

Oral and Written Communication and Transmission of Knowledge in Ancient Judaism and Christianity

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In antiquity, when no telephones, postal services, and internet connections existed, the transfer of information and knowledge depended on direct or indirect contacts and personal mediation.¹ If one wanted to ask someone's advice or tell him or her something, one would either have to go and visit that person oneself or send an oral or written message through an intermediary.² Only face-to-face communications would guarantee the reliable transmission of the words and opinions of one person to another, whereas mediated messages would always be suspected of misrepresentation or even forgery. Face-to-face communication could easily be conducted with one's immediate neighbors and fellow villagers or townspeople. In the case of more distant communication partners, a larger effort would have to be made to reach them. In such cases, communication would be intrinsically linked to mobility, either one's own or that of one's messengers.³ Only the most mobile members of a particular social group, and those who had the greatest access to mobile intermediaries, would be able to establish and maintain contacts over longer distances. One may assume that those who sat at the nodal points of the local, country-wide, or international communication system would be the most powerful members of their respective social circles.

In the following we shall investigate the forms and modes of communication reflected in Jewish and early Christian literary sources from the Roman period. We shall focus on Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinic sources here. The various forms of communication and transmission of knowledge were always context-specific, serving the respective individuals and groups to reach their particular goals. Communication among early Christians was closely linked to the empire-wide expansion of Christianity. In the case of rabbis, communication with distant colleagues helped to establish a province-wide decentralized rabbinic network, which would

¹ See also Menache 1996:5.

² For the biblical period see Zwickel 2003 and Meier 1988.

³ Claudia Moatti (2006:109) has pointed out that Moses Finley's view of ancient societies as face-to-face societies has sometimes obscured the aspect of movement and mobility. But these two aspects of ancient societies are not incompatible; on the contrary, the necessity of face-to-face contacts to communicate messages would involve and even increase mobility among some segments of society.

eventually be able to collect and transmit traditions to later generations of scholars in both the Land of Israel and the Diaspora.

Communication Among Rebel Leaders in Josephus' *Vita*

In his autobiographical *Vita*, Josephus is quite explicit about the exchange of information among his fellow rebel leaders. This information can either be correct and beneficial or false, misleading, and potentially dangerous to the extent of threatening the recipient's life. Most often, such military information is said to have been transmitted by messengers.

The messenger himself is sometimes not mentioned directly at all: Jesus "sent and requested" (*Vita* 106), or "the news was reported to me in writing" (319), a "messenger" or "courier" is called (89, 90, 301) or identified as a relative, a freedman or household slave, a soldier, or elder and community leader as part of an embassy, sometimes accompanied by an armed cohort. This means that the potentially most reliable and trustworthy person would have been chosen as an intermediary (Hezser 2001:265-66). Sometimes the trust in messengers would be disappointed, though. They could leak the message or information to one's enemies or they could be caught on the road and prevented from reaching the recipient. In the case of oral messages, the information could be forgotten, changed, or falsified. Thus, using an intermediary never guaranteed the safe and correct transmission of a message, but there was often no alternative if the sender could not travel himself and meet the recipient face-to-face.

The purposes for which messages were transmitted ranged from the pragmatic and trivial to issues of public concern. We have to assume that the form of the message, that is, its oral or written format, varied in accordance with the purposes for which it was sent and the respective circumstances. For example, the approach of enemies or supporters would be announced by a messenger orally: "A messenger arrived and whispered to Jesus that John was approaching with his troops" (301; see also 90). Or Josephus sent a courier to Tiberias to let people know that he was approaching (90). On another occasion a deserter of Jesus is said to have come to Josephus to tell him of Jesus' impending attack (107). These were messages of immediate military significance that had to be kept confidential and were meant for one particular recipient only, in contrast to rumors, which are usually presented as false and fictitious oral messages (different from rumors in the Gospels; see below) whose very purpose was to reach a larger audience. For example, "A rumor had now spread throughout Galilee that I [Josephus] was intending to betray the country to the Romans" (132).

In contrast to incidental oral messages, letters were deemed necessary to confirm Josephus in his leadership role. After having received letters from the Jerusalem authorities confirming him in his position, Josephus allegedly sent delegates to Jonathan and his supporters to inform them of the "written orders" that they should quit "giving orders to the bearer to take pains to discover how they intended to proceed" (312). The written correspondence between Josephus and the Jerusalem leaders is also reported elsewhere (62), where Josephus allegedly asked the Jerusalem leaders how to proceed in Galilee. Whether these reports are historically reliable and such correspondence actually took place is another question, but the texts suggest that information of an official nature would be transmitted in writing.

Sometimes Josephus may have claimed that written communication took place in order to present himself as superior to other rebel leaders. For example, John is said to have written to Josephus to ask him for permission to go to the hot baths in Tiberias “for the good of his health.” Josephus, who was at the Galilean village of Cana at that time, “went so far as to write separate letters to those whom I had entrusted with the administration of Tiberias, to prepare a lodging for him and any who might accompany him, and to make every provision for them” (85-86). Letters of recommendation and support are commonly written by patrons for their subordinates. On another occasion, John is said to have written Josephus a letter defending himself and his actions (101), thereby expressing allegiance to him. Similarly, Jesus is said to have “sent and requested my [Josephus’] permission to come and pay me his respects” (106). References to letters of request, support, and recommendation are used to enforce the notion that others were dependent on Josephus here.

