

What is disgrace? A new interpretation of *Pesahim* 116:a

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מתנ' ... ולפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח
ודורש מארמי אוכד אבי עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כולה:

גמ' ... מאי בגנות רב אמר מתחלה עובדי עבודת גלולים היו אבתינו
[ושמואל] אמר עבדים היינו אמר ליה רב נחמן לדרו עבדיה עבדא
דמפיק ליה רביה לחירות ויהיב ליה כספא ודהבא מאי בעי למימר
ליה אמר ליה בעי לאודויי ולשבוחי א"ל פטרתי מלומר מה נשתנה
פתח ואמר עבדים היינו

Mishnah ... And according to the understanding of the son, his father teaches him. He begins with disgrace and ends with praise and he expounds from 'My father was a wandering Aramean...' until he finishes the entire section.

Gemara ... What is 'with disgrace'? Rav said at first our fathers were idol worshippers. [Shmuel] said we were slaves. Rav Nahman said to Daro his slave, 'a slave whose master released him to freedom and gave him silver and gold, what does he have to say to him?' He said to him, 'he has to thank him and praise him'. He said, 'you have exempted us from saying *mah nishtanah*'. He opened and said, 'we were slaves'.

This is the *sugya* as it appears in the Vilna Shas. The standard understanding of the *sugya* is that Rav and his interlocutor are discussing what should come between *mah nishtanah* and the exposition of *parshat habikkurim* (*Devarim* 26:5-8) at the *Seder*. The Mishnah specifies that this intermediate section should begin with 'disgrace' and end with 'praise', but does not specify what these are. The *gemara* asks only about the 'disgrace'. *Rav* states that it refers to the fact that our earliest ancestors worshipped idols. A second opinion, either anonymous or that of Shmuel, claims that our disgrace consisted of having been slaves in Egypt. Commentators from the era of the *Geonim* and *Rishonim* add little except to state that we rule according to both opinions.¹ This is what we find in our *Haggadah*. Immediately after *mah*

¹ See. *Rif*, *Rosh*, and *Rabeinu Hananel ad loc.*

Among the early commentators on the *Haggadah* there is somewhat more diversity of opinion. *Ra'avan* and *Ba'al Shibolei haLeqet* echo *Rabeinu Hananel*. However, *Ritva* argues that the *mahloqet* in the *gemara* is only about which form of 'disgrace' to say first and argues that the *halakha* therefore follows the second opinion. Both *Amudraham* and *Ri ben Yakar* agree that the *halakha* follows the second opinion and elaborate a somewhat cumbersome theory in which the *Haggadah* from 'we were slaves' until 'matzah and maror laid out before you' is actually the *Haggadah* of the second opinion, and from then onwards is the *Haggadah* of Rav. See *Haggadah Shel Pesah 'im Peirushei haRishonim: Torat Hayyim* (ed. Ketznelbogen, Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 30-33, 60.

nishtanah we state that we were slaves in Egypt. A little later we follow Rav in declaring that our ancestors worshipped idols. The second opinion quoted in the *gemara* comes first based on the story brought by the *gemara* immediately following the debate. In this story, R. Nahman asked his servant a question, declared that the answer was sufficient to exempt the assembled from *mah nishtanah*, and 'opened' with 'we were slaves'.

In this essay, I wish to advance an entirely different interpretation of this *sugya*. First, however, we shall review the present state of knowledge. In so doing, I am heavily reliant on Joshua Kulp's synthesis of scholarship in the *Schechter Haggadah*.²

Who are the participants in the dispute?

The first opinion is almost certainly that of Rav. This is how it appears in most manuscripts and printed editions and is corroborated by the presence of a very similar statement in his name in the *Yerushalmi*, which we shall look at shortly. The weight of the manuscript evidence, as well as citations among the *Rishonim*, however, indicates that the second opinion was stated not by Shmuel, but Rava.³ Since the *gemara* here has the formal appearance of a *mahloqet*, it is likely that a scribe mistakenly edited it to include Rav's normal sparring partner, Shmuel. The *gemara*, properly understood, is, however, not really describing a *mahloqet* in the strict sense. Rav and Rava did not disagree with each other; one stated his opinion and the other stated his a century afterwards.⁴

