

15 Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia

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The great doxographer of the Sophists, Philostratus, relates the following legend about one of his heroes:

When this Leon came on an embassy to Athens, the city had long been disturbed by factions and was being governed in defiance of established customs. When he came before the assembly he excited universal laughter, since he was fat and had a prominent paunch, but he was not at all embarrassed by the laughter. "Why," said he, "do ye laugh, Athenians? Is it because I am so stout and so big? I have a wife at home who is much stouter than I, and when we agree the bed is large enough for us both, but when we quarrel not even the house is large enough."

Those familiar with the Babylonian Talmud will be reminded of the following anecdote:

When Rabbi Ishmael the son of Yose and Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them [under the arch formed by their bellies] and not touch them.

A certain matron said to them, "Your children are not yours."

They said, "Theirs [our wives' bellies] are bigger than ours."

"If that is the case, even more so!"

There are those who say that thus they said to her: "As the man, so is his virility." And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: "Love compresses the flesh." (B. Baba Metzia 84a)¹

To the memory of my father, Sidney Boyarin, ז"ר (d. 10 Kislev).

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These narratives are strikingly similar: A sophist/sage is made fun of owing to his avoirdupois. In both cases, the response is that his/their wives are even fatter than they are. In the talmudic version, the sexual slur is made directly, while in Philostratus it is only alluded to, but in both cases, the response is that where there is love, there is room in the bed! It is hardly necessary, I think, to argue further that the talmudic story is a version of the wandering Hellenistic narrative told about various sophists, but if further conviction is necessary, let me offer the following. The retort of the sophist Leon that his wife's stomach is bigger than his is clever, as well as his witty explanation; the retort of the rabbis that their wives' stomachs are bigger than theirs is witless, for since she had accused them of not being able to have intercourse with their wives owing to their obesity, retorting that their wives are even more obese seems distinctly counterproductive, as the *Matrona* immediately grasps.²

This minor but genuine ungrammaticality of the narrative (thematized within the narrative itself) makes most sense if the original retort is an artifact of an earlier version of the story from elsewhere, an elsewhere that we have before us in this instance. Moreover, as Derek Krueger has reminded me, the form of this narrative as a *chreia* in both its Greek and Jewish guises is also highly suggestive of a common Hellenistic origin.³ What is significant here, or at least heuristically stimulating, is that to the best of my knowledge, this anecdote only appears within rabbinic literature as part of a late legend cycle in the Babylonian Talmud. One cannot certainly prove that it did not circulate among Jews and even rabbis earlier than this, which would be an argument *ex silentio*, but at least as an initial provocation, it seems defensible to see this as a parallel specifically between a Hellenistic topos and a latish Babylonian story, one that suggests that Hellenism and Babylonian rabbinism are hardly as far from each other as generally surmised.⁴ Note that, while in this case, I am claiming a particular direction of influence, from an earlier (second-century) Greco-Roman narrative to a later and secondary talmudic version (fifth century or so), this is not the general burden of my thesis here, suggesting as I am, rather, a shared cultural milieu within which cultural innovation and productivity take place.⁵ I use this example as an instance with which to demonstrate the plausibility of such a shared world between Hellenistic and Christian traditions and those of the Babylonian rabbis.

It is commonly held among scholars and learned lay folk alike that while the Palestinian rabbis were in dialogue (and dispute) with

Christians and other Hellenists, the rabbis of Babylonia only contended with such secondarily through the medium of their interaction with Palestinian rabbis and their literature and traditions.⁶ Thus, in a recent essay, Shaye Cohen points to the great scholarship of the twentieth century (especially of David Daube [1949] and Saul Lieberman [1950]) that sought Hellenism in Palestinian Judaism, and while Cohen himself is searching for Hellenism in unexpected (ostensibly anti-Hellenistic) places, all of those places are, nevertheless, within the obviously Hellenistic (Roman) ambit of Palestine.⁷ Cohen completes his argument with the keen formulation that “through it all, Jews remained Jews, and Judaism remained Judaism, but even in their non-Hellenism they were hellenized” (2000, 237). Just so.

In this chapter, I would like to begin to show how we might need to revise significantly our understanding of the role of both Christianity and Hellenism more generally in the formation of the Babylonian rabbinism of the Sasanian realm. This is especially so with respect to matters not known from Palestinian rabbinic traditions and which, at least arguably, only enter the rabbinic textual world at a period and in a stratum of the Babylonian Talmud in which impact from Palestine is considerably less likely than interaction with the local milieu of trans-Euphratian Christian Hellenism.⁸ In another very important discussion, Shaye Cohen himself has pointed to the Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia, noting that the very structure of the rabbinic academies there, resembling the Hellenistic philosophical schools with their successions of “heads,” is not to be found in rabbinic Palestine, and, therefore, “perhaps then the parallels between patriarchs and scholars tell us more about the Hellenization of Babylonian Jewry in the fourth and fifth centuries than about the Hellenization of Palestinian Jewry in the second.”⁹ Most recently, Catherine Hezser has doubted Cohen’s suggestion, claiming that “however, especially in cases such as this, where no Palestinian evidence exists, one can also reckon with the possibility of a merely fictional construction or with an independent development of certain general institutional patterns in different cultural contexts. It is not necessary to assume a Hellenistic influence on Babylonian Jewish life.”¹⁰ Consistent with this position, when she considers “the extent of their knowledge of and ways of adapting Graeco-Roman philosophy”¹¹ it is only “the rabbis of Roman Palestine” that she considers in this regard. The argument of this chapter will tend to support the position of Shaye Cohen fairly vigorously, albeit not in terms of Hellenistic “influence,” nor even yet in terms of “hellenization,” so much as of Babylonian Jewish culture as itself a Hellenism.

DATING THE TALMUD: THE STAMMAITIC HYPOTHESIS

The recent convergence of a number of disparate but related directions in talmudic scholarship is increasingly leading us to look closely at Babylonian rabbinism and especially the period just after the amoraic period when the Babylonian Talmud was being redacted as the locus of some far-reaching changes and developments within the Babylonian rabbinic culture, changes and developments, indeed, that are so significant that they have simply given rise to the very features that we usually take as characteristic of rabbinic Judaism.¹² Several scholars have been investigating this hypothesized period – now dubbed by these scholars the period of the *Stamma'im* – in the wake of David Halivni's and Shamma Friedman's pioneering textual archaeologies, as one of the most formative and crucially determinative moments in the history of Judaism. Of course, it must be emphasized that there was not, to the best of anyone's knowledge, any group that ever were named the *Stamma'im* either by themselves or by anyone in Jewish history until the last three decades.¹³ The term is a conceit, a shorthand name for a hypothesis to the effect that the bulk of the crucial redactorial work, that which makes the Babylonian Talmud the Talmud, was actually done at the end of the period of the cited authorities, that is, in the immediate post-amoraic period.¹⁴ This is, in short, a historical hypothesis to account for the aspect, literary and thematic, of the Talmud that speaks, as it were, as a voice from no one, and has accordingly been dubbed in the tradition for centuries the *Stamma*, the anonymous voice (hence, the new coinage *Stamma'im*), or even more tellingly, just *The Talmud*. Seeing that this layer or voice in the text is independent of and later than the textual citations within it allows us to perform several operations on it. One is to place the production of the voice, the voice that gives us the Talmud itself (both structure and content), into an at-least-hypothesized historical, cultural context. The second is to inquire into the role that that voice plays in the history of rabbinic Judaism and the production of its most characteristic forms of thought.

