

Introduction

1.1 *Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer*

Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer (hereafter PRE) has long been regarded as a curious work, an odd appendix to classical Midrash, not easy to parallel in form and content from the earlier Midrashim. It charts events from the creation of the world to the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness, with substantial and frequent digressions into other themes. It seems to show signs of being incomplete; it contains for example only eight of a projected ten descents of God; but how much further it may originally have continued into the biblical story no one has been able to say. Scholarly consensus assigns its composition to eighth or ninth century Palestine, but pseudepigraphically it is attributed to the late-first-to-early-second century Rabbi, Eliezer ben Hyrkanos.

PRE was considered an authentic rabbinic work in medieval times. It is quoted as a significant authority both on halakhah and aggadah by, among others, Rashi, Yehudah Halevi, and Maimonides (see chapter 2.3 below), but while PRE extensively names Palestinian Rabbis and was transmitted in a rabbinic milieu, it is remarkable for incorporating an unusually broad range of traditions, not all of them rabbinic. The question of the sources of PRE has been hotly debated by scholars, and several studies have attempted to prove or disprove claims that it has drawn not only on classic rabbinic Midrash, but also on early Christian texts (including the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*), the Piyutim, the Heikhalot literature, Islamic tradition, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Second Temple Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

Though much valuable work has been done on PRE, particularly in recent years, any analysis of it from whatever angle (historical, literary, theological, and even textual and linguistic), has to be predicated on a clear understanding of its fundamental character as a literary work—its structure and literary integrity, its coherence or incoherence, its sources and its relationship to cognate texts, its genre, and its overall argument or message, if it has one. These topics have not been tackled as thoroughly as they could have been (save, perhaps, for the question of its relationship to Second Temple pseudepigrapha, which has figured largely in recent debate), and because they have not, much research on PRE rests on rather shaky foundations. The fundamental problem is methodology. Even where literary problems have been considered at length, problems of methodology have not been adequately addressed. Discussions of

genre have muddled up literary form and supposed authorial intention, and there has been a general failure to distinguish between synchronic and diachronic perspectives. It is precisely in the area of the literary character of PRE that I seek to make a contribution in the present work. I will attempt to apply a more rigorous, descriptive text-linguistic approach, particularly with regard to questions of structure, coherence, and intertextuality. Having profiled PRE, I will on the basis of this analysis offer some suggestions as to its genre and historical context.

In chapter one, after a survey and critique of the more important scholarship on PRE, I set out the methodology of the present thesis. In chapter two, I survey the evidence that has been accumulated so far on PRE's text, its recension history, its reception, its language, its content, its dating, and its provenance. Though numerous fresh details are presented here, this work fundamentally presents a critical digest of the best current scholarship on these topics. Chapters three and four are the heart of the thesis. Chapter three applies the methodological approach argued in chapter one to a text-linguistic description of PRE, with particular attention to its perspective, its text-type (narrative, commentary or thematic discourse), and its coherence. Chapter four deals with intertextuality, that is to say it explores the nature of PRE's relationship to other texts, with which it manifests either verbal, thematic, or narrative overlaps. The intertexts investigated, indicative rather than exhaustive, are: the Bible; rabbinic literature, both antecedent and contemporary (e.g. 'Avot de Rabbi Natan, Bere'shit Rabbah, and Seder Eliyyahu Zuta); Targum Pseudo-Jonathan; the Pseudepigrapha; Piyyut; and certain Christian and Islamic traditions. Finally, the detailed literary profiling performed in chapters three and four forms the basis for the concluding discussion of the genre and historical context of PRE (chapter five), particularly on its place on the map of rabbinic literature of late antiquity and the early middle ages. A number of appendices round out the work. These are integral to the argument, and provide much of the hard evidence on which various assertions in the main text are based.

1.2 Existing Work on PRE¹

PRE was a much copied, printed, and widely quoted text, but, as with so many rabbinic works, the historical-critical analysis of it really only begins with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars of the nineteenth century. The "scientific"

¹ The present literature review is comprehensive, but not exhaustive. For other works see the Bibliography below.