EXEGETICAL TECHNIQUES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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For at least the last century and a half, scholars have discussed the exegetical principles the rabbis supposedly employed when interpreting the Bible, usually to demonstrate that Rabbinic biblical hermeneutics were not necessarily illogical or fanciful, but followed set logical rules. In the last century these exegetical/rhetorical principles were set into the context of the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. In addition, many authors have pointed to this phenomenon as evidence of contrasting schools of biblical exegesis among the sages. For the most part, these arguments have relied on the lists of exegetical methods attributed to Hillel, Ishmael, and Eliezer b. Yose the Galilean. This paper challenges the widely accepted picture of the roles of Hillel and Ishmael in the development of Rabbinic exegetical activity. Furthermore, it questions the assumption that beginning in the Tannaitic period there were clearly identifiable “schools” of Rabbinic exegetical activity. To summarize our conclusions:

1) The lists are literary constructions: Hillel’s “list” appears in two versions, which are dissimilar in important ways. The number in the lists’ superscription do not match the number of items delineated in the lists themselves. Similarly, the number of principles attributed to Ishmael in Sifra does not correspond to its superscription. A close examination of Ishmael’s middot at the beginning of Sifra shows that it is a composite, probably drawn from several sources. We have no idea when the current “list” was put together or by whom it was composed.

2 For a discussion of the scholarship on these lists, see H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 17-34.
3 The list attributed to Eliezer b. Yose HaGalilce appears only in late anthologies of Rabbinic exegetical comments. For that reason, I do not discuss Eliezer’s activity or list here. In my opinion it is no earlier than the Geonic period.

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2) The evidence from the Rabbinic corpus does not support the claim that Ishmael or Hillel made extensive use of the items in their lists, or
3) That all the items listed were in fact used at all by any Rabbinic master.
4) The exact formulation of the principles and the methods by which they were applied is inexact.

We shall examine each of these points below in an attempt to demonstrate that the “lists” are editorial creations and that the connection of a set of exegetical rules to Hillel or Ishmael, or for that matter to any other Tanna, is highly problematic.

The results of this study, especially the discussions of the number of passages that employ the “exegetical methods,” are provisional for two reasons. First, I collected the data with reference to the terminology in the lists. Therefore, I looked for the term qal vehomer to assess the frequency with which that method was used. There are, however, many a fortiori and a minori arguments in the gemara that do not use the phrase qal vehomer. Similarly, there are analogies that do not employ the term hyq. These instances obviously are difficult to identify, and they present a methodological problem not addressed here: If the rabbis constructed an a fortiori or an a minori argument without employing the term qal vehomer, did they imagine it as a different type of exegetical/rhetorical method? The same question could be asked about analogies that do not employ the term hyq. Second, I gathered the data using Davka’s Judaic Classics Library.¹ I have not done the textual study that would ensure that all of the readings are the best readings of the sugyot. This analysis awaits further study.

Hillel’s Exegetical Rules

We begin with Hillel’s list, which occurs in three Rabbinic collections: T. San. 7:11, Sifra 3a, and Avot DeRabbi Natan A, 37:7. In the Tosefta we read that Hillel expounded (drš) “things” (dbrym), or, in Sifra and Avot, exegetical rules (mdwt) before the Elders of Bethyra (so Sifra), the inhabitants (bny) of Bethyra (so Avot), or the Elders of Petirah (so the Tosefta). While these variations point to the insecure