

Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

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14. SEDER ELIYAHU RABBAH: RABBINIC TRADITION FOR A NON-RABBINIC SOCIETY

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Seder Eliyahu Rabbah (SER) is a unique text that was composed at the end of the classical period of rabbinic Judaism, written somewhere around 800 CE by a single author, most probably in Babylonia (though a Palestinian origin cannot be totally excluded). What characterizes this work is not only its unique Hebrew style, but also its use of rabbinic tradition and its general approach to Jewish life, above all, learning. The author is clearly familiar with a wide range of rabbinic texts and traditions. He uses them freely, frequently without indicating them by the use of standard quotation formulas, as “we have learned,” “it has been taught,” and so on. Thus, for example, the author uses the phrase “He is rich and content with his portion” (m. Avot 4.1) twice in the first chapter, but he transfers the saying to God. In the first instance, he uses it for praise of God (here, of course, a quotation formula would be impossible). The second time, he is presenting God’s qualities to a Parsee questioner (חבר). In other cases, he quotes a text from the Mishnah, often not literally. What is more astonishing, he introduces texts with the formula מכאן אמרו or the like, but the citations cannot be found anywhere in rabbinic literature. SER leaves the impression that the author aims at different levels of understanding. In general, the whole text may be understood and appreciated by anybody with only a good knowledge of Scripture; other readers or listeners will recognize

Mishnaic quotations and will not mind that these quotations are not literal, since they know these texts only from oral recitation; others—again, with broad knowledge of rabbinic literature—will appreciate the frequent allusions to a wide range of texts and traditions. The first group of listeners are exactly those whom the author in his text addresses in direct conversation.

1.0. Conversations Between the First-Person Narrator and a Second Person

In SER there are thirteen conversations between the first-person narrator and somebody else.¹ Only in two cases is the interlocutor a non-Jew. Thus, in SER 1 (Friedmann, 5–6) a Parsee priest, apparently a person with some influence who could free the narrator from a levy, asks him two questions: 1) Why did God create reptiles? 2) How can you say fire is not God? Is it not written in the Torah “fire eternal” (Lev. 6.6)? The narrator responds with Deut. 4.15: “You saw no manner of form on the day that God spoke unto you at Horeb,” then suggests to his interlocutor that he might cite the following reference: “The LORD thy God is a devouring fire” (Deut. 4.24). This verse is not to be taken literally, but is intended as a description of a mortal king who threatens his servants in case they do not behave well. In spite of the dangerous situation, the narrator addresses the Parsee as “my son” and takes all his time to explain to him the true meaning of biblical texts. It might astonish the reader that the Parsee quotes the Torah, although this is not quite impossible.² Both questions

1 SER is quoted according to the edition of Friedmann with its page numbers (e.g., Friedmann, 5): see Meir Friedmann, *Seder EliyahuRabbah and Seder Eliyahu Zuta* (Warsaw: Achiasaf, 1904); English translations normally follow William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, *Tanna dēbe Eliyyahu: The Lore of the School of Elijah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981). Where this translation is too free, it has been changed without notice.

2 See Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 42–43.

address some basic differences between Zoroastrians and Jews, but they are questions any Jew, especially Babylonian Jews in contact with Persians, might ask.³ The dialogue could attest to the narrator's friendly approach to non-Jewish neighbours on the basis of their common knowledge of the Bible, but it also represents an attempt to answer simple questions within the boundaries of Judaism.

In SER 7 (Friedmann, 35), the narrator, while walking along a road, is accosted by a man who asks him aggressively: "You say that seven prophets have risen to admonish the nations of the world that they must go down to Gehenna. After these seven prophets, the peoples of the world can say: 'You did not give us Torah, and they did not yet admonish us'. Why, then, should we be doomed to go down to Gehenna?" The narrator replies: "My son, our Sages taught in the Mishnah: if somebody comes to be converted, a hand is held out to him to draw him under the wings of the Presence. From then onwards, the proselytes of every generation admonish their own generation." The whole passage is taken over from Lev. Rab. 2.9 (a first-person account in the name of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel), including the reference to the Mishnah, but such a text does not exist in the Mishnah; it fits the general tendency of SER, which is very open-minded towards non-Jews.

