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EXPRESSIONS OF SCEPTICAL TOPOI IN (LATE) ANTIQUE JUDAISM

*Edited by Reuven Kiperwasser and
Geoffrey Herman*

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Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies
JEWISH SCEPTICISM

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Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Antique Judaism

Studies and Texts in Scepticism

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Introduction

This volume collects papers presented on two different occasions. The first was a debate entitled “Scepticism in Qohelet,” which took place in the framework of one of the numerous activities held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS), a DFG-Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe at the University of Hamburg directed by Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri. This event was a “dialectical evening” held on 16 February 2016 and the presenters were Reuven Kiperwasser and Carsten Wilke, both affiliated with the centre at the time.

The second occasion was a workshop entitled “The Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Ancient Judaism,” which was also held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies on 18 and 19 June 2016 and convened by Reuven Kiperwasser. The first two papers are based on the presentations at the dialectical evening, while the other five resulted from the workshop.

Both the “dialectical evening” and the workshop were directly inspired by Kiperwasser’s research in Hamburg, about which a few words of description are in order. The project consisted of two structural units: “Sceptical Meditations within the Book of Ecclesiastes in Rabbinic Midrash” and “The Embodiment of Scepticism in Rabbinic Narratives.”

In the rabbinic tradition, Ecclesiastes is regarded as a prophetic book composed by King Solomon. It contains verses expressing doubt about divine justice or even about God’s involvement in earthly events. It also articulates a pessimistic point of view concerning the nature of mankind as a whole. The earliest midrash had already sought to reconcile such tendencies with more familiar Jewish theological beliefs by ascribing to many of them a prophetic hidden meaning. The rabbis re-interpreted problematic verses, often apologetically. Does this mean that they sought to distance themselves from the doubts of Ecclesiastes, or that they perhaps found it inappropriate for the wise king to be a proto-sceptical thinker? Another question relates to the characteristics of rabbinic culture that are implied by such activity. What kind of sceptical reasoning was appropriate for the rabbis, and what needs of rabbinic culture did it serve? Exegetical phenomena are undoubtedly placed at the centre of rabbinic intellectual life, but it is important to bear in mind that behind the ongoing process of proposing different readings of the sacred texts is the constantly changing theological thought. Reading Ecclesiastes through a seemingly non-sceptical exegetical lens, rabbis express their own doubts, which, as will be argued within this volume, are sometimes quite similar to the inquiries of a sceptical theist.

The reader of rabbinic literature, therefore, should not only address rabbinic scepticism in a narrow sense, looking for direct expressions of ideas similar to those found in the works of Greek authors. Rather, as was argued within the framework of this project, one should approach the cultural expressions of scepticism manifest

in rabbinic *exegetical narratives based on verses from Ecclesiastes* and other such ostensibly problematic verses from the biblical wisdom literature.

This project was, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic attempt to address sceptical modes of thought in rabbinic culture, as well as the first to explore their role in rabbinic thought in general. The second part of the project, the embodiment of scepticism in rabbinic narratives, was the inspiration and background of the lion's share of this volume. As part of an attempt to locate sceptical thought in rabbinic culture, Kiperwasser determined to analyse the representation of sceptical thinking in the ancient Jewish texts as a whole.

The term *scepticism* has its origins, as is well known, in the Greco-Roman realm. Philosophical scepticism questions the possibility of certainty in knowledge. Sceptical philosophers adopted different doctrines, but their ideology can be generalised as either the denial of the possibility of all knowledge or the suspension of judgment due to the inadequacy of the evidence. Sceptical ideas were shaped in the works of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, leaving us numerous literary monuments, and scepticism was both a driving force in the development of past cultures and also the impetus for far-reaching scientific achievements and philosophical investigation. The first wave of sceptical thought was Pyrrhonism, founded by Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360–270 BCE), and the second was the so-called Academic scepticism; namely, the sceptical period of ancient Platonism dating from around 266 BC. The interest of this approach seems to have dissipated in the course of the late Roman empire. An impressive revival of scepticism took place much later during the Renaissance and the Reformation, after the complete works of Sextus Empiricus were translated into Latin leading to far-reaching philosophical developments.

As is well known, early Jewish culture, in contrast to its Greco-Roman peer, avoided creating consistent representations of its philosophical doctrines. Jews of the first centuries of the common era, however, were engaged in persistent intellectual activity devoted to the laws, norms, regulations, exegesis, and other traditional areas of Jewish religious knowledge. An effort to detect sceptical ideas in ancient Judaism requires, therefore, a closer analysis of this literary heritage and its cultural context. In accordance with this, the aim of the workshop was to explore elements of sceptical thought in ancient and late antique Judaism through a new analysis of pertinent texts. The participants discussed a wide spectrum of texts: Jewish writings from the Second Temple period, rabbinic literature, magical texts, and the reflections of Jewish thought in early Christian and patristic writings. These textual corpora show little direct influence from Greek philosophical thought more generally and from sceptical thought in particular. Therefore, with the understanding that when reading Jewish texts in search of scepticism, we are to some extent looking for the equivalent of a concept taken from another culture, we nevertheless found it of heuristic value to embrace the term and concept as a hermeneutical lens through which to view classical Jewish culture.

It could be argued that the application of the philosophy of scepticism to the study of early Jewish thought is problematic, being, as it were, an eclectic and for-

eign cultural approach for the investigation of distant cultural phenomena. However, this argument does not present a challenge in our situation, since within the framework of this volume, our purpose is not to analyse the sceptical approach as a system of knowledge, but rather to employ certain basic components of sceptical thought in order to see whether there are analogies with chosen Jewish textual traditions. From a variety of the formal aspects of sceptical methodology, we concentrate mostly on presupposing a limited epistemology, reflections of doubt, a questioning spirit, and a rejection of dogma. These are the sceptical *topoi* disseminated among the texts produced by different communities of faith, which have often barely been recognised by readers.

We have deliberately chosen to use the term “*topoi*” (plural of *topos*) in the title of this volume, assuming that it is more suitable for expressing the rudimentary state of sceptical ideas in classical Jewish texts. The term “*topos*” is itself borrowed from ancient rhetoric. Its meaning was expanded by Ernst Robert Curtius in his ground-breaking *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948), and it has become a term for “commonplaces.” These commonplace features are the product of reworkings of traditional material, particularly the descriptions of standardised settings, but can be extended to almost any literary pattern. Early medieval Latin literature, for instance, inherited traces of motifs and fragments of plots from classical Greco-Roman literature and used them without being aware of their source. In this way, individual texts may include elements that were not invented by the author, but which rather belong to his or her culture. We aimed to find these modest manifestations of sceptical thought within the fields of classical Jewish culture and to shed light on them, employing modern methods of critical textual analysis. The collective efforts of the authors in this volume reflect this quest for expressions of these *topoi* in the various literary corpora.

Of the many historical intersections between philosophical scepticism and the Jewish tradition, the earliest possible and only canonical one is the Book of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), which is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, but can be dated to the Hellenistic period on linguistic grounds. Under the aphorism *ha-kol hevel*, “all is vanity” (KJV), the author insists on the futility of any quest for knowledge, labour, virtue, or happiness and dismisses the belief in both divine providence and human agency. The book’s competing maxims of enjoying a meaningless life and fearing an incomprehensible God have intrigued Jewish and Christian exegesis since antiquity. Contemporary scholarly research is divided between a philosophical reading affirming that the author shared his sources and critical stance with the Greek sceptical tradition and a religious reading that places the book within Levantine and biblical reflections on theodicy and divine transcendence. Based on a new look at the reception, structure, and context of the book, Carsten Wilke, in the first paper, “Doubting Divine Justice and Human Knowledge: Qohelet’s Cultural Dialectics,” seeks to show that Qohelet’s inner contradictions should be read dialectically as a way of coping with a historical moment of economic expansion and cultural

transformation. Dating the book to the peak of Hellenisation in Jerusalem during the years 175 to 172 BCE, he argues that it took advantage of sceptical inquiry in order to encompass the claims of both biblical theism and Greek science.

The second paper in this volume, “‘Matters That Tend towards Heresy’: Rabbinic Ways of Reading Ecclesiastes,” deals with how the main message of Ecclesiastes—its scepticism—is perceived by the modern reader. Earlier scholarship assumed that references to efforts to proscribe the Book of Ecclesiastes in rabbinic literature stemmed from the rabbis’ inability to cope with its sceptical tendencies and attest to a struggle over its acceptance within the canon. Kiperwasser claims that the rabbis accepted the closed canon, with all its twenty-four books, and did not question the inclusion of any of the books therein. They were in fact unaware of how the process of canonisation had been conducted and the reasons for the acceptance of certain exceptional books, such as Ecclesiastes. And yet, as sensitive readers and experienced exegetes, they felt that the book was different. For this reason, it received plenty of attention from the rabbis and featured extensively in their exegetical art form. The stories of the difficulties in accepting of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs essentially come as a defence of their enormous appeal and broad exegetical use as valuable resources for interpretation. The rabbis were fully cognisant of Ecclesiastes’s unconventionality and aspired to produce etiological explanations in order to account for its oddity.

The third paper, “Wisdom Scepticism and Apocalyptic Certitude; Philosophical Certitude and Apocalyptic Scepticism,” which analyses the attitude towards scepticism in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, is by Cana Werman. The paper begins by discussing writings from the beginning of the Hellenistic era which express sceptical notions based on the recognition that man cannot comprehend God’s role in the world. These include Ecclesiastes, where God is pictured as being detached from the world, the Book of the Watchers of 1 Enoch, and the biblical Book of Daniel, where evil heavenly forces rebel against God. The paper further points to two kinds of works that grappled with similar challenges but made an effort to avoid scepticism. The first group is semi-apocalyptic compositions such as the *Aramaic Levi Document* and the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*, where calamity and disaster are considered not as the consequences of a God who is removed from humanity, but rather as the result of human deeds and misbehaviour. The second collection is formed of works that adopted philosophical ideas claiming that God’s sovereignty over the world can be perceived by the mind’s eye.

The fourth paper, “Reasonable Doubts of the ‘Other’: Jewish Scepticism in Early Christian Sources” by Serge Ruzer, is devoted to reading early Christian sources which describe polemical encounters with “unbelieving Jews.” Such encounters, whether real or imagined, attribute to the Jews a rejection of Christian beliefs. This paper posits the question of whether such descriptions faithfully represent a real external rival, or, alternatively, whether they are tailored to overcome an internal problem of the Christian outlook, conveniently disguised as a struggle with the eter-

nal Jewish Other. Discussing a few representative examples, this study highlights a meaningful dynamic in the focus of the supposed Jewish scepticism. Thus, it takes us from Jesus's resurrection through claims about his messianic mission and stories of his miraculous birth to insistence—in spite of the obvious delay in the Parousia—on his future triumph and all the way up to theological concepts. While various combinations of the internal and external directions of the polemic are definitely possible, the paper takes a particular interest in the cases where the disbelief is perceived not as resulting from Jewish spiritual corruption, but rather as a reasonable, “sceptical” reaction, for example, in light of the absence of sufficiently convincing external signs of salvation. It is argued that especially in such cases, behind the scepticism of the “Other” might be looming the Christians' own internal doubts.

Geoffrey Herman, in his paper “Idolatry, God(s), and Demons among the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia,” argues against the opinion of many earlier scholars that for the Jews in the Second Temple period and afterwards, an interest in gods and the issue of idolatry was not a major factor in their beliefs. This paper considers the situation with respect to the Jews in Sasanian Babylonia in light of the polytheistic religious scene. Non-Jewish evidence points to a pervasive polytheistic religious culture that embraced numerous deities, some of which were demonised. The Jewish magical material from Babylonia indicates an awareness of and an engagement with these deities and demons among some of the Jews. The Babylonian Talmud also speaks of idolatry as a contemporary issue for Babylonian Jews, or interprets biblical sources, which suggest its continued relevance for them. In view of all this evidence, the paper argues that polemical and other reflections on idolatry in the Babylonian Talmud would appear to be more significant than previously assumed. The rabbis, it would seem, being a part of this religious world, accepted many of the assumptions of their non-Jewish contemporaries regarding the reality of demons perceived by others as gods and were grappling with a tangible religious reality that was impinging upon their world.

The sixth paper, “Facing Omnipotence and Shaping the Sceptical Topos” by Reuven Kiperwasser, is a narratological inquiry into late antique rabbinic stories told from the point of view of sceptical theists. Sceptical theists accept that we can know general truths about God but deny that we can know the reason for God's decision to act in a particular way in any given case. A sceptical theist will maintain his belief in God but will deny his involvement in the politics of evil. However, the rabbinic narrator's approach is different. God is involved in the world and is aware of the existence of evil; however, despite being omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent, God has decided not to change anything in the world. These theological ideas are embodied in narratives in rabbinic literature. This paper aims to show how behind the narrative fabric, serious doubts about how God controls the world are revealed, yet notwithstanding the intensity of such doubts, no expressions of disrespect for accepted religious values appear.

The final paper in this volume, “If a Man Would Tell You,” is by Tali Artman-Partock. It examines the groups of texts in rabbinic literature which start with varia-

tions of the phrase that appears in the title, arguing that it functions as a discursive marker that signals doubt in a rabbinic teaching which paradoxically serves to eradicate doubt about rabbinic authority. The texts often serve to reinforce the sense of belonging and the favoured status of the members of the rabbinic group as interpreters of the Bible, so much so that they might accept as true arguments that would normally be conceived as challenges to accepted rabbinic theology and epistemology.

The product of our joint efforts is offered to the reader in the hope of both expanding and intensifying a scholarly discussion on expressions of doubt and religious enquiry in Jewish sources in particular and in antiquity more generally. We would like to express our immense appreciation to the Maimonides Centre, and especially to Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri, both for supporting the conference and for supporting us in this publication of the proceedings. This is also a suitable opportunity to thank the staff of the centre in Hamburg—Karolin Berends, junior professor Dr. Racheli Haliva, Dr. Patrick Koch, Dr. Anna Lissa, Yonatan Meroz MA, Dr. des. Felix Papenhagen, Dr. Bill Rebigier, Silke Schaeper M.L.S., Prof. Dr. Stephan Schmid, Dr. Michela Torbidoni, and Maria Wazinski MA—and the fellows of the centre in Hamburg in 2016, namely Prof. Marietta Horster, Prof. Dr. Almut Renger, and Dr. Libera Pisano, and others who attended and participated in the workshop.

Carsten L. Wilke

Doubting Divine Justice and Human Knowledge: Qohelet's Cultural Dialectics

Julius Guttman was explicitly reluctant to begin his narrative of Jewish philosophical thought with Qohelet. He argued that this biblical book, which is also known as Ecclesiastes, may document the first known encounter between Jewish literature and Greek philosophy, but that it was a failed encounter, since the biblical author proved unable to understand philosophical ways of thought; worse, he even maintained his utterly “un-Greek” disrespect for the human cognitive faculties, denying their power, nobility, and efficiency.¹

Our conception of antique intellectual culture has evolved, and we are more likely to acknowledge that cognitive pessimism and the sceptical quest are as much a part of Greek thought as the Platonic and Aristotelian systems. Qohelet has often been represented in analogy with the Greek Sceptics,² and Charles Whitley even sensed this dimension in the author's moniker: if Qohelet “is to be represented by one term in English, perhaps ‘The Sceptic’ would have some measure of adequacy.”³ As I will argue in this chapter, Qohelet does indeed stand on the threshold of Jewish philosophising, and of Jewish scepticism in particular, and there are good reasons to locate him inside rather than outside of the doorway. What I will undertake here is a reappraisal of the book's dialectic quest based on a review of its reception⁴ and a new hypothesis about its structure and date.⁵ By “dialectics,” I mean the procedure of explaining a text on the basis of its unresolved inner contradictions. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer's dialectical ethics reflect the tension between the immanent “other” and the transcendent “good-beyond-being” in opposition to ethi-

1 Julius Guttman, *Die Philosophie des Judentums* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 1933), 27: “Die ebenso un-griechische Verwerfung der Erkenntnis, das Wort, daß Mehrung der Erkenntnis Mehrung des Schmerzes ist.”

2 Martin Alfred Klopfenstein, “Die Skepsis des Qohelet,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972): 97–109.

3 Charles F. Whitley, *Kohelet: His Language and Thought* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 6.

4 I have used the overviews by Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Kohelet: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung,” in *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie*, ed. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 5–38; and Jean-Jacques Lavoie, “Où en sont les études sur le livre de Qohélet?” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 69, no. 1 (2013): 95–133; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, “Où en sont les études sur le livre de Qohélet (2012–2018)?” *Studies in Religion* 48,1 (2019): 40–76.

5 The present article develops ideas that were exchanged during the dialectical evening held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies in Hamburg on 16 February 2016, when the two theses presented below were respectively defended by Reuven Kiperwasser (who at that time was affiliated with Humboldt University of Berlin) and myself.

cal reasoning founded on one essential principle, such as divine lawgiving or the self-sufficient human subject.⁶

As has often been remarked, Qohelet diverges from Jewish tradition through its generic and depersonalised conception of the divine, which acts through deterministic forces such as time, fortune, and fate. He never mentions the Israelite God by name, nor does his book refer to divine law, the Torah, the ideas of creation, revelation, redemption, or other dimensions of historical religion. His view of cultic religion, expressed in 4:17–5:7, is cautious at best, and ethical religion is discarded outright.

Qohelet also, however, diverges from what we might associate with the Greek ideal of autonomous human knowledge. Man cannot know anything for certain, nor can he influence the world through his activity. As a conclusion, the author recommends that one suspend the quest for knowledge, power, and perfection and instead enjoy life without any wish to understand, dominate, or improve it. This quintessential (im)moral conclusion is reiterated in the body of the text on seven (or rather, as we will see below, ten) occasions. The very end of the text at 12:1–8, 12–14, however, is a chapter on theistic morals.

In sum, while arguably marking the start of a controversy between biblical theism and Greek science, the book expresses ideas that are strongly at variance with both. As James L. Crenshaw succinctly put it: “The author of Ecclesiastes lacked trust in either God or knowledge. For him nothing proved that God looked on creatures with favor, and the entire enterprise of wisdom had become bankrupt.”⁷ Our dialectic reading will have to address one basic observation—namely the presence of multiple contradictions in Qohelet’s thought—which, with appropriate contextualisation, will lead us to disagreements both between eastern Mediterranean wisdom traditions and within them.

Harmonistic, Agonistic, and Dialectical Approaches

As a deliberately sceptical text, Qohelet is a model case for the possible strategies we can use to deal with internal contradiction, which the ancient rabbis already considered to be the major crux of the book.⁸ One strategy proceeds by logical de-

⁶ Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Gadamer’s Dialectical Hermeneutics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 127.

⁷ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 127.

⁸ *b. Šabb.* 30b: “His words contradict one another”; compare Abraham ibn Ezra on Eccl 7:3: “In one place it may say something and in another the exact opposite is said.” *Sefer Qohelet: im Perushei ibn Ezra*, edited by Mordechai Shaul Goodman (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2012). On the Talmudic quotation, see below.

duction, either fitting the author's thought into a coherent norm or imagining a harmonic balance of opposites. For historical-critical scholars, only a single stroke of the pen was necessary to dismiss the pietistic conclusion as a conformist gloss and to keep a more or less coherent text built around the hedonistic ethics that are made explicit in its main part. On the other side, theologians have often felt obliged, following their religious convictions and duties, to explain away the central parts of the book or to diminish their relevance. Crenshaw, for instance, finds Qohelet's insistent commendation of earthly pleasure to be "empty" of meaning and does not believe that the author seriously intended to promote it.⁹ A good example of a harmonistic reading is given by Alexander A. Fischer, who in 1997 argued that Qohelet could have been both a sceptical philosopher and a Jewish sage:

Indeed, both issues, scepticism and the fear of God, are vital to our understanding of Qohelet's teachings. While attempts have repeatedly been made to pit the one against the other and to thereby reduce the book to a one-way interpretation, we will be sure to show that the fear of God and scepticism go together in this work and that they depend on one another.¹⁰

From a modern theological perspective, it may not be much of an issue whether we believe in or deny divine providence, but classical exegesis did not treat this point with the same nonchalance. Both the rabbis and the Church Fathers had strong feelings about the contradiction between ethical attitudes that would follow from Qohelet's calls to enjoy a meaningless life while simultaneously fearing an incomprehensible God.¹¹ In their approach, which we may call agonistic, the Book of Qohelet was interpreted as a debate in which an impious sceptic voices his objections to faith and is finally vanquished by a pious opponent. In the thirteenth century, Menahem ha-Meiri wrote that Qohelet "mentions in a number of places views that contradict fundamental beliefs such as reward and punishment and God's providence in his world; but he mentions these views so as to use knowledge to search for the correct path."¹² The great majority of Qohelet's speculative propositions could thus be explained away as counter-truths concocted by the unruly antagonist, the conclusion in chapter 12 being the only straightforward expression of the book's true message. Following this tradition, later Jewish commentators read Qohelet as a dialectical controversy between the good and evil impulses.¹³ Modern Christian

⁹ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 138–40.

¹⁰ Alexander A. Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 1.

¹¹ For a survey of patristic interpretations, see Elisabeth Birnbaum, "Qohelet," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 28 (2017): 523–36.

¹² Menachem ha-Meiri, *Perush 'al Sefer Mishlei*, ed. Menachem Mendel Zahav (Jerusalem: Otsar ha-Poskim, 1969), on Prov 1:1.

¹³ See the interpretation of Eccl 9:7–10 in Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-'Ikkarim*, 4.28, developed in Menasseh ben Israel, *De la fragilité humaine et de l'inclination de l'homme au péché*, trans. Henry Méchoulan (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1996), 143–44.

scholars since Johann Gottfried Herder have likewise assumed a clash between various worldviews on Qohelet's pages, possibly in the form of an internal dialogue. In 1875, Franz Julius Delitzsch wrote: "One might therefore call the Book of Koheleth, 'The Song of the Fear of God,' rather than, as H. Heine does, 'The Song of Scepticism;' for however great the sorrow of the world which is therein expressed, the religious conviction of the author remains in undiminished strength."¹⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century, with the then-fashionable search for various redactional layers, Paul Haupt assumed that an Epicurean Sadducee and a Stoic Pharisee successively intervened in the redaction of the text,¹⁵ while Arthur Lukyn Williams read it as a dialogue between a *hakam* and a *hasid*.¹⁶ In all these constructions, the text's final voice recommending the fear of God overrules the cheerful commendations that the book expresses elsewhere. Some dialogue constructions have also been proposed in recent years,¹⁷ but twentieth-century scholarship has generally preferred to discard the unwelcome passages of the text as "glosses" or "quotations."¹⁸

The third and last approach is dialectical: it chooses to state Qohelet's contradictions as strongly as can be and to leave them unresolved. As a revealing example, allow me to quote a forgotten booklet by an Israeli author, Asher Sakal, who in 1959 expressed this perceived opposition with particular emphasis. For Qohelet, "God is an omnipotent entity that acts arbitrarily, uncontained by any legal order. In his world, being righteous does not help, and being evil does not harm, since God could not care less about a man's good or evil deeds." All Jewish exegesis, Sakal claims, was written in order to fit this provocation into the norms of dogmatic biblical theology. However, all of these efforts have been futile, and Qohelet's words against God's providence and justice, as well as against man's moral nobility, can in no way be reconciled with the understanding that Jewish tradition was used to giving them.¹⁹ As James Alfred Loader argued in his *Polar Structures in the Book of*

14 Franz Julius Delitzsch, "Einleitung das Buch Koheleth," in *Biblischer Commentar über das Alte Testament. Vierter Theil: Poetische Bücher. Vierter Band: Hoheslied und Koheleth* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1875), 185–97, here 190; translation in Franz Julius Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 183. Delitzsch misquotes Heinrich Heine, who in 1854 referred to Job, not Qohelet, as the "Canticles of Scepticism." See Friedrich Ellermeier, "Randbemerkung zur Kunst des Zitierens: Welches Buch der Bibel nannte Heinrich Heine 'das Hohelied der Skepsis'?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77, no. 1 (1965): 93–94.

15 Paul Haupt, trans., *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1905), 2–4.

16 Arthur Lukyn Williams, trans., *Ecclesiastes in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 56–57.

17 T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

18 For the latter approach, see Robert Gordis, *Kohelet—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd augmented ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

19 Asher Sakal, *Sefer Qohelet: Shenei panim, peshuto shel miqra mi-zeh vehashqafat hakhmei Yisra'el mi-zeh* (Holon: A. Sakal, 1959), 10–11.

Qohelet (1979), we should also abstain from minimising the book's inner contradictions, but should rather try to understand them as elements of a systematically self-contradictory kind of thought.²⁰

Competition between these options for meeting Qohelet's ideological challenge runs throughout the entire history of exegesis. For modern critics, the problem is also linked to different possible means of contextualisation. In sociological terms, we are dealing with a "multi-cleavage" situation, in which the logical problem of intratextual conflict overlaps with sociocultural contradictions that may ultimately be identified with the difference between Greek and Jewish ethnicity.

The Hellenistic and Orientalist Theses

The question of whether a hedonistic or an ascetic mood—and hence a secular or a religious meaning—should ultimately prevail in the interpretation of Qohelet also drives the debate about its proper cultural context. To put the matter in Straussian opposition, the "joy of life" option appears linked to Athens, while the "fear of God" alternative is associated with Jerusalem.

Since the Enlightenment period, Qohelet's readers have employed considerable bilingual erudition in order to prove that the book owes its linguistic and intellectual singularities to Greek language, literature, and philosophy. Preceded in this endeavour by Harry Ranston (1925),²¹ in 1973, Rainer Braun published what is still the most extensive collection of textual parallels which allegedly prove that there were Greek influences on many features of the book's phraseology, worldview, and general mood.²² Braun's observations on these parallel motifs were largely accepted and frequently reissued,²³ but scholars have not yet reached any consensus about them.²⁴

Parallels with expressions from archaic and classical works such as those of Homer, Hesiod, Theognis, Sophocles, and Euripides may suggest an acquaintance with the Greek canon. However, Braun's key observation is that the philosophical

20 James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979); Jimyung Kim, *Reanimating Qohelet's Contradictory Voices: Studies of Open-Ended Discourse on Wisdom in Ecclesiastes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

21 Harry Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Epworth Press, 1925).

22 Rainer Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973).

23 A sample of the most convincing observations appears in studies such as Otto Kaiser, *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal: Studien zur Geschichte, Theologie und Gegenwartsbedeutung der Weisheit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1985), 138–39, and Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 234–36.

24 Reinhold Bohlen, "Kohelet im Kontext hellenistischer Kultur," in *Das Buch Kohelet*, 249–73, here 255.

topoi that spread in the Levant during the Hellenistic period did not derive from the systems of the Athenian schools, but rather represented a popularised form of sceptical thought—that is, Pyrrhonian, Cynic, and Epicurean inspiration.²⁵ These minor genres of philosophical thought were not propagated through formal study, but as gnomic sayings in both oral and written transmission. Sextus Empiricus later affirmed that the Sceptics—just like the Cynics before them—would boil their arguments down into certain philosophical “slogans” (φωνάι). In this provocative simplification, their ideas could reach an audience that aspired to a philosophical worldview, but despised bookish culture or was excluded from it.

An example of such a “slogan” is the key phrase in Qoh 1:2, הַכֹּל הֶבֶל, literally meaning “it is all vapour.” This expression, translated as “all is vanity” (KJV), “everything is meaningless” (NIV), and “nothing matters” (CJB), has an exact parallel in a slogan coined by the Cynic Monimos, τῦφος τὰ πάντα, which uses the same metaphor to refer to the same horizon of meaning.²⁶ The famous sentence that follows in 1:3, מַה-יִתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכֹל-עֲמָלוֹ שִׁיעֲמַל תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, “What is the gain for a man from all the labour that he performs under the sun?”, is also thought to have a Greek semantic resonance. The expression “there is no gain” mirrors the Homeric idiomatic phrase οὐδὲν ὄφελος (*Il.* 22.513), where the commercial term for “profit” is used as a metaphor with an existential meaning. The same is true for the term עֲמָל, “labour,” referring to the troubles of human life in general, just as πόνος does in Greek mythology, tragedy, and the speeches of the Cynics.²⁷ “Under the sun,” meaning “on earth,” is another Homeric expression (*Od.* 4.539–40). The example shows how Qohelet’s author recomposed Greek phrases and ideas in his own particular way. It has been noted that his ethics of pleasure is close to that of the Epicureans, although his pessimism does not converge with the serenity of this school.²⁸ Rudman argued that the author was exposed to the determinism of the Stoic school, but that he was certainly not a Stoic himself,²⁹ and a similar conclusion regarding his scepticism was reached by Stuart Weeks.³⁰ It has also been remarked that the Cyrenaic philosophical school, with its close connection between pessimism, scepticism, and hedonism, may be the Hellenistic tradition that is closest to Qohelet’s thought.³¹

25 Norbert Lohfink, *Kohelet* (Würzburg: Echter, 1980), 9.

26 Braun, *Kohelet*, 45–46.

27 Braun, 48–49.

28 Emmanuel Podechard, *L’Éclésiaste* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1912), 95–102; Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 28.

29 Rudman, *Determinism*, 199.

30 Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012).

31 Rudman, *Determinism*, 28–29. On the combination of pessimism and scepticism, see also Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 7.

These textual borrowings, it seems, do not indicate a precise doctrinal affiliation, but rather a deeper intellectual affinity, which Martin Hengel attempted to characterise in his extensive study of Greco-Jewish cultural interaction.³² Both Hengel and Braun first point to the autonomous subjectivity of the disillusioned sage, who subverts the traditional notions of religion and ethics through his reasoned argument and individual observation (“I saw”).³³ Individual judgment is not a criterion of truth in earlier biblical literature, where legitimacy is sought in prophecy or in the verdict of sacred texts. Even Ben Sira, the author of *Ecclesiasticus*, belongs to a more nomistic intellectual climate than the author of Qohelet.³⁴

Qohelet's individualism is not only speculative, but practical as well. The author praises a personal *eudaimonia* disconnected from social or political values.³⁵ This happiness is, as it is among the Sceptics, the fruit of a radically disillusioned attitude, which rejects unattainable goals, including the purposeful pursuit of happiness itself. He confesses that his active search for pleasure as a means to perfection led him to despair (2:1–11), but that he attained happiness the moment he gave up his futile search and passively accepted pleasure as a gift from God, not as a reward for some achievement (2:24–26).³⁶ To illustrate their similarly contradictory view, the Sceptics tell an anecdote about Apelles the painter, who achieved through an unconscious gesture what he could not achieve through his art.³⁷

In the Hellenists' reading, even this paradoxical turn underscores Qohelet's “Greek” worldview, which is manifest in the independent quest for knowledge and happiness, as well as in the fatidic character of divine power. In Otto Kaiser's view, the belief in fate thoroughly banalises the author's final call to fear God. As a *deus absconditus*, God does not reward or punish humans for their actions; He only negatively limits their scope of happiness and can therefore inspire no confidence, only fear.³⁸

As a reaction to the Hellenistic thesis, which sees the thrust of Qohelet's scepticism mainly in the attack on the belief in a personal and just God, a group of scholars inserted Qohelet into a sceptical tradition of “Oriental” coinage that turns its doubt mainly, if not exclusively, against human autonomy. Qohelet is “not Greek, but Oriental,” as the Finnish Lutheran bishop Aarre Lauha put it.³⁹ This may mean

³² Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1974), i:115–30.

³³ Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück” (*Koh. 2,24*): *Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Heder, 1996), 237.

³⁴ Kaiser, *Der Mensch*, 122–23.

³⁵ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Nicht im Menschen,” 253–73.

³⁶ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 296, 311.

³⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Pyr.* 1.28.

³⁸ Kaiser, *Der Mensch*, 128.

³⁹ Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978).

for some that there is no demonstrable trace of Greek philosophy in his book;⁴⁰ others—such as Guttman—have held that occasional borrowings were not relevant to the author’s spirit, and a third position argues that the author consciously defends Middle Eastern traditions. In any case, Qohelet’s line of thinking is believed to be part of a tradition of doubt and inquiry that, anterior to Greek scepticism, derives its inspiration from pessimistic tendencies in the Oriental literatures of the early second millennium BCE. According to the Orientalists, Qohelet’s conjunction between a pessimistic outlook on life and the call to partake of whatever can be enjoyed goes back to such texts as the speech of the alewife Siduri in the Old Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh⁴¹ or the Egyptian “Harpist’s Songs.”⁴² The intertextual relations are less precise in these cases and mainly consist of shared commonplaces, some of them being of a fairly general character. Their comparisons are taken from writings from various millennia, and this long-term chronology not only makes any historical contextualisation impossible, but also obliges one to operate with the dubious assumption of a timeless Oriental wisdom tradition in which a corpus of motifs could be transmitted unchanged across the ages.⁴³ Moreover, pessimism means something quite different in the Gilgamesh epic and the Egyptian songs, where the joy of life is always recommended in the face of inescapable death and a gloomy afterworld. The doubts about virtue, knowledge, and providence that create the distress presented in Qohelet have no parallel in this literature.

Qohelet’s gnomic form of expression is not, according to the Orientalists, due to the influence of the Greek Cynics or Sceptics; rather, it is due to the author’s continuation of an age-old “wisdom literature” with its ancient genre of proverbs (Eccl 12:9)⁴⁴ and its great themes such as providential history,⁴⁵ human knowledge,⁴⁶ and, as mentioned above, theodicy. In sum, while the Hellenists credit scepticism for the turn to an anthropocentric model of knowledge, the Orientalists link Qohelet to an “old Levantine” tradition of scepticism, which insists upon the supremacy of divine forces over human ones.

40 Menachem Fisch, “Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) in Context: A Study of Wisdom as Constructive Skepticism,” in *Critical Rationalism: The Social Sciences and the Humanities. Essays for Joseph Agassi, Volume 2*, ed. Ian C. Jarvie and Nathaniel Laor (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 167–87.

41 Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964).

42 Stefan Fischer, *Die Aufforderung zur Lebensfreude im Buch Kohelet und seine Rezeption der ägyptischen Harfnerlieder* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999).

43 See the criticism in Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Kohelet,” 25–26.

44 Christian Klein, *Kohelet und die Weisheit Israels: Eine formgeschichtliche Studie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

45 John F. Priest, “Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism in Israel,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36, no. 4 (1968): 311–26, here 323–24.

46 Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem: Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

The Structure of the Book

Even the debate between literary historians backing either the Hellenistic or the Orientalist thesis centres on the question of the respective authority of the book's two moral maxims, the "joy of life" of the main part of the book and the "fear of God" of its last chapter. Do we have to give a preference to one of the two maxims, or can they be harmonised on an equal footing? The answer depends largely on the structural patterns that one discovers in the book. The majority of the critics presume that Qohelet is a planless collection of aphorisms, while the minority proposes a merely associative succession of themes held together by keywords and key phrases. Individual scholars have tried to prove the existence of a sophisticated plan: the suggestions most discussed are Addison Wright's numerological hypothesis and Norbert Lohfink's chiasmic model, according to which Qohelet's argument moves back and forth between sections devoted to such anachronistic themes as "social criticism" and "ideology criticism."⁴⁷

One comparatively solid thesis, however, has put forward a structural analysis on purely formal grounds, focusing on periodically reappearing leitmotifs, especially the exhortation to enjoy sensual pleasures always designated by words derived from the root *נחמ*. Since 1904, when John F. Genung referred to these exhortations as "landing-stages of inference or counsel,"⁴⁸ exegetical tradition has commonly counted seven such passages (Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–19; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10) and has convincingly argued them to be structuring devices. I would add three more such exhortations (4:6; 7:10–14; 10:19) and come to the conclusion that Qohelet is divided into ten parts, each one starting with a claim to experience ("I saw" and similar formulas) and ending on one of the ten commendations of pleasure. The first of the ten sections is the author's autobiography, forming an introduction to his wisdom, and if we examine the content of the other nine, there is a rough thematic partition between speculative and practical subjects that recalls the guiding idea of the Aristotelian division of the sciences, with the science of knowledge, originally called "analytics" and later called "logic," being counted among the practical sciences.⁴⁹ The shift from natural cycles to the afterlife and divine judgment in chapter 3 recalls the common epistemic succession of physics followed by metaphysics (or, in Aristotle's terms, "theology"), and the same is true for the shift from politics to economics at the end. We can imagine the model of the book as a sweep-

⁴⁷ Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 10.

⁴⁸ John Franklin Genung, *Ecclesiastes: Words of Koheleth, Son of David, King in Jerusalem; Translated Anew, Divided According to Their Logical Cleavage, and Accompanied with a Study of Their Literary and Spiritual Values and a Running Commentary* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1904), 183–84, until Martin Alfred Klopfenstein, "Kohelet und die Freude am Dasein," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 47 (1991): 97–107.

⁴⁹ Arist. *Metaph.* 6.1.5, 1025b26.

ing blow to the entirety of the Hellenistic canon of studies (ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία)⁵⁰ following a sceptical literary genre of which books 7–11 of Sextus’s *Adversus mathematicos* may still give us an idea. If we tentatively identify the Greek equivalents to the subjects of Qohelet’s wisdom, the overall structure of the book looks like this:

1:1–12: Preliminaries

- 1:1: first title, which identifies the author as King Solomon
- 1:2–11: prologue with a summary of the book’s teachings
- 1:12: second title, again affirming the royal dignity of the author

1:13–2:26: Introduction detailing the author’s experience of the pursuit of happiness, beginning with the phrase וְנִתְּתִי אֶת-לְבִי לְדָרוֹשׁ וְלִתּוֹר בְּחֻקֵּימָה and ending with a hedonistic exhortation; this part is structured in four sections:

- 1:13–18 on knowledge (דַּעַת)
- 2:1–11 on pleasure (שְׂמֵחָה)
- 2:12–16 on wisdom (חֻקֵּימָה)
- 2:17–26 on labour (עֲמָל)

Chapters 3–11: Main part structured in nine sections on different sciences, all of them ending with a hedonistic exhortation:

- 3:1–12 on *physics*: everything is governed by time and fortune. This section has no introductory formula, but רָאִיתִי (“I saw”) is present in the text.
- 3:14–21 on *metaphysics*: both humans and beasts have the same end. Incipit: יָדַעְתִּי (“I knew”).
- 4:1–6 on *anthropology*: humans generally cause evil to each other. Incipit וְשָׁבַתִּי וְאָרְאָה וְאָנִי (“and I saw again”).
- 4:7–5:19 on *psychology*: humans have no control over their suffering and joy. Once again, the incipit is וְשָׁבַתִּי וְאָרְאָה וְאָנִי.
- 6:1–7:14 on *history*: we have no foreknowledge of life except that it will finally be erased by oblivion. Incipit: רָאִיתִי (“I saw”).
- 7:15–8:15 on *ethics*: there is no righteousness and no reward for virtue. Once again, the incipit is רָאִיתִי (“I saw”).
- 8:16–9:10 on *analytics*: there is no knowledge of anything. The incipit is similar to that of the experience section: וְנִתְּתִי אֶת-לְבִי לְדַעַת חֻקֵּימָה.
- 9:11–10:20 on *politics*: warfare, glory, and government are unjust. Incipit וְשָׁבַתִּי וְרָאִהוּ.
- 11:1–10 on *economics*: the maxims of commercial prudence are paradoxes. This last section, like the first, opens without an introduction.

⁵⁰ This term, attested from ca. 50 BCE, came to designate an educational practice whose content and structure remained remarkably stable from the third century BCE to the seventh century CE, according to Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42.

12:1–8: Conclusion recommending piety

12:9–14: Epilogues

- 12:9–12: First epilogue: Wisdom epilogue
- 12:13–14: Second epilogue: Piety epilogue

The very order of Qohelet's "public teaching of knowledge" (12:9) seems to result in a strong polemical challenge to the truth claims of Greek science. On the other hand, if we assume that all the hedonistic passages conclude basic structural units of the text, we are much closer to a coherent discourse focusing on pleasure than we are to a controversial dialogue in which all these hedonistic passages belong to the discourse of a sceptic and are later refuted by a God-fearer.

Author and Date

One of the major harmonising devices found in Qohelet in its present form is the attribution of the book to King Solomon, the builder of the Jerusalem Temple. This attribution is found only in two title verses (1:1, 1:12), which closely resemble the stereotypical formula by which Proverbs (1:1), Canticles (1:1), and two Psalms (72:1; 127:1) attribute later compositions to the same prestigious author. The attribution of wisdom literature to monarchs was a legitimisation strategy employed to equate the hierarchies of knowledge with those of the social order, and the midrash still places a great deal of emphasis on the author's supposed royal background.⁵¹

While linguistic analysis of the text of Qohelet has made the traditional attribution implausible, most modern scholars see two possible means of rescuing the fusion of knowledge and power: first, although Qohelet may not have been written by a king, the author presumably belonged to an elite circle of courtly councillors, temple scribes, or other tenured intellectuals, and second, his text develops a literary fiction of kingship, and if the book is not by King Solomon, it is at least about him. As the *Jewish Encyclopedia* cautiously writes regarding this king, "it seems to be probable that his life formed the basis of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and possibly of some elements of the Song of Songs."⁵² This is specifically referring to Qohelet's literary autobiography in chapter 2, which a widespread scholarly convention has called the "Royal Experiment."⁵³

51 David Kimhi on 1Kgs 11:41; see also Reuven Kiperwasser, "The Midrashim on Kohelet: Studies in their Formation and Redaction" [Hebrew]. (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2005).

52 Ira Maurice Price, Emil G. Hirsch, Wilhelm Bacher, M. Seligsohn, Mary W. Montgomery, and Crawford Howell Toy, "Solomon," in *Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume 11*, ed. Isidore Singer et al. (New York and London: Funk and Wagnells, 1905), 436–48, here 438.

53 James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 68; R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 34; Y. V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006).

