Do Types and Forms Yield a Pre-History of the Bavli?

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1. The Promise of Form-Analysis
The Talmud of Babylonia is a remarkably cogent document, exhibiting uniform traits of rhetoric and logic throughout. It speaks in one voice everywhere. But the Talmud manifestly encompasses distinct compositions, in part forming a composite of ready-made writings. So the question presents itself: do the types and forms of Mishnah-exegesis and Halakhah-analysis of the Bavli make possible a sequential history of the Talmudic knowledge, layer by layer, for example, generation by generation?

The distinctive forms and types of analytical discourse, bits and pieces of we know not what, stand separate from the paramount and governing program of the document. These diverse exercises are subject to formal differentiation and

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also exhibit distinctive traits of logical inquiry, which distinguish one type from another. So the Bavli’s one voice is the voice of a large choir, parts that sing each its own melody, even as all sing together and respond to a sole conductor. The document itself claims no less. The ready-made compositions, distinct from the documentary plan, bear attributions to named authorities assumed to have flourished over centuries. What—short of gullibly taking at face value the attributions of sayings to named authorities—are we to make of the Bavli’s Halakhic compositions that do stand distinct from the documentary program of the Bavli’s compositors?

### 2. Prior Work: The Debt to Richard Kalmin

Happily, I am not the first to pursue the question raised here, and mine is not the first inquiry into the identification of the components of Talmudic knowledge that attributions and forms signal. Dr. Richard Kalmin, Professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, has undertaken a variety of studies, yielding these results, based on his accompanying studies:

1. “…formal aspects of Amoraic discourse provide evidence of generational contrast indicative of the diversity of talmudic source material…statements by later Amoraim are formally distinguishable from statements by earlier Amoraim…”

2. We may adduce “differences between the introductory formulae introducing statements by early, later, and middle-generation Amoraim. These differences…support my claim regarding the presence of diverse sources in the Bavli, distinguishable along chronological lines…”

3. “Middle generation Babylonian Amoraim [are] transitional…these transitional features may reveal the role of third—and fourth-generation Amoraim in the editing of earlier Amoraic statements…”

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3 I first introduced the metaphor of music to describe the Bavli in *Judaism’s Theological Voice: The Melody of the Talmud*. Chicago, 1995: The University of Chicago Press.

4 Collected in *Sages, Stories, Authors and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia* (Atlanta, 1995: Scholars Press for Brown Judaic Studies).

5 I checked with him this brief précis of his main results, and he confirmed that it is an accurate account.

6 “Unique formal characteristics of later Amoraic discourse,” p. 111.

7 “Quotation forms in the Babylonian Talmud,” p. 127.

8 “Middle-Generation Amoraim as among the editors of the Talmud,” p. 169.