Once again the Status Quaestionis of Research in Rabbinic Literature: An Answer to Chaim Milikowsky

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In an intentionally polemical, subjective and tentative article, ‘Research into Rabbinic Literature: An Attempt to define the Status Quaestionis’, I criticized the tendency dominating modern research to consider the texts of rabbinic literature as ‘identities’, simple, self-contained, composed at a given moment, and thus clearly distinguishable from one another. In contrast to this, I understand rabbinic literature as an open continuum in which the process of emergence is not to be separated or distinguished without further ado from that of transmission, and the process of transmission from that of redaction. Emergence, transmission and redaction overlap in various ways and overflow into one another.

1. Milikowsky begins by referring exhaustively to the state of rabbinic textual criticism and emphasizes correctly that it is ‘still in its infancy’. Equally correctly, he distinguishes between ‘simple variants’ of a text and ‘recensional variants’, but he frequently mixes them in his argument. The problem of the redactional identity of a text can, of course, not be discussed on the level of ‘simple variants’.

2. Although Milikowsky admits that the number of rabbinic texts whose ‘manuscript traditions have undergone a rigorous stemmatic analysis’ is very small, he is nevertheless sure that the Urtext can be reconstructed on the basis of this analysis. ‘The very fact’—he writes—‘that the manuscript traditions of these rabbinic texts allow for stemmatic analysis indicates that we are dealing with clearly distinguishable texts.’ This is nothing but a petitio principii. The use of a specific methodological means guarantees that what is looked for is also found. How this functions is shown by his handling of the Bereshit Rabba example. Although we have still no usable stemma, it is nevertheless Milikowsky’s ‘conviction (!) … that the stemmatic analysis of Bereshit Rabba will lead us to the following conclusions: (1) its redactional identity is clear-cut, and (2) there is no significant recensional variation’.

1 JJS 37 (1986), pp. 139–52.
4 Ibid., p. 205.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 206. On p. 204 he has by contrast conceded also recensional variants: ‘To the extent that recensional variations can be shown to exist among the manuscript traditions of Bereshit Rabba—and this is certainly a possibility—…’. Cf. also p. 207: ‘With regard to recensional variations I am more hesitant’.
3. The problem of the Urtext must be grasped more sharply than Milikowsky tries to do.\(^7\) When I say that ‘in most cases [an Urtext] has never existed’,\(^8\) this is an epistemological statement based on an ontological presupposition. It does not mean that the Urtext is not ‘recoverable’ because of the defective evidence (the evidence could ideally be improved through a subsequent additional manuscript discovery), but that the category ‘Urtext’ cannot be applied to rabbinic literature. That this is the case arises from the latter’s nature. This does not mean that rabbinic texts did not exist in space and time as definable entities, but rather that no single specific redactional version of a text is the source of all other redactional versions of the same text.

4. The crucial point in Milikowsky’s line of reasoning is his understanding of ‘work’ and ‘redaction’. This understanding, which determines his estimate of ‘variants’ (of whatever kind), is a premiss which is constantly presupposed but never established. Essentially, it signifies that every writing of rabbinic literature has two histories: namely, a pre-redactional and a post-redactional history. In the middle of these two histories stands firmly and unshakeably the zero-point, like, as it were, an absolute watershed between the essentially distinct pre- and post-redactional histories. Why this must be so is understandable from the point of view of scientific theory. The researcher believes that only so can he bring order into the chaos of fluctuating traditions and make peace between himself and his object.

The redactional identity of a work happens at this zero-point. All that precedes it is not yet ‘work’ but ‘sources used by the redactor’. All that follows belongs to the ‘history of transmission’ of the work defined through the zero-point of the single redaction. Simple variants, like recensional variants, are part of the transmission history and thereby clearly belong to the post-redactional phase, after the zero-point. Various recensions of a work are always recensions of one redactionally identical work: i.e. of an Urtext. (‘Recesion’ is related to ‘revising’, while ‘redaction’ is related to ‘editing’.)\(^9\)

This premiss of Milikowsky corresponds to the classic static view of rabbinic literature against which I would like to present a more dynamic model. According to this, the redaction which constitutes the work does not occur at the zero-point, which assigns a firm place to all the individual elements, but is a process which does not allow any neat division between pre- and post-redactional history. Milikowsky’s claim not to mix the two questions concerning the redaction of a work and the interrelationships between different works is consistent on the basis of his presupposed premisses. But he therewith does not enter into my request to reconsider

\(^7\) Art. cit., p. 206.
\(^8\) \textit{JJS} 37 (1986), p. 152.
\(^9\) Art. cit., p. 204, n. 12.
such concepts as 'text', 'Urtext', 'recension', 'tradition', 'citation', 'redaction', 'final redaction', 'work'.

