

Adam Gregerman
Building on the Ruins of the Temple
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PETER A. PETTIT
papettit@muhlenberg.edu
Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA 18104

Adam Gregerman's Columbia University doctoral dissertation was the original form of this detailed and thoughtful volume, which claims a helpful place in several scholarly arenas. It has become standard fare to note that "the parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity happened neither in a single moment in 70 CE or any other year, nor in the same way in different places. That negative conclusion has opened the way to exploring the dynamics that obtained between varieties of early Judaism and early Christianity, and Gregerman makes a contribution to our understanding of at least part of the Palestinian scene in the 2nd to 4th centuries CE. He also contributes well to our picture of the impact of the Temple's destruction on Jewish thought during the emergence of rabbinic Judaism and to the range of theodicy represented in Jewish texts dealing with that historical caesura.

On the latter points, his detailed exegesis of texts in Midrash Rabbah on Lamentations argue persuasively both that there was "a powerful sense of shock, disappointment, and theological confusion over the event" (225) and that this generated midrashim showing "coherent and sophisticated responses to the destruction that strongly challenge common scholarly views of uniformity in rabbinic theodicy" (226). Without denying the presence in many rabbinic texts of a Deuteronomistic theodicy "that exculpated God...and/or that blamed the Jews' suffering on their misdeeds" (225), Gregerman marshals a substantial body of material that demonstrates other approaches to the apparent injustice and shame of God's failure to act in the face of the Roman assault on the Temple.

To the first point, he sets the midrashic material alongside early Christian texts from Justin Martyr, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea, in which the destruction "has a prominence practically unequalled in other early Christian texts" (226). Each author's handling of the event in a central work receives thorough analysis, with particular attention to the way in which the destruction contributes to their respective constructions of Christian identity. Thus we gain careful readings of the *Dialogue with Trypho*, *Contra Celsum*, and the extant chapters of the

Demonstratio evangelica at the points at which the destruction is addressed. Particularly with Origen's *Contra Celsum*, this systematic attention to references to the destruction is a welcome advance on prior analyses. Collectively, the three studies add important detail to our image of the anatomy and physiology of the body of *adversus Judaeos* literature.

Gregerman builds a judicious and conservative case for seeing the Christian writers and the midrashic authors in a virtual conversation with each other. He grants that there is not sufficient evidence to establish any direct contact among them. So he draws on J. L. North's model of a religious market-place in late antiquity to argue his case. Oral transmission practices, the close proximity of communities in urban settings, and the physical evidence of the destruction within the region provide him with the critical minimum of awareness sufficient to enable reciprocal apologetic formulations by Jews and Christians. Moreover, the significance of the Temple and its destruction as key symbols in both communities' theologies, touching centrally on identity and covenant, would generate the motivation to advance and defend their respective claims against contravening interpretations. Thus, in a "zero-sum" stand-off, each community claims the heritage of biblical Israel as its own in asserting its identity as God's (true) people, and both use the event of the Temple's destruction as evidence to establish this claim.

One of the greatest strengths of Gregerman's work is his careful exegesis of both the Christian and the midrashic texts. To name just three examples among many: he teases out masterfully Origen's hermeneutics for historical periodization in *Contra Celsum* 4:31-32 (85f.); he elegantly demonstrates the import of the use of Ezekiel 9 in *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:3b by comparison with a parallel text in the Talmud (177f.); and, he draws out expertly a few brief lines in *Lamentations Rabbah* 5:1b to show how they "reveal deep anxieties about Israel's relationship with God" (209). However, the reader is well advised to keep the primary texts close at hand; the publisher might have afforded more room for full-text citations throughout the book. There is also a repetitiveness that develops as Gregerman works his way through a few dozen texts (perhaps attributable to the work's origin in a dissertation), but one can appreciate the detail when turning to a single section for reference, rather than reading through the work *seriatim*. A robust citation index also facilitates this function of the book.

There are a few elements that one wishes Gregerman had developed further. One of the theoretical points that he advances addresses the relative place of arguments from prophecy or from history. However, he articulates clearly and convincingly neither this distinction itself nor its exact value. When he observes, for example in Justin's work, that "history confirms [a particular understanding], as he applies prophetic quotations to the losses experienced by the Jews" (48), the distinction between prophecy and history as the warrant for an argument becomes complicated. The impression that emerges repeatedly, and not only in Justin, is that historical events are probative in light of a broadly—once might suggest "canonically"—construed prophetic hermeneutic, without which their meaning would be ambiguous, at best. How might the event and the scriptural hermeneutic

that valorizes it be distinguished in the argument, and is it necessary or helpful to do so?

The “anti-theodicy” that Gregerman sees developed in *Lamentations Rabbah* also deserves more of his attention, in this case because he very effectively lays the foundation for greater discernment of the midrashists’ meaning than he actually ventures. The dimensions of the anti-theodicy emerge clearly; it serves to console those in trauma and doubt. The Jewish community is already suffering rebuke from their putative Christian antagonists for an unfaithfulness or treachery that led to the Temple’s destruction. They are thus a people more in need of defense than God is. Consequently, the midrash criticizes, even rebukes, God, who is thus rendered variously in these texts “as weak, duplicitous, foolish, or cruel” (223).

Yet, says Gregerman, the midrashists are reticent to draw implications about the status of the covenant from their portrayals of God. Perhaps he is right to see this reticence serving the apologetic interest of protecting the community from Christians who are using the destruction to argue that the covenant is thoroughly and permanently abrogated. Yet the fact that he recognizes how much must be taken by inference from these “characteristically terse and exegetical” texts (223) would also justify asking further where such an anti-theodicy leads. Could one not infer that these midrashists may have questioned what value a covenant could possibly have if it created a bond with such a debilitated God? Or that they may have asked about the reality of that God, even if the value of the covenant were protected for the sake of the community’s identity?

Such questions take on a particular interest when one reads Gregerman’s work with an awareness of the paths into which post-Shoah and post-Zionist thought have moved. He notes that the opposition to which the midrashim seem to be responding is grounded not in Israel’s actions but in its very identity (211f.) and is exacerbated by the public shame and rebuke to which Israel is subjected before the other nations (196). As similar dynamics have emerged over the past century and in recent decades, Gregerman’s entire project, his development of the idea of anti-theodicy, and the examples he provides of an ancient response to questions hauntingly similar to some of our own may serve as models for contemporary theological conversations; their value is not limited to scholarship on early Judaism and early Christianity.