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AVINOAM COHEN. רבינא וחכמי דורו: עיונים בסדר הזמנים של אמוראים אחרונים בבבל [*Ravina and Contemporary Sages: Studies in the Chronology of Late Babylonian Amoraim*]. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2001. Pp. 323.

Under normal circumstances, the talmudic rabbis who bore the name Ravina would have elicited little interest from academic scholars. Like dozens of other rabbis whose opinions are scattered through the Babylonian Talmud without any distinctive biographical exploits or historical importance, the Ravinas would have been consigned to short entries in lexicons and handbooks. However, a cryptic tradition in the Talmud (bBM 86a) groups Ravina with Rav Ashi as *sof hora'ah*, the end of instruction, a status that is presented in the same talmudic passage as comparable to the roles of Rabbi [Judah the Prince] and Rabbi Nathan as the end of Mishnah, thereby seeming to imply that Rav Ashi and Ravina had roles in the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud that were equivalent to those of R. Judah and R. Nathan in the publication of the Mishnah. This equation cannot be taken at face value, since the Talmud cites teachings of scholars who lived several decades after Rav Ashi (who died, according to Sherira, in 427 CE). Sherira's solution to the conundrum was to identify the Ashi and Ravina of the talmudic tradition with obscure figures from the first generation of post-amoraic Saboraim: a Rabbah Joseph (or Yosé) and a later Ravina, both of whom lived into the early 6th century.

The identification of the various Ravinas who spanned the last generations of Babylonian amoraim has therefore become closely intertwined with the questions of the redaction of the Talmud and the transition between the amoraic and saboraic eras. Underlying the endeavor is the frustrating fact that there seems to be at least one rabbi named Ravina active at any given point during this period. The modes of talmudic citation make no explicit distinctions between the respective figures of that name.

Although academic talmudic scholarship learned long ago that legendary talmudic anecdotes like the one about *sof hora'ah* should be treated with great caution as sources of history or biography, in the present instance it has been hard to ignore the immense body of data collected by I. Hallevy to demonstrate that the discourse of Rav Ashi and his contemporaries differs substantially from that of previous generations in the way that it focuses much of its discussion on earlier talmudic discussions, a pattern that does indeed dovetail nicely with the claim that they were involved in redactional activity. It is in this context that we may appreciate the disproportionate energy that was invested by earlier scholars (including Hallevy, his disciple A. Heiman, and S. and H. Albeck) towards unraveling the confusing

chronologies of the Talmud's various Ravinas. In the present work, Cohen returns to this well-trodden territory and points out some fundamental weaknesses in previous solutions to the question.

As Cohen notes in his introductory remarks, earlier studies, in spite of many disagreements on points of detail and formulation, operated for the most part within a commonly accepted set of parameters. The starting points include the following premises: A rabbi named Ravina was a student of the prominent teacher Rava (d. 352). A Ravina predeceased Rav Ashi by five years (i.e., 422). At the late end of our period is the Sabora Ravina who died in 507. Working within this basic framework, scholars attempted to fashion chronologies that would account for the relevant talmudic passages in the most economic manner, i.e., by applying Ockham's Razor so as not to posit a greater number of Ravinas than are necessary to explain the facts. The conventional wisdom had it that it was Rava's disciple Ravina who predeceased Rav Ashi, and the major question under dispute was how many Ravinas it would take to most plausibly fill in the seventy-five years between Rav Ashi's death and the close of the amoraic age.

In reopening the investigation, Cohen discovers that there is virtually no element in the conventional discussions that does not require major rethinking. For one thing, he argues, the conventions of scholarly hierarchy make it very unlikely that a figure old enough to have studied with Rava could be treated as the disciple of Rav Ashi two generations later (a claim that generates a valuable discussion about the accepted norms of master-disciple relationships). Furthermore, as Cohen traces the tradition dating Ravina's death to 422, he notes that it is not attested in all versions of the *Seder Tannaim Ve-amoraim*, but only in the text contained in the *Maḥzor Vitry*. Cohen proposes an ingenious, though not entirely persuasive, theory of why the *Maḥzor Vitry*'s author would have inserted such a tradition on his own authority. Of special importance is Cohen's detailed philological and literary analysis of the pericope in bMQ 25a–b, which has been construed by many scholars as implying that Ravina predeceased Rav Ashi. Cohen's investigation of the pericope and its exegetical possibilities leads him to the conclusion that this widely accepted inference is not really found or suggested in the talmudic text itself. Quite the contrary, there is evidence that Rav Ashi's disciple Ravina continued his activity for some time after Rav Ashi's death. Cohen's investigation results in a convincing argument for distinguishing between two different Ravinas, one of whom was Rava's student and the other Rav Ashi's.

The investigation of his principal biographical question leads Cohen to extend his net to encompass other scholars associated with the Ravinas. In several instances, these subsidiary investigations also overturn long-established assumptions of the discipline. Thus, he demonstrates how Hallevy, in defiance of the talmudic evidence, extended the lifespan of Maremar beyond that of Rav Ashi so that he could serve as the teacher of the

latter Ravina. This unfounded view has become standard in most talmudic biographical lexicons. Cohen proposes that the same Ravina stood in relationships of discipleship or deference with both Rav Ashi and Maremar (as well as Rav Jeremiah of Difti). In formulating this theory, he has occasion to challenge yet another axiomatic assumption of talmudic history, that Sura and Mata Maḥasiah refer to the same locality. Many such provocative digressions occupy some seventeen appendices attached to the volume's various chapters.

Cohen's monograph is based throughout on a meticulous and thorough examination of the talmudic materials, including many whose connection to the problem is only peripheral (e.g., citation formulas and indications of collegial norms in the rabbinic academies). He pays attention to textual variants and to the citations and discussions of the medieval commentators.

Whether or not one is ultimately persuaded (as I generally was) by the author's radical reordering of the last century of amoraic chronology, Cohen's valuable enterprise raises disquieting questions about the tenuousness of several deeply rooted suppositions of talmudic historiography. No future discussion of these issues can avoid dealing with the arguments set out in this book.

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