A million people may study the Babylonian Talmud on a regular basis and hundreds of thousands more open its venerated pages from time to time, but the study of its grammar has long languished, even when compared to scholarly fields with less practical import. There are multiple overlapping reasons for this state of affairs. Two are worth singling out.

(1) The Bavli (as the Babylonian Talmud is known) is a sprawling and diverse “book,” different in kind from nearly any other work of literature. It was composed over the course of approximately four centuries, ending in the sixth or seventh century C.E., and it is an amalgam of legal discussions, stories, and interpretations of biblical texts with medical, philosophical, and other pieces of advice and speculation mixed in. Linguistically, too, the text is extraordinary. Every one of its students realizes immediately that it is in both Hebrew and Aramaic; further study shows that there are different dialects of Aramaic within, as well, sometimes dependent on the provenance of a citation and sometimes dependent on the vicissitudes of the editorial and transmission processes.1

There exists no critical edition of the Bavli. This is not only because scholars have not made the production of such an edition a primary goal—as classicists did for much of Greek and Latin literature in the nineteenth century already—but also because it has never been clear how such an edition would be produced. The manuscripts are diffuse and diverse, and each “tractate” (= volume) of the Bavli presents its own difficulties with regard to manuscript stemmatics and transmission history. Furthermore, this literature was originally oral (hard as that sometimes is to believe).

In recent years it has become more obvious that the phrase “the dialect of the Bavli” is not coreferential with “Jewish Babylonian Aramaic” (JBA). The dialect is also reflected in the Babylonian magic bowls published over the past century, as well as in later Geonic writings from the last centuries of the first millennium C.E. Although the dialects of these three corpora are very closely related—as, too, is the classical dialect of Mandaic—they are not identical (and are not internally consistent, either).

Matthew Morgenstern’s long-awaited book, *Studies in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic: Based upon Early Eastern Manuscripts*, conceals in its title the major polemical thesis of the book. The major theme of the volume is the argument that study of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA) can be dramatically furthered if it is based on the group of manuscripts Morgenstern calls the “Early Eastern Manuscripts” (EEMss). Morgenstern argues that the Yemenite traditions, reflected in manuscripts and oral reading traditions, are vastly inferior to the EEMss with regard to linguistic data and that EEMss should therefore provide the basis for writing a modern grammar of JBA (which does not exist).

The book consists of a formal introduction, followed by the real introduction (formally ch. 2), which provides a history of research into JBA. Chapter 3 is devoted to a theme touched upon in chapter 2: the inferiority of the Yemenite traditions, oral and written, of JBA grammar, especially when compared with what is possible to extract from the EEMss. In chapter 4 Morgenstern turns his attention to a fundamental problem in the study of JBA, namely, the lack of orthographic and grammatical consistency throughout the corpus. Finally, chapter 5 studies one syntactic feature—the marking of the direct object—in great detail, reaching specific conclusions about the various possible and impossible syntactic structures.

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Aramaic in Tractate Karetot according to MS Oxford (Bodl. heb. b. 1),” *Aramaic Studies* 5 (2007): 1–45, both with references to earlier literature.

Morgenstern is, fundamentally, continuing the grand project inaugurated in the middle of the twentieth century by Yehezkel Kutscher. Kutscher placed the linguistic study of rabbinic literature on scientifically sound footing by arguing that the most reliable manuscripts had to be identified; the description of the language (whether the language under discussion was the Hebrew of the Mishnah and other texts or the Aramaic of the Bavli) could then proceed on the basis of that textual witness. This is a project that has been continued by Kutscher’s students, notably, Moshe Bar-Asher, and Bar-Asher’s students—including Morgenstern—over the past few decades.

Kutscher did name a few candidates for what he judged to be reliable manuscripts of JBA, including MS Hamburg 165 of Neziqin and MS Sassoon of the Geonic legal text called Halakhot Pesuqot. Morgenstern sets out to show that Kutscher’s intuitions were to a large degree correct but that they can be improved in light of further recent and later findings. Kutscher did not have a reliable transcription of the Halakhot Pesuqot, only an unreliable printed edition of the manuscript; Morgenstern has studied the manuscript itself intensively over a number of years and is therefore well positioned to advance the study of JBA on this basis. This has also allowed him to relegate some of the other proposed witnesses to JBA to secondary status.

