

**THE SOURCES OF THE  
MIDRASH ECHAH  
RABBAH: A  
CRITICAL INVESTIGATION**

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The Sources of the Midrash Echah Rabbah: A Critical Investigation by Joseph Abrahams

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**JOSEPH ABRAHAMS**

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SOURCES OF THE MIDRASH

**ECHAH RABBAH.**

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A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION.

BY

JOSEPH ABRAHAMS, B. A., PH. D.

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BERLIN.

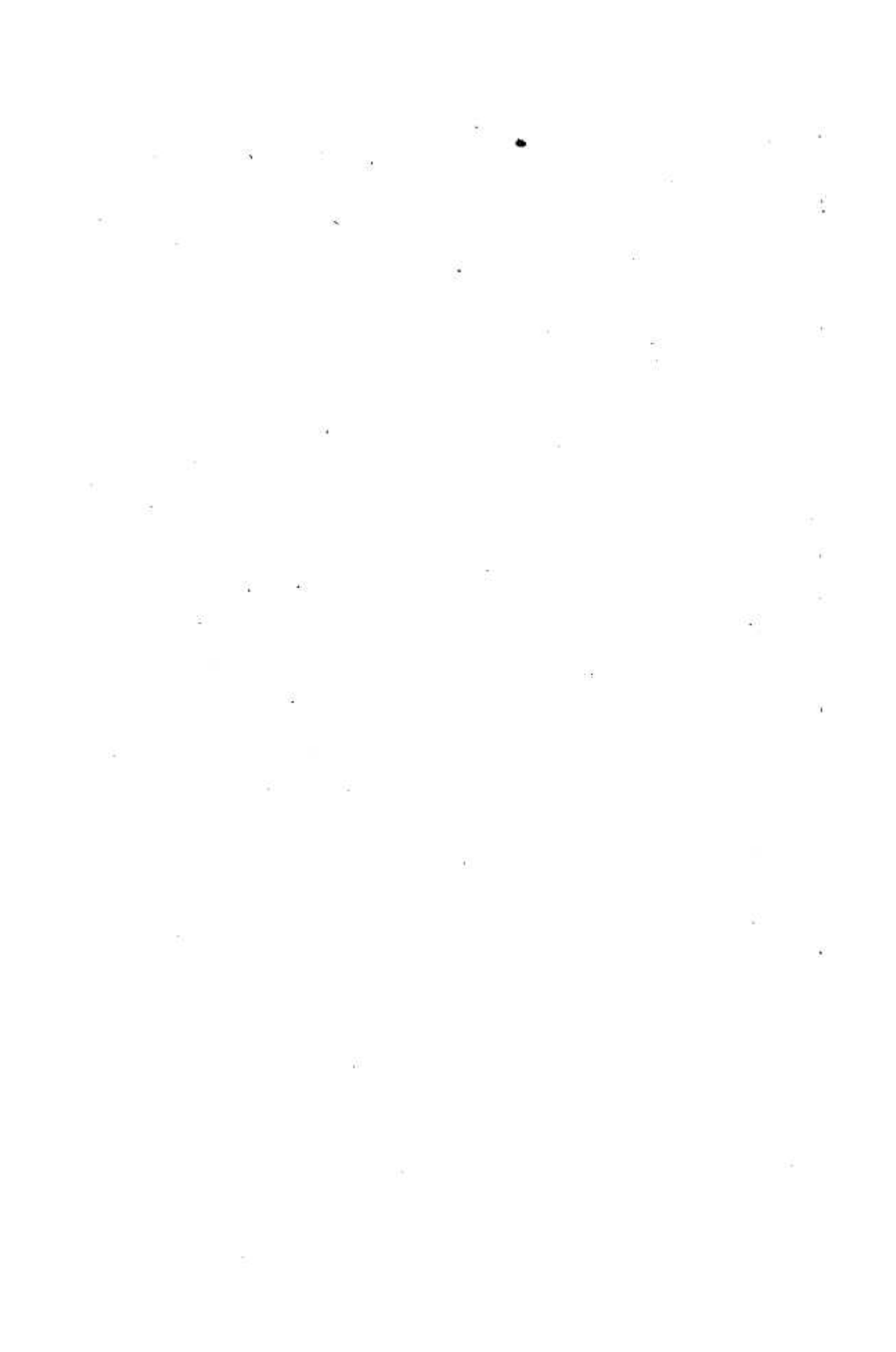
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### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

