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ABSTRACT

The present article surveys some significant developments in scholarship on rabbinic midrash and narrative (aggadic) sources. The contemporary trends in the study of midrash can be traced back to the work of Jacob Neusner in the early 1970s. This article traces developments from that time, and does so by isolating trends in (1) literary analysis, (2) cultural studies, and (3) new historicism. A final section (4) looks at equally important developments concerning still unfinished business of producing critical editions of rabbinic texts.

Keywords: critical editions, literary studies, midrash, rabbinic literature

Introduction

The past several decades have witnessed the recovery and rehabilitation of the study of midrash. Advancements in related fields and in the humanities in general have paved the way for its re-emergence and have established it as a firmly rooted area of study in its own right. This transformation is most palpable in works that address the literary and cultural aspects of rabbinic literature. The diverse approaches to midrashic studies, moreover, highlight the trend to move beyond the strictures of disciplines and to engage in inter- and intra-disciplinary research. No longer trained solely within the narrow confines of rabbinical seminaries, scholars of rabbinic literature are exposed to various discourses and intellectual crosscurrents, and therefore bring to the study of rabbinic texts a rich array of questions and a broad set of theoretical skills. And while scholarship in this area has advanced on the heels of other fields, it in turn has contributed to the study of the New Testament, patristic

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exegesis, the Talmud and late antique Judaism, and has made its presence felt in other circles such as literary theory. In fact, trends in midrashic studies impact other seemingly far afield areas of interest. We see a glimmer of this in Vevaina 2007, a recent dissertation that applies principles of midrashic intertextual studies to the analysis of a Zoroastrian text.

Several recently published volumes of articles attest to new directions in rabbinic literature in general, and rabbinic exegesis in particular (see, for example, Teugels and Ulmer 2005, 2007; Kraus 2006; Bakhos 2006a; Fonrobert and Jaffee 2007 and, most recently, Dohrmann and Stern 2008). The current state of midrashic studies is aptly described by Richard Sarason (2006: 9):

> The cautious, methodologically self-conscious juxtaposition and interweaving of multiple textual loci; of texts and a variety of contexts; of literary, historical, and religious-cultural perspectives and methodologies—all provide the contemporary scholar with fruitful lenses for the interpretation of what more and more is understood to be a dense, richly layered, multiform, and overdetermined (in the Freudian sense of being generated by multiple causal factors) literary corpus bearing witness to a complex and dynamic culture that produced and lied behind it. Under these circumstances, no single reading or interpretive lens will suffice to do justice to this rich complexity.

Scholarly efforts to introduce midrash as part of and apart from rabbinic literature initially revolved around the very definition of the term (Wright 1967; Le Déaut 1971; Bloch 1978a, 1978b; Porton 1981; Heinemann 1986; Kugel 1986; Bakhos 2006b; cf. Boyarin 1993: 9), that is, whether or not it is a process or product of exegesis. Notoriously difficult to define, most scholars nonetheless agree that it is both a method and product of rabbinic interpretation the very nature of which requires the multi-focal lenses of contemporary scholarship that acknowledges the importance of contextualized reading and resists the totalizing of any single method. Furthermore, as Reed observes (2007: 65): 'the difficulty in defining "midrash" may signal the inadequacy of investigating the intellectual significance of interpretation apart from its historical and cultural significations'. In turning to a comparativist model of inquiry that understands interpretation and its tradition in the context of others, scholars highlight these very significations (Dohrmann and Stern 2008).

1. *Literary Approaches*

Scholars, primarily in North America, but also in Europe and Israel, have come to pay less attention to the historical veracity of aggadic texts, and

to focus more attention on their 'literariness'. Underlying this trend is the notion that rabbinic stories not only reflect beliefs, values and customs, but also possess the earmarks of literature and should be examined in light of literary motifs, themes and structure. Many contemporary scholars are thus no longer interested, for example, in how a story about a certain rabbi may be utilized in constructing a historical biography (Neusner 1970, 1973; Green 1978; Boyarin 1990; Goshen-Gottstein 2000). Instead, rabbinic narratives are analyzed in terms of their literary quality. At the same time, however, they are regarded as artifacts that function as conveyors and mediators of rabbinic culture. The historical import of narratives is therefore undiminished to the extent that they yield insight into the milieu of those who recorded, transmitted and lived by them.