Knowing which personality to attach to these two opinions is highly relevant. Rav was born in Babylonia, but made '*aliya*' and studied under Yehuda haNasi. On his return to Babylonia he made it his mission to bring with him the Rabbinical scholarship he had learnt in the holy land. Under his influence, discussion of the Mishnah became the default form of Jewish study in Babylonia. Rava, by contrast, was responsible more than any other figure for pioneering an independent and distinctively Babylonian form of Judaism.⁵ When people talk – with admiration or derision – about 'talmudic reasoning' they are essentially talking about the form of scholarship he pioneered, characterized by abstruse discussion of small details, intensive questioning, and a willingness to extrapolate from close readings of the

² J. Kulp, *The Schechter Haggadah: Art History and Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2009), pp. 201-3, 211-3.

³ The opinion is also attributed to Rabah, Rabin, Rav Yosef, and Rav himself. All of these attributions could have originated as copyist errors from Rava. In particular, the attributions to Rav are clearly the result of dropping a letter. Furthermore, the arguments in this essay are also compatible with the attribution of the opinion to either Rabah or Rav Yosef.

⁴ This explains why the second opinion is not mentioned in the *Yerushalmi*, where we would expect to find it had it belonged to Shmuel.

⁵ With that said, it should be noted that Rava, as one would expect of a pioneer, was less 'Babylonian' than those who came after him and that the majority of his legal rulings reflect traditions from the land of Israel, in particular that of Rabi Yohanan. See B.S. Cohen, 'Was there really a Rava II? (A Re-Examination of the Talmudic Evidence)' *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, (103:3, 2013), pp. 278-9.

Mishnah in creative ways. It is in the light of the profound differences between these two *Amoraim* that we should read their respective opinions on what constitutes 'disgrace'.

Rav's opinion

According to the *Bavli*, Rav's opinion is that the 'disgrace' with which the father should begin the story of *yetziat mitzaryim* is the fact that our earliest ancestors were idolaters. The *Yerushalmi* presents a similar, but more complex, picture.

רב אמר (ב)תחילהת (צריך להזכיר) בעבר הנהר ישבו אבותיכם וג'
ואקח את אביכם את אברהם מעבר הנהר וגו' וארבה.⁶

Rav said (in the) beginning (he has to mention), 'Across the river dwelled your fathers....' 'And I took your father Avraham from over the river.... and I increased....'

(Y. *Pesahim* 10:5)

Here, Rav instructs us to begin the *Maggid* by reciting Joshua 24:2-4. The connection with his opinion as described in the *Bavli* is obvious, since the first of these verses states that the ancestors of Avraham 'served other gods'. However, there seems more to it than that. If Rav had only wished to emphasize this feature, he could have mandated only the recitation of 24:2. Moreover, since the passage ends with Ya'aqov going down to Egypt, it seems unlikely that the passage represents the transition from 'disgrace' to 'praise'.

Instead, argues Kulp, it seems that Rav's true opinion is that the 'disgrace' referred to in the Mishnah includes our entire history as nomads living mostly outside the land of Israel. Such a conception of how the exodus story should begin 'has a certain thematic affinity'⁷ with the plain meaning of *Arami oved avi*, a point of some significance which we shall return to later. The *Bavli* sanitizes this opinion for a Babylonian audience who would not have been happy to hear, and perhaps would not have comprehended, that living in exile and not having a fixed geographical abode is a form of disgrace. It does this by taking one aspect of Rav's conception of 'disgrace' and amplifying it into the entire story.

Rava's opinion

Looking only at the *Bavli*, it is hard to see why Rava considered Rav's definition of 'disgrace' to be inadequate and offered a different one. Wouldn't he, and any other

⁶ Y. *Pesahim* 10:5. I have followed Kulp's emendations based upon Lieberman, which render the passage more sensible, but do not change the meaning.

