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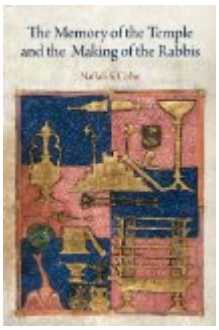

Naftali S. Cohn. *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 248 pp. $69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4457-1.

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Naftali Cohn's *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* tackles an important question concerning the Mishnah. Redacted in Palestine at the beginning of the third century CE, this ancient six-volume digest of Jewish law includes, surprisingly, a plethora of material dealing with Temple worship and ritual. In recent years, scholars have sought to understand why the authors of the Mishnah would devote so much time and energy to detailing cultic ritual when the Jerusalem Temple no longer stood (it had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE). After surveying a number of prior solutions, Cohn proposes his own: "In contrast to these earlier explanations ... my contention is that in writing or talking about the Temple and its rituals, the rabbis who created the *Mishnah* were arguing for their own authority over post-destruction Judaean law and ritual practice. They were asserting that their own tradition was correct and that all Judeans should follow their dictates" (p. 3).

Cohn bases his thesis on two premises. First, he relies on those "revisionist" scholars who, challenging the standard historiographical narrative of rabbinic hegemony after 70 CE, argue that the rabbis were, in reality a marginal and embattled Jewish sect competing for prominence and power in a complex post-destruction Jewish world. Second, Cohn demonstrates how, despite the Temple's disappearance, the image and memory of the Temple continued to serve as the central symbol and privileged "site of authority" for non-rabbinic groups, including apocalyptic Jews and early followers of Jesus. Thus, with these assumptions, Cohn posits that by reimagining their predecessors as controlling Temple worship, including priestly life (in the *past*), the rabbis were, in effect, claiming power and legitimizing their own authority (in the *present*).

To support his claim, Cohn examines a distinctive genre of Mishnaic discourse: ritual narratives. Rather than formulate rabbinic law in the typical apodictic or casuistic fashion (e.g., "do not allow your bull to gore" or "if your bull gores ... then ..."), this peculiar Mishnaic genre presents Jewish ritual by narrating how the practice used

to be followed (e.g.,"The High Priest used to bring ... "). Interestingly, this literary form appears predominantly in sections dealing with the Temple. According to Cohn, this is no coincidence. As the Temple served as the contested site of authority in late antiquity (as it is today!), the rabbis validated and strengthened their own claims to power by constructing, or better yet, reinventing a "rabbinicized" Temple. In these historical recreations, or what some scholars have termed "counter-narratives," members of the High Court were now depicted as empowered proto-rabbis (albeit without the title "rabbi") who not only controlled Temple procedure, but also overruled sectarian rivals, and even, at times, changed priestly ritual. Moreover, in what I regard as the most interesting section of the book, Cohn cleverly details how the Mishnah geographically situates this "proto-rabbinic" High Court at a central location within the Temple itself. Through a clever reading of Ezekiel 40-43, the authors of the Mishnah replace the Holy of Holies with a "rabbinicized" High Court as the "most important space of the Temple" (p. 87). In short, by reshaping older material, and, with it, constructing new memories of sacred practice and space, the rabbis could present their own hegemony as a natural continuation of the past rather than, as it truly was, a sharp break from it.

Sensitive to the literary dimension as well, Cohn shows how Temple ritual narratives use the grammatically peculiar "iterative past," wherein successive past and participle verbs are used interchangeably. According to Cohn, this produces the added rhetorical affect that these Temple practices "took place repeatedly and regularly" and that "these events that happened in the past are also what the law is, what ***ought*** to be done in the Temple" (p. 8). In other words, the past subtly becomes the perpetual present. Moreover, Cohn demonstrates how the Mishnah frequently interrupts the Temple ritual narrative by interjecting other rabbinic voices who recall the past differently. While he acknowledges that these "interjections" impinge upon the sought-after uncontested historicity of these memories, it has, on the flip side, Cohn claims, the poetic effect of placing "the rabbis front and center" in the priestly world (p. 70). And, in some cases, it even brings select rabbis, at least on a literary level, into the very spatial domain they could not enter, the Holy of Holies.

Cohn's claims are solid, substantiated, and well defended. However, the idea that the rabbis retroject themselves back into Temple history and reshape earlier priestly material as a method to address their own concerns or, more specifically, as a tool to legitimate their own authority has already been argued by, among others, Ishay Rosen-Zvi, Daniel Stoekel ben Ezra, Beth Berkowitz, and Moshe Simon-Shoshan.[1] And, Cohn's literary claim that the authors of the Mishnah used the distinctive genre of Temple ritual narratives as a rhetorical tool to blur the lines between past and present ("this is how it was done and should always be") has also been suggested by Simon-Shoshan and Rosen-Zvi. Although Cohn, to be sure, cites these authors, and (in the footnotes) states that he is "drawing" or "building" from their ideas, he could have done more in terms of directly engaging with these scholars. Had he done so, he would have accentuated the innovative elements of his work, which, while present, are sometimes difficult to uncover.

That said, Cohn's study does build on his predecessor's ideas in a number of important ways. First, he develops a ***comprehensive*** literary analysis of Mishnaic "Temple ritual narratives," showing, in great detail, how their content and manner of narration is thoroughly bound up with the rabbis' own social reality (which includes more than just their quest for power). To help in this endeavor, chapter 1 lays out the social context wherein Cohn argues that the rabbis imagined themselves as Roman-like jurists who served as authority figures for the entire Jewish community in areas of ritual practice. And, in chapter 5, Cohn nicely sets forth the wider context of Temple discourse that emerges in non-rabbinic circles. Finally, Cohn

deftly applies the methods and insights developed by his predecessors to Mishnaic passages that, heretofore, have not been treated. To bolster his readings, Cohn selectively and carefully draws from various literary theories, including works on narrativity (Gerard Genette and Hayden White), memory (Maurice Halbwachs and Barry Schwartz), and discourse (Michel Foucault).

The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis is a pleasure to read, convincingly argued, and accessible to specialists and nonspecialists alike. Although there are no new groundbreaking methods or claims put forward, the work makes an important contribution to Mishnaic studies in such key areas as narrative and law, discourse and authority, and memory and ritual.

Note

[1]. Beth A. Berkowitz, ***Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Orr Scharf, ***The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Temple, Gender and Midrash***, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Moshe Simon-Shoshan, ***Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, ***The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity***, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).