

Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). 1582 pp. ISBN 965 226 260 9.

As far as literary corpora concerns, this dictionary is in a way a double one. On the one hand it is concerned with the rabbinic texts from Mesopotamia, on the other hand it contains the lexical material of the Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls, of which hundreds have been found in Mesopotamia, many of which are still unpublished, and for which up to now no encompassing glossary or dictionary had been available. The author has taken his task with regard to these latter texts equally seriously as with the others, and clearly did not rely on interpretations of earlier authors only, but even suggested a number of new readings and interpretations.

The 1905 dictionary of Morris Jastrow, which most students of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic are indebted to for learning to read Talmudic texts, represented the beginning of a transition between traditional Jewish lexicography and what was regarded as modern linguistics in his day, though it contains not a few etymologies which are nowadays often considered as somewhat far-fetched. It is only when one reads a passage from the Talmud or a magical bowl text with Jastrow's dictionary beside Sokoloff's book that one discovers how great the differences are.

Of course, there remains room for further discussion, especially since the dictionary itself allows its users to make further advances. I will give just one example. Thus Sokoloff improved on Jastrow's somewhat less likely interpretation of *בנייתא* in Bavli Shabbat 95a and parallels by translating it as 'hairdressers', but I wonder whether his etymology as 'builders' is correct; would it not be logical to connect it with *בניתא*, plural *בניי*, 'hair'? The author noted the Mandaic equivalent of this latter word, *binta* (det.st.), but I missed the Syriac *menta*, plural *menne* (both det.st.), which in spite of the phonological problems seems to be its cognate also. But one almost feels ashamed to draw attention to such minor details when confronted with a work which surpasses even the author's rightly praised *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* in almost every way.

For the systematically minded among the readers it may be a disadvantage that the author here as in his earlier work often made his choice of which words to include in the dictionary and which to reject as extraneous (corrupt, archaic, Targumic, Western, or even Mandaic) on the basis of his intuition or sound judgment (and it is not always easy to distinguish between the two), but I would say that this is the only way in which such a dictionary can be made, and I found no place where his choice seemed manifestly wrong to me.

Confronted with the problematic state of the text tradition of many of these texts, especially the Babylonian Talmud, the author indicated very precisely which manuscript reading he used, a gigantic and extremely useful work by itself. What I also find especially attractive about this book is that on pp. 1243-1582 it contains a long list of all the passages adduced in the dictionary, which allows one to retrace all the new proposals for new readings and interpretations, and is also of considerable help in understanding difficult passages.

Just as every solution evokes a new problem, every new instrument makes its user wish for more. These days, of course, such a dictionary elicits the wish to have it available in electronic form, in a format which allows connections with other Aramaic dialects, preferably in combination with the website of the Comparative Aramaic Lexicon of Stephen A. Kaufman (<http://cal1.cn.huc.edu>), which it is already closely connected with. True, the bare lexical results of this dictionary are already in CAL, which is a wonderful thing by any standard, but firstly I would really like to skip the step between Internet and book and *vice versa*, and secondly (and more importantly) the juxtaposition of idioms and clauses in the three dialects

of Eastern Aramaic would allow for a much better insight in semantic and literary issues in the texts. What one would really like to have is a survey of all Eastern Aramaic attestations and idioms under each lemma, and this can even be done without new lexical research, as we now have usable dictionaries for all Eastern Aramaic dialects, Syriac, Mandaic and Jewish Babylonian. Sokoloff, by the way, is now engaged in revising or rather rewriting Carl Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum* as an up-to-date dictionary of Syriac, which may not be able to replace Ms Margoliouth's wonderful *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* as a handbook, but will certainly set a new standard for scholarly Syriac lexicography.

Through the book under review here, Michael Sokoloff has already erected an impressive monument for his scholarship and fine judgment. It is to be hoped that he will receive the power to complete his Syriac dictionary and, perhaps, one day to close the triangle of the major Eastern Aramaic literary dialects with a modern dictionary of Mandaic.

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