Benzion Halper

Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature

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Anthology of Medieval Jewish Texts & Writings

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PREFACE

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Although the Hebrew language ceased to be the vernacular of the majority of the Jewish people during the last years of the second temple, it has, throughout the various periods, with but few exceptions, persisted as the medium for the noblest literary productions of the nation. Irrespective of the language spoken by the people in the countries of their adoption, the best thoughts of the Jewish writers found expression in the holy tongue. The Gemara, which is preponderately in Aramaic, can hardly be regarded as an exception, for it consists, in the main, of records of oral discussions and arguments, which were naturally carried on in the vernacular, and as such it is not to be classed among works of literature in its narrower sense. On the other hand, it is very significant that the Midrash and some of the midrashic elements in the Talmud are mostly in Hebrew, and it is just these parts which may claim to be regarded as literature. Then the prayers, many of which date from the early centuries of the present era, and the piyyutim are practically all in Hebrew.

When the centre of Jewish literary activity was transferred to Arabic-speaking countries, the Hebrew language still continued to be employed by a good many of the writers. The treatises with a practical purpose, intended for the edification of the people at large, were, it is true, written in the vernacular, but the literary productions were composed in Hebrew. Lexicographical, grammatical, and philosophical books appealed to the general public, and had therefore to be expressed in the language spoken by the

people. But Hebrew was employed for the literary compositions, poems, and piyyutim. Sa'adya, Ibn Gebirol, and Judah ha-Levi wrote their philosophic works, which undoubtedly had a didactic aim, in Arabic, but their poems and hymns are invariably in Hebrew. Moreover, the popularity of books written in Arabic was short-lived. For shortly afterwards the centre of Jewish learning was shifted to other countries, and the vast Jewish-Arabic literature inevitably became a sealed book. While the Hebrew translations of Sa'adya's *Faiths and Creeds,* Bahya's *Duties of the Heart*, Judah ha-Levi's *Khazarite,* and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* have been repeatedly printed, the Arabic originals of these books had been moulding in the various libraries until scholars in comparatively recent years unearthed them and published them for the use of the few scientific investigators. A similar fate has befallen the grammatical treatises of the brilliant grammarians of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The works written in Arabic, in spite of their intrinsic merit, have almost entirely been forgotten, having been superseded by Hebrew manuals of an inferior character. In this case the Hebrew translations did not save them from oblivion to which they have been condemned for centuries. For the Hebrew writers of the subsequent periods, who knew Arabic, borrowed from their predecessors, and presented the material in a manner acceptable to their readers.

The continuity of the Hebrew language as a literary medium is, accordingly, unbroken, and to illustrate this fact by examples is one of the aims of this *Anthology*. Incidentally a study of the numerous extracts incorporated into this volume will establish the truth, which has too often been ignored, that the Hebrew genius did not become stagnant with the conclusion of the biblical Canon. It is true

that the literary quality of post-biblical works cannot approach the sublimity and beauty of the Bible; but this verdict may justly be applied to other literatures. During the last two thousand years no literature which could rank with the canonical books of the Bible has been produced.

Apart from the literary criterion, there is another aspect which differentiates post-biblical Hebrew literature from the Bible: the former is the product of men, who, with the exception of Ben Sira and possibly the teachers of the Mishnah, did not speak Hebrew as their mother-tongue. Their style, as a consequence, bears the marks of artificiality, and in many cases lacks spontaneity. Hebrew was for them a dead and foreign tongue, and this circumstance involved numerous obstacles and disadvantages. Some of the medieval Hebrew poets had to confine themselves to the vocabulary preserved in the Bible, and rarely ventured to employ expressions occurring in the Talmud or to coin new words which were needed for their poetic compositions. They were thus denied that freedom of expression which is essential to the creative genius, and were compelled to fit their work to the frame. It is due to these considerations that some of the hymns appear like strings of biblical verses or phrases, more or less skilfully put together. The original and daring spirits among these writers, in order to express their new ideas and sentiments, were driven to invest the biblical words and phrases with new significations, and thereby developed a novel style, which, though interesting in itself and doing credit to the ingenuity of the authors, could not have been conducive to literary creativeness. For while in quest of a biblical phrase which should serve as a vehicle for his newly-conceived thought, the poet could not give free rein to his fancy. And yet, despite all these disadvantages, we have

