

Abstract

The end of the Geonic period marked the conclusion of a distinct stage in the history of the transmission of the Babylonian Talmud (=BT). The Geonic period began as the BT took its final form; and by its conclusion the BT had been disseminated throughout the entire Jewish Diaspora. The first centuries of the Geonic period continue the “dark age” of the *Savoraim* in Babylonia, a period in which hardly anything is known regarding the BT and its study. It was then that the BT became the central discipline in the various academies. In the latter part of the Geonic period the transmission of the BT underwent a radical change: it was committed to writing. As the Babylonian center waned, oral study in the Babylonian academies was replaced by the study of written texts. The BT emerged as the dominant book of the Jewish library and became the corner stone of Torah-study and of the halakhic process.

The importance of Geonic readings as textual witnesses of the BT is self-evident – they are the earliest attestations we have to this text. The *Geonim* flourished soon after the *Amoraim* and the *Savoraim* who formed the BT, and their academies professed institutional continuity with their Amoraic predecessors, located as they were in the birthplace of the BT - Babylonia. In fact, all extant versions of the BT – manuscripts, commentators quoting the BT and later printed versions – originate from Babylonia, from where they circulated throughout the Jewish world.

The medieval talmudists – the *Rishonim* – were aware of the importance of Geonic readings for the study of the BT and those textual attestations were considered more

authoritative than later ones. However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that critical research of these Talmudic readings really began. Notwithstanding the importance with which the Geonic period was regarded with the rise of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the nineteenth century, the methodical study of Geonic readings began only some decades later. The studies of Y. N. Epstein and the work of B. M. Levin and others brought about an appreciation of the crucial contribution of Geonic readings to the history of the BT text. From then on the study of Geonic readings – both direct and indirect – increased. Research conducted by E. S. Rosenthal characterized the Geonic period as transitional, during which the BT – formerly transmitted orally – was committed to writing. All these scholars emphasized the uniqueness of Geonic readings of the BT text as opposed to other textual traditions both in manuscripts and in printed editions.

The uniqueness of the Geonic period in the history of the transmission of the BT is the basis of the present study. However, our knowledge of the way in which the BT was studied, transmitted and disseminated is limited. We do not know exactly how the *Geonim* treated the text of the BT and its variants, nor can we follow the history of such variant readings through out the period. This study intends to survey the contribution of the *Geonim* to the transmission of the BT by a systematic examination of the sources in which the *Geonim* explicitly discuss textual attestations and variants of the BT.

The basis of this study is the collection of sources in which *Geonim* related directly to textual matters (this *Collection of Sources* comprises the second volume of the thesis). The systematic scrutiny of Geonic literature has yielded some two hundred and ten

sources. Some of them are brief and general, others lengthy and detailed; some are implicit allusions and others explicit. This collation of sources presents a much broader basis than has been available until now, therefore enabling a more critical and nuanced view of the matter under discussion.

The earliest responsa dealing with textual matters come from the pen of *Rav Paltai Gaon* of the mid-ninth century. For the next hundred years we have very few Geonic responsa or discussions on such matters. Only at the very end of the Geonic period do we find a vast quantity of analyses dealing with textual readings and variants penned by *Rav Sherira Gaon* and *Rav Hai Gaon*.

An examination of the *Geonim*'s motives for addressing textual matters reveals a variety of reasons. In some cases a question concerning the text of the BT was put to them directly, and in others they were unable to answer the correspondent's query without addressing the text and the proper reading of the Talmudic passage under discussion. However, in many sources the initiative to discuss textual matters came – to a greater or lesser degree – from the *Geonim* themselves. Some did so to complement their Talmudic commentaries, while others corrected the Talmudic quotations of their correspondents, although these corrections might be irrelevant to the point discussed. Furthermore, some *Geonim* initiated textual analyses in their treatises and commentaries, where there is no evidence of response to external stimuli. These findings suggest that concern with variants and readings of the Talmudic text during the Geonic period was not only in response to external pressure.

The attitude of *Geonim* to variant readings was not uniform. Clearly, the *Geonim* were aware of corrupted text-readings which they dismissed out of hand. However, there are cases in which they rejected significant and meaningful readings and other instances where alternate readings were accepted and explained. When variant readings had important repercussions, such as halakhic differences, the *Geonim* usually preferred their own readings to others. However, there are cases where they accepted two variants notwithstanding their different understanding of the passage in question or the contradictory halakhic implications. In a few cases the *Geonim* exhibited ambivalence: they might reject a specific reading, but explain, or try to explain, the meaning of that reading and in so doing lend it recognition.