In this regard, Neusner's *The Development of a Legend* (1970) has proven to be a turning point in the field of rabbinics. Here he methodically demonstrates how stories depicting the life of the first-century sage Johanan ben Zakkai evolved into what is considered the 'normative tradition', and how they tell us more about those who produced the narratives or deemed them authoritative than about the actual personage. Consisting of two major parts, a chronological presentation of the sources and synoptic analysis, the work investigates what can be attributed to Johanan ben Zakkai the historical person, and what is considered pseudepigraphic. Basically we can safely claim that the sage opposed the Jewish Revolt against Rome (*b. Gittin* 55b-56b) and that after the war he promulgated decrees (*m. Rosh ha-Shanah* 4.1-4). And, yet, we cannot attest with surety 'how things actually happened'. Neusner, rather, set for himself the task of explaining the development of traditions around ben Zakkai, and addressed the question of why and how stories about him were re-told and refurbished so as to portray him in a particular light. Furthermore, if indeed later compilations prove to contain accretions, in what manner are they reliable sources? Having raised methodological issues and unmasked many of the thorny matters related to the study of rabbinic texts, in a subsequent two-volume work, *Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man* (1973), Neusner refined his methods and tackled head on some of the difficult questions arising from his earlier work. His related three-volume study, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees Before 70* (1971) examines sayings attributed to and narratives about the pre-70 Pharisees in order to discern their historical reliability.

Let us keep in mind that others dealt with issues pertaining to source- and form-critical studies. Neusner's work, however, is distinct in its deliberate, conscious focus on methodology, form-critical analysis, and

its attention to literary process. Rather than viewing the corpus of rabbinic literature as monolithic, Neusner's source- and form-critical analyses highlighted the importance of the diachronic, as well as structural aspects of rabbinic texts. More fundamentally, his work called attention to the need to explore basic assumptions about the nature of rabbinic literature, and thus the extent to and manner in which one can utilize rabbinic sources in historical studies. Neusner's underlying assumptions, shared by his compatriots in biblical studies—Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament—exposed the problems inherent in the dating and critical use of rabbinic literature, and provided the basis for future studies in rabbinics that were more consciously aware of these nettlesome problems and their ramifications. Neusner's scholarship advanced the field significantly such that whether one agreed with the particulars of his work, whether one appreciated his approach, scholars—the old and new guard alike—nonetheless had to reckon with the results of his prodigious and oftentimes compelling work.

Literary approaches to the study of midrash and narrative (aggadic) sources reach back to the medieval and into the geonic period (588–1040). As Levinson notes (2006b: 191), 'The literary approach itself has a history, and it is a history of the changing cultural needs and attempts of Jewish societies through the ages "to assimilate monuments of other times and places"'. He further observes (191):

> The literary approach to the study of midrash is both the youngest and the oldest of the various traditional and scholarly schools. As a modern discipline its emergence can be easily dated to the 1970s. However, from a historical perspective the literary approach is probably older than its historical and philological counterparts. In fact, while the historical and philological schools are anchored in fairly recent concepts of language, development, influence etc., there is in fact, nothing new in the literary approach per se. What is new and constantly changing is the very meaning of literature.

If one were to trace the history of the literary-critical approach to rabbinic literature, one would unquestionably point to the late '70s and early '80s as a watershed moment, when the midrash-theory linkage developed. According to Stern (1996: 3), one of the foremost scholars of midrash:

> Under the new dominion of theory, many separate fields—anthropology, literature, linguistics, music, the history of science—previously unrelated and hardly known to each other suddenly found themselves thrown together and engaged in genuine dialogue, often in the service of creating a kind of new critical metadiscourse.

The midrash-theory connection emerged among these shifting alignments, and as one might well imagine—as Stern also observes—'the initial impetus for this linkage came primarily from literary theory' (1996: 3).

