

*Research into Rabbinic Literature:
An Attempt to Define the Status Quaestionis*¹

PETER SCHÄFER
INSTITUT FÜR JUDAISTIK
FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

‘Research into rabbinic literature’—in the face of advances made in recent decades alone, this is an immense topic, and it would be extremely presumptuous to wish to deal with it in a single lecture. I would therefore immediately like to add that the sub-title is a more accurate description: ‘An attempt to define the *status quaestionis*’. It is, that is to say, not the discussion of introductory issues in the classical sense which is of paramount importance, although the paper will naturally also touch such matters. I would like, rather, to present the most important approaches in research on the basis of which rabbinic literature has been and is being studied. This has two implications. Firstly, such a summary cannot be comprehensive. Secondly, it will not be wholly objective. No-one claiming to be involved in investigating rabbinic Judaism can possibly be impartial but will inevitably convey his personal and sometimes even overstated view of the matter.

I have divided the topic into five different research approaches and will subsequently attempt to arrive at some conclusions.

1. The first, and historically the earliest, line of research is the *traditional-halakhic* approach. The leading principle here is ‘the Halakhah’ as a superior and comprehensive construct to which all individual elements of rabbinic literature are referred, irrespective of where the work belongs. This approach is standard for classical Jewish commentary literature as well as for numerous modern introductions to rabbinic literature. A notable example of the former is S. Lieberman’s famous commentary to the Tosefta,² and characteristic of the latter are J. N. Epstein’s ‘Introductions’ (*Mevo’ot*),³ which have individual works as their foundation but are basically aimed at ‘the Halakhah as such’, beyond all literary boundaries.

Commendable though these contributions are, the problem of such an

¹ This contribution is the slightly revised and annotated version of a lecture given on 20 November 1984 at the University of Duisburg and on 30 May 1985 in the Oriental Institute of the University of Oxford.

² S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshuta: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta*, vols. I–IX, New York 1955–73; cf. also D. Weiss Halivni, *Meqorot umasorot*, 4 vols., Tel Aviv–Jerusalem 1968–82.

³ J. N. H. Epstein, *Mavo’ le-nusah ha-mishnah*, 2 vols., ed. E. Z. Melamed, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv 1964; *Mevo’ot le-sifrut ha-tanna’im*, ed. E. Z. Melamed, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv 1957; *Mevo’ot le-sifrut ha-amora’im*, ed. E. Z. Melamed, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv 1962.

approach in research is obvious. It is that the final aim and uniting bracket of all these endeavours is determined by the entity 'Halakhah', which is taken for granted and has never actually been questioned. The course of research is thus in the end systematical-theological, not historical-literary. Rabbinic literature is not really seen as literature; its literary character is of secondary importance and subordinated to a systematic principle. No-one would wish to question the justifiability of such an approach but its advocates should be conscious of the methodological presuppositions and limits.

2. The next line of research, pursued *per definitionem* exclusively by Christians, I would define as *exploitative-apologetic*. This is the approach which sets for itself the acknowledged goal of using rabbinic literature as a quarry in order to draw on its isolated elements for the explanation of the New Testament. The issue here is not rabbinic literature at all, but something quite different. Rabbinic literature is merely a means to an end, the formal end being the exegesis of the New Testament, in the course of which this aim can be met with very differing results. At best, the point is to 'elucidate' the New Testament from its Jewish environment; at worst, the rabbinic parallels serve to demonstrate the superiority of the New Testament. The classic example of this research approach is the *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* by Billerbeck.⁴ The methodological problems linked with it have been sufficiently demonstrated and are aptly classified by the term 'parallelomania'. Interesting as individual parallels may be, it is now widely accepted that isolated parallels are meaningless as long as the status of the parallel in its respective literature cannot be evaluated. This presupposes that the literature from which a parallel is taken has been analysed as a whole. Since we are far from achieving such an analysis of rabbinic literature, contributions in which a comparison is made between individual New Testament passages and individual passages in rabbinic literature are methodologically obsolete. In spite of the fact that New Testament scholars certainly do not lack methodological awareness in their own field, it is astounding how strongly the interest of New Testament scholarly journals—in so far as they are concerned with Judaism at all—is concentrated almost exclusively on this primitive methodological approach.

