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Katell Berthelot’s new book represents a landmark in the study of Jewish thought under Rome. The importance of the Greco-Roman context for the study of Philo, Josephus, and rabbinic literature, the three foci of the book, has of course long been appreciated, but scholars have tended to dwell more on the Greek framework than the Roman, especially in the case of Philo and rabbinic literature. Berthelot, together with such scholars as Maren Niehoff in Philonic studies and Hayim Lapin in rabbinics, is at the forefront of a new wave of scholarship that underscores the significance of Rome.

The book invites comparison, in particular, with Hayim Lapin’s 2012 study, Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE. Lapin’s work highlights the rabbis’ “Roman provincial context, arguing that in significant ways Rabbis in Palestine are best understood as shaping their texts and their religious, social, and political stances as Roman provincials. In this, the emergence of the rabbinic movement is comparable to the identity politics of other provincials.” Lapin’s book is thus meant to serve as “a corrective to the tendency to treat Jews as unique in the ancient world.” The rabbis do not “respond” to the Roman world; they are embedded in it. Of course, Lapin recognizes that the rabbis were different in important ways from other Roman provincials, that they “were also developing a literature, modes of piety, and a cultural praxis all their own.”[1] But his goal is to surface what the rabbis likely had in common with other Roman provincials. Berthelot’s book, by contrast, focuses resolutely on the literature, ideologies, and practices of the rabbis, alongside other Jewish thinkers, and it is structured by the dynamic of Roman “challenge” and Jewish “response.”

The first chapter sets the framework for defining the distinctive character of the Roman challenge by surveying the impact of earlier examples of imperial domination—under the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic empires—on Jewish thought. Berthelot highlights transformations in the realm of political theology: the emergence of monotheism, the notion of a covenant
between God and Israel, the crystallization of the Torah as divine law, and the innovation of a coming kingdom of God. Following in the footsteps of Gerson Cohen, Berthelot ventures that the Roman challenge differed from those in these preceding circumstances because “the city and the people associated with the name ‘Rome’ defined themselves in ways that came surprisingly close to how Israel defined itself and the vocation of its capital city, Jerusalem” (p. 89). Many Jews found in Rome a rival that seemed to claim for itself the mantle of a uniquely pious people, rich in ancestral history, possessed of wise laws, and divinely chosen to rule the world. The perceived threat of supersession began, in other words, not with Christianity but with pagan Rome.

The burden of chapter 2 is to establish that Rome understood itself in the ways Jews understood themselves; that Jews were in a position to recognize these similarities, because these elements of Rome’s self-understanding featured in Rome’s self-presentation to its provincial subjects; and that Jews did in fact recognize them, and gave expression to such recognition in the texts they produced. Thus, for example, Berthelot shows that, throughout the period of interest, and even after the emergence of an emperor, the Roman people were understood to be the ultimate locus of Roman imperium; Rome’s imperialism was “that of a people, not a king,” and it was centered in the city of Rome (p. 93). This perspective was projected to Roman provincials through, among other things, coinage and public buildings, including monuments and temples. And texts like Sifre Deuteronomy 52, which associate the founding of Rome, and the legend of Romulus and Remus, with the transgressions of Israelite kings, manifest awareness of this aspect of Roman self-understanding, and attempt to grapple with it. Berthelot works similarly through Rome’s claims to virtue and piety, and to the special favor of the gods, as evidenced by its military achievements, and Rome’s sense of a messianic-like vocation to subdue the strong and protect the weak, and thus bring peace to the entire world. Berthelot also describes how the failure of three Jewish revolts against Rome—the Great Revolt, the Diaspora Revolt, and the Bar Kochba Revolt—led in stages to the displacement of Israel by Rome in a very concrete sense, as Jerusalem was transformed into a second Rome. Berthelot convincingly demonstrates that, “from a Jewish perspective, it could look as if Rome, the lux orbis terrarum (‘light of the world’), had taken over Israel’s role in bringing peace and prosperity to the world, as if Rome had become the fulfillment of God’s promise to the Israelites” (p. 163). The chapter culminates in the argument that the association of Rome with Esau in rabbinic literature and in at least one pre-rabbinic text, 4 Ezra, reflects the recognition of Rome’s resemblance to Israel/Jacob, to the point that Rome might be imagined as Israel’s more bellicose twin. This hypothesis may indeed explain in part the popularity of the identification of Esau with Rome in rabbinic literature, but to me it seems likely that the motif’s origin lies in the apocalyptic thought world inhabited by 4 Ezra, and the desire, within that framework, to find intimations of the imminent end of the reign of evil, now embodied in Rome, in eschatological biblical prophecies associated with Edom.

