

**POST-BIBLICAL  
HEBREW LITERATURE:  
AN ANTHOLOGY**

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Post-Biblical Hebrew literature: an anthology by B. Halper

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# POST-BIBLICAL HEBREW LITERATURE

AN ANTHOLOGY

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ENGLISH TRANSLATION

BY

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## PREFACE

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