



Rivka Ulmer. *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash.* Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009. Illustrations. vi + 404 pp. \$155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-11-022392-7.



Reviewed by Marc Bregman

Published on H-Judaic (May, 2011)

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This book is a collection of ten interrelated essays, with numerous figures, color plates, and tables of motifs, by the prolific scholar of rabbinic literature, Rivka Ulmer, utilizing her additional expertise in Egyptology, art history, and cultural theory. A number of the essays that have been published previously are here revised, updated, and integrated into a monograph on the significance of Egypt, as a cultural icon, in rabbinic texts. The concept of “cultural icon” is best explained in the introduction to chapter 7, “Cleopatra, Isis and Serapis”: “For the purpose of this chapter a cultural icon is understood to be a representative of a particular culture or a famous individual that emerged to signify this culture to a sizable segment of the known world of antiquity, the Roman provinces and even Non-Roman territories” (p. 215).

Ulmer’s introduction gives an overview of each chapter and explains their connections. Chapter 1 deals with the various named Egyptian pharaohs mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and concludes with the mostly unspecified image of

“Pharaoh of Egypt” in midrashic literature. Chapter 2 describes how the Nile was equivalent to Egypt and how this supremely positive symbol, indicative of life in Egypt, is transformed in midrashic texts into a negative symbol, indicative of idolatry and death. Chapter 3 deals with the reflection in midrashic literature of a number of Egyptian festivals, including the pharaoh’s birthday or coronation festival; the Nile festival; and the *Mayoumas*, a difficult term, with ambiguous historical references. Chapter 4 explores the use of magic in Egypt from ancient times until late antiquity focusing particularly on the comparison of Joseph’s burial in the Nile, as related in a number of places in rabbinic literature, to the legend of the burial of Osiris. This chapter also includes an extensive discussion of Moses as magician in rabbinic and extra-rabbinic sources. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the similarities and the differences between historiography and the midrashic interpretation of the past by applying the philosophical theories of Theodor Adorno and Ernst Cassirer. The continuation focuses on the use in

rabbinic literature of the term *iqonin*, which refers to statues, such as those of the Roman emperor Hadrian. The chapter concludes with a discussion of mummy portraits and other Egyptian funeral practices as reflected in rabbinic literature. Chapter 6 explores the Egyptian city of Alexandria as reflected in rabbinic literature. The following chapter focuses on the last Egyptian ruler Cleopatra VII and the cults of Isis and Serapis. Chapter 8 deals with Egyptian gods, language, and customs as mementos of Egyptian culture reflected in rabbinic literature. Chapter 9 discusses the symbol of the divine eye in ancient Egypt and rabbinic literature, while chapter 10 is an extensive exploration of the “Finding of Moses” in art and text.

A major point of Ulmer’s research is that Rome and Roman officials are frequently compared to Egypt and the pharaohs in rabbinic literature. The oppressive nature of Rome (regularly referred to as “the Evil Empire”) was an everyday experience for Jews living under its rule in late antiquity and a constant reminder of the suffering of the Egyptian exile of the biblical period. A parade example of this point, mentioned in various places in Ulmer’s book, is found in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu midrashim on the triennial lection beginning in Exodus 7:9. These midrashic materials include Tanhuma (printed version), *Va’era*, sections 3-4, 11-13; Tanhuma (Buber edition), *Va’era*, sections 11-15; Exodus Rabbah, chapter 9; and most important an early, complete Tanhuma-Yelammedenu homily preserved in a Cairo Genizah fragment (Cambridge University Library TS C2 46).

The opening halakhic proem contains the following material (reviewer’s translation):

And why did [the sages of the Mishnah] see fit to compare the coiling of the snake to royalty? It is because the evil empire [Rome] may be compared to a snake. R. Yehoshua be’ Nehemiah said: See what is written, *Its voice goes like a snake* (Jer. 46:22). Why is [the evil empire] compared to a

snake? For just as the snake hisses in a whisper and kills, as it is written *Shall the snake bite without a whisper* (Ecc. 10:11), so the [Roman] empire whispers about a man and kills him. For behold, he is put in prison. Behold, they put upon him a [death] sentence. Thus, *Its voice goes like a snake*. But does a snake have a voice?! The reason [this is written] is that just as the snake hisses in a whisper with its mouth and kills, so the empire whispers with its mouth and kills. This is the reason it [the empire] may be compared to a snake. Another interpretation. Why may it [the empire] be compared to a snake? Because just as a snake twists deviously, so too the [Roman] empire is devious in its ways. It [the Roman empire through its prosecutor] says to a man: What are you, a good man or a bad man? And he says to him: I am good! And they [the Roman court] say to him: How many people did you kill? And he says: I did not kill! And he [the Roman prosecutor] says to him: And who was with you and with what did you kill him [the deceased], with a sword or with a club or with a stone. He doesn’t desist until he [the Roman prosecutor or judge] gives him condemnation and kills him. For he is devious with him and kills him. Just as the snake twists deviously on him, so the [Roman] empire is devious in its ways. Therefore, when God sought to send Moses unto Pharaoh, God said to him: Moses, I know that just as this snake twists deviously, so too Pharaoh twists deviously. But behold, you are going unto him. If he seeks to twist deviously against you, say to Aaron that he should wield his staff upon him, just as one strikes the snake. From where? From what we read in the lection *If Pharaoh shall speak to you, etc. [saying: Give a sign for yourselves, then you shall say to Aaron: Take your staff and cast it before Pharaoh, and it will turn into a serpent]* (Exod. 7:9).[1]

The symbol of Egypt in rabbinic literature is certainly a topic that deserves scholarly discussion. Ulmer’s book is a major contribution to this discussion. It is remarkable for the specificity of its topic explored using a vast array of texts and

pictorial images, combined with an impressive theoretical sophistication. It is highly recommended for those interested in rabbinic literature and Egyptology.

Note

[1]. For an extensive discussion of this material, in the context of the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu genre of midrashic literature, see my *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2003), esp. 97-172.

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Citation: Marc Bregman. Review of Ulmer, Rivka. *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

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