⁷ *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 201.

rabbi, agree that it is disgraceful to worship false deities? By looking at the *Yerushalmi*, though, we can understand better why he felt compelled to offer an alternative. From his point of view there was nothing particularly disgraceful in living outside the land of Israel or moving from one locale to another as economic opportunities dictated. Instead, Rava suggested, the 'disgrace' with which the father should begin his story is one that any Babylonian Jew would understand: being slaves to foreign people.⁸

However, this does not entirely explain the matter. If Rava thought it unacceptable, or incomprehensible, to describe living outside of the land of Israel as a 'disgrace', he had another alternative available: the opinion of Rav as described in the *Bavli*. Kulp argues that Rava also wanted a story that was 'more limited in historical scope, focusing on the immediate topic of the evening'.⁹ However, this doesn't really explain anything, because after the father starts with 'we were slaves' he then has to expound the passage from *Arami oved avi*. Starting the story in the middle then going back to the beginning doesn't make it more focused; it makes it more confusing. Others have suggested that this opinion represents a more corporeally oriented, or perhaps 'nationalist', alternative to Rav's spiritual approach.¹⁰ The exodus, on such a view, is primarily a story about how we left Egypt and became a free people, not how we came to be servants of G-d. This interpretation is premised on the attribution of the view to Shmuel, based his famous opinion that the only difference between our world and the messianic age is the national liberation of the Jewish people.¹¹ However, there is no reason to think that Rava should have had any such motivation.

The correct interpretation of the Mishnah

So far, we have taken it as a given that the Mishnah is instructing the father to do two separate things: first to 'begin with disgrace and end with praise' and, secondly, to 'expound from *Arami oved avi* until he finishes the section'. There is however, another interpretation, which has most recently been argued with some force by Mitchell First.¹² If we look at the Mishnah on its own, the second clause seems to be an explanation, or restatement, of the first. How does the father 'begin

⁸ Modern Jews, if they were to reflect on it, would probably be as troubled by the assumption that being a slave (as opposed to owning a slave) is disgraceful as much, if not more, than the assumption that living outside your homeland is disgraceful. Rava was presumably untroubled by such sentiments.

⁹ *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 201.

¹⁰ See *Maharal, Gevurot Hashem*, 52. (https://www.sefaria.org/Gevurot_Hashem.52?lang=bi stanza 4). See also E. Mihaly, 'The Passover Haggadah as PaRaDiSe', *CCAR Journal* (53:1996), p.8

¹¹ See B *Sanhedrin* 99a, *Shabbat* 63a, *B'rachot* 34b.

¹² M. First, 'Arami Oved Avi, Uncovering the Interpretation Hidden in the Mishnah', *Hakirah* (13, 2012), pp. 136-9.

with disgrace and end with praise'? He 'expounds from *Arami oved avi* until he finishes the section'.

This interpretation explains why the Mishnah does not specify what the 'disgrace' and 'praise' are. It also works perfectly with the passage, *Arami oved avi* as understood on a literal level. The first clause, 'My father was a wandering Aramean,' is the 'disgrace' and the conclusion of the passage is the praise.¹³ It is also supported by at least one tanaitic source where the opening of *parshat habikkurim* is connected with disgrace.¹⁴ Most importantly, it removes the need to insert a preface before the exposition of *parshat habikkurim*, which is, on its own, a comprehensive retelling of the exodus story. There is only one problem, however. Rav was a student of Yehudah haNasi himself. It is simply not plausible that the correct reading of the Mishnah was forgotten and a first generation *Amora* should answer a non-existent question predicated on a basic misreading of a famous Mishnah with great practical relevance.¹⁵

Reinterpreting Rav's opinion

If we step back, however, it is apparent that there is nothing in Rav's statement that is incompatible with this reading of the Mishnah. Let us assume that it is understood that *Arami oved avi* is identical to 'he begins with disgrace'. The *gemara* asks what is disgraceful about this phrase and Rav provides an answer. True, he explains, the fact that our fathers were nomads who lived much of their lives outside the land of Israel is not disgraceful, however, *their* fathers were idolaters, which certainly is. As well as reconciling Rav's statement with the plain meaning of the Mishnah, it also removes the need to claim that the *Bavli* is sugar-coating Rav's

¹³ This is even more the case if the recitation was originally supposed to continue until *Devarim* 26:9. This seems to me to be a very reasonable assumption. Nevertheless, it is not actually necessary. Verse 8 can easily be considered a form of praise.

¹⁴ B *Sotah* 32b. There is an equivalent statement also in the name of Rabi Shimon in *Midrash Tanaim*, which is a 'rediscovered' midrash, not all of which can be relied on with perfect confidence. See First, 'Arami Oved Avi', p. 135 f. 22. See also footnote 23 for a list of Rabbinic and academic commentators who have interpreted the Mishnah in this way.