While the scholarly consensus seems to back one of the two above-mentioned “alternatives to the original attribution, these constructs have no firm basis in the text. As Qohelet clearly states, the author of the aphorisms was a *hakam* (12:9), and his references to kingship deliberately assume the point of view of the subject, who disagrees with the way in which vile and incapable people obtain public office (3:16; 4:13; 10:5–6) and yet fears to criticise the king for such political abuses (8:2; 10:20). Not even the allegedly “royal” experiment with the pursuit of happiness gives any internal evidence regarding the author’s royal identity. Aside from wisdom and labour, the author only enumerates such material means that were available to any wealthy individual: wine-drinking, residences, vineyards, gardens, orchards,⁵⁴ irrigation pools, slaves, cattle, sheep, gold, silver, and entertainers. The last element in the enumeration, *הַדְּבַר הַיָּשָׁר*, is a cryptic hapax that the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Git.* 68a) explained as referring to male and female demons, Rashi to carriages, and still others to sportive games, while Abraham ibn Ezra postulated a reference to concubines simply because he expected the list to contain a mention of Solomon’s many women and sexual infatuations.⁵⁵ Qohelet, however, is a monogamous misogynist (7:26; 9:9), and his literary self-portrait lacks indeed any decipherable reference to Solomon’s emblematic harem. He likewise glosses over the latter’s temple and stables: he boasts of his cows and sheep, but never mentions horses. More revealingly still, his “experiment” does not contain any mention of political justice, monumental constructions, public piety, military glory, or anything that would have pertained to a king’s individual achievements. It therefore seems safe to conclude that the politics of canonisation attributed to King Solomon a book whose author was never meant to be a king, nor was he a member of a wisdom circle at court. He does not speak like a man who lives off his wisdom, but like an independent proprietor and merchant (see 11:1) who, in the Greek style, used his prosperity to fund, among other prestigious occupations, his search for wisdom (7:11–12). Some of his more interpretable statements—that he accumulated more wisdom and wealth than any Jerusalemite before him (1:16; 2:7.9), that he received money from kings and faraway provinces (2:8), and that he mused about the effects of dynastic succession (2:12)—were probably not initially meant as a means of claiming royal dignity, though they would retroactively become proof of the tradition of Solomonic authorship.

The exuberant delights accumulated during the “experiment” thus portray a lifestyle that is patrician without any distinctively royal features. The frugal pleas-

⁵⁴ Of all the items mentioned in the list, the garden has been claimed as a proof of royal privilege; see Arian Verheij, “Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2.4–6,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16, no. 50 (1991): 113–15. However, wealthy individuals also practised horticulture, and philosophers such as Theophrastus and Epicurus were known for their gardens. See Louise Cilliers and François Pieter Retief, “Horticulture in Antiquity, with Emphasis on the Graeco-Roman Era,” *Akroterion* 54 (2009): 1–10, here 5.

⁵⁵ Mordecai b. Solomon Plungian, *Kerem li-Shelomoh* (Vilnius: R. M. Romm, 1857), 34.

ures that are subsequently praised in the ten exhortations are even more at variance with the alleged courtly setting. The reader is advised to enjoy ordinary life, which consists of food and drink (2:24; 3:13; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 10:19), work (3:22), rest (4:6), friends (4:9), property (5:18), cleanliness and body care (9:8), conjugal intimacy (9:9), ready money (10:19), the sight of sunlight (11:7), and all stages of the lifecycle (11:9). In sharp contrast to the ambitious hedonism of the initial autobiography, the book concludes on an Epicurean ethics of the golden mean, *aurea mediocritas*,⁵⁶ which is ideally located in a moderately affluent private home.

If Qohelet's author was an educated parvenu and not a king or a councillor, where does he fall in the history of the Levant and, more particularly, that of Jerusalem? While the Orientalists tend to favour an earlier dating, the Hellenists mostly agree that the author lived in the third century BCE under Ptolemaic rule, when Judean society had reached the levels of luxury and social inequality that the text seems to presuppose.⁵⁷ The foremost representatives of Qohelet scholarship in the twenty-first century have taken this dating for granted.⁵⁸ Only a few historians have placed Qohelet at a later date, after the Seleucid takeover in 198 BCE. Joseph Klausner famously attributed the book to the Tobiad warlord Hyrcanus who committed suicide in 175 BCE when King Antiochus IV rose to power, another hypothesis which is based on the allegedly royal or princely character of the "experiment."⁵⁹ Whitley claims that the book was written around 150 BCE under the latter king, who promoted Epicureanism as his state doctrine.⁶⁰

The almost complete consensus in favour of dating Qohelet to the Ptolemaic period is based on simple but rather weak arguments.⁶¹ First, there is an implicit bias against the second century, which is considered to be a time of religious turmoil because of the Maccabean revolt that began in 167 BCE, and second, there is the

56 Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Via Media: Koh 7,15–18 und die griechisch-hellenistische Philosophie," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. Antoon Schoors (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 181–203.

57 According to Elias Bickerman, he is "a product of Ptolemaic Jerusalem"; see Elias Bickerman, "Kohleth (Ecclesiastes) or the Philosophy of an Acquisitive Society," in Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Kohleth, Esther* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 139–67, here 141; Bohlen, "Kohlelet," 261: "Es sind exakt die Ungerechtigkeiten des Systems, deren Kohlelet sich bewußt wird."

58 Rudman, *Determinism*, 13; Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, 198–255; Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism*, 85–124; Lavoie, "Où en sont les études," (2019) 43.

59 Joseph Klausner, "Meḥabbero shel Sefer Qohelet," *Ha-Shiloaḥ* 42 (1927): 46–57. The thesis has even found its way into popular publications such as Martin Sicker, *Kohlelet: The Reflections of a Judean Prince. A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2006). It is all the more surprising that JiSeong James Kwon and Matthias Brüttsch fail to mention their predecessors when citing it in "Gemeinsame intellektuelle Hintergründe in Kohlelet und in der Familientradition der Tobiaden," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130, no. 2 (2018): 235–51.

60 Whitley, *Kohlelet*, 182.

61 I follow their enumeration in Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 19–20.

thesis that Jesus ben Sira knew the Book of Qohelet and that the latter must therefore have been written before Ben Sira's presumed composition, Ecclesiasticus, which is dated to around 180 BCE.⁶² However, the parallels between the two books can be explained either way.⁶³ Finally, the complaints about the gains of the rich and the exploitation of the poor allegedly fit nicely with a date somewhere during the Ptolemaic Empire, which was known for its exorbitant taxation system—although this monarchy certainly did not have a monopoly on this economic ill.

Thus, none of the chronological arguments is particularly conclusive. On the contrary, it seems to me that the Ptolemaic dating overestimates the economic and intellectual vitality of Jerusalem in the third century BCE. Archaeological excavation shows that the temple city was a minor townlet confined to the eastern slope of present-day Silwan Hill. It was only the change of government in 198 BCE that brought about a remarkable period of urban growth.⁶⁴

Wine is the most frequently mentioned consumer item in Qohelet's hedonistic exhortations (2:3; 9:7; 10:19). If, like Sneed, we attempt to trace wealth and luxury via the spread of wine connoisseurship, which in turn is quantifiable through the archaeological finds of the stamped handles of jars containing high-quality wine from the islands of Rhodes, Cos, and Chios,⁶⁵ we must seriously reflect on the chronology of these imports that the digs in the City of David have revealed. The number of stamped jar handles from Ptolemaic times that were found in the excavations is below five per lustrum; it rises constantly for finds of handles dating to the early Seleucid period, crossing the mark of twenty around 190 BCE and then peaking above sixty during the years 175 to 167 BCE. After the rebellion, wine imports plummet, and by the fall of the Seleucid garrison in 141 BCE, they have disappeared entirely.⁶⁶

In sum, the material evidence regarding the consumption of fine wines in Jerusalem allows us to make a case for dating Qohelet to the early years of King Antio-

⁶² According to Lohfink, *Qohelet*, 7, "setzt das Buch Jesus Sirach das Buch Koh voraus."

⁶³ Rudman, *Determinism*, 31: "The precise relationship between Ben Sira and Ecclesiastes remains unclear."

⁶⁴ Oded Lipschits, "Jerusalem between Two Periods of Greatness: The Size and Status of the City in the Babylonian, Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods," in *Judah between East and West: The Transition from Persian to Greek Rule (ca. 400–200 BCE)*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Oded Lipschits (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 163–75. On the causes of urban growth after 198 BCE, see G. G. Aperghis, "Jewish Subjects and Seleucid Kings: A Case Study of Economic Interaction," in *The Economies of Hellenistic Societies, Third to First Centuries BC*, ed. Zosia Archibald, John K. Davies, and Vincent Gabrielsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19–41, here 36.

⁶⁵ Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism*, 99.

⁶⁶ Gérald Finkielsztejn, "Du bon usage des amphores hellénistiques en contextes archéologiques," in *Céramiques hellénistiques et romaines: Productions et diffusion en Méditerranée orientale (Chypre, Égypte et côte syro-palestinienne)*, ed. Francine Blondé, Pascale Ballet, and Jean-François Salles (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée-Jean Pouilloux, 2002), 227–33. On the sources and interpretation of the data, see also Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 214–15.

chus's reign, which was the high tide of Hellenisation in Jerusalem. There may be another basis for such a hypothesis. I am referring to a historical allusion in Qoh 4:13–15, which scholars have most frequently judged to be an assemblage of proverbial or prototypical topoi,⁶⁷ but which deserves to be read in search of Qohelet's concrete political context.

Better is a poor and wise child (יָלֵד מִסֶּבֶן וְחָכָם) than an old and foolish king (מִמְלֶכֶת זָקֵן וְכֹסִיל), who knoweth not how to receive admonition (לְהִיָּהָר) any more. For out of prison (מִבֵּית יָסוּרִים), he came forth to be king, although in his kingdom he was born poor (וְנֹלַד רָשׁ). I saw all the living that walk under the sun, that they were with the child, the second, that was to stand up in his stead (וְהַיָּלֵד הַשֵּׁנִי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמֹד תַּחְתָּיו).⁶⁸

The detail of the king's past imprisonment is certainly not a proverbial topos. If we look for a historical model of this dynastic conundrum among three Hellenistic contenders, with one being qualified as old and the two others as minors, the allusions seem to fit the conditions in 175 to 170 BCE.⁶⁹ Indeed, Antiochus IV Epiphanes was the only Hellenistic king who ever ascended his throne after being held captive. As a younger brother of the ruling King Seleucus IV, he was held hostage in Rome for a decade, from 188 to 178 BCE, after which time he was exchanged for Seleucus's young son and heir, Demetrius I Soter, whom the Romans would hold captive until 164 BCE. Seleucus was assassinated by the usurper Heliodorus in 175 BCE and Antiochus, now released, in turn ousted Heliodorus by force. Though he was not the dynastic successor, Antiochus ruled the Seleucid kingdom from 175 BCE together with a second nephew, Demetrius's brother, also named Antiochus, who was assassinated on his orders in 170 BCE.

With his allusion to the Seleucid succession conflict, Qohelet's author seems to have been expressing his support of the legitimate heirs, the two child-age brothers, against their uncle Antiochus. The latter was seen as an eccentric character by his contemporaries, who turned his honorific *Epiphanes* (“[God] manifest”) into *Epimanes* (“madman”), as attested by Polybius.⁷⁰ When he became king in 175 BCE, he was in his forties, whereas the captive Demetrius was ten years old and his brother, the co-ruler, was even younger. Qohelet's contrasting of יָלֵד and זָקֵן describes with only a little exaggeration the age difference between King Antiochus and the two princes.

⁶⁷ Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 39: “Sprichwörter”; Ze’ev Weisman, “Elements of Political Satire in Koheleth 4,13–16; 9,13–16,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 111, no. 4 (1999): 547–60, here 547: “a common typological pattern”; Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism*, 128: “popular pseudo-history [...] prototypical picture.”

⁶⁸ Qoh 4:13–15; my translation is based on the American Standard Version.

⁶⁹ For the following, see John D. Grainger, *A Seleukid Prosopography and Gazetteer* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 37, 52.

⁷⁰ Polybius, *Histories* 26.10.

Rulers of different ages are again compared in Qoh 10:16–17, albeit in an inverted order of preference. This time, the author seems to juxtapose the two Hellenistic empires, Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria:

Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a boy (שְׂמֵלֶכֶד נָעַר), and thy princes (שְׂרִידָה) feast in the morning! Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is a free man (בֶּן-חֹרִים), and thy princes eat in due season, in strength, and not in drunkenness!

While King Antiochus was an adult in 175 BCE, the Ptolemaic ruler Ptolemy VI was only eleven years old, and the state was governed by his sister-wife Cleopatra II and two regents.⁷¹ Qohelet's author leaves no doubt about where his loyalties lay between the two kingdoms, which had become antagonistic by 172 BCE leading to open war two years later. Our dating of the text to the years 175 to 170 BCE places the author within a period during which the Hellenising tendencies were strongest among the Jews, creating a dynamic of economic growth from which the priestly and urban elite particularly profited. When Antiochus IV became king, he gave Jason, the son of Simon II (Simon the Just), the dignity of Jewish high priest. Jason offered to change the Jerusalem constitution in order to permit the foundation of a Greek-style polis with cultural innovations such as the opening of a gymnasium destined to educate young people. In 172 BCE, Jason was ousted by his brother Menelaus and had to flee to the Transjordan,⁷² while relations between Greeks and Jews became more conflicted. In retrospect, Victor Tcherikover calls Jason's time as high priest (175/4–172/1 BCE) "the rule of the moderate Hellenizers"⁷³ and a time of prosperity during which the new constitution had no effect on religious life.⁷⁴ If, as I propose, we date Qohelet to that period, then he must have witnessed a moment of important social change brought about by cultural imperialism and by the successful adaptation of an affluent colonised elite.

Conclusion

The Cynics, Epicureans, and Pyrrhonian Sceptics seem to have crossed boundaries of language and ethnicity more easily than their counterparts from the more established philosophical schools. This trend dominated the Levantine school of philosophical thought, which was based in the city of Gadara (Umm Qais, Jordan) and whose most notable figure was the satirist Menippus. The only Greek philosopher quoted in rabbinic literature, Abnomos ha-Gardi, is probably identical with Oeno-

⁷¹ Günther Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire*, trans. Tina Saavedra (London: Routledge, 2001), 143–52.

⁷² 2Macc 4:26.

⁷³ Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. Shimon Applebaum, 5th printing (New York: Athenaeum, 1979), 171.

⁷⁴ Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 166–67.

maus of Gadara, a Cynic of the second century CE.⁷⁵ The epithet “Epicurean” was preserved in rabbinic parlance as a term of abuse.

James A. Loader and James Crenshaw supposed that Qohelet's author was influenced by Greek models but that his arguments were directed against wisdom traditions in an internal Jewish context. As in the Book of Job, the “crisis of wisdom” leads to the pessimistic conclusion that the world is inaccessible to human knowledge and that man has no power over his life. But as we have seen, Qohelet's scepticism has a double thrust. It limits the Jewish view of history as an instrument of divine retribution, but it also raises doubts regarding Greek science's claims to explain nature, forecast history, and promote virtue. Qohelet's location in the larger context of the multilingual reception of Greek thought among the subdued nations of the Levant has already been studied from a postcolonial perspective by Christoph Uehlinger⁷⁶ and Leo Perdue.⁷⁷ While studies of biblical wisdom literature may have exaggerated its “internationality” as an irenic syncretism and a “sapiential koiné” of the antique eastern Mediterranean, a transcultural approach may detect the impact of an ethnic conflict and the clash of wisdom traditions. Qohelet was produced in the midst of a complex situation, in which members of the Jerusalem religious elite are believed to have profited economically as well as intellectually from the conditions of the polis privileges that came with the Hellenistic regime. Social conditions not only prompted Qohelet's author to cover his plutocracy with fatalism and pleasure ethics, as Sneed has argued,⁷⁸ but also to observe a sceptical distance from the norms of both *paideia* and Torah.

Qohelet's reception of popular oppositional undercurrents within a hegemonic culture may be compared to the modern intellectual circles in the Global South that appropriated Western culture via its dissidents. Chinese Marxists, for example, pursued the goal of “accepting Western culture critically” in order to resist both European imperialism and local conservatism.⁷⁹ Through his selective reception of the uncanonical trends from Greek philosophy, Qohelet could challenge providential theology using the means of individual doubt on the one hand and scientific certainty via references to the hidden *elohim* on the other. The conflict between Athens and Jerusalem was complicated rather than mirrored by the contradiction between the joy of life and the fear of God. It was further complicated by the presence of social tension and intellectual controversy in both camps. To the elements of dissident thought that he lifted from Greek scepticism, Qohelet assigned the task of brokering a balance between the two wisdoms.

75 Yehoshua Amir, “Doch ein griechischer Einfluß auf das Buch Kohelet?” in Yehoshua Amir, *Studien zum antiken Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), 35–50.

76 Christoph Uehlinger, “Qohelet im Horizont mesopotamischer, levantinischer und ägyptischer Weisheitsliteratur der persischen und hellenistischen Zeit,” in *Das Buch Kohelet*, 155–247.

77 Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, 232.

78 Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism*, 178.

79 Li Zonggui, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the Modernization of Chinese Culture* (Oxford: Chartridge Books, 2014), 226.

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Reuven Kiperwasser

“Matters That Tend towards Heresy”: Rabbinic Ways of Reading Ecclesiastes

The Book of Ecclesiastes has always troubled its readers, be they modern interpreters, Second Temple Jews, or late antique rabbis. The most obvious problem with it, in their opinion, is its recurring scepticism.¹ Indeed, it seems to question the very possibility that people might be able to shape their future or change their fate through informed action. In fact, the author’s concern would appear to be those problems that arise from this human inability to discern divine action or purpose. Biblical scholars have suggested that Ecclesiastes’s scepticism was in part a reaction to the more confident assertions found in other biblical works such as the Book of Proverbs.² Against this widespread tendency, Stuart Weeks has concluded that Ecclesiastes’s ideas are not actually sceptical, but rather that they are driven by a sense of disappointment with human nature. It is a feeling that people accept the world naïvely and that they are guided by emotion, which inevitably leads them to misperceive the true nature of the world.³ In this regard, the author of Ecclesiastes seeks “to steer others away from the false expectations and disappointment which he experienced himself, by opening their eyes to the reality of their situation.”⁴ According to Weeks, “the author has given us a character [in Ecclesiastes] who is not supposed to command assent at every turn from his readers, but whose situation drives him to a provocative, poetic, and sometimes very personal re-evaluation of the world and human priorities.”⁵ Readers, he continues, are “supposed to engage with Qohelet’s ideas, not necessarily to identify with his priorities and concerns.”⁶ Thus, modern readers, according to Weeks, mark Ecclesiastes as a sceptical

1 This has been argued by numerous authors. See, for example, Martin Alfred Klopfenstein, “Die Skepsis des Qohelet,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972): 97–109; William H. U. Anderson, “What Is Scepticism and Can It Be Found in the Hebrew Bible?,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 13, no. 2 (1999): 225–57; James Lee Crenshaw, “The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel,” in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God’s Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman*, ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel (New York: Ktav, 1980), 1–19. For criticism of these approaches, see Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 132–35.

2 See Milton P. Horne, “Intertextuality and Economics: Reading Ecclesiastes with Proverbs,” in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 106–17; Daniel J. Estes, “Seeking and Finding in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs,” in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, 118–29. See and compare further Werman, “Wisdom Scepticism and Apocalyptic Certitude” in this volume.

3 Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 169.

4 Weeks, 169.

5 Weeks, 179.

6 Weeks, 4.

text because they are unsure quite how to classify it. Weeks's point of view deserves a more detailed discussion, although I am more interested here in the rabbinic reception of Ecclesiastes.⁷ It is curious, however, that in many ways, rabbinic readings of Ecclesiastes, as we shall see, resemble those of modern readers. As if following Weeks's advice, they engaged too closely with the scriptural verses of Ecclesiastes and were attracted to the work's unusual tone and content. Similar to modern scholars, who have searched for foreign ideas in this biblical book in order to account for its unconventionality, the rabbis attempted to uncover heretical undertones in this ancient text, but at the same time to counterbalance them with their own readings, thereby rendering it acceptable despite its problematic nature.

There is a broad consensus among scholars that rabbinic controversy surrounded the question of whether to include Ecclesiastes in the biblical canon.⁸ In this article, I will first consider the early rabbinic discussion of the book, some of which has been taken as evidence of such a controversy. I will then address later rabbinic deliberations, which do indeed express genuine exegetical bewilderment about the book, though still no evidence of canonical controversy.

7 It would be interesting to attempt to explain this unusual nature of Ecclesiastes and the source of its attraction with the help of Umberto Eco and his idea of the open work (*opera aperta*). Eco refines the concept found in aesthetic theory that states that every text is open because it can be read in an infinite number of ways, depending on what the reader brings to the text. For Eco, an open work is a text that is not limited to a single reading or range of readings; it admits complexity and encourages or requires a multiplicity of readings. Eco sees open works as essentially political, as a work that openly expresses a pluralistic worldview. As examples, he cites texts which on the surface are more traditional, although still enigmatic. Thus, in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the reader relates to the text on the level of metaphor, but without a clear mapping of metaphors (Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989], 9). There is no fixed symbolism by which to unlock the meaning of Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis. However, if, in Kafka's case, we can imagine that the author intentionally left the hidden room of his work open—or, let us say, unfinished—did the author of Ecclesiastes construct his text as an open work, or did some peculiarities of its redaction and reception render it an open work, a text which invites us to interpret it and which expresses a worldview that can be understood as pluralistic?

8 See, for instance, the following: Saul Lieberman, "Notes on Chapter I of Midrash *Koheleth Rabbah*" [Hebrew], in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, Chaim Wirszubski, Gershom G. Scholem, and Ephraim E. Urbach (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967): 163–70; Marc Hirshman, "Qohelet's Reception and Interpretation in Early Rabbinic Literature," in *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, ed. James L. Kugel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University Press, 2001), 87–99; Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Academy, 1970), 51–56, 120–24.

Tannaitic Approaches to Ecclesiastes and Solomon

The date and authorship of this very exceptional biblical book has always been a matter of dispute. Modern Bible scholars place the composition of Ecclesiastes in the Hellenistic period (third to second centuries BCE) and regard it both as one of the latest books in the Hebrew Bible and as being of unknown authorship.⁹ The rabbis, however, assumed that Ecclesiastes was a prophetic work and attributed it to King Solomon along with Proverbs and the Song of Songs.¹⁰

Seder Olam, a historiographic tannaitic work dated to the second century CE,¹¹ describes how in old age and close to death, King Solomon repented for his sins, received the “holy spirit,” namely divine inspiration, and composed his three books one after another:

Seder Olam 15

“And King Solomon loved many foreign women” etc. “from nations which the Lord has said...,” “You shall not enter into marriage with them” etc. (1Kgs 11:1–2). As you will find it say “The city has aroused my anger and wrath” (Jer 32:31). But at the time of Solomon’s old age, close to his death, the Holy Spirit rested upon him, and he recited these three books: Proverbs, Canticles and Qohelet.¹²

והמלך שלמה אהב נשים נכריות וג' מן הגוים וג' (מלכים א' יא א-ב), כשתמצא לומר כי על אפי ועל חמתי וגוי' (ירמיה לב לא), אבל לעת זקנת שלמה סמוך למיתתו שרתה עליו רוח הקדש, ואמר שלשה ספרים הללו, משלות שיר השירים וקהלת.

⁹ For recent discussion, see Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 2–7, and Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 170–79 (and for further discussion on dating Ecclesiastes, see the contributions in this volume by Carsten Wilke and Cana Werman).

¹⁰ This idea already appears in tannaitic literature (roughly second to early third centuries CE); see also *Sifre Deut.* 1 (Finkelstein edition, 2). For another example, see, the following passage from *Seder Olam*, although his name is absent from the long list of prophets in chapters 20 and 21; see Milikowsky’s explanation in his commentary, *Seder Olam: Critical Edition, Commentary, and Introduction* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2013), 2:349. For a brief discussion of the attribution of prophetic abilities to Solomon, see Milikowsky’s commentary on *Seder Olam*, Vol.2, 348–49, and n. 93. The assumption of Solomon’s prophetic powers took further root in the writings of the amoraim: see Marc Hirshman, “The Prophecy of King Solomon and Ruach HaKodesh in Midrash Qohelet Rabbah” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1, no. 3 (1982): 7–14.

¹¹ See Milikowsky edition, introduction, Vol. 1, 116–29. The exact dating is problematic, because, as Milikowsky suggests, the prototype of the text was composed before the rabbinic period, but it was accepted by the rabbis and edited during the tannaitic period.

¹² Milikowsky edition, 2: 266. The translation is taken from Chaim J. Milikowsky, “*Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronography*” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1981), 2: 492.

This tradition presents certain challenges. In the passage above, the author shows that Solomon did not always possess the “holy spirit”; that is, he was not always inspired by God, as this divine inspiration left him in the fourth year of his reign.¹³ Milikowsky proposes that the author of *Seder Olam*, which is based on 2Chr 11:17, believed that unlike Rehoboam, Solomon returned to a righteous path at the end of his life, at which point he composed these works.¹⁴ A similar tradition to this is found in *Song of Songs Rabbah* (1:1:10), but in this case, it is questioned and an alternative view is advocated, which is of amoraic provenance, according to which Solomon composed each of these three works at different periods in the course of his life: the Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his old age. We shall take a closer look at this tradition below. Interestingly, nobody has raised the possibility that Ecclesiastes was *not* composed in the author’s later years. And indeed, the book does give the feeling that its author has already lived a full life, that he has both known everything and doubted everything. *Seder Olam*’s author appears to believe that all three books were composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This idea, however, was not embraced by everyone, as we shall see below. Notably, it appears that the author of *Seder Olam* does not doubt that Ecclesiastes belongs in the canon or that Solomon regained his prophetic abilities at the end of his years.

Lieberman’s Thesis: A Rabbinic Canonical Controversy

With its statement that Solomon received the Holy Spirit prior to composing the three books, this passage attributes a prophetic status to Ecclesiastes and the other books attributed to Solomon. Moreover, it does not suggest that Ecclesiastes’s status within the canon was ever in question. Saul Lieberman, however, suggests that this was not the case; rather, he argues that its status had been in dispute. He reconstructs this dispute, however, on the basis of later material, which is preserved in amoraic literature. Lieberman suggests that the exclusion of Ecclesiastes from the canon was proposed despite its attribution to Solomon, since the latter had composed the book in his old age, after having worshipped foreign gods.¹⁵ He bases his theory of rabbinic controversy on the fact that the only explicit discussion of the biblical canon, order, and authorship in rabbinic literature does not mention Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes, but rather someone else:

¹³ See the explanation in Milikowsky, *Seder Olam: Critical Edition*, 2: 262.

¹⁴ Milikowsky, 2: 262.

¹⁵ Saul Lieberman, “Mishnah of Song of Songs” [Hebrew] in Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1965, Appendix D, 118–126.

b. B. Bat. 15a

Hezekiah and his party composed Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes.

חזקיה וסיעתו כתבו ישעיה, משלי, שיר השירים וקהלת.

The meaning of this passage, and particularly the identity of Hezekiah (and his party), is obscure. Some scholars have suggested that the rabbis were thinking of none other than King Hezekiah of Judah, who lived in the late eighth to early seventh century BCE, and the members of his court. Others have proposed that this passage refers to a group of imagined editors who began the process of canonising the Bible, a process ostensibly completed during the generation of Yavneh.¹⁶ For his part, Lieberman suggests that Hezekiah’s party was an ancient group of unknown exegetes who offered a metaphorical interpretation of difficult biblical texts. This interpretative activity allowed Ecclesiastes, which presented some difficulty for rabbinic readers, to gain acceptance.¹⁷

The above-mentioned talmudic passage does not, however, explicitly refer to a canonical controversy over Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, or any of the other books in the list. Lieberman bases his claim largely on another ancient rabbinic debate found in *m. Yadayim*, which he understands as actually discussing the question of the inclusion or exclusion of Ecclesiastes from the biblical canon. The source is as follows:

m. Yad. 3:5

All the Holy Scriptures render the hands unclean. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean. R. Judah says: The Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, but concerning Ecclesiastes there is dissension. R. Yose says: Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean, and concerning the Song of Songs there is dissension. R. Simeon says: Ecclesiastes is one of the issues concerning which the School of Shammai adopted the more lenient, and the School of Hillel the more stringent ruling. R. Simeon b. ‘Azai said: I have heard a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they appointed R. Ele‘azar b. ‘Az-

כל כתבי הקדש מטמאין את הידים. שיר השירים וקהלת מטמאין את הידים. ר' יהודה אומר שיר השירים מטמא את הידים וקהלת מחלוקת ר"א קהלת אינו מטמא את הידים ושיר השירים מחלוקת רש"א קהלת מקולי ב"ש ומחומרי ב"ה אר"ש בן עזאי מקובל אני מפי ע"ב זקן ביום שהושיבו את ר"א ב"ע בישיבה ששיר השירים וקהלת מטמאים את הידים אמר ר"ע חס ושלום לא נחלק אדם מישראל על שיר השירים שלא תטמא את הידים שאין כל העולם כולו כדאי כיום שניתן בו ש"ה לישראל שכל כתובים קדש ושיר השירים קודש קדשים ואם נחלקו לא נחלקו אלא על קהלת. א"ר יוחנן בן יהושע בן חמיו של ר"ע כדברי ב"ע כך נחלקו וכן גמרו

¹⁶ See also Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture*, 120–24.

¹⁷ Lieberman, “Mishnah of Song of Songs,” 163–67.

ariah as an elder, that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes both render the hands unclean. R. ‘Aqiba said: God forbid!—no-one in Israel doubted [the common opinion] about the Song of Songs [by saying] that it does not render the hands unclean, for the whole world cannot compare to the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all of Scripture is sacred, but the Song of Songs is the most sacred of all. And if aught was in dispute, the dispute concerned Ecclesiastes alone. R. Yoḥanan b. Joshua, the son of R. ‘Aqiba’s father-in-law, said: According to the words of Ben ‘Azzai so did they dispute and so did they decide.¹⁸

This mishnaic passage discusses whether two of the books attributed to Solomon, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, should be considered in the same legal category as the rest of Scripture, which ritually defiles the hands. Underlying this discussion is the halakic principle that all holy scriptures have the capacity to transmit ritual impurity upon contact.¹⁹ The same mishnaic passage cites R. Simeon bar Yoḥai’s claim that the status of Ecclesiastes with respect to its capacity to render the hands impure was a point of contention between the schools of Shammai and Hillel.

Challenges to Lieberman’s Thesis

Along with Lieberman, there have been other scholars who have sought to connect the concept of the ritual defilement of the hands with the rabbinic process of canonisation.²⁰ However, this view has been rejected because at the very least, it could not be referring to a rabbinic controversy, as this ritual concept has pre-rabbinic roots.²¹

¹⁸ Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishna* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 781–82 (with some minor changes).

¹⁹ This form of impurity is only mentioned in rabbinic literature. See Chaim Milikowsky, “Reflections on Hand-Washing, Hand-Purity and Holy Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 149–62, here 160–62.

²⁰ Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture*, 102–20.

²¹ Menahem Haran, *The Biblical Collection: Its Consolidation to the End of the Second Temple Times and Changes of Form to the End of the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 1:201–76 (He-

Another problem with Lieberman’s thesis is that the surviving tannaitic interpretations of Ecclesiastes hardly give any indication that the book was seen as problematic. In fact, the two major tannaitic schools did indeed interpret Ecclesiastes in different ways.²² For R. Ishmael’s school, Ecclesiastes was fully integrated into the exegetical canon, and they regarded its main theme to be coping with death, including reward and punishment. The opposing school of R. ‘Aqiba conceded that Ecclesiastes’s value had once been debated, primarily to defend his position regarding the high status of the Song of Songs, which he interpreted mystically. There is no indication of a problematic or even different status being attributed to Ecclesiastes in the exegesis of R. ‘Aqiba or his school. Therefore, I believe that the school of R. ‘Aqiba’s hypothesis regarding a dispute over the status of the Book of Ecclesiastes is no more than their attempt to reconstruct the history of the book; namely, it is an explanation that they themselves invented, not a genuine memory dating from the period of the canonisation of the Scriptures.

The discussion about whether Ecclesiastes renders the hands impure implies that the rabbis perceived there to be some difficulty with the content of this work. Rabbinic literature, however, does not account for Ecclesiastes’s status with respect to rendering the hands impure by appealing to the problem of its canonicity. The only surviving tannaitic explanation of the problem cites a sage from the last generation of tannaim, Rabbi Simeon b. Menasya, who claims that while Ecclesiastes is indeed a product of wisdom, it was not divinely inspired. Therefore, it differs from the other books of the Bible. There is no question, however, about its canonicity.

t. Yad. 2:14

Rabbi Simeon b. Menasya says, the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean since it was said with the holy spirit; Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean since it is Solomon’s wisdom²³

ר' שמעון בן מנסיא אומר שיר
השירים מטמא את הידים מפני
שנאמרה ברוח הקדש. קהלת אינה
מטמא את הידים מפני שהיא
מחכמתו של שלמה

Rabbi Simeon b. Menasya is concerned with a number of issues here. He is dealing with matters of purity on the one hand, while on the other, he is attempting to organise Solomon’s oeuvre by genre: one is prophecy, and another is wisdom. He is not preoccupied with canonical controversy. The assertion that the author’s wisdom is not divinely inspired does not indicate that it is perceived as displeasing or

brew); Shamma Y. Friedman, “The Holy Scriptures Defile the Hands: The Transformation of a Biblical Concept in Rabbinic Theology,” in *Minhah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 117–32; Milikowsky, “Reflections on Hand-Washing,” 160–62.

²² *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 1–6*, edited by Marc Hirshman, (The Midrash Project; Jerusalem: Schechter Institute, 2016), 94–99.

²³ Zuckerman edition, 683.

heretical. However, it is clearly polemicizing against the tradition in *Seder Olam*, which supposes that all three books were the prophetic works of a repentant king.

The Amoraic Approach: Determining Ecclesiastes's Problem

There are, however, claims made in amoraic literature that suggest a more troubling issue of status. We saw above how *Seder Olam* regarded Ecclesiastes to be a prophetic book on a par with the other books attributed to Solomon. However, according to a relatively late midrashic tradition preserved in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the composition of these books occurred sequentially over the course of Solomon's life. As such, they have different statuses.

Song of Songs Rab. 1:1:10

[Solomon] composed three books: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Which of these did he write first? Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great and R. Jonathan [differ on this question]. Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great said: He wrote Proverbs first, and afterwards the Song of Songs, and then Ecclesiastes. He derived [this conclusion] from this verse: "He composed three thousand proverbs and his songs were a thousand and five" (1Kgs 5:12). "Proverbs" is the book of Proverbs, "and his songs were a thousand and five" is the Song of Songs. And Ecclesiastes was said at the end. Rabbi Ḥiyya's [tannaitic] teachings dispute this tradition. The teaching states that he wrote all three of them at the same time; but this tradition says that he wrote each one separately. Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great taught: Only in Solomon's old age did the holy spirit rest upon him and he composed the three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

Rabbi Jonathan said: he wrote the Song of Songs first, then Proverbs, and then Ecclesiastes. Rabbi Jonathan deduced this

ג' ספרים כתב משלי וקהלת שיר השירים
אי זה מהן כתב תחלה ר' חייא רבה ורבי
יונתן רבי חייא רבה אמר משלי כתב תחלה
ואח"כ שיר השירים ואח"כ קהלת ומייתי
לה מהאי קרא וידבר ג' אלפים משל,
זה ספר משלי, ויהי שירו חמשה ואלף זה
שיר השירים, וקהלת בסוף אמר, מתנייתא
דרבי חייא רבה פליגא על הדין שמעתא,
מתנייתא אמרה שלשתן כתב כאחת
ושמעתא אמרה כל חד וחד בפני עצמו, תני
רבי חייא רבה רק לעת זקנת שלמה שרתה
עליו רוה"ק ואמר ג' ספרים משלי
וקהלת ושיר השירים,

ר' יונתן אמר שה"ש כתב תחלה ואח"כ
משלי ואח"כ קהלת ומייתי לה ר' יונתן
מדרך ארץ כשאדם נער אומר דברי זמר,

from the way of the world: When a man is young he composes songs; once he has grown older he makes sententious remarks, when he becomes an old man he speaks things of vanity (*divrei havalim*).

Rabbi Yanai, the father-in-law of Rabbi Ami, said: All agree that Ecclesiastes was composed at the end.

הגדיל אומר דברי משלות, הזקין
אומר דברי הבלים

ר' ינאי חמוי דר' אמי אמר הכל מודים
שקהלת בסוף אמרה.

The rabbis debate the question of which of the three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or the Song of Songs, was composed first. According to Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great, it was only in his old age, when the “holy spirit” rested upon him, that Solomon composed all three books. R. Ḥiyya’s approach is more or less exegetical in that he attempts to reconstruct the order of composition of the books according to the order of the deeds in the biblical verse: the composition of proverbs as evidence of the authorship of the Book of Proverbs, the composition of songs as the composition of the Song of Songs. There is nothing about the composition of Ecclesiastes in the verse, and so the midrashist assumes that it was written after the events described in the verse. His opponent, R. Jonathan, proposes a psychological explanation, which is not supported by any verse, but rather by “the way of the world” (*derekh ereṣ*), an expression usually used to refer to the social order. Solomon composed the Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his old age, moving from the poetical mood of youth through mature reasoning and finally to the sceptical disappointment of his old age. R. Jonathan argues that “when a man is young, he composes songs, when he grows older, he makes sententious remarks, when he becomes an old man he speaks things of vanity (*divrei havalim*).” This last phrase, *divrei havalim*, could be translated as “the vanity of things,” “insignificant things,” or, simply, “nonsense,” but it could also mean “the things of vanity,” meaning that it is far from being conventional wisdom. I think that this is a deliberate pun: he wants to say that the wisdom of Ecclesiastes would appear senseless, resembling the sayings of an old embittered elder, if you did not have the special lens of interpretation in your hands. This diachronic view of the composition of these books explains how one author could have written three works as diverse in style and tenor as the sensual Song of Songs, the pious and conventional Proverbs, and the somewhat unconventional Ecclesiastes. What remains unclear, however, is establishing exactly how Ecclesiastes is unconventional.

The first amoraic accusation against Ecclesiastes appears in *y. Sanh.* 2:6 (20c). According to this tradition, Solomon, who was considered prone to conceit, was once replaced on his throne by an angel who was impersonating him.²⁴

²⁴ The version of the story about Solomon being usurped by an unnatural being is better known from *b. Giṭ.* 68a, although in this instance, it is a demon. See further, and also concerning its relationship to the version in Palestinian Talmud, Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre,*

y. *Sanh.* 2:4 (20c)

It is written, “I said of laughter, ‘It is mad’ (Eccl 2:2).”

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Solomon, “What is this crown [doing] on your head? Remove yourself from my throne.”

R. Yose b. Ḥanina said, “At that moment an angel came down and took on the appearance of Solomon and removed Solomon from his throne and took the seat in his stead.”

Solomon went around the synagogues and schoolhouses, saying, “I, Ecclesiastes, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Eccl 1:12). But they replied to him: the king is sitting in his *seat of honour* (Gk: *basileon*), and yet you say: “I am Ecclesiastes?!” And they beat him with a reed and placed before him a dish of grits. At that moment, he wept and said, “and this was my portion from all my labour” (Eccl 2:10).

There are those who say it was a staff, and there are those who say it was a reed, and some say that it was a belt of knotted rope.

This story follows on the heels of a description of the legendary wealth of King Solomon and is an exegetical bridge from the verse from Eccl 2:2, “I said of laughter: ‘It is mad’; and of mirth: ‘What doth it accomplish?’”,²⁵ to the other verse from the same chapter of Eccl 2:10: “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my

לשחוק אמרתי מהולל.

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לשלמה. מה עטרה זו בראשך. רד מכסאי. רבי יוסי בן חנינה אמר באותה שעה ירד מלאך ונדמה כדמות שלמה והעמידו מכסאו וישב תחתיו והיה מחזר על בתי כניסיות ובתי מדרשות ואומר אני קהלת הייתי מלך על ישראל בירושלם והווי מרין ליה מלכא יתיב על בסיליון דידיה ותימר אני קהלת והיו מכין אותו בקנה ומביאין לפניו קערת גריסין. באות' שעה אמ' וזה היה חלקי אית דמרין חוטרא ואית דמרין קניא אית דמרין קושרתיה

Meaning, trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 87–89, and more recently, Rella Kushelevsky, “Gaps between Versions Constituting a Thematic Series: A Study of the Legend ‘Solomon and Ashmedai’” [Hebrew], in *Ma’aseh Sipur: Studies in Jewish Narrative Presented to Yoav Elstein*, ed. Avidov Lipsker and Rella Kushelevsky (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 221–41. See also the recent overview in Gerhard Langer, “Solomon in Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Tradition: King, Sage, and Architect*, ed. Joseph Verheyden (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 127–42.

²⁵ Here and later, I am using the old (1917) JPS translation of Ecclesiastes, with minor changes.

heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil.” As is well known, the verses of this biblical book often contradict one another, prompting commentators to seek to harmonise them. Those who attributed the authorship of the book to Solomon often explained these contradictions by recourse to the events of the author’s life. According to the proposed exegesis, the first verse, which condemns laughter and merriment, would seem to be a typical reaction from an elitist intellectual to the foibles of the common people. In his view, laughter is always mixed with a tinge of sadness or cruelty, and fun is usually short-lived, giving way to sadness. Indeed, for the author of Ecclesiastes, the human oscillation between gaiety and sadness makes no sense. One should take the world as it is and leave aside both joy and sadness. God, however, grows impatient with the king for expressing such scepticism and denial of simple human enjoyment. By way of punishment, He determines to deprive Solomon of his crown and restore to him the true perspective of the relationship between joy and sorrow. An angel descends from heaven and assumes the king’s form, sitting on his throne and acting in his stead. Thus, deprived of his throne, Solomon first seeks to return to his palace and regain his stature. Visiting places of congregation, synagogues, and academies, he announces that a usurper has removed him from the throne. Here, the commentator adduces the verse “I am Ecclesiastes” (Eccl 1:2), reading it as an urgent admonition to the people of Israel: “I, Solomon, *was* a king,” but now I am banished. The people, however, are not willing to recognise the king in the vagabond because they know for certain that the throne is not empty. In this manner, the king learns true sadness: loss of recognition, uncertainty regarding his fate, and, of course, humiliation. Believing the itinerant to be impudent or insane, the people treat him accordingly, beating him with a staff. Being punished by his own people is a lesson that the Solomon who uttered Eccl 2:2 had not yet experienced. Bereft of his identity, the king is forced to wander the streets and beg for food. The very people who are cruel enough to beat him are merciful enough to feed him. He receives the typical beggar’s fare—a barley brew that can satiate, but hardly satisfy one accustomed to luxury. However, it turns out that the work of writing Ecclesiastes has continued, despite the king’s new living conditions. After tasting cooked barley, Solomon can say, “And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart had joy of all my labour; and this was my portion from all my labour.” According to the commentator, the first part of the verse speaks of his magnificent past. The final part of the verse (“and this was my portion from all my labour”) is a sober portrayal of his present state. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is wisdom acquired through suffering. Suffering helps him to understand both the price of enjoyment and the cost of sadness. The main problem is Solomon’s devaluation of the value of laughter and mirth; however, in the end, the king sincerely repents of this sin, which is echoed in Eccl 2:10.

