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INTRODUCTION

The Construction of Expertise in Tales of Rabbis and Donors

THIS BOOK tells the story of how rabbinic Torah scholars became religious experts within the Jewish communities of Roman Palestine from the second through fifth centuries CE.¹ This period saw the organization of a small group of literate Jewish men who devoted their lives to the interpretation and teaching of their sacred ancestral texts. They devised their own methods of reading attuned to vocabulary and grammar and created chains of interpretation spanning generations now canonized in rabbinic literature.² Students attached themselves to the orbits of these charismatic teachers and sought to emulate their speech and behaviors.³ Yet this mastery of words and habit did not make

1. The word Torah (lit. “law” or “instruction”) has two interrelated meanings. First, it refers to the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) that were known to ancient Jews as a collection called *Torat Moshe*, the Law of Moses. Second, the rabbis used the concept of Torah expansively to refer both to the entire canonical Hebrew Bible (the written Torah) and to their growing body of teachings (the oral Torah). In this sense, the rabbis thought of Torah as a broad universe of interpretive possibility. I use the word “Torah” typically to refer to the broad rabbinic sense of the word and will specify *Torat Moshe* when describing the first five books of the canonical Bible.

2. For an overview of the organization of rabbis in antiquity, see Hezser, *Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement*; S. Schwartz, *Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad*, Miller, *Sages and Commoners in Late Antique 'Erez Israel*; and Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans*. For an overview of distinctive rabbinic methods of textual interpretation, see Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash*; Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*; Rosen-Zvi, *Between Mishnah and Midrash*.

3. Rubenstein, “Social and Institutional Settings,” 59; Sivertsev, *Households, Sects and the Origins of Rabbinic Judaism*, 9–12; P. Alexander, “The Rabbis and Their Rivals,” 57–62; and Hezser, “Rabbis and the Image of the Intellectual” on early rabbinic disciple circles where students were mentored in close proximity to their rabbi. See Hezser, *Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement*, 332–52, for a survey of the relationship between named rabbis and their students.

these men automatic experts. Expertise is a social phenomenon, something people do in relational contexts rather than something people possess. Rabbinic expertise was thereby shaped by interactions in the streets. Rabbis socialized and noshed with neighbors. Friends of rabbis called upon them for advice or legal favors. In exchange for their expert judgments and instruction, rabbis received social invitations, donations, communal appointments, and recognition of value. I argue that it was these everyday interactions of mutual exchange just as much as their time in the study house that cultivated rabbinic expertise.

This periodization is not to suggest that this was the first flourishing of Torah study. Schools and scholars had populated not only Judaea but also Egypt, Asia Minor, and other diasporic places that Jews called home.⁴ We could speak of authors, such as Philo or Ben Sira, or the communities of Qumran and Alexandria, whose texts survive and attest to ongoing care. Ancient Jewish sages were animated by the stories, language, and intertextual potential of the Hebrew Bible.⁵ The men we call “rabbis,” a term initially used interchangeably with “sages” (חכמים) to denote teachers deeply entrenched in a preexisting world of textual knowledge, would eventually signify a new form of expertise entirely.⁶ Roman annexation of Judaea in 63 BCE followed by the long aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE changed the stakes of Jewish study. Jewish intelligentsia, who had comprised the leadership of Judaea, were forced to flee to the north, making new homes in Galilean cities such as Tiberias, Sepphoris, and Lydda.⁷ With the Temple reduced to rubble, many fundamental aspects of Torah that relied on a central Temple complex were no longer operative.⁸ The basic set of assumptions that grounded Torah knowledge transformed

Other scholars describe the centrality of disciple circles as a primary form of rabbinic education: see Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 83–99; Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 65–83 and 126–52; and Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*. On the institution of the study house or *beit midrash*, see Lapin, “Jewish and Christian Academies”; Mandel, “Concerning the Public Role of the Early Beit Midrash”; Marks, “Who Studied at the Beit Midrash?”

4. For examples of Torah engagement in the diaspora, see Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis*; Rajak, *Translation and Survival*; Shemesh, *Halakhah in the Making*; Gruen, *Diaspora*.

5. Kugel, “Thinking About Scripture.”

6. See Hezser’s argument in *Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement*, which posits that the title “rabbi” was used unofficially before and after 70 CE, only later to become the primary title of those associated with the rabbinic movement.

7. Rozenfeld, *Torah Centers and Rabbinic Activity*, 115–202.

8. For scholarship engaging the ways rabbis engaged with defunct Torah laws and Temple institutions, see Cohn, *Memory of the Temple*; Shemesh, *Halakhah in the Making*; Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature*; and Balberg, *Fractured Tablets*.

under these overwhelming constraints.⁹ Consequently, new questions emerged surrounding ritual practice and observance. A distinct domain of knowledge developed that expanded the sense of Torah to encompass new rabbinic teaching as a result of these questions.

Rabbinic men rose to prominence in a period when Torah expertise stood at a critical juncture. The Torah's vision of Jewish piety rested upon the notion that if Jews would be faithful to its precepts, God would bless the land and make them prosper in return.¹⁰ This promise of divine favor was brutally upended when the Romans wrested Jewish autonomy from the region. This loss of autonomy was not just a theological problem but one that brought tangible institutional destabilization. Human representatives of this promise (i.e., priests) were unmoored from their institutional base. Unlike other peoples across the ancient Mediterranean, the Jews had only one national priesthood on which to rely.¹¹ The loss of both Temple and palace meant the loss of the political, economic, and social jurisdiction that went with them. Priests could no longer offer a surety of how things were supposed to work. Resentment and suspicion surely arose among some Jews.¹² As the author of 2 Baruch wrote with the Temple's loss heavy on the mind,

Moreover, you priests, take you the keys of the sanctuary,
And cast them into the height of heaven,

9. With the dismantling of the Temple precinct, the boundaries of what Torah knowledge was and could be necessarily shifted. I do not contend that the rabbis represented a fundamentally different form of ancient Jewish biblical interpretation or were the first to claim Torah expertise, but I do suggest that the foundation for their study was distinctive. The what of their interpretation may not have changed, but the why and how were impacted by a sequence of events related to Roman imperialism. Here I rely on Berthelot's thinking about the term "im-pact" in *Jews and Their Roman Rivals*, 25–26.

10. See Deut. 28 and Lev. 26 for the covenantal promise of reward for obedience, as well as the general affirmation of the covenant statutes in Exod. 15:26, 18:20; Lev. 18:4–5, 18:26, 20:8, 20:22, 26:3, and 26:15; Deut. 4:1, 4:5–6, 6:17–24, 8:11, 11:13, 11:22, 11:32, and 26:16.

11. Himmelfarb, *Between Temple and Torah*, 105. See Gross, "Hopeful Rebels and Anxious Romans," for the argument that Jewish interconnectivity was "centered on the temple in Jerusalem" (489).

12. The theme of criticizing priests during periods of imperial conquest is well documented throughout the Bible's prophetic literature. According to Tiemeyer, the prophets viewed the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE not solely as a consequence of the populace's sin but also as a result of the priests' neglect of their sacred responsibilities as custodians of Israel's cult (*Priestly Rites and Prophetic Rage*, especially 207–17). I make the assumption that a similar dynamic between some Jews and their priests occurred following Roman conquest.

And give them to the LORD and say:
 “Guard Your house Yourself,
 For lo! we are found false stewards.” (2 Bar. 10:18)¹³

The priestly experts who guarded the house of the Jewish God are depicted here in the posture of confession. They admit to their obvious failure for which this author condemns them. Whether it is fair to castigate the priesthood for the devastation wrought by the hands of the Romans or not, in this author’s mind, the captain goes down with the ship.

One of the traditional assumptions that has largely been called into question is the idea that the rabbis simply took up the Jewish leadership mantle vacated by the priesthood.¹⁴ This was surely not the case. For one, the institution of priestly authority rested upon centuries of habit across the ancient Mediterranean and was constitutionally affirmed for Jews in the Torah.¹⁵ The status of priests was further bolstered by their hereditary claim to their position as ritual specialists. They belonged to a tribe designated as intermediaries between the Jewish God and people, performing the routine offerings and sacrifices that ensured the maintenance of their covenant relationship.¹⁶ Even if Jews outside Jerusalem did not regularly frequent the Temple, tithes and other gifts were sent from afar to support their work.¹⁷ Elite priestly families had

Though certainly not every Jew would have felt the same feeling about the Temple’s destruction, the destruction of the Second Temple came at a much later point in the development of Torah both as an idea and collection of scrolls. It is reasonable to think that a dissonance would emerge with the Temple’s absence. I speak in broad terms here to capture the fundamental ideological tensions that could shift how traditional experts were perceived.