All the other dialogues are dialogues with Jews, even the quaestor in SER 18 (Friedmann, 95), who invites the narrator to come to his place and teach there. Some of them, such as SER 10 (Friedmann, 51), are placed in the great academy in Jerusalem, where the narrator asks the rabbis permission to speak, proposing a biblical theme (the role of a woman as helper of man), which he illustrates with comparisons from everyday life and some biblical texts. There is nothing halakhic in this speech, not even a complicated derivation from the Torah.

In SER 16 (Friedmann, 80–83), the narrator is sitting in the great academy of Jerusalem when a disciple asks him, as a son

3 See, e.g., y. Ber. 9.2, 12c: "Elijah of blessed memory asked R. Nehorai: 'Why did God create insects and creeping things in his world?'"

asks his father: "My master, why were the first generations different from all other generations, having the most days and living the longest lives?" The answer is that this was "in order to see whether they would do deeds of kindness for each other," as is then demonstrated from the first ten generations (1 Chron. 1). It is a very general biblical question, not quite the topic of discussion expected in the great academy.

The master goes on to teach the disciple that "there ought to be joy in the world even because of the following three: the angel of death, the evil inclination, and the privy." Answering the question of the disciple, the master indicates the reasons for them: the fear of the angel of death keeps Israel away from sin. More astonishing is the reason why one should rejoice over the evil inclination: since Israel conquers the evil inclination, in the world to come the peoples of the world, as they go up to Jerusalem, "shall bring all your brethren out of all the nations to be an offering unto the Lord" (Isa. 66.20). God will free the righteous of the evil inclination, and "they will come to Scripture and Mishnah, to teach right conduct, and to do the will of their Father in Heaven." As to the necessity of sitting in the privy, the master explains that in the future "the Holy One will redeem Israel from [where it now sits as in a privy among the idols of] the nations and will bring Israel the days of the Messiah and the days of redemption." The privy is simply a symbol of oppression among the gentiles. In the end all three items will be no more, and this is already reason enough to rejoice.

The disciple then asks the master how many prophets prophesied to Israel. The answer is forty-eight, a number corresponding to that of the cities of refuge (Num. 35.7) and implying that "the prophets did not subtract from anything that is written in the Torah, nor did they add anything to what is written in the Torah." An example of this is Isa. 43.8: "Bring forth the people who are blind yet have eyes, those who are deaf yet have ears!"

The master explains: "People who are blind though they have eyes', these are men unlettered in Torah who are obedient to the precepts of

right conduct and to other precepts and stay away from transgression and every kind of indecency.” “Those who are deaf, yet have ears” are “the Sages and their disciples who give themselves utterly to Scripture, to Mishnah, to Midrash of halakhot and aggadot.” Of both groups it is said: “Open the eyes that are blind, etc.” (Isa. 42.7).

Two final questions concern Isaiah. First, the disciple asks what distinguished him “from all other prophets who prophesied all kinds of boons and comforts to Israel?” The narrator replies: “My son, because Isaiah joyfully took upon himself the [decrees of the] kingdom of Heaven.” To conclude this series of questions, he asks: “In what year did Isaiah the son of Amoz prophesy all God’s kindnesses and consolations for Israel?” The reply: “In the twenty-ninth year of Hezekiah, king of Judah.”