Lev. Rab. 28:1

Rabbi Benjamin b. Levi said: The Sages wanted to store away (*lignoz*) the Book of Ecclesiastes because they found in it matters that tend towards heresy. They said: Behold! all of Solomon's wisdom comes to teach "what profit has a man of all his labour wherein he laboured under the sun?" (Eccl 1:3). Could it be even when he laboured in the Torah? But then they responded [to themselves]: it is not written "in *any* labour," but "in *his* labour." There is no profit in his labour, but there is profit in the labour of the Torah.

R. Samuel b. Isaac said: The Sages wanted to store away the book of Ecclesiastes because they found in it words that tend towards heresy. They said: Behold! all of Solomon's wisdom comes to teach: "You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth." (Eccl 11: 9). Moses said: "you shall not follow after your own heart and your own eyes" (Num 15: 39), and yet he states: "Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see"! Is there neither judgment nor judge?! Is the restraint removed? But since he said: "but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment," they responded, indeed Solomon has spoken well."

R. Yudan said: "Under the sun," there is no [profit], but before the sun there is.²⁶

א"ר בנימן בר לוי בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת שמצאו בו דברים שנוטין לצד מינות. אמרו הא כל חכמתו של שלמה שבא לומר מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו שיעמול תחת השמש, יכול אפי' בעמילו של תורה, חזרו ואמרו לא אמר בכל עמל אלא בכל עמלו, בעמלו אינו מועיל אבל מועיל הוא בעמילה של תורה.

א"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק בקשו חכמי לגנוז ספר קהלת שמצאו בו דברים שנוטין לצד מינות. אמרו הא כל חכמתו של שלמה שבא לומר שמח בחור בילדותך ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותיך והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראה עיניך (קהלת יא, ט), משה אמ' ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם (במדבר טו, לט), והוא אמ' והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראה עיניך, לא דין ולא דין, הותרה הרצועה, כיון שאמ' ודע כי על כל אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט (קהלת י"א, ט), אמרו יפה אמ' שלמה

ר' יודן אמ' תחת השמש אינו לפני השמש יישנו.

²⁶ Mordecai Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes* (New York: JTS Press, 1972), תרמח.

According to *Lev. Rab.* 28:1, an unknown group of rabbis wanted to put the book into storage²⁷ in order to prevent its circulation, because they found in it “matters that tend towards heresy” (*devarim še-noṭin le-šad minut*).²⁸

The first example is Eccl 1:3, from which the rabbis have suggested, through a hyper-literal reading, that it implies a lack of respect for the study of the Torah, for the verse indicates a deficiency in *all* human labour. However, this concern is overcome through the understanding that Ecclesiastes speaks only of earthly labour, not of the toil in Torah study. What we ultimately see here is nothing more than a typical exegetical device of reading a verse in a hyper-literal manner, or conversely, by extending its meaning to embrace something additional that was not originally included. The first critical reading by R. Benjamin b. Levi turns out to be superficial and wrong, while the second reading in the name of R. Samuel b. Isaac reveals its pious character. Thus, the first exegete concluded with Eccl 1:3; however, immediately after the tradition of R. Samuel b. Isaac, a third statement appears that is attributed to R. Yudan, which is based on the same verse. This is based on the words “under the sun,” and the solution of the same problem evoked by Eccl 1:3 is that it only applies to human labour under the sun, but not to toil that is unbound by the limits of the universe.

The second example of the “matters that tend towards heresy,” according to this source, is Eccl 11:9. The following midrashic explanation of this verse builds on the collision between the verse’s beginning and end. The beginning could be understood as a hedonistic call to enjoy the world regardless of God’s presence in it. However, the end adds a well-balanced dose of fear of God, at least according to the midrashist. It transpires that the sceptical reader of the verse, who saw heretical overtones in it, had been reading it superficially, without appreciating the end of the verse. This discussion of the challenges of Ecclesiastes, then, looks more like a narrative frame for exegetical discussion and not like real evidence of the problematic acceptance of the biblical book. The third amoraic source is as follows:

²⁷ See Shamma Friedman, “The Primacy of Tosefta in Mishnah-Tosefta Parallels (Shabbat 16.1),” [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 62 (1993): 313–38. Friedman shows that the verb *g-n-z* is used primarily in the negative sense of making a book unusable without destroying it (323–24).

²⁸ I cannot discuss the problematic term *minut* here, which is usually translated as “heresy,” but I can mention that it serves as a term for all deviant customs, not only religious, but also ethical. The meaning of *minut* remains contested. See Stuart S. Miller, “The ‘Minim’ of Sepphoris reconsidered,” *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 377–402; Martin Goodman, “The Function of ‘Minim’ in Early Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Geschichte—Tradition—Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag. Band I: Judentum*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 501–10; Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 102–3, 210 n. 9; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 221.

b. Šabb²⁹

Rav Judah, son of R. Samuel b. Shilat, said in the name of Rav: The Sages wished to store away the Book of Ecclesiastes because its words are self-contradictory. Yet why did they not hide it? Because it begins with words of Torah and ends with words of Torah. Its beginning is words of Torah, as it is written, “What profit has man of all his labour wherein he labours under the sun?” And the school of R. Yannai commented: Under the sun he has none, but he has it before the sun.

The end thereof is words of Torah, as it is written, “Let us hear the conclusion of the matter, fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole of man” [...]

And how are its words self-contradictory? It is written, “anger is better than laughter” (Eccl 7: 3) but it is written, “I said of laughter, it is to be praised” (Eccl 2: 2) It is written, “Then I commended joy,” but it is written, “and of joy I said, What does it do?” There is no difficulty: “anger is better than laughter,” the anger which the Holy One, blessed be He, displays to the righteous in this world is better than the laughter which the Holy One, blessed be He, laughs with the wicked in this world.

This tradition seems to be partially based on the first part of the tradition from *Leviticus Rabbah* cited above. It deals with Eccl 1:3; however, the interpretation of R. Benjamin’s verse and of the words “under the sun” are seemingly taken from the words of R. Yudan, which are an addition in *Leviticus Rabbah*. Here, however, the book is considered as a whole, and the interpretation is not concerned with the particular difficulties evoked by certain problematic verses. According to the Baby-

אמר רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר שילת משמיה דרב: בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה, ומפני מה לא גנזוהו – מפני שתחילתו דברי תורה וסופו דברי תורה, תחילתו דברי תורה – דכתיב מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו שיעמול תחת השמש ואמרי דבי רבי ינאי: תחת השמש הוא דאין לו, קודם שמש – יש לו.

סופו דברי תורה – דכתיב סוף דבר הכל נשמע את האלהים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור כי זה כל האדם.

[...]

ומאי דבריו סותרין זה את זה? – כתיב טוב כעס משחוק וכתיב לשחוק אמרתי מהולל. כתיב ושבחתי אני את השמחה וכתיב ולשמחה מה זה עשה. לא קשיא, טוב כעס משחוק – טוב כעס שכועס הקדוש ברוך הוא על הצדיקים בעולם הזה, משחוק שמשחק הקדוש ברוך הוא על הרשעים בעולם הזה.

²⁹ This pericope is slightly abbreviated.

lonian Talmud, the main problem with Ecclesiastes is its inconsistency, as it contradicts itself. Ecclesiastes is a polyphonic book, constructed from many brief monologues which are very often contradictory. If for *Leviticus Rabbah*, the main issue of Ecclesiastes is its hedonistic tendency, for the Babylonian rabbis, it is the logical inconsistency of the composition. Nevertheless, both works similarly resolve or overcome these contradictions by evoking the God-fearing intentions of the author.

Diachronically, the author of Ecclesiastes has been accused of pessimism, hedonism, and a lack of consistency in three different works of amoraic literature. However, no doubts have been expressed concerning the sacral status of the book. Most importantly, all these approaches seem to reflect *amoraic* concerns and *amoraic* exegesis rather than a real historical debate over the acceptance of the book that might conceivably have taken place in the past.

In conclusion, the rabbis accepted the closed canon, with all its twenty-four books, and they did not question the inclusion of any of the books within this canon. They were not aware of how the process of canonisation had actually been conducted, nor of the reasons for the acceptance of certain exceptional books, such as Ecclesiastes or the Song of Songs. And yet, as sensitive readers and experienced exegetes, they felt that these books were different. They therefore received plenty of attention from the rabbis and were extensively used in their exegesis. The stories about difficulties in accepting of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs essentially came about as a defence of their enormous appeal and broad exegetical use as a valuable resource for interpretation.

Ancient (rabbinic) readers, I would argue, invented the story about the struggle for the inclusion of the book within the canon in order to apologise for its presence therein. They were fully cognisant of the book’s unconventionality and aspired to produce etiological explanations in order to account for its oddity. Firstly, they asserted, the book was not a book of wisdom at all; rather, it was a book of prophecy. Secondly, it was claimed that it was a book of obscure parables, like the Song of Songs. Finally, it was said to be a book of wisdom which seemed odd, but could still be accepted—as was shown in numerous interpretations which provided an appropriate context for the odd verses. The rabbis were the first readers of Ecclesiastes to give some thought to its unusual nature, and modern approaches to the book have, in many ways, merely echoed an ancient perplexity.

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Cana Werman

Wisdom Scepticism and Apocalyptic Certitude; Philosophical Certitude and Apocalyptic Scepticism

It is a common assumption among scholars that the Greek invasion of Judea in the last third of the fourth century BCE, during which time the Judeans were obliged to accept another foreign rule that was stranger and more culturally aggressive than previous ones, was perceived by the Judeans as a watershed.¹ A number of developments towards the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third centuries BCE in Judean Jewish literature lead to this assumption. Firstly, biblical works composed during this period do not present themselves as contemporary, but claimed to date from a much earlier period.² Secondly, compositions from the third century BCE reveal traces of scepticism, an acknowledgement that man is incapable of understanding God's conduct and rules. Scepticism appears overtly in biblical wisdom literature and covertly in the apocalyptic writings that emerge in this era.³

This phenomenon of scepticism will be the focus of the current paper. I wish to point to the ambivalent relationship that both wisdom literature and apocalyptic literature have to scepticism from the third century BCE onwards. I intend to show that the expression of scepticism was accompanied by efforts to abandon it and to offer an alternative historiography and view of reality. Tracing the move from wisdom-scepticism and apocalypse-scepticism to apocalypse-certitude and wisdom-certitude will enable us to understand the ancient debate regarding the place of God in a shaky world. It will also provide us with the opportunity to observe the penetration of a new component in the intellectual "adventures" of Second Temple Judaism: Hellenistic philosophy.

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1 On the reaction of the nations of the ancient Near East, see John Joseph Collins, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel* (Missoula, MT: Scholar Press, 1977), 101–4; 191–93.

2 Consequently, this point in time—the transition from the Persian to the Hellenistic period—was regarded by later generations as the end of prophecy. See Chaim Milikowsky, "The End of Prophecy and the Closure of the Biblical Canon in Rabbinic Thought" [Hebrew], *Sidra* 10 (1994): 83–94.

3 For a similar observation, see Leo G. Perdue, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qoheleth," in *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. Florentino García Martínez (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 231–58, here 232. Perdue, however, pointed to the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Seleucid regime as the crucial moment, not the Greek invasion of Judea.

Scepticism in the Third Century BCE

Ecclesiastes, the best representative of scepticism, will be our starting point. Its author, Qohelet,⁴ maintains that the old wisdom tradition is of no use. He questions wisdom sayings, cites accepted proverbs in order to refute them,⁵ and conveys the message that the wise man should rely not on wisdom accumulated by previous generations, but on his own personal experience.⁶ This move taken by Qohelet is the result of his perception of the world. While wisdom literature maintained that man has the ability to comprehend nature and humanity because they are ordered by God or the gods in justice and reason,⁷ Qohelet is of the opinion that there is no correlation between man's conduct and God's conduct. Indeed, God is active in the world, but man is unable to fathom His deeds and His government.⁸ Man can neither comprehend his own destiny nor determine the course of his life. One need express no surprise, then, that there is no difference between the wise man and the fool (e.g., 2:14–16; 7:15–20). Ecclesiastes offers no hope: man has no choice but to accept his tragic fate and to enjoy the very few moments in life in which he can take pleasure (9:7–9). His toil through his life is worthless since the property, skills, or wisdom he obtains are all lost at his death (e.g., 2:24–26; 5:17–19; 9:7–9).

We have the right, perhaps, to admire Qohelet for his courage and his willingness to portray God as foreign to the world, abandoning man with no mercy or compassion.⁹ Yet to my mind, Qohelet was not alone, and the new genre of apoca-

4 Following Goff, I use “Ecclesiastes” to refer to the book and “Qohelet” to refer to the author. See Matthew Goff, “Wisdom, Apocalypticism and Intertextuality: The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Sociolect of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 214–25, here 214 n. 1.

5 For a short summary, see Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to Psalmody and to Wisdom Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2004), 115–18. Compare: Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 19–28.

6 Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Re-Reading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 75–77.

7 Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 17–19; Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, *Proverbs: Introduction and Commentary. Volume 1: Chapters 1–9* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2012), 50–54.

8 Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 121; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 85–86. Compare: Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012). Weeks is of the opinion that Qohelet's ideas are not sceptical, but rather driven by the sense that “humans are missing the point.” In this regard, Qohelet seeks “to steer others away from the false expectations and disappointment which he experienced himself, by opening their eyes to the reality of their situation” (169).

9 Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 35: “Reading Qohelet's statements about God in context leads one to side with those who characterize Qohelet's God as distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel”; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 137: “Qohelet's God is hard and mostly indifferent but not hostile.”

lyptic literature, which emerged during the same century that Ecclesiastes was written, reveals a similar attitude.

A few compositions deserve our attention. The first half of the third century BCE presents two that are considered pre-apocalyptic, chapters 9 to 14 in the biblical book of Zechariah (labelled Deutero-Zechariah)¹⁰ and chapter 2 of the book of Daniel. Both have a national dimension. The second half of this century produced three others, two of which concentrate on the cosmos and on humanity as a whole. These are the book of the Watchers and the book of Luminaries, both in the Enochic corpus. The third work from this critical period is the Aramaic Levi Document.

Deutero-Zechariah

Scholars have observed that the unique features of Deutero-Zechariah distance this collection of chapters¹¹ from the known (and early) prophetic books,¹² bringing it closer to apocalyptic literature.¹³ Launching an attack on prophets and prophecy (13:2–6), Deutero-Zechariah allots man a very limited role in history. There is hardly any direct speech in this text, and it voices no demands from the people of Israel, nor does it point to any misdeed committed by the people. Moreover, it envisions only a minor role for the House of David (9:9–10).¹⁴ God is the one who is expected

10 On the difficulties in dating Deutero-Zechariah, see Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, “Will the Prophetic Texts from the Hellenistic Period Stand Up, Please!” in *Judah between East and West: The Transition from Persian to Greek Rule (ca. 400–200 BCE)*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Oded Lipschits (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 272–76. See, however, Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 315–16; 452–57.

11 Deutero-Zechariah itself consists of the combination of a few units. See (among many) Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2*, 313–15; Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 23–25.

12 I reject the current trend of seeing Zechariah chapters 1–8 and chapters 9–14 as one unit. Thus Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, 28 (“There are several pieces of evidence that suggest to me that Zechariah 1–14 should be treated as a single book”) and Byron G. Curtis, *Up the Steep and Stony Road: The Book of Zechariah in Social Location Trajectory Analysis* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006). Time and time again, Curtis points to the differences between chapters 1–8 and chapters 9–14 of Zechariah, yet he insists that the same author composed both sets of chapters, but in different circumstances.

13 Matthias Henze, “Invoking the Prophets in Zechariah and Ben Sira,” in *Prophets, Prophecy and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Michael H. Floyd and Robert D. Haak (London: T&T Clark International, 2006), 120–34, here 125–29. The arguments I will make in what follows differ from those of Paul Hanson: see Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 300–15. Stephan L. Cook’s effort to declare Zechariah’s first chapters apocalyptic (Stephan L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995]) has been rejected by John Joseph Collins: see John Joseph Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 23–33.

14 Cook’s assertion that “Zechariah 9:9 depicts the future entrance into Jerusalem of the coming king” (*Prophecy and Apocalypticism*, 137) ignores the fact that chapter 9 portrays the coming king

to “go forth” (9:14–17), and, as in the apocalyptic literature, against an enemy who has no distinct identity. God is also expected to change the course of nature and the topography of the land (chapter 14).

My claim that Deutero-Zechariah’s attitude is sceptical is rooted in the observation that its author or editor detaches himself from history and moves to meta-history (or to the “transhistorical realm,” to use Mayer and Mayer’s terminology¹⁵). His perception of the present and the future makes no effort to cope with reality, with the questions his period poses. No explanation is given for the course of history that his generation is witnessing. Furthermore, the author is convinced that God will intervene at the End of Days, but does not substantiate this conviction, nor does he link it to a change of heart or behaviour. The End of Days is a *deus ex machina* in Deutero-Zechariah, not a logical consequence of previous events.

It seems to me that if there were attempts to cope with the Hellenistic invasion of the Land of Israel and to offer an explanation for it in the first half of the third century BCE, the kind of meta-history that Deutero-Zechariah offers would be rejected or forgotten. The fact that Deutero-Zechariah entered the biblical canon indicates that a feeling of confusion and an inability to grasp the order in world history and in the fate of the Judeans was the zeitgeist of the era.

Daniel Chapter 2

The same confusion and inability to grasp the order in world history emerge in Daniel 2. Paradoxically, we deduce the feeling of disorder from the chapter’s evident attempt to impose an order on past and present events. This chapter presents an idol made of four parts, each made of a different metal (gold, silver, copper, and iron mixed with clay). We learn later that the four metals represent four world empires (Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece). The fourth empire is indeed more complex and less noble than the three previous ones, hence the clay, but in essence, it is no different from them. The image of the unmovable object, presented via a very brief and general description, bears the message that the four empires followed a fixed and identical route. They are actually one unit with one fate: a great stone, representing God or the people of Israel, will crush them in one step and will then grow to become a large mountain that will fill the earth.

as helpless. See Yair Zakovitch, “Humble, Riding on a Donkey,” in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought*, ed. Yair Zakovitch [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 1982), 7–17. See also Boda (*The Book of Zechariah*, 42), who, while exploring the attitude expressed towards the various leading groups in chapters 9 to 14, admits that these chapters show “a shift in Zechariah’s perspective on the royal house.”

¹⁵ Carol L. Meyers and Eric Mark Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 21.

As noted by Jacob Licht,¹⁶ one of the main features of the apocalyptic writings is the artificial framework imposed on the various details that constitute history. Thus, even though chapter 2 holds to biblical symbols (an idol that should and will be crushed) and biblical terminology (a king's dream that can be explained by a human being), the chapter presents a new way of thinking. The crucial point for our discussion is that by claiming that the four empires followed a fixed and identical route, the author frees himself from providing an explanation for the changes that he and his generation are witnessing in their own time. Like Deutero-Zechariah, Daniel 2 does not voice any demands from the people of Israel or from humanity as a whole. God has full control over history; man has no power over it, nor does he have a way of understanding God's decisions. Evidently, the fact that Daniel 2 entered the canon implies that the feeling of confusion and frustration due to the inability to understand world history and the fate of the Judeans was prominent.

The Book of the Watchers

The second half of the third century BCE yields writings that intensified the feeling of scepticism by taking the bridle from God's hands. The portrayal of a helpless God becomes central to the apocalyptic worldview of this era. This is first found in the early parts of the book(s) of Enoch.¹⁷ Six chapters, 6–11, of the Book of the Watchers (= 1 Enoch 1–36) will serve as representatives of the two earliest Enochic books, the Book of the Watchers and the Astronomical Book (= chapters 72–82).¹⁸

Chapters 6–11 are a retelling of Genesis 6. The author uses the Urzeit catastrophe of the Flood as a tool for depicting the Endzeit. Chapter 6 expands the enigmatic verses of Gen 6:1–4, in which the sons of God have intercourse with the daughters

16 Jacob Licht, "The Attitude to Past Events in the Bible and in Apocalyptic Literature" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 60 (1990): 1–18. See also George W. E. Nickelsburg, "Enochic Wisdom and Its Relation to the Mosaic Torah," in *The Early Enoch Literature*, ed. John Joseph Collins and Gabriele Boccaccini (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 81–94, here 92.

17 For the date of the earliest two Enochic books, see Józef Tadeusz Milik, ed., *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 7 ff.; 22 ff.

18 I am avoiding the term "Enochic Judaism." Popularised by Gabriele Boccaccini, this term has been an obstacle to the precise and accurate study of the Enochic corpus. The five books included in this corpus come from diverse periods and groups and should not be considered as one unit. The Book of the Parables has been dated to the first century CE by most scholars. Only the two mentioned here are from the first century of the Hellenistic era, and they were written as a reaction to this century. The other two, the Book of Dream Visions and the Epistle of Enoch, were written a century later than the first two by a group close to the Qumran community. They are reacting to a different crisis and voice a different ideology. See Menahem Kister, "Concerning the History of the Essenes" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 56 (1986): 1–18; Cana Werman, *The Apocalyptic Writings of the Second Temple Period* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: The Broadcast University; Ministry of Defense, 2003), 68–75, and Cana Werman, "Present Eschatology, a Messiah who Came and Passed away" [Hebrew], *Teudah* (forthcoming).

of man. 1Enoch turns this into a story about low-ranking angels, the Watchers, who decide to leave their heavenly posts and descend to earth in order to sin with the daughters of man. In 1Enoch chapters 7 and 8, we are told that the Watchers harmed humanity in two ways. They beget Nefilim, giants with endless appetites, who first consume the crops, then devour all the cattle and animals, and finally, when no animals or crops of the field are left, they turn to consume human beings and one another. They also teach their wives and later the entire human race how to produce weapons and cosmetics, as well as the science of magic/medicine and astrology/astronomy.

Following an appeal to God from the “good angels” Michael, Gabriel, Rafael/Sariel, and Uriel (chapter 9), the time of revenge comes. Chapter 10 simultaneously reports the punishments of the past (the earthly flood) and the future (the cosmic flame): the son of Lamech will escape disaster; the Nefilim will kill each other; the Watchers will be imprisoned beneath the earth in the Urzeit, but will perish along with the evil spirits, other descendants of the forbidden union, in the Endzeit. The purified world will then flourish (chapter 11) and “those who escaped,” such as the son of Lamech, will be there to enjoy it. Note that this transition from the past to the future and back helps the author to sustain his description concerning the End of Days.

An analysis of the Enochic chapters leads to the conclusion that their early layer consists of biblical interpretation and is intended to create a new coherent picture out of the various sections embedded in Genesis 6–8. Genesis 6 does not reveal a clear connection between the sons of God and their offspring and the Flood. The Book of the Watchers, while coating the components of Genesis 6 with myth, positions them as one continuum.¹⁹ The union between the Watchers and the daughters of man was a rebellious act on the Watchers’ part. They openly declared their plan to disobey God. This union, forbidden and regarded as fornication, produced not spiritual beings like their fathers, but Nefilim, flesh like their mothers. These giants have no option but “to corrupt”; that is, to murder and drink blood, the very acts Noah is warned about in Genesis 9. In other words, the author deduces what went wrong before the Flood from the warning after the Flood.

There is, however, a second layer in 1Enoch 6–11. This second layer moulds the early stratum and turns it into an attack on the Hellenistic era. The Book of the Watchers illustrates Hellenism, with its admiration for “Chaldean science”—that is, astrology/astronomy and its passion for medicine—as a rebellious force. In their unauthorised visit to earth, the Watchers teach these skills. Their “down to earth” operation leads the earth and its innocent creatures into chaos and decline.²⁰

¹⁹ Cana Werman, “The Story of the Flood in the Book of Jubilees” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 183–202.

²⁰ George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Apocalyptic and Myth in 1 Enoch 6–11,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 383–405. Compare: Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Early Enochic Tradition and the Restoration of Humanity: The Function and Significance of 1 Enoch 10,” in *Judah between East and West*,

It is clear that these chapters reflect the worldview of a group that despised Hellenistic culture. We can also assume that the educated elite was responsible for their composition and redaction. However, it is difficult to say more than that.²¹ We cannot assume, for example, that the writer (and his circle?) had left Jerusalem. For our discussion, the apocalyptic dimension of these chapters is the point that should be stressed. The author of 1Enoch 6–11 depicts a revolt in the higher realm. There is no human cause for the Urzeit deterioration which ended with the Flood, nor for the Endzeit one, that of the Hellenistic era. Human beings become guilty only later and only partly: their sins are the result of the forbidden knowledge brought to them by the Watchers and because of the influence of their offspring, the evil spirits (10:15). In sum, humanity is not to blame.

Why, then, did the heavenly forces have the right to act, to initiate a revolt? In its reply, 1Enoch both positions God as inferior to the heavenly creatures that He made and detaches Him from the world. God did not approve of the Watchers' actions; He stood aside, not noticing or unable to govern His world. It becomes clear, then, that 1Enoch is much more daring than Daniel 2 and Deutero-Zechariah. While the latter accept—without being able to provide an explanation or proof—the basic biblical claim that God is in control of history, 1Enoch rejects this claim.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that 1Enoch offers a worldview that is close to the scepticism of Ecclesiastes. Qohelet's God is indifferent to man; 1Enoch's God does not willingly abandon man, but has been forced to do so. By looking at man (Qohelet) and society (1Enoch), neither author can identify God's traces and both express scepticism.

Admittedly, the conclusions we have drawn from Deutero-Zechariah, Daniel 2, and the Book of the Watchers shake the very foundations of apocalyptic literature. The central claim of apocalyptic literature is that hidden knowledge is at hand since from time to time, God decides to channel it to man through visions and angels.²² However, the very need to rely on visions and angels for knowledge about rebellious heavenly figures is an acknowledgement that from man's perspective, historical and

225–41. Stuckenbruck maintains that we should not “regard the fallen angels and giants simply as a decipherable metaphor for the late fourth century BCE Diadochi [...] or wayward priests” (231), but rather as a metaphor for the influence of the Hellenistic culture and its inclusion in the Judean way of life.

21 On the methodological question whether it is correct to draw historical and sociological conclusions from a literary work, see Gabriele Boccaccini, “Enochians, Urban Essenes, Qumranites: Three Social Groups, One Intellectual Movement,” in *The Early Enoch Literature*, 301–27, here 302–4. As to Boccaccini's hypothesis regarding the origin of what he calls “Enochic Judaism,” this hypothesis should be rejected as it depends upon mistaken assumptions and notions regarding the priestly house(s) of ancient Israel and the Second Temple period. See Cana Werman, “Levi and Levites in Second Temple Period,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 4 (1997): 212–25; Cana Werman, “The Sons of Zadok,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after their Discovery*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. VanderKam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and the Israel Museum), 623–30.

22 John Joseph Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypse,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 21–59.

personal events do not make sense. Apocalyptic visions are a mask beneath which scepticism is found.

The shared sceptical attitude, however, should not blur the gap between Ecclesiastes and apocalyptic writings. While Ecclesiastes offers no hope, Deutero-Zechariah, Daniel 2, and 1Enoch 6–11 all express the belief that at some point, God will intervene in the world. Deutero-Zechariah (and Daniel 2) cope with the question of knowledge and understanding from a national perspective and envision cosmic change from which Judea will benefit (Zechariah 14). 1Enoch, which looks at the question from a universal point of view, established justice in human destiny by adding the belief in reward and punishment after death, either through judgment after resurrection or the judgment of souls (chapters 22), to the cosmic change described in chapters 10–11. Apocalyptic literature, contrary to Ecclesiastes, expects God to be back, at the end of history.

Aramaic Levi Document

One might assume that there were Second Temple Jews/Judeans who agreed with the worldview offered in 1Enoch 6–11.²³ Yet this daring position, the presentation of God as a victim of rebellious forces and the scepticism that accompanied it, could seem too threatening to monotheistic belief. Consequently, it could stir up antagonism. We detect such antagonism in the Aramaic Levi Document (henceforth ALD), which was composed by the priestly elite²⁴ and produced, like 1Enoch, at the end of the third century BCE. A comparison between 1Enoch and the ALD makes it clear that the ALD presents a less threatening picture.

The ALD contains a prayer followed by angelic discourse, a heavenly tour, a sequence of halakhot related to sacrifices and purity, a memoir of Levi that mentions his participation in the revenge against Shechem, and a poem praising learning and wisdom. The fragmentary nature of the composition does not allow a definite conclusion, but it is clear that the surviving parts of the ALD do not include a description of revolt in the heavenly realm. Indeed, there are two hints of heavenly entities with unjust conduct in the ALD, Satan (3:9) and the kingdom of the sword (4:9), while the Testament of Levi, a later reworking of the ALD, refers to “spirits of errors” and “Belial” that are destined to be punished at the End of Days (2:3). The ALD thus evokes forces that might be defined as rebellious. However, it does not elaborate on their role, and on other occasions it draws a more nuanced picture. In Levi’s prayer, the author uses terms such as רוח עויה, “unrighteous spirit,” and רעיונא באיש, that is, “evil thought”, which denote both metaphysical forces that

²³ See note 21.

²⁴ For the text, see Jonas Carl Greenfield, Michael Edward Stone, and Esther Eshel, *The Aramaic Levi Document: Edition, Translation, Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

cause man to go astray and the human heart's own inclination to sin.²⁵ The ALD also does not hesitate to put the blame for evil on human beings. Dina's rape was not the consequence of evil spirits or their influence; the Shechemites are the guilty party. The author of the ALD sketches a complex reality, with a tribal perspective and good and evil humans as well as obedient and disobedient angels and spirits. He gives the readers the impression that it is possible for man to understand reality and make his way through it. Scepticism evaporates in the ALD. In this, it stands in contrast to 1Enoch.

Scepticism in the Second Century BCE

The hidden dialogue or disputes between the two apocalyptic writings described above might not be the only dialogue that took place circa 200 BCE. A composition dated to the first decade of the second century BCE, the Book of Ben-Sira, can be seen as a rejection of Ecclesiastes. This second-century book returns to the classic assumptions that governed wisdom literature, the ability to understand the world.²⁶ Its optimistic view is rooted in the author's political stance. Ben Sira chose not to wonder about the place of Hellenistic rule in God's plan, but to accept it. For him, the autonomy that the Hellenistic kingdoms granted to Judea is ideal. It gives the high priest, God's representative on earth ("Greatest among his kindred, the glory of his people [...] like a star shining among the clouds [...] like the sun shining on the temple of the King" [48:1, 6–7]), the right to rule. Furthermore, it prevents the "evil" House of David ("Some of them did what is right but others were extremely wicked" [48:16]) from taking over.²⁷

However, the priests whose voices we find in Ben-Sira were not able to cling to their optimistic view when things started to deteriorate at the beginning of the second quarter of the second century BCE. The confrontation between Antiochus IV and the people of Judea started at this point and continued until Antiochus's death

²⁵ Compare: "Second Temple literature alternates between two substances with which human evil is connected: an inner substance, which depends also on man's choice, and an outer substance, governed by evil and good spirits"; Menahem Kister, "Body and Purification from Evil: Prayer Formulas and Concepts in Second Temple Literature and Their Relationship to Later Rabbinic Literature" [Hebrew], *Meghillot* 8–9 (2010): 243–84, here 263.

²⁶ John Joseph Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1997), 81–96.

²⁷ On the preference of priests over kings in Ben-Sira's "Praise of the Fathers" section, see Martha Himmelfarb, "The Wisdom of the Scribe, the Wisdom of the Priest, and the Wisdom of the King According to Ben-Sira," in *For a Later Generation: The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity. Festschrift for George W. E. Nickelsburg*, ed. Randal A. Argall, Beverly A. Bow, and Rodney Alan Werline (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 89–99.

in 164 BCE.²⁸ As in the situation at the end of the third century BCE, we witness a daring apocalyptic response. And likewise, we also witness a counter-response in which scepticism is denied.

Daniel 7–12

The second part of the Book of Daniel reflects on Antiochus’s decrees and the defilement of the Jerusalem Temple between 167 and 164 BCE. Daniel 7–8 depicts the Hellenistic kingdom(s) and Antiochus himself as mythological forces combating God and his temple.²⁹ Chapter 7, echoing chapter 2 mentioned above, describes a vision shown to Daniel where four beasts emerge from the great sea. The features of the fourth beast refer to the Seleucid kingdom (“fearsome, dreadful and very powerful, with great iron teeth—that devoured and crushed and stamped the remains with its feet” [7:7]) in general, and to Antiochus, a small horn protruding from the beast’s head (“There were eyes in this horn like those of a man and a mouth that spoke arrogantly” [7:8]), in particular. In chapter 8, a monstrous he-goat attacks “the host of heaven and it hurled some stars of the host to the ground and trampled them. It vaunted itself against the very chief of the host” [8:10–11]). God is under attack from evil angelic forces.

The presentation of Antiochus as the earthly representative of the heavenly *rebels* is at the same time a declaration that no finger is being pointed toward the Judeans/Jews. Besides Daniel’s standard prayer in chapter 9, the aim of which is mainly to explain Daniel’s presence in a foreign land, there is no call for repentance or self-examination. According to Daniel 7–12, Antiochus is not a punishment for the people’s misbehaviour. God is not willingly abandoning His temple and His people: He was forced to do so, and could not resist despite the fact that the chain of events was known 490 years before it took place (chapter 9).

The above conclusion regarding 1Enoch 6–11 is thus also true here. Daniel’s authors cannot identify God’s traces in history; instead they express scepticism. It is no wonder, then, that when the Danielic authors bring God back into the world, it is not into history, but into the *end* of history. Their attention is drawn to the out-of-this-world reality: the holy angels will rule in heaven and the dead will resurrect, “some to eternal life; others to reproaches to everlasting abhorrence” (12:2).³⁰

²⁸ For a summary of the events between 175 and 162 BCE, see Cana Werman, “On Religious Persecution: Studies in Ancient and Modern Historiography” [Hebrew], *Zion* 81 (2017): 463–96.

²⁹ See John Joseph Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 323–24; 342–43; Collins, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel*.

³⁰ Collins, *Daniel*, 393–98.

The Apocryphon of Jeremiah

An effort to offer an alternative to Daniel's rebels and scepticism was discovered in one of the scrolls found in cave 4 near the Qumran site.³¹ This is a composition written at the same time as the second part of Daniel, relating the same events and using the same time frame of 490 years (albeit counted not as seventy periods of seven weeks, but as ten jubilees).³² It has rightly been called the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*.

According to the *Apocryphon*, on the eve of the destruction of the first temple, Jeremiah received a survey of the expected events from God:³³

1. Jeremiah first learned that due to the Israelites' sins, God would hide His face from His people for 490 years. Throughout this period, the people would experience exile and suffering: "[And they will se]e[k] My pre[s]ence in their affliction, but I shall not respond to their inquiry because of the trespass [wh]ich they have trespassed [against] M[e], until the completion of ten jubilees of years; and you will be wa[l]king in ma[dness] and in blindness and bewilderment of the heart" (ll. 14–17).
2. These 490 years will start with a loss of sovereignty: "And because of the sin of that generation, I shall [tear away] the kingdom from the hand of those who hold it, and [I sha]ll raise up over it others from another people, and [the in]solence will rule over all [the l]and, and the kingdom of Israel will be lost" (ll. 17–19).
3. Further foreign regimes will follow: "In those days there [will] b[e a king and h]e (will) be a blasphemer and he will commit abominations, and I shall tear away [his] king[dom, and] that [king will be handed over] to other kings. And My face shall be hidden from Israel and the kingdom will turn to many nations" (ll. 19–22).
4. God will show no mercy: "And the children of Israel will be crying out [becau]se of the heavy yoke in the lands of their captivity, and there will be none to deliver them because they spurned My statutes and abhorred My Torah, therefore I have hidden My face from [them until] they accomplish their iniquity" (ll. 22–26).
5. Another wave of sins is expected at the end of these 490 years: "And this is the sign to them of the requital of their iniquity [for] I shall leave the land because of their haughtiness towards Me, and they will not know [tha]t I have spurned them and they will once again do evil, and the evil will be gr[eat]er than the former evi[l] [and they will violate the covenant which I made] with Abraha[m]"

³¹ Devorah Dimant, *Qumran Cave 4. 21: Parabiblical Texts, Part 4: Pseudo-Prophetic Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

³² Cana Werman, "Epochs and End-Time: The 490-Year Scheme in Second Temple Literature," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 13 (2006): 229–55.

³³ For the full text, see Elisha Qimron, ed., *The Apocryphon of Jeremiah*, in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: The Hebrew Writings. Volume 2: Between Bible and Mishnah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2013), 94–100.

and wi[th I]saac and with [Jacob] [...] and I shall abandon the land in the hand of the angels of Mastemot, and I shall hide [My face from Is]rael. And this shall be the sign for them in the day when I abandon the land [in desolation] the priests of Jerusalem [will retur]n to worship other gods [and to act] according to the abominations [of the Gentiles]” (ll. 26–30; 34–38).

6. The punishment for these misdeeds will be Antiochus: “[In those days] will arise a king of the Gentiles, a blasphemer and a doer of evil and in his [days I shall remove] Israel from (being) a people. In his days I shall break the kingdom of Egypt. [and I will save] Egypt, and I shall break Israel and deliver it up to the sword [and] I [shall lay wa]ste the [l]and and I shall drive man away”; “[] the altar [those ki]lled by the sw[ord] [] be polluted []” (ll. 30–34; 45–46).

There is a clear logic to the events described here. Unlike Daniel, the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah* claims that Antiochus’s decrees are the result of Israel’s sins at the end of the First Temple period (“the trespass [wh]ich they have trespassed [against] M[e]”; “their iniquity”; “because they spurned my statutes and abhorred my Torah”). In response to these iniquities, God proclaimed 490 years during which He would exile Himself from Israel: “But I shall not respond to their inquiry [...] until the completion of ten jubilees of years”; “And my face shall be hidden from Israel”; “Therefore I have hidden My face from [them until] they accomplish their iniquity.” At some point in that long period, the angels of Mastemot were appointed to rule the people of Israel, who in turn were again dragged into idol worship: “The priests of Jerusalem [will retur]n to worship other gods [and to act] according to the abominations [of the Gentiles].” The conflict with Antiochus, then, with its disastrous outcome (“[] the altar [...] [those ki]lled by the sw[ord] [] be polluted []”) is the direct outcome of that second sin, subjecting Israel to the same punishment it received at the end of the First Temple period, a blasphemer king, the defilement of the Jerusalem Temple, and Jerusalem lying in ruins.

First Temple Period

In those days there [will] b[e a king and h]e (will) be a blasphemer and he will commit abominations

I shall [tear away] the kingdom from the hand of those who hold it, and [I sha]ll raise up over it others from another people, and [the in]solence will rule over all [the l]and, and the kingdom of Israel will be lost.

Second Temple Period

[In those days] will arise a king of the Gentiles, a blasphemer and a doer of evil

and in his [days I shall remove] Israel from (being) a people.

Thus, while in the second part of Daniel, heavenly forces are blamed for Antiochus’s deeds, according to the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*, history is not only under God’s

control, but also fully understandable. Only Israel's blindness, which was caused by the people's sins at the end of the First Temple period, prevents them from seeing the logic behind the course of events. Man can comprehend God's hand in the world if he correctly evaluates the sins of his generation and those of previous generations. It is no wonder that the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah* accepts human agents in the promised healing: "... three priests who will not walk in the ways of [the] former [priests]. By the name of the God of Israel they will be called. And in their days will be brought down the pride of those who act wickedly against the covenant and the slaves of foreign things."

Escaping Scepticism at the End of the Second Century BCE

An evaluation of the literature written at the end of the second century BCE reveals the same tendency detected in the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*: a constant effort to avoid heavenly rebels and to express scepticism. It is not that there was no crisis. On the contrary, most of the writings identified as products of this era were written by the Qumran community, a priestly group that left Jerusalem due to a halakhic dispute with the new Judean government, the Hasmonean regime.³⁴ The aim of these writings was to cope with their loss of status and power and to provide an answer to the question of how God can approve the persecution of His devotees. Yet it seems that the authors were reluctant to portray God as a victim and to accept their own inability to find logic in the world.³⁵ To avoid rebels and scepticism, they employed a myth that made no reference to revolt. Furthermore, they quieted the myth by adopting a new mode of thinking introduced in the Land of Israel during the third to second century: Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy.³⁶

Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy retains both the universalistic approach and the optimistic approach of the old biblical wisdom writings. It accepts man's mental ability to understand the cosmic law that God has embedded in the world and to

³⁴ Cana Werman, "Introduction" [Hebrew], in Cana Werman and Aharon Shemesh, *Revealing the Hidden: Exegesis and Halakha in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2011), 9–21.

³⁵ Is this a hint that the group that composed the *Apocryphon* is the same group that founded the Qumran community? See Werman, "Present Eschatology."

³⁶ One of the earliest published scrolls, the Hodayot scroll, contains the philosophically opposed terms of "spirit" and "flesh" and the unique combination רוח בשר. Awareness of the Qumranites' use of philosophical terms and of their mixing of philosophical terms and the apocalyptic outlook has grown tremendously since the publication of 4QInstruction twenty-five years ago. See, for example, Jörg Frey, "Flesh and Spirits in the Palestinian Jewish Sapiential Tradition and in the Qumran Texts: An Enquiry into the Background of Pauline Usage," in *The Wisdom Texts from Qumran and the Development of Sapiential Thought*, ed. Charlotte Hempel, Armin Lange, and Herman Lichtenberger (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 367–404.

conduct himself according to it. The difference between biblical wisdom and Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy is found in the use of Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy's main novelty, the response to death. Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy holds that every human who conducts himself properly, suppressing his desires and his bodily needs, will be rewarded after death; his soul will exist forever.