13. Translation from Becker, “2 Baruch,” 1574.

14. See Büchler, *Political and Social Leaders*, 69–71; Alon, *Jews in Their Land*, 27, 100–103; Urbach, “Talmudic Sage” and *The Sages, Their Concepts, and Beliefs*; Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, 1–8; Dinur, *Yisra’el ba-Golah*, 5–7; Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 66. Goodblatt, *Monarchic Principle*, 232–76 assumes the persistence of the Sanhedrin. For examples of recent interventions to complicate the transition from priests to rabbis, see Schäfer, “Rabbis and Priests,” 155–72; P. Alexander, “The Rabbis and Their Rivals”; Z. Weiss, “Were Priests Communal Leaders in Late Antique Palestine?,” 91–111; Hidary, “Rhetoric of Rabbinic Authority.” However, even in these more recent publications, there is a latent assumption that the rabbis are the obvious successors, albeit if not as seamless in their transition.

15. Lev. 8–10. See S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 2 and 63–64 for the significance of the Torah as a national law code.

16. Exod. 32:26–29; Num. 3; Deut. 18.

17. Exod. 30:11–16; Neh. 10:32–34. Cf. Philo, *Her.*; 186, *Spec. Leg.* 77–78, 291, 312; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.110–113; Cicero, *Pro Flac.* 67. In addition to the expected annual tithe, Josephus describes gifts sent from the diaspora: Josephus, *B.J.* 4.567, 5.5, 5.201–205; *Ant.* 18.82, 20.51–53.

long comprised the political leadership of Judaea, pacifying imperial rulers so as to facilitate the continuation of the Temple cult.¹⁸ To suggest that rabbis just took up the role of ritual and legal experts because they asserted expertise in Torah is not a simple claim.

In fact, evidence suggests that for some time, few Jews were compelled to arrange their lives according to rabbinic guidance. Rabbinic texts express repeated discontent with persons they describe as *amei haaretz*, or ordinary Jews who did not heed their advice.¹⁹ In one early source, rabbis are advised to avoid the assemblies of such ignorant men.²⁰ Other sources indicate friction between rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews, with accounts of some sages being robbed,²¹ mistreated,²² or ridiculed.²³ Archaeological evidence in addition to critical reading of rabbinic sources reveals that rabbis did not run synagogues, nor did they hold automatic standing as teachers or judges in their local communities.²⁴ Once thought to be universal, rabbinic influence in this period is now understood to be primarily aspirational.²⁵

New sources of expertise also competed for the attention of Jews within the province. Roman imperial expansion established new forms of local administration, introduced a distinct and imposing legal environment, expanded points of cultural interaction, and shaped the very roads that marked the countryside. Already under the client-king Herod (37–4 BCE), Judaea had physically transformed with a newly constructed harbor, palaces, and temples dedicated to the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus.²⁶ Herod even

18. For a survey see Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in Antiquity*, 13–64.

19. The most comprehensive book on the subject to date is Oppenheimer's *The 'Am Ha-Aretz*, which argued that the *am haaretz* represented two categories of people: those who neglected their tithes and purity status and those who were largely ignorant of Torah. Furstenberg by contrast argues convincingly that there was no literal group at all but rather the term functioned as a discursive legal category marking the non-rabbinic Jew in rabbinic thought ("Am Ha-Aretz in Tannaitic Literature").

20. M. Avot 3:10.

21. Y. Terumot 8:10, 46b.

22. Y. Ta'anit 3:4, 66c.

23. Y. Berakhot 2, 5c.

24. Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 174–209. Alon, "Those Appointed for Money." Even as Alon assumed rabbinic supremacy, he identified the open competition between rabbis and upper-class non-rabbinic elites.

25. S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society* is largely credited with advancing this position.

26. Mazon, "Imperial Cult in the Decapolis," 355.

went as far as to call for the celebration of festivals and games honoring his political patron.²⁷ Following the Temple's destruction, the province continued to populate temples and altars devoted to the imperial cult, bearing with them the notion that the peace and happiness of the empire depended upon divine benevolence through the hand of the emperor.²⁸

This period also saw the circulation of ritual specialists who did not derive their authority from priesthoods or kings.²⁹ Instead, they trafficked in promises and charisma. Some hawked amulets and incantations, others were miracle workers whose abilities extended to bringing life-sustaining rain and bodily healing.³⁰ The presence of self-authorized ritual specialists, or “freelance experts” as Heidi Wendt has termed them, rose in prominence during the first centuries of the common era.³¹ The nascent community of Christ followers who moved in such circles, and would later come to dominate the Roman imperial scene, added an additional voice to the din.

This was a time period when claims of expertise were heterogeneous and uncertain, the competition between experts intense, and the mechanisms of gatekeeping and adjudicating competing claims were weak.³² Nowhere is this dynamic more illuminated than in the Babatha archive. Found in a Judean desert cave in Wadi Hever in 1961, these thirty-five legal documents—largely

27. These acts allegedly prompted a group led by sages named Judas son of Hezekiah and Matthias son of Margalothus to remove a golden eagle that Herod had mounted above the entrance to the Temple's inner sanctum, for which Herod later had them executed. Josephus, *B.J.* 1.648–55.

28. Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 8.

29. Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*; Frankfurter, “The Great, the Little”; Stowers, “Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings.”

30. Frankfurter, “Dynamics of Ritual Expertise,” 159. Much work has been done analyzing the role of amulet and incantation bowl makers, magicians, and rainmakers, other ritual specialists in late antiquity, which has been conveniently collected in the volumes *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Brill, 2002) and *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Brill, 2019). See the recent work of Manekin-Bamberger about the legal specialization of incantation bowl makers (*Seder Mezikin*). Rabbinic texts refer to some rabbis with mystical power or who operated as rain makers, but these sources also position rabbis in competition with these other ritual specialists. On bringing rain, see M. Ta'anit 3:8; Y. Ta'anit 3:4, 66c; Lev. Rab. 10:4. On competition, see Levinson, “Enchanting Rabbis”; Y. Sanhedrin 7:19, 25d; and Y. Hagigah 2:2, 77d.

31. Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*, 6.

32. I draw from Eyal's *The Crisis of Expertise*, which contends that there are cycles when the public can no longer identify who their primary experts are or what universally shared values expert judgments should depend upon.

bills of sale and marriage contracts—provide a window into the life of an ordinary Judean woman and her family in the first century CE.³³ While the owners of these documents used Aramaic scribes and, in some places, used similar clauses both prescribed and proscribed in rabbinic law, in other contracts they swore “by the genius (*tyche*) of the Lord Caesar” and employed Greek scribes.³⁴ No mention of a Jewish court appears, but the authors registered their contracts with local Roman officials. Babatha’s *ketubah*, or marriage contract, was written in Aramaic and contained the promise that she would be a wife “according to the law of Moses and the Jews.”³⁵ In her stepdaughter’s marriage contract, by contrast, the groom promised to feed and clothe her “in accordance with Greek custom.”³⁶ Examining the ways these documents do and do not align with rabbinic law offers a window into the fluidity of legal habits and choices available to Jews in antiquity. These documents represent, in the words of Hannah Cotton, “the raw material of which life is made on which the rabbis wished to put their own stamp.”³⁷ There were a range of ritual and legal experts available to Jews, of which rabbis were but one.

For all these reasons the rabbis did not easily or immediately achieve widespread recognition as Jewish ritual and legal experts. Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there remains a persistent perception that the rabbis were the natural experts to fill an institutional gap left by Roman conquest.³⁸ Their skill in Hebrew at a time when most Jews spoke Greek, their extensive knowledge of the textual contents of the Hebrew Bible, and their commitment to Jewish piety renders them obvious candidates. Their qualifications are further reinforced by the hindsight of readers who know that rabbinic Judaism would become the normative frame for many Jews into the modern era. Even if scholars recognize that ordinary Jews likely did not orient

33. On the significance of the Babatha archive, see Yadin, “Legal Interactions in the Archive of Babatha”; Esler, *Babatha’s Orchard*; Czajkowski, *Localized Law*; Greenfield and Cotton, “Babatha’s Property and the Law of Succession”; Ilan, “Witnesses in the Judean Desert Documents.” This point is repeated in Dalton, “Testimony of Ancient Books,” 55 to complicate the simplistic binary between lived and textual religion.

