The Dynasty of the Jewish Patriarchs by Alan Appelbaum (review)

Mika Ahuvia

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Book Reviews

Alan Appelbaum
The Dynasty of the Jewish Patriarchs
Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 156
Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2013
Pp. xii, 246. $135.00.

What was the origin and nature of the Jewish patriarchate? Did the Jews of Palestine lobby for a leader after the temple's destruction, or did the Romans appoint one? What connection did the patriarchate have to second temple period institutions and the Hillel and Gamaliel of the New Testament? In answer to these questions, a flurry of revisionist articles on the topic of the patriarchate was published in the 1990s and early 2000s (see the articles by Seth Schwartz, Lee Levine, and Sasha Stern).

Key to Appelbaum's monograph is Schwartz's historical reconstruction (1999), which traced the source of the patriarchate's prestige to the diaspora, where the patriarch helped Jewish communities navigate relations among gentiles in exchange for voluntary donations, which were later formalized into the *aurum coronarium*. Schwartz called for a dynamic history of the patriarchate, one that would trace the hard won *individual* efforts of each generation of patriarchs. Appelbaum's book answers this call and adds a *dynastic* emphasis.

Though previous scholarship interrogated the origins and fortunes of the patriarchate, all of them took for granted its dynastic nature. Appelbaum does not. If, as Schwartz points out, the foundation of the patriarchate cannot be explained by deference to Roman administrative practice, then it is explicable in terms of the opportunities afforded local elites in the Roman period and the general standing accorded wealthy elites in any age.

Appelbaum presents a narrative of a Jewish familial dynasty with successes and setbacks, heroes and villains, an interesting account of wealthy men standing between rabbis, Jews, and gentiles and attempting to engage with the powers of the Roman Empire as best they could. He offers a generation-by-generation reconstruction of the dynasty, identifying the patriarchs' names, powers, and at times, even their personalities. A final chapter examines the patriarchate's self-representation as a Davidic royal dynasty in the context of other dynasties throughout Mediterranean history.

Against traditional accounts, Appelbaum argues that the patriarchate was not an inevitable development in a subjugated Judean province, but a result of the

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successful ambitions of one family. The priestly Oniads and kingly Hasmoneans and Herodians may have provided a Jewish precedent, but Appelbaum argues that the emergence of the late antique patriarchate was an innovation that all the patriarchs, but Judah Nesia in particular, "worked tirelessly, and effectively" to make a reality (86).

Appelbaum, for the most part, follows the parameters of revisionist historians, accepting the premise that Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi inaugurated a new familial dynasty even as it claimed Hillelite ancestry, rejecting the rabbinic traditions about the relationship of Judah ha-Nasi and the emperor Antoninus as more myth than memory, and accepting Schwartz's suggestion that the source of the patriarchate's power was financial backing from Jewish communities.

Using all available evidence to maximum effect, his methodology for rabbinic sources prioritizes those traditions that are of Palestinian provenance, especially those that have legal consequence, and those that stand in tension with rabbinic interests (à la the New Testament criterion of dissimilarity). With respect to Roman legal sources like the Theodosian Code, Appelbaum makes the case for imagining the patriarchs at work behind the scenes, arguing that "laws favorable to Jews would not have been passed absent some advocates for Jewish interests and that no such advocates are more likely than the Patriarchs and their staffs" (122).

This monograph, part detective story and part legal history, offers a somewhat positivistic account, albeit with self-conscious caveats and disclaimers. Some of his readings of literary sources for historical kernels about dynastic logistics may be disagreed with, but other readings are most judicious. He trusts Origen enough to write the history of a "forgotten patriarch," but not enough to accept his testimony that the patriarchate exercised the power of capital punishment. His use of a tale in Epiphanius's *Panarion* might stretch credibility, but his interpretation of a rescript in the Justinian code as evidence for Judah Nesiah's attempt to elevate the status of rabbinic courts in the Roman Empire is convincing. So too is his insight that where Judah Nesiah failed in 293 C.E., his descendant Gamaliel V seems to have succeeded in achieving Roman recognition of rabbinic arbitration in 398 C.E.

Appelbaum takes up the challenge of reconstructing the dynamic history of the patriarchate and shares with us its exciting possibilities, limitations, and historical implications. After all, the patriarchate was to change the face of the rabbinic movement in late antiquity. Projects like these are not undertaken much these days—Appelbaum reminds us what we are missing.

Mika Ahuvia, University of Washington