CHAPTER THREE

SAR TORAH:
THE PRINCE OF TORAH

INTRODUCTION

The macroform conventionally known as the Sar Torah (§§ 281–306) gives instructions on how to invoke the angelic “Prince of Torah” (the meaning of the title) and compel him to grant the practitioner effortless knowledge of “Torah,” that is of the five books of Moses and the rabbinic teachings about them, thereby also granting the social and material benefits associated with a rabbinic education. The instructions for the praxis are preceded by stories that purport to tell how God chose, in the face of angelic opposition, to reveal it to the Judean exiles when they returned from Babylon to rebuild the Temple. The text is written in Hebrew.

Contents

The text opens with a paragraph attributed to R. Ishmael, citing R. Akiva in the name of R. Eliezer, asserting that the true power of Torah was not revealed until the time of the Second Temple (§ 281). There follows a dialogue between God and Israel in which Israel reproaches God for imposing troubles and toils on them which interfere with their study of Torah. God accepts their reproach, commends their desire to learn Torah, and offers them a “seal” and a “crown”, the proper use of which will eliminate the uneducated from Israel and will grant the users great benefits that are the envy of the angels (§§ 282–291a). An angelic chief then protests the unfairness of this arrangement, but God rebukes the angels and reaffirms his determination to grant these powers to Israel (§§ 291b–294). Then R. Ishmael, citing the same authorities, relates a tradition about a vision of the (macrocosmic?) Temple granted to the fathers at the site of the destroyed Temple, during which vision the praxis of the Prince of Torah was revealed (§§ 297–298). The praxis itself is given in §§ 299–303, again in the name of the same rabbis (although this time the second one is called R. Eliezer the Great). A few manuscripts include an episode, again narrated by R. Ishmael in the name of the same authorities, in which the praxis is tested by these three
rabbis in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia (§§304–305). Two prayers conclude the work (§ 306).¹

Manuscripts

The Sar Torah macroform is included as part of the Hekhalot Rabbati in fifteen manuscripts. In addition, it appears after the Hekhalot Rabbati in V, but separated from it by a colophon and thus understood to be a separate work. It appears as a separate work not associated with the Hekhalot Rabbati in one manuscript, London Harley 5510. Parts of the work also appear in F (§§297–306, before and §§281–306 after the Hekhalot Rabbati); Parma 1287/1 (§§281–298); and London Add. 15299 (§299–306).

This translation is of an interim eclectic critical text reconstructed from the text of the seven complete manuscripts of the Synopse and which does not take into account any of the other manuscripts. The degree to which their evidence would improve the reconstructed text must remain an open question pending a full collation of them.²

Title

The manuscripts of the Hekhalot Rabbati which include the Sar Torah reckon it as part of the Hekhalot Rabbati in their chapter and verse enumerations and give it no special title of its own. Manuscript Parma Cod. 1287/1 (de Rossi 2239) includes §281–298 and uses the phrase sod torah (“secret of the Torah”) at the beginning and end of the unit, also describing it as chapter 27 from pirqe hekhalot. London British Library Add. 15299 contains §§299–306 and indicates that it was copied from sefer hekhalot. Thus in both cases these passages were extracted from a longer text, presumably the Hekhalot Rabbati, since both pirqe hekhalot and sefer hekhalot are titles used in of that work in complete manuscripts of it and chapter 27 begins the Sar Torah in some chapter reckonings of the larger work. London Harley 5510 divides the work into five chapters but gives it no title.

The title sar torah marks the beginning of the unit §§281–306 in V and this unit concludes with the title sar sel torah. Both phrases mean “The Prince