before us masterly compositions which cannot fail to arouse our interest and admiration. On the other hand, the philosophers, grammarians, lexicographers, historians, and geographers have freely introduced new words and expressions, and have thereby enriched the volume of the Hebrew vocabulary. These new coinages, which, to a great extent, have been sanctioned by the usage of centuries, are of vital interest to us at present owing to the widespread movement to revive the Hebrew language. Instead of beginning with a *tabula rasa*, as is done by some of the leaders of this movement, it would be more advisable, and certainly more scientific, to explore our old treasures. There is ample material in post-biblical Hebrew works for the reconstruction of the language.

This volume of translations is a companion to the Hebrew texts printed in a separate book, and in the case of some extracts the reason for their inclusion in this *Anthology* may not be quite apparent. For, in preparing the selections, I have been guided by two principles: the literary merit of the extract and its pedagogic value. The latter quality would be entirely lost in a translation. A passage whose literary value is not very high, but which is pedagogically important, would naturally be welcomed by the student desirous of familiarizing himself with the style of post-biblical Hebrew. Such a passage, however, may appear cumbersome in translation. At the same time it is hoped that the reader will derive æsthetic pleasure from the beauty or quaintness, as the case may be, of the great variety of passages. In order to give an idea of the diversity and extensiveness of post-biblical Hebrew literature, practically all branches have been incorporated into this *Anthology*, and great care has been taken to select representative authors. Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, liturgy, poetry, philosophy, ethics, history,

geography, folk-lore, travel, philology, epistles, ethical wills, and general compositions are represented in this volume. It is to be regretted that two branches, which have been and are the most potent factors in shaping Jewish intellectual life, could not be included. I refer to Halakah and biblical exegesis, which had to be excluded for the simple reason that the representative passages of these branches scarcely possess literary value. At the same time I have excerpted sections from Maimonides' *Code*, Eleazar of Worms' *Rokeah*, and Abravanel's commentary on the Pentateuch. These extracts, however, do not represent Halakah or exegesis, though they happen to have been incorporated into halakic and exegetical works. For a similar reason Kabbalah is not represented here, although there is a mystical strain in the extract from the *Rokeah* and in Nahmanides' epistle. While in point of time Ben Sira belongs to the biblical period, it has been deemed advisable to incorporate passages from his *Wisdom*, because it is outside the Hebrew Canon. Moreover, in the Hebrew text of the extracts selected for this *Anthology* at least two Hebrew verbs, not occurring in the Bible, have been rescued from oblivion.

The texts are arranged chronologically as far as possible. The method of arranging extracts according to subjects, which other writers may prefer, presents numerous difficulties which are now obviated. Some passages defy classification, while others can be placed in more than one group. Moreover, the chronological arrangement has the advantage of presenting a complete picture of the growth and development of the various branches of Hebrew literature. Although some branches synchronize, as, for instance, poetry and philosophy, few of them persist throughout the various periods. In the majority of cases each age has produced a mode of literary expression

peculiar to itself. The eleventh century may be regarded as the Golden Age of Hebrew poetry. A few gifted poets have arisen during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but we meet with no great talents until we reach the modern renaissance, the beginnings of which are incorporated here. The philosophic activity extended over a much longer period, but the best works have been produced in a limited number of generations.