The other three chapters of the book are devoted to discrete “challenges” posed by Rome—Roman political power and martial valor (chapter 3); Roman law and jurisdiction (chapter 4); and Roman citizenship (chapter 5)—and Jewish responses to them. The framework of challenge and response becomes here something of a straitjacket. One can reasonably construe Roman law as a challenge to Jews, both at the practical level, insofar as Jewish leaders sought to assert control over the administration of justice, and at the ideological level, insofar as Roman pride in the excellence of its law spurred Jews to defend the preeminence of the Torah. It is harder to think of Rome’s conceptions of citizenship and adoption, the topics of chapter 5, as “challenges” to Jews, and the chapter might more straightforwardly be described as an
inquiry into how these conceptions “impacted” Jews’ understandings of Jewish peoplehood.

But no matter; these chapters are rich and helpful all the same, and scholars of rabbinics will glean insight especially from the detailed treatments of the relevant Roman material therein. Highlights of these chapters include the subtle account of gender in Rome’s constructions of conquered peoples and in the self-understanding of the rabbis; the analysis of Philo’s indebtedness to but also distance from Stoicism in his attribution of true power to the sage; the recognition that the challenge to Jewish law did not chiefly come from Hellenistic wisdom (or philosophy) but from Roman law; the distinction between conceptualizations of collective life among Greeks (the politeia) and Romans (the civitas); and the learned synthesis of scholarship on the ways rabbinic laws of manumission, capture, and conversion reflect the selective integration of Roman citizenship law.

While the book’s edifice is sound and fruitful, one might take issue with some of the local arguments. Thus, for example, it is clear enough that the rabbinic mainstream took the view that the Torah was for Israel alone, but Berthelot’s attempt to refute Marc Hirshman’s view that a minority voice construed the Torah as available to all people is rushed and unpersuasive. Again, the extended effort to establish that the novel rabbinic position in Yerushalmi Bikurim 1:4 allowing converts to claim Abrahamic parentage reflects the influence of Roman adoption law is likewise, though illuminating, ultimately inconclusive. Rabbi Yeḥudah in the Yerushalmi passage asserts that even though the text of the first-fruits liturgy identifies the patriarchs as the speaker’s ancestors, converts may recite it, because Abraham’s name signifies, per the rabbinic reading of Genesis 17:5, that having once been father to Aram alone (Avraham = av aram), he is now father to all the nations (Avraham = av le-kol ha-goyim, paraphrasing the biblical etymology, av hamon goyim “father of many nations”). But this reading of Genesis 17:5 occurs earlier, in a tannaitic text, Tosefta Berakot 1:12, and the context there contains no hint of converts; the theme of this passage is that a later, greater achievement tends to eclipse the memory of an earlier, lesser achievement. (Berthelot cites the Tosefta passage but takes it to have converts in mind.) It is not impossible that the Roman practice of adoption influenced the reuse of this statement in the Yerushalmi, but there is no positive evidence for this. It may simply be that a rabbinic figure relatively supportive of converts found in a homiletical exegesis of Genesis 17:5 a convenient prooftext for a halakhic innovation.

