

REVIEW

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal
*Early Christian Monastic Literature
and the Babylonian Talmud*

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Bar-Asher Siegal has given a great gift to the scholarly community and to those interested in its debates by displaying more fully Jewish-Christian relations in the Late Ancient Persian realm of the Sasanids. This last and devoutly Zoroastrian Persian empire saw the flourishing of two prominent religious minorities. It was host to the emergence of eastern, Syriac Christianity and saw the culmination of classical rabbinic Judaism in the formulation of the Babylonian Talmud. The question Bar-Asher Siegal asks is to what extent the specifically monastic strand of Syriac Christianity, on the one hand, and Babylonian rabbinic Judaism (as distinguishable from the Palestinian type) on the other, share cultural practices visible in the stories both groups told about holy men. Her answer to this question is as richly documented as it is rewarding to read. The book here reviewed amply illustrates that the Christian and the Jewish stories in question both show a remarkable overlap when addressing topics such as “asceticism, spirituality, and the balance between holy and daily life” (p. 2). Bar-Asher Siegal manages to present the shared values and the narrative affinities between Syriac and rabbinic literary culture at the same time as she maintains the essential distinctness and independent historical depth of both traditions.

Bar-Asher Siegal’s most important source, next to the Babylonian Talmud, is the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the famous “Sayings of the Desert Fathers.” This collection of stories about the Coptic Skete monks of Egypt (who amalgamated

cenobitic and eremitic ideals) transformed the face of monasticism, arguably even of Christianity itself. From the fourth century onwards, the simple, pragmatic, and often surprising ethical stories about the early desert fathers were avidly translated, collected, edited, rearranged, and most importantly, told and retold throughout the world of Christendom, including in the Sasanian Empire.

Siegal duly notes that the Syriac translations of the Sayings “are especially useful to explain the access the composers of Talmudic passages might have had to monastic traditions in the Persian Empire” (p. 41). Syriac, i.e. Christian Aramaic, the vernacular of the Persian church, is a language that was almost fully comprehensible to speakers of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. At this point, the reviewed monograph needs to overcome the difficulties presented by the still poorly understood transmission history of the *Sayings* in Syriac. While there is ample evidence for an early translation of the *Sayings* into Syriac, a full scholarly evaluation and critical edition of the material remains a desideratum (see especially Samuel Rubenson, “The Apophthegmata Patrum in Syriac, Arabic and Ethiopic: Status Questionis,” *Parole de l’Orient* 36 [2011]: 305-313). Bar-Asher Siegal circumvents the philological difficulties by citing from the Greek *Sayings* that more clearly predate the Babylonian Talmud than those of their Syriac translations that have thus far been edited. The result of the author’s choice, through no fault of her own, generates a certain imbalance between the volume’s careful and philologically astute treatment of the Talmud and its manuscripts and a necessary silence from the Syriac versions. Reverting to the Greek *Sayings* enables Bar-Asher Siegal to realize a study much-needed at the present time; the richness of her findings will hopefully invite future work both on the Syriac *Sayings* and on their potential Aramaic affinities with the Babylonian Talmud.

The book begins with a thoughtful consideration of the ways in which rabbinic-Christian relations are studied (“Christianity in the Babylonian Talmud: An Introductory Discussion,” pp. 1-34). Bar-Asher Siegal here notes that existing scholarship

(including that of the present reviewer; see pp. 10-11) tends to focus on polemical interactions rather than on aspects of culture shared by both traditions. She seeks to establish a more balanced approach. The second chapter then traces the rise of “Monasticism in the Persian Empire” (pp. 35-64), with a noteworthy emphasis on the flourishing of both monasticism and the church as a whole from the fifth century onwards. This is another topic at times overlooked especially by scholars of Judaism. The following two chapters both bear the main title “The *Apophthegmata Patrum* and Rabbinic Literature.” The third chapter, as indicated by the subtitle, on “Form, Style, and Common Themes” (pp. 64-100), considers the Babylonian Talmud in comparison with the *Sayings* along the lines indicated by the subtitle. Bar-Asher Siegal persuasively argues for a wealth of shared concepts attributed to holy men both Jewish and Christian, ranging from their attitudes towards prayer and emotion all the way to their respective guidelines when using Scripture.

The most fascinating chapter shifts the comparison between the two bodies of literature towards “Narrative,” as indicated by the subtitle of the fourth chapter (pp. 101-32). Here, we find several stories, many of which are well known to any Talmudist, presented in the completely new light of their affinity with the Christian *Sayings*. Examples range from the famous story of Honi the Circle Maker (*Ta’anit* 23a) to Resh Lakish’s conversion from robber to rabbi (*Bava Metsi’a* 84a). After the more cursory discussion in chapters three and four, the volume then presents the full-fledged analysis of two rabbinic stories. Chapter five, “The Making of a Monk-Rabbi: The Stories of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai in the Cave” (pp. 133-69), presents the famous narrative from the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 33b), along with some of its Palestinian rabbinic parallels, and shows its affinities not only with Hellenistic stories, but also with Christian narratives ranging from the *Sayings* to Jerome’s *The Life of Paulus the First Hermit*. The book’s final chapter, “Repentant Whore, Repentant Rabbi: The Story of Eleazar b. Dordya” (pp. 170-99) pays tribute to the more playful tendencies of the Babylonian Talmud as expressed in

the story recorded in *Avodah Zarah* 17a. Impressively, Bar-Asher Siegal reads this story alongside the *Sayings*, and especially with the story of John the Dwarf and the repentant prostitute Paesia. With a fine sense for the stories' ironies, the author shows that both the Jewish and the Christian stories, respectively, "challenge the established church and the rabbinic model of repentance because they suggest that these can be bypassed" (p. 190). The short "Conclusion" (pp. 200-3) briefly recapitulates the book's major findings and reiterates that Bar-Asher Siegal sees "no evidence of a hostile attitude in the incorporation of ... monastic analogies in the Talmudic passages"—a conclusion, she states, that does not contradict "the polemical uses of Christian materials identified by other scholars" (p. 202).

The volume under consideration is a great step forward in the ongoing revision of the way we understand Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity. Not everyone may agree with the difficult choices its author had to make, such as giving a general prominence to synchronic over more detailed diachronic considerations in the development of both the rabbinic and the monastic literature (see e.g. pp. 25-34 and 100), and placing the philological and thematic emphasis on the Talmud over and against the *Sayings*, as spelled out above. Yet it is precisely these choices that led Bar-Asher Siegal to write such a concise, comprehensive, readable, and rewarding first study of a largely-overlooked treasure located squarely within—and around—the culture of the Babylonian Talmud. The book then further demolishes the obsolete paradigm, dominant especially in the second half of the twentieth century, of a sterile separation of the Jewish and the Christian tradition throughout Late Antiquity. Bar-Asher Siegal shows the utter inadequacy of considering on their own the narratives about holy men in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and in the Babylonian Talmud, and in turn reaps the rich rewards of a comparative study. The volume, agreeably, is also written with as much clarity and verve as the stories it analyzes and is wholeheartedly recommended to anyone wishing to learn (or teach) about the fascinating world of holy men and women of Late Antiquity,

and about the intertwined development of rabbinic Judaism, monasticism, and the Syriac Church.