Consolidation and Further Research Paths

This book has argued that the Babylonian Talmud was conceptualized as a symposiac miscellany with the basic structure of a commentary on the Mishnah. Thereby, the Talmud's production process is comparable to the one implemented by composers of similar imperial period and late-antique works. These processes involved extensive data collection in the form of excerpts; management methods known from agricultural contexts, such as assigning keywords (numbers, in the agricultural context) and corresponding storage; arranging and rearranging tablets, ostraca, or papyrus scraps to find a decent structure; language editing and inserting comments to make breaks between the excerpts smooth and to maintain the symposiac (dialectic) style; drafting; and, finally, preparing a fair copy. To collate their archive around lemmas from the Mishnah, the composers (most likely a head composer and some helpers) worked from one lemma to the next. They selected keywords for a lemma and chose the excerpts to craft that particular commentary accordingly. To understand the production of the Talmud, these commentaries would then be the decisive units, not arguments (*sugyot*). Moreover, the project would (easily) have been executed in a man's lifetime.

The principle of working with preexisting units such as excerpts (or, in the agricultural context, receipts) is mirrored in the pedagogy of the *progymnasmata*, treatises that promoted and discussed the methodological benefit of certain preliminary rhetorical exercises. The exercises suggest and encourage working with preexisting stories rather than composing new ones. Template stories are combined with others – or, alternatively, amplified with dialogue, enhanced with sayings, maxims, recipes, or jokes – or summarized into bits the size of a *chreia*. Once these methods

are recognized, the text critic can attempt to reverse the process and reassemble dissected sources or delineate possible templates.

Accordingly, a possible further research path would be to work backward to reassemble and recompile the texts that have been disseminated into excerpts. Indicators for such sources are foremost style and vocabulary, maybe content and attributions. A generic similarity to other late-antique works can assist in the processes of reassembling sources. These sources, like the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic medical treatise, can then be analyzed in their own right. The reassembling of such treatises may also show how these texts were structured prior to their dissection and whether and how they were manipulated by the composers. Thus, as discussed in Chapter 5, one might find integrated headings and notes that were present in the original version.

Several avenues of research also emerge regarding materiality. I have made several assumptions in this book about the materiality that preceded the talmudic text. I have advanced the idea that we should think in terms of tablets, ostraca, papyrus scraps, rotuli, and the like, rather than entire scroll-length compositions, when imagining written transmission. Although not as elegant in appearance, these writing surfaces were, according to the thesis presented here, carefully stored. Such storage, again, raises questions about the existence of libraries and archives. Private libraries in particular may have taken hybrid forms, having been used to display renowned works but also as repositories for one's own writings or the legacies of deceased relatives and friends. Libraries were popular not only in the Roman Empire at the time; the Sasanid dynasty likewise invested in libraries, with a notable institution in Ctesiphon.[1]

As in Roman libraries, there must have existed some form of bookkeeping, maybe written tables, that indexed the topics available in the library/archive and where they could be found.[2] Such tables would have helped students of the Mishnah to perform inquiries into certain topics in order to write specific compositions. Conversely, such inquiries may have resulted in updated or new tables. Recent work on the Eusebian and other late antique tables could be helpful in that regard.[3]

---

[1] Ibrahim V. Pourhadi, "Iran's Public and Private Libraries," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 25, no. 3 (July 1968): 220.

[2] E.g., George W. Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 39–86.

[3] See, e.g., Matthew R. Crawford, *The Eusebian Canon Tables: Ordering Textual Knowledge in Late Antiquity*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Andrew M. Riggsby, *Mosaics of Knowledge: Representing Information in the Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 42–82; Jeremiah Coogan, "Transforming Textuality: Porphyry, Eusebius, and Late Ancient Tables," *SLA* 5, no. 1 (2021).

