Review – Reverent Irreverence (Amit Gvaryahu)

Lutheran Theology And Postmodern Philosophy,

The Vertical Form – The Iconological Dimension

Admitting A Certain Fear of Zizek's Theology – A...

http://jcrt.org/religioustheory/2018/04/05/review-reverent-irreverence-amit-gvaryahu/
Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism.

Pious Irreverence opens with a quote from America’s favorite fictional president, Josiah Bartlet of The West Wing. After the funeral of his friend and personal secretary, Dolores Landonning, Bartlet asks for some time alone in the church where he prays, “What did I ever do to yours [your son] except praise his glory and praise his name?...Have I displeased you, you feckless thug?” I knew no Latin when I saw this episode, and so couldn’t understand what Bartlet yelled at God immediately after this, but I understood the force of his final words: “cruciatus in crucem, eas in crucem.” Screw you, God, Bartlet said; but wasn’t he also talking to God “as a man speaks with his friend” (Ex 33:11)? Wasn’t he in church, having a conversation with the deity with whom he was so angry?

Weiss notes that this scene was dubbed by one analyst as “the most Jewish scene ever written in English,” and his Pious Irreverence is about the antecedents to this scene, the rabbinic and post-rabbinic moments that culminated in the God invoked by Aaron Sorkin, the creator of The West Wing, through the character of President Bartlet.

These antecedents, Weiss shows, are most complex and developed in a lesser-known genre of Jewish literature, known as midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu (TY). These works, cast as homilies on various books and pericopae in the Pentateuch, perhaps created for a synagogue audience, are very popular in the manuscript record: there are 20 such works in hundreds of manuscripts. Other editions and works are preserved in quotation (Bregman 2007).
Marc Bregman tentatively dates the final redaction of these works to “post-Talmudic times,” in the Byzantine empire. This would place them anywhere from the sixth to the tenth century. Scholars in the 11th century like the biblical exegete Rashi already quote TY, and the last TY-like works were redacted in Provence, by one “Moses the Preacher” not much before that. Thus, we can safely dub TY “post-rabbinic,” in the sense that the central shifts the rabbinic movement brought into the Jewish community were already accepted completely by TY. The shapers of TY were adherents of rabbinic writing but not part of the historical rabbinic movement.

TY

works evince a knowledge of rabbinic traditions but are not genetically related to that rabbinic behemoth, the Babylonian Talmud; in chapter two Weiss discusses points of affinity between the two corpora. Although pieces of Talmud and even a later work derived from the Talmud known as She’iltot are embedded in the manuscript tradition, TY works are not of the same milieu as the Babylonian Talmud. Instead, they are a remnant from the community of Palestinian Rabbinic Jews, which had different priorities, another rabbinic school, different liturgy, and different laws. They also do not reflect Muslim rule in any way; for example, there are no Arabic loanwords. Thus, the Byzantine provenance.

These works have often been called “late midrash,” and neglected as a lesser exemplar of what those in the field like to call “classical midrash” (redacted 4th-6th centuries in Byzantine Palestine). While the manuscript record has so
many of these works, there is as yet not one critical edition of a Tanhuma-Yelammedenu midrash. In recent years, however, there has been an uptick in the slight interest these works have commanded in rabbinic scholarship: some studies of the relationship between *TY* and Jewish liturgical poetry (*piyyut*) (1992 אליצור וורמסר), an article on the Hebrew language of *TY* (תשע״ג).

Weiss is the first in over 20 years to attempt a thematic study of the entire *TY* corpus. Unlike his predecessors, trained in philology and literary theory, Weiss is a scholar of religion. I use this word, in this case, in the old-school sense of “Theology.” Questions about the nature and character of the rabbinic God and His role in the lives of the rabbinic authors animate the book.

The rabbis and their lives have been the subject of scrutiny from many different angles in the past decades, since chairs dedicated to rabbinic Judaism have increasingly found their way to departments of religion. Veering away somewhat from subjects and themes defined by the texts or having the texts be the subject of inquiry, many scholars of rabbinics have focused on rabbinic special perception, senses and sensuality, sex and corporeality, and law and legalism.

