

STRUCTURE AND IDEOLOGY IN THE AHER NARRATIVE (bHag 15a and b)

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Introduction

The story of the apostasy and rehabilitation of Elisha ben Avuya (Aher) (bHag 15a-b and parallel in yHag 2:5, 77a) has been dealt with by many scholars. In the last few years, Alon Goshen-Gottstein has devoted an exhaustive monograph to this subject¹ and Jeffrey Rubenstein has spoken and written about it, most recently in an insightful chapter in *Talmudic Stories*.² More recently, Nurit Beeri published a monograph full of new perspectives on this subject.³ Their approaches, which combine literary-redactional and inner-rabbinic cultural considerations, have both broadened our understanding of the material and deepened it considerably.

Their work demonstrates the importance of analyzing the tale independently of its (post-Talmudic) reflections in Jewish mystical literature⁴ (*Sefer Hekhalot* =3 *Enoch*, *Hekhalot Zutarti* and *Merkavah*

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¹ *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: the Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and cf. "Four Entered Paradise Revisited", *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995), 69-133.

² *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), and cf. "Elisha ben Abuya: Torah and the Sinful Sage," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998), 141-122.

³ *יצא לתרבות רעה: אלישע בן אבוייה – אחר* (Tel Aviv: Miskal – Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books, 2007). Mention should also be made of Y. Liebes, *הטאו של אלישע: ארבעה* (Jerusalem: Academon, 1990), a rich treatment with serious methodological flaws (cf. Rubenstein 1998, 211-222). P. Schäfer's extensive comparison and analysis of the Toseftan, and Bavli Paradise texts contextualized within their respective documents in his *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) appeared too recently to be considered herein.

⁴ Locating Elisha's fall in the course of a heavenly vision or ascent as practiced or narrated in *merkavah* and *hekhalot* mysticism is problematic since there

rabbah).⁵ On the other hand, failure to assess the mystical elements properly has prevented rabbinic scholars from recognizing that the Babylonian Talmudic story encodes a phenomenology of esoteric mystical beliefs and practices as rehearsed by an extremely critical rabbinic polemicist who was developing a theme established in the *Tosefta* and possibly alluded to in just one obscure line in the *Yerushalmi* (see n. 25 below).

Consideration of the Bavli's narrative in its own terms leads me to the conclusion that some matters of form and content need to be rethought. For instance, Rubenstein suggests that the story was plotted in a chiasmic structural pattern.⁶ Bearing in mind the essential connection between structure and meaning in aggadic texts

seems to be no direct proof for such a Tannaitic practice (*hekhlot* texts, in which R. Akiva and R. Ishmael figure prominently, are pseudepigraphic) and those works had still not achieved final redaction when they were copied in Medieval Ashkenaz. This is discussed in Appendix A below. Schäfer 1999 acknowledges that the Bavli's opening scene is aware of *hekhlot* material, but does not find any such indications in the *Tosefta* or the *Yerushalmi*. It is important to state at the outset, however, that Talmudic period Palestine is a legitimate possibility as a point where not only was *hekhlot* activity and literature practiced (whether in theory or actuality is impossible to say) and composed, but where knowledge of such was sufficiently widespread – and considered normative to such a degree – as to be accepted into synagogue poetry of the pre-classical period (third or fourth – fourth or fifth century CE). Cf. M. Rand, "More on the *Seder Beriyot*," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16 (2009), 183-209 (cf. esp. pp. 189-196, including his summational remarks there, pp. 192 and 194).

⁵ Elisha's fall was briefly recounted in tHag 2.3, which tells of four who entered a *pardes*, and three of them ended badly. That text is brought in both yHag 2.1 (77b) and bHag 14b, as well as Song of Songs Rabbah A41-49, and each Talmud expanded on the material, especially the narrative of Elisha. The Bavli locates Elisha's fall in an unfortunate lapse that occurred while he was at the pinnacle of a mystical, heavenly ascent. That episode is recounted in *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur in Zusammenarbeit mit Margarete Schlüter und Hans Georg von Mutius*; hrsg. von Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), sect. 20 (*Sefer Hekhalot 3 Enoch* 16) and 671-673 (*Merkavah Rabbah*); it is wanting in the account in sect. 338-339 and 344-346 (*Hekhalot Zutarti*, and cf. the Genizah fragment of this work in *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, also edited by Schäfer, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984, 88, ll. 6-15).

⁶ 1999, 69. We differ in that Rubenstein divides unit 7 in two (See Appendix C). The failure of Beerli 2007 to discern the narrative or structural pattern of the Babylonian creation leads her to treat the units as a string of anecdotes, and to include in her analysis further units of bHag material, which may or may not deal with Elisha and, where it does, must be viewed as independent sources, other takes on Elisha.

demonstrated by Yonah Fraenkel,⁷ however, one can see that this narrative has been arranged in terms of a complex binary structure having the pattern (**a-b + c-d**) followed by (**a'-b' + c'-d'**): thematic parallels and contrasts are revealed much more clearly when seen in light of this structural organization. The bifurcated parallel structural pattern seems, therefore, to reflect the narrative intentions of the author/redactor.

A further stylistic refinement may be found in the comparison of literary and thematic structures of the first and final scenes. They mirror one another, albeit with certain crucial distinctions. Those differences reflect the overall contrasting and contrary meanings encoded more generally in the respective halves of the narrative into which these two scenes have been embedded.

Rubenstein argues further that the various component parts of a complex aggadic narrative cannot be fully comprehended piecemeal, for the aggadic storyteller purposefully creates the overall composite narrative as a context in which the meaning of its parts unfolds, and makes it possible for the various episodes to play off against one another.⁸ For this reason his analysis has achieved a comprehensiveness and integration, the lack of which mars other treatments of this narrative. I also follow such a policy in the holistic analysis of Talmudic *sugyot* and *aggadot*, and will apply this approach in the following analysis of the aggadic complex of which the Elisha story consists.

The following remarks will demonstrate two aspects of the structure, thus affording a reflection on the literary critical significance of structure for the meaning of aggadic narratives. Following the presentation of the overall literary structure, significant features of the meaning of this composition will be explicated. At that point, I will consider several aspects not addressed in previous scholarship, among them, the implications for its meaning of the audacious challenge launched by R. Meir and R. Yohanan that succeeded in reversing the decree of doom against Elisha; and the significance of the angels' problematic and paradoxical declaration that Elisha can neither be punished (because he was a Torah scholar) nor allowed into the world to come (because he was a sinner). I will

⁷ See the collection of his studies, סיפור האגדה: אחדות של תוכן וצורה (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001).

⁸ 1999, 34. The failure to do this handicaps the treatments of Liebes and Beeri, and makes it difficult to integrate Goshen-Gottstein's sprawling and atomizing analysis.

show that much of the meaning of this aggadic complex emerges from a narratologically contrived contrast between esoteric mystical and rabbinic modalities. At the end, I will speculate on when this aggadic complex was created.

In the second part, I will explicate functional aspects of the thematic structure of the design of the contrasting first and final scenes, and demonstrate the technique of encoding their opposing worldviews. This analysis will serve as a basis for the conclusion that it is misleading to package our text simply as “the tale of Aher”. This text is more than a story or a tale. It is an extended aggadic inquiry into the soteriological effects of the Torah of a sinning sage as seen in the lives of the paradigm sinning sage Elisha, his biological descendants, and his students and their students.

Part 1: The Overall Bifurcated Structure

The tale of Elisha ben Avuya is composed of a series of vignettes, seven episodes that could be described as “scenes”, plus one discursive, analytical (*sugya*-like) passage (no. 7, which despite its minimal narrative elements, could be taken as a scene in a dramatic sense, i.e., a dialectical discussion). They are all tightly interwoven, so that examining them from several different perspectives allows comparison and contrast that heightens the understanding of the composition.

For ease of reference, the texts of the Vilna edition⁹ and the Soncino translation are here supplied. They have been formatted to fit the structural paradigm presented immediately below.

⁹ Rubenstein 1999 bases his text on ms. London 400 (Harley 5508), 66-69 (transcription of original, 286-288) and provides significant variants, 102-104, while Goshen-Gottstein 2000 bases his on ms. Mun. 6, and provides a fuller listing of variants, 279-283 (see his discussion of manuscript families, 277-278). That version may exhibit signs of literary refinement (see the following paragraph and n. 66 below), but that is more an indication of a secondary, reworked source than an early version. The goal of identifying the most sophisticated literary manifestation of an aggadic narrative for purposes of analysis requires further methodological (re)consideration, because that procedure is essentially the opposite of locating the earliest linguistic and stylistic manifestation of a *sugya*.

In the present case, for example, the above two mss. exhibit clear signs of late (post-Talmudic, Medieval) redactional manipulation. Thus, ms. Mun. 6 repeats the encounter with the prostitute (from unit 2) between units 4 and 5; and the aforementioned London ms. reflects a similar – and more thorough – editorial move, completely eradicating that incident from 2 in the transfer to the end of 4. On the other hand, the fact that both those mss. leave the background

Tale of Aher Overall Parallel Structure**1. bHag 15a-b: Tale of Aher Overall Structure**

1→2 Or a→b		3→4 or c→d
5→6 or a'→b'		7→8 or c'→d'

segment that introduces scene **2**, viz., “[Thereupon] he said: Since I have been driven forth from yonder world, let me go forth and enjoy this world,” in place following scene **1**, without (also) moving it, shows that the transfer is secondary and post-redactional, having been executed by editors unaware of the intentional literary structural architecture of this composition, but who felt that the crescendo of rejections in unit **4** would lead Elisha to consort with a prostitute in an overt, final rejection of rabbinic mores. Indeed, neither Rubenstein nor Goshen-Gottstein accepted the change in the display and sequencing of their respective renditions, preferring to “halve” their cake and eat it, too.

2. bHag 15a-b Overall Parallel Structure (Soncino translation)

***Tannaitic source.* Aher mutilated the shoots. Of him Scripture says: Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt.**

A. Surface/external/deeds

1 / a. Elisha's fatal ascent experience	2 / b. Elisha with the prostitute: apostasy	3 / c. Meir continues to learn from Elisha	4 / d. Failed bibliomancy
<p>What does it refer to? – He saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel. Said he: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no emulation, and no back, and no weariness.</p>	<p>[Thereupon] he said: Since I have been driven forth from yonder world, let me go forth and enjoy this world. So Aher went forth into evil courses. He went forth, found a harlot and demanded her. She said to him: Art thou not Elisha b.</p>	<p>After his apostasy, Aher asked R. Meir [a question], saying to him: What is the meaning of the verse: God hath made even the one as well as the other? He replied: It means that for everything that God created He created [also] its counterpart. He created mountains, and created hills; He created seas, and created rivers. Said [Aher] to him: R. Akiba, thy master, did not explain it thus, but [as follows]: He created righteous, and created wicked; He created the Garden of Eden, and created Gehinnom. Every-one has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehinnom. The righteous man, being meritorious, takes his own portions and his fellow's portion in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, being guilty, takes</p>	<p>[R. Meir] prevailed upon him and took him, to a schoolhouse. [Aher] said to a child: Recite for me thy verse! [The child] answered: There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked. He then took him to another schoolhouse. [Aher] said to a child: Recite for me thy verse! He answered: For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before Me, saith the Lord God . He took him to yet another schoolhouse, and [Aher] said /fol. 15b/ to a child: Recite for me thy verse! He</p>

<p>Perhaps, – God forefend! – there are two divinities! [Thereupon] they led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes, saying to him: Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him? Permission was [then] given to him to strike out the merits of Aher. A Bath Kol went forth and said: Return, ye backsliding children – except Aher.</p>	<p>Abuyah? [But] when he tore a radish out of its bed on the Sabbath and gave it to her, she said: It is another [Aher].</p>	<p>his own portion and his fellow's portion in Gehinnom. R. Mesharsheya said: What is the Biblical proof for this? In the case of the righteous, it is written: Therefore in their land they shall possess double. In the case of the wicked it is written: And destroy them with double destruction. After his apostasy, Aher asked R. Meir: What is the meaning of the verse: Gold and glass cannot equal it; neither shall the exchange thereof be vessels of fine gold? He answered: These are the words of the Torah, which are hard to acquire like vessels of fine gold, but are easily destroyed like vessels of glass. Said [Aher] to him: R. Akiba, thy master, did not explain thus, but [as follows]: Just as vessels of gold and vessels of glass, though they be broken, have a remedy, even so a scholar, though he has sinned, has a remedy. [Thereupon, R. Meir] said to him: Then, thou, too, repent! He replied: I have already heard from behind the Veil: Return ye backsliding children – except Aher. Our</p>	<p>answered: And thou, that art spoiled, what doest thou, that thou clothest thyself with scarlet, that thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, that thou enlargest thine eyes with paint? In vain dost thou make thyself fair etc. He took him to yet another schoolhouse until he took him to thirteen schools: all of them quoted in similar vein. When he said to the last one, Recite for me thy verse, he answered: But unto the wicked God saith: 'What hast thou to do to declare My statutes etc. That child was a stutterer, so it sounded as though he answered: 'But to Elisha God saith.' Some say that [Aher] had a knife with him, and he cut him up and sent him to the thirteen schools: and some say that he said: Had I a knife in my hand I would have</p>
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B. Interior/Torah			
<p>5 / a'. Elisha purged and taken to heaven</p> <p>When Aher died, they said: Let him not be judged, nor let him enter the World to Come. Let him not be judged, because he engaged in the study of the Torah; nor let him enter the World</p>	<p>6 / b'. Elisha's daughter defends him</p> <p>Aher's daughter [once] came before Rabbi and said to him: O master, support me! He asked her: 'Whose daughter art thou?' She replied: I am Aher's daughter. Said he: Are any</p>	<p>7 / c'. Sages explain how Meir could continue to learn with Elisha</p> <p>But how did R. Meir learn Torah at the mouth of Aher? Behold Rabbah b. Bar Hana said that R. Yohanan said: What is the meaning of the verse, For the priest's lips should keep</p>	<p>8 / d'. God accepts reasoning of 7 / c, and with it Elisha's Torah via Meir</p> <p>Rabbah b. Shila [once] met Elijah. He said to him: What is the Holy One, blessed be He, doing? He answered: He utters traditions in the name of all the rabbis, but in the name</p>

<p>to Come, because he sinned. R. Meir said: It were better that he should be judged and that he should enter the World to Come. When I die I shall cause smoke to rise from his grave. When R. Meir died, smoke rose up from Aher's grave. R. Yohanan said: [What] a mighty deed to burn his master! There was one amongst us, and we cannot save him; if I were to take him by the hand, who would snatch him from me! [But] said he: When I die, I shall extinguish the smoke from his grave. When R. Yohanan died, the smoke ceased from Aher's grave. The public mourner began [his oration] concerning him thus: Even the janitor could</p>	<p>of his children left in the world? Behold it is written: He shall have neither son nor son's son among his people, nor any remaining in his dwellings. She answered: Remember his Torah and not his deeds. Forthwith, a fire came down and enveloped Rabbi's bench. [Thereupon] Rabbi wept and said: If it be so on account of those who dishonour her, how much more so on account of those who honour her!</p>	<p>knowledge, and they should seek the Law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts? [This means that] if the teacher is like an angel of the Lord of Hosts, they should seek the Law at his mouth, but if not, they should not seek the Law at his mouth! – Resh Lakish answered: R. Meir found a verse and expounded it [as follows]: Incline thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thy heart unto my knowledge. It does not say, 'unto their knowledge', but 'unto my knowledge'. R. Hanina said, [he decided it] from here: Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy</p>	<p>of R. Meir he does not utter. Rabbah asked him, Why? – Because he learnt traditions at the mouth of Aher. Said [Rabbah] to him: But why? R. Meir found a pomegranate; he ate [the fruit] within it, and the peel he threw away! He answered: Now He says: Meir my son says: When a man suffers, to what expression does the <i>Shekhinah</i> give utterance? 'My head is heavy, my arm is heavy'. If the Holy One, blessed be He, is thus grieved over the blood of the wicked, how much more so over the blood of the righteous that is shed.</p>
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not stand before thee, O master!		father's house etc. The verses contradict one another. There is no contradiction: in the one case Scripture refers to an adult, in the other to a child. When R. Dimi came [to Babylon] he said: In the West, they say: R. Meir ate the date and threw the kernel away.	
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3. bHag 15a-b: Overall Parallel Structure (ed. Vilna)

