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The tripartite structure and its design in a Tannaitic source

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This article deals with a tripartite structure applied to a Tannaitic source (Eruvin 41b). This structure is designed in the form of a difficulty and a short resolution, bringing one example for each of the three parts of the Tannaitic source. The uniform formative-stylistic phrasing gives the discussion of the Tannaitic source's three parts a tripartite form. The Tannaitic source utilises a chaining of examples from the first to the second part and from the second to the third part.

The three parts of the Tannaitic source

The Tannaitic source cites as follows (Epstein 1935):

> Our Rabbis learned: Three things deprive [*cause to pass*] a man of his senses and of a knowledge of his Creator, [*and they are*], idolaters, an evil spirit, and oppressive poverty.
> Three kinds of person do not see the face of Gehenna, [*and they are*], [*one who suffers from*] oppressive poverty, one who is afflicted with bowel diseases, and [*one who is in the hands of*] the [*Roman*] government.
> Three [*classes of person*] die even while they are conversing, [*and they are*] one who suffers from bowel diseases, a woman in confinement, and one afflicted with dropsy.

The Tannaitic source text consists of three sections, the first of which opens with (Epstein 1935):

> Our Rabbis learned: Three things[1] deprive [*cause to pass*] a man of his senses and of a knowledge of his Creator,[2] and they are: idolaters,[3] an evil spirit, and oppressive poverty.[4]

The initial part of our text thus groups together 'three things' which 'deprive [*cause to pass*] a man of his senses and of a knowledge of his creator' (Epstein 1935), and then goes on to itemise, detailing that these are 'idolaters, an evil spirit, and oppressive poverty' (Epstein 1935). The debate in this section of the text leads to the question of 'In what respect could this matter?' and a brief presentation of the Rabbis' way of solving the problem.

The second part of the Tannaitic source text goes on to state that (Epstein 1935):

> Three kinds of person do not see the face of Gehenna, and they are:[5] [*one who suffers from*] oppressive poverty, one who is afflicted with bowel diseases,[6] and [*one who is in in the hands of*] the [*Roman*] government.[7]

The middle section thus also groups its subject together into a set of 'three', following this with an itemised list of '[*One who suffers from*], one who is afflicted with bowel diseases, and [*one who is in the hands of*] the [*Roman*] government' (Epstein 1935). The subsequent debate on this also concludes with the question of 'In what practical respect does this matter?' followed by a brief consideration of the Rabbis' way of solving the problem, similar to the question and resolution in the preceding part of the text.

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1. MSS Munich 95, Vatican 109, Oxford 366 are missing the word: 'thing'; Rabbinovicz (1960:56).

2. MS Munich 95: '… of a knowledge of his creator and of his senses'; cf. Rabbinovicz (1960:56).

3. Cf. MSS Munich 95, Vatican 109, Oxford 366: 'Gentile'; Ben Hushiel (1961) 41b: 'Alien'.

4. ben Hushiel, *Eruvin tractate*, 41b the order of that part is different.

5. MSS Munich 95, Vatican 109, are missing the words: 'And they are'.

6. Cf. Rabbinovicz, *Dikdukei sofrim, Eruvin*, 56. The order of the two items is reversed.

7. Cf. Rabbinovicz, *Dikdukei sofrim, Eruvin*, 56. He indicates different word to the third item.

The third part of the same Tannaitic source concludes with this: 'Three [*classes of person*] die even while they are conversing, and they are: one who suffers from bowel diseases,[8] a woman in confinement,[9] and one afflicted with dropsy' (Epstein 1935).

The third section thus also opens with a reference to a threesome and then goes on to itemise the three instances: 'one who suffers from bowel diseases, a woman in confinement, and one afflicted with dropsy' (Epstein 1935). The debate in this part of the text also concludes with the question of 'In what[10] respect can this information matter?' – thus echoing the conclusion of the preceding two sections; this, in turn, is also followed by a brief statement of the Rabbis' approach to solving the problem.

The design of the Tannaitic source

A commentator previously noted the element of formal design and structure in the Tannaitic text, writing that: 'The Rabbis have taught: Three things, etc. A great many passages listing "three things" appear in the Talmud, which have not been brought together here, for here the principle was to make the second threesome include one [*item*] taken from the first, and among the third group of three to have one [*item*] from the second' (Zimering 1974).

In other words, many instances of 'three things' are evident in a variety of textual sources, and these could have been included in the Tannaitic text under consideration. However, they were not included, because the current text is built in such a way as to include in the second section one instance from the first, and among the three instances cited in the third section – one of those appearing in the second section.

True enough, these commentarial remarks offer no detailed elaboration or extensive exemplification. But what these comments spell out is enough to suggest that the three parts comprising our Tannaitic source text have in common a shared thread running through them, basting the first part with the second, and the second with the third, by means of recurring instances. The existence of a case common to all three sections of the source text makes it clear why these three instances in particular were chosen for explicit mention in this passage, to the exclusion of all other possible passages where 'three things' are mentioned.

Applying the argument in practice, we find that the term 'oppressive poverty' threads its way from the first section of the text into the second, appearing as an element common to both. From the second section, the instance of one 'suffering from bowel diseases' makes its way into the third section, becoming an element shared by both.

8. Rabbinovicz, *Dikdukei sofrim, Eruvin*, 56. The first item is missing in old printed versions except Venice 1528.

9. MSS Munich 95, Vatican 109, Oxford 366, the order of the two items is reversed; Rabbinovicz, *Dikdukei sofrim, Eruvin*, 56.

