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PROJECT

Sea of Babylon: The Formation of the Talmud in Sasanian Mesopotamia

“The Talmud is like the Great Sea,” so goes an early medieval Jewish adage, “it is as it says, ‘All the streams go to the sea.’” During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I will be working on a book-length monograph that reconsiders the famously encyclopedic and gargantuan Babylonian Talmud, which sits at the heart of the classical Jewish canon. The Talmud was compiled orally by rabbis living in late ancient Mesopotamia, then an important center in the Sasanian Iranian Empire. Organized as a commentary on the Mishnah – an earlier work of rabbinic law composed in Roman Palestine – the Babylonian Talmud also preserves numerous “tangential” passages ranging from biblical interpretation and theological speculation to medical advice, magical incantations, brief anecdotes, and tall tales. While the Talmud is the only work that has survived from late ancient Babylonian Jewry, its great diversity of materials mitigates this textual singularity.

The Talmud has never been fully inventoried, and so this project proceeds by digitally tagging so-called tangential passages and comparing the Talmud’s anthological impulse with that of the other rabbinic compilations produced in Roman Palestine. Philologists have studied the formation of the Talmud for many decades, yet they have focused almost entirely on the diachronic development of Talmudic discourse, which is regularly described as disembodied, redactional processes. In my research, I will examine the Talmud’s diverse contents synchronically and locate its formation in the minds, mouths, and bodies of Babylonian rabbis, in their scholarly circles and institutions, and alongside other religious communities in the Sasanian Empire – such as the imperially backed Zoroastrians, who were likewise engaged in a major effort to organize the Dēn – the Zoroastrian tradition.

Recommended Reading

Secunda, Shai. *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

–. *The Talmud’s Red Fence: Menstrual Impurity and Difference in Babylonian Judaism and Its Sasanian Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

The Sea of Babylon: Reconceiving the Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud is a gargantuan work of rabbinic legal discussion, interpretation, storytelling, medicine, myth, and more that sits at the center of the classical Jewish canon. It has been studied intensely by traditional scholars for well over a millennium, and by critical scholars since the founding of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* two centuries ago, yet in many ways the Talmud remains a mystery. What exactly is this work and what is its significance as a cultural monument? In this talk, I will suggest that unlike other compilations in the rabbinic canon, the Babylonian Talmud should be conceived as an expansive sea-like textual vehicle, designed as the sole transmitter of the Babylonian rabbinic culture that produced it.

Contemporary Talmud criticism is distinguished by its diachronic approach, in which the Talmud is conceived as comprising two primary layers: an earlier stratum attributed to named rabbis, known as amoraim, who lived from the third to the fifth century CE, and a later layer that is not attributed to named sages and that acts primarily as an editorial voice framing the earlier “amoraic” material. This is an important insight that has been a boon for critical Talmud interpretation, and it has helped scholars reconstruct the processes by which the Talmud was redacted. However, so-called Talmudic “Higher Criticism” overlooks a more basic question of what exactly the Talmud comprises, synchronically, and what the significance of its heterogeneous composition is.

Mapping the various kinds of material contained within the Talmud reveals that although it—like its sister compilation (the Palestinian Talmud)—is organized as a commentary on the foundational rabbinic work known as the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud has a considerable propensity to include material that is unrelated to the Mishnah and its concerns. Indeed, the Talmud’s unusual mixing of materials would seem to be a distinguishing characteristic of the work, evincing an unusually voracious attitude toward a great diversity of knowledge, which the rabbis preserved by incorporating it within the traditional structure established by the Mishnah. I suggest that the remarkable composition of the Babylonian Talmud is related, in part, to a radical commitment to oral textuality, which more easily lends itself to the construction of a single, expansive corpus. Also relevant is the Talmud’s apparent similarity to a contemporaneous endeavor undertaken by the neighboring Zoroastrian community, which similarly was organizing its knowledge into an expansive textual project called the *Dēn*.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOWS' LIBRARY

Secunda, Shai (2023)

Blind them as a sign : a photo essay

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Secunda, Shai (2022)

Wandering Jews

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1816942529>

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Secunda, Shai (Oxford,2020)

Like a hedge of lilies : menstruation and differences in the "Iranian" Talmud

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Secunda, Shai (Oxford,2020)

The Talmud's red fence : menstrual impurity and difference in Babylonian Judaism and its Sasanian context

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Secunda, Shai (Providence, Rhode Island,2018)

Gaze and counter-gaze : textuality and contextuality in the anecdote of Rav Assi and the Roman (b. Baba Mesī'a 28b)

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1814324461>

Secunda, Shai (Philadelphia,2014)

The Iranian Talmud : reading the Bavli in its Sasanian context

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Divinations: rereading late ancient religion

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