

REVIEW

Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple to the Fifth Century*

(Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2003), paper, xx + 445 pp.

Reviewed by Dmitrij F. Bumazhnov, University of Tübingen

The book is a revised doctoral dissertation and investigates the impact of Yom Kippur's ritual, imagery and theology on the Christian tradition in the first five centuries. Although there have been numerous studies about the influence of Yom Kippur on various Jewish and Christian religious practices and beliefs, Ben Ezra has successfully presented not merely the history of ideas but also the development of the liturgical traditions over this period. This extensive study, which although in some sections appears like a lexicon-article, makes the work of Ben Ezra an indispensable starting point for further studies on the impact of Yom Kippur on early Christianity.

The first part of his book focuses on the Second Temple and early rabbinic evidence. Discussing the description of Temple ritual of Yom Kippur in Mishnah *Yoma*, Ben Ezra observes "a certain 'individualization' of Yom Kippur in the time of the Second Temple: private confessions were added on top of the high priest's vicarious confession." Christian and surprisingly enough probably also pagan (e.g. Juvenal) eyewitnesses shed light on "the ritual of the people" (praying, fasting, walking barefoot, dancing etc.) in the celebrations of Christians (p. 70–77; 273–283), but surprisingly enough probably also pagans (e.g. Juvenal, p. 69) after the destruction of the Temple. As for the influence of Temple ritual in Jewish thought and liturgical practice, Ben Ezra points to allusions of the high priest's entry into the holy of holies in descriptions of heavenly ascent in the Testament of Levi, 1 Enoch, Apocalypse of Abraham Philo and the Hekhalot literature. He argues that this tradition is to be traced in the soteriology and eschatology of the Valentinian Gnostics through which it influenced the early Christian mysticism of Clement of Alexandria.

In Jewish apocalyptic literature Ben Ezra notes the influence of the scapegoat ritual on *1 Enoch* 10 and *11QMelchizedek* where the eschatological triumph over evil is shown with clear allusions to Yom Kippur, while the scapegoat appears as a personification of the demonic adversary of the Lord. Of great importance is the figure of Melchizedek who in *11QMelchizedek* is described as high priest performing a collective atonement on eschatological Yom Kippur. The author remarks that the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13–14 uses the demonology of 'Az'azel, employed also in *1 Enoch*, combining the elements from the scapegoat ritual with Zechariah 3. "It is through this association of Yom Kippur with Zechariah 3, with its high priest Joshua/Jesus, that Christian Jewish thinkers before Hebrews justified the high priesthood of the non-Levite Jesus."

In Part Two, Ben Ezra scrutinizes the earliest Christian evidences of the reception of Yom Kippur in early Christian writings, in Gnostic writings and in early Christian mysticism and legend. He suggests that Yom Kippur was observed by various "Jewish Christian groups" up to the second century, a thesis which challenges the widespread consensus about the abolition of Christian participation in Yom Kippur because of Christ accomplishing a once-and-for-all atonement. Basing his thesis mainly on Acts 27:9, Ben Ezra argues that Luke, who "does not include interpretations of Jesus' death as atonement and even eliminates them from his source, Mark," did not have "one of the theological reasons to abolish" Yom Kippur. Consequently, he observed it with his community. Here Ben Ezra in my opinion underestimates both the possibility of "the fast" in Acts 27:9 being a common reference to the time of the year rather than to observance, and to the renouncing of Jewish practice in Luke 23:45.

In Part Three, Ben Ezra focuses on the 3rd–5th century evidence about the Christian exegesis of Leviticus, Christian participation in the Jewish fast, and the impact of Yom Kippur on the autumn festivals Encaenia/Exaltation of the Cross and the Ember Day of September. Ben Ezra cites Origen, John Chrysostom and the *Canons of Apostles* that admonish Christians not to take part in the Jewish fast. While the author is certainly right that the texts in question “provide evidence for the participation of Christians in the Yom Kippur fast” (p. 277), his conclusion that “these three authors felt [threat] from Yom Kippur’s alternative atonement” needs further support. Only Origen speaks about it and even then the claim that Origen’s (re)interpretation of Leviticus 16 and 23 and use of Yom Kippur “as his hermeneutical key” may be due to other factors than being challenged by Christian participation in the Jewish festival. Similarly, Chrysostom’s mocking Jewish “templization” of Yom Kippur rites does not necessarily provide a reason to understand Christian “templization” of the Eucharist in terms of a response to the Jewish challenge, as the author suggest. In my view, the thesis that there is an “interdependence between the polemics against Christian participation in the Jewish fast and the development of a Christian alternative ... sacrificial atonement theology” requires further support.

Finally, Ben Ezra highlights the Christian autumn festivals Encaenia/Exaltation of the Cross and the Ember Day of September which, in his view, were influenced by the biblical description and contemporary Jewish practice of Yom Kippur. Notably in this section, there was a strong correspondence between the Bible readings on the Roman Ember Days and on Yom Kippur.

The book gives the impression of overemphasis and overgeneralization, based on scant evidence of Christian theological polemic in the 3rd–4th centuries. The central thesis of the author who argues that “Christian atonement theology and its festal calendar not only emerged under the influence of Yom Kippur ... but also continued to be developed in light of the ongoing challenge that the contemporary Yom Kippur posed to Christians” is only convincing if restricted to the Christian liturgical practices in Palestine and Rome in the 4th and 5th century respectively.

Ben Ezra’s most impressive achievement lies in his meticulous collection, systematization and historical analysis of a huge amount of material on Yom Kippur over almost eight centuries, combined with great number of insightful observations of which only a small part could be presented here. Having chosen an important and neglected area of the Late Antiquity religion history, Ben Ezra has provided an innovative and thought-provoking study which will certainly help sharpen our understanding of Jewish-Christian relations in this formative period.