Scholars of rabbinics were also swept away in the language of the day, that is, language about language, language about literature. 'Language', 'theory', and 'critical' reigned supreme even as scholars argued about their very meaning. Susceptible to the methodological currents within the academy, scholars of rabbinic literature in North America, Europe and Israel partook in the discourse, although they embraced the jargon and approach of literary criticism to varying degrees.

Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (1982) was one of the first works, if not the first, to draw attention to the connection between rabbinic exegesis and postmodern literary criticism. In addition to arguing that there is a distinction between the theory of meaning undergirding rabbinic and Christian models of interpretation, she also argues that there are striking and profound structural affinities between rabbinic models of interpretation and the work of some influential Jewish thinkers like Freud (1965), Derrida (1974, 1976, 1978) and Bloom (1973, 1975a, 1975b). Despite its shortcomings and problematic all-encompassing dichotomous approach to Jewish and Christian exegesis, the work brought to light many important parallels between rabbinic interpretation and postmodern literary criticism. Indeed as Stern observes (1984: 204), 'the newest criticism has actually taught us to appreciate midrash anew…a text whose own language exceeds the meaning we might causally assign to it' (see also Handelman 1985 and Stern 1988, 1996).

This growing interest among students and scholars to introduce rabbinics to the world of critical theory and vice versa is reflected in other works such as Faur (1986) and the widely read collection of essays edited by Hartman and Budick (1986; the product of a year-long seminar held at Hebrew University, 1983–84), and Stern (1996) which best exemplifies how the theory-midrash connection plays a meaningful role in engaging the classical tradition.

In Israel, Fraenkel's *Darkhei ha-Aggada veha-Midrash* (1991), for example, is a groundbreaking work in its systematic and exhaustive attempt to analyze the literary quality of midrash. Like Neusner, Fraenkel's work rejected the positivistic historicism of earlier scholarship and demonstrated how rabbinic literature reveals aspects of the rabbinic Weltanchauung rather than yields evidence about historical events and persons. Meir (1987, 1993), also a leading Israeli New Critic scholar of midrash, analyzed rab-

binic texts through a literary lens. Both authors emphasize the importance of understanding rabbinic stories on the literary level. The work of Goldberg (1999) also treats rabbinic literature qua literature and explores the basic forms and functions of literary units. Although he is very much aware of different approaches to the study of rabbinic literature, his own work is marked by a fundamental appreciation of the synchronicity of texts.

2. *Cultural Studies*

The recent decades were a watershed period in the study of midrash. Scholars began to read rabbinic texts differently. That is, the self-conscious awareness of reading as a culturally, politically and socially conscribed activity marked a significant shift in scholarly trends. Assumptions were explicit, and openness to a variety of approaches contributed to further recognition of the richly layered, multiform nature of the literature at hand.

Over the course of recent years the sea change that began nearly three decades ago has taken a turn toward cultural studies as a result of the publication of numerous works dealing with socio-historical contexts for understanding rabbinic reading practices. That said, works such as Fraade (1991) and Boyarin (1990) also aimed to understand midrash in literary and socio-historical terms. Fraade's work aims to highlight the inextricable interconnection between a text's dual facing, its engagement with and detachment from history.

Boyarin (1990) calls attention to the notion that midrashic discourse, any interpretive discourse for that matter, is historically and ideologically positioned. In outlining two basic approaches to midrash at the time, Boyarin writes (11):

> …if the school which I have synecdochically represented by Joseph Heinemann places midrash aggada too firmly in its own historical circumstances and considers it a mere reflection of them, Isaak Heinemann removes aggada too extremely from any historical and social meanings. What is common to these theories is that they both assume the opposition between 'objective' and 'subjective', one privileging the objective and the other the subjective. The assumption of this distinction forces one view to assume that the rabbis did not intend to interpret at all and the other to suppose a romantic, near mystical understanding of historical interpretation.

This notion is further elaborated in Boyarin's Carnal Israel (1993: 15) where he asserts that both halakhic and aggadic texts, texts of different genres, 'share the same cultural problematics as their underlying (some-

times implicit) themes'. He continues: 'I assume that both the halakha and the aggada represent attempts to work out the same cultural, political, social, ideological, and religious problems'. Time and again his prolific oeuvre demonstrates that both aggadic/midrashic and halakhic discourse must be read from the perspective of cultural poetics, a practice that respects the literariness of literary texts, while attempting at the same time to understand how they function within a larger socio-cultural system of practices.

