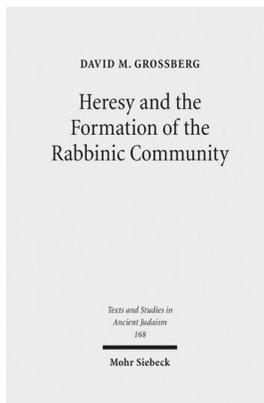




## *Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2018.11.09*

**David M. Grossberg.** *Heresy and the Formation of the Rabbinic Community. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 168.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-16-155147-5. 277 + x. €129. Cloth.

**Andrew Higginbotham**  
Ivy Tech Community College - Riverfront  
Lawrenceburg, IN



David M. Grossberg enters boldly into the present conversation over the origins of rabbinic Judaism, in relation not only to the Second Temple period but also to nascent Christianity. He begins by acknowledging the prevailing view that rabbinic formation at Yavneh is more myth than fact, though he also recognizes that such dismissal by the present generation of scholars, in the absence of another theory, leaves them adrift (2). Grossberg proposes in place of the Yavneh myth a slow process of rabbinic community formation, lasting several centuries and reflected in the texts of classical rabbinic Judaism extant today (5–7). He cautions that even his reconstruction is just that: a modern attempt to classify a religious movement, which remains somewhat anachronistic and heuristic (8–9). He anchors his *longue durée* formation of the rabbinic community in the idea of the formation of the sage (12–14).

Grossberg begins his first chapter by rejecting the use of heresy and orthodoxy as categories for understanding rabbinic Judaism, finding the patristic term *haireisis* to have a different history of semantic usage from the rabbinic term *min* (16, 30–31). For Grossberg, rabbinic “heresy” is more diverse and ambiguous than the more rigid dichotomy of orthodox and outsider in Christian heresiology (35). He also notes that there is little evidence that the rabbis and the early church fathers influenced each other in their use of heresy as a category (28, 40). While he acknowledges the importance of Alain Le Boulluec and Daniel Boyarin, he rejects their understanding of heresy and favors an approach based instead on the use of boundary-creating rhetoric (42–44). Grossberg suggests that a focus on boundary-formation-through-discourse is more in line with the diverse religiosity of the period and with the breadth of rabbinic literature (48–49).

In the second chapter, Grossberg discusses the semantic range of the term *minim*, a category he sees largely as referring to straw man opponents in rabbinic discourse (50). He first confirms the need to dispense with the equation of *minut* with *haireisis* by showing that the terms have opposite diachronic developments (55). After surveying the rare occurrences of *minim* in the earliest Second Temple texts, Grossberg shows that *minim* in the earliest stages is a reference to sectarian insiders, analogous to the group affiliations of

Pharisees and Sadducees (72). However, in the early Christian period, *minim* is fused with “those that say that there are two powers” to form a new polemical opponent (83, 86). This outsider category is emptied of its threat by the time of the Babylonian Talmud, which uses *minim* to depict the trope of the non-Jew in rabbinic disputes (88).

Grossberg focuses his third chapter on the nebulous categories *posh ‘ei yisra’el* or *rish ‘ei yisra’el*, “sinners of Israel” or “wicked of Israel,” labels increasingly used over the centuries to indicate outsiders-becoming-insiders, which thus follows a trajectory opposite to that of *minim* (92, 98). He notes a rhetorical shift between the Palestinian and Babylonian traditions that indicates both a greater inclusion of sinners within Israel and a fusion of good deeds and *mitzvot* as synonymous (103–6). Grossberg sees the rehabilitation of the character of Achan in the Bavli along these lines (110). The insertion of “all Israel have a portion in the World-to-Come” in the Bavli is another example of inclusionary rhetoric (114).

In the fourth chapter, Grossberg studies the term *meshummadim*, “non-observant ones,” an early grouping that becomes bifurcated in the development of rabbinic discourse (116). He notes that the evidence points toward a development: originally, the *meshummadim* were Jews lax in their observance due to Roman social pressures, while in later texts the term shifts to mean “apostates” (126). The thing not being observed also changes from biblical precepts to rabbinic juridical decisions (131). This culminates in the Bavli’s division of the *meshummadim* into those who sin out of appetite and those who sin out of provocation, the former seen as redeemable and the latter seen as incorrigible opponents (132, 138). Grossberg notes that the entity violated by the *meshummad*’s disobedience is not God but the Torah, and thus by extension rabbinic authority (143).

Grossberg studies in his fifth chapter the *apiqorsim*, leaving the term untranslated. The rabbis leave this category empty so that it can be progressively defined and filled with ideological deviants as rabbinic texts use the term (144–45). The key characteristic of the *apiqorsim* is their disrespect for the rabbis (153–55). Grossberg argues the term emerges due to the phonological convergence of the Greek *Epikouros* and Aramaic *afqiruta*, “irreverence” (157). Thus the categories of rabbinic opponents, *minim*, *meshummadim*, and *apiqorsim*, inscribe the boundary between the rabbis and the not-always-concentric circles of outsiders (158–59). Grossberg concludes the chapter with a discussion of the rabbinic advice to prepare for, but then avoid debate with, the *apiqorsim* as indicating the expanding role of the rabbis, who have now become community teachers and judges (162, 165–66).

