

FOREWORD

This work continues the inquiry into the history of the rabbinic tradition in late antiquity begun with *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yoḥanan ben Zakkai* (Leiden, 1970: E. J. Brill. *Studia Post Biblica Volumen Sextum Decimum*), and continued in *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70. I. The Masters. II. The Houses. III. Conclusions* (Leiden, 1971: E. J. Brill). Its problem is to trace the development of a sample body of rabbinic tradition, to analyze the literary traits of the various sayings and stories, to see whether we can locate characteristic techniques, forms, and tendencies in the formation of various sorts of materials—in all, to develop a form-critical structure and system. At the end are offered some firm conclusions on the historical Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.

Until now students of rabbinic literature have routinely assigned pretty much equal historical value to all sources, without regard to the date of the compilation or collection in which they appear. Exceptions to the rule are episodic, never systematic. Thus a story first occurring in a compilation of midrashim attested at the earliest in the fourteenth century and one first found in Tosefta have generally been given equal weight. Further, it has always been taken for granted that we deal with an essentially consistent, unitary tradition. Therefore all stories must be brought, or forced, into agreement with one another. Differences of viewpoint or of emphasis, where they are even recognized—and this was primarily in the legal, not in the biographical or theological-exegetical materials—have been bypassed or ignored or harmonized. At no point was the question raised, Is it possible that several groups, even in the time of the single master under discussion, had several different opinions about him, not to mention traditions in his name? Just as the texts—e.g., Mishnah, Tosefta—were seen as essentially unitary documents, so the stories and sayings told about, or attributed to, a given authority were taken for granted to be essentially unitary accounts, consistent traditions, from undifferentiated sources or authorities.

In *Development of a Legend* to my knowledge for the first time, I undertook to show by comparison of the forms and versions of all the stories told about one master, that materials found in a document close

to his life and times are apt to be historically more reliable than what first occurs in a document attested only long afterward. The traditions about Yoḥanan ben Zakkai are not substantial, however, and while the comparison of the several versions of each story or saying often revealed what seemed to be later emendations, omissions, or additions, yet the total result was limited.

In *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* I carried the study much further, first, by pointing out that a saying may be shown to have been known to an authority before its occurrence in a later document. Consideration of such attestations, proposed in *Phar. III*, pp. 180-238, resulted in the division of the rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees into the legal sayings attributed to the Houses, the themes of which often are first attested in Yavneh, and stories about specific, named masters as well as legal materials attributed to them, first known in later times, beginning with the Ushan stratum. It further appeared that the historiographical traditions about the pre-70 Pharisees came to the fore in Ushan times and proved astonishingly pertinent to the theological and political situation of Usha itself.

A second important result was the effort to propose a theory of the history of fixed forms for the formulation and transmission of traditions.

In the present work I have attempted to refine the methods developed in the former studies, both by reconsidering earlier results, and by developing, through the application to new, and more complex materials, the approaches employed in the earlier studies. The traditions about Eliezer b. Hyrcanus proved extremely complicated and demanded the revision and refinement of all former procedures. They represent the first really substantial body of attested materials on an individual master. In quantity they far exceed the whole of the rabbinic traditions about pre-70 masters and are nearly equal to those traditions as well as the ones about the Houses of Shammai and Hillel. In quality they bring us to a quite new situation, in which we have some idea of how traditions were handed on, when and where they were shaped, and what influences affected their formation.

Eliezer b. Hyrcanus stands, along with Joshua b. Ḥananiah, as the first major figure after 70 *in the preserved materials*. From the other early Yavneans, for instance, Ṣaddoq and his son Eleazar, Ṭarfōn, as well as those who, beside Eliezer and Joshua, are said to have been disciples of Yoḥanan b. Zakkai—Yosi the Priest, Eleazar b. ‘Arakh, and Simeon b. Nathana’el,—no important, independent traditions

have come down to us. If Gamaliel was a youngster at the outset of the Yavnean period, then he cannot represent the situation in the very beginning. Eliezer's traditions exceed in quantity and in originality those assigned to Joshua; and Joshua's materials stand close, in many respects, to 'Aqiba's. So with Eliezer we begin the study of the foundations of the Yavnean period in the history of Judaism—that is to say, the foundation of rabbinic Judaism as a whole.

My students are undertaking comparable studies of other early and middle Yavneans—Joshua, 'Aqiba, Ishmael, Eleazar b. 'Azariah, Gamaliel and some minor figures—so that in time we shall have a clear picture of the first stages in the formation of the Yavnean stratum of rabbinic theology and law. When similar studies will have been made of the later, and finally, the last Yavneans, a critical history of the Yavnean period as a whole will become feasible.

It is not my intent, however, to work out further biographical studies at this time. I hope to turn to another aspect of the history of rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity, namely, the study of the history of a corpus of traditions defined by a common theme and independent of a single authority and of a limited historical and geographical setting. That project will require the consideration of a wholly new and different set of methodological problems from those presented by the study of a single historical figure. I intend the present work as a model, for the present, of rabbinic biography. Criticisms from co-workers, particularly of matters of detail and analysis, will be especially welcome as the work proceeds.

References to S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuṭah* and *Tosefet Rishonim*, are intended to call attention to important discussions of the content of pericopae and their broader implications for the study of Talmudic law. Since these discussions do not directly pertain to the historical and critical problems before us, I have not summarized them. At the same time, it seemed useful to make reference to more extensive treatments of the several pericopae than are given here.