3. *New Historicism*

The reconceptualization of heuristic border lines has created a field of inquiry that privileges the study of a text in its immediate historical moment, while at the same time complexifies that 'historical' moment. In other words, midrashic studies, indeed the study of rabbinic literature on the whole, moves within the stream of current methodological approaches that take into account the text's socio-cultural and historical situatedness as inextricable to understanding the text's constitutive features as mediating meaning.

Current studies emerging from the school of New Historicism address the need for historians to re-conceptualize the role literary artifacts play within the historical horizon, and at the same time the need for readers of texts to appreciate the ways in which literature enmeshes and is enmeshed within the fabric of culture. Montrose (1996: 5) characterizes this interplay 'chiastically', 'as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of histories'. He writes (6):

> By the *historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the historical specificity, the social and material embedding, of all modes of *writing*—including not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them; thus, I also mean to suggest the historical, social, and material embedding of all modes of *reading*. By *the textuality of history*, I mean to suggest, in the first place, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, to a lived material existence that is unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question, and, furthermore, that the survival of those traces rather than others cannot be assumed to be merely fortuitous but must rather be presumed to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of selective preservation and effacement. In the second place, those surviving and victorious textual traces of material and ideological struggle are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the 'documents' upon which those who profess the humanities ground their own descriptive and interpretive texts [emphasis original].

Texts and non-textual contexts, however, are not homologous, as often implied or stated otherwise by practitioners of New Historicism, since not enough weight is given to the ontological differences between texts and reality. The relationship between literature and reality, between literature and culture, between literature and experience and literature *as* experience must nonetheless be teased out. The attempt to do so is exemplified in several works in the study of rabbinic literature. The endeavor to understand the social, cultural, and historical moment conveyed in and through these texts lies at the heart of Rubenstein's monographs (1999, 2003).

Rubenstein (1999) offers a fresh, incisive, first-rate literary treatment of six widely-read Talmudic tales: The Oven of Akhnai (*Baba Metzia* 59a-59b), Elisha ben Abuya, or 'Aher' (*Hagigah* 15a-15b), the education of Simon bar Yohai (*Shabbat* 33b-34a), the encounter between Johanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian during the siege of Jerusalem (*b. Gittin* 55b-56b), the story of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Nathan's scheme to depose Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel, the Patriarch (*Horayot* 13b-14a), and God's offer of the Torah to the Gentiles (*Avodah Zarah* 2a-3b). Taking into consideration philological, syntactical and thematic matters, Rubenstein not only keeps a keen eye on form-critical concerns, but also moves beyond the purview of literary analysis. In the second monograph, which builds a great deal on the work of the first, he endeavors to uncover the social setting of the editors of the Babylonian Talmud, known as the Stammaim. No doubt this is a daunting task given the paucity of evidence, yet in his examination of stories as cultural artifacts Rubenstein proffers a thick description of the social and cultural world of the Babylonian academy of the late fifth/early sixth century.

This approach to rabbinic literature is also attested in many recent works, especially the work of Hasan-Rokem as she brings the folklore method to bear on her reading of rabbinic texts. Hasan-Rokem 2000 is a folkloric treatment of Lamentations Rabbah, a collection of midrashim on the verses of Lamentations of Palestinian provenance, composed around the fifth century CE. As its title suggests (*Web of Life*), the underlying approach of the book is one which views culture as a complex web, a system that encompasses folk literature, which mirrors aspects of the system itself. Her analysis yields insights into the life of the Jews of Palestine, displaying the daily—not mundane—rhythms of life. Hasan-Rokem 2003 examines the 'neighborhood narratives' of Leviticus Rabbah, a collection of homiletical midrashim from a cultural poetics perspective. She develops the theoretical concept of the narrative dialogue, which serves 'as an analytical tool devised to explore the transport of cultural goods in terms that stretch the linear and dichotomous

models of thought lying behind the concept of influence' (2). Her purpose is 'to elicit the orality in the written, to invoke the plurality of the canonical, and by that to problematize the authority of received traditions' (2).

