SCHÄFER'S SYMPOSE ZUR HEBEKALOT-LITERATUR

The hebekalot literature is an anonymous corpus of writings attributed to the second-fifth centuries, which have come down to us primarily through medieval manuscripts and through some fragments from the Cairo geniza. The literature does not contain within itself any clear evidence as to its date of origin, nor does it offer a clear testimony as to the background of the concepts and conceptions expressed in it. Consequently the historical and chronological background as well as the religious orientation of these cycles from which the hebekalot traditions had sprung remain undefined and indefinite. 1

In recent years the hebekalot literature has attracted widespread attention and renewed scholarly interest, concentrated upon the inherent methodological problems and textual differences as well as upon its historical and phenomenological ramifications. Various scholars have dealt with the technicalities of the position of the hebekalot literature in the development of Talmudic Jewish mysticism, while attempting to link it to a less historical connection with talmudic literature, the Judaeo-Christian writings, early Christian literature, and various Gnostic trends. 2

The main problem has been defined, a number of important works have dealt with the history and the phenomenology of the hebekalot literature, and textual difficulties have been emphasized, but every discussion of these traditions is still hampered by severe difficulties and uncertainties of a substantial and technical nature.

The most important extant manuscripts of the hebekalot traditions were transcribed and edited by Maier Aschenband in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Copies of these manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century are the earliest in our possession. They had thus been transcribed nearly one thousand years after their assumed date of composition, and must therefore reflect late textual revisions. There can be little doubt that in the long period of time between their composition and their transmutation profound changes had occurred in the texts, their tradition, order, and edition. These manuscripts cannot be distinctly or consistently divided into identifiable treaties, chapters, or units; furthermore, there are usually no headings to the various parts. Thus the manuscript form of the texts, by its very nature, allows no unequivocal definition of identity, content, transmission, and segmentation of what has come to be considered the halakhic literature.

The earliest attempts to define distinct sections in the corpus of this literature can be found in the generic expression: There Halakhat Rabba and Halakhot Ezratin are mentioned as the first treat; however, the response cannot be indication of the extent of the texts or of their literary nature, and it is neither the point of their beginning nor the point of their end. Any attempt therefore to partition the halakhic corpus into meaningful sections would be most difficult. Nevertheless, the accepted method in past research has been to divide the major parts of the known material into reasonably clear units, and, controllable parts of it have accordingly been published by Jellinek, Warshofsky, Masloff, and others. Although these editions have been generally regarded as inadequate, scholars have continued to treat the material according to this principle. Further critical editions of some parts of the corpus were published by Olsberg, Schotten, Greenwald, Elior, Cohen, and others. In recent years this method has been questioned, and scholars have begun to view the manuscripts in a different light.

The indistinct character of the historical background and the doctrinal unitary identity have brought about a twofold methodological change in the modern research literature: a differentiation of the known halakhic traditions as pluralistic expressions of several circles which represented different religious interests.

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3. For a comprehensive list of the available material see G. Schotten, Jewish Gnosis, pp. 5-8; and I. Greenwald, Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism, pp. 154-217.

end spiritual enthusiasts," b) the accepted view of the existence of individual treatises within the hekhalot literature has been challenged by an attempt to treat the material in its entirety, in its earliest raw form, as a basis for a reconsideration of the entire corpus without preconceptions due to arbitrary or incidental changes effected by later editors, publishers, and scholars. 2

Peter Schäfer’s Synopsis zur Hekhalot-Literatur is an important contribution to this new approach. He presents synoptically a major portion of the hekhalot corpus—seven manuscripts of major importance—in their original form and sequence disregarding previous editorial conventions, abstaining from preconceived notions as to the nature of the texts and without passing judgment on the content or the order. The manuscripts included are: New York (Jewish Theological Seminary) 8138; Oxford 1531; Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) 40; Munich 22; Dy-epet 438, Vatican 228, and Budapest (Rabbinical Seminary) 228. The synoptic text has been divided into 965 sections, an artificial though useful separation. A brief introduction explains the structure of this edition and offers technical advice on how to utilize the sections. Schäfer’s primary editorial principle has been to abstain from any intervention in the transcribed text and to adhere to the original sequence of the manuscripts while avoiding the previously common division into individual treatises. Consequently Schäfer has abstained from giving or emphasizing titles in the manuscripts, and refrains from correcting or editing the manuscripts in any matter, thereby avoiding any historical or ideological instructions.

