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This work brings an essential contribution to the knowledge of the cultural, theological, and historical framework of the intersection between Judaism and Syriac Christianity in the first millennium. The book’s title is itself very representative, highlighting that the fundamental concept that links the articles is the term, “intersections”, which – although somewhat vague in the mind of the reader – nevertheless reinforces the comparison between the two cultures, Jewish and Syriac Christian, throughout the volume. It is to be appreciated that the volume’s editors have chosen particular rather than general categories for the title, referring to “Jews and Syriac Christians” as “lived communities” rather than speaking of “Judaism and Syriac Christianity” which, as the two editors point out, is rather more in the abstract (p. 1). Also related to the volume’s object of study, the demarcation or classification that the editors establish in the Introduction, dividing the vague term, “intersections” into two categories, is of great value. The first category refers to the debate of the ‘Other’ being “explicitly referenced” (generally, it includes cases of Jews being mentioned and polemicized in Christian texts), while the second category deals with cases featuring a more ambiguous kind of “Other,” less-referenced or contextualized within the literature (p. 2).

The volume contains 16 contributions in addition to a substantial, 26-page introduction signed by the two editors, wherein, in a well-structured manner, they discuss both the state of the art and the evolution of research in a field the editors often refer to as “Syro-Talmudica,” defining the various connections or intersections between Syriac Christians and Babylonian Jews while also providing a brief abstract of each article, something beneficial for orienting the reader before their further study of the volume.

As the editors suggest in their introductory study, scholarly interest in the liminal and intersectional elements between Syriac Christianity and Jewish and Semitic culture has been on an upward trend in recent years.

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The present volume traverses a well-defined area in terms of both space (from Mesopotamia to the Levant and back again, with the geographical nexus on Babylonian soil) and time, where the focus falls squarely on late Antiquity.

The volume starts with an article penned by M. Bar-Asher Siegal (pp. 27–46). This re-evaluates and extends Sholom Naeh’s argument from his article, “Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and its Syrian Background,” first published in English in 1997 and Hebrew in 2001. Bar-Asher Siegal accepts Naeh’s linguistic thesis, putting forth an interesting parallel that proposes a novel understanding of the Talmudic story of Rabbi Hiyya in a pointed comparison with monastic holy men and their struggle against temptation.

Further on, the reader remains in the Jewish cultural area but is now transposed in Christian reception by Adam Becker’s contribution (p. 47–66). This is of great importance to the volume as a whole, as it directly deals with Christian texts on the topic of anti-Judaic polemics (the Syriac Contra Iudaeos literature), concerned with the works of Aphrahat, Ephrem, Narsai, Isaac(s) (of Antioch / of Amida / of Edessa), Jacob of Sarug, Sergius the Stylite, Moses bar Kepha, John of Dara, and Dionysius bar Salibi. Becker presents the reader with a critical distinction between texts that have real Jewish personages as the polemicists’ addressees, and those whose addressees are likely imaginary, further offering some general features of these genres based on an extensive analysis that shows just how permeable the border between them is. Moreover, this rich analysis also raises the hypothesis and the accompanying arguments in support of the idea that “perhaps Mary also somehow triggered Christian anti-Judaism in some way” (p. 60) highly interesting.

Another article is jointly authored by Bar Belinitzky and Yakir Paz (p. 67–88), focusing on the theme of excommunication (from the Syriac verb šmd / and Babylonian Jewish Aramaic and Mandaic šmt = to ban) in Aphrahat (Dem. 14), with parallels in the Babylonian Talmud and the incantations bowls “pointing to a shared concept of the ban as a curse” (p. 87).

Shaye J. D. Cohen makes a good resumé of scholarly research with his paper on the treatment of the Jewish Sabbath in an early source: Barsaisan’s Book of the Law of the Countries (p. 89–102), offering three hypotheses for the list of activities prohibited by the Sabbath: the first being the Jewish Communion of Edessa from the time of Bardaisan, the second, the Philo’s
Providentia as a potential source, and the third, a Mishnah from the same time as the Book of the Law of the Countries.

Another article without which this volume would not have been complete and the only one referring to Islam is that penned by Sydney Griffith (p. 103–120). It discusses Christian Jews and the Qur`ān postulating the genuine arguments for Jewish presence in the context of the formation of the Qur`ān. Griffith formulates questions that prove essential to the understanding of “the potential connection between the Arabic-speaking community of Qur`ān addressees and the other Arabic-speaking scriptural communities with which its audience is familiar and with whom it is in conversation” (p. 106). The image of the Christian-Jewish milieu that the Qur`ān offers shares the same broad perspective as other ancient texts that focus on Christians.

After exploring the interaction with Islam the reader can discover in the paper of Simcha Gross (p. 121–44), a re-evaluation of the well-known hypothesis that traces the Jewish origins in Syriac Christianity. Gross further provides a review of the scholarly literature on this topic, a summarizing perspective most welcomed by the intended wider audience of this volume. Interestingly, the author takes the view that beyond any “positive configuration” of continuity (here, the Jewish background of Jesus and his disciples is mentioned as a positive argument) based on scholarly heritage, it can easily be shown that “the ‘Jewish origins’ hypothesis served to marginalize Syriac Christianity” (p. 129). Beyond this, the paper highlights how scholars have attributed a unique status to Syriac Christianity within Eastern Christendom by way of its particular form of asceticism predicated upon notions such as ḥidāyē or bnay qyāmā, notions that can, in one way or another, be traced back to Jewish origins.

In the continuation of the cultural perspective offered by Gross can be situated the interesting study of Geoffrey Herman (p. 145–53), focusing on the image of Jewish exile in comparison with the institution of the Eastern Syriac Catholicos.