There is, to be sure, another historical approach to the "anonymous" voice in the Talmud, which would see this voice as constantly developing throughout the amoraic period itself, with each *Stamma* representing the contemporaneous view of the 'Amora' in question, rendered anonymously because all agreed! Halivni explicitly points to the famous letter of Rav Sherira Gaon (fl. ca. 906–1006) as the major source of this pious account.¹⁵ It is increasingly being recognized how this nearly unique source for the institutional history of the talmudic period is prone to

systematic distortion via anachronism, that is, simply projecting backward (nearly five hundred years) institutions of its own time to the talmudic past. Much of our progress in the historiography of the talmudic period consists of critical work on the positions occasioned by this source. Richard Kalmin has produced some of the most painstaking work that has been done to disprove this traditional view and establish a new hypothesis in his 1989 monograph devoted to the subject.¹⁶ In this book he has made clear the distinctions between the major extant views:

This difference of opinion concerning the redaction of the Talmud is in large part a dispute over who authored the *stam*, the anonymous layer of the Talmud. In the anonymous layer, the Tannaitic and Amoraic portions of the Talmud are analyzed, explicated, and when necessary, emended and completed. In other words, this Tannaitic and Amoraic material was edited by the *stam*. According to the theory of Saboraic redaction, the Saboraim authored the *stam*, while according to the theory of continuous redaction, the *stam* derived from all Amoraic generations. According to the theory of stammaitic redaction, the bulk of the *stam* was produced by the *stammaim*, sages whose names have not survived within the Talmud itself.¹⁷

What Kalmin successfully shows is that the anonymous voice nearly always – if not always – comments on the named utterances of even the latest of 'Amora'im, and the opposite is never the case, and, moreover, the anonymous voice frequently misunderstands or even wilfully distorts the meaning of earlier named utterances in its drive for a coherent literary/logical structure, the *sugya*'. This suggests strongly, if, I will confess, not entirely ineluctably, that the work of *Stamma'im* (here to be understood simply as the producers of the *Stam*) was done after the production of the various chronological layers of named tradents had, as it were, had their say.¹⁸ For the purposes of my argument here, the only important assumption is that the essential work of redaction was in the post-amoraic late fifth–sixth centuries or later and that it was so substantial as to make the term "redaction" a misnomer. The Talmud and its major discursive peculiarities – the very traits that make rabbinic Judaism what it is, that we so often think of when we talk about rabbinic Judaism – are the product of a time beginning in the late fifth century and continuing perhaps for decades or longer.¹⁹ These points seem to me well established, inter alia, by Kalmin's own work in that monograph.

Kalmin himself remains "unable to account for the advent of a new era, characterized by anonymous editorial activity, coming after the conclusion of the Amoraic period." He rejects with good reason the traditional explanation offered by Rav Sherira Gaon that in 469, the 'Amora'im ceased their activities owing to a persecution on the part of Yazdigird,²⁰ as well as its modern variants as yet another iteration of the discredited "lachrymose" theory of Jewish history, concluding only that "we have no choice but to acknowledge our ignorance regarding the critical issue of the transition from attributed to unattributed discourse."²¹

What needs to be added to this point is that Rav Sherira's opinion is of a piece with other aspects of his entire picture of the development of the Talmud. He retrojects into the amoraic period the types of institutions that he knows from his own time and the preceding centuries, namely, the existence of large, formally constituted *yeshivot*, which are administered and led by a succession of leaders. In the context of such an institution, it is just about possible (but I think even then hardly plausible) to imagine that the work of a particular given "generation" – whatever that might quite mean – is redacted and entered into a developing schooltext, which is then handed on and added to by another generation of named scholars who are then redacted once again. Moreover, if there was no great institutional change that took place between amoraic and later times, the necessity for an external explanation of such a discursive shift as the cessation of this process becomes, as well, vitally necessary. In a book written three decades ago, the importance of which, I think, the measure has not yet been wholly taken, David Goodblatt demonstrated that the great institutional *yeshivah* is a product of the post-talmudic period, while study in the amoraic period was characterized by ad hoc study circles centered around individual teachers.²² Both Rav Sherira's account of continuous creation and his "lachrymose" explanation for its end become obviated by the lack of an institution in which such literary activity could take place, and we require a different kind of historical explanation for both institutional and discursive shifts.

The work I am doing here provides, I think, such an alternative historical hypothesis to that traditional one. A conjecture that I have begun developing elsewhere links three highly significant historical and cultural developments and locates them in the late fifth and sixth centuries. These are 1) the foundation of the great talmudic academies or *yeshivot*, which Goodblatt showed to be post-amoraic and Isaiah Gafni showed to be highly comparable in structure and tone to the great Christian (East Syrian) school in Nisibis = institution;²³ 2) the actual redaction of the Talmud together with its constitutive stammaitic layer = curriculum; and finally 3) the production of the Yavneh myth, a grand myth of

origins for rabbinic Judaism = founding legend²⁴ – comparable at least in part to the story of the alleged School of the Persians at Edessa as the origin for the School of Nisibis.²⁵ The new institution and the new form of study as well as the new text all hang together on this theory. The hypothesization of the crucial role of the late redactors, these anonymous “Stamma'im,” in forming the rhetorical structures of the Talmud, when put together with their increasingly appreciated role in shaping the talmudic legends (especially about Yavneh)²⁶ and the historical insight that the institutional yeshivah is also a product of this period, provides us with a powerful historical hypothesis and an attractive historical context for the formation of major structures of rabbinic Judaism in the late fifth and sixth centuries: Institution (yeshivah), founding text and curriculum of study (Talmud), theological innovation (indeterminacy of meaning and halakhic argument), and practice (endless study as worship in and of itself) all come together at this time to produce the rabbinic Judaism familiar to us until this day.

We have to stop, I think, speaking of the *redaction* of the Talmud, as if there were a Talmud already to be redacted (or even several to be combined, selected from, and redacted) and talk instead about the *production* of the Talmud in this period. The Stamma'im who produced the Talmud were so successful in “hiding” themselves that they were able to retroject those patterns and make it seem as if they were a product of a “real” Yavneh of the first century.²⁷ As David Halivni makes richly clear, it is at least a likely hypothesis that the vast bulk, if not all, of the characteristic Babylonian talmudic dialectic practice is to be attributed to the anonymous voice.²⁸ He writes that “all we have is what we see before our eyes which comes out of the Talmud itself. In the Talmud the anonymous portions constitute the spinal cord of the *sugya*: they object and they answer, they build and tear down and come to conclusions. . . . The stammaim created the *sugya*.”²⁹ To the extent that it is this redactional level and voice that contribute so much to that which makes the Talmud unique and meaningful (as appears in such common usages as “The Talmud says” referring to the anonymous layer), it is justifiable to investigate this voice in its *hypothesized* historical context of the late fifth and sixth centuries (and even perhaps extending later than that), which will enable us, presently, to hazard a way through Kalmin’s aporia. The importance of the painstaking work that scholars have done on “redaction” and the critical separation of literary layers in the Babylonian Talmud now comes into its own as providing a new set of historical and cultural contexts for perceiving, analyzing, and synthesizing the determining cultural work that constitutes the Talmud and, hence, its culture as a culture.

