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Ishay Rosen-Zvi. *Demonic Desires: "Yetzer Hara" and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 256 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4339-0.

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Toward A Redescription of Yetzer

A Google search of "conscience" reveals several examples of devils and angels hovering over a person's shoulders. Such images beg the questions: how does an abstract concept become two hypostasized beings and how do people view these beings? In his recent monograph on the y*etzer hara*, Ishay Rosen-Zvi provides a penetrating foray into a narrow theme that offers illuminating insights into the broader topic of Judaism in late antiquity. Besides addressing the always present need to measure the extent of internal and external determinants of Jewish phenomena, Rosen-Zvi convincingly demonstrates the possibility of reconstructing the chronological development of a concept from the Bible to the Babylonian Talmud. Simultaneously, he describes the *yetzer* in contextual terms without forcing it to conform to the sensibilities of post-Enlightenment rationalism. In this carefully argued work, Rosen-Zvi highlights several important principles. The rabbinic yetzer represents more of an internal, Jewish conceit than a Hellenistic idea especially because rabbinic literature does not assume a mind-body duality. The yetzer is a demon that attacks the whole person. Typical of Rosen-Zvi's subtle reading is his distinction between the mind fighting for control of the body and the yetzer enlisting the mind or the body to dominate the person. While similar to late antique Christian images of demons attacking individuals, the evil yetzer is a uniquely internalized, demonic being. Rather than fit the representation of the evil yetzer as a wicked, besieging king into a procrustean bed of biblical, qumranic, tannaitic, hellenistic, or patristic conceptions of evil or the yetzer, Rosen-Zvi firmly situates the image within the theology of Babylonian rabbis.

In the introduction, Rosen-Zvi nicely presents a close philological reading coupled with analysis of historical and theoretical models in scholarship on the yetzer. He begins by unpacking a rabbinic exegesis of Ecclesiastes 9:14 from the Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim* 32b. Typical of the work as a whole, Rosen-Zvi carefully examines a textual artifact, in this case the comparison of the yetzer to an evil king besieging a city. Rather than adding this image to an anthology of definitions for the evil yetzer, Rosen-Zvi delineates the unique features of yetzer as evil king to form the basis for innovative synchronic claims about the history of the yetzer and rabbinic anthropology. The notion of the evil yetzer as an independent, hypostasized entity represents a late Babylonian development in contrast to previous views of a complete and fully operational evil yetzer as a biblical or tannaitic phenomenon. Furthermore, Rosen-Zvi rejects recent scholarship on rabbinic anthropology that characterizes the yetzer as desire to be controlled. In contrast, he argues that it is an internalized demonic being to be defeated. Utilizing an arsenal of qumranic texts, Neusnerian periodization, and Ruth Padel's literal reading of demonic language, Rosen-Zvi traces specific stages in the biography of the yetzer: from internal thought, to the technical term "evil yetzer," to antinomian yetzer, and to the demonic yetzer. These stages are united in the latest strata of the Babylonian Talmud.

In chapter 1, "The Torah Spoke regarding the *Yetzer*: Tannaitic Literature," Rosen-Zvi convincingly demonstrates two characterizations of the yetzer. The school of Rabbi Akiva understands the yetzer as a natural inclination toward self-interest whereas the school of Rabbi Ishmael innovatively represents the yetzer as a substantive "demonic enemy" essential to its anthropology. Contrary to scholarly consensus and despite a Mishnaic reference to two *yetzerim* (mBer. 9:5), Rosen-Zvi shows that there is only one tannaitic yetzer. The concept of two *yetzerim* represents a later, amoraic development. Oaths and Torah assist in the human struggle against the evil yetzer, who can be surprisingly skilled in rabbinic dialectic. Defeat of the evil yetzer may involve enlisting it into divine service or excising it completely. While compara-

tive material from Greek philosophy and tragedy enables Rosen-Zvi to differentiate the tannaitic concept of the yetzer from the body-soul dichotomy or tripartite division of the soul into appetites, passion, and reason, the locus and opponent of the yetzer is unclear. This may result from the lack of precision in rabbinic anthropology where the opponent of the yetzer seems to be the person, not the soul. Similarly, the evil yetzer deceives from within the person, but the rabbinic texts do not explicitly explain where. The yetzer can be antinomian or simply desire or a character trait like anger. Or the hypostasized yetzer leads people astray to anger and idolatry. Most striking is a passage from Tosefta Avodah Zarah 6:17 comparing worship of Mercury to worshipping one's yetzer, as if an internal god.