¹⁵ See Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 214. Two explanations have been offered for this problem. Rav David Tzvi Hoffman argued that the change in understanding the Mishnah happened as a result of dropping *Devarim* 26:9 from the exposition of *parshat habikkurim* after the temple was destroyed. The *shevah* of the Mishnah originally referred to 'and He brought us to this place' and when these words were dropped it became unclear what *shevah* referred to. Therefore, the *Amoraim* were forced into a different explanation of the Mishnah according to which the transition from *genut* to *shevah* was something different from the exposition of *arami oved avi*. Both the assumption that the exposition of *arami oved avi* went back to the temple era and the assumption that *Devarim* 26:9 was originally part of the exposition are dubious and this theory doesn't really explain how the correct meaning of the Mishnah was lost so quickly unless we resort to the claim that even the compilers of the Mishnah were unaware of its meaning. More recently, David Henshke has argued that the identification of *g'nut* with *arami oved avi* was premised on understanding the verse to be referring to the nomadic status of the *avot*, but that by the time of the *Amoraim* this understanding had been pushed out by the interpretation 'An Aramean tried to kill my father'. Again, this explanation can't really account for the speed with which the correct interpretation of the Mishnah was supposedly forgotten. Moreover, the correct understanding of *arami oved avi* can hardly have been completely forgotten, since it is present in *Sifrei*, which may not even have been written down yet. See D. Henshke, *מדורש ארמי אבד אבי*, *Sidra* (4, 1998), pp. 34-9.

interpretation for a *galut* audience. It is more reasonable to suppose that Rav himself offered such an explanation to students who were perplexed about what was so disgraceful about the *avot*. Finally, we can dispose of the question of why the *gemara* only asks about the ‘disgrace’, but is silent on the ‘praise’. The question was why *Arami oved avi* constitutes ‘disgrace’; there was no doubt as to why the conclusion of *parshat habikkurim* constitutes ‘praise’.

We also need to look once again at Rav’s statement in the *Yerushalmi*. As a rule, scholars have interpreted this in the light of his better-known statement in the *Bavli*. This is a reflection of deeply rooted habits in rabbinic scholarship, as well as the fact that the *haggadah* that we use combines the two statements. Just as Rav in the *Bavli* is answering the question ‘What is “with disgrace”’, they assume, so is Rav in the *Yerushalmi*. Since the answers are subtly different, this creates a tension between Rav’s opinion as reported by the two Talmuds. There is, however, no reason to think that Rav in the *Yerushalmi* is answering this question, or any question at all. Rather, he should be read as doing no more than what he says: telling us how we should begin the recitation of the exodus story at the *Seder*.

The recitation of *Maggid* at the *Seder* is quite unique. A short exemplary passage is chosen as vehicle to tell the exodus story. The main way this is facilitated is by linking phrases to passages in which the story is expounded in a fuller form.¹⁶ Rav is doing nothing more than telling us what the first part of the *Maggid* should look like:¹⁷

אַרְמִי אֲבָד אָבִי (כְּמָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר):¹⁸ ... בְּעֵבֶר הִנְהַר יִשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם
מְעוֹלָם תִּרְחַ אָבִי אֲבָרָם וְאָבִי נִחֹר וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים. וְאָקַח אֶת
אֲבִיכֶם אֶת אֲבָרָהֶם מֵעֵבֶר הִנְהַר וְאוֹלָךְ אֶתוֹ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְאַרְבָּה אֶת

¹⁶ Rovner argues convincingly that the comments beginning *כמה שנאמר* were among the *last* parts to be added to the *Haggadah* text and that the ‘Midrash Arami Oved Avi’ section, in both the Babylonian and Israeli tradition, was far shorter until the 9th century. I do not believe this undermines my thesis. As I have argued elsewhere, it is quite impossible that the stub-like texts we find in early *haggadot* were ever intended to be read as they were written. Rovner correctly notes that ‘the original intent [*i.e. of the Mishnah*] was probably that the leader of the *Seder* supply ad hoc explanations’. It is highly probable that this was still the case for those who used the early *haggadot*, and that the scant material added to *parshat bikkurim* was intended just as a help. Further, the method of expounding *parshat bikkurim* was, I believe, must have always been to refer back to sections from the primary account of the exodus in *Shemot*. Thus, the *Maggid* we know, when properly understood as a map to the primary account in *Shemot*, is a formalisation of earlier practice.

