

The author concludes by reporting that gender consciousness has risen in Iran and that the issue of women has become a concern in exegesis, politics, and daily life. Despite the clerical establishment's control of the discourse on women, more "women are joining the modernist tendencies" (274), which means that equality, rights, and duties are discussed along with the need for reinterpretations of texts from within Islam or by using new concepts from outside. This conclusion is not surprising or new, but the preceding arguments on which it rests are fascinating to read.

Although the author frequently asserts that she wants to represent the actual experiences of women, she only uses some of these to challenge her partners, and they, swiftly and wholly predictably, make short shrift of them by referring to principles and by relegating hardships for women to the domain of the application of laws outside their control. This is how clerics argue—not only Muslim clerics—and it is a little disingenuous of the author to have expected otherwise. It is, however, quite clear that most of the theologians would rather stay above the fray of everyday gender concerns altogether.

Yet in Iran gender relationships are changing with or without clerical blessing—the book's cover with the inscribed face of the stereotypical veiled beauty notwithstanding. According to my own experiences in Iran, economic considerations far outweigh theological ones: where an inflated lifestyle demands that a wife earn money, the husband quietly will suspend his "wife must stay at home" policy without theological qualms. In addition, many modernist agents of change are at work, from education and the workplace (where women find that they are as able as men) to modern appliances and weakening of controls of in-laws and parents—again bypassing theology.

With these changes, self-images change, individuation accelerates, and religious notions change in their wake. In some people this leads to a dismissal of core religious beliefs, in others, to a reinterpretation of rules or to a shift away from regulations toward ethics. But in a religion that invests the principal text with divine origin, such a process is dangerous, as all men in this book realize only too well. It leads to a struggle for the "right" interpretations (a recurrent theme in the book); to accusations of ignorance, obstructionism, and heresy (a theme in the interviews); and to the danger of intolerance on the practical level. It is the great merit of the book and its author to allow us to see all these potential consequences of the current debate on women in Iran.

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Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture. By Jeffrey L. Rubenstein. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 435 pages. \$49.95.

The "rabbinic story" occupies a marginal territory among the principal categories of rabbinic discourse. It does not qualify as "midrash" insofar as it is not usually defined by its connection to the Bible. Most instances of the genre (in-

cluding the ones discussed in the present volume) are not concerned with the mechanics of religious law to a degree that would justify their classification as "halakah." Although the very fact that they are *not* halakic allows the stories to be counted as "aggadic" according to the accepted norms of classification, it is clear that their membership in the aggadic category is of a grudging, second-class nature, given that the vast majority of compilations of rabbinic aggadah consist of midrash, usually in the form of synagogue sermons expounding scriptural readings. The fact that there have come down to us no compendia devoted primarily to rabbinic *exempla* or *fibula* raises some stimulating questions about their origins and roles in Talmudic culture.

In spite of their marginal standing, narratives about the deeds of Talmudic sages have attracted disproportionate interest among academic scholars, and this in turn has resulted in some successful and well-received literary and philological investigations. Though the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school frequently approached these texts in a naive effort to reconstruct Talmudic history or biography, subsequent scholarship has generally acknowledged that its hagiographic character does not lend itself well to such endeavors; and even more modest attempts to discard the legendary embellishments in search of a credible "historical kernel" are unlikely to yield very solid results. Thus, the most impressive investigations of rabbinic stories have been conducted by students of literature who approached the texts as self-contained works of artistic expression, rather than as evidence for historical facts outside themselves. The pioneer of this approach is Jonah Frankel, whose brilliant insights into rhetorical aesthetics, thematic patterns, and more are frequently offset by an apparent hermeneutical arbitrariness and by a lack of philological rigor when dealing with textual and redactional variants. Frankel's program has benefited from ongoing methodological refinement at the hands of capable scholars who have approached the material from a variety of perspectives. Notable among these are Ofra Meir and Shamma Friedman. Jeffrey Rubenstein has studied their work carefully and has applied a broad range of methods to the examination of selected stories from the Talmud.

For the purposes of his study, Rubenstein has chosen several of the best-known and frequently cited narratives from the Babylonian Talmud. As he is well aware, the popularity of these stories owes principally to the fact that they were perceived as providing support for various modern ideological agendas. This very fact renders most of the recent discussions about them virtually irrelevant to an academic investigation that strives to recapture the meaning and literary impact that the stories would have had for their original authors and audiences.

In his quest for textual understanding Rubenstein consults manuscript variants, parallel traditions, and lexicographical resources as well as the prevailing theories concerning the relationships among different rabbinic compendia and the current approaches to the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud by the "Stam-matic" sages. His familiarity with previous scholarly literature, as reflected in the extensive endnotes and bibliography, is most impressive.

