

BOOK REVIEW

Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts. By SUSANNA DRAKE. *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 176. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-8122-4520-2.

Inter-league play is all the rage in the academy, but even for classicists who pose a triple-threat on the field (trained in philology, archaeology, and history), there are still the occasional anxious match-ups. For some, Jews and Christians can seem like two squads who play by their own rules, with and against each other and frequently by themselves.

In this climate a book like Susanna Drake's *Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts*, might easily get passed over. That would be a shame. Drake, who is a scholar of religious studies, is looking for like-minded teammates interested in exploring sexual stereotypes and how they come to shape other people's lives. Classicists play this game well.

Drake's study is a short and tightly-focused one (she wraps up her conclusion halfway through p. 105) but there is a lot of territory covered. Her aim is to analyze the ways in which early Christians painted grossly exaggerated pictures of Jews as sexually aggressive predators, "lascivious wolves in pursuit of innocent Christian sheep" (1).

She collects her evidence from Greek texts produced during the first four centuries CE. The Hellenistic Jew Paul, one of the "believers in Christ," is there, but the strength of Drake's book is its analysis of later writers: Origen and John Chrysostom, in particular.

In three chapters of this four-chapter book, we are treated to a patient explanation of how these two men misunderstood, misread, or outright distorted the words of Paul to slander Jews for their carnality, their lust, and their lax moral ways (49–58; 83–92). Drake provides a context for this rhetoric by drawing attention to the need (on the part of a few vociferous Christian writers, including Hippolytus of Rome) to draw sharp border lines between Jewish and Christian communities in the third and fourth centuries.

According to them, Jews had the audacity to read their scripture “incorrectly,” and for that, they were defamed both as interpreters of texts and as overly sexualized people. The result of this aggressive branding campaign helped create an image of Christians as spiritual, chaste, and upright—correct readers of Scripture and the polar opposites of Jews. “Sexuality and textually are linked,” as Drake observes (31). It is a theme she explores both in the literary record and in paintings of Susanna and the elders from the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome.

For those who may harbor the illusion that Christians and Jews neatly parted ways in the early second century CE, Drake’s work will alert them to an important turn that has been taking place in religious studies for some time now. Ignatius of Antioch may be the first to coin the word “Christianity,” or “being openly Christian” (*Christianismos*) in contradistinction to “being openly Jewish” (*Ioudaïsmos*), but the parting of the ways, as its often called, is actually much more complicated.

Just when *did* the two teams decide to form their own squads, and how did they face each other when they did? The question is being investigated anew, and the toxic rhetoric of men like Origen and John Chrysostom is an important part of the answer. Drake is right to call their rhetoric out and to use it to frame outbursts of violence directed against Jews in later Rome.

In a book that works so hard to push back against stereotypes, though, I wonder whether Jewish voices could have been given slightly more room to speak for themselves. Drake is good at illustrating and substantiating notions of complex Christian identity, but some corresponding discussion of Jewish identity might have helped reader see the terms of the discussion (Christianity, Judaism) in more nuance.

To mention two studies that have been known for some time, Steve Mason’s work on “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” in the *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007) 457-512, is missing. So is Shaye Cohen’s “Judaism without Circumcision and ‘Judaism’ without ‘Circumcision’ in Ignatius,” in the *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002) 395-415. Both of these would have benefited Drake’s discussion of Ignatius of Antioch (35), who is not really concerned with Jews but rather with Christians who, in his mind, “seem too Jewish.”

It’s also curious that the conclusion, which focuses upon Ambrose of Milan, Jewish-Christian relations, and the Latin literary tradition, misses a chance to engage with Paula Fredriksen’s *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010; first edi-

tion, New York: Doubleday, 2008). Fredriksen explores some of the same themes as Drake—for example, how Christian *and* Jewish writers learned to separate “spiritual” readings of Scripture from the “carnal” ones. Her work could have provided a nice way to connect dots across the landscape of the later empire, from Origen to Augustine. But these are exercises that can be taken up later.

For now, classicists who are interested in kicking around ideas about gender, the body, and sexuality—as well as the production of literary stereotypes based on them—should welcome a new member to the team.

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