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100 Years of JQR and Rabbinic Judaism

Abstract

In this issue we continue our celebration of the Jewish Quarterly Review's first century on American soil. This issue focuses on classical and rabbinic Judaism. Considering the topic, a certain question arises: To what extent is the very enterprise of Jewish studies a fundamentally rabbinic one? And yet, perusing the tables of contents of the preceding four hundred or so issues, the precise place of rabbinics remains strangely elusive.

Keywords

Natalie B. Dohrmann, Jewish Quarterly Review, Rabbinic Judaism, Jewish Studies, Jewish Academia

Disciplines

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100 Years of *JQR* and Rabbinic Judaism

IN THIS ISSUE we continue our celebration of the *Jewish Quarterly Review's* first century on American soil. This issue focuses on classical and rabbinic Judaism. Considering the topic, a certain question arises: To what extent is the very enterprise of Jewish studies a fundamentally rabbinic one? And yet, perusing the tables of contents of the preceding four hundred or so issues, the precise place of rabbinics remains strangely elusive.

Looking through the first sixty years of the journal's pages—its articles as well as its "Critical Notices," "Literary Gleanings," "Miscellanea," "Notes," and "Discussions" (the scholarly genres were wonderfully elastic then)—what caught my attention was a striking lacuna. Studies devoted to the Babylonian Talmud, the pinnacle of rabbinic production and core of the traditional Jewish curriculum, are remarkably sparse in these pages before the late 1960s. While the historical and literary contexts of the Talmud, as well as the editing of talmudic manuscripts, all receive intensive coverage, comparatively few studies directly address the Bavli's actual content. There are obvious exceptions (Boaz Cohen for example published some important pieces in the journal); still, Jewish studies as imagined and presented in *JQR* seems to have shied away from aiming its historicizing paradigm at the very heart of the traditional curriculum. What, if anything, might this mean?

In 1970, Solomon Zeitlin, who had inherited the editorship from Cyrus Adler three decades earlier, published a letter in the journal marking its eightieth anniversary. In his letter Zeitlin praised the scholarship of the journal's contributors, commended his editorial board (most of whom, as he noted, were his own students, as were several of the contributors), and celebrated the journal's then-relatively unique presentation of work by both Jews and Christians. He welcomed rigorous scholarship and controversial articles so long as they were based on true learning, "since such articles stimulate both scholars and intelligent laymen" (it may be noted that Zeitlin had spent years battling to prove the Dead Sea Scrolls a hoax). He emphatically shunned theological bias in the assessment of scholarship. There were, however, also "disillusionments." As Zeitlin then wrote:

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In the last twenty years many colleges, theological seminaries, and universities established departments and chairs for the study of Judaism for which their boards of directors and presidents should be congratulated. Many young people were attracted to these courses. Ph.D. theses multiplied. We must note that some professors called to occupy the Chairs for the study of Judaism were not well equipped. Certain young Ph.D.s sent chapters of their theses to the *Quarterly*. It was disheartening to note the superficiality and the lack of knowledge displayed, particularly in the fields of rabbinics and history. (*JQR* 60.4 [1970]: 274)

Did rabbinics merit singling out for critical lassitude? Was the expansion of Jewish studies at American universities accompanied by a dramatic lowering of standards? And if so, why specifically in the field of rabbinics? The new Jewish scholar, who Zeitlin imagined becoming one of Judaism's "future leaders," would be "steeped in the knowledge of historical Judaism" (*JQR* 57 [1967]: x) but may have also found it difficult to meet a standard set not by the university alone but also by the yeshivot of Eastern Europe.

Zeitlin's remarks bring to mind his younger contemporary Saul Lieberman, whose comparative work, philological agility, historical breadth, and ability to see rabbinic literature at once in horizontal historical context and as a distinct internally developed Jewish document made him the avatar of contemporary Anglo-American rabbinics. And yet, his path-breaking articles were, according to Lieberman himself, secondary to what he considered his *real* work. In his introduction to the combined publication of Lieberman's magisterial *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* and *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, Lieberman's student Dov Zlotnick tells us that his teacher thought of the scholarly articles included in these volumes (and, we might surmise, the several pieces he wrote for *JQR* between 1944 and 1982¹) as distractions from his real work: most notably his edition of and commentary on the Tosefta.²

Given the Talmud's centrality to traditional Judaism, its comparatively slight presence in *JQR* for many decades is all the more curious given that the large majority of the scholars published in *JQR* were classically trained and probably continued to study Talmud traditionally in their private time. Yet perhaps Lieberman and Zeitlin provide a key. *JQR*'s

1. Such as such as "Roman Legal Institutions in Early Rabbinics and in the Acta Martyrum," *JQR* 35.1 (1944):1–57; or his "The Martyrs of Caesarea," *JQR* 36.3 (1946): 239–53.