In chapter 2, "*Yetzer* and Other Demons: Patristic Parallels," a comparison with the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, Clement, and Origen indicate that patristic demons and the evil yetzer similarly assail the individual with soul-polluting evil thoughts leading to sinfulness. The internalization of this demonic function may explain why rabbinic literature views demons as a normal part of human experience unconnected to human sinfulness. Patristic demons, Rosen-Zvi notes, also differ from the evil yetzer because they have mantic powers and the power to harm physically.

Chapter 3, "*Yetzer* at Qumran: Proto-Rabbinic?" offers a nuanced explanation of the extraordinary phrase, "let not the plan of *yetzer ra* mislead you" (4Q417 2 II 12 Sapiential Work A or 4QInstruction). This earliest example of the term "*yetzer ra*" and its reification as an active misleading agent represents a great innovation over the biblical term. Rosen-Zvi, however, carefully avoids equating it with the rabbinic term. The qumranic usage is less defined as the rabbinic with the yetzer being homologous with the heart, or tendency, at the same time as blurring its internal and cosmological provenance. Moreover, we do not have the concept of two yetzerim in Qumran. This leads Rosen-Zvi to a critique of historian Daniel Boyarin's claim that the two yetzerim are coterminous in rabbinic literature. Rosen-Zvi argues, in contrast, that the dualistic model is rare in tannaitic literature. Moreover, the yetzer is represented differently in different strata. The school of Rabbi Akiva does not mention the term "yetzer hara" at all, but the school of Rabbi Ishmael uses "yetzer" and "yetzer hara" interchangeably. The process of reification and internalization begins at Qumran, but does not end there.

Chapter 4 traces the amoraic development of yetzer into a more active agent, especially apparent in the representation of the yetzer as a heavy burden, enemy, thief, trickster dragging humans to sins like murder and idolatry, and "dangerous predator" (p. 69). This becomes even more pronounced in the Bavli, where the yetzer acquires physical characteristics (like a fly, wheat crouching at door, kidney) and becomes a national enemy. Particularly unique, however, is the emergence of the yetzer as the enemy of Torah observance with a ubiquity underlying its centrality to amoraic anthropology.

Although demonic, the yetzer cannot force the individual to sin, but like a rabbi, must use persuasion. In chapter 5, "Refuting the *Yetzer*: The Limits of Rabbinic Discursive Worlds," Rosen-Zvi observes, however, that the yetzer often adopts positions that potentially subvert the rabbinic worldview. One cannot argue with the yetzer but must summarily reject it. This leads to one of the book's most significant conclusions: the "*yetzer* takes the role of the heretical partner with whom the very act of negotiation is to be avoided. Scholars have long noticed the strong dialogic nature of the rabbinic study house; the *yetzer*, in the sources cited above, marks the limits of such dialogism" (p. 101). Chapter 6, "Sexualizing the *Yetzer*," returns to the critique of overemphasis on a sexualized yetzer in Jewish studies and particularly in Talmudic scholarship. Rosen-Zvi argues that the sexualized yetzer is solely Babylonian and primarily post-amoraic. In chapter 7, "Weak Like a Female, Strong Like a Male: *Yetzer* and Gender," the author shows that while men and women possess a yetzer, men are the ones who struggle against it. The yetzer itself is more closely associated with women because it is often characterized in feminine terms or even instigated by women.

The representation of the yetzer as a reified, internal, demonic predator to be subdued as a prerequisite for fulfilling mitzvot reflects a discourse of conquering one's yetzer, not one's self. Rather than seeing the yetzer as another example of a "new care of the self," Rosen-Zvi reads it as a strategy of rabbinic ethics allowing for human choice and responsibility without compromising a belief in a concrete source of sin (p. 132).

Besides a few minor typos (e.g., "you imay" [p. 65] and "Sriac" [p. 117]), there is very little to fault in this book. Even though the work includes previously published articles, the author and editors do a fine job eliminating excessive repetition, a potential hazard when integrating separate essays into a monograph. I do have a few minor quibbles. While correctly arguing that king yetzer does not lead a battle between soul and body, first Rosen-Zvi locates the struggle "inside the soul itself" and then later places it "inside the body," not the soul (p. 2). It

does become clear throughout the book that the battle actually occurs in the person. Also, I would have preferred a crisper terminological distinction between "monastic" (rejecting and controlling the body) and "ascetic" (controlling any improper inclination). For example, on page 37, the observation that the ascetic ethos is absent in the rabbinic yetzer implies that rabbis reject controlling the yetzer when the author is (correctly) maintaining that the rabbinic yetzer is not synonymous with the body.

These minor comments no doubt instigated by this reviewer's critical yetzer do not detract from a well-written book that should become the standard work on the topic. Rosen-Zvi skillfully models the astute integration of textual analysis, broad contextualization, and attentiveness to issues in scholarship. He offers substantive historical analysis with the appropriate consideration of the limits of essentialist discourse.

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