Consensus

Volume 20
Issue 1 *A Ministry Miscellany*

Article 15

5-1-1994

Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash

David J. Reimer

22–24 (in part) to the sixth century. The Numbers text then is influenced by the Deir Alla find on Balaam. One other sample is that of Jerusalem discoveries (ch. 5) of the famous Siloam tunnel of Hezekiah and an inscription on the wall of that tunnel. In the final chapter (ch. 10), Yahweh is related to Asherah in inscriptions from Khirbet-el-qom, near Hebron and Kuntillet Ajrud in the Negeb. In the first noted, Asherah appears to be inherent to the worship of Yahweh. Such texts are at least intriguing when compared to the ethical monotheism in Isaiah 44:6 and elsewhere. These are examples of textual information with a bearing on ancient Israelite religion.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography, general and specific to each chapter. Inscription documents listed in foreign languages may offer a small obstacle, but sufficient works are listed for the English reader.

Writings from Ancient Israel is a concentrated yet lucid handbook, a reference for the pastor's study and students of the Bible in our seminaries and universities.

Ragnar C. Teigen
Professor emeritus
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash

H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger
Translated by Markus Bockmuehl; Foreword by Jacob Neusner
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992
xxii + 472 pp.

Günter Stemberger's thorough revision and update of H.L. Strack's introduction to rabbinic literature is destined to attain the same status as its illustrious predecessor: that of a classic, and a standard in the field. For those unfamiliar with the world of rabbinic scholarship, Stemberger's work will provide the ultimate *vade mecum*. Even for those whose interest in rabbinic writings is more than casual, Stemberger represents *the* point of departure, the port into which all must soon call.

There are several reasons why this is so. The first is the nature of the *Introduction*. It is, in formal terms, simply an extended bibliographic essay. However, the scale on which this task is undertaken is monumental. Second, an ever increasing number of scholars find it necessary to gain some understanding of this literature. The talmudic and midrashic literature is ever more within the purview of Christian as well as Jewish biblical scholars, for instance. As the divisions of labour traditional in biblical studies for the past hundred years break down, a thorough understanding of rabbinic literature will grow in importance. Third, the activity of especially Jacob Neusner, but others as well, has contributed to both a radical reorientation

in the study of rabbinic literature as well as a fundamental overturning of previously held notions about it. And finally, as Neusner himself points out in his Foreword, the study of religions and their foundational texts has shifted from interest in *historical facts* to *religious structures*. This in turn requires that rabbinic literature not simply be rifled for apt quotations as has so often been done, rather that the various documents be understood first in their own right and with their own integrity.

Stemberger's work falls into three major sections. Part One deals with general introduction. This includes matters of historical context, as well as an introduction to various periods of rabbinic activity, and the rabbis' mode of carrying out the task of understanding the dual Torah (oral and written). Thus the first part of the book is oriented to biography and underscores the fact that this literature is the product of certain communities, addressing the needs of their own times and places. It also indicates how problematic this realization can be, for the biography of *any* rabbi, even the best known, is beset with historical problems of many kinds.

Part Two deals with the talmudic literature. This comprises first of all the Mishnah which appeared c. 200 CE, and the Tosefta which, as its name indicates, is in some sense a supplement to the Mishnah and is thus a product of early Rabbis (the Tannaim). Mishnah and Tosefta themselves became the basis of study and commentary (called Gemara) by the Amoraim, and their legacy is found in the two talmuds: the Palestinian Talmud (or "Yerushalmi"), a product of the early fifth century, and the Babylonian Talmud (or "Bavli") which appeared about a century later and is quite different in character from its counterpart. The Talmuds have the appearance of being commentaries on the Mishnah and Tosefta, but they incorporate a vast range of material, including sayings of the Tannaitic rabbis that were preserved in neither the Mishnah nor the Tosefta (called "baraita"), as well as much else besides. This is especially true of the Babylonian Talmud, of which Stemberger writes:

> The overall character of [the Babylonian Talmud] is encyclopaedic. Everything was included which was taught in the rabbinic schools and considered worth preserving: many kinds of legends (e.g. about appearances of the dead), anecdotes about the rabbis, historical reminiscences, knowledge about medicine, biology, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, etc.... [It] is less a thematically closed book than a national library of Babylonian Judaism... (210).

The third major section addresses the midrashic literature. "Midrash" is the rabbinic interpretation of biblical texts and is, for modern scholars, an unfortunately elastic term. It has been pressed so often into service in discussions of the New Testament that it is in danger of becoming vacuous. True, "midrash" does not refer to a particular technique of exegesis, still "the particular character of rabbinic midrash has not always been properly recognized as a point of departure" (258). Stemberger reviews scholarship on not only the best known midrashic works, but also a whole bevy of books which are quite obscure. His reflections on the fluid boundary between

legal and homiletical exegesis (halakha and haggadah respectively) will be especially helpful for those who have been trained to think of them as very different entities.

