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Scientific Biography

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My research seeks to understand the creation of early rabbinic literature and law during the first three centuries in Roman Palestine against their social, cultural and political background. My work offers a unique combination of textual and historical tools, which serve to locate rabbinic activity within its multiple contexts. Source-critical literary methods serve to disentangle rabbinic sources into a history of law and ideas, which are then framed by means of comparative analysis within a changing environment. The new tools I have devised trace the development of rabbinic literature and law from their roots in the Second Temple period up to the High Empire.

[1] Evolution of Rabbinic Literature

In a series of articles, I have developed a distinctive history of the literary evolution of the Mishnah, the centerpiece of early rabbinic literature, from its inception in the study culture of the Second Temple period to the Romanized legal context of its redaction. In multiple occasions I applied my unique method of textual analysis to discern different organizing patterns within the Mishnah pertaining the different stages of its creation. Consequently, I was able to trace various stages in the crystallization of mishnaic discourse, as the earlier forms and sources were combined and reorganized into new literary patterns and conceptual structures. This textual approach not only provides a view into the history of rabbinic law and study culture, but it also accounts for the rise of the rabbinic movement within changing cultural and intellectual settings.

As part of my work on the history of the laws of purity I pointed to a shift from an earlier literary genre of “practical manuals” to a new form of scholastic writings, that were more concerned to articulate legal principles. The aggregation of organizational patterns points to the reintegration of the older material within new conceptual frameworks in the redacted Mishnah. My article “From Tradition to Controversy: New Modes of Transmission in the Teachings of Early Rabbis” addresses the changing role of disputes during the very first stages of the formation of rabbinic study practices. I argue for a shift from a tradition-oriented approach, grounded in the Pharisaic heritage, to new textual patterns centered on controversy. Through a close analysis of the disputes between the Houses of Hillel and Shammai in tractate Eduyot, I discerned a gradual shift towards more pluralistic practices of study, which utilize the multiplicity of views for the sake of developing more nuanced legal conceptions. This has consequently become one of the most powerful generators of rabbinic knowledge during the tannaitic period and on.

Another aspect of the development of rabbinic discourse from the patterns of Second Temple legal literature towards new modes of study underlies the complex creation of rabbinic private law, as I have demonstrated in my article on the literary evolution of tractate Neziqin. Here again shifting organizational patterns point to a fundamental change in the mode of study. Whereas initially the tractate followed the order and scope of the biblical units on matters of private law, in a manner reminiscent of Qumran legal writings, I have argued that a new topical structure was later imposed on the material, following familiar Roman legal categories. Finally, in a paper on tractate Sheqalim I have uncovered the diverse sources that underlie the Mishnaic treatment of the Temple. Scholars have debated the authenticity of the rabbinic traditions concerning the Temple. However, here again we must distinguish between different stages of rabbinic study and take into consideration the growing aspiration to “fill the gaps” and provide a comprehensive and monolithic description of the temple, based on discrete and limited sources. This case exhibits nicely how diverse sources, some with roots outside of rabbinic circles, were gradually collapsed into a unified rabbinic discursive framework.

Based on these and many other cases, I am currently working on a comprehensive project, “The History of the Composition of the Mishnah”. It will cover all the characteristic features of the Mishnah’s literary development and will offer an alternative to the now dated descriptions of the creation of the Mishnah, a field which has suffered stagnation in favor of synchronic (and in my mind superficial) approaches to the Mishnah. Ultimately, my work seeks to revive the role of source-criticism as a powerful tool for reconstructing rabbinic intellectual history. In each of the above cases we encounter different aspects of the gradual development of rabbinic study culture from its Second Temple roots towards new horizons. The unique nature of rabbinic literary production has perplexed scholars, who have tended to isolate them from their surroundings, but through the separation of sources and the reconstruction of literary development it has been made possible to associate various facets of their activity with a wide array of literary and intellectual phenomena in their surrounding during the first two centuries CE.

[2] Contextualizing Rabbinic Law

Alongside my work on the development of rabbinic literature, I have published widely on the history of rabbinic law, in two main fields: the development of the laws of purity from its Second Temple roots and the evolution of rabbinic private law within its Roman context. These two issues exhibit complementary aspects of rabbinic legal activity; while the first is deeply rooted in ancient traditions, the latter reflects new legal tendencies. In contrast to earlier historicizing approaches to rabbinic law, that attempted to draw direct (and often simplistic) links between particular rulings and historical events, my works explores rabbinic law-making within its widest cultural, social and political contexts.