This novelty separates Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy from the biblical wisdom writings.³⁷ At the same time, it brings the Second Temple wisdom literature, which incorporated and adopted philosophical terms, closer to apocalyptic literature.³⁸ Furthermore, its appearance on the intellectual scene enhances the tendency we detected above, the avoidance of scepticism in the apocalyptic writings. Thus, in the Qumranic wisdom work 4QInstruction, we find the term *רז נהיה*—“the mystery that is to be”—which denotes the divine plan governing the world from the creation to the *eschatological* creation. Man can apprehend *רז נהיה* by himself by looking at the historical events of the past and present,³⁹ if he belongs to the “spiritual people” and not to the “fleshly spirit.”⁴⁰ This optimistic view stands in contrast to the meaning ascribed to *raz* in the books of Daniel (chapter 2) and Enoch (8:3; 106:19), where *raz* can be learnt only by disclosure from God or the angels.

In the following, I will analyse two compositions where philosophy is combined with the “no rebels” apocalyptic perspective. I will start with the Two Ways treatise, which is found in the Community Rule, and will then move to the Book of Jubilees. My intention is to show the efforts undertaken to avoid scepticism.

1QS 3–4: The Two Ways Treatise

The Two Ways treatise, an independent treatise, was used by the editors of the Community Rule⁴¹ in order to explain why the righteous experience humiliation

³⁷ John Joseph Collins, “The Mysteries of God: Creation and Eschatology in 4QInstruction and the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 287–305, here 287. As to Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy and Ecclesiastes, see Lester L. Grabbe, “Intertextual Connections between the Wisdom of Solomon and Qoheleth,” *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, 201–13.

³⁸ Collins, who was among the scholars who were assigned the publication of 4QInstruction, was the first to note the closing gap between the wisdom literature found in the scrolls and apocalyptic thought. See John Joseph Collins, “Wisdom Reconsidered in Light of the Scrolls,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 4 (1997): 265–81.

³⁹ This statement contradicts the common assumption in scholarship that *raz* is imparted through supernatural revelation. See Cana Werman, “What Is the *Book of Hagu?*”, in *Sapiential Perspectives: Wisdom Literature in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. John Joseph Collins, Gregory E. Sterling, and Ruth A. Clements (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 125–40. For a summary of the common view, see, for example, Matthew Goff, ed. and trans., *4QInstruction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 15–17.

⁴⁰ “The ‘spirit’ of the ‘spiritual people’ denotes [...] their mental acumen and psychological bearing to meditate properly upon heavenly knowledge”; the ‘spirit’ of the fleshly spirit does not include this capability (Goff, *4QInstruction*, 168).

⁴¹ The treatise is included in the manuscript found in cave 1. However, it is only found in one of the manuscripts discovered in cave 4.

while sinners prosper. It is a message that the Maskil, the intellectual leader, should present to the community members. An Iranian myth⁴² where evil, with its three levels—cosmic, heavenly, and earthly—is part of the created world, is the framework on which the treatise is built. The evil angel of the heavenly realm, the source of iniquity on the cosmic level, and the sons of darkness on the human level are all planned by God. The message conveyed is that the self-exiled priests' current struggle is part of an overall divine plot. No revolt is taking place, and no offence is committed against God:

From the God of Knowledge comes all that is and shall be. [...] He has created man to govern the world, and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of His Visitation: the spirits of truth and of evil. Those born of truth spring from a fountain of light, but those born of evil spring from a source of darkness. All the sons of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light; but all the sons of evil are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness (1QS 3.13; 3.17–21; the translation here and below is my own).

In this account, the synonyms “truth,” “light,” and “righteousness” are notable. Furthermore, “truth,” “light,” and “righteousness” are the way in which אל דעוֹת, the God of *knowledge*, prefers to conduct His world. The author has written an apocalyptic treatise where angels and spirits appear (the spirits of truth and of evil;⁴³ the Angel of Darkness; the Prince of Light) while maintaining the assumption that governs wisdom literature, where God's commands are directed by truth and are in full harmony with it; hence, righteousness equals truth.

The complex relationship between wisdom and the apocalyptic outlook continues in the next statement. In full accordance with the apocalyptic view and contrary to the assumption found in wisdom literature, the treatise declares that there are periods through which the righteous man, despite being aware of the path he should follow, cannot cling to God's command:

The Angel of Darkness leads all the children of righteousness astray and until his end, all their sins, iniquities, wickedness, and all their unlawful deeds are caused by his dominion [...]. Every one of their chastisements, and every one of the seasons of their distress, shall be brought about by the rule of his persecution; for all his allotted spirits seek to lead the sons of light astray (1QS 3.21–24).

⁴² Shaul Shaked, “Qumran and Iran: Further Considerations,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 433–46. See a survey in John Joseph Collins, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Routledge, 1997), 152; John Joseph Collins, *Scriptures and Sectarianism: Essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 186–88.

⁴³ Frey interprets these spirits as psychological entities: see Jörg Frey, “Different Patterns of Dualistic Thought in the Qumran Library: Reflections on Their Background and History,” in *Legal Texts and Legal Issues: Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies, Cambridge, 1995, Published in Honour of Joseph M. Baumgarten*, ed. Moshe Bernstein, Florantino García Martínez, and John Kampen (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 275–335.

There is no explanation as to why God allows the Angel of Darkness and his allotted spirits “to lead the sons of light astray.” What the authors want to stress, and here the optimistic view of wisdom literature is evident, is that it is “in accordance with the mysteries of God.” God is in full control of his creation. This fact enables the authors to have full confidence (with no need for any revelation) that this period of distress and persecution will end. Anti-scepticism is at work here.

The role of philosophy in the anti-sceptical attitude is evident at the end of the treatise, which elaborates upon the destruction of evil. While the multi-level evil demands a three-step destruction, we find only two steps at the end of the treatise. In an attempt to lessen the apocalyptic tone, the author refers to level 1, the cosmic, and level 3, the earthly while he blurs level 2. Angels are not mentioned, only spirits. Furthermore, the author expresses the expectation of freeing man from the obstacles posed by his body in his effort for spiritual achievement.

1. God will first destroy evil on the cosmic level:

ואל ברזי שכלו ובחכמת כבודו נתן קץ להוית עולה ובמועד פקודה ישמידנה לעד.

But in the mysteries of His understanding, and in His glorious wisdom, God has ordained an end for the essence of evil, and at the time of the Visitation He will destroy it forever (1QS 4.18–19).

2. In accordance with the first paragraph, truth (a wisdom term) is triumphant:

ואז תצא לנצח אמת תבל היא התגוללה בדרכי רשע בממשלת עולה עד מועד משפט נחרצה.

Then truth, which has wallowed in the ways of wickedness during the dominion of evil until the appointed time of judgment, shall appear in the world forever (1QS 4.19–20).

3. Turning now to the earthly level:

God will then purify every deed of man by His truth

ואז יברר אל באמתו כול מעשי גבר

He will refine the human body for man's sake

וזקק לו מבני איש

Rooting out all spirit of evil from the bounds of his flesh.

להתם כול רוח עולה מתכמי בשרו

Cleansing him of all wicked deeds with the spirit of holiness;

ולטהרו ברוח קודש מכול עלילות רשעה

Like purifying waters He will sprinkle upon him the spirit of truth (to cleanse him) of all abomination and falsehood and of plunging in the spirit of impurity (1QS 4.20–22).

ויז עליו רוח אמת כמי נדה מכול תועבות שקר והתגולל ברוח נדה

The combination of purity/impurity (“purify,” “refine,” “cleanse,” “purifying waters,” “spirit of impurity”), holiness, heavenly entities (“spirit of evil,” “spirit of truth”), and transgression (“wicked deeds,” “abomination and falsehood”) is significant. The current account goes beyond the first paragraph where heavenly enti-

ties bring man to sin; there is no blame for causing impurity there, nor for the penetration of man's body. To my mind, the new components included in the eschatological paragraph are the outcome of the writer's desire to extend his apocalyptic treatise not only towards wisdom terminology, but also towards philosophical discourse. The emphasis the author wishes to put on the spiritual state that man will achieve at the End of Days due to God's intervention is probably the reason for the inclusion of *flesh and body*, which goes through a transformation. The author's aim is to stress that at the End of Days, the righteous man will be able to attain knowledge (דעת) and wisdom (הכמה) through his mind because with God's help, he will be able to overcome his bodily existence:

להבין ישרים בדעת עליון והכמת בני שמים להשכיל תמימי דרך

So that he may instruct the upright in the knowledge of the Most High and teach the wisdom of the sons of heaven to those of perfect behaviour (1QS 4.22).

According to the treatise, the End of Days will turn the sons of light not only into unblemished, righteous people, but also into men of philosophical facilities who understand the heavenly perspective, the world, and the entire cosmos.

Jubilees

Interestingly, even this mildly apocalyptic and philosophically oriented piece did not satisfy the author of Jubilees. The idea of God creating evil (on three levels!) might have seemed inexplicable to him. It is also possible that he did not approve of the universalistic tone of the Two Ways treatise.⁴⁴ In any case, the author of Jubilees, while sharing with the Two Ways treatise a willingness to adopt philosophy into his thought-world, created an alternative apocalyptical worldview where there is no myth at all and where philosophical terms play an integral part from the beginning.⁴⁵ The following will explore Jubilees's way of presenting its apocalyptical perspective with neither rebels nor scepticism.

1. Jub 2:2 (preserved in 4Q216) includes the following list of angels:

[... the angels of] the presence and the angels of holi[ness]
and the a[ngels of the *spirits* of fire; and the angels of the *spirits* of the wind];
[and] the angels of the *spirits* of the clouds for fo[g and for dew]; [and the angels
of the *spirits* of snow and hail and fr]ost; and the angels of the sound[s]; and

⁴⁴ On the reaction to the universalistic tone found in Jewish-Hellenistic writings in Jubilees, see Cana Werman, "Jubilees in the Hellenistic Context," in *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Lynn LiDonnici and Andrea Lieber (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 133–58.

⁴⁵ Cana Werman, "Two Creations for One Nation: Apocalyptic Worldview in Jubilees and Qumran Writings," in *The Religious Worldviews Reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Ruth A. Clements, Menahem Kister, and Michael Segal (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 264–83.

the angels of the *spirits* [of the lightnings; and the angels of the *spirits* of cold and] heat, of winter and summer

[and of all] the *spirits* of His creatures [which He created in heavens and which He created on ear]th and in every (place).

The idea of angels who are in charge of natural phenomenon is also found in the Enochic Book of the Watchers (6:7). What makes the list in Jubilees unique is the differentiation between the meteorological phenomena and their spirits, a move I would attribute to the Hellenistic dichotomy of spirit or soul vs. flesh or body.

The fact that Jubilees does not elaborate on the difference between the phenomena and their spirits leads to the conclusion that the author's main interest lies in the extremities of the list, where the three-tiered hierarchy is necessary. The list ends with a group of spirits, **אֱלֹהִים**, or souls, **נַפְשֵׁי**, which are related to creatures, **בְּרִיּוֹת**. Contrary to the other items in the list, where each meteorological phenomenon contains spirits ruled by angels, here, no angel is mentioned. We find the missing angel in chapter 10: it is Mastema, the prince of the spirits (v. 8). Mastema, as we learn in the same chapter, is the appointed executive of the just conduct of humankind; that is, of bringing punishment upon those who sin. Thus, the triad of angel—spirit/soul—physical reality (Mastema—spirits of the living things—the physical world) applies to humans as well. Philosophy and apocalypse are aptly combined here.

2. Verse 5 of chapter 10 supplies another detail that is important for understanding Jubilees's apocalyptic worldview. Jubilees comments that Mastema, in his wish to aggravate people's sins, is assisted in his enterprise by the evil spirits, the descendants of the Watchers. The evil spirits operate on the soul (or heart) and cause men to sin. Moreover, whereas Mastema is part of the good world created by God, the evil spirits are not. Their existence is due to a revolt against God: they are the offspring of the union of the Watchers with the daughters of man. In Jubilees, however, the union is only *partly* the outcome of disobedience and revolt, since here, the Watchers descended to teach justice and only later transgressed by copulating with the daughters of man (5:1). While the Watchers disappeared in the Flood, the evil spirits are to stay, and "they neither conduct themselves properly nor fight fairly" (10:10). The rebellious forces in Jubilees are assigned a very low rank and their disobedience is minor.
3. The evil spirits have power over man, but only after man independently chooses to stumble (7:26–27; 10:3). Why are people likely to sin? The influence of Jewish-Hellenistic philosophy enables Jubilees's author to provide an explanation. Jubilean humans are neutral, consisting of a body and a soul (or heart). The body in Jubilees is neither good nor bad, but rather a helpless entity leaning mostly toward the wrong side.
4. The people of Israel, even if they are not created differently and are inclined to sin like other nations, are granted protection from Mastema and the spirits of

his dominion (15:30–32). God is their guardian and He recruits servants to assist Him in this duty. The second part of chapter 2 teaches that Israel has a heavenly counterpart in the angels of the presence and the angels of holiness (the first to be mentioned in the list above). Wishing to impose complete, firm justice on the world, Mastema keeps sending the evil spirits to tempt and harm Israel. As long as this world continues to exist, Mastema continues to cling to his assignment, while the holy angels continue to cling to theirs. In Jubilees, the heavenly struggle between the angels (an apocalyptic approach) is the outcome of man being created to consist of both a body and a soul (a philosophical view).

5. Taking chapter 1 of Jubilees as well as chapters 15, 17, 18, and 49 into account, it becomes clear that only the circumcised Israel will be safe from Mastema's hands. Furthermore, in order to receive current protection (and to later enjoy eschatological bliss), they have to obey the Torah and make the Paschal sacrifice on time each and every year. This analysis could lead to the conclusion that the Jubilean division of the earthly and heavenly realms into two camps is carried out according to nationalistic considerations. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex picture. The terms of the covenant made with Israel have two facets because two *Torot* were given in Sinai: (a) the five books of Moses, written on the stone tablets, and (b) the law of the Qumran Community; that is, the Book of Jubilees, dictated to Moses during his forty-day sojourn on the Mount.⁴⁶ Thus, only the “righteous plant” (Jub 1:16), the chosen people (1:29), not the entire Israelite nation, holds fast to the terms of the second covenant, and consequently only they will be worthy of the second creation.
6. The eschaton is again a mixture of the two ways of thinking. In the eschaton, the souls of the righteous (יִדֹּאִים) will become a holy spirit (רוּחַ קֹדֶשׁ):

After this they will return to Me in a fully upright manner and with all (their) minds and all (their) souls. I will cut away the foreskins of their heart and the foreskins of their descendants' heart. I will create a holy spirit for them and will purify them in order that they may not turn away from Me from that time forever (1: 23⁴⁷).

In the promise of turning the soul into spirit, Jubilees relies on Ezekiel: “And I will provide you with a new heart and a new spirit I will place within you” (36:26). Jubilees adjusts the biblical wording to its own apocalyptic mindset: the evil spirits and Mastema will have no dominion over the holy spirits now embedded in the chosen group.

We can say, then, that the Jubilean view of creation is that it is both good and monistic. God created neither evil angels, the sons of darkness, nor sin. Adopting Hellenistic ideas, the God of Jubilees created neutral people, consisting of bodies

⁴⁶ Cana Werman, “The Torah and the Teudah Engraved on the Tablets,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 9 (2002): 75–103, here 93–95.

⁴⁷ James C. VanderKam, ed. and trans., *The Book of Jubilees* (Leuven: Peeters, 1989).

and souls (or hearts). In Jubilees, sin is a result of human weakness. Evil spirits strike the sinning person and they alone are evil, but they were neither created nor ordained by creation. Jubilees offers a picture close to that of the ALD, in that man can manage his life with no need of heavenly revelation to understand it. He can have full control over his life by obeying the right law and by understanding his own fragility. This is Jubilees's contribution.

Conclusion

We began with Ecclesiastes's scepticism. As I have attempted to show, over the course of two centuries, the idea of scepticism was used as a tool for coping with disastrous reality, both in wisdom literature and in apocalyptic literature. However, in Judaism, scepticism is too risky; it can easily lead to the negation of God's kingship and even to the negation of his existence. During the second century BCE, scepticism gradually disappeared. The Qumranites made an effort to avoid it and were able to do so with the aid of a new tool: philosophy. It was the destruction of the Second Temple that brought about a return to apocalyptic scepticism. However, that is a subject for another paper.

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Serge Ruzer

Reasonable Doubts of the “Other”: Jewish Scepticism in Early Christian Sources

When early Christian sources describe polemical encounters with “unbelieving Jews,” whether real or imaginary, and state that the Jews rejected Christian beliefs, they are referring to a variety of points of contention. In such instances, the question should be asked whether this picture faithfully represents a real external rival or whether it serves as an attempt to overcome an internal problem in the Christian outlook, conveniently disguised as a struggle with the Jewish religion: that eternal Other. In other words, how much of this polemic is actually directed against the Jewish Other and how much of it is implicitly aimed at intra-Christian disputes? Alternatively, in some illuminating cases of explicitly intra-Christian polemics, the Christian rivals are branded as Judaisers. One might wonder whether such accusations reflect views actually held by contemporaneous Jews or whether they are simply an exercise in expedient name-calling. There is a wide spectrum of attested points of contention with the “unbelieving Jews,” some of which may be viewed as reflecting a supposed Jewish scepticism. What is of interest is which of Jesus’s followers’ beliefs are perceived as being under attack from scepticism and to what extent this attack is presented as the result of Jewish spiritual corruption, or, alternatively, as a reasonable, “sceptical” reaction in light of the absence of sufficiently convincing external signs of salvation. In the latter case, behind the scepticism of the Other may loom the internal doubts of the Christians themselves, projected onto their Jewish rivals.

By addressing some representative examples, I will correspondingly ask whether they really attest to existing Jewish “sceptical” views and positions or rather to Christian uncertainties. In most cases, the question remains open—it goes without saying that the true answer may be a combination of both—but merely posing it helps us to better appreciate the complex dynamics of multi-religious milieux in late antiquity.

1 The Nascent Christian Tradition

I will start from a few characteristic instances attested in the nascent Christian tradition. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, we find that the author has appended an exclusively Matthean pericope to the Synoptic description of Jesus’s resurrection, culminating in Jesus’s appearance to the astounded disciples (Matt 28:11–15):

While they [the disciples] were returning [from Jesus's grave], behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers¹³ and said, "Tell people, 'his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews (παρὰ Ἰουδαίος) to this day (μέχρι τῆς σήμερον).

One may note the usage of *Ioudaioi*—unusual for Matthew, who, in contradistinction to John, habitually refers to particular groups within Jewish society and not to the Jews *en masse*. We are clearly dealing here with an editorial remark informed by an awareness of polemical Jewish versions of Jesus's post-mortem fate—something in the vein of what would reappear much later in the anti-Christian *Toledot Yeshu* circle of stories. It is worth noting, however, that the disbelief in resurrection in general—and by association, that of Jesus—was part and parcel of broader contemporaneous Jewish scepticism. Moreover, if we are inclined to accept the evidence provided by Flavius Josephus, this was a salient mark that distinguished all other "Jewish philosophies" from the strange beliefs of the Pharisees.¹ The same Gospel of Matthew, following the common Synoptic tradition, confirms Josephus's claim that belief in resurrection was a "sectarian fancy" of the Pharisees, rejected and mocked as unreasonable by Sadducees related to the members of the priestly elite (Matt 22:23–34):

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question,²⁴ saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies, having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.'²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother.²⁶ So too the second and third, down to the seventh.²⁷ After them all, the woman died.²⁸ In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her."²⁹ But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God,³² 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.³⁴ *But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.*

The whole passage in Matt 22:15–46 is tailored to position core points of Jesus's religious stance within the variety of contemporaneous Jewish outlooks: Matt 22:15–21 against the Zealots among the Pharisees; Matt 22:22–33 with Pharisees against Sadducees; Matt 22:34–38 with the Pharisees; Matt 22:41–46 in contradistinction to the Pharisees. The Sadducees' mockery in the pericope is thus not presented as being directed against Jesus or his entourage, but against resurrection-centred Phar-

¹ Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8; *A.J.* 18.

isaic fancy in general (v. 34), and the Sadducees’ “realistic scepticism” is backed by their reference to Scripture. In other words, Scripture, in its literary, “virtual” reality, functions as the additional argument regarding what is reasonable and what is not. Fittingly, Jesus’s counter-claim is also obliged to the same literary reality, offering its own interpretation of the Torah that supposedly backs the idea of resurrection.²

It is telling that Matthew names the “chief priests” as those who began propagating the derogatory explanation for the empty tomb—the Pharisees are involved neither in this event nor in Jesus’s arrest and delivery to the Romans to be crucified. Moreover, Matthew shows a clear awareness of the fact that the issue of Jesus’s resurrection even constituted a stumbling block for some members of Jesus’s movement (28:17): “And when they saw him, they knelt before him; *but some doubted.*” Likewise, Luke and John’s attempts to emphasise the bodily (Pharisaic) nature of Jesus’s resurrection bear important witness to this scepticism and to the need to overcome it. Here is the Lukan attempt to counter the doubt (Luke 24:36–42):

As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them.³⁷ But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit.³⁸ And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? ³⁹See my hands and my feet, that it is I, myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.” [...] ⁴¹And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish.

John addresses the same conundrum—between the “reasonable,” post-mortem existence of one’s soul and the strange belief in bodily resurrection—in the famous “Doubting Thomas” episode (John 20:24–29):

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Master.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord/Master and my God (ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου)!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

The context—Thomas finally overcoming his doubt regarding Jesus’s return from the dead—obliges us to interpret Thomas’s exclamation of “My Lord and my God”

² Compare *m. Sanh.* 10:1, where those denying that the belief in resurrection is grounded in the Torah are declared unfit for the world to come. On the possibly complicated editorial history of this ruling, see Israel J. Yuval, “All Israel Has a Portion in the World to Come,” in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 114–38.

(ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου), or at least its second part, “my God” (ὁ θεός μου), not as addressing Jesus, but rather as expressing astonishment about God’s great wonder, the bodily resurrection of his anointed one—something like “Oh my God!”³ It seems, moreover, that the doubt about Jesus’s resurrection is part of a broader doubt regarding his messianic calling—especially in light of the debacle of his death. Luke rejects this sceptical view, but he obviously sees it as being present among Jesus’s disciples themselves and as being founded on a traditional interpretation of Scripture, and thus as “reasonable.” Luke’s solution is to argue for an alternative interpretation of Scripture (Luke 24:13–27; 44–47):

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem [...].¹⁵While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. [...] ¹⁷And he said to them, “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. [...] ²⁵And he said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. [...] ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Torah of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

A different and more localised attempt to repel the scepticism backed by Scripture—or more precisely, by its seemingly well-established interpretation—is attested in Mark 9:11–13:⁴

And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹¹He replied, “Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; ¹²but I tell you that Elijah has already

3 This goes against a widespread understanding of the phrase as establishing Jesus’s divinity. The appearance of ὁ θεός in this context may in principle be viewed as reflecting a broader process of Jesus’s divinisation, attested, for example, in the letters of Ignatius (late first century) and thus detached from the Johannine strategies. However, if we strive to comprehend it in a specifically Johannine fashion, a problem arises: since it is the link to the *logos* that provides the Johannine Jesus with a divine status—like Moses, but greater—what is the inner logic in calling “God” the resurrected Jesus? In other words, how is Jesus’s resurrection connected to him being the bearer of God’s *logos*? Was it in line with Philo’s suggestion that Moses, as one to whom God spoke face to face, did not die? Though it is a suggestive possibility, I would argue that in order to indicate such an interpretation, the Gospel ought to have provided some further elaboration.

4 Compare Matt 17:10–13.

come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands.”¹³Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

This passage presupposes a collation between the understanding of Mal 3:23–24 as presenting Elijah as an eschatological prophet and messianic expectations: a collation that results in the idea of Elijah as the Messiah’s precursor. This scheme, which would become very popular in Christian thought, had, in fact, a much broader Jewish appeal,⁵ and the Gospel passage, where it is characteristically ascribed to the “scribes,” who clearly do not belong to Jesus’s entourage, may bear witness to its circulation in the early first century CE. As such, it becomes the criterion of what is “reasonable” and thus is the promoter of scepticism.

In other early traditions, the scepticism focused on what appears to be a fiasco in Jesus’s life mission and/or on his resurrection would be directed towards another essential part of a what appears to be a non-fulfilled promise—the promise of Jesus’s return “in glory” to complete the task of messianic salvation. The Epistles of Paul contain many examples; it is characteristic, however, that epistles, in accordance with their genre, directly address their audience with entreaties and admonitions or rebukes. In this situation, the author does not have to present scepticism as a “Jewish thing,” but rather explicitly ascribes it to the members of Jesus’s movement. It is they who are called to overcome their own doubts—doubts which seem “reasonable” in light of the difficult times the movement is going through. Yet in his famous statement in 1Cor 1:23, Paul notes the broader currency of this “reasonable doubt”: “We preach Messiah/Christ crucified, a stumbling block (σκάνδαλον) to Jews and folly (μωρία) to Gentiles.”

The post-Pauline Epistle to the Hebrews not only epitomises the predicament, but also establishes the necessary link with the general Jewish lack of “redemption certitude”—this time not among Jewish contemporaries, but among those who experienced the Exodus (Heb 3:14–4:2):

For we share in Messiah, if only we hold our first confidence [or faith] firm to the end, ¹⁵while it is said, “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”¹⁶Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was he provoked forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it. ²*For good news came to us just as to them; but the message, which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers [italics mine].*

⁵ See, e.g., Chaim J. Milikowsky, “Trajectories of Return, Restoration and Redemption in Rabbinic Judaism: Elijah, the Messiah, the War of Gog and the World to Come,” in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Perspectives*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 265–80.

Faith here, as in Paul, indicates the ability to overcome reasonable scepticism with regard to the upcoming redemption in light of the troubled, “non-redeemed” present. One wonders if the recurrent rabbinic formula בֵּן דָּוִד בָּא אִינְךָ (“the son of David will not come until ...”) in *b. Sanhedrin*, with its emphasis on the (indefinite?) postponement of the messianic salvation, represents a later echo of a broader sceptical sentiment. Thus, for example, “The Son of David will not come until two dynasties in Israel come to an end: the one of the head of the [Babylonian] exile and that of the *nasi* in the Land of Israel” (*b. Sanh.* 38a), or “The Son of David will not come until the whole empire embraces heresy” (*b. Sanh.* 97a).⁶

One notes that with all the scepticism concerning Jesus’s messianic mission, there is a conspicuous lack of any description of a sceptical Jewish reaction to the miracles performed by Jesus as reported in the Gospel accounts. The polemical response is presented as focusing on the possible source of Jesus’s miraculous powers, but no doubt is expressed with regard to the miracle itself (Matt 9:32–34):

As they were going away, behold, a dumb demoniac was brought to him. ³³And when the demon had been cast out, the dumb man spoke; and the crowds marvelled, saying, “Never was anything like this been seen in Israel.” ³⁴But the Pharisees said, “He casts out demons by the prince of demons.”⁷

This accusation, devoid of what we may call reasonable scepticism, might have been somehow linked to the dominant presence of demons in the miracle stories in the Gospels—not only those of exorcisms, but also of healings proper. Likewise, in rabbinic and later Jewish sources, Jesus is accused of being a magician (who, according to some traditions, received his magic powers through the theft of the divine Name).⁸ Of course, one man’s miracle is another’s magic, but, characteristically, the event itself is not being denied even in the sources expressing the polemical stance of the Jewish Other.

⁶ Compare *b. Yebam.* 63b: “The Son of David will not come until the number of all the souls [destined to dwell] in the body is filled.” See also discussion in Ephraim E. Urbach, “On Redemption” in Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2nd enlarged ed., (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 1:649–90.

⁷ The appellation “prince of demons” for the commander in charge of the demonic forces also appears in *T. Sol.* 3:6 [12] (of uncertain provenance). William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume II: Commentary on Matthew VIII–XVIII* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991], 195–96) suggest that by the New Testament times, he was considered to have once been the highest heavenly angel (*T. Sol.* 6:1–2) and had become associated with Satan and Beelzebul. Other appellations were also in use, such as Asmodeus (see Tob 3:8, but compare *T. Sol.* 5 [21], where a distinction is upheld between Beelzebul and Asmodeus), Belial (Jub 1:20, compare “spirits/demons of Belial” in *Damascus Document* 11:3–2), and Mastema (Jub 10:8; 11:5).

⁸ See, for instance, *b. Sanh.* 43a.

2 Justin Martyr as a Polemical Witness

The writings of Justin Martyr from the mid-second century attest to a somewhat different arrangement of the foci of the alleged Jewish scepticism. As the Gospel narrative acquired its detailed form, it was now not Jesus’s resurrection—already a firmly established belief among his followers—but additional details, such as the story of Mary’s miraculous impregnation, that needed to be defended against sceptics. Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, a composition that would become a blueprint for much of the later Christian anti-Jewish polemic,⁹ provides a telling example here. Since we cannot be sure if Trypho was the author’s real-life interlocutor or merely a fictitious figurehead,¹⁰ the question of what Trypho’s views as spelt out in the composition actually stand for is even more appropriate. At the beginning of chapter 67 of the *Dialogue*, Trypho is presented as confronting the Christian tradition of Jesus’s virgin birth, which was already gaining appeal:¹¹

Moreover, in the fables of those who are called Greeks, it is written that Perseus was begotten of Danae, who was a virgin; he who was called among them Zeus having descended on her in

⁹ On Justin Martyr’s polemical agenda and strategies, see Ben-Zion Bokser, “Justin Martyr and the Jews,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 64, no. 2 (1973): 97–122; no. 3 (1974): 204–11; Harold Remus, “Justin Martyr’s Arguments with Judaism,” in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity, Volume 2: Separation and Polemic* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 59–80; Marc Hirshman, “Polemical Literary Units in the Classical Midrashim and Justin Martyr’s ‘Dialogue with Trypho,’” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 83, no. 3–4 (1993): 369–84; Michael Mach, “Justin Martyr’s ‘Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo’ and the Development of Christian Anti-Judaism,” in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, ed. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), 27–47; Graham N. Stanton, “Justin Martyr’s ‘Dialogue with Trypho’: Group Boundaries, ‘Proselytes’ and ‘God-Fearers,’” in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 263–78; Judith Lieu, “Accusations of Jewish Persecution in Early Christian Sources, with Particular Reference to Justin Martyr and the ‘Martyrdom of Polycarp,’” in *Tolerance and Intolerance*, 279–95; William Horbury, “Jewish-Christian Relations in Barnabas and Justin Martyr,” in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, repr. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 315–45; Daniel Boyarin, “Justin Martyr Invents Judaism,” *Church History* 70, no. 3 (2001): 427–61; Philippe Bobichon, “Autorités religieuses juives et ‘sectes’ juives dans l’oeuvre de Justin Martyr,” *Revue des études augustiniennes* 48, no. 1 (2002): 3–22; Philippe Bobichon, “Persécutions, calomnies, ‘Birkat ha-Minim’ et émissaires juifs de propagande antichrétienne dans les écrits de Justin Martyr,” *Revue des études juives* 162, no. 3–4 (2003): 403–19; Antti Laato, “Justin Martyr Encounters Judaism,” in *Encounters of the Children of Abraham from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Antti Laato and Pekka Lindqvist (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 97–123; Tessa Rajak, “Theological Polemic and Textual Revision in Justin Martyr’s ‘Dialogue with Trypho the Jew,’” in *Greek Scripture and the Rabbis*, ed. Timothy M. Law and Alison Salvesen (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 127–40; Terence L. Donaldson, “‘We Gentiles’: Ethnicity and Identity in Justin Martyr,” *Early Christianity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 216–41.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Claudia Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30–150 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 135, 215; Larry R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 493.

¹¹ See also Rajak, “Theological Polemic and Textual Revision in Justin Martyr’s ‘Dialogue.’”

the form of a golden shower. And you ought to feel ashamed when you make assertions similar to theirs, and rather [should] say that this Jesus was born man of men. And if you prove from the Scriptures that he is the Messiah (Christ), and that on account of having led a life conformed to the Torah (law), and perfect, he deserved the honor of being elected to be Messiah, [it is well]; but do not venture to tell monstrous phenomena, lest you be convicted of talking foolishly like the Greeks.¹²

Trypho is portrayed as one who is ready to accept Jesus's messiahship in principle, but who can do so only on what he views as a solid Jewish basis of the Messiah's faithfulness to the Torah—not that of mythological imagination. Justin might have been aware of contemporaneous Jewish attacks on the story of the virgin birth. At the very least, Celsus, that sceptical second-century Roman "conservative intellectual,"¹³ was quoted by Origen in *Contra Celsum* (1.28) as claiming that he had heard from a Jew that Mary had actually been impregnated by a soldier named Panthera—a name that resurfaces in this context in a later Jewish source.¹⁴ Certain scholars would suggest that Trypho's rejection of the story represented the views of some Jewish followers of Jesus.¹⁵ It is moreover possible that the *Dialogue* here reflects disputations within Justin's community itself, especially in view of the fact that the texts of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which contain the virgin birth motif, had not yet become fully canonised: Justin himself seems to have used a harmony composed from excerpts from different Gospels.¹⁶ It is telling that the need to con-

12 For the English translation of the *Dialogue* used here and below, see, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), revised and edited by Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0128.htm>.

13 See Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 94.

14 See *t. Hul.* 2:22, Zuckerman edition, 503.

15 See, for example, Oskar Skarsaune, "Jewish Christian Sources Used by Justin Martyr and Some Other Greek and Latin Fathers," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 2007), 379–416.

16 What Justin makes Trypho say also seems to point to a written Gospel harmony rather than to separated Gospels of canonical status (*Dialogue* 10): "This is what we are amazed at," said Trypho, "but those things about which the multitude speak are not worthy of belief; for they are most repugnant to human nature. Moreover, I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and so great, that I suspect no one can keep them; for I have carefully read them. But this is what we are most at a loss about: that you, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from the nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths, and do not have the rite of circumcision; and further, resting your hopes on a man that was crucified, you yet expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments." Moreover, this is how Justin himself refers to the Gospel account (*Dialogue* 105): "For I have already proved that he was the only-begotten of the Father of all things, being begotten in a peculiar manner *Word* and *Power* by Him, and having afterwards become man through the Virgin, as we have learned from the memoirs." The author of the *Dialogue* seems, therefore, to be aware of various "memoirs" (less than canon) and harmonistically combines them—or others have combined them for him—into a single

front the ridicule head-on only arises at this point: nothing of the kind is attested in the Gospels. Does Jewish scepticism then also represent the internal debates and the opposition of those who—like Trypho?—disliked the story of the virgin birth, the story conspicuously absent from Mark, John, Paul, and so on?

The crux of Jewish scepticism, however, is presented in the *Dialogue* as a continuation of the motif already discerned in the New Testament—namely, a sceptical response to the lack of redemption promised to and by Christians. Chapters 31 and 32 of the *Dialogue* are tailored to overcome this “reasonable objection.” In chapter 32, Justin counters Trypho’s protestation that Jesus does not fit the scripturally sanctioned and thus reasonable picture of final salvation, with the idea of two messianic advents—the first, already accomplished by Jesus (with reference to Zech 12:10: “They look on him whom they have pierced”), and the one to come (with reference to the glorified Son of Man from Dan 7:13):

Trypho said, “These and such like Scriptures, sir, compel us to wait for him who, as Son of man, receives from the Ancient of days the everlasting kingdom. But this so-called Christ of yours was dishonorable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the Torah of God fell on him, for he was crucified.”

Then I replied to him, “If, sirs, it were not said by the Scriptures which I have already quoted, that his form was inglorious, and his generation not declared [...] and if I had not explained that there would be *two advents of his,—one in which he was pierced by you; a second, when you shall know him whom you have pierced.* [...] But now, by means of the contents of those Scriptures esteemed holy and prophetic amongst you, I attempt to prove all [that I have adduced] [...] [by] other words also spoken by the blessed David, from which you will perceive that the Lord is called the Christ by the Holy Spirit of prophecy; and that the Lord, the Father of all, has brought him again from the earth, setting him at His own right hand, until He makes his enemies his footstool.

Since there is no doubt that Justin’s coreligionists were very much aware of the disappointing postponement of final redemption—which had not yet been safely reinterpreted in a spiritualised fashion—the question lingers: Are we dealing here mostly with Jewish scepticism, inner-Christian doubt, or both?

3 The Case of Theodore of Mopsuestia

I will now address a later case, that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), where the Jewish rejection of basic tenets of the Christian outlook is not immediately derived from what may be viewed as scepticism. This case is therefore introduced

narrative: “Word” comes from John, the virgin birth from Matthew. On the canonisation of the New Testament, see, for instance, Guy G. Stroumsa, “The Body of Truth and Its Measures: New Testament Canonization in Context,” in Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 79–91.

here mainly as a backdrop in order to supply a broader perspective for discussion. Theodore was an important representative of the Antiochene tradition, a disciple of Diodore of Tarsus, and, at one point in his life, a friend of John Chrysostom.¹⁷ Theodore's major theological treatise, *On the Incarnation*, having been lost,¹⁸ we are left to reconstruct his outlook from the *Commentary on John*, which survives in its entirety only in Syriac translation.¹⁹ The *Commentary* bears witness to a combination of low Christology and a modicum of understanding with regard to the supposed Jewish rejection of Christological ideas—especially illuminating, as the Fourth Gospel itself is usually perceived as both vehemently anti-Jewish and as propagating a very high Christology.²⁰

The *Commentary's* outstanding feature is the perception of a gradual development in unfolding Christological truths.²¹ This concept of “progressive revelation” is not limited to Jesus's times, but functions as a guiding principle in Theodore's elaboration on the process of imparting divine knowledge throughout the history of salvation.²² Thus, the Interpreter is of the opinion that it is only in the incarnation

17 He would be celebrated in East Syrian tradition as the Interpreter (ܐܘܪܝܫܘܢܐ).

18 For Theodore's Christology, see, e.g., Francis A. Sullivan, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1956); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition. Volume 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Mowbray; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 421–42; Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 34–63. For the extant fragments of *On the Incarnation*, see Till Jansen, *Theodor von Mopsuestia: De incarnatione. Überlieferung und Christologie der griechischen und lateinischen Fragmente einschließlich Textausgabe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 234–91.

19 For the Syriac text, see Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis Apostoli*, ed. and Latin trans. Jacques M. Vosté (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1940) (hereafter *Comm.*). For an English translation, see Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on John*, trans. Marco Conti, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010) (hereafter Eng.). See Felix Thome, *Studien zum Johanneskommentar des Theodore von Mopsuestia* (Bonn: Borengässer, 2008), and recently, inter alia, Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer, “Shaping Christology in a Hermeneutical Context: Theodore of Mopsuestia's Endeavor in Face of Contemporaneous Challenges,” *Adamantius* 18 (2013): 256–75; Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer, “Hermeneutics of Progressive Development in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on John in Syriac,” *Parole de l'Orient* 40 (2015): 275–86.

20 See, for example, Reginald H. Fuller, “Lower and Higher Christology in the Fourth Gospel,” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990): 357–65; Jörg Frey, “Licht aus den Höhlen? Der ‘johanneische Dualismus’ und die Texte von Qumran,” in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive*, ed. Jörg Frey and Udo Schnelle (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 117–203; Martin Hengel, “The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth,” in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 265–94.

21 See discussion in Kofsky and Ruzer, “Hermeneutics of Progressive Development in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on John in Syriac.”

22 This principle is also consistent with the method of rational/literal/historical and contextual exegesis that Theodore inherited from his teacher Diodore of Tarsus, ingeniously elaborated and bequeathed to his disciples of the so-called Antiochene school. See Sullivan, *The Christology of*

that the logos was hypostatically revealed and *seen*, whereas earlier, God’s words (ܠܘܓܘܣ, logos) were conveyed through intermediaries (angels or prophets).²³

This “supersessionist” attitude, however, does not annul Theodore’s positive appraisal of biblical Israel as being cognisant of divine truths.²⁴ The logos did convey its messages to ancient Israel, albeit only indirectly. The deficient character of the biblical Jews’ theological cognition is therefore derived not from their unsatisfactory religious stance, but rather from the objectively veiled nature of the revelation to which they were exposed, which prevented Israel from a true recognition of its Lord.²⁵

As may be expected, Theodore views the incarnation, outlined in John 1:14 (“And the Word [ὁ λόγος] became flesh and dwelt among us”), as a direct personal revelation of the logos and the *watershed* in the unfolding history of salvation. However, with regard to the period after the incarnation, Theodore also develops a model of the disciples’ *gradual overcoming* of their lack of comprehension, the final phase of which comes only after Jesus’s resurrection. Even then, moreover, it does not occur instantaneously, but is also distinguished by a gradual development.

This general framework of such a gradual development of cognition is finally epitomised in Theodore’s bold and unusual concept of Jesus’s own personal development—more precisely, concerning the changing mode of the union between the human and the divine in the incarnation. Here, Theodore discerns two consecutive potential and effective modes of the logos’s operation on Christ’s humanity. The first mode, which is only latent, is applied to the period between Mary’s impregnation and Jesus’s anointment with the Spirit at baptism. The second mode, which is actually effective, is initiated by the Holy Spirit at Jesus’s baptism, when the additional grace is conferred, setting in motion Jesus’s public ministry, miraculous powers, and moral perfection, *newly acquired* by his enhanced humanity. Theodore thus

Theodore of Mopsuestia, 181–96; Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 352–60; Eduard Schweizer, “Diodor als Exeget,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 40 (1941): 33–75; Felix Thome, *Historia contra Mythos: Die Schriftauslegung Diodors von Tarsus und Theodors von Mopsuestia im Widerstreit zu Kaiser Julians und Salustius’ allegorischem Mythenverständnis* (Bonn: Borengässer, 2004).

²³ *Comm.* 18–19; Eng. 9. Theodore characteristically claims that the notion of serial pre-incarnation appearances of the logos—which he sees as a heretical, mostly Arian deviation—was also common among John’s Jewish contemporaries: “In fact, there was a firm belief (ܡܚܒܘܬܐ) among them (Jews) that he had indeed appeared to them many times in different guises (ܡܚܒܘܬܐ ܠܘܓܘܣ).” What clearly underlies Theodore’s polemical strategy here is his apprehension that such a position could potentially impair the singularity of the divine manifestation in the Messiah. This is, of course, a classic case of identifying heretical views with those of the Jews.