Indices of subjects, passages (biblical and rabbinic literature), and names (ancient and modern) conclude the volume and enhance its ease of use.

As noted above, this is a magisterial work. Still, at the risk of seeming churlish, some quibbles may be noted. Much of the book's importance stems from its authoritative review of secondary literature. It is unfortunate, then, that the presentation of the bibliographies is difficult to read. They are listed in paragraphs running item-to-item which makes picking out entries awkward. It would have been an easy matter to present authors' names in bold type, thus facilitating the use of these (sometimes quite large) lists. The huge number of citations is handled adroitly, and there was only one reference (to "Green, *Names*") that I had difficulty in tracking down. I noticed only a couple places where secondary literature in the English language could have supplemented that given by Stemberger: Peter Schaefer's article on Rabbi Aqiva and Bar Kokhba appeared in English in W.S. Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism II* (Brown Judaic Studies 9; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980) cf. p. 80; and Renée Bloch's seminal contributions to the study of Midrash have appeared in English in W.S. Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism I* (Brown Judaic Studies 1; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) cf. p. 254.

Another difficulty will be encountered by those new to rabbinic literature: although all the terms are identified eventually, an understanding of them is assumed throughout. For example, the generational notation for rabbis (e.g. "T3" refers to a tannaitic rabbi of the third generation) is used on p. 37, but is not explained until p. 63. Similarly, the baraitot are referred to many times before being defined on p. 195. This will not bother specialists, but impedes use of the volume as an "introduction" without some other more basic supplementary reading.

Finally, the Targumic literature (expanded translations of the Hebrew scriptures into Aramaic) are not dealt with. This omission is understandable from several vantage points, but I find it regrettable none-the-less. (On this topic see still J. Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature* [Cambridge, 1969].)

But these are only quibbles. The importance of this work for those working the field can hardly be overestimated. It demonstrates inexorably both how much we have, and how little we know about it. Longstanding assumptions will have to be revised. Out of many examples, one might note the following: (1) It is often claimed that anonymous sayings in the Mishnah must be old; that this is not necessarily so is demonstrated on p. 65. (2) Christians in particular are interested in the divisions between Hillel and Shammai, the former "lenient" interpreter of the law being traditionally associated with Jesus. Stemberger (71–73) shows that we know next to nothing about these two traditional figures, and certainly not enough to

make historical pronouncements about them or their schools. (3) The Mishnah is the foundation document of rabbinic Judaism par excellence. Yet the nature of this document (or collection of documents) remains frustratingly obscure. Stemberger reviews the options and obstacles on pp. 151–154. (4) Generalizations are often made about the relation of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. Again Stemberger's survey shows that these generalizations cannot stand, and that much work is needed on both talmuds before the comparative work can proceed afresh.

This all suggests the impact that this volume should have. It still might not suggest what is at stake here for biblical scholars or other readers of *Consensus*. There can be no return to use of isolated quotes or haphazard knowledge of rabbinic texts in the study of early Judaism, or its relations to early Christianity. Two recent exchanges in the pages of the major *Journal of Biblical Literature* illustrate. The infamous and tetchy exchange between Ben Meyer and E.P. Sanders (*JBL* 110 [1991] 451–477) over Joachim Jeremias' knowledge of rabbinic literature shows how even a scholar of the highest stature is prone to error without firsthand knowledge of the literature. More recently, the article of Craig Evans and response by Jacob Neusner (*JBL* 112 [1993] 267–304) indicate how important it is to keep up with the rapidly changing contours of rabbinic scholarship. Evans' easy assertions about what "everybody knows" (267) or about the relationship between Mishnah and Tosefta (269 and passim) could not have been made had Stemberger's work been consulted. More ominous than either of these is Stemberger's own account (243–244) of the work of Andreas Eisenmenger (*Entdecktes Judentum* [= "Judaism Revealed"], 2 vols., Frankfurt, 1700). Eisenmenger posed for 30 years as a potential convert to Judaism in order to study rabbinic literature with Jewish teachers. His work was a collection of anti-Jewish arguments taking its sources from Hebrew originals. These "quotations without context" found their way into the work of August Rohling (*Der Talmudjude*, Münster, 1871). This proved to be an immensely popular work, and fueled the antisemitism of late nineteenth century Austria. Such examples bring us back to Neusner's observation concerning the importance of understanding this literature within its own religious structures and with its own literary integrity.

For Christians who lack a sense of the importance or place of this literature, the novels of Chaim Potok provide one point of entry (especially *The Chosen* and *In the Beginning*. To the translator, Markus Bockmuehl (a Canadian NT scholar in Cambridge), thanks must be extended for making this work available in English. Stemberger's *Introduction* is an essential work for scholars of rabbinic Judaism and related fields, not only for "introduction", but much more for revealing the state of the art.

David J. Reimer
Regent's Park College, Oxford