A. Surface/external/deeds			
<p>d .4 תקפיה, עייליה לבי מדרשא. אמר ליה לינוקא: פסוק לי פסוקך! אמר לו: (ישעיהו מ"ח) אין שלום אמר ה' לרשעים. עייליה לבי כנישתא אחריתי. אמר ליה לינוקא: פסוק לי פסוקך! אמר לו (ירמיהו ב') כי אם תכבסי</p>	<p>c .3 שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה, אמר ליה: מאי דכתיב (קהלת ז') גם את זה לעמת זה עשה האלהים? אמר לו: כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא - ברא כנגדו, ברא הרים - ברא גבעות, ברא ימים - ברא נהרות.</p>	<p>b .2 אמר: הואיל ואיטריד ההוא גברא מההוא עלמא ליפוק ליתנהני בהאי עלמא. נפק אחר לתרבות רעה. נפק אשכח זונה, תבעה. אמרה ליה: ולאן אלישע בן אבויה את?</p>	<p>a .1 אחר קיצץ בנטיעות, עליו הכתוב אומר (קהלת ה') אל תתן את פיך לחטיא את בשרך מאי היא? חזא מיטטרון דאתיהבא ליה רשותא למיתב למיכתב זכוותא דישראל, אמר: גמירא דלמעלה לא הוי</p>

<p>בנתר ותרבי לך ברית נכתם עונך לפני.</p> <p>עייליה לבי כנישתא אחריתי. אמר ליה / דף טו עמוד ב / לינוקא: פסוק לי פסוקך! אמר ליה (ירמיהו ד') ואת שדוד מה תעשי כי תלבשי שני כי תעדי עדי זהב כי תקרעי בפוך עיניך לשוא תתיפי וגו'.</p> <p>עייליה לבי כנישתא אחריתי, עד דעייליה לתליסר בי כנישתא, כולהו פסקו ליה כי האי גוונא. לבתרא אמר ליה: פסוק לי פסוקך! אמר ליה: (תהלים נ') ולרשע אמר אלהים מה לך לספר חקי וגו'. ההוא ינוקא הוה מגמגם בלישניה, אשתמע כמה דאמר ליה ולאלישע אמר אלהים.</p> <p>איכא דאמרי: סכינא הוה בהדיה וקרעיה, ושדריה לתליסר בי כנישתא;</p>	<p>אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: ברא צדיקים - ברא רשעים, ברא גן עדן - ברא גיהנם. כל אחד ואחד יש לו שני חלקים, אחד בגן עדן ואחד בגיהנם, זכה צדיק - נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגן עדן, נתחייב רשע - נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגיהנם. אמר רב משרשיא: מאי קראה? גבי צדיקים כתיב (ישעיהו ס"א) לכן בארצם משנה יירשו, גבי רשעים כתיב (ירמיהו י"ז) ומשנה שברון שברם.</p> <p>שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה: מאי דכתיב (איוב כ"ח) לא יערכנה זהב וזכוכית ותמורתה כלי פז? אמר לו: אלו דברי תורה, שקשין לקנותן ככלי זהב וכלי פז, ונוחין לאבדן ככלי זכוכית.</p> <p>אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: מה כלי זהב וכלי</p>	<p>עקר פוגלא ממישרא בשבת ויהב לה. אמרה: אחר הוא.</p>	<p>לא ישיבה ולא תחרות ולא עורף ולא עיפוי, שמא חס ושלום שתי רשויות הן.</p> <p>אפקוהו למיטטרון ומחיוהו שיתין פולסי דנורא, אמרו ליה: מאי טעמא כי חזיתיה לא קמת מקמיה. איתיהיבא ליה רשותא למימחק זכוותא דאחר,</p> <p>יצתה בת קול ואמרה (ירמיהו ג') שובו בנים שובבים - הוץ מאחר.</p>
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<p>ואיכא דאמרי, אמר: אי הואי בידי סכינא - הוה קרענא ליה.</p>	<p>זכוכית, אף על פי שנשברו יש להם תקנה - אף תלמיד חכם, אף על פי שסרח יש לו תקנה. אמר לו: אף אתה חזור כך! אמר לו: כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד: שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאחר. תנו רבנן: מעשה באחר שהיה רוכב על הסוס בשבת, והיה רבי מאיר מהלך אחריו ללמוד תורה מפיו. אמר לו: מאיר, חזור לאחריך, שכבר שיערתי בעקבי סוסי עד כאן תחום שבת. אמר ליה: אף אתה חזור כך. אמר ליה: ולא כבר אמרתי לך: כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאחר.</p>		
<p>B. Interior/Torah</p>			
<p>8. d' אשכחיה רבה בר שילא לאליהו, אמר ליה: מאי קא עביד הקדוש ברוך הוא?</p>	<p>7. c' ורבי מאיר היכי גמר תורה מפומיה דאחר? והאמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר</p>	<p>6. b' בתו של אחר אתיא לקמיה דרבי, אמרה ליה: רבי, פרנסני. אמר לה: בת מי את?</p>	<p>5. a' כי נח נפשיה דאחר אמרי: לא מידן לידייניה, ולא לעלמא דאתי ליתי.</p>

<p>אמר ליה: קאמר שמעתא מפומייהו דכולהו רבנן, ומפומיה דרבי מאיר לא קאמר. אמר ליה: אמאי? משום דקא גמר שמעתא מפומיה דאחר. אמר ליה: אמאי? רבי מאיר רמון מצא, תוכו אכל, קליפתו זרק! אמר ליה: השתא קאמר: מאיר בני אומר (משנה סנהדרין ו, ה): בזמן שאדם מצטער שכינה מה לשון אומרת - קלני מראשי, קלני מזרועי. אם כך הקדוש ברוך הוא מצטער על דמן של רשעים - קל וחומר על דמן של צדיקים שנשפך.</p>	<p>רבי יוחנן: מאי דכתיב (מלאכי ב') כי שפתי כהן ישמרו דעת ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא, אם דומה הרב למלאך ה' צבאות - יבקשו תורה מפיהו. ואם לאו - אל יבקשו תורה מפיהו! אמר ריש לקיש: רבי מאיר קרא אשכח ודרש (משלי כ"ב) הט אזנך ושמע דברי חכמים ולבך תשית לדעתי. לדעתם לא נאמר, אלא לדעתי. רב חנינא אמר מהכא: (תהלים מ"ה) שמעי בת וראי והטי אזנך ושכחי עמך ובית אביך וגו'. קשו קראי אהדדי! לא קשיא, הא - בגדול, הא - בקטן. כי אתא רב דימי אמר, אמרי במערבא: רבי מאיר אכל תחלא ושדא שיחלא לברא. דרש רבא: מאי דכתיב (שיר השירים ו') אל גנת אגוז ירדתי</p>	<p>אמרה לו: בתו של אחר אני. אמר לה: עדיין יש מזרעו בעולם? והא כתיב (איוב י"ח) לא נין לו ולא נכד בעמו ואין שריד במגוריו! אמרה לו: זכור לתורתו ואל תזכור מעשיו. מיד ירדה אש וסכסכה ספסלו של רבי. בכה ואמר רבי: ומה למתגנין בה - כך, למשתבחין בה - על אחת כמה וכמה.</p>	<p>לא מידן לידייניה - משום דעסק באורייתא, ולא לעלמא דאתי לייתי - משום דחטא. אמר רבי מאיר: מוטב דלידייניה ולייתי לעלמא דאתי, מתי אמות ואעלה עשן מקברו. כי נח נפשיה דרבי מאיר סליק קוטר א מקבריה דאחר. אמר רבי יוחנן: גבורתא למיקלא רביה? חד הוה ביננא ולא מצינן לאצוליה. אי נקטיה ביד - מאן מרמי ליה, מאן? אמר: מתי אמות ואכבה עשן מקברו! כי נח נפשיה דרבי יוחנן - פסק קוטר א מקבריה דאחר. פתח עליה ההוא ספדנא: אפילו שומר הפתח לא עמד לפניך, רבינו.</p>
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	<p>לראות באבי הנחל וגו' למה נמשלו תלמידי חכמים לאגוז? לומר לך: מה אגוז זה, אף על פי שמלוכלך בטיט ובצואה - אין מה שבתוכו נמאס, אף תלמיד חכם, אף על פי שסרה - אין תורתו נמאסת.</p>		
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Paired sequencing: The action is laid out in paired scenes or episodes. In the first half, Elisha's doom in heaven (1) leads him to apostasy acted out with a prostitute (2). A series of encounters with Meir involving *talmud torah* (3) induces the latter to try to reverse Elisha's condemnation¹⁰ through bibliomancy, i.e., by means of augury or prophecy through the chance encounter of Scriptural study passages recited by various elementary students (4),¹¹ an effort that ends in failure.

In the second half, following Elisha's death, punishment and acceptance into heaven (5), his surviving daughter, left indigent, appeals to R. Yehudah ha-Nasi for charity, whereupon the latter, who responded initially with an unfeeling denial of her right to exist in consequence of her father's wicked deeds, relents in the face of a miraculous fire sent to communicate divine approbation of her plea, and grants her support (6). The following two units examine the paradox of Meir's learning Torah from Elisha, from whom Meir should have distanced himself because of Elisha's sinning ways. First, Amoraim explain how Meir was able to learn from Elisha without becoming tainted (7); then God is persuaded by that argument (8).

The paired sequencing could be represented as (1→2 + 3→4), and (5→6 + 7→8). The parallelism between the two sets of four units will be explicated in the next section.

Bifurcation contrasts angelic and human (rabbinic) modalities.

The eight units can be divided in two in terms of the nature of the authority or power governing them. This bifurcation encodes a general opposition between surface/deeds and interior/Torah. In the first half, an angelic regimen like that celebrated in *merkavah* and *hekhlot*

¹⁰ On Liebes' and Beeri's understanding, it is Aher who initiates this scene. While the subjects in this unit are not specified, that reading fails to appreciate the dialectical progression inherent in aggadic narrative structures. The dialectical and logical response to Elisha's statement at the end of scene 3 would be for Meir to initiate scene 4. Elisha then becomes the grammatical subject: it would have to be Aher who proceeds to ask the students to recite their verses in order for the negative messages to apply to him, not to Meir.

¹¹ S. 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, 1962), Appendix B 1: 194-199, notes the belief in Antiquity that children in a holy setting (an Egyptian temple or a rabbinic house of study) could reveal a divine message, e.g., through the text that they were uttering, so that a passerby could decode it as a divine message addressed to him.

mysticism holds sway. Through it Elisha is doomed as a result of an innocent mistake made when, at a crucial point in his mystical vision (heavenly ascent), he haltingly expressed a Two-Powers heresy, all the while thinking that that would not make sense (1):¹² his past merits and his hope for the future are taken away as all his good deeds are stricken from the divine record books, and his repentance will not be accepted. As a result of that grim sentence, Elisha decides to stop denying himself the pleasures of this world and becomes an apostate (2). Nonetheless, he clearly loves discussing Torah, a holy and meritorious act, but refuses to try to capitalize on the merit of his learning to regain the right to repent, due to the aforementioned sentence of doom (3); his policy is confirmed by the failed quest for a reversal initiated by Meir through the medium of innocent young Bible students (4).

The situation is totally changed in the second half, where human reason and intervention reverse the angelic condemnation. The redactor shows that the angelic system produces gridlock: unwilling to punish Elisha because he is a sage, the angels will not let him into heaven because of his sins. In contrast, the human way involves pragmatic reasoning and resolute action tilted in favor of the scholarly merit accrued by Elisha through his knowledge of Torah. Meir and Yohanan punish-purify him and bring him into heaven (5), and his daughter capitalizes on the merit of his Torah to qualify for charity (6). Meir is justified in learning from Elisha despite the latter's unrepentant apostasy because he could compartmentalize, discounting

¹² Beerl 2007, 114, explains appropriately that in the TB the phrase שמא חס ושלום connotes concern for the spiritual integrity of the person or the fate of the nation: here, Elisha is not voicing a heretical belief, but the concern that perhaps the world is based on Two Powers, which is bad policy and contradicts his own beliefs. While he objected to this, the seeds of doubt were nonetheless sown in his heart. (Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 107-108, observes that this phrase functions as part of paradigm expressing doubt and its reassurance through a *bat kol*, but acknowledges that our instance is an inversion of that paradigm.) Boyarin 2004, 142, claims that Elisha concludes that there are Two Powers, and interprets the *pardes* episode as “not ... so much the site of mystical experience or philosophical speculation as the trace of the ancient Logos theology” (p. 144). However, while Elisha in the TB expresses concern about Two Powers (see Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 106-107), it is only in *Sefer Hekhalot's* version that he is certain of that (*Synopse* 20 =3 *Enoch* 16). Liebes 1990, 32-34, interprets Elisha's statement completely differently.

Elisha's deeds while benefiting from the latter's knowledge (7); God accepts Meir into His canon for that same reason (8).¹³

It is significant that God confirms both of these perspectives through the *bat kol* (1, and echoed in 3) and bibliomantic verses (4) in the first group; and, conversely, in the second group, by accepting Elisha into heaven (5), sending a fire to affirm the justice of his daughter's demand (6), and restoring Meir's teachings into His heavenly version of the Mishnah (8).

Playing the angelic aspect off against the rabbinic one, the redactor of this material produced a composition that divides evenly into two sets of four units.

Parallelism between corresponding units across the bifurcated structure. The two four-unit sequences described above exhibit a running parallel strategy. The (melo-)dramatic doom scene in heaven (1) is contrastively paralleled by the rehabilitation and acceptance into heaven that begins the second series (5). A female figure suspects that he is the renowned scholar Elisha, but changes her mind when confronted by his sinful act (2);¹⁴ on the other hand, his daughter

¹³ One could understand the nature of Elisha's situation as follows. The parabolic Toseftan *baraita* of four who entered *pardes* is structured as a tetralemma, a logical structure used in rabbinic rhetoric. Two terms are contrasted in four permutations. The terms being contrasted are mind and body. Akiva came out in peace, sound in mind and body. Elisha ben Avuya became an apostate, sinning in his mind and with his body (the two Talmuds complicate this structure by thematizing the inviolability of his Torah and his devotion to it). Ben Azzai died, stricken in body. Ben Zoma went insane, sound in body, but stricken in mind. Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 48-54, explicates the structure of this typological list differently.