Reckoning with such technical aids would also do justice to what Adam H. Becker has observed, namely, that late antique learning saw a transition from reliance on a teacher to a reliance on infrastructure, that is, the place of learning.[4] This transformation was a result of the learning culture that became feasible with the advent of libraries, public as well as private, in the imperial period. Private libraries often attracted other literati and fostered self-supporting circles "in the sense that the activities of reading, writing, sharing, vetting, comparing, researching, all took place within the circle, using shared resources (meaning lectors and books, but also the *amici* themselves, a resident intellectual or two, and suitable venues such as a large house with porticoes to walk in and dinners over which to talk)."[5] These libraries offered a platform for authors to present their work, that is, read and thereby perform it in public.[6] The synagogue, which emerged somewhat contemporaneously with the libraries and spread throughout the Roman Empire, served, among other things, the same purpose, of making adult education publicly accessible and, accordingly, serving as a platform to exhibit one's learning.[7] This is not least exemplified in the fact that "most of the physical evidence for communal dining by Diaspora Jews (e.g. synagogal triclinia) dates from the third century or later."[8] More generally, it can also be observed that once people were in possession of an excerpt collection or a library with a corresponding inventory, even if it consisted of their own writings, they could compose new works quite rapidly by simply slightly diversifying the topic or genre. Thus, Philo of

---

[4] Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 167.

[5] William A. Johnson, "Libraries and Reading Culture in the High Empire," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. Jason König, Katerina Oikonomopoulou, and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 363.

[6] See Fabio Tutrone, "Libraries and Intellectual Debate in the Late Republic," in König et al., *Ancient Libraries*; Johnson, "Libraries and Reading Culture." Johnson points to the importance of display in public libraries, whereas the actual intellectual engagement with books took place in private and exclusive environments.

[7] Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 292. Levine references Jerome's *Letter* 36.1, in which he writes that he encountered a *Hebraeus* "with many books (*volumina*) that had borrowed from the synagogue."

[8] Margaret H. Williams, "Alexander, *bubularus de macello*–Humble Sausage Seller or Europe's First Identifiable Purveyor of Kosher Meat," in *Jews in a Graeco Roman Environment*, WUNT 312 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 165. For the *triclinium* as a locus of (Palestinian) halakic discussion, see Gil Klein, "Torah in Triclinia: The Rabbinic Banquet and the Significance of Architecture," *JQR* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2012).

Alexandria's *On Animals* consists almost entirely of stories and facts about animal behavior that are also found in his other works. Philo similarly must have arranged his notes according to keywords and later associated them with different thematic threads. Indeed, this is one way of explaining the recurrent imperial period and late antique self-pastiche.

Daniel Picus has recently pointed out that knowledge in the Talmud is generally depicted as the product of reading and writing.[9] To this end, it would be worth continuing to explore the significance and status of drafts versus fine copies and to ask whether the concept of Oral Torah may have covered such personal notes and drafts, and maybe even a fine copy on a scroll that differed in size and quality from a Torah scroll. A similar idea of a "dislocated" orality has already been observed in Chapter 2, where I briefly mentioned Shifra Sznol's research on the translation of the *parashah*, the Torah portion read in the synagogue on Sabbath. The translators were not allowed even to look at the biblical text while translating but, rather, prepared themselves with written translations, commentaries, and, mostly, glossaries for their task.[10] The inferior status attributed to tablets, ostraca, and nonstandard scrolls would also explain why no such evidence has been found, since they were left to decay after the composition was completed. This research path is ultimately also entwined with notions of aesthetics and the visual perception of what is considered established and authoritative knowledge as opposed to what is considered "preliminary notes" or "knowledge in the making."[11] What I have in mind is, however, not an intermediary and passing step within oral transmission.[12] Rather, I am suggesting that a value system was in play, a hierarchy, along which texts were classified based on material, size, and/or stage of refinement. In other words, texts that were not written with the same care as the Torah, or that were not written on a scroll that approximated the quality or size of a Torah scroll, were not considered Written but Oral Torah.

I have pointed out that students were generally trained to modify existing stories rather than to invent stories of their own. From the ways a story was modified, as has long been noted, one can detect the personal

---

[9] See Daniel Picus, "Better Left Unread: Rabbinic Interpretations of Prophetic Scrolls," in *Knowledge Construction in Late Antiquity*, ed. Monika Amsler, Trends in Classics 142 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023).

[10] See Shifra Sznol, "Text and Glossary: Between Written Text and Oral Tradition," in *Greek Scripture and the Rabbis*, ed. Timothy M. Law and Alison Salvesen (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 223–227.

[11] On theories of vision, see Rachel Rafael Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18–40.

