abstract

Metasystemic and Structural Indicators of Late-Stage Babylonian Stammaitic Compositions

Jay Rovner

The Babylonian Talmud contains several types of textual expressions, chiefly among them, halakhic sugyot and aggadic narratives. It is a layered document, whose sources, which originated in various periods, have coalesced into compositions of varying complexity. Not all stammaitic (anonymous) sugyot derive from the same period; some may definitely be distinguished as having stemmed from the latest period of sugya-creation, as they incorporate material from smaller stammaitic sugyot, and even rework it, sometimes in a revisionist manner. It may be inferred that they, as well as their sources, cannot have originated from the same period, as the new compositions can be shown to supersede their sources in terms of their agenda; indeed, some reach conclusions contradictory to their sources.

The increasing complexity of style and thinking traceable in sugyot is not so easily detected in aggadic narratives. Nonetheless, by identifying similar compositional strategies and the degree of conceptual abstraction, one can posit that some narratives probably hail from the same late period and scholastic academic environment as such sugyot.

In order to appreciate what is new in these advanced compositions, it will be helpful to revise our understanding of the nature of the sugya from the perspectives of its program and style. Stammaitic sugyot have been criticized for presenting seemingly artificial and superficial argumentation, and for failing to provide decisors and judges clear halakhic conclusions. Instead, they must be understood as scholastic pedagogical exercises, composed to provide students comprehensive, even exhaustive, analyses of their textual traditions. To help appreciate this, one can profitably apply a kind of holistic structural analysis, like that developed by Y. Fraenkel for aggadic narratives. Then, one can see how the complicated argument of many a sugya is built upon an intricate design, calculated to show how each component teaching has a unique

intention and serves a discrete function within the sugya's overall conceptual universe of meaning. The argument of such a sugya is not designed to demonstrate the halakhah per se but rather, through dialectical comparison and contrast, to identify the systemic coherence of its component sources, while showing the uniqueness of each one.

Certain talmudic sugyot and aggadic narratives share complicated, sophisticated, stylistic and programmatic features. They may be called metasystemic according to the degree of conceptual abstraction they have achieved. The sugya on the feminine exemption in bKid 34–35, and the narrative of the repudiation and redemption of Aher in bHag, may be profitably compared. Each one has a complex literary structure, whose sophisticated and intricate design shows conscious planning. The sugya in Kiddushin is demonstrably from the latest stratum of sugyot, as it incorporates earlier stammaitic sugyot and takes their teachings to new levels of metasystemic abstraction. The Aher narrative exhibits a similarly complex literary design. It also moves its source materials into thematically more abstract areas.