This is a quite astonishing study session in the great academy of Jerusalem! It is completely structured by the questions of the disciple, who demonstrates a certain knowledge of the Bible through reference to details raising his curiosity, such as the longevity of the first generations or the number of prophets. Other questions concern popular moral sayings, but none belong to the realm of halakhah or the more difficult problems of biblical interpretation. Men unlettered in the Torah, but observing the commandments, are the equals of the Sages and their disciples, who devote themselves completely to Scripture and to all aspects of halakhah and aggadah. Both elite groups, in fact, are blind and need to have their eyes opened. This chapter leaves the impression that even unlettered Jews who try to live according to the demands of the Torah may come to the Bet Midrash. Their questions will be treated as seriously as those of students completely dedicated to the Torah. The author tries to close the gap between the *virtuosi* of the study-house and ordinary Jews in order to attract these simple people to the House of Study without overburdening them. One might speak of an outreach campaign.

With all his forbearance towards unlettered Jews, the narrator is also concerned about people who have learning in Scripture, but not in Mishnah. SER 15 (Friedmann, 70) tells of a meeting between the first-person narrator and a man who wanted to ask

him something, but was afraid that the master might be angry with him. Encouraged by the master, the man points to the contrast between Ps. 136.25, “He who gives food to all [human] flesh,” and Ps. 147.9, where God “gives the beast his food.” Do not humans need to find food for themselves? The answer is that humans must work, but God blesses all the work of their hands (Deut. 14.29). This blessing, however, does not come to one who sits in idleness, as the verse ends with the words “which you must do” (ibid.). The master then turns to the equally important spiritual aspects of food: “When a man comes to understand Scripture and Mishnah and teaches [himself] out of the fear of Heaven and the practice of doing good, the words of Torah feed, nourish, and sustain him until he goes to his eternal home.” The knowledge of Mishnah is necessary for every Jew to the extent that it teaches piety and good works as the basis for a religious life, but not as an intellectual exercise; Talmud and halakhah are not mentioned at all.

The next questions in the same chapter (Friedmann, 71) first address the relative importance of the Torah and Israel, which are answered with the precedence of Israel over the Torah (based on Jer. 2.3 and 31.2). The next topic is Israel’s two exiles: “Why was the period of Israel’s exile [after the destruction of the First Temple] specified, but not specified after the destruction of the Second Temple?” The answer is that “though those who lived during the days of the First Temple were certainly idolaters, right conduct characterized them [...] charity and loving-kindness.” Some of the children of Israel during the First Temple “possessed no more than Scripture, some no more than Mishnah, some were tradesmen.” Thus, God left them, but he promised to return to them (after seventy years? There is a lacuna in the text).

If this last passage really refers to the time of the First Temple, it is astonishing that knowledge of the Mishnah was already considered a criterion for God remaining with his people. After the Second Temple’s destruction, no time limit for the banishment is specified. The only remedy is for Israel to entreat God “with supplications and prayer and to find a doorway into words of Torah among all the doorways that God opened for us through

His servants the prophets.” Here again the author insists on the study of Torah as a path to redemption. He praises the questioner for his intelligent questions: “I swear by the [Temple] service that all the questions you have put to me, no man ever put to me before. But for you I would not have put my mind to them.” The chapter ends (Friedmann, 72) with a blessing of God “who chose the Sages and their disciples to teach us the Mishnah” and with the admonition of m. Avot 4.14 to go as a voluntary exile to a place where Torah is taught rather than relying on one’s own understanding.

The discussion of the first-person narrator with the questioner is again characterized by a rather simplistic approach to the biblical text. The narrator patiently listens to these basic questions and confesses that he had never thought of them. He insists on the study of Mishnah beyond the mere knowledge of Scripture, but what really counts is the desire to learn at a level appropriate to one’s station in life, so long as one also leads a life of right conduct and loving-kindness.

Only the next chapter, SER 16 (Friedmann, 72–75), introduces questions of halakhah, proposed by a friend of the former questioner, a person who “knew Scripture but not Mishnah.” He asks about the origin of the precept of washing the hands, which was not prescribed at Mount Sinai. The narrator answers:

My son, we have many practices of grave import which Scripture did not think it necessary to prescribe, but instead put upon Israel the obligation of prescribing them, saying: “Let Israel increase their merit by setting out for themselves the precepts governing such practices.”

