



# Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture

*Jenny R. Labendz*

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The relationship of the rabbis of Late Antique Palestine to their non-Jewish neighbors, rulers, and interlocutors was complex and often fraught. Jenny R. Labendz investigates the rabbis' self-perception and their self-fashioning within this non-Jewish social and intellectual world, answering a fundamental question: Was the rabbinic participation in Greco-Roman society a begrudging concession or a principled choice?

Labendz shows that despite the highly insular and self-referential nature of rabbinic Torah study, some rabbis believed that the involvement of non-Jews in rabbinic intellectual culture enriched the rabbis' own learning and teaching. Labendz identifies a sub-genre of rabbinic texts that she terms "Socratic Torah," in which rabbis engage in productive dialogue with non-Jews about biblical and rabbinic law and narrative. In these texts, rabbinic epistemology expands to include reliance not only upon Scripture and rabbinic tradition, but upon intuitions and life experiences common to Jews and non-Jews. While most scholarly readings of rabbinic dialogues with non-Jews have focused on the polemical, hostile, or anxiety-ridden nature of the interactions, *Socratic Torah* reveals that the presence of non-Jews was at times a welcome opportunity for the rabbis to think and speak differently about Torah.

Labendz contextualizes her explication of Socratic Torah within rabbinic literature at large, including other passages and statements about non-Jews as well as general intellectual trends in rabbinic literature, and also within cognate literatures, including Plato's dialogues, Jewish texts of the Second Temple period, and the New Testament. Thus the passages that make up the sub-genre of Socratic Torah serve as the entryway for a much broader understanding of rabbinic literature and rabbinic intellectual culture.

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