A Talmud in Exile

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Preface to the Digital Edition

I am grateful for this opportunity to introduce A Talmud in Exile: The Influence of Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah on the Formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah to new readers, and to reintroduce it—by way of these retrospective reflections—to the many readers who have grappled with its arguments since it was first published in 2005. A Talmud in Exile was the result of my systematic study of the widely known phenomenon that many Bavli tractates exhibit broad similarities to their Yerushalmi counterparts in the selection and arrangement of material. On a more granular level, this phenomenon is made manifest in discernible striking similarities in structure and content between the Yerushalmi and Bavli gemarot to particular mishnah pericopes (in many, but not all cases).

My quest in the late 1990’s to find a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon in the excellent scholarship available at that time left me dissatisfied. I found that some scholars seemed to ignore the similarities in structure and content between a Bavli tractate and its Yerushalmi counterpart, focusing more on the two Talmuds’ numerous and obvious differences. These differences were proclaimed fatal to a conclusion that the Bavli tractate was in any way influenced by the Yerushalmi. Other scholars closely studied the Palestinian amoraic material common to a Bavli-Yerushalmi tractate pair and examined Babylonian amoraic reception and reworking of this material. Some dubbed this Palestinian amoraic material “talmud kadum” (“early talmud”), others called it “homer basisi amora’i kadum” (“early foundational amoraic material,” or “early basic amoraic material” as I translate it in the book) and still others labeled it “siddur kadum” (“early arrangement”). These scholars assumed—overtly or tacitly, typically tacitly—that the similarities in structure and content between a Bavli tractate and its Yerushalmi counterpart could
be explained largely, if not entirely, by this amoraic-era transmission of Palestinian amoraic material.

Now, it is undeniable that Babylonian amoraim received, transmitted, and reworked Palestinian amoraic material. Some Babylonian amoraim, especially those of the fourth generation and later, are portrayed as interacting with *nehotei* (“those who descend”; sages portrayed as traveling between Palestine and Babylonia, bearing rabbinic traditions). One such example among many is Abaye’s conversation with the *nehota* Rav Dimi (B. Avodah Zarah 14b). Another example is the portrayal of the fifth-generation amora Rav Papa as pondering two versions of the same Palestinian *sugya*, one attributed to Rav Dimi and the other to the latter’s fellow-*nehota* Rabin (B. Ketubot 57a). Babylonian amoraim also demonstrably engage with Palestinian amoraic material in the absence of a nexus to the *nehotei*; one of numerous examples is the martyrdom *sugya* on B. Sanhedrin 74b–75a, in which Abaye and Rava are portrayed as key players in the reworking of a parallel martyrdom *sugya* on Y. Shevi’it 4:2, 35a–b.

