The Growth of the Rabbinic Canon and its Interpretation

Michael Chernick

Hermeneutics may be described as the development and study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts. They are essentially the lenses through which interpreters view the material they interpret. In this seminal study, Michael Chernick demonstrates how hermeneutical methods confronted the difficulties that arose for the Rabbis when various literary and logical problems appeared in scriptural texts and later in rabbinic texts. Given the numerous complexities of these texts, the Rabbis were forced to develop and employ hermeneutical strategies to elucidate and interpret the Scriptures.

Chernick focuses on six midrashic hermeneutics: outright midrashic resolutions of contradictions in Scripture, distinguishing between what constitutes true scriptural proof and what is merely prooftexting; a midrashic hermeneutic that transfers the rules of one rubric to another; two hermeneutics that limit interpretive extensions of halakhot; and the claim that two redundant pentateuchal rubrics are needed to ward off incorrect analogies. Chernick not only analyzes and illustrates these hermeneutical methods in great detail. He highlights the significant changes that occurred in rabbinic legal hermeneutics from the tannaitic through post-amoraic strata of rabbinic literature — some 500 years at least — as well as the persistence and continuity of rabbinic hermeneutical interests as evidenced through such changes.

Of particular significance is Chernick’s connecting of these changes in hermeneutical practice to changing rabbinic views about the level of the revelatory status of non-Pentateuchal parts of the Hebrew Bible and of rabbinic legal discourse as they developed during the formative rabbinic period. Indeed, Chernick’s study draws its title from the Torah’s portrayal of the Sinaitic revelation, when God spoke to the assembled people with “a great voice that did not cease” (Kol gadol ve-lo yasaf — Deut 5:19). This view, Chernick believes, is at the core of rabbinic Judaism — the Judaism that claims to hear that “great voice” through the medium of interpretation, a notion imaginatively illustrated here in the painting “Harim” by artist Miriam Stern.

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