The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature

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Published by Brown Judaic Studies

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Introduction

Since the 1780's, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have been referred to as the Synoptic Gospels (from synoptikos, "seen together"). The extensive parallels in structure, content, and wording of Matthew, Mark, and Luke make it even possible to arrange them side by side so that corresponding sections can be seen in parallel columns. ... Such an arrangement is called a "synopsis," ... and, by careful comparison of their construction, compilation, and actual agreement or disagreement in wording or content, literary- or source-critical relationships can be seen.¹

Much of ancient rabbinic literature is as synoptic as Matthew, Mark, and Luke; because of their extensive parallels in structure, content, and wording, rabbinic texts should be "seen together." Much of the Mishnah is paralleled by the Tosefta and the tannaitic midrashim, much of the Tosefta is paralleled by the beraitot cited in the two Talmudim, much of the Bavli is paralleled by the Yerushalmi, etc.² The first person to apply the term "synoptic" to rabbinic literature may well have been Morton Smith in his doctoral dissertation, published as Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels. By using this term Smith did not mean to suggest that the relationship of the Mishnah to the Tosefta was the same as that of Matthew and Luke to Mark; rather he intended to suggest that the synoptic problem faced by rabbinic scholars was of the same kind as that faced by scholars of the New Testament.³

² I leave aside the extensive parallels within each document.
Long before Morton Smith introduced the term "synoptic" into the discussion, medieval scribes and scholars of rabbinic texts noted the extensive parallels among these corpora. Scribes would routinely harmonize texts with each other, especially with the Bavli. In his commentary on Mishnah Zeraim R. Shimshon (Samson) b. Abraham of Sens (ca. 1200) cites virtually the entire Tosefta that parallels the Mishnah, and comments on both texts; in his commentary on Mishnah Negaim he cites extensively from the Sifra, and comments on both texts together. R. Shimshon's goal, of course, was not synoptic criticism but the explication of the Mishnah; still, he has the merit of having realized that a complete understanding of the Mishnah requires an understanding of the Tosefta (and Yerushalmi) as well. I think that R. Shimshon would have endorsed the view that "synoptic texts must always be studied synoptically," for this is what he did. With the emergence of historically minded Jewish scholarship in the nineteenth century the synoptic problem in rabbinic literature became a question of source criticism, textual priority, and literary relationship. Is the Tosefta a commentary on the Mishnah, or an early version of the Mishnah from which our Mishnah derives? Are the tannaitic midrashim reactions to the Mishnah, or sources for the Mishnah? Did the Bavli use our Tosefta, or did the two corpora draw on a common source? Did the Bavli know our Yerushalmi? These questions and others like them define the synoptic problem for scholars from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginnings of the twenty-first.

In an attempt to sort out some these questions and possibilities, I organized a small conference on "The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature." Here is the call for papers, as sent out to the invitees:

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM IN RABBINIC LITERATURE
A CONFERENCE SPONSORED BY
THE PROGRAM IN JUDAIC STUDIES, BROWN UNIVERSITY
March 1–2, 1998

The conference is dedicated to The Synoptic Problem In Ancient Rabbinic Literature. By "synoptic problem" I mean the following (I exclude Targumim and the later midrashim from consideration here):

1. The relationship of the Mishnah to the Tosefta


6 Among recent monographs I mention Alberdina Houtman, Mishnah and Tosefta: A Synoptic Comparison of the Tractates Berakhot and Shebiit (TSAJ 59; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996), and Ronen Reichmann, Mishna und Sifra (TSAJ 68; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1998).
Introduction

2. The interrelationship of the Mishnah, Tosefta, the tannaitic midrashim and beraitot
3. The relationship of the Bavli and the Yerushalmi to the Tosefta and the tannaitic midrashim
4. The relationship of the Bavli to the Yerushalmi
5. The relationship of the Yerushalmi to Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, etc.

There is abundant scholarship on all five of these problems, but little scholarly consensus. Because of my own personal interests I would hope that the presenters at the conference would focus on either nos. 1, 2, or 4, but presentations on nos. 3 or 5 are welcome as well. Presentations may deal with either macro or micro issues; they may be large overviews of intertextual relationships or they may be analyses of specific halakhot or sugyot.

Closely related to the synoptic problem is the documentary hypothesis championed by Prof. Neusner. To what extent do individual rabbinic documents (i.e., Mishnah, Tosefta, Bavli, Yerushalmi) constitute wholes that may/must be studied independently, and to what extent may/must they be studied only in comparison with other documents? What are the advantages and limitations of the non-synoptic study of rabbinic documents? Do rabbinic documents, in fact, constitute integral wholes with editorial or thematic unity?

The conference will be small, consisting of approximately 10 presentations, by specialists for specialists. Each presentation will be given a substantial block of time for discussion; I hope that each presentation will be pre-circulated in advance so that conference time can be devoted exclusively to discussion. Presentations will be published as a volume in Brown Judaic Studies.

