

BOOK REVIEW

JOSEPH HEINEMANN'S STUDIES ON THE AGGADAH

by MARC BREGMAN*

יוסף היינמן, אגדות ותולדותיהן; ירושלים, כתר, 1974.

(Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and its Development*; Jerusalem, Keter, 1974)

In this age of ever increasing specialization, it is rare for a scholar, having become the acknowledged authority in one field, to turn the focus of his research to a different area of inquiry and make a major contribution to that field as well. It is all the more remarkable when such academic acumen is combined with sincere humility and the deepest humanity. Professor Joseph Heinemann (1916-1978) was such a man. His memory will indeed remain a blessing to those to whom he taught so much.

Prof. Heinemann is perhaps best known as a scholar of Jewish liturgy. In addition to his many Hebrew and English articles in this field, he published a comprehensive, form-critical study of the development of prayers and blessing-formulae. An English version of this book has recently appeared, entitled *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin-New York, 1977).

In recent years, however, Prof. Heinemann turned his attention to the similarly broad and interrelated fields of Midrash and Aggadah. As he notes in the introductory first chapter of *Aggadah and its Development*, the elusive term "Aggadah" is perhaps best defined as all the vast and variegated material found in talmudic-midrashic literature that does not fall into the category of Halakhah. So defined, Aggadah is serviceably outlined as the legendary, ethical, homiletical and speculative complement to Jewish legal thought. One of the most intriguing aspects of this material is the existence of parallel versions of almost every aggadic tradition. Such parallels, preserved in the various works of talmudic-midrashic literature,

* Marc Bregman is a doctoral candidate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and studied under the late Professor Heinemann.

differ from one another in ways that cannot reasonably be attributed to scribal errors or to other changes associated with the written transmission of texts. The free, creative branching out exhibited by parallel aggadic traditions serves as the *point d'appui* of Prof. Heinemann's approach. The Aggadah is viewed as an oral literature, which was committed to writing only after a long and complex process of oral transmission and development.

This central thesis is tested, and its correctness demonstrated, in a number of separate studies of specific aggadic motifs and genres. The following is a brief abstract of each of these independent but interrelated essays.

Chapter II, "The Oral Transmission of the Aggadah", describes the methods used to transmit rabbinic traditions in talmudic times and illustrates several of the main characteristics of oral literature. Traditions handed down by word of mouth were not memorized word for word, though occasionally, highly successful formulations of important details may be preserved verbatim. Rather, each retelling is, in effect, a recreation of the tradition in the tradent's own words. In comparing parallel traditions transmitted in this way, it is useless to try to determine the "original version", for each new version is original to a certain extent. It may, of course, sometimes be possible to determine that one version is dependent on what seems to be an earlier version, but we must assume that this version too is a product of numerous tellings and retellings. By comparing different versions of several legends, Prof. Heinemann illustrates an often neglected point. Not every difference between versions of the same aggadah can be taken to reflect the particular ideological *Tendenz* of the source which preserves each version. Rather, each version reflects the end result of a long and complicated process of transmission in which each tradent was free to rework the tradition according to his own views and aesthetic tastes.

Chapter III is a detailed analysis of the complex of legends about the difficulties Moses encountered in fulfilling Joseph's deathbed adjuration of the children of Israel to carry up his bones with them out of the land of Egypt. The many versions of this story exhibit alternative formulations of practically every one of its details. The presentation of a specific motif that seems most "right" in terms of the story as a whole, may be preserved in a version found only in a late work. This indicates that even late adaptations of an aggadah may preserve elements that were at work in the original genesis of the basic tradition. Furthermore, alternative presentations of one specific detail may appear together in the same version of the story. This highlights the composite nature of our written texts which preserve what were originally separate oral versions of a common aggadic tradition.

An English version of Chapter IV, entitled "210 Years of Egyptian Exile" has already appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Studies* 22 (1971), pp. 19-30. The chronological calculations of the length of time Israel spent in Egypt is traced through both rabbinic and non-rabbinic sources, which are shown to share common traditions. It is suggested that many midrashic expansions on the relevant biblical texts

were already known to non-rabbinic authors toward the end of the Second Temple period.

Chapter V, “Are There Hasmonean and Anti-Hasmonean Aggadot? ”, is a critical evaluation of V. Aptowitz’s *Parteipolitik der Hasmonäerzeit*. Several examples cited by Aptowitz in support of his thesis that a wide variety of aggadot reflect the struggle between the upholders and opponents of the Maccabean monarchy are subjected to critical analysis. A liturgical phrase “May no stranger sit on his (David’s) throne, and may others no longer inherit his glory” is shown to reflect an anti-Hasmonean polemic as Aptowitz had argued. However, the rabbinic dispute over the question of who was the first to courageously plunge into the Red Sea and thus be rewarded with the kingship cannot be said to reflect political disputes of the Hasmonean period. On the contrary, the opinion of R. Tarfon that the tribe of Judah was the one to take this courageous step and was rewarded with everlasting kingship seems to reflect political ferment preceding the Bar Kokhba revolt. The claim that Moses was “king” of Israel may have originally been used by the defenders of the Hasmonean dynasty who sought a precedent for kings descended from the tribe of Levi. However, the Amoraim who later transmitted the midrashic argumentation on this subject were no longer aware of its polemical implications and made various attempts to harmonize the conflicting views.