One of the contributions of the *Geonim* was the delineation of criteria for evaluating variant readings and the creation of characterizations and definitions for distinguishing between types of variants. Conformity with the regnant interpretation of a passage or with an accepted halakhic ruling was among such criteria, as well as personal tradition, and the tradition of the *yeshiva*, and textual attestation regarded as “precise” (*dika, davkanei*). They also characterized readings as “exact”, “in error” etc. One of their important characterizations was “two readings, but one reason [or meaning]” (*trei lishanei v’had ta’ama* or the like) which was used explicitly in eleven different passages, and there are indications that this also applied to others.

Notwithstanding all this, the criteria set by the *Geonim* were not fixed rules. There are cases where a *Gaon* employed a rule establishing a preferred reading in one passage and contradicted it in another. In the final analysis it seems that the specific understanding and interpretation of a local passage determined the *Geonim*’s attitude

to its variant readings. They used criteria and characterizations as tools with a vote but not a veto. Textual considerations were subordinate to the meaning of the text and in various instances a specific reading was preferred because it fitted the interpretation and conformed to the suggested meaning of the passage.

In the material examined, the last two *Geonim* of *Pumbedita* -- *Rav Sherira* and his son *Rav Hai* -- are prominent. As stated above, these two *Geonim* stand out because of the great amount of textual analysis they provided, thus far outweighing the discussion of any other *Gaon*. In order to concretize this statement, we will provide some statistics. There are two hundred and eleven sources in the *Collection of Sources*. Ninety-nine of these Geonic sources were written by *Rav Sherira* and *Rav Hai*, and another twenty-three are somehow associated with them (albeit in twelve of these sources the connection is tenuous). Nine or ten sources are by *Rav Paltai*; two by *Rav Natronai*; three by *Rav Saadia*; and three by *Rav Shmuel bar Hofni*. Six more sources can be attributed -- with some degree of certainty -- to other *Geonim*, and fifty-three are anonymous. Although in general more responsa of *Rav Sherira* and *Rav Hai* are preserved than of any other *Geonim*, this would still seem to represent the historical reality of this pair being much more active in matters of textual debate than other *Geonim*.

However, quantity is not the most significant factor, but rather the quality of the textual deliberations of *Rav Sherira* and *Rav Hai*. It is particularly in their writings that we find explicit use of criteria in evaluating variant readings of the BT. Almost all lengthy and developed discussions in this area stem from them. It appears that *Rav Hai* was more involved in this field than his father, although this is not always

unequivocal since many responsa are signed by both, and sometimes their identities are interchanged (some compilations attribute a specific responsum to the father while others attribute the same responsum to the son). We also find clear evidence of *Rav Hai* providing glosses to the Talmudic text. He is alone among the *Geonim* in creating conscious and detailed comments regarding the correct text of the BT. Furthermore only he accuses others of corrupting the text with their glosses.

These findings indicate that one should not describe a gradual development throughout the Geonic period. A clear distinction must be made between the involvement of *Rav Sherira* and *Rav Hai* in textual matters, and that of other *Geonim*. The first *Gaon* who dealt with the text of the BT – *Rav Paltai* – touched on this issue only sporadically, usually in answer to a question addressed to him. As far as *Rav Sherira* and *Rav Hai* were concerned, clarifying variant readings was perceived as part of the repertoire of a commentator and a *posek*. The fact that in the extant parts of their commentaries on *Berakhot* and *Shabbat* we find some twenty textual discussions, generated by them themselves, indicates the central position of such matters in their conception of Talmud study. In their mind, textual considerations are an integral part of the intellectual discipline and its practical implementation.

