

Alexei M. Sivertsev, *Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. viii, 247 p. \$85.00. ISBN 978 1 1070 0908 0.

In his new book, A. Sivertsev, Professor for Rabbinic Judaism in the Department of Religious Studies at DePaul University, Chicago, studies the influence of Roman imperial ideology and eschatology on Jewish representations of the Messiah and the messianic age in the period between the fifth and the early eighth centuries A.D. He argues that the Jews as part of the Byzantine commonwealth not merely sought to subvert the dominant imperial discourse, but attempted to appropriate this discourse as part of their own narrative.

The first chapter, “Esau, Jacob’s Brother”, deals with the idea of the succession of power. Christian texts of the period develop the narrative of Christian Byzantium as successor of Davidic Israel. This “became a ubiquitous feature of Byzantine religio-political discourse and court ritual” (9). Jewish sources (PT Avodah Zarah 1:2, 23c; Ester Rabbah 1:12; Leviticus Rabbah 13:5, among others) reinterpret this narrative: Rome became the navel of the earth only as a consequence of Solomon’s marriage with Pharaoh’s daughter. Byzantine midrashim ascribe to David and Solomon Byzantine imperial practices — Byzantium imitates its predecessor, Israel. Rome now has the royal insignia of Israel; they legitimize its rule, but at the same time spell its doom. Christian and Jewish apocalyptic texts of the period may be read as in constant dialogue with and reacting to each other.

These apocalyptic interests are central to the second chapter, “Coronation in the Temple”. In the context of the Byzantine defeats in the seventh to ninth centuries, there is a revival of Jewish apocalyptic literature, most prominently the *Sefer Zerubbabel* and the *Otot ha-Mashiah* in its different versions. The *Otot* mention as the seventh sign of the Messiah’s arrival that the king of Edom will come to Jerusalem and lay his golden crown on the foundation stone of the Temple: “I have returned what my fathers took”. This motif is known from Pseudo-Methodius where the last Roman emperor surrenders his crown to God as its true owner at Golgotha in Jerusalem; it seems that the author of the *Otot* had access to a version of the Christian legend. The foundation stone of the Temple has its Christian equivalent in Golgotha; both represent the *axis mundi*. Earlier forms of the Christian tradition know of emperor Jovian accepting the crown only after it had been placed on the cross (thus in the Syriac Romance of Julian the Apostate, 5th century). This connection between the cross and the crown is rather common in Byzantine ideology; its symbolism stands behind the equestrian statue of Justinian whose left hand holds a globe topped by the cross; this statue stood in the very center of Constantinople, considered as the *omphalos* of the world, thus the equivalent of Golgotha and of the foundation stone of the Temple. The crown symbolizes the legitimate rule and its rightful succession, even by other peoples, a symbolism taken up by the *Otot* as well. Many Byzantine texts underline this symbolism; thus, Sivertsev’s interpretation of this text as “a Jewish reaction to the Heracleian imperial mythology” (76) is absolutely convincing.

The third chapter takes up the motif of the “Mother of the Messiah”, central to the *Sefer Zerubbabel*. There, Hephzibah, the mother of the Messiah Menahem son

of Ammiel, personifies Jerusalem and shields the city from invaders, calling to mind many artistic representations of city *tyches*, above all the personifications of Rome and Constantinople. Two sixth-century diptychs depict Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; he is greeted by the female representation of Jerusalem who wears a mural crown on her head. This is closely paralleled in the scene of *Sefer Zerubbabel* where Hephzibah greets her son at his entry to Jerusalem. By the seventh century, the symbolism of the city *tyche* was already transformed by that of the *Theotokos*. She was also considered as the protector of the city, as two churches dedicated to the Theotokos just outside the main gates of Constantinople and contemporary texts connected with them demonstrate. In the same way, *Sefer Zerubbabel* depicts Hephzibah as the guardian of Jerusalem. “She is entrusted with protecting Jerusalem in the absence of her son, the Messiah, just as the Theotokos is entrusted with protecting Constantinople in the absence of the emperor Heraclius” (101). But despite many parallels, Hephzibah is *not* the Jewish equivalent of the Theotokos; she never crosses the line to the heavenly sphere. Nor is Hephzibah the exact equivalent of the *Tyche* of Jerusalem nor that of Helena who found the true cross (as Hephzibah transmitted the staff of Moses). But she shares many characteristics with all of them. It is interesting to see how Hephzibah functions only in a Christian context; after the rise of Islam, her figure disappears from Jewish tradition.

