
Human foodways—how we procure and prepare food—are as constitutive of our identity as any other social activity. The importance of food laws for Judaism—the restrictions more often than the injunctions—have been the subject of intense popular and scholarly interest for over two millenia. Two recent publications, therefore, are most welcome as advancing our understanding of how food makes Jews just as much as Jews make food. I will here discuss Jordan Rosenblum’s Food and Identity, which appeared in 2010 and is based on a 2008 (Brown) dissertation. A year later, David M. Freidenreich published Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law (Berkeley, 2011), in turn based on a 2006 (Columbia) dissertation. Both authors emphasize their indebtedness to the each other at numerous occasions, and the discussion has indeed lead to two commendable studies.

The books of Rosenblum and Freidenreich are compatible in their sociological and methodology—especially Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, and their modern critics are prominent—and each shows the strengths of its respective focus. While Freidenreich addresses Jewish, Christian, and Muslim food laws in toto, delivering many comparative insights, Rosenblum discusses the foodways of early Tannaitic rabbinic Judaism based on the textual and archeological evidence stemming from second and third century Roman Palestine. In particular, Rosenblum argues that “the Tannaim innovate and manipulate food practices to construct a distinctly Jewish, male, and rabbinic identity” (186).

Rosenblum rightly begins in chapter one with a survey of actual food related practices—what rabbis ate and how it was prepared—and then explores how rabbis used their food to establish their Jewish identity vis-à-vis non-Jews (Chapter two), their male identity in their interaction with women (Chapter three), and their rabbinic identity in distinction from other “Jewish” groups such as Samaritans, apostates, and heretics (Chapter four, with a helpful discussion of the cognate practices of the haverim). Rosenblum concludes that while the later amoraic rabbis make the connection between identity and diet explicit, in the earlier Tannaitic period, “this connection is inchoate and nascent” (154).

The book shows an impeccable command of rabbinic literature (esp. in its careful distinction between Tannaitic and Amoraic trends), a sophisticated conceptually approach (esp. on gender), and engages relevant scholarly discussions (e.g. in Shaye Cohen, Seth Schwartz, Christine Hayes, and Dennis Smith). Like any study seeking to apply contemporary sociological insights to ancient history, Food and Identity runs the risk of merely confirming the presuppositions one brings to the table, and one must indeed forgive that the monograph once too often announces its conclusions with a variation on the saying that “you are what you (do and do
not) eat” (e.g. 51). Yet Rosenblum avoids the danger of circularity through his rigorous and learned approach to his object of study. His precise conclusions illuminate an important aspect of early rabbinic discourse, and will prove a solid basis for further studies.

I find Rosenblum’s insights most helpful when employing a comparative perspective. For example, he notes that unlike “the Qumran sect, whose food rules are part of an identity system intended to reify social segregation, tannaitic literature reflects a conception of edible identity that defines itself within the context of its greater environment” (90). Likewise, Rosenblum shows that while the rabbis “problematize many social encounters, they do not necessarily prohibit all table-based social intercourse” (182). When discussing the persisting, though challenged, commensality between Jews and Gentiles, Rosenblum notes relevant Christian discussions, such as expressed in the Council of Ancyra (92 note 205). Unfortunately, the cognate legislation such as Didascalia XXIV and XXVI or Clementine Homilies (L.22, II.19 and XIII.4) is not discussed, and often, I wish Rosenblum would have gone further in his explorations—doing so based on his insights can be quite rewarding.

For example, Rosenblum addresses the status of the food of the *mînîm*, the rabbinic terms for Jewish “heretics” (a designation that has received considerable attention in recent scholarship, for a summary see Eduard Iricinschi and Holger Zellentin, “Making Selves and Marking Others,” in idem [ed.], Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity [Tübingen, 2007], 15-16). Rosenblum persuasively concludes that “the status of the meat of the *mîn* parallels the status of the *mîn* himself: classed with neither Gentile nor rabbinic Jew.” He then argues that slaughter by a Gentile is viewed as no slaughter at all, but rather “equated with carrion. However, slaughter by a min does count as an act of slaughter. . . . As such [it] must count for something; hence, it is classified as idolatrous” (157). This is a helpful explanation that highlights the point that heretics count as Jews. But would they also slaughter animals in a kosher way, as suggested by the rabbinic distinction between heretics and apostates?

Rosenblum himself notes that heretical slaughter does not confirm to rabbinic law (*Tosefta Hulin* 2:3). The Tosefta’s objections only make sense if the heretics did indeed observe at least biblical kashrut. Moreover, Rosenblum is well aware that some scholars relate the discussion of *minut* in the cognate passage on gentile slaughter in *Tosefta Hulin* 2:20 to practices of Jesus-believing Jews (155 note 62). While *minut* is a problem for the rabbis that is both larger than Jesus-belief and partially motivated meta-historically by rabbinic hermeneutics, the historical evidence of third century Palestine should still guide our reading of the Tosefta. There are many recent publications that point to the fact that throughout late Antiquity, many Jesus-believing Jews did keep kosher (e.g. Jewish Ways of Following Jesus: Redrawing the Map of Late Antiquity [Tübingen, 2010]. If so, Rosenblum’s explanation of the rabbinic classification of heretics and their food would prove even more