From Disagreement to Talmudic Discourse: Progymnasmata and the Evolution of a Rabbinic Genre

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1 Introduction

How did rabbinic literature develop from the simpler structure of the Mishnah in tannaitic Palestine (ca. 70 to 220 CE), with its statements of laws sometimes followed by a dissenting opinion, to the complex structure of the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli) several centuries later in the Persian Empire, with its lengthy give-and-take? What facilitated this change in the style of composition? While many answers to these two questions exist, two key answers are able to account for much of this change. The first is the introduction of a model of composition found in Greek primers of compositional writing. The second is a subtle but significant change in the rules of biblical exegesis that facilitated the increasing complexity of many sugyot.

The quintessential genre of the Talmud is the sugya, which in its basic form is a statement with a support (usually a scriptural or tannaitic proof-text), followed by a challenge (qushya קושיה), a resolution (teiruts תירוץ) of the challenge, another challenge, another resolution, and so forth. bEruv 52b is a classic example:

* אֵדֶרֶמְד אָרְאֵנְאָ: רֵגֶלָא אַהֲתָבַּהָ הַהָתָהָו רֵגֶלָא אַהֲתָבַּהָו לָא הואָכָהו. [STATEMENT]
* מְשָאַבַּה: יָאַָמְאָ תִָשְׁבָּאשָבַּה רָגֵלָא[ך]וֹ (יָשְׁעָאָו נָה יֹי) רְצָלָא".v. [SUPPORT]
* הוּאַהֲנָא: יָכָהו. [CHALLENGE]
* תִָהֲא מָנָא אָתָהְו בָא. דָתָהֲנָא: אָתָהְו אָמָא: לִפָּאָהו שַרָוֵב יָאָכ לָאָכ. [Resolution]

[STATEMENT] Rabbi Hanina said: If [a person has] one foot within the Sabbath limit [past which it is forbidden to walk on the Sabbath], and one foot outside the Sabbath limit, he should not enter.

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1 MS Vatican 109.
[Support] Because it is written \textit{mishum di-khetiv};
\footnote{The shift in language from Hebrew to Aramaic (משום דכתיב) suggests that Rabbi Hanina's statement likely ended and the anonymous voice of the Bavli (the stam) has picked up. While not all of the manuscripts have the word משום, they all contain the word דכתיב, confirming the change in language from Hebrew to Aramaic.} “If you return your feet \textit{raglekha} from the Sabbath” (Isa 58:13). It is written “your foot \textit{regelkha}.”

[Challenge] But is it not taught \textit{ve-ha-tanya}: He may enter \textit{if one foot is within the Sabbath limit and one is outside of it}?!

[Resolution] Who taught that \textit{איל מאי}? Others [that is, not the majority], for it is taught: Others say: He is considered to be in the place in which his majority resides. \footnote{Except when otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.} [So, if only one foot is past the Sabbath limit, but the rest of his body is within it, he may still return home. Since this is quoted as the minority opinion, it proves that the majority must have held that such a person may not return home.]

This is a fairly simple sugya. It begins with an opening statement with a biblical proof-text to support it, followed by a challenge to this statement, based on a tannaitic ruling, and a final resolution, arguing that the tannaitic ruling represents a minority opinion. More complex sugyot have a lengthy series of challenges and resolutions. Some use the Mishnah as the opening statement, others open with a \textit{baraita} (a statement from the tannaitic period) or \textit{meimra} (a statement from the amoraic period), with the series of challenges posed thereon. Some begin with two opposing laws and pose a series of challenges and resolutions from one to the other and vice-versa. A variety of sugyot exist, but the fundamental, basic structure underlying most of these sub-genres of the sugya is the one present in \textit{bEruv} 52b.

This structure is particularly known from the Bavli, and, for that reason, as Daniel Boyarin recently stated, “the common sentiment [has been] that the Bavli is a very strange book indeed, a unicum even on the rabbinic scene, a fortiori in world literature.” \footnote{D. Boyarin, \textit{Socrates and the Fat Rabbis} (Chicago 2009) 23.} Yet, as Boyarin has noted, “The composition is rarely discussed, and it seems that most scholars believe (without ever having spelled it out) that the Babylonian Talmud is indeed sui generis.” \footnote{Boyarin, \textit{Socrates}, 21. On the sugya and its development, see, e.g. A. Weiss, \textit{The Talmud in its Development} (New York 1954) [Hebrew]; \textit{idem}, \textit{Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim} (New York 1962) [Hebrew]; \textit{idem}, \textit{Mehqarim ba-talmud} (Jerusalem, 1975) [Hebrew]; J. N. Epstein, \textit{Prolegomena ad Letteris Amoraicicas Talmud Babylonicum et Hierosolymitanum} (Jerusalem 1962) [Hebrew]; C. Albeck, \textit{Introduction to the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi} (Tel Aviv 1969)