But I found the contemporary implicit scholarly assumption that these amoraic-era exchanges account not only for the presence of that material in the Bavli but also the discernible inter-Talmudic structural similarities in selections of topics and *sugyot* to be unpersuasive. First, this assumption comes freighted with another: an assumption that Babylonian sages received not only traditions, *sugyot*, aggadic materials, scriptural interpretations, and other such sources from Palestine, but also the ordering of *sugyot* and topics attached to each *mishnah*. This assumption requires that even broad inter-Talmudic similarities in the structuring of *sugyot* and topics be dated to the two rabbinic cultures’ shared portion of the amoraic period (up to the late fourth century and perhaps a bit beyond). I leave detailed discussion of this point to Chapter 1 and other relevant places in the book but will simply note here that such an assumption (implied or otherwise) is inconsistent with the Bavli’s portrayal of Babylonian amoraic scholarly activity. Babylonian amoraim are not portrayed as demonstrating awareness of broader arrangements of topics and *sugyot* that range beyond a discrete *sugya*. Even the *nehotei* are not portrayed as demonstrating such wider awareness of the ordering of materials in relation to a *mishnah*. To the extent, then, that we may demonstrate that a Bavli tractate and its Yerushalmi counterpart display such structural similarities in the ordering of topics and *sugyot*, we cannot reasonably date these structural similarities to the amoraic period. At the very least, I (continue to) believe(d), scholars should be open to the possibility that these structural similarities result from the (post-amoraic) Bavli tractate’s reflection upon, and adoption of elements of, its Yerushalmi counterpart.
But there was little openness to such a possibility in the 1990’s and early 2000’s. The regnant scholarly consensus was that a Bavli tractate did not, could not, have relied on its Yerushalmi counterpart. Most academic scholars who studied the Palestinian amoraic material in the Bavli seem to have accepted this consensus almost as a wissentschaftliche article of faith. I use the provocative phrase “article of faith” because the idea that a Bavli tractate did not and could not have relied on its Yerushalmi counterpart was viewed as axiomatic, as a given of inter-Talmudic research, despite the lack of a systematic and rigorous inquiry establishing it as such. The story of the emergence of this “article of faith” remains fully to be told; it appears to date from the 19th century beginnings of the academic study of (rabbinic) Judaism, whose pioneers rejected the tacit consensus of medieval Jewish jurists (also an “article of faith” as it were) that the Bavli knew the Yerushalmi. Martin S. Jaffee was the notable exception; in a seminal 1989 essay he demonstrated that Bavli tractate Horayot exhibits broad similarities in the structure and arrangement of materials to Yerushalmi Horayot, and boldly proposed that the former may have had access in some form to the latter.

My survey of all this scholarship convinced me that the time was ripe for a fresh consideration of the question of whether a Bavli tractate might be demonstrated to have known and relied on its Yerushalmi counterpart. All relevant previous scholarly investigations played a role in my crafting of a research methodology. My choice of the Avodah Zarah tractates was largely due to the subject matter’s inherent interest and the sizable (yet manageable) amount of Talmudic material available for study. I had no idea what conclusion I would be able to draw from this tractate pair, which was all to the scholarly good. I devised a two-level analytic approach: “macroanalysis” and “microanalysis.” Macro analysis is the subject of Chapter 2; three variations of micro analysis are examined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. “Macro analysis” is a holistic examination of the two Talmuds’ treatments of a given mishnah pericope. The point of macro analysis is to identify similarities between the two Talmuds’ treatments of a given mishnah that can only reasonably be attributed to the Bavli’s adaptation of the Yerushalmi. These similarities are dubbed “structural similarities.” Structural similarities are identified by a process of elimination: similarities between the two Talmuds’ treatments of a mishnah that are attributable to the mishnah itself, or to shared tannaitic material drawn by the Talmuds from the Tosefta or some other tannaitic compilation, tell us nothing about whether the Bavli’s gemara to that mishnah relied on the Yerushalmi. This process of elimination can be complex, as I observe in Chapter 1. If the Talmuds share a sequence of Toseftan baraitot or an eclectic mix of tannaitic sources traceable to various tannaitic compilations and use this sequence or eclectic mixas the basis of different patterns of argumentation, then they
are each more likely relying on a pre-existing tannaitic stratum rather than the Bavli relying on the Yerushalmi. But if the Talmuds use this Toseftan sequence or shared eclectic mix of tannaitic material in developing the same or similar patterns of argumentation, then it is possible the Bavli derived that tannaitic stratum along with the pattern of argumentation from the Yerushalmi tractate.