This is only a smattering of the explosion of monographs and articles dedicated to the rabbis since 1990. None of these, however, have been about the rabbinic God. Some have advanced the idea that the rabbis in fact had no God, or that their God was largely absent. The rabbinic project is either a theodicy of this absent God, or conversely a substitution of God with something else (gentiles have been offered as a replacement, as has been the law itself) (Hayes 2015; Rosen-Zvi and Ophir 2018).

*Pious Irreverence* stands out in its charting out a colorful and complex dialog between rabbis and God in *TY*. The six chapters of Weiss’ book respond to various aspects of the Talmudic and post-Talmudic tradition of divine confrontation.

The book is divided into two unequal parts. In the first two chapters Weiss offers readers a discussion of the normative aspects of divine confrontation. In early rabbinic literature,
known as *Tannaitic Literature*, created in the late second and early third centuries CE in Palestine, confronting and questioning God is a sin. Tannaitic works of midrash preserve a prohibition against second-guessing God (הרהור, הרה) and confronting Him (השבה). These are, Weiss claims, “a new moment in the history of Jewish theology.” Weiss offers some historical contextualization for this moment, both in the history or myth of Tannaitic martyrdom as well as polemic with movements such as Marcionism and “Gnosticism”.

Weiss also offers an illuminating and cross-cultural discussion of the conceptual underpinnings of this prohibition. The Tannaitic prohibition against questioning and confronting the divine continues into post-rabbinic literature — at least in some texts. In these texts, confronting the divine sometimes brings about punishment as well: the sage Levi is made lame (33); Abraham is compelled to sacrifice his son (36). The chapter ends with a survey of the various Jewish and Christian responses to divine confrontation in scripture, especially Job and Habakkuk.

In chapter two Weiss charts the rise of the biblical theology of divine confrontation in later rabbinic literature, known as *Amoraic Literature*, and in post-rabbinic literature. This theology asserts that it is permissible and virtuous to confront God and his decisions. Some traditions that forbade questioning the divine were re-worked and made more ambivalent. Other Tannaitic traditions were explicitly reworked to permit challenge where one was forbidden. These re-workings are common in rabbinic literature; Weiss applies the tools of rabbinic source criticism to understand, in each case, how they worked. Different characters, such as the ministering angels, were also employed to voice critiques that the rabbis did not want to place in the mouths of people. (Jenny Labendz discusses this strategy in her *Socratic Torah* (2013)).

The importance of these traditions is twofold: first, in that they show the rabbis reflecting on divine confrontation themselves. Second, the very existence of such traditions demonstrates that confronting God and His Justice are permissible in the
rabbinic world. Weiss ends the chapter by pointing to rabbinic traditions that valorize standing up to God, as well as God himself approving of this move (70). The first half of chapter three continues the normative discussion, pointing out sources that approve of certain types of confrontation but not others. Weiss uses the Greek term parrhesia, “frank speech” as a heuristic tool to understand this phenomenon.

The second segment of Pious Irreverence shifts from a normative and diachronic discussion of the phenomenon of divine confrontation to a synchronic and descriptive analysis. Thus, the end of chapter three moves to the modes in which the rabbis performed their theological protests. Chapter four is a discussion of the ethics that led the rabbis to challenge God: what did they think was right, how did they know it, and how did they know God was doing it wrong? Chapter five is a discussion of the theology of confrontation, which I will discuss shortly, and chapter six is about the role of God in these confrontations, and most forcefully, his capitulation in arguments.

In many ways these three and a half chapters seem to be the heart of the book. No longer committed to drawing lines in the sand and tracing the evolution of the motifs and interpretive strategies in TY works, Weiss seems happiest when presenting midrashic traditions and illuminating them. There
are many excerpts of TY midrashim translated and commented on, as well as other passages which he summarizes. Chapter four on the ethics of confrontation is a treasury of dubious scriptural heroes — the ones who make liberal readers blush and fundamentalist readers happy. The nuanced responses of the TY preachers to these narratives are important, oft neglected resources for understanding the roots and motivators of liberal Jewish thought to this day.

