

CATHERINE HEZSER

The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine

*Texte und Studien zum
Antiken Judentum*

66

Mohr Siebeck

Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

Herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Peter Schäfer

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Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Hezser, Catherine:

The social structure of the rabbinic movement in Roman Palestine / Catherine Hezser. – Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997
(Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum; 66)
ISBN 3-16-146797-3
978-3-16-158728-3 Unveränderte eBook-Ausgabe 2019

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This book was typeset by Marianne Seegelken-Reeg in Berlin using TUSTEP, printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper from Papierfabrik Niefern and bound by Heinr. Koch in Tübingen.

ISSN 0721-8753

Preface

This study was submitted as a *Habilitationssarbeit* in the field of Jewish Studies at the Free University of Berlin. I have changed the text only slightly before publication.

The initial stages of research and writing of this study took place between 1992 and 1994, when I was a Senior Research Fellow at King's College in Cambridge, England, and worked on an interdisciplinary project on early Judaism and Christianity. The stimulating and sometimes heated discussions with the other members of the project, especially Keith Hopkins and Seth Schwartz, as well as the highly cooperative atmosphere at King's College in general, which provided the opportunity to meet representatives of other disciplines, greatly contributed to the development of my thoughts. I am especially grateful to Keith Hopkins for introducing me to network theory, for constantly challenging my presumptions, and for encouraging me to question traditional theories.

My interest in social theory goes back to the years of my graduate studies in Heidelberg. Gerd Theissen provided me with a model of scholarship which crosses the boundaries of its own discipline and makes use of the methods and results of other, related fields. Besides his general influence on my approach, I thank him for reading the draft of the first part of this work.

I further thank Shaye J.D. Cohen, who followed the development of this study from its very beginnings until its completion. The courses I took with him while I was a Ph.D. student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York inspired the issues examined and the questions asked. When I began this study after my graduation from the Seminary, he discussed the initial outline with me and continuously read and commented on the manuscript drafts.

I owe special thanks to my Talmud *chavruta* Paul Radensky, who copy-read the entire manuscript and made many valuable suggestions concerning its style and content. Marianne Seegelken-Reeg prepared the computerized version of the manuscript for publication.

I finally thank Peter Schäfer and Martin Hengel for including this work in their series *Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum*.

Berlin

July 1997

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of text collections, journals, and series are usually in accordance with Siegfried M. Schwertner, *Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete*, 2nd ed. Berlin and New York, 1992. Abbreviations of rabbinic literature are usually in accordance with H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 7th revised ed. Munich, 1982. The following abbreviations are used instead of or in addition to those included in the two mentioned works:

AIRJL	Annual of the Institute for Research in Jewish Law [Hebr.]
BAR	Biblical Archaeology Review
BIS	Bar Ilan Studies
CI	Critical Inquiry
CJ	Conservative Judaism
CRINT	Corpus Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum
CTh	Codex Theodosianus
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
JH	Jewish History
JWH	Journal of World History
LMD	La Maison-Dieu
SH	Scripta Hierosolymitana

Introduction

1. Previous Scholarship

While rabbinic literature enables us to know more about the rabbis than about any of the other members of the Jewish population of Roman Palestine, the social structure of the rabbinic movement remains largely unexplored.¹ This lacuna seems to be due to historians' concentration on either the political history of institutions or the biographies of individual rabbis, and Talmudists' focus on either the internal logic of halakhic argumentation or the literary history of rabbinic texts. Although a few attempts have been made to study the rabbis from a social-historical point of view, in comparison to recent social scientific approaches in the fields of Graeco-Roman and early Christian history these studies generally lag behind in their uncritical usage of the sources and their lack of social theory. It is necessary to combine a critical evaluation of the available source material with a selective employment of sociological models which may help to make sense of the scattered pieces of evidence.

a) The Political-Historical Approach

Since Heinrich Graetz, historians of ancient Judaism have been mainly interested in political history. They have concentrated their scholarly endeavours on what they perceived as the major institutions of Jewish self-government in Palestine, namely, the patriarchate and the sanhedrin. Graetz created a paradigmatic history of these "institutions" which, in its basic outline, became the scholarly consensus and has been repeated with minor deviations ever since. In this paradigm the rabbis are seen as the members of the sanhedrin and as the administrative and religious leaders of local Jewish communities. As such