¹⁴ It is worth inquiring as to how a prostitute got into this narrative. Once he had accepted the daughter from the TY version (he had narrowed TY's daughters down to one to heighten the dramatic effect of her confrontation of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi), the *ba'al aggadah* would be looking for a female character to balance the daughter on the structural level, and she would function as a contrasting, negative character in a context of sinfulness. A prostitute was an ideal foil because, in a scene that dramatizes Elisha's "otherness" she represents the threatening "otherness" of her sex and her profession, not to mention her non-Jewishness (our narrator most probably would not make a Jewess a prostitute). Prostitution or fornication is also connected with idolatry and gentile ways (Beeri 2007, 123), albeit Elisha was not a full-fledged heretic. It is quite possible that the prostitute's identifying Elisha as Aher puns on another meaning of the word, viz., fornication (H. Yalon, פרקי לשון, Jerusalem: Bialik, 1971, 292-294, 300-301, 303-304).

knows him for his Torah, not being misled by his deeds (6). The virtue of Meir's learning from Elisha (3) is explicated in its opposite number (7).¹⁵ The failed attempt to secure a positive divine acknowledgment of Elisha along with an explicit divine denial of his right to engage in Torah (4) contrasts with the divine acceptance of Meir's Torah even though he studied with Elisha (8).

The paired sequencing was represented above as (1→2 + 3→4) (first series), and (5→6 + 7→8) (second series). To highlight the symmetrically balanced parallelism obtaining across the bifurcated structure, we could represent the two series as (a→b + c→d) and (a'→b' + c'→d') respectively (see structured tables above). M. Kline calls such a complex structure a "woven" text, and observes that it has been used in the Bible and is widespread in Rabbinic texts.¹⁶

The significance of structure and parallelism for the redactor and the auditor. One may question whether the claim of structure and parallelism is an anachronistic insight made under the influence of modern literary-critical theory. Aesthetics aside, the redactor worked in a milieu in which complex texts were communicated in oral performance, which could well motivate structurally balanced

Fornication, furthermore, is an archetypally emblematic sin: the term עבירה (willful or serious transgression) often connotes sexual sin in Rabbinic texts. Thus, R. Judah observes that a successful penitent is one who has avoided sinning three times, and, he clarifies by adding, "with the same woman ..." (*bYoma* 86b). Cf. the entries on 'averah in M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York and Berlin: Choneb; London: Shapiro, Valentine & Co., 1926) 1068, and Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (reprint of ed. New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960: Jerusalem and New York: Sagamore Press, 1959-1960 [Hebrew]) 5:4294. See also S. Y. Friedman, *Tosefta Atiqta, Pesah Rishon: Synoptic Parallels of Mishna and Tosefta Analyzed with a Methodological Introduction* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002 [Hebrew]) 378 and n. 18; B. Lifshitz, על הערב, *Shenaton Hamishpat Ha'ivri* 13 (1986/87), 185-213, Appendix A (pp. 206-209); Meir Gruzman, למשמעותם של הביטויים, *Sinai* 100 (746 [1986/87]) 200-72.

¹⁵ My structural synthesis of form and content requires that scene/unit 7 be seen as one overall unit. Rubenstein has divided it into two in order to support his reading of the Elisha narrative structure as chiasmic. See Appendix C below.

¹⁶ Kline's *The Structured Mishnah* (http://chaver.com/Mishnah-New_English/Mishnah_Portal.htm).

composition. This structure would facilitate memorization and guide the reciter – and his auditors – in the course of his oral delivery.¹⁷

Structural balance and parallelism were realized in diverse ways and to different degrees in various texts. According to Rubenstein, the Yerushalmi's version of the Elisha narrative is organized into five sections,¹⁸ with each section divided into three subsections.¹⁹ The symmetry extends only so far. Each Yerushalmi subsection has its own structure. In our Bavli text, which is a far more ambitious and sophisticated treatment of Elisha's apostasy and its implications, the internal structure within each section is not always as tight as in the Yerushalmi. Thus although the bifurcated parallelism is more complex, each unit is a function of the material its redactor sought to incorporate and, consequently, has its own unique structure. Still the overall parallelism functions well as a mnemonic guide to the recall for oral performance of this text. Moreover, it also provides a framework of comparisons and contrasts that, from various angles,

¹⁷ In a study of memory and its methodology in rabbinic literature, אמנות הזיכרון, בספרות חז"ל, *Mehqerei Talmud: Talmudic Studies* 3:2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005, *Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach*), 543-589, Shlomo Naeh distinguishes between rote memorization and the methodologies of organization of information in the memory for ease of retrieval for purposes of review and communication. He observes that the Babylonians, unlike their colleagues in Eretz Yisrael, did not recommend mnemonic methodologies, possibly because they favored dialectical skill over prodigious memorization, although all require the memorizing of texts (pp. 549, 587 and n. 29). Indeed, the situation is more complicated for, unless texts are formulated according to the aforementioned principles of organization, e.g., the earliest textual layers of mEduy (cf. *ibid.*, 582-586), they cannot be retrieved according to those techniques. Unfortunately, most rabbinic documents were not organized in this way. See Appendix B below.

¹⁸ This is somewhat problematic as it cuts across textual boundaries, i.e., Rubenstein's first unit ([A]) is cited before the Toseftan Akiva clause, 1999, 82-83, and the remaining ones follow it. Rubenstein acknowledges that the first TY unit "has no substantive connection with the rest of the story...and even stands in some tension with it" (p. 89, and 1998, 147; Beeri 2007, 95-99 also treats both groups structurally as one). In reality, that unit is a different source, and was editorially situated separate from the other Elisha material in yHag. A further hermeneutical difference between myself and Rubenstein is that he combines subunits [A](1) and [A](2) with the third one even though the two groups each illustrate different, albeit related and consecutive, Toseftan clauses. In analyzing the literary structure of a text, and the textual boundaries of an aggadic complex or story cycle, I would treat items separately, which the redactors have divided among different base-text clauses.

¹⁹ 1999, 86 and in greater detail, 1998, 147.

leads to deeper understanding of the meaning produced in this aggadic complex.

In the following remarks I will call further attention to deeply felt conflicts and issues that resonate emotionally in this story. It is a powerful masterpiece. Many of my key insights arose out of comparisons and contrasts arising from the redactor's esthetic-mnemonic design. At the same time, while I do not claim that the redactor would articulate matters or feelings as I do below, I would insist, nonetheless, that he felt that way, and these feelings do underlie his composition. In other words, while the people of his culture may not have articulated their inner thoughts and feelings directly, preferring instead to convey them in myth, legend and story, I would argue that they encoded them in moving compositions like the Elisha complex because that is what they intuitively thought and felt, and considered appropriate for their audience of disciples. As R. Kushelevsky observed: "The dialogues and actions of aggadic and midrashic protagonists are, in general, a concretization of internal conflicts."²⁰

Meaning

Its various episodes seem to militate against assigning one message to the Elisha story. Ostensibly, given the Toseftan background, it is an enquiry into the failure attendant upon his visionary quest; the Bavli's opening question relates this material explicitly to the Toseftan cautionary narrative. However, our narrative expands on themes introduced in the Yerushalmi's version to transcend its originating matrix and become a dramatic vindication of the sinful sage through the recognition of the value of his Torah,²¹ as Rubenstein has

²⁰ הצהרה מונותיאיסטית כנגד תפיסה מיתית – אגדת בן דורדיא – *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 18 (1996), 7, 11: הדיאלוגים של גיבורי האגדה והמדרש ופעולותיהם הם: בדרך-כלל המחשה של לבטים פנימיים. Penetrating psychological insights bubble just below the surface, and may fully emerge, in many aggadic narratives, e.g., the effects of Rav Hiya bar Ashi's sexual renunciation on himself and on his wife (bKid 81b). Rubenstein 1999, 58-60, notes that the Babylonian Talmudic tendency to express emotion distinguishes its narratives from Palestinian versions, remarking that "most of the additions emphasize the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of the [Achnai] story" (p. 58).

²¹ Elisha is known for his interest in Torah and deeds, and the most effective ways to learn (*Avot* 4.20; *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, version A 24, and version B 35). It should be noted that the Torah that Elisha displays in the Bavli and Yerushalmi narratives is aggadic and homiletical in nature; he does not show dialectical skill and mastery of *halakhah*. However, *Ruth Rabbah* (ed. M. B.

observed. This, by the way, helps to explain why so much space is devoted to his student-colleague, R. Meir, and will be discussed below. In further complicating this tale, the Bavli has also produced a stunning critique of a *hekhlot*-like theology, albeit as seen from a uniquely rabbinic perspective, which it eclipsed in a dramatic affirmation of rabbinic spiritual heroics. This construct forms a foundation that invests *talmud torah* with preeminent value and salvific power when embodied in rabbinic sages, who counterbalance the heavenly angels here.

Returning to the question of message, the structural analysis aids in the recovery of the nature of the unity of this complex text, which lies primarily in its thematic structure, i.e., as a literary complex of structural relationships, as explicated above. This intense set of relationships is supported by a narrative structure, whose development follows a chronological sequence, which, where it breaks down, is somewhat abetted by a logically-determined order. Chronologically, it works as a tale of the fall and redemption of a sinning sage by virtue of his Torah, as follows. As a consequence of Elisha's fall (1) he embarked on sinning (2), but, in a logical move, his deeds (sinning) are contrasted with his attainment and joy in Torah in scenes that occurred temporally after he had become a sinner (3), but his deeds are later shown to trump Torah (4). At his death, the merit of Elisha's Torah incites Meir and Yohanan to resolute action to expunge Elisha's guilt (5), and his spunky daughter to secure alms (6). Albeit, the purgation (5) is not completed until R. Yohanan's demise, i.e., after the daughter's issue is resolved, that resolution assumes the divine acceptance of Elisha's Torah. While one might see the final episode (8) as a chronologically later epilogue, this is not the case regarding the preceding unit. However, both the final unit and the penultimate one (7) have been positioned at the end for thematic-structural reasons, principally because both the scenes with women (2 and 5)

Lerner, *Aggadat Rut u-Midrash Rut Rabbah*, PhD diss.: Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1971) 6.7, end (p. 174), reports that he was a celebrated teacher, acknowledged for his knowledge by his colleagues:

אמרו עליו על אלישע בן אבויה, שלא היתה העזרה ננעלת על אדם חכם וגבור בתורה בישראל כמותו. וכיון שהיה מדבר ודורש בלשכת הגזית או בבית המדרש של טבריא, היו כל החברים עומדים על רגליהם ומאזנים לדבריו, ואח"כ באים כלם ונושקין אותו על ראשו. אם בטבריא כך, קל וחמר בשאר מדינות ובשאר עיירות.

(discussed in Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 44-47, and cf. Lerner, *ibid.*, nn. 61-64).

It is noteworthy that *Pitron Torah* (ed. E.E. Urbach, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978) 15, portrays Elisha in a subordinate position seeking a solution to a question of theodicy from R. Meir.

must come first to contrast with each other – scene **2** had to come first since it follows directly from the first scene; as a consequence, Torah takes the next position(s) in each structural half. The final two episodes recast much of what precedes them in a new light, for demonstrating the irrelevance of short-sighted criticism of learning from Elisha (**7** and **8**) both excuses Rabbi Meir's devotion and saves his Torah (**3**), and justifies the purgation of Elisha through Meir and Yohanan (**5**), as well as the claim of Elisha's daughter (**6** contra **2**). Of course, in a further stunning reversal, God, who had repeatedly abetted the angels' rejection in the first half is shown in the final scene to have been gravely sorrowful at Elisha's suffering (**8**).²²

Comparison with the Yerushalmi shows how the Babylonian narrative burst its stays to become not only an account of Elisha's apostasy and redemption, but also a narrative dramatization of the value of Torah of the sinful sage. Units **3** and **5-6** have Yerushalmi counterparts, and deal in one way or another with the positive valence of Elisha's mastery of Torah, and the intervening unit **4** is also adumbrated there, except that where Elisha rejects students in the Yerushalmi, they reject him in the Bavli. The Bavli furthers the Yerushalmi's concern with Elisha's Torah in units **7** and **8**. In locating Elisha's problem in some failure in the episode of his visionary ascent (**1**, and the consequential sinning, **2**), the Bavli effects a narrative move that unifies the overall story.²³ However, the latter move also causes the thematic dislocation that was observed in the confusion sown by contrasting the opening question with the greater part of the narrative.

Now we will take up specific issues of interpretation and meaning.

²² The mishnaic teaching that God cites in Meir's name clearly refers to the punishment of a condemned evil-doer. In the present context, it references Aher's unjust condemnation in the first scene.

²³ It also corresponds to the other situations depicted in the tHag 2.3. The subsequent failure or success of each of the other three visionaries is linked, through a proof-text, with a positive or negative occurrence, response or behavior during their vision. Akiva conducted himself properly, and the other two either went too far (Ben Zoma, based on proof-text *Prov.* 25:16) or were otherwise stricken in a way that led to premature death. The Yerushalmi instead locates Aher's problem either in events he witnessed that led him to question divine justice, or in statements or behavior of his parents, thus diffusing responsibility (the diffusion re-emerges in the Bavli's mitigation of his problematic utterance by contextualizing it in confusing circumstances and attributing a hesitant expression to Elisha).

How Elisha became an apostate. The *Tosefta* links Elisha's apostasy with his mystical vision;²⁴ and TY refers to that link to

²⁴ Scholars have debated whether the *pardes* episode describes visionary or exegetical activity (reviewed in Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 69-70); E.E. Urbach's seminal treatment, *המסורות על תורת הסוד בתקופת התנאים*, *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 1-28, is especially important. The text has a numinous quality: its allusively riddling-metaphorical form of expression distinguishes its use of language from the preceding Toseftan treatment of esoteric inquiry; it is opaquely enigmatic (Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 88-106, attacked this issue from "the problem of genre"). I suspect that the operative verb *hetsits* ("peered", "gazed") indicates some form of visionary activity, and follow Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 102-13, in relating this text to "visual experience" (*pace* D. Halperin's hesitations, *The Merkava in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980), 91; *idem*, p. 93 shows that *hetsits* does not necessarily connote brief peeking, but can mean peering to examine something), even if the vision arises from contemplation of scriptural passages as opposed to esoteric exercises. Others view the "peering" as an allegorical image whose analogue is theological or theosophical and exegetical speculation. In view of the absence of visionary activity from the mystical rule of mHag 2.1, it is logical to infer, on my reading of the *Tosefta*, not so much that visionary mysticism is lacking among the rabbis, as that it has been suppressed (or that the phenomenology of the Toseftan text is post-Mishnaic). Cf. n. 33 below and D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), "The Apostasy of Rabbi Akiva," 139-140. While M.D. Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism: an Analysis of Ma'aseh Merkavah*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992, 218, is undoubtedly correct in dating and localizing that work to post-Talmudic Bavel (*pace* Bar-Ilan 1987, who dates that work to tannaitic times on the basis of its liturgical textual components), his acknowledgment of Halperin's claim that no stories of ascent mysticism earlier than Amoraic Bavel are known (1980, 175-176) misses a moot point. The Toseftan *pardes baraita*, and, the Yerushalmi Elisha narrative as well, may have had some form of ascent experience in mind, but particulars have undoubtedly and tendentially been suppressed (cf. the following note, and n. 33 below, and n. 4 above on the knowledge of *hekhalot* praxis in Palestine at least as early as the Amoraic period). On the other hand, it may be that the contradictory explications of the Toseftan visions are a product of a broader tendency of scholars to draw a false dichotomy between exegesis and "prophetic states of consciousness or visionary experience," and that those, rather, may be two aspects of a complex, mutually engendering experience conditioned by broader cultural acceptance and preparation (E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], 121). Schäfer, 2009, 351 and n. 48 there, explicitly rejects that position, but a critique of his thorough examination of our text (pp. 196-203) requires a treatment impractical to undertake in the present context.

underline that having such an experience is irreconcilable with sinning.²⁵ The scene in heaven, however, is an innovation of the Bavli author(s).²⁶ Where heretofore the consequence “he cut the shoots” was understood to apply to events subsequent to Elisha’s vision, the Babylonian author(s) interpreted it to have occurred in the very midst of his heavenly vision.²⁷ They made Elisha into a sympathetic

²⁵ Although the Yerushalmi’s *בי ומרד כהי שידע* may be stylistically and functionally parallel to the Tosefta’s *בנטיעות וקיצץ*, it is too diffuse a remark to establish its meaning with certainty. Cf. M. Rand cited in n. 4 above for the possibility of its mystical *hekhalot* reference.

