

THE TALMUDIC STORY: AGGADA AS HISTORY

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In this paper, I examine the Talmud's portrayal of the characters and personalities of Amoraim of the second and third generations. I ask whether these Amoraim are presented as scholars or ignoramuses, as friends and colleagues or as barely on speaking terms. My goal is to determine whether their portrayal aids us in identifying and describing some of the diverse sources that make up the Babylonian Talmud. I discover that Talmudic accounts of their characters and personalities and the nature of their interaction contain contradictions that suggest the existence of opposing sources.

This is not to say that every contradiction is proof of a distinct source. Yonah Fraenkel is certainly correct that aggadic compositions must be examined as works of art.¹ The purpose behind many Talmudic stories is to make a statement about the nature of the world, or God, or the human predicament. As such, the character of the Amoraic protagonist may be molded to fit the particular statement the author wishes to make. The same school or author, depending on the needs of the narrative, might portray the same ra

g sources seems the most likely explanation. In the final analysis, every narrative and every contradiction needs to be evaluated on its own terms.

¹See, for example, Yonah Fraenkel, "She'elot Hermeneutiot ba-Heker Sipur ha-Agadah," *Tarbiz* 47 (1978), pp. 139-42. See the response by E. E. Halevi, "Od Al Genre Hadash ba-Sipurei ha-Agadah," *Tarbiz* 49 (1980), pp. 424-28 and Fraenkel's rejoinder ("Teshuva," p. 429, there). See also Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1983).

The discovery of contradictory sources suggests that several aspects of the history of the Amoraic period need to be re-evaluated, since many historians have tended to accept Talmudic stories as reliable evidence once miraculous elements and later editorial accretions have been removed. As several recent scholars have argued, however, before Talmudic stories can be evaluated as historical evidence we must ask who the original authors were, what were their motives, and who was their intended audience.² Even once we obtain the "original" version of a story, we do not necessarily have access to the historical event which gave rise to the story. For perhaps accounts of the historical event have been colored, even distorted beyond recognition, by the beliefs, desires, and biases of the original authors.

Talmudic accounts of the relationship between two third-generation Amoraim, Rabbah and Rav Yosef, will illustrate my point. Throughout the Talmud, we often encounter Rav Yosef as Rabbah's junior contemporary, and on occasion as his subordinate and student.³ Some passages, however, reflect a different perspective on their relationship. In one context, Rabbah and Yosef are described as candidates for the same position of communal responsibility.⁴ At issue here is who is the superior scholar, whose method of learning is preferable. The Babylonian rabbis send "there," to Palestine, for a decision, and word is sent back that Yosef is preferable. Yosef declines, however, out of humility or due to an astrological prediction that he will rule for only two years and then die.⁵ Rabbah rules in his place, his tenure lasting twenty-two years, and Yosef follows, ruling for two years as foretold by the astrologers. According to this story, Yosef was the superior scholar and it was his decision to delay assumption of a position that was

²A comprehensive bibliography cannot be provided in the context of the present paper. See, however, Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965-1970), vol. 3, pp. 50-94, and vol. 4, pp. 73-82 and 85-124. See also Daniel Sperber, "On the Unfortunate Adventures of Rav Kahana: A Passage of Saboraic Polemic from Sasanian Persia," in *Irano-Judaica*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1982), pp. 83-100. Compare Yoel Florsheim, "ha-Yahasim bein Hakhmei ha-Dor ha-Sheni Shel Amora'ei Bavel," *Zion* 51 (1986), pp. 285-93. Compare also Shmuel Safrai, "Tales of the Sages in the Palestinian Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), pp. 209-32.

³Eruvin 78a-b and 78b, and Kiddushin 58a,

⁴Berakhot 64a (and parallel).

