

Fasting and Asceticism in the Babylonian Talmud in Light of Zoroastrian Ideology*

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Questions regarding the relationship of Talmudic Judaism to afflictive practices and ascetic ideologies have occupied scholars since the very beginning of the academic study of Jewish texts and does not yet appear to be in decline. In general it appears that the most significant discourses prevalent in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries with regard to the degree of asceticism of Talmudic Judaism¹ have given way to a more complex discussion², taking into

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¹ The majority of early scholars have derived a picture of Judaism that is not intrinsically ascetic, despite the fact that they have not denied the existence of ascetic tendencies in Judaism. Ascetic schools in the Talmudic sources were generally assessed as instances that were popular only in the fringes of society, and as not representative of mainstream Jewish thought. See for instance Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and D. Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1952), pp. 254, 343, 401-410; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927) 2, pp. 263-266. But see also James A. Montgomery, "Ascetic Strains in Early Judaism", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51 (1932), pp. 183-187.

In his work *Yisrael ba-Amim* Fritz Baer attempts to minimize the certainty among scholars regarding an anti-ascetic and an anti-afflictive Judaism. According to him the Jewish rabbis and saints were the archetype of the later Christian monastics, ascetics, and spiritual seekers. The Second Temple and Mishnaic eras were ascetic and spiritual periods in Jewish history and, although it was the agenda of the Babylonian Talmud to discourage extreme asceticism, the laws and teachings of asceticism left undeniable traces in all areas of Halakha and *Agaddah* in the corpus of rabbinic literature. See Fritz Baer, *Yisrael ba-Amim: Iyunim be-Toldot Yemei ha-Bait ha-Sheni ve-Tekufat ha-Mishnah ube-Yesodot ha-Halakhah veba-Emuna* (Jerusalem 1956), pp. 39-48.

Ephraim-Elimelech Urbach attempted to negate Baer's underlying premise and argued that true asceticism does not exist in Talmudic literature. To the extent that we do find sources for ascetic practices in the Talmudic literature, they are well-defined historically and contextually, and are related to traumas suffered by the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple, during the Bar Kokhba revolt and in the Talmudic era. Urbach validated his historicistic approach by assessing clear occurrences of asceticism in the Talmud as the result of specific historical realities from which one cannot make any conclusions regarding earlier periods, and even less so regarding the spirit of rabbinic Judaism. Judaism remained as it was—anti-ascetic and anti-afflictive in its core. See especially Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, "Asketes and affliction in Hazal". *Festschrift for Fritz Baer*, edited by S. Etlinger, S. Baron, B. Dinor, and Y. Halpern (Jerusalem 1961), pp. 48-68. Compare David Halivni "On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Nazritism of Simon the Just", *JQR* 58, (1967-1968), pp. 243-252.

² See especially Steven D. Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 253-288; M.L. Satlow, "'And On the Earth You Shall Sleep': Talmud Torah and Rabbinic Asceticism", *Journal of Religion* 83:2 (2003), pp. 204-222; Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); E. Segal, "A Review of 'Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture'", *JAAR* 73:3 (2005), pp. 911-913; L.M. Wills, "Ascetic Theology before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self", *JAAR* 74:4 (2006), pp. 902-925.

consideration the various meanings of the term, the difficulty in categorizing the type of asceticism³, and the different approaches to this topic in Talmudic literature.⁴

A comparative study of matters relating to the question of asceticism in Talmudic literature has concentrated until now in the Christian context of this complex question, since a sizable portion of the Judeo-Christian dialogue in the first centuries of the common era dealt with the definition of holiness and the status of sexual abstention⁵. Even aspects of asceticism which arise from the Babylonian Talmud –which was created and compiled predominantly within the Sassanian Empire—were generally perceived in contradistinction with the world of Syriac Christianity.⁶

While it is true that placing discussions of the Talmud into their Christian context is the natural and sensible approach in light of the centrality of ascetic rhetoric in early Christian sources⁷, the stress on the Christian world has distracted scholarly attention to a large degree from the Iranian context and from the strong connection between the discussions concerning asceticism in the Babylonian Talmud to those in the Zoroastrian sources.

