

# H-Net Reviews

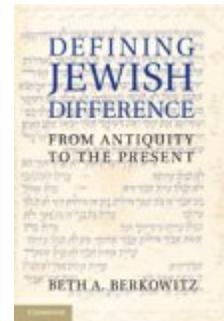
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Beth A. Berkowitz. *Defining Jewish Difference: From Antiquity to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. viii + 280 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01371-1.

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## Ethnicity and/or Religious Practice: Defining Jewish Identity through the Ages

The past decade has seen considerable debate over the birth of the religious category of Judaism from its earlier ethnic origins. The birth date of Judaism varies. Shaye Cohen locates its origins in the Judaizing program of the Hasmonean state. Seth Schwartz describes the emergence of Judaism *qua* religion as a “disembedded” category that developed in the late fourth and early fifth centuries in response to the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Jews began to identify themselves in contradistinction to Christians as a result of the Christian imperial authorities’ efforts to categorize them along religious lines. Thus, as Daniel Boyarin has argued, Judaism ought not to be seen as the parent religion to Christianity but as its twin.

Beth Berkowitz offers us a fresh perspective on how Jews have described their differences from other peoples through the prism of the interpretation of a single verse—Leviticus 18:3. Her book provides a useful lens for understanding how Jews defined themselves in different historical circumstances; it also smartly uses biblical interpretation as a vehicle to chart the course of Jewish attempts to shape their identity in response to encounters with other cultures. Throughout history Jewish legal authorities have negotiated the separatist requirements of this verse with their need to make space for Jews within majority cultures. Berkowitz pays attention to how “readers’ location in space and time as well as their orientation to the biblical text” have shaped their interpretation of the prohibition on Egyptian and Canaanite law in Lev 18:3 and “how their assumptions about and aspirations

for Jewishness in turn shaped the substance and method of their hermeneutics” (p. 12). By charting this verse’s interpretive history, Berkowitz gives us a fuller flavor of the nuances and complexities involved in defining Jewish identity in different periods and places. The result is a work which will transform previous notions of how Jews have historically defined Jewishness. In the course of the book, Berkowitz engages several important and current scholarly debates about the formation of Jewish collective identity, assimilation, hermeneutics, and the place of foreign law.

At the heart of this book is Berkowitz’s close reading of Lev 18:3 in chapter 2. The relevant verses as produced by the author are: “(1) The Lord spoke to Moses saying: (2) Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: I the Lord am your God; (3) Like the practice of the land of Egypt where you have dwelled, you should not practice, and like the practice of the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you, you should not practice, and in their laws you should not go; (4) My rules you should practice and my laws you should heed to go according to them; I am the Lord your God; (5) You should heed my laws and my rules, which if a person practices them shall live by them; I am the Lord” (p. 27).

As textualized, Lev 18:3 offers two different types of interpretation. When read minimally within verses 1-5, Lev 18:3 delineates a hard ethnic separation between Israelites and Canaanites and Israelites and Egyptians. On the other hand, when Lev 18:3 is read against the entire

chapter, the ethnic differences fall away and sexual and moral distinctions emerge. In this case, the Israelites are not to follow the practices and laws of the Canaanites and Egyptians because they engage in sexually deviant and immoral behavior. Such an interpretation allows readers to imagine a scenario in which the differences between Israelites, Egyptians, and Canaanites could fall away.

What follows in the remainder of Berkowitz's work, are specific examples of Jewish (and one Christian) interpretations of Lev 18:3 throughout history. Chapter 3 examines Philo's exegesis of Lev 18:3 in his *De congressu*. The first-century Alexandrian Jewish philosopher uses Lev 18:3 to explain why Abraham waited ten years before taking Hagar as his concubine. Philo allegorizes Egypt in this verse as representing the period of childhood in human development when people are unable to master their emotions. Canaan represents the period of adolescence, when the soul is tempted by evil but has not yet learned to master it. Thus God's instruction to resist the practices of Egypt and Canaan in Lev 18:3 is meant to encourage the Israelites to develop into well-behaved adults. After careful consideration of manuscripts of *De congressu*, Berkowitz concludes that Philo's work underscores the tension he experienced between the presentation of Egypt in the Bible and that of his own day, wherein he sought to strike a balance between Jewish exclusivism and Jewish participation in Egyptian culture.

In chapter 4, Berkowitz demonstrates how Clement of Alexandria in *Stromateis* preserves the ethnic language of this verse. For Clement historical ethnic Israel and a straightforward understanding of law play a significant role in his conception of the Christian community. Berkowitz then compares the interpretation of Lev 18:3 in Clement with its interpretation in the Sifra. Both extend this passage's legal requirement to people beyond historical Israel and to new practices.