3. A further line of research could be described as *thematic*. Here, too, the issue is not rabbinic literature as literature but, in contrast to the approach just characterized, rabbinic Judaism is at least considered in itself and not merely as a means to an end. Mostly, theological ideas are selected as themes,

⁴ H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, München 1922 f.

for instance—to name a few examples—ideas about God,⁵ the Holy Spirit,⁶ the Messiah⁷ or the angels.⁸ This approach is (or was?) pursued, if not exclusively, then certainly to a considerable extent in Judaic studies in Germany. It involves, as a rule, collecting as many appropriate ‘passages’ as possible and analysing them separately but with their respective parallels. More often than not, the final result is an attempt at a synthesis of the investigated theme, in which literary and historical distinctions are taken into account as far as possible. However, most advocates of this approach decline (and rightly so) to write a ‘history’ of their subject, since the sources do not allow of any historical continuity.

Almost all the more recent studies in this field are aware that in each case the superordinate question (the theme) pursued is not inherent to the sources but is applied to the texts from outside. The idea of God, the idea of the Holy Spirit, of the angels, or of the Messiah, have not been made into themes in rabbinic literature; it has expressed no systematic consideration of them. The usual supposition that one need only to assemble the fragments and shreds of the ‘idea’, ‘dispersed’ throughout the whole of rabbinic literature in order to ‘reconstruct’ a more or less uniform picture of the ‘underlying’ concept is only partly pertinent to the facts. The rabbis have given the themes no consideration, not because by reason of some mysterious deficiency they were unable to do so, but because they did not wish to, because they were not interested in these themes as isolated themes. This signifies in regard to the thematic approach that the identity of the object of research is not given by the sources but artificially, and this in two respects. Not only is the identity of the theme artificial, but also the identity of the material from which it is extracted. ‘Rabbinic literature’ in its full extent, however defined, is a fictitious entity that never existed as a *totum*.

This does not necessarily mean that the thematic approach must be altogether abandoned. The dilemma of the artificial identity of the theme cannot be avoided, but this need not constitute a fundamental objection, for it is undoubtedly possible to ask questions of the texts which they themselves do not pose. One should merely be (more than previously) aware what tradition the question has, why this particular question and no other is applied to the text. (In the case of theological themes this will mostly be an interest stemming from Christian theology and not a Jewish question, even if

⁵ E.g. P. Kuhn, *Gottes Selbsterniedrigung in der Theologie der Rabbinen*, München 1968; idem, *Gottes Trauer und Klage in der rabbinischen Überlieferung*, Leiden 1978; A. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen über die Shekhinah in der Frühen Rabbinischen Literatur*, Berlin 1969.

⁶ P. Schäfer, *Die Vorstellung vom Heiligen Geist in der Rabbinischen Literatur*, München 1972.

⁷ S. H. Levey, *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation. The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum*, Cincinnati 1974.

⁸ P. Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Untersuchungen zur Rabbinischen Engelvorstellung*, Berlin–New York 1975.

it can be shown that rabbinic Judaism had its own concept which differed from the Christian one or was even its precursor.)

The dilemma of the fictitious identity of the material from which the theme is extracted can be avoided to some extent if the analyses are made separately work by work.⁹ In this way a literary structuring of the theme is undoubtedly successful; but the extent to which a historical distinction can be connected to this presents difficulties, for the scholar immediately finds himself faced with the problem of redaction and tradition. The analysis of a separate work uncovers a theme in its chronological differentiation only at the level of the final redaction of individual writings, not at the level of the individual tradition. However, since the individual tradition is virtually impossible to date, the analysis of the work appears to be the most promising method of a thematic approach at present. I shall return later to the problem of the work concept inevitably connected with this methodological approach also.

The elaboration of a rabbinical theology is a special case within the thematic approach. The classic recent example of this is E. E. Urbach's *ḤZ" L. Emunot ve-de'ot*.¹⁰ This is a very respectable attempt that could characterize both the climax and the temporary demise of its subject. J. Neusner's emphatic criticism of the methodological approach is,¹¹ although somewhat exaggerated, basically justified, since a rabbinic theology, at whichever methodological level of reflection it may be written, intensifies the previously mentioned problems of the thematic approach: it introduces yet another general identity, namely that of 'rabbinic theology', which is no less debatable than that of the individual theme.

