

Oral Tradition and Rabbinic Studies

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The literature of classical rabbinic Judaism is usually said to have been “redacted” from around 300 CE until about 700 CE in the Palestinian and Mesopotamian centers of rabbinic settlement. Rabbinic literature itself assumes that the traditions that stand behind the written texts were transmitted orally for at least several generations (and in some views, centuries) prior to the compilation of the written manuscripts that are known from the Middle Ages. The formulaic and stylistic traits of the rabbinic writings also suggest a firm basis in orally transmitted material in at least two senses. First, the strong mnemonic traits of the medieval manuscripts suggest that the documents preserved by them were formulated by people for whom oral textual performance was a common experience. Secondly, the written texts as we have them seem to have emerged in a milieu in which written versions of texts were shaped by prior orally-managed material, even as written texts then shaped the outlines of further oral performances based upon them as mnemonic aids. To sum up, oral tradition in the context of rabbinic studies is the complex of legal, theological, and exegetical material transmitted by rabbinic sages of antiquity in the context of oral-performative instruction and preserved in a host of manuscript exemplars that reflect in varying degrees the presence of oral-traditional stylistic traits.

The most important recent work in rabbinic oral traditional studies concerns the relationship of the surviving manuscript materials to their primary oral-traditional milieu, either in the original formation of the earliest rabbinic oral traditions in the first centuries CE or in the consolidation of the extant texts in the transition from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages. A comprehensive discussion of the history of ancient rabbinic oral tradition, and particularly, the ideological formulation of oral tradition as part of an oral revelation to Moses parallel to the Torah, has recently been offered by Martin S. Jaffee (2001). Important studies of the ways in which rabbinic compilations of biblical exegesis reflect and, in some senses, create an oral traditional milieu include Fraade (1991) and Nelson (1999). A fresh look at ways in which the oral transmission of the Mishnah, regarded as the

earliest rabbinic “redaction,” can be recovered from the extant discussions of later talmudic writings, is now available from Elizabeth Shanks Alexander (1998). The most important student of the oral background of the Babylonian Talmud in particular is Yaakov Elman, who has contributed several major articles to this issue (e.g., 1999).

Scholars of rabbinic Judaism are increasingly sensitive to the peculiar characteristics of rabbinic texts as an example of oral tradition deeply impacted by the technology of writing and the pressures of written culture. But the implications of this perception have yet to be fully explored in at least two domains of traditional scholarship in rabbinic literature. The first concerns the importance of the oral-traditional character of rabbinic textuality for the conduct of historical inquiry into the events “behind” rabbinic literature. Thanks to the crucial works of Jacob Neusner (1971) scholars have long known that rabbinic sources must be used carefully in the reconstruction of “history.” Neusner’s work on the “formal traits” and “mnemonic traits” of rabbinic texts remain crucial exercises in demonstrating how the needs of orally managed narrative dominate recountings of the past in rabbinic tradition. There remains the enormous task of comprehensively examining the various rabbinic narrative traditions to determine further ways in which the media of rabbinic tradition have shaped the message of rabbinic historiography. Secondly, and perhaps even more crucially, it is time to reexamine the entire corpus of rabbinic literature from the perspective of oral-performative theory in order to develop distinctions within and among the various rabbinic corpora with regard to the relative role of orally-managed material in the composition, editing, and transmission of the material. The studies of Nelson and Alexander mentioned above are moving in that direction, and it is to be hoped that scholars in the United States, Germany, and Israel, the main contemporary centers of rabbinic studies, will take up this rather daunting challenge.

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References

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