Loanwords in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic: Some Preliminary Observations

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Before actually treating the specific topic of this paper, it is perhaps worthwhile to make a few remarks on the term Talmudic Archaeology. Despite the many ways one might interpret the subject, at first glance, Talmudic Archaeology is somewhat of a misnomer, at least for Babylonia. The region which comprises geographically central and southern Iraq and parts of Western Iran is dotted today with archaeological sites. Indeed, excavations have been ongoing in that area of the world since the beginning of modern archaeology in the 19th century. Although the amount of work conducted in Iraq is relatively extensive, Jewish archaeological remains are poorly attested and although a number of artefacts which may be ascribed as Jewish, such as incantation bowls, are known, the lack of finds prevents us for the moment from dealing with any type of real Talmudic Archaeology.

Material culture may, however, be partly ascertained by textual evidence. True, this is much more abstract than actual artefacts and buildings, but the written word does provide a certain insight into tangible objects as well as cultural features. Thus what is commonly termed Talmudic Archaeology may be more accurately described as realia or material culture in Talmudic times as evidenced in text. S. Krauss’ Talmudische Archäologie is the classical work on the subject, published in 1910. The three volume work is based on rabbinical sources i.e., the Talmuds and Midrashim and includes archaeological and anthropological information. Impressive is its vast collection of sources and references, which shows enormous diligence. The book is now outdated and its sources are often not differentiated—neither chronologically nor geographically. Consequently, the work draws on a broad spectrum of material indiscriminately. Of interest and importance for the present study is Krauss’

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division of the collected material into 12 categories that reflect the cultural and material aspects of rabbinical texts.¹

Also relevant to the present subject, although from a completely different aspect, is Samuel Krauss’ *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter.*² This two volume work is divided into a grammatical and phonological presentation that includes transliteration issues and a dictionary with 1455 entries as well as extensive annotations from I. Löw. The first volume or grammatical presentation was severely criticized by Sigmund Fraenkel, the author of the 1886 *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, in particular for its unsound etymologies. Fraenkel accused Krauss of attributing Greek origins to Semitic words. The second volume, the dictionary, was in contrast well received, mainly because of I. Löw’s annotations. In the preface to the indexes, Löw stated that from 1455 entries in Krauss’ dictionary he rejected 800 etymologies. Despite the criticisms, it should be noted that *Lehnwörter* is a standard reference work in Jewish Studies and is still useful for research. On the other hand, the tendency to etymologize and to emphasize a certain perspective is not unique to Classicists or Krauss’ time. Assyriologists, Iranists and Indo-European scholars all have their specific interests, often attempting to demonstrate a certain cultural influence or impact on Jewish culture.

¹ Krauss is also the author of *Synagogale Altertümer* 1922 in which the source material was arranged into a geographic framework, see Brisman 2000 111–2.

² Krauss 1898–99.

1 The Loanword

The following presentation treats the subject of loanwords in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic for the period between the 3rd and the 11th centuries CE. Loanwords are a complicated subject and it is impossible to discuss the multi-faceted aspects and problems within the limitations of a paper. The following presentation can only give a general and preliminary overview of the subject with tentative results. The loanword as such is a somewhat strange notion since languages do not actually borrow words. It is the reason that often instead of designating this category of lexems as loanwords one talks of interferences or influences. The loanword is a specialized research field that comprises the study of word origins, derivations or etymologies, cognates and calques, etc. The loanword once becoming part of a particular language often undergoes the same processes as the main vocabulary such as changes in meaning, grammaticalization and affixation. Thus the loanword may be distinguished from a foreign word which remains foreign or exceptional to the language in which it is used.