

major architectural expansion of the Second Temple compound. But these criticisms should not obscure the fact that Marshak has written an engaging and impressive scholarly work.

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Stuart S. Miller. *At the Intersection of Texts and Material Finds: Stepped Pools, Stone Vessels, and Ritual Purity among the Jews of Roman Galilee*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015. 342 pp.
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The past twenty-five years have witnessed an explosion in scholarly interest in the topic of ancient Jewish purity practices. While much of this interest has focused on the textual—especially the critical halakhic texts from Qumran Cave 4, which began to be made accessible from the mid-1980s and onward—an increasing number of studies have also begun to pay close attention to archaeological remains that are widely interpreted as relating to ritual purity observance, namely: stepped pools and chalkstone vessels. Spawned by the seminal investigations of Ronny Reich on immersion pools (*mikva'ot*) and Yitzhak Magen on chalkstone vessels, these studies have invariably attempted to interpret the archaeological finds through the prism of halakhic texts, often rabbinic, while sometimes also trying to understand the texts in light of the material remains. Stuart Miller has published a number of articles on these topics over the course of the past decade, but his truly comprehensive treatment of the subject is now available in this thought-provoking volume, which serves not only as a response to the current discourse but also as an important contribution to the ongoing discussion in its own right.

Following a personal preface, the volume opens with an introduction that provides a “lay of the land” for the ensuing eleven chapters, with a brief summary of the history of archaeological research on stepped pools, and an introductory presentation of the data relating to the persistence of these pools, as well as of chalkstone vessels, following both the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE. While recognizing that the number of stepped pools and chalkstone vessels drops sometime after 135 CE, Miller argues that it is not so much the relative intensity or ubiquity of these phenomena that is important, as much as their character and very persistence.

The first two chapters discuss the diverse meanings of the terms *mikveh* and *bet tevilah* in the sources, and the relevance of using these designations, as well as the modern term “ritual bath,” when relating to the archaeological remains of stepped pools. Here Miller argues that, on the one hand, the term *mikveh* in the tannaitic sources invariably means simply a natural or artificial “gathering of water,” which may or may not have originally been used exclusively for ritual bathing and, on the other hand, that the stepped pools found in excavations

could well have been used for both ritual and secular purposes. Chapter 3 goes on to explore differences between Second Temple period sects with regard to the various kinds of water which may or may not be used for ritual immersion and how these might relate to later rabbinic prescriptions, and furthermore looks at the archaeological evidence of stepped pools with divided stairways and/or dual entrances. The next chapter (4) is something of an excursus in which the author explores the possible relevance of P. Oxy. 840 (a fragment from an otherwise unattested extracanonical gospel) to our understanding of Second Temple period ritual-bathing practices and their archaeological representations. Miller sees it likely that this document reflects later Christian concerns and that its author was unaware of the technicalities of earlier (or even contemporary) Jewish notions of ritually valid water and of the existence of stepped pools with divided stairways. In chapter 5 the author argues that both the origins and usage of chalkstone vessels may have had very little to do with purity concerns, and as such cautions against using chalkstone vessel finds as Jewish identity markers or as indicators of purity practices. (It is for this reason that chalkstone vessels are hardly discussed outside of this chapter, which might be somewhat surprising considering that the term “stone vessels” appears in the subtitle of the volume.) Chapter 6 discusses the stepped pools excavated on the western acropolis of Sepphoris as an example of the larger issue, and shows how all of these installations *could* have been used in accordance with rabbinic prescriptions—but just as well may *not* have been. In the following two chapters (7 and 8) the author discusses perceptions of purity among the Jews of Palaestina in the centuries after 70 CE, and argues for a continued—and perhaps even increased—devotion to popular purity practices whose primary locus was the home and whose point of reference was the Bible (and not the rulings of the rabbis!).

Chapter 9 seemingly digresses somewhat from the main theme of the book in discussing the place of priests in Roman and Byzantine Galilee, a group that the author argues should not be seen as having settled at any particular location in coherent, well-organized families. The upshot of this conclusion is that archaeological finds relating to purity should not, as some have suggested, be related to any specifically priestly interests, but rather should be viewed in light of popular lay concerns over purity issues. Chapter 10 takes a look at the dynamics of ritual purity practices in various Diaspora communities during the medieval period, with the goal of showing how even at such a late date, when rabbinic Judaism is thought to have already become largely ascendant, many Jews continued to practice purity rites that were viewed by contemporary rabbis as aberrant. The final chapter presents the author’s views on the character of the ancient Jewish society that is represented by the purity practices explored in the preceding chapters, a society he characterizes by a phrase coined in one of his earlier works: “complex common Judaism.” The book closes with a postscript entitled “From Roman Galilee to Nineteenth-Century Chesterfield, Connecticut,” which describes a turn-of-the-twentieth-century *mikveh* uncovered in excavations codirected by the author at the site of a long-defunct Jewish farming community. Miller views this as an example of the tenacity of dedication to halakhic rites under

difficult circumstances, and suggests that a comparable dynamic lay behind the sustained popular adherence to purity rituals in the post-70 CE period.

While the book is replete with numerous novel insights on a large array of topics, a leitmotif that runs throughout the volume is that remains of stepped pools attest to widespread *popular* adherence to purity rites, whose basis was the *shared biblical tradition* common to the majority of Jews rather than any particularistic understanding of this collective heritage. This is primarily a reaction to an all-too-common tendency among archaeologists and historians to read rabbinic Halakhah into the archaeological finds. Miller stresses that it was precisely the *biblically derived laws*, and at times also popular notions of the ritually unclean, that informed the purity concerns of those who created and used these installations—commoners who lived within a complex Jewish society of which the rabbis were only a segment. The implications of this critical assertion go far beyond the limited question of stepped pools and purity observance, and I can only hope that Miller’s vitally important message finds a receptive audience within current scholarship.

The bibliography is remarkably comprehensive and up to date, including a number of unpublished doctoral dissertations consulted by the author. On practically every topic touched by the book, Miller cites an impressive array of prior scholarship, and then proceeds to assess these views in an inspiringly respectful manner. Much of this important dialogue takes place in the copious and hefty footnotes found throughout. “Dialogue” is actually an apt description of what this book is really all about; this is the author’s latest and most thorough contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the interpretation of the finds at hand, and the implications of such interpretations for a broader understanding of the character of Jewish society in ancient and late antique Palaestina. Scholars already “immersed” in the subject matter—whether historians, talmudists, or archaeologists—will no doubt find themselves the book’s most appreciative audience. For these as well as others wishing to acquaint themselves with the *status quaestionis*, this superb volume is most certainly a mandatory read.

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Guy G. Stroumsa. *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 225 pp.
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This book brings together ten articles, nine of which have been published previously in a variety of venues between 1986 and 2015. They have been reworked slightly here, with an added introduction, to carry on a long tradition of scholarship endeavoring to place early Islam in relationship with its religious precursors. Much benefit in Professor Stroumsa’s approach derives from his many