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between dispute and instruction

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Seder Eliyahu Zuta (SEZ), as well as its fellow-text called Seder Eliyahu Rabba (SER), is a fascinating rabbinic work from late Antiquity or early medieval times. It is mainly concerned with questions of ethical lifestyle and righteous conduct. With literary skillfulness those traditions combine many different genres and sub-structures which make the texts function for different audiences. The texts integrate complex discourses on their own Jewish culture as well as various cultural-religious influences and disputes connected to a Karaite, Christian, Persian or Islamic background.

Recent scholars broadened the perspective of rabbinocentric history for “Judaism” in the Mediterranean context. Consequently, emerges a picture of continued inner-Jewish competition with a variety of external influences in late antique and early medieval time.

Against this backdrop an outstanding and interesting feature of these works is the conversation between rabbinic characters and figurations of the “other”. The variety of opponents includes “one who has Bible but no Mishnah”, mocking and unlearned rural laymen, the Wise in the academy in Jerusalem as well as gentile religious specialists. These discussions, together with other episodes, centre mainly on exegetical, theological and ethical topics. By focussing on characteristics of revelation, authority of the Oral Torah or importance of moral lifestyle and Torah-study they touch upon most of the major issues in Jewish religious thinking.
In my presentation I would like to discuss various functions (exegesis/ critique/ teaching/ dispute) and literary figurations of inter- and intra-religious encounters in differing contexts. Of special interest are the changes of characters and the mode of interplay between and within religions and cultures. Are there references to intra- and inter-religious polemics? How are religious issues presented to the reader and why? Can we discover different emphasis in SER and SEZ? Which cultural dynamics maybe reflected in this literary phenomenon?

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