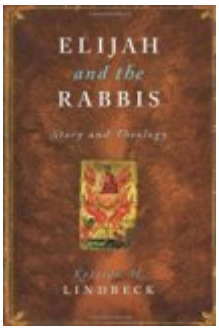
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kristen H. Lindbeck. *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 272 pp. $26.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-13081-3.



Reviewed by Eliezer Segal

Published on H-Judaic (October, 2011)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

There is an understandable appeal in the image of Elijah the prophet as a figure who was exempted from the limits of mortality and continues to make appearances in the human world. The Bible provided a complex set of themes related to Elijah that could be drawn upon by later storytellers. The scriptural Elijah was at once a zealous warrior against idolatry, a wonder-worker who performed supernatural miracles for the benefit of common folk, and an eschatological herald who, according to Malachi, would be sent by God "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (4:5). Medieval Jews developed their own legends and customs through which Elijah could participate in their lives, the most familiar of these being his appearances at circumcisions and at the Passover seder, or as a poor wayfarer who might test the hospitality of his hosts.

The present volume focuses on the tales about Elijah that appear in the Babylonian Talmud--the work in the rabbinic corpus that preserves the largest number of such stories. The image of Elijah that emerges from this corpus differs in some significant respects from those of earlier and later eras; e.g., little importance is attached to his role as a messianic harbinger, and much of his activity is tightly enmeshed in the values of rabbinic scholarship. Lindbeck's treatment of the topic is thorough and thoughtful. She subjects the texts to incisive questions, classifications, and analyses, and she succeeds in eliciting interpretations that are true to the texts and their cultural contexts. As befits the topic, there are points when it is best to let the sources speak on their own terms, while it is also instructive to learn from comparisons with related phenomena in Jewish and neighboring cultures.

The formal structure of the book is somewhat awkward. I suspect that some of the problems arise from the fact that it follows the format of an academic dissertation, wherein it is customary to sprinkle the work with summaries at the beginnings and conclusions of individual sections, as well as of the work as a whole. Thus, the introductory chapters already presuppose familiarity with the corpus of Elijah tales, though those tales have

not been set out yet. Some of those stories will be presented in detail in the course of subsequent chapters, and all of them are translated (with relevant textual notes) in the volume's appendix. The author is aware of the inconsistencies created by the order of the presentation, and suggests in the preface a number of different strategies and sequences for reading the book.

The opening chapters situate this study methodologically. Lindbeck's approach is primarily a literary one. As such, it draws on the methods of folklore studies and form criticism, and is particularly sensitive to the distinctive features of oral cultures and their implications for understanding the texts' social implications. At times her extensive survey of the state of scholarship in oral-formulaic analysis of rabbinic texts seems to exceed what is strictly needed for the purposes of the current project.

As noted, Lindbeck has chosen to concentrate her study on material in the Babylonian Talmud. There are incidental mentions of the related traditions preserved in the Palestinian Talmud and *Pesikta deRav Kahana*, but these are generally confined to comparative observations, while avoiding questions of possible literary borrowing--and of the directionality of such borrowing--questions that stand at the center of several studies of Babylonian *aggadah*, especially those of Shamma Friedman (including his “La-Aggadah Ha-Hisṭorit Ba-Talmud Ha-Bavli” in the *Saul Lieberman Memorial Volume*, 1993, which touches in passing on one of the Elijah traditions). Similarly, apart from its peripheral relevance to the analysis of the story of Rav Anan in *b. Ketubbot* 105b-106a (pp. 100-102), she sidesteps the old scholarly controversies surrounding the provenance of *Seder Eliyahu* and the identity of its mysterious protagonist. This study is not directly interested in the redactional questions that have dominated the last generation of academic research into the Babylonian Talmud, in that it does not seek to situate the Elijah material as component sources vis à vis the various amoraic, "stammaitic," or redactional strata.

Appeals to orality or folk creativity are commonly used in order to claim textual fluidity or a general looseness in the formulation of literary traditions; and indeed, when undertaking the study of the Elijah motifs we might understandably entertain some initial skepticism about the prospect of encountering consistent patterns in the phenomena under investigation. After all, beyond the acknowledgment that we are dealing with a convenient literary vehicle for depicting interaction and communication between the divine and human realms, should we really expect the storytellers and preachers to adhere strictly to rigid narrative conventions when deciding whether Elijah or some other figure should be the agent of a particular interaction, or which contexts are suitable for his appearances? Under the circumstances, it is indeed astonishing how well the data does lend itself to a methodic scholarly analysis. For example, we might legitimately have expected the Elijah figure to be interchangeable with alternative supernatural intermediaries, especially the angel Gabriel who plays comparable roles in other rabbinic narratives, or the heavenly voice (*bat kol*) that issues occasional pronouncement from the supernal realms. In the end, however, Lindbeck's careful study of the sources demonstrates convincingly that these figures and motifs are not chosen randomly or casually, and that there are definite rules that govern which supernatural intermediary is most likely to be employed in a given setting. The fact that the similarities and differences can be organized into a tabular summary (on pp. 58-59) emerges therefore as quite remarkable and unexpected. In conducting her comparative study of supernatural intermediaries, she provides astute observations about figures like the angel of death and Satan as they function in rabbinic tales; and these observations have value beyond their application to the specific topic at hand.