BETWEEN THE TALMUDS

Zecharia Frankel's classic observation in the nineteenth century that "the Yerushalmi will frequently raise questions or objections and never supply an answer to them. This phenomenon is extremely rare in the Bavli"³⁰ requires some reframing in my view. Frankel surely meant to indicate a certain defect in the Yerushalmi, an apparent willingness to abandon discussions in midstream. When looked at, however, from a non-Bavliocentric point of view, this translates as the willingness of the Yerushalmi to declare that one opinion is wrong and another right, while the Bavli's practice of refusal of such closure discloses the stranger and more surprising epistemology.³¹ It is a key feature of the Babylonian Talmud that its dialectic seems most often to be there for its own sake, that even the attempt to achieve truth through logical procedure has been abandoned (or transcended) in favor of the pure spiritual pleasure of the logic chopping.³² I would place the two Talmuds clearly in diachronic relation. The Palestinian Talmud was redacted on all accounts in the third quarter of the fourth century or so, while the Babylonian Talmud is some century and a half or two centuries later. Rather than presenting the practice of the Palestinian Talmud as a deviation, a "rejection," I would prefer to imagine that it was the practice of the Babylonian Talmud that was constituted through a renunciation of the desire for "certain knowledge." The making of decisions is, after all, the more obvious telos of an intellectual endeavor, while the "the chaos of speculation" and "plurality of possibilities," the endless deferral of decision that characterizes the Babylonian Talmud, is more of an innovation.³³

The work of Christine Hayes is also very instructive in this regard. Hayes (1997) articulates the distinction between two modes of understanding the differences between the Talmuds as an "external" approach that sees these differences as being the product of "cultural, regional, historical factors," versus an "internal" approach that sees the differences as "textual, exegetical/hermeneutical, dialectical, redactorial," but also then as "the natural evolution of a complex and fertile core tradition." I am exploring here a third option, one that deconstructs the very opposition between "external" and "internal" approaches, namely, positing that precisely the textual, exegetical/hermeneutical, dialectical, redactorial factors are themselves bound up with complex historical, cultural interactions between the rabbis, respectively, of Palestine and Mesopotamia and the other communities in which they were embedded. To put this another way, Hayes considers that a "reductive historical approach" "posits historical and contextual reasons for halakhic differences between the two Talmuds...that ignore the textual,

hermeneutical, and dialectical characteristics of the sources in question" (1997, 3–4), but she does not seem to inquire into the historical and extratextual reasons for precisely those different "characteristics of the sources in question," which is the project of this current work of mine. Hayes explicitly allows us to see "historical" factors only when the respective exegetical methodologies of the two Talmuds are "muted, compromised, or distorted" (1997, 8), whereas I am seeking the history made precisely in and by the formation of those distinct exegetical methodologies and discursive practices more generally.

The diachronic difference between the two Talmuds adds up to a significant epistemic shift between the earlier and the later stages of rabbinic thought.³⁴ In that shift, within rabbinic Judaism, the Logos, one of the central theological entities of the common Judeo-Christian heritage of Judaism and Christianity, is shattered, with the notion of determinate meaning giving way to a notion of truth not as unitary and univocal but as plural and indeterminate, like the sparks struck by a hammer from a rock.³⁵

The Palestinian Talmud seems to consider determination of the correctness of one of the views of paramount importance, whereas for the Babylonian, it is most often the case that such an apparent proof of one view is considered a difficulty (*kushi'a*) requiring a resolution that, in fact, shows that there is no resolution, for "These and these are the words of the Living God." David Kraemer writes: "This contrast in overall compositional preferences may be the most important difference between the Bavli [Babylonian Talmud] and the Yerushalmi [Palestinian Talmud]" (1990, 95). When seen, as it traditionally is, from the point of view of the Bavli – after all, the hegemonic work for rabbinic Judaism – the practice of the Yerushalmi can seem as strange and even defective. This crucial, if not determinative, epistemic shift within Babylonian rabbinism that comes, on my hypothesis, fairly late in the day should be, I now suggest, read in the context of a late ancient Mediterranean culture in general.

I would like to explore here this development as one case for a conjectured growing interaction between Mesopotamian Jews and a Hellenism promoted in the East by its Christian connections. I begin by reconsidering and elaborating on a fascinating development within Greek culture, especially but not only Christian, during the relevant period. In his historical account of the drive of the orthodox Church toward *homonoia*, single-mindedness, and of the fate of disputation in the formation of Christian orthodoxy, Richard Lim (1994) provides a crucial context for reading the history of disputation and its theological place

in the formation of rabbinic Judaism, as well. As Lim demonstrates extensively, the notion of homonoia, the notion that Christian truth must be one, immutable, and *undebatable*, was a long time developing.³⁶ Its development coincides, moreover, as argued especially by Virginia Burrus, with the displacement of the Logos theology of ante-Nicene Christianity.³⁷ One possible context for that development could be, of course, the shift of Christianity from embattled sect to state religion of the empire.

Lim points out that in Origen's mid-third century, we find "the use of public debate as a means for restoring social order and discipline within divided Christian communities" (1994, 17). As paraphrased by Lim, the *acta* of one such a debate present a "prevailing tone" that is "of a friendly conversation: the sincere goodwill demonstrated by Origen and his respondents recalls the intimate collegiality of Plutarch's dialogues" (1994, 19), and indeed, upon being caught by Origen in a *reductio ad absurdum*, his disputant concedes defeat and agrees never to express Christological opinions again.³⁸

What is important here is the emphasis on rationality and dispute as modes for arriving at agreement. This pattern is more or less characteristic of the Palestinian Talmud, roughly contemporary in time and exactly coterminous in the space of its production with Origen's own Palestinian activity.³⁹ Within that earlier Talmud, reasoned argumentation not infrequently results in one or another of opposing views being discredited. Origen, likewise, insists that Christians were not "of one mind," not as a concession,⁴⁰ but rather as part of a refutation of Celsus's imputation that Christianity has become degenerate as it has grown in numbers:

From the outset there were disagreements among the believers about the interpretation of the books regarded as divine. At least, when the apostles were preaching and the eyewitnesses of Jesus were teaching his precepts, no minor dispute in the Church took place among the Jewish believers about those of the Gentiles who were converted to the faith; the question was whether they ought to keep the Jewish customs, or if the burden of clean and unclean meats ought to be taken away so that it would not be a load upon those Gentiles who abandoned their traditional customs and believed in Jesus.⁴¹

Origen goes on to cite Paul's disputes with other Christians about the nature of the resurrection and even Timothy's refutation of "the gnosis

which is falsely so-called" as other examples of the differentiations in views between "believers" at even the earliest beginnings of the Jesus movement, as indeed had Justin before him.

Origen's practice in his *dialektoi* suggests that in spite of the endemic nature of disagreement among Christians, he believes that there is finally truth and that it can be discovered through rational means and via disputation:

The man who is qualified in medicine is he who is trained in the various sects and who after examining the several schools of thought with an open mind chooses the best; and a man who is well advanced in philosophy is he who by having known about several schools of thought is trained in them and follows the doctrine which has convinced him. So also I would say that a man who looks carefully into the sects of Judaism and Christianity becomes a very wise Christian.⁴²

In the end, for Origen, "Christ gave to the Church, whom He had gathered in from the prostitution of many philosophical doctrines, pledges of future perfection, and put this necklace of obedience on her neck."⁴³ but the Christian attains to this perfection only after thoroughly studying philosophy, which is, for Origen, "cosmetics for the soul" through which "the vanity of the world is discovered and the deceitful marvels of perishable things are rejected."⁴⁴ Orthodoxy itself, for Origen, is not so much a fideistic gesture as the carefully derived product of right reasoning and right dialectic from right principles.

