COMPARING NEUSNER’S AND GUGGENHEIMER’S TRANSLATIONS OF THE JERUSALEM TALMUD

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The ongoing publication of the parallel editions of the Jerusalem Talmud (Peter Schäfer, et al., eds., Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi [Tübingen, 1991-]) together with various projects translating the Jerusalem Talmud marks a welcome revival in the study of this smaller of the two Talmuds. The modern study of the Yerushalmi was greatly enhanced by Jacob Neusner’s publication of the first English translation, The Talmud of the Land of Israel (Chicago, 1982-1994).

As with his Mishnah and Tosefta translations, Neusner (and the several of his students and other scholars who participated in this project) chose to break up the Talmudic text into small units so as to represent redactional units and also to highlight the repetitions and parallels that are essential for understanding the text. He also marked insertions and comments within square brackets, so that it was easy to see which words were actually translated from the text and which had been inserted to make the sense plain. It is inevitable and essential for a translator to add words and sometimes whole phrases in order to produce a translation of halakhic texts, because words that appear to be superfluous or obvious to Rabbinic scholars are missing from the original. Neusner’s translation also employed italics to indicate citations from Scripture or from the Mishnah, and even allusions to the Mishnah are indicated by references. His references employ the subdivisions found in his Mishnah and Tosefta translations, so that the precise phrase can be indicated.

Guggenheimer has now brought out several volumes of a new translation of the Yerushalmi that promises to be a very valuable resource. Unlike Neusner’s, this includes the Hebrew text and some extensive footnotes that form the outline of a commentary. His Hebrew text follows the editio princeps, i.e., the Vienna edition that is virtually identical to the only reasonably complete manuscript. Guggenheimer is very keen to follow this edition without any emendation, though he says that he has checked other editions and occa-
sionally notes significant differences. He has vocalized the text following Sephardic traditions, except for the sections of the Mishnah in which he has followed H. Yallon. The English translation is particularly well done, because he has managed to produce a flowing, intelligible text that does not deviate significantly from the original, and the absence of square brackets and italics makes this work very pleasing to the eye.

Neusner humbly subtitled his work *A Preliminary Translation and Explanation* in the expectation that something better would be produced later at a slower pace; I therefore wondered if Guggenheimer’s work would now replace Neusner’s. I decided to compare some passages to discover the relative merits of each work. I chose the Tractates Ma’aserot (Tithes) and Shebiit (Sabbath Years) and looked for the first passage in each that involved an exegesis of Scripture, because the first-century world often neglected tractates because they are of great importance for understanding the first-century world. Both tithing and Sabbath Year regulations were at least partially followed by the populous of the land of Israel, including the vast majority of the so-called *amei ha-aretz*. There is considerable evidence that the restrictions of the Sabbath Year were widely practiced in the first century and that this caused serious privations for some of the poor.¹ Because of this, even the Tosefta admits that “the sages prescribed only such rules as they could enforce” (T. Sheb. 3:11, 13). We also know that the *amei ha-aretz* obeyed most of the laws of tithing Heave-Offerings (not even the most paranoid of rulings about doubtful tithing suggests that a Jewish farmer might have neglected to remove the major Heave-Offering), but they were probably not very scrupulous about other tithes. The rabbis were concerned that some Israelites might have neglected the minor Heave-Offering (a Pharisaic innovation), and they assumed that they had not removed First and Second Tithes (probably because Pharisees thought this should be done by the vendor, while most farmers thought it should be done by the buyer), though they never had any doubts about the major Heave-Offering.²
