

Jewish Thought

THE TWO MEHILTOT ON THE JETHRO PORTION (EXODUS 18). By Menahem I. Kahana. Magnes Press, 2025. Pp. 370.

For over four decades, Menahem Kahana (1946–2025) was the leading expert on the Tannaitic Midrashim, early rabbinic exegetical works on the latter four books of the Pentateuch. These collections most often focus on legal or halakhic matters and are thus often termed “Halakhic Midrashim.” But this is a bit of a misnomer, as they all—if to differing extents—contain commentaries on non-Halakhic sections of Scripture. The various

works are divided into two and a half “schools”: one group of *midrashim* was composed by students of Rabbi Ishmael, and another by students of Rabbi Akiva; a third group, only minimally represented in the surviving textual evidence, is made up of midrashim composed by an Akivan splinter group. A surprising feature of these works is that despite the significant differences between the Ishmaelian and Akivan midrashim—for example, each promote their own sages, use their own exegetical terms, have differing approaches to Scripture, and utilize the Mishnah differently—the Aggadic (non-Halakhic) material is mostly shared across the schools. In an earlier book,¹ Kahana addressed this topic by comparing the treatment of Exodus 17 in the Ishmaelian *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* and in the Akivan *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on Ben Yohay*. Kahana there reached the conclusion that the material in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* was “earlier” in the sense that it better preserved the originality of the shared material. *The Two Mekhilot on the Jethro Portion (Exodus 18)*, published shortly before Kahana’s death this past December, continues where his earlier study left off. This is particularly relevant as the two sections—covering the stories of Amalek and Jethro in Exodus 17–18—appeared together in the original division of the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* into nine tractates. Kahana, though, had to deal with a methodological problem that was now more acute: while the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* is well attested in the manuscript record, the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon Ben Yohay* is not, and is known only from partial copies found in the Cairo Genizah and from citations in medieval works. And while the portion of Amalek is attested in a complete Yemenite copy, no such evidence exists for the portion of Jethro. The book begins with an introduction outlining the limits of prior editions and the goals of the present edition and study. Kahana then presents a side-by-side edition of the two Mekhilot; given the sparse evidence, significant work went into reconstructing the sections from the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon Ben Yohay*. An extensive commentary follows the edition. Before each comment, the texts of the two *Mekhilot* are presented yet again, this time with the differences—almost all quite slight—emphasized in bold. The commentary utilizes what Kahana terms “the philological-historical-literary” method. After first establishing the correct text of each work, Kahana moves to compare the two *Mekhilot*. Much of the commentary is devoted to explaining the processes of midrashic exegesis. Over the course of the portion, the *Mekhilot* record differing interpretations of R. Joshua and R. Elazar ha-Modai. Kahana shows that, as a general rule, R. Joshua veers near the plain meaning of the text in his interpretations, whereas R. Elazar often stretches the text to arrive at “religious meaning” or “allegorical interpretations” (in an appendix, Kahana summarizes the main differences between the two rabbis). With that, there are occasions when R. Joshua strays from literal interpretation, and Kahana explains that in these instances R. Joshua is engaged in intra-rabbinic or inter-religious polemics. Significant attention is

given also to the Scriptural version on which the rabbis relied; Kahana shows that on several occasions in this portion, the rabbis’ version diverged from that of the Masoretic Bible. In a brief conclusion, Kahana summarizes that here, too, the material in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* appears more original than that in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon ben Yohay*. Attention is given also to the by now well-documented phenomenon by which the material in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon ben Yohay* more closely parallels that found in the Babylonian Talmud. Kahana shows also that while the Aggadic material in the two Mekhilot is shared, it was incorporated into each Mekhilta early enough for the material to have undergone slight revisions that reflect the style of each midrashic school. This book is a significant contribution from a leading scholar. It is required reading for students of rabbinic literature, rabbinic Hebrew, and early biblical exegesis. As a first-rate critical edition, it will undoubtedly be an invaluable reference work for years to come.

NOTE

- [1] Menahem Kahana, *Two Mekhilot on the Amalek Portion: The Originality of the Version of the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishma’el with Respect to the Mekhilta of Rabbi Shim’on Ben Yohay* (The Magnes Press, 1999).

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CHARACTERIZATION IN MIDRASH AND MEDIEVAL

JEWISH BIBLE COMMENTARIES. By Sivan Nir. The Bible and Its Reception, 8. SBL Press, 2024. Pp. xvi + 440. Cloth, \$98.00; paper, \$78.00.

Histories of interpretation often privilege either early midrash or medieval commentators, but rarely give both equal weight. This volume offers an attempt to hold these traditions in a single frame by following reinterpretations of the biblical characters Balaam, Jeremiah, and Esther across a spectrum of Jewish works, from second-century rabbinic texts to medieval Jewish biblical commentaries. Nir argues that three types of characterization (comparison of character traits, depiction of inner thought, and the idea of a protagonist in a biblical narrative) used in late midrash and medieval biblical commentary show a shift toward more realistic, mimetic readings. This marks a divide from classical midrash, which leans toward typological interpretation. Scholarship in the past decade has increasingly approached midrash and related exegetical traditions with an emphasis on literary method, diachronic development, and cross-cultural context; Nir’s work is a significant contribution to these ongoing efforts to consider these texts as dynamic literary traditions embedded in wider interpretive ecologies. Taking Auerbach’s *Mimesis* as his model, Nir divides his study both by character and by method of characterization, choosing for each a representative early and late midrashic source, and two contrasting