34. P. Yadin 24; cf. P. Yadin 11 and 16.

35. P. Yadin 10.

36. P. Yadin 18.

37. Cotton, “Rabbis and the Documents,” 190.

38. Urbach, for example, reasoned that the early rabbis derived authority from “their intellectual standing” (“Talmudic Sage,” 119). This line of reasoning assumes that intellectual learning and knowledge assure one standing as an expert.

their lives as the rabbis would have wished, what has shifted is only the assumption that these ordinary Jews simply did not listen to their natural experts.³⁹

Recent insights in expertise studies emphasizes that one does not become an expert through the acquisition of specialized knowledge alone. Such an understanding construes expertise as a primarily cognitive endeavor, taking for granted that acquisition of knowledge equates to an objective state of competence that merits respect.⁴⁰ Expertise in this view is considered a possession of individuals who have trained and acquired mastery at a high degree. Because rabbis possessed knowledge of Torah and skills in its interpretation, their expertise is assumed as a fact.

Instead, social theorists claim that this portrait of expertise neglects the ways expertise is a relational phenomenon.⁴¹ Expertise is a dynamic produced through interaction between would-be-experts representing what they know and others perceiving, accepting, and/or rejecting their judgments. This is not to say that possession of “real” knowledge is not an important part of the equation, but it is only one piece of the puzzle.⁴² Relationships of trust form when non-experts, or those without claim or access to a domain of knowledge, choose to believe in the reliability, value, and skill of those deemed expert with said domain, which requires effective persuasion and verified performance on the part of the expert that influences broader social perception of their value.⁴³ This dynamic thereby influences how would-be-experts convey specialist knowledge and uphold their credibility. Expertise is therefore not tied to a cognitive understanding of possessing “truth,” but to the wide array of relationships that authorize and reinforce the function of expertise.⁴⁴

It is with this in mind that I bring new scrutiny to the expertise of rabbis in late antiquity. The rabbis of Roman Palestine were not *de facto* experts within

39. See, for example, Morton Smith’s critique of Goodenough’s argument for the self-conscious marginality of the rabbis in light of ancient Jewish iconography, by contending that ordinary Jews were largely apathetic or ignorant of rabbinic teaching (“Goodenough’s Jewish Symbols in Retrospect”).

40. See, for example, Coady, *What to Believe Now*; Goldman, *Social Epistemology*; Fricker, “Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy.”

41. See the work of Turner, *Politics of Expertise*; Collins and Evans, *Rethinking Expertise*; Goldman, “Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?”; Agnew, Ford, Hayes, “Expertise in Context.” They each approach the issue of social relation differently, which will be discussed later in this introduction.

42. Here I draw from Carr’s “Enactments of Expertise,” 10, 18.

43. On the significance of trust to expertise, see Watson, *Expertise*, 11–26.

44. On expertise as conceptual function, see Quast, “Expertise,” 18–26.

Jewish communities but rather men who joined localized disciple circles, possessing a measure of social flexibility that afforded the time to study. Their status as experts was not the product of an expertise vacuum created upon the dissolution of the Jerusalem priesthood. Nor did their skills as Torah scholars necessarily mandate that other Jews should obey them. Their expertise was instead dependent upon their ability to persuade others that their mobilization of Jewish cultural resources was beneficial to them. This persuasion was enacted through everyday interactions that played an essential role in the growing perception that rabbinic knowledge was valuable.

A relational approach to rabbinic expertise assesses the objects and people that made the enactment of their expertise possible.⁴⁵ The possibilities for examination are wide ranging and not easily distilled into one arena, but for the sake of scope, this project looks to the explicit and implicit support to be gained through patronage and its related forms. Connections with wealthy friends and acquaintances were crucial. The rabbinic texts this book examines depict instances where merchants, householders, civic administrators, or relatives shared a measure of disposable wealth and other resources with rabbis.⁴⁶ Not only was patronage a tangible potential product of these relationships, but gifts of hospitality, including food, banquets, and housing, direct donations in the form of tithes and charity, and even communal appointments and other favors signaled gestures of support. These friendships also facilitated social occasions for rabbis to perform as experts in public view, whether engaged in rhetorical exposition at a dinner party or summoned to offer legal advice on a matter of business. Assistance like this not only provided tangible backing but served as a public vote of confidence that telegraphed to others the value of rabbinic expertise.

These relationships also imposed their own set of constraints. At the same time that rabbinic texts recognize valuable tangible support, they also express heightened anxiety about the way such relationships could intrude into the rabbinic domain with expectations of favors or personal instruction.⁴⁷ This project examines the sticky situation of funding expertise. Not only did

45. On expertise as enactment, see Carr, "Enactments of Expertise."

46. On aspects of supporting Torah scholars, see Labovitz, "Scholarly Life"; Dalton, "Rabbis as Recipients of Charity"; Kalmin, "Relationships between Rabbis and Non-Rabbis"; Marks, "Follow that Crown."

47. On reciprocity as a dynamic of social relationships, see the work of Komter, "Gifts and Social Relations"; Kolm, *Reciprocity*; Godbout and Caillé, *The World of the Gift*; Gouldner, "Norm of Reciprocity." These build upon the earlier anthropological studies of Mauss, *The Gift*; and Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

these reciprocal expectations threaten the credibility of the rabbinic expert, who might be accused of trading objectivity for profit, but they inverted the power relations inherent to expertise itself. Experts wield epistemic authority because expertise constructs a distinction between those who know and those who do not know. Experts do not merely regurgitate an internal cache of facts that provides automatic authority, but, as E. Summerson Carr argues, expertise is an “intensively citational institutional action,” producing and organizing what counts as knowledge and who has claims to it.⁴⁸ The authority of expertise stems from this power to communicate the boundaries of an authoritative domain of knowledge that will be understood as such, which insists upon a measure of autonomy and insularity on the part of those who contribute to the domain. While this dynamic is inherently unstable, donors upend the table with expectations that intrude upon the constructed specialist domain. This project examines stories attuned to this pressure and illuminates the interpretive arguments aimed to mask the power of these relationships, defend rabbinic autonomy, and assert credibility as impartial judges and ritual specialists. At stake was not only the perception of rabbis as experts but the virtue of the Torah itself.

This book is an examination of rabbinic knowledge as a domain of expertise constructed through relationships of mutual obligation sustained through expectations of exchange. These relationships brought benefit and risk. They strengthened ties between rabbis and wealthy people that provided avenues for wielding expert influence and receiving donations that authorized and reinforced the status of rabbis as Jewish experts. They also brought tension from potential encroachment upon rabbinic ideals, intrusion into an expert domain, and unwanted demands. Expertise studies draws attention to the relational processes that made rabbinic expertise possible while also making legible the tensions that it generated. It is precisely these stories of tense encounters that allow us to see how rabbinic expertise was socially constructed, performed, and defended rather than self-evident. If expertise is a “relation” or “interaction” between experts and “consumers,” then transactions of social exchange between rabbis and their wealthy friends are meaningful nodes for understanding how rabbis became experts.⁴⁹

48. Carr, “Enactments of Expertise,” 19. For similar arguments in the context of modern science, see Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, and *Science in Action*.

49. Turner, “Circles or Regresses?,” 26.

Expertise as Social Enactment

Expertise is one of those concepts so pervasive in ordinary language that we use it all the time without questioning what it means. In its most basic sense expertise describes knowledge attained through specialized skill that warrants our trust.⁵⁰ Yet were we to probe the scope of this concept, we'd encounter a range of situations that unsettles neat definition. How does someone become an expert? How do others recognize that someone is an expert? Is someone an expert because they are better than someone else at a certain skill? Do they have more experience or education? Must someone be certified through institutional mechanisms, such as receiving a PhD or passing the Bar Exam, or can expertise emerge through personal experience, such as intimate knowledge about one's body? How do we reconcile when experts fail or when competing experts bid for our trust? What does it mean when ordinary people feel that they know more than the experts? These questions demonstrate that expertise in fact refers to a range of different aspects describing how and who we know to trust in society.⁵¹

Despite the conceptual relationship between them, expertise is not synonymous with knowledge. Knowledge refers to all the things learned through education and experience. The study of these distinctions and the different classifications of knowledge and means of acquisition comprise an entire field of philosophical study. In epistemology, a distinction is often made between knowledge of how to do something (ability) and knowledge of facts (propositions), a distinction characterized in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) as "knowing how and knowing that."⁵² For example, I know how to swim and ride a bike. At the same time, I could not verbalize exactly how I know those things other than to demonstrate with my body by plunging into the water or pumping my legs. Propositional knowledge, by contrast, describes things known to be true that can be articulated through a statement, such as two plus two equals four, or the fact that New York is a city. Michael Polanyi characterized this difference as one between explicit, easily verbalized knowledge and tacit knowledge, the kind of knowledge that cannot be

50. Ericsson and Towne, "Expertise."

51. "Trust" is another term that is used in a myriad of ways. McKnight and Chervany suggest a "typology of trust" that maps the related concepts and dispositions invoked by the senses of trust. "What Is Trust," 829–30.