³ In studies which deal generally with comparative religion, several broad classifications have been given for ascetic phenomena, which can also be applied to rabbinic Judaism. Some have distinguished between asceticism which concerns the training and exercise of the body, spirit, and desire, and a "dualistic" asceticism which requires escape from the physical body. Some have differentiated between "mystical" asceticism, the goal of which is a mystical attachment to Godliness, and an asceticism with the goal of affliction. Others have distinguished between an escapist asceticism and an asceticism which retains the norms of life and society. See primarily Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. xix-xxv; T.C. Hall, "Asceticism (Introduction)", in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner's, 1910); Oscar Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism: An Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion* (London: SPCK, 1924); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 95-183; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), pp. 291-292; Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph W. Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 350-356.

⁴ See below.

⁵ For an *example of this orientation, see e.g. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁶ See e.g. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation*, Judaism in Context 12 (NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011); eadem, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); eadem, "Aphrahat and the Rabbis on Noah's Righteousness in Light of the Jewish-Christian Polemic", in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, eds. J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (Lovanii: Peeters, 1997), pp. 57-71; eadem, "Zippora's Complaint: Moses is Not Conscientious in the Deed! Exegetical Traditions of Moses' Celibacy", in *The Ways that Never Parted*, eds. A. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 293-307; Shlomo Naeh, "Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and its Syrian Background", in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, eds. J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (Lovanii: Peeters, 1997), pp. 73-89.

⁷ See for example: Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); E.A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999).

Recently a number of scholars have shown links between the Babylonian Talmud and the Iranian religious and cultural world in a broad spectrum of topics, among them theology, Agaddah, civil and criminal law, and religious law⁸. Yet with regards to any discussion concerning ideology and ascetic practices, the interconnectedness between the Babylonian Talmud and the Zoroastrian culture has not yet been sufficiently clarified.⁹ The study before us attempts to—for the first time in a comprehensive analysis—bridge this gap in research and to address the important relationship between the study of asceticism in the Babylonian Talmud to Zoroastrian literature. The discussion concerning the various aspects of ascetic rhetoric in the Babylonian Talmud—the status of sexuality, fulfilling bodily requirements, relationship between body and spirit etc. — obviously deviates from the framework of an individual study, and therefore the present discussion will focus on the – concerning fasting and abstaining from food according to the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Tan. 11a-11b). This passage will serve as the criterion upon which to determine the importance of the Iranian context in furthering our understanding of Talmudic concerning asceticism.

⁸ For some of the more recent studies, see, for example Yaakov Elman, “The Other in the Mirror: Iranians and Jews View One Another: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth-Century Iranian Empire, Part 1”, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2009), pp. 15-26; idem, “The Other in the Mirror: Iranians and Jews View One Another: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth-Century Iranian Empire, Part 2”, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20 (2010), pp. 25-46; idem, “Toward an Intellectual History of Sasanian Law: An Intergenerational Dispute in Hērbedestān 9 and its Rabbinic Parallels”, in *The Talmud in its Iranian Context*, eds. Carol Bakhos and R. Shayegan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 21-57; Shai Secunda, “The Sasanian ‘Stam’: Orality and the Composition of Babylonian Rabbinic and Zoroastrian Legal Literature”, in *The Talmud in its Iranian Context*, eds. Carol Bakhos and R. Shayegan (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 140-160; idem, “Learning from a Magus / Like Giving a Tongue to a Wolf”, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2009), pp. 51-57; idem, “Reading the Bavli in Iran”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100:2 (2010), pp. 310-342; Geoffrey Herman, “‘Bury My Coffin Deep’: Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources”, in *Tiferet Leyisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus* (Jewish Theological Seminary: New York, 2010), pp. 31-59; Yishai Kiel, *Selected Topics in Laws of Ritual Defilement: Between the Babylonian Talmud and Pahlavi Literature*, Ph.D. Diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011.

⁹ Although several scholars have proposed possible links between the Babylonian Talmud and the Zoroastrian world in all matters concerning asceticism, these links were proposed in passing, and not as the result of a methodical analysis of the sources. These sources will be expanded upon below.