In actuality the conference consisted of seven presentations, six of which are contained in this volume. Each paper was pre-circulated among the participants; at the conference each author in turn was given ten minutes or so to reflect on his/her work, after which the participants joined in a vigorous discussion for an hour or more. Over the course of a day and a half the participants thoroughly discussed each of the papers. This volume, which contains revised versions of the presentations, does not give any sense of the seriousness and collegiality of the discussions, just as it does not—cannot—survey the problem as a whole. Still, the six essays published here well illustrate various aspects of the synoptic problem in rabbinic literature.

In the opening essay Robert Goldenberg (State University of New York at Stony Brook) poses a serious methodological question, "Is 'The Talmud' a Document?" Goldenberg assesses the documentary premise (or approach or hypothesis) championed by Jacob Neusner and his disciples and finds it wanting. According to the documentary premise the only data that rabbinic texts afford are the texts or "documents" themselves. Each document attests to the worldview, philosophy, and opinions of its editors, nothing
more. Attributions of statements to named individual sages are unreliable and fundamentally can be ignored, because the voice of rabbinic texts is not the voice of individual sages but the voice of the text itself. Similarly, according to this premise rabbinic texts do not preserve "sources," at least not sources that can be identified and recovered. Goldenberg sensibly objects that the documentary premise presumes what it needs to demonstrate; it ascribes to rabbinic documents a self-conscious unity, coherence, and intentionality that they never possessed or claimed to possess. In addition, Goldenberg observes that the boundaries and definitions of these documents are elusive and somewhat arbitrary (for example, is tractate Avot part of the Mishnah or not?). Goldenberg instead proposes that rabbinic texts be regarded as anthologies, whose composition is partly purposeful, partly not. That is, the documents may well contain material that their editors found objectionable, but which was incorporated into the anthology nonetheless. Goldenberg does not develop this suggestion but clearly implies that the anthological character of rabbinic texts, at least of the Mishnah, Tosefta, Bavli, and Yerushalmi, does not preclude synoptic study or source criticism. I shall return to this question below.

Now we turn to two essays on the Tosefta. In her "Mishnah As a Response to "Tosefta"" Judith Hauptman (Jewish Theological Seminary) offers an alternative to the widely-held view that the Tosefta is a commentary on, and reaction to, the Mishnah. If I read Hauptman correctly, she too concedes that the Tosefta, as it exists today, is indeed secondary to the Mishnah, but she argues that the Tosefta frequently contains, in unedited or lightly edited form, the "stuff" out of which the Mishnah itself was created. The Mishnah, being more coherent, formulaic, and consistent than the Tosefta, revises this material far more than the Tosefta does. Thus, Hauptman concludes, the Mishnah is dependent on an earlier collection of material that is preserved by the Tosefta. She supports this conclusion by observing that in many Mishnah-Tosefta parallels, the Mishnah version is cryptic, almost incomprehensible, while the Tosefta version is fuller and readily comprehensible. We might, of course, argue that the Tosefta is simply explaining the Mishnah, but this argument fails to explain the purpose and method of the Mishnah's redactors: why should they have produced a text that was cryptic, almost incomprehensible? Surely it is easier to explain the Mishnah, argues Hauptman, if we assume that it is a condensed version of the fuller and readily comprehensible text that now finds its home in the Tosefta. The Mishnah could afford to be brief because its source was readily available. Hauptman, I think, would readily concede that this argument is suggestive, not probative, but it strengthens other arguments in support of this position that have been advanced elsewhere.

Shamma Friedman (Jewish Theological Seminary and Bar Ilan University) addresses the problem of the Bavli's citation of beraitot that re-
semble our Tosefta but are not identical with it. If we leave aside various permutations and implausible possibilities, we have two fundamental possibilities by which to solve the problem: either the Bavli and the Tosefta are independent of each other (that is, each corpus is citing a bona fide version of a tradition that circulated in various forms), or one is dependent on the other (that is, that the Bavli has purposefully reshaped the Tosefta that it cites). In his “Uncovering Literary Dependencies in the Talmudic Corpus” Friedman briefly reviews the history of the research on this problem and concludes that the correct model for understanding the Bavli-Tosefta relationship is not that of “independent parallels” but “the edited parallel”—the later source, in this case the Bavli, has revised and improved the source that it cites. Friedman argues that the Bavli introduced these changes for a variety of motives: to harmonize one source with another, to improve the style, to update the language, etc.

