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Geniza-Fragmente zu Avot de-Rabbi Nathan

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This welcome edition of the presently known fragments of the rabbinic work *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* from the Cairo Genizah follows the pattern set by the exacting standards of text editions that are produced in Germany. The editing process of Hebrew manuscripts has become somewhat of a cottage industry in Germany; sophisticated Hebrew editing computer programs as well as substantial financial support and numerous research assistants are readily available. Research programs of this magnitude place the scholar in the position of a managing editor in charge of financial and personnel management as well as providing academic oversight. This sizeable book (10.4" x 12.5") is the product of the collaborative efforts of ten people.

Avot de Rabbi Nathan ("The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan") is found in present Talmud editions at the end of Tractate *Nezikin*; this text is used by the intended audience, the community of Talmud students. The literary genre of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* is notoriously difficult to determine; basically, it is a mixture of commentaries on a version of Mishnah *Avot* and midrashic materials. Since the nineteenth century it has been established that there are essentially two versions of the document *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, version A and version B, respectively, and this observation has been confirmed by the book under review. Version A is the version that has been printed in the Talmud since 1550. The edition of version B from manuscript material was first published in 1872. The publication by Solomon Schechter in 1887 placed both versions side by side in a synoptic edition; however, Schechter's method of creating a "diplomatic" edition, containing corrections of the printed texts from manuscript material, is outdated. Nevertheless, his edition is still useful for study purposes. The variant readings in the manuscripts that are

presented in the book under review do not significantly deviate from one another. As is the case in many other editions of rabbinic texts, scholars currently pay heightened attention to the manuscript material that is available in fragments or hitherto neglected corpora of rabbinic text-witnesses.

The Hebrew manuscript fragments utilized to produce this present edition of segments of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* are located in Cambridge, Oxford, St. Petersburg, and New York. The thirty pages of Genizah fragments have been identified as belonging to fourteen manuscripts. It is significant that the fragments of a single manuscript are now housed in different libraries and have come together in the present edition. As an aside, an archeologist would note that other artifacts from Egypt, such as Sphinx and its beard, are kept in different locations as well. This edition of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* utilizes a systematic procedure of presenting the Hebrew manuscript material, which makes this a user-friendly book. First, a facsimile of a fragment is reproduced, with a transcription on the facing page of the book. Second, a German commentary is added, comprised of the following subparts: a physical description of the fragments, a list of the scribal characteristics, and an evaluation of the synoptic comparison. This evaluation is somewhat superfluous, because the purpose of a synoptic edition is to provide scholars with the tools to draw their own conclusions. The physical descriptions follow the exacting standards of the discipline of codicology that was developed by Malachi Beit-Arié. The third step in the procedure utilized by the editors is to present the transcribed text in a parallel, synoptic, edition in juxtaposition to other text-witnesses of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*. This is the most valuable part of the book because it facilitates the recognition of the dynamic text of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* in relation to different but similar rabbinic texts that fluctuate between parallels, semiparallels, and partial parallels.

Since every fragment is published as a facsimile, it is easy to check the readings assigned by the editors to certain letters of the text witnesses, which leads us to some general considerations in respect to edited manuscripts. In order to produce scientific editions of Hebrew texts, scholars are confronted with the problem of how correctly to transcribe the graphic signs in the manuscripts. Based upon the exact same shape of the graphic signs we find, for example, numerous times *resh* instead of *dalet* or *yod* instead of *vav*. The scribe of a particular manuscript may be careless and blur the Hebrew letters *dalet* and *resh*, or the combination *yod-ayin* and *aleph*, in such a way that these letters become indistinguishable, not only to the human eye but also to a reading that is aided by computer imaging and enlarging the text. Even these procedures will not tell the difference between the graphic sign on the fragment and the intended, or expected, correct sign.

These similarities between distinct letters may be explained by the psycholinguistic apperception theory whereby one reads signs as linguistic units rather than mere graphic signs. Initially the term apperception was used as an expression for a distinct and precise perception of an object; this perception is determined by the process of identifying any object (cf. the mathematician-philosopher G. W. Leibniz) or, in this case, any sign. Presently, the term *apperception* refers to a process that underlies the acquisition of knowledge; in this process one's preexisting knowledge in respect to the acquisition of any new knowledge is the determining factor in interpreting objects. If this is carried over to the reading of medieval or other Hebrew manuscripts, psycholinguists would assume that scholars not read only the graphic sign but also process these signs into a linguistic sign. Some transcriptions by the editors in the present volume of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* may only be explained by relying upon this apperception theory.