4. Another attempt at devising a suitable approach to rabbinic literature can be described as *biographical*. Characteristic of this are, above all, the earlier works of Jacob Neusner and his students, who make individual rabbis the objects of their investigation: Yohanan b. Zakkai, Eliezer b. Hyrcanos,¹² Aqiva,¹³ Ishmael,¹⁴ Yose the Galilean,¹⁵ Eleazar b. Azariah,¹⁶ Tarfon,¹⁷

⁹ This is the case, e.g., in J. Neusner's *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism*, Philadelphia 1984.

¹⁰ Jerusalem 1969. English edition: *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2 vols., Jerusalem 1975, ²1979.

¹¹ *Ancient Judaism: Debates and Disputes*, Chico 1984, pp. 115–26.

¹² J. Neusner, *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man*, 2 vols., Leiden 1973.

¹³ Ch. Primus, *Aqiva's Contribution to the Law of Zera'im*, Leiden 1977.

¹⁴ G. Porton, *The Traditions of R. Ishmael*, 4 vols., Brill 1976–82.

¹⁵ J. N. Lightstone, *Yose the Galilean: I. Traditions in Mishnah–Tosefta*, Leiden 1979.

¹⁶ Tz. Zahavy, *The Traditions of Eleazar Ben Azariah*, Missoula 1977.

¹⁷ J. Gereboff, *Rabbi Tarfon: The Tradition, the Man, and Early Rabbinic Judaism*, Missoula 1979.

Gamaliel II.,¹⁸ Joshua,¹⁹ Meir,²⁰ among others. Naturally, it is not simply a matter of writing biographies of rabbis; it was clear from the outset, or became so very early, that that would be a quite unreasonable aim. Neusner's treatment of Yohanan b. Zakkai throws light on this process of thought. Whereas in 1962 he was still able to write a *Life of Yohanan ben Zakkai*,²¹ rather in the style of an imaginative biographical reconstruction, which (ironically, it must be said in retrospect) was awarded the 'Abraham Berliner Prize in Jewish History', in 1970 he completely revised his subject and published 'only' unassuming *Studies on the Traditions concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai* under the programmatic heading *Development of a Legend*.

This title denotes the line of research of the modern biographical approach. The identity establishing the theme still has its roots in the figure of a rabbi, but this identity more and more proves itself to be fragile. It is becoming increasingly evident that virtually nothing is to be learned of the historical figure of the rabbi concerned from rabbinic sources (this is rather obvious). Neither can any coherent 'doctrine' of any chosen rabbi be discerned from an analysis of all the relevant traditions. This is the case whether we look for a structured attitude to parts of the Halakhah or, still further, for a systematic general outline of the Halakhah. The rabbis hand down the Halakhah, but beyond this purely formal function they are of no historical importance. It is an overstatement, but one might say that the only overall taxonomy reflected by a rabbi's name in rabbinic literature is the name itself, whose meaning is thus reduced to nothing.

Accordingly, the modern variant of the biographical approach has also proved itself to be, if not wrong, then certainly not very fruitful. It is significant that in 1973 Neusner himself submitted his last study concerning a rabbi (*Eliezer ben Hyrcanus*). The methodological approach makes it possible to carry out interesting individual analyses of a wide range of themes. But since the identity of the subject is based on a fictitious or ideal entity, it is in the end unsuitable for an appropriate investigation into rabbinic literature.

5. In the light of these findings it is but consistent that the aim of research has at last moved away from tracing topics of whatever nature and is finally focussing directly on the object of the whole endeavours: rabbinic literature. In connection with this, two approaches should be distinguished, which aim at the same point from different directions.

¹⁸ Sh. Kanter, *Rabban Gamaliel II: The Legal Traditions*, Chico 1980.

¹⁹ W. S. Green, *The Traditions of Joshua ben Hananiah*, Part I: *The Early Traditions*, Leiden 1981.

²⁰ R. Goldenberg, *The Sabbath-Law of Rabbi Meir*, Missoula 1978.

²¹ Leiden 1962.

