

Kiperwasser, Reuven. *Going West: Migrating Personae and Construction of the Self in Rabbinic Culture*. BJS 369 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021). Pp. xiv + 237. \$82.00 (Hardback), \$29.00 (Paperback and eBook); ISBN: 978-1-95-149888-7.

The journeys of Babylonian rabbinic scholars to the Land of Israel and, less frequently, in the other direction are a well known phenomenon that led to the development of two interrelated yet separate rabbinic cultures in the politically divided territories of the Roman Empire and Sasanian Persia in late antiquity. While other scholars have already pointed to cultural clashes reflected in stories about encounters between the locals and the Babylonian migrants, this book is the first more comprehensive study of the traditions from a narratological perspective. The author provides detailed analyses and readings of narrative traditions about Babylonian scholars in Palestine and Palestinian sojourners in Babylonia transmitted in both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. He argues that stories about the “internal Other” were particularly important for Palestinian rabbis’ “construction of the self,” whereas “the Palestinian Other did not evoke the same strong emotions among the Babylonians as the Babylonian aroused among the Palestinians” (169). While “mocking narratives” also appear in the Babylonian Talmud, in general, Palestinian *nahote* (lit. “those who descend”) such as Ulla seem to have been accepted more. The rivalry known from Palestinian sources is met by “reciprocal respect” (6).

The book consists of eight chapters of which six focus on stories in Palestinian rabbinic documents and the last two on stories in the Babylonian Talmud. In his Introduction the author points out that “*migrating personae on the move*” between the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic centres were a common phenomenon “[f]rom the earliest times of the two centers’ existence” (3) until the “parting of the ways” (5) in the fourth century CE, when the Babylonian rabbinate had become independent of Palestine. He traces the beginning of this movement back to Hillel, a native Babylonian, to whom the Palestinian patriarch traced his descent. Rather than applying the traditional center and periphery model, Kiperwasser points to a much more complex relationship between the two rabbinic cultures. Torah scholars of the respective other culture constituted the “internal Other” in relation to whom local rabbis defined themselves. The superiority claimed by Palestinian sages based on their native link to the Land of Israel is accepted in the earlier Babylonian sources but rejected in the later ones, which argue that Torah scholarship should be the sole criterium for assessing sages. Membership in a shared textual community becomes more relevant than geographical or cultural factors. Nevertheless, Derrida’s hermeneutical model of the host-guest relationship remains a useful framework for examining these narratives.

In the first chapter Kiperwasser shows how the symbolic significance of the Land of Israel, expressed in the terminology of “going up” to Palestine and “down” to Babylonia, could lead to “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu) against Babylonian migrants in Palestinian narratives that depict Babylonia “as a dystopic place, inferior to their own land” (25). The biblical ancestor Abraham originated in Mesopotamia and was promised a new land. Babylonia was associated with language confusion (Tower of Babel) and topographic issues (lowest place on earth). “To emphasize the authority of the Land of Israel,” the author argues, the Palestinian rabbinic narrators “added many dystopic elements to the symbolic geography of Babylonia” (31). Students who wanted to depart from the Land of Israel for whatever reason had to ask their teachers for permission. In Kiperwasser’s use of a story about R. Yasa (y. Ber. 3:1, 6a–b) a tendency to read more into a story than is explicitly said is noticeable. Whereas the text merely says that R. Yasa asked to go to Bosra in Syria temporarily, to meet his mother there, Kiperwasser assumes that he “is probably looking to leave the Land of Israel” and return to Babylonia (32). Similarly, in regard to another story about R. Yasa’s encounter with a jester in a bathhouse (y. Ber. 2:8, 5c), Kiperwasser embellishes the tale: “Finding himself surrounded by a crowd of naked people, our shy Babylonian felt uncomfortable; perhaps he was still covering his nudity, as was customary in his homeland” (69). In such embellishments the sphere of narratology seems to have given way to historical reconstruction.

The author points to the use of the metaphors of “mother” (Land of Israel) and “stepmother” (Babylonia) in Palestinian rabbinic texts. The actual terminology used is “wife of his father” (y. Ber. 2:8, 5c) and “foreign woman” (y. Moed Qat. 3:1, 71c). It would have been interesting to know more about the concept of the “stepmother” in a society in which polygamy may have been practiced and in which levirate marriage was known. In the Babylonian Talmud (b. Pes. 87b) the perspective is different: Babylonia is seen as the “mother’s house” from which the people of Israel emerged. Whereas contemporary Roman (Byzantine) Palestine subjected Jews to harsh Roman decrees, Sasanian Persia is presented as a place of refuge and redemption from death and the netherworld.

Following Daniel Boyarin and Joshua Schwartz, Kiperwasser argues that Palestinian stereotypes against Babylonians and stories that mock the “internal Other” enable the Palestinian narrators to shape their own identity, “cultivating their distinctiveness” (39). The humour that is sometimes used in these narratives resembles the notion of *Schadenfreude* that is linked to expressions of superiority. Three Yerushalmi stories about the mistreatment of Babylonian

arrivals (y. Ber. 2:8, 5c) are re-examined. They contain physical violence against those perceived as Others but end with the death of the aggressor, so that the Other “triumphs” at the end. What is important to note, though, is that the aggressors are local commoners, whereas the Other is always a Torah scholar. The rabbinic narrators would have deemed the Babylonian scholar superior to the local *ignoramus*. Local stereotypes associated with Sasanian Persia are challenged in these stories. Sometimes the narrators even incorporate the values of their “internal Others” while maintaining their cultural boundaries (Gen. Rab. 59:4 par. y. Peah 1:1, 15d) or express empathy with them (y. Moed Qat. 3:7, 83c).

The chapter about “The Appointment of Babylonians” suffers from the uncertainty of the meaning of *minui* in Palestinian sources. The explanation given (“ordination as a ‘licensed’ sage—someone entitled to an exemption from fees and taxes specified by Roman law,” 101 n. 1) seems to reflect early Byzantine law rather than the time of Hillel and Hanina b. Hama. Also problematic is the use of the late Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah as (historical?) evidence for Rabbi’s annual appointment of two candidates. In any case, the stories about appointments indicate that competition between the two centres and Palestinian hierarchy claims continued into late antiquity. In later amoraic times, Babylonian storytellers knowledgeable of the Palestinian claims created counter-narratives that shifted between mocking Palestinians and reducing the conflict. The author ends his analysis with a Yerushalmi narrative about the Babylonian Rav Kahana’s death and bequeathing of his “books,” that is, his personal library to a Palestinian scholar, suggesting that the Babylonian Other belongs to the Land of Israel, “to his land, to his culture, to his textual community” (204).

This is an excellent study of Talmudic narratives about rabbinic travellers between East and West, Sasanian Persia and Roman Palestine. It is based on (post)modern literary theories and a cultural studies approach and reveals the many hidden meanings and nuances of the stories. The book can be recommended not only to students and scholars of Rabbinics, Ancient Judaism, and Ancient History but to anyone interested in ancient travel, culture clashes, and identity formation.

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