¹ Here and elsewhere within this study the terms "structure" and "movement" are used in a neutral sense without implying a formal, institutionalized organization. The term "movement" is e.g. applied to the early Jesus movement by G. Theissen and to the Reform movement by M. A. Meyer, that is, to sets of people at different places and over some period of time who share particular concerns but who do not necessarily know each other or have contact with each other or be formally organized. For the term "structure" see under 2.b) below.

they play the role of either supporters or antagonists of the patriarch, who is considered hierarchically superior to them. This paradigm has recently been imperiled by critical studies of the literary sources which deal with these institutions. These studies question the existence of a sanhedrin at least after 70 and challenge the traditional view of the political authority of the patriarch.

At the end of the nineteenth century Graetz's focus on the political history of ancient Jews and the integration of Jewish history into the context of general history was a new and significant achievement. Other *Wissenschaft* scholars were convinced that Jews had no external history and that the rabbis were not given an opportunity to develop wide-ranging self-governmental institutions. They therefore preferred to study the internal history of the Jews, that is, their religious and cultural expressions.² According to Ismar Schorsch, "the breakthrough effected by Graetz was methodological: to integrate the fields of political and cultural history, or put differently, the history of Jews and Judaism in the same volume".³

Graetz viewed Yochanan b. Zakkai as the initiator of a Jewish restoration after 70. Yochanan b. Zakkai laid the foundations for a centralized organization of Jewish self-government which ensured Jewish national and religious survival.⁴ After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple Yavneh became the new center and the seat of the reconstituted sanhedrin which Yochanan b. Zakkai founded and over which he presided.⁵ Although the reconstituted sanhedrin did not possess all of the prerogatives of the pre-70 institution, it was its legitimate heir and successor and shared its religious and legal rights.⁶ Graetz repeatedly emphasizes its significance as a guarantor for the survival of Jewish spiritual values embodied in the "oral tradition".⁷ Moreover, as the new "national" center, Yavneh guaranteed the "spiritual" unity of both Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism.⁸

After Yochanan b. Zakkai's death this spiritual unity achieved through his leadership was threatened: some rabbis founded schools outside of Yavneh and engaged in scholarly disputes. The old controversy between the houses of Hillel and Shammai experienced a revival.⁹

² See Schorsch 430–431: "Members of the *Wissenschaft* circle, regardless of their disagreements, fully shared the view that Jews had no external history, other than a morbid record of unbroken persecution which hardly inspired painstaking research. Accordingly, *Wissenschaft* scholars much preferred to direct their energies to studying the internal history of the Jews, or more narrowly still, the expressions of Jewish culture, where freedom, dignity, and creativity visibly abounded".

³ See *ibid.* 431.

⁴ See Graetz 11.

⁵ See *ibid.* 14–15.

⁶ See *ibid.* 14.

⁷ See e.g. *ibid.* 15 and 19.

⁸ See *ibid.* 25.

⁹ See *ibid.* 28.

The restoration of unity and harmony was the achievement of R. Gamliel II who carried the title *nasi*.¹⁰ Like Yochanan b. Zakkai before, as the head of the sanhedrin Gamliel II was the guardian over halakhic unanimity. He stood beyond party disputes and was therefore in a position to bring about scholarly consensus.¹¹ Halakhic consensus was achieved through votes. R. Gamliel strived to maintain unity by fighting those who disagreed with the majority and by admitting to the Yavnean sanhedrin only those whom he trusted. He used the authority of the patriarchate to maintain the validity of halakhic decisions and to determine the membership of the sanhedrin.¹²

The patriarch's endeavours to regulate and control rabbinic teaching found opposition amongst individual rabbis. For example, R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus became R. Gamliel's antagonist in this regard.¹³ For his opposition against the patriarch and the unity of rabbinic Judaism R. Eliezer was punished by excommunication.¹⁴ Similarly, R. Yehoshua challenged the patriarch's strict use of his power.¹⁵ Like R. Eliezer he was punished for his daring pursuit. Against such individual rabbinic defectors R. Gamliel was able to maintain the spiritual unity of the sanhedrin.¹⁶