5.1. The first line of research to be mentioned here has been intensively pursued for several years by Arnold Goldberg and developed in his articles in *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge*. Goldberg probably makes the most of rabbinic literature *as literature* and attempts to record and describe the system of rules inherent to it. His approach might therefore possibly be described as *analytical-descriptive*. The identity of the subject is constituted by the common *language*. In a programmatic essay published in 1977 he himself called his method 'form-analytical' ('Entwurf einer formanalytischen Methode für die Exegese der rabbinischen Traditionsliteratur').²² However, this form-*analysis* must not be confused with form- or generic-*history*: 'The form-analytical method does not investigate the "Sitz im Leben" but, if the expression may be modified here, the "Sitz in der Literatur oder in der Sprache", the place in literature or in language.'²³

Proceeding from the realization that rabbinic literature consists fundamentally of textual units the original contexts of which have been lost and which 'only' exist in newly coined (and changing) redactional connections (later he speaks of 'citemes'), the first issue is to portray the *forms* and *functions* of these smaller and larger literary units. As the most important (provisional) basic forms Goldberg names the *Midrash* (explained in 1982 in the article 'Die funktionale Form Midrasch'²⁴), the *Dictum* or *Logion*, the *Mashal* (1981: Das schriftauslegende Gleichnis im Midrasch'²⁵), the *Ma'ašeh* (= precedent; 1974: 'Form und Funktion des Ma'ase in der Mischna'²⁶) and the *Haggadah* ('saga, legend, tale'). 'Forms of a higher order' have evolved from these basic forms according to definite structural principles, for instance the form of the *homily* (1978: 'Die Peroratio [Ḥatima] als Kompositionsform der rabbinischen Homilie';²⁷ 1980: 'Versuch über die hermeneutische Präsupposition der Struktur der Petiḥa'²⁸) or the form of the *Sugya*, the halakhic discussion in the Talmud.

Whereas form-analysis develops and defines individual 'citations', functional-analysis describes their 'function' within the larger redactional unit. Both aim at recording the 'message' ('Aussage') and 'meaning' ('Bedeutung') of the text, whereby Goldberg understands by the 'message' of the 'citation' that which the 'citation' itself implies (i.e. without consideration of its 'function' in the superordinate redactional unit), and by 'meaning' that which it means in the mind of the one making the citation, i.e. *within* the larger redactional unit. The analysis of the meaning must 'show the citations, reconstructed by form-analysis and portrayed as a means by functional-

²² *FJB* 5 (1977), pp. 1–41.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴ *FJB* 10 (1982), pp. 1–45.

²⁵ *FJB* 9 (1981), pp. 1–90.

²⁶ *FJB* 2 (1974), pp. 1–38.

²⁷ *FJB* 6 (1978), pp. 1–22.

²⁸ *FJB* 8 (1980), pp. 1–59.

analysis, in their allusive and qualifying meanings over and beyond their message (sc. of the citations as such).²⁹

The consciously descriptive process of the depiction of the forms and functions of smaller and larger literary units in their message and meaning inevitably forgoes a diachronic (that is a historically discriminating) analysis of the texts. In his article written in 1977, Goldberg still cautiously describes a diachronic analysis of the functions as 'possibly not imperative . . . but certainly useful and therefore in no way superfluous'.³⁰ However, in his recent article (1983, 'Der Diskurs im babylonischen Talmud. Anregungen für eine Diskursanalyse'³¹), he emphasizes strongly the fundamental synchronicity of the texts: 'Once it has been written, every text is exclusively synchronic, all the textual units (*textemes*) exist simultaneously, and the only diachronic relation consists in the reception of the text as a sequence of textual units whose "first" and "then" become "beforehand" and "afterwards" in the reception of the text. . . . The synchronicity of a text is . . . the simultaneous juxtaposition of various units, independent of when the units originated.'³²

This emphasis on a fundamental synchronicity of the texts of rabbinic literature is completely consistent with Goldberg's methodological approach. The text, *as it stands*, is exclusively synchronic and, since we cannot go back beyond this state, there remains only the classifying description of that which is there—which should, of course, be as well considered and comprehensible as possible. A historical differentiation is deliberately excluded, because, in effect, the texts do not permit it. Whilst analysis of the forms and functions of a text makes its *system of rules* transparent, 'the comprehension of rabbinic texts through habituation and insight could be superseded by a comprehension of the rules of this discourse *as competence* (i.e. according to the rules of its production)'.³³

The question that arises here is obviously what is meant by 'text'. What is the text 'once it has been written'—*the Babylonian Talmud*, *the Midrash*, a definite Midrash, all Midrashim, or even the *whole of rabbinic literature* as a synchronic textual continuum whose inherent system of rules it is necessary to describe? Indeed, in such a description, neither the concrete text concerned, nor the form a particular textual tradition takes, needs to be important. Every text is as good—or rather as bad—as every other, the 'best' being presumably the one representing the latest redactional stage.