²⁴ *Comm.* 18.20–21; Eng. 9. Theodore retains the basic pre-incarnation perception of the logos as omnipresent and as the voice proclaiming (ܡܚܒܘܬܐ ܠܘܓܘܣ) God’s will—in fact, as God’s intermediary in His dealings with the world and humanity.

²⁵ ܡܚܒܘܬܐ ܠܘܓܘܣ, *Comm.* 32.14–15; Eng. 15.

presupposes that Christ needed an additional influx of God’s grace in order to achieve moral perfection:

Christ-in-the-flesh, when he was not yet in his nature—namely, conjoined with God the Word—necessarily needed the mediation of the giving of the Spirit (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ) [...]. After receiving every perfect grace (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ), which he received thanks to his anointing (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ), he lived a life of great integrity (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ) in a way that is not possible for human nature (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ).²⁶

Theodore also seeks to conceptualise in Christological terms the events of the post-resurrection stage, when Jesus’s enhanced human state is perceived as being derived from a new and stronger *mode of conjunction* with the logos:

He (the assumed man) separated his person from other human beings [...] by indicating that he had received a *more excellent* grace (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ) through which he is [now] joined together with God the logos like a *real* son (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ).²⁷

It is in the context of this gradual development that the Interpreter portrays the cognitive situation of Jesus’s Jewish environment. For Theodore, first-century Jewry seems to stand for pre-incarnation stages of revelation delivered through the prophets,²⁸ and Jesus’s disciples shared this general Jewish matrix—especially regarding messianic beliefs. Such recognition underlies Theodore’s perception of the initial post-incarnation cognitive difficulties shared by the two groups.

Commenting on John 7:34, Theodore explicitly states that Jews *and* disciples during Jesus’s lifetime belong to the same epistemological category:

The Jews did not understand any of these words (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ). And this is not surprising, because even the *disciples* [...] could not understand the words that were said at that time (ܠܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܚܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܢܐ). It was only at the end that they learned these things from the facts.²⁹

In a fascinating replay of his treatment of the pre-incarnation biblical stages of revelation, he is ready to explain the lack of acceptance—on the part of Jesus’s Jewish contemporaries in general, the disciples included—of the Christological truths regarding the Messiah’s union with the logos. The rejection of those truths is again presented as being conditioned not by “Jewish weakness,” but rather by a still limited mode of revelation, and thus as the expression of a “reasonable doubt.” There-

²⁶ *Comm.* 296.29–297.2; Eng. 137.

²⁷ *Comm.* 350.19–22; Eng. 162.

²⁸ See also Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Galatians* 3:23, in *Commentary on the Minor Pauline Epistles*, ed. Rowan A. Greer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 82–83.

²⁹ *Comm.* 161.1–5; Eng. 74.

fore, Theodore’s interpretation—which the Interpreter explicitly presents as opposing the broad, and incorrect, understanding—of Thomas’s initial scepticism in John 20:24–28, the Gospel passage I already addressed above, is particularly significant. Tellingly, Theodore views it not as a sign of weak faith, but rather as conduct that was most realistic and adequate at this stage, since *objectively*, Thomas was not yet *able* to discern the divine nature in Christ. Therefore, when Thomas, the “doubting disciple,” exclaimed “My Lord and my God,” he was merely praising God for the miracle of Jesus’s bodily resurrection.³⁰

To conclude, I have highlighted a variety of points from early Christian discourse towards which “Jewish scepticism” was supposedly expressed. We have observed a meaningful dynamic in its foci: from Jesus’s resurrection through claims about his messianic mission and stories of his miraculous birth to the insistence—in spite of the obvious delay in the Parousia—on his future triumph, all the way to theological concepts. The extent to which those expressions of “Jewish scepticism” reflected actual contemporaneous Jewish patterns of thought remains an open question that warrants separate discussion on a case-by-case basis. What is clear, however, is that in most instances, they might in fact have also reflected internal Christian “reasonable doubts”; on some occasions, this is actually spelt out by our sources.

In this sense, the background case of Theodore of Mopsuestia remains an outstanding one, both because there is no indication that the Jews in Theodore’s reasoning are his contemporaries and because he explicitly presents “Jewish doubts” regarding new Christological schemes that were being propagated in that time as reasonable and thus justified. He seems to be keenly aware of the highly complicated character of those schemes, and in his opinion, the “lack of comprehension” corresponds to the actual level of revelation to which Jesus’s entourage had been exposed. Here especially, one may suppose that the Jewish “lack of comprehension” should, in fact, be viewed as reflecting internal Christian doubts *vis-à-vis* elaborations introduced into contemporary Christology. Unlike others, however, Theodore not only tries to help his audience to overcome its uncertainties by branding them as “Jewish doubts,” but also identifies with those doubts, demonstrating sympathy with the predicament of the “unbelieving Jews” and thus that of his coreligionists themselves.

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³⁰ *Comm.* 358.3–11; Eng. 166.

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Geoffrey Herman

Idolatry, God(s), and Demons among the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia

Sasanian Babylonia was a region brimming with the supernatural. In this paper, I shall discuss how the rabbis of this region responded to the pervasive polytheism surrounding them, including the expansive world of demonology, and how they sought to reconcile it with their religious worldview.

According to a number of Second Temple sources, Babylonian Jews, like Jews throughout the ancient world, were staunchly monotheistic. For instance, we hear from a source attributed to Hecataeus of Abdera how the Jews serving in the army under Alexander of Macedon adamantly refused to participate in the reconstruction of a temple to Bel in Babylon.¹ Additional Second Temple works also give this impression, such as the Book of Judith,² and *Bel and the Dragon*—a work that seems to polemicise against the worship of Bel. Other accounts are less emphatic. For instance, the account of the robber kingdom of the two Jewish leaders Anilaeus and Asinaeus, which is recorded by Josephus, thematises the pagan images worshipped by Anilaeus's Gentile wife and its disastrous impact on the Jews. Even though Jews are not themselves implicated in idolatry, it might be alluding to, and warning against, inner-Jewish dabbling in such pagan images.³

Rabbinic sources speak of Second Temple Jews and their late antique descendants as having *overcome* what is described as the “inclination” (צִרְיָה) or impulse towards “alien worship.”⁴ On the basis of these sources, Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, for example, would conclude that “the prevailing view of the Sages in the third century was that the craving for idolatry had been uprooted and removed from Israel already at the beginning of the Second Temple period.”⁵ The most explicit rabbinic

1 Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.192. See Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), 38. For doubts regarding the accuracy of the attribution of this episode to Hecataeus, see generally Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus, “On the Jews”: Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996).

2 Jdt 8:18. For the Persian era, see Rivka Raviv, “Hafsaqat ha-Elilut beYisrael bitqifah haParsit,” *Bekhol Derakhekha Daehu: Journal of Torah and Scholarship* 25 (2011): 83–92, and further references.

3 Josephus, *Ant.* 18.345. On this episode and for further references, see Geoffrey Herman, “Iranian Epic Motifs in Josephus’ Antiquities (XVIII, 314–370),” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 57, no. 2 (2006): 245–68. Here, idolatry is related to a forbidden sexual union. On this linkage, see further below.

4 For the rabbinic term, עֲבוּדָה זָרָה, a literal translation would be ‘alien worship’ which I have adopted in cases of ambiguity. The term ‘idolatry’, which is far more common, suggests the existence of a physical object, an idol, which is not always assumed in the rabbinic term.

5 Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1979), I, 22; Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Rabbinic Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts, I–II,”

ic sources to make this claim appear in *b. Yoma* 69b, a Babylonian rabbinic source which will be examined in detail below, and the Palestinian midrash *Song of Songs Rab.* 7:8. Some rabbinic sources question the degree to which even those Israelites depicted as sinning through the practice of idolatry in the Bible during earlier periods were in fact truly devoted to it. A tradition in the name of Rav, for instance, defends the religious credentials of the Jews prior to the beginning of the Second Temple era. It declares: “The Israelites knew that they were nonentities, and they engaged in alien worship only in order to allow themselves forbidden sexual relations (*b. Sanh.* 63b).” Such an assertion, which reiterates the ancient tendency to equate idolatry with sexual promiscuity,⁶ was reassuring to the talmudic sages in its implication that the ancient Israelites, notwithstanding their sin of idolatry, committed “no cognitive error.”⁷

Saul Lieberman is of a similar view. While observing that the rabbis possessed “a fair knowledge of the rites and practices of idol worshippers and of the various regulations bearing on heathen divinities,”⁸ he asserted that “the Rabbis did not *deem it necessary* to engage in theoretical discussions against” idolatry (italics mine).⁹ In his view, they confined themselves to the legal sphere of permitted and prohibited interaction and contact, albeit providing an extensive and detailed tractate containing legal discussion on the subject. He also tended to minimise the direct impact of pagan idolatry on rabbis and Jews in his close studies of “rabbinic polemics against idolatry” and “heathen idolatrous rites in rabbinic literature,” even as he provided and studied many examples of rabbinic *familiarity* with pagan practices.¹⁰

Such an assertion might seem difficult to substantiate. Furthermore, and more generally, it does not clearly distinguish between the situations in Babylonia and Palestine. I wish here to limit my examination to Babylonia. Indeed, studies of Jewish attitudes towards idolatry, pagan deities, and demons in late antiquity, particularly in the rabbinic period, have tended to focus on Palestine, with its rich offerings of literary sources, material findings, and archaeological data alike.¹¹ The Mishnah,

Israel Exploration Journal 9, no. 3/4 (1959): 149–65; 229–45, especially 154: “The consensus of opinion amongst the Sages in the third century was that all idolatrous impulses had been eradicated from amongst the people of Israel as early as the beginning of the Second Temple.”

⁶ For example, Exod 34:16; Lev 20:15; Ezek 6:9, and elsewhere.

⁷ For this phrase, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 23.

⁸ Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 115.

⁹ Lieberman, *Hellenism*, 128, italics mine.

¹⁰ Lieberman, *Hellenism*, 115–27; 128–38.

¹¹ See, especially, Emmanuel Friedheim, *Rabbinisme et paganisme en Palestine romaine* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 25–67; 109–60; Friedheim, “Sol Invictus in the Severus Synagogue at Hammath Tiberias, the Rabbis, and Jewish Society: A Different Approach,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 12 (2009): 89–128; Emmanuel Friedheim, “Sur l’existence de Juifs polythéistes en Palestine au temps de

Tosefta, and Yerushalmi tractates of *'Abodah Zarah* naturally provide an immense and highly focused collection of material on this topic.¹² Recently, for instance, a chapter on seeing idols in rabbinic sources in Rachel Neis's book *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture* is mainly concerned with Palestine and Palestinian rabbinic sources, noting, in contrast, "the Bavli's relative lack of engagement with the visuality of idolatry."¹³

The situation with regard to Babylonia does indeed differ from Palestine in some respects, and it would appear to be more complicated.¹⁴ Richard Kalmin's study of the talmudic sources concerning "idolatry in late antique Babylonia," for instance, recognises the manifest presence of idols in public places, including cities with a significant Jewish population, within the Roman milieu. This reality, he notes, is often addressed in the Palestinian rabbinic sources and in sources *about* Palestinian rabbis cited in the Babylonian Talmud. Against this, Kalmin registers considerable discussion of idols and idolatry in the Babylonian Talmud, but an absence of explicit cases of actual idols affecting the lives of *Babylonian rabbis* in the Babylonian Talmud. When the Babylonian Talmud provides examples, they invariably feature Palestinian rabbis. He believes there to be a "paucity of idols in Babylonia," and hence that the "rabbinic anxiety" with regard to idols that he has uncovered in his study points to a "puzzling disconnect between reality 'on the ground' in Sasanian Babylonia and the rabbis' experience of the world."¹⁵

Two examples where Babylonian rabbis *do* encounter idols that are provided in the Babylonian Talmud are somewhat ambiguous and thus might not be seen to altogether contradict this impression: the so-called *andarta* in the synagogue of *Shaf Veyatev*, near Neharde'a,¹⁶ and the idol in Bei Torta, a place of unknown location

la Mishna et du Talmud: Une nouvelle approche," *Les judaïsmes dans tous leur états aux I^{er}–III^e siècles: Les Judéens des synagogues, les chrétiens et les rabbins*, ed. Claire Clivaz, Simon Claude Mimouni, and Bernard Pouderon (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 73–116. In these studies, Friedheim has argued for the existence of what he terms "polytheist Jews" in the rabbinic period. See, too, recently, Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Did the Rabbis Believe in Agreus Pan? Rabbinic Relationships with Roman Power, Culture, and Religion in *Genesis Rabbah* 63," *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 3 (2018): 425–50.

¹² In addition, one can mention a significant portion of Sanhedrin chapter 7.

¹³ Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196.

¹⁴ See the discussion below on *b. Ber.* 57b and its assumptions about idol worship.

¹⁵ Richard Kalmin, "Idolatry in Late Antique Babylonia," in Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine: Decoding the Literary Record* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103–20, here 119–20. Compare Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 69–72, who discusses Kalmin's article. Boyarin may, however, be blurring the boundaries between rabbinic Palestine and Babylonia too much in asserting that "Jewish Bavel is doubly located in Iranian Āsōristan and in Palestine at the same time" (71).

¹⁶ On this synagogue and its location, see Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983), 290–91.

but probably within the vicinity of Pumbedita.¹⁷ Another case, which Kalmin does not address, is the apparently real and perhaps regular possibility of seeing “Mercury,” for which a particular benediction was mandated (*b. Ber.* 57b). It would appear that we are not actually dealing with *Mercury* here, but with the chief Babylonian god. This is supported by the context of this statement. It features on a list of traditions concerning the city of Babylon and its biblical legacy. In addition, the tradent is a rabbi from this region, Rav Hamnuna, and the tradition is further confirmed by Rav Ashi, also from the region of Babylon in Southern Babylonia. Mercury was not worshipped in Babylonia in this period, nor his Greek equivalent, Hermes, so “Mercury” must merely be the term of reference carried over from the tannaitic sources.¹⁸ It is interesting, nevertheless, that Hermes was early on identified with Nabu, the god traditionally associated with Borsippa, a city adjacent to Babylon, which may mean that this is in fact referring to a specific situation. Either way, Kalmin’s data can likely be accounted for without acknowledging a true *disconnect*. Michael Shenkar, for instance, is probably correct in suggesting that since

the majority of the population of Babylonia in this period seems to have been pagan, and there is evidence that pagan temples and shrines, which undoubtedly contained idols, continued to exist in the Babylonian countryside even into the Islamic period [...] it is likely that the situation with idol-worship in Babylonia was different to the Roman Near East in that, in Babylonia, idols were removed from the public sphere and kept in the temples, in accordance with millennia old Mesopotamian practice. This, rather than a “Sasanian iconoclasm” [...] could be the main reason underlying the paucity of evidence for encounters with cult statues in the Bavli.¹⁹

The examination of rabbinic sources from Babylonia *separately* from Palestinian sources is important and may help to avoid possible misconceptions. For instance, we have a rabbinic statement, “Rav Naḥman said: All irreverence is forbidden apart from irreverence towards alien worship” (אמר רב נחמן כל ליצנותא אסירא בר) מליצנותא דעבודה זרה דשריא *b. Sanh.* 63a–b; *b. Meg.* 25b), to which Lieberman refers in his study of Palestinian rabbinic attitudes. However, in the Babylonian Talmud, the expression itself only appears in the mouths of Babylonian *amoraim*, and it may very well be reflective of the *Babylonian* rabbinic mindset alone rather than a broader rabbinic one. The distinctive religious milieu of Roman Palestine

¹⁷ *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 43b; *b. Sanh.* 64a. On its location, see the discussion in Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*, 367.

¹⁸ On Mercury as the generic term for idolatry in rabbinic literature, see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshuṭah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta, Part I*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 103.

¹⁹ Michael Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic World* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 31. The theory of Sasanian iconoclasm has its own problems, but this is not pertinent here. In contrast, see the new study by Kevin T. van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaean to Šābians of the Marshes* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017). This study proposes that some of the Sasanian rulers were actively attempting to erase idolatry and its temples as part of its argument for the emergence of minor religious cults in the course of the Sasanian era.

against which the Palestinian rabbinic sources are examined needs, naturally, to be matched with a parallel effort to probe and describe the particular religious milieu of the Sasanian realm whence the Babylonian Jewish sources stem.

Pagan Deities in Sasanian Babylonia

Turning to Babylonia and its environs, we see that the proliferation and perseverance of diverse pagan worship throughout the Sasanian era is affirmed in multiple ancient sources, including considerable Christian testimony. For the northern reaches of Mesopotamia or Adiabene, the Syriac Christian literary evidence is particularly valuable. This generally well-informed body of evidence, while confirming enduring pagan beliefs and practices, questions the extent or depth of the officially sanctioned and occasionally aggressive process of Christianisation that this region experienced. The *Doctrine of Addai* (15b–16a), for instance, which dates from fourth- to fifth-century Edessa, has the following declaration:

I see that this city is filled with paganism which is contrary to God. Who is this idol Nebo which you worship, and Bel which you honor? Behold there are those among you who worship Bath Nikal, like the inhabitants of Harran your neighbors, and Tar'atha like the inhabitants of Mabug, and the Nishra like the Arabs, and the sun and the moon, like the rest of the inhabitants of Harran who are like you.²⁰

Likewise, Jacob of Sarug, from the late fifth or early sixth century, in his *memra* “On the Fall of the Idols,” which is devoted precisely to the theme of pagan deities, explicitly identifies Bel and Nabu as Edessan gods.²¹ The fall of Nisibis to the Persians in the second half of the fourth century is judged by the contemporary Ephrem to be a punishment for its tenacious paganism. Likewise, in the fifth century, Isaac of Antioch details extensive and varied pagan beliefs in cities in northern Roman Mesopotamia. One can hardly imagine that the regions of the non-Christian Sasanian empire would have been less infused with pagan deities.

As we cross the border and enter the Sasanian empire, the Persian divine pantheon joins the non-Persian ancient Near Eastern religious scene. This finds expression in both Christian and Jewish (talmudic) sources, some of which will be mentioned below. It would appear, however, that the non-Persian pantheon retained its prominence in the region where the Jews resided. Thus, of all the Gentile names in *b. Giṭ.* 11a, which may be taken to be names with a theophoric element, only one is recognisably Persian: Hormiz. Among the other names on the list, only Shabtai is

²⁰ George Howard, trans., *The Teaching of Addai* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 49. I have slightly revised the translation.

²¹ For a detailed study of the pagan cults in Edessa, see H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden: Brill, 1980). For studies of Jacob of Sarug's list, see references cited in Drijvers, *Cults*, 37 n. 70.

Semitic, while the others are of uncertain origin. There is also little Christian impact in the incantation texts: only one demon called Mešīḥa (= Messiah, Christ), a demon in the church of Qrābul, according to BM 132947, is mentioned. Evidently, Christ is treated like other deities and is demonised. Furthermore, an explicit reference to pagan sanctuaries and practices found in *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b would seem to support the enduring pre-eminence of the Babylonian religious background to the Sasanian period:

מ' רב חנן בר רבא אמ' רב חמשה בתי ע'ז קבועין הן ואלו הן בית בל בבבל בית נבו בבורסיף תרעתא שבפמוג צריפא שבאשקלון נשרא שבערביא כי אתא רב דימי אמ' הוסיפו עליהן יריד שבעין? ב?כ? ונתבכה שבעכו איכא דאמרי נתבכה שבעין בכי רב דימי מנהרדעא מתני איפכא יריד שבעכו ונתבכה שבעין בכי אמ' ליה רב נחמן בר רב חסדא לרב חסדא מאי קבועין הן אמ' ליה הכי אמ' אבוהא דאימך שקבועין הן לעולם דכולה שתא פלחי לה.

Mar Rav Ḥanan bar Rava said [in the name of] Rav: There are five fixed sanctuaries of alien worship: They are the temple of Bel in Babylonia; the Temple of Nabu in Borsippa; Tīr'ata [= Astargatis] in Mabug [= Hieropolis]; Šerifa in Ashqelon, and Nishra in Arabia.

When Rav Dimi came [i.e., to Babylonia from Palestine] he said: They added to them the fair in 'Eyn Bekhi [= Heliopolis] and the brick in Acre—some say: the brick in 'Eyn Bekhi.

Rav Dimi of Neharde'a teaches the opposite order; the fair in Acre and the brick in 'Eyn Bekhi.

Rav Naḥman the son of Rav Ḥisda said to Rav Ḥisda: What is the meaning of "fixed"? He said: "So said the father of your mother: fixed means they worship there all year long."²²

This list, which interestingly lacks reference to any Zoroastrian sanctuary, can be compared to the lists provided in the Syriac sources mentioned above. While those sources focus on *their* neighbourhood of northern Mesopotamia, this list incorporates references to its own neighbourhood of Babylon and Borsippa. It also complements Mandaic sources which evoke Bel, Nabu, and Nishra together, the latter of whom is associated with Kashkar, as Jonas Greenfield has shown.²³ This list can only be understood as a sample, not as a complete or even representative list of the *key* deities in these places. The Syriac sources cited above demonstrate the association of many of these deities with *other* locales. Astargatis and Nishra are prominent in Hatra, for instance, and a Mandaic magic text speaks of Nanaya of Borsippa.²⁴ Many of these deities, then, are found in a number of places.

²² *B. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b. According to MS Paris 1337. One other reflection on Babylonian pagan religious culture is found in the Babylonian Talmud with reference to the Chaldeans (כַּלְדָּאִי), who, despite the vagueness of the sources, might be associated with religious experts in the mould of ancient *Babylonian* stock. They are consistently depicted as astrologers whose predictions are accurate and fulfilled, hence the length of Rav Joseph's rule over the academy in *b. Ber.* 64a and Rav Naḥman b. Isaac's future as a thief in *b. Šabb.* 156b. See also *b. Šabb.* 119a; *b. Sanh.* 95a; *b. Yebam.* 21b. In the realm of astrology, this "science of the times," the Chaldeans are reliable experts.

²³ Jonas C. Greenfield, "A Mandaic Miscellany," in *'Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology*, ed. Shalom M. Paul, Michael E. Stone, and Avital Pinnick (Leiden: Brill, Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001), 1:397–404.

²⁴ Christa Müller-Kessler, "Interrelations between Mandaic Lead Scrolls and Incantation Bowls," in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, ed. T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (Groningen: Styx, 1999): 197–210.

Pagan Deities in Incantation Bowls

The perseverance of these and other pagan deities is also demonstrated from the texts on Jewish, Christian, Mandaean, and other incantation bowls, Mandaean lead rolls, and similar sources, testimony that is not mentioned in the studies that we mentioned earlier.

Of particular interest here are a number of phenomena of both religious and social significance. Firstly, within these magical artefacts there are extensive references to many of the same deities described as active religious cults in the literary sources, including those of Bel, Nabu, Bat Nikal, Shamash, and others.²⁵ This would suggest a certain correspondence between the religious pantheon reflected in the bowls and the religious scene “on the ground.” This is also somewhat confirmed with respect to the Zoroastrian deities evoked on the incantation bowls and in other texts from this period.²⁶ Hormiz b. Lilwatha/Lilitha in *b. B. Bat.* 73a, for example, would seem to create a demonic caricature of the foremost Zoroastrian deity, as Hormiz = Ahura Mazda.²⁷ Hormiz is explicitly described as a *dew* in a polemical Syriac text from the late Sasanian era.²⁸ Moreover, one must wonder how, or indeed whether one is to distinguish between the deity revered by their Zoroastrian neighbours and his namesake evoked in the Talmud, who is comparable to other Zoroastrian deities mentioned on contemporary magical artefacts. Secondly, one may also encounter deities known from much earlier Babylonian sources, such as Mulit and Dalebat, that are not otherwise reflected in other contemporary sources.²⁹ An addi-

²⁵ For a Jewish text, see Dan Levene and Gideon Bohak, “A Babylonian Jewish Aramaic Incantation Bowl with a List of Deities and Toponyms,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 56–72, although the readings offered there probably need further study.

²⁶ See Geoffrey Herman, “Jewish Identity in Babylonia in the Period of the Incantation Bowls,” in *A Question of Identity: Social, Political, and Historical Aspects of Identity Dynamics in Jewish and Other Contexts*, ed. Dikla Rivlin Katz, Noah Hacham, Geoffrey Herman, and Lilach Sagiv (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2019), 131–52, especially 140–41.

²⁷ See Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan D. Y. Shapira, “Encounters between Iranian Myth and Rabbinic Mythmakers in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon*, ed. Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 285–304, here 292.

²⁸ Mār Grigor, 7 (in Florence Jullien, ed., *Histoire de Mār Abba, catholicos de l’orient. Martyres de Mār Grigor, général en chef du roi Khusro Ier et de Mār Yazd-panāh, juge et gouverneur* [Leuven: Peeters, 2015], 50).

²⁹ For the ancient Babylonian background of certain deities, see Wolfgang Fauth, “Lilits und Astarten in aramäischen, mandäischen und syrischen Zaubertexten,” *Welt des Orients* 17 (1986): 66–94. For the Babylonian deities see especially Christa Mueller-Kessler and Karlheinz Kessler, “Spätbabylonische Gottheiten in spätantiken mandäischen Texten,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 89 (1999): 65–87; Christa Müller-Kessler, “Dan(ḥ)iš – Gott und Dämon,” in *Assyriologica et Semitica: Festschrift für Joachim Oelsner anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstages am 18. Februar 1997*, ed. Joachim Marzahn and Hans Neumann (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 311–18. Mulit features on a Jewish bowl published in James Nathan Ford and Alon Ten-Ami, “An Incantation Bowl for Rav Mešaršia Son of Qaqay” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 80 (2012), 219–30.

tional point of interest is the considerable degree of borrowing and exchange between the incantation formulae written by the practitioners of diverse religious confessions.³⁰ Thus, Jewish formulae are found on bowls written in Syriac or Mandaic script, and Mandaic and Christian formulae find their way onto bowls inscribed in a clear and elegant Jewish Aramaic hand. Some Manichaean texts found in Turfan also contain what would seem to be Jewish formulae and so reflect this religious atmosphere.³¹ Examples include YBC 2393, a bowl with a Jewish Babylonian Aramaic inscription, that adjures “by Shamesh, and Sin, and Nabu, and Dalebat, and Bel, and Nerig, and Kewan! Oh Great King, Warrior, and oh Mistress of Destruction”³² or “Shamash, the king of the gods” (שמ״ש מלכא דאלהי) in Moussaieff 163. Mulit appears on a Jewish bowl that mentions a certain rabbi, as well as in Mandaean texts and many others.³³

If we limited ourselves to the Babylonian Talmud alone, we would not be aware of the degree to which pagan deities were present in Babylonia, and more significantly, of their presence in texts written by Jewish scribes. Needless to say, the testimony of the incantation texts may be seen as just the tip of the iceberg, a chance but rather consistent testimony of a rich ancient, but not stagnant, religious diversity. Much of the earlier scholarship on the Jews of Babylonia has tended to marginalise the Jewish sources that deal with incantations. Magic in general, including that practised by rabbis, is sidelined in accounts and is regarded as “popular,” and the magical artefacts are brushed aside as external to the study of Babylonian Jewry.³⁴ These artefacts serve, however, as valuable comparative data for assessing the Babylonian Talmud’s discussions relating to idolatry.

Alien Worship in the Babylonian Talmud

The Jews were always a minority in Babylonia and would naturally have been under the shadow of the local religious deities, and they were often forewarned of such,

³⁰ See Tapani Harviainen, “Syncretistic and Confessional Features in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls,” *Studia Orientalia* 70 (1993): 29–37.

³¹ For their publication, see Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, “The Apotropaic Magical Text M389 and M8430/I/ in Manichaean Middle Persian,” *Aram* 16 (2004): 141–60, and see Geoffrey Herman, “The Talmud in Its Babylonian Context: Rava and Bar Sheshakh; Mani and Mihrshah” [Hebrew], in *Between Babylonia and the Land of Israel: Studies in Honor of Isaiah M. Gafni*, ed. Geoffrey Herman, Meir Ben Shazar, and Aharon Oppenheimer (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Centre, 2016), 79–96.

³² בשמ״ש וסין ונבו ודליבת וביל ונריג וכיון מלכא רבא קרפדנא ומרתא דהרובנא. Julian Obermann, “Two Magic Bowls: New Incantation Texts from Mesopotamia,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 57 (1940): 1–31.

³³ Ford and Ten-Ami, “An Incantation Bowl for Rav Mešaršia.”

³⁴ Neusner’s five-volume *History of the Jews in Babylonia* devotes twenty-five pages of the fifth volume to “other Jews, other magicians,” with the addition of a thirty-page appendix penned by Baruch Levine on “The Language of the Magical Bowls,” which is mostly a textual study of earlier

firstly by the prophets in the biblical sources, who also condemned the local gods, Bel and Nabu, along with the kingdom of Babylon.³⁵ Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud itself shows an interest in local idolatry. While discussing the ridicule of alien worship already mentioned, it evokes the names of deities such as those that appear in local toponyms (*b. Sanh.* 63a–b = *b. Meg* 25b). In one place (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 53b), there is a discussion of a pagan temple referred to as the “Temple of Nimrod” (בית נמרוד). Elsewhere (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 53b), the rabbis debate the status of a local damaged pedestal on which one would stand an idol (בימסא פגימא). As the Talmud discussion clarifies, however, this Temple of Nimrod is already in ruins, abandoned forever by its worshippers. And yet, they encounter more in Babylonia than just the ruins of temples and damaged pedestals! The contemporaneity of polytheism is transparent in another source, *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 55a, which discusses the question of the reality of pagan deities and reveals the complexity of their relationship with these pagan gods and metaphysical forces. Taking its cue from the Mishnah, which relates a debate about pagan gods between the elders of Rome and the rabbis, the Talmud continues to cite discussion between rabbis and Gentiles regarding the reality of idolatry. Most of these sources are in Hebrew, cite tannaim, and would appear to be of Palestinian and tannaitic provenance. The underlying tendency is to deny any reality to the gods. Different assumptions seem to undergird what is related next in *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 55a, which now brings Babylonian rabbis into play, as follows:

א. אמ' ליה רבה בר יצחק לרב יהודה: איכא ע"ז באתרין דכי מינגיב עלמא ולא אתי מיטרא שחטו ליה גברא ואתי מיטרא
 ב. אמ' ליה השתא איכו שכבי לא אמרי לכו הא מילתא הכי אמ' רב מאי דכתי' "אשר חלק יי אלהיך אותם לכל העמים" מלמד שהחליקן בדברים כדי לטרדן מן העולם.
 ג. והינו דאמ' ר' שמעון בן לקיש מאי דכתי' "אם ללצים הוא יליץ ולענויים יתן חן" בא ל[י]טמא פתחין לו בא ליטטר מסייעין אותו.

- I. Rava b. Isaac said to Rav Judah: There is (a case of) alien worship in our region. When the world is dry and no rain comes they slaughter a man and rain comes.
- II. He replied to him: Now, if I was dead I would not [have been able to] tell you this matter. Thus said Rav: What is the meaning of the scriptural verse, “the Lord your God has apportioned (*halaq*) to all the nations” (Deut 4:19)? It teaches that he caused them to trip (*hiḥliq*) with words, in order to remove them from the world.
- III. This corresponds with that which R. Simeon b. Laqish said: What is the meaning of the scriptural verse: “He mocks proud mockers but shows favour to the humble and oppressed” (Prov 3:34)? If one comes with the intent to become impure, he is enabled; if one comes to become pure—he is aided.³⁶

readings (Jacob Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 5 [Leiden: Brill, 1970], 217–43; 343–75). In his fourth volume, he had devoted only three pages to magic and the rabbis (Jacob Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 4 [Leiden: Brill, 1968], 347–50).

³⁵ E.g., Isa 46:1.

³⁶ *B. 'Abod. Zar.* 55a, according to MS New York JTS Rab 15.

The diverse responses found in this collection of conversations point away from the previous scepticism regarding the potency of such deities and towards a clear anxiety concerning the claims made by those of pagan religions that they were attaining tangible results in their temples. The conversation between R. 'Aqiba and a certain Zonen, which immediately precedes the source we have cited, works on the premise that “my heart and your heart know that alien worship has no essence” (לבי ולבך) (ידע שע"ז לית בה ממש) and explains that any result it effects is pure coincidence.³⁷ This, indeed, is the assumption of the sources cited earlier on in this *sugya* and in the Mishnah debate with the elders of Rome. The recovery from malady which takes effect at the moment when a person enters a pagan temple is explained by the divine decree of healing just happening to coincide with the sick person's visit to the pagan temple. Sickness itself takes a vow, which it must honour.³⁸ It falls under God's domain. The Babylonian Talmud's choice to pursue the discussion further suggests its lack of satisfaction with this answer. Rava b. Isaac's remark to Rav Judah points to the effective human sacrifice practised in “our region” in order to bring about rain.³⁹ The focus of devotion whose power is efficacious is local, “in our region,” but the benefit it provides is also local—it serves for the welfare of the entire local population, including the Jews. Rav Judah's reply, prefaced with the dramatic “now if I was dead,” etc., for rhetorical effect,⁴⁰ is cited in the name of the Babylonian amora, Rav. The Talmud compares this answer with a teaching by the Palestinian amora, R. Simeon b. Laqish, which treats the distribution of pagan deities to the Gentiles as a divine device in order to justify their punishment. Punishing the Gentiles is apparently the desired effect, but the pagan deities by which they acquire their measure of iniquity, even if part of God's design, are evidently quite real. The Jewish interlocutor is advised to stay away from them not because they are not efficacious, as the benefits are evident, but rather due to their side effects.

37 There has been some discussion as to whether this Zonen is Jewish or not. I take him to be a pagan, thus providing the drama of the conversation. For discussion, see in particular and with references to earlier scholarship Friedheim, *Rabbinisme et paganisme en Palestine romaine*, 49–52. For an onomastic overview on this name in ancient Palestine, see Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity. Part 1: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE.*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 281.

38 והינו דאמ' ר' יוחנן והליים רעים ונאמנים רעים בשליחותן ונאמנין בשבועתן. This can be compared with the notion of sickness as something demonic that must be exorcised, as is common in the incantation bowls. See, too, Dov Noy, “The Talmudic-Midrashic ‘Healing Stories’ as a Narrative Genre,” *Koroth* 9 (1988): 124–46, especially 136. For a broad view on the phenomenon and antecedents, see Markham J. Geller, “Akkadian Healing Therapies in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Max-Planck-Institut Für Wissenschaftsgeschichte Preprint* 259 (2004): 1–57.

39 The only significant variant between the textual witnesses for our purposes here relates to the addition of a phrase which relates that the deity appears to them in a dream and instructs them to slaughter a victim. This addition appears in the Vilna and Pesaro print editions, MS Munich 95, and Bazzano Archivio Storico Comunale Fr. ebr 11, but is lacking in the better MS Paris 1337 and MS New York JTS Rab 15.

40 Cf. *b. B. Meṣ.* 73b; *b. Šabb.* 152b; *b. Yebam.* 46a.

The Inclination towards Alien Worship

The rabbis, as mentioned, speak of the overwhelming attraction of idol worship in the pre-exilic period and of having already been cured of this temptation in the distant past. Of particular interest is the Babylonian rabbis' remarkable rehabilitation of the Judahite king, Manasseh. Notwithstanding his negative scriptural reputation and his mishnaic damnation, he is portrayed in the Talmud as capable of juggling rabbinic-style expertise in the Torah and idolatry. When challenged about this incongruity, he responds by pleading for our understanding: the temptation was simply too great!⁴¹ This individual entreaty might, indeed, serve to account for the challenge of idolatry that accompanies Israelite history throughout the First Temple period. It is the determination to rid the Jews of their preoccupation with idolatry that spurred the intriguing aggadic exposition of Scripture in *b. Yoma* 69b.⁴² It appears as an expanded re-telling of an episode from the fifth chapter of the Book of Zechariah. This scene, which “is often seen as one of the most bizarre in Zechariah,”⁴³ is as follows:

הַיְצָא, הַמַּלְאָךְ הַדֹּבֵר בִּי; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי-שָׂא נָא עֵינַיִךְ וּרְאֵה, מָה הַיּוֹצֵאת הַזֹּאת. וַיֹּאמֶר, מִה-הִיא; וַיֹּאמֶר, זֹאת הָאִיפָה הַיּוֹצֵאת, וַיֹּאמֶר, זֹאת עֵינָם בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ. זֶה וְהִנֵּה פֶּכֶר עֹפֶרֶת, נִשְׂאֵת; וְזֹאת אִשָּׁה אַחַת, יוֹשֵׁבֶת בְּתוֹךְ הָאִיפָה. הִיא וַיֹּאמֶר זֹאת הַרְשָׁעָה, וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶתָּה אֶל-תּוֹךְ הָאִיפָה; וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת-אָבִן הַעוֹפֶרֶת, אֶל-פִּיהָ. ט וַשָּׂא עֵינָי וַאֲרָא, וְהִנֵּה שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים יוֹצְאוֹת וְרוּחַ בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם, וְלִהְנֶה כְּנָפִים, כְּכַנְפֵי הַחֲסִידָה; וַתִּשְׂאֵנָה, אֶת-הָאִיפָה, בֵּין הָאָרֶץ, וּבֵין הַשָּׁמַיִם. י וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-הַמַּלְאָךְ הַדֹּבֵר בִּי: אָנֹכִי הֵמָּה מוֹלְכוֹת, אֶת-הָאִיפָה. יא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי, לְבָנוֹת-לָהּ בַּיִת בְּאָרֶץ שְׁנַעַר; וְהִיכֵן וְהִנִּיחָה שָׁם, עַל-מִכְנָתָהּ.

⁵Then the angel who was speaking to me came forward and said to me, “Look up and see what is appearing.” ⁶I asked, “What is it?” He replied, “It is a basket.” And he added, “This is the iniquity of the people throughout the land.” ⁷Then the cover of lead was raised, and there in the basket sat a woman! ⁸He said, “This is wickedness,” and he pushed her back into the basket and pushed its lead cover down on it. ⁹Then I looked up—and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth. ¹⁰“Where are they taking the basket?” I asked the angel who was speaking to me. ¹¹He replied, “To the country of Babylonia to build a house for it. When the house is ready, the basket will be set there in its place.”

⁴¹ *b. Sanh.* 102b, according to MS Yad HaRav Herzog:

אי איתיה ליצרא דעז' בשנך? הוה כיסכסתוה כסכסוי איכא דאמרי הכי אמ' ליה אי הוית בההוא דרא הוה נקטת שיפולך [שולידך] בשקר [בידך] ורהטת.

“If the temptation of alien worship were in your years you would have constantly chewed it up” (translation follows Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* [Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002], 592: “There are those who say he said to him: If you were in that generation you would have taken hold of the folds in your hands and run [after them/me]). See Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 178.

⁴² See also *b. 'Arak.* 32b; *b. Sanh.* 64a. The Palestinian midrash also speaks of the removal of the inclination to idolatry in *Song of Songs Rab.* 7:8, but its discussion is based on different biblical sources and different rabbis.

⁴³ Edgar W. Conrad, *Zechariah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 116.

The talmudic passage is as follows:⁴⁴

והא כת' ויעמד עזרא הסופר על מגדל עץ אשר עשה לדבר אמ' רב גידל אמ' רב שגידלו בשם המפורש
התם הוראת שעה היתה דכת' ויזעקו בקול גדול אל יי אלה הינו האי דאחרביה למקדשא וקלייה להיכלא
ואגלינהו לישראל מארעיהו כלום יהבתייהו נילן אלא לקבולי אגרא לא איהו בענן לא
אגריה בענן.

יתיבו תעניתא תלתא יומי נפל פיתקא מרקיעא דכתיב ביה אמת
אמ' רב חונא שמע מינה הותמו שלהקב"ה אמת

נפק כי גוריא דנורא מבית קודש הקדש'

אמ' להו נביא האי הוא בהדי דקא נקטי ליה אשתמיט מינתא מני(?)א(?)ה] אזל קליה בארבע מאה פרסי
אמרי הכי ניבי ניקטליה ראמי קלא ומחריב ליה לעלמא

אמ' להו נביא שדיוה בדודא וכסויה באברא דאברא שאיב קלא ורמו ליה נורא מתחותיה וקיליוהו שני' "ויאמר
זאת הרשעה וישלך אותה אל תוך האיפה וישלך את אבן העופרת אל פיה".

But it is written: "And Ezra the Scribe stood on the wooden tower which he had made to speak" (Neh 8:4). Rav Gidal sad in the name of Rav: For he elevated Him with the Tetragrammaton.

That was in an emergency, as it is written: "And they cried in a loud voice to the Lord, their God" (Neh 9:4). It is he who destroyed the temple and burned the sanctuary and exiled Israel from their land, have you only given it to us so that we receive a reward? We desire neither it, nor its reward do we want! They sat fasting for three days. A note fell from the skies on which was written "truth"!

Rav Huna said: One learns from here that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He is "truth."

It emerged as a fiery young lion from the House of the Holy of Holies.

The prophet said to them: This is it. As they took hold of it a hair fell out from it. Its voice travelled 400 parasangs. They said: How shall we act? We shall kill it. [Otherwise] it will raise its voice and destroy the world. The prophet replied to them. You need to cast it into a pot and cover it with lead that absorbs the sound. And they put fire beneath and roasted it, as it is said: "And he said: This is the wickedness, and he cast it into the *ephah* and he cast the lead stone over the mouth" (Zech 5:11).

The Talmud arrives at this juncture after a discussion concerning the use of the Tetragrammaton outside the temple. A source is summoned that claims that Ezra the Scribe made use of it outside the temple. This is treated as an exceptional circumstance and a story is then provided to describe that very situation. It depicts the expulsion of the urge for idolatry, itself a midrash on the above-mentioned passage from Zechariah.

