



## Creation of Rabbinic Culture

November 12, 2006

- Social location of Rabbis: sect? elite? marginal?
- Study of Torah as central practice
- A world of *men*
- Transformative knowledge—the mystical tradition and Rabbis

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## Social location of Rabbis: Sect? Elite? Marginal?

- **Who** were Rabbis?
  - In third and fourth century Palestine: largely wealthy and urban (not socially isolated)
  - As time went on, more room for non-wealthy (but this relied on support of the wealthy)
- What **kind** of movement?
  - Voluntary religious association (a feature of urban sociality)
  - "Academies" (as opposed to disciple circles) develop **late**
  - Like philosophical schools (individual **devotion to a master**; trace their origins; outcome of discipleship is better **person**)
  - Some features of movement (esp. in Babylonia) suggest a kind of sectarianism
    - minimizing contact with non-rabbis, marrying into other rabbinic families
    - study house as exclusive center of activity

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## Study of Torah as Central Practice

- Oral Torah:
  - An ideological claim (we have something that those who have scripture alone do not)
  - Also a mode of practice: Mishnah memorized and "performed" (recited)
  - Modes of reasoning (Midrash, Talmud—"from where and how do we know"), Particularly in Babylonian Talmud: emphasis on dialectical reasoning
- Like philosophical schools: study transforms the student:
  - Piety: expectation that a sage will "expound well and uphold well"
  - Manner and carriage (A sage is distinguished by three things: his manner of walking, speaking, and dress)

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## A world of *men*

- Disciple circle, academy, an intimate even erotic male enclave (Torah as love-object).  
Women never fully absent (appear as interlocutors, ask questions, etc.), but also never full participants (NB: story of Beruriah)
- Construction of women in rabbinic lit (Wegner):
  - Legal: Question of *personhood*
    - Sexual function of (dependent) women is chattel-like
    - In other respects: subordinated members of society but have agency
  - Non-legal: Deep-seated ambivalence (woman both reflects divine presence (shekhinah) and "a pitcher of filth") reflects whether women live up to their expected roles

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## Transformative knowledge—the mystical tradition and Rabbis

- *Sefer Yetsirah* (book of creation) shows that learned non-rabbis may have engaged in cosmological speculation in Hebrew
- Most of our evidence for mystical practice or speculation (*Hekhalot/Merkavah* texts) comes from the peripheries of rabbinic circles
  - Cite important 1st/2nd C rabbis as authorities
  - In *Sar ha-Torah* (Prince of Torah) traditions: call down an angel who will reveal Torah and make it possible to *remember*
  - Generally, however, goal is either imagining (speculative) or experiencing divine heavens.

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