

SHAMMA FRIEDMAN'S TREATMENT OF THE STORY OF RAV KAHANA

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Shamma Friedman has devoted a long article to the relationship between what are essentially two textual traditions of the justifiably famous story of Rav Kahana's adventures found in TB Baba Qamma 117 a-b and to what he considers to be the sources underlying this story.¹ I will concentrate on the textual portion of his analysis but will also have some comments to make on his analysis of sources.

The second section of Friedman's article summarizes earlier discussions of the textual issues: Isaiah Gafni discovered in 1980 that a version of this story which differs in numerous details from the version found in most textual witnesses is attested in the Spanish manuscript Hamburg Cod. Heb. 19 and in a Genizah fragment (Antonin 861). The essential difference between what we may call the Hamburg-Genizah version and the vulgate is that the vulgate includes a number of motifs which are lacking in the Hamburg-Genizah version; some of these reflect customs known to us from the Babylonian academies of the Geonic period, which are retrojected and transplanted to R. Yohanan's academy in third-century Palestine, while others reflect Iranian realia, similarly transposed to R. Yohanan's academy.² In fact these motifs are not entirely lacking in the Hamburg-Genizah version: they are to be found as marginal glosses in MS Hamburg. Gafni and others have inclined towards what would appear to be the obvious explanation of these data, namely, that the Hamburg-Genizah version is significantly closer to the original version of this story, and that a number of later additions found their way into the margins of MS Hamburg and were incorporated within the text represented by most witnesses.³ Friedman, however, is convinced that the opposite is true: the vulgate version is closer to the original, and the motifs lacking in the Hamburg-Genizah version were removed intentionally and later partially restored in the margins of MS Hamburg. Not only that: when MS Munich 95 agrees with the Hamburg-Genizah version, instead of seeing this as an indication of the gradual accretion of additions within the

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¹ Sh. Y. Friedman, "The Talmudic Narrative about Rav Kahana and R. Yohanan (*Bava Kamma* 117a-b) and its Two Textual Families" (Hebrew), *Bar-Ilan Annual* 30-31 (M. S. Feldblum memorial volume, 2006), pp. 409-490.

² I. Gafni, "The Babylonian *Yeshiva* as Reflected in *Bava Qamma* 117a" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 49 (1980), pp. 292-301; cf. D. Sperber, "On the Unfortunate Adventures of Rav Kahana: A Passage of Saboraic Polemic from Sasanian Persia", *Irano-Judaica* (ed. Sh. Shaked), Jerusalem 1982, pp. 83-100, esp. p. 100.

³ See: Gafni, *ibid.*, esp. pp. 299-301; Sperber, *ibid.*, esp. p. 100; A. Schremer, "'He Posed Him a Difficulty and Placed Him' – A Study in the Evolution of the Text of TB *Bava Kama* 117a" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 66 (1997), pp. 403-415, esp. pp. 412-415.

vulgate version, Friedman sees this as evidence that the text of MS Munich was affected by secondary exposure to the text of the Hamburg-Genizah version.⁴

Friedman attempts to establish the truth of this convoluted reconstruction on the basis of a long series of comparisons between the two versions, in almost all of which he argues for the primacy of the vulgate version. However, despite several attempts to characterize what he considers to be authentic Talmudic style, Friedman does not offer clear and consistent criteria for determining the primacy of a given version; many of the differences he notes are quite trivial and in almost all of them a good case can be made for the primacy of the Hamburg-Genizah version.⁵ It sometimes seems that Friedman simply describes what he perceives to be the difference between the two versions and then tries to think of a reason to prefer the vulgate; the arbitrariness of his approach is particularly striking when on a single page he argues for the primacy of the vulgate version in one instance by noting that the two sides of a dialogue are expressed using a single verb “and in this way the style of the entire sentence is unified”, and in another instance by noting that while the vulgate version uses two synonyms for “now” within a single dictum, the Hamburg-Genizah version uses the same word twice, which “may be understood if we suppose that ‘now’ was emended... in order to balance the style”.⁶ Perhaps even more egregious is his preference for “go up (to the land of Israel)” over “flee (to the land of Israel)” in a context in which Rav Kahana is being advised to flee Babylonia before he can be arrested on a charge of murder; the fact that “go up to the land of Israel” is a common expression in other contexts, in which an individual relocates voluntarily, does not mean that this is the appropriate phraseology when someone is being advised to flee there in order to escape being punished as a murderer.⁷

Aside from stylistic preferences of this sort, Friedman offers two main arguments in favor of his hypothesis: (1) the vulgate version contains several details which recall a group of stories in TB Bava Mezi'a 83b–84a which Friedman believes to have provided the inspiration for the creation of the Rav Kahana story; (2) in his opinion, many of the differences between the two versions may be explained by positing that a later editor considered the original version of the story to be overly critical of R. Yohanan and undertook to revise it in order to defend his honor.⁸

⁴ See Friedman, *ibid.*, pp. 421, 426 (and cf. p. 418).

⁵ For example: on p. 419 Friedman considers the words “for (seven years)” and “when (he went)”, which fit well in their contexts, to be additions in the Hamburg-Genizah version; on p. 423 he argues that the order of two clauses in the vulgate version is more dramatic, but one might equally argue that the order in the Hamburg-Genizah version is more respectful; on p. 426 he prefers the vulgate version which adds “he stood on his feet” before Rav Kahana’s questioning of R. Yohanan (see n. 13 below); and on p. 434 he admits that the Hamburg-Genizah version’s reading “raise my eyelids” is more precise than the vulgate version’s “raise my eyes” but argues that the vulgate version should be preferred because it is more “poetic”.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 417, in the discussions of line 2 and of lines 8-9.

