Rubenstein, Jeffrey L.

The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud


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In his latest book Jeffrey Rubenstein describes an academic institution in which colleagues engage in turbulent verbal battles. The goal of these battles is not always a pure search for truth and illumination, but a pursuit of the participating scholars for personal advancement in the institutional hierarchy. Each colleague’s greatest fear is the shame that might be brought on by his inability to respond correctly; hence such violent discourse is both typical and yet institutionally discouraged. Although academic ability is essential toward promotion, genealogical descent from other scholars is not a negligible consideration. The male scholars of such institutions find it burdensome to conduct family lives while being totally dedicated to their academic pursuits. Their superior intellectual abilities lead them to disdain the simple, uneducated folk.

Rubenstein is not describing a modern university; these scholars are not young assistant professors seeking tenure, nor are they tenured professors sitting in the ivory towers of elite universities. Rather, Rubenstein is describing the elusive cultural world of the academy of the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud, coined Stammaim by David Weiss Halivni, after the fact that they do not identify themselves by name.

According to Rubenstein, at some time in the late fifth to early sixth century, Babylonian Torah study was formally institutionalized, leading to transformations in the structures in
which their oral Torahs were preserved and significant editorial changes in the very literary style of these traditions. The establishment of a formal academy (or perhaps academies) is reflected in many of the Babylonian haggadot, especially in those that purport to portray earlier Palestinian sages. The emphasis placed in these stories on dialectical ability is a reflection of an academic setting in which sages debate each other in public, each attempting to “conquer” the other and thus rise through the hierarchy, which inevitably accompanies a more established academy. Sages who fail are shamed, and hence these stories frequently warn of the consequences of shaming others. These qualities are featured prominently in later Babylonian haggadot and are much less prominent in Palestinian literature and in earlier strata of the Babylonian Talmud. Hence, although they purport to portray life in Palestine in the second and third centuries, in reality they are pseudepigraphic. According to Rubenstein, they are cultural artifacts of the Stammaitic period, the period that fell between the end of the Amoraic period and the beginning of the Geonic period. The late dating of these stories, established through philological tools and source criticism, allows us to correlate them to historical changes that occurred between the Amoraic and Stammaitic periods.

We should appreciate that Rubenstein is attempting to solve one of the greatest mysteries in talmudic scholarship, perhaps one of the great conundrums of all of Jewish history: Who edited the Babylonian Talmud, why was it completed (as opposed to continuing to grow in a more amorphous form), and why don’t we know their names? Since the beginning of Wissenschaft des Judentums, entire books have been dedicated to this issue and multiple theories have been offered. For several generations, these theories typically attributed the redaction/completion of the Talmud to various political/religious persecutions, although such persecutions have never been convincingly identified. I once heard a teacher suggest that a great comet that landed in Babylonia around this time may have contributed to a depression in Torah learning and that the accompanying loss of authority caused rabbis to withhold their names from their talmudic traditions! In my opinion, Rubenstein’s suggestion that formal academies rose during this period is the most compelling suggestion that has been offered to solve this puzzle. Redaction is a product of cooperation between sages, formalization of their learning, and a self-recognition in the change from one epoch to another. Such changes seem most likely to occur in institutional settings.

With regard to the puzzle of why we do not know the names of the heads of these groundbreaking Stammaitic academies, Rubenstein tentatively suggests that those sages whom R. Sherira Gaon, the tenth-century rabbinic chronicler, identifies as “Saboraim” and who lived between the Amoraic and Geonic periods, may have functioned as the heads of the academies. Rubenstein’s research demonstrates a certain degree of continuity between the qualities characteristic of Stammaitic and Geonic culture, as if the
former were an embryonic version of the latter. Indeed, Rubenstein points to a greater continuity between the Stammaitic and the Geonic periods, rather than between the former and the Amoraic period. It is interesting to compare this suggestion with the proposal made by David Weiss Halivni, Rubenstein’s doctoral mentor, in the introduction to his commentary on Bava Metzi’a. Halivni pushes back the dating of the Stammaitic period to the beginning of what we call the Geonic period. In other words, whereas he previously thought that the historical progression was Tannaim, Amoraim, Stammaim, and then Saboraim, he now believes that the Stammaim were later than the Saboraim and that they overlap with the Geonic period. In this way, both Halivni and Rubenstein may be, albeit from different angles, arriving at a similar point.

The first half of this book is basically a demonstration of these aforementioned matters. The second half of the book changes tone, and, instead of addressing themes directly related to the rise of the Babylonian academy, Rubenstein deals with several themes and topics that are more loosely connected to the world of these late Babylonian sages. In a chapter on the importance of genealogical lineage, he analyzes three Babylonian haggadot about the patriarch and claims that these were rewritten in order to underscore the tension that existed in Babylonia. While in Palestine the Patriarchate was certainly inherited, the Patriarch was not the head of an academy, and hence lineage was not a factor in an academic hierarchy. Rubenstein posits that the leadership positions in the Stamaitic academies were, at least on occasion, passed down from father to son. What is remarkable here is that we do not know if such academies existed, nor do we know the names of its alleged sages. Although I am somewhat skeptical about making such an assertion, Rubenstein persuasively demonstrates the tension that surely existed between academic skill and lineage.

