Rosenblum, Jordan D.

Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism


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While there is some disagreement as to the source of the quote “you are what you eat,” there is little disagreement as to the sentiment behind it. Food and cooking are popular topics in many branches of the media worldwide. The growing interest in food and culinary culture has not escaped the attention of academic scholarship, and much of late has been written on these topics. Particular concern is paid to food and identity in the broadest sense. The present volume, a revised version of the author’s doctoral dissertation, seeks to examine one small aspect of this field in ancient Jewish society: “how the tannaitic movement constructed identity through regulating culinary and commensal practices.”

The Tannaim, according to Rosenblum, draw on earlier and contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish culinary and commensal practices. The table is the locus for identity negotiation. Rules and regulations divide the world into a binary: those with whom “we” eat and those with whom “we” do not. These regulations are not the only manner in which the Tannaim seek to establish their own identity, but they are a key component of the larger identity process.
Rosenblum seeks to avoid three weaknesses prevalent in current Jewish food and identity research: two seemingly relate to establishing a rationale for the rather limited chronological scope of his book, and the third is related to pitfalls in the study of identity. As for the first weakness to be avoided, Rosenblum finds fault with the “scrapbook” approach, based on piecemeal data spanning a large time frame and covering a wide swath of geographically and culturally diverse territory.1 Second, focusing on culinary regulations and commensal relations between Jew and non-Jew or between rabbinic and nonrabbinic Jews fails to fully address boundary maintenance and does not provide a complete picture.2 The third weakness that Rosenblum seeks to avoid is that much of Jewish scholarship on Jewish identity rarely theorizes the term itself and thus “identity” has no clear meaning. To avoid this mistake, Rosenblum focuses on tannaitic self-identity as a category of practice and not as an analytical category. In spite of these caveats that form the methodological basis of the work in its limited scope, I was not convinced as to the justification of the limited chronological time framework. I shall have more to say on this below.

The book has a programmatic introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction the author lays the anthropological theoretical framework for the study and informs us that, in addition to “explaining a specific ancient data set,” he intends to “develop a methodological framework for analyzing the interlocking dimensions of identity formulation and commensality regulations that can be applied cross-culturally” and to study, *inter alia*, tannaitic “edible identity,” that is, the “complex of culturally significant activities surrounding the preparation and ingestion of food.”

1. An example of this approach would be David C. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages* (London: Routledge, 2007). Kraemer’s 200-page volume begins with the biblical period and reaches the *kashrut* wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rosenblum thanks David Kraemer in his introduction. Kraemer devotes 47 pages to the rabbinic period, technically including both tannaitic and amoraic corpora, while Rosenblum sticks to the former.

2. Rosenblum cites as an example of this faulty approach David Moshe Freidenreich, “Foreign Food: Restrictions on the Food of Members of Other Religions in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Law” [sic!] (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2006). The title, however, of the (PDF) copy of this dissertation, which Dr. Freidenreich kindly sent me, reads: “Foreign Food: A Comparatively-Enriched Analysis of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Law.” In the 623 pages (!) of this dissertation, Freidenreich begins with the Bible and deals with Hellenistic Times, the New Testament, early Christianity, Mishnah and Tosefta, the Talmuds, early medieval Christian literature, the Quran, early Sunni and Shi’i sources, Islamic law, and Latin canon law. Not providing a “complete picture” on account of the stress on “regulation,” as Rosenblum implies, does not do justice to the scope and content of this dissertation (and needless to say, there is no “scrapbook” approach here). The dissertation is scheduled for publication in book form in September, at which time readers can draw their own conclusions. Rosenblum thanks Freidenreich for commenting on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

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The first chapter is devoted to realia. How did they eat, obtain food, prepare it, and eat it? The second chapter focuses on Jewish identity and deals with the pretannaitic evidence for commensality restrictions, food as a metonym/food embodiment, the status of food qua cook, and commensality as idolatry. The following chapter discusses Jewish male identity and such matters as preparing food as (re)producing male identity and women at the tannaitic table. The final chapter is on Jewish male rabbinic identity and studies the cuisine of the rabbinic Jew, purity and commensality, the relation between food and cook, festival and Sabbath observance, and commensality and the synagogue.

Regarding the issue of realia, Rosenblum finds that the tannaitic evidence for the diet, means of obtaining food, processes for food preparation, and the “cadence of ingestion” does not seem to differ greatly on the macro level from that of their non-Jewish neighbors. In the chapter on Jewish identity, the author shows how the Tannaim perceive preparing and eating food to be an act of social and sometimes ontological identity construction in three specific ways. First, by understanding certain foods as metonymic and embodying, the Tannaim construct a network of culinary and commensal practices that constitute a Jewish “foodway.” Second, by correlating the status of that which is prepared with the status of the preparer, the Tannaim make an analogy between food regulations and desired social regulations. Third, by connecting commensality between Jews and non-Jews with idolatry, the Tannaim use legal and persuasive rhetorics to problematize social relations with those whom they do not want Jews to interact.