The translations are obviously based upon the Hebrew volume of this *Anthology*. A reader comparing my translation with other editions of the extracts will therefore come across some discrepancies. A few examples may suffice to illustrate this point. The printed editions of the Mishnah have a word denoting "silver" which is here rendered by "golden" (II, 2, l. 7). Of course, my edition has the correct word which is found in the famous Munich manuscript. In the Pesikta extract there is an additional sentence not found in any of the editions that have hitherto appeared: *A messenger came and said unto me: "Thy husband died in the city across the sea"* (V, 1, l. 10). My reading, however, is derived from the Parma manuscript. In Judah ha-Levi's poem entitled "Meditations in Mid-Ocean" (XVIII, 2, l. 6 from end) my translation reads: *The waters and the sky are like brilliant and bright ornaments on the night.* The word "ornaments" does not occur in any of the printed editions, and, instead, they all read two words which signify "until the sea," which are entirely unsuitable for the context. My rendering is the result of a slight emendation involving merely the joining of the two words into one and a change in the vocalization. In the notes to the Hebrew volume the reader will find ample justification for the rather numerous variants. In order not to render this volume cumbersome, those notes have been omitted here.

Wherever possible, I have attempted to retain the flavor of the original, and the translation is literal as far as the English idiom would allow. In a number of cases, notably Judah ha-Levi's letter (XVIII, 3), a free rendering would, I fear, be meaningless. To my mind, only a literal translation is capable of doing justice to a literature of this kind. The King James' Version of the Bible owes part of its charm to its literalness. Those translators were fortunate in writing during the formative period of the English language, before the various idioms became fixed. But even in more recent times the superiority of Burton's *Arabian Nights* must be partly ascribed to its quaint literalness. This method has been wisely followed by Chenery and Steingass in translating Al-Hariri's *Assemblies*, though they lacked Burton's artistic skill. The average reader is probably not aware that the literal translator imposes upon himself a much severer task than the writer who merely gives a free rendering. The former, if he is a conscientious worker, attempts to reproduce everything, while the latter often allows himself to omit or vary difficult expression which task the translator's skill. The unchary reader finds the free translation smooth and easy, and is liable to condemn the literal one, which is necessarily rugged.

Some of the extracts had been previously translated in a satisfactory manner, notably Ben Sira, Kalir, Ibn Gebirol's *Royal Crown*, Benjamin of Tudela, Judah ha-Levi's *Khazarite* (by H. Hirschfeld), and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (by M. Friedländer). But in all cases I found it necessary to subject the passages to a thorough revision, partly because my aim was different from that of my predecessors. This revision was especially necessary in the two last-named extracts. Hirschfeld and Friedländer translated the Arabic originals, while I wished to illustrate the style of the Hebrew

translators. This fact will also explain another difficulty which may puzzle a reader of this volume: Extracts XXIII and XXVI are listed under Judah b. Saul Ibn Tibbon and Samuel b. Judah Ibn Tibbon, and not under Judah ha-Levi and Moses b. Maimon, respectively. In an anthology of philosophy these sections would naturally be credited to their original authors, but the Hebrew translations must be given under the Ibn Tibbons. And obviously the arrangement of this volume ought to follow that of the Hebrew texts.

Doctor Cyrus Adler has kindly read the manuscript and proof-sheets of this volume, and I am indebted to him for a number of valuable suggestions, especially in connection with the style. My thanks are also due to Professor Israel Davidson and Doctor Isaac Husik for going over the proof-sheets of the poetic and philosophic sections, respectively.

B. Halper.

Dropsie College, *February, 1920*.

I. THE WISDOM OF BEN SIRA

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(This apocryphal book, usually called “Ecclesiasticus,” was composed about 180 B. C. E. by Jesus, the son of Simon, the son of Eleazar, the son of Sira. The author was probably a scribe, and was well-versed in the wisdom literature of his day. The Hebrew original of this work was still known in the tenth century, but was subsequently lost sight of. In 1896 a fragment from the Cairo Genizah was given to Prof. S. Schechter, who immediately identified it as the Hebrew original of this book. Other discoveries were afterwards made, and now about two-thirds of the entire work have been recovered.)