But this is precisely where the problem begins. Goldberg himself must finally decide on one text, and in doing so—in many cases anyway—must decide *against* one or several other texts. Whether he wants to or not, he

²⁹ *FJB* 5 (1977), p. 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³¹ *FJB* 11 (1983), pp. 1–45.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 5 f.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

inevitably faces historical questions. This problem can be elucidated by the second line of research within the 'literary' approach.

5.2. This second line of research, which has been propagated during approximately the last ten years by J. Neusner (and has superseded the biographical approach in his own research history) is that of the interpretation *immanent in the work*. Complete literary works are analysed as a whole, as literary systems so to speak, and are examined for their characteristic arguments. With admirable consistency and energy, Neusner has submitted or sent to press such analyses of the *Mishnah* and *Tosefta*,³⁴ as well as of the *Yerushalmi*³⁵ and *Midrash Wayyiqra Rabba*,³⁶ and now recently has begun work on the *Bavli*.³⁷ A new translation of the respective literary works serves as the basis for all these analyses, for Neusner proceeds from the doubtlessly correct assumption that a work in a foreign language can only be mastered via a translation.

The plane on which this research approach moves—and economically can only move—is the final redaction of the respective work, i.e. as a rule the *textus receptus*; the identity of the theme is thus constituted by the finally redacted version of a work of rabbinic literature. Two closely related problems arise from this.

The approach inevitably disregards the manuscript traditions of the work in question. But, especially in the case of rabbinic literature, this is essential. Thus, to give an example, both Vatican manuscripts of the Bereshit Rabba (MSS Vat. Ebr. 60 and 30) represent texts which are quite different from that of the London manuscript (MS British Museum, Add. 27169) serving Theodor as a basis for his edition. The variations are sometimes so great that the redactional identity of the work is debatable.³⁸ Is it meaningful to speak of one work at all, or rather of various recensions of a work? But then how do these recensions relate to one another? Are they different versions of one and the same text (do they therefore presuppose an 'Urtext'), or are they autonomous to a certain extent, and is 'Bereshit Rabba' merely an ideal or fictitious entity? What then constitutes the identity of the work 'Bereshit Rabba'? Any preserved manuscript, or the modern 'critical' edition by

³⁴ *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities*, 22 vols., Leiden 1974–77; *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Holy Things*, 6 vols., Leiden 1979; *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Women*, 5 vols., Leiden 1979–80; *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Appointed Times*, 5 vols., Leiden 1981–83; *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Damages*, 5 vols., Leiden 1983–85; *Judaism: The Evidence of Mishnah*, Chicago 1981.

³⁵ *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*, Chicago 1982 ff.; *Judaism in Society: The Evidence of the Yerushalmi. Toward the Natural History of a Religion*, Chicago 1983.

³⁶ *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah*, Chicago 1985; *The Integrity of Leviticus Rabbah: The Problem of the Autonomy of a Rabbinic Document*, Chico 1985.

³⁷ *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation*, Chico 1984 ff.

³⁸ The best discussion of the manuscripts of Bereshit Rabba can be found now in M. Sokoloff, *Qit'e Bereshit Rabbah min ha-Genizah*, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 19 ff.

Theodor-Albeck? These questions could easily be added to and applied *mutatis mutandis* to almost every text of rabbinic traditional literature.

The problem becomes more acute when the question of the boundaries of works is taken into consideration. To remain with the example of Bereshit Rabba, the problem of what relation Bereshit Rabba and the Yerushalmi bear to one another has been discussed since the time of Frankel³⁹ and Zunz.⁴⁰ The detailed comparison of numerous parallel passages by Albeck in his introduction to the critical edition of Bereshit Rabba has made it *communis opinio* that the redactor of Bereshit Rabba indeed used the Yerushalmi, but that this Yerushalmi was decidedly different from the Yerushalmi in existence today. How are Bereshit Rabba and Yerushalmi related to one another in this case? Does Bereshit Rabba quote Yerushalmi, i.e. can we regard Bereshit Rabba and Yerushalmi at the *time of the redaction of Bereshit Rabba* as two clearly distinguishable works, one of which (Yerushalmi) was complete and the other (Bereshit Rabba) in the process of being completed? Did the redactor of Bereshit Rabba therefore 'know' with what he was dealing and from what he was 'quoting'? With regard to the Yerushalmi, this conclusion is obviously unreasonable, for we immediately have to ask how the Yerushalmi of the Bereshit Rabba is related to the Yerushalmi existent today. The Yerushalmi cannot have been 'complete' at the time of the redaction of Bereshit Rabba since it is not identical to the one we use today.