52. Ryle, *Concept of Mind* and "Knowing How and Knowing That," 212–25.

easily expressed.⁵³ While explicit knowledge could be studied by reading books and manuals, tacit knowledge could only be acquired through personal experience.

Expertise is related to these broader questions of how knowledge is constituted and learned. Where knowledge encompasses skills, experiences, beliefs, and capacities learned in forms both abstract and practical, expertise generally refers to an active mastery of a domain of such knowledge. But where does expertise derive from? A growing interdisciplinary subfield of psychologists, philosophers, and social scientists are divided in their approaches to answering this question. The ongoing debate centers on whether expertise is something cognitively possessed or whether it is something socially attributed or constructed. Scholars who follow the cognitive or “truth-based” view focus on the individual’s journey to becoming an expert and their performance in that role. They aim to understand the roles of both the conscious and subconscious mind in the expert’s experience. In other words, what is the magic cognitive sauce and true beliefs that they possess? Scholars of the social or “performance-based” view are more focused upon what expertise implies—what does it describe, how is it authenticated, what authority does it produce, what social roles emerge, and who trusts in it? They analyze the external processes of evaluating experts and how society interacts with them. The disagreement between these two positions stems from the question of whether expertise objectively exists in and of itself or whether it is a product of human interaction. This book is situated within the social perspective, but it is useful to identify the stakes of the debate so as to see how the rabbinic material contributes as an important case study to this broader interdisciplinary conversation.

From the cognitive position, expertise is something experts possess because of the unique capacities of their minds. Cognitive science has typically centered the self and consciousness within the brain, analyzing how the self is organized as a cognizing unit within the body’s fleshy regions. The self in these terms is a wholistic entity that engages with the external world through chemically induced emotional behaviors. Oxytocin prompts feelings of trust; adrenaline stimulates mechanisms of defense. Viewing expertise in cognitive terms means that expertise is a product of these internal processes. As psychologists Merim Bilalić and Guillermo Campitelli surmise, “Expertise is a prime example of how various cognitive processes, such as memory, attention, and perception,

53. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.

come together to enable a truly magnificent performance.”⁵⁴ Their research charts how experts show functional and structural changes within the brain that enable their superior act. Other scholars have studied the excellent memory of experts and the effects of deliberative practice upon the cognitive mechanisms of the brain.⁵⁵ These studies attempt to prove that experts are really the best at what they do because of their unique cognitive capabilities.

Expertise in this view is argued to be objectively “true” because an individual possesses real mastery over a domain of knowledge whether their expertise is recognized or affirmed by anyone else. An expert in chess is still a master even if they only play in Washington Square Park on Thursdays.⁵⁶ Whether expertise is configured around “knowing how” to do something well or “knowing” the “truths” of a domain, experts must possess something real that distinguishes them from non-experts. Another version of this perspective emphasizes the “truth” inherent to real expertise. Alvin Goldman has called this a “truth-linked” approach because he argues experts have greater truth-possession and error-avoidance.⁵⁷ Similarly, David Coady argues that an expert possesses “a greater store of accurate information” than most people.⁵⁸ By grounding the epistemic authority of expertise in the mind, the objectivity of expertise is affirmed. The neurons firing in the brain produce the capabilities and logical operators that enable an expert’s ability to know at a level of mastery, shaping the likelihood that they will be objectively correct in their expert judgments. Experts can be trusted, therefore, because their expertise is a real possession.

The problem with this cognitive and “truth-linked” account of expertise is that people we would otherwise consider experts do not apply under this criterion. The history of science is filled with superseded theories espoused by experts of the past that are no longer believed to be true. Humorism, the idea that illness could be attributed to an imbalance of the body’s humors, dominated the field of medicine until the advent of germ theory in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Under a “truth-linked” approach, premodern scholars of medicine would not be considered experts because they did not know the

54. Bilalić and Campitelli, “Studies of the Activation and Structural Changes of the Brain Associated with Expertise,” 233.

55. On memory, see Ericsson, “Superior Working Memory in Experts”; on the effects of deliberative practice, see Ericsson, “Differential Influence of Experience.”

56. Gobot and Charness, “Expertise in Chess.”

57. Goldman, “Expertise.”

58. Coady, *What to Believe Now*, 28

59. Hippocrates, *Hippocrates, Volume IV*. Bhikha and Glynn, “Theory of Humours Revisited.”

“truths” of their domain.⁶⁰ Fortunately, it is not the case that every expert who expounded humorism in premodern medicine lacked the cognitive ability to generate accurate information. Certain technological advances enabled medical and scientific experts to build upon and eventually set aside erroneous scientific beliefs. This diminished veritism suggests that experts do not simply possess more accurate or true information than ordinary people.

A further challenge to the cognitive or “truth-linked” accounts is that they do not sufficiently describe what experts do. Experts do not just know things in their mind, but they do things with what they know in a skilled, intuitive manner not easily expressed in propositional form. The recent interest in studying expertise arose in part from research in artificial intelligence technology that confirmed the significance of intuitive tacit knowledge. The field of cybernetics devoted itself to understanding the arrangements of communication within biological and social systems.⁶¹ It drew attention to embodied causality, or the feedback loops between cognition, bodies, and external environments that guide expert action.⁶² Take the example of a helmsman steering a ship, from whom cybernetics derives its name.⁶³ In the midst of stormy seas, without stable landmarks or a clear view of the celestial sky, the helmsman steers the ship by interpreting the meaning of the wind and currents and the sensations of his body with his own reasoning and experience in quick instinctual movements. The knowledge of what to do is a balance between the laws of sailing that he carries in his mind, his body’s perception of the real-time environment, and his intuitive reaction all channeling through a continuous loop.

Researchers interested in simulating human intelligence in machines sought to replicate this information pathway through knowledge engineering. Their attempt was largely a failure. While computers could do hard things, like master chess or prove mathematical theorems, they could not replicate the instinctual problem-solving capabilities of human experts. This failure was famously termed “Moravec’s paradox,” because Hans Moravec, along with other researchers, found that it was difficult for robotics to achieve even the

60. It could be argued that the truth condition only refers to the possession of more true beliefs than most people at a given time, but that does not resolve the problem that supposedly expert assumptions were false.

61. The earliest published instance of the term “cybernetics” is Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics*.

62. Wiener, *Cybernetics*. For a survey of early cybernetics, see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

63. Gage, “The Boat/Helmsman.”

basic instinctual intelligence of children.⁶⁴ Machines could not stand in for formal models of human cognition because some aspects of knowledge are not easily expressed in reducible form. Expertise could not be simply distilled into a repertory of cognitive rules that could be programmed into a machine because expertise is not produced through the interiorizing of knowledge systems.⁶⁵ The large failure of artificial intelligence to replicate the instinctual behavior and reasoning of experts prompted scholars to look beyond strict cognitive explanations of expertise.