1. Wisdom Is a Source of Happiness[1]

Happy is the man that meditateth in wisdom,
And that hath respect unto understanding;
That setteth his heart upon her ways,
And considereth her paths;
Going out after her in search of her,
And spying all her entries;
That prieth through her window,
And hearkeneth at her doors;
That encampeth about her house,
And fixeth his pegs into her wall,
And he pitcheth his tent by her side,
And dwelleth in a goodly dwelling;
And he buildeth his nest on her bough,
And lodgeth among her branches;

And he sheltereth in her shade from the heat,
And dwelleth in her habitations.

For he that feareth the Lord doeth this,
And he that taketh hold of the Law attaineth unto her.
And she will meet him as a mother,
And receive him as a wife of youth.
And she will feed him with the bread of understanding,
And give him water of knowledge to drink.
And he is stayed upon her, and shall not be moved;
And in her he trusteth, and shall not be confounded.
And she will exalt him above his neighbor,
And in the midst of the congregation will she open
his mouth.
He shall find joy and gladness,
And she will make him inherit an everlasting name.
Men of vanity shall not attain unto her,
And men of arrogance shall not see her.
Far from scorners is she,
And liars remember her not.

2. The Usefulness of the Physician[2]

Honor a physician according to thy need of him—
Him also hath God apportioned.
From God a physician getteth wisdom,

And from a king he receiveth gifts.
The skill of a physician lifteth up his head,
And he may stand before nobles.
God bringeth out medicines from the earth,
And let a prudent man not despise them.
Was not water made sweet by wood,
To make every man know His power?
And He gave men understanding,
That they might glory in His mighty works.
By means of them doth a physician assuage pain,
And likewise the apothecary maketh a confection:
That His work may not cease,
Nor health from the sons of men.

My son, in sickness be not negligent;
Pray unto God, for He healeth.
Flee from iniquity, and from respect of persons,
And from all transgressions cleanse thy heart.
Offer a sweet savor as a memorial,
And prepare a fat offering according to thy substance,
And also to the physician give a place,
And he shall not be removed, for there is need of him likewise.
For there is a time when in his power is good success,
For he, too, maketh supplication to God,
That He should prosper to him the treatment,
And the healing, for the sake of his living.

He that sinneth against his Maker
Behaveth himself proudly before a physician.

3. In Praise of the High Priest Simeon the Son of Johanan[3]

Great among his brethren, and glory of his people,
Was Simeon the son of Johanan, the priest;
In whose generation the house was repaired,
And in whose days the temple was fortified;
In whose generation a cistern was digged,
A pit like the sea in its abundance;
In whose days a wall was built—
Turrets for protection in the temple of the King:
Who took thought for his people against the spoiler,
And fortified the city against the besieger.
How glorious was he when he looked forth from the Tent,
And when he went out from the sanctuary!
As the morning-star from amid thick clouds,
And as the full moon in the days of the solemn feast;
As the sun dawning upon the temple of the King,
And as a rainbow seen in the cloud.
As a bud in the branches in the days of the solemn feast,
And as the lily by the watercourses;
As the flower of Lebanon in the days of

summer,
And as the fire of incense upon the meal-offering:
As a gold vessel....[4]
That is set with precious stones;
As a green olive full of berries,
And as a wild olive-tree with branches full of sap.
When he put on robes of honor,
And clothed himself with robes of glory;
When he ascended the altar of majesty,
And made glorious the court of the sanctuary;
When he received the portions from the hand of his brethren,
While standing by the altar-fires:
Round him the garland of his sons,
Like cedar-plants in Lebanon.
And they compassed him about like willows of the brook—
All the sons of Aaron in their glory;
With the fire-offerings of the Lord in their hand,
Before all the congregation of Israel;
Until he had finished serving the altar,
And arranging the fires of the Most High.
Then sounded the sons of Aaron, the priests,
With trumpets of beaten work;
And they sounded, and made their mighty voice heard,
To bring to remembrance before the Most High.
All flesh hastened together,
And fell down on their faces to the ground;

Worshipping before the Most High,
Before the Holy One of Israel.
And the choir uttered its voice,
And over the multitude they made sweet melody.
And all the people of the land chanted,
In prayer before the Merciful;
Until he had finished serving the altar,
And had brought his customary offerings unto it.
Then he came down, and lifted up his hands
Over all the congregation of Israel;
And the blessing of the Lord was on his lips,
And in the name of the Lord he gloried.
And they bowed down again a second time,
The people, all of them, before Him.

