Book Title:

Portraits through the Generations:

The Refashioning of Biblical Characters in Second Temple and Midrashic Literature

Summary:

The book, “Portraits through the Generations,” traces a group of biblical figures, liberated from their biblical constraints and refashioned by the traditions of the Second Temple, Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. At the foundation of this study lies the intriguing question: What is the cause of the fluctuation in interpretations of their actions, in such a way that at times a character portrayed negatively in the biblical text stands fully glorified in subsequent literature, while conversely, a character presented positively in the Bible becomes shrouded in criticism, casting the purity of their deeds into doubt?

The book’s premise is that tracing the manner in which traditions about these biblical characters developed opens an aperture into hidden historical aspects of the periods of composition, enabling us to sketch social, religious and polemical features that were sometimes concealed in the halakhic and Talmudic discussions, or presented from a one-dimensional perspective that denied a fully comprehensive portrait.

In this book, the biblical characters themselves indeed serve as building blocks, however of more interest to us than the historical figures themselves was our attempt to deepen familiarity with those who chose to engage with them, while attributing to those characters motives and deeds not delineated in the biblical text. We sought to understand the rationale for the self-afforded freedom of those commentators, who purported, as it were, to interpret the events and lives of the biblical characters, but actually portrayed them in such a fashion that the original biblical character could no longer be identified. As the disparity between the original and refashioned characters grew, so too did our curiosity in understanding the author’s motives and discovering their social, and sometimes biographical, environment.

The book is divided into four sections, each dealing with one of the challenges of Jewish life during the generations extending from the Second Temple period through to the Talmudic era: Israel and its gentile neighbors; personal status and Torah study achievements; leadership; women’s status. In each section, we chose biblical archetypes that formed the commentators’ basis for expressing their positions in each separate field. The negative or positive assessment of the archetype, the assigned characteristics, and the commentators’ self-assumed freedom in interpreting the archetype differently from the biblical text’s description, formed the informational fragments with which we evaluated and constructed the varied worldviews of those who composed these traditions and exegeses.