

Benjamin Kamine
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Rabbinic Imaginations of the Gentile Other:

Ethnicization and Religionization
in Late Antique Rabbinic Literature*

Rabbinische Vorstellungen vom nichtjüdischen Anderen

Ethnisierung und Religionisierung
in der rabbinischen Literatur der Spätantike

Abstract

This response to Marianne Moyaert's work on Christian religionization examines parallel processes in late antique rabbinic literature from a Jewish perspective. While Christians constructed Jews as religious others through religionization, rabbis primarily employed ethnicization, creating the Jew-gentile dichotomy as their fundamental organizing principle. Unlike Christian religionization that centered religious difference, rabbinic thought prioritized ethnic difference, with covenantal and genealogical participation being mutually constitutive. The rabbis flattened gentiles into a category of negation while maintaining that ethnic and religious logic were intertwined. This asymmetric process helps explain the dynamics of Christianity and Judaism in late antiquity.

Keywords

→ Religionization
→ Ethnicization
→ Rabbinic literature
→ Jewish-Christian
relations

Zusammenfassung

Diese Antwort auf Marianne Moyaerts Arbeit zur christlichen Religionisierung untersucht parallele Prozesse in der rabbinischen Literatur der Spätantike aus jüdischer Perspektive. Während Christen Juden durch Religionisierung als religiöse Andere konstruierten, bedienten sich Rabbiner in erster Linie der Ethnisierung und schufen die Dichotomie zwischen Juden und Nichtjuden als ihr grundlegendes Ordnungsprinzip. Im Gegensatz zur christlichen Religionisierung, die religiöse Unterschiede in den Mittelpunkt stellte, priorisierte das rabbinische Denken ethnische Unterschiede, wobei die Teilnahme am Bund und die Genealogie sich gegenseitig bedingten. Die Rabbiner reduzierten Nichtjuden auf eine Kategorie der Negation, während sie gleichzeitig die Verflechtung von ethnischer und religiöser Logik aufrechterhielten. Dieser asymmetrische Prozess hilft, die Dynamik des Christentums und des Judentums in der Spätantike zu erklären.

Schlüsselbegriffe

→ Religionisierung
→ Ethnisierung
→ rabbinische Literatur
→ jüdisch-christliche
Beziehungen

Sumario

Esta respuesta al trabajo de Marianne Moyaert sobre la cristianización examina procesos paralelos en la literatura rabínica de la Antigüedad tardía desde una perspectiva judía. Mientras que los cristianos construyeron a los judíos como otros sujetos religiosos a través de la cristianización, los rabinos emplearon principalmente la etnicización, creando la dicotomía judío-gentil como su principio organizativo fundamental. A diferencia de la religionización cristiana, que se centraba en la diferencia religiosa, el pensamiento rabínico daba prioridad a la diferencia étnica, siendo la participación en el pacto y la genealogía mutuamente constitutivas. Los rabinos redujeron a los gentiles a una categoría de negación, a un grupo que mantenían que la lógica étnica y la religiosa estaban entrelazadas. Este proceso asimétrico ayuda a explicar la dinámica del cristianismo y el judaísmo en la Antigüedad tardía.

Palabras clave

→ Religionización
→ etnicización
→ literatura rabínica
→ relaciones
judeocristianas

In *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, Marianne Moyaert takes a *longue durée* approach to the role of Christian religionization in constructing normative Christian identity over and against a series of hermeneutical others. This critical work helps demonstrate the longstanding and systematic impact such tactics have had on the real others behind those hermeneutical creations in Christian Western Europe. In addition, her reflection in this issue of *ZMR* on the interconnectedness of religionization and racialization is an important corrective to discourse that has seen a rupture between pre-Enlightenment thinking about religion and modern conceptions of race. As she notes, in the study of bigotry against Jewish beliefs and the Jewish people, these bifurcations of past/present and religionization/racialization have contributed to an artificial differentiation between Christian anti-Judaism (anti-belief) and racial antisemitism (anti-people). Following other recent scholars who have questioned this division, Moyaert argues that religion and race have a complex interweaving in the Christian imagination. Through her case study of Christian Iberia, Moyaert shows how these categories have been continuous with each other when applied to Jews in Christian societies.

