"Associative" Organization in the Talmud: Some Reconsiderations[1]

Eliezer Segal
Department of Religious Studies
University of Calgary

In recent weeks I have been rereading and enjoying a work that is encyclopedic in its scope. It collects and reformulates an immense variety of earlier religious and narrative traditions, which it subsequently organizes according to flexible literary criteria. The "criteria" to which I refer are anything but systematic by current standards. The compiler attaches one item to another on the basis of the flimsiest of similarities. The work has earned a measure of notoriety for its contrived and associative manner of arrangement.

The work to which I have been referring is Ovid's Metamorphoses.[2] Within the broad and flexible structure allowed by his theme of "transformations" the Latin poet strove to assemble and retell the best and worst of Greek and Roman myth. For the most part however, the individual tales and legends are not arranged in accordance with any obvious logical classification, but rather they run on (or, if you prefer: metamorphose) into one another by virtue of formal links that are usually peripheral to the main focus of the stories themselves.

At least that is how it appears from a distance. When we examine the specific transitions with greater precision, we note however that in several cases the juxtapositions of the units do indeed reflect a communality of theme and content that satisfies even our western standards of esthetics and reasonableness.

Let me illustrate the above comments with the help of a few examples:

1) In Book I Ovid places side by side two legends whose plots and themes are virtually identical. In the first, the unresponsive Daphne is pursued by the enamored Apollo until she finds that her only escape is to appeal to her father, the River Peneus, to transform her into a Laurel tree. In the second, Io is similarly harassed by Jove and is transformed—in this case, only temporarily—into a cow, in order to conceal her from Juno's wrath.

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[1] As will be pointed out in subsequent notes, most of the evidence that underlies this study has been published in other works of mine. I nevertheless feel that there is a value in assembling those disparate materials in order to shed some new light on certain issues that would otherwise not receive their deserved emphasis.

In keeping with this paper's origins in an oral lecture, I have minimized the annotation, especially with respect to textual variants. More complete critical apparatus can be consulted in my above-mentioned works.

These striking narrative parallels would appear to be a sufficient reason for Ovid's pairing of the two myths. However that is not the way in which the *Metamorphoses* is constructed. There the tale of Daphne and Apollo is made to flow into that of Io and Jove by following the course of the River Peneus from its role in the former story through to vale of Tempe that provides the scene for the latter. In keeping with the literary conventions of the *Metamorphoses*, that incidental thread is accepted as the legitimate way to unite two passages. Thematic parallels without the formalistic connections do not normally suffice for this purpose, whereas a purely mechanical literary link that did not reflect any similarity of content would be considered fully adequate.

2) In Book VIII the story of Baucis and Philemon, followed immediately by that of Erysichton, present us with symmetrical contrasts between models of piety and blasphemy, set in relief by motifs and plot elements that are common to the two legends. The former story speaks of a pious old couple who are transformed into sacred trees as a reward for their hospitable treatment of two hungry sojourners who are in reality Jupiter and Mercury. In the second story, the sacrilegious villain is consigned to an eternity of insatiable hunger for boldly chopping down the trees in a sacred grove. Here too, though the relationships between the stories would amply justify their juxtaposition in the poem, the explicit reason given for their inclusion has more to do with the narrative setting in which they were told, in an exchange of tales by the rivers Calydon and Achelous.

A conclusion that might be drawn from these examples is that the grouping of literary units according formalistic links or according to similarity of content need not be mutually exclusive goals. Even when the juxtaposition of the units finds adequate justification according to purely logical and thematic criteria, the esthetic conventions of a work or genre might require, if only for ornamental purposes, to express the connection through a contrived literary transition.

The above comments inspire some intriguing comparisons with another ancient encyclopedic compendium of religious literature, namely the Babylonian Talmud. More than Ovid, the redactors of the Talmud have acquired a reputation for unsystematic and associative arrangement of traditions, a feature that earlier generations of scholars would sometimes ascribe to a quaint "oriental mentality."

In my own research on the Talmudic Tractate *Megillah* I encountered a number of instances in which the editors' use of artificial, "associative"-looking links between

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[2] See E. Segal, "Anthological Dimensions of the Babylonian Talmud," *Prooftexts* 17 (1997), 58-9, n. 80.

components appeared suspiciously superfluous, in light of the fact that the presence of those passages made perfect sense from a logical or contextual perspective. In my study of the "Babylonian Esther Midrash" I made brief and incidental mention of the phenomenon, but I would like to take this opportunity to focus on it.[3]