Chapter 6, which considers the conflict between marriage and Torah study, focuses on the famous cycle of stories concerning rabbis who leave their houses for extended periods of Torah study. These stories have been analyzed by Jonah Frankel, Daniel Boyarin, Shulamith Valler, and Aryeh Cohen, and Rubenstein does not add a lot in terms of analysis to the passage itself. Rubenstein’s main contribution is to ascribe the editing of the stories to the Talmud’s redactors and provide their world as its setting. The conflict between a family life and Torah study becomes an issue of burning importance to those in the Stamaitic academies. Indeed, he suggests that the Stammaim generally regarded their wives as obstacles to learning. Such conflicts were also posed to earlier rabbis, and, while earlier rabbinic literature does reflect these issues, their intense dramatization is a product of the Stammaim and a reflection of their world.

Chapter 7 deals with the sages’ attitude toward the ʾam hāʾāres, the unlearned Jew. While earlier rabbis also occasionally demonstrated disdain for the unlearned, the Babylonian
Talmud exhibits a degree of contempt that was unprecedented. Again, employing convincing literary criteria (based largely on previous analysis by Stephen Wald), Rubenstein locates this contempt in the Stammaitic strata of the Babylonian Talmud. It is isolated in the world of their academy, away from the very people portrayed and vilified in these stories, that sages allowed themselves the freedom to spew such venom.

The final chapter deals with the enduring legacy of the Stammaim, those editors who left us with what became the most influential and the most studied book in Jewish history—the Babylonian Talmud. The yeshiva dominates the Jewish religious landscape to this day. The dialectical method has become synonymous not just with rabbinic culture but perhaps with the nature of a Jew. Indeed, some of these qualities of Jewish culture and learning are so pervasive that we take them for granted. They are almost inherent to Judaism itself. Rubenstein points out that the Jewish world owes this heritage to the Stammaim. He ends his book with a paean to the Babylonian Talmud, which is ultimately literary heritage of the Stammaim. Its subsequent triumph over all other Jewish books is not merely a result of the tireless promotional efforts of the Babylonian Geonim, nor is it an indirect result of the rise of the Islamic empire. Its success can be attributed to its very qualities as an engaging, complex, sophisticated text.

The methodology that Rubenstein typically employs is the presentation of a number of Babylonian passages that emphasize a certain theme. Usually the passages are haggadic in nature; occasionally they are embedded in halakic discourse. Rubenstein always compares the presence of the theme in the Babylonian Talmud with its presence in Palestinian literature, in order to prove that such a concern or behavior is not typical of all rabbis at all times, but is specifically Babylonian, and in his opinion, late Babylonian (and not Amoraic). Rubenstein is at his best when he brings parallel traditions from Palestine in Babylonia in parallel columns in order to highlight the literary changes imposed on the earlier sources by the later Palestinian editors. Consider the following example, which appears a couple of times in the book:

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\text{Ybik 1:8, 64d} \quad \text{BBB 81a–b}
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R. Eleazar said to him: “You ask about a matter which the sages of the assembly-house still need [to explain].”

He [R. Eleazar] said to him, “Do you ask me in the study-house about a matter which former scholars did not explain in order to shame me?”

The Babylonian Talmud changes “assembly-house” to “study-house” and adds the theme of shame; both of these changes are considered reflective of Stammaitic culture. The book abounds in these types of comparisons, and they are very convincing and apparent when Rubenstein lines them up in parallel columns. The book is meticulously researched; the
author brings impressive evidence for each of his claims. To prove his point Rubenstein usually brings a myriad of sources that all emphasize one theme or that demonstrate a redactorial change from earlier literature. While one might disagree with any individual proof, their combination is almost always quite persuasive.

One methodological issue that must be raised is Rubenstein’s claim that the revisions of earlier Palestinian haggadah should be ascribed strictly to the Stammaim. Consequently, the changes in Torah learning and especially its formalization (hierarchical academies, regular learning periods, etc.) are also ascribed to the Stammaitic period and not to the Amoraic period. Others might argue that these structural and literary changes occurred more gradually and that the process began already in the later Amoraic generations. Rubenstein is more confident of his ability to date the editorial changes than are many other scholars who also belong to the “historical/philological” school of talmudic scholarship. Part of the problem with dating these editorial changes is that we do not have haggadot that we can confidently ascribe to Babylonian Amoraim; any haggadah in the Babylonian Talmud is likely to have been redacted by the Stammaim. Hence, Rubenstein can effectively compare Palestinian and Babylonian haggadot but has great difficulty in comparing earlier Amoraic haggadah with later Stammaitic haggadah. Nevertheless, even if Rubenstein may be slightly overly confident in his ability to date the haggadic changes strictly to fifth- to sixth-century editors and not to those who lived in the fourth to fifth generations, this does not negate the fact that he has overwhelmingly proven the main thrust of his argument; the qualities, attitudes, and issues that he describes are Babylonian. Babylonian editors rewrote these haggadot, imbuing them with their values and using them to convey messages important to the audience in Babylonian settings. Whether they existed in early stages of development already in the fourth century, when many sages from Palestine probably came to Babylonia, or later will probably never be determined. In my opinion, this potential hesitation does not diminish from the significant value of the book.

Rubenstein’s style of writing is remarkably clear and deserves special recognition. This book, like his previous one, is written in straightforward, clear language and organized well. His familiarity with the haggadot he analyzes, his precise translations, and his clear analysis make the book a pleasure to read. His historical conjectures and reconstructions make it a must.