

Joseph M. Baumgarten

Because the Oral Law was committed to writing with only the greatest reluctance, the literary form of the Talmud suffers from difficulty of style, terseness of expression, and an almost complete lack of system in arrangement. For these reasons, this classic source of rabbinic Judaism has long been a closed book for the uninitiated. In the current review, Dr. Joseph M. Baumgarten, professor of Rabbinic Literature at the Baltimore Hebrew College, examines whether and to what extent translations of the Talmud provide the reader with a key to the understanding of the intricacies of Talmudic literature. Professor Baumgarten contributed "The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Threat to Halakhah?" to the Spring, 1959 issue of TRADITION.

THE TALMUD IN ANGLO-SAXON GARB

According to a recent announcement, the Soncino Press of London is publishing a new edition of its English translation of the Babylonian Talmud.* This edition which presents side by side with the translation the original text in Hebrew-Aramaic, will afford a new opportunity to appraise the value of one of the most significant modern undertakings in the popularization of rabbinic literature. To

what extent has the Soncino translation succeeded in communicating the intricate Talmudic idiom to the English reader? How does this translation compare with previous efforts at rendering the Talmud into other tongues?

Historically, translations of rabbinic sources have lagged far behind translations of Scripture. While the earliest portions of the Septuagint, the Alexandrian ver-

* *Hebrew-English Edition of the Talmud, Berakhot*. Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices by Maurice Simon, under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1960).

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

sion of the Bible in Greek, date from the third century B.C.E., even antedating the final formation of the biblical canon, the Talmud has remained, up to modern times, completely inaccessible to those not familiar with its language. This circumstance may be attributed to causes both within and surrounding the life of the Jewish community.

As far as the non-Jewish readers were concerned, access to the Talmud was for centuries virtually precluded by official hostility. According to a medieval tradition, Joseph ibn Abitur, a Jewish scholar of the 10th century, had translated the entire Talmud into Arabic for the Calif Al-Hakim, but no trace of this translation has ever been found. The attitude of the medieval church was typified by Honorius IV, who in 1286 wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury about that *liber damnabilis*, admonishing him gravely and desiring him vehemently to see that it not be read by anybody, since "all other evils flow from it." It was only toward the end of the 17th century that an awakening humanistic interest in Hebraic sources led to the translation of portions of the Mishnah into Latin. The first translation of a number of complete tractates were not made before the middle of the 18th century by Blaisio Ugolini, an Italian Jewish convert.

Nor can one find much enthusiasm for translations of the Talmud within the Jewish community up to the latter half of the 19th century. As long as familiarity with

Hebrew and Aramaic was widespread among the Jewish masses the basic need for translations was not felt. Indeed, one detects in late rabbinic sources a distinctly negative estimate of the value of translations, even those of Scripture. The Greek Septuagint, which had once been hailed as the product of inspiration and whose completion Alexandrian Jews marked with an annual celebration, was held in a later talmudic source to be "as bad for Israel as the day on which the Golden Calf was made, because the Torah could not be adequately translated" (*Soferim* I). The Greek version which Aquila prepared under the guidance of R. Akiba was held in better repute, probably because of its extremely literal character.

As far as the Oral Law is concerned, there was the foreboding that it, too, might someday be translated and thus cease to be the peculiar heritage of Israel. R. Judah b. Shalom (fourth century) speaks of the desire of Moses to reduce the Oral Law to writing. The Holy One, however, foreseeing that the nations of the world would translate the Scriptures into Greek and put forth the claim that they are Israel, forbids Moses to reduce "His mystery" to writing. This homily is ingeniously connected by R. Judah with Hosea 8.12: "If I write for him so many things of my Law, they (will be) accounted as a stranger's" (*Midrash Tanchuma, Vayera* 5).

