*Langue, littérature, épigraphie et paléographie hébraïques
et araméennes du IV^e siècle avant notre ère au IV^e siècle
de notre ère*

Social History from early Rabbinic Texts

Conférences de l'année 2013-2014

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SOCIAL HISTORY
FROM EARLY RABBINIC TEXTS
*HISTOIRE SOCIALE
D'APRÈS LES PREMIERS TEXTES
RABBINIQUES*

Conférences de M. Martin GOODMAN,
University of Oxford, Faculty of Oriental Studies,
directeur d'études invité

In these four sessions, the seminar examined the extent to which valid data about the social history of Roman Palestine can be extracted from the early rabbinic texts preserved from antiquity building on the British Academy research project published in Goodman and Alexander (2010).

The first lecture discussed the nature of the rabbinic texts from late antiquity, examining the wide variety of genres represented in the texts and the different purposes and audiences for which they seem to have been composed as revealed in Ben Eliyahu, Cohn and Millar (2012), a handbook about early rabbinic materials which was produced as an offshoot of the British Academy project. Considerable time was spent discussing the transmission of these texts from antiquity and the difficulty of asserting with confidence with regard to an oral tradition when the texts preserved in the medieval manuscripts took their present form. The inclusion of rabbinic-type passages in the sixth-century Rehov synagogue mosaic was cited as evidence of the existence of this discourse by this time, but not as proof that the compilations in which these passages are later found were already in existence. The existence of the Mishnah in more or less its present form by the early third century CE was considered as a special case, both because the divergent commentaries on much of the Mishnah text in the two Talmuds suggest that the Mishnah text itself must be quite accurately recorded in the two later compilations and because, as was first noted by Jacob Neusner in the 1970s, the apparent accuracy of attributions of sayings to particular sages in this text and in the Tosefta (in comparison with the pseudepigraphic attributions frequent in later rabbinic compilations) suggests a higher degree of reliability in the transmission of these traditions at least in the final stages of compilation. A number of Mishnaic texts were then examined to extract from them the social conditions assumed by the text, such as the siting of shops in narrow alleyways through which heavily-laden pack animals might pass (Mishnah, *Baba Kamma* 6:6) or the availability of bath houses into which a rabbi might enter for recreational purposes (Mishnah, *Abodah Zara* 3:4).

The second lecture delved into economic history as revealed by the innovative legal formula of the *prosbul*, which is attributed in the Mishnah to Hillel (Mishnah, *Gittin* 4: 3). The lecture demonstrated both the extent to which this innovation constituted a direct break with biblical regulations in Deut. 15:1-9 and the reasons for believing that the traditions about the *prosbul* in Mishnah *Shebiith* 10:1-9 represented a genuine social institution in late Second Temple Judaeen society, whether or not Hillel was responsible for the innovation. Moralising explanations of the innovation in rabbinic texts were shown to make no economic sense in a society which retained a taboo against lending on interest, and the seminar therefore investigated an alternative model for the distribution of wealth in first-century Judaea in which the introduction of the *prosbul* might have an economic rationale (Goodman 1982). The discussion was much enhanced by the provision of evidence by members of the seminar of attitudes to interest and lending in other periods of Jewish history.

The third lecture looked at the development and cessation of religious taboos, such as the failure of Jews (apart from Essenes, according to Josephus, *BJ* 2.148-9) to carry out the requirement in Deut.23:12-13 (Heb.23:13-14) to carry a hatchet for covering excrement, and alterations in the laws about fasting on the Sabbath (I Macc. 2:29-41; Josephus, *AJ* 18.319-24), and investigated rabbinic evidence for the lifting of a specific religious taboo on the use of gentile oil (Mishnah, *Abodah Zara* 216). The taboo was shown to have been sufficiently widespread in Jewish society over a number of centuries for it to be taken for granted in anecdotes in the writings of the historian Josephus (*AJ* 12.119-20; *BJ* 2.591-2; *Vita* 74-6). Both the reasons for the taboo and the reasons for its abrogation were shown to have puzzled rabbis as cited in the two Talmuds (b. *Abodah Zara* 35b-36a; y. *Abodah Zara* 2:9,41d). Economic explanations were investigated and found implausible against the background of other evidence, primarily archaeological. An explanation of the lifting of the taboo in terms of rabbinic modes of authorising customary religious law either through biblical exegesis or through other forms of rationalisation was proposed.

The final lecture compared the evidence in the Mishnah for marriage and divorce procedures to the procedures presupposed in the biblical texts (e.g. Deut. 24.1-4) and those actually used by Jews in the first and early second centuries CE according to the evidence of documents from the Judaeen Desert. It was demonstrated that the Mishnah presupposes both the ubiquity of marriage documents (*ketubot*) (nowhere mentioned in the biblical texts) and the possibility of marriage without a *ketubah* (Mishnah, *Ketubot* 11:1-6). A comparison with documents from the Judaeen Desert (*DJD* II nos. 20 and 21; *DJD* XXVII no. 65) showed that these documents resembled the customary documents presupposed by the rabbis in some respects but not in others, and it was proposed that in marriage law, as in the laws surrounding taboos examined in the previous lecture, rabbis shaped existing customs rather than creating law on their own authority. The seminar looked closely at a number of the Judaeen Desert documents as part of these proceedings and a number of important suggestions were made to improve the reconstruction of lacunae (especially in *DJD* II no. 20).

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