The Sifra is again the subject of Berkowitz's focus in chapter 5. Here she concentrates on two passages from this text and focuses on the extent to which Roman behavioral practices are relevant to defining Jewishness. This is an excellent example of how two different readings of Lev 18:3 are used to define Jewishness by the rabbis. In one passage the rabbis carve out space in which Jews can comfortably participate in Roman imperial culture. In a second passage, adherence to Lev 18:3 requires rejection of Roman practices which are defined as idolatrous even where certain practices do not *prima facie* appear to be so.

In chapter 6, Berkowitz turns to the fifth-century rab-

binic text Genesis Rabbah and demonstrates how Jewishness is defined in a variety of different ways, including by ethnicity and religion but also by moral probity, physical appearance, theological stance, ritual life, sexual practice, economics, and demographics. The parshah both "naturalizes" and complicates these modes of Jewish difference using intertextual strategies which produce paradigms of difference. Berkowitz examines how these constructions of Jewish identity reflect the situation of Jews and Christians in fifth-century Palestine.

The Babylonian Talmud contains two pericopes which deal with Lev 18:3. In Sanhedrin 52b, the redactor "nativizes" the gentile's practice of decapitation by sword, by declaring it originally Jewish and thus allowing for a degree of Jewish syncretism. On the other hand, the gentile practice of burning royal property on the occasion of a king's death discussed in Avodah Zarah 11a is deemed incidental to gentile religion and therefore falls outside the scope of Lev 18:3's prohibition, which is here limited to idolatrous practices of worship. In chapter 7, Berkowitz notices that these Talmudic texts discuss how to restrict the scope of Lev 18:3's prohibition.

Berkowitz turns to the treatment of Lev 18:3 in medieval halakhic authors in chapter 8. For the Tosafists Nissim Gerondi and Joseph Colon, "their laws" serves as a moment to engage in "interreligious polemics, to construct political theory, and to analyze the Jewish psyche" (p. 22). Each of these interpreters engages the text from a rationalist point of view. Nissim Gerondi, himself a physician for the Spanish king, a Jewish textual scholar, and legal arbiter for Barcelona's Jews, reads "their laws" in light of his theory of kingship which he developed in his sermons. Joseph Colon's treatment of Lev 18:3 shows interest in morality and psychology as well as rationalism. Berkowitz then considers the codification of these sources in Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* and in Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's responsa about men's clothing and the celebration of Thanksgiving, and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's responsum about the practice of placing flowers on a coffin, are treated in chapter 9. Both identify rationality and modesty as markers of Jewish identity and both deal with whether these practices were originally Jewish or gentile. Each considers the intentionality of the participant, whether religious or secular, imitative or unalloyed by gentile intentions. For Feinstein it is often the gentile's intention that persuades him, whereas for Yosef it is the Jew's intention that is determinative. Berkowitz considers how these help define Jewishness and under-

scores not only the use of Lev 18:3 to define Jews against gentiles but also how it has been employed to define one group of Jews against other Jews.

Berkowitz's work is astounding in its scope, both in the issues it takes on and in the breadth of the material she analyzes. As someone interested in identity formation in late antiquity, I found Berkowitz's application of Aaron Johnson and Denise Kimber Buell's work about the importance of ethnic language to Clement of Alexandria's and the Sifra's treatment of Leviticus 18:1-5 to be most interesting. Each has a universalizing rhetoric while retaining ethnic (Clement) and genealogical (Sifra) categories. When set against a context of Romanizing practices in Palestine where Jews attended and participated in performances and dressed like gentiles, the Sifra's interpretation of Lev 18:1-5 reveals much. It is the slipperiness of the straightforward ethnic terminology vis-à-vis the practices retained in the intricate weaving of Leviticus 18 that makes these readings and forma-

tions of identity possible.

One of Berkowitz's greatest contributions in *Defining Jewishness* takes me back to where I began. Scholars of ancient Judaism have traced the birth of Judaism to various periods in Jewish history and even as late as the modern period. Berkowitz's analysis cuts through this debate and the use of jargon. In her analysis of Leviticus Rabbah, she points to its redactors' strategic use of ethnic and religious terminology. That both sit side by side in the same text demonstrates a multiplicity of models of Jewish identity. Her suggestion that we look beyond moments of change from ethnicity to religion and make mental space for the fact that there were a variety of ways and a range of markers that defined Jewishness is well taken.

This book should be read by students and teachers of the history of interpretation, hermeneutics, identity formation, rabbinics, as well as cultural and social historians of Jews and Judaism.

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