From a Jewish perspective, Moyaert's work on religionization prompts some second-order questions on (a) whether we can understand Jews to be going through a parallel religionizing process in regard to Christians; and (b) how much of historic Jewish self-understanding has been constructed in opposition to or in collaboration with Christian religionization. The rabbis, naturally, also go through a process of selfing and othering as they establish their authority in Jewish communities, even within their own positions of minority status and limited power. And that process is replete with multiple hermeneutical others, some of whom appear to be subjected to a religionizing process akin to the one Moyaert describes in the Christian creation of the hermeneutical Jew. However, I wish to argue that the primary process of selfing and othering for the rabbis is not one of religionization along a Jewish-Christian border but ethnicization along the Jewish-gentile divide. This process, which innovates beyond Biblical models, also partially guides the response of the rabbis to Christians and Christianity.

Although Moyaert has been explicit that her project does not engage with how the real other behind the hermeneutical creation has constructed their own self-understanding,¹ my hope here is to briefly explore some of the implications of her work from the other side of the hermeneutical divide. I will focus primarily on the rabbinic movement of late antique Palestine. In particular, I will seek to build on Moyaert's recognition that religionization and racialization are interrelated processes by showing how religionization and ethnicization are interrelated processes in classical rabbinic material.

The term religionization, in itself, should be nuanced when applied to the work of the late antique rabbis in configuring their conception of normative Judaism. As noted by Moyaert, the construction of Christianity as a religion was a hermeneutical process that, of necessity, cast Jews as a religious other, still part of the religious belief system of Christianity, although engaged in wrong interpretations.² However, while late antique Christian authorities constructed Jews as a religion, their rabbinic contemporaries largely rejected or ignored that hermeneutical process, consistently preferring the ethnic division of Jew and gentile over conceptions of religious difference.³ The Jewish construction of ethnicity,

* A digital version of the article can be found at: <https://www.ctsi.uni-bonn.de/zmr/aktuelle-ausgaben/zmr-109-2025-3-4>

1 MARIANNE MOYAERT, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other. A History of Religionization*, Hoboken, NJ 2024, 8.

2 *Ibid.*, 30–38.

3 DANIEL BOYARIN, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia 2004, 220–225.

in turn, wrestles with the tension between participation in the religion of Israel (through acceptance of and performance of the covenant) and genealogical membership in the people of Israel. These two criteria are distilled to a single dividing line between the Jew, who is both covenantally and genealogically Jewish, and the gentile, who is neither. One of many ways that the rabbis work out this idea is through case of the gentile convert to Judaism, who is recast as having been spiritually present at Sinai and genealogically descended from Abraham.⁴ Indeed, it may even be possible to read one early rabbinic source as considering the convert who returns to idolatry as equivalent to an apostate Jew, rather than a gentile idolator.⁵ Becoming religiously Jewish creates membership in the ethnicity of Israel.

The rabbinic innovation of the Jew-gentile dichotomy in late antique rabbinic literature turned the gentile into a category of negation. The gentile became simply the non-Jew, created as a hermeneutical other against which Jewishness was constructed. This does not necessarily follow from the Biblical use of the gentile, which differentiates among many different tribes and national histories. As observed by Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, »there is nothing in rabbinic literature about the gentile that is not posited from the perspective of the Jew.«⁶ And, in ways similar to the production of the hermeneutical Jew, the hermeneutical gentile is a flattened and simplified structure. Hybrid Jewish-gentile categories, such as the resident alien and the Samaritan, will eventually evolve to be considered as gentiles in every legal respect.⁷ And alongside this flattening will come significant stigmatization. Though this literature was produced in a time and place where Jews were dominated by a gentile empire, Ophir and Rosen-Zvi remind us that there were also gentile slaves and servants in Jewish households, and so this ethnicization had a specific impact on real people.⁸

The rabbinic ethnicization of the gentile also carried implications of physical difference. For example, in Leviticus Rabbah 23:2, as part of a larger treatment of Jewish uniqueness, the redemption of the Jewish people in Egypt is ascribed to their ability to maintain certain bodily practices, despite the pressure to conform to the dominant culture.⁹ Thus, the (male) Jewish body is circumcised, does not sport pagan hairstyles, and does not wear biblically prohibited garment mixtures. Jewish uniqueness is affirmed through physical characteristics alongside moral ones.¹⁰ Notably, as with Christian religionization, gendering also plays a role. The normative Jew in classical rabbinic literature is male. However, unlike the medieval racialization of Jews by Christians as described by Moyaert, in which the Jewish body is maligned and its physical difference is passed on by blood, the rabbis here are not describing heritable traits but resistance to the dominant culture. As such, any derision of the gentile body is not stated explicitly but is implied through the positive description of the appropriately altered Jewish body. This is part of a consistent rabbinic strategy to center Jews and Jewish obligations, paying as little attention as possible to those on the other side of the Jew-gentile divide.