²⁶ The TB story seems to be a dramatic exegetical response to the prooftext concerning Elisha, of which only the first part was cited in the Toseftan *pardes baraita*, viz., Eccl. 5:5 (suggested by Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 91-93; Rubenstein 1999, 70-71; the continuation is, “... nor say before the angel, that it was an error: why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”). It may be suggested that scriptural exegesis is sufficient to account for the action of scene 1. Sometimes a verse drives its exegesis, but the exegete generally has a point to make. In our case, the visionary setting and esoteric details are foreign enough to the Talmudic worldview, certainly rare enough in the Talmudic corpus, to justify a claim that the portrayal of the visionary setting combined with the verse in a creative synergy to produce this scene. Indeed, the pointed contrast between the angelic and rabbinic modalities played out consistently over the contrasting halves of the overall narrative are indicative of a sustained, intentional and tendentious project executed for didactic purposes.

This connection between the experience and its consequence is unique to the Babylonian storyteller, and was applied only to Elisha. That redactor also interpolated into the *baraita* R. Akiva’s warning about the mortal danger of mistaking the sparkling pavement for water (bHag 14b), which, again, moves the bad outcome into the visionary scene itself, and was later applied to Ben Zoma and Ben Azzai in *hekhalot* versions of this story.

²⁷ It should be noted that the *Tosefta*’s formula, “gazed” → unfortunate outcome (x 3) indicates that the unfortunate outcomes are patterned similarly, as a cause and its effect, but how closely can we press the parallelistic paradigm? It seems reasonable to infer that the effect occurred immediately in the midst of the vision (especially by analogy with the background referenced in n. 34 below). Nonetheless, while the unfortunate outcome for Elisha’s unfortunate companions could have occurred in the course of their mystical experiences, they could also have suffered their fates as a result of their ascent, but following them. It seems that Elisha’s “cutting the shoots” relates not to what happened in the aforementioned *pardes*, but simply to the connotation of that phrase, “engaging in sinful acts” (cf. Goshen-Gottstein and Rubenstein cited in the previous note; G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965), 16, n. 6; cf. *Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 7.5, p. 113b, cited in Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah: a Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta*,

character, achieving thereby an emotional resonance that is missing in the *Tosefta* and is submerged into an inchoate cluster of background images in the Yerushalmi telling.²⁸ Therefore, it is worth paying attention to how they accomplished this. To anticipate my conclusions, I suggest that a question should continue to nag us as the analysis progresses, viz., how can God be portrayed as affirming the doom punishment (through permission to Metatron to expunge Elisha's good deeds and the medium of a *bat kol*, unit 1, etc.),²⁹ when

Part V: Order Moed (New York, 1962), 1289, and see the comments to ll. 10-11 on p. 1288, and ll. 16-17 on p. 1289: Lieberman's explanation there links the disparity between expounding mystical Scriptural teachings and violating others by sinning, analogous to Elisha's case where his mystical attainments are incommensurable with his sinning). This is the meaning of the *kal* form as in the *Mekhilta, Yitro, Ba-hodesh* 6 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 226): פוקד עון אבות על בנים; רבי נתן אומר קוצץ בן קוצץ בן קוצץ ... הא כיצד? רשע בן רשע; רשע בן רשע; רבי נתן אומר קוצץ בן קוצץ בן קוצץ (and in Elazar ha-Kalir's *kedushta* for *Shabbat Zakhor* [Y. Baer, מהד' חדשה, סדר עבודת ישראל, מנהל' חדשה, [Berlin]: Schocken, 1936/1937, 697]: אץ קוצץ בן קוצץ; cf. M. Jastrow 1926, s.v. *katsats*, p. 1407, and note that the *kal* and *pi'el* forms share meanings). In other words, the orchard image of "cutting the shoots" is an allusive usage originating in other contexts, and may not have been intended to imply a "cutting of the [theosophical] shoots" in this particular orchard.

It must be acknowledged that the action of the "mouth" that brings the "flesh to sin" (the prooftext, Eccl. 5.5), remains a desideratum that the Talmuds endeavored to explain. TY understood that "cutting the shoots" was a result, but interpreted that phrase as a post-visionary killing of students (the "shoots") or ruining their careers (Jastrow explains "cutting the shoots" as "wicked," through the primary meaning "destroy"). TB's dramatization is unique in placing the "cutting" directly into the *pardes* experience. This tendency may also be reflected in TB's version of the *baraita* (in all manuscripts): at some point a "formulator" had removed "gazed" in Elisha's case (not that of Ben Zoma or Ben Azzai), thereby reading אלישע קיצץ בנטיעות עליו הכתוב אומר..., so that the cutting occurred right in the midst of his experience. On this rendition, therefore, the Babylonian portrayal of Elisha's cutting, viz., the ambivalent theological blunder, is an eminently logical interpretation.

²⁸ The Yerushalmi treatment lacks the cohesiveness of the Bavli. While it follows Elisha's life from his initial sinning (Rubenstein's A1-3, cf. n. 2 above) to his death and his daughters' penury, it is unable to make up its mind as to what caused Elisha's fall (B2 and C1-3). An intriguing thought is that the several scenes of arbitrary, divine injustice suggested in the TY as reasons for Elisha's fall may underlie the reason the TB gives for his fall: the injustice has been imported into Elisha's own biography in an act of narrative economy.

²⁹ Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 106-107, claims that Metatron was lashed in the sight of Elisha to show the latter that the angel is not a second Power, and that Elisha was punished for causing Metatron to be lashed, not for uttering a Two Powers heresy. It is not clear, however, that Elisha witnessed the lashing, for it

later on He admits Elisha into heaven (5) and accepts his student Meir's Torah (8)? But, getting back to Elisha, the latter is portrayed as a student proficient in esoteric lore, one teaching which he ostensibly cites in the opening scene.³⁰ There Elisha encounters a problem when what he sees in his vision, viz. the angel Metatron sitting down, is not at all what its textual representation led him to expect: according to his text, no angel should be seated.³¹ In this case, the Babylonian narrator

occurred in a different area (אפקודה ומחירה). That reading works for Metatron's measure-for-measure expunging of Elisha's past merits, but the weight of the *bat kol's* foreclosure of his future implies that other considerations (inappropriate utterance) are involved (cf. n. 34 below).

³⁰ In the rabbinic fantasy that makes up this scene, Elisha could be referring to a "rabbinic" teaching in describing the supernal setting. Rubenstein 1999, 90, and W.J. van Bekkum, "Paradise as Paradigm: Good and Evil and Kabbalah," *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. G.P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 126, suggest that it is an adaptation of Rav's (bBer 17a) depiction of the state of the righteous in "the next world," with the aim of describing the conditions obtaining amongst angels (cf. also Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 92; P. Alexander in the note immediately following, however, provides a rationale for a theosophically oriented source independent of Rav and his purposes), and Beeri 2007, 113, suggests that Elisha was referring to a passage found in *Masekhet Derekh Eretz, Perek ha-Minim* or to one like it (see *The Treatises Derekh Eretz*, ed. M. Higger, Brooklyn: Moinester, 1935, *Tosefta Derekh Erets*, no. 30 [pp. 292-293]; cf. M. van Loopik, *The Ways of the Sages and the Way of the World: Tr. on the Basis of the Manuscripts and Provided with a Commentary* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991], 79). In *hekhalot* terms, Metatron would be seated in (the entrance of) the sixth heaven/palace, which leads into the inner chamber (seventh palace) wherein the God of the mystical visionary sits enthroned. On the identity of this *hekhal* (palace), represented in the Toseftan *baraita* as the *pardes*, see n. 33 below. Morray-Jones 1993, 204-205, shows that the Garden of Eden, the heavenly sanctuary and the abode of the righteous have come to be identified (4 *Ezra* 7.92-98 only allows the highest of seven classes of righteous into the seventh heaven; *yHag* 2.1, 77a bottom, is aware of both a threefold division and a sevenfold division of the righteous and, presumably, of heavens; evidently *Paul*, 2 *Cor.* 12.2, knew of three). Like the Toseftan author, the Babylonian narrator provides no particulars regarding the number of heavens/*hekhalot*, whether because they would be of no narrative relevance, or out of a desire to avoid placing *hekhalot realia* in the Rabbinic record (both worldviews seem to have combined in the next *Derekh Erets* passage, see ed. Higger, 293-294 and van Loopik, 80-81). In the end, esthetic considerations imply the desire that this text appear somewhat exotic, something a mystic would find meaningful.

³¹ Most TB mss. read למעלה לא עמידה ולא ישיבה, there being paradoxically neither sitting nor standing so near to the Divine Presence. Rashi, followed by Rubenstein (66 and 102) and Beeri (113), strikes "no standing" probably on the

informs his audience, an exceptional practice unbeknownst to the author of the text Elisha recited was in play: Metatron had been given permission to sit on high and record the merits of Israel.³² In his

widespread belief that angels can stand but not sit because they lack joints in their legs (*Derekh Erets* texts do not include “no standing” either, but Maimonides, who quotes the TB version as describing the deity, includes “no standing” [*Introduction to Perek Helek, Yesod 3*]). Assuming that this text refers to angels, Maimonides notwithstanding (but see Alexander’s suggestion below), “no standing” warrants serious consideration, not only because it is both a *lectio difficilior* but also because it is found in most mss. One might suggest that it refers to lesser angels, i.e., those assigned to guard the entrance to the *hekhal* could remain neither sitting nor standing in the vicinity of the Divine Presence because the very proximity would consume them in flames; Angels of the Presence, however, would not suffer such a fate. Such a distinction goes back to a conception seen as early as the apocalyptic 1 *En* 14.21-23 (third century BCE), which distinguishes between “the angels,” who may neither approach nor view the Divine Presence, and “the most holy ones who are near him [who] neither go far at night nor move away from him.” Elisha’s error could then lie in the failure to understand the distinction among angelic beings of different status, except that the narrator already knows that Metatron himself would not normally sit, having permission to do so only when recording the merits of Israel. The attempt to force hermeneutical consistency among the disparate elements of this scene may arise from a modern reader’s ignoring the rhetorical nature of Talmudic composition: the redactor often cites a text for one element (in the present case, “no sitting”), letting the other pieces fall where they may. P.S. Alexander, “3 Enoch and the Talmud,” *JJS* 18 (1967) 40-68, arguing that the fuller text is superior because it is rhetorically balanced, suggests that it “asserted that God and the angels are without body parts or passions. In rather Platonic fashion, it defined the heavenly world as the negation of all that we know and experience here on earth ... [in the TB] the general drift of the statement has been ignored and only the *ישיבה* highlighted in a very literalistic way” (pp. 60-61).

³² Metatron’s exalted status as a scribe recalls the biblical Enoch, who upon his translation to heaven became a Righteous Scribe (1 *En*. 12:14) or Great Scribe (*ספרא רבא*) according to Targum pseudo-Jonathan ad Gen. 5.24. The latter source identifies Enoch as Metatron (A.A. Orlov notes that it is probably a late addition, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 97, n. 48). Since one of Enoch’s scribal functions was to record the iniquities of men (*Jub.* 4.23), this could anticipate the TB scene, with Metatron recording deeds. In a peculiarly rabbinic shift, the deeds are those of Israel, and it is meritorious deeds that the angelic being records. A. Hintze, “Treasures in Heaven: a Theme in Comparative Religion,” *Irano-Judaica* 6 (2008), 9-36, distinguishes the rabbinic trope of recording good deeds (as well as bad) from the Intertestamental paradigm, in which “only bad deeds are written in books, while good deeds are stored in heavenly ‘treasuries’” (p. 31). On the one hand, while one cannot be completely sure that the TB was drawing on an

confusion, Elisha uttered a heretical possibility: “Perhaps, heaven forefend, there are Two Powers [in heaven].” The untruth uttered in a supernal setting, Elisha was doomed.³³

identification of Metatron with Enoch in formulating this scene (Moses was also designated a great scribe, cf. Lieberman, “Appendices” to I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* [Leiden: Brill, 1980], 237), one can definitely conclude that the Bavli story takes precedence over the *hekhalot* version (3 *En.* 16=*Synopse* 20), where Metatron has been promoted to a judge (Orlov, *op. cit.*, 100).

³³ Elisha’s fateful utterance that brings the flesh to sin and results in his doom (prooftext, Eccl. 5:5) may have been his articulation of a Two Powers heresy contra mHag 2.1, end: כל שלא חס על כבוד קונו ראוי לו שלא בא לעולם (see n. 36 below).

Rubenstein and Goshen-Gottstein show how the Babylonian *ba’al aggadah* worked out the process that eventuated in Elisha’s doom through skilled utilization of the prooftext (see n. 26 above). The utterance of an untruth in a supernal setting can be very dangerous. R. Akiva warns of the mortal danger to the visionary who utters, “water, water” upon seeing the shiny marble surface and confuses it with water (see the following note) leads Morray Jones 1993, 204-205 to identify it as the pavement of the sixth heaven. That corresponds to the sanctuary building of the heavenly temple (which corresponds to the earthly one), within which is situated the Holy of Holies, where God sits enthroned. This proximity to the enthroned deity explains why it is so important to avoid errors.

Pardes itself is used in *hekhalot* literature for the inner sanctum (Holy of Holies), and the Toseftan *pardes* would also presumably refer to the inner sanctum. R. Elior discusses its many synonyms, e.g., Garden of Eden (*The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* [Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004], 244-250), including, e.g., *merkavah* and *lifnai velifnim* (inner sanctum), that clearly indicate the Holy of Holies. She identifies the Toseftan *pardes* as the latter (p. 246, on the basis of R. Akiva’s experience as reported in conflated *hekhalot* versions of this episode; Morray Jones 2001, 20, notes that *pardes* represents the inner sanctum of the heavenly Temple).

Despite its vagueness, the Tosefta’s prooftext for R. Akiva, viz., *Song of Songs* 1:4, speaks of bringing the protagonist into the (many) rooms of the King. Seeming to imply an experience involving several palaces or heavens (cf. J. Dan, 'הדרי המרכבה', *Tarbiz* 47 [1977/1978] 49-55), that prooftext demonstrates an ascription on the part of the (presumably tannaitic) author of that Toseftan *baraita*, of some form of *hekhalot* mystical praxis to the Tannaim, a hint on the part of an author who spoke only of a “*pardes*,” without any specification or contextualization. For a very different interpretation of the Akiva episode, see Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 100-106, who limits Akiva’s mysticism to exegesis.

This localization of Akiva’s and Elisha’s visions to the heavenly inner sanctum also explains the TB portrayal of Elisha’s consternation. As an Angel of the Presence (*mal’akh ha-Panim*), Metatron would be ministering next to the

That scene portrays, in subdued manner, the potential for (self) destruction that confronts a mystical adept in a visionary setting as described in *hekhalot* literature.³⁴ It dramatizes some of the dangers alluded to in the disclosure that three of the four who entered a *pardes* suffered grievous harm, while Akiva alone returned unscathed. Moreover, it is intended to frighten its audience with a tale of an unfortunate whose promising career was unjustly destroyed to mollify an angel who was too lazy to stand up. (Metatron gets no respect in this tale.) That text is a rabbinic cautionary composition, warning students away from the dangers awaiting one who pursues mystical experience. (Rabbinic practice affords the curious a midrashic path to unlocking the heavenly mysteries, as opposed to an experiential visionary one; the former is anchored in Scripture, the latter, in the uncertain psyche of the mystic seeker.³⁵)

Contrast with the parallel scene on Elisha's afterlife: esoteric dualistic gridlock confronted by rabbinic dialectical soteriology. The angelic approach is arbitrary and rigid, rooted in the dualistic thinking

deity whom he serves. Seeing two divine beings seated together brought Elisha to discern the contradiction to his esoteric textual tradition.