The Jewish populace considered the sanhedrin a remnant of the Jewish state and therefore attributed royal honors to its president, the patriarch: "Der Naßi war Volksfürst und seine Würde kam dem königlichen Range nahe".¹⁷ The patriarch appointed communal leaders and supervised the life of local communities. He determined the calendar and introduced fixed prayer formulas: "Das religiöse Leben wurde in dieser Weise vom Synhedrion und dem Patriarchat allseitig geregelt".¹⁸

After the Bar Kokhba revolt the sanhedrin was reestablished in Usha and R. Gamliel's son Shimon became patriarch. Again, the spiritual unity of the halakhah, which the revived institutions guaranteed, is seen by Graetz as a remedy which ensured Jewish survival in politically hazardous times.¹⁹ While individual rabbis tried to resist the authority of R. Shimon,²⁰ R. Yehudah ha-Nasi was the great conciliator who restored harmony and unanimity.²¹ His reputation was so great that the sanhedrin willingly subjected itself to him and

¹⁰ See *ibid.* 29.

¹¹ See *ibid.* 30.

¹² See *ibid.* 32.

¹³ See *ibid.* 40.

¹⁴ See *ibid.* 44.

¹⁵ See *ibid.* 34 with reference to the story of R. Gamliel's temporary deposition transmitted in *y. Ber.* 4:1, 7c-d par. *b. Ber.* 28a.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 170.

²⁰ See *ibid.* 186–187.

²¹ See *ibid.* 192.

granted him sole authority in appointments.²² As the editor of the Mishnah R. Yehudah fixed the normative halakhic tradition: “Sie wurde das geistige Band, das die zerstreuten Glieder der jüdischen Nationalität zusammenhielt”.²³

With R. Yehudah ha-Nasi the patriarchate as the central hierarchical leadership of the Jewish community and as the guardian of its unity reached perfection. Afterwards the patriarchate gradually declined. Rabbinic opposition against Rabbi’s successors, whose weaknesses were all too obvious, steadily increased.²⁴ When the patriarchate had lost almost all of its significance within Jewish society, the Christian emperors bestowed it with external glories.²⁵ Under Theodosius II, however, these glories proved to be vain. After the death of Gamliel VI the patriarchate was abolished.²⁶

Graetz’s emphasis on Jewish spiritual unity and the institutions which allegedly guarded over this unity may, perhaps, be understood in the context of developments within Judaism in Germany at the time when he wrote his work. Graetz was an outspoken opponent of the Reform movement represented by Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim. He was “conservatively religious” and an ally of Zacharias Frankel.²⁷ As Schorsch has pointed out, “his visceral contempt for Reform played a formative role in the determination of his own scholarly agenda”.²⁸ With his picture of a strict patriarchal control over individual rabbis’ teaching and a hierarchical communal structure which ensured spiritual harmony he seems to have created an ideal which he could hold up against the religious diversity and lack of central authority which he experienced amongst his contemporaries. He seems to have felt that only spiritual unity could ensure Judaism’s survival in the age of emancipation and assimilation, when rabbis had lost their former control over individual Jews’ lives.²⁹

²² See *ibid.* 195.

²³ *Ibid.* 203. *Ibid.* 213 he emphasizes the normative character of the Mishnah.

²⁴ See *ibid.* 221–227.

²⁵ See *ibid.* 304.

²⁶ See *ibid.* 358–359.

²⁷ Meyer 477. See *ibid.* 140 for Graetz’s alliance with Frankel: Graetz had planned to come to the conference of “Jewish theologians” which was meant to take place in Breslau in 1846. Frankel had planned this conference as a conservative alternative to the conferences organized by the Reformers. For Graetz’s affiliation with Frankel see also *ibid.* 413 n. 66. For his hatred of Holdheim and Geiger see his diary entries in Michael 86, 131–132. It seems that although both conservatives and traditionalists considered Graetz their ally, Graetz himself did not absolutely identify himself with any particular “movement” but propagated his own “cause”, see his diary entries in Michael 135–136.

