CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN HELLENISTIC JEWISH EXEGESIS AND IN EARLY RABBINIC LITERATURE

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I have written to him many things of my law, but they were counted as strange things.

Hosea 8:12

Many things of Jewish literature look strange if not alien. What is there in common between Jerusalem and Alexandria, Cordova and Odessa, New York and Warsaw? These were the cities in which Jewish literature is said to have flourished. As different as these places are, can we speak about “a” Jewish literature? Should we not speak instead of “many” Jewish literatures, influenced by the many different cultures and languages in which they were created? Of course, one can ignore cultural differences and “cite biblical and Talmudic materials on the same topic in the supposition that the latter flow naturally and without mediation from the former.” But doing this is a mistake. Rather than disregard diversity, one should recognize it as a result of literary revolutions’ interrupting periods of smooth cultural development.

The notion of literary revolution includes the collapse of old genres and the birth of new ones. The most important change is that of style, since any style is based on a system of ideas. The transition from classicism to sentimentalism is an example of a minor literary revolution. The movement from medieval to modern literatures was much more radical: in the course of that revolution, not only styles but also languages changed (from Latin and Church Slavonic to “modern languages”).

1 See similar question in D. Biale, ed., Cultures of the Jews: A New History (New York, 2002), p. XXIV.
But a literary revolution involves more than literature. It either follows or initiates a revolution in popular mentality. This can be seen in my work on the popular mentality of Roman and Byzantine Egypt, based on documentary papyri (private letters, petitions, and edicts).³ Ptolemaic and early Roman documents discussed specific cases with precision. But the second-fourth centuries witnessed the generalization and typification of every conflict: the author was always a “moderate,” honest, and poor man, while the offender was always a “powerful” man. The virtues of the “poor” and the vices of the “rich” were invariably enumerated; references to abstract law and morality were ubiquitous. With this in mind, it is no coincidence that the diffusion of the rhetorical style and vulgar philosophy was the most important thing happening within the Greek and Roman literature of this époque (the Second Sophistic).

In the fifth-seventh centuries, there was another change of style. Typology was replaced by analogy. This better suited the contemporary historical perception of the world, in which Eden lay in the past, the Advent in the future, and a peripeteia, or dramatic reversal, in the present. Social types were replaced by roles. Types had been permanent, unchangeable. The virtuous man was always poor and virtuous. In contrast, roles were changeable. A repenting prostitute might traverse a path from resplendence to poverty and from vice to virtue. And again, something similar happened in the Jewish literature of late antiquity, as J. Neusner has noted in comparing the Mishnah to Genesis Rabbah. Typification characterized the work of the framers of the Mishnah. They created a vast labor of taxonomy, an immense edifice of orders and rules, governing the classification of everything on earth and in heaven. In contrast, the framers of Genesis Rabbah focused their attention on the events of contemporary history, which they interpreted in the light of the past by way of analogy. This transformation was provoked by the collapse of the Roman Empire.⁴

In my opinion, Neusner’s work is most valuable in its call for an historical approach, and it raises a provocative question: “What happens if we carefully differentiate ideas attributed to rabbis from ideas

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