In the sixth chapter, Grossberg examines the famous rabbinic outsider Elisha ben Abuya. He links the terminological work done in previous chapters with how Elisha is similarly transformed over the centuries into a progressively excluded anti-rabbi character (167–69). Grossberg finds it striking, however, that Elisha is essentially self-ostracized, as the rabbinic discourse seeks to reincorporate him into the community at each stage (171, 175). In his examination of parallel instances of Elisha’s exclamation, “Perhaps, *has v’shalom*, there are two powers!” Grossberg determines that the phrase should be understood as counterfactual rather than impious (181–84). When Grossberg reads the episode involving Elisha and Metatron (b. Hab. 15a; 3 Enoch § 20) in light of these conclusions, he finds that Elisha’s expulsion is the result of Metatron’s vengeance, which Elisha misunderstands as divine punishment (177, 186, 189–92). In the end, Grossberg sees Elisha as self-excluded from divine redemption and rabbinic fellowship, while the texts seek to restore Elisha to both.

Grossberg then extends the trope of failed rabbi, first seen in the case of Elisha, to three other examples in his seventh chapter: Gehazi, Eleazar ben Dordia, and the unnamed student of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahia (193, 199). In the case of Gehazi, Elisha (the biblical prophet and not ben Abuya) rejects his student because of his greed in the instance of Naaman’s healing, but never succeeds in restoring Gehazi, who sees himself as excluded due to tannaitic precedent (205–6). Eleazar ben Dordia and the student of Yehoshua ben Perahia are treated together, the former excluded because of his sexual transgression and the latter for accusing his

teacher of the same (211–13). For Grossberg, repentance functions in all three cases (or all four, if Elisha ben Abuya is included) as the mark “that there is no place for an individual sage outside of the rabbinic collective” (215). Grossberg finds that by both polemically targeting outsider groups and enforcing rabbinic orthopraxis, the rabbis create their community through inclusion and exclusion.

Each of Grossberg’s chapters focuses on one aspect of rabbinic polemic, yet he combines them neatly into a larger narrative (7, 12–13, 16–17, 27, 167, 193–94, 215–24). The result is an able defense of his overall thesis: the rabbinic movement developed over several centuries through the rhetorical process of boundary-setting. Grossberg carefully clarifies how his work relates to that of other scholars and to prevailing scholarly views. He is equally precise in his use of terminology, not feeling the need to define rabbinic phrases if internal ambiguity does not warrant it (24, 31 n. 11, 144).

However, two related issues occasionally weaken Grossberg’s presentation. First, his reliance on diachrony is not well-matched to his use of the rabbinic texts. While he does use a wide survey of rabbinic literature (see p. 6 for his list and p. 22 for his dating), he often tends to prioritize the Bavli, particularly in chapter 6 (167–92), and its readings in his conclusions (see pp. 22, 158, 204). Grossberg would have been better served to treat the parallels more evenly and then position the findings (as he does) in a chronological series. Second, Grossberg limits his use of the Yerushalmi tradition about Elisha ben Abuya to one paragraph (173), while he reads the two talmuds at other junctures more evenly (103, 152–54, 205). His argument would have been stronger with a synchronic reading of a single text or tradition, which might then be related to the larger arc of development across the centuries. One tantalizing example of such a synchronic reading is Grossberg’s near-equation of the *minim* with the Pharisees on pages 62–72. He builds a case for a similar polemic trajectory for both groups, but then unclearly states whether the parallel runs deeper (see pp. 96, 148, 153).

A final, though minor, weakness is the incomplete bibliography he cites. The publication of this book (2017) so soon after its completion as his doctoral dissertation (2014) may explain the omission of Naftali Cohn’s “Heresiology in the Third Century Mishnah: Arguments for Rabbinic Legal Authority and the Complications of a Simple Concept” (2015) and Devora Steinmetz’s “Interpretation and Enactment: The Yerushalmi Story of Elisha ben Abuyah and the Book of Ruth” (2016).<sup>1</sup> However, his omission of Daniel Boyarin and Virginia Burrus’s “Hybridity as Subversion of Orthodoxy? Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity” (2005) diminishes his findings about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first few centuries CE, especially given his significant use of Boyarin in his bibliography (see pp. 28–29 n. 3 and 228–29).<sup>2</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, Grossberg’s work on the whole is a vital addition to the scholarship on the development of rabbinic Judaism. His departure from the “Yavneh myth,” which began already in the work of Jacob Neusner years ago, brushes the cobwebs out of what at times is still an overly historicized reading of rabbinic texts (1–2, 220–24). His focus on boundary rhetoric, instead of heresy, moves forward the field of study concerning how both Judaism and Christianity develop (217, 221). His recognition of, and at times pointed emphasis on, the diversity of Judaisms in the Second Temple era is also vital for the proper orientation and understanding of this seminal period of religious formation (218, 220, 222–24). I recommend this book to other researchers of the Second Temple and early rabbinic periods and anticipate its influence in years to come.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cohn, “Heresiology in the Third Century Mishnah: Arguments for Rabbinic Legal Authority and the Complications of a Simple Concept,” *Harvard Theological Review* 108 (2015): 508–29; Steinmetz, “Interpretation and Enactment: The Yerushalmi Story of Elisha ben Abuyah and the Book of Ruth,” *AJS Review* 40 (2016): 359–92.

<sup>2</sup> Boyarin and Burrus, “Hybridity as Subversion of Orthodoxy? Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity,” *Social Compass* 52 (2005): 431–41.