⁵See *Dikdukei Sopherim*, n. yud, on Berakhot 64a, and see Horayot 14a.

rightfully his. This story is most likely an attempt on the part of sages who favor Yosef to explain why Rabbah was chosen to rule ahead of Yosef. This happened not because Rabbah was the superior scholar, these disciples or editors claim; on the contrary, Yosef was superior, and it was his decision to delay the appointment.⁶

Rava's claim in two contexts⁷ that Rabbah and Yosef were unable to resolve a certain difficulty over a period of twenty-two years, and that only when Yosef became head was the matter resolved, is a clear echo of the story described above. Rava is alluding to the twenty-two years that Rabbah ruled and suggesting that only when the appropriate person came into power could the matter be satisfactorily resolved. Rava, or whoever placed these sentiments into Rava's mouth, shares the view that Yosef was greater than Rabbah. It is understandable that Rava would hold such an opinion (or that such an opinion would be attributed to Rava), since he was a student of Yosef but not of Rabbah.⁸

The famous story of the death of Rabbah bar Nahmani, the third-generation Amora discussed above,⁹ clearly derives from circles friendly to Rabbah. Rabbah dies according to this story because the heavenly academy is deadlocked over an issue of ritual purity, and Rabbah's vote is necessary to decide the question. I concluded above that several Talmudic passages reflect the view that Yosef was superior to Rabbah. If this is the case, then the story of Rabbah's death provides further support for my claim that the Talmud contains a variety of contradictory sources. It is difficult to imagine that people who transmitted stories whose major point is Yosef's superiority to Rabbah also transmitted a story which views Rabbah as a figure of cosmic importance. Furthermore, Abaye and "all of the rabbis" attend to Rabbah after his death,¹⁰ but Yosef is nowhere to be found. According to the conventional view that Yosef was Rabbah's junior contemporary and successor in Pumbedita, his absence from the story is

⁶Compare Mordechai Yudelowitz, Yeshivat Pumbedita bi-Yemei ha-Amoraim (Tel Aviv, 1935), pp. 21-22.

⁷Ketubot 42b and Baba Kamma 66b.

⁸See, however, Moed Katan 28a.

⁹Baba Mezia 86a.

¹⁰See Dikdukei Sopherim, n. dalet.

striking. According to some versions, in fact,¹¹ the story explicitly serves to legitimate Abaye, and not Yosef, as Rabbah's successor in Pumbedita. According to these versions, a message descends from heaven and falls upon the head of Abaye, designating him, and not Yosef, as Rabbah's successor. Very likely, whoever told the story of Rabbah's death disagrees with the view that Yosef was greater than Rabbah. The Talmud preserves contradictory views regarding the scholarly status of Rabbah and Yosef which most likely derive from diverse sources.

Talmudic accounts of the relationship between the Persian government, the exilarch, and Geniva, a first- and/or second-generation Babylonian Amora, provide a striking illustration of my claim that historical studies of the rabbinic period are in need of revision. Mar Ukba, identified in Igeret Rav Sherira Gaon as exilarch, complains to R. Elazar about certain individuals who are "vexing him greatly," and who he wishes to hand over to the Persian government.¹² Elazar counsels restraint; Mar Ukba should study Torah¹³ and God will reward him with the destruction of his enemies. The story concludes with Geniva's imprisonment, confirming the wisdom of Elazar's counsel. God's hand is clearly at work, rewarding Ukba for his restraint in the face of Geniva's provocation. Ukba deserves praise for not taking matters into his own hands, for not involving the gentile government in an internal Jewish affair.

This story has been the subject of scholarly concern for the light it sheds on the relationship between the exilarch, the rabbis, and the Persian government. In general, the Talmud provides little information about the exilarchate and the Persian government, and is interested in both institutions only to the extent to which they impinge on the rabbis.¹⁴ The story of the altercation between Geniva and Mar Zutra is extremely valuable historically, for it is one of the few instances in which the rabbis,

¹¹See Dikdukei Sopherim, n. bet.

¹²Gittin 7a.

¹³Or pray. See Tosafot, Meiri, and Maharam Shif.

¹⁴See Jacob Neusner, A History of the Jews in Babylonia, vol. 3, pp. 202-13; vol. 4, pp. 125-31; and vol. 5, pp. 321-29. See also Moshe Beer, Reshut ha-Gola be-Bavel bi-Yemei ha-Mishna ve-ha-Talmud (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1976), p. 2; and Yeshayahu Gafni, "Al Mazav ha-Mehkar; Skira Al ha-Mehkar ha-Histori Shel Bavel ha-Talmudit be-Dorot ha-Aharonim," Yidion ha-Igud ha-Ofami le-Madaei ha-Yahadut 21 (1982), pp. 5, 9, and 12.

the exilarch, and the Persian government converge in a single story. The dramatic end to the tale: a prominent sage taken out, imprisoned, and executed¹⁵ has further stimulated the interest of scholars.