The precept of washing the hands may be derived from the Torah from Lev. 11.44: “Sanctify yourselves and be holy.”

The next question is about ritual slaughtering: “My master, there is no precept that prescribes the ritual slaughter of an animal by cutting its throat.” The narrator answers that “the very precept of ritual slaughter is derived from the Torah. And the Sages went on to proffer precise requirements for obedience to the precept.” The questioner goes on to provoke the master:

“According to Torah, the eating of human blood is not prohibited,” since Lev. 7.26 does not mention human blood. The master rejects this claim, referring to other biblical texts which imply the prohibition against eating human blood. In a further step, the questioner accepts that eating the fat of an animal from which an offering is made to the Lord is prohibited, but assumes that the eating of fat from other animals is permitted, since Lev. 7.25 does not explicitly prohibit it. The master answers that Lev. 3.17 generally prohibits the eating of blood and fat; both blood and fat are on the same level. A Mishnaic statement is quoted as confirmation: “If he who keeps away from eating blood, which his soul despises, receives a reward, then how much more will he attain merit if he keeps away from robbery and fornication, which his soul desires and after which he lusts” (m. Mak. 3.15).

The reference to robbery in the Mishnah leads the questioner to his next point: is robbing a non-Jew permitted, since it was not forbidden at Mount Sinai? The narrator repeats his earlier answer that “there are many and even grave matters which Scripture did not think it necessary to state explicitly. Instead, responsibility was given to Israel to discern them and thereby increase their merit.” The passage in Exod. 20.12–14 mentions only the neighbour from whom one may not steal and against whom one may not bear false witness. This does not imply that cheating a non-Jew is permitted. “Cheating a non-Jew is cheating.”

The last two questions concern sexual behaviour: “Which is the graver offence—sexual intercourse with a daughter or with a daughter’s daughter?” The questioner is told to draw the proper inference from explicit statements in the Torah; the same answer is applied to the final question: “Which is the graver offence—sexual intercourse of a woman with a man who has a discharge from his member or sexual intercourse of a man with a woman who is menstruating?”

The whole series of seven questions concerns only elementary aspects of halakhah or basic moral behaviour. It is conceivable that the obligation of washing one’s hands or the concrete form of ritual slaughtering were not accepted by every Jew, with or without reference to a clear biblical statement. The prohibition

of the fat of non-sacrificial animals is a comparable case, but the question of whether the consumption of human blood is permitted is hardly serious. The same holds true for the cheating of a non-Jew. A double standard in one's behaviour towards Jews and non-Jews remains conceivable, though not on a theoretical level. The last two questions regarding sexual intercourse cannot be regarded as serious; rather, they make fun of the rabbi. The characterization of the questioner as a man who knew the Bible, but not the Mishnah might hint at somebody with 'proto-Karaite' tendencies, but his questions are rather a caricature of someone who wanted to return to the biblical foundations of Judaism. At least some of the questions may be regarded as intentional provocations of the rabbinic thought-system. They offer the rabbi an opportunity to demonstrate on the basis of straightforward or even popular questions that knowledge of the Bible alone is not sufficient if one wants to lead a truly Jewish life. The whole chapter seems to be addressed at a Jewish public with only basic biblical knowledge, treating the issue of extra-biblical traditions seriously, but also, to some extent, playfully, in order to maintain his public's attention.

2.0. Minimal Judaism in Seder Eliyahu

The texts of Seder Eliyahu discussed so far were dialogues between the first-person narrator (a rabbinic Jew) and non-Jews, or, more commonly, Jews accustomed to a traditional Jewish way of life with some biblical knowledge, but without any formal training in the Oral Law, even though some of these dialogues take place in a rabbinic academy. Only the last interlocutor openly challenges or even ridicules Mishnaic traditions. The author regards it as his duty to argue with these people and to convince them of the correctness of rabbinic teachings, without ever going into technical details and, above all, without ever losing his patience.