A number of social constructionist approaches have shifted focus from the individual expert's possessed knowledge to various external factors that influence the signification of expertise. One social factor is reputation. Neil Agnew, Kenneth Ford, and Patrick Hayes advocate that the minimum criterion of expertise is "to have at least one reasonably large group of people . . . who consider that you are an expert."⁶⁶ They propose that expert status and authority are not intrinsic but are bestowed by others who acknowledge the individual as an expert. Ben L. Martin similarly states that "expertness is an ascribed quality, a badge, which cannot be manufactured and affected by an expert himself, but rather can only be received from another, a client."⁶⁷ This perspective emphasizes the contingency of expertise that relies on social attribution to come into being. However, if expertise is *only* a reputation, then is expertise real? Some researchers fear the reputational approach produces a world of charlatans, where snake oil salesmen masquerade as experts through an acquired reputation while in reality pawning tricks.⁶⁸ While approaches focusing only on reputation overlook the role of skill in establishing a lasting reputation, epistemologizing expertise does not resolve the problem. Non-experts, by definition, cannot assess an expert's credibility based on the affirmation of objective truth because they are not experts. Instead, the value of the reputational approach is the attention shown to how experts gain credibility through socially informed processes of validation. Reputation is not

64. Moravec, *Mind Children*, 15.

65. Neil M. Agnew, Kenneth M. Ford, and Patrick J. Hayes argue, "Expertise is not synonymous with knowledge. Expertise, unlike knowledge, does not reside in the individual, but rather emerges from a dynamic interaction between the individual and his physical / cultural domain." "Expertise in Context," 67.

66. Agnew, Ford, and Hayes, "Expertise in Context."

67. Martin, "Experts in Policy Processes," 159.

68. See the critique in Watson, *Expertise*, 144–64.

inherently less real because it is a product of social relations; reputation is earned because of real performance deemed to be credible and valuable.

Harry Collins and Robert Evans alternatively shifted focus from externally ascribed reputation to the internal processes of socialization within an expert group. They contend that to become an expert in a domain of knowledge is “a matter of becoming embedded in the social life of the domain, acquiring what is to a large extent, tacit knowledge, so as to internalise the associated concepts and skilful actions to the point of fluency.”⁶⁹ Spearheading a new interdisciplinary field called Studies of Expertise and Experience (SEE), their research assesses the “interactional expertise,” or the jargon, demeanor, and intuition acquired through social interaction with a specialist group.⁷⁰ Collins and Evans stress that expertise extends beyond merely acquiring propositional knowledge or a reputation. What it means to be expert is shaped by the interactions of those working with a domain of knowledge.⁷¹ However, an exclusive focus on the socialization of a specialist group fails to assess the ongoing external processes of public recognition, social persuasion, and institutional compulsion that naturalize a sense of who a community’s experts are and the various ways non-experts engage with (or reject) them. Reputation and socialization are important facets of expertise, but each alone fails to capture the full scope of a relational approach.

Stephen Turner, by contrast, contends that “experts are not just knowers. They are people making claims within a social relationship.”⁷² These claims encompass internal and external relationships and wield real power. They distinguish between types of people (i.e., those who know and those who do not know) and draw boundaries around the domain of knowledge experts claim to control. Experts also claim the means to make that knowledge legible. Their

69. H. Collins, “Studies of Expertise and Experience,” 68.

70. This tacit knowledge cannot be easily learned through verbal explication but must be absorbed through observation and interaction. As they argue, “socialization not embodiment is what underpins expertise.” Collins and Evans, “A Sociological/Philosophical Perspective on Expertise,” 28.

71. Collins and Evans ultimately aim to identify *real* expertise in a contemporary moment when science and its related professions are being called into question. However, they are perhaps too cautious about overemphasizing social construction, which they fear could compromise the objectivity of expertise. They maintain the epistemological truth of a specialist group’s domain of knowledge with which the right exclusion criteria could distinguish real experts from imposters (“A Sociological/Philosophical Perspective on Expertise”).

72. Turner, “Circles or Regresses?,” 26.

knowledge constructs objects that provide occasions for the performance of their expertise. Joseph Dumit, for example, asserts that “expert objects” such as brain scans create opportunities for expert medical interpretation.⁷³ Non-experts choose to trust these claims, not because they themselves can evaluate what is true, but because they believe in the credibility of the expert. They attribute expertise to those claiming expertise, which is its own type of claim. Institutions and funding emerge to support both the attribution and specialist claim of expertise. “Expertise” is therefore the word we use to describe a range of social configurations, claims, and tools that enable the possibility of enacting the ongoing distinction between experts and non-experts.

The rabbis of late antique Roman Palestine are a particularly useful case to consider when thinking about the relational components of enacting expertise. They appear in our sources just as a new domain of knowledge was being produced through the socialization of like-minded men forming the rabbinic specialist group. The Torah, both as textual entity and broader imaginal world of stories, characters, and values, served as a shared cultural object between these men and other Jews. Rabbis made claims about what constituted rabbinic knowledge and used those claims to construct their own objects for expert performance. Rather than brain scans, we might think of more relevant premodern cases, such as a farmer’s field or the fluid discharges of a body, which are framed as objects requiring rabbinic diagnosis.⁷⁴ These claims distinguished who was a true Torah expert, someone affiliated with the rabbinic specialist group with the capacity to diagnose objects of their knowledge, and who was not. They developed a unique jargon, methods of argumentation, and a repertoire of teachings that reinforced this distinction and generated the rabbinic “interactional” expertise identified by Collins and Evans.

However, practical skill and interactional intuition alone did not empower rabbis as experts. Rabbinic expertise was demonstrated in social interaction, expressed through verbal jargon, tied to the cultural object of the Torah, perceived by a public, and enabled by strategic allies who contributed recognition, trust, and donations to support their expert claims. These processes enabled rabbinic expertise to be enacted, thereby producing the very knowledge they professed to be experts in. This network or “assemblage” of relations resists

73. Dumit, *Picturing Personhood*.

74. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 114: “The rabbis, equipped with the science that they themselves created, are now the judges to tell a woman whether she is menstruating, whether she is a *zavah* or whether she has merely an internal wound.”

locating expertise within an individual or reputation and instead assesses all the capacities and contexts required to make an expert performance possible.⁷⁵ The rabbis represent an interesting case where we can chart the production of a new domain of knowledge and its social and material outgrowth through communities of people.

There is a further critical need for an analysis of the relational processes of expertise within premodern sources because expertise studies is dominated by a preoccupation with modernity.⁷⁶ According to Gil Eyal, discussion of expertise accelerated in the twentieth century, as legal questions arose about the official roles of experts, especially in courtrooms and policymaking.⁷⁷ People began questioning what deference should be paid to experts, whose testimony should be treated as “expert,” and what influence experts should wield in politics.⁷⁸

This focus has led some researchers to assume that expertise is a byproduct of the rise of modern science, dismissing the premodern and employing versions of an old evolutionary teleology that views scientific achievement as the pinnacle of human civilization.⁷⁹ Modern professions and scientific experts are viewed as the apex of an evolutionary trajectory from the primitive knowledge leaders of the past. Take for example this description of the professionalization of modern experts within the *longue durée* of history:

From a historical point of view we can see various predecessors of modern experts. For instance, we can conceive of priests or shamans as an extreme, undifferentiated version of “experts” in premodern societies, encompassing

75. This approach relies heavily on Foucault and his influence in actor-network theory (*Archaeology of Knowledge*), especially the work of Latour (*Science in Action*).

76. Scholars of the ancient world have begun to demonstrate that professionalization did in fact occur prior to the advent of science. See the recent edited volume, Verboven and Laes, *Work, Labour, and Professions in the Roman World*.

77. Eyal comes to this figure based on Google Books Ngram data. Eyal, “Expertise,” 2–3.

78. Latour, *Science in Action*. Scientists represented a new kind of professional expert in so-called democratic societies, whose authority of knowledge of scientific facts posed a threat to those processes. Some argued that the scientific facts should supersede the consent of the governed via their chosen policy makers. Much of expertise studies scholarship is preoccupied with responding to the particular problems posed by scientists as experts in modern democracies. See the recent discussion in Turner, “Balancing Expert Power.”