How much do we actually know, however, about the reasons for Geniva's conflict with Mar Zutra? To answer this question, Jacob Neusner introduces another Talmudic story into the discussion. According to this second narrative, Rav Huna and Rav Hisda are seated together as Geniva passes by. One of the seated scholars¹⁶ suggests that they stand before Geniva, a learned man, while the other wonders whether it is appropriate to stand before a man of division. Geniva approaches and greets them: "Peace be upon you, kings, peace be upon you, kings," which prompts Huna and Hisda to ask why he refers to them as kings and why he repeats his greeting twice. In response, Geniva quotes scriptures and a statement by Rav, whereupon Huna and Hisda ask Geniva to join them in a meal. Again Geniva responds with a quotation of Rav, explaining why he cannot do so.¹⁷

According to Neusner, this second story helps explicate the first, supplying the motivation behind Mar Ukba's anger and the source of his conflict with Geniva. Geniva believes that the rabbis are kings, according to Neusner. He rejects the exilarch's authority, declaring false his claims of Davidic descent. The true descendants of David are the rabbis who alone have the right to rule the Jewish people based on their knowledge of Torah.¹⁸ Given this background, Ukba's anger is easily understandable, as is Huna's or Hisda's reference to Geniva as a man of division. The rabbis themselves, claims Neusner, were divided on the issue of the exilarch's authority. Some actively supported Geniva while others were sympathetic to him but uncomfortable with his tactics. Undeniably a man of learning, he was also a troublemaker. In the opinion of many rabbis, argues Neusner, close association with Geniva was to be avoided because of his dangerous challenge to the exilarch.

¹⁵Yer. Gittin 6:5. See also B. Gittin 65b-66a.

¹⁶We are not told which one.

¹⁷Gittin 62a.

¹⁸See also S. Funk, *Die Juden in Babylonien 200-500*, Part 1 (Berlin, 1902), pp. 108-9, n. 5.

Neusner concludes that both stories outlined above "derive from exilarchic circles."¹⁹ The first story clearly favors the exilarch, reporting Geniva's imprisonment as God's reward for Ukba's restraint. The second story, argues Neusner, likewise supports the exilarch. It "seems to stress that Geniva's meddling and divisiveness did not win the support of the great men of the generation," that these great men did not pay Geniva the respect due a man of his learning. The story serves the exilarch's cause by teaching that despite his learning, Geniva was a man of division, avoided by the most prominent rabbis of his day.

Moshe Beer also attempts to explain the background behind Mar Zutra's conflict with Geniva.²⁰ He notes the close connection between the second story outlined above and a similar story involving the same protagonists. In this third story, Huna and Hisda are once again seated together as Geniva passes by. Again they debate whether to stand before Geniva, one arguing that he is a man of learning, the other that he is a man of division. Geniva approaches and asks what they are discussing. "Wind," they say, whereupon Geniva quotes a statement by Rav on the subject of wind.²¹ Beer argues convincingly that a unified story featuring Huna, Hisda, and Geniva has been divided in two, each half placed in an appropriate context by a later editor.²² Beer notes further that the story portrays Geniva as well-versed in the opinions of Rav, and claims that Geniva wishes to contrast his own expertise with Huna's ignorance, an ignorance made even more shocking by the fact that Huna was Rav's successor as head of the academy at Sura.

Beer, like Neusner, uses the Huna-Hisda narratives to shed light on the story of Mar Ukba and Elazar. He points out the antagonism between Huna and Geniva reflected in the Huna-Hisda narratives, combines this with Sherira's claim that Huna was "of the family of the patriarch," and concludes that Geniva's problems with Huna and Mar Ukba stem from

¹⁹Neusner, A History of the Jews in Babylonia, vol. 2, p. 80.

²⁰Moshe Beer, "Rivo Shel Geniva be-Mar Ukba," Tarbiz 31 (1962), pp. 281-86; and Reshut ha-Gola, pp. 94-98.

²¹Gittin 31b.

²²See also Wilhelm Bacher, Die Agada Der Babylonischen Amoraer (Frankfurt am Main, 1913), p. 72.

