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The Literature of the Sages: Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature

Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2.3b

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Shortly after the reprint of the *Mikra* volume of the series *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, the second and last part of the subdivision, *The Literature of the Sages*, has appeared, nearly twenty years after the first. Thus section 2, *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, of the *Compendia* is now complete: (1) *Mikra* (1988); (2) *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (1984); (3a) *The Literature of the Sages 1: Oral Torah, Halakha...* (1987); (3b) *The Literature of the Sages 2: Midrash and Targum...* (2006). The waiting has certainly not been in vain, for this voluminous book contains a considerable number of fine essays by older and younger experts in the fields represented here. Unlike *Mikra*, which was and is also quite suitable as a first introduction into various fields, many of the articles in this book are of a more specialist nature.

The table of contents gives a good impression of the many and variegated treasures contained in this volume. Section 1, “Midrash and Targum,” offers: (1) Menahem I. Kahana, “The Halakhic Midrashim” (3–105); (2) Marc Hirshman, “Aggadic Midrash” (107–32); (3) Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim” (133–229); (4) Chaim Milikowsky, “Seder Olam” (231–37), with an appendix by Zeev Safrai, “The Scroll of Antiochos and the Scroll of Fasts” (238–41); and (5) Zeev Safrai, “The Targums as Part of Rabbinic Literature” (243–78). Section 2, “Liturgy,

Poetry, Mysticism,” includes: (6) Joseph Tabory, “Prayers and Berakhot” (281–326); (7) Joseph Tabory, “The Passover Haggada” (327–38); (8) Vered Noam, “Megillat Taanit—The Scroll of Fasting” (339–62); (9) Ezra Fleischer, “Piyut” (363–74); (10) Joseph Yahalom, “Syriac for Dirges, Hebrew for Speech—Ancient Jewish Poetry in Aramaic and Hebrew” (375–91); and (11) Michael D. Swartz, “Mystical Texts” (393–420). Section 3, “Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science,” comprises (12) Mordechai A. Friedman, “Contracts: Rabbinic Literature and Ancient Jewish Documents” (423–60); (13) Jonathan J. Price and Haggai Misgav, “Jewish Inscriptions and Their Use” (461–83); (14) Samuel S. Kottek, “Medical Interest in Ancient Rabbinic Literature” (485–96); (15) Zeev Safrai, “Geography and Cosmography in Talmudic Literature” (497–508); (16) Abraham Ofir Shemesh, “Biology in Rabbinic Literature: Fact and Folklore” (509–19); and (17) Yuval Harari, “The Sages and the Occult” (521–64). Finally, section 4, “The Languages of Rabbinic Literature,” includes: (18) Moshe Bar-Asher, “Mishnaic Hebrew: An Introductory Survey” (567–95); (19) Yohanan Breuer, “The Aramaic of the Talmudic Period” (597–625); and (20) Daniel Sperber, “Rabbinic Knowledge of Greek” (627–40). The volume concludes with a list of abbreviations (641–44), a cumulative bibliography (645–710), and indices of sources and personal names (711–72).

Each chapter starts with a detailed table of contents, which greatly assists the reader in navigating through some of the long chapters, and concludes with recommendations for further reading. On the whole, I found the bibliography complete enough for the purpose.

I read the articles with considerable pleasure and interest, only experiencing some very minor disappointments while perusing the book. The scholarship evinced in the volume, although sound and solid enough, tends somewhat towards the conservative side. Thus in Menahem Kahana’s article about the halakhic midrashim there is great attention to the classical question of the distinction between the schools of R. Akiba and R. Ishmael and to the occurrence of various rabbis in these midrashim, but little information about the formal literary structure of the texts. The old problem of the provenance of the targums of Onkelos and Jonathan is discussed by Yohanan Breuer in terms of eastern and western provenance in the traditional way (605–6), whereas scholars such as E. M. Cook¹ and Chr. Müller-Kessler² have proposed entirely new ways of looking at this issue; neither of the two is mentioned in this connection. I also missed the latter’s name in the brief section about the language of the incantation texts (616–17). The question of the long diphthong

1. Edward M. Cook, “A New Perspective on the Language of Onqelos and Jonathan,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context* (ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 142–56.

2. Christa Müller-Kessler, “The Earliest Evidence for Targum Onqelos from Babylonia and the Question of its Dialect and Origin,” *JAB* 3 (2001): 181–98.

-e- in Aramaic is still treated in the same way as the late E. Y. Kutscher did in the 1960s, with the demonstrative pronoun (*ha*)'ellayin in Galilean Aramaic supposedly not exhibiting a diphthongization of this vowel, a position that many linguists nowadays would not be ready to defend (621). Finally, the well-known controversy between Peter Schäfer and Chaim Milikowsky about what is in effect the right way to edit the fluid texts of rabbinical literature I would have liked to see discussed with some more attention to the very real and novel observations made by Schäfer and others than Myron Lerner is willing to impart on the reader (162–63), irrespective of questions of right or wrong. Lerner's conjecture about the history of Schäfer's first article in this discussion, by the way, is quite amusing, though of course rather speculative (163 n. 156).

Although a cumulative bibliography will usually save space, which is especially desirable in a volume that is already very sizeable, the problems of such a type of bibliography, if it is not checked in every detail, are apparent, such as in the entries for Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto, whose name is listed in three different forms without any cross-reference, and for R. Ulmer, who is of course identical with Rivka Kern-Ulmer.

The original Hebrew is somewhat too visible behind the English style of some articles (although there is not much wrong with the translation itself), which is not a very great obstacle, apart from the fact that some non-Anglophone students tend to imitate this style. In general, it would have been preferable to let a native speaker of English correct somewhat awkward sentences such as "Further examples of this phenomenon are easily multiplied" (595). But all these are issues of minor importance.

There were very few things in the subject area of the book that I missed. As noted above, I would have liked to see some more discussion of the literary structure of various midrashim, perhaps in a separate article. To mention only one example, W. S. Towner's seminal study of the enumeration of scriptural examples in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael³ is mentioned only very briefly at the end of Hirshman's article and not at all in Kahana's otherwise very thorough study of the halakhic midrashim, which is especially regrettable since comparable numerical patterns seem to underlie the structure of large parts of the Mekhilta (and, it can be added, also other Jewish and Christian Bible commentaries). With regard to poetical texts, Joseph Yahalom discussed the genre of the eulogy and Ezra Fleischer treated the piyyut, but the interesting corpus of the Aramaic piyyutim from the Byzantine era is almost entirely absent, apart from a brief mention of Yahalom's and Sokoloff's edition of these texts (364 n. 9).

3. Wayne Sibley Towner, *The Rabbinic Enumeration of Scriptural Examples: A Study of a Rabbinic Pattern of Discourse with Special Reference to Mekhilta d'R Ishmael* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

Summarizing we can say that the second volume of *The Literature of the Sages* presents advanced students and specialists in the various disciplines of rabbinic studies with a wonderful set of new tools and that the authors and editors are to be congratulated with the result of their work.