³⁴ For his lapse at the entrance to the sixth *hekhal*, Ben Azzai was immediately beheaded and his body buried under iron bars or riddled with iron knives (*Merkavah Rabbah* [Synopse, 345] and *Hekhalot zutarti* [idem, 672]), and see the preceding note. J. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot: the People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) examines *hekhalot* mysticism by comparison with varieties of shamanism. Among the aspects considered was the breakdown of the aspirant's personality in the course of the visionary quest and its reconstitution as a new being, a process during which the person is extremely vulnerable. Such vulnerability obtains in further visionary situations as well: when the soul leaves the body it is not certain that it will be able to return. Nehunya ben Hakanah, whose soul had left his body in a heavenly ascent, but whose expertise was required back on earth, had to be recalled by a very carefully calibrated halakhic mechanism to avoid endangering him while securing his return (*Hekhalot Rabbati* 18; cf. Lieberman in Gruenwald 1980, 241-244).

The punishments the *Tosefta* metes out to Akiva's three mystical comrades, viz. death, madness, and apostasy, while atypical of *hekhalot* retribution, which comes automatically and immediately at the hands of the protective and/or offended angels (exemplified in the Bavli in the immediate punishment of Metatron, although even there the angels discussion with the offending Metatron is not normative – the Bavli is not a *hekhalot* text – although the accusatory angelic discussion is not found in all mss.), is suggestive of the shamanistic background suggested by Davila.

³⁵ See Halperin 1980; Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 79-84.

that informs many esoteric mystical systems: it is so extreme here that a mistake is accounted as a willful act, and repentance cannot atone.³⁶ In Elisha's case, furthermore, it produced heavenly gridlock, leaving him in limbo (5). There is a real problem with this preternatural paradox: it both validates the worth of his Torah,³⁷ and leaves the angels in a bind, for even if Elisha's repentance is not accepted, sin can be atoned for through fiery punishment (mirroring the fiery lashes with which Metatron was whipped in the contrastingly parallel scene 1). Action on this possibility would undo the angelic condemnation: they evidently had not considered it, and it took Meir and Yohanan to put it into effect.³⁸

That possibility may simply have been unavailable in the *hekhlot* system as presented by the storyteller, perhaps somewhat tendentiously, and that is why he did not introduce it until the fifth episode, as he moved from the angelic to the rabbinic frame of reference. (Hence the angelic view seems out of place in this new and structurally opposed context.)³⁹ The bottom line for the narrator is this: the sinful sage presents an oxymoron that a dualistic mystical modality of either/or simply cannot digest; for the dialectically oriented rabbinic adept, however, the sinful sage becomes a paradox to be resolved by playing the two horns of the dilemma off against

³⁶ Angels are praised in a *hekhlot* hymn as “you who annul the decree...who repel wrath...” (*Synopse* 158, cited in M.D. Swartz, “Jewish Visionary Traditions in Rabbinic Literature,” C.E. Fonrobert and M.S. Jaffee, *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 209) but Elisha's iteration was evidently beyond the pale, because he had disrespected the honor of his Maker (cf. mHag 2.1, and Rubenstein's comments, 1999, 100-101).

³⁷ The value of Torah is acknowledged in the mystical half of the narrative (3 & 4), though the bibliomantic revelation held Elisha unworthy to participate in it.

³⁸ This is a satirical paradox, a joke of the rabbis at the expense of the angels. Beeri 2007, 145, compares Elisha's case to the fate of an apostate whose sins are so severe that they are unforgivable, but who repented (Elisha's Torah corresponds to their repentance): he is left in limbo, condemned to sleep eternally (yBer 9.2, 13b; cf. Rubenstein 1999, 100). The Babylonian storyteller felt free to dialectically transcend the constraints of the angelic situation (cf. Beeri, *op. cit.*, 146-148). For Rubenstein 1999, the angelic wish “unambiguously articulate[s] the cultural problem represented by Aher, namely the conflict that arises from the coexistence of sin and Torah. Sin must be punished but Torah must be rewarded” (p. 77).

³⁹ This dissonance is mirrored in the first half of the tale where the angelic either/or approach leads Elisha to apostasy out of despair and negates Meir's attempts to reverse the decree in unit 4. See the next paragraph above.

each other, with the merit of Torah having the final say, facilitating the process of atonement for fateful sinfulness.

Put another way, one could say that dialectics, which loom large in the Babylonian rabbinic arena, leads to negativity and destruction in the dichotomizing, dualistic mystical realm, and to salvation in the rabbinical spiritual one.⁴⁰ Under the former regime, Elisha reasons himself into apostasy and attains anonymous and sociological “otherness” in episode **2**, refuses to follow Meir’s logical argument for repentance in episode **3** and, in the quest for a saving augury in the following one (**4**), he finds his very right to engage in Torah spurned. Under the rabbinic regime, on the other hand, dialectical reasoning gets Elisha punished so that he can be admitted into the World to Come (**5**), secure alms for his daughter (**6**), and gain acceptance of Meir and his Torah in this world and the next (**7** and **8** respectively).

It seems that, just below the surface our storyteller has encoded a contrast between two ways of thinking that underlie the competing world views in his narrative, that of either/or versus that of dialectical synthesis. Teleologically considered, each modality leads to a heavenly transfer, one to (temporary) transformation in this life,⁴¹ the

⁴⁰ This was sensed by Beeri 2007, 119-120 (following Liebes 1990, 24), who observed that Elisha’s problem was that he resorted to simple logical inferences: if Metatron sits, there must be two powers; since Metatron erased his merits, Elisha must become an apostate. Unable to deal with paradoxes and contradictions, Elisha is incapable of reasoning himself to the more complex and ethically nuanced conclusion of repentance in an effort to reverse the decree (cf. the next section, “Elisha is a flawed character,” below). (TY itself explicitly raises the issue of Elisha’s fatal inability to reason about a complex issue, such as the death of an innocent child from a snake bite, albeit the narrator there faults Elisha’s ignorance of the teaching that the child receives his reward in the next world.) The situation in the Bavli, however, is more problematic and diverse: the failure of logic is only part of the problem in the world of Either/Or, to which Elisha has fallen victim, for the prostitute allows herself too easily to be misled concerning Elisha’s identity, and Meir’s moral reasoning is helpless in the face of the bibliomancy and the *bat kol*, whose messages support the Absolute world’s bankrupt theology (that point would not be registered by Beeri 2007, 135, because, on her understanding, it is Elisha rather than Meir who instigates unit **4**; on the dualistic worldview that obtains in *hekhalot* settings, cf. Morray-Jones, cited in n. 54 below).

⁴¹ Actually, his personal eschaton could be said to come in this world, as P. Schäfer remarked, and to the extent that one can project that thinking backwards onto Talmudic-era visionary practitioners: “The *merkava* mystic is the chosen of God to whom messianic qualities are ascribed ... the redemption does not occur in the world to come but in the here and now” (“Aim and purposes,” *HS* 293, cited in Morray Jones 2001, 229). In contrast to the rabbinic

other to eternal salvation in the next. In a larger sense, the narrative dramatizes the victory of the dialectical process over the dualistic one, for the second half resolves the difficulties created by the first half, point by point as comparison and contrast through the bifurcated design structure makes clear.

Elisha is a flawed tragic figure. The resolute thoughts and actions of Meir and Yohanan, not to mention Elisha's daughter, serve as a foil that highlights a tragic flaw that the *ba'al aggadah* has built into Elisha's character. He is irresolute in one respect, fatefully and too easily discouraged in another (both of which contrast with his confidence and forthrightness when discussing Torah). Elisha's irresoluteness is manifest in the hesitant manner in which he voices his concern that there may be Two Powers in heaven (1: *shema has ve-shalom shete reshuyot hen*), but one that he should have known would be his undoing in a visionary setting, despite his expressed hesitation.⁴²

He is far too easily discouraged by the declaration of his doom. Instead of calling the heavenly bluff by repenting, Elisha becomes Aher, an apostate incapable of entertaining the possibility of doing so.⁴³ True, the evil decree was confirmed by a *bat kol*, but the Bavli elsewhere affirms that *ein mashgihin be-vat kol* ("We do not regard a *bat kol* as authoritative").⁴⁴ The Talmud also tells of the grievous sinner Eleazar b. Dordia who, after being told that his repentance would not be accepted, ceases sinning and, having concluded in the face of divine rejection that "the matter depends on nobody but me,"

concept of a two-stage revelation, at Sinai and in the time-to-come, *hekhhalot* literature "for the most part abandons the expectation of the end of time, the classical repertoire of this world and the world to come, the messianic redemption and the final judgment...[Rather] the revelation at Sinai does not culminate in the time to come but in the heavenly journey or adjuration..., direct access to God here and now." Heavenly journey and adjuration now heavily supplement the study of Torah and prayer (P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mystical Theology*, tr. A. Pomerance [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 162-163).

⁴² Cf. n. 12 above.

⁴³ In TY he does raise the possibility, albeit as an impossibility: ואן חזרין מקבלין: ("If one [in my circumstances] repents, will they accept him?"). Beeri 2007, 119-122, explicates Elisha's responsibility, in the view of the rabbis, to repent in terms of R. Akiva's maxim, הכל צפוי והרשות נתונה ("all is foreseen, but permission is granted;" mAvot 3.16).

⁴⁴ bBM 59b.

dies with a cry of misery, securing thereby an invitation to the World to Come.⁴⁵ Indeed, in this Bavli narrative Meir several times urges Elisha to repent (as in the *Yerushalmi* version). Even in the *Yerushalmi*, Elisha dies despairing that his repentance will not be accepted (as did Eleazar b. Dordia in the aforementioned story), and Meir, given the last word in that scene, expresses the hope that Elisha died a penitent.⁴⁶ It being likely that the Babylonian redactor drew upon a source such as that of the *Yerushalmi*, it is also likely, then, that for his own narrative purposes, he chose not only to keep Elisha unrepentant, but even stoically unmoved at this tragedy.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ bAZ 17a. Eleazar ben Dordia and Elisha ben Avuya are similar in several respects in the Babylonian telling. Their sin is sexual and involves consorting with prostitutes, and a prostitute pronounces the doom of Eleazar and the “otherness” of Elisha. Despite her low status, the prostitute’s utterances can be authoritative in one respect, but ultimately are not determinative: ben Dordia realizes that he alone can change his fate (אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי; see the following note), whereas Elisha gives in to his, but Meir and Yohanan redeem him despite himself.

⁴⁶ The Talmud understands that Eleazar ben Dordia repented (R. Yehudah ha-Nasi, who like Meir in the TY Aher scene has the last word – expressing the Talmudic bottom line – explicitly refers to ben Dordia as a penitent), but his sins were evidently so grievous that he could atone only with his death. E. Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (tr. J. S. Teitelbaum, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 123 mentions this tale briefly; see the analysis in Kushelevsky 1996 (cited in n. 20 above). Beerl 2007, 63-64, relates Elisha’s cry of despair at being unable to change, having mentioned his knowledge that repentance on his part has been foreclosed. Both he and Elisha (in the *Yerushalmi* version) die sobbing, which is why R. Meir there suggests that he repented.

⁴⁷ However, Elisha’s helpless frustration and fury at his fate are given palpable expression in the conclusion of unit 4, where he either murders an unfortunate student or just voices a wish to do so. It seems that the *ba’al aggadah* here encoded both possibilities, neither of which he had to invent, since it is likely he had received both the tradition of overtly murdering students along with that of verbally killing them from a TY-like Elisha source. The framing terminology, ואיכא דאמר... ואיכא דאמר, then, does not reflect a situation where a variant tradition was added/invented later (one does find such terminology employed in TB *sugyot*, but only before the second possible version: there it often seems that one of the two versions is authentic and one invented), but the narratological intention to recreate the concubine of Gibeah incident in one scenario (in this context, it furnishes an indictment of the cruel bibliomantic messages and the divinity behind them), and to dramatize Elisha’s feelings while preserving his innocence in the other. (Killing off only one student instead of several reflects the same esthetic change for purposes of dramatic

It should not escape our notice that in the Babylonian account, Meir refused in word and deed to grant credence to the *bat kol*. Ignoring Elisha's report of the *bat kol*, he again urged Elisha to repent (3), and sought to reverse the decree through bibliomancy (4). Stymied in the half of the story governed by the angelic ethos, Meir took decisive action on his own to purge Elisha's sin (5). It does seem that this storyteller, by locating the *bat kol* in the mystical half and reversing its decree in the second human-oriented portion has subtly let us know that, indeed, *ein mashgihin be-vat kol*. On this telling, the latter is but a stage prop for the mystical spectacle; it is unnecessary in the rabbinic arena, which in effect subverts it, as happened in the Oven of Achnai narrative, another late Stammaitic composition.⁴⁸ Having accepted the motif of the *bat kol* from the Yerushalmi version, our *ba'al aggadah* reworked it for his own narrative purposes.⁴⁹

The Babylonian recreator also makes it difficult for the attentive listener/reader to escape noticing the contrasting characterization of the pro-active rabbis Meir and Yohanan, as well as Elisha's daughter, vis à vis that of Elisha, to the latter's detriment. The daughter's reasoned rejection of R. Yehudah ha-Nasi's dismissive proof-text is a

effect that our narrator made in reducing TY's report of Elisha's daughters to one.)

⁴⁸ Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 100, and Beeri 2007, 117-118, follow E.E. Urbach's explanation of *bat kol* at the end of הלכה ונבואה, *Tarbiz* 18 (1946/1947), 2-27, pp. 23-27 (=idem, *The World of the Sages: Collected Studies* (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1988), 43-47; cf. K. H. Lindbeck, *Story and Theology: Elijah's Appearances in the Babylonian Talmud* (PhD diss.: New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1999), 147-158) to the effect that a divine *bat kol* is a form of attenuated prophecy that communicates important messages of national encouragement or comfort, or information concerning an individual's reward in heaven. That characterization, however, does not account for its function in late Babylonian aggadic compositions such as our Elisha narrative or the Achnai oven (bBM 59). There the *bat kol* represents a lesser form of divine approval for a superseded message or ideology whose rejection has been confirmed by a higher form, viz., God himself (the oven story) or in the form of His *Shekhinah* (the Elisha narrative). Dan Ben Amos, *Narrative Forms in the Haggadah: Structural Analysis* (PhD: Indiana University, 1966 [i.e. 1967]), 92-93, notes that the point of R. Eliezer's lack of success in the Achnai narrative, despite a *bat kol* and miracles, is to deny their validation power. Ironically, it is the prostitute in the Elazar ben Doradia story (bAZ 17a) who delivers the equivalent message to that of our narrative, viz., that a particular sinner's repentance will not be accepted.