While oral messages could also be false and misleading, letters are often associated with plots in Josephus’ writing. In contrast to oral messages, letters could be shown to others and used as evidence against someone. For example, Josephus repeatedly refers to forged letters asking townspeople for military support but actually leading them into a trap (284-85). He admits to have used such means himself to mislead competing rebel leaders (324). Jonathan is said to have “laid a plot to entrap me, writing me the following letter,” asking him [Josephus] to meet him with few attendants in the village where he stayed (216-18). The message carrier allegedly arrived in the middle of the night and asked for an immediate reply. Josephus made him drunk instead, so that he would reveal the plot against him. In such cases only oral comments extracted from someone who is no longer able to keep face and hide the sender’s true intentions can reveal the true meaning and purpose of the written message.

Altogether then, Josephus purports to have exchanged a large amount of oral and written communication with fellow and competing rebel leaders, townspeople, and the Jerusalem authorities. We do not know to what extent his allegations are historically reliable. He may have used such references partly to present himself as superior to his colleagues and to claim the Jerusalem leaders’ support for his actions. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that written communication was considered more official and forceful than oral messages but at the same time prone to falsification and misuse. Oral messages, on the other hand, were used in more urgent and confidential circumstances. They may also have been considered more honest and reliable, if one could trust the bearer or force him to reveal the sender’s true intentions.

Communication in Early Christianity

Interestingly, written communication through letters is mentioned neither in the three synoptic Gospels nor in the Gospel of John, very much in contrast to Acts and the Pauline letters, where we find a number of such references. While Mark mentions on a number of occasions (Mk. 1:21, 39; 6:2) that Jesus *taught* in the synagogues in Galilee (see also Mt. 4:23, 9:35, 13:54; Lk. 4:15-17, 4:44), only Luke lets him read from a written scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk. 4:17). Luke is also the only Gospel that mentions the postpartum inscription of the baby’s name by his father (Lk. 1:63). It therefore seems that only Luke, who lived and wrote in a

Hellenistic (and probably upper-class) context, would automatically assume that Jesus and other important early Christian figures could read and that he was literate. In Mark and Matthew, on the other hand, the emphasis is very much on Jesus' oral teaching, whereas reading and writing are never mentioned.⁴

According to John 7:15, when Jesus taught in the Jerusalem Temple, his fellow Jews were amazed and said: "How does this man know letters, having never learned?" John thereby stresses the higher, spiritual authority of Jesus' teaching (v. 16), which is not based on the written word of the Hebrew Bible. The assumption is that a Jewish scholar's learning would be based on the knowledge he gained from his reading of the scriptural text, whereas a Christian teacher's power goes back to the source of Scripture itself and is therefore independent of letters and writing. A similar distinction between letter and spirit also underlies Paul's writing.

In the three synoptic Gospels all communication between Jesus and his disciples, sympathizers, and local Jewish communities is conducted orally. In order to spread his message and reach a larger number of people, Jesus and his disciples are therefore said to have constantly traveled, especially within Galilee, but also between Galilee and Judaea, at least at the beginning and end of his career. The emphasis on direct contacts between Jesus and his interlocutors made his frequent change of place necessary. As Gerd Theissen and others have stressed, this practice of traveling and teaching may be a reflection of the work of early Christian wandering charismatics who tried to imitate Jesus' restless activity (1983:79-105).

The references to Jesus' (and his disciples') travels are so numerous in the Gospels that they cannot be listed here. The reasons for the constant departures and arrivals are usually not specified, unless Jesus tries to escape the Jerusalem authorities or the masses who allegedly pursued him. The private hospitality that he and his travel companions received in the various villages and towns they entered is frequently mentioned. Wherever they arrive, Jesus is said to have addressed the masses and/or talked to his disciples. Rumors are said to have played an important role in spreading knowledge about him and his healing faculties. For example, Mk. 1:28 reports that the rumor about Jesus' ability to drive out evil spirits spread everywhere throughout Galilee, and, according to Lk. 4:14, when Jesus returned to Galilee "a report about him spread through all the surrounding country." The rumors prepare the stage for Jesus' more specific teaching and healing activity.⁵ References to such rumors spreading to areas outside the Jewishly defined Land of Israel, for example to Syria (Mt. 4:24), may anticipate later Christian teachers' missionary activities among gentiles.

Although most of the contacts between Jesus and his interlocutors consist of face-to-face communication, occasionally intermediaries and messengers are mentioned whom others sent to Jesus. For example, when a Roman centurion wanted Jesus to heal his sick slave, "he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave" (Lk. 7:3). Later, when they reach the centurion's house, he "sent friends" outside to deliver a message (v. 6). According to Mt.