²⁸ Schorsch 430.

²⁹ According to a diary entry, Graetz considered S.R. Hirsch’s criticism against Holdheim’s work *Die Autonomie der Rabbinen*, Schwerin 1843, too mild (see Michael 132–133). He thought that the “lack of unity” amongst rabbis was the greatest evil: “Aber die größte Kalamität dabei ist der Mangel an Einheit unter uns. Tot copiata tot sententiae!” (*ibid.* 137). Yerushalmi, 98, suggests that philosophical idealism may have influenced Wissenschaft scholars who emphasized “normative Judaism” and the notion that a basic “idea” was underlying Jewish history through the ages.

Almost all of the subsequent histories of rabbinic Judaism follow Graetz' model. The existence of the two main institutions, the patriarchate and the sanhedrin, is unquestioningly accepted, and their role in the administration and leadership of the Jewish communities is presumed. The rabbis are viewed as members of the sanhedrin and as communal leaders who were subject to the control of the patriarch. Occasionally some rabbis revolted, but those who revolted were soon put into their places. Only minor deviations of this paradigm occur, for example, with regard to the question who was the first patriarch or to the time when the sanhedrin moved from Yavneh to Usha. The image of a fixed hierarchical structure of the rabbinic movement is always maintained.

Thus, Avi-Yonah writes that in Yavneh a new leadership consisting of the patriarch and the sanhedrin was established.³⁰ Through ordination rabbis became members of the sanhedrin, whose authority in legal matters was acknowledged by everyone.³¹ While R. Gamliel II had already been president of the sanhedrin and "head of the people", after the Bar Kokhba revolt the patriarchate as the "highest national authority" was formally established in Usha.³² Subsequently, occasional conflicts between the "monarchy" of the patriarchate and the "parliament", the sanhedrin, arose.³³ Yet most of the members of the sanhedrin acknowledged the authority of the patriarch.³⁴ Under Yehudah ha-Nasi the patriarchate reached the summit of its power. The main task of the patriarch was the general administration of the communities which included appointments of communal officials and the supervision of their work.³⁵ The rabbis were his functionaries on the local level who were rewarded with a tax exemption. In the third century this tax exemption ceased and rabbinic opposition against the patriarch increased.³⁶ Demands for egalitarian rule led to a stronger role of the sanhedrin.³⁷ Rabbis became the legal advisors of the patriarchs and represented the Jewish population before the Roman authorities.³⁸ Finally the Christian emperors abolished the patriarchate and split the sanhedrin.³⁹

³⁰ See Avi-Yonah (1962) 13.

³¹ See *ibid.* 53.

³² See *ibid.*

³³ See *ibid.* 54.

³⁴ See *ibid.* 55.

³⁵ See *ibid.* 58–59.

³⁶ See *ibid.* 114–119.

³⁷ See *ibid.* 120.

³⁸ See *ibid.* 121.

³⁹ See *ibid.* 227 with regard to the patriarchate: "Sie sahen darin eine die in der Diaspora zerstreuten Gemeinden zu einer Volkseinheit zusammenschweißende Institution"; and *ibid.* 231 with regard to the sanhedrin: "Es scheint, daß die römische Regierung eine Zersplitterung der Kräfte der Juden zu erreichen suchte".

Similar versions of the Graetian paradigm are presented by Alon and Safrai. Alon and Safrai emphasize the inner-Jewish initiative to re-create an organizational structure after the first Jewish war against Rome; only later, at the end of the second century, were the institutions of Jewish self-government recognized by the Romans.⁴⁰ Like Graetz, Safrai points to the role of the central leadership institutions in the national and spiritual survival of Judaism:

“The development of the central leadership – i.e. the Sanhedrin – and the public struggles to shape it while the Temple existed, and particularly after its destruction, may be regarded as the bond of Jewish history and culture”.⁴¹