However, the same historical pressures which ultimately led to the writing down of the Oral Law

The Talmud in Anglo-Saxon Garb

later made themselves felt in the area of translation. Maimonides explains R. Judah's editing of the Mishnah as follows:

Because he saw the students diminishing and new troubles ever arising . . . and Jews wandering to far away places, he composed a work which would be available for study and not be forgotten. (Introduction to Mishnah Commentary)

Similarly in the 19th century, although Zecharias Frankel had declared the Talmud to be untranslatable, the combined corrosive effects of emancipation and enlightenment on the level of Jewish learning in western Europe made such an undertaking inevitable. Even in eastern Europe, which boasted the most prominent centers of rabbinic learning, the saintly Rabbi Israel Salanter urged the preparation of a simple Hebrew version of the Talmud, a project which, except for individual tractates recently published in Israel, was never brought to fruition.

At the same time a renewed interest in the text of the Talmud emerged in non-Jewish quarters. In 1878 John Barclay, an Englishman, published a crude translation of sixteen tractates. However, at the end of the eighth chapter of *Shabbat* there appeared the following characteristic note: "The remaining two thirds of this treatise are not translated as they are devoid of interest, and in parts unfit for publication." Lazarus Goldschmidt, who in 1895 began his competent German translation of the entire Babylonian Talmud, refers in his memoirs to the wave

of propaganda hostile to the Talmud which engulfed Germany at the end of the last century, culminating in the curious demand made by some anti-Semitic members of the Reichstag to have a translation prepared under government auspices.

In New York, Michael Rodkinson began at the same time to publish with much fanfare a *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* translated into English. The edition was new indeed, but, alas, hardly a translation! Such liberties did Rodkinson take in curtailing and "formulating" the text that the results were justly described by Professor G. F. Moore of Harvard as "in every respect impossible."

In recent years the most ambitious undertakings in translating *rabbinnica* have been made in England. While the Yale edition of the Code of Maimonides is the only major American effort which comes to mind in this area, Anglo-Jewish publishers have produced complete translations of the Midrash, the Babylonian Talmud, the Midrash Rabbah, and the Zohar.

The largest of these enterprises, the Soncino Talmud is the product of cooperative literary effort. Begun in 1935 under the aegis of the late Chief Rabbi Hertz, the project stretched over more than a decade and a half (interrupted by World War II) and culminated with the index volume published with a foreword from the present Chief Rabbi Brodie in 1952. The editor who planned the scope and character of the work and strove

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

to stamp a degree of uniformity upon the separate contributions of about twenty-four translators is Dr. Isidore Epstein, the erudite principal of Jews College in London. Although differing radically in approach from L. Goldschmidt, who shunned any co-workers in his one-man German translation of the Talmud, Epstein nevertheless "revised and supplemented, at his own discretion" the work of the contributors, an immense task which, as stated in the foreword, required "checking and controlling every line of the work."

The format includes brief introductions before each tractate, the translation amplified by notes accompanying the text, glossaries, and indexes of subjects and scriptural references. In addition, some tractates have appended notes on technical subjects. One of the most valuable features is the general index to the entire translation, which provides a topical key to the Talmud, previously unavailable in any language.

The value of a monumental work like the Soncino Talmud which has been in use for the past twenty-five years hardly needs further attestation. During this period it has proved useful as a reference work on the shelves of most Jewish libraries and has even found its way into the hands of a goodly number of readers able to follow the text of the Talmud in the original. Not long ago this writer chanced upon a student who, in accordance with traditional usage, was chanting melodiously while reviewing a talmudic selection. "He

who studies without a tune," declares an ancient rabbinic homily, "of him Scripture says, 'And I have given them statutes which are not good'" (Megillah 32a). Upon closer examination I determined that this student was chanting not the original text, but the English translation — a remarkable example of cultural transfer.