⁴ Fox (1994:127) assumes that Jesus' teachings were first transmitted orally, probably until the 60s CE. See also Kelber 1983:65 and Ong 1987:12-18.

⁵ On a number of occasions Jesus is said to have tried to prevent such rumors from spreading, see for example, Mk. 1:44, 5:43. Reports about rumors may have been meant to enhance Jesus' significance: his divine powers developed a force on their own that he did not initiate himself.

22:16, the Pharisees “sent their disciples to him” to ask whether one should pay tax to the emperor. The Gospel writers were probably familiar with the practices of upper-class Romans (Lk.) and rabbis (Mt.) using friends or disciples as messengers to gain information. One may perhaps understand the traditions about Jesus’ sending out his disciples (Mt. 10:5ff; Lk. 9:1-2) in a similar vein. The difference is that, according to the Gospels, Jesus was represented by his followers after his death only, whereas rabbis already had their views spread through traveling disciples during their lifetime. In both cases the oral teaching of the master is deemed superior to that of the transmitting student.

The practice of letter-writing seems to have been adopted once early Christianity entered the Hellenistic milieu. In Acts, letters are mentioned several times. The first reference relates to the time shortly before Saul’s conversion, when he allegedly asked the Jerusalem high priest to send letters to synagogues in Damascus to act against Jewish Christians (Acts 9:2; cf. 22:5). This letter-writing can be understood within the context of relationships between the high priest and Jewish Diaspora communities. Before 70 CE letters were probably sent from the Jerusalem center to the periphery and vice versa, with a clear notion of the center’s superior authority.

Interestingly, Acts attributes a similar practice to Paul and other leaders of the early Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem. Acts 15:23-29 transmits a letter that apostles and elders are said to have sent to Antioch through Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and Judas as its representatives and intermediaries. The letter is addressed to gentile Christian “brothers” in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. It serves as a letter of recommendation for Judas and Silas, a warning against “false” apostles who were not sent by the Jerusalem authorities, and a prescription to observe the Noahide Laws. Judas and Silas were supposed to add their oral commentary to the information contained in the letter (v. 27). They allegedly stayed in Antioch for some time before returning to Jerusalem (v. 33). Paul and Barnabas, on the other hand, are said to have started major missionary journeys from Antioch then (v. 36ff). Differences between Acts and the Pauline letters concerning the itineraries of the journeys are much discussed among scholars but cannot be dealt with in this context. What needs to be stressed here is the Jerusalem center’s alleged use of an “official” letter to claim authority over the practices and beliefs of the Diaspora communities before 70 CE.

From an early stage onward, Paul’s missionary activity in the Diaspora seems to have involved both intensive traveling and personal visits, delivering his teaching and instruction orally, as well as communication by means of letters in his absence as a supplement to his presence at certain places. Although they sometimes give the impression of stylized theological tractates, the Pauline letters themselves are the main testimony of Paul’s attempts to maintain contact with Christian communities⁶ over more or less large distances by means of written communication. The exchange of letters between Paul and Diaspora communities also meant that the Jerusalem center’s claim to superior authority had been broken. Paul created a network of Diaspora communities that became independent of Jerusalem and maintained connections among each other instead (cf. the greetings and recommendations at the end of Pauline letters). Such a decentralized network would especially have developed after 70 CE.

⁶ The term “community” is used here to refer to groups or gatherings of Christians at various places; it does not imply organization and institutionalization. For reservations about the usage of the term for early Christians, see Hopkins 1998:198-99.

Obviously not every member of the gentile Christian Diaspora communities would have been able to read the Pauline letters him- or herself. These letters were intended to be read out loud to the assembled (house) communities by their literate sub-elite leaders or by specially appointed readers.⁷ Direct connections through letters would be established among community leaders on behalf of and as representatives of their local Christian co-religionists. These leaders, and especially Paul, would at least try to maintain control over lay Christians' beliefs and practices and divert attention from competitors ("false" apostles) who orally proclaimed alternative teachings.⁸ In this way, letters would still function as a means of executing authority and control, although the center had shifted from a particular locale (Jerusalem) to a Christian "holy man" (Paul). The fact that Pauline Christianity eventually became dominant will have been partly due to the publication and publicity, that is, the repeated copying, circulation, and oral reading, of his particular theological message (McGuire 1960:150).

Later bishops and church leaders maintained extensive correspondences among themselves and with Christian communities.⁹ Stanley K. Stowers even calls early Christianity "a movement of letter writers" (1986:15), a phenomenon that will have contributed greatly to the gradual expansion and dispersion of Christianity in the first four or five centuries CE (44). Letters among Christian religious leaders also seem to have served another function: "Through letters, the bishops, elders, deacons, and teachers sought consensus through dialogue and conflict. They drew boundaries of developing self-definition; they gave praise and blame to one another; they developed an articulate religious philosophy for the church" (44-45). That is, the exchange of letters helped develop Christian theological ideas and ethical recommendations. Despite the entirely oral beginnings of Christianity in the early Jesus movement, the very character and identity of Christianity would develop only later on the basis of stenographed sermons (Maxwell 2006), written communication, and the transmission of such written records to later generations of Christians. The oral teachings were not recoverable in their "original" form. What survived was their written reformulation and transformation.