To the best of my knowledge, scholars since 2005 have not taken issue with this aspect of my approach to identifying structural similarities. The same cannot be said of what is perceived to be A Talmud in Exile’s approach to “early talmud.” As noted, I did (and do) not take issue with the notion that Palestinian amoraic material was brought to Babylonia during the amoraic period. In Chapter 1 I assert that a “structural similarity” must also be one that is “not reasonably identifiable as early talmud” (38). I thus acknowledge that if a given inter-Talmudic similarity is reasonably identifiable as “early talmud,” that is, if the similarity is likely due to the reception of Palestinian amoraic material in amoraic Babylonia, that similarity is not a “structural similarity,” not a data point that can shed light on the question of whether the post-amoraic redactors of Bavli Avodah Zarah relied on the structure of Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah in crafting their own tractate. My dissatisfaction with the scholarly treatment of “early talmud” up to the 1990’s was that its alleged role in accounting satisfactorily for observable inter-Talmudic structural similarities was viewed axiomatically, taken as a given rather than as a hypothesis to be studied and tested (much like the Bavli’s presumed disconnection from the Yerushalmi). My approach to “early talmud” in A Talmud in Exile was consequently one of challenge and opposition—again, not to the idea that Palestinian amoraic learning made its way to Babylonia during the amoraic period—but to the large claims being made for “early talmud” in much of the scholarship up to that time. My goal was to interrogate the role of “early talmud,” reframe it as a hypothesis to be tested, and decenter it as “the” explanation for inter-Talmudic structural similarities. Throughout A Talmud in Exile I examined whether recognizable inter-Talmudic similarities not attributable to the local mishnah, Tosefta, or shared eclectic mix of tannaitic sources should rightly be considered “early talmud.” In most (if not all) cases I found reasons to support the conclusion that the alleged “early talmud” more likely came to Babylonia after the amoraic periods as part of a larger macro ordering of topics and sugyot, that is, as part of a structural similarity. In the case of the Avodah Zarah tractates the alleged “early talmud” cannot be clearly distinguished from the structural similarity of which it is (now) a part. Babylonian amoraim appear to be no more aware of the alleged “early talmud” than they are of the structural similarity of which it is a part, or, if they do seem aware of it, their “awareness” is tinged with elements drawn from the structural similarity and therefore, the literary
manifestations of that “awareness” were likely introduced by the Bavli redactors.

Since 2005 I have identified and studied examples outside the Avodah Zarah tractates categorizable as “early talmud.” I have also learned much from colleagues who have pursued inquiries into “early talmud” in light of the methodological lesson of A Talmud in Exile; “early talmud” is a hypothesis to be tested rather than a historical and literary given. If I were to undertake the systematic study of another tractate pair, I would be more inclined today to devote a chapter or two expressly to “early talmud.” This hypothetical chapter or two would adumbrate clearer criteria by which to identify and distinguish “early talmud” from any structural similarities in which it may be embedded—or show how it cannot be distinguished from them, as it is not in A Talmud in Exile.

The goal of macroanalysis is to identify structural similarities between the Talmuds. It is followed by microanalysis, the detailed study of the Palestinian material in the Bavli (structural similarities and smaller units of Palestinian amoraic material) to determine whether and to what extent differences between the presentations of these materials in Palestinian amoraic compilations and the Bavli may be due to characteristic, recurring patterns of how the Bavli reworks its prior sources. The evidence developed through microanalysis prospectively neutralizes the possible argument that the many (inevitable) differences between the Talmuds preclude drawing a conclusion that the later tractate relied on the earlier. To the extent these differences can be sorted into recurring patterns of how the Bavli reworks prior sources, these recurring patterns point to exactly the opposite conclusion: they reflect just how deep the Bavli tractate’s debt to its Yerushalmi counterpart (and to Palestinian learning more broadly). Some of these patterns include the Bavli’s tendency to arrange Palestinian materials in a more sensible order, its tendency to eliminate references specific to the land of Israel or the late Roman context, and its introduction of Babylonian cultural, halakhic, or linguistic features. Microanalysis also shows how the Bavli tends to begin a discussion at the point at which the Yerushalmi leaves off, and how at times it answers questions the Yerushalmi leaves unanswered.

