

Encyclopedia of Mishnah: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, vol. 1, pp. 54-59. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Deuteronomy in Sifre to Deuteronomy

The Sifre commentary to the book of Deuteronomy, written in Mishnaic Hebrew, represents the oldest extant running commentary to that biblical book. It is generally thought to draw its traditions from the teachings of the Palestinian Rabbinic sages from ca. 70-ca. 230 C.E., but to have been editorially composed in its present form probably a generation or two later (mid- to late third century), although dating is not firmly established. While the influence and interpretation of Deuteronomy figured prominently in the writings of Second Temple Jewish groups and individuals, most notably the Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus, there is no evidence of any of them having composed a sustained exegesis of Deuteronomy in commentary form.

Not all of Deuteronomy is covered by Sifre, with notable omissions in the horta-

tory and narrative sections preceding and following the legal core (Chaps. 12-26) of the biblical book. The following are the chapters and verses of Deuteronomy that receive successive commentary, with indication of the respective sections of Sifre in parentheses: 1:1-30 (1-25); 3:23-4:1 (26-30); 6:4-9 (31-36); 11:10-26:15 (37-303); 31:14 (304-305); 32:1-34:12 (306-357). Why commentaries to some non-legal sections of Deuteronomy were composed/preserved and others not has never been answered with certainty. However, it should be noted that although the legal core of Deuteronomy receives continuous coverage, and Sifre is commonly listed among the legal midrashic collections, slightly over half of its text is devoted to the non-legal, or aggadic, sections of Deuteronomy.

The name of the collection, *sifre* being

Aramaic for "writings" or "books," most likely derives from references in the Babylonian Talmud (but never in the Jerusalem Talmud) to a collection of halakhic teachings by this name (B. Ber. 47b; B. Meg. 28b; B. Hag. 3a; B. San. 86a [which attributes its anonymous teachings to Simeon b. Yohai]; B. Qid. 49b; B. Sheb. 41b), or to *she'ar sifre debe rab* ("the other books of the school"; B. Yom. 74a; B. B.B. 124b), from which derives *sifre debe rab* ("the books of the school"), a common designation for Sifre in much later times. However, from none of these references can it be determined that a running commentary to Deuteronomy (or Numbers), let alone one identical to the extant Sifre, is being referenced, even though from early medieval times Rabbinic commentators assumed such an identity (see Rashi on B. Yom. 74a and Rashbam on B. B.B. 124b). The first clear references to the Sifre as a midrashic commentary on Scripture derive from gaonic writings of the ninth and tenth centuries, where the term is understood to include the "tannaitic" commentaries to Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (e.g., *Yigget rab shieria ga'on* [ed. B. Levin; Haifa, 1921], pp. 39, 41-42). The attribution of editorial authorship of the Sifre to the *amora* Rab (ca. 220) by Maimonides (Introductions to *Mishneh Torah* and *Mishnah Commentary*), and by others in turn, probably reflects a misunderstanding of the talmudic phrase *dabe rab* (cf. Rashi to B. Hul. 66a). From the early manuscripts on, it is clear that Sifre to Deuteronomy and Sifre to Numbers were copied and then printed and commented upon together as one work, since they inherited a shared name, even though their

origins are quite distinct. The name Sifre raises the question of whether these midrashic collections were transmitted and studied in written and/or oral form.

In modern times, various theories have been proposed for the editorial origins of Sifre. Like the other "tannaitic" midrashic collections, Sifre's commentary is an anthology, organized according to the sequence of scriptural verses, in which individual teachings are either attributed to named *tannaim* or given anonymously, while no named authorship is claimed for the collection as a whole. The *tannaim* cited extend to the generation after Judah the Patriarch, e.g., Simai, Bannayah, and Judah's sons. It is common for the incorporated traditions in Sifre to find parallels, with varying degrees of identity of language and content, and varying degrees of agreement of attribution, in other tannaitic midrashic collections, the Mishnah and Tosefta, later midrashic collections, the *targumim*, the two Talmuds, etc.¹ However, it is exceedingly difficult to determine when such parallels denote direct knowledge of one collection by another, rather than some shared written or oral source. Traditions, especially legal ones, found anonymously in Sifre are attributed elsewhere to Agba and Simeon b. Yohai, but also to Judah the Patriarch, Hizkiyyah, and Yohanan b. Nappaha, to whom, therefore, modern scholars have attributed varying degrees of editorial responsibility for the collection, but on scant grounds: In any case, it is likely that Sifre to Deuteronomy, like the other tannaitic midrashim, was produced in a series of editorial stages,² with accretions continuing into the early middle ages, as evidenced by