The application of literary strategies and historical analysis to illumine rabbinic texts is central to the work of the aforementioned scholar as well as to Levinson (2005, 2006a, 2006b), and Wimpfheimer (2004) who examines two legal stories on *b. Baba Metzia* in order to highlight the interplay of law and literature. Wimpfheimer writes (2004: 52):

> Though I am breaking law's monopoly on meaning by refusing to center my reading on the normative ramifications of these narratives, I am positing a thorough, detailed understanding of those very normative ramifications as the necessary background for understanding affective meaning in these stories. This methodological choice allows me to reflect more generally on the relation between law and literature in the Talmud and on the role of halakhic narrative in rabbinic discourse.

He compellingly argues that by focusing too narrowly on the legal aspects, we overlook the richness and import of the narrative. Rather, by reading legal narratives with an eye toward their literariness, our understanding of the narrative enhances our interpretation and calls our attention to other significant aspects of the narrative, such as the 'human vicissitudes that surround law's creation and application' (71).

The effects of the emergence of Jewish Studies from the circumscribed world of yeshivas and seminaries into the broader university arena have also produced a spate of works that draw on social-scientific methods (see Berkowitz 2006) and the critical lenses of gender studies to examine rabbinic literature (Peskowitz 1997; Fonrobert 2000; Baskin 2002; Ilan 1997, 1999 and 2006). It has also generated an interest in understanding rabbinic literature within wider contexts (Fraade, Shemesh and Clements 2006; Yadin 2004), as in the case of situating the Babylonian Talmud within its socio-cultural Iranian setting (Kalmin 1999, 2006; Elman 2003, 2004, 2007), and has created nexuses across scholarly fields.

The work of Schofer on ethics and classical rabbinic literature and thought (2005) in many respects exemplifies an approach to rabbinic literature that is attuned to the unique qualities of rabbinic literature. Yet, he also locates the work within a broader spectrum of rabbinic thought and texts, and brings rabbinic thought in conversation with current scholarship on self, ethics and theology. In many respects Schofer (2005) is paradigmatic of the current role Jewish Studies plays in the Humanities, namely that of a dialogue partner who in the process transforms and is transformed by the very process.

The interdisciplinary fields of orality and performance studies have particularly affected the study of rabbinic literature. Jaffee, the pioneering scholar who first broke major ground with his seminal work, *Torah in the Mouth* (2001), provides a corrective to studies of rabbinic literature that erroneously view the transition from oral tradition to written text in evolutionary terms—from oral to written form. His compelling thesis explains the existence of diverse versions of tannaitic teachings, not as mistakes that arise from a purely oral transmission process but rather multiple versions reflecting diverse oral performances of a tradition in diverse contexts, especially since in Graeco-Roman rhetorical culture memorization of a written text led to a variety of versions in various settings. In examining several readings of mishnaic texts, Jaffee calls our attention to how the material as scripted performance is in some ways analogous to a dramatic or musical presentation. They come alive in the very performance or recitation. In point of fact, their existence assumes the act of performance, and in turn the act of performance assumes the existence of the texts.

We also find the notion of the rabbinic oral-literary culture as a circulatory system of performative textuality in Fraade's early work on the tannaitic Midrash Sifre Deuteronomy, where he writes that Oral Torah in written form is 'the literary face of an otherwise oral circulatory system of study and teaching' (1991: 19). He applies this notion not only to the Mishnah but also to the early midrashic literature, which is an appropriate place to examine the 'complex interplay of oral and textual registers of tradition and its transmission' (33). After all, it is in midrashic collections that we first encounter expressions of the dual Torah, and moreover, the very structure and rhetoric of midrashic commentary reflects the interplay of orality and writing.

