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The Babylonian Consolidation of Rabbinic Judaism

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Introduction

The significance of Diaspora

Following the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of Jews from Judea in the sixth century BCE, a new paradigm emerged that would shape Jewish history for ever more. From this point on, the Jewish community was divided between people living in the Land of Israel and those who made a home outside it, in the Diaspora (*Golah/Galut*). Even with the rebuilding of the Temple and the return of some of the exiles late in the sixth century BCE, the Jews remained a people geographically divided. Indeed, Jewish identity has been and continues to be shaped by the Homeland–Diaspora split, with the Jewish experience in the Diaspora defined by, on the one hand, longing to return to the Land of Israel, and, on the other hand, establishing deep roots abroad. Despite the fundamental contributions of those living in the Land of Israel to Jewish religious practice, belief, and the great Jewish literary tradition, it is impossible to understand Judaism as we recognize it today without taking into account the role that the Diaspora played in its formation.

Of the many communities that have dotted the colorful and varied map of the Jewish exile, the community in Babylonia can be seen as particularly representative of the Diaspora. Jewish exiles first arrived in Mesopotamia – a Greek term that means "the land between the (Euphrates and Tigris) rivers" – in 597 and

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586 BCE. For many centuries, the evidence for Babylonian Jewish history is quite meager, but the little information that we do possess allows us to assume that the exiles flourished (Gafni, 2002: 223–226). Regardless, the true significance of Babylonian Jewry was to be realized only many years later, during the third to seventh centuries CE – a period that general historians refer to as late antiquity, and some scholars of Jewish history call the "Talmudic period." It was then that the rabbinic class rose to prominence and produced the Babylonian Jewish community's magnum opus – the Babylonian Talmud, or the Bavli, as it is commonly known.

The Influence of the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli)

The Bavli was not the only Talmud that Jews produced. It was produced more than a century after the Palestinian Talmud, or Yerushalmi, which took shape in the fourth century BCE. Nevertheless, the Bavli proved far more influential. By way of the Bavli, the Babylonian Jewish community left its mark on nearly all aspects of subsequent Jewish history, religion, and culture. The Bavli has constituted the primary source for Jewish law and theology across the centuries and throughout the world; and it has also served as a touchstone for post-Talmudic forms of learning such as Jewish philosophy and kabbala. Imaginative Talmudic stories have engendered and intersected with Jewish folklore of nearly all types, and they have inspired other forms of artistic expression as well. On a deeper plane, the Bavli has managed to infiltrate the very structure of Jewish consciousness – particularly through the medium of language. The Talmud's terse and sometimes eccentric lexicon has influenced Jewish tongues from Yiddish and Judeo-Arabic to Modern Hebrew and the speech patterns of modern yeshiva students.

The history of the Bavli is very much caught up with the history of the Jews – first that of Babylonian Jewry, and second its medieval and modern heirs. Still, despite its overwhelming significance, the Bavli's (and Babylonian Jewry's) influence cannot be measured by looking for wholly new forms of Jewish texts, rituals, theology; rather by focusing on its ostensibly *modest* reception and reshaping of antecedent forms of Judaism. Much like the Talmudic text, Babylonian Judaism was itself a kind of compilation or, better, consolidation, of earlier forms of Judaism that were reworked and transmitted within a new cultural context. This consolidation was in turn received by other Jewish communities in the years following the Bavli's completion, first in Iraq and North Africa, and later in Europe, the Land of Israel, and beyond. Thus, a critical aspect of understanding the contribution of Babylonian Jewry to Judaism is by describing what the Babylonian Talmud is, where it stands in relation to its antecedents, and what was its relationship to the dynamic cultural context in which it was produced.

Neither Here nor There: What Is the Babylonian Talmud?

By almost any standards, the Bavli is a strange work. It defies a number of basic literary expectations, especially those which pertain to questions of authorship and composition, and it can take a lifetime to study in its entirety – to say nothing of achieving mastery. Along with the challenges presented by the Talmud's dense discussions, Talmudists in every generation have struggled to discern both the Bavli's nuts and bolts as well as its larger goals. Epistles, rabbinic genealogies, and full-fledged introductions first appeared towards the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium CE, and the genre of Talmud guides remained popular in medieval Europe and North Africa in centuries hence. The modern era, especially the past one hundred and fifty years, has seen an explosion of introductions and aids to Talmud study.