The mysterious *ephah* in the biblical narrative here, a measure of grain that is usually understood as a basket that can contain such a measure, contains a woman. The woman symbolises wickedness according to the Scriptural verses. Here, it has

⁴⁴ *b. Yoma* 69b. Compare *b. Sanh.* 64b. Cited according to MS New York JTS Rab. 218 (EMC 270). The significant difference between this version together with the earlier textual witnesses in comparison with the later MSS and printed editions is the description of placing the sealed pot over a fire to be roasted before being sent off. See the discussion of this source in Meir Ben Shahr, "Biblical and Post-Biblical History in Rabbinic Literature: Between the First and Second Destruction" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011), 249–52, and his examination of the textual variants.

been interpreted as representing the temptation of idolatry, again drawing on the association between idolatry and fornication. Withstanding this temptation is meritorious, but it would be better to have neither the temptation nor the reward. The temptation, personified in the form of a fiery lion, is secured and removed. The Babylonian Talmud does not dwell on the fact that the scriptural verses send this evil to the “Land of Shinar,” a synonym for Babylonia in rabbinic literature. While the temptation of alien worship is sealed in this instance, elsewhere, the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 24a) treats this verse as speaking of the unshackled descent of the highly negative traits of hypocrisy and arrogance to Babylonia.⁴⁵

The Babylonian provenance of this narrative is evident from its appearance in the Babylonian Talmud and the absence of direct parallels in Palestinian rabbinic sources. Its reference to having “exiled Israel from their land” is a nod to the Babylonian exiles who are its audience. The focus on the urge towards idolatry in this Babylonian source and the detailed description of the praxis of its expulsion, presumably based on contemporary local exorcism practices, suggests the relevance and immediacy of the issue to be current rather than historical. The fact that the evil ironically finds its way to Babylonia raises the uncanny deliberation as to whether it had indeed been finally and entirely vanquished, not merely for the Jews in Palestine, but particularly for those in Babylonia. It leaves open the discussion of the extent to which idolatry and the drive towards it had indeed departed in the distant past or whether it was in some way still quite present among them.

Babylonian Jews were very much a part of the complex religious world of Babylonia, accepting many of the assumptions shared by their contemporaries regarding the demonic and the divine. The frequent engagement with themes relating to the supernatural and the divine in the Babylonian Talmud, when read alongside the Jewish magical evidence from Babylonia and other contemporary sources, suggests a degree of anxiety about the fact that the rabbis were grappling with the appeal of a multiplicity of deities and forces present among the inhabitants of Sasanian Babylonia and that they were actively seeking to clarify how their notions of the divine differed from those of their neighbours.

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⁴⁵ See *b. Sanh.* 24a and *b. Qidd.* 49b. Here, they are passed on to Elam in an internal polemic against a major competing region within the Sasanian Empire.

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Reuven Kiperwasser

Facing Omnipotence and Shaping the Sceptical Topos

In this paper, I would like to analyse the metamorphosis of narrative traditions.¹ The core of my examination will be the transformation of a notion that is concealed beneath the narrative. The story to be considered deals with a problem which is usually a subject of contemplation for sceptical theists, a branch of philosophy which accepts that God exists and that we can know general truths about Him, but denies that we can know the reason for God's decision to act in a particular way in any given case. The argument to which sceptical theism primarily responds is the ever-present problem of evil, whose argument against the existence of God runs as follows: if God exists, then there should be no undeserved evil. However, it is well known that cases of undeserved evil do exist. Therefore, a sceptic would or might assert that an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent God does not exist. However, the sceptical theist would respond that based on our limited knowledge of the reasons for God's actions, we cannot know that the second premise is correct.²

In other words: "If, after thinking hard, we cannot think of any God-justifying reason for permitting some horrific evil, then it is likely that there is no such reason."³ The sceptical theist will maintain his belief in God, but will deny God's involvement in the politics of evil. However, the rabbinic narrator's approach is more that of a sceptical pantheist, if such a term is possible. God is involved in the world; He is aware of the existence of evil; however, despite being omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent, He has decided not to change anything in the world.⁴

In a manner of speaking, the rabbinic narrator accepts the teaching of the Book of Job, with which the stories to be considered have an intertextual relationship,

1 A first draft of this paper was presented at the "Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Ancient Judaism" workshop held at the Maimonides Centre in Hamburg on 18 and 19 April 2016, and the comments of the other participants were most helpful in the preparation of this paper. I began to write it during my stay at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (DFG-Kolleg-Forschergruppe FOR 2311) and completed it as an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation fellow at the Judaic Studies Institute at the Free University of Berlin. I would like to express my gratitude to both these institutions for their support.

2 See Trent Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/skeptical-theism/>. (19. 06. 2020)

3 Michael Bergmann and Michael Rea, "In Defence of Sceptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 2 (2005): 241–51.

4 Regarding theological inquiries on this theme in rabbinic Judaism see, for example, David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 73–93; Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 150–60.

which states that God is very interested in earthly events and would even *like* to intervene; however, since He is currently to be found in another dimension, intervention is simply impossible, just as it is impossible for Job to play with Leviathan or hunt Behemoth.⁵ These theological ideas, expressed through these metaphorical images in the Book of Job, do not, as a rule, appear in rabbinic literature as theological teachings; rather, they are embodied in narratives. A narrative is the best form for the author to express theological doubts, as he can do so through his heroes' thoughts without any need for apology. One narrative in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Ta'an.* 25a) is, I believe, very illustrative of the narrator's holding of such theological doubts. However, before allowing the Babylonian narrator to express his sceptical pantheism, we should consider the Palestinian prototype of this story, although it is less subversive, since a comparison with its Babylonian counterpart will show us the conception of this theological idea.

The Prototype and Its Context

The pericope in which the Palestinian tradition appears consists of a parable and a story, which are connected both to each other and to a verse from Genesis (25:8), for which the text provides an interpretation. For a better understanding of the context, we must read this parable tradition with some thoughts about the nature of this literary form in rabbinic literature and its theological implications. The parable considered here belongs to the particular genre known as "king parables." These have been widely discussed by scholars as a literary form that is characteristic of rabbinic literature; however, the genesis and theological insights of this form still await exploration.⁶ King parables are stories with a typical hero: a leader or head of a Roman province, or even the emperor himself, who functions as the parable's signifier for the God of Israel.⁷ This analysis focuses on a specific subset of rabbinic

5 See Trent Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Sceptical Theism," *Faith & Philosophy* 25 (2008): 172–76.

6 The first study of royal parables in rabbinic literature was Ignaz Ziegler's *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch Beleuchtet durch die Römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: S. Schottlaender, 1903). The topic has also been discussed in more recent works: see Yona Fraenkel, *Darkei ha-aggadah we-ha-midraš*, 2 vols. (Giv'atayim: Yad la-Talmud, 1991), I:323–93; David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 19–24. The methodological problems with the *mashal* were discussed in reviews of this work: see the review by Daniel Boyarin, "Review of Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature" by David Stern," *AJS Review* 20 (1995): 123–38. See also, more recently, Alan Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-Parables: Midrash from the Third-Century Roman Empire* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010).

7 See Stern, *Parables*, 16–19, and Fraenkel, *Darkei ha-aggadah*, I:370–72.

king parables: namely, parables about a king who invites commoners to a banquet, but whose invitation has strings attached, unbeknownst to the guest.⁸

In an earlier paper of mine, I made the argument that royal banquet parables are in an ongoing inter-textual dialogue with the prophet Isaiah's depiction of the eschatological feast. The idea of the banquet at the End of Days first appears in the biblical corpus in the future banquet scene famously described in Isa 25:6–7:

<p>The Lord of Hosts will make on this mount for all the people a banquet of rich viands, a banquet of choice wines— of rich viands seasoned with marrow of choice wines well refined.</p>	<p>וְעָשָׂה ה' צִבְאוֹת לְכָל-הָעַמִּים, בְּהַר הַיְהוָה, מִשְׁתֵּה שְׂמָנִים, מִשְׁתֵּה שְׂמָרִים: שְׂמָנִים, מִמְחִים, שְׂמָרִים, מִזְּקָקִים.</p>
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The rabbinic parables relating to the royal banquet usually provide no explicit reference to the verses in Isaiah. The structure of these texts, however, points to Isaiah's eschatological banquet as an underlying foundation.⁹ The sumptuous eschatological banquet Isaiah describes is an expression of divine triumph and victory. I believe that this motif, which makes its first appearance in the prophet's words, proliferates and expands in the later phase of the Second Temple period,¹⁰ becoming widespread in rabbinic literature.¹¹ However, in rabbinic literature, it is seldom a story of celebrating the victory of a glorious king. There, rather, it is typically a scene of embarrassment, making the story more of a trial. The royal banquet parables include additional motifs such as the invitation to the banquet, dismissal from the banquet, refusal to participate, and guests arriving in inappropriate dress. The honour of the banquet's host is represented as something that could either increase or diminish, while the composition of the guest list receives additional weight. However, in the parable that I want to discuss here, the scenario of the royal feast will include some details that are difficult to explain. We will address the question of what they indicate regarding the relationship between the host and the guests.

⁸ I have devoted a paper to this type of parable: see Reuven Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation to the King's Banquet: The Metamorphosis of a Parable Tradition and the Transformation of an Eschatological Idea," *Prooftexts* 33, no. 2 (2014): 147–81. However, if in my previous study I wanted to show that sometimes some of a parable's details are accidental rather than intentional, here I wish to show that sometimes these details are expressions of theological doubts, illustrating the narrator's inability to concentrate on the problem at hand.

⁹ See Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 172–73.

¹⁰ 4Ezra 6:52, En 60:24.

¹¹ *Lev. Rab.* 22:10; *b. B. Bat.* 74b. For the significance of the image of the eschatological feast in rabbinic literature, see also Geoffrey Herman, "Table Etiquette and Persian Culture in the Babylonian Talmud" [Hebrew], *Zion* 77 (2012): 149–88, here 171–75.

The typical *mashal* (parable) has a schematic plot, including a number of artificial elements which are left nearly entirely unexplained. The *nimshal*—that is, the meaning of the parable—is an exegetical explanation which forms part of the *mashal*'s composition, thus compensating for the missing narrative. If the *mashal* is the narrative frame, then the *nimshal* is the exegetical context, which at the same time also functions as a partly independent narrative. The typical rabbinic *mashal* is preserved within exegetical contexts which, in the form in which they are conveyed to us by the literary midrash anthologies, are usually taken by scholars to be their original settings.¹² In this paper, I will propose an alternative hermeneutical model for understanding the *mashal* by focusing on the details of a parable of a royal banquet which differ from the typical version of this royal banquet parable. I believe that these details stem from a general theological context within which the parables were traditionally embedded rather than from the local literary context in which we find them preserved. In my other paper, I argued that we need to attribute the abundance of plot detail neither to the storyteller's creativity nor to his desire to adorn the story; rather, these details of the *mashal* preserve meanings that had once been available in earlier historical contexts and are now hidden within the new literary contexts.¹³ Here, too, I wish to reconstruct their context, which is much wider than the immediate exegetical context of the parable.

The *Mashal* in Context

The *mashal* I want to discuss appears in a fifth-century midrashic anthology of Palestinian provenance, *Genesis Rabbah*, which is a key source for rabbinic theology and exegesis.

Gen. Rab. 62:2¹⁴

It is written: "Strength and splendour are her clothing, and she laughed on the last day" (Prov 31:25). The entire reward of the righteous is kept ready for them for the Hereafter, and the Holy One, blessed

כת': "עוז והדר לבושה ותשחק ליום אחרון" (משלי לא כה). כל מתן שכרן של צדיקים מתוקן להם לעתיד לבוא, ומראה להן הקדוש ברוך הוא עד שהן בעולם הזה מתן שכרן מה שהוא עתיד

¹² See Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation," 149, and the literature cited there.

¹³ Appelbaum proposed explaining the discordance between the *nimshal* and the *mashal* as a result of a process of transmission by different tradents; see Appelbaum, *The Rabbis' King-Parables*, 86–87 n. 53.

¹⁴ Theodor and Albeck edition, 2:671–72. For the parallel tradition of the parable, see y. 'Abod. Zar. 3:1 (42c). I intend to analyse this parallel elsewhere. For the parallel of the story of R. Abbahu in Palestinian rabbinic literature, see the very distant version in *Deut. Rab.* 'Egev (Lieberman edition, 77).

be He, shows them all that He will give them in the Hereafter and then their souls are sated and they fall asleep.

R. Lazar said: A parable about a king who made a banquet and invited guests and showed them what they would eat and drink, and their souls were sated, and they fell asleep. Thus, God shows the righteous while they are yet in this world the reward which will be given to them in the Hereafter and then their soul is sated and they fall asleep. What is the [scriptural] proof? “For now, should I have lain still and been quiet; [I should have slept; then had I been at rest]” (Job 3:13, JPS). Thus, when the righteous are about to pass away the Holy One, blessed be He, shows them their reward in the Hereafter. When R. Abbahu was dying, he was shown thirteen streams of balsam. He said to them: “For whom are these?” They told him: “They are yours.” He said: “This for Abbahu?! ‘But I said: I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for naught and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God’ (Isa 49:4, JPS).

ליתן להם לעתיד לבוא, ונפשם שביעה והן ישינים.

אמר ר' לעזר: משל למלך שעשה סעודה וזימן את האורחים והראה להן מה שהן אוכלין ושותין ושבעה נפשם וישנו להם. כך הקדוש ברוך הוא מראה להם לצדיקים עד שהן בעולם הזה מתן שכרן שהוא עתיד ליתן להם לעתיד לבוא ונפשם שביעה והם ישינים. מה טעם? "כי עתה שכבתי ואשקוט וגו'" (איוב ג יג) הווי, בשעת סילוקן של צדיקים הקדוש ברוך הוא מראה להן מתן שכרן.

כד דמך ר' אבהו, חוו ליה י"ג נהרין אפרסמון. אמר להון? אילין דמן? אמ' ליה: דידך. אמר להון: אילין דאבהו "ואני אמרתי לריק יגעתי ואתה והבל כחי כליתי אכן משפטי את י"י ופעלתי את אלהי" (ישעיה מט ד).

This midrashic passage is connected to the verse from Gen 25:8: “And Abraham expired, and died in a ripe old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.” The connection is as follows: the verse from Genesis uses the word *ושבע*, which literally means “was sated.” The redactor of *Genesis Rabbah* made the link with the Genesis verse with the help of a verse from Prov 31:25: *עוז והדר לבושה*.¹⁵ This verse now plays the role of the “distant verse” of a *petiḥta*,¹⁵ in which the juxtaposition of the verse from the chapter in Genesis and the “distant verse” must shed additional light on the Genesis verse and create a new meaning. The midrashist accentuates the literary meaning of Abraham having died “sated”

¹⁵ Concerning the term *petiḥta* or *petiḥah* (the proem) and its content, see recently Paul Mandel, “On Pataḥ and on the Petiḥah—A New Study” [Hebrew], in *Higayon L'Yona: New Aspects in the Study of Midrash, Aggadah and Piyut, in Honor of Professor Yona Fraenkel*, ed. Yaakov Elbaum, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Joshua Levinson (Jerusalem: Magnes 2007), 49–82.

and, with the help of the *mashal* and the short story that follows it, proposes a new exegetical-theological meaning. The Palestinian editor is thinking about the reward of the righteous in this world, and he concludes that it is impossible. However, letting the poor but pious die without any awareness that a reward has been promised and only providing the opportunity to discover it in the Hereafter seems unfair. Therefore, he decides that God shows people their reward before they die and that the righteous, fully content with this knowledge, pass away without complaint and probably even without telling those who are still alive what they will receive in the Hereafter. The exegetical basis for this story is a verse from Job, in which a pause, some interval of time, seemingly occurs between “sleep” and “rest.” The first is a dream in which God shows a person his future reward, while the second is his final rest; namely, death. The parable expresses this idea very boldly. A king invites guests and instead of serving them food and fragrant wines, as is customary in Roman banquets and prescribed by the above-mentioned verses from Isaiah, he leaves them with no food to eat at all. Instead, he only shows them the food and drink. Does this imply that the guests literally only feast their eyes? The parable might feasibly be explained in this way. Contemporary theories of how vision was perceived in antiquity, both by the rabbis and within the broader Greco-Roman world, maintain that vision was understood as something that directly touched the mind and soul. Thus, to gaze upon an object was to have it physically enter oneself.¹⁶ Seeing something catastrophic or pestilent would cause the body to react physically, since the sight of it would be like a disease entering the body. Seeing something ideal and perfect would teach the soul to resemble it and would provide it with an uplifting experience.¹⁷ In this parable, the guests’ souls are fed. However, I would like to propose, with particular emphasis on the *nimshal*, that “shown” here means that the host not only pointed out all the ingredients of the banquet menu, but also lectured his guests about the food and drink. While it is customary for the *symposiarch* to ask questions about the meal during a symposium and to make it a topic of discussion, this is clearly no substitute for the long-awaited meal. The *mashal* therefore seems somewhat comical, because here we see that the guests, tired of the king’s oratory, fall asleep without consuming anything. However, considering the *nimshal*, it turns out that the situation is not ridiculous, but rather highly moti-

¹⁶ An excellent summary of the topic can be found in Mark D. Stansbury-O’Donnell, “Desirability and the Body,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 31–51. See also the analysis of visual theories in Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 142.

¹⁷ One literary tradition including something very close to the rabbis’ metaphorical physiology is related in Plato’s *Timaeus* (45b–d), in which the author articulates a theory of visual fire. According to this theory, a ray emanates from the viewer’s eye which touches an object and brings an impression of it back to the psyche. This theory also explains how a person might react to being stared at by someone else, since their visual fire reaches out and touches him or her as well.

vated by a particular spiritual code. The royal banquet is an eschatological banquet, and the king is God Himself.¹⁸ While the meal is served in the Hereafter, it is announced in the present. The guests, then, have no choice but to fall asleep—that is, to interrupt their connection to the present—and die. We can see from the parable that a person who already knows what his reward will be no longer desires a life that is full of suffering. The reward in the Hereafter is an entirely material and substantial reward, because the future world is not spiritual, but a physical world with the same material needs as this one.¹⁹

We now come to the main task of this paper. We see that this obscure story with its inexplicable details reflects obscure theological paradigms regarding quite impenetrable features of the divine order of the world. Behind the plot lies a profound meditation about God's omnipotence. The midrashist does not dare to intimate that God cannot ameliorate the suffering of the righteous or even reward the pious in this world in some way. Instead, he proposes a pious and somewhat apologetic explanation whereby despite his lack of involvement in the affairs of the present, God is ready with a reward in the Hereafter. This explanation, however, only appears in the *nimshal*. The *mashal* provides us with a picture of a royal host who invites his guests and prepares a sumptuous meal with fragrant wine, but during the preparation of the feast, all the guests fall asleep (and notice the symbolic proximity between dream and death!), and a little amusingly, the host is left alone in the palace, which is full of food and wine. This situation is paralleled in the tragic theological paradigm of the world, which God has created for the righteous despite the fact that they leave it without consuming its bounty. However, why has the God of Israel left the reward for the righteous to the Hereafter and kept this world in its odd condition? The Palestinian editor prefers not to answer. The answer to this question is the issue raised by its distant narrative offspring in the Babylonian Talmud, although, the courage of giving such an answer will lead the author to avoid using the form of a parable. A parable is a form which is used when it seems impossible to give a bold answer.

The narrator seemingly wants to express some doubt about the value of the eschatological meal. For the guests, the sight of the meal is quite enough to feed their living souls. It seems that it is more important, on the level of the *nimshal*, to accept the invitation to the banquet and to be there on time than it is to consume the meal. Behind this strange situation of a royal host who fails to feed his guests in an appropriate manner lies the familiar theological question of God's involvement in the present affairs of His creation and (or) the reward that He presumably provides for His subjects.

¹⁸ See Kiperwasser, "A Bizarre Invitation," 147–81.

¹⁹ See Chaim Milikowsky, "Which Gehenna? Retribution and Eschatology in the Synoptic Gospels and in Early Jewish Texts," *New Testament Studies* 34, no. 2 (1988): 238–49.

The Story in its Palestinian Context

The Palestinian prototype (*Gen. Rab.* 62:2) of the Babylonian story is very short and sketchy, but it is much more understandable than its Babylonian counterpart. The story is even a little elliptical. However, in the light of the preceding exegetical theological discussion, the message seems relatively clear. The Palestinian redactor in the above source addresses the notion of the righteous receiving a reward in this world, and through the parable, he alludes that this is not possible. This source is ultimately an evaluation of the preceding topic. Rabbi Abbahu, here portrayed as poor,²⁰ learns of his reward through a vision of thirteen streams of balsam oil.²¹ The streams are the products of a well-established industry that produces fragrant oils. This implies that there is also a sizeable plantation of balsam trees elsewhere, making the owner an immensely rich man. Rabbi Abbahu, bewildered, asks to whom this wealth belongs and discovers that all of it is his. To this, he exclaims, citing a verse: “I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for naught and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God.” By this, he means that he has laboured in vain throughout his life, but now, when he is close to dying, he is aware that God has rewarded him. However, the imperfect world that this guest must now leave will remain imperfect, and God will not change his practice regarding the distribution of wealth; the situation will be corrected only in the world to come. Why? Is God not omnipotent, or is this His will? The answer to this question will be the main focus of its distant narrative offspring. Let us allow the Babylonian narrator to explain why:

The Story in the Babylonian Talmud

b. Ta’an. 25a

Rabbi Ele’azar ben Pedat was in great need.²² He had nothing to eat.

רבי אלעזר בן פדת דחיקא ליה מילתא טובא
(עבד מלתא ו) לא הוה ליה מידי למטעם,

²⁰ The Babylonian Talmud, which is very distant from our hero both geographically and chronologically, describes him as possessing wealth. It is my view, however, that this story, as well as another in *y. Šabb.* 8:1 (11a), where the students explain Rabbi Abbahu’s unusually happy expression by the fact that he found some treasure, is better understood on the assumption that he enjoyed a more modest income.

²¹ See Joseph Patrich and Benny Arubas, “A Juglet Containing Balsam Oil (?) from a Cave Near Qumran,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 39, no. 1–2 (1989): 43–59. See also, more recently, Yohar Amar and David Iluz, “Balsam: The Most Expensive Perfume Plant in the Ancient World,” in *The Paths of Daniel: Studies in Judaism and Jewish Culture in Honor of Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber*, ed. Adam S. Ferziger and David Sperber (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2017), 15–27 (English section).

²² There are interesting variants among the textual witnesses at this point in the story. The majority of the textual witnesses propose מילתא טובא ליה דחיקא or מילתא ליה דחיקא, which could mean that he was in (great) need. The word מילתא has various meanings—see Michael Sokoloff, *A Diction-*

He carried out a deed (<i>'abad</i> <i>milt'a</i>). ²³	[עבד מלתא]:
He took a [something] of garlic (<i>bar'a</i> <i>de-tumah</i>) and cast it into his mouth.	שקל ברא דתומ(י)ה ושדייה בפומיה
His heart weakened, and he fell asleep. ²⁴	חלש לביה ונים
The rabbis went to inquire [after his health].	אזול רבנן לשיולי ביה
They saw him crying and laughing and a fiery branch came out from his forehead.	חזויה דקא בכי וחייך ונפק צוציתא דנורא מאפותיה
When he awoke, they asked him: “Why were you crying and laughing?”	כי אתער אמרו ליה מאי טעמא בכיית וחייכת
He said to them: “Because the Holy One, blessed be He, was sitting with me	אמ' להו דהוה יתיב עמי הקדוש ברוך הוא
and I said to Him: ‘How long will I suf- fer in this world?’	ואמרי ליה עד מתי אצטער בהאי עלמא
And He said to me: Ele'azar, my son,	ואמר לי אלעזר בני ניהא לך דאפכיה לעלמא

ary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 668–69—and sometimes it means “monetary matters.” However, some textual versions (Vatican 134, Göttingen 3) have דחיקא ליה, which means that he was ill (see Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 867 n. 4). According to one version (Oxford 366), his problem was his ill fortune in an astrological sense, דחיקא ליה שעתא טובא, which is probably a scribal correction influenced by the continuation of the plot where this term is employed. See further n. 25. It is interesting that all this is lacking in the Jerusalem manuscript.

23 The word מילתא (Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 668–69) is traditionally understood as being bled, which is quite possible. For this meaning of עבד מלתא, see also *b. Šabb.* 129a and *b. Pesah.* 59b. Bloodletting was a common procedure. On bloodletting, see Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. Fred Rosner, new ed. (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1993), 33–34. For bloodletting being mentioned more often in the Babylonian Talmud than in Palestinian sources, see Markham J. Geller, “Bloodletting in Babylonia,” in *Magic and Rationality in Ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman Medicine*, ed. H. F. J. Horstmanshoff and M. Stol (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 305–24. However, bloodletting is a common cure for illness or for some instances of physical distress, which is seemingly not the case here, at least according to most of the textual witnesses, although see the previous note. I would therefore suggest that the above-mentioned word refers to a deed or act and that it has some magical undertones: see Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 669 n. 4. Assuming that the “deed” is magical, I am compelled to change the sequence of events and place the phrase *'abad milt'a* before the depiction of taking the mysterious drug. See further below.

24 The phrase “and he slept” only appears in the printed versions, albeit as early as the old Spanish edition. MS Oxford Opp. Add. Fol. 23 adds that he went home after feeling weak; however, according to MS Göttingen 3, he went to the study house, where he fell down.

do you want me to return the world to its beginning, so that perhaps you may be born²⁵ in an hour of plenty?"

I said to Him: "All this and [then only] perhaps?"

I said to Him: "Is [the time] I have lived more than [the time] I shall live?"

He said to me: "That which you have lived."

I said to Him: "In that case, I do not want it."

[I said to Him: "What would You give me in the world to come?"]²⁶

He said to me: "As a reward for saying 'I do not want it'²⁷ I shall give you in the world to come thirteen streams of pure balsam oil²⁸ like the Euphrates and the Tigris, in which to indulge yourself."

I said to Him: "That and no more?"

He answered me: "And what would I [then] give to your colleague?"

I retorted: "Have I asked this from one who has nothing?"²⁹

מרישא אפשר (דמתליד) [דמתלידת]
בשעתא דמזוני

אמרי לקמיה כולי האי ואפשר

אמרי ליה דחיי טפי או דחיינא

אמ' לי דחייית

אמרי לקמיה אם כן לא בעינא

[אמרי קמיה לעלמא דאתי מאי יהבת לי]

אמר לי בהאי אגרא דאמרת לא בעינא יהיבנא
לך לעלמא דאתי תליסרי נהרוותא כפרת
ודיגלת דשפלי בהו אפרסמא דכיא דמענגת בהו

אמרי לקמיה האי ותו לא
אמ' לי ולחברך מאי יהיבנא

אמרי ליה ונא מגברא דלית ליה[קא]בעינא

25 I have corrected the scribal error of the Pesaro print with the help of the Jerusalem manuscript, which provides a more logical reading. However, according to MSS Vatican 134, Vatican 487.9, and Munich 140, the version is *בשעתא דמזוני*; דנפלת בשעתא דמזוני; namely, "you will fall (out of your mother's womb?) in an hour of plenty." The version in Munich 95, דכפלת, is probably a scribal error from the previous one. MS Oxford Opp. Add. Fol. 23 reads *דמיברית בשעתא דמזוני*, that is, "you will be created in an hour of plenty," which also seems to make good sense. According to Göttingen 3, the version is *דמתרמי לך שעתא*, which simply means "an hour of plenty will be established for you."

26 This sentence is lacking in the Pesaro edition, but not in other textual witnesses, except for MS Jerusalem, and I think that its presence here is justified.

27 This sentence only appears in the Pesaro print and in MS Jerusalem, which suggests an addition, with the apologetic intent of justifying Rabbi Ele'azar's daring behaviour.

28 Although the entire story is Babylonian, this theme, like the reward of the righteous in the world to come, originates in Palestine: see y. *'Abod. Zar.* 3:1 (42c); *Gen. Rab.* 62:2.

29 The text is taken from the early Pesaro print (1516). For the critical edition of this text, see Henry Malter, ed., *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1930), 113. For an English translation, see Henry Malter, trans., *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 113. For commentaries on this story, see Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 269–70, and Shulamit Valler, *Sorrow and Distress in the Talmud*, trans. Sharon

He hit me on my forehead with his finger bone [of fire]³⁰ and said: “Ele‘azar my son, let the arrows be shot at you!”³¹ מחיין³² באסקוטלא [דנורא] אפותאי ואמר לי אלעזר ברי [אי]גרו בכ גירי

The poor and suffering Rabbi Ele‘azar ben Pedat³³ did not have any suitable food to eat on account of his poverty,³⁴ and he therefore ate something inappropriate. The expression *ברא דתומא/תומה*, *bara’ de-tuma’/de-tumah*, is relatively rare and not easy to translate.³⁵ This is the one and only *locus* in which someone is depicted eating a *bara’ de-tumah*. Simply eating garlic is referred to as *akhlah tuma’* (אכלה תומא) (*b. Yebam.* 106b). A single (piece of) garlic is usually designated as *יהידיא תומא*, *tuma’ ihidaya’*, or *שופתא דתומא*, *šufta’ de-tuma’* (*b. Giṭ.* 69a). Even though the literal translation of *bara’ de-tumah* would be “something external to the garlic,” here I translate it as “something belonging to garlic,” according to the usage of this expression in *b. Šabb.* 139b, where it means something that is large enough to absorb leaking liquid. It was translated by the medieval commentator Rabbenu Ḥananel as *roš šum*, meaning the whole head of garlic. Another translation, from gaonic writings, is the Arabic *ḥabb al-tum*, meaning “a clove of garlic,” which might also be the meaning of the expression in *b. Šabb.* 139b.³⁶ Both meanings are difficult to support here since one might wonder why a person would eat either a clove or a whole head of garlic. This translation could only make sense if this was the one and only edible substance he could find. The results of this, however, go well beyond his

Blass (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 172–75. See also Julia Watts Belser, “Between the Human and the Holy: The Construction of Talmudic Theology in Massekhet Ta’anit” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008). See also, more recently, Yaakov Elman, “Dualistic Elements in Babylonian Aggada,” in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, ed. Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), 273–312, here 296–99.

30 This detail is absent in the Pesaro print. I have added it on the basis of MSS Munich 95 and Vatican 487.9, and probably also MS Jerusalem.

31 The correction from גרו to איגרו is based on the readings in MSS Munich 95, Munich 140, Oxford Opp. Add. Fol. 23, London British Library Harl. 5508 (400), Vatican 134, and Vatican 487.9. This version is preferable since it is actually the *אתפעיל* form, which means an imperative in the plural form: גרו(ת).

32 The better version is probably טרק as in MSS Vatican 134, Munich 140, and Göttingen 3. However, it does not change the translation: טרקלי באסקוטלא באפותאי.

33 R. Ele‘azar (b. Pedat) was a third-generation amora who studied with R. Yoḥanan (y. *Sanh.* 1:2 [18c]; y. *Ber.* 2:1 [4b]). Another story that portrays R. Ele‘azar as weeping, poor, and suffering appears in *b. Ber.* 5b. See my discussion in “Narrative Bricolage and Cultural Hybrids in Rabbinic Babylonia: On the Narratives of Seduction and the Topos of Light,” in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, 23–45, especially 36–40.

34 See above notes 22 and 33.

35 This reads ברע דתומיה in some versions of the text, which is most likely a scribal error induced by analogy with פומיה in the same line.

36 According to Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 240.

expectations. Our hero falls into an incubation sleep in which he encounters God Himself. The external features of this encounter are his unusual emotional expressions: he laughs and cries simultaneously, while fire comes out of his head. A hero who both laughs and cries is a narrative topos in rabbinic literature,³⁷ as well as in Syriac patristic writings,³⁸ and its goal is to draw the attention of the secondary heroes, who then ask for an explanation. It turns out that laughter, crying, and even the emission of fire are all features of the conversation that our hero has had with God.³⁹ He asks how long he will continue to suffer in this world; namely, he wants to know whether poverty will be his lot until the end of his life. Seemingly, he has understood that his poverty was directly determined by God. Accordingly, while most Babylonian traditions indicate that poverty is a consequence of misconduct and sin, there is also an opinion that one's socio-economic status is determined before birth or according to one's astrological lot at birth.⁴⁰ If so, the story we have analysed here does not share the belief that poverty is a consequence of misconduct. Our hero is sure that he has never sinned, and he wants to know whether the divine plan is for him to suffer from poverty throughout his entire life. Seemingly, this narrator believes that poverty is divinely predestined, and he shares the presupposition of numerous rabbis, such as, for example, the pericope from *b. Niddah*, which conveys the idea that poverty and wealth are prenatally determined by God:

b. Nid. 16b⁴¹

As Rabbi Ḥanina bar Papa expounds:
The angel who governs over conception is named Laylah (night). And it takes a drop and places it before the Holy One, blessed be He, and says before Him: Master of the Universe, what will become of this drop? [Will the person born from it be] strong or weak, foolish or

דדריש ר' חנינ' בר פפ' אותו מלאך הממונ'
על ההריון לילה שמו ונוטל טיפ' ומעמיד'
לפני הק"ב ואו' לפניו רבו' ש"ע טיפ' זו מה
תה' עליה גבור או חלש טפש או חכ' עני
או עשיר אבל רשע וצדי' לא כדרי' חנינ'
דא"ר חנינ' הכל בידי שמי' חוץ מירא'
שמים שני' ועתה ישר' מה יי' אלהיך שואל
מעמך כי אם לירא' וגו'

³⁷ See *t. Yoma* 2:7 (par. *y. Yoma* 3:9 [41a], *b. Yoma* 38a); *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 20a; *Sifre Deut.* 43 (*b. Sanh.* 101a).

³⁸ See *Protevangeliem Jacobi* 17:2, in Montague R. James, trans., *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, with Other Narratives and Fragments*, reprint corrected ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 46.

³⁹ In her commentary on this story, Tal Ilan preferred the manuscript version, in which the hero has a conversation with a feminine representation of the Divine Presence (Shekhinah) (*Massekhet Ta'anit*, 270). However, since the verb attached to the feminine character is in the masculine form, I would suggest that the scribes were perplexed by the circumstances of such a direct exchange with God and changed "The Holy One" to the more neutral Shekhinah. Therefore, the printed edition's version is preferable here.

⁴⁰ See Yael Wilfand, *Poverty, Charity and the Image of the Poor in Rabbinic Texts from the Land of Israel* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014), 78–79.

⁴¹ The text is discussed in great detail in Wilfand, *Poverty*, 79–80.

wise, poor or rich? But [the angel does not ask whether it will be] wicked or righteous, and it is in accordance with the view of Rabbi Ḥanina. For Rabbi Ḥanina said: everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven; for it is stated [in Scripture]: “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to revere the [Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul]” (Deut 10:12, JPS).

According to this text, people can only control their own morality, whether to be evil or righteous. Everything else, including poverty and wealth, is beyond human control. Whether a person is poor or wealthy, according to this tradition, is decided by the Creator before their birth.⁴² Therefore, it seems that the narrator of our story shares this idea with the abovementioned tradition and sends his hero to God to demand an explanation. Another Babylonian tradition which could be viewed as complementary to the previous story is as follows:

b. Šabb. 146a

It was written on R. Joshua b. Levi's wax tablet: He who [is born] on the first day of the week] shall be a man without one [thing] in him.

What does “without one [thing] in him” mean?

Shall we say, without one virtue? Surely R. Ashi said: I was born on the first day of the week!

Hence it must surely mean one vice. But surely R. Ashi said: Dimi b. Qaquzta and I were born on the first day of the week:

כתיב אפינקסיה דרבי יהושע בן לוי: האי מאן דבחד בשבא – יהי גבר ולא חדא ביה. מאי [ולא חדא ביה]? אילימא ולא חד לטיבו – והאמר רב אשי: אנא בחד בשבא הואי! אלא – לאו חדא לבישו, והאמר רב אשי: אנא ודימי בר קקוזתא הוויין בחד בשבא, אנא – מלך, והוא – הוה ריש גנבי! אלא: אי כולי לטיבו, אי כולי לבישו. (מאי טעמא – דאיברו ביה אור וחושך.)

⁴² This is in line with the assertion made in Zoroastrian literature from the Sasanian period that property-related matters (i.e., whether one is rich or poor) are not subject to one's own control, but rather to what is called *brēh* or *baxt*; i.e., the decree of fate, in which heaven plays no part. See Ādurbād ī Ēmēdān, *The Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages* (Dēnkard VI), trans. Shaul Shaked (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 174–75 (section D1a); see also the commentary on 297–300.

I am a king⁴³ and he is the head of thieves!—Rather it means either completely virtuous or completely wicked. [What is the reason? Because light and darkness were created on that day.]

In this tradition, one's socio-economic status is determined either by the day of the week when one's birth occurs or according to an astrological sign. Not all rabbis accepted celestial influence as a determining factor of one's lot. Some doubt regarding astrological influence can be seen later on, where we hear how a Jew can escape his astrological fate by giving alms.⁴⁴ However, Ta'anit's narrator is certain the celestial order has a strong power over the distribution of wealth.

In a pointedly formulated dialogue between them, God actually admits that he cannot change the poor scholar's financial situation without causing the far-reaching destruction of all creation and its reconstruction in order that this time, our hero will perhaps successfully be born into improved circumstances.⁴⁵ After all, as it turns out, his welfare is dictated by the position of the stars on the day of his birth; namely, "the hour of plenty," which is celestially determined.

Seemingly, our text in Ta'anit is characterised by a more comprehensive approach to the problem than the above-mentioned texts from *b. Niddah* and *b. Šabat*. It features the concept of the "hour of plenty" (*ša'ita' de-mezenei*, the meaning of which is that the hour of one's birth determines whether one will be rich or poor.⁴⁶ The existence of such an hour is predetermined by the Creator Himself. How-

43 This means that he was the head of a rabbinic school or study house: see Geoffrey Herman, "Insurrection in the Academy: The Babylonian Talmud and the Paikuli Inscription" [Hebrew], *Zion* 79 (2014): 378–407, here 378–84.

44 See Wilfand, *Poverty*, 80.

45 This motive is rather rare in the Babylonian Talmud; however, in a Middle Persian composition, the author tells another story about suffering men and God's inability to change their fate as a typically Jewish story that expresses typical rabbinic theology. See Samuel Frank Thrope, "Contradictions and Vile Utterances: The Zoroastrian Critique of Judaism in the Škand Gumānig Wizār" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 100–101, who also rightly observed the similarities between this story and our story from *b. Ta'anit* (102). See also Jason Mokhtarian, "Clusters of Iranian Loanwords in Talmudic Folklore: The Chapter of the Pious (*b. Ta'anit* 18b–26a)," in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, 125–48, who assumes that the Persian author "clearly knew this talmudic folklore" (141).

46 The latter is probably the *ša'ita' de-'aniyuta'*. This expression, however, does not appear in our story. It would nevertheless be correlative with the opposition between the representations of poverty and plenty, or the opposition between the genius of plenty and the genius of poverty which appears elsewhere in the Bavli, in *b. Hul.* 105b–106a (a tradition that has been discussed by Wilfand, *Poverty*, 78–79), and reads as follows: "There was a certain man who was followed by the demon (or angel) of poverty [אָנְיֻטָא] in the printed edition, although MS Hamburg 169, MS Vatican 121, and MS Vatican 122 have אַנְגֶּל instead, suggesting an *angel* in charge of poverty. However, taking into consideration the existence of the angelic patron of poverty mentioned elsewhere in the

ever, having created the conditions of the “game,” he allows the participants a certain freedom, and he can no longer change the rules.⁴⁷

Naturally, this is disappointing to our hero, who now, I would suppose ironically, bemoans his lot in life and inquires whether what remains of it is shorter or longer than what he has lived until now. It appears that the Omnipotent and Omniscient is not only aware of the limits of his own capabilities, but also of the duration of mortal life. The life of Rabbi Ele‘azar will be hard, but short. It is bitterly ironic.

It is common to find the traditional interpretation that the lack of divine intervention in “this world” is compensated for the righteous in the “world to come.” Thus, Rabbi Ele‘azar, accepting the absence of a reward in this world, asks about his reward in the Hereafter. God considers it necessary to tell him that in the future, he will indeed receive quite significant financial compensation—sources of fragrant oils that will make him immensely rich. The hero now mocks the extent of the compensation, implying that it would not hurt God to add to it even more. When the Creator, who does not recognise the mocking tone, justifies His decision to give “only” thirteen rivers of fragrant oil by the need to distribute the wealth equally among all the rabbis, He is challenged in that being omnipotent, He cannot have difficulty distributing the wealth! The relationship between this world and the future one is seemingly being ridiculed. If the Hereafter is little more than a better managed imitation of this world and even there, God has His limits, why does it deserve such acclaim, and how can it be expected to compensate for this imperfect world?

The Creator rebukes our hero and, somewhat surprisingly, flicks him on the forehead, which was the cause of the fiery branch observed by the rabbis,⁴⁸ and

Bavli, one might prefer the version found in the manuscripts], but the demon (or angel) of poverty was unable to prevail against him because the man was very careful about disposing of crumbs at the end of a meal. One day, the man was eating his bread over cynodons [a species of grass]. [The demon] said: Now he will fall into my hands! After he ate, the man took a spade and uprooted all the cynodons. He then heard [the demon] exclaiming: ‘Alas, he has driven me out of his house.’” Here, poverty is portrayed as a form of demonic possession, caused by a demon who is specially designated for that purpose. There is another Babylonian tradition according to which poverty and sustenance is maintained not by demons, but by a certain benevolent creature named *Isra*, which is usually translated as an “angel” or “genius” (see Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 122–23): “The name of the Angel of sustenance is Naqid and the name of the Angel of poverty is Nabil” (*b. Pes.* 111b). Comparing this tradition with that of *b. Niddah*, one might suppose that it was held that *isra’ de-mezenei* governed over the hours when rich people were born and *isra’ de-‘aniyuta’* governed over the hours when poor people were born.

⁴⁷ Alternatively, if one is to read it in the light of the tradition discussed in the previous note, after giving power to the angels of poverty and sustenance, he can no longer interfere with the order of their mutual replacements and so protect Ele‘azar in order to enable him to be born in an hour of plenty.

⁴⁸ The fire branch is referred to as צרִיָּתָא. This term has been the subject of considerable discussion. For a summary of earlier scholarship and a suggested solution to the lexicographic problem, see Daniel Boyarin, “Towards the Talmudic Lexicon” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 50 (1981): 164–91. Boyarin

reassures him through the use of an Aramaic expression: *אגירו בך גירי* “Let the arrows be shot at you!” In this blissful moment, the story comes to an end, leaving the reader in a state of mild bewilderment. Clearly, it is a form of apology on the Creator’s part, who constituted this world in such a manner that poor pious scholars endure a life of suffering. But how does it work exactly?

This very interesting and highly enigmatic story⁴⁹ evokes many questions. Why did this strange incubatory dream happen? How was this vision actually induced by the consumption of a *bara’ de-tumah*, such an innocent agent? Did our hero take it by accident, or was it, as it seems, deliberate—was he seeking an encounter with God? For what reason did our hero want to meet God? What is the meaning of the strange reward of the flowing balsam oil? Why is God actually unable to resolve the pious scholar’s financial problems? And what does the strange phrase at the end of the story mean? The story clearly has a strong theological message, albeit a rather obscure one.

