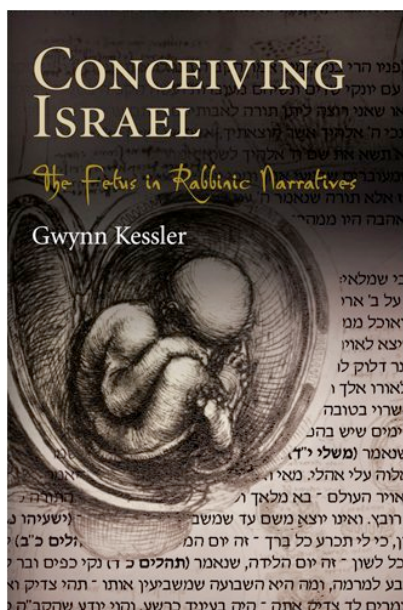


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Kessler, Gwynn

Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives

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Rabbinic perceptions of the human body are a subject that has not received much attention in scholarship so far. Besides the groundbreaking studies of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz in the early 1990s and a few articles that focus on gendered depictions of the body and particular body functions, the physical aspects of human existence have generally been neglected in favor of legal, historical, and theological studies. Gwynn Kessler's rather slim volume (the body of the text has only 135 pages) focuses on one particular aspect of rabbis' reference to human nature, namely, the fetus and its development. Although the book's primary aim is to understand rabbinic discourse on the fetus from the perspective of the rabbis themselves ("This book follows the rabbinic gaze and looks at the rabbis looking at fetuses," 24), at least some of the discussions are also relevant for the history of medicine. What is particularly stressed in this volume, however, is the "theologizing and rabbinizing" of rabbis' discourse about the fetus, which enabled rabbis to create a link to the biblical past and, at the same time, adapt certain ideas from their Greco-Roman cultural environment.

The book consists of five chapters, of which the last two are the most interesting, since they place rabbinic views within the broader cultural context of Hellenistic, Roman, and patristic discussions of conception and childbirth. The first chapters, which examine the

theological use of the fetus in rabbinic texts, are rather repetitive, reiterating again and again that the fetus serves rabbis to explain the relationship between God and Israel. When the traditions are interpreted within their literary context, this metaphorical understanding of the fetus is evident. Rabbis obviously used the fetus as “ideological and theological records that articulate an idea of, and an ideal, Israel” (4), dependent on and cared for by God from the time of inception onward. At the same time “rabbis project themselves unto the fetus” (4) and thereby emphasize their particular relationship to God. In identifying the fetus with collective Israel and with rabbis in particular, rabbis construct a link between the biblical past and the rabbinic present and stress the continuity of the covenantal relationship. The focus on the fetus allowed them to connect genealogy and covenant, ethnicity, and religion into a whole in which ancestry, beliefs, and practices are equally important.

Although all of this sounds abstract and theoretical, Kessler points to the great graphic detail of the rabbinic sources. Biblical interpretation, Greco-Roman notions of fetal gestation, and practical examinations seem to have informed rabbinic embryology. Nevertheless, rabbis do not seem to have been very interested in biology; they rather “worked to imbue embryology with theology” and saw the development of the fetus as a theological process, governed by God (19). The author stresses that it would be wrong to view rabbinic embryology in the context and from the perspective of modern abortion debates, and modern feminist approaches must also be used with caution when interpreting ancient religious texts. It becomes clear, though, that “rabbinic narratives that foreground fetuses simultaneously background women”; that is, women’s bodies, in which the fetus develops, “fade from view” (21).

In focusing on the biblical basis and theological impact of rabbinic embryology, the author tends to neglect more detailed discussions of the medical-historical context within Greek and Roman culture and patristic adaptations conducted in a similar biblical and Hellenistic framework. She states that such discussions are “beyond the scope of this study” (25). Some limited comparisons between rabbinic, Greco-Roman, and patristic embryology are drawn in chapters 3–5, in connection with specific aspects of the subject.

In chapter 3 Kessler shows how a midrashic text on Jacob and Esau (Gen. Rab. 63:6–8) can be understood as a counterargument against Paul’s notions in Rom 9. The midrash “tries to fix the identities of Jacob as Israel and Esau as not-Israel rather definitely—even as fetuses” (48), whereas Paul—and Origen in his reception of Paul—argue that Jacob is the church and Esau Israel. The midrashic rabbis countered this notion by presenting “pre-natal Esau as (Christian) Rome in the flesh” (56). The author thinks that at least some rabbis were familiar with Rom 9, thereby sharing Peter Schaefer’s and Israel’s Yuval’s

recent claim that at least some late antique rabbis had more knowledge of Christian teachings than previously assumed.

Although Greco-Roman ideas about fetal development clearly constitute the context in which rabbinic notions were formulated, both rabbinic and patristic embryology differ from the Greek and Roman models in their emphasis on the creator God. Kessler discusses this different emphasis in chapters 4 (“Embryology as Theology”) and 5 (“Reproductive Theology”), which constitute the most interesting parts of the book. Since embryology is almost completely absent from the Bible, the Greco-Roman context becomes tantamount: rabbinic discussions “point to the possibility of rabbinic engagement with and absorption of notions circulating in late antique culture” (66) while, at the same time, remaining truthful to biblical theology. This is subsequently shown in connection with rabbinic discussions of ensoulment, fetal formation and development, pregnancy, sex determination, and resemblance. Whereas the time of ensoulment is also discussed in Greco-Roman sources and Rabbi is even said to have favored Antoninus’s view that the soul enters the body at the time of conception (Gen. Rab. 34:10), for rabbis it is God who contributes the soul. In this way, rabbis are able to adopt Hellenistic notions and remain within the general framework of biblical theology.

Kessler refers to differences between Palestinian rabbinic traditions and the Bavli but does not examine the Babylonian particularities on the basis of Sasanian culture. For example, the Bavli transmits the alternative view that the soul is entered into the body later, after forty days of gestation, in analogy to the giving of the Torah at Sinai after forty days. It remains unclear, however, to what extent this notion is also reflected in Hellenistic, patristic, and Sasanian texts. If these comparisons had been expanded, the particularities of the particular rabbinic texts would have stood out more clearly.

Another issue that is mentioned in passing in the discussion of the rabbinic texts is the focus on men’s contribution to the creation of (especially male) children and the neglect of the mother in whose womb the fetus develops. Although God’s role in procreation is always emphasized, it is the male seed that God uses to create the fetus, “de-emphasizing if not downright denying any female contribution to procreation, either active or passive” (93). On the contrary, women are said to endanger the fetus, in contrast to God, who saves and protects it. Although Kessler briefly mentions the one-seed (Hippocrates) and two-seeds (Aristotle) theories in Greek thinking, more detailed discussions and comparisons between these approaches are not provided, based on the argument that theology was more important to rabbis than ancient scientific approaches. Nevertheless, such discussions would have been advantageous, not only in connection with the seed theories, but also for the issue of inheritance of physical or character traits that may reveal themselves in resemblances.

The author's main interest in theology has led to some repetitious passages and statements in the first chapters of the book while at the same time limiting the discussions of the Greco-Roman and patristic cultural environments. Nevertheless, the present volume constitutes a welcome and informed contribution to rabbinic discourse on human nature in general and embryology in particular. Hopefully, these issues will continue to be discussed within their wider context in the future.