Surely the most blatant occurrence of the pattern I have been describing involves the very placement of the midrash itself. It makes up the end of the first of the tractate's four chapters. Most scholars[4] are agreed that its presence there is justified by a flimsy associative connection: The Talmudic *sugya* on the chapter's final mishnah—a unit which, we might recall, is itself part of the associatively linked sequence of "איזהו " mishnahs that are embedded in the chapter—includes (on folio 10b) the formula: "Said R. Ishmael the son of R. Yosé:...Every town concerning which you possess a tradition from your fathers that it was walled from the days of Joshua the son of Nun—all these precepts are applicable there…" To this the editors juxtaposed a passage that commenced:

> R. Levi; and if you should say: R. Joḥanan: This matter is a tradition in our hands from the Men of the Great Assembly: Every place in which it says "*and it came to pass*" is none other than a reference to sorrow.

R. Levi's dictum is included in a brief sequence of three dicta whose grouping is based on purely formal parallels. Having created the associative link to the opening sentences of a discourse on Esther, the redactors went on to copy in full the entire midrashic commentary to the Book of Esther. The basic structure is standard in the Talmud. What is special to our passage is merely the proportions: The Esther Commentary extends for fourteen densely printed pages.

There is no denying that loose associative affinities often determine the grouping of disparate literary units in the Babylonian Talmud. It is nevertheless difficult to accept that this sort of redactional pattern would have furnished powerful enough grounds for the inclusion of a text of the magnitude of the Esther-Midrash. Moreover, it strikes me as too great a coincidence that the midrash should have *happened* to find itself in the only tractate in the Talmud that is devoted to the laws of Purim and the reading of the Megillah.

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[3] The passages discussed here were analyzed in my monograph *The Babylonian Esther Midrash* (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1994). Extensive annotation and bibliographic references may be found there.

[4] A. Weiss, *Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim*, 280. Ibn Ḥabib has already noted in the *'Ein Ya'akov* that the pericope about *mishloaḥ manot* and gifts to the poor on 7a-b most probably originated as a part of the Esther Midrash (where it is to be inserted at 16b).

A more likely scenario is that the redactors, in their determination to find a place for the Esther-Midrash within the suitable talmudic tractate, felt that the appropriateness of the subject-matter did not furnish a sufficient reason for its inclusion, and therefore sought an additional formal connection, contrived as it may appear to us.[5]

Similar patterns are observable with respect to the inclusion of other associative digressions inside the Esther Midrash itself:

Thus, on *Megillah* 14a–15a we find a long pericope about the number of biblical prophets, and especially about the seven prophetesses. The passage is inserted in connection with R. Abba bar Kahana's incidental mention of forty-eight male prophets and seven prophetesses in his comment related to Esther 3:10.

Later on, on 16a–b, seven dicta by R. Benjamin ben Japheth, all of which comment on the conclusion of the Joseph story in the latter chapters of Genesis, are incorporated by virtue of a comparison that was drawn with Esther 8:15 in one of the comments.

As is readily apparent from the above examples, most of these digressions conform to a familiar organizational pattern in the Talmud, of inserting lists of traditions into the local pericope by virtue of one item in the list that bears a direct relevance or similarity to the present context. In the Esther-Midrash a link is often created when a biblical verse from outside the Book of Esther is quoted, which justifies the assembling of various comments on that verse.

Further reflection suggests that in deciding to inject extensive foreign bodies into the Esther-Midrash the redactors were being guided by something other than mere formal principles of associative juxtaposition. A long pericope about the female prophets of the Bible naturally suits an exposition of Esther, inasmuch as she was herself counted among those prophetesses, even though the formal connection to the pericope does not actually hinge on that particular point of thematic affinity.

The same might be argued for the incorporation of a sequence of comments to the stories of Joseph and Benjamin, seeing that the Midrash repeatedly posits an archetypal continuity that extends from them through to their descendant Mordecai.`

Ultimately this characterization holds true for the very inclusion of the Esther-Midrash in the talmudic tractate *Megillah.* As we have noted, its presence can be justified on far stronger thematic grounds than the feeble formulary similarities that make up the technical occasion for its incorporation.

It therefore appears possible that the technical and formal connections between the passages were adduced only after the fact, as a kind of literary ornament, but that thematic

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[5] *The Babylonian Esther Midrash* 3:219.

appropriateness was the primary consideration that impelled the talmudic editors to place these sources where they are. In light of these phenomena we might with profit rethink some of our cherished notions about the nature of "associative principles of arrangement" throughout the Babylonian Talmud.

When we really think about it, this thesis is consistent with the standard midrashic ways of linking Scriptural texts. As most of us are aware, it is always preferable, according to the prevailing esthetics of rabbinic rhetoric, to build such links on a word or phrase that is common to two verses; a "mere" identity of theme or content somehow does not have the same appeal.