Lim very carefully documents the political and social shifts in a late Roman Christian society that transformed it from one in which controlled dissensus was not a threat but a resource to one of "simplicity," the notion that there is and always had been only one truth and the social ideal is *homonoia*, total agreement without discussion or dispute. These shifts in the modes of discourse were central in the transformation of the classical world into the world of the Byzantine culture:

An intensified advocacy for apophatic simplicity as a paradigmatic virtue was but one of many results of this confluence of competing interests. Many individuals and groups sought to domesticate the perceived threat of dissensus in public disputing, choosing from various ideological strategies and cultural values to mobilize hierarchical forms of authority against a culture that validated individualistic claims and rational argumentation. (Lim 1994, 20)

With the close interaction between Syriac and Greek Christian thinking, beginning at least with Efrem, the kataphatic/apophatic distinction, preferring the latter, pushes its way eastward, ever gathering strength. Evagrius of Ponticus's spirituality has a powerful influence on Isaac of Nineveh, a figure "who represents the culmination of East-Syrian monastic spirituality."⁴⁵ This development extends, moreover, beyond the confines of Christian intellectual culture, as we shall yet see.

This is precisely the historical context within which the classical rabbinic literature came into being, as well. However, while equally transformed within this period in its ideals of discourse, rabbinic Judaism went in what seems *at first glance* the opposite direction from orthodox Christianity. Since rabbinic Judaism has been interpreted by scholars more as an essence than as a historical and historically shifting cultural form, it is not surprising that it has not been much studied in the context of the histories of the developing discourses about discourse within the late Roman cultural world. While early Palestinian rabbinism manifests a version of the dispute pattern, however, later and especially Babylonian rabbinism defeated dialectic instead by promoting a sensibility of the ultimate contingency of all truth claims. Thus, while dialectic is, of course, the very stuff of the Babylonian Talmud, it almost never issues in agreement. The Babylonian talmudic text elaborates a third term in the paradigm, neither dialectic toward agreement nor the rejection of dialectic, as the Christians had, but rather dialectic without telos: Without ever reaching agreement or even seeking to do so, *dispute that cannot ever be resolved as both holy rabbis are always already right even when they directly contradict each other*. The practice of dialectic is, then, a pseudodialectical practice, a devotional – or even liturgical⁴⁶ – act (known as "enlarging the Torah and making it wonderful") and not truly an intellectual one. Better put, perhaps, it is a devotional (as opposed to teleological) use of the intellect. In the earlier Palestinian rabbinic imagination, presumably sufficient investigation could discover the original truth, whether Hillel's or Shammai's, similarly in this respect to the earlier dispute pattern described by Lim for ante-Nicene Christianity, by the latter stratum, the contradictory views of the disciples of both of these sages are being declared equally the words of the Living God in direct contravention of the original model of decline from an original situation of truth and homophony. The (hypothesized) Stamma'im have moved beyond a notion of rational discovery of truth (or at least the securing of agreement) through dialectic into a realm in which the words of the Living God are paradoxical, self-contradictory, undecidable, and undiscoverable and talk goes on forever.

DIALECTIC AND DIVINATION

A remarkable story in the Talmud is a product, I reckon, of this epistemic shift:

Rabbi Yehudah said that Rav said: In the hour that Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy Blessed One sitting and tying crowns for the letters. He said before him: "Master of the Universe, What [lit., who] holds you back?" He said, "There is one man who will be after several generations, and Akiva the son of Joseph is his name, who will derive from each and every stroke hills and hills of halakhot." He said before him: "Master of the Universe, show him to me." He said to him: "Turn around!" He went and sat at the back of eight rows [in the study house of Rabbi Akiva], and he didn't understand what they were saying. His strength became weak. When they reached a certain issue, the disciples said to him [to Akiva], "From whence do you know this?" He said to them: "It is a halakhah given to Moses at Sinai." [Moses'] spirit became settled.

He returned and came before the Holy Blessed One. He said to him: "Master of the Universe, You have such a one and yet You give the Torah by my hand?!" He [God] said to him: "Be silent! That is what has transpired in My thought." (B. Menahot 29b)

It is, to be sure, difficult to assert positively a late date for this narrative, given its attribution to Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav, but, in any case, it is clearly of Babylonian provenance and at the earliest a product of the early fourth century, even if this attribution be deemed reliable.

In this talmudic story, knowledge is thoroughly opaque in its form; no one, not even Moses himself, could possibly know what Rabbi Akiva knows nor contest rationally his interpretive assertions. The latter's mode of interpretation of the Torah could be fairly characterized as divination clothed in the language of tradition. Rabbi Akiva's "divination" – if I may call it that – seems to involve something like contemplation of the serifs of the letters to divine their meanings. Rabbi Akiva seems to be dangerously innovating using virtually divinatory methods, but the tradition (Moses) is mollified (at least somewhat) when he describes the contents of his divination as having been transmitted (only to him?) from Moses at Sinai. It will be seen that something like apostolic authority is being promulgated here. The only way that such knowledge could be achieved, moreover, is via access to the traditions of the particular

community. Who but an Akiva could know what is meant by jots, titles, and decorations on letters? And how could we know other than by being his disciples? Moses would represent on this account a more rational, logically based reading of the Torah, while Rabbi Akiva represents almost a postrational account.

I would like to suggest that this story represents a conflictual moment in the historical development of Babylonian rabbinism, one in which earlier dialectical methods for discovering truth were beginning to be replaced by divinatory and traditionalist ones, while at the same time the act of study was made an end in itself, not requiring any results to achieve its religious purpose, the notion that becomes, incidentally, determinative within later rabbinic Judaism as the concept of Torah for its own sake (*torah lishmah*). This is, itself, strikingly akin to the place of dialectic and study within the East Syrian school of Nisibis as described by Becker and bespeaks some kind of cultural interaction between the two communities, without asking for or even imagining the validity of inquiry into or a model of a specific historical account of influence in one direction or the other.⁴⁷ Indeed, the time has come, I think, to cease thinking in terms of influence and think, rather, of shared and overlapping cultures imbricated on each other and partly simply just the same culture in different variants.⁴⁸ In the face of Moses' demand, as it were, for rational understanding of Rabbi Akiva's discourse, he is told, in effect, to be silent and have faith. Moses' faith is, however, to be tested even more severely, for

He said to Him: "Master of the Universe: You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward." He said to him: "Turn around!" He turned around and saw that they were weighing the flesh of Rabbi Akiva in the market [after his martyrdom]. He said to Him: "Master of the Universe, this is the Torah and this is its reward?!" He said to him: "Be silent! That is what has transpired in My thought."

This silence is redolent of the silence of the apophatic moment in Christian theology, as well. Without determining lines or directions of influence, indeed denying, as I do, the significance and even possibility of such determination, I would nevertheless submit that such comparisons bespeak a common intellectual, discursive, spiritual milieu between patristic Christianity and Babylonian rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁹ I think we are witness in this text to a distinctive turn to both fideism and apophaticism in Babylonian rabbinic circles that answers to similar developments within patristic Christianity both Western and Eastern.

The significance of the argument does not rest, however, in the theorization of a particular Christian/Jewish milieu within which the institutions of rabbinic Judaism and the Church of the East developed together. More than that, I am suggesting that we look in general at the Greek intellectual culture of Late Antiquity in its various manifestations as an important aspect of the context within which Babylonian rabbinic Judaism developed even in its phases that are independent of further Palestinian input, subsequent, that is, to the end of vigorous literary creativity in Palestine.⁵⁰ The Church of the East (and other Syriac-speaking Christians) provide then a pendant on which to hang – by analogy – the plausibility of claims for Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia as much, or more, than as a vehicle for transmission. The extent to which the post-amoraic rabbinic community in Babylonia seems to have been open to the scholasticism of the Nisibene foundation renders the notion of a hermetically sealed, exclusively inner-directed community less and less convincing.⁵¹ In addition to the Persian connections discovered by such scholars as E. S. Rosenthal and Shaul Shaked and increasingly being exposed by Yaakov Elman,⁵² we certainly need, I would suggest, to be looking to the West and the Greco-Roman Christian world as well in order to understand the culture of the Babylonian Talmud.