The Palestinian story is clearly the prototype for the Babylonian one; however, a few elements of Palestinian *realia* have become hyperbolised in the Babylonian version. Streams of balsam have become powerful rivers. An inability to reward the righteous in the present and the reward of immense wealth appear in both stories. However, a few motives are unique to the Babylonian version: the preparations for the incubation dream; the behaviour of the hero during his dream; and the dialogue between God and Rabbi Ele’azar.

The story’s exposition bears a broad resemblance to the beginning of the Middle Persian story of the pious Ardā-Wirāz. The latter was chosen from the entire community assembled at the fire temple of Ādur-Farnbag on account of his virtue⁵⁰ and was ordered to drink the narcotic *mang*.⁵¹ His seven sisters, who were also his wives (according to the pious practice of consanguineous marriage, *xwēdōdah*) strongly objected to his being subjected to this ordeal, but eventually assented to it. Ardā-

writes that this word relates to part of a stalk of wheat. In a figurative sense, this is a strand of hair growing from the head or even fringes sticking out of cloth (Boyarin, “Talmudic Lexicon,” 169–70).

⁴⁹ The context in which the story appears is not very helpful for understanding it. The story is directly connected to the Ḥanina ben Dosa tradition (*b. Ta’an*. 24b–25a) and is only very remotely linked to the general theme of this chapter (which is rainmaking). Like Ḥanina ben Dosa, Rabbi Ele’azar ben Pedat is very poor; like Ḥanina ben Dosa, he has a special relationship with his creator; and like Ḥanina ben Dosa, he will be entitled to the greatest possible pleasure in the world to come, if he will only endure hardship in this one. The Babylonian editor decided that a fitting location to insert this story was just after the Ḥanina story cycle. On Ḥanina ben Dosa, see Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68–69. See also Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*, 269.

⁵⁰ See Phillipe Gignoux, “Notes sur la rédaction de l’Ardāy Virāz Nāmag,” *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Supplementa* 1 (1969): 998–1004; Walther Hinz, “Dantes persische Vorläufer,” *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, n.f., 4 (1971): 117–26.

⁵¹ See V. Dinshaw, “A Note on the Pahlavi Word “mang” in the Arda Viraf Nameh,” *Journal of the Cama Oriental Institute* 23 (1932): 107–8.

Wirāz was unconscious for seven days and nights and during this time, his sisters and others watched over him, praying and reciting from the Avesta and the Zand. When Wirāz's soul returned to his body, he narrated his experience. We will leave his experiences untold, but will draw attention to Ardā-Wirāz's journey to the next world, a journey undertaken in order to affirm the truth of the Zoroastrian beliefs. This is set after a period when Iran had been troubled by the presence of a confusing alien religion; namely, Islam. Seemingly, we have here a similar motive—a pious man, after consuming some unusual food, ascends to the other world and converses with a divine partner. This is apparently the way to find out what his god wants. Iranists have observed that the story of Ardā-Wirāz is not unique.⁵² Parallels are found in more precisely dated sources—the legend of Zoroaster recorded in *Dēnkard* 7 and the monumental inscriptions of the third-century Zoroastrian high priest Kirdīr (q.v.).⁵³ In the *Dēnkard*, King Wištāsp is depicted as hesitating before embracing the new religion. After drinking *mang* (and thereby undertaking an extra-terrestrial journey), his doubts are resolved.⁵⁴

The theme of doubt is also Kirdīr's case, a vision of heaven and hell is again presented during a soul journey. He explains in the Naqš-e Rājab inscription that he was seeking assurance that the religion to whose development he had contributed was efficacious. Again, the theme of doubt is implied in a visionary literary work. I will not discuss the sources relating to Ardā-Wirāz Nāmaq, but I would like to show that the Babylonian and Persian narrators share this and the ritual involves this Pahlavi parallel, it seems that the ingestion of garlic, even in a sizeable quantity, is not enough to allow a visionary to see the divine. It might be suggested that the *bara' de-tumah* of our story is a transformation or corruption of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian term *barsom* (Avestan *barəsman*). *Barsom* serves as a cultic item used by the Magi, presumably consisting of branches of dates, pomegranates, and tamarisk, holding the *barsom* and repeating prayers to praise the Creator for the support accorded by nature.⁵⁵ *Barsom* was used alongside the consummation of the narcotic *haoma*, both of which were important items in the Zoroastrian cult.⁵⁶

52 See Philippe Gignoux, "La signification du voyage extra-terrestre dans l'eschatologie mazdéenne," in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 63–69, and Philippe Gignoux, "Une ordalie par les lances en Iran," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 200 (1983): 155–61.

53 See Prod O. Skjærvø, "Kirdir's Vision: Translation and Analysis," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, n.f., 16 (1983 [1985]): 269–306.

54 See *Dēnkard* 74.83–86, in Marijan Molé, ed. and trans., *La légende de Zoroastre selon les textes pehlevi* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1967).

55 See M. F. Kanga, "Barsom," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica, Volume 3*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1988), 825–27, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/barsom-av> (19.06.2020).

56 See David Stophlet Flattery and Martin Schwartz, *Haoma and Harmaline: The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and Its Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Kasim Abdulaev, *The Cult of Haoma*

According to some scholars, the *barsom*'s bundle of twigs may originally have been a bundle of haoma stalks. The Haoma divinity is identified with priesthood, while the *barsom* stalks “cut for the bundles bound by women” (*Yasna* 10.17) are a symbol and instrument of the Zoroastrian priesthood. Phonetically, the Aramaic *bar(a de)θōm* sounds similar to the Middle Persian *barsom*. While there is no evidence that anyone ever swallowed *barsom* leaves,⁵⁷ I would merely like to suggest that the Babylonian narrator had come across an unfamiliar motif and that the alterity of this motif was emphasised by the somewhat erroneous use of a foreign term. This usage was not completely clear to later editors, and the foreign *barsoma* may have become the enigmatic *bara' de-tumah*. Another explanation was suggested to me by Shaul Shaked in a personal communication. He proposed understanding the words *bara' de-tumah* literally, meaning “that which is outside of garlic.”⁵⁸ This is the name of a late Persian custom, *sir u sedaw*, meaning the consumption of garlic along with the plant *Peganum harmala*. However, the purpose of this custom is unclear, and we have no proof that it was practised in Sasanian times.⁵⁹

Let us now turn to other additions made by the Babylonian narrator. The jet of fire is already known to us from *b. B. Bat.* 73a, where a similar feat is described as being routinely performed by Jewish sailors themselves rather than by heavenly creatures:

Raba b. Bar Ḥana said: Seafarers told me: The top of the wave which comes to sink the ship is shaped like a fringe of pale fire. We strike it with tree-branches with “I am who I am the Yah Lord of Hosts, Amen, Amen, Selah” engraved on them.⁶⁰

in *Ancient Central Asia* [Russian] (Samarkand: International Institute of Central Asian Research, 2009).

⁵⁷ See the extensive discussion of this term in Flattery and Schwartz, *Haoma and Harmaline* (80 onwards). The sense of the term remains uncertain.

⁵⁸ This is as follows: the word *bara'* may be a borrowed Persian word, as there is a Middle Persian word *bar* which means “fruit.” The phrase *bara' de-tumah* can thus be interpreted as “fruit of garlic,” meaning one grain of garlic.

⁵⁹ See Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athār-ul-Bākiya of Albīrūnī, or, Vestiges of the Past, Collected and Reduced to Writing by the Author in A.H. 390–1, A.D. 1000*, ed. and trans. Edward C. Sachau (London: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain, 1879), 212, on the use of garlic as a weapon against demons. I owe this note to Shervin Farridnejad.

⁶⁰ Here, a paraphrase of Exod 3:14 seems to be being used as a magical formula establishing the dominion of the God of Israel over the powers of nature. See, for example, its usage in MS 1911/1 (fifth to seventh centuries CE), an incantation bowl in the Schøyen collection: see <http://www.schoyencollection.com/palaeography-collection-introduction/aramaic-hebrew-syriac/4-6-3-jewish-aramaic/ms-1911-1> (19. 06. 2020), and see also Christa Müller-Kessler, “The Use of Biblical Quotations in Jewish Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” in *Studies on Magic and Divination in the Biblical World*, ed. Helen R. Jacobus, Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, and Philippe Guillaume (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2013), 227–45, especially 243–44.

It could be suggested that the fiery light of the menacing waves, which is an embodiment of divine anger, must be overcome by the light of God's countenance, which is equivalent to the light of the Torah. However, in our story, the fire is produced from the head of our sleeping hero,⁶¹ because at the same time, far away from our trivial world, where rabbis are looking in bewilderment at the body of R. Ele'azar, God is flicking the scholar's forehead, and this contact in the distant divine world causes the appearance of the fire in the mundane one.⁶² God is a foreigner who cannot appear in this world; however, His deeds are echoed in it in strange and inexplicable ways. God's last words to the suffering scholar deserve some explanation. R. Ele'azar's boldness must be punished. This is evidenced by God saying that he ought to punish his daring with fiery arrows. However, instead of arrows, He gently flicks the daring mortal's forehead, and even this light touch generates fire, which, however, does not cause him any harm.

Let us turn now to the theological nucleus of the story expressed in the brief dialogue between the rabbi and God. As it turns out, God is not able to help the poor suffering rabbi. He is omnipotent, but His tools are too strong and powerful to change the already created world. Now that the world has come into existence, it is governed by principles established by its Creator. To change anything in the created world now would require a return to the very beginning, to the initial conditions of the divine experiment, a rewinding, so to speak, implying the destruction of everything that has been created and starting all over again. However, even with such a drastic scenario, the creation may still have its own dynamics and place the newly born Ele'azar in a poor family once again. The principles I describe here are connected to the concept of *mazala* in the Babylonian rabbinic thought; namely, fate, determined by the position of the stars.⁶³

61 A sage's production of fire as a consequence of his immersion in Torah study is another known rabbinic topos. Here, one could also mention the story in *b. Hul.* 137b, where Rabbi Yoḥanan recalls that when he was a student, he witnessed the scholarly debates between his two prominent masters, which are described as the emanation of זיקוקין דגור, "fiery sparks," from the master's mouth to the student's and vice versa. I thank Geoffrey Herman for reminding me of this tradition. See also the story of Rabbi Abin in *y. Ber.* 5:1 (9a), in which assassins seeking to murder the sage are frightened by sparks of fire (זיקוקין דגור) coming out of his neck. Other examples could also be provided.

62 A single ray of light emanating from the hero's head or from some other miraculous object is an image that is quite rare and unknown to me outside of the texts under discussion. In this connection, it may be appropriate to mention the mysterious image on the wall found in the Mithraeum discovered at Hawarti in Syria in 1996/97. See Michal Gawlikowski, "The Mithraeum at Hawarti and Its Paintings," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 20 (2007): 337–61, especially 355. There is a still-unexplained mythic scene that depicts seven heads without bodies, each of which is emitting a ray of light. Some have suggested that these bodies belong to demonic creatures. I would like to express my appreciation to Michael Shenkar for this reference.

63 See Giuseppe Veltri, *Magie und Halakha: Ansätze zu einem empirischen Wissenschaftsbegriff im spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1997), 210–11.

We can see, then, that the narrator in *b. Ta'anit* is preoccupied with questions about divine intervention in mundane existence. Like the narrator of Job before him, he wants to emphasise the alterity of God, which probably could be defined as His transcendence and which is the reason for His inability to interfere in events on Earth. However, the talmudic narrator wants to explain this inability more precisely. He describes God as being so obedient to the rules of His own game that He cannot change its rules, but only start a new one.⁶⁴ As a sceptical theist, therefore, our narrator keeps his belief in God, but denies His involvement in the politics of evil. However, he is not willing to say that there is no God-justifying reason for permitting evil, because there is a reason—God planted the seeds of evil in this world and now He is obliged to let them grow, not without some sadness and bitter irony: “Ele‘azar my son, let the arrows be shot at you!” While the Babylonian narrator has succeeded in keeping his god far away from the imperfect world, at the same time, he has shown Him to be involved in what is happening there and empathetic to the problems of the suffering pious man.⁶⁵

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64 This theological notion of portraying God as being trapped by the conflicting requirements of his divine powers is not uncommon in rabbinic literature: see David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 79–81.

65 In his work on suffering in rabbinic literature, David Kraemer characterises the Bavli as a text that affirms and recovers a full range of biblical models of suffering that were apparently rejected or de-emphasised by earlier rabbinic texts, expressing these theological responses in its own idiom and voice. He mentions, for example, Job’s questioning of God’s justice, or Ecclesiastes’s sense of meaningless suffering. Though earlier rabbinic texts had also grappled with the problems of suffering, Kraemer argues that the Bavli gives fullest expression to a wide range of responses to it, including “even the most radical expression of questioning or doubt.” See David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 207.

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Tali Artman Partock

“If a Man Would Tell You”

The Bible, the only treasure which escaped the fire of Jerusalem, was in the greatest possible danger. The doctrine of God, as taught and believed in synagogues and the houses of the Jews, was at stake.¹

To speak of scepticism as a philosophy that is embedded in rabbinic literature carries the risk of using an unsuitable, external category to decipher the codes of an epistemic, theological, and social system which is very remote from both “Athens” and us. When interpreting phenomena occurring in a culture other than one’s own, it is necessary to be careful not to impose external theoretical frameworks (analytical categories) on the subject of study. One should rather learn how the studied culture understands and categorises its discursive (and other) practices. Dan Ben Amos called these practices “ethnic genres.”² Ethnic genres, he argued, could be identified either by members of the studied group or by the one studying them. The subject of this study, the rabbinic circles of late antiquity, functions as a somewhat imagined “ethnos.” This trans-generational and spatial group was often well aware of its own rules of creativity, as Galit Hasan-Rokem has shown.³ As Ben Amos argues, reading with ethnic genres in mind rather than analytical categories does not entail losing the benefits that these categories may hold or disregarding them; rather, it is a call to proceed with caution. Scepticism itself is a rather diverse and somewhat unstable sign.⁴ Rather than superficially dwelling on the differences between philosophical, religious, and scientific scepticism, for this discussion of what I see as a rabbinic form of engagement with scepticism, I would like to borrow the four main axes around which sceptical theories revolve: the existence of truth; the proper means of the production of knowledge; their relationship to authority; and the concept of doubt. In order to do so, I would suggest studying a group of texts which thematises the process of examining the ways in which rabbinic knowledge is produced. This group, fortunately, has a very clear stylistic feature, or discursive marker, which allows us to connect its members. I am referring, of course, to the

1 Arthur Marmorstein, “The Background of the Haggadah,” in *Studies in Jewish Theology*, ed. Myer S. Lew and Joseph Rabinowitz (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1950), 4.

2 Dan Ben-Amos, “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres,” *Genre* 2, no. 3 (1969): 275–301.

3 Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Did the Rabbis Recognize the Category of Folk Narrative?,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 19–55.

4 Richard H. Popkin, “Skepticism,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/skepticism>, accessed 20 April 2018; Richard H. Popkin, “Skepticism,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Collier Macmillan, 1967), 449–61. Both contain a bibliography on the subject.

group of texts which open with the words “if a man would tell you” and their close variants. There has only been one study of these texts as a distinctive group.⁵ At the very least, the members of this group share the first instinct that is essential to scepticism: doubt.

My objective in this paper will be to attempt to formulate the relationship between truth, epistemology, and authority within this group of texts. I shall argue that the expression “if a man would tell you” functions as a discursive marker which rabbinic literature utilises in order to suggest an engagement with what we have learnt to call “scepticism”: doubting epistemology as well as authority. The phrase “[and] if a man would tell you” is found more than one hundred times in rabbinic literature, up to the period of the *Tanḥuma* genre. The overwhelming majority of the corpus where this phrase occurs is Palestinian, whereas it appears only fourteen times in the Babylonian Talmud. A noteworthy study of these texts was published by Arthur Marmorstein in 1950,⁶ but since then, they have not been further studied as a group and their rhetorical and discursive function and attributes have remained unexplored. While Marmorstein made a significant contribution, his study was not without its problems.

Marmorstein justifiably identified the “if a man would tell you” texts as part of the rabbinic tradition of the diatribe, a form that he considered to be rooted in the Cynic and Stoic philosophical traditions. He made three main claims. Firstly, he proposed that the expression “if a man would tell you” is used by homilists to introduce hypothetical counter-arguments, whether alleged or real, to their biblical interpretation. Secondly, he suggested that they should be grouped together with five other groups of texts that he saw as similar, if not identical: “Anyone who says ...,” “So that they would not say ...,” “An answer to those who say ...,” “So that they may not say ...,” and “If they would say ...” (כל מי שאומר, שלא יאמר, תשובה למי) (אם יאמרו, שאומרים, שלא ליתן פתחון פה, אם יאמרו). Finally, he claimed that all these groups are polemical in function and that the hypothetical or real speakers in all of the groups are hostile to rabbinic teaching; that is, all apart from a small group of texts that start with the phrase “do not wonder if ...” (אל תתמה). He believed that this group represented an inner-rabbinic voice, although in my view, this group is irrelevant to the discussion. The support for Marmorstein’s assertions is often wanting, either because he believed it to be self-evident, or because it was part of his more fundamental claim that there was a dispute between rabbinic Judaism and the Marcionites that was pivotal to rabbinic self-definition.

It is difficult to agree with Marmorstein on many of his points, all of which either lead towards or are the building blocks of his broader argument that all of these aggadic passages are polemical in nature and that Marcion was the single

⁵ Marmorstein, “The Background of the Haggadah,” 57–71.

⁶ Marmorstein, 57–71. Marmorstein consistently dates the sources on the basis of the names of the tradents and not based on the composition in which they appear.

greatest threat to rabbinic theology. His argument might have been stronger if only biblical verses were indeed the focus of all the diatribes mentioned, as the Bible stood at the heart of interreligious dispute in late antiquity, but this is not always the case. For example, almost none of the sources in the “if a man would tell you” group in tannaitic literature⁷ and in the Babylonian Talmud⁸ are anchored on the interpretation of a verse. Furthermore, not all the speakers are hostile to rabbinic teaching, nor are they outsiders to rabbinic circles. Indeed, looking closer at the identity of the speakers reveals that the groups that Marmorstein categorised together do not, in fact, belong together.

The group that starts with “so that they would not say” (שלא יאמרו), for example, is an enormous group with over 200 sources as early as the second and as late as the seventh century. These sources concern things that are done not for their truth value or necessity, but rather in order that it may not seem to anyone, irrespective of whether they are an Israelite or not, that the Law is being transgressed (מראית עין). These have an entirely different relationship to truth from the “if a man would tell you” group, which at least attempts to appear to be searching for truth and reasserting truth as a value.

The group starting with “so that they may not say” (שלא ליתן פתחון פה), however, has the specific function of rejecting the hypothetical or actual claims of non-Jews (the “nations of the world”) or heretical Jews, as they are directly mentioned. It includes, for example, the much-discussed polemic regarding the notion of “two powers in heaven.”⁹ It is mostly tannaitic¹⁰ and has very little continuation in classi-

7 *m. Ed.* 1:6; *t. Menah.* 13:1; *t. Nid.* 6:4; *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 1:3; *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* 17:10 (Hoffmann edition, 103).

8 *b. Ber.* 10a; *b. Hag.* 16a; *b. Meg.* 6a–b, 31b; *b. Nid.* 52b; *b. Sanh.* 80a; *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 9b; *b. Ned.* 40a.

9 See Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, reprint ed. (Boston, MA: Brill, 2002); Adiel Schremer, “Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39 (2008): 230–54; Stephen Waers, “Monarchianism and Two Powers: Jewish and Christian Monotheism at the Beginning of the Third Century,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 70 (2016): 401–29; Menahem Kister, “The Manifestations of God in the Midrashic Literature in Light of Christian Texts” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 81 (2012): 103–42; Menahem Kister, “Metatron, God, and the ‘Two Powers’: The Dynamics of Tradition, Exegesis, and Polemic” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 82 (2013): 43–88; Daniel Boyarin, “Two Powers in Heaven; or, The Making of a Heresy,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 331–70; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “Jewish-Christian Relations and Rabbinic Literature—Shifting Scholarly and Relational Paradigms: The Case of Two Powers,” in *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 15–43; Daniel Boyarin, “Once Again: ‘Two Dominions in Heaven’ in the Mekhilta” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 81 (2012): 87–101.

10 *Mek. of Rabbi Ishmael*, Shira 4 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ismael*, 129–30); BaHodesh 5–6 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, 219–21, 223); *Mek. of Rabbi Shimeon*, Beshalah 15:3 (Epstein and Melamed edition, 81); *Sifra*, Dibura deNedava 2:5 (Finkelstein edition, 2:22 and varia in 4:63), *Sifre Num.* 119 (Kahana edition, appendix 1, ב”ל); *Sifre Num.* 143 (Kahana edition, appen-

cal midrash.¹¹ This group is focused on authority rather than on epistemology or truth. In fact, it categorises only utterances from “proper” sources of authority, such as from (“orthodox”¹²) rabbinic Jews, as true. The “anyone who says” (כל מי שאומר) group is focused on the punishment or reward for uttering certain things and has nothing to do with doubt.¹³ The phrase “an answer to those who say” (תשובה למי שאומרים) appears only once and in a rather late source (*Pesiq. Rab.* 47), and “if they would say” (אם יאמרו) is merely a plural version of “if a man would tell you” and should therefore be classified with it.¹⁴ I am arguing here, through a detailed taxonomy, that the group that has “if a man would tell you” as a discursive marker is unique, as it preserves a moment of hesitation in the rabbinic discourse. As opposed to the complete negation of the false opinions and theologies of others as reflected in the “so that they would not say” (שלא ליתן פתחון פה) and the “anyone who says” (כל שאומר) groups, the doubts raised by the sources in this group are seriously considered, at least in part, and at times cause a change of heart.

What Marmorstein may have been reacting to when he created his taxonomy is the fact that a statement which begins with the marker “if a man would tell you” (אם יאמר לך אדם) is often rejected by the speaker/writer/redactor of the diatribe. I assume that it was this, in addition to the somewhat provocative content of some of the texts in the “if a man would tell you” group, that led him to believe that *all* the hypothetical speakers in this group are hostile to rabbinic teaching. I propose here to take a more historical and methodical approach to examining the data in order to understand the function of this discursive marker in classical rabbinic literature and to group the texts that use it. In order to classify the sources, I will use the focal points that scepticism offers us, examining epistemology, authority, truth, and doubt. I believe that we must ask the following questions: What is the identity of the people who are posing the challenges? Is there a difference between those who ask their interlocutor questions and those who offer simple propositions? Are they “right” or “wrong?” Are they indeed refuted? And finally, why are their claims rejected?

In order to classify the appearances of the expression “if a man would tell you,” I would suggest initially organising them into five groups, corresponding to three

dix, ט"ט); *Sifre Deut.* 42 (Finkelstein edition, 89); 43 (Finkelstein edition, 96–97); 308 (Finkelstein edition, 347), *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* 5:7; 11:14; 19:1 (Hoffmann edition, 20, 35, 113).

¹¹ It appears only in *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 26 (Mandelbaum edition, 394); *Lev. Rab.* 21:8 (Margulies edition, 462); *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 9). In *Lev. Rab.*, it is directed not against the Gentiles, but against Satan. *Tanḥ. Jethro* 16 (Buber edition, Ex 79) recycles the material we already know.

¹² I use “orthodox” in the sense that Boyarin offers in his argument for the creation of orthodoxy and heresy in rabbinic Judaism in the second century: see Boyarin, “Two Powers,” 364–70.

¹³ *Gen. Rab.* 67:4 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 757–58); *Song. Rab.* 1:1; *Tanḥ. Zav* 7; and *Sifre Num.* 105 (Kahana edition, 260), which is the most relevant to the discussion and to which I shall return later.

¹⁴ This is what I have done here.

major variables: the identity of the speakers, the response, and the type of utterance they use. In the first group (G1), anonymous speakers make an argument which is rejected;¹⁵ in the second group (G2), unidentified people ask a question and receive a (positive) answer;¹⁶ in the third group (G3), an argument made by an identified speaker is accepted;¹⁷ in the fourth group (G4), an argument made by an identified speaker is rejected;¹⁸ and in the final group (G5), an argument made by an unidentified person is accepted.¹⁹ Analysing each group separately and the corpus as a whole will reveal the relationship between authority, truth, and the discourse therein.

A full and detailed taxonomy of the cases will not only undermine the validity of many of Marmorstein’s assumptions, but will also enable us to understand the historical function of the formula “if a man would tell you.” I shall now analyse each group separately in order to clarify both my own choices relating to the classifications and the function of the groups. I will then offer my own taxonomy.

15 *m. Ed.* 1:6; *b. Meg.* 6a; *b. Meg.* 6b, *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 9b; *y. Ber.* 4:3 (32b), four times; *y. Sanh.* 10:1 (50b); *y. Šeb.* 1:1 (4a) twice; *y. Ta’an.* 2:1 (9a) thrice; *y. Ta’an.* 2:2 (9b) four times; *y. Ter.* 11:12 (56a); *Gen. Rab.* 12:1 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 97–99); 17:6 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157); 44:19 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 441–2); 50:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 527); 69:4 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 793) twice; 94:9 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 1181); *Lev. Rab.* 23:2 (Margulies edition, 629, line 1 in the apparatus); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 3:5 (Mandelbaum edition, 43); 4:2 (Mandelbaum edition, 59); 5:1 (Mandelbaum edition, 100); *Deut. Rab.* Nitsavim 5 (Liebermann edition, 117); *Song. Rab.* 1:14 (3); *Song. Rab.* 2:2 (2); *Lam. Rab.* (Vilnius) 2:13; 4:1; *Eccl. Rab.* 2:11–12 (Hirshman edition, 140–42); *Tanḥ.* Noah 17 (Buber edition, Gen 44); Ḥukot 19 (Buber edition, Num 104); Ki Tetse 9 (Buber edition, Deut 39); *Tanḥ.* Vayera 1 (Warsaw, Gen 46); Ha’azinu 3 (Warsaw, Deut 245), Yelamdenu according to the citation in Talmud Torah Bereshit 131 (Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, vol. 1 [Penna: Jewish Publication Society, 1940]. 317).

16 *b. Ber.* 10a; *y. Ta’an.* 1:1 (3a); *Gen. Rab.* 55:15 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 585); *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31, four times); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (four times; Mandelbaum edition, 152); *Deut. Rab.* Ekev (Liebermann edition, 74, four times); *Eccl. Rab.* 12,10 (Vilnius edition) and 3,15 (Hirshman edition, 210–212) (three times); *Tanḥ.* Emor 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91) three times; *Tanḥ.* Nasah 31 (Buber edition, Num 41–42, four times).

17 *t. Menah.* 13:1; *t. Nidd.* 6:4; *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 1:3; *Midrash Tannaïm Deut.* 17:10 (Hoffmann edition, 103); *‘Abot R. Nat.* B 37 (Schechter edition, 98); *b. Nid.* 52b; *b. Sanh.* 4a; *b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 4a; *y. Mo’ed Qat.* 3:1 (10a); *y. Hor.* 1:1 (2b); *Gen. Rab.* 78:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 919). In theory, *y. Šeb.* 4:2 (10a) could be included here too, but as it is not an opening of a dispute or discourse, I have decided to leave it out.

18 *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 1:9; *b. Ḥag.* 16a; *b. Sanh.* 4a; *b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 40b; *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b); *Tanḥ.* Baha’alotkha 16 (Buber edition, Num 52); Beshallah 24 (Buber edition, Ex 67), Nasa 30 (Buber edition, Num 31, three times); *Tanḥ.* Ki Tisa 24 (Warsaw edition, Ex. 244); Shoftim 12 (Warsaw edition, Deut 225).

19 *b. Meg.* 6a; *b. Meg.* 6b; *Deut. Rab.* Nitzavim (Liebermann edition, 117, twice); *Lam. Rab.* 2:13.

1 Five Different Groups within the Genre

1.1 Group 1, or, Are the Speakers Telling the Truth?

I shall start with the unidentified speakers who make claims, as they are the largest group. This group consists mainly of examples found in the early Palestinian amoraic literature (32/42), with only one tannaitic example (*m. Ed.* 1:6). All but one of its seven examples in the Tanḥuma genre²⁰ are repetitions of earlier sources, and the Bavli contributes three more. As we shall see, this group presents us with a phenomenon in which empirically just claims or claims that could be, or indeed are, accepted elsewhere in rabbinic literature as true are deemed to be false.

This happens in ten out of the sixteen cases taken from the Yerushalmi in this group. Eight of them revolve around the numbers of blessings in the *'amidah*, one is about the interpretation of a mishnaic passage, and one is about a tradition concerning the Sabbatical year. As the majority of the cases in the group refer to the correct number of blessings, we will examine this text more closely.

In *y. Ber.* 4:3 (33b), there is a lengthy unit devoted to various attempts to explain why there are eighteen blessings in the *'amidah*. Five explanations are given: the number of psalms which appear before the psalmist is answered; the eighteen spinal vertebrae;²¹ the eighteen invocations of God in Psalm 29; the eighteen times the three patriarchs are mentioned together in the Bible, and finally, eighteen different commandments relating to the construction of the Tabernacle. I will not analyse or quote here those explanations for the phenomenon which do not directly respond to a claim starting with the marker “if a man would tell you,” and I will consider only the first, third and fourth explanations just listed:²²

Why eighteen? R. Joshua ben Levi said: Because there are eighteen psalms from the start of the Book of Psalms to the verse: “and the Lord answers you in your day of trouble” (Ps 20:2). *If a man would tell you:* there are nineteen, tell him: “Why are the nations in an uproar” (Ps 2:1) is not included [...]

20 I have separated the Tanḥuma group from the classical midrash sources because of its generally different poetics, its anthological nature, and its possible influences from the Bavli. This is a group of Palestinian midrashim on the Torah dated from the sixth to the ninth centuries. Some of them have been preserved in the collections we now call Tanḥuma, but others “travelled independently” as midrashim to a specific book (for example, the second part of *Exodus Rabbah*). On the basic characteristics of the group, see, for example, Moshe David Herr, “Tanḥuma Yelammedenu,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Volume 15*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971): 794–96; Ronit Nikolsky, “From Palestine to Babylonia and Back: The Place of the Bavli and the Tanhuma on the Rabbinic Cultural Continuum,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Tal Ilan and Ronit Nikolsky (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 284–305; Marc Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003).

21 Based on *m. 'Ohal.* 1:8.

22 The parallel *sugya* in *b. Ber.* 28b adds another explanation: the eighteen times God is mentioned in the *Shema*’.

R. Levi said, [The eighteen blessings] correspond to the eighteen invocations [in Psalm 29]. [But what of] “Ascribe to the Lord?” (Ps 29:1) R. Huna said, *if a man would tell you* that there are nineteen [blessings], tell him that the rabbis at Yavneh established a [nineteenth blessing] concerning the heretics.

R. Eleazar b. R. Yose objected before R. Yose: It is written, “The God (*El*) of glory thunders” (Ps 29:3)—they should have established another blessing on its account. He said to him, “It was taught, they insert the references to the heretics and the sinners in the blessing concerning the slanderers [the twelfth], and the references to the elders and the proselytes in the blessing concerning the righteous [the thirteenth], and the reference to David in the blessing concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem [the fourteenth]. We have enough invocations [in the chapter] for each and every one of these subjects.

R. Ḥaninah in the name of R. Pinḥas: [The 18 blessings] correspond to the eighteen times that the [names of the] patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are mentioned together in the Torah. *And if a man would tell you* that there are nineteen [instances], tell him that we do not count this one: “And behold the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac” (Gen 28:13); *and if a man would tell you* that there are only seventeen [instances], tell him that we do count this one: “And in them let my name [Jacob] be perpetuated, and the name of my father Abraham and Isaac” (Gen 48:16).²³

All the unidentified speakers challenging assumptions in this passage from the Yerushalmi are, in fact, right. The first speaker is correct in that there are indeed nineteen psalms, not eighteen, up to the moment that God answers the psalmist on his day of trouble in Ps 20:2. The second speaker, introduced to the discussion by R. Huna, is also right, as God is mentioned by name more than eighteen times in Psalm 29. His opinion is accepted to the degree that R. Huna agrees that there are indeed nineteen blessings in the ‘*amidah*, as *birkat ha-minim* was added.²⁴ R. Eleazar, however, claims that if we count the times God appears with the name *El*, there are indeed twenty invocations in Psalm 29, and according to the logic presented by R. Huna, we should add another blessing to the ‘*amidah*. The answer given by R. Yose reflects the difference between the Palestinians and the Babylonians (represented here by R. Huna) about the number of blessings in the ‘*amidah*.²⁵ R. Yose ends

23 The translation here is a (slight) adaptation of Tzvee Zahavy’s translation, published in Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel, Volume 1: Berakhot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 170–71.

24 On *birkat ha-minim* and the different forms (and numbers) of the benedictions in the ‘*amidah*, see, for example, David Instone-Brewer, “The Eighteen Benedictions and the *Minim* before 70 CE,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (2003): 25–44; Uri Ehrlich, *The Weekday Amidah in Cairo Genizah Prayer Books: Roots and Transmission* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2013); Günter Stemberger, “Birkat ha-minim and the Separation of Christians and Jews,” in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity*, ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 75–88; Yechezkel Luger, *The Weekday ‘Amida in the Cairo Genizah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Orḥot, 2001); Ruth Langer, *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat Haminim* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

25 On the Babylonians’ difficulty with not counting *birkat ha-minim* as an additional blessing, see Ezra Fleischer, “On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 435–38.

the counting game by showing that we can add more text to the existing blessings without changing their numbers and keep the traditional eighteen, corresponding to the eighteen invocations of the ineffable name. He does so by adding the *minim* to the curse of the informers, the elders and the proselytes to the blessing of the righteous, and David to the blessing of Jerusalem. A different variant on the theme of the number of blessings appears in *t. Ber.* 3:25, which nevertheless counts eighteen.²⁶ He thus rejects both the doubt raised by the unidentified speakers and R. Huna's opinion. In the next section, R. Ḥaninah attempts another explanation for the number eighteen, this time based on mentioning all the patriarchs in one verse. His discursive opponents justly claim that this is not the case.²⁷ Once again, the argument is about the details: Can we consider the verse in which Jacob speaks of his forefathers to be mentioning all three forefathers together? The point I wish to make here is that it is difficult to think of those who know how to count as Marcionite, as non-rabbinic, or to see their arguments as completely false, or "polemical," as Marmorstein suggested. The "unidentified speakers" seem to fulfil different discursive functions: personifying hypothetical counter-arguments, pointing out places where the claims are weak and should be further supported, or facilitating or explaining change (as in the case of R. Huna). The speakers do not seem to have a hidden agenda, and often they reflect opinions that are not foreign to rabbinic thought itself. The number of the blessings, at any rate, is an entirely inner-rabbinic dispute.²⁸

We find the same phenomenon of rejecting perfectly viable claims in six out of the seven cases of G1 in *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, in *Gen. Rab.* 17:6,²⁹ commenting on Gen 2:21, which has "and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh" (וַיִּסְגֵּר בֶּשֶׂר תַּחַתָּהּ). In *Genesis Rabbah*, Rabbi Ḥaninah attempts a *draṣat 'otiyot* (a midrash of single letters in the Bible) regarding the end of the verse: "Rabbi Ḥaninah son of R. Adda said: from the beginning of the book to this passage the letter *samek* is not written. But when the woman was created, Satan was created with her. *And if a man would tell you* 'that is it which encompasses' (Gen 2:11), tell him that verse speaks only of rivers."

The letter *samek* undoubtedly appears in the Book of Genesis before the creation of woman, in Gen 2:11, which deals with the River Pishon, which encompasses (sovev סִוֵּב) Kush. However, R. Ḥaninah has the last word. A different midrash that

²⁶ Fleischer, "On the Beginnings," 435–438; Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta, Volume 1: Seder zera'im 'alef* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987), 53.

²⁷ The simplest way to count would be seventeen, including Gen 25; 28; 31; 32 (twice); 35; 49; Ex 2; 3 (three times); 6; Lev 26; 2Kgs 13; 1Chr 1 (twice); 2Chr 32; to this, one might add a second occurrence in both Gen 28 and Gen 32, making it nineteen.

²⁸ Ezra Fleischer, "The Shemone Esre, Its Character, Internal Order, Content, and Goals" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 62 (1993): 179–223, here 182–83.

²⁹ Theodor and Albeck edition, 157.

appears in *Genesis Rabbah* (with parallels in *Lamentations Rabbah*, *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, and *Songs of Songs Rabbah*) has the following:

“I will Judge” (וְיִשְׁפֹּט אֱלֹהִים) (Gen 15:14). R. Eliezer in the name of Rabbi Jose, in those two letters the Holy One, blessed be He, promised our father to redeem his sons, and if they will repent from their bad deeds he will redeem them by 72 letters. R. Judan said, from “has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within *another* nation” to “by great terrors” (Deut 4:34) we find 72 letters. *And if a man would tell you* there are 75, take out (three letters that make) the second mentioning of “a nation (גוֹי).”³⁰

It is difficult to prove that the argument of there being seventy-five letters here is wrong, as indeed seventy-five letters appear in the Bible. The rejection of the claim is no more convincing than that of R. Ḥaninah regarding the letter *samek*.

Working out of the specific examples given here and the other members of the group, a unified cause for the rejection of the arguments of the unidentified speakers does not seem to be possible, since it appears that the grounds for rejecting the claims of the speakers in G1 are too varied. They stretch from inconsistencies between verses to reading a different part of the verse, using a different counting technique, the observed natural world, a different system of categorisation, or a ruling of a *beit din*. To put it differently, the claims are not rejected on the basis of any coherent epistemology. They are also not being rejected because of the identity of the speakers, as most of the claims are not presented to the rabbinic collective by a member of an out-group.

There are two texts that may seem to be exceptions to this rule, which could be treated as polemical. One appears in *Gen. Rab.* 12:2 and in a parallel text in *Eccl. Rab.* 2:12, and the other appears in *y. Ta’an.* 2:1 (9a).³¹ The first has to do with a man who claims that he understands the cosmic order. While his interlocutor, R. Huna, rejects his claim as impossible, the subsequent opinions quoted are quite different and suggest that human beings can indeed understand some if not all of the natural world and the cosmic order.³² This is consistent both with the trend of rejecting acceptable claims that we saw earlier and with the speakers being people who do not necessarily come from outside of the rabbinic collective. This brings us to the famous passage from *y. Ta’an.* 2:1 (9a):

If a man would tell you: I am a god, he is a liar; I am (the) Son of Man, he will regret it; I go up to the heavens—he has said so, but he shall not do it.

³⁰ *Gen. Rab.* 17:6 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157).

³¹ *Gen. Rab.* 12:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 97–99), and in a parallel text in *Eccl. Rab.* 2:12 (Hirshman edition, 140).

³² See Reuven Kiperwasser, “‘The Natural Order’—The Perception of the Nature in Rabbinic Thought” [Hebrew], *Akdamot, the Journal for Jewish Thought* 5 (1998): 35–52.

While Peter Schäfer sees anti-Christian polemic here,³³ and others even inner-Christian polemic,³⁴ I wish to probe the identity of the speaker and the nature of R. Abbahu's answer. Schäfer justly argues that Jesus is a better fit as the object of the question than Hiram, who claims to be a god in Ezek 18:2, or Nebuchadnezzar, who claims he will ascend to heaven (Isa 14:13), because only with the inclusion of Jesus is the whole sequence coherent. He is the only one about whom it was claimed that he was God, the Son of Man, and that he ascended to heaven. Schäfer also noted that the first two claims are refuted by an appeal to the same verse in Balaam's oracle (Num 23:19), "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?" The third claim about ascending to heaven, however, is not rejected on the basis of a verse (even if Isaiah could be utilised here). It is simply rejected outright.

However, Schäfer disregards the problems created by the narrative structure: Is Jesus talking to R. Abbahu and we are witnessing his second coming, or is there another man who thinks he is a god, who went up to heaven to sit with God and keeps appearing to the sages? Is this a dramatisation of rabbinic dogma, or just R. Abbahu's view concerning a third-century Christian controversy?

The logic of this midrash is of particular interest. As with some other cases in this group, it is not without blemish. Let us follow the three claims and their answers again. The refutation of the first argument is based on a verse that says "God is not a man," read as proof that man is not God. There are two fallacies here. Firstly, the argument is circular in claiming that if God does not lie and men do, then God cannot be a man, so if someone claims that he is God, he is lying and is not God. If the man is indeed God, he is not lying, and therefore he is a god. The second is that there is a difference between being a god and being God. This is a difference that Christianity and many types of dualist heresies have noted. I also do not recall anyone regretting saying that he was the son of man,³⁵ or any rabbinic doctrinal teaching against sinless men who go to heaven without dying. In fact, the opposite appears as an answer to one of the questions asked by unidentified speak-

33 See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 107–11; Samuel Tobias Lachs, "R. Abbahu and the Minim," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 60, no. 3 (1970): 197–212, here 198–99; Robert Travers Herford, *Christianity in the Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903), 62–63; Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Jesus in the Talmud," in Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Rabbinical Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1951), 545 ff., and also Ephraim E. Urbach, "Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam Stories" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 25 (1956): 272–89, here 277–78. Urbach sees this as an imagined dialogue between Balaam and a Christian.

34 Oded Irshai, "R. Abbahu Said: 'If a Man Should Say to You "I am God"—He Is a Liar'" [Hebrew], *Zion* 47 (1982): 173–77, points out that even within the church, the divinity of Christ was contested by some. See the literature mentioned there.

35 On the Son of Man in the context of "two powers," see Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 202–15.

ers in G2. To put it differently, the answers offered here by R. Abbahu are more negations, threats, and promises than real refutations. As with some other cases within this group, the point is not how valid the claims are, but their rejection, and we shall return to this point later.

1.2 Group 2: Those Who Ask Questions

Group 2, the group of questions asked by unidentified personae, includes fourteen early amoraic cases, one example from the Babylonian Talmud, and eleven examples from the Tanḥuma genre, of which only three are not original and four are repeated.