⁷ Pp. 418-419.

⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 412-414, 424, 425, 434-435, 437. It seems that even Friedman does not believe this explanation accounts for all the elements which are “lacking” in the Hamburg-Genizah version; see for example *ibid.*, pp. 420, 428.

I find both these lines of argumentation quite unconvincing. Methodologically speaking, to argue that one version of a text is more original than another because it more closely resembles another source runs the risk of creating a vicious circle. Even if we were to agree that a certain version of a particular source (say A' versus A) shows signs of depending on some other source B, why should we not suppose that someone revised A under the influence of B? In addition, the connections which Friedman finds between the Rav Kahana story and the stories in Bava Mezi'a seem to me very tenuous as indicators of dependency. For example, one of the Bava Mezi'a stories has Resh Lakish die as a result of R. Yohanan's pique and the Bava Kamma story has Rav Kahana die as a result of a similar pique on the part of R. Yohanan; according to Friedman the Rav Kahana story was created as a corrective to the Resh Lakish story and has a "happy end", but this happy end and its redemptive function are very much in the eyes of the beholder.⁹ Describing someone as a lion or a fox is proverbial, and the motif of a snake guarding the corpse of a righteous man looks like a folkloristic element which need not have been borrowed by one literary source from another.¹⁰ More generally, Friedman appears to me to have an overly mechanistic conception of literary borrowings, in which the appearance of certain words or roots in proximity to each other in each of two sources is taken as proof that one is dependent on the other, even when their meanings and contexts are completely different.¹¹

The notion of "defending R. Yohanan's honor", too, seems to me highly subjective. However we read the story, R. Yohanan was sufficiently piqued by Rav Kahana asking him difficult academic questions, and by his mistaken perception that Rav Kahana was grinning, to bring about Rav Kahana's death.¹²

⁹ See especially *ibid.*, p. 414 and n. 15: whereas the story in Bava Metzi'a ends by describing how bereft R. Yohanan was after the death of Resh Lakish, the story in Bava Kamma ends with him reviving Rav Kahana long enough to have a learned conversation and invite him to rejoin the scholars of R. Yohanan's academy, but Rav Kahana explains that he must remain among the dead. On p. 412 Friedman describes this as a "sweet" conclusion because of the miraculous revival of Rav Kahana and "R. Yohanan's willing and respectful reconciliation with his student", but I would emphasize that Rav Kahana remains R. Yohanan's superior and stays among the dead, the victim of R. Yohanan's misguided wrath.

¹⁰ The idioms of fox and lion are of course not restricted to Jewish sources but they are fairly common in rabbinic literature, beginning with the famous maxim in Mishnah Avot 4:15. See for example: PT Shevi'it 39a (column 211 in the Academy of the Hebrew Language edition), Shabbat 4a (column 373), Gittin 50a (column 1091), Sanhedrin 22b (column 1288); BT Yoma 78a, Avodah Zarah 31b, and parallels. I have not found the precise motif of a snake guarding a corpse outside the Talmudic passages in question, but the motif of a snake/serpent/dragon guarding a treasure is rather widespread; see S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature²: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*, Copenhagen 1955, I, p. 352 (motif B 11.6..2).

¹¹ See for example: Friedman, *ibid.*, pp. 417 (discussion of lines 3-4), 428-429, and cf. p. 437.

¹² By contrast, in the Bava Mezi'a story one might at least argue that R. Yohanan was offended by Resh Lakish's remark, comparing his status in the academy with his former status as a brigand, on behalf of the Torah or the rabbinic community and not from personal pique or jealousy.

Given that this core of the story is stable in all versions, it is hard to see how the reader's impression of R. Yohanan will be greatly enhanced by adding or removing details such as the seven mats or carpets on which he was seated, or by describing R. Yohanan's causing Rav Kahana's death as "he punished him" (undeservedly).¹³

Finally, I would like to discuss briefly the section of the story in which the difference between the two versions is greatest. This section describes Rav Kahana's arrival at R. Yohanan's academy and preliminary display of his prowess, which leads to Resh Lakish warning R. Yohanan to be on his mettle the next day, as "a lion has come up from Babylonia". Here Friedman is willing to admit that the Hamburg-Genizah version is, at least in some respects, "lovely and literary itself" despite his conviction that this is "the new formulation", and even to concede that its version of events has "a certain literary advantage". He fails, however, to notice the greatest shortcoming of the vulgate version in this passage, which reads: "he went and found Resh Lakish sitting and reviewing the daily lesson for the rabbis. He said to them: Where is the son of Lakish?... They told Resh Lakish..." According to this version, Rav Kahana walks into a review session conducted by Resh Lakish and then has an extended conversation with other rabbis out of Resh Lakish's hearing. Either we must assume that this conversation was conducted *sotto voce* while Resh Lakish continued to hold forth unawares, or that the scene has shifted without any indication of this in the text.

In conclusion, it seems to me clear that a preponderance of the evidence supports the hypothesis that the Hamburg-Genizah version of this story is significantly more original while the vulgate version is the result of substantial revision and particularly of significant additions redolent of the atmosphere of the Babylonian academies and their Iranian milieu.

¹³ References: pp. 414, 435. See also the end of p. 424 and p. 426 (in this case I would have thought that describing Rav Kahana's behavior as aggressive would have made R. Yohanan look better!).