¹ See Ezra Z. Melamed, *The Relation Between the Halakhic Midrashim and the Mishna and Tosefta* (Jerusalem, 1967) (Hebrew); *idem*, *Halakhic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Babylonian Talmud* (2nd rev. ed., Jerusalem, 1988) (Hebrew); *idem*, *Halakhic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Palestinian Talmud* (Jerusalem, 2000) (Hebrew); and Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to*

Deuteronomy (Hoboken, 1982), pp. 8-10, 43-47.
² See Meirahen Kahana, "Marginal Annotations of the School of Rabbi in the Halakhic Midrashim," in Sara Japhet, ed., *Studies in the Bible and Talmud: Papers Delivered at the Departmental Symposium in Honour of the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Institute of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 69-85.

variants among the extant manuscripts. Therefore, it would be a mistake to assume a single author/editor or provenance for the whole.

The historical circumstances and literary processes by which traditional raw materials were selected, combined, and shaped to form *Sifre* as we have it has been a subject of much scholarly attention. Of particular interest has been the question of whether aggregate units of accreted tradition and commentary display the sort of strong editorial molding for rhetorical purposes as is generally acknowledged for the later amoraic and Byzantine homiletical midrashic collections.³ Jacob Neusner⁴ has argued for a more systematic overall rhetorical and topical program for *Sifre* to Deuteronomy as a whole.

One very influential theory, originating with David Hoffmann,⁵ but having undergone refinement over the years, divides the "tannaitic" collections of midrash into two "schools": that of Aqiba (and his student Simeon b. Yohai) and that of Ishmael, based on the named sages to whom teachings are attributed, technical terminology, and exegetical methodology. Hoffmann posited that originally two midrashic collections existed for each of the biblical books of

³ See Louis Finkelstein, "The Sources of the Tannaitic Midrashim" in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 31 (1940-1941), pp. 211-243; Steven D. Fraade, "Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deut. 3:23): How Conscious the Composer?" in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983), pp. 245-301; *idem*, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany, 1991); Reuven Hammer, "Section 38 of Sifre Deuteronomy: An Example of the Use of Independent Sources to Create a Literary Unit," in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 50 (1979), pp. 165-178.

⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical, and Topical Program* (Atlanta, 1987); *idem*, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York, 1994), pp. 328-351.

Exodus through Deuteronomy, although in most cases only one had survived intact. According to this scheme, the legal core of *Sifre* to Deuteronomy (55-303) is assigned to the school of Aqiba, the units 31-54 to Ishmael, and, much less certainly, the non-legal aggadic beginning (1-30) and end (304-357) to either of the two schools, but with a significant admixture from the other (Hoffman himself changed his mind on the attribution of the non-legal sections). Hoffman's general theory of midrashic schools, and the division of the midrashic collections between them, was challenged by Chanoch Albeck,⁶ who argued that the differences between the collections, aside from terminology, was not so clear-cut and that their differences may be attributed to later editors rather than deriving directly from the tannaitic "schools." Other scholars⁷ have reworked Hoffmann's theory, especially with respect to the attribution of the non-legal sections of *Sifre* Deuteronomy. However, it is likely that the criteria for differentiating between the two midrashic "schools," rooted as they are in the halakhic sections, do not apply to the aggadic sections, which may represent a shared or mixed tradition that cannot be assigned simply to either.⁸ In any case, the legal tra-

⁵ *Zur Einleitung in die halachischen Midraschim* (Berlin, 1888).

⁶ Chanoch Albeck, *Untersuchungen über die halakischen Midraschim* (Berlin, 1927) and *idem*, *Mavo' l'ittimudim* (Tel Aviv, 1969), pp. 79-143, followed by Moshe D. Herr, "Midreshet Halakha," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 11, pp. 1521-1523, and *idem*, "Sifrei," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 14, pp. 1519-1521.

