

BOOK REVIEW

A MILLENIUM OF JEWISH LITERATURE: A REVIEW OF *SAREI HA-ELEF*

by JOSEPH TABORY

שרי האלף. רשימת הספרים שבדפוס ומחבריהם, שחיו בתקופה בת אלף שנים, מזמן חתימת התלמוד, שנת ד"א ר"ס, עד שנת ה"א ר"ס, תקופת השו"ע, ובתוספת כל ספרי התנאים והאמוראים והיוחסים להם, מאת מ.מ. כשר וי.ב. מנדלבוים, מהדורה חדשה, ירושלים, תשל"ט.

Sarei Ha-Elef. A Millenium of Hebrew Authors, by M.M. Kasher and J.B. Mandelbaum. Jerusalem. 1978.

The first requisite for a student who wishes to study a certain field and do research in it is a clear idea of the boundaries of the field, its composition and prior research that has been done in it. The first tool which such a student seeks is a bibliography which will serve him as a map to that field. In the absence of such a guide he may wander in uncharted fields without even knowing whether he is always circling the same point or he is progressing towards his goal. This is especially true for the student who desires to delve into the vast realms of Jewish literature of which just one branch has been aptly described as the "sea of the Talmud". In the uncharted oceans of this literature one may often drift without knowing what works have been written by a certain author or what commentaries have been issued in explanation of particular work. Although several attempts have been made to chart selected areas of these oceans, *Sarei Ha-elf* is the first attempt to present a comprehensive, classified bibliography in one volume. For this reason, all students of this literature are very grateful to the authors and compilers, Rabbi M.M. Kasher and J.B. Mandelbaum, for the comprehensive bibliography which they have presented us.

The first edition of this work, published in 1959, which managed to encompass the field in one volume, has rapidly become out-of-date due to the vast number of works which have been printed in the meantime. The second edition, which has

grown to two volumes, retains the structure and arrangement of the first edition while being fully updated to 1977 and including some material from 1978. Much of the new material has been incorporated into the original framework but a great part of it appears as an appendix, collected by Mandelbaum and edited by Dr. J. Spiegel, which takes up a full fifth of the present work (137 out of 684 pages). The appendix follows the main work page by page and it is necessary, when using the main work, to constantly refer to its matching pages in the appendix. While this is tiresome, it is also very rewarding, and it is a small price to pay for such an up-to-date research tool.

The title of the present bibliography serves, in itself, as a guide to the field. The Hebrew title may be translated, "Princes of the Millenium" and the authors explain, in a subtitle, that the millenium referred to is that which began in the year 500 C.E. The round number was not picked by chance but coincides with the year 811 of the Seleucid Era which was noted by Rabbi Sherira Gaon, in the 9th century C.E., as the end of the Talmudic era. The end of the millenium is fortuitous as it coincides, approximately, with the composition of the "Shulchan Aruch" by Rabbi Joseph Karo which is, till today, considered the final codification of Jewish Law. Thus, the millenium is not just a matter of chance but it really represents a successful periodization of literary endeavour — at least in the field of Rabbinic legal work.

Sarei Ha-elef serves not only as a map which delineates the borders of the territory but also as a detailed chart which guides us on the paths of the field so that we may unerringly proceed in the right direction. This purpose is served by two methods. The first method is the inclusion of vast bibliographical references, after most of the listings, to books and articles which discuss the work and/or its author. This is especially important due to the great amount of anonymous literature or wrongly attributed literature from this period. Anybody who attempts to deal with this literature without checking the information contained in *Sarei Ha-elef* does so at great risk.

The second method of guidance is the division and classification of the works included in this bibliography. This, as presented in the English title-page, is in seven divisions: 1. Post-Biblical literature; 2. Commentaries on the Pentateuch; 3. Commentaries on the Prophets and Writings; 4. Commentaries on the Talmud; 5. Responsa; 6. Codes; 7. Others (grammar, philosophy, ethics, mysticism, etc.).