Utilizing parallel or otherwise relevant passages from other text-witnesses of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* and related texts, which are also transcribed in this edition, leads to the inevitable question of the constituents of rabbinic works and the form that such rabbinic documents might have had. The redactional "identity" of the document, in particular its contents and the structure of its compilation, seems to have been condensed during its transmission. The presumably "oldest" extant fragment of a rabbinic text (T-S AS 74.324 Cambridge) was probably produced at a transition point between the scroll form and the codex form of Hebrew text. The dating of this fragment refers to dates between the fourth/fifth century and the seventh century (based on the script's similarity to the script of the Hebrew papyrus fragments) and the statement that this fragment is no later than the ninth century (Beit-Arié). In response to these differing views in respect to the "oldest" extant fragment of rabbinic manuscript material, the editors of the book under review claim that the final product of the two versions of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* is not the same as the document that seems to be the *Vorlage* of the older documents—it is submitted that this is no longer a question of manuscript analysis but rather of literary criticism. This is a major problem that we all have to address. Additionally, in this edition there is shared material from other texts that has been assigned to different rabbinic works but is still deemed useful for comparative purposes by the editors; many scholars working in the problematic field of rabbinic document identity also consider the analysis of shared material to be productive. It is probable that, even with the keenest tools of text-linguistic theory or literary and socioeconomic genre theories, we are at a loss to determine the exact "intended" readings of the "original" text. Relying on shared materials in other texts might be useful for a single misread or miscopied word; however, it is submitted that a textual unit becomes part of a larger, dominating coherent statement of a work, once it has been integrated into another document or once it has been cited in another document. A related problem that the user of rabbinic texts encounters is the sequencing

of examples or exegetical subparts within a pericope. In an example of sequencing of exegetical subparts on page 300, the editors refer to a series of “servants” (Hebrew *avadim*) that are cited in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*. The numbers of said examples of this biblical term range from fourteen to eighteen in the pericopes of different manuscripts. An example of the sequencing of several exegetical moves in different manuscripts is mentioned on page 87. This is a well-known phenomenon of different sequence lengths in rabbinic midrash—it is probably due to orality as a genre of instruction. The different chapter numbers (299) in different versions is a closely related problem. The basic question remains: When did rabbinic texts become rabbinic “documents”?

The editors of this edition systematically mark the additions, emendations, and questionable readings that relate to the reading of the manuscripts. In addition, the editors discuss explanatory glosses, which is very revealing and useful. It is disturbing to note that a previously known manuscript of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, “MS Epstein” (now called MS JTS 10484 *Avot de Rabbi Nathan a*), which Schechter had used for his complete edition, is apparently now missing some folios. This illustrates the reality that original manuscripts can be lost or destroyed, and in order to preserve the text one has to publish printed text editions. An additional aspect of reviewing manuscript materials is that superior readings may be gained. For example, the Genizah fragments sometimes contain the “complete” version of a passage that is corrupt in the other manuscripts, because text was lost during its transmission or because sentences that were originally separate were subsequently combined.

An example of lost text that has been clarified through a Genizah fragment is found in a passage that exemplifies the “fence” that Moses created around the Torah. *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* contains an inadequate connection between a menstruant and the (subsequent) immersion in a *mikveh* (the synoptic text of these passages is produced on pp. 98–99). The discussion of the menstruant focuses on the possibility that it is not known whether the husband has forbidden sexual relations with his wife during her period of *Niddah*. Concerning this passage, the manuscripts entitled Vatican 44, New York Rab 50, Oxford Opp. 95 as well as the *editio princeps* from Venice immediately continue the discussion with the immersion in a *mikveh*. However, the manuscript evidence in New York 10484, New York rabb. 25, and in the Genizah fragments Bodleiana Heb e 73 and Ant. Heb III B 292 assign the required immersion in the *mikveh* to a completely different case, namely, a nocturnal seminal emission. A man who experiences this is required to immerse himself in a *mikveh*. This omission in some of the texts had been recognized by Schechter and has now become even clearer from the additional evidence from the Genizah fragments. The editors of the book under review appropriately reject the idea that the text itself is the result of a linear development from the fragments. Such a simplified development of the tradition is simply no longer tenable.

Not all the manuscripts in the present edition are textual witnesses of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, which raises interesting questions in respect to the text *Gestalt* of this work. There might have been many versions of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* in circulation; it is possible that people were interested in the religious teaching in this type of document. The details of providing supporting exegetical statements in regard to the structural sentences were simply not fixed, which means that the texts were open to the dynamics of different teachers and their different styles.

Although the survival and retrieval of any Hebrew manuscript material is mainly dictated by chance, one may posit the question: Was this text widely studied in medieval Cairo (Fustat), and what importance should be assigned to the so-called “minor” tractate of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*? These questions were not addressed by the editors. The editors are to be highly commended for presenting the *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* Genizah fragments within their textual tradition in this clear presentation of the textual material. This book should be in the collection of every Judaica research library; it is an indispensable tool for scholars working in the textual transmission of rabbinic works.