A related topic that might merit re-evaluation in the wake of our examination of the Esther-Midrash is the status of "lists of dicta" as a genre of talmudic source-material. It has been customary to regard these collections as being linked by purely formal criteria, particularly the identities of their authors and tradents.[6]

Examination of one such list suggests an alternative explanation of the evidence.

In *Megillah* 15a–b the Talmud inserts a heterogeneous series of midrashic dicta by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Ḥanina. More than with most such lists, the fact of common authorship cannot be a sufficient reason for the collecting of these quotations, since dozens of sayings by these rabbis are distributed through rabbinic literature. As frequently occurs, the list is brought here by virtue of a single one of its units which bears directly on the topic of the pericope. In the present example, the first dictum is a midrashic comment on Esther 5:1.[7] Like many such lists, the present one contains seven items[8] and is introduced in many witnesses by a mnemonic "*siman*."

Three of the seven items in the collections contain explicit citations from Esther. These include: #1 (5:1); #4 (2:22); #6 (5:13).

With regards to the remaining items, which contain no explicit allusions to Esther, it is illuminating to note that recent manuscript discoveries have provided us with lost midrashic traditions in which the themes of two of those items are connected to verses from Esther.

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[6] The preceding argument appeared in *The Babylonian Esther Midrash* 3:221-3..

[7] Two of the other units cite verses from Esther, 2:22 and 5:13. The location of the unit makes it clear that it was the comment to 5:1 that determined its placement within the pericope. It is conceivable that in their original context the other units also were connected to a midrash on Esther.

[8] See A. Weiss, *op. cit.*, 232 ff.; Shamma Friedman, "Some Structural Patterns of Talmudic *Sugiot*," in: *Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem*, edited by A. Shinan, World Union of Jewish Studies, 396-402 (our current list is adduced as an example on 399).

Thus, with respect to item #2, which deals with the efficacy of "the blessing of a commoner," as can be learned on the precedents of Araunah (2 Samuel 24:23) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 6:17)

We now know of an intriguing connection to Esther in a version of *Panim aḥerim* B published by Z. M. Rabinovitz in his *Ginzé midrash*.[9] The passage there is linked to Esther 2:9 through a word-play on *vayyeshanneha* ("he preferred her") which it reads midrashically as "*vayyesanneha*," from the root for "enemy":[10]

> Says R. Simeon ben Ḥalfuta: A *matrona* does not enjoy true praise unless she is acknowledged by her enemies.

The passage then goes on to list several Biblical passages in which Israelite protagonists merit the blessings of heathens, including:

> Jethro: "*Blessed be the Lord*" (Exodus 18:10); Araunah to David: "*The Lord thy God accept thee*"; The queen of Sheba…; Naaman… Nebuchadnezzar…; Darius: "*Thy God whom thou servest continually*…"

Rabinovitz (n. 18) observes that there is no other known source for this exposition, while noting also its resemblance to our pericope in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash. This example gives strong support to the hypothesis that the entire collection of R. Ḥanina's dicta originated in a midrash on Esther.[11]

A similar phenomenon is observable in connection with item #3 in the list, a homily on Jeremiah 10:13: "*At the sound of his giving a multitude of waters in the heavens…he causeth the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings with rain, and bringeth forth the wind out of his treasures*."

Here as well our evaluation of the evidence is enriched by a Palestinian midrash on Esther published in *Ginzé midrash*.[12] This passage is part of a midrash connected to Esther 6:13 where Zeresh tells Haman that "*If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom*

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[9] Z. M. Rabinovitz, *Ginzé Midrash* (Tel-Aviv: Chaim Rosenberg School for Jewish Studies, 1976), 164.

[10] See Rabinovitz, n. 11 on the difficulties in understanding this obscure text.

[11] The preceding discussion is taken from *The Babylonian Esther Midrash* 2:308-9. See also *ibid*., 271-4.

[12] p. 158.

thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him." In the course of its exposition of this verse (see above) we find the following in Rabinovitz's fragment:

> …Says R. Simeon ben Laqish: Israel were likened to fire {and the nations of the world were likened to water}.
> Israel were likened to fire—"*And the House of Jacob shall be a fire*, etc." (Obadiah 1:18).
> And the nations of the world were likened to water: "*Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of the water, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty water*" (Isaiah 17:12).
> It is the way of fire to rise upwards, whereas water descends downwards. Thus, if he begins raising them, he raises them…

The midrash in the fragment is very different from R. Eleazar's dictum in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash, as are the biblical proof-texts which it cites. Nevertheless the similarities of phraseology and content between the respective verses from Jeremiah and Isaiah are quite striking, and raise the suspicion that in an early, undocumented stage in the in the fluid oral transmission of the aggadic traditions, our dictum was attached to a passage very much like R. Simeon ben Laqish's, which was unmistakably devised as a discourse about Esther.