Besides these divisions, some mention should be made of a slight introductory chapter which is a bibliography of the Bible and its translations. In this field, the reader of modern European languages will be better served by existent bibliographies in those languages. He will find some value in the large number of

Rabbinic studies of the Aramaic translations of the Bible which appear here. These translations have been considered of great importance for the study of Judaism in the early Christian Centuries. However, the significance of the choice of a particular word in the translation and its broader meaning can be appreciated only by a wider knowledge of more explicit Rabbinic statements which are often quoted by the Rabbinic commentaries.¹

The vast field included in the English title of the first division — Post-Biblical Literature — is greatly narrowed in its more correct Hebrew title: The Literature composed by the Tannaim and the Amoraim or reputed to them. Since the last of the Amoraim is assumed to have died in 500 C.E., this division does not seem to fit into the chronological framework of *Sarei Ha-efef*. An important branch of literature which is justly included here consists of the anonymous commentaries on the Bible collectively known as midrashim, which were mostly redacted in this millenium although they are based on earlier traditions. Also included here are independent prose works such as apocalypses, works on magic and mysticism, polemics and others whose dates may only be conjectured.²

The second and third divisions present an invaluable list of commentaries on the Bible arranged according to its books. Although these commentaries do not present a consistent critical approach, they are “replete with critical observations ranging from textual to historical problems.”³ Since the times of Jerome, Christian scholars have profited by a study of Jewish exegesis of the Bible and even today the student would gain much by a thorough study of Jewish commentary.

Over a third of *Sarei Ha-efef* is devoted to its fourth division, “Commentaries on the Talmud”. In this case, the title is too modest. “Talmud” here includes not only the Palestinian and Babylonian — both Amoraic commentaries on the Tannaitic Mishna — but also the Mishna itself and an other Tannaitic work which follows its arrangement — the Tosephta.

Included here as a source is also the compendium of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi, compiled in the twelfth century. Although this work should really be included among the Codes, its great dependence on the Talmud, which has earned it the title “The

1. For a more detailed criticism of this chapter and some of the other divisions see *Kiryat Sefer* 54 (1979), 148–153.

2. For a selective bibliography of exegetical and homiletic texts with references to translations see John T. Townsend, “Rabbinic Sources.” *The Study of Judaism — Bibliographical Essays*, N.Y. 1972, pp. 64–76. For a similar list of the smaller works see John T. Townsend, “Minor Midrashim,” *Bibliographical Essays in Medieval Jewish Studies* 2 (1976), 333–392.

3. Nahum N. Sarna, *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities: The Proceedings of a Colloquium*, N.Y. 1970; quoted by J. Neusner, in *The Study of Judaism* (above n. 2), Introduction, p. 6.

Short Talmud" or "An Epitome of the Talmud". has enabled it to replace the Talmud in many communities and justifies its inclusion here.

This division involves further subdivision according to each tractate, so that a student of any tractate may easily find a complete list of its commentaries.

Although this division is technically limited to commentaries, the authors have seen fit to do us a service by including critical editions of the texts themselves and facsimile edition of their manuscripts. Christian interest in establishing the text of the Talmud is emphasized by the fact that the first facsimile edition of a Talmudic text was published in 1879 by the Christian Hebraist, William H. Lowe, who also published the first edition of the Mishna based on a selected ms. In 1912 Georg Beer undertook the first serious effort to produce a critical edition of the Mishna, known as the Giessen Mishna, on which work still continues. In that same year, H. Strack published the first facsimile edition of the complete Talmud based on Ms. Munchen 95. Strack's purpose in this case was to demonstrate, by the availability of an unexpurgated ms. of the Talmud, the baselessness of blood libels against the Jews. In the meantime, many more facsimile editions of other mss. have been issued — as one can see in *Sarei Ha-efef*. Strack's list of mss., is still valuable for those which have not been reproduced.⁴ A more complete list of unpublished mss. of the Babylonian Talmud, published elsewhere by Rabbi Kasher,⁵ is marred by many misprints. A list of texts and translations into modern European languages, published by John T. Townsend,⁶ mentions an important edition of the Tosephta, with German translation and commentary, published in a series begun by G. Kittel and K.H. Rengstorff in Stuttgart in 1933. For the text of the sixth order of the Tosefta, Tohorot, this is perhaps the most satisfactory edition available at present. A fine bibliographical survey of the texts and commentaries of the Palestinian Talmud by B. Bokser, together with one of the Babylonian Talmud by David Goodblatt, have recently appeared.⁷ A bibliography of commentaries on the Babylonian Talmud compiled by A. Freimann⁸ has been largely superseded by *Sarei Ha-efef*, but it is still valuable for its listings of commentaries still in manuscript which have not yet been published.

