

Appendix

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The Talmud of Babylonia. An American Translation: Volume XXX.A: Tractate Hullin; Chapters 1-2. Tzvee Zahavy, Translator. Brown Judaic Studies 253. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992. Pp. xix + 238.

“All may slaughter,” has to be one of the more memorable three-word opening lines ever invented – right up there with “Call me Ishmael.” While the latter is the opening to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the former is less readily identifiable. In fact, the words “All may slaughter” open and form the reiterated recall to the ground theme of Tzvee Zahavy’s modern English translation of Hullin, one of the Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. On beginning *Moby Dick*, I am sure I would feel conscientious and obligated and virtuous and bored. Similarly, that was my expectation in opening Hullin on preparing to review it. That expectation has been dispelled by this accessible and fascinating portrayal of the world of the rabbis.

Hullin is a volume in **The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation** produced as part of the Brown Judaic Studies Series, under the direction of Jacob Neusner and more recently Shaye Cohen. Neusner has translated all but a few tractates. Peter Haas, Martin Jaffee, and Tzvee Zahavy, all members of IOUDAIOS, have also completed assigned tractates.

This edition of Hullin understandably reflects Neusner’s approach: in Z.’s attention to the structural properties of the redacted discourse; in the layout, which [almost] has abandoned the customary reference to Talmud folio page; and in the introductory material, which quotes Neusner’s outline of the Tractate, from his **Mishnaic Law of Holy Things**. A major effect of this approach is the academic presentation of *confessional* material.

The critical question in evaluating this work, and Z.’s contribution, is the quality of the translation. I am happy to report that it is an excellent translation. Z. has managed the difficult task of keeping to a literal rendition of the Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew of the original, while making excellent sense as one reads the English version alone. Often, translations of rabbinic literature represent paraphrases, and pass along the traditional meaning of a passage. This approach is extremely frustrating to one who is learning the language from an academic point

of view, because words and phrases do not always mean, in the translated literature, what they seem to mean lexically. One often has the sense of being tricked.

Zahavy's translation does not perpetuate this world of special meanings that lack any correspondence with the words of the text. Nevertheless, he translates with full knowledge of those meanings, as a one-time Yeshiva University student under the late R. Soloveitchik, the celebrated *posek* (decider of difficult questions of Jewish law). Now, however, from his academic vantage point as a professor in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Minnesota, Z. has provided the reader with clear English equivalents of the Mishnaic Hebrew and Aramaic of the original, as well as the parenthetical comments that are necessary to translate the laconicities of the original that contribute so much to that sense that understanding the language is never enough.

For example, the Mishnaic Hebrew phrase BO MISTAKEL does have the extended meaning "here is the proof," and the Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud provides that translation. Z., however, translates "*Come and take note.*" This literal meaning becomes amply clear in the context; it is hard to see why the phrase needed to be given a special meaning over and above the literal translation.

The overall excellence of Z.'s translation gains from such features of Neusner's approach as the bracketed explanatory concepts which take the place of Soncino's footnotes. Z. uses these conventions with extraordinary economy and respect for the text and the reader. Z. has mastered the Neusner approach, and as a result the text speaks clearly for itself and the world it portrays.

Zahavy's choices of American English equivalents are generally excellent; perhaps I was at first taken aback by his use of 'heretics' to translate MINIM, the word the Rabbis often used to designate Christians. After some consideration, I found that I agreed with Z.'s choice. The discussion distinguishes between Jewish and Gentile heretics with respect to the validity of their acts of ordinary slaughter (p. 72). I would have found two words, apostate and gentile, understandable in the English, yet I agree with a translation technique that finds the same equivalent for all cases, however odd the concept of Gentile heretic sounds at first.

What is it about Hullin that dispelled my initial sense of obligation, virtue, and boredom? Why do such excellent work as Z.'s, to translate an ordinary collection of rabbinic discussions of minutiae? The answer lies in the content of Hullin. Come and take note.