10. MS Oxford 366 is missing the word.

The technique of chaining has a formal-stylistic function (Rivlin 1998). Chaining as a structuring element in the Tannaitic text, as this text has been preserved in the printed version, is borne out by a comparison with other extant versions. Chaining is evident in the various other versions of the text, as well, but there the links follow a different geometric pattern *vis-à-vis* the instance reiterated from one part to the next in the Tannaitic source.

The transfer of the linking instance from the first to the second section is unlike the transfer from the second to the third. The instance of 'oppressive poverty', which appears third in the first part of the text, occupies second place in the second part. The instance of 'one who is afflicted with bowel diseases', which is first in the second part, becomes second in the third. There is no correlation or consistency in the order of the chaining formed by the two cited instances in these versions of the text as opposed to the printed version. The printed version forms a consistent design by transferring each example from its place in an earlier section of the text to the first place in the next section.

The tripartite structure of the discussion on the Tannaitic source

The deliberation in each of the three parts of the Tannaitic source text is an outgrowth of the same basic question, 'In what respect could this matter?' and a brief reply citing no more than a single example. The same question, reiterated in each of the three parts of the Tannaitic source, along with the different replies which always include a single instance as an example, creates a unified formal-stylistic context which combines the three parts of the text (Neusner 1991: 105–112). This creates a formal-stylistic feature: a tripartite structure. The tripartite structure is based on a short debate surrounding the Tannaitic source.

The background of the tripartite structure

Tractate Eruvin says: 'R. Ḥisda stated: The Torah can only be acquired with [*the aid of*] mnemonic signs, for it is said, *Put it in their mouths*; (Dt 31:19) read not, '*put it*' but 'its mnemonic sign'.[11] Yitzhaki (= Rashi) comments: 'Signs – signs of traditions one after the other and signs used by the Rabbis as in the Talmud, and you shall put a version of the signs in their mouths' (Yitzhaki 1961).

Rashi's words 'signs of traditions' may be interpreted widely (and not only as indications of a new section) (Rosenthal 2005) also as the numbering of traditions, as evident from the following instruction (Kanfanton 1981):

> In any matter or homily, you must inquire into its roots and branches and mark them with signs and rules such that they will be remembered and noticed forever, just as signs were given in

11. Eruvin 54b.

the Talmud – signs for traditions and to these [*the traditions*] numbers are added. (p. 25)

Accordingly, it is possible to discern various contents or other matters that come in a numbered form with a tripartite structure. For example in the text considered here, there is a form of chaining between three parts of the Tannaitic source (called baraita) in the format of a numbered threesome. In folklore, Noy (1971) and Olrik (1965) agreed that there is a common 'rule of three' customary in various folk tales. The shaping and redaction of the Tannaitic source includes one instance of chaining that begins in the first section of the baraita and continues to the second section, and a second instance that begins in the second section and continues to the third, with the linking part constituting the first instance of each section (the second and the third).

All three sections of the Tannaitic source constitute together a tripartite structure, and each section includes three instances of which one forms a link to the next section.

The chaining is of course not mentioned in the text itself as a tripartite structure (Jacobs 1983:140) but it is embedded within it naturally and assimilated as shown above.

The tripartite structure in *sugyot* in the Babylonian Talmud in general has already been discussed (Friedman 1973:391; 2010:10; cf. Friedman 1978:40–43, 47); for example, the threefold *sugyot* in Tractate Yevamot, Chapter 10, and Bava Metzi'a Chapters one and two. Other tripartite structures also exist in the *sugyot* of the three first chapters in Tractate Eruvin in the Babylonian Talmud (Zur 1999:368; 392–393; 2016) and elsewhere (Jacobs 1983:138–142; Nádor 1962).

The significance of the tripartite structure is not only in emphasising a certain element by repeating it three times (Pope 1962), or as a structure that represents completeness (integrity) and significance (Friedman 1978:41), or as a very important structure associated with sacred matters, rather it is also considered a complete formative-stylistic structure with a beginning, middle and end.[12]

Notably, a few researchers (Valler 1995; 1999) dealt with the tripartite structure in *sugyot* that appear in the tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. Some discussed the tripartite structure in a small number of chapters, and others were more brief and only mentioned this in passing.

Some of the scholars also mentioned various phenomena (Friedman 1978:40–43; Zur 1999:368, 392–393; 2016:370–383)[13] related to the tripartite structure that are worthy of extensive examination (Cohen 1998:131–147; Nador 1962:315).[14]

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12. Pope, 'Number, Numbering, Numbers', 564: 'Next to the number Seven, the number most frequently used in connection with sacred matters is three. This number naturally suggests the idea of completeness-of beginning, middle, and end'.

13. A criticism on Friedman method, see Weiner (1983), Cohen (1998:34–42), number 89 and Rubenstein (2005).

14. 'An especially exciting undertaking would be the investigation of number 3'.

In the *sugyot* of the three first chapters of Tractate Eruvin in the Babylonian Talmud, there are also *sugyot* that have a tripartite structure relating to various issues, for example, general topics, names of *amoraim*, sayings by *amoraim*, debate and linguistic expressions.

The unique role and significance of the current article is its emphasis on the phenomenon of chaining in one instance that links the sections of the Tannaitic source, shaped as they are in a tripartite structure.

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Competing interests

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