A solution to this dilemma is offered by the temporary hypothesis whereby one speaks of various *stages* in the process of editing the Yerushalmi. There were several editorial stages, one of which (and possibly a particularly early one) is represented by the 'citations' in Bereshit Rabba. But the problem is not thereby solved. What is the relation between stage A and stage B, and above all stage Z, the stage of the presumed final redaction? Are all the stages 'preliminary phases' leading to the one objective, the final redaction Z as the sum total of all the preceding stages? Then the predicate 'Yerushalmi' would only be added to the final redaction, and the redactor of Bereshit Rabba would not have quoted 'the' Yerushalmi at all. But what would he have quoted? A preliminary phase that did not yet merit the title 'Yerushalmi'?

Let us take another example to clarify the problem further. The question of the relation between the Mishnah and the Tosefta also has a long and highly controversial research history.⁴¹ The realisation has long been generally accepted that simple dependence models are senseless. The Mishnah is not dependent on the Tosefta, nor is the Tosefta as a whole

³⁹ Z. Frankel, *Mevo' ha-Yerushalmi*, Breslau 1870 (Jerusalem 1967), pp. 51b ff.

⁴⁰ L. Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt*, Frankfurt a. M. 1892 (Hildesheim 1966), pp. 185 f.

⁴¹ A short résumé is provided by H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, München 1982.

dependent on the Mishnah. The separate investigation of individual tractates produces a much more complicated picture. Although it can be shown that, for the main part of the material, the Tosefta presupposes the Mishnah, and is to be understood as its very first commentary,⁴² this result cannot be applied to all the tractates. There appear to be Mishnah tractates which presuppose the Tosefta, and above all there are Tosefta tractates which identify it as an independent 'work' *vis-à-vis* the Mishnah, in which the Tosefta does not refer to the Mishnah, at least not to the one extant today. Finally certain Tosefta tractates suggest that they appeal to another (earlier?) Mishnah than the one which became normative through the final redaction.

Here, too, the question is: which entities can be compared to one another? Quite obviously these are not 'the' (one) Mishnah and 'the' (one) Tosefta, for already this quite cursory review shows that we must distinguish between three different 'Mishnahs': a postulated Mishnah which can only be 'reconstructed' from reference to it in the Tosefta; a Mishnah that has given rise to the Tosefta commentary; and a Mishnah which is by contrast to be regarded as a reaction to the Tosefta. Likewise we obtain three different 'Toseftas': a Tosefta related to an otherwise unknown Mishnah; a Tosefta appealing to the existing Mishnah; and a Tosefta completely independent of any Mishnah.

If we wished to apply the model of the various editorial stages to these findings, we would see in the postulated Mishnah the earliest form of the Mishnah, in the Mishnah expounded by Tosefta the second stage of the editorial development, and in the Mishnah based on Tosefta the final stage. The Tosefta would then be dealt with similarly, the most important decision being whether to acknowledge the Tosefta independent of the Mishnah as the earliest or the latest stage, though I am rather sure that one would tend towards the former possibility. Apart from the fact that this reconstruction of the stages would be altogether arbitrary, the question of the relation between the various stages arises here too with regard to the identity of the text investigated. Can every single stage claim the quality or identity 'Mishnah', or 'Tosefta', or only the last stage, i.e. the final redaction?

Recent research attempts to evade the thus accentuated problem by no longer comparing 'the' Mishnah with 'the' Tosefta, but only individual Mishnah and Tosefta tractates. The relationship between Mishnah and Tosefta manifests itself differently in different tractates; accordingly, *different answers are concurrently possible*, depending on the situation of the individual tractate. Without a doubt, this is a great step forward compared with earlier research. Nevertheless, the problem is not thereby solved once and for all but is merely transferred from the level of Mishnah *versus* Tosefta to that of Mishnah tractate X *versus* Tosefta tractate X. Appeal to this level

⁴² This has been shown explicitly for Tohorot; cf. J. Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities*, vol. 21: *The Redaction and Formulation of the Order of Purities in Mishnah and Tosefta*, Leiden 1977, pp. 247 ff.