[12] Thus, for example, Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 124–125.

and cultural taxonomies that shaped the author's choices. Moving beyond "cultural appropriation," however, active scholarly search for templates might reveal patterns of availability and translation efforts. An interesting case would be a comparison with fable collections such as the ones by Phaedrus or Babrius. As noted in Chapter 4, Henry Fischel has long since suggested that some rabbinic stories might be modeled after fables.[13] A story in tractate Bava Qamma 60b, for example, employs an Aesopian parable.[14] The literary context in which the parable is embedded is Aramaic, whereas the parable itself is in Hebrew. The parable was apparently available to the Aramaic author in a Hebrew translation. Such instances lead to thinking about the availability of sources, organized and occasional translation work, archives, and libraries, and ultimately also to considering Sasanid infrastructure and education more broadly.

Indeed, we know very little about how and why people learned in Sasanid Mesopotamia, where Aramaic and Persian were crucial languages if one aspired to social relevance – and social and economic factors have always been attached to education to some degree.[15] Sasanid Mesopotamia, in spite of its learned heritage, is often depicted as an illiterate place, since Pahlavi script was developed considerably later than Aramaic script and relies on the latter.[16] Yet if the focus is shifted away from Persian language, we find an explicit accent on writing, book production, and text adornment among the Manicheans.[17] Less pronounced

---

[13] Henry A. Fischel, "Story and History: Observations on Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism," in *American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Semi-Centennial Volume: A Collection of Original Essays*, ed. Denis Sinor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 65–66.

[14] Babrius, Fable 22; Phaedrus, Fable 2.2, see Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 17–18. This particular fable does not involve animals.

[15] The degree to which education was socially relevant seems to have increased after Alexander the Great died unexpectedly and left his successors in a physical and intellectual fight over his heritage. See Francesca Schironi, "Enlightened Kings or Pragmatic Rulers? Ptolemaic Patronage of Scholarship and Sciences in Context," in *Intellectual and Empire in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Philip R. Bosman (London: Routledge, 2019); Helmut Krasser, "Universalisierung und Identitätskonstruktion: Formen und Funktionen der Wissenskodifikation im kaiserzeitlichen Rom," in *Erinnerung, Gedächtnis, Wissen: Studien zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Gedächtnisforschung*, ed. Günter Oesterle, Formen der Erinnerung 26 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

[16] Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Iran VI. Iranian Languages and Scripts (3) Writing Systems," *EIr* 13:366–370.

[17] See Iris Colditz, "'… werdet mit den Schriften vertraut': Schriftgelehrtheit, Mehrsprachigkeit und Bildungsvermittlung in manichäischen Gemeinden," in *Iran und Turfan: Beiträge Berliner Wissenschaftler, Werner Sundermann zum 60; Geburtstag gewidmet*, ed. Christiane Reck and Peter Zieme, Iranica 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995).

but similarly productive were the Mandeans, who wrote in "an eastern Aramaic dialect (the closest to the Babylonian Talmud)."[18] Indeed, the rhetorical training that shines through in the Talmud is also observable in other texts that are close to it in location and time and which omit details as to the educational background of their authors.[19] These include Syriac monastic as well as Coptic texts or texts emerging in the Arabian Peninsula and Transoxania.[20] Although no nearby academy is attested, extensive works survive from Dadīšō and Isaac of Nineveh, two East Syrian Christians of remote Qatar.[21] It seems that what Becker observed regarding East-Syrian schools was also true for the schools throughout Aramaic-speaking Mesopotamia, namely, that "some of the East-Syrian schools, even the smaller, less attested village schools, developed into centers for a learning more sophisticated than the mere acquisition of literacy, elementary church doctrine, and a foundational knowledge of liturgy. Centers of learning were often more fluid than not, evolving into institutions simultaneously offering both elementary and higher learning."[22]

The little evidence we have for a Jewish presence in rhetorical schools comes from a letter by the rhetor Libanius. The letter concerns a student, presumably the son of the Jewish patriarch Rabban Gamaliel V,

---

The same emphasis on writing and reading can also be observed in private letters from what appears to be a Manichean community in the village of Kellis in Egypt. See Mattias Brand, *Beyond Light and Darkness: Religion and the Everyday Life of Manichaeans*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies Series 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[18] Birkha H. S. Nasoraia, "The Mandeans: Writings, Ritual, and Art," in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Tromp in collaboration with Gunner B. Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston, Routledge World Series (London: Routledge, 2019).

[19] On rhetorical structures in the Talmud, see Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 106–130.