The fifth and sixth divisions, Responsa and Codes, will be of limited interest to any one who is not a specialist in the field. Historians are working on this material to extract from it its numerous sidelights on daily life during the

4. H. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud*, Philadelphia 1945, p. 79-83.

5. *Talpiot* 3 (1948), 475-496.

6. "Rabbinic Sources" (above, n. 2), p. 49-62.

7. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Principal, Volume 19:2, Berlin-New York 1979, 139-336.

8. *Louis Ginsberg Jubilee Volume*, Volume 2, N.Y. 1945, 323-334.

medieval period. Bar-Ilan University has developed a project, at the initiative of the Jewish History department, to record responsa in its computer. The main purpose of the project is to enable the historian to utilise this vast material for historical research. The Hebrew University's department for Jewish Law studies is also involved in preparing an index of this material but with more emphasis on its legal aspects. A number of interesting researches have been published based on this material but the non-specialist will find its direct use extremely difficult.

The final division of *Sarei Ha-efef*, labelled "Others", is one of its most intriguing. One always finds it interesting to dip into a mixed bag of goodies to see what comes out. However, in a well planned scholarly work one should know what one might expect to find. There is an index to this section which divides its works into the following types: *Azharot* (poetical works of didactic nature — mostly listing and explaining the Commandments); Beliefs (or Theology); History; Grammar; Homiletics; Polemics; Reasons for the Commandments; Ethics; Travels; Liturgical Poetry; Philosophy, Research and Science; Commentaries on the Passover Haggada, Commentaries on the Book of Creation; Wills; Mysticism; Medicine; Astronomy and Astrology. The index shows clearly the wide range of Jewish literary production in the middle ages but one wonders why this classification was not introduced into the text itself.

Some justification for the lack of classification in this division may be found in the difficulty of defining precisely whether a work belongs to ethics, philosophy, or even polemics. The present arrangement permits the indexing of any work in more than one category. However, the majority of the literary types included admit no such ambiguity and they should have been listed in separate sections. Works which can not be precisely classified could be provided with cross-references.

Arrangement of the last division according to topic would enable one to get a better overview of each field. One would notice more obviously that a classic of polemics, the *Sefer Nizahon*, is missing here — although it is to be found among the Biblical commentaries — while the well-known *Toldot Yeshu* is apparently missing completely. The field of the Passover Haggada is also inadequately treated although there is a somewhat out-dated remedy to this in the extensive bibliography of both commentaries and manuscripts of this work in Rabbi Kasher's *Haggada Shelema* (New York, 1955).

Most of the criticism of *Sarei Ha-efef* refers to problems of planning and organisation which are most difficult in an extensive work of this kind. Ordinarily, one would expect a scholarly body to take such a project upon itself with each scholar contributing from his field of expertise. As far as details are concerned — this has been done for *Sarei Ha-efef*. The page-proofs of both editions were sub-

mitted to scholars whose additions were incorporated into the text under their names. A list of these scholars appears in the introduction (p. 11) although the name of Professor David Weiss-Halivni seems to have been inadvertently left out (see page 221, number 11). This collective effort is part of the reason that this work has become such an indispensable tool for every student of Judaic studies. However, our greatest debt is to Rabbi Kasher who has accomplished this great project almost single-handedly. We may hope that the classification system will be improved when the time comes, as it surely will, for a new edition of this book.

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