All of these attempts can be seen as compensating for a basic problem. Despite its overwhelming importance, the Bavli, like a newborn child, does not come equipped with an instruction manual. Notably, this omission is not shared with other late antique legal compilations. The roughly contemporaneous work of Roman Law, the Digest of Justinian, includes no less than three prefaces, while the Sassanian Book of a Thousand Judgments preserves a brief, theologically inclined introduction. For the Bavli's part, instead of beginning with a description of the committee responsible for its composition or a homily about the religious significance of studying law, the Talmud's opening lines form a pair of localized, exegetical questions directed at a single Mishnah – the earliest form of rabbinic literature. The omission of a preface from the Bavli, and for that matter from virtually every classical rabbinic compilation, has allowed debates about redaction, goals, audience, and more, to flourish with no end in sight, just as the absence of clear rulings at the end of many legal discussions has encouraged the same.

A further difficulty in understanding the nature of the Bavli is related to the fact that it is not a *sui generis* specimen, rather, as just noted, a kind of derivative literature. In certain respects, the Bavli signifies the culmination of the classical rabbinic project. It is first and foremost organized as a commentary on the most central rabbinic legal text – the Mishnah – which was composed about 200 CE in Roman Palestine. The primary goal of the Bavli, like the Palestinian Talmud – the somewhat earlier, fifth-century counterpart from the Land of Israel, is to explain difficult statements in the Mishnah and to compare the Mishnah with parallel collections of rabbinic material known as *baraitot* (texts "outside – *bar*" and not included in the mishnaic canon) which also can be roughly dated to early third-century CE Roman Palestine. Furthermore, since the Mishnah is an apodictic work that normally does not explain where its laws derive from, the Bavli often attempts to get at the biblical and early rabbinic roots of Mishnaic law. This is normally

pursued by citing classical Halakhic (legal) Midrash – a collection of Palestinian exegetical works from the third century CE which interpret the Torah and show how Jewish law (*halakha*) is related to Scripture. In addition, the named Babylonian rabbis cited in the Bavli take their cue from the Midrash and engage in their own biblical interpretations (Elman, 2004b). Sometimes they produce innovate readings, though many Midrashic interpretations are there to support existing religious practices and beliefs.

The Babylonian rabbinic exegetical imagination is not limited to explaining Mishnah, parallel *baraitot*, and the Bible. The Bavli cites and interprets a great variety of earlier Babylonian, but often Palestinian, rabbinic rulings, theologies, and anecdotes on subjects ranging from pharmacology and astrology to mythology and table etiquette. Often there is very little connection, if any, to the particular Mishnah at hand. It is thus possible to conceive of the Bavli as a hyper-interpretive work which seeks to analyze and explain nearly every text that enters into its orbit. The renowned twelfth-century French rabbi, Rabbeinu Tam, was onto something when he suggested that Jews who singly pursued Talmud study need not pay heed to the Talmud's own proscription to divide study time among the different pillars of the Jewish canon. Since, as a Talmudic folk-etymology would have it, the Talmud of Babylonia (*bavel*) was a perfect mixture (*balul*) of Bible, Mishnah, "Talmud," and more, the Bavli could be seen as a comprehensive and self-sufficient curriculum of Jewish learning (Bavli Qiddushin 30a). The Bavli's genius can be located in its consolidation of the classical rabbinic corpus and its subsequent reworking of its sources into a wholly unique and influential work of interpretation.

As much as the Bavli is closely connected to the sources and traditions of earlier times and other locations, it remains, unquestionably, a product of Sassanian Mesopotamia. The Bavli is the only major rabbinic work composed on the eastern side of the Rome/Persia political and cultural divide, and it contains detailed Mesopotamian geographical descriptions and colorful expressions of Babylonian Jewish *Lokalpatriotism*, or local pride (Gafni, 1990). Not a few Talmudic passages refer to encounters with Persian kings, Zoroastrian religious functionaries, and other representatives of the Sassanian Empire. More broadly, the echoes of late antique daily life – from language, food, and dress, to narrative motifs, demonology, and taxes – can be found throughout the Talmud. Notably, the moniker used to refer to Babylonian rabbinic learning in the folk etymology cited above is, quite simply, "*bavel*" – "Babylonia." As much as the Bavli signifies the culmination of a literature which was mostly produced in Palestine, the influence of place on text production should not be underestimated. Properly appreciating the Bavli, Babylonian Jewry, and the influence of Diaspora on Judaism requires one to acknowledge both internal development and external influence, and understand that when it comes to consolidations, the sum is often far more than the yield of its parts.