The evidence regarding the text of the BT in the writings of the Babylonian *Geonim* is the earliest textual attestation we have. In the sources discussed in this study - sources in which *Geonim* explicitly treat textual matters - we have identified many significant variant readings worthy of discussion. The variants can reflect differences between the Talmudic text of the questioners and that of the Geonic respondents, or differences between various readings the *Geonim* themselves cite. Analysis of the different

variants reveals those that are habitual and mechanical: differences in methods of writing, copyists' mistakes, phonetic differences and the like. In addition, we find variants which are the result of different meanings and interpretations of the material: variants which create different meanings and variants which affect the practical halakhic results. This type of text variant was not created by copyists or careless students, but rather by scholars and students whose study of the *sugya* led them to make various emendations. There are also variants in the structure of the *sugya*: differences in the positioning of elements of the Talmudic discussion; addition of various stages in the discussion and suchlike. Such variants are not frequent and do not affect the basic structure of the Talmudic source. We found no examples that would suggest a completely different structure of the *sugya*. In some of the sources we found stylistic differences in which a word or a sentence was formulated differently.

It should be pointed out that the variants stemming from the sources discussed do not reflect a full inventory of variant readings in the Geonic period. For example, the variants cited do not include meaningless mistakes, found abundantly in the later manuscripts of the BT. This is because the sources cited only discuss variants which created difficulties for those who posed the questions or which were of interest and significance to the *Geonim* who responded.

The question as to when the literature of the Oral Torah was committed to writing is a weighty one and beyond the scope of this thesis. I have dealt only with the transmission of the BT - orally or in writing - in the Geonic period. On the one hand we find that the BT continued to be transmitted orally until the end of the Geonic

period. For this there is both direct and indirect evidence. This oral study and dissemination finds expression in the sources cited, including variant readings created by oral study and from mistakes in pronunciation and hearing comprehension. It follows that the variants affecting the structure of *sugyot* were also the result of oral study, which is by character lively and vivacious and not a result of mechanical copying. On the other hand, however, volumes of the Talmud did exist towards the end of the Geonic period - certainly in the ninth and tenth centuries - and some *Geonim* made use of them. Analysis of the variant readings recorded in Geonic literature suggests that some of them resulted from studying written volumes of the BT, or from copyists' errors. There is also evidence that various scholars made use of halakhic compendia which quoted the BT, serving as sources for Talmudic citations. These facts leave no room for theories that sharply distinguish between oral transmission of the BT and its transmission in writing. It is clear that there was some overlap and interaction between the various methods of transmission.

This being said, there was still a significant difference between the mode of study in the Babylonian academies and medium employed throughout the rest of the Diaspora. The later medieval scholars - except for those in Babylonia - studied the BT exclusively from books, whereas in the academies of the *Geonim* much of the study remained oral. This difference created a transfer of terminology. When questioners outside Babylonia referred to the BT as a book, the *Geonim* responded - consciously or unconsciously - by using terminology of oral study. When the *Geonim* employed terminology reflecting oral transmission, later *Rishonim* "translated" this into terms with which they were familiar, i.e. terms reflecting a BT that was written and copied. Even the attitude of some of the later medieval scholars to the "Books of the

Academies” [*Sifrei ha-Yeshivot*] reflects the milieu of those scholars in Europe and North Africa, and not that of the *Geonim* in Babylonia. In Geonic writings there is no real evidence of authoritative books in the academies, such as reference books from which texts would be copied and other books corrected.

An analysis of Geonic textual attestations cited in this study reveals that many of them were ancient and original. However, several were secondary and reworked. Some of the readings are ancient variants preserved by the *Geonim* and not found in any other textual tradition at our disposal. On the other hand, there are precise and original readings preserved in the European and North African Diaspora – in manuscripts and books of *Rishonim* – whereas in Babylonia itself, the works of the *Geonim* preserve only adaptations and corrected versions of these passages.

The intensifying textual activity of the *Geonim* during the ninth and tenth centuries, referred to above, indicates that the transmission of the Talmudic traditions from generation to generation was not merely passive, but was creative involving various independent considerations and interpretive motivations. Such a method of transmission made emending and glossing the text of the BT more readily possible. This conclusion is buttressed by drawing attention to the interpretive and halakhic considerations that lie behind some of the variants with which we are concerned. I have discovered that a sizable amount of these variants reflect differences of opinion and varying interpretations held by Geonic scholars. Such differences reveal that textual scrutiny in the world of the *Geonim* and the resulting variant readings, were indeed a part of an interpretive process. In fact, correcting the text served those scholars who indulged in textual examination and correction as an interpretive tool.