79. This teleology is as old as the disciplines of anthropology and religious studies, as exemplified in Frazer, *Golden Bough*. In recent scholarship of expertise, see Winegard, Winegard, and Geary, “The Evolution of Expertise,” which replicates this evolutionary model.

the roles of counsel, physician, and medium. In the rising empires of antiquity we see the growing importance of scholar-officials—experts with literacy skills—such as the Chinese mandarins often charged with extended official duties in astronomy, architecture or bureaucracy. In medieval times merchants and artisans (bakers, shoemakers carpenters, etc.) formed trade guilds that controlled quality standards, prices, and the rules for apprenticeship thereby organizing the work and markets for craftsmanship in European cities. The historical view shows two trends: differentiation and (self)-organization. Guilds were self-organized and can be considered the predecessors of today's professions. (Mieg and Evetts, "Professionalism, Science, and Expert Roles" 127)

Here Harald Mieg and Julia Evetts chart an evolutionary path from the "undifferentiated" priests of the past to scholars of antiquity to the medieval guilds of Europe that they claim were the precursors to modern experts. These pre-modern figures are different, they argue, because they do not possess the "collegial organization" or the truth of scientific systems of knowledge that mark the modern professions as distinct.⁸⁰

This teleology of the primitive past to scientific discovery is wrong. Priests served as both ritual experts and textual scholars, rather than being replaced by them, and continue to persist to the present day. Nor did scholars only emerge in the waning days of antiquity or always hold the same authority as civic officials. Medieval guilds were not the first to organize communities of skilled people; many took their cues from the ancient Roman *collegia*. This model insists upon an artificial teleology that disassociates geographic contexts and equates every iteration of priest, scholar, and guild through thousands of years of history as signifying the same thing. The key revelation is not an ontological difference between past experts but rather how science has become the accepted basis of "truth." As Bruno Latour and others have insisted, one of the fictions of the Enlightenment is that everything in the pre-modern world is religious and superstitious while modernity is defined by the secular truth of science.⁸¹ But modern experts do not actually have greater organization or stronger claims of truth. They are grounded in a scientific knowledge system rather than other systems of knowledge, and modernity has decided that science is "true" where other systems of knowledge are false.

80. Mieg and Evetts, "Professionalism, Science, and Expert Roles," 129.

81. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

The above teleology presents modern professions as unique “epistemic communities, that is, groups or networks of experts who share knowledge and beliefs that are in general linked to values and interest.”⁸² The rabbis of Roman Palestine throw such assumptions of modernity’s particularity out the window. Rabbis developed “theories about our world” and shared “terminology, a set of assumptions, and paradigmatic cases” about the world.⁸³ Rabbinic texts reflect distinct jargon and methods of interpretation that seek not only to interpret Torah but to apply its meaning to both theoretical and everyday practice. Just as the medical profession is “tied to the value of health” or the legal profession is “tied to the value of justice,” rabbis were tied to the value of Torah. They sought “social recognition and influence” just like any profession in modernity because they believed that their interpretations of Torah held social value.⁸⁴ The rabbis are not the first nor the only specialist group in the premodern world that confounds a simplistic teleology of expertise, but this project argues that they offer a significant case for examining the dynamics of authority, knowledge, and persuasion animating the enactment of expertise.

Expertise and Patronage

This project focuses on the social relationships that enabled rabbinic transmission and performance of knowledge during the first few centuries of the common era. Rabbinic texts from this period provide important glimpses into the relationships between rabbis and their clients. Rabbis dined with the wealthy and met in the homes of their well-connected friends. These interactions fostered relationships built on trust and mutual obligation, which were crucial to the authorization of rabbinic knowledge. However, these relationships also invoked expectations of reciprocity. While they provided a mutual support system, where each party could rely on the other for help and resources, they also intruded upon the autonomy of the rabbinic expert. This book surveys rabbinic texts that showcase these points of contact and the efforts made by rabbis to distinguish these relationships from patronage.

Stephen Turner documents how expertise and patronage are closely intertwined in modern science, contending that “scientists solve the problem that any possessor of embodied knowledge faces: how to convert one’s knowledge

82. Mieg and Evetts, “Professionalism, Science, and Expert Roles,” 132.

83. Mieg and Evetts, 132.

84. Mieg and Evetts, 132.

into money.”⁸⁵ This conversion takes a variety of forms: from large-scale employment, such as research or teaching salaries or offering judgments in a paid advisory capacity, to endowed fellowships, grants, or corporate-funded research aimed at producing a particular (ideally marketable) product. Turner’s interest goes beyond the general observation that funding facilitates the production of knowledge. He considers the processes by which experts are compelled to transmit their knowledge to non-expert clients, participating in an exchange of knowledge for resources. He claims that scientists are constrained by the wishes of their employers and donors, as they often must use the resources they receive toward their funder’s desired ends. Experts therefore cannot exist in epistemic isolation because of the constraints of these relationships of mutual obligation. As Turner dryly states, “The practice of patronage is a response to the fact that the distribution of wealth and the distribution of knowledge and knowledge-generating talent are misaligned.”⁸⁶

The production of rabbinic knowledge did not have access to modern infrastructure like higher education, research labs, and government agencies. However, rabbinic sources indicate that the basic reciprocal dynamic of funding expertise identified by Turner is present in these premodern sources. Early rabbinic texts depict rabbis meeting in each other’s homes or in the homes of friends and using those occasions to debate a matter of Torah or the application of a law. Those meetings did not occur in a vacuum. Someone paid for dinner, owned the home, and offered hospitality out of their largesse. Houses or rooms of study (*batei midrash*) were built by private donors, such as in Dibbura and Sepphoris or by the Silani family in Tiberias.⁸⁷ Students in rabbinic disciple circles needed funds to clothe and feed themselves while devoting their days to study. Stories of wives and parents supporting their Torah scholar kin in extraordinary ways highlight the considerable financial and material challenges such scholars faced. Hillel’s wife, for instance, is said to have sold the very braids upon her head to support his study.⁸⁸ Bible teachers were employed with communal funds and rabbinic judges charged a fee for their time.

85. Turner, “Scientists as Agents,” 376.

86. Turner, *Politics of Expertise*, 2.

87. On the Dibbura synagogue inscription, as well as distinguishing epigraphical rabbis from their literary counterparts, see Miller, “‘This Is the Beit Midrash’” and Fine, “‘Epigraphical’ Study Houses.” For a textual description of a house of study in Sepphoris, see Y. Pe’ah 7:4, 20b. See also discussion in Lapin, “Jewish and Christian Academies,” 511. For Tiberias, see Y. Horayot 3:7, 48a.

88. Y. Shabbat 6.1, 7d. On this story and its parallels, see Marks, “Follow That Crown.”

Rabbis may not have published articles or conducted conferences, but their teachings were eventually collected into anthologies—edited volumes as it were—that demanded scribal technology and tools.

Rabbinic literature is less forthcoming about the costs associated with their work, but Christian counterparts wrote letters and kept ledgers that have survived and detail the many ways their patrons supported their scholastic work. Jerome, for example, was supported financially by widows and received books, which were gift commodities at the time, from wealthy friends to assist his scholarship. Their funds contributed to the material production of texts, such as buying papyrus or parchment, to the building of personal libraries, and even to the hiring of stenographers to take dictation and assistants to read over his drafts. Jerome writes with envy that a friend supplied Origen, the famed ascetic scholar from an earlier century (185–253 CE), with “parchment, money, and copyists,” which allowed him to produce “innumerable books.”⁸⁹ Megan Hale Williams has argued that the austerity of ascetic life was necessarily shattered by the infrastructures of scholarly expertise, which required unencumbered time, libraries, workplaces, tools of the trade, and the means of textual production and dissemination. Scholars in late antiquity could not work in isolation, yet with funding came a loss of control. Jerome complains about patrons who commissioned translations when he wished to work on other things. Other patrons took his writings and circulated them in ways that he found distasteful.⁹⁰ Williams writes that “in general, Jerome’s readers knew what they wanted him to write, and it was not what he had planned for.”⁹¹

Turner details similar demands upon scientists who are beholden to the interests of their funders. These demands may threaten the scientists’ autonomy in terms of control over scientific standards and choice of knowledge production methods.⁹² Donors, including patrons, employers, and one-time gift givers, provide the financial support that enables knowledge production. Funding also grants authorization to the experts themselves, validating their work and expanding their reputation within their field. Scientific projects that are awarded federal grants, for example, are viewed as passing a bar of viability

89. Jerome, *Epist.* 43.1. All references to Jerome’s letters adapted from Jerome and F. A. Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

90. On Jerome’s tense relationship with his elite networks, see Williams, *The Monk and the Book*, 233–60.

91. Williams, *The Monk and the Book*, 247.

92. Turner, “Scientists as Agents,” 381.

and importance. Yet with benefit also comes threat. Clients can expect privileges or oversight in exchange for their investment. They might want to be involved in the production of knowledge, solicit special favors, or lay claim to the expert's time. Whether showing up in a lab, demanding research updates, or even holding a congressional oversight hearing, the clients of experts can invoke the power of being a donor at any time.