The sympathy of the author for uneducated people who nevertheless make every effort to lead a Jewish life becomes even more evident in a few other texts. SER 14 (Friedmann, 66) introduces "a story of a man (מעשה באדם אחד) who neither

read Scripture nor recited Mishnah.” Then the text immediately switches to a first-person account:

Once he and I were standing in the synagogue. When the reader reached the Sanctification of the Divine Name, the man raised his voice, responding loudly to the reader, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.” People asked him: “What impelled you to raise your voice?” He replied: “Is it not regrettable enough that I never read Scripture and never recited Mishnah? So when I get the opportunity, should I not raise my voice so that my troubled spirit be calmed?”

Instead of repeating silently the Eighteen Benedictions recited aloud by the prayer leader, the humble man responds loudly to the only passage he apparently knows.

The text mentions the astonished reaction of the people in the synagogue, but the narrator seems to approve of the action of the man. As the story continues, the man is soon rewarded for his attitude. He moves from Babylonia to the Land of Israel, then receives a high position in the imperial government and a large tract of land where he builds a city, which, at the end of his life, he leaves to his children and grandchildren. This is an astonishing, happy end. The man is rewarded with a high position in the gentile administration, wealth, and a large family, all purely material and this-worldly rewards. One would expect that the man used his good fortune to spend at least part of his time learning Torah, but there is no word about it. The narrator seems to be content that the man is rewarded for his simple wish that he might have learned Torah. The high respect for Torah learning is sufficient; not everybody can become a Torah scholar.

We encounter this same attitude already in the first chapter of the book (SER 1; Friedmann, 4) in a discussion of the Sabbath, based on Ps. 139.16. The author reads לו ‘for him’ (as in the Masoretic *qere*), instead of the consonantal לֹ ‘not’, thus turning the verse into a reference to the Sabbath: “Among the days that were to be fashioned, one of those days was to be wholly His.” The meaning of the verse thus read is then explained:

In what sense is it to be wholly His? A man labours all six days, rests on the seventh, and so finds himself at peace with his children and

the other members of his household. Likewise, a man labours all six days in the presence of people who are hostile to him, but then, as he rests on the Sabbath, he forgets all the vexation he had previously had. Such is the nature of man: the day of rest brings about his forgetting of evil, and a day of trouble brings about his forgetting of good. Thus said the Holy One to Israel: "My children, have I not written for you in my Torah, 'This book of Torah shall not depart out of thy mouth' (Josh. 1.8)? Although you must labour all six days of the week, the Sabbath is to be given over completely to Torah." From there they said: "A man should rise early on the Sabbath to recite [Mishnah] and then go to the synagogue or to the academy where he is to read in the Torah and recite a portion in the Prophets. Afterwards, he is to go home and eat and drink, thus fulfilling the command: 'Eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart' (Eccl. 9.7)." For the contentment of the Holy One comes only from those who fulfil the Torah [עושי תורה].

The text of Josh. 1.8, normally understood as a command to permanently study the Torah without interruption, is here reduced to an absolute minimum. A person who has to work for the living of his family all six days of the week, perhaps even under non-Jews ("people who are hostile to him"), cannot afford to sit in the study-house every day. For him it is enough to celebrate the Sabbath in the spirit of the Torah. In the morning he should recite (ישנה). The object of this recitation would normally be the Mishnah. Later on, when he is in the synagogue, the same verb is used of the Prophets, which he is to read after the Torah. Thus, even at home a biblical text might be the object of his 'recitation'. Returning home after the synagogue service, the man is to celebrate the Sabbath with his family, eating and drinking with them. Doing so, he fulfils the Torah. The rabbinic demand of constant and serious study of the Oral Torah is here reduced to its bare minimum. Everybody who must work for his living during the week should learn at least some Torah on the Sabbath before going to the synagogue. Having actively participated in the synagogue service, he should peacefully celebrate the Sabbath and thus fulfil the Torah. As long as somebody does what is possible for him in his personal circumstances, values

the learning of the Torah, and dedicates at least some time to it every Sabbath—but otherwise makes the Sabbath a pleasant day for his whole family—he also fulfils the command of Josh. 1.8: The Torah will not depart from his mouth. The rabbinic ideal of learning is not abandoned, but it is adapted according to the circumstances of every Jew, making each part of the community of Torah students.

