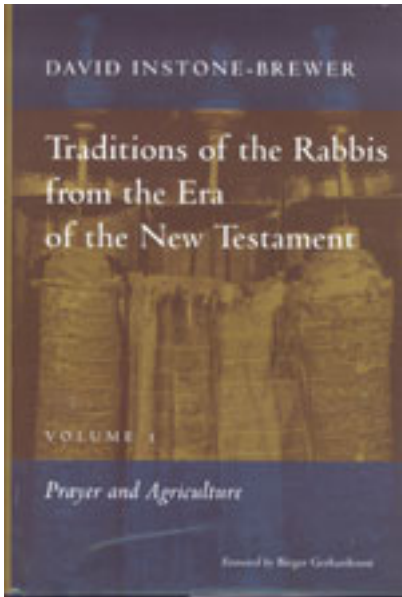


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Instone-Brewer, David

Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament, Volume 1: Prayer and Agriculture

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Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament is a projected six-volume work that attempts to recover the Jewish context for interpreting the New Testament. Volume 1, on the first order of the Mishnah, *Zeraim* (seeds), dealing with prayer and agriculture, is a collection of rabbinic traditions that, according to Instone-Brewer, originated in the New Testament era. That is, the work purports to collect traditions that illustrate “rabbinic Judaism before 70 CE.” Whereas one of the aims of the early editors of rabbinic material was to “preserve the *conclusions* of scholarly debate,” rather than their “*origins*” (emphasis original), this work attempts to locate the earliest teachings that were transmitted, however inaccurately, in the process of preserving the later conclusions for the purpose of understanding the New Testament in its Jewish setting.

By all estimates, the task of identifying all the mishnaic sources is daunting and exceedingly ambitious. The Mishnah comprises traditions that have been edited and “re-ordered to fit in with the motives and organization of the Jewish world of later centuries.” Instone-Brewer writes: “The early traditions which have been preserved are not the actual words of the early rabbis. Editors abbreviated them and made them conform in vocabulary and style in order to make them more memorable.” That said, there are

sufficient “reasons to believe that much of the content of the early material has been faithfully preserved” (28).

Building on the pioneering work of Jacob Neusner and others in dating mishnaic traditions, Instone-Brewer establishes a system of evaluating the level of confidence of a tradition, ranging from 1 to 13, 1 designating the highest level of confidence in dating. “These numbers,” he writes, “should not give a false sense of accuracy to the process of dating rabbinic traditions, which is still somewhat an art rather than a science. But they help the reader to make a quick appraisal of the relative value of a text” (40). Thus, despite his systematic and seemingly scientific approach, Instone-Brewer provides measured caveats, lest the reader assume that the assessment provided is foolproof. For example, biographical details must be treated with care and exegetical materials with extra caution. With regard to attributions, on which he relies most heavily to establish a large portion of the traditions, despite invoking three criteria, Instone-Brewer contends, “The attribution of a saying to a named rabbi cannot be assumed to be correct, but extensive historico-critical work has suggested that such attributions are generally correct. Even when the attribution is suspect, the saying can usually be assumed to date from the same time period as the person to whom it has been attributed” (31). Given that Instone-Brewer draws on the work of Neusner, it would have been worthwhile to see in what instances and manner this work diverges from that of Neusner’s five-volume *A History of Mishnaic Law* or Avery Peck’s *Mishnah’s Division of Agriculture: A History and Theology of Seder Zeraim*, since both works also attempt to identify whether or not smaller traditions designated as pre-70 are in fact from that period.

The order of the Mishnah, which treats matters topically, is the basic organizing structure of this work, although it is not slavishly followed; that is, a tradition presented in one tractate may appear in another, if it better suits the subject matter in the other tractate. Tractates deemed to contain pre-70 material are given more attention, whereas other tractates are, as expected, dealt with in a more cursory manner. Instone-Brewer not only presents the Hebrew text along with a deliberately literal English translation (texts dated before 70 C.E. are printed in bold; explanatory words are placed in brackets), but also equips the reader with background information that helps to situate the wide-ranging discussions. He also presents variant readings, a glossary of terms, commentary, and New Testament and Toseftan parallels. Summaries of tractates are helpful, and, provided the assessment of traditions is handled with caution, these features make the work on the whole a useful resource for scholars in rabbinics and related fields.

In his introduction, Instone-Brewer points to the mishandling and uncritical use of rabbinic texts by New Testament scholars who showed lack of consideration with regard to the difficulty of dating these sources. Today this, however, is by and large no longer the

case, since scholars have heeded the warnings and endured the chastisements, so much so that New Testament scholars altogether avoid the use of rabbinic sources (29). To Instone-Brewer's credit, he endeavors to disabuse them of the notion that, since rabbinic sources are difficult to date, they are justified in steering away from them. While he must be credited for this undertaking, his conceptualization of the issues at hand and the underlying assumptions of the work at large are problematic.

First, the author maintains that the collection of traditions is "a faithful reflection of the ideas and practices of rabbinic Judaism before 70 CE," but given what we know of the development of, for want of a better term, "rabbinic Judaism," the very aim of the work is questionable. The project assumes that the mishnaic sources already created or reflect a coherent system that coalesced centuries later. In other words, are we projecting a phenomenon that developed two, if not three or four, centuries later? In what ways and to what extent can we discuss "rabbinic Judaism" before 70 C.E.? Can we go back to the "origins" of the scholarly debates? Furthermore, Instone-Brewer contends, "This collection is the best insight we have into the mindset of the Jews to whom both Jesus and Paul addressed most of their teaching" (1). But is it "the best insight"? By focusing on the Mishnah, he limits, in fact skews, a more nuanced picture that a careful study of early midrashic literature, especially the *midreshei halakhah*, as well as the Tosefta, might also help furnish.

Furthermore, the very title of the work, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, is noteworthy. What are we to make of "the New Testament era," and what is implied vis-à-vis the literature of this so-called era? Indeed, the very first line of the introduction reads, "The aim of this work is to collect rabbinic traditions which originated in the New Testament era, which is defined as the first century before 70 CE," although Instone-Brewer states elsewhere that the objective of the work is to examine the "Jewish world of the early and middle first century, when the New Testament was written" (40). While in the preface he distinguishes his work from Strack-Billerbeck's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, which presents isolated quotations with insufficient regard to context or dating, and whereas this work is more scientific in its attempt to carefully date the traditions and to provide a background to the material, the work nonetheless shares a potentially apologetic aim, one that has occupied the attention of many New Testament scholars. One should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that these sources can serve as intertexts; knowledge of rabbinic literature can throw light on the New Testament and vice versa, and many scholars have insightfully and deftly demonstrated as much. When rabbinic sources, however, are approached in this manner—when literature that antecedes the New Testament is subsumed under "the New Testament era"—when the project is framed in these terms, then the very purpose of

elucidating the Jewish background of New Testament is potentially distorted. This observation is not meant to be accusatory, but rather cautionary.

The pitfalls of this work, pitfalls that willy nilly accompany this endeavor, despite a careful and rigorous attempt to assess the traditions at hand, should not detract from the contributions of the work. Instone-Brewer should be commended for his attempt to be systematic. The extensive, detailed introduction provides useful lists of names of rabbis and of rabbinic works. It also outlines the problems associated with the notorious difficulty of dating rabbinic works, and it sets out the criteria employed in evaluating the mishnaic traditions. The notes are often instructive, and for experts and the uninitiated alike the work is a very good resource.