Based on the findings of macro and microanalysis, A Talmud in Exile concludes that Bavli Avodah Zarah was indeed aware of, and relied upon, Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah. This conclusion, like Jaffee’s, is a deviation from the scholarly consensus about the relationship between the Talmuds and very few scholars since 2005 have cited this finding approvingly (or even referred to it at all). The proposition for which A Talmud in Exile is most frequently cited is that the Bavli reworks materials derived from the Yerushalmi in characteristic and recurring ways; indeed, the book appears to be a standard and almost “mandatory” footnote reference for schol-
ars who work comparatively with Bavli and Yerushalmi material. There are very recent signs that *A Talmud in Exile*’s core finding that Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah influenced the formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah is attracting more sympathetic scholarly attention, which suggests that the consensus about the relationship between the Talmuds may be (slowly) starting to shift.

Another aspect of *A Talmud in Exile* that attracted little scholarly notice was Chapter 6’s historical reconstruction of how Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah might have made its way to Babylonia. My point in Chapter 6 was to offer scholars more than a breezy, evidence- and argument-free assertion that the Yerushalmi tractate just somehow arrived in Babylonia. Drawing primarily on historical context and orality and literacy studies, I wished to paint a vivid picture of how Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah’s demonstrable literary influence on Bavli Avodah Zarah can be demonstrated to have been historically plausible. Today I would augment Chapter 6 with scholarship on travel in late antiquity, especially travel for purposes of acquiring or disseminating knowledge. I would also explore in greater depth the many textual examples from both the Bavli and Palestinian rabbinic corpora of Palestinian sages’ willingness to describe themselves as using written repositories of rabbinic traditions; naturally this exploration would also require engagement with Yaacov Sussmann’s and Neil Danzig’s lengthy and learned studies of rabbinic orality. I remain convinced that while Babylonian sages clearly privileged orality in their own study contexts, the transmission of a Yerushalmi tractate from its Palestinian study context to Babylonia could not have been accomplished without the involvement of writing.

*A Talmud in Exile*’s inquiry is, at bottom, historical: source- and redaction-criticism, investigation of historical context, and orality and literacy studies are all deployed with the goal of demonstrating that Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah did in fact influence the formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah in a particular time and place. But *A Talmud in Exile* can do more than model how one may discern a Yerushalmi tractate’s influence on its Bavli counterpart. Its careful cataloguing of what and how a Bavli tractate selects from its Yerushalmi counterpart and how it reworks—or not—its selections (and other Palestinian material besides) renders *A Talmud in Exile* a methodological model for using the intertextually linked rabbinic canon to reconstruct rabbinic religious, cultural, intellectual, and social history. What aspects of Palestinian intellectual and religious culture did Babylonian amoraim and the later creators of the Bavli adopt? Which did they set aside? Which did they adapt, and how? Answering such big questions must begin with very granular, micro-level research: how did the Bavli rework its prior sources?

If I were to undertake another inter-Talmudic study, my scholarly focus at present would lean more literary than historical. Source- and
redaction-criticism being a sort of intertextuality avant la lettre, I would be more inclined today to complement these traditional academic methods with the literary studies toolkit, especially theories of intertextuality. Intertextuality and literary studies more broadly would draw scholarly attention to, inter alia, how the Bavli tractate uses the Yerushalmi tractate to create meaning; that is, how it selects and transforms an earlier text in order to emend it, criticize it, or bolster its authority in a world in which that authority is newly in doubt. Using a literary lens to examine a Bavli tractate’s use of its Yerushalmi counterpart would lead to a greater focus on what the rabbis’ pervasive intertextuality means not only in the context of a discrete tractate pair, but for rabbinic literary and religious culture more generally. That is: assuming other tractate pairs demonstrate Bavli reliance on the Yerushalmi, what does it mean for Babylonian rabbinic culture that at least parts of its magnum opus are based on the earlier rabbinic culture’s Talmud? To what extent might we speak, à la Harold Bloom, of a Babylonian “anxiety of influence”? It is my hope that, thanks to this digital reissue, A Talmud in Exile will catalyze continued inquiry into these and other issues yet to be identified.

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