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cepts. Briefly alluding to negative theology as “an ongoing ritual of unsaying,” he quotes Foucault referring to himself as a “negative theoretician” (121) in order to emphasize that Foucault does not offer theories of power or the subject, but rather a historical analytics of power’s operation with respect to the objects it brings into being. This astute observation frames Foucault’s entire corpus as an ethical exercise of self-writing, a succession of efforts to think himself otherwise, and, in a Kierkegaardian gesture, to harness, confound, and redirect the reader’s desire “to another way of conceiving the self” (151). Foucault’s turn to the ancient world comes into focus not as an enterprise of recovering lost origins, but as an ethical attempt to write across thresholds of alterity (167), an effort to unmake oneself so as “to become again,” in a Nietzschean turn of phrase, “what one never was” (173).

Jordan’s study is bookended by a deeply personal vignette and by an intimate account of Foucault’s death. It marks the time of Jordan’s coming out, his falling away and return to Christian community, and the AIDS crisis that ultimately claimed Foucault. It is a text both of admiration and of mourning. In addition to mourning Foucault, Jordan’s writing is an exercise that mourns the loss of a language capable of confidently patterning human lives around Christianity’s greatest somatic drama—incarnation. Seeking religion in Foucault at the edges of language and in theaters of bodily resistance is, for Jordan, an ethical practice of restaging that drama in a language that he knows cannot fully support it.

DANIEL J. SCHULTZ, *Chicago, Illinois*.

KALMIN, RICHARD. *Migrating Tales: The Talmud’s Narratives in Their Historical Context*. Oakland: University of California Press / S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies, 2014. xxiii+282 pp. \$65.00 (cloth).

Migrating Tales takes on a most worthwhile task: to situate the Babylonian Talmud, by far the largest and most influential late ancient Jewish corpus, within the great cultural matrix of the world in which it came into being. The author’s main claim is that close readings of Babylonian Talmudic narratives reveal a continuous contact between Jewish Babylonia and the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, contact that manifests itself in the appropriation of literary motifs, plot structures, and ideas. By examining up close eight Talmudic case studies and tracing connections between the Talmudic units at hand and various Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Mesopotamian, and other texts, Kalmin makes the point that when attempting to understand the Babylonian Talmud in context, one must take into account a wide repository of traditions and corpora that to date have rarely been identified as pertinent to the world of Jewish Babylonia. Thereby, Kalmin seeks to undermine both the long-held view of Jewish rabbinic culture as entirely insular—a view that has long been discredited in scholarship, but remains prominent in traditional Jewish circles—and the recent scholarly emphasis on Sasanian Persia as the ultimate setting against which the Babylonian Talmud is to be read. Kalmin’s book rightly contests a dichotomous division of the rabbinic world into “West” and “East,” “Greco-Roman” and “Persian,” and presents instead a much more complex and dynamic picture of migration, transition, and interaction between regions, languages, and cultures.

The book deserves praise for the remarkable erudition that underlies it, for its scrupulousness, and for the textual and philological sensitivity that guides every page of it. I especially applaud Kalmin’s exercise of scholarly caution and his unwillingness to reach hasty or simplistic conclusions. Every avenue of interpretation and explanation for the textual data is carefully weighed, and the complexity of the evidence is

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presented candidly, leaving room for ambiguity and uncertainty. Although this mode of writing can become tedious at times, I do believe it is warranted when one is dealing with a phenomenon as elusive and intangible as the travel of motifs and themes across a broad geographical and historical terrain.

In terms of the book's proclaimed goal, namely, to establish that the Babylonian Talmud is fundamentally a part of the Roman East (at least from the fourth century CE and onward), the book is largely successful. Not all of Kalmin's readings are equally persuasive: alongside chapters that make a compelling case for literary contact and borrowing (e.g., chaps. 1, 4, 5), there are chapters whose arguments are rather weak and forced (notably chaps. 6 and 7). The general picture that emerges from the book, however, is cogent and renders a highly valuable service in probing scholars of the Babylonian Talmud to examine this corpus vis-à-vis a wide range of other late ancient literatures that have thus far been out of most rabbinicists' purview.

Nevertheless, while the book is successful in establishing the Roman East as a critical context for the Babylonian Talmud, it is less successful in taking the next step and showing how this newfound context can redefine and reshape our understanding of the Babylonian Talmud itself. Kalmin pursues his investigation of motifs, stories, and ideas from across the late ancient world in Babylonian Talmudic narratives as if it were a project of source criticism: he attempts to uncover the constituent materials that are at play in the Talmud and then to see how these source materials were adapted in their new rabbinic setting. What he does not do, however, is allow the various materials he uncovers to challenge existing notions of rabbinic Babylonian Jewry as such. It is especially because Kalmin so convincingly portrays the late ancient Levant as porous and dynamic, and shows how fluid and shifting the boundaries between regions and languages were in this world, that it becomes all the more apparent that he is not interested in questioning the assumed rigidity of religious and national boundaries within this cultural setting.