Apparently *Rav Hai*'s seemingly authoritative statement, "We may not allow ourselves to correct the Mishnah or the Talmud because of a difficulty we have in understanding them", does not fully reflect the variety of attitudes toward the Talmudic text in this period.

There can be no doubt that the great importance of Geonic readings is due to the fact that they were closest in time and venue to that workshop in which the BT was created and thus were able to faithfully preserve ancient traditions. However, in those cases where the transmission of the Talmudic text from one generation to another was accompanied by conscious intervention by scholars correcting and glossing the text, there is no reason to afford these variants precedence over those of other, later scholars and text witnesses. Evaluating Geonic attestation of the BT text must be selective and discriminating: if these readings stem from tradition they should be accepted; but if they are a result of discretionary interpretation and emendation they should be regarded critically. This being so, the idea that the *Geonim*'s BT text represents a protected and preserved textual tradition which serves as a textual baseline -- in contradistinction to readings of the later *Rishonim* which are revised and adapted -- must be abandoned. We have demonstrated the fact that even in the works of the *Geonim* the text was dynamic and given to the influence and emendation of those who studied it.

The above point is made in contrast to widespread scholarly opinion held during the first decades of twentieth century, and which still reverberates today. Geonic readings were almost blindly preferred over others, apparently because of the rediscovery of major portions of Geonic literature at that time, texts which included *inter alia* ancient

and superior readings. This tilted the scales in favor of Geonic BT textual attestation and lead to excessive admiration. This evaluation associated the textual attestations of the *Geonim* with the original text of the BT itself, notwithstanding the four or five centuries in between. This brings to mind similar romantic ideas that were widespread in other disciplines at the beginning of the twentieth century. This approach attributes a sizable amount of continuity to sages and institutions of the Orient throughout ancient and medieval times, which were perceived as countries and civilizations insulated from, and therefore not affected by change and development.

Since we cannot attribute such continuity and unity to the Geonic period, it is also difficult to assume that the text tradition of each academy was uniform and consistent. I have found no convincing indication that were distinct textual traditions associated with the two *yeshivot* of *Sura* and *Pumbedita*.

The fact that the text of the BT varied and changed throughout the Geonic period requires us to examine the relationship between the Geonic textual attestations and those of the other extant textual witnesses. To what extent did Geonic readings influence the textual tradition of the Talmud? This task requires a systematic examination of all BT readings of the *Geonim*, and an assessment of their influence on the text of different BT tractates, a task which is beyond the limits of our study. Nevertheless, a comparison of the Geonic readings with the extant texts emphasizes the fact that in several instances even though the *Geonim* emphasized the “correct” text, that reading is not to be found in any of the extant manuscripts. This phenomenon can be explained in two mutually exclusive ways: [1] Geonic readings are not to be found in “our” textual witnesses because they are the earlier and the

superior readings. Only they were rescued from the hands and quills of proofreaders, scribes and copyists. [2] In some instances the Geonic readings did not influence the existing medieval textual tradition because they were comparatively recent, being created by the *Geonim* themselves.

The present study has addressed sources in which the *Geonim* discuss the text of the BT and has led to a discussion of several issues relating to the ways in which the *Geonim* regarded texts. However, I was unable to discover any data from before the mid-ninth century. This fact raises several questions: [1] Do our findings accurately reflect the textual analyses of the *Geonim* – even for the century between *Rav Paltoi* and *Rav Hai* – or have we uncovered random and unrepresentative data? [2] Assuming our findings are complete and representative, do the texts in which *Geonim* explicitly discuss textual matters fully reflect the extent of their textual activity, or was there further activity not explicitly discussed? [3] Even if our findings accurately and comprehensively reflect the textual activity at the end of Geonic period, can we infer from the last century and a half back to the beginning of the period for which where we have no sources whatsoever?

At present there are no answers to these questions. It is possible that new texts will be discovered complementing our present state of knowledge, but it is also possible that what is available at present will have to suffice. Be that as it may, every BT textual attestation of the *Geonim* must continue to be examined and compared to the textual tradition of each BT tractate in other text witnesses. In the present study only the later layers of Talmudic readings of the *Geonim* have been uncovered and discussed. Earlier and important layers - particularly the BT text of the *Sheiltot*, the BT

quotations in halakhic compendia, and the Talmudic quotes of the early *Geonim* - still await systematic research.