An English version of Chapter VI, “Anti-Samaritan Polemics in the Aggadah”, may be found in the *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1977), III, pp. 57-69.

Chapter VII, “Conflicting Views on Eschatology”, analyses several highly independent assertions made by R. Akiba: that “the Generation of the Desert have no portion in the World to Come” and the exiled Ten Tribes of Israel will not return to the Land of Israel in the End of Days. These claims are shown to reflect R. Akiba’s realistic conception of the coming redemption. Holding the view that Bar Kokhba was the promised messiah, Akiba had to dispense with some of the more graphic aggadic depictions of miracles that were expected to betoken the messianic redemption. Another miraculous eschatological claim was that Moses himself will return to lead the people once again in the End of Days. This notion was popular among several non-rabbinic Jewish movements, but its rejection by the Rabbis seems to reflect a polemic directed particularly against the Samaritans.

Chapter VIII analyses the contradictory views on the question whether revelation has also been granted to nations other than the Jews. Positive attitudes on this question are shown to reflect an apologetic attitude; the Rabbis wanted to counter possible claims by non-Jews that they had never been given the chance to accept the Torah. While negative attitudes reflect a somewhat contradictory polemic: the Rabbis wanted to head off Christian claims to a new revelation. The expression “a nation like an ass” – which the Midrash uses to describe the two servants who, unlike Abraham and Isaac, could not perceive the divine presence on Mt. Moriah – seems to have been a pejorative allusion to Christianity. By using this

phrase, the Rabbis ridiculed claims to revelation made by Christians who were enjoying considerable success in converting slaves, many of whom were the servants of Jewish masters.

An English version of Chapter IX, "The Messiah of Ephraim and the Premature Exodus of the Tribe of Ephraim", may be found in the *Harvard Theological Review* 68:1 (1975), pp. 1-15; while an English version of Chapter X has appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974), pp. 114-122 under the title "Early Halakhah in the Palestinian Targumim".

Chapter XI discusses "The Attitude of the Babylonian Sages to the Aggadah". Though the Babylonian Talmud contains a great deal of aggadic material, very few aggadic traditions originated with the Babylonian Amoraim, apart from stories of the Babylonian Sages themselves. In dealing with aggadic traditions learned from their Palestinian counterparts, the Babylonians often failed to appreciate the unique mixture of seriousness and playfulness which is so characteristic of the Aggadah. The non-historical truth of a homiletical assertion such as "Jacob, our Father, did not die!" was likely to be understood in Babylonia as a perplexing statement of fact. These great legalists often attempted to resolve the contradictions between aggadic statements by applying rational methods of argumentation developed for clarifying and elaborating the Halakhah. The inappropriateness of this "factual" approach to the Aggadah makes it all the more apparent that the Palestinian Aggadists were more concerned with grappling directly with the biblical texts than in creating a "systematic theology".

Chapter XII investigates the reworking of earlier aggadot in Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer. This work, which seems to have been written in the eighth century in some country under Moslem rule, differs from earlier midrashic texts both in terms of its style and its content. The "classical" midrashim are for the most part composed of numerous, separate comments on each verse or subject; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, on the other hand, tends to rework such material into a consecutive narrative. This stylistic departure represents a re-emergence of a literary genre — referred to as the "rewritten Bible" — which was current in the Second Temple period, being represented by such works as the Book of Jubilees and the Genesis Apocryphon. The author of Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer also took considerable liberty in adapting the content of earlier aggadot in a way that reflects the changed political and cultural realities of his own time. In many cases earlier traditions — especially those dealing with Ishmael, traditionally the progenitor of the Arabs — are reformulated in order to dispute some point of Muslim belief. In other cases, aggadot that are potentially insulting to the new Muslim rulers are emended so as not to cause undue enmity.

The internal contradiction between these two sharply divergent tendencies suggests that the author of Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer used a variety of aggadic material that had already been readapted in Jewish communities under Islamic rule. It is suggested that the source of this material is the Targumic tradition which was still very much alive at the time. The oral translation of the biblical lection into Aramaic

and its aggadic elaboration in the synagogue service allowed for a particularly high level of diversity and flexibility. It is within just such a tradition that both polemical and apologetical responses to Islam could develop together side by side.

These brief abstracts will, it is hoped, give the non-Hebrew reader a general idea of the many and varied subjects dealt with by Prof. Heinemann in this work. In order to make all of these important essays in their entirety, more readily available, an English version of the entire book is in preparation.