The early amoraic group consists of variants on the same questions: six ask about the possibility of something, and two ask “where” (is your God, *y. Ta’an.* 1:1 [3a]) and “when” (will God redeem Israel, *Eccl. Rab.* 12:10).³⁶ All the questions are answered by a verse or an allusion to a biblical story. All of those who ask questions may be part of the rabbinic group, borderline rabbinic Jews, or members of an out-group, but only in one case (*y. Ta’an.* 1:1 [3a]) is it clearly someone who is identified as a non-member of the Jewish collective. In the Tanḥuma group (4) and in the Bavli (1), another five are added about the possibility or impossibility of an event.

The group as a whole poses a hermeneutical challenge. All but the two “where” and “when” questions are answered by a straightforward affirmation. Seven of them ask about God: Can God make the poor rich?³⁷ Can God resurrect the dead?³⁸ Could Adam be alive today had he not sinned?³⁹ Could God create water upon water?⁴⁰ Turn water into dry land?⁴¹ To this list, *Deut. Rab.*⁴² adds another three questions: Does God accept those who repent? Does God open the wombs of barren women? And can God save from fire? These questions focus on the relationship between God and men, which we encounter also in the Bavli with the man who asks: “Does a slave rebel against his master?” (*b. Ber.* 10a). All the answers are supported by verses. The hermeneutical challenges are, however, how to interpret the nature of the questions; that is to say, are they meant to challenge what they may think of as rabbinic “dogma,” or are they honest questions, seeking answers in the face of different theological and textual difficulties?

³⁶ Hirshman edition, 140.

³⁷ *Gen. Rab.* 55:15 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 585).

³⁸ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210); *Deut. Rab.* ‘Eqev (Liebermann edition, 74).

³⁹ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210); *Deut. Rab.* ‘Eqev (Liebermann edition, 74).

⁴⁰ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53).

⁴¹ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210).

⁴² *Deut. Rab.* ‘Eqev (Liebermann edition, 74).

The oldest member of the group, found in *Gen. Rab.* 55:15, interprets the trials of Abraham as the Torah's way of teaching us about reward. Abraham wins great favour because of his loyalty to God. When someone asks, "Can God make rich whoever he pleases, and make poor whoever he pleases, and make whomever he wants king?", the affirmative answer takes the omnipotence of God as a given and focuses on God's ethical standard. God may do so, and His decisions are not arbitrary.⁴³ The man who may be understood as complaining that God does not favour him is therefore asked to measure himself against the scale of Abraham. I see no reason to think of the question asked as external to the rabbis, since the desire to understand God's actions is at its heart and graver questions about God's decisions in the face of the destruction of the temple are often raised. If, however, a person tells you that this question is polemical by nature, suggesting that God is not just, then tell him/her that we will address this question shortly.

A most interesting and much-repeated tradition is the one that appears as an opening of an obviously popular proem, which has survived in multiple versions.⁴⁴ I shall quote its beginning here as it appears in MS Munich of *Leviticus Rabbah*, as this is most likely its first documentation.⁴⁵

"That which is now, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what is pursued" (Eccl 3:15).⁴⁶ R. Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah. Rabbi Judah said: *If a man would tell you* that had the first man not eaten from that tree he would be alive and well forever, tell him this is "that which is now": Elijah is alive and well forever. "That which is to be, already is": R. Nehemiah: *If a man would tell you*, how is it possible that in the beginning the whole world was water upon water! tell him "[it] already is," as Okeanos is full of water. Shall he say, will the Holy One, blessed be he, dry it? Say to him "it has already happened"—"the Israelites walked through the sea on dry land" (Ex 15:19). "That which is to be, already is"—shall you say, is it possible that the Holy One, blessed be he, will resurrect the dead? Tell him this: "[it] already is," he has already resurrected the dead by the hands of Elijah and Elisha, and Ezekiel in the valley of Dura.⁴⁷

This is the first part of a very long proem which connects Eccl 3:15, "That which is now, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what is pursued," and Lev 22:27: "When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as

⁴³ This stance is also taken in a conversation between Matrona and Rabbi Jose repeated in *Gen. Rab.* 68:4 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 771); *Lev. Rab.* 8:1 (Margulies edition, 164–68); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 2:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 18–20).

⁴⁴ In *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152); *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210–12); *Tanḥ.* Emor 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91).

⁴⁵ Here, I have not chosen the version that Margulies reconstructed from many manuscripts, but rather that of MS Munich. On the problems presented by textual criticism, see Margulies's comments on pages 727–28 of his edition.

⁴⁶ Hirshman edition, 210–12.

⁴⁷ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31).

the LORD’s offering by fire.” The whole proem functions as consolation to a nation which is based on interpreting the biblical lexeme *nirdaf* (נִרְדַּף) in the Ecclesiastes verse as “persecuted” rather than “chased” and as the sacrificial herbivores offered to God in the Leviticus verse. The first part of the proem is dedicated to fostering hopes for the future based on God’s actions in the past. The Ecclesiastes verse is foremost read as a promise: God will stand by his people and redeem them. The proem follows a chronological order, from creation to salvation, and links biblical stories to the “rabbinic present” in which, as it is said, “Israel are pursued by the nations of the world” in the hope that “God will seek the pursued.”

The proem is a long list of examples of situations that seem irreversible or catastrophic, but turn out to be merely temporary phases. This midrashic tradition (in its five variations⁴⁸) is the only instance where this verse from Ecclesiastes is ever quoted in rabbinic literature.⁴⁹

Marmorstein read the opening of the proem as a polemic answering an imagined “gnostic” allegation against the Bible, the nature of which is not entirely clear from his writings. We can assume that he saw it as a problem as it might point to inconsistencies in the Bible, or as reflecting inconsistencies within the nature of God Himself; that is, suggesting that he is either bad, or—perhaps even worse—that he is but the demiurge who created the earth for the higher God.

The four questions the speaker asks could be split into two dyads, one concerning life and death, the other concerning creation and the eschaton. We can read the first question of the first dyad as making two conflicting claims. The first is that if all men are mortal now but Adam was initially immortal, then “what is now” and “what has been” is not one and Ecclesiastes was wrong. The way the midrash refutes the claim is ironically not by mentioning the death of Adam and his mortality, but the possibility of immortality after Adam. The idea that Adam was created im-

⁴⁸ In *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152); *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210–12); *Tanḥ. Emor* 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91).

⁴⁹ This verse was in fact highly unpopular even among the contemporary Christians and other “heretics.” It is translated but not elaborated on in the Peshitta; it is not referenced by any of the ante-Nicene Fathers, and is mentioned only thrice afterwards, in traditions that did not gain much popularity: Peter Chrysologus, Evagrius Ponticus, and Jerome. Chrysologus, an influential Jerusalemite theologian, reads the verse about all the persecuted who have insight into the knowledge of created things in his sermon 70 (see Peter Chrysologus, *Selected Sermons*, in *Saint Peter Chrysologus, Selected Sermons, and Saint Valerian, Homilies*, trans. George E. Ganss, paperback ed. [Washington: Catholic University Press, 2004], 119–23), while Evagrius Ponticus reads “have already been” as referring to John the Baptist still in his mother’s womb, while no Christological reading is to be found (see Evagrius Ponticus, *Scholia on Ecclesiastes* 3.15, in *Evagrius Ponticus*, ed. and trans. Augustine Casiday [London and New York: Routledge, 2006], 135–36). Jerome, in his *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, reads the second part of the verse as referring to martyrs, whom God will avenge (see Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi, opera omnia*, vol. 23 of *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. Jacques Paul Migne [Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1845], 1040B).

mortal is not only manifested in Genesis, but also restated and reasserted in midrash, especially regarding Eve's part in bringing death to the world.⁵⁰ There is no heresy in claiming that Adam was initially immortal, and I cannot see why a tradition that is so well attested within rabbinic circles should be seen as some kind of Marcionite challenge to them.⁵¹ The challenge, then, is in the difference between every man and the first man: Is there indeed a fundamental difference between Adam and every man born of him? Was Adam unique, a case of what has been and now is not? In order to refute the argument that the ways of the world have changed, the text is willing to go to an extreme. R. Judah's answer focuses on making Adam's death (and perhaps accordingly everyone's death) a result of his personal sins and avoidable, inasmuch as sin is avoidable. A man without sin may live forever, and we have Elijah to prove it.

Theologically, the argument about the possibility of immortality for every person without sin may be far more dangerous to the rabbis than yet another contradiction in the Bible.⁵² It may validate Jesus as a sinless man, one who transcended the fate of Adam and did not die. It may also call for finding fault in each and every patriarch and prophet in the Bible. Moreover, Elijah has a part in the messianic future, as we can find in Mal 3:23–24,⁵³ a fact which may support a reading of Malachi 3 as referring to Jesus, a reading with which Marcion himself surprisingly agreed. The final refutation of the function of this question as Marcionite polemic lies exactly in Marcion's view of Malachi 3 as one of only three places in the Old Testament that refers to Jesus.⁵⁴ In other words, claiming that it is Marcionite propaganda in disguise is more likely to describe the answer given than the question asked by the "unidentified speaker."

In any case, while making Jesus's life story plausible, R. Judah insists that it was not unique. The second part of the dyad again finds a very close alliance between rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity. The resurrection of the dead stood at the heart of a well-known inner-Jewish dispute from the Second Temple period,⁵⁵ as well as at the heart of a dispute with the pagan world and between

⁵⁰ See, for example, *Gen. Rab.* 17:7 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 158); *y. Šabb.* 2:6 (20a); *'Abot. R. Nat.* B 9 (Schechter edition, 24–25); *Tanḥ.* Noah 1 (Buber edition, Gen 27–28). I thank Shoshana Cohen for helping me to make this connection.

⁵¹ An argument even Marmorstein himself struggled to make: see Marmorstein, *Studies in Jewish Theology*, 58.

⁵² The Babylonian Talmud even speaks of contradictions within Ecclesiastes itself (*b. Šabb.* 30b).

⁵³ 5:4 in NRSV.

⁵⁴ Edwin Cyril Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), 117–18.

⁵⁵ This is described, for example, by Flavius Josephus in *Ant.* 18.1; *J.W.* 2.8. On the importance of the doctrine of resurrection, see also Albert L. Baumgarten, "Josephus and the Jewish Sects," in *A Companion to Josephus*, ed. Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 261–72 (and see Cana Werman's contribution to this volume).

different followers of Jesus.⁵⁶ While Marcion’s followers rejected it, it was essential to orthodox Christianity and even Arian Christianity, as Epiphanius shows.⁵⁷ As polemical questions, in other words, these put rabbinic Jews and the majority of Christians on the same side of the divide, a risk which I believe was greater in the Christian empire where the rabbis producing the texts lived than in the Marcionite sect. As far as polemics go, this is hardly a strong strategy.

The questions regarding water do not, to my knowledge, threaten rabbinic theology or specifically support the Marcionite theology of creation in any way. The question of where all the water that once covered the earth went after Gen 1:9 troubled some rabbis regardless of any foreign intervention. The answer—namely, into the (river) Okeanos⁵⁸—is given in *Gen. Rab.* 5:1 and again in *Lev. Rab.* 10:9, where the gathering of the water is mentioned as an example of how an apparently small vessel can hold a great amount. But why should God create too much water to begin with? Is He not omniscient? The answer to this is also given in *Gen. Rab.* 5:1, as there the water is kept as a sort of whip, always ready to flood the earth in case humankind turns evil. Since not even Marcion doubted the power of the creator God to form the world as He pleases, I cannot see why this would be the best representation of his “heresy.”⁵⁹ We can read R. Naḥman’s main question as being about chaos and order and God’s ability to separate the two. When R. Naḥman affirms it, it is more of a refutation of pagan beliefs about the weak defeated God of Israel than of any heretical claim. Everything God wills, including the redemption of Israel, is possible, a fact that we learn from the (biblical) past. The affirmation of the omnipotence of God is so common in rabbinic literature⁶⁰ that I find it difficult to believe that in this instance alone it is an argument made against gnostic sects.

So how are we to understand these questions? I believe that they are indeed there to affirm some basic rabbinic theological conventions: God’s omniscience,

56 See recently Yifat Monnickendam, “I Bring Death and Give Life, I Wound and Heal” (Deut. 32:39): Two Versions of the Polemic on the Resurrection of the Dead,” *Henoah* 35 (2013): 90–118, and the literature mentioned there on the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and closely related “others” regarding the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

57 Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion, Book I (Sects 1–46)*, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 228, 295, 297.

58 On its importance and mythical function in Greek culture, see James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20–25; Arent Jan Wensinck, *The Ocean in the Literature of the Western Semites* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1918), and see also Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 70.

59 Marcion, however, would argue that the creator god is not God; see Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of an Alien God* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990), 13.

60 Marmorstein himself highlights this as essential in Jewish theology in *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 1, 160–79.

omnipotence, and ongoing commitment to Israel. While those questions may have been raised by Others, they could have been, and indeed were, raised by good rabbinic Jews, or at least by what Boyarin calls “synagogue Jews” as opposed to “study house Jews.”⁶¹ The amount of dogmatic freedom embedded in the answers, the way they ignore theological hazards which might be created by them, and the fact that the questions indeed do not correspond to any one specific known heresy, added to the overall structure and meaning of the proem, lead me to believe that the questions are not polemical by nature. This does not entail that they do not engage with defining rabbinic dogma, or that they do not have “others” in mind, but more likely that these texts are there to show that every question which may be brought in from the outside had already been solved in an inner discussion. The fifth-century texts, that is, if they take any interest at all in an alleged second-century interreligious dispute, do so as part of their own inner-religious legacy, not as part of a continuous engagement with a prominent threat.

This line of thought can be further stretched into the other questions in the group about the whereabouts of God and the date of the eschaton. Those are also inner-rabbinic questions, which are dealt with in many other places. The question which I find most telling is the one that asks about the whereabouts of God in *y. Ta’an.* 1:1 (3a), which has: “Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said: *If a man would tell you, where is your God? Tell him, in the big city of Rome. Why? One is calling to me from Seir (Isa 21:11).*” This is a very playful answer, and it is based on an assumption that the omnipresence of God is already established. It plays with the conventions of what polemic questions may look like or imply. At first glance, it may appear as if R. Joshua is admitting defeat: the Romans, who captured Jerusalem, presumably also captured its local god. This answer is more radical than the question, even if the epistemology is quite ordinary (learning from a verse). The exiled here is not the Shekhinah, but God Himself, and He is held captive in Rome. This may sound more like a Roman narrative than a rabbinic one, until the verse from Isaiah is quoted and the pun becomes clear. Since “Seir” is identified with Rome and “Dumah” is interpreted to mean Rome a little earlier on the page⁶² in the Talmud, Rome is the new dwelling place of God. But if we read the whole chapter in Isaiah, especially the parts of it not quoted here, the hidden transcript will become clear and the members of the rabbinic inner circle may burst out laughing, as intended by the midrash. If God is indeed in Rome, then redemption is near, as too is the fall of Rome. Rome is just another kingdom to be overthrown, and God’s presence there is the starting point of redemption. This question is a masterful play between public and hidden transcripts.⁶³ While on the public level, it pleases an imagined Roman,

⁶¹ Boyarin, “Two Powers,” 335.

⁶² Based on the graphic similarity between דומה and רומא.

⁶³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

on the hidden level, it completely usurps Rome. Here, just like in the four questions above, it appears that what the members of the community believe is far more important than what the “Others” might think. Let the Romans believe what they please, R. Joshua says; we know what they do not.

A pattern is starting to emerge. While all questions are answered by citing proof texts, the supposed refutations of hostile claims turn out to be more threatening theologically than the questions asked. The flexibility about certain “truths” that are expressed in the answers, as well as their sometimes radical (unintended?) consequences imply, I believe, that the answer given and those who quote them were not threatened by the questions themselves, but rather used them in order to reaffirm and creatively explore their own conventions.

1.3 Groups 3 and 4: Identified Speakers and Their Fate

Groups 3 and 4, which contain the sayings of identified speakers, are perhaps the only groups to exhibit a clear epistemology. Unfortunately, this epistemology is hardly revolutionary, and it can be boiled down to *ad hominem* arguments. The claims brought forth by members of the inner rabbinic circle are accepted. Such is the opinion of Rabbi ‘Aqiba (regarding bringing a ram as an offering in *t. Menah.* 13:1 and the age from which a girl cannot refuse marriage and must get a proper divorce bill in *t. Nid.* 6:4 and *b. Nid.* 52b). The same holds true for the “elders” whose opinion is accepted in *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 1:3, *b. Meg.* 31b, *b. Ned.* 40a, and a *beit din* in *Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy* 17:10. Arguments coming from the mouths of members of the extended rabbinic circle or borderline characters are rejected (a prophet in *b. Sanh.* 80a and *y. Hor.* 1:3 [5b]; children in *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 1:3, *b. Meg.* 31b., and *b. Ned.* 40a; *yetzer hara’* in *b. Hag.* 16a). In this context, it is interesting to note that none of the speakers are identified as *not* being members of rabbinic society. In fact, tannaitic literature has a different formula for introducing hypothetical heretical or false arguments from the mouths of people who are directly marked as strangers (*‘ummot ha-‘olam*) or who are wrong: “So that they would not say” (שלא יתכן פתחון פה). This is the formula that introduces the familiar discussion of the questions of the two powers in heaven, the names of God, the appearance of “other gods” in the Bible, and so on.⁶⁴ To put it differently, tannaitic literature uses both

⁶⁴ *Mek. of Rabbi Ishmael*, Shira 4 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, 129–30); *BaHodesh* 5–6 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, 219–21, 223); *Mek. of Rabbi Shimeon*, Beshalah 15:3 (Epstein and Melamed edition, 81); *Sifra Leviticus* Vayikra D’nedava 2:5 *Sifre Num.* Korah, 119 (Kahana, Appendix 1, ל"ב); Pinhas 137, 143 (Kahana edition, appendix, ט"ט, ט"ד); *Sifre Deut.* ‘Ekev 42 (Finkelstein edition, 89); 43 (Finkelstein edition, 96–97); Ha’azinu 308 (Finkelstein edition, 347), *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* (Mekhilta) 12:28; 31:4; 31:6 (Hoffmann edition, 60, 61, 62); *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* 5:7; 11:14; 19:1 (Hoffmann edition, 20, 35, 113). In the amoraic period, this formula is not as dominant: it appears twice in *Lev. Rab.* (20:8; 21:10, Margulies edition, 462, 490), twice in *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* (12:20; 26:8;

“if a man would tell you” and “so that they would not say” to introduce arguments made by (collectively) identified rather than unidentified speakers. While the latter are mostly non-Jews, the former are always members of the rabbinic group.

In the amoraic period, things are not quite as clear, as “so that they may not say” (שלא ליתן פתחון פה) loses popularity and “if a man would tell you” grows in popularity. In classical amoraic midrash, the “so that they may not say” group occasionally refers to heretics, while at other times it refers to Satan or to all the inhabitants of this world; that is, the division of labour between the two discursive markers ceases to exist.

1.4 The Key: Group 5

The last group, group 5, consists of only three examples: *b. Meg.* 6a–6b and *Lam. Rab.* 2:13. However, these may hold the key to understanding the rhetorical function of all the groups. *Lam. Rab.* turns on its head the contextual meaning of one of the gravest verses in the Bible (*Lam* 2:8): “Her (Jerusalem’s) gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; there is no Torah; and her prophets find no vision from the Lord.” From this verse, the sages learn the following:

“Her king and princes are among the nations there is no Torah” (*Lam* 2:8). *If a man would tell you* there is *wisdom* among the nations, believe him, as it is written, “I will destroy the wise men from Edom, and understanding from the mountains of Esau” (*Obad* 1:8) [There is] Torah among the nations—do not believe him, as it is written, “Her king and princes are[,] among the nations there is no Torah,” her prophets are false prophets, and even if these prophets are true prophets, “they find no vision from the Lord” (*Lam* 2:8).⁶⁵

The frightful words about Jerusalem and her people are turned against the nations by changing the location of an imagined comma. Instead of reading “her king and princes are among the nations, there is no Torah,” one should read “her king and princes are, among the nations there is no Torah.” It is only the nations who do not have Torah, not *us*, and prophecy is lost to all. From this, we are to learn that the nations, here obviously non-Jews, cannot have Torah; that is, they cannot be *verus Israel*. But let us go back to the nature of the anonymous speaker’s arguments.

The *ad hominem* argument that decided the fate of the utterances in groups 3 and 4 is no longer relevant, as the same speaker makes both an argument which is accepted (there is wisdom among the nations) and one which is rejected (there is Torah among the nations). The proof text for the acceptance of the first argument

Mandelbaum edition, 218, 394), and twice in *Gen. Rab.* (1:10; 8:8; Theodor and Albeck edition, 61,91).

⁶⁵ *Lam. Rab.* 2:13.

is far more straightforward and convincing than that for the refutation of the second argument.

B. *Megillah* gives us two further examples in which the unidentified speakers who make claims are clearly a rhetorical tool rather than actual people. The first, in *b. Meg.* 6a, draws special attention to questions of epistemology:

Caesarea and Jerusalem. *If a man would tell you* that both are destroyed, do not believe him; if he says that both are flourishing, do not believe him; if he says that Caesarea is wasted and Jerusalem is flourishing, or that Jerusalem is wasted and Caesarea is flourishing, you may believe him, as it says, “I shall be replenished, now that it is wasted” (Ezek 26:2). If this one is replenished, that one is wasted, and if that one is replenished, this one is wasted.

Hypothetically, we could have learned from this, again, that an utterance may be deemed true or false on the basis of its agreement with scripture. However, the verse may have only an ornamental value, as in fact the verse which is the basis of this midrash unfortunately does not refer to Caesarea and Jerusalem, but to Jerusalem and Tyre. The once mortal enemy becomes nothing but a metaphor, and the powers of history reveal the ideological bias in the interpretation of the verse. The rabbis who want to claim that the animosity between Caesarea and Jerusalem is eternal, not political or circumstantial, ironically point to the negation of such assumptions made in the biblical past. Tyre is no threat in their days.

Tractate *Megillah* 6b in the Babylonian Talmud gives us an even more interesting unidentified hypothetical speaker, or rather, even less stable grounds for refuting him:

R. Isaac also said: If a man says to you, I have laboured and not found, do not believe him. If he says, I have not laboured but still have found, do not believe him. If he says, I have laboured and found, you may believe him. This is true in respect of words of Torah, but in respect of business, all depends on the assistance of heaven. And even for words of Torah this is true only of penetrating to the meaning, but for remembering what one has learnt, all depends on the assistance of heaven.

R. Isaac introduces the principles known in contemporary culture as *no pain no gain* as the basis for the objection to a man who says the opposite. However, the *sugya* qualifies R. Isaac’s total rejection of the man’s arguments and slowly begins to agree with his argument in some cases. The *sugya* is willing to compromise with R. Isaac’s initial position on issues that do not immediately reflect on the professional guild of the rabbis. Merchants may be fortunate, some people have a better memory than others, but the unique skills the rabbis hold are not divine gifts, but the result of human effort. Why is this so? We are not told. We just have to accept it.

The axiomatic status of the claims here is paralleled by the decisive tone used in the two other members of this group. We are to accept that there is no Torah among the nations and that the opposition between Rome and Jerusalem is eternal, even if the proof texts are highly manipulated and without any proof in the case of understanding the meaning of Torah without years of study. In this group, we draw

closer and closer to a rabbinic “credo” of transcendental truths that cannot be denied: Rome is an eternal enemy, Gentiles (whether Christians or others) cannot have a true knowledge of Torah, and nor do others who study it outside the rabbinic schools or by way of revelation. Since the unidentified speakers in all instances here give one argument which is accepted and one which is rejected, it is difficult to interpret their function as threatening rabbinic orthodoxy. Rather, they are used in order to allow a manifestation of those things which should be considered pillars of rabbinic faith. To put it differently, the fifth group might point us to the function of the “speakers” not as markers of boundaries between the rabbis and their Others, but as enablers of the manifestation of rabbinic dogma. Therefore, it is not the quality of the arguments nor the identity of the people expressing them that is important here. The claimants are but rhetorical instruments, used to emphasise the power and authority of rabbinic teaching and to transform simple utterances into dogmatic statements.

Going back to the challenge posed by Marmorstein, we must ask ourselves again, after closely reading many of the sources which open with the formula “if a man would tell you,” whether those “who would tell you” indeed have only a polemical function, intended to overcome Marcionites, and what relationship between knowledge and power is manifested in them. A taxonomy of all the occurrences of the formula “if a man would tell you” may give us the answer.

2 General Taxonomy

The earlier Palestinian texts group (not including *Tanḥuma*, *Deut. Rab.*, *’Abot. R. Nat.* (B), and the Bavli)⁶⁶ have fifty-seven members.⁶⁷ Of these, the biggest group (G1) is the group of unidentified speakers who make an argument which is rejected (about 56 %, 32/57). The second-largest group, about 26 % (G2), includes the questions from unidentified speakers (15/57). The third-largest group (12.5 %) includes the cases in which an identified person, generally belonging to the rabbinic circle, makes a claim which is accepted (seven, of which four are tannaitic sources, two-thirds of the tannaitic texts studied here). The fourth group (G4) consists of the identified “tellers” whose claims are rejected (2/57, about 3.5 %, one of which is tannaitic). The fifth group (G5) is made up of unidentified speakers who argue for something whose argument is accepted (1/57, about 1.7 %).

In classical rabbinic literature, then, between 14 % and 49 % of the arguments made by such hypothetical speakers are accepted (G3 + G5 + parts of G2). This alone

⁶⁶ The Babylonian sources do not seem to know any of the Palestinian amoraic traditions, nor are they familiar with the *Tanḥuma*, *’Abot R. Nat.*, or *Deut. Rab.*

⁶⁷ For the full statistical distribution, see the table at the end of this section.

sets them apart from the groups of text Marmorstein considered close or identical in (polemic) function.

In the later midrash sources (*Tanḥuma, Deuteronomy Rabbah*),⁶⁸ the questions group is the largest (G2, 40 %, 11/27), followed by the anonymous claims (G1, 27 %, 7/27), G4 (identified speakers with rejected claims; 27 %, 7/27), and G5 (anonymous accepted claims; 4 %, 2/27). Group 3, identified claims which are accepted, is absent. This is significant, as it seems that the Tanḥuma group understood the marker “if a man would tell you” as more polemical: all the claims made by the people “who would tell you” are rejected.

In the Bavli and *’Abot de Rabbi Natan*, G3 is the biggest group (33.3 %, 5/15). G4 comes second with four (27 %), G1 is third with three (20 %), G5 has two (13.3 %), and G1 comes last with one (6 %). To put it differently, almost half the claims are accepted, and most of them (60 %) are identified, a rather different distribution from that found in both the early and late strictly Palestinian groups.

The Babylonian Talmud seems to hold a unique and specific link to the tannaitic group, and it differs from the Palestinian amoraic sources in that much like in the tannaitic group, the people “who would tell you” never ask questions. Moreover, the identity of the speaker seems to be an influential factor on the acceptance or rejection of their claims. Some known rabbis’ opinions are accepted (*b. Nid. 2b*; see *t. Nid. 6:6*); others, identified as “elders” or “youngsters” (*b. Meg. 31b*; *b. Ned. 40a*), are accepted or rejected *ad hominem*.

	Tanaitic	PT	Gen R	LevR	PsRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanḥ.	DeuR	Total
Sum	6	19	9	5	7	2	3	6	57	14	1	20	7	99
G1	1	15	7	1	3	2	2	1	32	3		6	1	42
G2		1	1	4	4			5	15	1		7	4	27
G3	4	2	1						7	4	1			12
G4	1	1							2	4		7		13
G5							1		1	2			2	5

⁶⁸ I have separated the Tanḥuma group from the classical midrash sources, for reasons I have explained in an earlier note. See also Marc Bregman, “Early Sources and Traditions in the Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu Midrashim” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 60 (1991): 269–74; Bregman, *The Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu Literature*. Jacob Elbaum, “On the Character of the Late Midrashic Literature” [Hebrew], *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, division C: *Jewish Thought and Literature* (1986): 57–62; Ofra Meir, “The Hermeneutic Story in Early and Late Midrash” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 86 (1980): 146–66; Gila Vachman, “On the Uniqueness of the Redaction in ‘Midrash Ḥadash’ on the Torah” [Hebrew], *Iggud* 1 (2008): 253–63.

2.1 Ad Hominem? Exploring the Identity of the Speakers Who Ask Questions or Make Claims

For thirty-seven of the fifty-seven speakers who make claims or ask questions in the earlier sources, there is no reason to assume they do not belong to the rabbinic circle.⁶⁹ Another two are marginal characters in it (children, an angel),⁷⁰ seventeen are borderline characters, which should also be counted as part of the in-group,⁷¹ and only one is clearly a non-rabbinic speaker. This is the person in *y. Ta'an. 1:1 (3a)* who asks: “Where is your God?”

In the later midrash group, something new and surprising happens. A fifth (6/27) of the speakers are marked as foreign and hostile to the rabbis;⁷² for about 40% (12/27), there is no reason to assume they are not part of the inner rabbinic circle,⁷³ and another third (9/27) are speakers whose identity as rabbinic Jews needs further examination (those who pose questions).⁷⁴ In the Babylonian Talmud group,⁷⁵ two thirds (10/15) are clearly rabbinic and a third (5) belong to an extended rabbinic circle (child, prophet, and the evil inclination winning each soul).⁷⁶

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanh	DeuR	Toyal
Sum	6	19	9	5	7	2	3	6	57	14	1	20	7	99
In-group	5	14	8	1	3		3	1	37	9	1	8	3	58

69 *m. Ed.* 1:6; *t. Menaḥ.* 13:2; *t. Nid.* 6:4; *Midrash Tannaim Deut.* 17:10 (Hoffmann edition, 103); *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3; *y. Ber.* 4:3 (33b) (four times); *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:1 (10a); *y. Sanh.* 10:1 (50b), *y. Šeb.* 1:1 (4a) (twice); *y. Ta'an.* 2:2 (9a–9b) (four times); *y. Ter.* 11:2 (2b), *y. Hor.* 1:1 (2b); *Gen. Rab.* 12:1; 17:6; 44:19; 50:10; 55:15; 69:4; 94:9 (twice) (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157, 441–42, 527, 585, 919, 1181); *Lev. Rab.* 23:2 (Margulies edition, 528); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 3:5; 4:2; 5:11 (Mandelbaum edition, 43, 59, 100), *Eccl. Rab.* 2:11 (Hirshman edition, 140).

70 *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:9; *Gen. Rab.* 78:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 919).

71 These include two people who make arguments, in *y. Ta'an.* 2:1 (9a) and *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b). The rest are people asking questions, whose identity is not clear. They could be members of the rabbinic circle, or “heretics.”

72 *Tanḥ.* B'haalotkha 16 (Buber edition, Num 52); Beshalach 24 (Buber edition, Ex 67); Emor 3 (Buber edition, Lev 81); Nasa 30 (Buber edition, Num 41); *Tanḥ.* Ki Tisa (Warsaw edition, Ex 244); Shoftim 12 (Warsaw edition, Deu 225).

73 *Tanḥ.* Noah 17 (Buber edition, Gen 44); Emor 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91) (thrice); Hukot 9 (Num 104); Ki Teze 9 (Buber edition, Deut 9); Vayera 1 (Warsaw edition, Gen 46); Ha'azinu 3 (Warsaw edition, Num 245); Yelamdenu according to the citation in Talmud Torah Bereshit Genesis 131 (Mann, *The Bible as Read*, 317); *Deut. Rab.* Nitzavim (Liebermann edition, 117, three times).

74 *Tanḥ.* Nasa 30 (Buber edition, Num 41); Nasa 31 (Buber edition, Num 41–42, four times); *Deut. Rab.* 'Ekev (Liebermann edition, 74, four times).

75 Supported by the single example from *'Abot R. Natan* B 9 (Schechter edition, 24–25).

76 *b. Ḥag.* 16a; *b. Sanh.* 90a (twice); *b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 40a.

(continued)

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanh	DeuR	Toyal
Ext. In-group	1		1						2	5		1		8
Border-line		4		4	4			5	17			5	4	26
Out-group		1							1			6		6

2.2 Rejection or Acceptance of an Argument

A quick look at the table here would allow us to see that most of what the “men who would tell you” would tell you will be rejected, in either earlier or later sources (58/99). A little over a third would still be accepted (36/99). In other words, while it is likely that an utterance or question from a “man who would tell you” would be rejected, there is still a very good chance that it would not. As this data does not discriminate between different types of speakers, either by the type of utterance they produce (argument or question) or by their identification, further analysis according to group is necessary (and will appear after the table).

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanh	DeuR
Confirmed	4	2	2	4	4		1	4	21	5	1	7	2
Rejected	2	14	7	1	3	2	2	1	32	8		13	5
Neither		3						1	4	1			

The majority of the arguments made by the hypothetical speakers (G1) in the early group are rejected, while questions (G2) are usually answered in the affirmative. Groups 1 and 4 (rejected argument) make up 80 % (34/42) of the cases in the arguing groups. The accepted arguments are a small minority which makes up the remaining 20 % (8). In the later Palestinian group, out of the sixteen arguments (i.e., the sum of G1+G4), fourteen are rejected (87 %). In the Babylonian Talmud, while 50 % (7/14) of the arguments are rejected, another 50 %, an unprecedented number, is accepted.

The questions (G2), however, show a different pattern. All of them behave in the same way. If we accept them as real questions, then the arguments applied in them are always reaffirmed. If we think of them as ironic or polemical, they are always rejected.

2.3 The Empirical Status of the Claims

In the earlier sources, it is easy to see that two groups stand out. Empirically correct arguments are the biggest group (24), followed by the empirically uncertain (23). Only three out of fifty-seven arguments or implied arguments can be interpreted as empirically invalid. This indicates, above all else, that it is not the content of the claims which functions as the deciding factor of their acceptance. The relationship to truth here is thus undermined, or the definition of truth itself found inadequate. In the latter group, we see a clear similarity between the Palestinian and Babylonian sources. The dominant category of appearances of “if a man would tell you” has little or no relationship to empirical knowledge (19/42). Such is the case, for example, in *b. ‘Abod. Zar. 9b*, where one is instructed not to buy a field for the price of a dinar (thus participating in the game of guessing when the eschaton is coming). This signifies a shift in the function of our discursive marker.

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son- nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tan	DeuR
Empirically right		11	6	1	2	2	2		24	2		3	2
Empirically wrong	1	1	1						3	2			
Empirically irrelevant	2	3	1					1	7	9	1	9	
Empirically uncertain	3	4	1	4	5		1	5	23			8	5

It is specifically important to notice that within G1, the rejected anonymous arguments, almost half (21/42) of the claims brought forth by the hypothetical speakers are empirically correct or true.⁷⁷ By “true,” I mean something which is “empirically” or exegetically confirmed; that is, something which indeed exists in the world or in the biblical text (for example, there are indeed seventy-five letters in the quoted verse, not seventy-two).⁷⁸ Fourteen cannot be decided;⁷⁹ for four, the question is

⁷⁷ *y. Ber. 4:3* (32b) (four times); *y. Ta’an. 2:2* (9a–b); *y. Ter. 11:2* (56a); *Gen. Rab. 17:6* (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157); *Gen. Rab. 69:4* (twice, Theodor and Albeck edition, 793); *Gen. Rab. 44:19* (Theodor and Albeck edition, 441–42), *Lev. Rab. 23:2* (Margulies edition, 528); *Pesiq. Rab Kah. 4:2*; 5:11 (Mandelbaum edition, 59, 100); *Song. Rab. 114*; *Song. Rab. 2:2*; *Lam. Rab. 4:1* (twice).

⁷⁸ *Gen. Rab. 50:10* (Theodor and Albeck edition, 527).

⁷⁹ *m. Ed. 1:6*; *t. Menah. 13:1*; *t. Nid. 6:4*; *y. Mo’ed Qat. 3:1* (10a); *y. Sanh. 10:1* (50b); *y. Šeb. 1:1* (4a) (twice); *y. Ta’an. 2:1* (9a) (three times); *Pesiq. Rab Kah. 3:5* (Mandelbaum edition, 43); *Lam. Rab. 2:13* (twice); *Eccl. Rab. 2:11* (Hirshman edition, 140).

irrelevant,⁸⁰ and only three are clearly wrong: the members of the court who state that left is right and should be listened to anyhow and the man who argues that Venus and the first lights of dawn appear at the same time in the morning sky.⁸¹

The question group (G2) once again follows a different pattern. Two are irrelevant to any “right or wrong judgment” (for example, the question asking about the date of redemption in *Eccl. Rab.* 12:1:10), and for the remaining twelve, deciding if the claims are right or wrong is a doctrinal rather than an empirical question (for example, whether there has ever been a man who was free of sin).

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tan	DeuR
Empirically uncertain	3	7	1	4	1+4		1	1+3	25				
Confirmed	4	1	1	5	4		1	5		6	1	8	
Rejected	1	10	7		3	2	2			7	1	10	
Other		1											

3 Conclusion: Truth, Epistemology, and Doubt

Looking closer at the group of speakers who ask or tell something, who express doubt about a given or speculated assumption, gives us a glimpse into rabbinic epistemology and its somewhat flexible nature. The expression of doubt from hypothetical people who make claims or ask questions focuses our attention on the arbitrariness or ideological bias of the claims made against them. At times, this focus leads to a change of heart in the collocutor. At others, it does not. This very difference forces us to accept that we cannot say anything certain about the relationship between positivism and truth in the group of texts studied here. On the one hand, in the cases where the doubt raised does lead to a change of heart, such as the case of the man arguing for the existence of nineteen benedictions in the ‘*amidah* before R. Huna, it may seem that positivism/objectivism is an adequate epistemology. However, it is in the cases where the observed reality or textual reality is rejected that we find that “seeing is not believing.” Otherwise acceptable means of argumentation may be rejected in favour of either the authority of the person making the claim, the “dogmatic” status of the claim made, or a different, more important claim that someone may wish to make. This is not the familiar rejection of the observed

⁸⁰ *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 1:9 (twice); *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b); *Gen. Rab.* 72:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 919).

⁸¹ *Midrash Tannaim Deut.* 17:1 (Hoffman edition, 103); *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b); *Gen. Rab.* 50:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 527).

world in favour of learning from verses as expressed, for example, by R. Yoḥanan in *b. B. Bat.* 75a, with parallels in *b. Sanh.* 100a, and *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 18:5 (Mandelbaum edition, 297–8), who kills his student who only believes his interpretation of a verse after seeing it manifest in reality,⁸² but at times, a rejection of a reading of a verse in light of “a greater argument” which needs to be made. This argument is at times expressed and at times left for us to understand by ourselves. These cases come close to threatening what may be labelled as rabbinic dogma, or rather they can be identified as attempts to dogmatise claims which have no epistemological superiority over others. To put it differently, what the hypothetical interlocutors are really asking is whether this is a final answer and also whether we favour one demonstrable truth over performative aesthetics; ultimately, they wonder whether we can know.

If we had to reconstruct rabbinic dogma from this genre, we would end up with a rather frightening list. The questions may give us more or less familiar themes: the dead will be resurrected, the world was created of water alone, the borders between the sea and dry land are not stable, a man cannot be a god, nor a son of God, and no one can tell when redemption will come; God rewards the righteous. However, they also give us rather unusual themes: God will dwell in Rome until the eschaton, a man can live without sin, and a man may live forever. If we add to this the questions from the later sources, we must also add the rather familiar list: God opens the wombs of barren women, God accepts those who repent, and God can save people from fire. However, we must also add the entirely unacceptable ones: David did not sin, Joshua did not fight on the Sabbath, Gideon did not sacrifice outside of Jerusalem, and Elijah did not sacrifice outside of Jerusalem. If we read the claims as having dogmatic implications, we may get an even stranger picture, including that right is indeed left, that nineteen is indeed eighteen, that counting is an unstable practice, that Satan and woman are internally bound together, and that Jerusalem and Caesarea cannot coexist.

However, we can learn that the mindset specific to rabbinic epistemology assumes that a dichotomy between true and false does indeed exist. In it, while false is always false, truth has many forms. In other words, while there may be more than one truth, not everything is true. It is also clear that there are mechanisms that allow one to distinguish a true argument from a false one; however, they are not always explicitly defined. With respect to the limitations in participating in the production of knowledge, rabbinic literature seems to be egalitarian in the sense that every person who uses the agreed-upon rules of knowledge production may add to the community’s body of knowledge. The quality of performing such an act of production must nevertheless be evaluated, and it may still be rejected.

⁸² See Dina Stein, “Believing Is Seeing: A Reading of *Baba Batra* 73a–75b” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999): 9–32 (especially 23–25).

This epistemological soup is created by the very same problem I presented at the start of this chapter: attempting to read rabbinic literature through philosophical terms that are foreign to it. If we accept the rabbinic truth-making procedure and relationship to truth as being different from that of philosophy, the smoke clears. The place where this group of texts takes its meaning is a place where truth exists—albeit a polymorphic rather than a philosophical logocentric truth—and where its performative, memorable value outweighs logic as a vehicle for reaching it. The “if a man would tell you” group, then, indeed signifies the existence of doubt. But this doubt is not necessarily in the minds of those Others who ask the questions or make the claims in the texts, but in the mind of the implied rabbinic narrator.

The fact that some of the answers to the questions asked are theologically dangerous, combined with the lack of epistemic stability in the group of those who make claims, leads me to believe that the function of the discursive marker “if a man would tell you” is somewhat homoeopathic: a small dose of doubt is used to eradicate even larger doubts. If rabbinic culture allows its members and its “extended family” to raise doubts about accepting the rabbis’ authority, in trusting them, paradoxically, it remains protected. The way this group of texts functions may be compared to the parables of Jesus as he himself defined them in Mathew 13:10–16: to reinforce the sense of belonging and favoured status of the members of the group.

One person may argue that he is God, another that he is without sin, some may say that nineteen is actually eighteen, or that God is in exile—all can be equally accepted or rejected based on the same lines of argument and the same modes of knowledge-production, as long as the people trust the rabbis, their leadership, their spiritual and interpretative authority. The only reason we are not to believe a speaker who is introduced by the words “if a man would tell you,” as we have learnt, is not because his claims may not be true, or because he is not a “good Jew.” It is simply because he falls under the discursive marker that tells the audience that even though the counter-argument may be bad, and even if the person who is asking is one of us, or not one of us, the important thing is that the one who answers the question must be believed, accepted, and followed, and all of this without a shadow of a doubt.

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