Communication Among Rabbis

⁷ On (Christian) sub-elites and their literacy levels, see Hopkins 1998:209-10. On his missionary journeys Paul repeatedly stayed in the houses of fellow Christians, and so-called "house"-churches or local gatherings of Christians took place in the houses of sufficiently well-off community members. Those who opened their houses to gatherings and served as the main local contacts for "international" authorities such as Paul are likely to have been seen as local leaders by their fellow Christians.

⁸ See also Botha (1992:211), who notes that this "'political' side of Paul's letters has received little attention, how he uses writing to control and influence others and to promote a (probably) minoritarian viewpoint."

⁹ In the second and third centuries this seems to have especially been the case for city bishops such as Origen and Cyprian, who had secretaries at their disposal to write the letters for them (Fox 1994:135 and 141). McGuire (1960:150) calls the mid-fourth to the mid-fifth century "the golden age of patristic epistolography," and he stresses that "many more letters would have been written than those that survived" (151).

A development that is similar in some regards and different in others can be observed for rabbinic Judaism. After 70 CE a Temple- and Jerusalem-centered Judaism turned into a decentralized, country-wide movement of like-minded Torah scholars and teachers who supported one another but also competed with each other (Hezser 1997:171-80). Holiness was no longer found in a particular institution or place, but was represented by each individual rabbi himself. By establishing relationships with other rabbis at more or less distant places and by attracting students and sympathizers among the populace, rabbis created a broad network of exchange and communication that covered the Galilee as well as the coastal region and even Babylonia from the third century CE onwards. Such a network between rabbis who resided at different locations could be created and maintained in only two ways: on the one hand through travel, mutual visits, and direct contacts, and on the other through the exchange of written messages in the form of letters. Rabbinic literature provides ample evidence of rabbinic communication over distances and the exchange of halakhic knowledge among rabbis. The very fact that rabbis established such a mobile and lively communication network must be considered the basis of the eventual transmission and collection of traditions and the creation of rabbinic documents.

In both tannaitic and amoraic documents at least some rabbis are presented as very mobile.¹⁰ Far from being sedentary teachers or established leaders of local communities, these rabbis seem to have traveled for many different purposes, which were probably partly linked to their worldly professions. In contrast to early Christian missionaries, rabbis did not travel for missionary reasons, nor did they value travel as a means towards achieving a higher level of spirituality as did the later itinerant monks. Their mobility gave them an opportunity to visit colleagues and to discuss halakhic matters with them. For rabbis who lived in many different locales and did not have immediate access to their colleagues, such travels provided the best opportunity to engage in halakhic discussions with other scholars and to thereby develop *halakhah* (rabbinic rules and regulations) itself. The development of the Roman road system in the province of Syria-Palestine (Roll 1995:1166-70) would have made their travels easier. Colleagues and friends provided hospitality in addition to the inns available to travelers (Rosenfeld 1998).

Already in the Mishnah and Tosefta rabbis are frequently said to have visited each other. Usually the reason for the visit is not further specified, since the later transmitters and editors would consider it irrelevant. They were interested in the halakhic discussions and opinions of the respective rabbis only. Therefore the narratives that report such visits have very brief introductions and focus on the oral discussions and debates among rabbinic colleagues. The impression is that the topics discussed came up incidentally rather than having been planned from the outset. Yet such incidental discussions on visits that may have been undertaken for entirely different, profane reasons were obviously transmitted orally to later generations of scholars and became part of written collections of traditions. The following story can serve as an example (M. Kil. 6:4):

¹⁰ Tannaitic documents, such as the Mishnah and the Tosefta, contain traditions attributed to rabbis from the time between 70 and approximately 200 CE; amoraic documents, such as the Talmud Yerushalmi and aggadic midrashim, contain traditions as well as amoraic traditions associated with rabbis assumed to have lived from the third to the first half of the fifth century.

It happened that R. Yehoshua went to R. Yishmael to Kefar Aziz, and he showed him a vine that was trained over part of a fig tree. He said to him: May I put seed under the remainder [of the tree]? He said to him: It is permitted. And he brought him up from there to Bet Hameganiah and showed him a vine that was trained over part of a branch and a trunk of a sycamore tree in which there were many branches. He said to him: Under this branch it is prohibited [to put seed], but [under] the rest it is permitted.¹¹

The reference to R. Yehoshua's visit to his younger colleague R. Yishmael in Kefar Aziz is mentioned only briefly at the beginning of the story to set the scene. We do not know the purpose of R. Yehoshua's visit, whether he went to Kefar Aziz to meet his colleague or merely passed by this village on his journey to another destination. The halakhic discussion allegedly developed incidentally, when the rabbis walked in R. Yishmael's garden or vineyard and looked at some of his plantings. The younger R. Yishmael asks his older and more experienced colleague whether a certain practice would violate the rules concerning mixed seeds. Their walk and R. Yehoshua's halakhic instructions continue. Only the orally exchanged and transmitted halakhic views were relevant to later generations of scholars.

