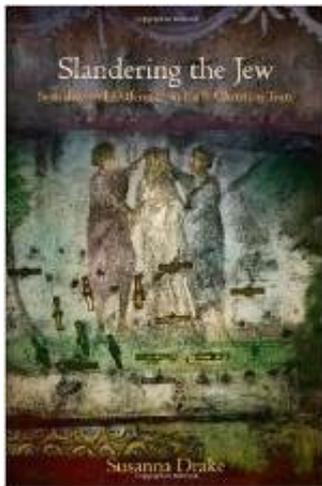




According to the Flesh: Sexual Slander as a Tool of Early Christian Anti-Jewish Rhetoric



Gail Labovitz | 30.06.2015

Susanna Drake:

Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts.

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Two decades ago, Daniel Boyarin took the title of his book *Carnal Israel* from Augustine's Tractate *Against the Jews*, where in the course of interpreting 1 Corinthians 10:18 ("Behold Israel according to the flesh"), Augustine describes the Jewish people as "indisputably carnal." Stating at the outset that "Augustine knew what he was talking about," Boyarin therefore announced his intent to "assert the essential descriptive accuracy of the recurring Patristic notion that what divides Christians from rabbinic Jews is the discourse of the body, and especially sexuality."^[1] In this new book, however, Susanna Drake returns to the rhetoric itself. Although she cites Augustine, and Boyarin's interpretation of his words, as "the initial provocation for the present study" (p. 112, n. 8), her concerns are not the accuracy, but the intent and implications of such accusations made by Christian writers against Jews in late antiquity: what did it mean not only for Augustine, but for a number of early Christian writers--and those for whom they wrote--to accuse Jews of carnality? Her questions are: How did the figure of the "carnal Jew" come to function as a topos of early Christian literature? When did this topos first appear, and what purposes did it serve? How did the stereotype of the carnal Jew serve Christian leaders as they forged the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy, Christianity and Judaism? And what can the development of this topos tell us about ancient understandings of gender and sexuality (p. 2)? To this end, she examines "the sexualized representations of Jews in writings by Greek church fathers from the first through fifth centuries CE" (p. 2); the authors she focuses on are the unknown author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, Origen, Hippolytus, and John Chrysostom.

The period in which these writers were active was one in which Christian leaders were seeking to establish the boundaries of the newly emerging religion: boundaries between Christian and pagan, between Christian and Jew, and between orthodox Christian and heretic. Attributing negative sexual and gender stereotypes to one's ideological opponents served (not only for Christians but for many groups in the world of late antiquity) as a common means, then, to separate and distinguish oneself

from such others. It also played a role in constructing internal norms of ideal attitude, practices, and social norms (and as Drake notes as an aside, often still does; p. 3). Because Jews and Christians shared origins and sacred texts, the boundary between Judaism and Christianity could be especially troublesome, and was often linked to discourse over heresiology as well (that is, perceived, accused, and/or actual “Judaizing” among those who claim to be Christians becomes a signifier of heresy). Sexual slander thus spoke to early Christians not just about who Jews were, but also how Jews read and (mis)interpreted sacred scripture, interacted with Christians, and threatened the purity of the Christian community. Among the particularly intriguing elements (for this reader, at least) of the materials that Drake surveys are that different authors, and even the same authors in different works, deploy gendered and sexualized imagery in multiple and not always compatible ways, with varying degrees of stability and effectiveness. Finally, as Christianity and imperial power became aligned at the end of this time period, such slander could further serve as rhetorical justification for coercion and violence against Jews and Jewish institutions.