We can use the evidence of such specific connections to reconstruct a *shared* cultural milieu. Once again, the sophisticated doxographers have something to contribute here, for I think that the Kulturkampf being dramatized in the narrative about Rabbi Akiva manifests itself as well in a story that we find in Eunapius. This legend manifests the rivalry between dialectical discussions, on the one hand, and thaumaturgy and divination, on the other, in the latter part of the fourth century (during Julian's reign, the same Julian whom the Christians call "the apostate" and Eunapius "the holy").

In this narrative we are told that a certain Aedesius, a great sophist, had two pupils in the latter fourth century, Chrysanthius and Eusebius. Eusebius remained entirely loyal to the old rule of dialectic and logic, while Chrysanthius became particularly attached to the newfangled doctrines of Maximus: "Now Chrysanthius had a soul akin to that of Maximus, and like him was passionately absorbed in working marvels, and he withdrew himself in the study of the science of divination." Eusebius, it seems, was somewhat in awe of this Maximus, for

when Maximus was present, [he] used to avoid precise and exact divisions of a disputation and dialectical devices and subtleties; though when Maximus was not there he would shine out like a bright star, with a light like the sun's; such was the facility and

charm that flowered in his discourses. . . . Julian actually revered Eusebius. At the close of his exposition Eusebius would add that these [dialectical discussions, trans.] are the only true realities, whereas the impostures of withcraft and magic that cheat the senses are the works of conjurors who are insane men led astray into the exercise of earthly and material powers.

“The sainted Julian” was puzzled by this peroration that he regularly heard and asked Eusebius what he meant, whereupon the latter said:

Maximus is one of the older and more learned students, who, because of his lofty genius and superabundant eloquence scored all logical proof in these subjects and impetuously resorted to the acts of a madman. . . . But you must not marvel at any of these things, even as I marvel not, but rather believe that the thing of the highest importance is that purification of the soul which is attained by reason.

Eusebius receives something of a surprise, for “when the sainted Julian heard this, he said: ‘Nay, farewell and devote yourself to your books. You have shown me the man I was in search of’”⁵³ (much like, even verbally, the “You have shown me his Torah” of the talmudic text).⁵⁴

The earlier, traditional commitment to dialectical investigation and surety that logic would provide answers has been rejected, and by no less, it seems, than the sainted Julian, in favor of thaumaturgy and divination. But not without conflict – a conflict, I think demonstrated also in the narrative about Rabbi Akiva. Lim’s account of the downfall of dialectic can be extended both further east and outside of Christian circles as well (not, I hasten to add, that Lim had ever said or implied that it was a singularly Christian, or Western, phenomenon).

RABBI ELIEZER AT NICAEA: RUFINUS AT YAVNEH

Normally, however, the Babylonian Talmud is characterized by both traditional and critical scholars as the very repository of rational, dialectical discourse.⁵⁵ My thesis seems, then, to produce a paradox, arguing for a breakdown of dialectic precisely at a moment of its seemingly most vigorous development. We may be able to gain some further insight into this development within rabbinic discourse via comparison with seemingly very different shifts in the patterns of Christian discourse and, in particular, by reading a very familiar (redacted in the stammaitic period)⁵⁶ talmudic story about Yavneh in the context of an equally powerful

fifth-century and therefore contemporary legend about Nicaea. The rabbinic narrative will be seen to be full of paradox itself.

Lim argues that the exigency of articulating an opposition to dialectical discourse in Christian theology comes, in a sense, in the wake of the success of that very dialectic. He describes a situation in which: “[i]n a language game that allowed for the clear articulation of nuances, people pressured each other to profess their beliefs in the middle of a controversial minefield, the features and contours of which were just beginning to be mapped” (1994, 153–54). This pressure led to the conclusion that the endemic dissension of the Christian Church had arisen precisely because of “vain disputes and questionings,”⁵⁷ even among some who had been trained as highly skilled practitioners of this discursive modality. One solution to this “problem” was the turn to a mystical and apophatic theology, as most fully expressed in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Evagrius of Pontus, the latter of which had, as suggested earlier, a major impact precisely on the propensity toward the apophatic (and subordination of the kataphatic to it) in the East Syrian Church. Related to this was the demand, on the part of such a centrally located theological authority as Gregory Nazianzus, to avoid dialectic and engage in Christian practice. One of the responses that Gregory articulated to Christian theological argumentativeness was the catechism.

The climax of Lim’s narrative is his account of the effects of the Council of Nicaea in the century immediately following the time of the great Cappadocians. The centerpiece of Lim’s argument in his chapter on Nicaea and its discursive afterlife is the analysis of a legendary encounter between a confessor and a philosopher at Nicaea, as preserved in the Christian historians’ writings of the late fourth and fifth centuries. Because these legends are more similar in genre to the only type of “historiographical” text preserved within rabbinic literature at this precise period, they provide us a particularly interesting basis for comparison of discursive movements within the two formations at the time: “These legends about Nicaea are inherently interesting to the modern historian, not because accurate information can be mined from them but because they tell us much about the period in which they arose and circulated” (Lim 1994, 187).

According to the version in Rufinus of Aquileia’s *Church History*:

Now we may learn how much power there is in simplicity of faith from what is reported to have happened there. For when the zeal of the religious emperor had brought together priests of God from all over the earth, rumor of the event gathered as well philosophers

and dialecticians of great renown and fame. One of them who was celebrated for his ability in dialectic used to hold ardent debates each day with our bishops, men likewise by no means unskilled in the art of disputation, and there resulted a magnificent display for the learned and educated men who gathered to listen. Nor could the philosopher be cornered or trapped in any way by anyone, for he met the questions proposed with such rhetorical skill that whenever he seemed most firmly trapped, he escaped like a slippery snake. But that God might show that the kingdom of God is based upon power rather than speech, one of the confessors, a man of the simplest character who knew only Christ Jesus and him crucified, was present with the other bishops in attendance. When he saw the philosopher insulting our people and proudly displaying his skill in dialectic, he asked for a chance to exchange a few words with the philosopher. But our people, who knew only the man's simplicity and lack of skill in speech, feared that they might be put to shame in case his holy simplicity became a source of laughter to the clever. But the elder insisted, and he began his discourse in this way: "In the name of Jesus Christ, O philosopher," he said, "listen to the truth. There is one God who made heaven and earth, who gave breath to man whom he had formed from the mud of the earth, and who created everything, what is seen and what is not seen, with the power of his word and established it with the sanctification of his spirit. This word and wisdom, whom we call 'Son,' took pity on the errors of humankind, was born of a virgin, by suffering death freed us from everlasting death, and by his resurrection conferred upon us eternal life. Him we await as the judge to come of all we do. Do you believe this is so, O philosopher?" But he, as though he had nothing whatever that he could say in opposition to this, so astonished was he at the power of what had been said, could only reply to it all that he thought that it was so, and that what had been said was the only truth. . . . The philosopher, turning to his disciples and to those who had gathered to listen, said, "Listen O learned men: so long as it was words with which I had to deal, I set words against words and what was said I refuted with my rhetoric. But when power rather than words came out of the mouth of the speaker, words could not withstand power, nor could man oppose God."⁵⁸

What is stunning about this story, of course, and well analyzed by Lim, is its staging of an opposition between the power of human reason and

rhetoric and the simplicity of faith in which – of course – “nor could man oppose God.”

