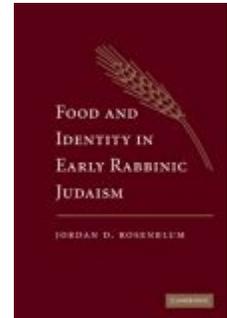




**Jordan Rosenblum.** *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiv + 223 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-19598-0.



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Following decades of excitement over new social scientific methodologies in the study of religion, more recent scholars have asked why the new insights offered by these models so often appear inadequate. Jordan Rosenblum provides one answer by actively embracing anthropological innovations in the study of early rabbinic food practices, while simultaneously insisting on a different data set. He observes that previous treatments have elided biblical law and Jewish identity, overlooking the great changes that rabbinic texts made to the food (and other) practices that have shaped later Judaisms. Asserting the necessity of his own investigation of food and identity in early Judaism, he demonstrates that crucial, anthropological approaches have not been adequate for the consideration of rabbinic sources because the questions most frequently posed have not engaged available evidence. In reply to famous early explorations of Roland Barthes, Mary Douglas, and more recently Marvin Harris, Rosenblum argues that “the absolute origins of the prohibitions against pork, for example, are irrelevant. What

matters for the Tannaim is that God instituted the ban in the Hebrew Bible. How they interpret, understand, and enact this regulation is verifiable” (p. 9). He promises a book that presents the appropriate data set, as well as the best tools and models for considering how the preparation and ingestion of food constructs identity.

The wealth of ideas in this book is impressive. Taking advantage of the careful dissertation on which the book was based, Rosenblum presents a rich, usable survey of all that relates to foodways for tannaitic Judaism. He engages scholars of rabbinic texts, of history, and of food, weaving their best insights together to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts. His focus on a limited time frame, the tannaitic period, allows for some of this expansiveness. As Rosenblum develops his argument, he draws on the many scholars who have made observations relating to the intersection of food and rabbinic practice in the service of some other exploration. With his questions and through his narrative, Rosenblum pulls these disparate insights together, setting a place for all of

them at the same table: David Kraemer's long historical overview of Jewish eating; Peter Garnsey's discussion of Greek and Roman practices; Cynthia Baker's examination of evidence for the household practices of women in the rabbinic period; Dennis Smith's consideration of a variety of meal-related Greco-Roman liturgical practices; Massimo Montanari's work on the cultural relationship of food practices; Marjorie Lehman's investigation of women in relation to Sukkot meals; and Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus's perspective on words of Torah shared over a meal, to name only a few. Rosenblum's artful presentation of these varied ideas provides an abundant banquet.

From the beginning Rosenblum rejects the notion that perception of self determines identity. He instead insists that "culinary and commensally constructed tannaitic identity is *always* about practice. Identity is not a passive experience" (p. 7, emphasis in the original). It thus follows that the sources that can teach us about rabbinic Jewish identity must also be about what the rabbis and others do, and, for Rosenblum, what they do in relationship to food. After a brief presentation about rabbinic sources, Rosenblum's insistence on the right evidence leads directly to his presentation, in chapter 1, of what is known about what the Tannaim ate, how they obtained food, how they prepared food, and what meal customs they observed. In a beautifully succinct presentation, Rosenblum synthesizes primary sources, as well as existing secondary sources that consider the local diet of bread, olive oil, and wine; the nature of local markets; labor-intensive food preparations; and an appeal to the "Roman meal structure" as the manner in which they ate (p. 30). As Rosenblum has kept his promise of consigning authors and technical language to the footnotes, the chapter flows well. If he leaves us wondering what to do with this realia, his following chapters return with their vision of the relationship of these practices to the construction of identity.

Chapters 2 through 4 concern the differences between Jew and non-Jew, male and female, rabbinic Jews and other Jews. Rosenblum considers eating practices that might appear merely to symbolize separation from an Other, but when viewed closely also prove to enact identity in a range of ways, from the construction of actual boundary markers to allowing for shared, but appropriate, commensality. After considering the most visible, symbolic abstention from pork, Rosenblum also examines the ingestion of manna, an "edible identity: ancestral access to manna provides access to Torah, the study of which is the sine qua non of male rabbinic identity" (pp. 60-61). In keeping with his focus on Tannaim, he admits that they did not create this interest in manna, but he argues that they expanded its biblical importance so that "in at least one text, the difference between Jew and non-Jew created by the former's ingestion of manna appears to be ontological, as well as metaphorical" (p. 63). Rosenblum suggests the early Christian Eucharist as an analogy of such embodied practices.

Those who prepare food also contribute to the identity and status of those who eat it. Rosenblum develops a concept that he labels the "chef/sous-chef principle," distinguishing between the work that must be done by a Jew, as opposed to a gentile, by a Jewish man as opposed to a Jewish woman, or by a rabbinic Jew as opposed to a non-rabbinic Jew (p. 83). This overarching framework of enacted difference is a particularly interesting perspective for examining foodways and women. The glimpse of women sous-chefs found by Rosenblum in tannaitic texts reveals their involvement, but simultaneously unveils the fact that the particulars of this involvement are the construction of male rabbinic Jews. Thus, with only the acknowledgement that the available evidence will not answer the question of women's practices, the rabbinic kitchen/hall-of-mirrors sends us back to learn about the work (and food) that went into constructing male rabbinic Jews.

Altogether these chapters do indeed offer a strong data set, and a helpful exploration of how recent trends in food studies can help us see this data. Rosenblum offers an excellent synthesis that helps correct explorations of rabbinic identity that neglected either a sufficiently theoretical view of foodways or, alternately, recognition of the textual nature of evidence for food practices. Rosenblum reveals a glimpse of how the right data shapes the questions, even as he encourages scholars of rabbinics to take their place as “foodies,” at the table of food studies. I can envision the book being very helpful in either a seminar on rabbinic Judaism or one on food practices and identity. By making important connections between disparate fields and studies, this book makes a strong contribution to the study of Jewish identity.

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