Geniva's opposition to exilarchic interference in the affairs of the rabbinic academy. Specifically, Geniva opposed the exilarch's role in the selection of Huna as head of the academy.²³ Beer explains Geniva's reference to Huna and Hisda as "kings" as a mocking reference to Huna's close connection to the exilarch, who derived his power from the Persian government.

While my own understanding of the stories owes much to both Neusner and Beer, I must take issue with the attempt by both scholars to use the Huna-Hisda narratives to explain the conflict between Geniva and Mar Ukba.²⁴ The attempt is unsuccessful because the stories reflect different perspectives on the merits of Geniva and very likely derive from diverse sources. Neusner's claim that all three stories reflect a common pro-exilarchic standpoint, that they derive from a common source and can be used to shed light on one another, is unconvincing. Neusner is most likely correct about the anti-Geniva stance of the Mar Zutra tale. The portrayal of Geniva's imprisonment as divine reward for Ukba's restraint marks this source as hostile to Geniva. The Huna-Hisda stories, however, are sympathetic to Geniva and hostile to Huna and Hisda. The most striking proof of this claim is the portrayal of Geniva's superior knowledge of the opinions of Rav, contrasted by the ignorance of Huna and Hisda.²⁵ Other, subtler aspects of the narrative, however, also attest to its unfavorable opinion of Huna and Hisda. Huna and Hisda very likely betray the narrator's evaluation of their conduct when they inform Geniva that they were discussing "wind." Their debate about the wisdom of standing before Geniva was wind, worthless talk. Later on,²⁶ impressed by Geniva's responses, Huna and Hisda invite him to join them in a meal. By rejecting their invitation, Geniva turns the tables on them. Huna and Hisda, by their ignorance, are unfit to associate with him, not the other way around as they initially thought.

²³Beer, "Rivo Shel Geniva," pp. 284-86. See also Reshut ha-Gola, pp. 94-98, where Beer slightly modifies his theory.

²⁴For further discussion of Beer's article, see Ephraim Urbach, "Al Iyun Histori be-Sipur Al Moto Shel Rabbah bar Nahmani," Tarbiz 34 (1963-64), pp. 160-61; and Shama Yehuda Friedman, "Ia-Agada ha-Historit ba-Talmud ha-Bavli," pp. 28-42.

²⁵Compare Beer's treatment of this issue, "Rivo Shel Geniva," pp. 282-83.

²⁶Assuming that Beer is correct that the two accounts were originally one.

Given this understanding of the story, Neusner's claim that pro-exilarchic circles transmitted all three stories is unconvincing. Neusner's understanding requires us to say that the exilarch transmitted a story favorable to the leader of a movement bent on undermining his authority. It is also impossible to accept Neusner's claim that Geniva's reference to the rabbis as kings was viewed by his contemporaries as subservise. It is odd that neither Huna nor Hisda are put off by Geniva's subversive claims. On the contrary, they respond to Geniva's shocking statement by inviting him to dinner!²⁷

Most likely, the Talmud preserves two (or three) stories about Geniva which derive from different sources. The stories share in common the view that Geniva was a controversial figure. The designation of Geniva as a man of division in the Huna-Hisda narrative may or may not be an allusion to his conflict with Mar Ukba. Even assuming it is, however, the Huna-Hisda narrative provides no help in determining the cause of that conflict.²⁸ More importantly, even if the Huna-Hisda narrative did give us insight into this difficult question, it would be insight deriving from sources sympathetic to Geniva. The authors of the Mar Ukba-Elazar tale, hostile to Geniva and sympathetic to Mar Ukba, would very likely have explained the matter differently.

To reiterate, we have examined the Talmud's portrayal of several rabbis who flourished in the second and third Amoraic generations. We repeatedly found that Talmudic accounts of their characters and personalities and the nature of their interaction contain contradictions which betray the existence of opposing sources. Accordingly, several aspects of the history of the Amoraic period need to be re-evaluated, since many historians have tended to accept Talmudic stories as reliable evidence without critically evaluating the role of authors, tradents, and later editors in coloring and distorting stories about the Amoraim.

²⁷See also Yoel Florsheim, "Yisudan ve-Reshit Hitpathutan Shel Yeshivot Bavel--Sura ve-Pumbedita," *Zion* 39 (1974), p. 186, n. 10.

²⁸See also Bacher, *Die Agada der Babylonischen Amoraer*, p. 72.