This staging can serve, as well, as the setting for an interpretation of some of the best known of Yavneh legends from the Babylonian Talmud that may be implicated in the same historical changes and discursive contexts that informed the developments that Lim has laid bare, even if not necessarily responding to them in precisely the same fashion. The most palpable of comparisons would seem to be with the story of Rabbi Eliezer’s controversy with the sages, in the tale of the proverbial “Stove of Akhnai,” a controversy in which he was unable to convince the sages via dialectical reasoning after arguing the entire day to support his traditions from his teachers, and even direct divine interventions on his side did not win the day, and not, of course, because his interlocutors doubted the divinity of the intervenor but because God, too, is only a participant in the dialectic.⁵⁹ As we have seen with respect to the *chreiai*, here too there are sufficient points of similarity between the plots of these two narratives to suggest some kind of cultural connection between them. Perhaps the best would be to conceive of them in the manner of folklorists as *oikotypes* (local variants) of a single oral tale type.

The talmudic tale, perhaps more written about than any other narrative in the Talmud, can be seen in an entirely different light when compared with Rufinus’s roughly contemporaneous production:

On that day,⁶⁰ Rabbi Eliezer used every imaginable argument [refutation], but they did not accept it from him. He said: If the law is as I say, this carob will prove it. The carob was uprooted from its place one hundred feet. Some report four hundred feet. They said to him: One does not quote a carob as proof. He further said to them: If the law is as I say, the water pipe will prove it. The water began to flow backwards. They said to him: One may not quote a water pipe as proof. Again, he said to them: If the law is as I say, the walls of the house of study will prove it. The walls of the house of study leaned over to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them, saying to them, If the disciples of the wise are striving with each other for the law, what have you to do with it? They did not fall because of the honor of Rabbi Yehoshua, and did not stand straight for the honor of Rabbi Eliezer. He said to them, if the law is as I say, let it be proven from heaven. A voice came from heaven and announced: The law is in accordance with the view of Rabbi Eli’ezer. Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said “it [the Torah] is not in heaven.” (B. Bava Metzia 59a)

On the original halakhic question, Rabbi Eliezer initially tried to support his position using the “normal” rabbinic modes of rabbinic dialectic, the very modes of argument [*teshuvot*, lit., refutations] that might be said to define rabbinic rationality. When that failed, however, he didn’t accept defeat, but rather turned to another source of authority: miracles and heavenly oracles. The parallels with the Nicaea tale are obvious: Dialectic (for an entire day, or longer) fails to produce agreement, and resolution is, in the end, achieved by some other means entirely. This brief sequence out of the longer narrative of Rabbi Eliezer accordingly represents something like a close narrative parallel of Rufinus’s story of the old Christian and the philosopher.

At first glance, it seems (and so it did for me in previous publications) to be a sort of inversion, for in Rufinus’s text, of course, it is the miracle workers and divine voice that win the day, defeating the dialecticians, while in the Talmud, at first glance it would seem that the dialecticians defeat the miracles and the voice of God. We shall see, however, that the plot is yet thicker than that. Rufinus is “altogether reluctant to report debates” and legitimizes his account of the Council of Nicaea via the power of faith of the simple confessor,⁶¹ as expressed in his legendary narrative cited here. For the rabbinic legend of the same moment, it is precisely the debate that is the crux of the religious life, and the reporting of debates becomes the very stuff of rabbinic textuality. God himself and his miracles cannot interfere with this holy dialectic, this sacred polyphony: “If the disciples of the wise are striving with each other for the law, what have you to do with it?”

Paradoxically then, while on the one hand, the story seems to be the opposite of Rufinus’s tale, since divine knowledge seems to be excluded as a source of authority, on second look it is more similar than different, owing to the crucial fact that Rabbi Eliezer’s apparently cogent dialectical arguments are not successful in achieving agreement any more than are those of rhetors of Nicaea. Dialectic is predicated on the validity of arguments to command assent (not to establish “absolute truth,” whatever that might mean, but rather to move people from one position to another), which neither the Babylonian Talmud nor the post-Nicene Church seem prepared to endorse. For all their dissimilarity, then, the story of Rufinus and the talmudic story are also in some significant ways both comparable and compatible. In a way that seems at first to be entirely different but in the end achieves – at least negatively – the same result, Rabbi Yehoshua also rejects the notion of dialectic. Rabbi Yehoshua’s statement, frequently taken as an instance of a sort of proto-deconstruction, in this Babylonian version, represents an instance of

a complete collapse in credence in dialectic to produce truth or even assent. The device of the majority vote, while more democratic perhaps than other possible solutions, is just as indicative of this collapse as any other in Babylonian rabbinic Judaism and thus represents a particular episteme of power/knowledge different even from that of earlier Palestinian Judaism. In the face of the perceived failure of dialectic to produce consensus, a perceived failure that I wish to suggest was endemic around the fourth-century Mediterranean and later, the Jewish text seeks to effect a transfer of authority and of control over discourse from heaven – which now can be seen to mean, at least sometimes, reasoned argument – to earth, the allegedly God-given authority of the majority of rabbis, while the Christian text transfers such authority to an equally unquestionable “apostolic” authority, the Council of the Fathers. Both communities turn from reasoned and reasonable attempts to persuade those with whom they disagree to the use of “power” against them. Rabbi Eliezer, possessor of the capacity to provide refutations for an entire day, is very severely punished by excommunication and exile from the House of Study for his refusal to accept the conclusions of the majority, failure to accept the will of the majority thus having consequences as dire as dissent from Christian orthodoxy from the fourth century on.⁶²

Even Julian, losing faith in the power of dialectic, turns to the magician Maximus as an alternate source of authority, yielding yet a third variation on the pattern. The pattern of the Babylonian Talmud, in which endless and bootless dialectic finally only receives conclusion via arbitrary rules for deciding the law, would be, on this hypothesis, only a reflection of the general collapse of faith in dialectic characteristic of the latter part of Late Antiquity in the West and in the East, as well (according to this conjecture). Apophatic dialectic proves remarkably similar, in this sense, to apophatic simplicity. Difference between the patterns remains, of course, as significant as semblance. Note that I am not claiming that one group or text influenced the others, but rather that there was a common Mediterranean episteme, perhaps especially eastern Mediterranean episteme, within which these mutations in patterns of discourse and theories of knowledge took place.

The East Syrian connection, demonstrated so clearly by Gafni, provides the historical scene upon which a drama can be played with characters as seemingly incongruous as Cappadocian Fathers and Babylonian rabbis. As Becker has shown, all of the intellectual developments that took place among Nicene Christians, and in their world became transferred to the Syriac realm as well, and then translated further east with the founding of the school in Nisibis. Shouldn't we consider, at least

as a possibility, the notion that increased interaction between Aramaic-speaking rabbis and Aramaic-speaking Christians, interaction that has been shown to have had enormous institutional impact on the rabbis and the East Syrian Church in the very founding of their most characteristic institutions – the post-amoraic yeshivah and the school at Nisibis – also makes plausible significant imbrication in the ways that these two scholastic communities thought and spoke?

The Talmud itself would seem to want to deny such a connection:

Rabbi Abbahu used to praise Rav Safra [a Babylonian immigrant to Caesarea Maritima] to the minim that he was a great man [i.e., a great scholar]. They released him from excise taxes for thirteen years.

One day they met him. They said to him: "It is written: Only you have I known from all of the families of the earth; therefore I will tax you with all of your sins" [Amos 3:2]. One who is enraged,⁶³ does he punish his lover?

He was silent, and didn't say anything to them. They threw a scarf on him and were mocking him.

Rabbi Abbahu came and found them.

He said to them: "Why are you mocking him?"

They said to him: "Didn't you say that he is a great man, and he could not even tell us the interpretation of this verse!"

He said to them: "That which I said to you has to do with mishnah, but with respect to the Scripture, I didn't say anything."