Like Graetz, Alon and Safrai see R. Yochanan b. Zakkai as the one who laid the foundations for the internal administration of the communities.⁴² Although the newly established sanhedrin at Yavneh did not possess all of the rights of the Jerusalem institution, it is considered a legitimate continuation of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin.⁴³ At the time of R. Gamliel II both the patriarchate and the sanhedrin “became firmly entrenched”,⁴⁴ and under Yehudah ha-Nasi the patriarchate reached a unique and dominant position.⁴⁵

Alon emphasizes the power of the patriarch in determining halakhah. Although halakhic decisions were made by majority vote, the patriarch “was in a position to exercise considerable influence over the resultant decisions in matters of halakhah”.⁴⁶ He could appoint those sages to the sanhedrin whose views were similar to his own.⁴⁷ The power of rabbis was limited. Since the individual sage “derived his status from an outside source – the Sanhedrin and the Patriarch”,⁴⁸ within the official hierarchy he played only a minor and subordinate role. On the other hand, sages were important figures in the local communities whose leaders they became.

One may adduce a number of reasons for these Israeli scholars’ unquestioned acceptance and repetition of Graetz’s model. Firstly, they were influenced by the *Wissenschaft* approach to Jewish history and valued its results. Secondly, like Graetz they were traditionally religious and interested in defending the unanimity and normativity of rabbinic teaching. Thirdly, and in contrast to Graetz, they lived in a politically autonomous Jewish state. They may have been interested in showing that autonomous Jewish self-government already existed in the rabbinic period despite Jewish subjugation under Roman rule. Both Graetz and the Israeli scholars believe that a centralized hierarchical

⁴⁰ See S. Safrai (1974) 378 and Alon (1989) 131.

⁴¹ S. Safrai (1974) 378.

⁴² See *ibid.* 406; Alon (1989) 86.

⁴³ See S. Safrai (1974) 405; Alon (1989) 99.

⁴⁴ Alon (1989) 119; See S. Safrai (1974) 406.

⁴⁵ See S. Safrai (1974) 409; Alon (1989) 721.

⁴⁶ Alon (1989) 467.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 486.

structure and a strict halakhic control were necessary for the national and spiritual survival of Judaism.

While the institution of the sanhedrin became the subject of two monographs in the fifties and sixties already,⁴⁹ the patriarchate has only recently achieved similar attention. Both studies of the sanhedrin, that by Hoenig (1953) and that by Mantel (1961), unquestioningly accept the notion of the existence of a sanhedrin both before and after 70. They also accept the idea of a move of the post-70 sanhedrin from Yavneh to Usha and later to a number of other places in Galilee. The issues Mantel deals with are exemplary for this approach:

“Historians in general are agreed that within seventy years after the destruction of the Temple the Sanhedrin moved twice from Jabneh to Usha. They differ only as to the dates when the Sanhedrin moved from Jabneh to Usha the first time, when it returned from Usha to Jabneh, and when it again moved from Jabneh to Usha”.⁵⁰

The general paradigm is accepted as *communis opinio*, while further study is devoted to minor details which are perceived as open questions.

The existence of the sanhedrin, which was one of the two main pillars of Jewish self-government in the traditional model of the rabbinic period promulgated by Heinrich Graetz and some Israeli historians, has recently been questioned and outrightly rejected by a number of scholars. In his *Studies On the Hasmonean Period* (1987) Joshua Efron has argued that neither rabbinic nor non-rabbinic sources allow for the assumption of a supreme Pharisaic or rabbinic court and rather suggest the existence of a variety of “differently constituted councils”.⁵¹ The talmudic references must be regarded as abstract and fictional, they draw an “idealized picture” of an institution which they thought existed in biblical times.⁵² In his book *The Monarchic Principle* (1994) David Goodblatt has reached a similar conclusion. He, too, rejects the idea that a central council or national body of self-government existed in rabbinic and pre-70 times.⁵³

In contrast to those earlier scholars who posited the existence of a sanhedrin, both Efron and Goodblatt, who reject the existence of a sanhedrin, base their conclusions on a critical examination of the available sources. Efron has pointed to the differences and inconsistencies between Josephus, the New Testament and the rabbinic accounts.⁵⁴ He has also emphasized that “the main [rabbinic] passages on the matter, in their overall significance, do not reflect

⁴⁹ For an even earlier treatment of this subject see Büchler (1902).

