The idea underlying this book is interesting and seems to hold some promise. In keeping with the trend of much recent work on rabbinic literature, Rosenblum proposes to confront a “data set” drawn from the classical rabbinic textual corpus with social-scientific approaches, specifically, in this case, with food studies and discussions of identity construction. Unfortunately, the execution leaves quite a bit to be desired, for reasons some of which I will outline below.

On the whole, the rabbinic texts cited are translated and explained accurately (an egregious exception is the translation of “transgressors” in m. Shevi’it 5:9, Gittin 5:9 as “idolaters” on page 117; cf. pages 118, 139). There are, however, a number of occasions on which the author then proceeds to introduce unwarranted and, in my opinion implausible, assumptions. For example, on page 83 he asserts, with no foundation in the sources, “It would seem that, at least for the Tannaim, were a Jew to drink Gentile wine, this action would be tantamount to idolatry.” On page 158 he says that, “Without this blessing [being recited when the animal was slaughtered], which brings the practice of animal slaughter under further rabbinic control, a rabbinic Jew presumably could not eat the otherwise acceptable meat.” This “presumption” is however totally unfounded; in rabbinic law, failure to recite the benediction prescribed as an accompaniment to a
particular action in no way invalidates the action itself. On page 176 the author states, “Presumably, if a rabbinic Jew cannot respond ‘Amen’ to a Samaritan’s blessing, then they cannot break bread together.” Once again, I believe this presumption is highly implausible.

Perhaps more insidiously, the author reads the sources in accordance with other preconceptions that are not necessarily spelled out, the general thrust of which is to portray the tannaitic rabbis not merely as a small and marginal group but as a virtually solipsistic one. A few examples must suffice. On page 12 the author states, “Throughout, I will argue that, in the tannaitic corpus, women’s actions are of interest only insofar as they affect men’s practice,” and he certainly repeats this assertion over and over and attaches great importance to it, but he does not actually offer any arguments to support it. I would argue that this is a complete distortion: in the rabbis’ view, the rules governing the permissibility of various foodstuffs applied to women just as much as they did to men (see m. Kiddushin 1:7), and they would certainly have been anxious to ensure that the female members of their families observed these rules, even if we imagine they were indifferent to the religious behavior of Jews outside their immediate circles. Similarly, on pages 128–29 he writes:

Further evidence for exclusion of women from the Passover haburah is found in t. Pisha 8:6, which states, “They do not make an association [consisting] of women, slaves, and/or minors...” Discussing the meaning of this deceptively simple passage, Wegner notes: The Babylonian rabbis ... interprets [sic] the Mishnah ... to forbid a fellowship of women and slaves combined or of children and slaves combined ... but to permit a fellowship consisting of women alone. But the mishnaic text is distinctly ambiguous, and we must be circumspect....” Although Wegner is correct to point out the ambiguity of this passage, the fact remains that women, slaves, and minors are, in some fashion, excluded from participating in Passover associations. Whether this means that women could join a Passover fellowship consisting of men or only women ... Although I prefer the reading that these three classes of people are generally excluded from participation, the other possible reading—that this refers to combinations of these categories—still indicates a social exclusion from tannaitic commensal practice.

1. See especially p. 23. This is an approach that has become fashionable in recent years, and although I disagree with it, this is not the place to debate it.
2. For example, on p. 107 he writes, “In tannaitic texts about women and food preparation, women’s actions are of interest only insofar as they affect men’s practice” (emphasis original), and in n. 15 ad loc he adds: “In many ways, this statement is generalizable to the entire corpus of rabbinic literature.”
It is not clear to me exactly what Rosenblum envisions as the place of women (in the rabbinic system) on the Seder evening, but neither of the possible interpretations of m. Pesahim 8:7 and t. Pisha 8:6 excludes women from participating in a Passover haburah together with free men, and in fact this arrangement is taken for granted in other passages such as t. Pisha 7:4 and 8:10.

Another example: Rosenblum asserts or implies in several contexts (see, e.g., 76, 117–18, 153, 157, 161) that the rabbis of this period were intent on using halakic regulations concerning food preparation and consumption in order to create maximal distance between Jews and non-Jews and between “rabbinic” and “nonrabbinic” Jews, when in fact various regulations that he discusses seem clearly designed to allow for such interactions while safeguarding the ability of the (rabbinic) Jews involved in such relationships to adhere to rabbinic standards of religious behavior (see 82, 117–18).³

An important methodological issue concerns Rosenblum’s use of the term “rabbinic Jew,” which he (finally) defines in the following way: “Throughout this book, the term ‘rabbinic Jew’ refers to a Jew who chooses to follow the prescriptions of rabbinic Judaism, as opposed to a nonrabbinic Jew who, although unquestionably Jewish even in the eyes of rabbinic Judaism, has chosen not to adhere to rabbinic practice” (138–39). Despite this seemingly unambiguous formulation, the author actually uses this term (or variants on it) to mean a number of different things in different contexts; it functions effectively as shorthand for whatever “in group” is implied in a particular context and thus fails to maintain a stable meaning (compare the author’s strictures on others’ use of the term “Jewish identity” on page 5 and compare 149). For example, on page 141 we are told that “these practices do not transform one into a non-Jew; they simply mark one as a ‘bad’ rabbinic Jew.” In fact, engaging in “these practices” (e.g., eating pork, drinking libation wine, or attempting to conceal one’s circumcision; see 140–41) would have marked one, at the very least, as having “chosen not to adhere to rabbinic practice.” On page 155 the author states that a certain Tosefta passage “begins by validating animal slaughter by every (male) Jew—‘normative’ rabbinic, Samaritan, uncircumcised, and apostate—except the heretic…”; here “‘normative’ rabbinic” appears to be a catchall term for a circumcised, non-Samaritan Jew who is neither apostate nor heretic, thus presumably including many Jews who had “chosen not to adhere to rabbinic practice.” This applies in particular to the so-called ammei ha-aretz, who, as is well known, figure prominently in early rabbinic sources and present numerous challenges; on page 146 they seem to be the author’s

³. On page 117 the author comments, “The reason given for the leniency… is ‘peace’. It would seem that the economic necessity … takes precedence here.” In fact, the text says nothing about economic necessity; “peace” refers to the desirability of maintaining good relations with other groups, in this case with less punctiliously observant Jews.
paradigmatic “nonrabbinic Jews.” It is in fact quite possible that some Jews who affirmed their allegiance to rabbinic Judaism fit into this category, at least according to some definitions, while some Jews who did not belong to this category did not follow rabbinic practice.⁴

To conclude, this study may serve to expose mainstream students of classical rabbinic literature to an unconventional perspective and a body of research that could provide some interesting insights and introduce specialists in food studies or related anthropological domains to an unfamiliar body of literature, but it must be used with considerable caution.

⁴ I will note in passing that there is nothing in the sources to indicate that “Shimon ben Netanel the priest” was a rabbi, as Rosenblum appears to assume (see 147–48 and n. 36) or even a “rabbinic Jew” in Rosenblum’s sense.