Chapters five and six, on the God of these confrontations, are a return to the topic most neglected in the academic study of the rabbinic world, God. Known to the rabbis and subsequent generations of their followers by various epithets, it seems that rabbinic the aversion to naming God has manifested itself in the academic study of the rabbis as an aversion to the study of the same. Weiss artfully sweeps aside the theological preconceptions of previous generations of academics who preferred to imagine the rabbinic God as a philosophical construct a la Maimonides or, as Weiss helpfully points out, the Kabbalistic tradition. The God of these two rival theologies is actually quite similar in His silence and absence of personality [155]. Going back to narratives about God in TY and reading them for what they are, Weiss teases out the personality and humanity of God in these works. The many aspects of God’s action in the world divulge a plethora of personality traits and characteristics.

That God has a personality unconstrained by philosophical notions of his abilities stands in contrast to contemporary Christian theologies. The latter sought to integrate the God of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures with Platonic or Aristotelian ideas of the divine. The rabbis, who consciously ignored philosophy and its traditions, made room for a “morally fallible God” (160), constrained by the dictates of the Torah but not always managing to live up to them.

Weiss also offers the reader asides which would be profitably used in teaching: comparative studies of Jewish and Christian interpretations of certain biblical characters and passages in chapters one and two, as well as comparative analyses of terms in chapters three and four. He is careful in his comparisons, pointing out his methodology at the beginning of
each section, and is conscious and explicit about the limitations of each tool he employs. This too is laudable and important.

Weiss’s book charts out the work ahead for scholars of TY and comparative Jewish theology, but there are two areas which he leaves for others. The first is the textual study of TY — its myriad manuscript traditions, the relationship between the various works, the Greek loanwords etc. Sensitivity to thematic, ideological, and theological shifts is an important tool in this work, and one which practitioners of textual analysis often ignore. Weiss’s systematic and conceptual work is a boon to those of us who often drown in the mass of variants and textual peculiarities.

The second is comparative exegesis and comparative work more generally. For example, Weiss notes parallels to Syriac literature in secondary literature, but only in passing (86). Though there are significant affinities between TY and piyyut, Jewish liturgical poetry, he does not even mention them. As the rabbinic adage goes, “the task is not upon you to complete, but you are not free to avoid it.” Others can follow in Weiss’s footsteps in these areas.

Both in terms of its content and its methodology, Pious Irreverence is a pioneering work. Weiss artfully employs all the tools of textual analysis developed over the last four decades of rabbinic scholarship and brings them to bear on TY, a largely neglected corpus. Tanhuma-Yelammedenu has never been studied as a work of theology, nor from a theological perspective. The old-school search for God in this book has never seemed so new or so fresh, and neither has the rabbinic God Himself.

_Amit Gvaryahu holds a BA in Talmud and Classics from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and received his MA from the same institution in 2012. In 2010 he was scholar-in-residence at the Paideia Institute in Stockholm. He has also taught at the Hebrew University, the Pontifical Gregorian University, and Mechon Hadar in New York, as well as studied at Oxford and Princeton. His interests range from rabbinic literature to comparative ancient law, the ancient economy,
midrash, and rabbinic textual criticism. His doctoral dissertation, on the rabbinic laws of usury in a comparative context, is slated for completion later this year. His latest article, “Twisting Words: Does Halakhah Really Circumvent Scripture” was published in the Journal of Jewish Studies. He lives in Jerusalem with his family.
About Books
View all posts by Books →

« The Vertical Form – The Iconological Dimension in 20th Century Russian Religious Aesthetics and Literary Criticism, Part II (Oleg Komkov)
Admitting A Certain Fear of Zizek's Theology – A Modest Plea For A Deleuzian Reading Of The Death Of God (Elijah Prewitt-Davis) »

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website

Post Comment