⁴⁹ It should be noted, however, that the Yerushalmi narrator countered the *bat kol*, as well, by portraying R. Meir as hoping until the very end that Elisha would repent, and urging the latter to do so.

re-enactment and reversal, in a rabbinic mode, of the failed bibliomancy episode, and her action received divine approbation. This resolute group must be an element of design consciously woven by a gifted, and cunning, *ba'al aggadah* into his powerful narrative. Not only has he recreated Elisha as a sympathetic character whose apostasy resulted from an innocent mistake, but he has located the problem in part in Elisha's personality: certain character issues contributed to the latter's unfortunate decision to accept the *bat kol's* decree and embark on a life of sin,⁵⁰ thereby sealing his fate. Where others aforementioned called upon God and man to ignore or forgive Elisha's sins, he himself made no such attempt. This furnishes another fine instance of the penetrating portrayal of the psychology or phenomenology of sin in the person of a rabbinic hero wrought by a Babylonian *ba'al aggadah*

The divine confirmation of both the angelic and the human perspectives: implications for the meaning of this narrative. The time has come to return to the nagging question of God's paradoxical behavior, both condemning Elisha and ostensibly accepting him into heaven. Basically, this rabbinic *ba'al aggadah* recognizes the existence of two spiritual paths, that of the (*merkavah* and *hekhalot*) mysticism of his day, and that of *talmud torah*.⁵¹ He is aware that some students will encounter both, and find the mystical one attractive. A story complex like this one ascribes a certain level of validity to the mystical system and its theology, but it forcefully

⁵⁰ TY suggests that his fall resulted from factors outside of Elisha, among them, things his father and mother said or did that led to moral flaws and shortcomings in Elisha's character. The Bavli artist located the flaws directly in Elisha's personality, utilizing his psychological acuity to emphasize personal responsibility. For an example of the unremitting insistence on the part of a Babylonian aggadist that a student take responsibility for himself despite issues of personality and immaturity, cf. J. Rovner, "'Rav Assi Had This Old Mother: The Structure, Meaning and Formation of a Talmudic Story,'" *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggadah*, ed. J. L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 101-124, pp. 106-112.

⁵¹ He was preceded in this by the creator of the *pardes baraita*. It may be significant that the text portrays the three who met failure and an unfortunate end, as students; only Akiva, who emerged unscathed, was portrayed as a master by being given the title "Rabbi" (see Morray-Jones 1993, 195; Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 107, 109-110).

dramatizes the latter's weaknesses. A system run by angelic guardians is cruel and unyielding, therefore dangerous and amoral.

The mystical path and its worldview are accepted by God, who confirms this with His *bat kol* and through bibliomancy. However, God also recognizes the contrasting spiritual power of *talmud torah* and the rabbinic adepts who embody its ethos. They are reasoning creatures who act decisively out of moral courage. Just as God accepts the validity of angelic decrees, He also accepts the virtue of rabbinic decisions. He valorizes the rabbinic actions, allowing Elisha into heaven despite the angels' wishes, and accepts Meir's Torah against His own initial inclination,⁵² because it is reasonable and moral to do so. In the rabbinic pantheon, the sage is higher than the angels who guard the heavenly palaces in the esoteric realm.⁵³

Setting his story upon a foundation of this almost primal conflict between two competing spiritual systems, our *ba'al aggadah* achieves a compelling contrast between the redemptive power of Torah, which valorizes the sages who devote themselves to it, and the moral-psychological indifference of the *hekhalot* regime, which is unable to function in the face of imperfection.⁵⁴ Seen against this backdrop

⁵² R. Meir has been similarly characterized elsewhere as an independent and idiosyncratic, but gifted, individual who, because of a conflict with a high-status personage (the *Nasi*), almost had his teachings deleted from the Mishnah (bHor 13b-14a).

⁵³ According to Schäfer 1992, 148-149 (and cf. 133, n. 53), the message of *hekhalot* literature is that God passionately desires that Israel undertake heavenly ascents to close the distance between them; He loves them more than He does the angels, who oppose those journeys out of competitive jealousy. Enoch-Metatron is the supreme example of a human transformed into an angel, who is elevated to a higher status than all other angels because God prefers him. Ironically, it is this human made divine who confused Elisha precisely because of his special closeness to the deity.

⁵⁴ The *hekhalot* portrayals of vigilant guards and the dangers of encroachment are consistent with the requirement that the adept must approach the esoteric realm armed with esoteric knowledge and facility found in other Antique and Late Antique systems. Such concerns also resonate with the biblical priestly analogues, where encroachment on the part of unauthorized persons is punishable by death on the spot (Num. 1:51; 3:10 and 38): both systems are centered in the Tabernacle/Temple and its sanctity: the Torah with the earthly one, and *hekhalot* literature (along with its antecedents in Ezekiel and pseudepigraphic visionary texts) with the heavenly one (wherein certain classes of angels take on the roll of the Priestly literature's Levitical guards). C.R.A. Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion: the Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism: a Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002, 226-227, observes that the rigid condemnatory

Elisha's fall is illuminated as a multi-faceted phenomenon. He may have had psychological flaws, but the mystical system really failed him: it only exacerbated them. He had accumulated the redemptive merit of Torah, but was unable to use it to his own advantage: the mystical regime afforded no potential for hope from Elisha's (too human) rabbinic attainments. And yet the merit of that Torah extended to his spiritual and biological heirs, gaining Meir renown and Elisha's daughter sustenance. That merit, further, moved Meir and Yohanan to honor⁵⁵ and rehabilitate Elisha. It compensated for his personal weaknesses and gained him redemption, against the wishes of the powers-that-be in the esoteric mystical realm. The God of the rabbis listens, and He lets them have the last word,⁵⁶ which is, appropriately, a message of divine empathy and love, qualities that were so lacking in the mystical economy of the heavenly palaces overseen by angelic hierarchies.

The creator of this narrative complex has contextualized the value of achievement in Torah within the cultural world of the rabbinic Jew. Communicated, Torah facilitates the growth and development of others (an extension of the contrasting images of nourishing fruits versus husks or pits, **7** and **8**). The substance of their learning leads to spiritual heroism, prompting R. Meir and R. Yohanan to defy angelic decrees (albeit supported by the divine *bat kol*),⁵⁷ and a daughter to challenge the purported leader of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael who threatens her on the authority of a Scriptural cliché. All of those efforts receive divine affirmation. This system is underwritten

approach to the water test of the sixth heaven exemplifies a pre-rabbinic type of dualistic thinking found in Qumran, where, e.g., water is contrasted with fire, commoners with priests, worshipers of the golden calf with Levites who maintain priestly purity, and thinking the floor is paved with water (a feminine and impure substance) with knowing that it is paved with rarefied, brilliant air.

⁵⁵ The exact nature of Elisha's accomplishments is worthy of further research, for his Torah here is exemplified in a popular, aggadic, genre, viz., homiletics. He never teaches *halakhah* in these narratives. However, *Rut Rabba* notes his renown as a teacher in the *beit midrash*, who was beloved and honored by the *haverim*, a term indicative of some academic attainment (cf. n. 21 above). That tradition evidently carried over into the ongoing narrative treatment of Elisha.

⁵⁶ Rabban Gamaliel is portrayed as powerful enough to force the hand of heaven. Sages move to protect R. Akiva from possible divine punishment instigated by the latter (דילמא עניש ליה, bBer 27b), and Gamaliel secured a place in the next world for a Roman official (*hegmon*; bTaan 29a).

⁵⁷ The Talmud ascribes superiority to worthy humans with respect to angels. Righteous men are greater than the ministering angels (bSan 93a); worthy ones have access to a division of Paradise that angels may not enter (bNed 32a).

by a God who feels for the human condition, listens to reason, and calls a man who teaches about His empathic nature “my son” (8). In accepting Meir, it is as if God did not really change, for that scholar merely articulated what kind of being God really is. The identification of the suffering deity is a masterful stroke, for it puts the entire narrative in a new light: God was in great pain as Elisha suffered his punishment and, possibly, from the time of his apostasy, pain which He evidently repressed out of an obligation to support the system (expressed via His *bat kol*) under which it happened.⁵⁸

The narrative structure, bifurcated to portray two contrasting spiritual modalities, is an integrated whole. At the end, God empathizes with Elisha’s suffering, but He still considers him a sinner responsible for his sins committed under the *hekhlot* regimen which he had internalized, to his misfortune. The merit of Elisha’s Torah may have impelled other Sages to rescue him, but not without Elisha undergoing punishment.⁵⁹

Chronological disparities in Stammaitic aggadic narratives

The attentive reader will note some chronological disparities in this narrative. For instance, God does not accept Elisha into heaven until Yohanan dies (5), yet He sends a fire to warn Yehudah ha-Nasi to provide sustenance to Elisha’s daughter (6).⁶⁰ To make matters worse, God is portrayed as still refusing to recite Meir’s Torah, on the grounds that he had learned from Elisha, in the time of Rabbah bar Sheila, a fourth generation Amora (8),⁶¹ though He himself had accepted Elisha into heaven two generations earlier and, even more,

⁵⁸ The trope that God suffers alongside Israel, his *Shekhinah* having gone into exile with them goes back to the *Mekhilta Shirah* 3 (p. 128: ישראל כשירדו למצרים; עלו עלת שכינה עמהם, שנ' ואנכי אעלך גם ירדה שכינה עמהם, שנ' אנכי ארד עמך מצרימה; עלו עלת שכינה עמהם, שנ' ואנכי אעלך גם ירדה שכינה עמהם), closely paralleled in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, p. 1, and bMeg 29a extends it to every exile. The possibility that God suffered from the beginning of the apostasy was raised above (before the detailed analysis): it is clear that Elisha was suffering then because he did not express his heresy with joy and only embarked on a life of sin out of despair; Elisha’s sorrow in the face of God’s implacable refusal to accept his repentance was most poignantly dramatized in the double conclusion to the bibliomancy episode (4).

⁵⁹ His sins were so numerous and/or serious that he was still burning when Yohanan rescued him.

⁶⁰ Noted by Rubenstein 1999, 93.

⁶¹ The structural analysis below shows that the Rabbah bar Sheila–Elijah encounter is an invention of the *ba'al aggadah*, created to mirror the first scene. Beerl 2007, 160, treats the episode as a separate source (סיפור, “story”) that was placed here, linked to the preceding unit by fruit consumption imagery.

had already affirmed the argument of the latter's daughter, that his Torah gave her merit.

One can evade the second problem by suggesting that Meir's punishment is due to a technicality not addressed until Amoraic times (7 and 8), i.e., while Elisha's Torah may be beyond reproach, a student of the sages should still refrain from associating with evildoers. Similarly, in the situation of Elisha's daughter, the distinction she draws between deeds and learning cuts both ways: the fact that Elisha himself deserves punishment for his deeds need not detract from the merit of his Torah accruing to her.⁶²

However, while the distinctions advanced above may be consonant with the attitudes of the Babylonian *ba'al aggadah*, the latter not having been articulated, it would seem that the author(s) were simply operating at a level of abstraction or imaginative, ahistorical distance such that certain types of disparities would not bother him(them). In other words, this may be analogous to the chronological disparities found in Stammaitic *sugyot*, where, for the logical progression of the argument Amoraic teachings may be adduced achronologically, citing a later Amora before one who lived in an earlier time. In the present case, the aggadist mentioned Yohanan in scene 5 and the daughter in scene 6 because the former had a role in the reversal of scene 5's structural opposite 1, and the daughter belonged in scene 6⁶³ which corresponds structurally to scene 2 with its contrasting female figure. The narrative effect of prolonging Elisha's punishment in scene 5 over three generations emphasizes the seriousness of his sinfulness.⁶⁴ In addition, Yohanan, though not included in the TY version, is introduced anonymously here, which could imply that that segment was developed by the redactor in his revision of the posthumous source. Scene 6 had its own issues (charity for Elisha's progeny), and it is closely anticipated by its parallel in the TY version. Similarly, there is some logic to putting Meir's problems last, being as they are refinements of the conflict between Elisha's life and his Torah.

⁶² This acceptance of individual responsibility negates the contrasting notion of visiting one generation's sins onto another not entirely lacking in Rabbinic thought (as Yehudah ha-Nasi's remark to Elisha's daughter demonstrates), although our aggadist clearly favors individual responsibility.

⁶³ The roles of R. Meir and Rabbi were inherited from the prior treatment as in TY. Both characters are functions of chronological constraints, with the former as Elisha's disciple and the latter as a leader when the daughter was destitute.

⁶⁴ The gravity of his sins was so great that the punishment could well have gone on longer absent Yohanan's spirited intervention (unit 5).

In addition, there are structural considerations, for the narrator concluded with **8**, not just for the fine observation, but because, reflecting back on Elisha's predicament from the divine perspective (the *Shekhinah*), it balances and reverses the negative revelations of scene **4**. The incident with Rabbah bar Sheila was probably invented by the aggadist (see Part Two below); the chronological issue would simply be irrelevant to a narratological purpose that had other concerns. This finding sheds further light on the understanding that the complex of episodes is formatted in loose chronological sequence but plotted along a tight structural-thematic form, with **8** balancing **4**, to recast the whole preceding narrative in a new light.⁶⁵

Conclusion of Part One: Origins and transformations

The Talmud elicits this textual complex with the simple question *mai hi* (literally, "what is it," i.e., "what does [the foregoing text] mean") or in more refined formulation, *mai haza* ("what did he see [in his vision in the Toseftan account]")?⁶⁶ The story far exceeds its [assigned

⁶⁵ Beeri 2007, 154 (מציג סיפור שאין לו קשר מפורש עם מה שקדם לו) and 156 (סוגיית מאי חזא? חזא (מאי חזא? חזא) is aware of some disconnectedness in certain material included in this complex, but did not utilize the literary structural evidence to explain why those scenes were placed there.

⁶⁶ This version (Ms. London and the majority of mss.), a secondary refinement, was formulated with an eye to the first scene, the heavenly vision (מאי חזא? חזא (מאי חזא? חזא...); in addition to the Vilna ed., *mai hi* is found in ms. Oxford Bodleian heb. d. 63 (1286) 32 and ed. Pesaro 1514, and ms. Vatican 134 reads מאי חזא. *Mai hi* is focused more generally on the Toseftan *baraita*, and asks what *hi* (feminine pronoun, used to refer to the preceding text), means. The latter form is more typical of a Talmudic question because its starting point is the preceding text. Moreover, the anticipation of the ensuing text by noting that Elisha *haza* "saw" something is not anticipated by the Bavli's version of the source *baraita* which lacks any mention of seeing (*hetsits* is wanting in all TB mss.!) and focuses only on "cutting the shoots". Therefore, the latter form would probably be a secondary, narratologically motivated refinement. Two witnesses have only one *haza* following *mai* (so ms. Mun. 95 and an unidentified "Spanish printing," perhaps the one Goshen-Gottstein, 278, referred to as ed. Guadalajara, 1482). Since *mai* does not come by itself, but either before or after a word or phrase, we would have to say that both words form the question, and the answer begins directly with the identification: "Metatron". However, one might counterclaim that one of two instances of *haza* was lost due to haplography, and even that the other (or its ancestor) only copied that version; moreover, *mai* alone is unusual, as mentioned: it accompanies another word or appears either at the end or the beginning of a sentence (question). (I used the Saul Lieberman Institute of Talmudic Research,

task]. One can learn something about the redaction of aggadic passages from asking whether this question preceded the composition of the Elisha story in its present form. In other words, it might seem reasonable that the question was meant to elicit a far simpler answer, and a masterful aggada narrator (*ba'al aggadah*) developed and expanded his material after the fact. This would be an argument that aggadic composition went on until late in the process of creating the Bavli.