Now bless ye the Lord, the God of Israel,
Who doeth wondrously on earth;
Who bringeth up man from the womb,
And maketh him according to His will.
May He give you wisdom of heart,
And may He be with peace among you.
May He make His mercy stand fast with Simeon,
And may He confirm to him the covenant of Phinehas,
That shall not be cut off from him and from his seed,
As the days of heaven.

II. THE MISHNAH

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(A collection of Jewish jurisprudence, dealing with the various aspects of Jewish life, and classified in the following six orders: *Zera`im* (“Seeds”), containing eleven tractates; *Mo`ed* (“Festivals”), containing twelve tractates; *Nashim* (“Women”), containing seven tractates; *Nezikin* (“Damages”), containing ten tractates; *Kodashim* (“Holy Things”), containing eleven tractates; *Teharot* (“Purifications”), containing twelve tractates. The Mishnah is written in terse and simple Hebrew, well adapted to the various subjects, and has preserved a number of words, which, as may be seen from the cognate languages, must have been in common use in biblical times, though they do not occur in the Bible. It also contains some loan-words from Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. It was redacted by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi about 200 C. E.)

1. The Bringing of the First-Fruits to Jerusalem[5]

In what manner were the first-fruits brought up? All the inhabitants of the towns of a district assembled in the principal city of the district; they spent the night in the market-place of the city, and entered no house. Early in the morning the appointed officer would proclaim: ‘Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the house of the Lord our God.’

They that lived in the vicinity would bring fresh figs and grapes; they that came from afar would bring dry figs and

raisins. The bull went before them, its horns overlaid with gold, and a garland of olive-leaves on its head. The flute played before them, until they drew near Jerusalem. When they drew near Jerusalem, they sent messengers before them, and adorned their first-fruits. The governors, deputies, and treasurers came out to meet them; according to the rank of those that entered did they come out. All the craftsmen of Jerusalem stood up before them, and greeted them, saying: 'Our brethren, ye men of such and such a place, ye are welcome.'

The flute played before them, until they reached the temple mount. When they reached the temple mount, each man (even king Agrippa) put his basket upon his shoulders. Then they went in as far as the temple court. When they reached the temple court, the Levites recited the song: 'I will extol Thee, O Lord, for Thou hast raised me up, and hast not suffered mine enemies to rejoice over me.'[6]

The pigeons which were fastened to the baskets were offered as sacrifices, while those which they held in their hands were given to the priests.

While the basket was still on his shoulder, he recited from *I profess this day unto the Lord thy God*,[7] till he finished the entire portion. Rabbi Judah says: Only as far as *A wandering Aramean was my father*.[8] When he reached the words *A wandering Aramean was my father*, he took the basket down from his shoulder, held it by its rim (while the priest put his hand under it, and waved it), and recited from *A wandering Aramean was my father*, until he finished the entire portion. He then placed his basket at the side of the altar, prostrated himself, and went out.

Formerly any one who was able to read would read by himself, while he who could not read would repeat after the reader. But as many people refrained from bringing the first-

fruits on account of this, it was instituted that both, those that are able to read and those that are not able, should repeat after the reader.

The wealthy would bring their first-fruits in baskets of silver or of gold, while the poor would bring them in wicker baskets made of peeled willow-twigs. The baskets and the first-fruits were given to the priests.