While Turner is thinking about modernity, his insights shed light on an important dynamic that I argue was present between rabbis and their clients. In stories about rabbis engaging with donors, employers, or potential clients, there are similar dynamics of benefit and risk. These stories describe conflict, gendered insults, and contests of superiority between rabbis and their acquaintances. These stories typically resolve with the rabbi in a position of expert authority, as we might expect from texts authored from the rabbis' perspective, but they also preserve tensions that suggest similar scenarios in real life were fraught. They offer cases of how expertise and patronage were intertwined in the ancient past. Although this entanglement manifested in distinct ways in rabbinic relationships, it resembles the tensions that plague the production of expertise today.

There are three key concepts that I use to formulate the intersections of knowledge production and patronal support of expertise within rabbinic literature. The first is specialist groups. I define a specialist group as an epistemic community of experts and professionals with a shared set of beliefs, values, and skills in a particular domain of knowledge. The rabbis formed a new epistemic community that used distinct hermeneutical methods, the boundaries of which demarcated members of their specialist group from non-specialists. These boundaries were both formal, such as education requirements and lineage of instruction, and informal, such as shared experiences or contacts. The shared beliefs and values of the rabbinic epistemic community served as a foundation for rabbinic work and constructed an ideological boundary designating rabbis as the spokespeople of Torah.

The second concept is friendship. Friendship, as Elizabeth Telfer defines it, encompasses a broad spectrum of interpersonal relationships comprising reciprocal services, mutual contact, and joint pursuits.⁹³ These are intricate relationships that disrupt clean boundaries and norms. While in some contexts "friendship" conjures notions of intimacy and social proximity, this project uses the term expansively to consider the broader network of relationships that include acquaintances, family, and rightful friends because each level of

93. Telfer, "Friendship."

intimacy shares the tugs of mutual obligation. Such relationships were invaluable to the cultivation of rabbinic expertise, even as they complicated the ideals of rabbinic autonomy and expert authority. Michael Satlow and Eliezer Diamond have both rightfully framed the ideal of devotion to Torah study as an ascetic ideology that forsakes worldly preoccupations for higher-order concerns.⁹⁴ This impulse, Satlow contends, understood Torah study to be “an activity of the elite” because it assumed that most Jews could not engage in the total mastery of the rabbinic curriculum.⁹⁵ I argue that this ascetic impulse is a fundamental product of drawing boundaries of specialist groups but did not represent a totalizing insularity. Rabbis could not exist in epistemic isolation. They had friends, family members, and other acquaintances who both validated the rabbinic specialist group and through their interactions directly shaped the rabbinic domain of knowledge.

The final concept that I use is donor systems. By donor systems I refer in the broadest terms to social relationships that make possible the production of expertise, which allows me to collect a range of rabbinic texts that are seldom treated together. I survey texts where charity, tithes, patronage, benefaction, communal funds, food gifts, hospitality, and even dinner parties supported rabbinic work. While scholars have analyzed the fundamental differences between these types of gifts, emphasizing distinction can have the adverse effect of siloing textual evidence. I want to illuminate the way these types of gifts are conceptually related, which contributed to the similar ways rabbis imagined their engagement with them. Marcel Mauss contended that “the terms commonly used—present and gift—are not themselves exact,”⁹⁶ and Mark Osteen frames the difficulty well: “The Question of the gift is thus a question of categories, and we fail to account for them adequately if our classification remains rigid.”⁹⁷ The benefit of casting a wide net is that I can group the limited sources that we have from rabbinic literature together so as to assess their shared links. While hospitality and charity are different types of transactions, for example, they share conceptual logic in the rabbinic material.

My aim is to think expansively about the social relationships that influenced and supported rabbinic expertise through expectations of mutual

94. Satlow, “‘And On the Earth You Shall Sleep,’”; and Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*.

95. Satlow, “‘And On the Earth You Shall Sleep,’” 220.

96. Mauss, *The Gift*, 124.

97. Osteen, *Question of the Gift*, 23.

obligation. This means looking at texts that explicitly describe gifts of goods and money but also stories where acquaintances and friendships were forged with the theoretical potential for future gifts.⁹⁸ It will invariably frustrate some readers that I employ the category of donors to discuss certain examples where no explicit gift exchange is stated in the text, but I do this intentionally. Informal interactions were not only occasions where rabbis performed their expertise, but they helped forge friendships of varying stripes. Friendship imposes expectations of reciprocity that often manifest in later, tangible support. By including these kinds of interactions within our scope, we can better assess the microtransactions that contribute to tangible exchange.

For example, I once met a neighbor at a mutual friend's barbecue. We followed each other on social media, made plans to meet up, and had dinner together over several months. Eventually, she asked if I would consider donating to a local campaign she was running. Although the candidate was not from my district and I did not know him well, I felt compelled by our casual acquaintance to contribute. Analyzing my donation to that campaign might lead to assumptions about my political party and investment in local politics. However, such analyses would fall short if they did not account for the social interactions that led to the donation in the first place. I would not have donated if she had not asked. Nor was she forming a friendship with me in a long game attempt to fundraise. These soft expectations of reciprocity are rooted in the social norms we develop through our social interactions with others. They are not always explicitly stated, but they influence our behavior and the choices we make. My neighbor's request for a donation was not a formal agreement or contract, but rather a natural extension of our growing acquaintance and shared interests.

When rabbinic experts received gifts of hospitality, goods, or social favors, these did not come without strings attached. Gift exchange ties individuals together through shared obligation to balance their social debts to each other. Theories of this inherent gift reciprocity begin with Marcel Mauss's seminal work, "Essai sur le don."⁹⁹ A French sociologist at the turn of the twentieth century and nephew of Émile Durkheim, Mauss was preoccupied with

98. See Van Berkel, *Economics of Friendship*.

99. For commentaries on Mauss's work, see Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*; Sahlin, *Stone Age Economics*, 149–83; Firth, *Symbols*, 368–402; Parry, "The Gift, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift,'" 453–73; Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, 98–111; Derrida, *Given Time*; Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions*; Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities*.

understanding the social relationships generated through gifts. In these essays, Mauss contends that gifts are never free, but activate an entire social system comprised of “religious, legal, moral, and economic” expectations, which inherently place constraints upon it. Fundamental to the gift is a system of exchange, Mauss insisted, requiring that each gift be reciprocated. Some gifts are returned in kind, others must exceed the gift’s value, and still others will fail to ever fully reciprocate the initial gift. Society is built, Mauss argued, upon these transfers of gifts. Givers and the recipients of gifts enter a continual relationship of masked obligatory actions encoded with social meaning. As Mark Osteen contends, “Gifts at once express freedom and create binding obligations, and may be motivated by generosity or calculation, or both.”¹⁰⁰

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the ways Jewish giving interacted with institutions of patronage and benefaction.¹⁰¹ Patronage is a formal system of gifts sustained by reciprocal exchange.¹⁰² These relationships took a variety of forms, including between landowners and tenants, wealthy elites and scholars, and even between the emperor and the citizen body. Donations could take the form of individual personal gifts and favors, or come in the form of benefaction (*euergetism*), which expected civic leaders to personally finance the building of monuments, city centers, and festivals in exchange for their social position.¹⁰³ As a “patron of public life,” the benefactor was repaid for their efforts through civic honors and memorialization through inscriptions.¹⁰⁴

The rabbis had reason to be uneasy with formal patronage and benefaction. Seth Schwartz has argued that the rabbis inherited an ideal of “corporate

100. Osteen, *Question of the Gift*, 14.

101. S. Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?*; Gardner, *Origins of Organized Charity*; Gardner and Wealth, *Poverty, and Charity*; Gray, *Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*; Wilfand, *Poverty, Charity, and the Image of the Poor*; Sorek, *Remembered for Good*; Marks, “Who Studied at the Beit Midrash?”

102. Saller, *Personal Patronage* argues that these relationships are inherently asymmetrical because the donor—who is often of a superior social position—controls the purse strings and so holds power over the recipient of their attentions. The recipient is perpetually in the donor’s debt. However, we should be careful to not assume a flat asymmetry that might distract from more overlapping cases with less hierarchical differences.

103. Andre Boulanger coined the term in *Aelius Aristide et la sophistique dans la province d’Asie au IIe siècle de notre ère*. “Euergetism” is itself a neologism derived from the epigraphic habit of honoring civic donations from *euergetai* or benefactors.