5. For Milikowsky, the model of oral tradition plays the role of a deus ex machina in order to explain the exceptions and irregularities which in spite of his 'simple' premisses cannot be overlooked. On the level of an individual work, there are still obviously such cases of which 'no one absolute Urtext [was] ever in existence', e.g. the Bavli, and here oral tradition comes in. The differences in the formulation of the sugyot go back to the oral school activity, which was only concerned with the essentials of the text and not with the precise formulation. In other works such as Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, which have never undergone a standardized redaction, oral tradition is obviously not required. They are late, and for that reason their authors-redactors did not consider them as closed.

On the level of the interrelationships between various works, oral tradition is needed to save the premiss of firmly definable texts to which one can refer as self-contained units, and at the same time to explain the incontestable phenomenon that works redacted later can contain 'an earlier formulation of a tradition-unit', and works redacted earlier, 'an evolved version of this same tradition-unit'. If we consequently find in the Tosefta, which was composed later, older traditions than in the Mishnah, this stems from the fact that the redactor of the Tosefta knew oral traditions which have not been accommodated in our written Mishnah. So far so good. This is conceivable even if I doubt that all this has taken place on the oral level. But what about the 'transmitter' of the Tosefta who 'copies' it one hundred, or several hundred, years later? The zero-point of the history of the Tosefta is, according to Milikowsky, in the past. The transmitter has to know that he is a transmitter and not a redactor; he may therefore only 'revise' the once 'edited' Tosefta text and not 'redact' it anew! But what if through the oral transmission he acquires essentially new items of content which he would like to introduce? Will he then keep to being just a transmitter and not a redactor?

For Milikowsky, the answer is simple because he has solved the problem by his definition. Redaction is reserved to the one and only zero-point; everything subsequent must be transmission. But it is also possible to come to a very different conclusion from the application of the oral tradition model, namely that it contradicts the thesis concerning the absolute zero-point of redaction. Oral tradition does not save the rigid schema concerning a pre- and post-redactional history clearly separated by the zero-point, but leads it ad absurdum.

6. The oral tradition model is unscientific because it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. We can only work with the evidence we possess, and this is
exclusively the literary plane of the texts. We agree, for all that, on the point that it is the task of future research to further investigate the transmission history of rabbinic literature. Disagreement exists on whether redaction being the zero-point precedes transmission history or is a component of it.

A fine example of the state of the problem is Milikowsky’s handling of the Tosefta manuscripts.\textsuperscript{13} It is more and more apparent that the Erfurt manuscript is the product of the aggressive Ashkenazi revision which I. Ta-Shma has so impressively characterized,\textsuperscript{14} and that the Vienna manuscript offers the ‘more original’ text. However, to conclude from this that the Vienna manuscript ‘has generally preserved the original text of the Tosefta’ (and consequently marks the zero-point), and that the Erfurt manuscript belongs to the transmission history and study of the Tosefta in the Middle Ages, is a naive and deficient presentation of the problem. The Vienna manuscript (dating actually to the beginning of the fourteenth century) also belongs to the medieval transmission and reception of the Tosefta, and it is only within this transmission history that it is to be judged differently from the Erfurt manuscript. The evaluation of the Geniza fragments, which is still in its beginnings, will be decisive for the more concrete classification of the Vienna (and the Erfurt) manuscript.

The progress of his studies on the Seder ‘Olam shows that Milikowsky, too, could arrive here at more nuanced judgements. In his article, ‘Seder ‘Olam and the Tosefta’,\textsuperscript{15} he comes, despite a start indicating almost full awareness of the problem, to the rather flat result that the Seder ‘Olam existed as a completed work before the Tosefta was definitively redacted, and the methodological instrument for this is precisely that ‘mistaken perspective’ justly criticised by him, viz. the analysis of ‘relationships between the tradition-units as evidence for the relationships between the finished literary works’.\textsuperscript{16} He is, to be sure, still in pursuit of the original text of the Seder ‘Olam, yet the evaluation of the Geniza fragments has caused a new situation to arise.\textsuperscript{17} The manuscript codices of the Seder ‘Olam are almost all of European provenance and, save for one exception, are all traceable to a single text tradition. By contrast, the altogether older Geniza fragments almost all come from the East (Egypt, Palestine, Syria) and represent ‘many different textual traditions’. The correct recognition that in Europe ‘one specific textual tradition became predominant’, whereas in the East varied textual traditions ‘co-existed’, unfortunately still does not lead to the correct conclusion, namely a relinquishment of the search for the one ‘original text’. The Geniza fragments do not tell us ‘what the Seder