There are other cases where an interpretive conclusion seems insufficiently founded. The story of Titus’s blasphemy against God undoubtedly portrays him as impious, but there is a long tradition, tracing to the Bible, of characterizing Israel’s enemies as blasphemous, and it is not at all clear, contra Berthelot, that the story is aware of or means to challenge “Roman and pro-Roman claims ascribing the empire’s military victories and its power to the piety of its people and the gods’ support” (p. 126). Again, the suggestion that Philo, in On the Life of Moses, 1.242, alludes to Rome through the figure of Edom, is far-fetched: when Philo writes of a conflict that is “renewed by the nation so many generations later,” the reference is to Edom’s hostility toward Israel in Numbers 20, which renews the enmity expressed by Esau toward Jacob many generations earlier; there is no reason to see a connection to Pompey’s conquest of Judea. Again, it seems overhasty to suppose that Philo and Josephus, in exalting Moses over Greek legislators, remain silent about Roman law only “for political reasons, obviously” (p. 295).

Let me reflect at somewhat greater length on one case study that highlights both the fruitfulness of Berthelot’s analysis and the way the book, in its ambition and scope, leaves room for further inquiry into the particular sources analyzed. Berthelot observes that Roman rule was often expressed in terms of dominion over and preserva-
tion of peace through “land and sea” (terra marique) and finds evidence of awareness of this framing in a passage from Josephus and in one from rabbinic literature. There is more to say about both, but I will focus on the second, Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah 3:1. In the Yerushalmi, Rabbi Yonah ventures that Alexander the Great is depicted holding a globe, signifying the land, but not a dish, signifying the sea, because he does not rule over the sea, whereas God “rules over sea and land [or: the dryness], [He] saves on the sea and [He] saves on land.” As the bracketed alternative introduced by Berthelot indicates, the word that pairs with yam (“sea”) is yabashah (“dry land”). This coupling is in fact biblical; see especially Jonah 1:9, where Jonah reveals that he is fleeing from “the God of the heavens ... who made the sea and the dry land.” Of course, the point in the context of the book of Jonah is that God indeed controls the sea as much as the land, and can appoint the sea and its creatures to do his bidding. Does the Yerushalmi passage in fact refer to the Roman ideology of terra marique? Or does it allude to the Jonah passage? Or, perhaps most likely, do we find here an internal Jewish idiom into which Rome’s pretension to rule on land and sea breathed new life? Surely there is something to make, in this connection, of the fact that the Romans’ missive to the Jewish nation in 1 Maccabees 8 begins (v. 23) and ends (v. 32) with references to peace and war “on sea and dry land”; these cases, too, arguably involve the translation of the Roman phrase into a Hebrew idiom. And what of Matt 23:15, where Jesus attacks the Pharisees for crossing “sea and dry land” to win a convert, only to thereby make him into a son of Gehenna? Should we hear any echo of the Roman claim to dominion over land and sea, especially given Jesus’s similar accusation two verses prior (23:15), that the Pharisees shut the “kingdom of the heavens” before those who would enter it? Finally, the Yerushalmi passage must be put into conversation with the story of Titus’s destruction of the temple (Bavli Gittin 56b and parallels). According to this story, Titus, returning to Rome, encounters a squall and concludes that the power of Israel’s God is only over the sea; “if he is a hero, let him ascend to dry land and make war against me.” God proceeds to do just that, in the form of the lowly gnat, which enters Titus’s ear after he ascends on to dry land, and eventually kills him. Berthelot alludes at a number of points to the Titus story but does not make reference to this plot element, which is so evocative of the Jonah story, and of the Yerushalmi passage, and of the Roman assertion of authority over land and sea.

Berthelot’s book demands the attention of scholars in the fields of Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, and rabbinic literature. Researchers who focus on apocalyptic texts from the Roman period might reflect on how this corpus, which falls mainly outside the book’s scope, can be illuminated by it. Students of early Judaism and early Christianity might consider how Christian supersession looks different when we appreciate that Jews may have perceived pagan Rome itself as in its own way supersessionist. I suspect that classicists, too, will find the book of great interest for the light that it sheds on a range of figures who, with all of their idiosyncrasies, were Roman provincials, and deeply engaged, as the book amply demonstrates, with the challenge of Rome.

Note