"THERE was once a dense forest into which no one ventured to enter, for it was impossible to secure a safe journey back. One man, however, who had long been brooding over the difficulty resolved at last to make an attempt to overcome it. Accordingly, he began by gradually cutting away the trees, until he succeeded in forming a road, by means of which he could penetrate into the heart of the forest, without fear of going astray. The great obstacle was now removed, for it lay in the power of every comer to enter and return along the path thus cleared by the original traveller."<sup>1</sup>

Even such a forest is presented to us by the multitude of Midrashim and Hagadoth; and I have availed myself of the path indicated by the profound scholar Zunz, who first succeeded in arriving at clear statements and definite conclusions with respect to the origin and arrangement of this branch of our Wise Men's labours. The present investigation is based on the following passages of "Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden":<sup>2</sup>

"The so-called Midrash Rabbah is by no means the work of one author. The expression Midrash Rabbah was unknown to the older writers, who invariably cite the different books, each by its own special name; it came first into use when the Hagadoth on the Pentateuch and on the Five Megilloth were arranged together and joined to one body". "The three Hagadoth, Bereshith Rabbah, Echa Rabbah, and Vayikra Rabbah, are the oldest of all." "Bereshith Rabbah was probably composed in the sixth, and Vayikra Rabbah about the

<sup>1</sup> Midrash Bereshith Rabbah, ch. XII.

<sup>2</sup> Pp. 179—181, and end of ch. X.



middle of the seventh century. The next place<sup>1</sup> with respect to priority must be assigned to the Hagadah on the Lamentations. This Hagadah is usually called Midrash Echah Rabbathi; and in the work of Rabbi Nathan, by whom it is first mentioned, it bears the name of Megillath Echah. The introduction to this Midrash forms a prefatory Hagadah consisting of thirty-three sections (not numbered), all of which — except the last — begin with the words רַבִּי . . . פָּתַח. They contain discourses which are connected with the contents of the Lamentations though based on extraneous texts, and which tend to awaken mournful reflections on the downfall of our national independence. As a rule, each discourse ends with the first words of that book.<sup>2</sup> The introduction is followed by the Hagadah to the book itself arranged and divided into sections according to the verses of the text. It is interspersed with tales and legends describing the unhappy lot of the Jews, with instances of the talents and the genius of the Israelites (including ten narratives in which natives of Jerusalem and of Athens are introduced), with accounts of the persecutions by the Romans, and with a description of the manner in which the Jews were ridiculed in the Roman comedies. The work is full of extracts from the Talmud Yerushalmi<sup>3</sup> and from the Bereshith Rabbah; and since the incident of the Mother of the Maccabees is related as having taken place in the time of the emperors, it seems that the author of Echah Rabbah did not know the Books of the Maccabees. One passage appears to hint at the Arabian rule.<sup>4</sup> The Hagadah on the first chapter is as large as that on the remaining four chapters together, although the latter contain many repetitions; and in the fifth chapter the Midrash is reduced to a minimum. This leads to the conclusion that the last four chapters are all later additions; and the completion of the whole work

<sup>1</sup> After the Bereshith Rabbah.

<sup>2</sup> איכה ישבה בדד or איכה.

<sup>3</sup> I wish to be particularly noticed that no evidence is adduced by Zunz in support of this assertion.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. I, sec. 42. מקדון קשה . . . . . יון קשה ואדום כחונה וישמעאל כחונה. "The Grecian rule was severe, but Edom's sway was mild . . . . Macedonia's, severe, but Arabia's, mild."

cannot be fixed at a date prior to the second half of the seventh century, although the authorities quoted *by name*<sup>1</sup> are not later than the Talmud Yerushalmi. Echah Rabbah was compiled in the same country as Bereshith Rabbah,<sup>2</sup> and it is worthy of remark, that a complete Latin phrase<sup>3</sup> occurs therein. In our text we find many interpolations, explanatory notes and corrupt passages. After Rabbi Nathan, Rashi makes the first distinct use of this Midrash".