See J. Rovner, ‘Two Early Witnesses to the Formation of the “Miqrā Bikkurim Midrash” and Their Implications for the Evolution of the Haggadah Text’, *Hebrew Union College Annual* (75:2004), pp. 77-8 and *passim*.

I should emphasize, though, that all the Geonic-era *haggadot* we have are unanimous in interpreting Rav’s statement as preface to the exposition of *parshat bikkurim*.

¹⁷ This has already been suggested by Henshke, *מדרש ארמי אבד אבי*, p. 50.

¹⁸ See footnote 15. I believe the *כמה שנאמר* formula used to link elements of *parshat bikkurim* to sections of *Bereishit* or *Shemot* is earlier than its appearance in written *haggadot*, but it is probably anachronistic to include it in the *Seder* of Rav. Since, however, we have no idea what sort of formula was used, I include it so as to make Rav’s purpose clearer to the modern reader.

זרעו ואתן לו את יצחק. ואתן ליצחק את יעקב ואת לעשב ואתן לעשב את הר שעיר לרשת אותו ויעקב ובניו ירדו מצרים.

My father was a wandering Aramean (Like that which says,) '... Across the river dwelt your fathers from of old, Terah father of Avraham and father of Nahor, and they served other gods. And I took your father, Avraham, from across the river and I brought him in all the land of Canaan, and I increased his seed and I gave him Yitzhak. And I gave to Yitzhak Ya'aqov and Esav, and to Esav I gave Mt. Seir to possess it and Ya'aqov and his sons went down to Egypt.¹⁹

There would have been two good reasons for Rav to mandate that the recitation of the *Maggid* should begin with these verses. First, the story of the *avot* is extremely long and there is a chance that a father might simply get lost and perhaps not leave himself enough time for the main part of the story. Rav therefore points to a short epitome of the book of *Bereishit* as a way of effectively starting the *Maggid*. Secondly, as we have already seen, *Rav* taught that 'disgrace' was nothing to do with the *avot* themselves, but with their *avot* (our 'pre-forefathers'). The Torah, however, nowhere explicitly mentions that Avraham's ancestors worshipped idols. Therefore, Rav requires us to begin with a passage from the book of Joshua which does.

Reinterpreting Rava's opinion

This explanation of Rav's opinion has many advantages. It reconciles his statements with the plain meaning of the Mishnah and abolishes the alleged discrepancy between what he says in the two Talmuds. However, Rava's opinion cannot be explained in a similar way. 'We were slaves' cannot possibly be an explanation of what is disgraceful about *Arami oved avi*. One could argue that the correct explanation of the Mishnah was lost between the era of Rav and Rava. This is possible, unlike the claim that it was lost between the Mishnah and Rav, but it is still unlikely and there exists a much neater explanation.

On daf 116b, immediately following the next Mishnah, we find the following statement of Rava:

אמר רבא צריך שיאמר ואתנו הוציא משם

Rava said, one must say 'And he brought us out from there'.

¹⁹ I have included Joshua 22:4 because it is included in all extant *haggadot*. It seems to me that Rav, or whoever quoted his opinion, intended all three verses to be included and he thought that a verse break came in between ארץ and זרעו את זרעו. וארבה את זרעו.

This statement is quoted verbatim in the *halakhot* of *Rif*. However, despite the fact that Rava is apparently making a halakhic statement, it has received very little attention from commentators and *poskim*. In the *Seder* of Rav Amram Gaon, followed by subsequent *haggadot*, we find something apparently based on Rava's statement immediately before *Hallel*:

בכל דר ודר חייב אדם לראת את עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים שנאמר
בעבור זה עשה יי לי בצאתי ממצרים. שלא את אבותינו גאל הקב"ה
בלבד אלא אף אותנו גאל שנאמר ואתנו הוציא משם למען הביא אתנו
לתת לנו את ארץ אשר נשבע לאבותינו.

