Beatty on Berthelot, 'Jews and Their Roman Rivals: Pagan Rome's Challenge to Israel'

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A common cliché about Jewish history is that Jews existed as a people apart, living alongside Gentile populations but generally remaining separate and culturally distinct. Such views might underpin colloquial conceptions of Jewish identity but would hold little water with the vast majority of serious researchers of Jewish history. As the conservative British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper once remarked, “if the old Hebrew prophets and the medieval rabbis thundered about the distinctness of the Jews, that may well indicate a maddening preference, among their inattentive disciples, for assimilation.”[1] Katell Berthelot’s recently published book, near encyclopedic in its range, explores this historical problem—Jewish mimesis of the dominant cultures in which they lived—returning to the foundational moment of rabbinic Judaism’s encounters with Roman imperial power on the eve of the empire’s conversion to Christianity.

This is certainly not a book that anyone could accuse of moving too quickly. Starting with Jewish encounters with various pre-Roman empires, Berthelot moves through the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, the Persians, and the Hellenistic Kingdoms. According to Berthelot, as empires rose and fell, what remained the same was a complicated intellectual interaction between Judaism and the regnant imperial politics. Rather than accepting the Assyrian king as a warrior king or the earthly representative of the god Ashur, the authors of Deuteronomy proffered their God as a superior alternative. Rather than accepting Neo-Babylonian rulers as the wisest kings, the God of Isaiah was wiser. The idea of a universal God was weaponized by both Achaemenids and Judeans. Homi Bhabha’s idea of colonial mimesis is subtly employed here, as the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic rubbed up against each other within shared cultural frameworks. Biblical authors resisted the imperialisms of the ancient Near East but were also bound up within their political assumptions. And by rehearsing all this, a very thick foundation is laid for later arguments about how and why Jews interacted with Roman political ideologies.

Proceeding slowly and deliberately, Berthelot examines the various challenges that Roman politics posed for Jews in the Second Temple period and later, as well as the obverse: the Jewish challenge to Rome. Some of these challenges were far from novel; Roman claims to be “establishing a universal, benevolent, and law-abiding rule, or the claim to benefit from the support of the gods” reiterated older imperial claims of the Babylonians or the Persians (p. 89). On the other hand, Rome claimed to
rule in the name of a specific people, whether conceived as an *ethnos* or a *demos*, and this was new. In addition, Jews were living in a Diaspora that was already extant across the Mediterranean basin, with ample opportunities for Jews and Romans to interact. As unpacked by Berthelot’s investigation, Jews and Romans held to self-images that were mutually reflective. Both claimed to be divinely ordained in their actions; both "had a clear sense of a historical destiny that was both unique and the will of the gods or God" (p. 107). Both claimed to be holders of universal religious and political truths and residents of a universal city. Talmudic authors subtly presented Israel as preceding Rome, in the chronological sense as well as in the sense of being of greater global import. In various rabbinic texts, "Rome" was assimilated into the biblical figure of the wicked brother Esau, with Israel valorized as Jacob, a trope more commonly associated with later Christian-Jewish polemics that Berthelot shows had an earlier history. Yet, at the same time, this was a one-way street: Jewish authors debated the nature of Rome, as it compared to a supposedly superior Israel, at a proportion far higher to any Roman interest in the Judeans. On the other hand, a number of physical actions exemplified the Roman-Jewish challenge, whether the crushing of the Judean revolt between 66-73 CE or the building of a temple to Jupiter in Jerusalem after the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The post-Constantine conversion was thus not the starting point for a Roman-Christian hostility toward Jews. Rather, antipathy toward Jews was already well entrenched, and Judaism itself was recreated through this sociopolitical clash with Rome.

Berthelot explores all this by moving fluidly from exegesis to hermeneutics to social and political history and even numismatics (to which she regularly returns). And, for sure, the argument is not unconvincing. But it is also not really clear who this is for? The chapters have a length and a level of granular detail that will probably be off-putting to undergraduates. The author’s supply is always going to outstrip demand here. The regular literature reviews within each section will be of great use to emerging scholars and doctoral candidates but probably do not provide anything new for specialists. The opening claims about Rome/Israel as a transhistorical case study in imperialism are well made, but the subsequent chapters remain singularly embedded in ancient and late antique historiography. This is a large work, in terms of both the time frames covered and the sheer page length. At times it approaches being more of a reference book than a conventional monograph and it ultimately remains a book that will demand hard work and patience on the part of readers.

Note


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