The next section of the volume contains two thematic studies. The first is by Christine Hayes (Yale University), “Halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai in Rabbinic Sources: A Methodological Case Study.” Hayes contrasts the documentary (or synchronic) approach championed by Prof. Neusner with the source critical approach. Some of Hayes’ criticisms of the documentary approach echo those of Goldenberg in the first essay of this volume, but her real contribution is the careful attempt to apply both approaches and to balance the limits of the one against the limits of the other. She studies the term halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai (or HLMM), “a law given to Moses at Sinai.” After observing that the Mishnah provides contradictory signals as to the meaning and application of this term, she notes that a diachronic (source critical) reading of the Talmudim shows important development, either ideological (Yerushalmi, where later tradents see HLMM as equivalent to scripture but early ones do not) or terminological (Bavli, where later tradents use the term halakhah or halakhot as synonymous with HLMM, but early ones do not). A synchronic (documentary) reading of the Bavli and Yerushalmi reveals a whole series of parallels and contrasts between them, suggesting that the presence of sources and layers within each document does not necessarily impugn the presence of a unitary setting or purpose. In particular, Hayes suggests that the Bavli’s use of HLMM reveals some anxiety over rabbinic authority and over the justification of that authority, an anxiety that seems to be absent from the Yerushalmi. Thus both the synchronic and the diachronic approaches have utility.

Our second thematic study is by Richard Kalmin (Jewish Theological Seminary), “Rabbinic Portrayals of Biblical and Post-biblical Heroes.” Here, in consonance with some of his earlier work, Kalmin questions the utility of the documentary approach by observing that various themes or patterns emerge from rabbinic texts precisely if the documentary origins of the evidence are ignored. If we assume that statements ascribed to tannaim are
Introduction

actually tannaitic, even if they are attested only in amoraic documents; if we assume that statements ascribed to sages of the land of Israel are actually Israeli (Kalmin uses the term “Palestinian”), even if they are attested only in the Bavli; if we assume that statements ascribed to early amoraim are in fact earlier than statements ascribed to later amoraim; in other words, if we assume the fundamental historicity of the ascriptions in rabbinic corpora and ignore the identity of the documents in which they appear—a survey of the evidence can yield meaningful and consistent results. As a specimen of this method Kalmin studies rabbinic self-assessment (thereby treating some of the same texts treated by Hayes), specifically the equation of rabbinic worthies with biblical ones. Such equations are the work of tannaim and early amoraim, not later amoraim; such equations are formulated somewhat differently when attributed to tannaim, Israeli amoraim, or Babylonian amoraim. Rather than assume that we have before us evidence of massive and massively skillful pseudepigraphy, Kalmin concludes that it is far more plausible to assume that the attributions are fundamentally reliable across all these documents and that the documentary origin of each attribution is not significant. This demonstration is highly suggestive, and gains force when set beside other such demonstrations that Kalmin himself has made elsewhere. Kalmin has not disproved the documentary hypothesis, of course; when judged by other criteria or other methods perhaps the individual documents can be shown to be distinctive or to have shaped their materials in distinctive ways. Still, Kalmin clearly has proven that the source critical method can work and can yield meaningful results.

The final paper, “Texts and History: The Dynamic Relationship between Talmud Yerushalmi and Genesis Rabbah,” by Hans-Jürgen Becker (University of Göttingen), is perhaps the most radical and brings us back to some of the issues that were discussed by Goldenberg. Becker argues that the documentary approach cannot yield meaningful results because it assumes that rabbinic texts are closed, fixed documents, whereas they are not. Creation, redaction, transmission, inscription—in the case of rabbinic texts these four activities are virtually synonymous. Rabbinic texts seem not to have attained closure and fixity until the age of printing. Becker has elsewhere carried out extensive comparisons between Genesis Rabbah and the Yerushalmi; he concludes that both texts used a series of written sources, but that the redaction of each of the two texts is a protracted process, not a momentary event. These texts constitute primary evidence for their own internal literary histories, but hardly constitute evidence for a documentary view of anything, let alone for rabbinic Judaism in the fourth century. Becker endorses the source critical approach, but only on condition that we do not move too quickly from literary history to social history. Becker himself tries to show what kind of “history” can be extracted from
the literary history of the texts—one can talk about the "big picture," nothing more. All in all, this is a very stimulating paper that defends an intellectually consistent, if extreme, position. If Becker is correct, not only does the documentary hypothesis lack any foundation, but so does most of current rabbinic historiography.

It is striking that four of the six presentations reject or question the documentary approach championed by Prof. Neusner. Goldenberg and Becker reject its intellectual foundations outright, Kalmin demonstrates the utility of the source critical method, and Hayes allows the utility of the documentary method only if accompanied by the source critical method, too. Hauptman and Friedman do not address the documentary approach outright, but each provides a fine illustration of the source critical method at work. The clear message emerging from this volume is that the methodological exclusivity claimed for the documentary method by Prof. Neusner is completely unjustified, and that the method itself is based on assumptions and foundations that are not universally accepted. The synoptic problem in rabbinic literature still endures.

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P.S.: I would like to thank two graduate students in the Program in Judaic Studies for their assistance: Mr. Nat Levto w for administering the conference and attending to numerous organizational details, and Mr. Abe Hendin for copyediting and formatting this volume.