

Contribution to Roundtable Discussion on Biblical Studies

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A cursory glance at the program book of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) annual meeting affords one an opportunity to get a sense of transformations in the field of biblical studies. The number of sessions has increased exponentially, keeping a pace with multidisciplinary work in a variety of intersecting fields. That my own research interests do not reside firmly in rabbinics, but traverse biblical studies, hermeneutics, late antique Judaism, and biblical and quranic interpretation is not all that uncommon within the academy. In fact, most members of the SBL, while rooted in one field, have an expertise, or minimally an active interest, in another. There is no indication that this trend, which is part of a larger movement in the humanities, will diminish in the years to come, nor should it. Much is gained from the cross-fertilization that takes place with the expansion of intellectual horizons, which is often best achieved when departmental and disciplinary boundary markers are blurred.

The building of silos within the academy is by and large no longer considered a worthwhile endeavor. We see this with respect to the collapse of smaller departments into larger units. I do share some concerns of colleagues who fear the effects moving into broader units may have on the quality of programs. I do not, however, regard this trend as the beginning phase of the dismantling of the humanities. While the decline in undergraduate student enrollment in humanities courses across the States is rather alarming, there will always be a desire and need for the cultivation of the life of the mind through critical reading and writing. If done thoughtfully and not merely for economic purposes, the downsizing of departments and the concomitant expansion of broad-based, multidisciplinary programs can actually be an exciting opportunity to create innovative, robust learning opportunities for students yearning for a liberal arts education.

And, yet, while there are many reasons to consider this a salubrious change in the humanities in general, how does this affect graduate programs, especially for our purposes those in the study of rabbinics? Should we lament the movement away from philological training? The debate that raged when I was in graduate school twenty years ago between those who valued specialization over generalization and vice-versa continues unabated with some significant differences. Even those today who maintain that specialization is essential, also admit the indispensability of broad-based knowledge of related textual traditions, as well as methodological sophistication. And, those who endorse more generalized training recognize the necessity of language training.

I suspect that we will always have generalists and specialists in our midst, as well as those who privilege the reading of texts over historical exigencies, and vice-versa. Scholars of rabbinic

literature, as their counterparts in biblical studies, cannot afford to sacrifice philological expertise even if one is first and foremost a historian. As Carl E. Schorske in the introduction of *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* writes:

Yet the historian will not share to the full the aim of the humanist textual analyst. The latter aims at the greatest possible illumination of a cultural product, relativizing all principles of analysis to its particular content. The historian seeks rather to locate and interpret the artifact temporally in a field where two lines intersect. One line is vertical, or diachronic, by which he establishes the relation of a text or a system of thought to previous expressions in the same branch of cultural activity (painting, politics, etc). The other is horizontal, or synchronic, by which he assesses the relation of the content of the intellectual object at the same time. The diachronic thread is the warp, the synchronic is the woof in the fabric of cultural history. The historian is the weaver, but the quality of his cloth depends on the strength of the color of the thread. He must learn something of spinning from the specialized disciplines whose scholars have in fact lost interest in using history as one of their primary modes of understanding, but who still know better than the historian what in their metier constitutes stout yarn of true color. The historian's homespun will be less fine than theirs, but if he emulates their method in its making, he should spin yarn serviceable enough for the kind of bold-patterned fabric he is called upon to produce.¹

I refer to Schorske's vivid imagery in an attempt to highlight the ways in which current and future scholarly pursuits in understanding rabbinic and biblical literature must be multi-faceted, and must account for historical phenomena that shape the very literariness of our sources, and at the same time require the specialized language training necessary to appreciate the texture of our sources.

Over the past several years, I have served on the steering committee of the SBL History and Literature of Early Judaism section (I am currently co-chairing the section), and have noticed a considerable move away from paper proposals dealing strictly with passages of midrash, Mishnah, or the Talmud. A paper that unpacks rabbinic texts with an eye toward how a specific passage works within rabbinic corpora is uncommon. That is to say, the horizon of inquiry has broadened to include adjacent fields and the wider circulatory system of ancient and medieval Near Eastern literature. It is taken for granted that rabbinic literature be understood within social, religious, and cultural contexts that push the very limits of how we understand "rabbinic" vis-à-vis other classifications.