In the chapter on Jewish male identity, Rosenblum devotes a good deal of time to women, who seem to appear only to play a literary role and in relation to informing how various practices form the male identity, not perhaps a great surprise. In his discussion on Jewish male rabbinic identity, Rosenblum argues that Tannaim create differences between rabbinic and nonrabbinic Jews via four food practices. First, they create a distinct rabbinic cuisine and foodway and connect consumption with a construction of rabbinic identity. Next, they expand the biblical purity system to establish a unique Jewish, male rabbinic identity. Third, they once again correlate the status of food and cook, and, finally, they reinterpret festival rules to exclude nonrabbinic Jews from tannaitically defined proper observance, marking them as an “internal Other,” as opposed to non-Jews.

It is a cardinal rule of review to judge a book on the book that has been written and not on the book that should have been written, but in this case there is just so much that

seems to be missing. The first problem relates to talmudics: while occasional passages receive somewhat extensive treatment, many do not. The source index is indeed quite extensive, but many of the references remain just that: references. This is acceptable when the scope of the work is extensive, less so when it is limited, and in any case, most of the discussion relates to the relevant anthropological issues and not to analysis of tannaitic sources based on common and accepted methodologies. I also have great difficulty with the trend toward generalization vis-à-vis this or that tannaitic or rabbinic “anything.” More discussion and analysis might have allowed for much more fine-tuning regarding the sages of the period and their views. While there might have been the occasional “general” trend, much more work was necessary to be convincing.

Rosenblum’s discussions on food and identity benefit greatly from his use of anthropology, but it is baffling to me why there is no reference at all to the entire field of the “archaeology of food and identity.” While there is a rudimentary and basic use of some archaeological material in the first chapter, the use of methodologies current in social archaeology might have contributed important insights to the book.

The discussions on the preparing and the eating of food are also very limited in scope, and even if the tannaitic period framework is maintained and even if the thrust remains on identity, there is still so much that is missing or should have been expanded upon. Prohibitions against the eating of pork, or problems with non-Jewish olive oil or breads are well known, but what about fruits, vegetables, and legumes? Is there not Jewish or tannaitic identity in these foods? Moreover, location is also of great importance. In which room does the meal take place? Or is it in the courtyard? Or perhaps both? Is there a difference between private, intimate meals and those of a more public nature? What about “public eating” in relation to stores, inns, and the like? All of this might be pertinent to identity. Further, much of what I just stated regarding dining might be pertinent to food preparation. There is some discussion of courtyard and kitchen in the book, but much has been written of late on domestic architecture and social archaeology that might have helped Rosenblum.

4. See, e.g., Katheryn C. Twiss, ed., The Archaeology of Food and Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University; Center for Archaeological Investigations, 2007). The 37th Archaeological Conference in Israel of the Israel Antiquities Authority is devoting an entire session this year to the social functions of “feasting and festivities. It is not enough to ask “how,” as the author does in his first chapter on re
alia, but today it is necessary to ask “what does the how mean” from a social-archaeological perspective.


6. The author makes use of the excellent but outdated work of the late Yizhar Hirschfeld, The Palestinian Dwelling in the Roman-Byzantine Period (Jerusalem; Israel Exploration Society, 1995). (The English volume is a translation of the original Hebrew, which was a revision of Hirschfeld’s MA thesis. Nobody would have
Rosenblum discusses meals with non-Jews, women, and nonrabbinic Jews, but there is so much more that could have been done on commensality. What about meals between rabbis and disciples? In addition, there should have been more on family meals (beyond the discussion on women) of both rabbinic and nonrabbinic Jews. To be fair, while this or that aspect mentioned in the criticism above might be found only in amoraic literature and not tannaitic tradition, this perhaps makes a case for a wider framework to begin with.

Rosenblum has provided us with a promising start. His use of anthropology enriches our understanding of food and identity and the tannaitic period. However, it is a start. We look forward to the continuation of food and dining research in relation to the rabbis and Roman period Palestine, both by Rosenblum and by other scholars.

expected social archaeology then or missed it if it were not there.) Today, see Eyal Baruch, “The Dwelling House in the Land of Israel during the Roman Period: Material Culture and Social Structure” [Hebrew] (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2008) and the detailed bibliography there, esp. on kitchens and courtyards. The dissertation in revised book form will be published shortly by Yad Ben Zvi.