Where the rabbis do seem to engage in a process more akin to Christian religionization is in their approach to the deviant Jew (*min*). Unlike their Christian counterparts, the

4 JOSHUA LEVINSON, Bodies and Bo(a)rders: Emerging Fictions of Identity in Late Antiquity, in: HTR 93 (2000) 345-348.

5 ADIEL SCHREMER, Brotherhood, Solidarity, and the Rabbinic Construction of the Commandment to Return Lost Property, in: Journal of Law, Religion and the State 3 (2014) 57-59.

6 ADI OPHIR/ISHAY ROSEN-ZVI, Goy. Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile, Oxford 2018, 14.

7 Ibid., 180-202.

8 Ibid., 14.

9 Cf. Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 5:11.

10 BETH A. BERKOWITZ, Defining Jewish Difference. From Antiquity to the Present, Cambridge 2012, 118-122.

11 Cf. MARTIN GOODMAN, The function of *minim* in early rabbinic Judaism, in: HUBERT CANKIK / HERMANN LICHTENBERGER / PETER SCHÄFER (eds.), Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion. Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag, Tübingen 1996, 505f.

rabbis do not go through a process of systematic heresiology, and the rabbinic term, *min*, shifts in meaning according to the time and place of its usage. Also, the deviant Jew is not necessarily characterized by the rabbis as possessing erroneous belief but can instead be designated as deviant due to errors in the performance of ritual practice,¹¹ hostility to rabbinic interpretation of Scripture,¹² or just a desire to be separate.¹³ In this way, the word initially carried a strong sectarian valence, only evolving over time in Palestinian rabbinic texts to point primarily to Jewish-Christians.¹⁴ However, the term's resistance to being assigned to a specific group is a rhetorical advantage for the rabbis, who primarily use the *min* as a way of working out their own discursive boundaries, defining what is and is not appropriate by labeling it as belonging to the *minim*.

In addition to using the *min* as a rhetorical device, the rabbis devised significant legal disabilities for the *min* within the Jewish legal system, prohibiting the prayer formulae of the *min* in prayer leadership,¹⁵ banning their slaughter practices,¹⁶ and including a curse of the *min* in the liturgy.¹⁷ We must consider that rabbinic labeling of practices as belonging to the *min* is not necessarily a description of historic fact so much as it is a method of labeling acceptable and unacceptable practices with an epithet. And, although late antique rabbis lacked state power to enforce their own conceptions of Judaism in the way that their Christian counterparts possessed for Christianity, we must still take seriously the growing relevance of their rulings in Jewish communities over the course of late antiquity. Where the rabbis held authority, their designation of what was or was not the practice of *min* was part of a process of selfing and othering through religious boundaries as they defined them: religionization.

After the Christianization of the Empire, *min* rhetoric also began to engage more directly with Christian readings of Scripture, especially in the Babylonian Talmud.¹⁸ As argued by Daniel Boyarin, in the Babylonian Talmud, the *min* often becomes a referent for gentile Christianity, and Christianity is no longer viewed as Jewish deviance but as belonging to a gentile empire. Thus, Christianity is re-ethnicized, and the dividing religious line is again indicated primarily on ethnic terms.¹⁹ *Min* will often be deployed as a simple euphemism for Christian in medieval rabbinic commentaries.²⁰ And Christians will be considered functionally equivalent to idolators in Jewish law.²¹

It would be incomplete, however, to view rabbinic ethnicization of the gentile as lacking a religionizing approach. As has been demonstrated, the rabbis considered ethnic and religious logic to be fully intertwined. For them, covenantal and genealogical participation are mutually constitutive. As such, the rabbis also conceive of the gentile as having covenantal obligations: the Noahide laws. This brief list of commandments was, according to rabbinic literature, commanded of all the descendants of Noah.²² However, this description of covenantal obligation also functions to construct ideas of the special Jewish relationship with God. As commonly articulated in rabbinic literature, the hermeneutical gentile

12 Cf. CHRISTINE HAYES, *What's Divine About Divine Law? Early Perspectives*, Princeton 2015, 223–225.

13 Cf. ADIEL SCHREMER, *Brothers Estranged. Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2010, 16.

14 REUVEN KIMELMAN, *Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity*, in: ED PARISH SAN-

DERS/ALBERT I. BAUMGARTEN/ALAN MENDELSON (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2: *Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period*, London 1981, 228–232.