On the other hand, one must take into account the evidence of the Yerushalmi's complex treatment of the material, which undoubtedly preceded the Babylonian version.⁶⁷ Clearly, people had shown an unusually keen interest in the *Tosefta's* report of Aher's failed quest for centuries. Both the Toseftan *baraita* and the Yerushalmi's treatment had been redacted in this passage in the latter Talmud. It is reasonable to assume that the Babylonian *ba'al aggadah* was aware of that material, or material like it, when he came to reframe it for his own time and place (audience). Actually, the discrepancy between the introductory query and the cited answer is typical of the Talmud. A redactor will insert a question relevant to the local context in order to elicit a complex text only a part of which transmits information pertinent to that query.

The aggadic complex under consideration, then, could indeed have been composed and/or redacted prior to the Stammaitic redactor who introduced it with the question, *mai hi?* This fulfills the requirement of oral culture for information to be repeated so that it can be memorized and learned, and we are treated to the whole text. However, one can never know whether Bavli *aggada* texts belong to the group of pre-existing texts upon which the redactors drew in working up their *gemara*, e.g., Tannaitic *baraitot*, Amoraic *mimrot*, case reports, summaries of court proceedings and other anecdotes, or whether they were synthesized in the course of the redactional process.

Anonymous aggadic narratives present a problem that the dialectical, halakhic analogue to aggadic stories, the *sugyot*, do not, for the anonymous *massa u-mattan* (the "give and take" of the dialogical discussion) within which the attributed material is

Sol and Evelyn Henkind Talmud Text Databank, Version 5, CD-Rom: 200-, software: Bar Ilan University, c2002, which has not incorporated all the sources used by Goshen-Gottstein.)

⁶⁷ The Bavli knew it to some degree because elements incorporated into the TY story may be found elsewhere in TB. J. Liebes came to the opposite conclusion (cf. Rubenstein's critique, cited n. 3 above, pp. 213-214).

embedded, is by and large attributable to the late, Stammaitic redactors. However, the situation in the *sugyot* is not as simple as one would like to imagine. As mentioned above, an anonymous question cites earlier material (which may have independently undergone a long process of revision). Moreover, despite its apparently late final textualization, the anonymous *massa u-mattan*, including its anticipatory queries and challenges, may well incorporate pre-existing questions or other texts, in many cases seamlessly.⁶⁸

The Elisha narrative is a complex made up of eight textual groups, some of which contain attributed material. Each of those could have some pre-history of its own, as evidenced by the presence of many in Yerushalmi textualizations. Some may be pseudepigraphic, but that does not necessarily mean that the latest redactors invented them. The latest invention seems to be at least units **1**, **2** and **8**, which are anonymous (Stammaitic, i.e., they cite or echo no Tannaitic, Amoraic or anonymous Palestinian teachings) and lack any parallels. Some of the attributed material may constitute a form of confirmation that the issue of Aher, in particular, and of the sinning sage and his Torah in general, were addressed over many generations.

When all is said and done, what can one conclude about the time of the redaction of this complex? I think that the brilliance and lateness of the opening scene, taken together with the overall bifurcated structure, which integrates that scene in the overall design of this narrative, are similar in sophistication to the design⁶⁹ and intellectual creativity displayed in late Stammaitic *sugyot*, and are, accordingly, indicative of a late Stammaitic production (and see, further indications, part two, immediately below). All of the early material has been modified to fit the bifurcated pattern of comparative and

⁶⁸ J. Rubenstein, "Criteria of Stammaitic Intervention in Aggada," in Rubenstein 2005, 417-440.

⁶⁹ See S. Y. Friedman, "Some Structural Patterns of Talmudic *Sugyot*," *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies, 1973* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977) 3:387-402 [Hebrew]; *ibid.*, "A Critical Study of *Yevamot X* with a Methodological Introduction," *Texts and Studies: Analecta Judaica* 1 (New York: JTS, 1977), 275-441, pp. 316-319 [Hebrew]; L. Jacobs, "The Numbered Sequence as a Literary Device in the Babylonian Talmud," *Hebrew Studies* 7 (1983) 137-149; S. Valler, "The Number Fourteen as a Literary Device in the Babylonian Talmud," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26 (1995), 169-184; Y. Elman, "Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud," *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999), 52-79; Rovner, *op. cit.* n. 94 below.

contrasting symmetries that combine in generating the meaning of this piece.

Moreover, the fact that the opening question is inadequate as an anticipation of such a complex text does not mean that the latter was not redacted by the group responsible for that query. Rather, it seems reasonable that the invention of the query is an integral aspect of the creation of the opening scene (1). Remove the question and the first sentence of the scene, “He saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit...,” hangs in the air devoid of context. We know neither who “he” is, nor why Metatron is mentioned. Rather, it makes the most sense to understand the opening question as a narrative device used by the aggadist as a transition from the *baraita* to a form of the tale that only he knows because he (re)created and synthesized it.⁷⁰

Elisha ben Avuyah joins a group of sages, among them famous ones like Rabban Gamaliel of Yavneh (bBer 27b-28a) and R. Assi (bKid 31b), and lesser known ones such as Rav Hiyya bar Ashi (bKid 81b), who became negative exemplars celebrated in finely-crafted Babylonian Talmudic narratives that ascribe to them errors from which one can learn moral and spiritual lessons important to rabbinic culture. The learning process, moreover, is modeled in those very stories, by the end of which the protagonists achieve illumination and/or redemption, in some form.

Part 2: The Meaning of the Aher Narrative (bHag 15a & b) As Seen in the Structural and Functional Analysis of its First and Final Scenes

2.1. Introduction

Literary structural analysis has provided a firm basis on which to (re)construct the meaning and intention of the narrative of Elisha ben Avuyah’s fall and redemption. It helps the reader see clearly that the Babylonian aggadist has adapted a narrative like the Yerushalmi’s

⁷⁰ The alternative presumption is that the opening scene pre-existed its narrative context. Then, one could suppose that the redactor modified its opening language, presumably a *précis* of the *baraita* material, in order to create the linkage with the present context in the Bavli. It seems that there is no way to avoid introducing the *baraita* in order to make sense of the first scene, and this is most efficaciously done by assigning the question to the *ba'al aggadah* himself.

story on that subject to form the basis of a narrative on the continuing merit and soteriological effects of the Torah of the sinning sage. In this reworking, Elisha comes across as a tragic figure, a master of esoteric and rabbinical knowledge who is unable to assert himself in the face of the angelic expunging and the condemnation of the *bat kol*. Somewhat out of character for a champion of *talmud torah*, that passivity resulted from his unquestioning acceptance of the “either/or” policy prevailing in the mystical world-view. This stands opposed to the disputational mode of the rabbinical approach, whereby dialectical progression driven by reason can reverse prior positions and situations, as demonstrated in the second half of this composition.

In revising older texts for a new edition, redactors may, in addition to internal revisions, enclose their versions in new opening and closing pieces.⁷¹ Further examination of the structure and meaning of this narrative shows that the redactor has designed the final scene as an inversion of the first one. This appears clearly when their literary structure is compared. On the other hand, however, comparison of parallels in terms of the functions of the various characters and occurrences yields an even deeper understanding of the ideological and esthetic underpinnings of this tale. In that analysis, God in the final scene emerges as an innocent victim of a bureaucratic error paralleling Elisha in the first. The method and meaning so built into the structure of this narrative will be explicated in the following comparison of the twofold parallelistic structure.

2.2. Structural table of scenes 1 and 8 showing mirror imaging

Since both the first and final scenes/units are wholly original contributions of the late redactors, it should not be surprising that they share many features: they add a heavenly perspective to the Elisha story, each features a divine immortal figure (Metatron and Elijah) and a sage who is in danger of being condemned on high. Indeed, they are inversions of one another. In the first scene, the sage moves from inclusion in the most august vision allowed a mortal to exclusion and condemnation, whereas, in the final one, a sage moves from being excluded by the deity to rehabilitation and inclusion in His own personal collection of Oral Torah.

⁷¹ “Textual expansions at the borders of a text are often a way of reframing a composition in the course of a new edition” (K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, 128). Such reframing expansions provide their authors with “a new interpretive horizon” within which to work (*ibid*, p. 151; cf. pp. 150-152).

To better limn the parallel but contrasting nature of these units, insights based upon a structuralist approach to textual analysis can be used to great effect. The material presented below utilizes discrete aspects of structuralist analysis of folk literature and fiction. This is not a claim that, e.g., folk tales or novels follow certain universal structuralist rules by their very nature.⁷² Rather, structuralist methods of analysis can serve the critic to reveal meaning and explicate various aspects of texts. This applies to the present text in two ways. One is that it helps one apprehend the nature of the material and its meaning. The other is that the similarities of structure and technique followed in both the opening and closing scenes are strongly suggestive of their both being creations of the same authorship.

The columns showing general structure and contrasts/parallels in the table below indicate how unit/scene **8** is an inverted parallel to unit/scene **1**.

It should be noted that scene **8** takes place on earth (the rabbinic habitat), while scene **1** takes place in the heavens (the esoteric speculator's ideal habitat). To bridge this gap, the narrator introduces Elijah to reveal to Rabbah bar Sheila what is taking place in heaven.⁷³ Elijah is a stand-in for God, in that he renders the latter's exact thoughts and doings transparent to the sage. The pronoun "he" converts effortlessly to "I" to reveal what God does and says.⁷⁴ At the same time, our author, in introducing Rabbah bar Sheila as his human witness, also gains a "helper" essential to moving the plot forward, as will be explicated below.

The realization that the final scene mirrors the first sheds light on several problems. A primary issue is the apparent redundancy of the scene: the ability of rabbinic scholars to accept the good a person has to offer while rejecting the bad has been laid out clearly in the preceding narrative unit. Another problem is that God already knows

⁷² For structuralist theories and approaches, I have relied upon R. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: an Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1974) and J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1975). Culler is particularly helpful in addressing the problems with each approach.

⁷³ This tale is more developed than most stories where a human encounters Elijah (אשכחיה ר' פלוני לאליהו), of which TB has seven. Those tales tend to be "pronouncement stories", typically "lacking a developed plot", and serving instead to highlight a memorable saying usually recited by Elijah (Lindbeck 1999, 269-270).

⁷⁴ On third person narration which is really a first person account (narrative "he" is a transparent expression of the character "I"), see Culler 1975, 199.

this anyway, whether because of His understanding or because He would be aware that sages had laid it out as in the preceding unit (7). In addition, it seems anti-climactic and redundant for God to accept Meir when the latter's standing was not questioned during his lifetime; moreover, he secured purificatory punishment for Elisha (unit 5) with no opposition in heaven. Resolving those issues will shed light on the nature and method of the composition of this narrative.

The following table shows a fairly common aggadic plot structure.⁷⁵ The tale begins with an *exposition* introducing important characters and establishing a situation. It proceeds rapidly to a *complication*, events come to a catalyzing *climax*, and *consequences* ensue. Interestingly, this structure helps one see how the opposed circumstances of the climax led to opposed consequences. Indeed, that situation is challenged in different ways by textual learning (segment 2): Elisha's textual learning misleads him because he does not understand that Metatron is the exception that proves the rule, for he sat only after having been granted permission; God's exclusion of Meir from His heavenly Mishnah⁷⁶ is misleading because it is based on the mistaken assumption that it was tainted by Meir's inclusion of Torah from Elisha. The misunderstanding involves a problem with pairs or parts of a whole (segment 2): heaven can have only one ultimate Power, not two; a pomegranate has only one useful (good) part (inside), but also a useless (bad) one which must be rejected (skin, peel). A forceful act produces a resolution in contrasting ways (segment 3): in an act of indiscriminate rejection, angels flog Metatron for remaining seated even though that angel never pretended to be a co-deity; Elijah defends Meir who, in an act of discriminating acceptance, consumes the inside of the pomegranate, demonstrating that he regards only Elisha's Torah, but rejects the bad example of his deeds (discards the peel).

The next consequence (segment 4) contrasts Metatron and Elisha with God and Meir: Metatron is allowed to punish Elisha, on whose account he was flogged, by expunging the latter's good deeds (which

⁷⁵ Noticed in part in Rubenstein 1999, 79. On plot structure see, e.g., D. Ben-Amos, *Narrative Forms in the Haggadah: Structural Analysis* (PhD: Bloomington: Indiana University, 1966 [i.e. 1967]); Fraenkel 2001, esp. chapter 3, 75-138.

⁷⁶ Meir has made a dangerous choice resulting in its rejection elsewhere in TB *aggadah* in the story of the deposition R. Shimon b. Gamaliel (bHor 13b-14a, noted above, n. 52). The quality of his Torah and his enterprising resourcefulness are celebrated there, as well.

actually impelled Elisha to embark on a life of sin); while God accepted Meir, after initially rejecting his Torah on account of Elisha, upon being told that Meir had indeed rejected the latter's bad deeds (discarding the pomegranate skin).

The tale closes with an epilogue in which a revered figure confirms the outcome and comments upon its meaning. Typical of many aggadic tales, a voice emanating from a higher authority concludes each episode (each one is actually a discrete, fully formed aggadic tale), affirming the preceding point from a broader perspective. Here the contrasting conclusions refract their preceding narratives with reference to rejection from/acceptance as God's sons,⁷⁷ thereby echoing one another (segment 5). The *bat kol* confirms rejection of Elisha as permanent, while God acknowledges and accepts Meir's teachings.⁷⁸ In accepting those teachings, God indirectly includes Torah from Elisha; in reciting them, God articulates his empathy for the suffering of sinners, such as Elisha, again, indirectly, by inference.

⁷⁷ A theme raised in Goshen-Gottstein 2000, 95-97.

⁷⁸ Lindbeck 1999, 155, notes that a *bat kol* functions to limit the power of humans, whereas Elijah in the role of informant affirms their power. In the "Oven of Achnai" story (bBM 59b), the *bat kol* limits the power available to humans to legislate and innovate, while Elijah affirms that power. Cf. n.48 above on the unique and ambivalent stand *vis à vis* the status and function of the *bat kol* taken in the Elisha narrative and in bBM 59b.

General structure	Contrasts/Parallels	Scene 1	Scene 1	Scene 8	Scene 8
1. Setting. a. Sage sees an immortal hero;	Vision in heaven / on earth	[Elisha] saw Metatron	חזא [אלישע] מטטרון	Rabbah b. Shila [once] met Elijah [= God]	אשכחיה רבה בר שילה לאליהו [= הקב"ה]
b. Situation in heaven.	Metatron writes merits of Israel (inclusion) / God recites the teachings of all rabbis except for Meir (exclusion)	[to whom] permission was granted to sit and write down the merits of Israel.	דאתיבא ליה רשותא למיתב למיכתב זכוותא דישראל.	He said to him: What is the Holy One, blessed be He, doing? He answered: He utters traditions in the name of all the Rabbis, but in the name of R. Meir he does not utter.	אמר ליה: מאי קא עביד הקדוש ברוך הוא? אמר ליה: קאמר שמעתא מפומייהו דכולהו רבנן, ומפומיה דרבי מאיר לא קאמר.
2. Complication: <i>gamar</i> segments imply/contain problem: incommensurate mixing leads/led to improper conclusion.	Bad role models: according to text, Metatron ought not be sitting / God thinks Meir wrong to incorporate Elisha's Torah. Metatron's action leads Elisha to	Said he: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no emulation, and no back,	אמר: גמירא דלמעלה לא הוי לא ישיבה ולא תחרות ולא עורף ולא עיפוי, שמא חס ושלום שתי רשויות הן.	Rabbah asked him, Why? – Because he learnt traditions at the mouth of Aher.	אמר ליה: אמאי? [אמר]: משום דקא גמר שמעתא מפומיה דאחר.

	skirt two-powers heresy / Meir's learning led to his exclusion	and no weariness. Perhaps, – God forefend! – there are two divinities!			
3. Catalyzing climax: Metatron beaten by colleagues (angels); Meir defended by colleague (Rabbah b. Sheila).	Angels punish Metatron for remaining seated (which led to error) / Rabbah b. Sheila defends Meir: he ate only the pomegranate's insides (avoiding error)	[Thereupon] they led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes. ⁷⁹	אפקוהו למיטרון ומחיוהו שיתין פולסי דנורא. ⁸⁰	Said: [Rabbah] to him: But why? R. Meir found a pomegranate; he ate [the fruit] within it, and the peel he threw away.	אמר ליה: אמאי, רבי מאיר רמון מצא, תוכו אכל, קליפתו זרק.