Methodologically, Drake’s touchstones are works of postcolonialism (Homi Bhaba, Judith Butler) and (religious) cultural studies (Daniel Boyarin, Virginia Burrus), in which identities (such as Christian or Jew, orthodox or heretic, male or female) are recognized as socially constructed categories, constantly influenced by and reacting to forces and circumstances both external and internal in a complex web of power relations. Boundaries are typically less impermeable than some would wish, and “hybridity” threatens “purity.” Particularly influential here is Homi Bhaba’s analysis of the stereotype as a means to fix the identity of the colonized as “Other” and distinct from—typically meaning also inferior to—the identity of the colonizer, and thus to justify domination and colonization and to discourage undue mixing. Sex and sexuality, then, become a prime realm of metaphor for the simultaneous desirability of the Other and the threat of the “mongrel” who both results from and abets the process of blurring of boundaries between categories.

Because several later writers invoke Paul as part of their rhetoric, Drake begins in chapter 1 with an examination of the image of “Israel according to the flesh” and the deployment of sexual slander in the New Testament works attributed to Paul. The two are not directly connected at this point. While Christians are to be distinguished in their practices of chastity (or even celibacy), self-mastery, and shunning of porneia, the sexual Other for Paul is not the Jews, but idolatrous gentiles. In this, Paul draws on and develops similar trends in earlier and contemporaneous Jewish discourse regarding gentiles. Only once, Drake notes, does Paul attribute sexual sin (adultery, in Rom. 2:22) to a Jew, and in context the concern is as much hypocrisy (preaching against a variety sins while committing them oneself) as the particular sin itself (p. 24; also 28). “Israel according to the flesh” (and similar expressions), meanwhile, is bound up in the duality of “flesh” and “spirit,” and Paul’s privileging of the latter over the former for Christians and the Christian community. “Flesh,” however, has multiple and not always consistent associations for Paul, some more morally neutral than others. It may be associated with unruly, sinful physical desires including but not limited to the sexual, but also with the this-worldly sphere: procreation, kinship, and ethnic particularity; observance of the law as religious practice; and literalism in hermeneutics while missing the inner spiritual and allegorical meaning of scripture. Thus when second-century Christian writers begin to turn sexual slander against Jews, as in the Epistle of Barnabas and Justin Martyr’s Dialogue With Trypho, they at first do so “[a]part from Paul and in contradistinction from him” (p. 19). Both do, however, associate Jewish literalism with Jewish sexuality, and with particularly Jewish “lusts of the flesh.” As Drake writes of Justin Martyr, “[h]is argument depends on a tautology ... : Jewish misunderstanding of scripture is rooted in Jewish lust; simultaneously, Jewish lust is rooted in and authorized by Jewish (mis)understanding of scripture” (p. 33).

These ideas and images carry over into the works of Origen, who was active in the third century and whose work is the subject of chapter 2. Many of Origen’s writings were composed in Caesarea in Roman Palestine, a city of cosmopolitan reputation and diverse population at the time, and thus the dangers of hybridity and Judaizing among Christians also emerge as a critical theme in his homilies and commentaries. The particular importance of Origen’s works in the history of Christian sexual

slander against Jews, however, Drake argues, is his turn to and reinterpretation of Paul to further this discourse. The distinction between flesh and spirit that functioned in Pauline literature as a boundary between an old way of (Jewish) life prior to Christ and a new “life of the Spirit” open to believers of all ethnic origins alike (as well as a series of other dichotomies attributed to Paul), is mapped in Origen’s thought onto an essentialist difference between “Jew” and “Christian”—a difference that is “both interpretive and embodied” (p. 49). The “interpretive” and the “embodied” are further connected in that one supports the other: the truest spiritual interpretation of scripture can only come from the subjugation of the flesh to the spirit in the bodily discipline of the (Christian) interpreter, while (Jewish) fleshiness and indulgence in desires of the flesh on the one hand, and literalist hermeneutics on the other, are mutually reinforcing “adulterous” (in the multiple meanings of the word) practices. And in one final turn, these dichotomies are gendered, such that Christian spirituality is rational, self-controlled, and masculine, but Jewish fleshiness is uncontrolled, carnal, and feminine. It should be noted that Drake makes an unusual, or at least insufficiently explained, choice in this chapter (and also in the next) to present the representative texts—and hence the development of Origen’s thought—out of chronological order. Instead, her intent appears to be to first establish the rhetorical matrix of Jewishness, fleshiness, and literalism (in both interpretation and practice) in Origen’s writings, and then to discuss the ways in which Origen re/misreads Paul (and works attributed to Paul) “to depict Paul as the original and legitimating source for his representation of Jewish literalism and Jewish carnality” (p. 49).