They said to him: "What is it different with respect to you that you know [Scripture also]?"

He said to them: "We who are located in your midst, take it upon ourselves and we study, but they do not study." (B. Avodah Zarah 4a)

We find the Talmud here explicitly denying that in Babylonia the Rabbis were "located in the midst" of Christians. In general, in the scholarly tradition this has been taken as straightforward evidence that the rabbis of Babylonia had no Christians with whom to contend,⁶⁴ but now I would see its rhetorical function as quite different from that straightforward reading, indeed almost as evidence for the opposite conclusion. Just as the sites in which the most avid disavowal of Hellenism are very Hellenistic sites, as Cohen showed in his essay, so might we argue vis-à-vis the Babylonians and Christianity. The very overstatement and vehemence of that denial, the palpably false claim that there are no Christians in the midst of the Babylonian rabbis, can (at least) be defensibly read

in the wake of Cohen's work as manifesting the effort of the Babylonian Talmud to disavow any connection with, intercourse with, and influence of Christians, just as the Qumran folk and the Hasmoneans wish to present themselves as the very opposite of hellenized Jews.

Richard Kalmin (1994a) has demonstrated that contrary to what might be expected from the Talmud's own self-representation, it is in the Babylonian Talmud that we find a much greater instance of confrontations with early Christians narrated. Although to be sure, most of these narratives are about Palestinian sages, this phenomenon of increased narrative of such confrontations can best be explained in my view by assuming that Christians and Christianity were important dialogue partners (or polemic partners) in fourth-century Mesopotamia and later.⁶⁵ As Becker has argued with respect to other similar interactions: "In the process [of polemicizing], these intellectuals ironically developed a common ground in which their disputation could occur. The fact that teachers and students could come from different religious backgrounds and even engage in polemic with each others' faiths, yet could still maintain their academic relationships, demonstrates the proximate intellectual space that they shared" (Becker and Reed 2003, 390).⁶⁶ Could we not say the same for our rabbis and East Syrian schoolmen?

Be that as it may, it seems hardly implausible to consider even the rabbis of the eastern Mediterranean, even as late as the end of Late Antiquity, as part and parcel of the Hellenistic world. As Becker, once again, sharply put it, "Our assumptions about the lack of any interrelationship between the Jewish and Christian communities in late antique Mesopotamia have too often limited our capability of imagining how to use our wealth of textual evidence in new ways" (2003, 392). The transition into a Gaonic period (eighth to eleventh centuries) in which Babylonian rabbinism was deeply and explicitly involved in Greek thought will seem much less abrupt and sudden on this account, and it would be the overall developments of thought in late ancient eastern Hellenism, including Syriac Christianity, and not only the Muslim conquest that would have brought about such transition.

Notes

1. For longer discussion of this passage in its context, see Boyarin 1993, 200–206.
2. To the point that in my earlier writing on this text, I assumed that there had been an elaborate charade of misunderstandings.
3. See, on this most recently, Hezser 1996 and 2000, 167–69.

4. Note that even Henry Fischel, who most expansively considered the presence of *epicurea* and *rhetorica* in rabbinic literature and especially the role of the *chreia*, explicitly only considered it for Palestinian literature; Fischel 1973, xi, writes: "It is fortunate that at this stage of scholarship no further defense has to be made for the assumption that Greco-Roman situations were well-known to the creators of the Midrash, i.e., the literature that modifies the word and the world of Scripture by interpretation, explicitly or implicitly. Rather the problem is how far this knowledge went, how much of Greco-Roman academic procedure and philosophical quest was used in that on-going process in which the culmination of the tannaitic culture, c. 200 C.E. (the codification of the Mishnah) and that of Palestinian amoraic culture, c. 400 (Jerusalem Talmud) were important stages." For Fischel, it seems, the "Near East" for these purposes extends as far as Palestine and Asia Minor but no farther (Fischel 1973, 2–3). For Fischel on the *chreia*, see especially 86.
5. I thus disagree very slightly with Catherine Hezser's suggestion that "[t]he influence question, which occupied scholars for many decades, is a question which can never be answered in a satisfactory way," (2000, 162). In total agreement with Hezser's overall strictures, and even more importantly, with her alternative models for thinking about shared materials and those of others, I do think, nevertheless, that occasionally, as here, one can determine the direction of a certain flow.
6. A very recent exception is Richard Kalmin, who, in a forthcoming book, will explicitly treat other aspects of Western connections for Babylonian rabbinism. It should be mentioned that Kalmin has indeed been making an impressive case for profound textual/literary *influences* on the Babylonian 'Amora'im, i.e., for the actual importation of Palestinian texts in the fourth century, which, if correct, would only partly vitiate the present argument, for I am looking at developments that seem to have taken place *after* the demise of Palestinian rabbinic culture sometime around the late fourth century. The argument presented herein is particularly valid, I think, if we consider precisely those developments, such as the loss of trust (as I argue) in dialectic as a means for producing consensus, that are not to be found in Palestinian texts and traditions.
7. Cohen 2000. The last of his examples is ambiguous on this point; he writes of a Babylonian talmudic passage that has partial parallels in Palestinian sources. This would suggest that this is an example of a Palestinian topos that had migrated eastward. In any case, Cohen declines to consider the differences between the Palestinian and Babylonian versions, so from my perspective, some more work (beyond the scope of the present essay) is required on that text.
8. In a parallel discussion, Adam Becker has argued that most scholars, including the present writer in the past, have regarded the question of "partings of the ways" (or not, as the case may be) as largely an issue confined to the Roman West; "Beyond the Spatial and Temporal *Limes*: Questioning the 'Parting of the Ways' Outside the Roman Empire," in Becker and Reed 2003, 373.

9. Cohen 1981, 85. Further, Abraham Wasserstein has, at least, adumbrated such a result, arguing: "The Jews were as susceptible to the lure and influence of Hellenism as their gentile neighbours. This is no less true of the Aramaic-speaking Jews in Palestine and Babylonia than of those of their co-religionists who, living in Asia Minor or in Egypt, or in Greek-speaking cities in Palestine and Syria, had either adopted Greek speech or inherited it from their forebearers" (1994, 223). I thank Shamma Boyarin for bringing this essay to my attention. It is important to point out that Wasserstein emphasizes as well the common Hellenistic world of the Rabbis and of Syriac-writing Christians (*ibid.*). I would only, of course, wish to emend here the language of "influence," which seems to imply that Hellenism is a substance free of the actual actors, necessarily not only imported by Greeks (for otherwise it wouldn't be Hellenism but Hellenicity!) For which term and concept, see Hall 2002.
10. Hezser 2000, 164.
11. *Ibid.*, 186.
12. This is the conclusion of my "The Yavneh-Cycle of the Stammaim and the Invention of the Rabbis." in J. L. Rubenstein 2005, 256–309. See also Schremer, "Stammaitic Historiography," *ibid.*, esp. 226, making very similar points.
13. To the best of my knowledge, the term was introduced by David Halivni 1982.
14. For an excellent discussion of various approaches to the stammaitic question, see Schremer, "Stammaitic Historiography."
15. Halivni, "Aspects," 76.
16. Kalmin 1989.
17. *Ibid.*, 51.
18. See now too Schremer 2005 and Halivni, "Aspects," 74, distinguishing clearly between two quite distinct literary projects and thence (in my view, precisely on Ockham's razor!) between two groups of redactors.
19. Halivni, "Aspects," 73. While I am less than fully comfortable with certain positivistic aspects of Halivni's argument, namely, the assumption of bounded and named periods, functions, and functionaries, I think he is absolutely right to hypothesize that the redactorial activity that produced the Talmud was lengthy and uneven (Halivni, "Aspects," 75). If there were no other evidence at all, the witness of a Gaonic work, *The She'iltot of Rab Ahai Gaon* (fl. ca. 650–782) would provide sufficient reason for this view, as the author of that work is clearly working from a significantly different version of the Talmud, one that is the product of other Stammā'im than the ones in the Talmud that has come down to us (on this point Halivni, "Aspects," 90–91). The work of the Stammā'im may very well have still been going on during the seventh and into the eighth centuries, in accord with Halivni's latest position. If Halivni's position stands, it will be necessary to rethink the nexus between the Talmud and the beginnings of Islam and the Karaite movement in the wake of this very late dating.
20. *Iggeret Rav Sherira Ga'on*, 96–97, although Yazdigird II was no longer shah then, having been succeeded in 459 by Peroz.