The author also displays proficiency with respect to both the specific features of rabbinic rhetoric (e.g., homiletical formats) and modern literary paradigms that have been applied to rabbinic literature. Nonetheless, he is very prudent about

imposing anachronistic theoretical models on his material, preferring to allow the texts to speak for themselves. The resulting conclusions are therefore not particularly dramatic but solidly convincing. The author produces a useful catalog of literary techniques that are employed by the Talmudic narrators and redactors. Among the most valuable of these is his treatment of “doublets,” that is, when a character or episode in an earlier (usually Palestinian) version of the story is transformed into two or more in the Babylonian version in order to enhance narrative or thematic clarity. In the study of rabbinic texts methodological breadth is no luxury but, indeed, constitutes the necessary precondition for reliable historical research. Nevertheless, the sifting of the evidence demands intelligent judgment and, for the most part, Rubenstein demonstrates a healthy measure of common sense in choosing which methodological routes are the most appropriate for a given question or passage.

Although not all his interpretations are equally persuasive, he presents the reader with all the relevant evidence so that we can arrive at our own assessments. To take one example, in spite of the evident ingenuity that went into his charting of a “chiasmic” structure for the pericope about “Aher” in *Hagigah* 15a–b, a straightforward reading of the original passage argues much more strongly for a pastiche of diverse materials that were stitched together in a manner that is fundamentally unstructured. (Rubenstein himself is fully cognizant of the subjectivity that is involved in scholarly attempts to impose schematic structures on literary texts.)

One of the most crucial questions that must be dealt with in any study of rabbinic texts is, What is the text that we are analyzing? The compendia in which the passages are currently embedded constitute one stage in a fluid process of transmission in the course of which the passage under investigation may have undergone extensive reformulations. The reconstruction of the original version (if we assume that a single original did once exist) can be assisted by means of comparisons with parallel traditions from other rabbinic works. Even if we are ready to concede that the text of the passage has survived in substantially its original form, its significance is likely to have been altered as a result of the novel context in which it has now been inserted. Rubenstein demonstrates ample awareness of all these issues and of the impressive body of scholarship that has been devoted to solving the manifold puzzles of Talmudic redaction. As a matter of methodological principle he has chosen to embrace in his study the full process of transmission. That is to say, he pays close attention to the evolution of the story through the various pericopes and collections in which it is attested. The need for such an investigation is premised on the assumption that the meaning and wording of each story can be significantly affected by the context in which it has been set and by the use to which it is being put in a given document.

In several places Rubenstein reaches very insightful conclusions by assuming that the earliest version of the story is the one that is preserved in the Palestinian Talmud or Midrash and that the differences between that original and the one found in the Babylonia Talmud can be accounted for by the tendency to harmonize it with the local traditions. Particularly impressive are the instances in which he demonstrates how the “Stammaitic” redactors inserted bits and pieces of material from elsewhere in the Talmud, whether as direct citations or as gen-

eral literary calques and stock phrases. These additions are frequently the main reason for disparities between the later Babylonian and earlier versions of a story. The upshot of Rubenstein's analysis is that Frankel's characterization of rabbinic stories as "closed" units is seen as fundamentally inaccurate, at least when applied to the Babylonian Talmud. The recognition that the story has undergone such a process of intertextual adaptation allows Rubenstein to arrive at realistic literary evaluations of the final products; he notes that the stories are likely to retain inconsistencies and redundancies that must be viewed as vestiges of their early incarnations. This approach leads to more convincing assessments of the stories than would be achieved if he treated the texts as self-contained units, authored at a particular moment and intended to make their point in the most effective and articulate manner. It also brings into clearer relief the ways in which the Babylonian versions diverge thematically from their Palestinian prototypes, for example, in their greater readiness to subject rabbinic sages to criticism.

The major contribution of *Talmudic Stories* lies not in any sweeping theoretical statements that it makes but, rather, in the exhaustive attention it pays to intricate details of philological exegesis as it helps elucidate the meaning, purpose, and aesthetics of its selection of rabbinic narratives. This is a mature work, in which the author invested much labor and thought. The thoroughness, methodological diversity, and scholarly discretion can serve as a model of the demanding standards that are to be expected from serious research into rabbinic literature.

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Religious Minorities in Iran. By Eliz Sanasarian. Cambridge University Press, 2000. 228 pages. \$59.95.

Iranian peoples have produced a number of the world's most influential religions, including Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Baha'i. Historically they have also played a major role in the development and transmission of Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Though Iran today is about 98 percent Muslim, the religious makeup of contemporary Iranian society among both Muslims and the numerous small non-Muslim minorities is extremely complex.

Only about one-half the current Iranian population speaks Persian as a native language. One-quarter is Turkish-speaking Azeris, and several million Qashqa'i's, Shahsevan, and Turkmens also speak Turkic dialects. Seven percent of the population is Kurdish, and there are also small but important communities of other Muslim groups such as Arabs, Baluch, and Lurs, as well as Zoroastrians, Jews, Baha'is, and Armenian, Assyrian (Nestorian), and Chaldean (Roman Catholic) Christians. The majority of Iran's Muslims follow the Ithna 'Ashari or "Twelver" sect of Shi'ism (which was declared the official religion of the state in 1979), while the Turkmens, Baluch, most Kurds, and some Arabs are Sunni. Within these various groups there are adherents of several different Sufi orders.