Origen also figures in chapter 3, along with the early third-century Roman theologian Hippolytus (and several other writers, briefly), as Drake analyzes their commentaries to the story of Susanna and the elders, one of the Greek additions to the book of Daniel. In contrast to the deployment of gendered rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter, in which Christian chastity and Christian spiritual exegesis are associated with masculine self-discipline, in this case it is the vulnerable woman (Susanna) who is linked with chaste Christians subject to the predations of sexually aggressive male antagonists, Jewish and/or gentile; the story becomes (among other things) an allegorical prefiguration of the persecution of the early church and even Christian martyrdom at the hands of religious and imperial oppressors. Origen, more so than Hippolytus, focuses on Jews as the villains of the tale. Moreover, he “collapses the difference between the sexually corruptive elders in the Susanna story and the textually corruptive elders of his own day” (p. 69), once again drawing links between sexuality and exegetical practices. The Christian exegete in Origen’s model is trapped, as Susanna is between submitting to the elders or being falsely accused of adultery: “either he submits to the Jews and follows the literal sense of the law, or he follows the spirit of the law and is persecuted by the Jews on account of it” (pp. 71-72). Drake concludes the chapter with a quick survey of other Christian writers of the second through fourth centuries who presented Susanna as a model of piety and chastity for Christians and particularly Christian women, but did not focus on role of the elders, or hold them out as examples of opponents of the church.

A similar trope appears in *Adversus Iudaeos*, the sermons of John Chrysostom, which are the subject of chapter 4. While others have approached the sermons with an eye to the historical and social realities that might underlie and be reflected in Chrysostom’s rhetoric, Drake’s interest is in the sermons as a means of constructing reality: “identities, differences, communities, and boundaries in late fourth-century Antioch” (p. 79). In this case it is heretical and Judaizing (these being overlapping categories) elements in the Christian community who are cast as (sexual) aggressors (sometimes quite literally; in the first sermon, Chrysostom relates an episode in which he himself rescued a faithful Christian woman from a “Christian” man attempting to force her into a synagogue to take an oath); Jews themselves are deviant and threatening in other ways as well. Among the metaphors and images that Chrysostom musters, Jews are demonic, a disease, animalistic (Chrysostom especially invokes animals associated with brutish and overtly sexual behavior), prone to drunkenness and gluttony, sexually unrestrained, gender-deviant. The synagogue is like a theater—a site “disruptive of social hierarchies and ‘natural’ order” (p. 86)—and full of “soft” men (*malakoi*) and whorish women (*pornai*). Bestial Jewish bodies are indeed fit for suffering, violence, and even slaughter—or as Drake cleverly puts it, not only carnal but to be “treated as carne” (p. 93). Drake thus concludes with a

brief discussion of the deployment of rhetoric such as Chrysostom's in the fourth and fifth centuries to sanction legal discrimination against Jews and Jewish practice in imperial legislation, and actual violence against Jews even when nominally opposed by imperial authorities. The import of these discursive topoi is that rhetorical and physical aggression "were not merely coincidental": "Early Christian leaders' recourse to sexual and gendered invective ... helped create the conditions for programs of dehumanization and violence" (p. 103).

The actual text of this book is not long--105 pages of text and just over 30 more of notes--and is hence quite dense, in the most positive sense of that word. There is a risk of missing the complexity of the discourse(s) Drake is examining and of her explication of her materials in an overly quick read. But for the careful and conscientious reader, there is much to be learned from this book.

Footnotes

[1] Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1, 2.

Editorial remarks

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