

REVIEW

Holger M. Zellentin
*Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish
and Christian Literature*

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Holger M. Zellentin's monograph *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* takes on a notoriously slippery topic—ancient humor. Thankfully, and with some success, Zellentin restricts himself to one explicit form of humor, the parodic satire, leaving other forms of rabbinic humor, e.g., irony, for others to contend with (p. 6).

The satiric parodies that Zellentin discusses are found primarily in Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts from the fourth, fifth, and six centuries CE. As parodies, all of these passages “imitate extant texts...along with some of their literary devices and their message” (p. 15). These rabbinic parodies also provide a “counter-song” to their imitated text, targeting either the texts themselves or their interpreters as objects for satire (p. 14).

The book as a whole argues convincingly that satiric parody is “a literary technique that is firmly embedded in the established rabbinic genres such as the Talmudic *sugya*, the midrashic sermon, and midrashic exegesis” (p. 5). By “embedded,” Zellentin means that satirical parody occurs at every level of rabbinic interaction with text. In order to better demonstrate this point, Zellentin organizes his book according to three different “modes” of satiric parody. The first mode consists of “intra-rabbinic parodies” which occur at the redactional layer of rabbinic texts and target aspects of the same text in which they are found. “Inter-rabbinic parodies” are also found at the redactional layer of rabbinic texts, but differ from “intra-

rabbinic parodies” because the texts that they target were produced by other groups or communities of rabbis. Usually, but not exclusively, Zellentin uses the term “inter-rabbinic parody” to refer to Babylonian texts that parody stories produced by Palestinian rabbis. Lastly, Zellentin discusses “external parodies” which target the texts of non-rabbinic groups, including contemporary Christians and their literature (p. 25).

Chapter one identifies an extended passage found in the Babylonian Talmud (b. B. Metzi’a 97a) as a rather sophisticated example of “intra-rabbinic” or “redactional” parody. In this passage, a humorous story about the Babylonian sage Rava, who accidentally sells himself to his students, appears not only to respond to, but also to imitate and to satirize, an earlier legal discussion about ownership (which mentions, in fact, this very same sage). Anyone familiar with a Talmudic sugya might easily recognize this particularly self-reflective and self-critical aspect of the Babylonian Talmud. Zellentin’s discussion of this redactional strategy as parody, however, provides some context for this oft-noted reflexive feature of the rabbinic literary tradition and establishes that the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud had a profound and deep-seated familiarity with satirical parody.

In chapter two, Zellentin demonstrates that parody is not a solely Babylonian rabbinic enterprise. Here, he takes up a comical story about a drunkard in *Leviticus Rabbah* (the Palestinian rabbinic midrash on Leviticus). In this story (Lev. Rab. 79:5-6), a drunkard’s sons leave their father in a pit to die in order to sober him up. But through a simple twist of fate, these same sons end up supporting their father’s excessive drinking habits in perpetuity. The message of this tale clearly works against the staunchly temperate views about alcohol in the rest of the chapter, a unit which Zellentin identifies as a “temperance sermon” (p. 53). Yet the story also “imitates and satirizes the themes and particular features of the temperance sermon” and therefore meets the two major qualifications of satirical parody (p. 76).

Chapter three investigates the well-known story of Bar Hedyā, a Palestinian dream interpreter, as an instance of “inter-rabbinic parody” (b. Berakhot 56a-b). Through a close literary analysis Zellentin reveals that this text from the Babylonian Talmud satirizes a passage about dream interpretation in the Palestinian Talmud—the so-called Palestinian “dream book”—in order to target Palestinian rabbinic ideas about dreams and their interpretation. Therefore, Zellentin argues, satirical parodies in rabbinic literature sometimes target other rabbinic communities and may help us to better understand the relationship between Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis.

Chapters four and five will be of the most interest to the readers of this journal. Zellentin here turns his attention to “external” or “exegetical” parodies—i.e., rabbinic texts that imitate and satirize non-rabbinic texts. Zellentin suggests that when these rabbinic parodies imitate the Gospels and other New Testament texts, they do so with the primary intention of satirizing contemporary Christians. Though they reference and allude to foundational Christian texts, he claims, these rabbinic parodies actually target the practices and interpretations of Christians living in Palestine and Sassanian Persia during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries CE.

Both these chapters discuss rabbinic texts that parody sections of the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter four examines the story of Imma Shalom, Rabban Gamaliel’s sister, and her claim for equal inheritance (b. Shab. 116a-b). Zellentin suggests that this story—which rather explicitly refers to Syriac versions of the Christian Gospels—targets contemporary Christian ideas about physical and spiritual inheritance rather than Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon. A similar argument continues in chapter five which covers the famous story of Shimon bar Yochai, a second century CE Palestinian rabbi, and his retreat to a cave with his son (Gen. Rab. 79:5-6). This story, Zellentin argues, targets passages from the Gospel of Mathew (6:25-7; 10:28-30) in order to satirize contemporary Christian ascetic practices.

In these two chapters, Zellentin engages directly with the question of whether the rabbis of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries CE were familiar with Christian literature and culture. References to Jesus or Christianity are rare in Palestinian rabbinic texts. Some scholars argue Palestinian rabbis completely ignored or deliberately omitted any mention of contemporary Christianity. Arguing against this view, the author's interpretation of these two rabbinic parodies of the Sermon on the Mount suggests that some Babylonian rabbis not only had "first hand or mediated familiarity with Christian foundational texts" but that they were also aware of their "contemporary patristic or popular interpretations" (p. 141). Though Palestinian rabbinic discourse on Christianity is "more implicit and allusive" (p. 172), Zellentin suggests that Palestinian rabbis also satirized, albeit in less explicit ways, Christian texts and practices.

Zellentin displays an impressive familiarity with both Jewish Aramaic and Syriac Christian texts in these chapters. Where he is able to demonstrate that rabbinic texts, such as the story of Imma Shalom, imitate vocabulary or structural elements from specific passages from the Peshitta and other Syriac versions of the New Testament, his argument for rabbinic familiarity with Christian texts and stories seems particularly sound. On the other hand, the author's claim of a Palestinian rabbinic parody of the Gospel of Matthew in the Shimon bar Yohai story, where these signs of imitation are less clear, is somewhat less convincing.

As a whole, the book has much to offer. By far the most noteworthy aspect of Zellentin's book is its attention to parody as a literary technique. This focus on specific texts, rather than a more nebulous concept or theme, distinguishes it from other treatments of Jewish-Christian relations in Late Antiquity. In addition, Zellentin covers methodological questions in a brief yet exacting manner, providing excellent summaries and references to scholarly debates regarding the redaction of rabbinic texts, the self-reflective nature of rabbinic literature, and the question of rabbinic interaction with external groups. Finally,

his suggestion that parodies may target more than just texts and also satirize contemporary Christian dogma provides new and interesting readings of some well-known rabbinic stories.

This book is an academic monograph which, though written for scholars of Late Antiquity, contains a few excellent introductory sections about methodological issues in the study of rabbinic literature that might be appropriate for students in upper level religion courses as well. The book would be a welcome addition to any university or seminary library. But as with many other books in this series, the price probably prohibits most from purchasing personal copies.