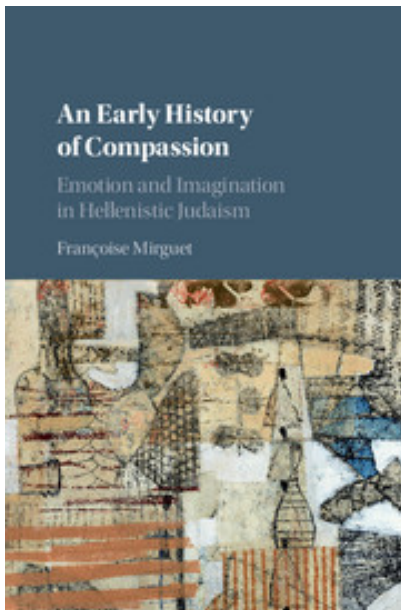


RBL 07/2019



Françoise Mirguet

An Early History of Compassion: Emotion and Imagination in Hellenistic Judaism

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 272. Cloth. \$99.99. ISBN 9781107146266.

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Studying compassion in ancient literary corpora can be a convenient springboard for posing critical questions about the history of emotions and human experience, about social and class dynamics, about gender and power relations, and much more. A number of bright scholars have attended to these questions in recent years, including David Konstan, Jinyo Kim, and others on pity in ancient Greece; Paul Blowers on pity in early Christianity, where it becomes a supreme virtue uniquely able to connect the pitying party to Christ; Susan Wessel on the affective dimension of compassion in early Christian writings; Ulrich Barton on appeals to compassion in the passion plays of the Middle Ages; Sarah McNamer on medieval constructions of compassion in meditations on Christ's passion; and Martha Nussbaum and many others on philosophical discourses of compassion in Western traditions.¹ Readers can now add another valuable contribution

1. See David Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2001); Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*, RCLec (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Jinyo Kim, *The Pity of Achilles: Oral Style and the Unity of the Iliad* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Paul M. Blowers, "Pity, Empathy, and the Tragic Spectacle of Human Suffering: Exploring the Emotional Culture of Compassion in Late Ancient Christianity," *J ECS* 18 (2010): 1–27; Susan Wessel, *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ulrich Barton, *Eleos und compassio: Mitleid im antiken und mittelalterlichen Theater* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion,"

to that list in Françoise Mirguet's carefully researched and methodologically sophisticated account of pity and compassion in Hellenistic Judaism.

Mirguet's study is literarily focused on how Hellenistic Jewish authors "describe, prescribe, and imagine emotional responses to others' pain; it also probes the potential of emotions to reinvent identity and social interactions" (2). The resulting account is "more 'story' than 'history'" (7), a story of the discourse of pity in Hellenistic Jewish writings, which reflect social mores and anxieties about, inter alia, gender, selfhood, and politics. The book does not prioritize chronology; there is no attempt to offer a definite history of how the compassion discourse took shape. Such a task, Mirguet points out, would be hampered by the fact that many of the texts involved cannot be dated with precision. Nor does Mirguet fall into a teleology trap, tracing an evolution of compassion from some primitive conceptualization to "our" modern conceptualization.

Mirguet's theoretical approach is deeply informed by history-of-emotions scholarship. Mirguet accepts that emotions are socially constructed and best analyzed in functional terms; that is, emotions are performed by people and act on people, both individually and in groups. Following Monique Scheer, Mirguet resists the idea that we can separate the "history of emotions" from the "history of discourses about emotions" (10). Emotions exist "at the very intersection of discourses and bodies; they are physical enactments of the social norms expressed in discourses" (10). Accordingly, Mirguet does not limit herself to literary analyses of emotions in sundry Hellenistic Jewish narrative contexts; instead, she moves between literary analysis and commentary on the roles of compassion and pity in social identity formation and maintenance. "Groups do not precede emotions; rather, emotions, with their attendant scripts and discourses, give groups visibility and substance, especially when they are complex, eroding, or in flux. Emotions contribute to making—and unmaking—groups" (11).

The "imagination" of the book's subtitle refers to Ricoeur's *imaginaire social* as it applies to the generation and negotiation of emotions. "Literature is for emotions a kind of playground. Literary texts experiment with emotions, as they deploy them in their varied potentialities. Texts draw upon their communities' imaginary, itself a sedimentation of emotional scripts and norms; texts thus contribute to the internalization of emotional rules" (12). Mirguet is particularly interested in how the emotional imaginary of Hellenistic Judaism was useful in negotiating a new space, socially and culturally, as a people dispersed and conquered by Rome.

Social Philosophy and Policy 13 (1996): 27–58; Nussbaum, "Compassion and Terror," *Daedalus* 132 (2003): 10–26.

Chapter 1, “Between Power and Vulnerability,” begins with an outline of ancient Greek vocabulary for emotional responses to the suffering of others, then turns to discuss pity in Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* (where Mirguet argues that pity is primarily implicated in the discourse of privilege and power, used to mark those wielding it as socially or morally superior) and in the Testament of Zebulun (where it is primarily connected to the vulnerability felt by pitiers), followed by a short discussion of pity in Philo (where it participates in novel ways in the discourse of virtue). The chapter concludes with an acknowledgment that the two potentialities of the compassion dynamic (vulnerability and empowerment) nevertheless intersect in Josephus, Testament of Zebulun, Philo, and other Hellenistic Jewish texts: “being touched by others’ distress implies recognizing one’s own vulnerability; concurrently, it also depends on (and enacts) one’s privilege, or power, over them” (22).