Richard Kalmin follows with a paper on two distinct rabbinic narratives, in which he argues for an intersection and “historical connection” (p. 155) between Syriac Christian communities and Jews in Mesopotamia, based on hermeneutical elements of close cultural proximity. Based on the examples he offers, the author speaks of the “emerging but never fully realized cultural unity that was beginning to form in Jewish and Christian Mesopotamia” (p. 155) – a unity which, given the cultural and historical context of the region, we believe could never have fully come into its own.
A contribution that had piqued my interest ever since perusing the volume’s Table of Contents is authored by Naomi Koltun-Fromm focusing on “The Syriac Fathers on Jerusalem”. This study heralds a very interesting topic and, according to the title, presages a complex patristic analysis. The focus of this analysis lies with early authors within the Syriac patristic tradition, notable scholars such as Ephrem the Syrian, or other anonymous sources such as the Cave of Treasures. However, even though the perspective Koltun-Fromm brings is highly original (dividing her article into three distinct sections: ‘Jerusalem Dismissed’; ‘Jerusalem Mythologized’; ‘Heavenly and Earthly Jerusalem Re-United”), given the great potential of the topic on hand, its treatment could have borne the consultation of further source material such as the tension of Heavenly and Earthly Jerusalem in hagiographic literature. The wide perspective of this contrast I will not discuss herewith as it is the subject of my most recent book: The Making of Syriac Jerusalem: Representations of the Holy City in Syriac Literature of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, forthcoming with Routledge (London and New York, 2023).

Another interesting study is that by Sergey Minov (p. 187–205), wherein he presents two examples of women engaged in doing laundry and discussing comparative material from rabbinic sources, found in the works of Ephrem and Jacob of Nisibis. Minov’s analysis contributes to the hypothesis of a “possible exchange of ideas between rabbis and their Christian neighbours” (p. 205).

In cultural relation to Minov’s paper is the contribution of Yonatan Moss (p. 207–29), which discusses two polemical texts that highlight a particular tension and intersection between the two communities and identities. The first text is authored by James of Edessa (8th century), and represents an interpretation of Genesis ch. 6, arguing that the Jews were the ones to have altered the Biblical text for Christological reasons. The other text under discussion was written in Baghdad by the Rabbanite community leader Saadia Gaon (9th–10th century), in which the Jewish author rejects the accusations Jacob made against the Jews, and – without directly mentioning Jacob – accuses the Christians of the same crime, namely the distortion of the holy text.

A further article is that of Ophir Münz-Manor (p. 231–53), which compares Hebrew, Palestinian, Aramaic, Jewish, and Syriac liturgical poetry that shows stylistic similarities and points towards similar modes of identity formation based on not only religious affiliation but also other elements that constituted sources of rapprochement between the two
groups, Christians and Jews. As the author states, “Linguistic proximity, common Semitic literary heritage, and similar geo-cultural conditions must have played a significant role in bringing these two varieties of religion closer together” (p. 253).

The journey offered by the book continues with Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (p. 255–79) who presents an interesting comparative approach. This, not only between rabbinic texts – such as Pirquoi ben Baboi – and Syriac texts such as the Synod of Catholicos Gregory I (612) but also referring to other Christian texts, fundamentally arguing for the potential of Christian texts of this kind “to provide contextualization for Talmudic stories and other sources” (p. 279).

A form of intersection between the two religious cultures that the volume revolves around is comprehensively discussed by Christian Stadel (p. 281–90), based on examples from the Judeo-Syriac corpus of texts about the “Jewish square script” used to write Syriac words, and from “Jewish adaptations of a Syriac literary Vorlage” (p. 281).

A text that focuses again on Early Syriac authors is penned by J. Edward Walters (p. 291–319). This leads the reader again to Aphrahat (an author discussed in part, albeit thematically differently, in two other articles in the volume), broaching an equally interesting topic from the field of polemics. Before analyzing Aphrahat’s polemical rhetoric against Jewish ritual practices (such as the classic tropes of circumcision, Passover, and Sabbath) and linking said analysis to the discussion of Christian symbolism and identity formation, the author also provides an overview of the extant scholarship on Aphrahat’s perception of Jewish culture, itself a very useful introduction for the reader into the scholarly state of the art.

The final paper of the volume, by R. D. Young (p. 321–35), constitutes an analysis of the Anonymous Mēmrā on the Maccabees, successfully providing sufficient arguments to consider this composition as part of Syriac literature on the Maccabees. Indeed, as Young stresses, “this mēmrā can certainly be treated as an example of Christian appropriation of Jewish heroes, who have now been repurposed as Christian saints and benefactors” (p. 334–35).

As the editors themselves highlighted in the closing lines of their Introduction, where they announced that the purpose of the volume was “to provide the status questionis”, from a review of the works contained within it is apparent that the volume achieves this goal very well. Moreover, it successfully provides a broad framework for bold new methodological approaches to this area of cultural intersection and interference, which
scholars to date have approached with all too much caution. The volume represents an essential tool for anyone looking for traces of a common Syro-Talmudic substratum. It has indeed fulfilled its purpose and will constitute the perfect framework to offer going forward, as the editors correctly anticipated “new robust research” into the history of communities of Jews and Syriac Christians, whose solid cultural interrelationships shaped their identities and intensified their critical relationship to each other – a cultural model that continues to challenge scholars by continuing to push and pull the historical timeframe of these emerging divisions between Jews and Syriac Christians through time. Indeed, it is possible no true break between the two cultures took place, with both cultures preserving a series of defining characteristics through the ages, and perhaps even later than we, at present, believe them to have done.