The Redaction of Desire: Structure and Editing of Rabbinic Teachings Concerning Yeṣer (“Inclination”)

Jonathan Schofer*

Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Introduction

Did rabbis of Late Antiquity examine human emotions and desires, and ways to transform them, with subtlety that is comparable to the extensive Hellenic and Hellenistic reflections on the soul, or early Confucian debates about human nature? Did they create sophisticated works of literature in which they discussed these issues? Do we have the tools for expositing them? These questions do not yield simple answers, for rabbinic sages appear to have been primarily concerned with matters such as the development of the law or balakhab, the nature of “Torah” or tradition, God’s involvement in the world, and the status of “Israel” or the Jews. Their interests in what we might call the self and its cultivation, then, were channeled through questions concerning how one should comport oneself while carrying out ideals prescribed in the law, how immersion in tradition impacts one’s emotions and desires, how God responds to various actions and states, and so on. With this qualification, though, my answer to the first question is yes, there were rabbis who reflected in subtle ways about the shaping of desire and emotion. In this article I examine one complex set of passages concerning this topic, and I set out a set of research questions for analysing its concepts and imagery.

In considering classical rabbinic thought, both in this case and in general, a key issue concerns our scholarly unit of analysis. Should we center upon a rabbinic term, *I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Annual Meeting of the AJS in December of 2001. David Kraemer offered very thoughtful responses, and the ensuing discussion was extremely productive. Perhaps most important, at that conference I began discussions with Elizabeth Shanks Alexander concerning our interests in literary analysis, redaction, and the topic of the yeṣer. Her comments and suggestions have been a crucial element in my development of this paper, and I also thank her for sharing with me various manifestations of her important article, “Art, Argument and Ambiguity in the Talmud: Conflicting Conceptions of the Evil Impulse in b. Sukkah 51b–52a,” *HUCA* (forthcoming). My senior colleague Michael Fox read and commented on the full manuscript, and the feedback from the anonymous readers from the JJTP has helped me strengthen the argument. I learned from many others concerning specific points, and I have tried to cite them conscientiously.

*Email: jwschofer@wisc.edu

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a corpus, a given rabbi and the teachings attributed to him, rabbinic literature as a whole, a modern conceptual formulation, or some combination of these? I do not believe that we need to have one answer to this question – each approach has its own possibilities and dangers. In this article, I examine a highly edited collection of ten passages concerning the term yeşer (“impulse, inclination, desire”). I analyse each passage in detail, but my main concern is with the work of redaction. The compilers shaped their materials into wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. While I do not claim that this compilation indicates systematic thought or debate, if we want to consider whether or not rabbis of Late Antiquity attempted to create sustained arguments or positions concerning human nature and its formation, such units may be our most productive sites of inquiry.

As a study of rabbinic texts, this paper emerges at the intersection of two lines of scholarship. First, numerous researchers in the last two decades have addressed the literary features of rabbinic sources, often with focus upon the creative activity of redactors. An exemplary synthesis of this research is Jeffrey Rubenstein’s recent book *Talmudic Stories*, which examines ways that anonymous Babylonian editors shape and rework their narrative sources to make new literary works. Can we identify similar practices in other *aggadic* materials? I suggest that large edited units of *aggadah* (perhaps a sugya in the Babylonian Talmud or a similar length in other sources) can be particularly valuable for examining literary structure and thematic development.

The second line of scholarship concerns the rabbinic term yeşer. The yeşer is a fundamental category through which rabbis expressed their conceptions of desire, emotions, and particularly impulses to transgress their own norms. There has been substantial research upon this concept, focusing on small passages of material such as a single teaching of a given sage. There exist in rabbinic literature, however, several

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1Marc Hirshman presents key issues in an articulate fashion, writing that the rabbinic sages of the first centuries of the common era “turned debate and dissent into their very trademark. Whether in matters legal, ethical, or theological, differing and even contradictory opinions were the norm. A natural result of this rabbinic posture is that the entire rabbinic corpus is anthological. We do not possess individual works of the rabbis, great as they might have been. We have instead catenae or collections of statements. Sometimes they present real conversations between sages, but other times they reflect an editorial juxtaposition of opposing views. These characteristics of rabbinic literature create a formidable challenge for those who wish to treat rabbinic thought systematically.” Marc Hirshman, “Rabbinic Universalism in the Second and Third Centuries,” *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 93, no. 2 (April 2000), p. 101.

2Throughout the paper, I will refer to the full set of material that I examine as a “unit” that I divide into ten “passages” or “teachings.” These passages, I will show, can be grouped into two “sections” or “sub-units” within the larger unit. I do not mean to set out technical senses of these terms, but I have found it useful to decide on a set of consistent conventions.