⁵⁰ Mantel (1961) 140.

⁵¹ Efron 290.

⁵² See *ibid.* 293 and 300.

⁵³ See Goodblatt (1994) 129: “In other words, the great sanhedrin is clearly an idealized or utopian institution”.

⁵⁴ See Efron 290.

the actual reality of that period".⁵⁵ Furthermore, he distinguishes between tannaitic and amoraic and Palestinian and Babylonian traditions and points out that "the terminology prevalent in many studies adheres to the garbled version in the Babylonian Talmud, which is contrary to the original clear tradition".⁵⁶ Similarly, Goodblatt's study is based on a carefull and critical analysis of all the extant sources relating to a high court or sanhedrin. If one accepts Efron's and Goodblatt's conclusion, the main basis of rabbis' assumed institutional power disappears.

The second institution of Jewish self-government, the patriarchate, has been the subject of a number of articles and book chapters until it received a monographic treatment by Martin Jacobs (1995).⁵⁷ In an article published in 1979 Levine maintained that the patriarch was "both a religious as well as a political figure" and "head[s] of a national-religious community".⁵⁸ His picture only slightly deviates from the traditional Graetzian model outlined above. He postpones the "crystallization ... of an institutionalized rabbinic class", which was involved in the leadership of the communities, to the mid-third century,⁵⁹ and he assumes that the "political base" of the patriarchate was weakened in the third century while its religious leadership position was maintained.⁶⁰ In his book *State and Society in Roman Galilee* (1983) Goodman has argued that the patriarch was not acknowledged by the Roman authorities before the fourth century.⁶¹ Neither Levine's nor Goodman's argumentation is accompanied by a critical examination of the sources.

Such a critical analysis has for the first time been undertaken in recent years. In the above mentioned work *The Monarchic Principle* (1994) Goodblatt suggests that from the time of R. Gamliel II onwards and as "a result of Roman intervention" the patriarchs substituted for the priests in exercising a monarchic rule.⁶² Since no sanhedrin existed, they could not exert their influence through a national rabbinic court but had to rely on their private patriarchal courts.⁶³ In his book *Die Institution des jüdischen Patriarchen* (1995) Jacobs analyses and discusses all the relevant rabbinic and non-rabbinic sources which deal with the Jewish patriarch. He suggests that the institution of the patriarchate only began with R. Yehudah ha-Nasi and that the office was not instituted by the Roman authorities but the result of an internal Jewish

⁵⁵ Ibid. 291.

⁵⁶ See ibid. 301.

⁵⁷ In addition, Efrat Habas has written a doctoral dissertation on the patriarchate under the supervision of A. Oppenheimer at Tel Aviv University. The publication of a revised English version of her thesis has been announced.

⁵⁸ Levine (1979) 681.

⁵⁹ See ibid. 684.

⁶⁰ See ibid. 685.

⁶¹ See Goodman (1983) 116 and (1992) 133.

⁶² See Goodblatt (1994) 231.

⁶³ See ibid. 255.

development.⁶⁴ The patriarch had an inner-Jewish role rather than being a recognized political authority.⁶⁵ Like Efron and Goodblatt, Jacobs rejects the notion of the existence of a sanhedrin in rabbinic times. There is no basis for the traditional assumption that the patriarch was the president of a rabbinic high court or that the offices of *av bet din* and *chakham* existed at that time.⁶⁶

None of these recent studies of the patriarchate examined the question of the relationship between the patriarch and the rabbis.⁶⁷ If no sanhedrin or central rabbinic court existed which the patriarch presided, one has to ask how and to what extent he was able to exert control over the rabbis. Furthermore, if a sanhedrin did not exist, the meaning of rabbinic ordination has to be redefined.⁶⁸ It can no longer be assumed that ordination meant membership in the sanhedrin and qua membership in the sanhedrin a communal leadership role. On the basis of the above mentioned critical studies of the institutions which had, until then, been deemed central to the organisation of the Jewish communities after 70, a re-examination of the role of the rabbis within ancient Jewish society becomes imperative.

b) The Biographical Approach

In addition to the political-historical approach which dealt with rabbis as a collectivity, some historians of ancient Judaism made the lives and teachings of individual rabbis the subject of their studies. Until the 1960s scholars believed that it was possible to write biographies of rabbis, and they considered these biographies of individual masters a necessary supplement to those works which delineated the history of rabbinic institutions.