permits a more differentiated picture than that which can be conveyed by the two extremely static entities, Mishnah and Tosefta; but this picture too, referring to every tractate as a whole, remains static. Although there is, as yet, no substantially detailed investigation into the relationship between individual Mishnah and Tosefta tractates, it would hardly be too speculative to predict that the same problem will arise on the tractate level as on the level of the Mishnah as a whole *versus* the Tosefta as a whole. Even on the level of the individual tractate, *one* constant factor determining the relation will not always emerge, but the individual tractate, too, will contain different material which, *within the same tractate*, requires different models of the relation between Mishnah and Tosefta. Thus the problem of the boundaries of a work, with regard to the relationship between Mishnah and Tosefta, as well as to the extent of delimitation of the 'works' Mishnah and Tosefta, becomes more acute. We are finally referred to 'raw material', to relatively small literary units, that can only be interpreted and compared as such, and no longer as exactly determinable parts of well defined works.

A brief reference to Hekhalot literature will constitute a last example.⁴³ This is without doubt the prototype of a literature where the boundaries between the works are fluid. Every 'work' in this literary genre that I have investigated more closely proves to be astonishingly unstable, falls into smaller and smaller editorial units and cannot be precisely defined and delimited, either as it is or with reference to related works. This finding is of course valid with regard to the works of Hekhalot literature to a varying degree, but can be generalized as a striking characteristic feature of the whole literary genre. There is not much sense in dividing off works of any kind within Hekhalot literature and comparing them with one another as defined identities. Most of the 'works' only reached the stage of a standardizing and structuring final redaction very late or not at all. Most of the manuscripts hand them down in the form of only loosely structured 'raw material', without a title (and if with a title, then with phantasy titles interchangeable almost at will), with no recognizable beginning and no recognizable end (and if with a beginning or an end, then not very uniform in the various manuscripts).

6. It is hoped that these examples will be sufficient to draw attention to the underlying problem. The questioning of the redactional identity of the

⁴³ Cf. P. Schäfer, 'Prolegomena zu einer kritischen Edition und Analyse der Merkava Rabba', *FJB* 5 (1977), pp. 65–99; 'Die Beschwörung des sar ha-panim: Kritische Edition und Übersetzung', *FJB* 6 (1978), pp. 107–45; 'Aufbau und redaktionelle Identität der Hekhalot Zutrati', *JJS* 33 (1982), pp. 569–82; 'Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature', *JJS* 14 (1983), pp. 172–81; 'Handschriften zur Hekhalot-Literatur', *FJB* 11 (1983), pp. 113–93; 'Merkavah Mysticism and Rabbinic Judaism', *JAOS* 104 (1984), pp. 537–41; 'Zum Problem der redaktionellen Identität von Hekhalot Rabbati', *FJB* 13 (1985), pp. 1–22; 'Ein neues Fragment zur Metoposkopie und Chiromantik', *ibid.*, pp. 61–82; 'Shi 'ur Qomah: Rezensionen und Urtext', forthcoming.

individual works of rabbinic literature inevitably also disavows the research approach to the work at the level of the final redaction.⁴⁴ The terms with which we usually work—text, ‘Urtext’, recension, tradition, citation, redaction, final redaction, work—prove to be fragile and hasty definitions that must be subsequently questioned. What is a ‘text’ in rabbinic literature? Are there texts that can be defined and clearly delimited, or are there only basically ‘open’ texts, which elude temporal and redactional fixation? Have there ever been ‘Urtexthe’ of certain works, with a development that could be traced and described? How do different recensions of a ‘text’ relate to one another with respect to the redactional identity of the text? How should the individual tradition, the smallest literary unit, be assessed in relation to the macroform of the ‘work’ in which it appears? What is the meaning of the presence of parts of one ‘work’ in another more or less delimitable ‘work’? Is this then a quotation in work X from work Y? And finally what is redaction or final redaction? Are there several ‘redactions’ of a ‘work’—in chronological order—but only one final redaction? What distinguishes redaction from final redaction? What lends authority to the redaction? Or is the final redaction merely the more or less incidental discontinuation of the manuscript tradition?

