The Antiquity and Development of Rabbinic Holidays’ Practices

in Light of Ancient Near Eastern Evidence

Numerous practices instituted by the Pharisees and the rabbinic sages, describing in Jewish texts, do not derive directly from the biblical commandments. Some are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible at all, while others actually contravene the biblical text. Josephus (*Ant*. 13.297, 18.16, cf. 4Q166 II: 5-6) claims that the Pharisees maintain that ‘they have delivered to the people some practices by succession from the fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses’. This method was perpetuated by the rabbinic sages, which explicitly acknowledge (*m. Hag*. 1:8 [and *t. Hag* 1:9]; *s. Deut* 335) that many halakhot do not have their origin in the Bible – or have ‘little Scripture for many laws,” being “mountains hanging by a thread’. While few of these practices are reflected in non-legal Biblical texts, we appear to be able to learn about the antiquity of other practices from a comparison with findings from the ancient Near East.

Scholars have already noted the significance of ancient Near Eastern sources for the history of the halakhah. However, while drawing attention to the civil law mainly, most of them have focused on the presumably Babylonian influence upon post-biblical Jewish practices. Demonstrating that some of the Jewish practices are in fact constituted part of a Syro-Levantine continuum, i.e. a cultic *koine* in which the Jewish – following the Israelite – culture was embedded, the current research suggests to compare rabbinic halakhah with evidence from all the ancient Near Eastern cultures, in particular – those reflecting the Syro-Levantine area. Such an undertaking will enable us to assess the antiquity of certain practices, their original character, and the manner in which they developed.

שני ניצנים ראשונים ממחקר זה יצאו תחת ידי בעשור האחרון; מחקר אחד עסק במנהג ה-crimson thread that was tied to the scapegoat, ומחקר נוסף דן בטעמי הקרבת שבעים קרבנות הפרים בסוכות.In the research proposed here, I am seeking to examine further parallels from the ancient Near East, focusing initially on the Second Temple festival laws (such as the water libation, the water-drawing ceremony, the *hakafot*, the taking of the limbs in procession from the place of slaughtering to the altar, and others) as reflected in Rabbinic and related literature.

The main ancient sources for this project include the distinctive evidence from Ebla, Amorite Mari, Emar and Ugarit (in various publications) – אשר כולם מעידים על הַתַּרבות השמית המקומית בסוריה ובלבנט. רוב המקורות הללו – ובהם כמה שהתפרסמו בשנים האחרונות – טרם נידונו במחקר ה- Rabbinic literature. In addition, recent publications from Hattuša (now primarily in ChS and *hethieter.net* [CTH] editions), whose origins lie in Hurrian culture, have opened a window onto the culture of the Western-Hurrians who inhabited northern Syria and the Levant during the second millennium and absorbed many of the local traditions, ואף אלה יכולים לתרום רבות למחקר זה. My hope is that this research project – אשר אותו אני מקווה לבצע במסגרת השתתפות בקבוצת המחקר בשנת 2021-2022 – a project which adduces findings from the ancient Near East that are not always either accessible or sufficiently familiar to those studying the early history of halakhah, will contribute to the understanding both of the development of the halakhah and of the meaning of laws and practices which have been inadequately comprehended to this day.