Chapter Four, “*Renovatio Imperii*”, first studies the motif of the Temple spoils kept in Rome and their return to Jerusalem, as depicted in the *Otot*, but also by Procopius in whose account it is Justinian who after Belisarius’ victory over the Vandals sends them to Jerusalem to be distributed among Jerusalem’s churches. In both texts, the return of the Temple vessels signifies a renewal of Jerusalem. This may be seen in parallel with Byzantine stories of the transfer of a statue from Ilium and of the Palladion from Rome to Constantinople to legitimate its position as the New Rome. Another aspect of this constant dialogue between Jewish tradition and Roman-Byzantine mythology is the motif of the last Roman emperor and, on the Jewish side, of the suffering Messiah. In *Sefer Zerubbabel*, the sick and despised man who in Rome is awaiting his mission (BT Sanhedrin 98a) is suddenly transformed into a young man; he reveals himself as the Messiah and puts on “clothes of vengeance as a garment” to fight against the Christian empire. This is closely paralleled by the last Roman emperor in Pseudo-Methodius who will suddenly “awake like a man who has shaken off his wine” (Ps 78:65) to fight against the eschatological enemy, in his case the Ishmaelites, Islam. Other elements of the story also have their parallels in both traditions, most prominently the depiction of Armilos, the last ruler of Rome and the demonic adversary of the Messiah, in *Sefer Zerubbabel*, and Christian polemics against certain emperors as anti-Christ (Procopius in his *Historia Arcana* depicts Justinian as son of the devil). The mother of Armilos inverts the idea of the Theotokos and other Byzantine topoi; her statue, with whom Satan begets Armilos, may be understood in the context of the ambivalence of statues in contemporary Byzantium, in their attraction, but also the anxiety that they might be inhabited by demons. On the other hand, old statues that receive new heads or the use of spolia in the decoration of Constantinople are also part of the idea of the *renovatio imperii*.

The fifth chapter, “King Messiah”, deals with the enthronement of the Messiah in the Temple, as described in a piyyut attributed to Qalliri, and that of the Byzantine emperor, who sits on a throne besides that of God or Christ or even on the same throne, temporarily incorporating Christ. In the Alexander Legend (seventh century), Alexander promises to give his throne to the Messiah; awaiting his arrival, he will deposit it in the Temple of Jerusalem. “Alexander’s throne thus serves as a tangible symbol of continuity between Roman and messianic imperialism. No disruption between the two is envisioned” (184). Heraclius underlined the essential unity between himself as emperor and Christ when he assumed the title *pistos en Christo basileus*. The Messiah in the piyyut may be seen as product of the same discourse; he is God’s “prefect” (*segan*), but remains human. The Messiah receives one of the garments of God (Pesiqta Rabbati 37) and the scepter of the Christian emperor resembles that of God’s kingdom: Thus the imperial office and that of the Messiah are both sacred, as is underlined by many other details as well.

As Alexei Sivertsev draws out in his conclusion, many Jewish texts of the Byzantine period are best understood as a Jewish response to the imperial crisis. The Byzantine discourse that legitimized the empire by tracing it back to the Davidic kingdom, is accepted and inverted in Jewish texts of the period. The *peregrinatio imperii* is indeed divinely sanctioned, but the empire will return to its original owner. The Jewish eschatological kingdom will be the true realization of the Byzantine empire, Jerusalem the true Rome or Constantinople.

The book is a very important contribution to our understanding of Jewish Byzantine literature and its context within the Christian Byzantine discourse. Some of the parallels and connections Sivertsev points out may be rather hypothetical; not every detail of his presentation will resist a critical examination. Other aspects have been known and discussed for a long time already (for example, the role of the mother of the Messiah or that of Armilos). But what is important is the fact that he has greatly expanded our vision of the intellectual and religious dialogue between Jews and Christians of the period. He has demonstrated how important details find their parallels on the other side of the discourse and that the discourse is essentially the same. The Christian authors were acquainted not only with the Biblical tradition, but with many post-Biblical Jewish ideas as well. Jewish authors, on the other hand, were not as isolated as frequently thought, but part of the greater intellectual world of the Byzantine period and able to appropriate it for their own purposes. Sivertsev’s book is a great achievement and may be highly recommended to everybody interested in the intellectual world and religious thought of late antiquity.

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