In every generation a man is obligated to see himself as if he went out from Egypt, as it says, 'Because of this which *HASHEM* did for me when I went out of Egypt.' (*Shemot* 13:8). For not only did the Holy One Blessed be He redeem our fathers, but he also redeemed us, as it says, 'And he brought us out from there in order to bring us, to give to us the land he swore to our fathers.' (*Devarim* 6:23)²⁰

The first part of this passage was probably taken by the author from the Mishnah, where it appears in many versions, though it was apparently absent from the original one. It states that each Jew must see himself as having left Egypt and uses *Shemot* 13:8 as a proof-text. The second part seems to do little more than reiterate the first in different words and with a different proof-text. In fact, it has been removed from its proper place. At the beginning of Rav Sa'adya Gaon's version of the *Haggadah* we find the following passage:

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים ויוציאנו יי א-להינו משם ביד חזקה ובזרוע
נטויה ואלו לא גאל המקב"ה את אבותינו ממצרים כבר אנו ובננו ובני
בננו משועבדון היינו לפרעה במצרים ולא את אבותינו בלבד גאל
המקב"ה אלא אף אתנו גאל שנאמר ואתנו הוציא משם.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and *HASHEM* our G-d brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Omnipresent Holy and Blessed be He had not brought our fathers out of Egypt, we and our sons and the sons of our sons would be subservient to Pharaoh in Egypt. And not only our fathers did the Omnipresent Holy and Blessed be He redeem, but also us he redeemed, as it says 'And he brought us out from there'. (*Devarim* 6:23)²¹

²⁰ *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (ed. Goldschmidt, Jerusalem, 2004), p. 115.

²¹ *Siddur Rav Sa'adya Gaon* (eds. Davidson, Assaf & Joel, Jerusalem, 1963), p. 137.

This passage creates obvious exegetical difficulties since the last of the pharaohs had perished the better part of a millennium before Sa'adya Gaon was born. Nevertheless, two things are clear enough. The first is that Rava's statement is actually an injunction to say *Devarim* 6:23. The second is that, in earlier versions of the *Haggadah*, this verse is stated as a conclusion to the section starting 'we were slaves'. It would appear that Rava's statements on 116a and 116b are connected. This has been hidden from most commentators by the incorrect attribution of his first statement to Shmuel, and the fact that his second statement was moved from its original place in the *Haggadah*.

We may further observe that 'we were slaves' is actually a quote from *Devarim* 6:21. If we read Rava's two statements together it looks very likely that he instructing us to read verses 21-3:

...עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים ויציאנו יי ממצרים ביד חזקה. ויתן יי אותת ומפתים גדלים ורעים במצרים בפרעה ובכל ביתו לעינינו. ואותנו הוציא משם (למען הביא אתנו לתת לנו את הארץ אשר נשבע לאבותינו):

... we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and *HASHEM* took us out from Egypt with a strong hand. And *HASHEM* placed great and bad signs and wonders on Egypt, on Pharaoh, and on all his house before our eyes. And he took us out from there (in order to bring us, to give us the land which he swore to our fathers).²²

As Kulp argues, reading such a passage would take us through both the 'disgrace' and the 'praise' required by the Mishnah.²³ Rava's opinion, properly understood, is that we should read *Devarim* 6:21-23, which constitutes a coherent epitome of the story of the exodus, starting with our slavery.

So far argues Kulp, but I believe it is possible to go further. These verses are such an effective epitome of the exodus story that Tabory asks why they were not chosen in preference to *parshat habikkurim* as the basis of the *Maggid*. Kulp suggests the answer is technical: there is no material on *Devarim* 6:21-3 in *Sifrei*, whilst there are some comments on *Devarim* 26:5-8/9.²⁴ This is not convincing, since the comments in *Sifrei* on 26:5-9 are extremely sparse and, anyway, it's far from clear that the material in *Sifrei* predates the Mishnah. In any case, this assumes that the compilers of the Mishnah wanted the father at the *Seder* to recite a midrashic commentary on the verses rather than tell the story. The correct answer seems to me obvious: *Devarim* 26:5-8 starts at an earlier stage in the exodus story than 6:21-23. The compilers of the

²² Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 202 argues that Rava intended the recitation to end before the parentheses, based upon Rava's words in the *gemara* and how it is quoted in the Siddur of Rav Sa'adya Gaon.

²³ *Schechter Haggadah*, pp. 201-2.

²⁴ *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 215, f. 85.

Mishnah had to choose whether to begin the recitation of *yetziat mitzrayim* with the children of Israel already in Egypt or include the story of how they got there. They chose the latter.