⁷ Most notably Jacob N. Epstein, *Mevo'ot leSifrut hattanna'im* (Jerusalem, 1957), pp. 501-515, 521-544, 625-633, 703-724, and Abraham Goldberg, "The School of Rabbi Aqiba and the School of Rabbi Ishmael in Sifre Deuteronomy Ptericos 1-54," in *Te'uda* 3 (1983), pp. 9-16 (Hebrew).

⁸ Menahem Kahana, *The Two Mekillot on the Aradik Portion: The Originality of the Version of*

ditions and exegeses of *Sifre* to Deuteronomy (unlike those of *Sifre* to Numbers) display a close relation to the legal traditions of the Mishnah of Judah the Patriarch, which is thought to reflect the halakhic views of Aqiba and his disciples.

Hoffmann⁹ sought to reconstruct the missing tannaitic commentary to Deuteronomy from the school of Ishmael, based mainly on the early medieval midrashic collection *Midrash Haggadol*, which he dubbed *Midrash Tanna'im*, which has since been confirmed to some extent by Genizah fragments of a Mekilta to Deuteronomy.¹⁰ Most recently, a third tannaitic midrashic collection to Deuteronomy has been reconstructed, *Sifre Zuta* to Deuteronomy, also thought to derive (at least in its legal sections) from the school of Aqiba.¹¹

⁹ *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishma'el with Respect to the Mekhilta of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai* (Jerusalem, 1999), pp. 19-24 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ David Hoffmann, *Midrasch Tannaim zum Deuteronomium*, 2 parts (Berlin, 1908-1909).

¹¹ Menahem Kahana, "New Fragments from the Mekhilta to Deuteronomy," in *Tarbiz* 54, 1985, pp. 485-551; *idem*, "Citations of the Deuteronomy Mekilta Ekev and Ha'azinu," in *Tarbiz* 56, 1986, pp. 9-59; and *idem*, "Pages of the Deuteronomy Mekhilta on Ha'azinu and Wezot Ha'berakha," in *Tarbiz* 57, 1986, pp. 165-201 (all in Hebrew).

¹² Menahem Kahana, "Citations from a New Tannaitic Midrash to Deuteronomy and Their Relation to Sifre Zuta," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C, Volume I: *Rabbinic and Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 23-30 (in Hebrew); *idem*, *Sifre Zuta on Deuteronomy: Citations from a New Tannaitic Midrash* (Jerusalem, 2002) (in Hebrew); and *idem*, "The Tannaitic Midrashim," in Stefan C. Reif, ed., *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 59-73.

¹³ Fascimile ed.: Jerusalem, 1970-1971.

¹⁴ Meir Friedmann (Sh-Shalom), ed., *Sifre debe rab. Ber aleste hadachische und hagadische Midrasch zu Numeri und Deuteronomium* (Vienna, 1864).

¹⁵ Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre ad Deuteronomium* (Berlin, 1939; reprint: New York, 1969).

The first printing of *Sifre* is from Venice, 1546.¹² Noteworthy modern editions are those of Meir Friedmann¹³ and Louis Finkelstein.¹⁴ The latter is the most commonly cited edition by contemporary scholars. However, as an eclectic critical edition it has been subjected to critique,¹⁵ especially for instances in which it adopts questionable readings from secondary witnesses that are contravened by the better manuscripts. The best manuscript, both textually and linguistically, has been shown to be that of Vatican Ebr. 32.3,¹⁶ but it too needs to be used in conjunction with other manuscripts and witnesses. Other major manuscripts are London British Museum Add. 16.406 Margolouth 341.4, Oxford Bodleian Neubauer 151.5, Berlin Staatsbibliothek MS Orient. 1594.33.¹⁷ Complete

¹⁵ See Jacob N. Epstein, "Review of Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre zu Deuteronomium*, fascs. 1-4," in *Tarbiz* 8, 1936-1937, pp. 375-392 (in Hebrew); Saul Lieberman, "Review of Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre zu Deuteronomium*, fasc. 1," in *Kiryat Sefer* 14, 1937-1938, pp. 323-336 (in Hebrew); Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany, 1991), passim.

¹⁶ Fascimile ed.: Jerusalem, 1972.