In his three collections, *Die Agada der babylonischen Amoräer* (1878), *Die Agada der Tannaiten* (2 vols., 1884–1890), and *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer* (3 vols., 1892–1899) Wilhelm Bacher arranged rabbis according to a chronological order. After a short description of their lives, he listed their aggadic teachings under particular subject headings. The short biographic sketches which precede the teachings are based on an indiscriminate usage of sources from Babylonian and Palestinian, early and late rabbinic works. These sources are taken at face value and interweaved into a harmonious whole. The teachings of the respective rabbis are arranged under subject headings such as “Israel, Paganism, Polemics, Proselytes”, “On Biblical Narratives and Perso-

⁶⁴ See Jacobs (1995) 115.

⁶⁵ See ibid. 343: “Weder aus den jüdischen noch aus den nichtjüdischen Zeugnissen geht hervor, daß dem palästinensischen *nasi* von den Römern offizielle politische Aufgaben übertragen wurden”.

⁶⁶ See ibid. 64–70.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 337 Jacobs points out that, at least theoretically, the patriarch claimed to be the highest authority with regard to rabbinic jurisdiction.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of y. Sanh. 1:2, 19a in this regard see ibid. 172–175.

nages”, “Homiletics, Parables”, “God and the World. Eschatology. Pseudepigraphy”,⁶⁹ which reveal a slight awareness of different literary forms. The teachings are rarely quoted in full. They are usually abbreviated and/or paraphrased.

Bacher’s goal was to provide a clearly arranged digest of the aggadists’ “intellectual work” (“Geistesarbeit”) which would allow the reader to perceive these men’s individuality.⁷⁰ He considered his chronological digest a necessary preliminary work which, in the future, might lead toward a survey of the history of the aggadah.⁷¹

Louis Finkelstein’s book *Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr* (1936, reprinted in 1970) is an example for the traditional writing of biographies of individual rabbis.⁷² Like Bacher, Finkelstein never questioned the historical reliability of the stories which dealt with a particular rabbi and the authenticity of the statements attributed to him. He was amazed that the “wealth of relevant source material” had never been sufficiently exploited.⁷³

Finkelstein was aware of the fact that neither biblical nor rabbinic literature contained biographies. He attributed this phenomenon to the biblical authors’ main interest in clan, tribe or nation,⁷⁴ and to the group consciousness of the compilers of the rabbinic works.⁷⁵ Despite or rather because of his awareness of the lack of biography in ancient Jewish writings, Finkelstein considered it necessary to compensate for it. He thought that “only biography can serve as an introduction to the spirit of the Talmud”,⁷⁶ that it was necessary “to discuss motives and characters, parties and issues, the changing scenes and the human actors”.⁷⁷ Only biographies could “indicate the full significance of the component individuals”, their lives, thoughts, and careers.⁷⁸ Finkelstein’s emphasis on the necessity of rabbinic biography seems to have at least partly been caused by his wish to provide depictions of rabbis which were similar to Christian hagiographies and could counteract anti-Jewish stereotypes.⁷⁹

⁶⁹ See *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, vol. 1.

⁷⁰ See Bacher (1892) VII.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*

⁷² Another example is Nahum Glatzer’s book *Hillel the Elder*, New York 1956, which was not available to me.

⁷³ See Finkelstein VII.

⁷⁴ See *ibid.* X.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.* XIII.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* XI.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* XII.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* XIII.

⁷⁹ See e.g. *ibid.* XII: “The lack of such intimate descriptions of the rabbinic world, especially in its earliest phases, has been disastrous to the study of western religious history. Much in Christianity which only an appreciation of the talmudic sages could make explicable has remained a mystery”.

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