We find in the SER several texts that insist on the full curriculum of rabbinic study or, at least, more thorough dedication to study. It remains characteristic of this text how much it values even the smallest effort of ordinary Jews. Thus, we read in SER 2 (Friedmann, 13), where God reassures Israel:

My children, I swear by my throne of glory that even a boy who is busying himself for my sake with Torah in his teacher's house, his reward lies ready before me if only he is kept from transgression. Even for a man who knows no more than how to behave properly and Scripture, his reward lies ready before me if only he is kept from transgression. Even for a man who has neither Scripture nor Mishnah but comes early, mornings and evenings, to the synagogue or to the academy where having in mind my great name he reads the Shema and having in mind my great name recites the Tefillah, his reward lies ready before me if only he is kept from transgression.

Here again a moral life is more important than the study of rabbinic tradition. Everybody should make the effort to learn, but in the end even the knowledge of the principal prayers can be sufficient, as long as somebody tries his best. A last example may suffice (SER 6, Friedmann, 31):

One should do good deeds first and only then ask for Torah from Him whose presence is everywhere. One should first emulate the deeds of those whose lives are righteous and spotless and only then ask for grasp of the reasoning in Torah from Him whose presence is everywhere. One should first hold fast to the way of humility and only then ask for understanding [of Torah] from Him whose presence is everywhere. Thus it is said: "Ask ye of the LORD rain in the time of the latter rain" (Zech. 10.1).

One could cite many other texts to illustrate the understanding of Jewish life propagated by SER. As Lennart Lehmhaus has shown for Seder Eliyahu Zuta, SER also proposes a program of “minimal Judaism.”⁴ The author lets himself be drawn into conversation with all kinds of people, non-Jews as well as uneducated Jews. He is critical of people learned in rabbinic tradition, but without proper adherence to strict rules of sexual conduct or even simple *derekh eretz*. He sympathizes with poor Jews who work hard among non-Jews to earn a living for their families. Only on the Sabbath are they free to devote themselves to learning, but only a few verses of Torah and a section of the Prophets in place of the Mishnah. Other Jews know even less—only the Qedushah, which they recite in a loud voice, thereby astonishing other participants in the service.

The strict elitism of the earliest rabbinic movement is no longer an ideal, and neither is the Babylonian attempt to encourage the pursuit of the highest intellectual achievements in the study of the Torah. The author of SER favours minimally educated Jews who know only Scripture. He prefers a small Jewish community in a gentile city who earn the respect of their non-Jewish neighbours through their righteousness (SER 18; Friedmann, 93) to a fully Jewish city of higher learning without moral standards (SER 18; Friedmann, 100–1).

In its scale of values, SER reaches out to the non-rabbinic Jewish world, partly criticizes the rabbis, and even establishes a friendly dialogue with non-Jews. Praising everybody who practices *derekh eretz*, even non-Jews, the author appeals to all people and represents a certain universalism: “All the inhabitants of the world reside under a single star” (SER 2; Friedmann, 9). In

4 See Lennart Lehmhaus, “Were not understanding and knowledge given to you from Heaven?” Minimal Judaism and the Unlearned “Other” in *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 230–58. Lehmhaus uses the term “minimal Judaism” to describe Seder Eliyahu Zuta, but it fits equally well with Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, which Lehmhaus (230) calls a “cognate tradition.” This is a minimalist statement; the common authorship of both parts is at least highly probable.

this way, the author tries to transmit Jewish values to the many not yet integrated into rabbinic society and shows a way of life outside the world of the academy.

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