All these questions, to which of course more could be added, point to one basic problem, namely the relation between text and time. When even the individual work of rabbinic literature—Mishnah, Tosefta, Yerushalmi, Midrashim, Bavli—is no longer a stable quantity, provides no fixed frame of reference within which closed systems can be worked out and placed in chronological relation to one another, it becomes extraordinarily difficult, if not virtually impossible, to ask adequate historical questions of the texts, and to answer them. Is then the consequence merely a return to a history of traditions in which traditions, detached from their literary contexts and more or less freely floating, are tracked down, traced and placed in relation to one another? However enlightening comparative motif research and *comparative midrash* have been, and may still be, their methods are hardly promising with respect to historical questioning. When one starts out from a diversely interwoven and in the end open text-continuum ‘Rabbinic Literature’, from a dynamic process that has entered into various and changing configurations and fixations, it is meaningless either to divide off finally redacted ‘works’ from one another and to compare them with one another, or to make pseudo-causal connections between isolated traditions.

It appears to me that the problems thus accentuated permit of only two models offering possible solutions. One would have to be based on the fundamental synchronicity of not only one, but of all the works of rabbinic

⁴⁴ For another attempt to overcome the problems posed by the fluid boundaries of ‘works’ see now J. Neusner, ‘When Tales Travel: The Interpretation of Multiple Appearances of a Single Saying in Talmudic Literature’, in *Formative Judaism V: Revisioning the Written Records of a Nascent Religion*, Chico 1985, pp. 87–103.

literature. If the individual text cannot be fixed in time and space, then it hardly makes sense to behave in regard to certain questions as though this were possible. We would thereby be, although at a methodologically more considered level, exactly where we started, with the 'traditional' study of rabbinic literature as a synchronic unit. This seems to follow from Goldberg's logic. His method of language- and form-analysis allows for an almost 'scientifically' precise description of the mechanisms and rules by which the corpus 'rabbinic literature' is constructed and functions; as such, it is of admirable unity and consistency. This unity and logical consistency is admittedly paid for with the final, even programmatic, renunciation of every attempt at temporal placing and historical differentiation. Legitimate and doubtless necessary as this process is, its price is very high.⁴⁵

I would therefore favour a second model that adopts the research approach just described but goes a step further. If it is difficult to separate works from each other because on the level of their final redaction most of the works of rabbinic literature are artificial products which at best mirror the historical reality of the last redactor, and at worst, the historical reality of the modern 'critical' editor, we should reach back to the evidence in existence before the level of the final redaction: the manuscripts. Before we speak of 'works', we should analyse the manuscript traditions of the works concerned as well as the whole of rabbinic literature in its diverse relations, and compile a nomenclature of the manuscript traditions. The scholarship intent to a large degree upon constructing critical editions in the service of the 'original text' is still far from achieving this. Work on the manuscripts must rid itself of the odium of the whimsical scholar constantly in quest of the 'better' reading and finally buried under his collection of variants. It is not a matter of variants of static texts, but rather of the documentation and description of a dynamic manuscript tradition. Only when this step has been taken shall we possibly also be able to make more reliable statements about individual works of rabbinic literature and their boundaries.⁴⁶

Study of the manuscripts also allows for more concrete historical statements. If the works of rabbinic literature cannot be fixed in time and space (because by their very nature they elude such fixation), the manuscripts often can. We often know from the manuscripts when, where, and by whom they were written and, in the course of time, we ought to be in a position to

⁴⁵ It should be stressed, however, that Goldberg by no means considers his method as being exclusive in the sense that he allows for no other and different approaches. On the contrary, he is perfectly aware of the fact that each method requires its own set of questions, and may exclude other questions but not other methods.

⁴⁶ An important step forward in this direction seems to me the article of Y. Susman, 'Masoret-limud umasoret-nusah shel ha-talmud ha-yerushalmi: Leverur nusha'oteha shel yerushalmi masekhet sheqalim', in *Researches in Talmudic Literature: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Shaul Lieberman, Held 13-14 June 1978*, Jerusalem 1983 (in Hebrew), pp. 12-76. Cf. also Y. Ta-Shema, 'Sifriatam shel ḥakme ashkenaz bene ha-me'ah ha-'aḥat 'ešreh', *Kiryat Sefer*, forthcoming.

elicit the historical and social context from which they originate. In this way, a frame of reference of manuscripts, scribes, copyists and migrations could emerge which admittedly would not lead to the 'Urtext' (which in most cases has never existed), but which would tell us something about the history of the texts and their reception. This means that it is not 'the' text as such that is to be fixed in time and space, but rather the history of the text as reflected in the transmission of its manuscript traditions.