15 m. Megillah 4:9.

16 m. Hullin 2:9.

17 t. Berakhot 3:25.

18 MICHAL BAR-ASHER SIEGAL, *Jewish-Christian Dialogues on < in Late Antiquity. Heretic Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud*, Cambridge 2019, 22–24.

19 Boyarin, *Border*, 220–225.

20 E.g., RASHI on BT Rosh Hashana 17a, s.v. המינין.

21 E.g., MAIMONIDES, *Mishneh Torah*, *Forbidden Foods* 11:7.

22 t. Avodah Zarah 9:4–8.

is incapable of honoring these few commandments, while Israel resolutely carries its far heavier obligation.²³ In contrast, one early source offers the case of »the gentile who does Torah,« which may function as a rebuke to Jews who fail their covenantal obligations.²⁴ So the rabbinic argument goes: if one can imagine a gentile who can fulfill those obligations even with their own difficulties in carrying out commandments, then a Jew who does not do the same has little excuse.

The rabbis also understand gentiles to possess cultural and religious laws that are passed down father to son, laws that Jews are to avoid emulating at all costs. In two early *midrashim* on Leviticus 18:3, the rabbis contrast the gentile patriarchal transmission of corrupting behaviors with the rabbinic master-disciple transmission of divine law.²⁵ These two *midrashim* take opposite strategies in defining the scope of »their laws.« For one, the definition of prohibited gentile laws is constrained and leaves room for shared practices between Jew and gentile.²⁶ For the other, broad collections of social practices, such as going to Roman games or theater performances, are included in »their laws,« widening the Jew-gentile divide.²⁷ As argued by Beth Berkowitz, core to these competing strategies is not just questions of assimilation to a dominant society, but the rabbinic contestation of the scope of their authority. The hermeneutical gentile defines the boundaries of what it is to be a Jew, and as such, the boundaries of rabbinic authority over Jewish communal practices.²⁸

In this brief response, I have partially charted the interrelated and mutually affirming nature of religionization and ethnicization in late antique Jewish sources. While there is a resemblance between these processes and the Christian religionization strategies described by Moyaert, there are some important differences. In Moyaert's work, she helpfully acknowledges the power asymmetry. Jews living in Christian lands were subject to the impacts of Christian religionization in a way that late antique Christians were generally not subject to the impacts of parallel processes in rabbinic thought. Further, I have shown that while the Christian process centered religious difference as a primary axis of Christian self-definition, specifically targeting Jews as a necessary hermeneutic other, the Jewish process more often centered ethnic difference as a primary axis of Jewish self-definition. The medieval racialization that Moyaert describes emerged out of a Christian process of religionization begun a millennium earlier. In contrast, ethnicization was the primary strategy for rabbinic interpreters, co-developed alongside religionization; both were there from the beginning. This difference helps explain why the hermeneutical Jew features prominently in the earliest Christian material, while the hermeneutical Christian is largely absent from early rabbinic material, eclipsed by the hermeneutical gentile. This observation offers another lens through which to understand the so-called parting of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity. Not only was this process contingent on time and place, but it was also asymmetric between Jews and Christians, whose differing logic of selfing and othering would, of necessity, conceive of the border between communities differently. ♦

23 Cf. Mekhilta Bahodesh 5; Sifre Deuteronomy 343; Leviticus Rabbah 13:2; BT Bava Qamma 38a.

24 Sifra Aḥare Mot 9.13:13, Weiss 86b; cf. MARC HIRSHMAN, Rabbinic Universalism in the Second and Third Centuries, in: htr 93 (2000) 107-110; BERKOWITZ, Difference, 68.

25 Commandments (BERKOWITZ, Difference, 81).

26 Sifra Aḥare Mot 9:8-9, Weiss 85c-d.

27 Sifra Aḥare Mot 9.13:9, Weiss 86a.

28 BERKOWITZ, Difference, 110f.