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 208, n. 27.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Kiryat Sefer} 60 (1985), pp. 298–309.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Tarbiz} 49 (1979/80), pp. 246–63 (Hebr.).

\textsuperscript{16} Art. cit., p. 211.

'Olam really said', but that 'originally' there were several versions of the Seder 'Olam one beside the other, which in Ashkenazi Europe apparently became standardized. This means that the process of redaction indeed reaches into transmission history, and this finding coincides exactly with that regarding the Hekhalot literature and also other rabbinic texts.  

7. I abstain from entering into further details, and to end would add only that, despite Milikowsky's warnings, others also doubt the premiss of a single and definitive redaction of the texts in ancient Judaism. The editor of this Journal questions the redactional idenitytity of the Hebrew Bible and the Qumran writings, and D. J. Harrington and A. J. Saldarini go in the same direction in respect of the Targumim: 'When one inspects the extensive critical apparatus in Sperber's edition and reconstructs what the various manuscripts contained, the impression arises that the manuscript situation described by Peter Schäfer for Hekhalot literature also obtains to some extent in targumic literature. The individual manuscripts of what we call Targum Jonathan tend almost to constitute separate works. The process by which these works were shaped was so varied and fluid that the search for the “one” text or the “original” text may be illusory.'

Postscript

The 'biographical approach' to rabbinic literature is not an issue in Milikowsky's discussion with me but, predictably, it bothers Jacob Neusner and his students. In a recent article ('Judaic Uses of History in Talmudic Times', History and Theory 27 (1988), p. 20, n. 5) Neusner argues against the possibility of writing biographies of talmudic rabbis which, as he says, has been buried by W. S. Green's essay 'What's in a Name? The Problematical of Rabbinic "Biography"', in Approaches to Ancient Judaism (Chico, California, 1978), pp. 77-98. My article 'Research into Rabbinic Literature',

19 Even if Milikowsky underplays in this connection the relevance of the Hekhalot literature and states that 'Ta-Shma's conclusions regarding Ashkenazic intervention in rabbinic texts need to be corrected' (art. cit., p. 204, n.13). Naturally, 'the compositional process of Seder 'Olam [is also] radically different from that of rabbinic literature in general' (ibid., p. 211, n. 34).  
20 G. Vermes, The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty years on (The Fourteenth Sacks Lecture) Oxford 1987, pp. 1-19. Cf. his comments on the War Scroll: 'The text of this quite extensive composition existed in remarkably different versions, and these came about within a fairly short lapse of time ... As a matter of fact, I do not think that we can speak of the real War Scroll, for there are as many real War Scrolls as there are manuscripts. In fact, the variations in style, terminology and structure cannot be explained as arising from deviations from a single original version, but rather as representing various semi-independent "editions" of this writing' (ibid., pp. 13 f.)  
21 Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets (The Aramaic Bible, vol. 10), Edinburgh 1987, p. 2.—I thank Pamela Vermes for the English translation of this paper and my student, Ronen Reichman, for extensive discussion of my article and Milikowsky's rejoinder.
according to Neusner, 'provides a fine reprise of Green’s arguments and ideas, without crediting him with having originally presented them'. This is too much honour, because it gives the impression that my entire article is nothing else but a repetition of Green’s ideas; in fact, it deals on one page out of thirteen with the biographical approach (of precisely Neusner and his students, and not of ‘the earlier generations of historians reading the Talmud, as well as many in our time’, as he expresses himself rather vaguely in his article). Furthermore, it develops an argument I have formulated already in the introduction to my Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des Rabbinischen Judentums (Leiden, 1978), which was written before Green’s article had appeared and which I did not find worth mentioning either. Unfortunately, it has been published in German and obviously had no chance, therefore, of entering ‘the canon of learning in this field’ (Neusner, op. cit.).