With respect to the laws of purity, I have uncovered the fundamental transformation of Second Temple legal traditions into new social and ideological patterns promoted by the rabbis of the second century. The issue of purity, I claim, optimally represents both the transformation and fragmentation of ancient religious institutions. A combination of source-criticism and comparative analysis of legal material from Qumran and the New Testament supplies a strong foundation for discerning strands of Pharisaic participation in Second Temple legal discourse, and it even produces new interpretations of well-trodden Gospel traditions. In addition, my work offers new, more sophisticated ways for setting rabbinic law within its social context, and thus viewing it as an artifact of its own time and place. For example, by pointing out the changing attitudes towards *am-haaretz*, among other non-rabbis, I have uncovered the revolving social environments of the tannaitic period.

My paper on the changing attitude of the rabbis to another non-rabbinic group, the Samaritans, which I attributed to the adoption of Roman citizenship model, and the rabbis’ Roman conception of idolatry, marks the turn to my current project: “Making law under Rome: Rabbinic Law in a Provincial Context.” This has become a long-term and wide-ranging project that aims to map the diverse forms of interaction between Rabbinic and other (mainly Roman) systems of law based on a socio-legal approach to the plurality of laws under the Empire. This project is currently supported by the ISF and I plan to develop it into an ERC application with the collaboration of colleagues abroad. I have two doctoral students writing on this topic and others involved in this issue to various degrees. I am grateful to see that it has led a new scholarly trend (that until recently was considered untenable) and has opened new avenues for the study of rabbinic law.

This project uncovers the different roles the Imperial legal presence played in the immeasurable leap in rabbinic legal activity. Roman administration set a standard for local legal communities, and exercised power through the language of law. Rabbinic literature offers a unique test case for the ongoing infiltration of this language, and its application among local provincial elites seeking recognition under new circumstances. On one level I have pointed out the growing awareness of the rabbis to the plurality of legal systems and the need to share the space with competing systems. On another level, the impact of Roman legal culture on the development of specific practices is aptly

demonstrated in the laws of divorce, which exhibit surprising affinity to the discussions of Roman jurists. Furthermore, comparison to current papyrological evidence from Egypt points to same patterns of exchange between local and Imperial practices.

From a wider historical perspective, I have argued that the crystallization of a local law system, such as demonstrated in the creation of a corpus of private law by second century rabbis, follows a pattern widely attested in colonialized societies, whose legal mindset and forms of conflict resolutions have been transformed by local elites seeking to integrate into the colonial order. The very codification of new legal field testifies to the rabbinic attempt to integrate within Roman legal standards. Finally, in a yet unpublished paper I argue that the later layers of the Mishnah exhibit direct knowledge of Roman legal literature, including textbooks and the praetor's edict, which served as models for the rabbis' own reformulation of their laws. The close study of multiple fields of private law, as I am undertaking with my research assistants, reveals an array of responses to the complex legal surrounding on multiple levels, from an adoption of specific rules, through the imposition of new conceptual frameworks on familiar practices, and the application of Roman models for filling legal lacunae. Alongside the formation of a comprehensive database with all the relevant information, intended to enhance the integration of rabbinic sources into the study of Roman imperialism, I am in the first stages of writing a monograph that will present this new perspective on the creation of rabbinic law and legalism based on representative examples from a wide-range of legal fields.

[3] Jewish Legal Cultures in Antiquity

Rabbinic law represents but one of multiple approaches to the Torah within ancient Judaism (and Christianity), and it developed to a large degree in opposition to alternative options. While following in the footsteps of scholars who have worked to characterize rabbinic law in relation to sectarian systems of law, my work seeks to broaden the scope of Torah discourse and its role in shaping both Jewish and Christian identity in Antiquity. My publications on the Gospels aim to integrate the debate over the law in the Jesus traditions into the internal Jewish discourse over the purpose and nature of the Torah. This background sheds new light on the interpretation of Jesus' debates with the Pharisees, and the historical image of this group. At the same time, while Early Christianity by and large defined itself through the annulment of Torah observance, Church orders and other Christian texts preserve Jewish patterns of ritualization that remained pertinent for defining communal identities. In addition, I have identified some Christian forms of discourse that have penetrated into rabbinic traditions and practices.

My works on the varieties of legal practices and approaches to the Law in Antiquity have recently led me to broaden the scope of my investigation and examine the gradual extension of Jewish Law from its modest roots in the Torah (among the codes of the Ancient Near East) to new spheres of human activity with higher level of regulation. This transformation is anchored in the change of legal cultures and conceptions of legal codification in the Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, this change created new forms of legal knowledge and legal profession. In this vein I have recently suggested a new (and in my view quite revolutionary) framework for understanding the rise of the rabbinic movement. While all branches of Second Temple Judaism, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora, limited the scope of Torah knowledge and religious authority to ritual spheres, the rabbis created a new class of professional elite modeled by the rise of the local jurists in the Roman provinces, thereby acquiring a heightened political and social status.