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*Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity: Betrothal,
Marriage, and Infidelity in the Writings of Ephrem the
Syrian* by Yifat Monnickendam (review)

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Hierotheos in the Dionysian Corpus,” in *Proclus and His Legacy*, ed. D. D. Butora and D. A. Layne [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017], 183–97, at 183–84).

3. There is no definition of “metaphorical symbolism” (Chapter Five) nor a theoretical inquiry about what “forgery” is and what a “literary ploy.” Kharlamov merely refers to two titles about pseudonymity, pseudepigraphy, and forgery (8n30), but he does not discuss the issue and does not use other works on the topic (e.g., A. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990]). And what would the “metaphorical symbolism” and a “literary ploy” be, especially if they are not primarily supposed to underline the Pauline connections (55–56, 79)?

Other scholars have speculated about the personality and the intention of this author (e.g., T. Lankila, “The Corpus Areopagiticum as a Crypto-Pagan Project,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 5 [2011]: 14–40), and Kharlamov adds another story to this list, even though he claims he does not want to develop “the genre of pure theological fiction” (49). He wonders whether a woman could have written the *CD* since there have been “learned Byzantine empresses”; he thinks this is “possible but not likely”:

If a woman would write on this subject it might have a more picturesque and interesting approach, and a more passionate style. Her work certainly would not sound like a work on the *theory* of mysticism, but would speak out of personal experience. A female author, perhaps, would be less interested in building predominantly male hierarchies and attempting to squeeze the whole universe into a coherent system. (49)

This description is a pastiche of clichés about female writers, a resurrection of the presentation of women as less theoretical and philosophical and more emotional and passionate.

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Yifat Monnickendam
*Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity:
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Yifat Monnickendam’s revised dissertation uses the legal traditions within Ephrem’s corpus as a test case for situating Syriac Christianity in a broad, late antique intellectual environment. The book offers a compelling model for how to place Ephrem’s obscure and allusive corpus in a firm literary and, specifically, legal

setting. Arguing that Ephrem sits uniquely between Greco-Latin, Christian traditions, on the one hand, and rabbinic, especially Palestinian, halakhic traditions, on the other, the book proceeds in four primary content chapters, prefaced by a substantial introduction and a conclusion that summarizes the book's findings and argues for their significance.

Chapter One places Ephrem's language and conceptualizing of betrothal in comparative perspective. Examining first Ephrem's terminology around marriage and betrothal, Monnickendam finds here a general overlap with the terminology of rabbinic halakha—one that differs from terminology in Greek and Latin literature—as well as a shared tendency to collapse the distinction between betrothal and marriage. Monnickendam then suggests, however, that this terminological overlap functions primarily as a linguistic veneer, not necessarily reflecting shared legal positions. Ephrem's conceptual articulation of the links between betrothal and marriage bears instead the marks of Greco-Latin Christian polemics and thus reveals a theological, not necessarily a legal, stance.

Chapter Two, focusing on premarital sex between betrothed couples, nevertheless argues that, in fact, Ephrem's collapse of betrothal and marriage does represent a legal stance. Monnickendam pursues this argument by looking at a passage in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* that addresses the scene of Lot's daughters' seduction of their father. A speech that Ephrem composes for Lot's wife appears to take for granted that sex between betrothed couples does not amount to fornication. Monnickendam suggests that this passage, because it is shorn of any theological polemic, provides evidence for Ephrem's legal perspective on betrothal, which in turn enables her to build on the insights of Chapter One to argue that Ephrem's view of betrothal is closer to rabbinic halakha than to Greco-Latin discourse, but also closer to Palestinian sources than Babylonian (108).

Chapter Three looks at Ephrem's attitude toward rape and abduction marriage. The chapter argues that Ephrem saw the physical sex act as constitutive of marriage. Unlike the preceding two chapters, the material of Chapter Three connects Ephrem most closely neither to Greek and Latin Christian sources, or to contemporary rabbinic thought, but to "earlier Palestinian sectarian groups," such as the Qumran community (110).

Chapter Four surveys Ephrem's views on fornication, adultery, and divorce. The chapter first shows that Ephrem discusses divorce only in contexts of betrothal, never in contexts of marriage. He sees the dissolution of betrothal, moreover, as demanding "full divorce, as if the couple were already married" (154). Monnickendam argues further that Ephrem demands "the death penalty in the case of adultery of a married woman," and that he "demands divorce and a full legal procedure in the case of fornication during betrothal" (154)—both positions that connect him to rejected Palestinian halakhic traditions.

The book's concluding chapter helpfully summarizes its findings. Monnickendam sees in Ephrem a figure whose legal thought on marriage was shaped culturally in a myriad of ways—by Roman law, as well as Greek and Latin Christian theology and practice, as well as Palestinian rabbinic and sectarian halakha (202). Monnickendam argues that Ephrem does not seem to be in dialogue with contemporary Jews, but that his use of Jewish legal concepts connects him to

“early and even sectarian Jewish literature” (205). To the extent that he is in conversation with contemporary religious communities, it appears to be with Greek and Latin Christian communities to the west of him.

Monnickendam has written a book that is creative and bold in its approach to Ephrem’s corpus. Some of her arguments did raise questions for me. For example, the book maintains a clear distinction between a legal stance and a theological conviction. Legal issues are those that “did not serve a polemic or theological need . . . but addressed principally the legal issue in question,” and “theological statements” are those related to “the core issues of the Christian belief, especially as part of a religious debate with other groups or independently” (23). But can the two be so neatly divided? Monnickendam does anticipate this question in Chapter One, and I understand that in this context she aims primarily for caution—not to argue that a legal position is not operative, just that we cannot uncover it. But is the theological-legal dichotomy itself, when applied to Ephrem’s corpus, appropriate? Rather than assuming a firm division between the theological and the legal, would it be more apt to use a corpus such as Ephrem’s to problematize the division itself?

A second question relates to the way Monnickendam represents her sources in Chapter Four. In the chapter’s introduction, she says that she will “show Ephrem’s demand for the death penalty in the case of adultery of a married woman,” and in the conclusion that “Ephrem claims that an adulterous wife should be beheaded” (154, 200). However, in the actual section within Chapter Four that addresses the relevant materials, Monnickendam says that she does not intend to “imply that adulteresses were sentenced to death in Ephrem’s days, or that Ephrem wanted to rule this way,” but only that “he was acquainted with such a tradition” (174). These statements say very different things. I also wondered whether, in this discussion of punishment, Monnickendam gave sufficient attention to the poetic and metaphoric character of Ephrem’s language. For example, she points to three passages in Ephrem’s corpus that suggest that “a married woman accused of adultery should be beheaded . . .” (175). None of these passages give a legal opinion in a direct way, but allusively refer to some version of “the judges’ sword,” which “frightens the adulterers” (this example is from *Madrashé against Heresies* 34.14). Could such language not be metonymic? Can we so easily move from such poetic language to concrete, legal reality?

Monnickendam’s book exhibits vast learning and offers a unique and often persuasive model for thinking about the relationship of Ephrem to the late antique world. It will be of great use in discussions of the cultural setting of early Syriac Christianity, especially with respect to Judaism, as well as in studies of legal knowledge in late antiquity.

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