Schäfer’s adherence to the editorial principles of presenting the exact sequence of the manuscripts, disregarding previous divisions as well as avoiding prejudgment of the existence of different treatises and of the problems of interpolations of the various parts, must be met with full approval and support. Since modern research has recognized the need to review the nature of the hekhalot corpus, this synopsis offers a solid base for further investigation, free from prior editorial intrusions into the texts. However, the reader must bear in mind the fact that the material here published is by no means the entire corpus of the hekhalot literature. Here we have, but a selection of the available manuscripts. 3 Important treatises, such as the so-called ‘Ala-Baqa de-Rabbi Ashpa, the hekhalot portion of Midrash Mibhle, the hekhalot portions in the genizah fragments, 4 and hekhalot traditions

3 The Microfilm Institute of the National Library in Jerusalem has a comprehensive list of most of the available manuscripts.
4 P. Schäfer, Geniza Fragments zur Hekhalot-Literatur (Tübingen, 1984).
in midrashic and kabbalistic literature, are absent. Others, such as Seder Rabbah de-Beri, are included because they are found in a particular manuscript, although their inclusion in the hokhotl corpus has not been established. Many manuscripts and portions of almost all of them may be cross-referenced in other, parallel, manuscripts and printed sources which may offer important variants. The reader should therefore bear in mind that further textual evidence is available, although often in a much less convincing form. The Synoptic, nevertheless, offers a very practical presentation of the major hokhot traditions in their original manuscript form, emphasizing the inherent editorial difficulties. True, it cannot replace a much needed critical edition of all the various parts which must include the selection of texts and the evaluation of all available material. But the Synoptic is not intended to be a critical edition; rather, it offers to the scholar the manuscript material required to attempt such a comprehensive work.

The guiding editorial consideration—presentation of the original sequence of the manuscripts—is essentially correct, although faulty may be found with the total adherence to accidental variations and errors found in the manuscripts. Three major considerations arise in the reading of doublet texts: 1) unknown words which have no parallel, 2) words probably mistranscribed which can be alternatively interpreted, 3) doublet variants in phrases which can be found in traditional sources. The first two kinds of words should be corrected as they appear, since we have no criteria to select the correct version. The third instance is open to original appraisal, especially if traditional sources, such as biblical verses, talmudic quotations, or the name of God, are in question.

In the Synoptic great importance is attributed to the shape of the characters, based upon the assumption of calligraphic consistency and lack of variation in the form of particular letters, while an attempt is made to conform the meaning of the text. This approach shoul; be treated with reserve. Readers of Hebrew manuscripts are familiar with the objective difficulties in discerning between bat and ket, mof and mof, amah and useful. One instance between batbatvau is a presumed calligraphic consistency which can result in meaningless words, and seeking a reasonable meaning based upon known tradition. In my opinion, the author has overemphasized his presumption of consistent calligraphic tradition and commitment to formal character shapes, with the result ambiguous readings. The has called Schali’ot to retain obvious errors and mistranslations in the texts, with no indication of possible alternative readings.

Schaden’s insistence upon presumed calligraphic consistency, the similarity between certain letters in cursive Hebrew script, and the physical condition of the manuscripts, now nearly five hundred years old, have resulted in errors, such as the Synoptic: 4.99; תשרו can be alternatively read תשרו, as a quick look at the manuscript will show. Likewise, ויהי is an impossible entry by the fourteenth-century scribe for the biblical ויהי. The structure of the Synoptic allows no room for such comments or alternative readings, and even the question of the limits of the modern tran-
scriber's commitment to the continuation of previous transcribers' errors remains unsolved. Considerable effort has been expended by Schäfer to produce, as far as possible, a precise and authentic version of the text. However, a sample check of New York manuscript 8128 reveals a number of errors and omissions. Synop. §419 reads נבון, while the manuscript quite clearly has נבון, Synop. §353 reads מעון, while the manuscript has מעון. Synop. §419 drops דבש, which is clearly present in the original manuscript. The number of such errors is actually small considering the size and scope of the work. My main argument with the editor is one of principle. In Synop. §376 the name of God is spelled הנע (in the statement ד Whatsapp. רוגא, an obvious scribal error; Synop. §364 reads דניא וינטב שיאו רוגא - obviously the correct word is רוגא. Synop. §355, in a chapter dealing with the holy creatures Schäfer reads שרי לא רועיש, while it is clear that the correct reading is שרי לא רועיש. The point which should be stressed is not the number of errors due to faulty reading but rather the mistakes which have been allowed to enter the text for overreaching editorial considerations. This editorial inflexibility, which has made no allowance for alternative readings, reasonable correction, or explanatory comments, has brought about meaningless sentences, such as זכר היה ידיע דניא ואיש דרר אלע שולש אלע שולש, the curvilinear דאש and דא being easily interchanged. Another example of preference for presumed character shape over meaningful words is found in the cosmological hymn of Synop. §367, where עקרקי מימינא שפורט - easily corrected to עקרקיו מימינא שפורט, bearing in mind the similarity between the curvilinear דא and final ד. We have thus seen that this reliance upon the doubtful criteria of the shape of characters and of calligraphic consistency can prevent us from achieving a reliable and meaningful text. Consequently Schäfer's readings cannot always be accepted as decisive, and one is well advised, if in doubt, to consult the original manuscripts.

Despite these reservations, Schäfer's book is a major contribution in the study of the principal problems touching the halakhah literature. His comprehensive presentation of the manuscript material opens new ways for measurement of the various portions and their relation to the entire corpus. The scholar is offered a very convenient and helpful means to become acquainted with these components of the halakhah literature.

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