However, for someone who *did* want to start the story at a later stage, *Devarim* 6:21-23 would be perfect. I propose that this is precisely the meaning of Rava's statement: the father should begin with 'disgrace' and end with 'praise' and he should do this, not by using the verses specified in the Mishnah, but *Devarim* 6:21-3. Such a ruling might seem to us enormously radical, but it would not have been so much so at the time. Many elements of the *Seder* ceremony as we know it are not much older than the Mishnah itself.²⁵ Some parts of the *Seder* may go back two or three centuries further, but only among minorities within the Land of Israel. In Babylon, at least, the *Seder* would widely have been seen as something of a novelty and adherence to it was certainly far from universal. Rava would likely have faced an annual struggle to get the Jewish inhabitants of his city, Mehoza, to have any kind of halakhic *Seder* at all. It would not be so surprising if he modified the *Maggid* somewhat to make it more acceptable to Babylonian sensibilities.²⁶

To sum up, the correct interpretation of the *sugya* on *Bavli* 116b is this. The Mishnah specifies that the father should begin reciting the exodus story at the *Seder* by describing the disgraceful fact that 'my father was a wandering Aramean'. Rav explained that the disgrace described is that our earliest ancestors worshipped idols. Rava later suggested using a different passage, which began with a form of disgrace that was more comprehensible to Jews of his place and era. The only question that remains is why the meaning of the *sugya* was lost and replaced by the interpretation in which Rav and his interlocutor were arguing about what should preface *Arami oved avi*. This must have happened before the 8th century CE, since both Israeli and Babylonian *haggadot* from that era include Rav's statement as a preface to the exposition of *parshat bikkurim*. This presents fewer problems, however, than any existing interpretations of the *sugya*. The list of cases in which the meaning of a passage in the *gemara* became obscure and was only rediscovered in the era of the *Rishonim* or by modern academic scholarship is long indeed. It is quite possible that it was already obscure to the compilers of the *gemara* itself.

²⁵ J. Kulp, 'The Origins of the Seder and the Haggadah', *Currents in Biblical Research* (4.1, 2005), pp. 112-113, 125-128.

²⁶ Contemporary historical research leans to the view that, not only can we say very little about how Jews practiced Judaism between the destruction of the second temple and the mid-4th century, but that we are not likely to ever be in a position to say much more. My arguments are compatible with a maximalist view of the role of Rabbinic Judaism in the Jewish world and I have phrased certain parts of this essay in accordance with that view. My arguments are, however, equally compatible with a minimalist view in which adherents of Mishnaic law were a tiny minority well into the Talmudic period. See S. Schwarz, *The Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 98-123.

Two reinterpretations of disgrace

It is possible to argue that Rav was simply maintaining the *halakha* as specified by the Mishnah whilst Rava was trying to create a new exilic version of the Seder. However, I believe the case is slightly more complicated than that. It is dubious whether Avraham's ancestors can accurately be described as 'wandering Arameans'²⁷ and pushing the exodus story back to Terah seems excessive. It is more reasonable to suppose that the 'wandering Aramean' as understood by the Mishnah is Ya'aqov, who lived for twenty-one years in Aram and spent much of his life on the move. The recitation of *parshat habikkurim* at the *Seder* proceeds naturally from discussing Ya'aqov ('my father was a wandering Aramean') to the descent to Egypt ('and he went down to Egypt'). Rav's identification of the 'disgrace' as referring to Terah's idolatry appears to be an attempt to defuse the Zionist overtones in the Mishnah's specification of how to tell the story of the exodus, whilst preserving its essential content. Rava, who perhaps considered Rav's interpretation to be implausible, took the next step and suggested changing the core text to an alternative through which 'disgrace' could be explained in a way that was not offensive to Babylonian Jews. The recorded incident at Rav Nahman's *Seder* indicates that Rava's ruling was taken up and the *haggadah* of Rav Sa'adya Gaon preserves a trace of this practice. However, in the long term, Rav's approach won out. The text *Arami oved avi* retained its place at the centre of the *Seder*, but the Mishnah's implication that living outside the land of Israel is disgraceful was forgotten. Ironically, it was the misinterpretation of an imaginary debate between Rav and Shmuel that did most to obscure the meaning of the Mishnah and thus achieve Rav's goal.

²⁷ *Ramban* (*Bereishit* 11:28 and 12:1) argues that Avraham's ancestors were originally from Aram. According to this view, one could plausibly claim that Terah was a 'wandering Aramean' who first travelled to Ur and then travelled to Aram. I personally find *Ramban's* view convincing, but his proofs that *Hazal* shared this view rather less so.