Such stories are more numerous in the Tosefta.¹² For example, R. Yehoshua allegedly "went to R. Yochanan b. Zakkai in Beror Hayil and townspeople would bring them figs" (T. Maas. 2:1). R. Yehoshua's ass drivers approach R. Yehoshua to ask him whether they have to tithe their produce and he pronounces his halakhic opinion on the matter (*idem*). In another story R. Halafta is said to have gone to R. Gamliel II in Tiberias and "found him sitting at the table of Yochanan b. Nazif. And in his hand was the scroll of Job in translation and he was reading in it" (T. Shab. 13:2). R. Halafta reminds R. Gamaliel II of his grandfather R. Gamliel the Elder, who refused to even touch a translated biblical scroll when sitting on the stairs of the Temple Mount (*ibid.*). Again, certain practices with which a rabbi is confronted on his journey give rise to the formulation of halakhic opinions on a variety of issues. The practice of a colleague at another location is corrected and/or criticized. Only direct contacts between distant rabbis would enable such confrontations between variant opinions and practices. Such contacts would also allow rabbis to learn about other rabbis' views and exegeses. According to T. Sot. 7:9, R. Yochanan bBeroqah and R. Eleazar Hisma were on their way from Yavneh to Lydda and visited R. Yehoshua in Peqi'in. R. Yehoshua allegedly took this opportunity to ask them about what was taught in the study house in Yavneh and they tell him about R. Eleazar bAzariah's teaching. In this case, R. Yehoshua would only know of R. Eleazar bAzariah's exegesis through the mediation of his visiting colleagues from another location.

Such references to the exchange of halakhic and exegetical knowledge through direct contacts between rabbis from different locations are especially numerous in the later Talmud Yerushalmi and amoraic midrashim. This may partly be due to the literary style of these documents, which incorporated more narrative traditions. It may also be a reflection of the expansion of the rabbinic movement and the increase of rabbis' mobility and mutual visits.

¹¹ All translations of rabbinic texts are my own.

¹² The Tosefta is a collection of tannaitic traditions in addition to the Mishnah.

Rabbis are said to have visited each other to help prepare or attend family events (for example, yBer. 2:4, 5a: “R. Chiyya, R. Issa, [and] R. Ammi went to make a marriage canope for R. Eleazar. They heard the voice of R. Yochanan [teaching]”; yBer. 2:8, 5c: “When R. Bun b. R. Chiyya died, R. Zeira went up and gave a condolence speech on his behalf”; yBer. 6:5, 10c: “R. Yona and R. Yose went to the banquet of R. Hanina of Anat”), to pay sick calls (e.g., yPeah 3:9, 17d; yA.Z. 2:3, 41a), or to work with their colleagues (e.g., yShab. 2:1, 4d).

Rabbis are also often said to have “walked on the road” together or to have gone to visit bathhouses. Most often, the reasons for rabbis’ mutual visits are not stated explicitly, but such direct contacts almost always led to the discussion of *halakhah*, the observance of certain practices, or the transmission of exegetical insights. Although we cannot take such stories literally as historical evidence of particular rabbis’ actual meetings with particular colleagues, the frequency of such traditions in different forms, addressing different subjects, makes it quite likely that travel and mutual visits were the social contexts in which the oral exchange of halakhic and exegetical knowledge between spatially separated rabbis took place.

In addition to direct contacts through visits of rabbinic colleagues, indirect contacts were established through messengers and intermediaries. Students, colleagues, friends, and relatives could function as messengers. The literary sources do not always specify whether oral or written messages were delivered. Occasionally, however, letters are directly mentioned. As in the case of rabbinic travel and mutual visits, references to messengers and (written) notes are much more common in amoraic than in tannaitic documents.

Already in the Mishnah there are references to students citing traditions in the name of their teachers (for example, M. Er. 1:2: “In the name of R. Yishmael a student said before R. Aqiba”) and the notion that two or more students’ memory of the same tradition makes it more trustworthy (cf. M. Er. 2:6: “R. Ilai said: I heard from R. Eliezer: . . . And I went around among his disciples and looked for a partner for myself [in having heard and memorized these teachings] but did not find [any]”). Especially interesting is the following tradition concerning communication between Palestine and Babylonia in the tannaitic period (M. Yeb. 16:7):

R. Aqiba said: When I went down to Nehardea to intercalate the year I found Nechemiah of Bet Deli. He said to me: I have heard that in the Land of Israel they do not allow a woman to [re]marry on the basis of [the testimony of] one witness, except for R. Yehudah b. Baba. And I answered him: That’s right. He said to me: Tell them in my name: . . . I have received [a tradition] from R. Gamliel the Elder, that they permit a woman to [re]marry on account of one witness. And when I came and recounted the words before R. Gamliel he rejoiced over my words and said: We have found a fellow for R. Yehudah b. Baba [i.e., someone who transmits the same teaching heard from R. Gamliel the Elder].