21. Kalmin 1989, 93–94.
22. Goodblatt 1975, esp. 267.
23. Isaiah Gafni, "Nestorian Literature," 567–76. It is important, however, to caution that I am *not* arguing for a direct influence causation relationship here. Becker has well demonstrated that the founding of the school of Nisibis entailed itself a transition from study circle to institutional corporate structure (2006, 62), similar to the transition from amoraic study circles to institutional yeshivah exposed by Goodblatt. One could as easily, perhaps, hypothesize influence in reverse. I prefer, as usual, to think of shared universes of discourse. See, too, Becker 2006, 167.
24. Boyarin, "The Yavneh-Cycle."
25. For the destabilization of that Syriac myth, see Becker 2006, 41–61. See also his important comments at 71.
26. Rubenstein 2002.
27. See fascinating discussion of Halivni, "Aspects," 94–97, on the anonymity of the Stamma'im. His explanation (that their names were not given in order to protect the authority of Rav Ashi) is not incompatible with mine that they hid themselves in order to project their own activity as the activity of the Tanna'im and Amora'im themselves, a kind of pseudepigraphy, the authors of which, by definition, remain anonymous.
28. Halivni, "Aspects," 76.
29. Halivni, "Aspects," 95–96.
30. As paraphrased in *ibid.*, 96.
31. Cf. also *ibid.*, 123–24, for related observations.
32. This characteristic has been known historically on more than one moment to deteriorate into a logic chopping empty even of spiritual passion and devotion and to become the virtual equivalent of a chess match. This is less often so, however, than enlightened enemies of the Talmud would have us believe.
33. Neusner 1991, 110–11. For an exhaustive discussion of these characteristics of the Babylonian Talmud, also dating them to the redactional level of the text but presented in a somewhat different explanatory framework, see Kraemer with many examples as well.
34. For extensive argument that this shift is, indeed, a shift within the history of rabbinic Judaism, see Boyarin 2004, 159–63, 190–92, making use, *inter alia*, of the work of Shlomo Naeh and of my own student, Azzan Yadin. Cf. the explanations offered by Kraemer 1990, 114–21. See Neusner 1995a, 103–6, for a rich characterization of the Bavli that I believe is compatible with the aspect that I am exploring here, as well). See also 94–95.
35. In an earlier stage of my thinking, I took this formulation very literally, more literally than I do now, as representing the enormous impact of a theological decision on other areas of textual practice, thus that the rabbinic rejection of Logos theology gave rise to midrash and Talmud in its Babylonian sense. I am less committed to actual cause and effect now, seeing the relationship between theology and textuality as more heuristic than necessarily historical (and the theological shift as less decisive than before, as well); see Boyarin 2007.
36. See also Martin 1995, 38–47.

37. Burrus 2000, 56–59.
38. As described by Lim, the tone seems remarkably similar to that of Justin's Dialogue with Trypho. See also on this question in general the very subtle and nuanced Lyman 2003.
39. Urbach 1971; Kimelman 1980.
40. Contrary to Lim 1994, 20.
41. Henry Chadwick, trans. and ed., *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 134–35.
42. *Ibid.*, 136.
43. Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, 148.
44. Origen, *Song*, 73.
45. Adam Becker, personal communication, Aug. 22, 2005.
46. My evidence for this would be moments in the Babylonian Talmud in which we find rabbis refraining from communal prayer, arguing essentially: "They do their thing and we do ours."
47. This is a moment to illustrate the compatibilities and differences between my approach and that of Hayes (Hayes 1997, 18–19). Thus, while elegantly (and convincingly) interpreting the passage as being about rabbinic anxiety and also self-confidence in respect of their hermeneutic positions vis-à-vis the Bible, she does not even consider the question of why this particular narrative was told, when and where it was told, and what may have generated this particular reflection at that time.
48. "In contrast to most prior research I advise against the positivistic search for 'influences' when dealing with similarities" (Hezser 2000, 162). I couldn't agree more, in spite of my modest modification of Hezser's position in n. 6.
49. See too Richard Kalmin, who in the introduction to his forthcoming book, writes: "Rather, it is my contention that the Jewish and Christian developments in the region during the fourth century, continuing until the advent of Islam in the seventh century, may be closely related, and that processes accelerated by Shapur's dramatic conquests of the third century may have had pronounced literary and practical consequences in Babylonia and surrounding territories." I thank Prof. Kalmin for letting me see this material prior to publication.
50. As Hayes informs us, the doyenne of Palestinian Talmud studies in our time, Prof. Y. Sussman of the Hebrew University regards the end of Palestinian amoraic activity to have been in the third quarter of the fourth century, while the Babylonians went on for centuries more elaborating and producing their Talmud.
51. Although, to be sure, as Richard Kalmin (1994b) has shown, precisely this openness to cultural impact from the surrounding Sasanian world promoted another kind of insularity among the Babylonian rabbis, insulation from contact with or power over and among their fellow, non-rabbinic Jews.
52. Yaakov Elman, "Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Traditions," in this volume.

53. Philostratus, Eunapius, and Wright, *Philostratus: The Lives of the Sophists*, Eunapius: *Lives of the Philosophers*, 433–35.
54. I wish to thank Ronald Reissberg for pointing this out to me.
55. See notably Fisch 1997, an important work on which I have commented extensively elsewhere.
56. Note that my argument here is not crucially dependent on one particular determination of when that was so long as it is after (or even at the end of) the fourth century.
57. The *Vita Dianielis* 90, cited Lim 1994, 156 n. 35. See also McLynn 1992. Particularly striking and amusing in our present sociocultural context is the description by Gregory Nazianzen of dialecticians as being analogous to the wrestlers of the World Wrestling Federation and not even genuine athletes, apud Lim 1994, 162.
58. Rufinus, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11*, trans. Philip R. Amidon, 10–11. Compare somewhat different version of Lim, *Public Disputation*, 192.
59. For recent readings of this much-read story, see Rubenstein 1999, 34–64, and Fonrobert 2001b.
60. According to the Babylonian Talmud itself, “on that day” always refers to the crucial day of decision at Yavneh when the characteristic forms of Babylonian talmudic rabbinism were set in stone.
61. Lim 1994, 196.
62. Burrus 1995. Although, as Charlotte Fonrobert reminds me, it is not insignificant that his main tormentor, Rabban Gamaliel, is “killed” by talmudic legend in the end as punishment for his high-handedness, so nothing is quite simple.
63. Trans. following Rashi ad loc.
64. See now too Schremer, “Stammaitic Historiography,” 223–24, critiquing the usual position.
65. For a related point, Becker, “Beyond the Spatial and Temporal *Limes*,” 382 n. 39.
66. This formulation is quite similar to my own notion of smuggled “wheelbarrows,” as developed in Boyarin 2004, 1–5.