Lindbeck's comparisons are not restricted to the Jewish rabbinic corpus. She notes, for example, pertinent parallels with the evolving roles of Christian saints as religious intermediaries (on the other hand, no significant information is adduced from the Zoroastrian or other Iranian-Babylonian environments). Probably the book's most intriguing claim is that in shaping their image of Elijah as an immortal who maintains an active participation in human affairs, the rabbinic narrators were consciously (at least at some level) invoking motifs that their pagan neighbors were applying to the figure of Hermes--as a trickster, a guardian of travelers, and other roles that he played in popular Graeco-Roman legend. The author is aware of the tenuousness of this claim--at least insofar as it focuses on the specific figure of Hermes rather than on a more generic motif of deities who come to the assistance of humans--and she erects a carefully constructed edifice of circumstantial evidence and arguments to defend her thesis. In support of her claims, she offers us a general overview of the distribution of the Hermes cult in the ancient Near East, and summarizes the references to it in halakhic texts (which deal principally with the roadside stone stacks that were devoted to the travelers' god) and in Jewish magical texts, as plausible indicators that specific knowledge of Hermes must have been quite widespread in popular culture. Not all of the evidence that is adduced for the claim is, however, equally convincing. An example of the requisite methodological caution is her treatment of the tale about the "old man leading a ram" (***b. Yeb.*** 121b) who rescued a girl who had fallen into a cistern. Lindbeck draws our attention to the epithet Κριοφόρος, "ram-bearer," that was applied to Hermes and is actually invoked in an incantation preserved the ***Sefer HaRazim*** (a Hebrew magical manual from the Talmudic era). As tantalizing as the association might be (and she acknowledges the tentativeness of the proof, pp. 82-83), it would have been preferable if some attention had been directed to the important distinction between "bearing" and "leading" the ram (the iconographic tradition normally shows the god or officiant carrying the animal on his shoulders), or to the fact that traditional Talmud commentaries identified the figure as Abraham or Isaac, and never (as far as I know) Elijah. At any rate, the cumulative case is a very strong one; and if the thesis is correct, it further strengthens the impressiveness of how precise and specific the rabbis were when employing their archetypes--even mythological ones--rather than merely relying on generic models of supernatural involvement in human affairs.

The analysis of the relevant texts in chapter 4 is organized according to formal-thematic criteria. The three groupings of Elijah stories are: (1) Elijah stops visiting a person to whom he had previously been appearing regularly; (2) Elijah appears in disguise, usually in order to save someone from a danger; (3) sages direct questions to the prophet, especially with regard to goings-on in the divine realm. The first grouping is particularly fascinating from a number of perspectives, including the unstated assumptions on which it is based, that it is normal for sages to be vouchsafed visits by Elijah, and that the suspension of the visits is perceived as anomaly that demands explanation. As capably interpreted by Lindbeck, the respective tales function as indices of some fundamental values and beliefs of rabbinic society, particularly as regards relationships between scholars (in collegial or master-disciple situations), or between rabbinical insiders and outsiders (such as "simple" Jews or heathens). While it is not possible here to discuss in detail everything she has to say about each of the passages, I was very impressed by her reasonableness in allowing the texts to speak for themselves on their own terms without imposing methodological presuppositions on them.

Indeed, the fact that the corpus, consisting of more than three dozen individual passages, can be reduced to these three basic categories is consistent with what we have noted previously about

the systematic quality of the literature, at least in its final redaction. The results also confirm the utility and validity of the form-critical methods that have been a venerable mainstay of research into Talmudic literature (e.g., in the many studies that have been based on the examination of terminology and recurring literary patterns). Of course, the value of the method requires that the material be studied in depth and from broader cultural perspectives, which Lindbeck does throughout.

The final chapter collects miscellaneous instances of Elijah legends as they functioned in post-Talmudic folklore and custom until the present day. Insofar as all this lies outside the book's actual area of investigation, the selection of examples is somewhat serendipitous and it gives an impression that the author was unable to resist the temptation to make some use of fascinating extraneous material that she collected in the course of her research. Indeed, that material is engaging and helps underscore the distinctive characteristics of the rabbinic portrayals of Elijah.

With its charming, exotic subject, Lindbeck's ***Elijah and the Rabbis*** stands out as a solid work of literary historical research that enriches our understandings of rabbinic literature, religion, and scholarly culture within the broader context of Hellenistic society.