Hullin means "ordinary slaughter." It is not until one is well into the discussion that the relationship of the book to its origins in Deut 12:21 is explored. Upon entering the land, all worship was to be in a central location, which meant that sacrificing animals for worship and food could only occur at that place. Until that point in the story, only priests could slaughter; however, priests could be found in a number of local sanctuaries. Now that the cult was to be centralized, there were no local priests to slaughter the meat, offering a portion for sacrifice, keeping a share, and returning most of the meat to the devotee upon some occasion for feasting. Now the rule would become "All may slaughter," so that outside the

designated central place people could still eat meat. The Deut 12:21 passage is cited as follows in this edition, p. 143 (II.2.A):

R. Yemar said, “The verse says, ‘[If the place which the Lord your God will choose to put his name there is too far from you], then you may kill (ZBHT), any of your herd or your flock, which the Lord your God has given you...]’

I know of no one who has suggested that the intention of Hullin is to encourage vegetarianism. That may well be the effect, however, of reading through easily understandable discussions of the validity of slaughter if the knife is examined afterwards and found to be notched or nicked when the cut was made in a sawing fashion, back and forth. *It is a bloody book.*

It is in the midst of such discussions, however, following the details of what renders meat TEREFAH, “torn” or fatally damaged in some way that would render the meat carrion, that one learns the fascinating and relevant bit of rabbinic lore that it is not a capital crime to kill someone who is terminally ill, or TEREFAH.

“All may slaughter,” means women as well as men may slaughter; does it mean Samaritans, gentiles, apostates? The Mishna has already qualified the permission somewhat, in saying that the deaf-mute and the idiot and the minor may not slaughter, on the practical grounds of being unlikely to do it properly. However, if supervised, they too may slaughter. The discussions range widely and show some of the best of rabbinic thought, without omitting to display the pickiness of the issues. Yet the first word, “all,” characterizes the attempt at rabbinic inclusiveness.

The portrayal in Hullin of the rabbinic world grappling with the implications of the word “all” is fascinating. A similar discussion of the extent of meaning implied by permitting “all” to do something is found at the beginning of the first volume of b. ‘Arak., 2A-2B. There the Mishna begins “All [persons] are fit to evaluate,” in the Soncino translation, or “All may pledge the Valuation [of others],” in Neusner’s translation, given in the introduction to **THE TALMUD OF BABYLONIA: An American Translation; I: Tractate Berakhot** ([Brown Judaic Studies 78. Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1984] p. 8). The discussion is confusing, however, and neither translation explains the meaning of what it is the Mishna has permitted “all” to do. Also, the discussion in b. ‘Arak. wanders around, sometimes including women and minors, sometimes excluding one or the other, in a consideration of various other occasions where “all” are permitted to do something. In contrast, “All may slaughter” is a straightforward statement that requires a minimum of social explanation for today’s reader. The discussion that ensues is straightforward enough—by rabbinic standards, that is.

While the initial discussion in Hullin deals with the standard group of deaf-mutes, minors, and imbeciles, who comprise those who are excepted from

mishnaic permission to slaughter, women are unequivocally admitted under the wings of the inclusive “all.” Nor does Hullin show a rabbinic discussion that is completely non-sexist, and therefore an inaccurate representation of the rabbinic world. Hullin provides insight into a world that is not hermetically sealed off from reality; that tends to prefer academic points to the close study of animal anatomy; that occasionally takes the world of women for granted; and that has a great deal of investment in determining the ethical way in which humans should proceed – in the specific case of ordinary slaughter of our food, and in the general case of the abstract consideration of “all” and its exclusions.

The discussion in Hullin is simple, clear, and precise. One does not need extensive explanation of rabbinic concepts to understand and follow the discussion. I have begun to imagine using this edition of Hullin as the text for a beginning course in Rabbinic Judaism, and find myself enthusiastic about the prospects. Hullin would also work well as a text for those fascinating courses that are often listed and seldom taught, where some students are reading the original language, and some are reading an English translation.

A Seminar on Christian Origins might look at Hullin in this edition to gain a preliminary understanding of a rabbinic view of Christianity. Since there is also material defining sacred and profane time, as well as grappling with the effects of idolatry and apostasy on the food supply, one might wish to use selections from Hullin in any number of approaches to the academic study of religion(s).

In describing Hullin as suitable for a number of applications above, I did not take up the question of explanatory material. For some of the uses I proposed, introductory material would be necessary. Z.’s introduction positions his volume in relationship to Neusner’s approach to the Mishna and the Babylonian Talmud’s GEMARA. Various audiences would need more or less information about the background, setting, and position of this Tractate in relationship to rabbinic thought, in some of the approaches I have sketched above. This information is lacking in the book as reviewed.

Yet, the text speaks.