[20] For progymnasmatic features in monastic texts, see Lillian I. Larsen, "Early Monasticism and the Rhetorical Tradition: Sayings and Stories as Schooltexts," in *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity: Reflections, Social Contexts and Genres*, ed. Peter Gemeinhardt, Lieve Van Hoof, and Peter Van Nuffelen (New York: Routledge, 2016). For the example of a Coptic text, see Janet Timbie, "The Education of Shenoute and Other Cenobitic Leaders inside and outside the Monastery," in Gemeinhardt et al., *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity*. And see, further, Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, Ancient Warfare and Civilization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 219–222, for education on the Arabian Peninsula and Transoxania.

[21] See Martin Tamcke, "Wie der Islam die christliche Bildung beflügelte," in *Von Rom nach Bagdad: Bildung und Religion von der römischen Kaiserzeit bis zum klassischen Islam*, ed. Peter Gemeinhardt and Sebastian Günther (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 247–252.

[22] Becker, *Fear of God*, 209 and 167.

who ran away from Libanius's school.[23] The evidence seems to refer to a single case where a rabbinic sage unsuccessfully tried to familiarize his son with Greek rhetoric. Yet the case could also be used to argue for the opposite, since the letter was written because the boy *ran away*. If he had stayed, we would know nothing about his attendance at Libanius's school in Antioch. There might have been thirty other Jewish boys at the school with him, but we do not know about them because they did *not* run away. In Hayim Lapin's words: "When people we would otherwise classify as Jews did things that failed to leave a record, or did them in ways that were not culturally distinctive, they are invisible to us as Jews."[24]

In Sasanid Mesopotamia, where different ethnic groups had their own character fonts, it is somewhat obvious that categorization would follow these fonts. But overreliance on script or language can also distort the historiographical account. As in Islamic historiography, the period and place's multilingualism has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged in rabbinic studies.[25] Following this line of thought, the broader educational landscape of late antiquity comes into view and offers further avenues for research. Sons from rabbinic households may also have attended rhetoric schools outside of Mesopotamia. In the fourth and fifth centuries, rhetorical schools existed in Athens, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Rome, Carthage, Bordeaux, Berytus, Cappadocia, Gaza, and the school associated with the East Syrian church in Sasanid Nisibis.[26] Unless there is historical evidence to the contrary, there is no reason to imagine a rabbinic sage as a one-sidedly focused entity, exclusively trained and vested in rabbinic exegesis – an ideal forced upon us by the talmudic text itself. Rather, it is conceivable that there were multiple platforms, among them also marketplaces and what seems to have been a sort of Persian

---

[23] Libanius's Letter 1098, see the discussion and references in Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric*, 7, and David Brodsky, "From Disagreement to Talmudic Discourse: Progymnasmata and the Evolution of a Rabbinic Genre," in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan, *AJEC* 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 188–189. The exact addressee of the letter remains a matter of debate.

[24] Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

[25] See Antoine Borrut, "An Islamic Late Antiquity? Problems and Perspectives," in *The Byzantine Near East: A New History*, ed. Scott Johnson, Elizabeth Bolman, and Jack Tannous (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[26] See Jan R. Stenger, "Learning Cities: A Novel Approach to Ancient *paideia*," in *Learning Cities in Late Antiquity: The Local Dimension of Education*, ed. Jan Stenger (London: Routledge, 2019), esp. 9; and Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric*, 7.

convention house, the *bei abeidan*, that ultimately added to the skills learned in rabbinic circles.[27] Gravestones in North Africa show that some Jews, similar to some gentiles, were members of multiple associations.[28]

(Even) non-rabbinic Jewish Aramaic texts, such as incantation bowls or poetry (*piyyut*), show the imprint of progymnasmatic training in their use of *energeia* (vividness) and *ethopoeia* (speech in character).[29] Whether they went to Greek rhetorical schools or Aramaic rhetorical schools, the authors of these texts were clearly versed in those methods. They were part of a culture where the spoken and written word were very important, with the latter supporting the accuracy and rigor of the former.