Fortunately, the aforementioned student, could reasonably be expected to ultimately master the Gemara in its original idiom. What needs to be assessed is the usefulness of the Soncino edition for those who rely completely upon it. Is it possible to follow the terse, almost stenographic give-and-take of halakhic debate in translation? How much of the vast sea of the Talmud can one safely navigate in English? The writer has attempted to answer these questions empirically by assigning students to some difficult selections without recourse to the Aramaic text. The results have generally been disappointing. The Soncino commentary, while much more elaborate than Goldschmidt's minimal apparatus, is much too brief to give the reader an adequate insight into the subtleties of rabbinic discourse. This becomes evident when one compares it, for example, with the elaborate notes provided in Herzog's English edition of the Mishnah *Berakhot*.

The pitfalls which await even the scholarly reader who ventures to consult passages in the Talmud without the aid of the commentaries may be illustrated by a recent volume on hellenistic influ-

The Talmud in Anglo-Saxon Garb

ences in Judaism.* The author, referring to *Rosh Hashanah* 24b, where it is related that Rav and Samuel used to attend a Babylonian synagogue which had in it a human statue, writes:

They are excused, apparently, on the ground that they went in not at a time of service, for "where a whole body of persons is concerned it is different."

The quotation is based on the Soncino translation. However, the sense of the passage is precisely to the contrary. Rav and Samuel entered this synagogue only during the time of services when the presence of the congregants would allay any suspicions of idolatry. Incidentally, this explanation throws valuable light on the abundance of representational art in other synagogues of this period.

The philological, historical, and scientific notes scattered throughout the text bespeak a generally receptive attitude to the contributions of the modern *Wissenschaft des Judentum* to talmudic studies. Dr. Epstein's expositions of the legal-philosophical concepts found in the six orders of the Talmud are noteworthy for their lucidity. However, there is hardly any use made of the abundance of illustrative material which can be derived from comparative jurisprudence. It is true that rabbinic law has a formal structure all of its own and operates with independent hermeneutic principles. The efforts of modern scholars to demonstrate

within the Talmud the direct influences of Hellenistic, Roman, or Persian law have heretofore born little fruit. Nevertheless, the materials brought to light by these studies can be most illuminating from the comparative point of view. For example, what often perplexes the modern reader is the apparently artificial nature of talmudic discussions, their seeming lack of any "*Sitz im Leben*." Thus, we find in numerous places lengthy discourses on the legal status of one who is half free and half slave. In a notorious German translation of the *Tosefta Berakhot* these discussions were contemptuously dismissed as "idle hairsplitting." It so happens, however, that the very same problem is treated in Greek-Egyptian, Roman, and Mohammedan legal literature, as much apparently for theoretical purposes as for application in cases involving dissolutions of partnerships.

Another example, pointed out by A. Gulak, may be cited. It has been noted that in Greek-Egyptian marriage contracts the enumeration of the dowry is often followed by the phrase "to which nothing has been added." According to *Ketuvot* 6.3, one fifth is to be deducted from the appraised value of articles contained in the dowry. Both these sources reflect the apparently widespread practice of exaggerating the value of the dowry as a compliment to the bride.

In general, the modern reader, especially one who relies upon

* *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period*, by Erwin R. Goodenough (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1954) Vol. IV, p. 15.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

translations, needs to be cautioned about the use of quotations from the Talmud. Aside from the long and sad history of vilification (still continuing sporadically in our day) based on misrepresentation and fabricated excerpts, it is important to remember the rabbinic saying:

The words of Torah may be sparse in one place and ample in another. (Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah, III)

The Talmud is an organic entity which can be properly interpreted only by one who has a comprehensive understanding of its principles and methodology. Such mastery can never be achieved by the

use of translations.

That a work of the magnitude of the Soncino Talmud should contain an appreciable number of errors is to be expected. A detailed enumeration of those we have found would take us beyond the framework of this article. Future editions will no doubt eliminate a good many of these. Such continuing improvement will not only enhance the usefulness of this monumental undertaking, but will serve to retain for the publishers the adage once applied to their Italian forerunners of the 15th century: Out of Zion shall go forth the Law and the word of the Lord from Soncino.