

A Talmud in Exile: The Influence of Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah on the Formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah

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Modern critical Talmudic scholarship has been concerned with the relationship between the two Talmuds (the 7th century Babylonian Talmud, or “Bavli,” and the 4th-5th century Jerusalem Talmud, or “Yerushalmi”) since its inception in the 19th century. Earlier scholars, and those of a traditionalist bent, assumed that the later Bavli knew and relied upon the earlier Yerushalmi. Modern scholars focused on the many differences between the Talmuds and coalesced around the view that the Bavli has no literary relationship at all to the Yerushalmi. They explain the many similarities and shared materials in the two Talmuds as the results of the (most likely) oral transmission of discrete texts between the land of Israel and Babylonia (modern-day Iraq). *A Talmud in Exile* proposes a new and original method for approaching the issue of inter-Talmudic relationship. Drawing on previous scholarship, Dr. Gray studies one Talmudic tractate (*Avodah Zarah*, “idolatry”) in both Talmuds, modeling two levels of analysis: “macro” and “micro.” These analyses, together with historical research, show that, in this case, Bavli *Avodah Zarah* likely knew and relied on its Yerushalmi counterpart. Such studies will ultimately lead us to a new understanding of the origins of the Babylonian Talmud, as is discussed in this excerpt.



Conclusion

Y. Avodah Zarah Influenced the Formation of B. Avodah Zarah

I recently participated in a conference where I presented a paper related to the thesis of this book, although unrelated to y. and b. *Avodah Zarah* specifically. In the discussion period, a colleague to whose views I always pay careful attention asked me to spell out the larger significance of demonstrating literary dependency between the Talmuds. I think that my colleague’s question is a suitable one to consider as this book draws to a close.

My response must begin with a reiterated caveat. This book has demonstrated only that y. *Avodah Zarah* influenced the formation of b. *Avodah Zarah*, not that the Yerushalmi as a whole influ-

enced the formation of the Bavli as a whole. Thus it would be imprudent to do more than point to what this book *suggests* in the way of larger significance. That said, this book has much to suggest. First, our finding that y. *Avodah Zarah* influenced b. *Avodah Zarah*, especially if this finding is followed up by similar findings from other studies of tractate pairs, suggests that our understanding of the formation of the Bavli may have to change. Without a doubt, the Babylonian Talmud is a remarkable intellectual and cultural achievement, but we may have to stop viewing it as virtually an entirely Babylonian creation. As Martin Jaffee pointed out some years ago, “it is not self-evident . . . that independence of judgment and vision, such as that exercised

by the Bavli in its exegesis of the Mishnah, is incompatible with immersion in traditional processes of learning . . . The Bavli can indeed be ‘original’ while at the same time being largely dependent . . . on an earlier work for its power of originality.” In a related vein, our understanding of the relationship between the two rabbinic centers in the fifth through the seventh centuries may require revision, as we see that large blocks of edited materials drawn from the amoraic learning of the Land of Israel exerted a profound influence on that of Babylonia as late as the sixth or seventh century.

Apropos of this last point, a methodological point is in order. A key finding of this book is that macro analysis – the comparison of each Talmud’s entire

treatment of each mishnah in the tractate under study – is indispensable to forming an accurate picture of the relationship between the tractates. We must begin big, noting the large-scale inter-Talmudic similarities and progressively checking off alternative explanations for them. Only then should we proceed to the step of micro analysis and analyze precisely how the Bavli has reworked specific textual parallels. By analogy, a scientist wishing to explain the apparent hand-in-glove shapes of South America and Africa would be well-advised to begin by studying the forms of the continents rather than by commencing with soil samples in Brazil and Liberia. The time for such soil studies will come; but without the macro analysis of

the structures and contours of the continents, there may be no larger context in which to locate and assess the true significance of the findings of micro analysis. This book also helps us to better understand the intellectual profile of the Bavli redactors. Our work in chapter 2 demonstrates that the redactors appropriated a great deal of material from *y. Avodah Zarah*, and that these appropriations exhibit five tendencies:

B. *Avodah Zarah* appropriated *y. Avodah Zarah sugyot* or sequences of two or more *y. Avodah Zarah sugyot* in the same order as *y. Avodah Zarah* and attached to the same *mishnah*;

B. *Avodah Zarah* built up a complex *sugya* using materials marked as relevant to the issue by *y. Avodah Zarah*;

B. *Avodah Zarah sugyot* tend to resemble their *y. Avodah Zarah* parallels more closely than parallels in other rabbinic compilations;

B. *Avodah Zarah* placed materials at points in the tractate similar to where *y. Avodah Zarah* placed them; and

B. *Avodah Zarah* sometimes used the same *mishnah* as *y. Avodah Zarah* as the opportunity to present similar genres of material.

The common feature of these five tendencies is that b. *Avodah Zarah* is demonstrably closer to *y. Avodah Zarah* than to other rabbinic compilations. This suggests both that the b. *Avodah Zarah* redactors had the tractate in some form and that they felt it appropriate to build their own work upon it.

The redactors remained *close*, but did not subordinate their own tractate entirely to *y. Avodah Zarah*. In chapters 3 and 4 we learned more about them; they revised and reworked their prior sources in characteristic ways. They tended to add Babylonian linguistic, cultural,

and/or halakhic features to *y. Avodah Zarah sugyot*, they tended to leave out of b. *Avodah Zarah* materials found in *y. Avodah Zarah* that were of particular relevance to the Land of Israel, they re-arranged prior materials in a more sensible order, and they reworked their *sugyot* to exhibit a higher level of legal conceptualization than we see in *y. Avodah Zarah*. The redactors' creative appropriation of *y. Avodah Zarah* shows that they viewed themselves as authorized to interject their own contributions into the received heritage, even to the extent of rewriting vigorously. Similarly, we saw in chapter 4 that these creative redactors sometimes answered questions left unresolved in *y. Avodah Zarah*, or took up their own deliberations at the point where *y. Avodah Zarah* left off. The redactors were thus creative and proactive; they did not simply leave us with a thin layer of redactional "icing" on the "cake" baked by the *amoraim*. To continue this

metaphor, the redactors of the Bavli "baked the cake" using a modified version of *y. Avodah Zarah's* "recipe"—they revised it in light of their own cultural and other concerns.

For over 1,000 years, the Babylonian Talmud has been the focus of intense and devoted scrutiny as well as the fountainhead of the classical *halakhah*. The Yerushalmi, although never entirely neglected, was relegated by the jurisprudence of *geonim* and *rishonim* to a secondary and subordinate status. This book has demonstrated that, with regard to b. and *y. Avodah Zarah*, we can discern the fingerprints of *y. Avodah Zarah* – not simply Palestinian learning generally – in the formation of b. *Avodah Zarah*. Whoever the scholars were that brought *y. Avodah Zarah* to Babylonia, their contribution to the making of the Bavli, and, by extension, to the formation of Judaism in the Middle Ages, is at once shrouded in mystery and of inestimable value.

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