

REVIEW

Adiel Schremer

*Brothers Estranged:
Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity*

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Reviewed by Ruth Langer,
Boston College

Adiel Schremer's *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* represents the latest contribution to academic discourse about rabbinic attitudes to early Christianity, the identity of the *minim*, and the construction of separate Jewish and Christian identities. The uniqueness of Schremer's volume derives from the set of well-defined methodological guidelines that he limns for himself. He applies sociological theories about identity formation to the late antique rabbinic construction of social boundaries. He carefully applies these only to the earliest rabbinic texts, which he reads critically in order to identify later accretions and to avoid drawing conclusions based on these additions. He also deeply questions the presuppositions by which other scholars read the rabbinic traditions, suggesting that their questions have been shaped by Christian culture, thus generating gratuitous interpretations of the texts as responses to Christianity instead of considering other alternatives. Schremer seeks to read his carefully selected texts through internal Jewish lenses and thus to come to a sharper analysis of the degree to which early rabbinic Judaism was indeed constructed in dialectic with Christianity.

The book presents a series of interrelated studies, some more persuasive than others, that either add to our understanding of the issues addressed or, at the very least, undermine our confidence that scholars might have clarified them previously. Schremer first argues that the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE precipitated a crisis in Jewish socio-political identity. He argues that the defeat led Jews to doubt God's ability to act in history and hence also the value of remaining part of the Jewish community. Rabbinic texts express this Jewish doubt obliquely by projecting it onto the nations of the world.

The rabbinic construction of *minut* was a response to this socio-political reality that stigmatizes those who seek to separate themselves from the Jewish community. "*Minut*" and "*minim*" thus are badly and inadequately translated as "heresy" or "heretics," as this language incorrectly confines the discussion to matters of religious doctrine. Indeed, Schremer suggests that language that may seem theological is actually cloaking other, more significant issues. Thus, the rabbinic concern with those denying God's power is always paired with a concern about social separatism (p. 62). The category of *minut* was applied only to Jews, albeit to Jews accused of undermining divine authority in various ways. This category came to include Christians, but initially applied more to those accepting divinities instead of or in addition to God, such as Gnostics or those who worshiped the Roman imperial cult (chap. 2). Schremer later emphasizes that no Tannaitic reference to *minim* necessarily applies to Christians (pp. 79, 86 and chap. 4 *passim*).

Schremer presents *minut* as a construction of the rabbis in order to define deviance and create boundaries. *Minim* are “Jews who left the confines of the Jewish community and became as non-Jews” (p. 71). Rabbinic discourse about the *minim* thus focuses on regulating contact with them in order to create this “otherness.” In this context, Schremer focuses on an analysis of Tosefta Hullin 2:19-20 and its regulation of various sorts of social contacts with *minim* (such as matters of food, books, trade, marriage, education, and medicine). He also dates this act of construction to the early second century (chap. 3).

These claims lead Schremer to a discussion of t. Hullin 2:20-24, which does refer to the followers of Jesus. He claims that this text concerns “whether the followers of Jesus should be considered, too, [among the] *minim*” discussed in the previous passage, and that the Tosefta’s answer is “yes” (p. 88). However, the nature of the Tosefta’s examples suggests that the differences between the two communities were so minimal that the boundary needed to be constructed. Relying on the attributions to specific rabbis, Schremer dates this text to the second century, along with the vast majority of Tannaitic references to *minim*. This reveals an attempt by the rabbis to present the Christians as “other,” labeling them *minim* because they were challenging the social identity of the Jews (p. 94). This was also the time when, he says, Romans recognized Christianity as a distinct religion (p. 96). The rabbinic act, he points out, was not an act of “parting” but an act of “exclusion.” “From the point of view of early rabbinic sources, the concept of the ‘parting of the ways’ is misguided and inapplicable: it presupposes two *equal* parties, and this is a deeply Christianizing notion” (p. 98). The early rabbis thus regarded the Christians as *minim*, separatists, who had left Israel (chap. 4).

Schremer rejects as “Christianizing interpretations” the common understanding that the reason for this separation was Christianity’s dogma or renunciation of Jewish law (p. 144). Only Christian texts make these claims. Rabbinic texts that appear to polemicize against Christianity could equally well be directed against the Roman imperial cult and power. Romans, for instance, referred to their emperor as a “son of god.” Schremer’s final chapter argues that rabbinic objection to Christianity was not a driving force in their discussions of Rome, even after Constantine. He points out that rabbinic literature, including *piyyut*, reflects a growing recognition that the transformation of the empire from paganism to Christianity was an extended process, so Rome remains for the rabbis almost entirely a political category. However, the rabbis ceased to consider Christians to be *minim* as they were now seen as gentiles, not as members of a Jewish heretical movement, allowing the possibility of toleration and even, as Schremer’s title suggests, a sense of estranged brotherhood (p. 141; chap. 5). Thus, the brotherhood here is not the prior condition, as suggested in much Christian-Jewish discourse, but the end result of the development of Christianity into a gentile religion.

As I have presented it, this narrative arc is coherent and plausible, and the work is a significant contribution to the topic. I believe that my summary reflects Schremer’s intentions. Unfortunately, though, the book required careful editing by someone knowledgeable in the field to resolve inconsistencies and logical leaps. For instance, in his introduction, Schremer says his fundamental question is, “What was the role that Christianity occupied in the formation of rabbinic Judaism?” (p. 11). In the conclusion, this question has become, “What troubled the rabbis about the *minim*?” (p. 144). The two could easily have been brought together, but Schremer does not do so.

The logical leaps appear primarily in his detailed arguments. I noted at least three in his discussions of the *birkat haminim*. For instance, he argues plausibly that the *malkhut zadon* (arrogant empire) documented first in Geniza texts of the malediction refers to Rome. This then indicates (in a discussion that took me many readings to sort out) that the much earlier attested concluding blessing of the prayer “who humbles the arrogant” was also anti-Roman and hence

fits the larger context that Schremer has established for the rabbinic response to Judea's defeat (p. 59). However, his suggestion that the rabbis removed Christians from the category of *minim* (p. 141) ignores entirely one of the best attested elements of the language of this prayer from precisely the period of the Christianization of the empire, its explicit naming of *Notserim* (Nazareans, or Christians), always paired with *minim*. (In the first discussion, Schremer cites my article with Uri Ehrlich, which presents the textual evidence. See "The Earliest Texts of the Birkat Haminim," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 76 [2006]: 63–112. See also my forthcoming book, *Cursing the Christians?: A History of the Birkat HaMinim* [Oxford, 2011].) The discerning reader of my summary will find evidence of additional problematic points.

Schremer's methodological contributions to the topic are important, his critiques of other scholars (especially Daniel Boyarin) deserve attention, and his proposed solution, especially his argument that Christianity did not play a major role in the shaping of rabbinic Judaism, may well be correct.