



Rachel Adelman. *The Return of the Repressed: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. viii + 352 pp. \$179.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-17049-0.



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Published on H-Judaic (April, 2010)

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Myth and Pseudepigrapha in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer

This book contains an analysis of the late midrashic work *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (eighth century), which is markedly different from other midrashic literature. Rachel Adelman's work is based on her dissertation under Jacob Elbaum of The Hebrew University. The main thesis contends that *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* reflects mythic narratives from the Pseudepigrapha of the Second Temple period that were excluded from earlier rabbinic literature. The book is a welcome and sophisticated addition to the current interest in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* that engages methodologies and theories of midrashic analysis. Recent publications concerning this work include a monograph by Steven Daniel Sacks (*Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture* [2009]) and the edition and translation by Dagmar Bäurle-Klein (*Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer. Nach der Edition Venedig 1544 unter Berücksichtigung der Edition Warschau 1852* [2004]). Thanks to these three publications scholars are in a much better position to understand and evaluate the popular work and its multitude of editions.

In part 1 of her book, Adelman addresses the question of genre, the type of literature that may be assigned to *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*; she suggests referring to the category of midrash found in the book as "narrative midrash" (*midrash sippuri*). Adelman is a superb teacher who addresses the general reader by providing some basic information, such as the dating of tannaitic literature; she draws on proposed criteria of defining the term "rewritten Bible." The author of *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* partially modeled the work on this mode of textual expression. The purpose of the term "narrative midrash," according to Adelman, "will allow us to explore its continuity with previous traditions while acknowledging the innovation of the form" (p. 19). In this reviewer's opinion, "narrative midrash" overlaps with the diffuse term "agadic midrash," but while being more precise, it is not uniquely confined to *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*. It is also utilized to refer to some of the other later midrashim that predominantly demonstrate a deviance from the strict hermeneutic form of tannaitic, amoraic, and post-amoraic midrashim. Later midrashim often use a quotation from the Hebrew Bible

as a pretext for the creation, retelling, or embellishment of a narrative. However, the element of continuity with literature of the Second Temple period mentioned by Adelman is crucial; *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* (and other late midrashim) utilize material from the Pseudepigrapha that may have been purposely suppressed in earlier midrashim. Based on the uniformity of the composition of *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* and following Elbaum, Adelman posits that the book was written by one author, who in the manner of the Pseudepigrapha, wrote under a false name.

After confirming the historical context of *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* as the early Islamic period, Adelman progresses to part 2, “The Personification of Evil.” This section engages with some theological questions raised by *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*, such as the origin of evil, the first version of the Fall (Adam, Eve, and the serpent), and the myth of the fallen angels. She carefully considers some of the variants in the text witnesses; this becomes evident in the wonderful appendix that presents the reader with carefully edited Hebrew texts of the sections under discussion. *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* combines and artfully conflates the myths of the Fall with the myth of the fallen angels. Additionally, it utilizes tropes that demote “satan” in the Garden of Eden in contrast to other Jewish texts. Adelman addresses the trope of Cain, the son of the serpent, as the progenitor of evil, drawing on metaphoric expressions in the text: “It is metaphor metamorphosed into myth” (p. 106). In the myth of the fallen angels, *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* (and the book of Jubilees) reverse the pattern established in the Garden of Eden. In the retelling of these myths, she keeps the reader involved by making connections to *Paradise Lost* (1667) by John Milton and to modern films by Ingmar Bergman. This cross-referencing demonstrates how deeply indebted Western culture is to the same mythical patterns that we have in biblical, postbiblical, and medieval midrash. Referring to myth is pursued by both Adelman and Sacks. Sacks examines mythological motifs, while at the same

time analyzing modes of hermeneutics found in *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*, for example, the multiplicity of midrash, in his excellent book. Anybody seriously interested in advanced midrashic theory should read the two books concurrently, while also consulting BÄrner-Klein’s edition.

Part 3, entitled “Myth and Praxis in Pirque De-Rabbi Eliezer,” comments on some of the *minhagim* (customs) explained in *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*. For example, the author presents an analysis of the observance of Rosh Hodesh as a holiday for women and of Elijah’s invitation to a Brit Milah. Adelman cites multiple commentaries, such as Isaac ben Moses of Vienna’s *Or Zaru’a*, and legal codes, such as the *Shulhan Arukh*, in order to explain why women may be exempt from work on Rosh Hodesh. While the author is able to preserve her scholarly attitude in this section, some of the discussion seems to be somewhat excursive. Nevertheless, she provides interesting material relating to certain customs in Ashkenaz. The conclusion of part 3 delineates the correlation between myth and praxis.

Part 4 presents a literary analysis of one chapter of *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 10), focusing on the biblical figure of Jonah. This investigation includes the assumed parallels between Jonah’s three days in the belly of a fish and the lapse of time between the End of Days and the resurrection of the dead (Hos 6:2–“After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up that we may live before Him”). Additional transformations are reviewed by the author, including the three days that the founder of Christianity was in a liminal state. The link between Urzeit and Endzeit is noted by Adelman.

The book has an extensive table of contents, as well as appendixes and indexes. Adelman’s book belongs on the shelf of any scholar interested in the later midrashic literature. It contains excellent, sophisticated, and readable interpretations of some of the theological passages in *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* and demystifies some of the contextual issues related to this work.

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Citation: Rivka B. Ulmer. Review of Adelman, Rachel, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. April, 2010.

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