In the eleventh chapter of the same work, Zunz shows that, besides the two Midrashim known by the name of Pesikta<sup>4</sup> — Pesikta Rabbathi and Pesikta Zutarta — there must have existed a third Pesikta, different from the other two both as regards its form and its age. It was not a Midrash on the Torah,<sup>5</sup> but on twelve Haphtaroth,<sup>6</sup> and on the portions of the Law read on the Festivals, Shabbath Hanucah, and the four distinguished Sabbaths viz., Shekalim, Zachor, Parah, and Hachodesh; it contained twenty nine Piskoth, and was composed about 700 c. e. Zunz thus discovered the lost Pesikta<sup>7</sup> solely by the aid of his careful researches, and by the power of his penetrating intellect; his results have since been verified in a most remarkable manner. Thirty-six years after these conclusions had been published<sup>8</sup> Salomon Buber edited the "Pesikta derab Kahana",<sup>9</sup> with a learned introduction and

<sup>1</sup> The italics are Zunz's.

<sup>2</sup> i. e. Palestine.

<sup>3</sup> "Vive domine imperator". וְיִבְרַח מֵאֵרֵי אֱמִלְטוֹר Ch. I, sec. 31.

<sup>4</sup> I shall have occasion to explain the signification of the words Pesikta, Piska, and Piskoth, when I treat of the relation between Midrash Echah and the Pesikta derab Kahana.

<sup>5</sup> As Azulai asserts. Comp. Gottesdienstl. Vorträge, p. 194, note a.

<sup>6</sup> דַּרְשׁוֹ: שׁוּבָה: דְּבַר יִדְמִירוֹ: שְׁמֵעִי: אִיכָה: נִחְמוּ: וְחִמְצוּ צִיּוֹן: עֲנֵה סִפְרָה: אֲנֹכִי אֲנֹכִי הוּא מְחַמְצֵם: רַגִּי עֲקְרָה: קוֹמֵי אֲדָרָי: שׁוּשׁ אֲשִׁירָה. Gottesdienstl. Vortr., pp. 203, 204, 220, 221, 222, 223, 223, 224, 224, 225, 225, 225, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Rapoport first called attention to the Pesikta quoted by the Aruch, but it was reserved for Zunz to describe its characteristic features, and thus to effect its restoration. Comp. Gottesd. Vortr., p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> In 1868 (Lyck).

<sup>9</sup> This name was not unknown to Zunz, who says that it probably refers to the Hagadoth on the twelve Haphtaroth. Comp. Gottesdienstl. Vortr., p. 193.

instructive notes, under the auspices of the society "Mekitsee Nirdamim". This work is printed from a MS. which was found in Zafed and copied in Egypt;<sup>1</sup> and it corresponds almost completely with the third Pesikta described by Zunz.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction the editor observes that many of the Midrashim, and among them Echah Rabbah,<sup>3</sup> frequently quoted this Pesikta anonymously.

It remains to be noticed that according to Frankel ("Mebo Hayerushalmi", p. 53), Echah Rabbah quotes freely from Talmud Yerushalmi, with explanations and additions of its own.<sup>4</sup> According to Rapoport ("Erech Millin", p. 253), the accounts of the Midrash and Talmud Babli respecting the Wise Men of Athens, are both drawn from the same source, and the narrative in our Midrash is much older than that in the Talmud.

To sum up: the opinion now generally in vogue is, *that the Midrash Echah Rabbah is the work of one author; that it was composed in Palestine; and that its principal sources are the Talmud Yerushalmi, the Midrash Bereshith Rabbah, and the Pesikta derab Kahana. The number of introductory Piskoth is thirty-three in Zunz's opinion, and in the ordinary printed texts thirty-four.*

The present investigation is an attempt to prove that *all these propositions can only be received with qualification; because —*

I. The Midrash Echah Rabbah, in its present form, is the work of at least *two* authors or compilers, the latter of whom was thoroughly acquainted with the Talmud Babli.

<sup>1</sup> The editor had three other MSS. before him — Oxford, Parma, Fez; he faithfully records the variations in the readings of the four MSS. in his *דקדוק וחקנים*. In his opinion the Pesikta was composed towards the end of the fourth century.

<sup>2</sup> The differences between the real Pesikta and the one reproduced by Zunz, are enumerated by Buber in the Hebrew periodical "Hachachar", (edited by P. Smolensky, Vienna,) 1871, pp. 49—66.

<sup>3</sup> No proof is adduced for this statement; the reader is referred to the notes, where the variations in the readings of Echah Rabbah and the the Pesikta are carefully given.

<sup>4</sup> Three passages are brought in support of this view, all of which will be fully discussed in due order.