Throughout the book, Kalmin seems to maintain a rather essentializing view of ideas and themes as "Jewish" as opposed to "non-Jewish" and of "rabbinic" as opposed to "nonrabbinic" and does not entertain the possibility that the continuous cultural connections to which he is pointing also challenge these categories themselves. To take one example, in chapter 8, Kalmin argues that ideas of extreme asceticism and self-annihilation are "difficult . . . to square with rabbinic thought" and therefore identifies the appearance of such notions in a Talmudic narrative as direct and unqualified borrowing from Stoic or Cynic sources (217–19). I do not disagree with Kalmin that one can trace clear Greek influence in the narrative at hand, but once a notion appears in a rabbinic compilation, it is by definition a part of "rabbinic thought," and the onus is on the scholar to produce a more nuanced and less reified picture of rabbinic thought accordingly, rather than to separate "foreign" chaff from "rabbinic" wheat. An even more troubling example for essentialism can be found in chapter 6, which discusses rabbinic traditions on Pharisees. Kalmin writes: "Given the New Testament's general hostility to Judaism, it is unlikely that the Bavli would have incorporated criticism of a Jewish group they tended to sympathize with directly from the New Testament" (167). Not only does this statement flatten the New Testament's many books—most of which were written by Jews—into a single monolith manifesto, it also refuses to acknowledge that perhaps boundaries of identity and self-definition in late antiquity were not as unyielding as traditionally assumed, and as Kalmin's textual evidence itself urges the reader to consider.

The book's commitment to painting a rich and diverse picture is thus somewhat compromised when it comes to situating the Babylonian Talmud in its social and religious, rather than exclusively its textual, context. Despite these limitations, however,

the book makes a valuable contribution to the field and opens important directions for further inquiry.

MIRA BALBERG, *Northwestern University*.

KEFELI, AGNÈS NILÜFER. *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014. xx+289 pp. \$52.50 (cloth).

The Volga basin in what is now Tatarstan has been a frontier zone between the Slavic-Christian and Muslim-Turkic worlds in Eurasia for over a millennium. It provides an ideal locale for a fruitful study of religious traditions and their interactions, but very few scholars in the world have the necessary linguistic *and* disciplinary skills to do justice to the subject. For this reason, Agnès Kefeli's book is a tour de force. She brings to bear on her analysis a mastery of sources in Russian and Tatar, a keen understanding of popular religion and religious change, and a solid command of issues of empire. The book revisits the history of the so-called Kräshens, a community of Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians who saw a number of apostasies (i.e., mass conversions to Islam) in the nineteenth century. These conversions put the religious tolerance of the Russian Empire to test and provoked a great deal of imperial angst. They have either been studied as part of the legal history of the Russian Empire (as a problem for the Russian state) or as part of Tatar national history, where they have been narrated as a "return" of Tatars to their "natural" religion from which they had been torn through forcible conversions. Kefeli examines this encounter in completely new light. She combs the sources to reconstruct the world of the religious frontier in which identities were fluid and hybrid. The apostasies were not the restoration of ancestral faith but a new commitment undertaken at considerable risk to self and community (renouncing Orthodox Christianity was a crime). Indeed, some of the Kräshen communities might never have been Muslim in the first place. Kefeli also tells of Kräshens who did not convert. The church and the state mounted measures (not always aligned with each other) to counter the apostasies, the most successful of which were the attempts by Nikolai Il'minskii to create a network of schools for the Kräshens that taught Christianity in the Kräshens' native language, rather than in Russian. The Il'minskii schools created a bridgehead against the Islamization of the Kräshens and ultimately were responsible for the creation of a separated (Christian) Kräshen identity.

Two major achievements stand out in the book. The first is Kefeli's account of popular religion in its thaumaturgic tradition. For ordinary Muslims, Islam was as much about miracles and magic and acts of wonder as it was about law, and it was this religious tradition to which the apostatizing Kräshens converted. Yet this popular Islam came to have many critics—Russian missionaries, modernist Muslims, Bolsheviks, and (after the collapse of the Soviet Union) would-be Saudi benefactors have all found it wanting in its scriptural rigor—and it remains extremely difficult to understand on its own terms. Kefeli succeeds in bringing back to life the world of popular religion through a sustained reading of premodern texts of Islamic piety that have all too often been dismissed by scholars.

This is connected to her second major achievement. The apostasies, Kefeli argues, were not the result of an organized missionary effort on the part of Muslim Tatars but rather the work of ordinary peasant men and women, many of them apostates themselves. Many peasants traveled over the long northern winter to work in cities and towns, and a popular profession among Kräshens was tailoring. Tailors "constituted the wealthiest stratum of the [Kräshen] village and its intellectual elite" (159)