Dynamics of Midrashic Traditions in Second Temple and Rabbinic Literature by Menahem Kister (review)

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the great contribution of Lieber's book. It sets this poetry in situ and challenges us, students and researchers of late antiquity, to deepen our understanding of this fascinating cultural phenomenon and to contribute to the ever-evolving scholarly mosaic of the Near East in the late antique period.

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Menahem Kister. *Dynamics of Midrashic Traditions in Second Temple and Rabbinic Literature*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 2024. 498 pp. In Hebrew.

This brilliant book delves deeply into the connections between rabbinic literature, midrashim, Targums, and the traditions found in Second Temple literature. It offers a concise summary of various of Kister's studies of almost fifty years, while introducing many new ones. For those already familiar with Kister's extensive body of work, this collection not only adds new material but sheds fresh light on his previous work by helpfully organizing these studies according to the types of comparisons drawn between different literatures—a meticulous structure that may feel disorienting but accurately captures Kister's unique methodological approach. The true contribution of this book, however, lies elsewhere: in its clear, explicit, and reflexive presentation of Kister's method, something that often remains hidden in his individual studies. This comprehensive collection allow us to reassess Kister's profound impact on the study of ancient Judaism and to better appreciate his distinctive scholarly method.

Kister excels in comparing sources and reconstructing traditions. His unmatched expertise, textual sensitivity, and in-depth knowledge of ancient Jewish and Christian literature (including Eastern and Western, gnostic, Manichean, and occasionally Islamic) enable him to trace the origins and evolutions of numerous traditions. He convincingly demonstrates that the affinities and continuities between seemingly disparate texts, produced in different times and places—sometimes removed by many hundreds of kilometers and years—are far more significant than previously recognized.

Throughout the book, Kister demonstrates how late midrashim, from late antiquity and even the Middle Ages, often have much older origins. For him, traditions lack a definitive historical setting; even those that appear rooted in specific historical contexts (e.g., the destruction of the temple or the Christianization of the Roman Empire) are often found to have much older foundations, merely taking on different forms and applied anew to various contexts. Kister frequently cautions readers that the ways traditions manifest in the texts available to us, and their particular usages, do not necessarily indicate their origins. Thus, he asserts that it is impossible to study each source in isolation. One must examine them together—combining early with late—to understand their evolution and expansion.

There are many major implications to Kister's approach on the study of different corpora. One of the most innovative is his treatment of Paul and the rabbis, an old subject of scholarly inquiry. According to Kister, when there is an apparent connection between Paul and the rabbis, Paul is reacting to an old Pharisaic tradition preserved by the rabbis, rather than rabbinic midrash (which is obviously later) responding to Paul. A striking example can be seen in the interpretation of Deuteronomy 32:21: "I will make them jealous with what is no people, provoke them with a foolish nation." Sifre Deuteronomy 320 applies this verse to the *minim*, heretics, while Paul, in Romans 11:11, applies it to his community of Jesus-believers from the nations, saying it was intended to "make Israel jealous." Kister meticulously unpacks this fascinating comparison and draws on other sources—such as Ben Sira, a Qumranic fragment, and a Samaritan homily—to trace the history of this verse's interpretation. His conclusion is surprising: although the Sifre provides the earliest known identification of this verse with the *minim* (earlier sources had identified it with the Samaritans), it is not a reaction to Paul's interpretation. Rather, the Sifre, composed in the second century and redacted in the third century CE, preserves a much older midrashic tradition which Paul "reclaims" and, in doing so, reverses the hierarchy embedded within it. In Kister's words: "It is reasonable that his [Paul's] words grapple and polemicize with a Jewish homily on Deut 32:21 that was aimed against the *minim*, including the gentile Christians, that existed already in the 50s CE, and was pretty similar to the homily in Sifre Deuteronomy" (125). Although one might disagree with Kister—indeed, I find the alternative scenario, that the Tannaitic midrash is responding to Paul, more plausible—Kister's argument is both fascinating and thought provoking.

One of Kister's fundamental innovations is his assertion that mythologemes are highly malleable and can change and merge over the course of their reiteration. Even ideas that appear contradictory from a philosophical standpoint might actually represent different versions of the same tradition, sometimes presented in universal garb and at other times in more particularistic attire.

Kister's effort to trace traditions back to earlier sources while acknowledging how they fluctuate raises an important question: Where does tradition end and innovation begin? How does one isolate what is old and what is new, what is part of a mythologeme's "core" and what any particular manifestation thereof has altered? For instance, in one of Kister's articles on the evil inclination, *yeṣer ha-raʿ*, he writes: "If we combine the treatment of lust in Ben Sira with the term *yeṣer* in the book of Jubilees and *yeṣer raʿ* in Qumran, we come very close to the rabbinic anthropology and their use of the concept of *yeṣer ha-raʿ*." In my view, this convergence represents precisely the rabbinic innovation. Cultural creativity rarely emerges ex nihilo; there are always novel combinations and constellations. Identifying their diverse sources does not diminish the originality of these combinations, which, only in hindsight, seem inevitable or self-evident.