¹⁷ See Louis Finkelstein, "Prolegomena to an Edition of the Sifre on Deuteronomy," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 3, 1931-1932, pp. 3-42; Menahem Kahana, "Prolegomena to a New Edition of the Sifre on Numbers," Ph.D. dissertation (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 2-6, 116-227, 276 (in Hebrew); Moshe Bar-Asher, "A Preliminary Study of Mishnaic Hebrew as Reflected in Codex Vatican 32 of Sifre Bernibbar," in *Te'uda* 3, 1983, pp. 139-164. For a full description of the manuscripts that include *Sifre*, especially a full catalogue of Geniza fragments, some of which were not known to Finkelstein and must now be given serious weight by critical scholars, see Menahem Kahana, *Manuscripts of the Halakhic Midrashim: An Annotated Catalogue* (Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 97-107 (in Hebrew); and Kahana, "The Tannaitic Midrashim."

translations into modern languages¹⁸ generally rely on Finkelstein's edition and hence must be used with the same caution. A printed Hebrew concordance to Sifre to Deuteronomy¹⁹ is also based on the Finkelstein edition.

Since the Sifre to Deuteronomy, like other early midrashic collections, takes the form of a dialogical commentary rather than a topical treatise, summaries of its contents risk essentialization.²⁰ As a scriptural commentary, it takes its topical cues from the text of Deuteronomy. However, how it handles those cues is a function simultaneously of its hermeneutical method and its rhetorical purposes, resulting in some striking and significant reworkings of Deuteronomic themes. Of particular importance is the way in which Sifre responds to Deuteronomy's distinctive emphasis on the importance of the instruction and adjudication of Torah within Israel. As Rabbinically understood, the Torah revealed at Sinai and enjoined by Moses upon Israel at Moab for future generations is no less than the whole of revelation, written as well as oral, the latter in several discursive genres, with its chief teachers and adjudicators being the sages as successors to the biblical elders and the Rabbinic patriarch as the succe-

ssor to Moses. Similarly, Deuteronomy's stress on the obligation to love and cleave to God is interpreted by Sifre in terms of study of God's Torah and adhering to the sages. Deuteronomy's desacralization and spiritualizing of religious obligation,²¹ in comparison to the preceding priestly sections of the Pentateuch, enables Sifre's further extension of teaching and judicial functions from the priesthood to the Rabbinic sages and their pedagogical and judiciary institutions, no longer tied to a centralized sacred locus. Numerous interpretations express the paramount value of Torah study, the importance of memorization, internalization, retention, and transmission of Torah teachings, and the proper relation of disciples to their teachers. These recurring themes suggest that the primary audience for Sifre's commentary consisted of Rabbinic discipleship circles.²² The Deuteronomic emphasis on covenantal obligations and consequences is interpreted by Sifre, in the aftermath of the national calamities of 70 and 135 C.E., in such a way as to lay particular emphasis on Israel's privileged relation to the "nations of the world," by virtue of its possession of revelation, and to reinforce the expectation of Israel's ultimate vindication and redemption.²³

¹⁸ Reuben Hammer, trans., *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven, 1986); Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, 1987), 2 vols.; Hans Bietenhard, trans., *Der tannaitische Midrasch 'Sifre Deuteronomium'* (Bern, 1984); Eric Cortés and Teresa Martínez, *Sifre Deuteronomio: Comentario tannaitico al libro del Deuteronomio* (Barcelona, 1989-1997).

¹⁹ Binjamin Kosovsky, *Otzar Leshon Hatanaim: Theasaurus "Sifre" Concordantiae verborum*, 5 vols. (Jerusalem, 1971-1974).

²⁰ Cf. Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy:*

An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical, and Topical Program (Atlanta, 1983), pp. 143-160; *idem*, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, pp. 336-342; Hammer, *Sifre*, pp. 15-21.

²¹ Moshe Weinfield, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 190-243.

²² For a close reading of the relevant passages, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*.

²³ See Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*; Reuven Hammer, "A Rabbinic Response to the Post Bar Kochba Era: The Sifre to Ha-Azinu," in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 52 (1985), pp. 37-53.

Bibliography

- Finkelstein, Louis, ed. *Sifre ad Deuteronomium* (Berlin, 1939; repr. New York, 1969).
- Fraade, Steven D., "Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deut. 3:23): How Conscious the Composition?" in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54, 1983, pp. 245-301.
- , *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany, 1991).
- Hammer, Reuven. *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Notes (New Haven, 1986).
- Neusner, Jacob, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical, and Topical Program* (Atlanta, 1987).
- STEVEN D. FRAADE
Yale University