Building on Fraade's and especially Jaffee's insights and application of orality studies to rabbinic texts, Alexander (2006) illustrates that the transmission of mishnaic traditions involved more than the conveyance of textual material, namely, the 'crafting of their authority' and 'the cultivation of intellectual habits through which to analyze and interpret them' (Alexander 2006: 8). Like Jaffee, she argues that we should steer away from the model of envisioning texts as stable and fixed, whereby variations are deviations from an original. Instead we should adopt the model that underscores the important role the performer plays in bringing the text to life. She shows how 'traditions could be constructed anew in different performative settings' (74). Central to her thesis is the notion that the transmitters of the Mishnah were not passive conveyors of tradition but its very shapers, and the very process of transmission required analytical engagement of the material at hand.

Joining the chorus of scholars concerned with orality and text performance is Nelson (2007) whose work attempts to expand the purview of Orality-based scholarship. Unlike others in the field, he is interested in employing Orality Studies to aggadic texts, not halakhic material. In his analysis of a series of midrashic traditions associated with Exod. 3.1ff in the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai*, Nelson highlights the reciprocal development of the oral and written textuality of early rabbinic tradition, and detects that the patterned structures of thought and formulaic style of composition, distinctive features of halakhic textual traditions, are characteristic of this midrashic corpus.

4. *Textual Criticism and Critical Editions*

Developments in literary studies, theory and philosophy have also contributed to the advancements and investigation of Jewish manuscripts, and more specifically to those in the field of rabbinics. To be sure, the field itself has always recognized the essential, foundational role manuscripts and critical editions play, but this acknowledgement is accompanied by the awareness of the regrettable inadequacy of textual editions. As Nelson notes (2005: 98) in a volume partly devoted to the question of critical editions (Teugels and Ulmer 2005), 'Most of the classical, midrashic textual editions are deficient to some extent, often failing to be representative of all the manuscript evidence or source materials currently identified and available, produced in ill-conceived fashion, lacking sophisticated translations, annotations, or comprehensive analyses'. And yet, in the same volume, while also acknowledging the deficiencies of critical editions of midrashic works, Visotzky offers a more sanguine assessment (2005: 155):

> The field of Midrash Studies is blessed with a plethora of critical and so-called critical editions of midrashic texts. Virtually all of the Tannaitic midrashim have had one or more critical editions published. These texts are presented in varying states of reconstruction through citations and parallels or through manuscript evidence, as is also the case with later midrashim. Most Aramaic midrashim have received critical treatment either in published works and/or dissertations. In large measure this holds true for later works of Midrash, as well.

It is true that compared to the state of Quranic exegetical works—*tafsir*—of the medieval period, midrashic studies is certainly blessed with several critical editions, but it is a shared desideratum of many in the field that defective works be replaced with those of higher quality. And indeed while a plethora of transcriptional editions of rabbinic works have been produced

recently, such as Ulmer's synoptic edition of *Pesiqta Rabbati* (1997), what Milikowsky noted a decade ago remains true today (1996: 409): 'not many critical editions of complete rabbinic texts have been published in the last twenty years or so'.

As Milikowsky explains (1999: 138):

> a scholarly edition is any edition which presents in some form or another the manuscript material of the work under study. A critical edition, however, presupposes the use of the critical faculty of the human mind to reconstruct—or perhaps it is more fitting to write construct—a better text of the work than any that has been preserved in the extant documents.

Thus, while we have noticed a spate of scholarly editions of rabbinic texts, including Mishnah and Talmud, we have yet to reap the fruits of the production of critical editions. Given technological advances and manuscript discoveries such editions may not be long in the making.

One such edition is Kirschner 1992, which treats the Baraita de-Melekhet ha-Mishkan (BMM). The BMM is a rabbinic compilation of exegesis of Exodus 25–27, 30–31, 35–40, the portions describing the building of the Tabernacle—*mishkan*. The work details the building of the tabernacle, and passages found in the BMM are also found in parallel rabbinic sources such as Sifre Numbers, Mishnah, Tosefta, the Yerusalmi and the Bavli, to name a few. Kirschner's work is the first critical edition of this rabbinic text, which in its own right is of significance. Other more recent important editions include Noam 2003 (on Megillat Ta'anit) and Kahana 2002 (on newly published fragments of a rabbinic commentary on Deuteronomy).