These secondary witnesses include, it turns out, not only manuscripts such as Hamburg 165 (whose unreliability is discussed again by Morgenstern on 259–62), but also the Yemenite traditions. Shlomo Morag had championed these, in opposition to Kutscher’s emphasis on manuscripts, as the primary source for the study of the Bavli and of JBA. Morgenstern devotes one hundred pages (55–154) to demonstrating the unreliability of the Yemenite traditions. The major thrust of the argument is that in case after case it can be shown that the Yemenite readings have artificially reintroduced a feature into the language that, it can be shown on the basis of other evidence, was actually lost in JBA. This appears to be the case for the distinction between pataḥ and qaṭem; for the pronunciation of the ʿayin and the ḫet, and for many details in verbal morphology. The Yemeni tradition did not preserve these features but reintroduced them, on the basis of the written (or printed) texts in front of them or on the basis of other texts, such as the Targum. Thus, Morgenstern convincingly concludes, following other recent scholars, that

the Yemenite traditions cannot be taken as the foundation of any scientific study of the language of the Bavli.4

After rejecting the Yemenite traditions as the primary source for JBA, Morgenstern returns to the EEMs. The primary EEMs is the Sasson manuscript of Halakhot Pesuqot, a manuscript that is available online at http://resource.library.utoronto.ca/manuscripts/digobjectbook.cfm?idno=F4655 for all to study. His findings of the reliability of these manuscripts allow Morgenstern to study grammatical details with a confidence not previously possible within JBA. If variability is found within the manuscripts, the conclusion is that within JBA itself there was free variation. There are many such cases, such as אבד and אווד for “lost,” ושישנה ושיש for “twenty,” and נשים and נשים for “let us make,” עיסין and עיסין for “along with,” and ומתריע ומתריע for “one must.” Morgenstern’s conclusions are worth citing, for the methodological conundrum they reflect:

It is possible that [these different spellings] reflect different phonological realities, representing different historical stages of the form’s development, e.g., קים ליה qīm leh, קיל ליה qīl leh, קייליה qīlleh and קי לי qī le. However, it is also possible that all the spellings reflect only one phonological reality, perhaps qīle or qīle, and that the various orthographies are different attempts to reach a compromise between the historical and phonetic forms. The historical orthographic may disguise the phonological realities. (183)

Normally historical linguists would not hesitate in such a case. If there are variable spellings, some reflecting older pronunciations and others more developed pronunciations, the more “modern” spellings are to be taken as reflecting actual pronunciation, and the other spellings are to be written off as historical spellings—reflecting the stubbornness of scribes, and of orthography in general, but unrevealing with regard to the way the language was actually pronounced. In contemporary English, for example, we stubbornly write <light>, but the relatively few spellings <lite> reveal how the word is actually pronounced. Certainly it would be inaccurate to suggest that English speakers pronounce the word differently or that the different spellings reflect different registers of the language.

What this means is that the researcher must be very precise in defining the question she or he is asking.5 If the question is the history of spoken Aramaic, it seems clear that the

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4. Besides the study in the previous note, see also, e.g., Yochanan Breuer, “תרומתו של כתב-ידי תומי משפחתו לחקור הנוסח והעריכה של התלמוד הבבלי,” Pe’amim 88 (2001): 157–67; and the literature cited in Morgenstern, passim.
The hard question is whether this conclusion extends even to matters of grammar. Morgenstern’s final chapter (223–66) is devoted to the syntax of the direct object in JBA. This is a model study in which Morgenstern combines the hard philological work of determining the best reading in each instance with the abstract grammatical analysis to divide the data into various distinct categories. Because of this work, Morgenstern is able to conclude that JBA does not utilize the construction עבד Лמידתא: “the lamed marks a nominal direct object only when it is preceded by an agreement pronoun and that, in this respect, RBA differs from classical Syriac” (257). This conclusion stands in opposition to earlier grammars and so is an important one.

The broader conclusion is that, when it comes to the grammar of the language, there very much are correct and incorrect conclusions. Certainly identifying more and less reliable manuscripts is part of the process of arriving at these conclusions, but it turns out, following Morgenstern’s tour de force, that there is no textual magic bullet. There are three examples of the ungrammatical עבד למידתא construction in Halakhot Pesuqot, but these are judged (reasonably) by Morgenstern to be textual errors. In one case, the less reliable MS Hamburg 165 preserves a better reading דמיתנא סדהי rather than דמיתנא לשהדי.

Overall, scholars of rabbinic Aramaic literature, and the late Aramaic dialects in general, owe Morgenstern a debt of gratitude. The book begins with a long Forschungsgeschichte that ably traces the development of the modern study of JBA. (This section tends to focus on the weaknesses of previous scholarship, which is understandable since the goal is to highlight the contribution of the present book, but it has the unfortunate result of seeming to minimize the significance of some earlier work.) For students of Aramaic who have until now stayed away from the Babylonian Talmud, the book can provide a fitting and up-to-date entry point into a complex and exciting field. For specialists in JBA, the book is valuable for its detailed investigations into complex textual and grammatical

5. The following point is made forcefully in Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal’s forthcoming paper, “Reconsidering the Study of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic: Five Decades After E.Y. Kutscher and His Influential Methodology.”
topics. In being focused on finding reliable textual witnesses and on distilling the original grammar of JBA, the book produces new insights in both directions.

Morgenstern’s book may be conceived of as a sort of prolegomenon. It does not contain basic verbal paradigms, although there is enough data sprinkled throughout the book to begin to construct them. It is to be hoped that the enormous work Morgenstern has done, in methodology and in substance, will set the stage for the next phase of research into JBA. Either he or others in his wake can begin to finally produce a modern and accurate grammar of the dialect.