The story relates that when R. Aqiba came to Babylonia, he met a fellow Palestinian, Nechemiah of Bet Deli, who claims to know Palestinian rabbinic views on the remarriage of widows, with which R. Aqiba is also familiar. Interestingly, this person also claims to have knowledge of a teaching of R. Gamliel the Elder that only one Palestinian sage (R. Yehudah b. Baba) is said to have remembered. The tradition seems to have been new to R. Aqiba himself, who nevertheless carried it back to Palestine and confronted R. Gamliel the Elder’s grandson

with it. The latter is glad to have found confirmation of a tradition that until then had rested on the memory of only one Palestinian sage.

Although the story cannot be taken literally as a historical record of encounters between the mentioned individuals, it nevertheless reveals rabbinic notions about oral memory and the oral transmission of traditions across borders. It also shows how precarious such transmission was: deceased sages' views could easily be forgotten or remembered by one student only. If there was only one witness to a view, there was no certainty that he had remembered it correctly. Therefore, a second independent testimony would be all the more valuable. The Mishnah does not tell us how Nechemiah of Bet Deli would have gained knowledge of the mentioned Palestinian rabbinic views. The reference to the Galilean village of Bet Deli indicates his Palestinian origin, so he must be a Palestinian who emigrated to Babylonia at some stage in his life. Neusner's suggestion (1999:52) that he studied with R. Gamliel in Jerusalem before 50 CE seems to overstate the matter, but contacts between a Palestinian immigrant to Babylonia and Palestinian rabbis are certainly assumed here. Such immigrants would have been able to spread Palestinian views in Babylonia and to tell their Palestinian contacts about Babylonian views, a practice that was still exceptional in the tannaitic period but became commonplace from the third century CE onward.

There is no reference to the transmission of written messages or letters among rabbis in the Mishnah, neither within the Land of Israel itself nor between Israel and the Diaspora, in contrast to the famous story in T. Sanh. 2:6, according to which R. Gamliel I and elders were sitting on the steps of the Temple Mount with Yochanan the scribe, dictating letters to Diaspora communities concerning the intercalation of the year, an issue relevant for the festival calendar. This is the only letter directly mentioned in the Tosefta, however, and it is presented as an official letter, sent by Jerusalem rabbinic authorities to Diaspora communities, much like the letters sent to Diaspora Christian communities by the Jewish-Christian Jerusalem authorities mentioned in Acts. Within rabbinic circles, there are several references to oral testimonies instead (for example, T. Dem. 3:1: "R. Yose bHameshullam testified in the name of R. Nathan, his brother, who said in the name of R. Eleazar Hisma"; T. Shevi. 5:12: "R. Yehudah bIsaiah the perfumer testified before R. Aqiba in the name of R. Tarfon that balsam is subject to the [laws of the] Seventh Year"). The tannaitic evidence suggests, then, that orality rather than writing played a dominant role in the transmission of rabbinic traditions throughout the first two centuries CE (Hezser 2001:267-75).

Although oral communication continues to be important in amoraic times, and while rabbinic travels and visits to distant colleagues even increased at that time, as pointed out above, there are many more references to letters and written messages in amoraic than in tannaitic sources and the use of written communication seems to have increased, both within the Land of Israel and especially between Israel and the Diaspora, in late antiquity. For the first time we encounter a situation similar to that of Josephus, who claims to have exchanged written notes with other rebel leaders on various occasions. First, there are direct references to letters in amoraic documents. Second, rabbis are now frequently said to have "sent to" colleagues through intermediaries, a formulation that is sometimes followed by the verb "he wrote."

Only a few examples for the exchange of letters can be provided here. In connection with the intercalation of the year, "Rabbi sent him [Hananiah, who had moved to Babylonia] three

letters through R. Yitzhaq and R. Natan” (ySanh. 1:2, 19a), criticizing his practice. After receiving the first two letters, he is said to have honored the letter-bearers; when he received the third, “he wanted to treat them with contempt” (*idem*). This behavior seems to have been quite typical for recipients who received bad messages. Elsewhere R. Hiyya bBa is said to have asked R. Eleazar to intervene with R. Yudan the patriarch to ask him to write a letter of recommendation for him, since he wanted to move abroad (probably to Babylonia) to make a living (yHag. 1:8, 76d; for a variant version see, yM.Q. 3:1, 81c). When Yehudah bTavai had fled to Alexandria, Jerusalemites allegedly wrote a letter to Alexandria concerning him (ySanh. 6:8, 23c). The Babylonian Rab is said to have written a letter to the Palestinian patriarch Rabbi concerning the case of the daughter of Absalom’s support after her divorce (yGit. 46d).

In many of these cases, letters are imagined to have been employed in communication between greater distances in quasi-official contexts: intercalation of the calendar, court appeals, recommendations, threats of excommunication, exchanges between the patriarch and exilarch, or community issues. But elsewhere in the Yerushalmi, written messages are also said to have been employed sometimes among rabbis for the “minor” purpose of discussing halakhic issues or asking colleagues halakhic questions. The formulation “sent and asked” is commonly used in the Yerushalmi and may refer to both oral and written messages. Sometimes the written nature of the message is directly mentioned, as in the following case (Qid. 3:14, 64d):

R. Tanhum b. Papa sent [and] asked R. Yose [concerning] two cases from Alexandria, one about an unmarried woman and one about a married woman [who had sexual relationships with an improper man]. Concerning the married woman he sent [and] wrote to him: “A *mamzer* shall not enter the congregation of the Lord” [Deut. 23:2]; concerning the unmarried woman he sent [and] wrote to him: “It seems that you are not careful about holy Israelite girls.” He said to R. Mana: Take and sign [the letters], and he signed. He said to R. Berekhiah: Take [and] sign, but he did not accept.