In addition to the recurring debates among scholars having to do with the production of eclectic and diplomatic critical editions (Alexander 1993; Barth 1999; Beit-Arié 2000; Milikowsky 2006; Milikowsky and Schlüter 1999; Ulmer 2005; Teugels 2005; Vistotzky 2005; see also Maas 1958; Vinaver 1976; Greetham 1994, 1999), textual studies have also encountered methodological challenges of theoretical import. Becker's provocative essay (2000), for example, draws our attention to notions of text, document, transmission and redaction. In addition to criticizing Neusner's form-critical approach, Becker considers the meaning of textual transmission and applies his theoretical reflections to the intertextual relationship between Genesis Rabbah and the Talmud Yerushalmi. Before briefly discussing his synoptic analysis of texts from both works, he exhorts us to keep in mind the fluid character of these 'macroforms'. That is to say, the boundaries of these texts should not be understood as fixed, but rather porous and less rigid. This he attributes to the nature of the works at hand. Becker writes (2000: 150):

> As commentaries on another text, they can be arbitrarily extended; their orientation is external. These macroforms are also in principle open because most of the texts that are ordered in such a way can be integrated into different literary context, regardless of their 'original' formal framework… Furthermore, it is impossible to overlook the many points of contact between the two collective works; they attest to the openness of their textures.

One can extend his conclusions to other rabbinic works, since they, too, are commentaries of other texts. To begin with, the redaction of these works must be understood as a series of the process of redaction—not as a single event. Furthermore, we should not assume that the process was linear and internally consistent. Regarding the issues of dependency, of whether one corpus relied on another, Becker concludes that it is difficult to argue for the primacy of one over the other. While it is clear to him that the redactional process took place independently, the redactors assimilated similar texts into their work.

Despite emphasizing the fluidity and openness of these texts, Becker states (2000: 158) that there are moments when a text is fixed, as when the commentary structure is determinedly the ordering principle for diverse traditions. Yet, he avers, even this fixed point 'must also be relativized: the ordering principle need not have been a conscious decision, made at a specific point in time, and the first editions could in no way establish the text-form of the collective works once and for all'. Even these stages in the development of Genesis Rabbah and Yerushalmi therefore do not mark a definite 'beginning' or 'end' of the tradition histories of these works.

One must, however, wonder if all points on the continuum of redaction are equally significant, or perhaps insignificant. At some point these texts become fixed to the extent that Becker is permitted to examine the textual relationship between the Yerushalmi and Genesis Rabbah. In other words, even if there is no consensus as to when communities, whether religious, secular, or scholarly, have accepted these texts as *qua* fixed texts in the sense that nothing substantial will be added or deleted, we nevertheless have delineated borders that allow us to analyze one work in light of another.

Becker's monograph (1999) builds on and develops Schäfer's ideas. Over twenty years ago in his stimulating article (1986), Schäfer questions the dominating tendency to regard the texts of rabbinic literature as, as he puts it elsewhere, ' "identities", simple, self-contained, composed at a

given moment, and thus clearly distinguishable from one another' (1989: 89). Like Becker, Schäfer understands rabbinic literature 'as an open continuum in which the process of emergence is not to be separated or distinguished without further ado from that of transmission, and the process of transmission from that of redaction. Emergence, transmission and redaction overlap in various ways and overflow into one another' (1989: 89). Schäfer raises epistemological questions, challenging the very notion of Urtext and its applicability to rabbinic literature. What is a text? Are there texts that can be defined and clearly delimited, or are there only basically 'open' texts, which elude temporal and redactional fixation? Can we ever trace the development of an Urtext?

Schäfer's appraisal of rabbinic literature not only raises inescapably difficult, perhaps insurmountable, broad methodological concerns, but it also specifically challenges the traditional approach to the production of critical editions. According to Schäfer (1986: 151), 'Work on the manuscripts must rid itself of the odium of the whimsical scholar constantly in quest of the "better" reading and finally buried under his collection of variants. It is not a matter of variants of static texts, but rather of the documentation and description of a dynamic manuscript tradition.'