Apropos *yeṣer*, I will add that the image of the mythical *yeṣer*—which conspires, seduces, is rebuked by God, and often associated with Belial and other demonic forces—appears in Qumran but disappears from early rabbinic texts, reemerging only in later Amoraic literature. Similarly, many of the traditions Kister examines from rabbinic literature come from Amoraic midrashim,

particularly the Babylonian Talmud and Genesis Rabbah. Kister does not attribute much significance to this phenomenon. For instance, in discussing the myth of the Leviathan reserved for the righteous in the world to come, Kister notes that "the absence of this tradition from the (early) material available to us does not necessarily teach us much" (292). I would argue that the absence or presence of these traditions indeed teaches us something valuable, not necessarily about their age but about their suppression in early rabbinic literature. It appears that various Second Temple traditions did not find their place in the early rabbinic literary diet and were reintroduced only in later, more inclusive texts, which may tell a larger intellectual and cultural story about changing rabbinic attitudes toward these traditions.

Kister takes an extreme stance in denying innovation within rabbinic midrashim. While my aim here is not to defend the originality of midrash (a worthy endeavor in and of itself), it is necessary to ask what constitutes "innovation." Even when antecedents for a tradition can be identified—and I suspect there are fewer rabbinic legends with genuinely ancient roots than Kister intimates—one must assess how closely these manifestations resemble each other, both in content and form.

For example, Kister demonstrates that the Rule of the Community from Qumran (1QS 2) contains different interpretations of the word *vikhunekha* from the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:20). It is interpreted both as wisdom and as forgiveness. Kister points out that "in rabbinic terminology, such a dual interpretation is indicated by the expression *davar ʾaḥer*." I would argue that this seemingly minor phrase marks a significant difference between the corpora. In tannaitic midrash, *davar ʾaḥer* explicitly acknowledges multiple and even conflicting interpretations without requiring resolution, something fundamentally absent from Qumran literature. As Steven Fraade argued, Qumranic interpretation is conceived as divine revelation, precluding the acceptance of interpretive plurality. What Kister perceives as essential similarity, therefore, can be viewed as manifesting a fundamental difference in notions of interpretation, hermeneutics, and authority. Kister concludes regarding the Qumranic interpretation: "It also has interpretive polyphony (although the form of expression—and the ideology—is different from that of the rabbis)" (203). I suggest reversing this statement: the interpretive ideology itself is profoundly different, even though some interpretive elements overlap.

Similarly, Kister brilliantly illuminates the parallels between the Damascus Document's discussion of David's many wives (CD V, 2–6) and a talmudic-style dialectical sugya. Only the form of presentation, he adds, differs (211). I once again would caution against downplaying the innovative nature of rabbinic dialectical thought in favor of emphasizing shared ancient traditions. Innovations in form, rhetoric, framing, and context can be as transformative just as the content itself.

Consider the tannaitic midrash (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Ba-ḥodesh* 3; Mekhilta to Deuteronomy 11:19), which presents differing opinions about the nature of the "Book of the Covenant" that Moses read at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:7). Kister skillfully demonstrates that a fragment of a rewritten Pentateuch from Qumran (4Q158) includes an expanded version of this verse that details the

covenant and identifies it with the promises to the forefathers. While he rightly emphasizes the similarities between this fragment and the midrash, it is crucial to recognize the differences. All sages in the midrash agree that the "Book of the Covenant" refers to passages from the Torah itself. Unlike the rewritten Pentateuch's free reconstruction, the rabbis assume that the text must be grounded in the Torah that we have before us. Therefore, while the passage from Qumran creates a new text forged from different biblical passages, the midrash cites specific texts from the Torah to which our verse supposedly refers. This rabbinic insistence on using the Torah as the definitive source represents a fundamentally new approach, arising from an entirely different conception of the biblical text. It positions the Torah as a definite, holistic work containing all answers, with midrashic techniques serving to uncover them.

In highlighting the continuity of traditions, Kister vastly enriches our understanding, but may risk obscuring critical differences. This makes us too beholden to the horizon that the old traditions allow, and thus narrows our appreciation of subsequent innovative leaps that took place, whether in content or in form. Ancient Jewish interpretive and literary traditions are not like DNA that already encodes its future development, but rather like a dynamic conversation, constantly shaped by new contexts, influences, and historical moments.

But these discussions and critiques are but footnotes to the main point: this is a magnificent book by a true master of ancient Jewish literature. It is a challenging read, but those who commit to it will find it splendidly rewarding. Instead of attempting to capture the full extent of this textual (indeed, spiritual) reward, let me conclude with the book's closing words: "The main thing is trying to listen to the texts—in silence and with bated breath—and notice the subtle movement of the traditions. . . . Even the principal conclusions are tightly connected to each of the individual readings, as a flame is tied to an ember."

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Amram D. Tropper. *A Tragedy of Errors: Bar Qamtza and the Fall of Jerusalem*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2022. 302 pp.

A Tragedy of Errors takes us on an immersive, surround-sound journey into the two versions of the Bar Qamtza story, found in the Babylonian Talmud and in Lamentations Rabbah, a fifth- or sixth-century midrashic work. As Tropper explains, this story is well known both in and out of academia for its prime role in the "legends of destruction" cycle, that is, stories that narrate the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Rome. The Bar Qamtza story tells of a mistaken banquet invitation and a subsequently ejected guest who conspires to punish the Jews of Jerusalem for allowing his public embarrassment. He tricks the temple