

CHARLOTTE ELISHEVA FONROBERT. *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000. Pp. viii + 326.

*Menstrual Purity* is the latest contribution to a growing body of critical scholarship on the construction of gender in rabbinic culture. More specifically, it builds on Daniel Boyarin's work on rabbinic notions of the Jewish body by offering a sustained account of what the Rabbis have to say about female bodies. It is very appropriate that this book joins volumes by both Boyarin and Miriam Peskowitz in the *Contraversions* series, for together, these works mark this series, both at the University of California Press and its current home at Stanford University Press, as the premier publisher of new scholarship on rabbinics and gender.

Charlotte Fonrobert offers a powerful and nuanced reading and recontextualization of *Niddah*, the laws of family purity within rabbinic culture. Fonrobert is not afraid to look at these texts, perhaps the most controversial laws related to women's bodies. Furthermore, instead of dismissing them as simply misogynous, Fonrobert argues for the importance of these embodied practices in the lives of ancient Jewish women. She makes a powerful case for the ways that these laws and practices enabled Jewish women to distinguish themselves as Jews. For Fonrobert, these practices are at the heart of a reading for women in rabbinic culture. Although Fonrobert is at times highly critical of some of the rabbinic accounts of these practices, she makes a point of continually reading with the aim of discovering what these practices meant for ancient Jewish women. In order to do so, she combines readings of rabbinic texts with readings of Greco-Roman and early Christian sources.

Fonrobert is very clear about her own critical orientation. In her introduction she positions herself as both a lover of rabbinic texts and a feminist. She makes explicit the challenges that this dual allegiance poses for her as a reader of texts on *Niddah*. She does not shy away from the fact that this is controversial and uncomfortable material. Not many feminist scholars would willingly pursue rabbinic discussions about what Fonrobert calls "the hermeneutics of colors and stains" or the "rabbinic science of women's blood." Yet Fonrobert stays with these sources in order to offer close readings that enable readers to consider these texts in a different light. Here Fonrobert makes explicit her reliance on feminist literary theory as a way into interpreting these texts. This hermeneutic strategy allows her both to acknowledge the problems these texts pose for feminist readers while also allowing for some of the possibilities they open up for addressing the embodied practices of ancient Jewish women. By not turning away,

Fonrobert enables feminists to begin to read these texts differently—but never uncritically.

I cannot say that Fonrobert made me want to return to these texts and affirm them, but she builds an argument for their significance. In so doing, she answers male scholars who have written extensively about the centrality of circumcision to rabbinic Judaism as a way of marking Jewish male bodies as Jewish. In a sense, Fonrobert makes the case that the laws of Niddah enabled Jewish women to engage in a similarly embodied set of practices that distinguished their female bodies as Jewish. Although she does not deny the centrality of circumcision, she does make a strong case for reconsidering Niddah as a way for Jewish women to embody their Jewishness in the ancient world. Perhaps the most fascinating chapter of her study is her account of an early Christian text about Jewish-Christian women who wished to maintain these practices even as they became Christians (chapter 6, “Menstrual Politics in Early Christian Literature”).

This is a beautifully written book that will appeal to a wide audience. It makes a strong contribution to rabbinic scholarship and it will interest feminist readers as well as students of early Christianity. Fonrobert makes her work accessible by carefully defining all of her critical terms as well as explaining how rabbinic arguments work. Her infectious enthusiasm for the material will permit new readers, who must work in translation, to enter into the intricacies of rabbinic argumentation. Her translations of these critical practices enable readers to share both her fascination with the Rabbinis as well as her feminist literary critique. *Menstrual Purity* is an ideal book for use in both advanced and introductory courses not only in Jewish studies but also in Christian seminaries, as well as in graduate and advanced undergraduate courses on the New Testament and the intertestamental period. I stress this final point in part because this volume works especially well in relation to a growing body of scholarship that demonstrates the close interrelationship between rabbinic and early Christian cultures, including works by Elizabeth Castelli, Karen King, A. J. Levine, and Daniel Boyarin, among many others. For readers in Jewish studies, especially feminist scholars not working exclusively on rabbinic texts, *Menstrual Purity* can be read as part of a growing literature that re-evaluates the practices of Niddah, including works by Rachel Adler and Rahel Wasserfall. Given its broad appeal, I am glad that *Menstrual Purity* has been reissued in a more moderately priced paperback edition.

In *Menstrual Purity* Fonrobert offers readers a powerful argument for re-reading the laws and discussions about menstruation in rabbinic literature from a feminist perspective. This book will enable a new generation of both feminist scholars and students of rabbinics to see these fascinating and troubling texts in a new light.