The World of the Talmud

The earliest Babylonian *amoraim* (the late antique rabbis who came after the tannaitic rabbis of the Mishnah and early rabbinic literature) date to the very beginning of the third century CE. At this time, change was afoot in the Iranian world, which then included Jewish Babylonia. The Parthian dynasty, which had ruled Greater Iran for over three hundred and fifty years, was on the way out, and in its place, a new dynasty with roots in Fars (an area that flanks the northeastern shores of the Persian Gulf) was rising to power, which was achieved with the defeat of the Parthian king Artabanus V in 224 CE. The ascension of the Sassanians had major implications for the political dynamics in Mesopotamia. Parts of the region had been under Roman influence for some time, and under formal Roman rule since at least the end of the late second century. The Sassanians challenged the status quo and now presented a serious, ongoing challenge to Roman presence throughout Mesopotamia and beyond (see Edwell, 2008: 149–200). Although Jewish Babylonia is in modern day Iraq and not located within classical Iranian territory, the Sassanians nevertheless centered their power and bureaucratic structure in Mesopotamia, which was fertile enough to be considered the breadbasket of the entire Empire. For most of the classical "Talmudic" period (third to sixth centuries CE), the Sassanian kings used Ctesiphon, which was in the heart of Jewish Babylonia, as their winter capital.

The Sassanian Empire consisted of a deliciously diverse salad of religious and ethnic communities. We can get an impression of the components in the mix from the inscriptions of Kerdīr, a powerful and politically connected priest of the third century BCE (see Skjaervo, 2011). Kerdīr himself was Zoroastrian, or as he would have put it, a Mazdayasnian – a worshiper of the ancient Iranian deity, Ahura Mazda. In a portion of his inscription, Kerdīr cites his opposition to false, demonic beliefs – perhaps a reference to Zoroastrian heterodoxies – and his success at having "struck down" Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Nazarenes, Baptists, and Manichaeans. Although the Buddhists and Hindus could be found primarily further East and probably were not well represented in Mesopotamia, the other named communities were. These include the Jews, followers of the prophet Mani and the brand-new dualistic religion of Manichaeism, two different communities of Christians (see discussion in Julien and Julien, 2002), and Mandaeans (Kerdīr's "Baptists"). Although Kerdīr does not refer to them in his list, there were apparently still more communities that populated Mesopotamia, including those which spoke Aramaic and continued ancient and indigenous Babylonian traditions and beliefs.

There is ample evidence that Jews regularly interacted with Zoroastrians, Christians, and the general local, Aramaic-speaking population (Gafni, 2002: 240–241). Conversion and intermarriage were occurring between these three communities as well. Furthermore, there were intersections between Zoroastrians

and Jews in more formal interreligious contexts, including official or semiofficial disputations. Middle Persian texts refer to an official royal project of collecting wisdom from non-Persian cultures and "re-fitting" it with Zoroastrian tradition. We know that the project included the mixing of Greek philosophy and Indian science with Iranian tradition, and it may very well have included intersections with Jewish texts (Secunda, 2010). What this means is that the Sassanian Mesopotamian ethnic "salad" was not only made up of a variety of items, but that these items were melted together – as in the traditional Ashkenazi Jewish *chollent* stew.

Text and Context

Interaction between the different religious communities of Sassanian Mesopotamia left its mark on the religious practices, beliefs, and surviving textual corpora. Obvious examples include the Manichaean pantheon, which adapted many of its deities from surrounding Christian, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist communities. For their own part, there is evidence that Mandaean texts ended up incorporating biblical and even distinctly Jewish traditions. Further, an enormous cache of magical incantation bowls have survived from the period, and they testify to a remarkable intermingling of Jewish, Christian, ancient Babylonian, Mandaean, and Zoroastrian traditions (Shaked, 2002).

The Zoroastrian–Jewish encounter was one of the most extensive and fruitful in the Sassanian Empire. At the present, it seems that Jewish tradition was influenced more by Persian culture and Zoroastrianism than the other way around – though this impression may be due to the nature of the evidence that has come down to us. First, it is worth pointing out that there are significant issues in the Bavli's religious theology, such as an idea of an implacable divine anger, that appear to have developed in concert with corresponding Zoroastrian ideas (Elman, 2006). Zoroastrianism also left its mark on Jewish ritual. For example, it is possible that specific Jewish concerns regarding ritual dress, including the need to don a belt for prayer and the obligation to constantly wear a fringed, four-cornered garment, can be related to similar Zoroastrian prescriptions concerning the *kustīg*, or ritual belt, which served as a central religious symbol in Zoroastrianism (Elman, 2004a: 34). Moving away from religion and towards more general aspects of culture, the Talmud preserves a colorful anecdote which both reflects and criticizes the absorption of certain elite Persian mores by upper-class rabbis like the Babylonian *amora*, Rav Nahman. These include the consumption of Persian delicacies, the use of Persian words on a high linguistic register, naming children after Persian queens – or divinities – as well as a more relaxed attitude towards the intermingling of the sexes than many rabbis were used to (Elman, 2007).