When we combine these two cases with the explicit citation of verses from Esther in several of the other dicta in this series, it begins to appear much more likely that the entire collection evolved out of a homily to Esther, and is not simply an arbitrary sequence of disparate traditions by a single author.[13]

It would not be difficult to compose expansions of the remaining two units that would connect them to themes or verses from Esther. Thus, unit #5, on the loss felt by the perishing of the righteous, might have alluded to the deaths of Esther's parents (2:7) or to the threatened extermination of the Jews. And item #7, about the crowns that will adorn the heads of the righteous in the Next World, begs comparison with the royal honours that were heaped on Esther and Mordecai at the end of the Purim story (8:15).

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[13] *Ibid.*, 309.

Taking together all the evidence, it begins to appear much more likely that the entire collection evolved out of a homily to Esther, and is not simply a sequence of disparate traditions by a single author. Aside from teaching us something about the fortuitous nature of manuscript finds, this assessment might also raise significant questions with respect to such issues as the nature of "lists of dicta" in general, and the incorporation of extraneous materials into the Babylonian Talmud. This model for reconstructing the genesis of "lists of sayings" pericopes might easily hold true for the "Joseph and Benjamin" traditions in *Megillah* 16a-b,[14] and for kindred collections elsewhere in the Talmud.[15]

Of course, it remains to be seen whether the phenomena we have been examining can be discerned in other places in the Talmud. I fear that a preliminary examination has produced only ambivalent conclusions.

With respect to the placement of other midrashic passages, clearly none fit as naturally into the themes of Mishnah tractates as the Esther-Midrash does into *Masekhet Megillah*. At any rate, I did survey some of the lengthier midrashic digressions in tractates *Shabbat*, *Soṭah* and *Sanhedrin*; and what I found particularly striking was how most of these passages had very straightforward connections to the local Mishnah, in which the relevant biblical texts were usually quoted explicitly.

As for the "lists of sayings" type of collections, here it is more difficult to formulate objective criteria to test the hypothesis. Although it is nice when we are able to show, as in the above example, that all the sayings relate to a single theme or biblical text—it is obvious that aggadic homilists were at least as likely to string together verses that are scattered through the Bible. Furthermore, faced with any arbitrary collection of rabbinic sayings it would not be too difficult a challenge to invent a plausible reconstruction of a discourse in which all the sayings could have been included. It would be ideal if we could find the actual midrashic discourse preserved somewhere in the extant literature, but I for one am not going to hold my breath until that fortunate day. The editors of the various midrashic compendia have effectively fragmented and reassembled the original sermons so that few are likely to have survived in their pristine form. Consequently, little likelihood exists of testing the thesis against a fully verifiable control.

I feel that the above discussion, however modest it might appear in its scope, provides some apt illustrations of the demands of proper textual study, as well as of its

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[14] *The Babylonian Esther Midrash* 3:121-144.

[15] For instance, see my discussion of *TB Ketubbot* 5a in "Anthological Dimensions of the Babylonian Talmud," 42-5.

rewards. The question of the organizational principles of the Talmud is fundamental to our appreciation of rabbinic literature and to the use that we may make of that literature as a source of historical, literary, religious or legal information. As we have seen, a proper characterization of those principles cannot be attempted unless we are prepared to approach the material from a variety of different methodological directions. Careful attention must of course be directed to the history of the respective texts and to comparisons with other works in the rabbinic corpus. We must also test the evidence against the various theories about the redaction of the Talmud and other rabbinic works. We must cautiously make allowances for the fluid nature of talmudic texts, keeping in mind that they benefited from the continued intrusion of marginal glosses over several centuries. The comparison with contemporary non-Jewish literatures might also be of relevance in this interpretation. Ultimately, after we have collected all the available data, we must humbly acknowledge our uncertainties and be grateful for serendipitous discoveries such as the midrashic Genizah fragments that shed so much light on the cryptic talmudic passages. Although we may not ignore the textual evidence, there are times when we are obliged to go beyond the given facts and theorize about how to fill in the gaps in the most plausible fashion.

Some recent rabbinic scholarship has been guilty of outright laziness in its treatment of texts—a laziness that expresses itself in a blind reliance on printed editions, or in a commitment to a particular methodological school that supposedly eliminates the need to consult other scholarly literature.

As we have been learning from all the presentations of this conference, scholarship worthy of the name must strive not for narrowness of scope, but for a more thorough application of the broadest range of methodological approaches.