This development did not come about overnight, but in many respects is the product of a process going back to the early 1980s, a watershed period when scholars began to draw on the innovations taking place in literary studies and to apply them to the study of rabbinic literature. No longer

trained solely within the narrow confines of rabbinical seminaries, scholars of rabbinic literature were exposed to a host of discourses and intellectual crosscurrents. They brought to the study of rabbinic texts a rich array of questions and a broad set of theoretical skills. Furthermore, while scholarship in this area advanced on the heels of other fields, it contributed to the study of early Christianity, New Testament Studies, patristic exegesis, and late antique Judaism, and continues to do so.

In an article that I published in 2009 on current trends in the study of midrash, I quoted Richard Sarason whose reflections on changes in the field are as apt now as they were almost ten years ago:

The cautious, methodologically self-conscious juxtaposition and interweaving of multiple textual loci; of texts and a variety of contexts; of literary, historical, and religious-cultural perspectives and methodologies—all provide the contemporary scholar with fruitful lenses for the interpretation of what more and more is understood to be a dense, richly layered, multiform, and overdetermined (in the Freudian sense of being generated by multiple causal factors) literary corpus bearing witness to a complex and dynamic culture that produced and lied behind it. Under these circumstances, no single reading or interpretive lens will suffice to do justice to this rich complexity.²

Scholars began to read rabbinic texts differently. That is, the self-conscious awareness of reading as a culturally, politically and socially conscribed activity marked a significant shift in scholarly trends. Assumptions were explicit, and openness to a variety of approaches contributed to further recognition of the richly layered, multiform nature of the literature at hand. This shift remains ever with us today as we pay far closer attention to the tools we employ and methodological frameworks we create in our research. The multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the relationship between texts and intertexts, between texts and contexts, and between literature and history, characterizes to a large extent the research trends not only in the study of rabbinic literature but biblical studies as well as the humanities at large.

A relatively recent development in the study of rabbinic literature, for example, is the resuscitation of the Irano-Talmudica sub-field which examines the relationship between the Babylonian Talmud and Iranian studies. Those invested in this area excavate the Talmud for traces of Sasanian Persian culture and the effects of that imperial context on the Talmud's formation. They attempt to situate the Talmud in its Sasanian context. Others are also turning eastward, toward the literature of the Syriac Church. Rome and Western Christendom remain vital contexts; however, generally speaking, the scholarly gaze is set on the eastern Mediterranean arena. Other trends include exploring the margins of the classical rabbinic corpora. Sources such as Pirque de

Rabbi Eliezer or the Midrashei Ge'ulah are resources for locating the nexus between Islam and Judaism of the early medieval period.

It is hard to ignore how gender studies and environmental studies interact with the study of rabbinic literature. Moreover, advancements in the digitization of manuscripts and critical editions has opened up new avenues of inquiry and has forced us to reconsider some underlying assumptions about the very sources under examination.

There was once a time when you could readily distinguish between the scholarly hedgehogs from the foxes, but it has become increasingly difficult, though not impossible, to do so. We are required to train our students to be both, to possess the requisite equipment to drill down into texts, and the skills necessary to survey the field in order to situate those very texts within a cultural, social and religious landscape. While it is true that in the past rabbinic studies seemed to lag behind related fields of studies in its embrace of cutting-edge approaches, this is no longer the case and has not been the case since the early '80s. The rise of Jewish Studies within the academy played an influential role in ushering in the study of rabbinic literature into the Liberal Arts domain. The interlocutory role it continues to play within the academy helps to shape the manner in which scholars of rabbinics formulate and address their concerns, and in turn, the changes in the academy, that is, its orientation toward greater cross-, inter- and multidisciplinary studies, contributes to the future of Jewish Studies and the subfield of rabbinics.

Notes

1. Schorske 1979, xxii.
2. Sarason 2006, 9. I quote Sarason in Bakhos 2009, 273.

Works Cited

- Bakhos, Carol. 2009. "Recent Trends in the Study of Midrash and Rabbinic Narrative." *Currents in Biblical Research* 7.2: 272–293.
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