Wilhelm Bacher and Jacob Lauterbach considered the letter mentioned in this tradition a forerunner of the later *responsa* of the Gaonic period (see www.JewishEncyclopedia.com). Interestingly, the correspondence concerns cases from Alexandria in Egypt that were allegedly brought before the Palestinian R. Yose for decision. It is not explicitly said whether R. Tanhum bPapa sent a written or oral message to R. Yose to request his help in the mentioned cases. R. Yose’s answer (negative in the first and positive in the second case) is said to have been submitted in writing. In order to make his views more authoritative, he is said to have asked two other rabbis, among them his former student R. Mana, to sign the letter with him. The tradition does not cite the letter in full but merely mentions phrases most relevant to the decision. In the Talmud the discussion continues: R. Berekhiah is said to have eventually changed his mind, at a time when it was too late, since the letter had already been sent off.

According to Bacher and Lauterbach, “This story shows that often questions were settled by a single letter, as was later the case with the Geonim, who exchanged a series of *responsa*” (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, we do not know how common this practice was in the amoraic period, despite the Babylonian Talmud’s (infrequent) use of the formula “they sent from there,” that is, halakhic messages or decisions from Palestine to Babylonia (bGit. 66a, 73a; bZev. 87a;

bArakh. 22a), without specifying the written or oral nature of such messages. That written requests for halakhic information were occasionally sent from Babylonia (and also other Diaspora locations?) to the Land of Israel is certainly imaginable, but how frequent and legally authoritative such messages actually were remains uncertain.¹³

In the Yerushalmi the formula “sent and asked” usually appears without reference to the oral or written nature of the message. Sometimes the transmitters and editors of these traditions may have imagined the message to have been transmitted in written form, but in (most?) other cases an oral message may have been envisioned, especially if communication within the Land of Israel (rather than between Israel and the Diaspora) was involved. When a rabbi is said to have “sent to” a Palestinian colleague to request an answer to a halakhic question, such a question and answer could have been exchanged in writing or orally. In either case an intermediary would have been necessary to transmit the message. Such messengers are usually not mentioned, however. The later tradents may have considered a reference to students’ transmission of their teacher’s messages too insignificant or self-evident to mention explicitly. Yet occasionally the identity of the intermediary is specified, though: for example, R. Gamliel sent to R. Yehoshua through R. Aqiba (yR.H. 2:8, 58b); R. Zeira sent to R. Nahum through R. Yannai bR. Yishmael (yTaan. 2:2, 65c); R. Shmuel bYitzhaq sent R. Yaqob bAha to ask before R. Hiyya bBa (yYeb. 12:2, 12d). Such references are rare in comparison with the many traditions not specifying the messenger, however.

Altogether, then, both mobility and visits among rabbis, as well as direct and indirect oral and written communication among them, seem to have increased in the amoraic period, from the third to early fifth century CE. The increase in literary references to these phenomena may partly be due to the sheer volume of amoraic in comparison to tannaitic literature and the larger corpus of narrative traditions in the Talmud Yerushalmi as compared to the Mishnah and Tosefta. On the other hand, we know that the rabbinic movement expanded and diversified in the amoraic period and that rabbis were increasingly present in the cities of Roman Palestine, in addition to their presence in villages.¹⁴ If there were more rabbis at more places, there would have been more reasons and opportunities to contact those colleagues who lived outside of one’s hometown.

Another reason for the many reported visits may have been rabbis’ increased participation in the late Roman “culture of mobility.” A number of ancient historians have already stressed that late antiquity was characterized by the greater mobility of a larger segment of the population: not only soldiers and Roman officials but also merchants, monks, bishops, philosophers, teachers, students, tourists, pilgrims, and health-seekers traveled on the roads.¹⁵ Rabbis seem to have increasingly been affected by the “travel bug” and recognized its advantages: travel allowed them to establish and maintain direct contacts with distant colleagues and thereby create a

¹³ From the Palestinian rabbinic side there would obviously have been an interest in transmitting such traditions and claiming such authority.

¹⁴ On the expansion and diversification of the rabbinic movement, see Cohen 1999; on the gradual urbanization and the continued importance of villages, see Hezser 1997:157-65; on Galilean villages’ participation in cultural and economic developments, see Edwards 2007.