2. In his introduction to Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine/Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1994), vii–viii.

areas of inquiry in its first eight decades seem perhaps to echo, in their way, the self-imposed critical limits of Ibn Ezra under whose critical gaze rabbinic aggadah and biblical meaning were pared to a scholarly peshat—but for whom halakhic literature remained largely untouched. Although *JQR* has always been proudly ecumenical (many non-Jews have published in the journal since its inception) its Jewish transcript (to borrow a concept from James C. Scott³), remained largely hidden.

To what extent, then, is rabbinics central to Jewish studies? Was *JQR* consciously or unconsciously protecting the sacred heritage of traditional learning by leaving it alone? Rabbinics is no doubt present in the early *JQR* but takes a rather specific shape as merely one of the fields of study and seems at first blush properly unprivileged. The journal gave comparably robust coverage to issues and eras cognate to the Talmud: there is an enormous amount of material on the Bible, on liturgy, on midrash; there are discoveries and discussions of Geniza manuscripts, and Semitic philology, New Testament and patristics, Second Temple literature and history, Karaites and Geonim, and the medieval commentators. Rabbinic theology is present as well. Yet in its way theology is, from a traditional perspective, also ancillary to the prime vocation of the yeshivah, as evidenced by Solomon Schechter's grand "Aspects of Rabbinic Theology" (published in seven parts between 1894 and 1896), which largely used aggadic materials as its sources—and was indeed criticized as being a Protestant endeavor *ab ovo*.

All of this, then, might tempt a mischievous observer to suggest that this era in the *JQR* represented a "feminization" of the academic pursuit of Jewish studies in two regards: first, in terms of its emphasis on subjects considered of secondary significance to those pursued in the traditional yeshivah; and second, in its focus on those subjects that were more open and available to women in traditional settings, such as Bible, liturgy, aggadah, poetry, and narrative. However, if "Judaism" in its normative version is a talmudically based religion, this leaves *JQR*'s "study of historical Judaism" in an oblique relationship to its object.

In the past half-century the place of the Bavli seems to have shifted. Its contents have received increasing and intensive academic focus from many angles. What accounts for the shift from the latent to the manifest in recent decades? The passing of a generation educated in European (mostly Lithuanian) yeshivot? The maturation of rabbinics in the secular university? Trends in humanistic scholarship may be important here as

3. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., 1990).

well: the literary turn brought historical, halakhic, and aggadic texts under a single conceptual umbrella, and the law is now vital material for this generation's cultural historians.

But one is still aware of the special demands that quietly attend classical learning, even if not always visibly performed. The Bavli continues to exert a distinctive authority over those who were raised in it, and to intimidate scholars who were not, in ways that other challenging corpora from the ancient world do not. This itself may hinder the incorporation of talmudic studies within the dominant disciplinary contexts of the modern research university, and it may perhaps also help to explain the fuller representation of work on less culturally laden materials such as midrash, the Jerusalem Talmud, and even the Mishnah. Yet in a world in which, for some at least, an ability to read a daf of Gemara, even if (especially if?) learned in a yeshiva, is still considered desirable (if not a prerequisite) for an academic position even in such fields as modern American Jewish literature, one can sense the powerful presence of a rabbinism that backshadows, for good and for ill, the disciplines that make up Jewish studies.

It is clear that times have changed. Now, balanced against the many other fields of Jewish studies, *JQR* receives a significantly disproportionate number of submissions in rabbinics, and to some extent this is reflected in our pages (work on Bible by contrast has nearly vanished). The pieces that make up this issue build upon the deep knowledge and traditions of learning established in no small measure by the scholars enshrined over the past century in the pages of *JQR*. Topics range from Josephan historiography to rabbinic philology, scholasticism, and ethics, as in the piece by Tzvi Novick, to the history of scholarship. Typical of this generation, all approaches internalize a distinct attention to rhetoric and power, and a revised vision of the place of rabbis in the social fabric of the Roman and Sasanian East. Both Eyal Regev and Michael L. Sattlow use the Roman empire, both pagan and Christian, as an indispensable frame for the understanding of inner Jewish and inner rabbinic thought and action. Jonathan Klawans's piece looks at the influence of the experiences and cultural biases of a generation of scholars who endured the Second World War on the received understanding of first-century Judaism. The Babylonian Talmud itself plays a central role in the article by Shai Secunda, who himself addresses some of the methodological issues that make the Bavli an especially thorny text to contextualize.