Unfortunately, there is no ideal way to present editions of ancient texts. As Alexander observes (1993: 161) 'it is fair to say that classical text-critical editions suffer from over-compression and too much editorial intrusion, while synoptic editions suffer from over-diffusion, coupled with an abnegation of the traditional critical responsibilities of the editor'.

Milikowsky's article (2006) deals squarely with questions related to the making of text-critical editions, in particular of midrashic works. In light of the intellectual currents in literary criticism of the late twentieth century such as indeterminacy and polysemy that challenge textual scholars to re-evaluate and re-envision their work, Milikowsky discusses the role of editors of critical editions, as well as methods employed and editions produced.

Drawing on an array of scholarship in the fields of classical and medieval literature, Milikowsky affirms the value and necessity of stemmatic analysis in the attempt to recover the most original text possible. Furthermore, although not opposed to the creation of synoptic editions per se, Milikowsky nonetheless rejects the attenuated role of editors as merely producers of multidiplomatic, synoptic editions. *Au contraire*, the editor must exercise one's judgment and 'critical instinct' in reconstructing the text, which Milikowsky argues is not only possible but necessarily part and parcel of the critical editor's role. He writes: 'I am not at all opposed to

creation of synoptic editions…but to limit ourselves to their creation is to indulge in what Jennifer Fellows rightly termed scribolatry' (2006: 95; cf. Fellows 1998).

Milikowsky has produced a forthcoming critical edition of Seder Olam (an early midrashic chronography dealing primarily with the biblical period, beginning with Adam and ending with the Bar Kochba Revolt, on which see Milikowsky 1985), though this was prepared in the predigital era. Milikowsky states that if he were to begin the work presently, he would indeed generate a digital synoptic edition, and then reconstruct the text, basing himself much less on any one specific manuscript and would follow his 'judgment and critical instinct', for, he argues (2006: 102), it is the editor 'who must be considered the person most competent to decide which variant is the most original reading that can be recovered from the extant documents'.

The theoretical issues emerging from relatively recent discussions, issues that seemingly threaten the production of critical editions of rabbinic works, have not deterred scholars who continue to take on the painstaking, wearisome enterprise reserved for those with a penchant for minutiae. As mentioned above, scholars have produced several midrashic texts editions. Ulmer's edition of Pesiqta Rabbati (1997, 1999, 2002) is a synoptic edition in column format, which differs in approach from what is considered the standard methods of producing critical editions, due to what Ulmer considers the absence of a reliable base text. Furthermore, Milikowsky and Schlüter recently made a synoptic edition of Leviticus Rabbah available on the internet (http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/midrash/VR/), and Barth has been working on an electronic text-editing project of Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE), a medieval midrashic retelling of several biblical stories from creation through to the book of Esther. PRE has been preserved in numerous manuscripts—more than twenty complete manuscripts and over seventy-five partial manuscripts. Additionally, over thirty printed editions have appeared since the sixteenth century. Initially, since there is no scholarly edition of this work, Barth embarked on this project with the intention of producing one, but now the goal of the project is to make available electronically all manuscripts and fragments of PRE in two forms: digital facsimiles and transcriptions with hypertext links. Although electronic editions are still in an experimental stage and the advantages over printed editions remain to be seen, it is resoundingly evident that as technology advances and better search engines, for example, are developed, and as the high cost to transcribe material online decreases, electronically formatted editions will play a vital role in the study of rabbinic texts.

Conclusions

Whether scholars of rabbinic literature address hoary matters or current concerns, whether they maintain well-established positions or proffer suggestive readings, they do so cognizant of broader contexts and alternative methodological frameworks. This survey of prevalent trends in midrashic studies has attempted to trace and highlight the varied methodological approaches in order to give the reader a sense of the type of work scholars are producing in this prodigious subfield of rabbinics. While it is true that in the past rabbinic studies seemed to lag behind related fields of studies in its embrace of innovative approaches, this is no longer the case and has not been the case since the early '80s. The interlocutory role Jewish Studies plays within the academy has helped to shape the manner in which scholars of rabbinics formulate and address their concerns. The cross-disciplinary interrogation of the relationship between texts and intertexts between texts and contexts, and between literature and history, characterizes to a large extent the research trends in the study of midrash.

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