Chapter 2, “Found in Translation,” explores innovations in the discourse of compassion that attended the translation of Hebrew scriptures into Greek. Readers familiar with Erich Auerbach’s “Odysseus’ Scar,” which compares the style of Homeric epic to that of biblical Hebrew, will find here a complementary essay comparing affective content in Biblical Hebrew to that in Hellenistic Greek, with particular attention to pity and compassion.² Mirguet’s work, however, is not a paraphrase of Auerbach, swapping in Hellenistic Jewish literature where he had Homer; rather, Mirguet draws on history-of-emotions scholarship to add an illuminating discussion of the relationship between the affective aspect of human experience (which is universal) and the concept of emotion (which is culturally determined). Biblical Hebrew, she shows, does not isolate and distinguish a strictly emotional realm from a strictly physical one, and it “has no term to narrowly designate an emotional pain felt for others’ pain” (77). Such language, however, is “found” by creative translators and retroactively attributed to the ancient Israelites of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, the Greek translators “discovered” pity in the character of the divinity and attached it those who acted in godlike ways.

Chapter 3, “Within the Fabric of Society,” shifts gears from the cultural-linguistic to the sociocultural. Using the book of Sirach, Mirguet investigates how pity and its acts are rooted in social imbalance, a dynamic that Sirach embraces. The book of Tobit and the Testament of Job are introduced in connection to explorations of what happens to the self’s capacity for pity when the self suffers. “The texts promote care for vulnerable others and acts of pity; they also establish the authority of the discourse by attributing it to an ancestral figure. At the same time, they articulate discomfort with a discourse that presupposes social privilege—itsself far from secure—and causes exposure to suffering that

2. Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, new ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3–23.

may contaminate the self” (129). The chapter also considers gender dynamics: compassion and pity are frequently figured as feminine emotions; one can be emasculated both by *receiving* pity and by *feeling* it. Mirguet illustrates these observations both with positive examples using male characters and with negative examples in female characters in 4 Maccabees and Josephus’s *Jewish War* 6 who are masculinized insofar as they withhold sympathy from their own children.

Pity and compassion have the potential to create, reconfigure, or dissolve social bonds. Chapter 4, “Bonds in Flux,” considers Hellenistic Jewish pitiers’ perceptions of their social bonds. Tobit is the centerpiece of this chapter, too, but now as a text that “simultaneously constructs pity (and its acts) as a typical family norm and as a requirement to be shown towards the whole ethnic group in exile, thus ‘inventing’ Diaspora as an extended family” (19). Alongside Tobit, Mirguet discusses the Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides, which extends the reach of pity to all of humanity. “The *Sentences* invite the self to perceive vulnerable others as being subject to conditions of human life that it, too, will experience sooner or later” (160). This chapter contains another illuminating discussion of Philo, who uses pity to signify inclusion within the Jewish community (insofar as pity is essential to his understanding of Mosaic law) and within humankind (insofar as it is a universal affective drive). Testament of Zebulun is also reintroduced alongside Luke’s parable of the Samaritan; both illustrate how compassion can disrupt and extend social bonds by coming to interpret the love command.

Chapter 5, “In Dialogue with the Empire,” takes a broader comparative perspective, looking at Jewish authors alongside Greco-Roman novels and historiographies. Mirguet finds that Hellenistic Jewish expectations for, exhortations to, and rationalizations of pity and sympathy are paralleled in contemporary imperial contexts. Mirguet also looks here at certain philosophical discourses advocating universal care, particularly in Stoicism. There are important lines of continuity here with the emphases on pity one finds in Jewish texts of the same period, but there are also differences. Where Stoic authors denigrate pity as “an attack on the sufferer’s dignity, resulting from an incorrect evaluation of suffering,” Judeo-Hellenistic sources find in pity “a vehicle for a universal extension of the love command” (207).

As with any work of such scale, one can find points with which to quibble. From time to time, for example, one encounters potentially oversimplified claims such as, “Josephus rewrites the scriptures, while the Testament of Zebulun expands on them” (23). Second, the book frequently repeats or circles back to points it had made earlier, giving one the impression of reading a cyclic essay rather than a linear argument. Third, some interesting and germane questions are raised but not answered. For example, Mirguet opens her first chapter with a vignette from the Testament of Abraham, in which Abraham is

represented as not having pity (οὐκ ἐλεᾷ) on sinners. This is puzzling, as Mirguet points out, insofar as pity is here “understood as an attitude towards wrongdoers and not sufferers (and is therefore a kind of mercy),” and, in the larger context (Abraham here is sinless), suggests that human beings “must [be able to] draw on their own experiences of fallibility” in order to exercise leniency. These puzzles are left unresolved; Mirguet never returns to Testament of Abraham to answer these questions. The study of emotions in early Jewish literature is still in its early days; perhaps these questions without answers should rather be thought of as opportunities for future research.

With her study of the discourse of pity and compassion in Hellenistic Judaism, Françoise Mirguet has given the field a superb gift. I heartily recommend this book to students of the long and complex history of emotions; to readers interested in Hellenistic Jewish social and political history; and to scholars working on the authors and texts from which Mirguet draws her case studies.