This list could be magnified exponentially. By adducing more examples it would be possible to further demonstrate the many areas of Jewish tradition which were touched by the encounter with Zoroastrianism in Babylonia. Instead, I prefer to shift focus by considering another facet of the relationship between text and context. Here I refer to the possibility that even when a Talmudic text or Jewish tradition scarcely reflects external signs of influence, it is still possible to presume that it "reverberated" differently in the new context in which they were transmitted. This possibility is particularly significant for the current discussion which considers the way the Bavli itself, and Babylonian rabbinic Judaism in general, can be considered a consolidation of antecedent traditions which nevertheless represented a different product upon completion.

As an illustration, consider the following example. Judaism is at its heart a monotheistic religion, though one which emerged in dialogue with and polemic against polytheistic religions. One of the more interesting polemics that one finds classical Judaism taking up in this regard is a dispute against "two powers in heaven." The late Alan Segal devoted important research to identifying the actual religious groups who believed in "two powers in heaven" (Segal, 1977), though the topic continues to be debated among scholars (see Schremer, 2008). Regardless, what remains clear is that the term "two powers in heaven" and the polemics surrounding it initially emerged within the distinct sphere of Roman Palestine at the beginning of the first millennium of the Common Era. The question arises then of what happens when discussions about "two powers in heaven" migrate into a completely different cultural context, such as Sassanian Babylonia, where the terms of debate and the issues at stake are vastly different. To be specific, in the shadow of a dualistic religion like Zoroastrianism, it seems unlikely that Babylonian rabbis would transmit and discuss texts about "two powers in heaven" without ever considering its implications for the local, dominant form of dualism.

And yet, that is just what we find. The Bavli often tells stories specifically about Palestinian (and not Babylonian) rabbis arguing with people who believe in "two powers." The Talmud seems at times to merely parrot what once was a burning issue in a different cultural sphere without even realizing the larger significance of the issue at hand. It would seem that, as a consolidator, the Bavli here is merely transmitting earlier rabbinic material concerned with "two powers in heaven," and it is doing so without really understanding or updating the terms of debate.

And yet there is one telling instance in the Bavli's discussion of "two powers" where it is possible to perceive Sassanian influence. In Bavli Sanhedrin 38b–39a we are treated to a fascinating array of sources that treat various heresies, including one traced all the way back to Adam. The rabbis of course respond to the heretics and their heresies, as we find in the following dialogue:

> The emperor (some versions, "heretic") said to Rabban Gamliel: The God who created the mountains did not create the wind, as it says, "Behold, he who *formed*

> (*yatsar*) the mountains, and *created* (*u-vara*) the wind (Amos 4.13)." But now, it is written regarding Adam: And he *created* (*va-yivra*) (Gen 1.27); And he *fashioned* (*va-yitsar*) (Gen 2.7). Here too, [the God] who created this did not create that? There is a handbreadth by a handbreadth of space in the human body in which there are two cavities. The God who created this did not create that—for it says, "Shall he who *implants* (*ha-note'a*) the ear not hear; he who *forms* (*yotser*) the eye not see (Ps 94.9)?" The emperor said, "Yes!" And at the time of death they are all appeased? (BT Sanhedrin 39a)

It is possible to see within this source a debate fairly typical of the type that monotheists engaged in with various kinds of dualists and polytheists across the Roman Empire. The first two "proofs" that the emperor presents Rabban Gamliel with reflect the relatively prevalent view that two separate forces created the world – a physical one and a spiritual one. Thus, the mountains were created by a physical power and the wind by a spiritual one. Likewise, the contradictions between the description of mankind's creation in the biblical book of Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, was taken to refer to essentially two different episodes. Genesis 1 was seen by some Neoplatonists as the spiritual God's creation of the perfect, ideational human, while the account in Genesis 2 was in a number of respects a "lower" and more earthly affair. In some renditions, Man himself was created in flesh and blood while the force that created him may even have been the evil Demiurge of "Gnostics." Even the third link in the discussion, which relates to the creation of ears and eyes, seems to deal with a dualistic view, though one would think that it is no more than a caricature.

