CHAPTER SEVEN

SABBATH AS DAY OF REST AND READING THE TORAH: THE MISHNAH

Introduction

There are various theories about, and explanations of, the origin of the Mishnah. They are usually coloured by legend and tradition and attribute only the highest of motives to those untraceable authors who compiled the volume.

One explanation of the origin of the Mishnah claims that in the last centuries before the turn of the era, midrashim were prepared to explain the unclear sections of the teachings in the Torah.¹ In time, the quantity of such midrashim was such that a method of organising the material was required, and so, during the first two centuries CE, the code of oral law, the Mishnah, was prepared. And in order to make clear that the oral law was not monolithic, the disputes and disagreements that were included in the formation of the final opinion were gathered together in the Mishnah. Tradition states that the bulk of the organisation of the laws and their sub-divisions was carried out by R. Akiba,² and that the compilation was completed near the beginning of the third century CE.

Neusner sees the organising principle of the compilers as being neither abstract nor theological, but grounded in the needs of everyday life. These needs, he believes, have been organised in six sections: agriculture (including blessings and prayers), festivals,

² R. Akiba died in 132 CE.
women, damages, sacred things and purifications. And, although he notes that the Mishnah portrays an orderly world revolving harmoniously round the Temple, he concedes that the bulk of it represents the views of rabbis active between 135 CE and 200 CE, long after the Temple had been destroyed. He explains this apparent contradiction by claiming that those later rabbis wished to incorporate what they regarded as really important in their writings and to build a Jewish future based on the most excellent parts of their past.

Sanders takes issue with Neusner’s conclusions about the content and purpose of the Mishnah and believes that a more measured approach to evaluating the Mishnah would begin with a consideration of the genre of the work. He regards as unwarranted the claim of Neusner that the Mishnah couched its philosophical writings in the guise of ‘legal discussion about everyday activities’. The Mishnah—according to Sanders—is no more than it appears to be, ‘a collection of legal debates and opinions’, and is likened, by Sanders, to a highway code.

An important part of Jewish worship is religious devotion in the home, but of that little is said in the Mishnah. As Sanders comments, ‘common piety is difficult to discover in the Mishnah’; only rules about the sabbath and the synagogue are recorded there.

Such details as are given about the sabbath are found in the tractate of that name (Shabbat), and details of Jewish worship in the synagogues are found within the tractates on festivals (Mo‘ed) and on sacred things (Hodashim), but there is no section that deals directly and specifically with sabbath worship either in the synagogue or in the home.

The Sabbath in the Mishnah

There are many texts about the sabbath in the Mishnah, but most of the references are to a person’s culpability or blamelessness with

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3 Neusner, Formative Judaism, p. 112.
4 Neusner, Formative Judaism, p. 25.
5 Neusner, Formative Judaism, pp. 113-14.
7 Sanders, Jewish Law, pp. 311-12.
8 Sanders, Jewish Law, pp. 314-16.
9 Sanders, Jewish Law, p. 331.