

Sokoloff's methodology inspires. The *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* in particular is a must for anyone working with the Babylonian Talmud, the magic bowls, Syriac or Mandaic.

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JEFFREY L. RUBENSTEIN, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore / London, 2003. xii, 232 pp. £31.00. ISBN 0-8018-7388-6.

This is a sequel to Rubenstein's *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (1999). There he argued that the aggadic sections of the Babylonian Talmud, similarly to its halakhic sections, were created by the anonymous authors of the Talmud (the 'Stammaim'): they reflected not only a range of distinctively Stammaitic editorial techniques, but also an ideology specific to the post-Amoraic period. This ideology was shaped by the social setting of the Babylonian academies (*yeshivot*) which—as Rubenstein convincingly argued—were instituted precisely in the Stammaitic period (fifth or sixth centuries). Indeed, the institution of the academies would have marked the end of the Amoraic period, and would account for the development of the anonymous layer—halakhic and aggadic—of the Babylonian Talmud.

Here Rubenstein sets out to study in more detail the ideology, ethos or 'culture' of the Stammaim, and their academies, as reflected in the aggadic sections of the Babylonian Talmud. He considers the centrality of the academy in Stammaitic culture (ch. 1) and the importance accorded in this context to argumentation and dialectics (ch. 2)—themselves a distinctive feature of the Stammaitic, halakhic layer of the Babylonian Talmud. Stammaitic academies were far from serene: debates frequently verged on violence (ch. 3) and sages were constantly exposed to the risk of public shame (ch. 4).

The social organisation of the academies is similarly reflected, according to Rubenstein, in the Talmudic *aggadot*. Pedigree and lineage are given far more prominence in the Babylonian Talmud than in Palestinian sources, and this says something of the hierarchy and leadership of the Stammaitic academies (ch. 5). Rubenstein considers further the attitude of Talmudic sages towards their wives—who appear, in many cases, as impediments to their careers in the academies (ch. 6)—and towards non-rabbis, the *amei ha'arets*, whom the Babylonian sages revile. Their elitism, according to Rubenstein, can again be attributed to the institutional reclusiveness of the Stammaitic academies (ch. 7).

Unlike Rubenstein's earlier work *Talmudic Stories*, which had the merit of restricting itself to literary analysis and made only limited historical claims (see my review in *JJS*, lii.2 (2001), pp. 379–81—I remain as enthusiastic about it as ever), the programme of this work is primarily historical. Its fundamental premise is that the society and culture of the Stammaim are reflected in, and hence inferable from, Talmudic *aggadot*. In many cases this assumption is vindicated, but often it is taken to extremes. For example, referring to an aggadic story in *b. Ketubot* 103a–b, Rubenstein writes: 'Rabbi bequeaths the positions of Nasi and sage to his two sons, suggesting that a combination of heredity and testamentary designation determined succession to the highest academic offices' (p. 96). This inference appears unwarranted: why should such a literary work, albeit Stammaitic, reflect the real-life practices of the Stammaitic academies? To some extent Rubenstein is lapsing here into old-school historicism, with the only difference that his history has been displaced from the Tannaic and Amoraic periods to that of the Stammaim.

This approach is also based on the claim that the ‘culture’ or ethos outlined above is exclusive to, or at least characteristic of, the Stammaitic layer of the Talmud, and hence informative of the Babylonian academies of the post-Amoraic period. But this is to underplay the role of earlier tradition in the formation of Stammaitic culture. It must be acknowledged that the institution of the great Babylonian academies, which Rubenstein convincingly places in the Stammaitic period (as argued already in *Talmudic Stories*), must have constituted something of a revolution. But his own evidence reveals that much of the Stammaitic culture was actually rooted in earlier sources. Interest in lineage may be distinctive to the Babylonian Talmud, but it features widely in the form of Amoraic traditions (see pp. 87–99). The notion of *pilpul*, presented in pp. 48–51 as a reference to Stammaitic Talmudic dialectics, appears mainly in sayings about, or attributed to, Amoraim. Violent debate is a theme not only of the Babylonian but also of the Palestinian Talmud, albeit less pronounced there (pp. 59–64). Thus unless we dismiss these sources as Stammaitic fabrications—for which there is no evidence—we must consider at least the strong possibility that they are of Amoraic origin. If so, the ethos and culture attributed by Rubenstein to the Stammaitic academy should not be seen as revolutionary, but rather as the culmination of a continuous tradition. This would also suggest that although the institutional setting of the Stammaitic academy may have been relevant, it was perhaps not essential to the formation of this ethos.

The Stammaitic academies themselves were also perhaps not as revolutionary as Rubenstein makes out. Consistent with his general argument, Rubenstein relates their institution to the *external* context of the Christian, Nestorian academies in the rather distant Nisibis of the fifth to seventh centuries (pp. 35–38, a suggestion first made by I. Gafni). However, internal, earlier rabbinic traditions may have played an important part in their institution: for example, the Mishnaic concept of the Sanhedrin, and the rabbinic assemblies associated with R. Gamaliel at Yavneh. There is perhaps more cultural continuity from the Tannaitic to Stammaitic periods than Rubenstein is prepared to concede.

An oddity in this work is Rubenstein’s total silence on the Savoraim (except on p. 23—see below). It must be remembered that the Savoraim are explicitly attested in Geonic sources, whereas the existence of a rabbinic group called ‘Stammaim’ (a term coined, I believe, by D. Halivni) is only a modern scholarly hypothesis. The *Epistle* of R. Sherira Gaon suggests that the editorial activity of the Savoraim, mainly as authors of glosses, was very different from that of the redactors of the Talmud (whom we now call ‘Stammaim’); moreover, the passages of the Babylonian Talmud that are identified by R. Sherira as Savoraic have clear and distinctive editorial features. It does not seem right, therefore, to treat Stammaim and Savoraim as one and the same group (as implied on p. 23). How the Savoraim, who logically succeeded the Stammaim but appear to have been uncomfortably close in time to them (sixth century?), fitted into the cultural context of their predecessors’ academies is a question which Rubenstein should have addressed.

Although this book is methodologically problematic, it does have merits that should be spelled out. Chapter 7, on the *amei ha’arets* and the elitism of the Stam, stands out as lucid, well argued and convincing on all counts. Rubenstein remains a dynamic, productive scholar, whose future works should be looked forward to with anticipation and interest.