104. Veyne conceived of benefaction as a canopy upheld by three “themes”: voluntary patronage, political trade, and memorialization. *Bread and Circuses*.

solidarity” from the Torah that resisted relationships of social dependency.¹⁰⁵ The association of patronage with imperial “Romanness” in addition to the imposition of social debt may have sat uneasily in rabbinic thinking. This book contributes to this examination of patronage but from a different vantage point. Unease could be provoked from the expectations that coincide with the funding of expertise. Donors to rabbis expected the same reciprocal favors as patrons in other settings. But I argue that rabbis would not have wanted their donors to become their patrons because it usurped their expert autonomy. In addition, by linking Torah expertise with the exploitative mechanisms of patronage and employment, it might devalue Torah itself. This project surveys the arguments that rabbinic literature produces to negotiate the constraints of patronage as a way to retain the tangible benefits of donors while distancing rabbinic experts from a position of social debt.

Rabbis may have resisted the logic of Roman patronage and constraints of reciprocity in some contexts, but their expert domain could not ignore the benefits of donors. Scholarly expertise required donor buy-in because it both sustained knowledge-producing work and authenticated their claims of expertise. Rabbis who formed friendships with wealthy neighbors would have become accustomed to the expectations of reciprocity. They therefore developed interpretive strategies to reframe these gifts, either by invoking religious categories like tithes or charity, or by reconfiguring the power of the donor relationship to assert the religious and symbolic legitimacy of supporting Torah scholars. Gifts for rabbis were therefore framed as a public good rather than selfish private funds by introducing God as a meaningful entity into the socioeconomic relationship.

Rabbinic expertise was continually enacted and challenged through social interactions. These interactions provided opportunities for rabbis to make expert pronouncements, offer advice, and provide interpretation both within their expert group and outside of it. Through such occasions, rabbinic expertise itself was shaped, as rabbis were compelled to transmit their knowledge to non-experts in a convincing form. The relationships between rabbis and their wealthy friends therefore provide a useful window into these dynamics. These relationships imposed explicit expectations of reciprocity and required the rabbinic expert to persuade and defend their claims to people who wielded power over them. By doing so, these acquaintances pierced the veil of epistemic isolation that often characterizes expert groups. Expertise is a delicate

105. S. Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?*, 18.

balance between autonomy and client needs, and it requires ongoing effort and adaptation to maintain.

Methodology and Rabbinic Texts

I have primarily focused on rabbinic sources from the Roman province of Syria Palaestina that were largely composed prior to the fifth century CE. My interest is in the rabbis living in Roman Galilee who produced these sources within a specific imperialized place. These men initially referred to themselves by somewhat generic terms like *hakhamim* (sages) or *zeqenim* (elders), but we now know they were becoming a new class of Torah experts that emerged as a legible group in the second century CE.¹⁰⁶ They saw themselves as an extension of the *Torat Moshe*, the ancestral collection of Jewish law and legend, and cultivated a distinct expertise in the nitty gritty components of an increasingly atomized biblical text. They produced a particular form of piety that I call “grammarian piety,” which meant they viewed the granular linguistic components of the Hebrew Bible as both an intellectual and spiritual avenue awaiting rabbinic generative hermeneutics.¹⁰⁷ Their thinking fashioned a particular landscape of Jewish culture—transcendent in the sense that they linked their novel traditions to the biblical and Second Temple past and yet also contingent upon the concerns of their day.

Their earliest textual material is called *tannaitic* after the first generations of rabbis, the *tannaim*, or reciters, who authored it.¹⁰⁸ Their most important textual corpus is the Mishnah. Codified around 200 CE, this anthology collects rabbinic teachings composed in a distinct Hebrew describing how laws in the Torah might be applied in their post-Temple context. This collection became the foundation for rabbinic thinking. The Tosefta, a related companion collection, serves a similar purpose and covers many of the same topics as the Mishnah, but it also contains different material and teachings authored after the Mishnah was collected. The next group of texts are called *amoraic* because they were composed by the rabbinic *amoraim*, literally “those who speak.” This group took the Mishnah and used it as a textual anchor to think

106. Hezser, *Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement*; S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*; Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans*.

107. For more on grammarian piety, see Dalton, “Rabbis as Recipients of Charity.”

108. On the meaning of *tannay* in the Palestinian Talmud and the role of the sages themselves as reciters, see Vidas, “What Is a Tannay?”

with. The resulting tractates of the Palestinian Talmud (and later Babylonian Talmud) are formally commentaries upon the Mishnah, but they are best viewed as anthologies of commentary, original teachings, stories, and folklore, including quotations from both the Tosefta and other non-Mishnaic teachings called *baraitot*, inspired by the content in the Mishnah. Scholars largely agree that this Talmudic collection was redacted sometime in the fifth century CE, while the only full extant manuscript (Leiden Or. 4720) dates to the thirteenth century.¹⁰⁹ Other commentaries and teachings from both the tannaim and amoraim are collected in midrashic form, meaning a proof-text from the Torah served as the textual anchor rather than the Mishnah. These texts similarly contain legal commentary, folklore, stories, as well as different versions of passages that appear in the Talmud.

The sources that comprise these volumes of rabbinic literature are difficult to date. While we think we know more or less when the collections received their near final form, it is difficult to pin down individual events, rabbis, or passages therein. All rabbinic texts are comprised of layers of material dating to different rabbinic generations, signaled by differences in language and composition structure. These anthologies span hundreds of years, collating the thoughts of generations of teachers and students with attributions to individual rabbis resting upon precarious historical ground. This means that when a source in the Talmud attributes a saying to an earlier tannaitic rabbi, for example, the historicity of that attribution is suspect, especially when one saying might be attributed to different rabbis in different sources.¹¹⁰ Other times rabbis who were not contemporaneous with each other may show up in the same scene. While time travel makes for compelling rhetorical effect, it does not allow us to do concrete historical work. Thus, one cannot swiftly carve out historical proof from the page.

I read these texts first as redacted versions, parsing the argumentation, interpretive techniques, and composition of the passage at hand. Then I consider carefully what kind of realities are being depicted and theorize what the implications might be. I am making a general historical argument about the kinds of exchanges rabbis likely had with their clients in the second through fifth centuries CE based upon anecdotal stories in rabbinic literature. While these stories cannot be unproblematically taken at face value, I operate under the

109. See Mayer, *Editio Princeps*, for the manuscript and book history of the Palestinian Talmud.

110. Neusner, "Why We Cannot Assume the Reliability of Attributions."

general assumption that they provide and assume real social patterns. People ate with each other, gave each other gifts (in various forms), and sought favors from friends in late antiquity. I therefore read these anecdotal stories for glimpses of the social transactions encoded, even when the text serves a different interpretive and/or legal purpose. I assume that while those individual accounts may be fabrications themselves, they represent plausible types of social interactions understood by the authors.

What this means in practice is that I may have a text that depicts Rabbi Gamaliel and a wealthy Jewish merchant at a banquet when there may in fact have never been such an occasion. Or there may have been such a banquet but it was Rabbi Yoḥanan not Rabbi Gamaliel in attendance, or the wealthy merchant may have not in fact been a merchant. The banquet could be loosely informed by historical circumstances or not at all! The text does not relay historical events and figures with reliability. I do not, however, believe that should stop us from historicizing the text. We can ask what the representation of Rabbi Gamaliel and a wealthy Jewish merchant might tell us about similar banquets and similar social relationships. We can consider intentions, anxieties, and aspirations in the discernible choices made in the composition and redaction of the text. This historicizing does not leave us with hard evidence, neither does it leave us with nothing.

The other issue to consider when using rabbinic sources is whether one is making a synchronic or diachronic argument. This book spans those texts traditionally identified as tannaitic (Mishnah, Tosefta, Halakhic Midrashim) with those identified as amoraic (Talmud and Hermeneutical Midrash). There are meaningful differences between the two periods, and amoraic literature often includes details and practices that are absent from tannaitic literature. When useful, I identify trends or differences between these sets, but I prefer not to argue from absence. There is a tendency to view rabbinic literature through an evolutionary model where earlier strata are deemed underdeveloped.¹¹¹ But just because an early rabbinic source does not describe something, such as fundraising, for example, does not mean we can say with confidence that rabbis of that period never received donations. Absence can occur because such practices were foreign or because the genre or the focus of the redactors led to its omission.

This raises a methodological problem since the assessment of rabbinic expertise rests between the redacted textual tradition and the living people who interacted with rabbis, both of whom we know very little. This requires an element of

111. See the critique of this method in Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud*, 28.

(continued...)

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