¹⁵ See Casson 1994:122; McCormick 2002. André and Baslez (1993:7) speak of “une culture voyageuse.”

network of communication throughout the province as well as with rabbis in neighboring regions.¹⁶

Especially from the third century onwards, direct contacts between rabbis were supplemented by indirect communications through oral and written messages. Together, these contacts allowed rabbis to receive answers to halakhic questions and cases, identify similar or divergent opinions, and transmit their views to more or less distant colleagues and through students to later generations. A rabbinic dispute could emerge only once different opinions were identified. Discussions of *halakhah* depended on direct or indirect contacts among rabbis. Since the rabbinic movement was decentralized and no regular meetings between rabbis (like the Christian synods) took place, such informal visits and meetings and individual contacts were the only way in which halakhic opinions could be exchanged. The establishment of such a travel and communication network can be considered the social basis of the eventual collection, fixation, and editing of rabbinic traditions that eventually developed into written documents.

It should be noted at the end of this discussion that not all rabbis would have participated in the communication network in a similar way. Not all rabbis would have been able to engage in (extensive) travel or had traveling students who could function as intermediaries. Rabbis whose mundane profession involved travel could visit rabbinic colleagues most easily and even sojourn with them on their way. Those rabbis who had the most significant contacts, who sat at the nodal points of the communication network, were probably most powerful within the movement. They would have been able to gather the largest inventory of halakhic knowledge and determine which views to pass on to others and which to delete from memory.¹⁷ For the Middle Ages, Sophia Menache points to a model “in which the amount of information assimilated by the different social strata correlated with their social status and the political functions they fulfilled” (1996:7). The existence of communication channels as such constituted only the basis; whether and to what extent actual communication took place depended on the individual rabbi’s initiative. Those who were most powerful within the rabbinic network, such as the patriarch R. Yehudah ha-Nasi, will have tried to monopolize the communication, a phenomenon that may be reflected in later rabbinic traditions’ identification of him as the editor of the Mishnah.

Conclusion

Both the early Jesus movement and the rabbis of the first few centuries CE seem to have relied on face-to-face contacts and direct oral communication to establish contacts with colleagues, students, sympathizers, and others. In order to establish such contacts with people at

¹⁶ I am currently working on a book-length study on the relationship between mobility and communication in ancient Judaism.

¹⁷ For an application of network theory to late antique pagan intellectuals, see Ruffini 2004. He points out that “the chief characters” all had extensive networking connections over provincial distances, especially connecting Egypt and Greece. Connections were maintained directly but also through fourth- and fifth-degree contacts.

more distant places—colleagues willing to discuss halakhic issues in the case of rabbis; people to whom they could spread their message in the case of the early Jesus movement—mobility and travel were often necessary. Only those early Christian missionaries who were ready to leave their hometowns would be successful in their missionary activity, a phenomenon realized by the “wandering charismatics” and especially Paul. Similarly, only those rabbis who established and maintained contacts with their colleagues at different locations would be able to discuss and develop their halakhic knowledge and gain support for their opinions. They would be able to spread their own views and amalgamate knowledge collected through such contacts. Accordingly, the most mobile and communicative rabbis would be the ones whose traditions would survive and who would actively participate in the transmission and eventual collection of their colleague-friends’ views.

When Christianity entered the Greco-Roman realm, letters seem to have been increasingly employed, a process that started with Paul and reached its summit with the extensive correspondences of the church fathers and bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries, which were eventually published. In Palestinian Judaism it seems to have taken longer until the advantages of written correspondence were recognized, and this practice seems never to have caught on as much as in late antique Christianity and the Greco-Roman world. We noticed a dramatic increase in references to letters in amoraic in comparison with tannaitic literature. Yet even in amoraic times letters seem to have been mainly employed for semi- or quasi-official purposes and in order to transfer information over long distances, between Palestine, Babylonia, Syria, and Egypt. Nevertheless, the rabbinic movement seems to have expanded in late antiquity and with it the rabbinic communication network. Both oral and written messages were increasingly sent through intermediaries to supplement face-to-face contacts. Both direct and indirect contacts helped to develop, preserve, and transmit rabbinic *halakhah*, while early Christian communication helped develop Christian theology. In both cases those religious leaders who sat at the nodal points of the communication network would have had most control over this development.

The most likely Greco-Roman analogy would be communication networks among philosophers. Like rabbis, philosophers put a great emphasis on oral instruction and on oral discussion and disputes (Alexander 1990). They established schools at various places throughout the Roman Empire. Whereas the cities of Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Caesarea in Palestine and Sura, Pumbedita, and Nisibis in Babylonia seem to have developed as the most significant locations of rabbinic activity in late antiquity,¹⁸ Athens and Alexandria were the focal points of pagan philosophical life (Ruffini 2004:241). According to Ruffini, all major philosophical figures of the fifth and sixth century CE (the period of his investigation) “had extensive connections to both Alexandria and Athens, and provided links between the pagan intellectual communities in Egypt and Greece” (*idem*). Such connections would be established primarily through visits and direct oral communication and secondarily through written communication by means of letters. They would have had a major impact on the development of views and would eventually

¹⁸ There is a large amount of literature on contacts between Palestinian and Babylonian sages in late antiquity. See, for example, Oppenheimer 2005.

determine whose views were considered worthy of being transmitted to other locations and to later generations of readers.

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