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Katharina E. Keim, Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer: Structure Coherence, Intertextuality

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Katharina E. Keim

Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer: Structure Coherence, Intertextuality (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, vol. 96. Leiden: Brill, 2017), 249 pp. ISBN 978-9004333116. \$132.00.

Katharina Keim's book presents a superb analysis of Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE) and a detailed overview of textual issues in that work. Keim is to be commended for providing scholars with a methodologically sound guide to PRE. Her definitions and analyses are comprehensive and succinct. The book relies aptly on the profiles of ancient Jewish literature in *The Manchester-Durham Typology of Anonymous and Pseudepigraphic Jewish Literature in Antiquity*.¹ Nevertheless, Keim's sound methodology has been completely misunderstood by other scholars of midrash. In particular, the methodology applied by Keim has been confused with the German *Formgeschichte* that was applied to Psalms and other biblical texts. Unfortunately, such basic misunderstandings and the complete rejection of the Manchester project are often the case regarding this type of highly sophisticated analysis of rabbinic works.

Keim begins her study by addressing the oddity of PRE, which is different than earlier midrashic texts in regard to content and form. In her erudite analysis of the entire PRE, Keim works with a "readily available" text, namely, the printed text from Venice (1544) as reprinted in the publication of PRE by Dagmar Börner-Klein. This choice of text by Keim may evoke criticism in the scholarly community, but she provides a convincing rationale for using a printed edition by referring to the complex manuscript evidence of PRE. Although she utilizes Börner-Klein's PRE text, she is keenly aware of the existence of multiple manuscripts, which were described in different lists created by other scholars. Keim consolidated these divergent lists and added a few additional textual witnesses that she has identified. Her own resulting list was part of her dissertation and has not been included in her outstanding book. This reviewer wishes to emphasize that working with an "available" text is not unusual with regard to midrashic works. John Townsend, e.g., translated Solomon Buber's edition of the Midrash Tanḥuma.² Throughout her book Keim asks questions that are similar to interior monologues, but that greatly assist in organizing her analyses. For example, regarding the date of PRE she asks: "Can we be more precise?" (40).

Among the many topics addressed by Keim are the reception of PRE within Judaism and the "knowledge horizon" of PRE, which includes festivals, other texts, and "code names" (i.e., "Babylon" for Rome). This reviewer detected only

1 See <http://literarydatabase.humanities.manchester.ac.uk>.

2 Solomon Buber, *Midrash Tanḥuma*, trans. John Townsend (New York: Ktav, 2003).

a minor oversight in her book; synoptic editions of rabbinic texts were already produced in Frankfurt am Main³ before the monumental “synoptic editions” (23) of the Talmud Yerushalmi and Hekhalot literature by Peter Schäfer were published.⁴ The debate between enthusiasts of synoptic editions vs. diplomatic editions of rabbinic texts continues.

The following sections of the book exemplify Keim’s breadth of approaches to PRE. Within her discussion of the narrative in PRE, Keim describes the story of Jonah and the Big Fish as a *Bildungsroman* that supports a story that derives from Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, thus contextualizing this episode within rabbinic literature. She engages with the idea that the author of PRE was acquainted with Islamic sources, e.g., concerning Abraham’s visits to Ishmael. Here Keim explains the polemics concerning Ishmael’s differing roles in Islam. While discussing PRE’s intertextuality, she is carefully limiting her use of the term by applying it to narrative, thematic, or verbal overlap between PRE and other texts.

Generally, genre descriptions have proven to be inadequate to fully describe PRE; instead, Keim utilizes a modern, scientific empirical description. She suggests that new taxonomies of texts may be derived from the similarities in their textual profiles as denoted in the Manchester project. Keim’s systematic analysis provides text-linguistic descriptions of PRE that range from commentary to thematic discourse to coherence. In this reviewer’s opinion, textual coherence is the most critical factor in any determination of literary features. One cannot over-emphasize the importance of defining the coherence of PRE. Keim saliently reduces the term “coherence” to refer to textual unity, orderliness, and textual boundedness. She also turns to the “micro-level” of PRE when she investigates the construction of the text; her conclusion emphasizes that PRE contains small structural units that are standard elements in rabbinic literature.⁵

3 Arnold Goldberg, *Erlösung durch Leiden: Drei rabbinische Homilien über die Trauernden Zions und den leidenden Messias Efraim (Pesiqta Rabbati 34.36.37)*, Frankfurter Judaistische Studien 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft zur Förderung judaistischer Studien, 1978); Goldberg, *Ich komme und wohne in deiner Mitte: Eine rabbinische Homilie zu Sacharja 2,14 (Pesiqta Rabbati 35)*, Frankfurter Judaistische Studien 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft zur Förderung judaistischer Studien, 1978); Hartmut Hahn, *Wallfahrt und Auferstehung zur messianischen Zeit: Eine rabbinische Homilie zum Neumond-Shabbat (Pesiqta Rabbati 1)*, Frankfurter Judaistische Studien 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft zur Förderung judaistischer Studien 1979).

4 Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981); Peter Schäfer and H.-J. Becker, *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

5 Cf. Katherina Keim, “The Role of Small Forms in Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer,” in *It’s better to hear the rebuke of the wise than the song of fools” (Qoh 7:5): Proceedings of the Midrash Section, Society of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 6., ed. David Nelson and Rivka Ulmer (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2015), 153-78.

PRE engages with a limited repertory of themes that are found throughout rabbinic literature. The textual order in PRE is created by “shadowing” known texts, e.g., the Hebrew Bible and the *Amidah* prayer. Additionally, Keim discusses structuring by lists, e.g., the ten descents of God, the ten trials of Abraham, the eight things created, and the twelve signs of the Zodiac. Further structural components of PRE are proof-text units, speech reports, and question-and-answer units. Keim suggests that PRE is a collection of discourses (198). The content of PRE is primarily focuses upon theological and ethical issues. A few other late midrashic texts show some similar profiles, e.g., Seder Olam Rabba and Seder Olam Zuta, as well as Pesiqta Rabbati with its series of thematic discourses. She further suggests that, based upon taxonomy, the closest comparable text to PRE may be Philo’s *Allegories of the Sacred Laws*, which were attached to the biblical text. However, Keim states that this model by Philo was not known to the author of PRE. She concludes that PRE was perhaps a “scholarly text for a scholarly audience” (200). She remarks that, overall, PRE should be seen within the context of Arabic literature of its period such as Qalam. PRE indicates that there was a whole area of life, such as ethical questions, which was not covered by the *mitzvot*. Nevertheless, in PRE human actions can be judged to be good or bad, which brings it close to Musar literature in its attempt to outline the right behavior for its audience.

Keim’s book places PRE in the context of Jewish literature of antiquity (and the early Middle Ages). This publication results in the clarification of its structure, coherence, and literary type (or “genre”). Compared to most other books on PRE, Keim’s book is unique and much more successful in providing an excellent intellectual and textual map of PRE than piece-meal approaches focusing on single items in PRE. Keim’s book is a great reference tool that should be on the desk of every midrash scholar and on the shelves of every Judaica library.

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