2. The Libation of Water and the Water-Drawing Feast[9]

In what manner was the libation of water made? A golden pitcher of the capacity of three logs was filled with water from the brook of Shiloah. When they reached the Water Gate, they sounded a plain note, a tremolo, and a plain note. The priest went up the ascent of the altar, and turned to his left, where stood two golden basins. Rabbi Judah says: They were of gypsum, but their appearance was darkish because of the wine. In each was a hole like a narrow nostril, one of the basins having a big opening and the other a small one, so that both should become empty at the same time. The basin toward the west was for water, that toward the east for wine. But if the water is poured into the basin for wine, or the wine into the basin for water, it is lawful. Rabbi Judah says: The libation was performed with one log during all the eight days. Unto him who poured out the water they said: ‘Raise thy hands;’ because it once happened that a priest poured the water over his feet, and all the people pelted him to death with their citrons.

As they did on week-days, so they did on the Sabbath, except that on the eve of the Sabbath they would fill a golden pitcher, which had not been consecrated, with water

from the brook of Shiloah, and place it in the chamber. If the water was spilt, or uncovered, they would fill the pitcher with water from the laver; for wine or water, which was uncovered, is not fit to be offered on the altar.

He who did not see the rejoicing of the water-drawing never saw real rejoicing in his life.

At the expiration of the first day of Tabernacles they[10] descended to the Women's Court, where they made great preparations. Golden candlesticks were there, upon whose tops were four golden basins. Four ladders were placed near each candlestick, and four young priests held pitchers of oil containing one hundred and twenty logs, which they poured into basins.

Of the worn-out breeches and girdles of the priest wicks were made, wherewith to kindle the lamps. There was not a court in Jerusalem which was not illuminated by the lights kindled at the water-drawing.

Pious and distinguished men danced before them with torches in their hands, and chanted before them hymns and praises. The Levites with harps, lutes, cymbals, and trumpets, and musical instruments without number stood upon the fifteen steps, that led from the Men's Court to the Women's Court, corresponding to the fifteen Songs of Ascent of the Book of Psalms. Upon these steps the Levites had stood with musical instruments, and chanted hymns. Two priests with trumpets in their hands stood at the Upper Gate, which led down from the Men's Court to the Women's Court. When the cock crowed, they sounded a plain note, a tremolo, and a plain note. When they reached the tenth step, they again sounded a plain note, a tremolo, and a plain note. When they reached the Court, they once more sounded a plain note, a tremolo, and a plain note. They continued to blow the horn, until they reached the gate that

led out to the east. As soon as they reached the gate that led out to the east, they turned their faces from east to west, and said: ‘Our fathers who were in this place turned their backs toward the temple and their faces toward the east, and prostrated themselves eastward to the sun; but as for us, our eyes are turned to God.’ Rabbi Judah says: They repeated it,[11] and said: ‘We are God’s and our eyes are turned to God.’

III. ABOT DE-RABBI NATHAN

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(A sort of Tosefta (addition) to *Pirke Abot* (Saying of the Fathers). It contains homiletic expositions, based upon the mishnic text of that tractate, as well as a number of independent maxims and narratives. It is divided into forty chapters (in some editions there are forty-one), and is of tannaitic origin. Two recensions are extant.)

Rabban Johanan the Son of Zaccai's Pupils Offer Consolations to Their Master on the Death of His Son[12]

When the son of Rabban Johanan the son of Zaccai died, his pupils came to console him. Rabbi Eliezer entered, sat down before him, and said unto him: 'O master, is it thy will that I should say something to thee?' He replied: 'Speak.' Rabbi Eliezer then said unto him: 'Adam had a son who died, and yet he accepted consolation for him. Whence do we know that he accepted consolation for him? because it is written: "And Adam knew his wife again."[13] Accept thou consolation likewise.' Whereupon Rabban Johanan said unto him: 'Is it not enough that I am grieved, must thou also remind me of Adam's grief?' Rabbi Joshua then entered, and said unto him: 'Is it thy will that I should say something to thee?' He replied: 'Speak.' Rabbi Joshua then said unto him: 'Job had sons and daughters all of whom died in one day, and yet he accepted consolation for them. Accept thou consolation likewise. Whence do we know that Job accepted