In short, the Bavli seems to preserve and transmit here a fragment that stems from a completely different cultural world. The protagonists (Rabban Gamliel and an emperor) are decidedly Palestinian, and the terms of their debate reflect some of the burning issues within the Greco-Roman sphere. And yet, the anecdote that immediately follows this one raises the question of how texts like this one may have actually resonated within a new cultural context like Sassanian Babylonia: "A magus said to Amemar: From your waist upwards is of Ohrmazd. From your waist downwards is of Ahrimen. [Amemar] said to [the magus]: If so, how does Ahrimen let Ohrmazd pass urine through his land?" As opposed to its textual "neighbor," this source quite clearly refers to the Bavli's Sassanian milieu, and it records a debate held between a Babylonian rabbi and a Zoroastrian priest about the dominion of the two major powers in Zoroastrianism – the beneficent creator, Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) and the malevolent Ahrimen – over the two halves of the human body. Indeed, there are original Middle Persian sources that confirm this "anatomical dualism" as a genuine Zoroastrian belief. So for example, one text from the ninth century describes a Zoroastrian–Muslim debate held in the presence of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'amun that concerns very similar terms. In that vein, it seems possible that the earlier passage about Rabban Gamliel and the emperor was slightly updated the Bavli's transmitters, with the final discussion

about the god who created the ear and his counterpart who formed the eye working as a kind of caricature of the Zoroastrian belief. Instead of reflecting a spirit–matter divide, like the first two proofs the emperor brings, these locate the gods on the human body, but do so in a way that pokes fun at the absurdity of the idea. The caricature directly leads up to Rabban Gamliel's final question ("at the time of death they are both appeased") which defeats the emperor once and for all (Secunda, 2010).

I have taken the time to delve into this example because, despite its apparent marginality, it is possible to look at this small textual artifact as representative of larger trends. That is, the case at hand can provide a certain amount of insight into the Bavli's role as a creative consolidator. First, when examining the way earlier, originally Palestinian, sources are incorporated into the Bavli, we need to pay careful attention to whether the texts were altered or adapted to reflect their milieu. Again, the protagonists in the Rabban Gamliel anecdote are marked as inhabitants of the Roman Empire, and two elements in the debate reflect some aspects of the theological realities there. This leads to the conclusion that the source originally derived from Roman Palestine. However, as we saw, the third and final verse and discussion point to a different kind of debate about anatomical dualism. Further, the fact that this anecdote is then juxtaposed to a debate about anatomical dualism set in Babylonia indicates that the Rabban Gamliel source has undergone some alteration.

That said, there is a point that could be, and should be, made even in cases where there is no evidence that the Bavli altered its sources. Specifically, even if the Bavli transmitted all of its received traditions faithfully, without updating, alteration, or adaptation, there still is value in considering the way that the experience of Sassanian Babylonia may have affected the way these sources were received and passed on. Recently, literary theory has progressively turned away from focusing on origins, authors, and even the independent status of literary works, and has instead emphasized the significance of the way texts are received and interpreted by their readers. This has had major implications for achieving a kind of self-awareness on the part of theorists as readers, but it is also important for understanding the dynamics of text reception, that is, the way texts are received by their readers.

The Talmudic rabbis, after all, were readers par excellence. Each time they cite a Mishnah, transmit the statement of an earlier sage, or interpret a text, they are engaged in the experience of reading. As readers, they do not need to alter the text in question in order for it to resonate in a distinct way within their world. The *new* reading of the source occurs automatically in the space between the performance of the text aloud, and the confines of their minds. As such, "reading" a source about a form of dualism encountered within Palestine could not but resonate in a unique way within a world that included Zoroastrians and Manichaeans. The same point could be made about virtually every text and source transmitted within the Babylonian Talmud and indeed any compilation of its kind. The consolidation

of the Bavli and Babylonian Judaism thus signifies a massive ingathering of sources, rituals, and beliefs that, though normally "faithfully" transmitted, inevitably came to mean something else in its new milieu.

What this means is that although the Bavli can justifiably be seen as the culmination of the rabbinic project, this is only a portion of its signification. The internal textual and religious antecedents of the Bavli and Babylonian Judaism are merely the material on which the rabbis wrote a new story – sometimes explicitly, though occasionally through the "silent" reading of the sources. The Babylonian consolidation was influenced by general cultural aspects of the Sassanian milieu, including such "banalities" as food, cuisine, and language, and "weightier" matters like theology and religion. And it, in turn, influenced further consolidations in the Jewish communities spread across the Diaspora.

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Further reading

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