The meaning of the talmudic idea of reciting and transmitting could also be questioned a little further. The verb *tny* is usually translated as "to recite," but, at least in some instances, it refers to reading. The semantic field of words used to denote reading in Greek and Latin is indicative of what people thought reading did or should do to the mind. Mary Carruthers has argued, "Ancient Greek had no verb meaning 'to read' as such; the verb they used, *anagignōskō*, means 'to know again,' 'to recollect.' It refers to a memory procedure."[30] Similarly, the Latin verb *lego* means "to collect" or "to cull, pluck," thus referring less to a "memory procedure" than to the acquisition of new knowledge.[31] Together, the Greek and the Latin notions of reading describe two functions: reading to recall what was already learned and reading to learn new things. The

---

[27] On the various markets attested in the Talmud, see St. John Simpson, "The Land behind Ctesiphon: The Archaeology of Babylonia during the Period of the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Markham Geller, IJS Studies in Judaica 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 20–29; on the *bei abeidan*, see Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 50–58. Susan Marks, "Who Studies at the Beit Midrash? Funding Palestinian Amoraic Education," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 12 (2021), has recently complicated the story of the education of rabbis and scribes in Palestine.

[28] See, e.g., Philip A. Harland, "Acculturation and Identity in the Diaspora: A Jewish Family and 'Pagan' Guilds at Hierapolis," *JJS* 47, no. 2 (Autumn 2006), for a discussion of the gravestone of a Jewish family whose members belonged to the local synagogue but also to the professional association of carpet weavers.

[29] See Laura S. Lieber, "Setting the Stage: The Theatricality of Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity," *JQR* 104, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 553; or the example of the bowl with the *historiola* about Hanina ben Dosa, discussed above, in Chapter 3, n59.

[30] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: The Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34.

[31] My interpretation of the term's point of reference differs from Carruthers's interpretation, as Carruthers again connects it with a "memory procedure," namely, "the recollection or gathering up of material" (*Book of Memory*, 34).

repetitive nature of reading is equally captured by the Aramaic verb *tny* (תני), translated in the *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* as "to repeat, learn a Tannaitic tradition, to recite, to report a tradition."[32] A translation that also includes "secular/mundane reading" or "reading aloud" may explain passages in which the passive *mtny* (מתני) and the active *tny*, or even *tny*, *mtny*, and the verb expressing reading of scripture, *qry* (קרי), are contrasted.[33]

Looking at and understanding the Talmud as a distinct part of late-antique book culture would not only shed new light on the work itself but simultaneously benefit other Jewish texts and communities that often remained in the work's shadow.[34] Only through a simultaneous and equal reading of liturgic poetry (*piyyutim*), bowls, *hekhalot* literature, graffiti, art, and artifacts, alongside texts from the surrounding environment, can an intellectual history be written that does true justice to similarities, differences, and innovation.[35] By so doing, scholars can make a contribution both to the intellectual history of Jews in Sasanid Mesopotamia and to the history of Sasanid Mesopotamia more generally.

[32] *DJBA*, see "תני." Cf. also the meaning attested to the verb in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, where it includes learning in general as well as teaching and telling; *DJPA*, see "תני." And see also the verb's meaning in Syriac: "to repeat; to tell, relate; to say, speak; to recite; to recall, learn" (*SyrLex*, see "ܬܢܐ"). In his assessment, Sokoloff may have shared the traditional premises of rabbinic studies regarding this verb.

[33] See b. Meg. 28b, b. Ned. 8a, and b. Meg. 29a//b. Ketub. 17a, respectively. A change in premises as to the semantic field of the verb may also shed light on a story told in Syriac, in which תני and קרא are referred to as subsequent steps in learning to read the Bible, against the רטן of the Zoroastrian magi, who relied on oral transmission (qua repetition) because they had no alphabet. See Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 162–163 and references there.

[34] On the difficulties but also the possibilities of countering the hegemony of the Talmud in reconstructing Jewish life in Sasanid Mesopotamia, see Geoffrey Herman, "In Search of Non-Rabbinic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia," in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1,000 CE*, ed. Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures 8 (Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2021).

[35] Mika Ahuvia's book *On My Right Michael, On My Left Gabriel* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021) is a prime example of this approach. For an investigation into the social world of Babylonian Jews through incantation bowls, see Geoffrey Herman, "Jewish Identity in Babylonia in the Period of the Incantation Bowls," in *A Question of Identity: Social, Political, and Historical Aspects of Identity Dynamics in Jewish and Other Contexts*, ed. Dikla Rivlin Katz, Noah Hacham, Geoffrey Herman, and Lilach Sagiv (Berlin: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019).