⁷⁹ The following line in printed ed. Vilna is an addition not found in many mss.: אמרו ליה: מאי טעמא כי חזיתיה לא קמת מקמיה ([They said] to him: Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him?). Dov Septimus calls attention to a ms. version of this line, חטאו של, *Leshonenu* 69 (2006/2007) 291-300.

⁸⁰ See previous note.

4. Contrary consequences: Elisha expunged from a text; Meir restored to a text.	Rejection of Elisha's good deeds / God calls Meir "my son"	Permission was [then] given to him to strike out the merits of Aher	איתהיבא ליה רשותא למימחק זכוותא דאחר.	He answered: Now He says: Meir my son says:	אמר ליה: השתא קאמר: מאיר בני אומר (משנה סנהדרין ו, ה).
5. Epilogue. a. Contrasting divine voices...	God, speaking through a <i>Bat kol</i> / <i>Shekhinah</i>	A Bath Kol went forth and said:	יצתה בת קול ואמרה (ירמיהו ג'):	When a man suffers, to what expression does the Shechinah give utterance?	בזמן שאדם מצטער שכינה מה לשון אומרת?
b. express opposed messages.	confirms the preceding action: condemns Elisha, rejecting him as a son / God, through Meir's Torah, acknowledges Elisha's suffering.	Return, ye backsliding children – except Aher.	שובו בנים שובבים — חוץ מאחר.	'My head is heavy, my arm is heavy'. If the Holy One, blessed be He, is thus grieved over the blood of the wicked, how much more so over the blood of the righteous that is shed.	קלני מראשי, קלני מזרועי. אם כך הקדוש ברוך הוא מצטער על דמן של רשעים - קל וחומר על דמן של צדיקים שנשפך.

2.3. *Contrasting plot development in scenes 1 and 8*

The contrasting plots in scenes **1** and **8** involve sages threatened with divine condemnation for an apparent violation of a religious-conceptual and/or social-ethical norm, but they move in opposite directions. Each story may each be summed up in a single sentence. In scene **1**, a sage apparently fell victim to a serious theological error, and is condemned. In scene **8**, a sage who is condemned because he seems to be in serious error is shown to be free of that error, and is rehabilitated.

The basic flow of the story, as well as the similarities and contrasts of the two scenes, may be clarified in light of the following table, in which the preceding table has been modified to show the “progression of the plot.” Each story flows in the opposite direction, from inclusion to exclusion and from exclusion to inclusion, respectively.⁸¹ Both feature a sage as hero. In unit/scene **1**, Elisha moves from *inclusion* (segment **1**) to *exclusion* (segment **4**); R. Meir in unit/scene **2** moves from *exclusion* to *inclusion* (segments **1** and **4**). The movement is set in motion when an error introduced in the *complication* (segment **2**) leads to a *catalyzing climax* (segment **3**). At that stage, the lack of a helper leads to Elisha’s *exclusion*, while the presence of a helper facilitates Meir’s *inclusion* (segment **4**). The outcome of each story is affirmed in an *epilogue* by a divine declaration (segment **5**).

⁸¹ C. Bremond, according to S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (London & New York: Methuen, 1983), 27, claims that narrative sequences are of improvement or deterioration. An improvement sequence begins with a lack or a disequilibrium ... and finally establishes equilibrium. When a man who lacks a wife marries, his disequilibrium is reversed. However, if she, e.g., runs away, that sets up a new sequence which begins with disequilibrium, and equilibrium is sought.

Progression of Plot

Progression of Plot	Scene 1	Scene 1	Scene 8	Scene 8
<i>Summary: movement from state of sage's inclusion / exclusion to the opposite state</i>				
1. Initial state: Elisha included / Meir excluded	[Elisha] saw Metatron [to whom] permission was granted to sit and write down the merits of Israel.	[אלישע] חזא מטטרון דאטיהבא ליה רשותא למיתב למיכתב זכוותא דישראל.	Rabbah b. Sheila [once] met Elijah [= God]. He said to him: What is the Holy One, blessed be He, doing? He answered: He utters traditions in the name of all the Rabbis, but in the name of R. Meir he does not utter.	אשכחיה רבה בר שילה לאליהו [= הקב"ה]. אמר ליה: מאי קא עביד הקדוש ברוך הוא? אמר ליה: קאמר שמעתא מפומייהו דכולהו רבנן, ומפומיה דרבי מאיר לא קאמר.
2. Complication: textual evidence contradicts apparent norm	Said he: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no	אמר: גמירא דלמעלה לא הוי לא ישיבה ולא תחרות ולא עורף ולא עיפוי שמא חס ושלום שתי רשויות הן.	Rabbah asked him, Why? – Because he learnt traditions at the mouth of Aher.	אמר ליה: אמאי? [אמר]: משום דקא גמר שמעתא מפומיה דאחר.

	emulation, and no back, and no weariness. Perhaps, – God forefend! – there are two divinities!			
3. Catalyzing climax: colleagues punish Metatron / colleague defends Meir	[Thereupon] they led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes. ⁸²	אפקוהו למיטרון ומחזוהו שיתין פולסי דנורא. ⁸³	Said: [Rabbah] to him: But why? R. Meir found a pomegranate; he ate [the fruit] within it, and the peel he threw away.	אמר ליה: אמאי, רבי מאיר רמון מצא, תוכו אכל, קליפתו זרק.
4. Final state (Reversal): Elisha excluded / Meir included	Permission was [then] given to him to strike out the merits of Aher	איתיהיבא ליה רשותא למימחק זכוותא דאחר.	He answered: Now He says: Meir my son says:	אמר ליה: השתא קאמר: מאיר בני אומר (משנה סנהדרין ו, ה).

⁸²The following line in printed ed. Vilna is an addition not found in many mss.: אמרו ליה: ([They said] to him: Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him?)

⁸³ See previous note.

<p>5. Epilogue: divine representation (<i>bat kol/Shechinah</i>) affirms exclusion / inclusion</p>	<p>A Bath Kol went forth and said: Return, ye backsliding children – except Aher</p>	<p>יצתה בת קול ואמרה (ירמיהו ג'): שובו בנים שובבים — חוץ מאחר.</p>	<p>When a man suffers, to what expression does the <i>Shekhinah</i> give utterance? 'My head is heavy, My arm is heavy.' If the Holy One, blessed be He, is thus grieved over the blood of the wicked, how much more so over the blood of the righteous that is shed.</p>	<p>בזמן שאדם מצטער שכינה מה לשון אומרת? קלני מראשי, קלני מזרועי. אם כך הקדוש ברוך הוא מצטער על דמן של רשעים - קל וחומר על דמן של צדיקים שנשפך.</p>
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2.4. Contrasting character roles highlight the different outcomes.

The contrast may be seen in the following table of character roles, adapted loosely from Propp.⁸⁴ Of the seven character roles or “spheres of action” Propp identified for the fairy tale type he analyzed, the tales here examined have three: a villain, a hero (victim) and a helper. The transfer is not perfect (this is not a fairy tale, and comparison is only being drawn to aid in making certain observations), for the villain is not a malicious evil-doer but an unwitting agent of error who had no desire to mislead the victim.

The literary structural parallels and contrasts are full of anomalies. Elijah is parallel to Metatron as a divine being,⁸⁵ but not as eminent a character, functioning there just there to impart information,⁸⁶ while Metatron is the source of the error. The latter is also the one who writes, paralleling God who recites, but who is not the source of the error (the source being Meir). Because Metatron is flogged on Elisha’s account, he is (unjustly) allowed to expunge the latter’s merits, but Meir, who is also punished on Elisha’s account, had previously rejected the latter’s errors/sins/flaws (segment 3). A comparison of parallels and contrasts with regard to the functions of the characters in these two scenes facilitates the recovery of the meaning of these two episodes in a deeper and more comprehensive manner.

⁸⁴ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2d ed. rev. and ed. with a preface by L. A. Wagner; new introd. by A. Dundes (Austin: University of Texas, c1968).

⁸⁵ “Amongst supernatural beings, Elijah’s most distinctive role is providing otherwise unobtainable information in response to human questions,” whether “on his own initiative or ... in response to human inquiry” (Lindbeck 1999, 269). She observes (p. 159), “The existence of Elijah, a supernatural mediator who is at the same time a human being, is both unique to later Rabbinic Judaism and also part of a contemporary shift in the religious imagination.” More widely, “the phenomenon of human beings as mediators of God’s power ... appeared throughout Late Antique Culture, even though no other religious tradition of the same time tells stories of Elijah in particular as a being who travels freely from heaven to earth, partaking [of] both human and angelic nature.”

⁸⁶ The *bat kol* is oracular, the lone continuator of prophesy which according to the rabbis had long ceased to exist (cf. Elijior 2004, 214), and Elijah is not. Lindbeck 1999, 164, claims that the *bat kol* is also impersonal, addressing no-one in particular (הַיְצִתָּה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה) and, on that understanding, Elisha just happened to hear it (as he explains, שְׁמַעְתִּי מֵאֲהוּרֵי הַפְּרָגוֹד). Elijah, on the other hand, is personal and private, and appears to individuals.

Character Roles

Character	Action (Function)	Unit 1	Unit 8
Apparent Villain (unwitting agent of error)	-----	Metatron (divinity)	R. Meir (sage/hero)
	Cause of error (Complication)	Metatron sat	R. Meir included Elisha's teachings
Victim	-----	Elisha (sage/hero)	God (divinity)
	Apparent error	Two Powers	Elisha is virtuous
Helper	-----	Absent (Defending angels) →	Present (Rabbah b. Sheila) →
	Consequence (Catalyzing climax)	Metatron (agent) punished by angels	R. Meir (agent) defended by Rabbah b. Sheila
	Result (Reversal)	Metatron (agent/villain) expunges Elisha's (victim) merits	God (victim) adds R. Meir (agent/villain) to His Mishnah
	Conclusion (Epilogue)	God (<i>bat kol</i>) rejects Elisha (victim)	God (<i>Shechinah</i>) empathizes with Elisha (victim)

The apparent “villain” unwittingly misleads the “victim.” The outcome hangs on the presence or absence of a helper to aid the victim in redeeming the situation. Absent a helper, Metatron is punished, and as a double consequence, Elisha is not shown his error and Metatron is allowed to expunge that sage’s good deeds.⁸⁷ On the other hand, the presence of a helper aids God (the victim) in understanding Meir’s reason and method in learning from Elisha, so He restores Meir.

Note that the functions of “villain” and “hero” are filled by characters from different categories in the above schema, as also happens in fairy tales. The heroes are sages and the other major characters are divine figures: among the sage-heroes, Elisha is a victim, whereas R. Meir is a “villain”; the divine figure Metatron is a villain, whereas God is a “victim”.⁸⁸ Two phenomena account for this structural disparity. One is that Metatron is involved in two actions: sitting, he is an agent of error (function of villain); recording the good deeds of Israel (compiling a text), he straddles a function similar to God, who is reciting (rabbinic) texts. God similarly straddles two areas, for he is both a victim of error like Elisha and a restoring figure opposite Metatron in the “consequence” row. The second phenomenon is that the plot adjusts itself in the “helper” and “consequence” rows. The “helper” row focuses on the same function: the respective roles played by the two “villains,” Metatron and Meir. The sage/hero finally come together to figure in the “consequence” column: their contrary fates are a function of the absence or presence of a “helper.”

The table of correspondences between themes and functions in the action of the narrative allows us to see how the aggadist worked to creatively craft a final scene that contrasts dramatically with the initial one. Right from the beginning he draws a contrast between the rabbinical ambiance and the mystical one. The first scene takes place in a heavenly visionary setting; the final one on earth (segment 1, “Setting”): Elisha sees Metatron in a heavenly vision; Elijah appears to the sage on earth. Thus the parallel between the two immortal beings, both of whom share the biographical feature, namely that they

⁸⁷ Actually, taking the Elisha plot from repudiation and apostasy to apotheosis (units 1-5), R. Meir may be seen as Elisha’s helper, who failed in units three and four, only succeeding in unit five. There, of course, Meir was only partially successful; R. Yohanan had to intervene.

⁸⁸ As Scholes, reviewing Propp notes, the personages are variable while the functions are constant and limited, and one character may perform several functions (1974, 62).

began as humans, does not continue into the story for, whereas Metatron has a major role to play, Elijah functions as a mediating narrative device to transmit to an earthbound sage information about matters as they transpire in heaven. In a similar vein, Elisha is the subject and protagonist of the first scene, whereas Rabbah bar Sheila, while not the subject, is an active observer, who has a key intervention in the course of the ensuing final scene.

The “Cause of error” (“Complication,” segment 2) is instructive. R. Meir, an unintentional agent of error, corresponds to Metatron, whose recording of Israel’s good deeds parallels Meir’s reciting oral teachings of learned scholars. Both of them are unwitting agents of an illusory error. Metatron appears to act like a Power coeval with God, but he does not intend to be so; Meir appears to consider Elisha a virtuous man, but he does not himself think that. Rather, Metatron was given permission to sit, and Meir discerningly benefits from Elisha’s valuable teachings while remaining uninfluenced by the latter’s sinful life-style.

Beginning with “Consequence” (“Catalyzing climax”, segment 4), two types of differences arrest the pattern of parallel symmetry seen in the functional structure of the action up to this point. Thus, the “results” are parallel, but in a contrasting way, and those contrasting results affect the respective sage-heroes Elisha and Meir, irrespective of their differing functional roles, viz., victim of initial error versus agent of initial error respectively. The key to the difference is the division between the anti-dialectical mystical worldview of either/or and the dialectical one of the sages. No angel defends Metatron (the unwitting agent), with the consequence that, having been punished, he is allowed to wreak vengeance on Elisha (the victim, who unintentionally led to his being flogged), while Meir (unwitting agent), having been defended by Rabbah b. Sheila, is rehabilitated by God (victim)!⁸⁹

A common problematic situation resides in the deep structure underlying the two scenes. Each one encodes the disparity in apprehension that arises when an attempt is made to bridge the upper and lower worlds: something vital is lost in the transfer: context. Each is tripped up by a problematic pairing: Two Powers in Heaven; learning and sinning in one individual. Unaware that there can be exceptional characters or circumstances, Elisha assumes that a

⁸⁹ Lindbeck 1999, discusses this story on pp. 280-281. She observes that the phenomenon of a rabbi changing God’s mind is virtually unparalleled in stories that take place in the rabbinic present.

mystical teaching adequately represents the supernal reality. God learns an earthly text, and assumes it to be an adequate representation of the nature of the earthly scholar; He does not consider the psychologico-ethical dynamics of the human dimension. Each requires reassuring background information that can defuse the situation by placing the text in a heavenly or human context so that it may be properly understood. In another aspect of the contrastive parallelism obtaining in the last half of these scenes, Elisha, given no information by the heavenly hosts, remains mired in a state of confusion. God, on the other hand, is reassured by a human subject that men have the ability to discriminate, to assess the whole individual, and to accept the good and reject the bad.

The mirroring concerns of Elisha and God help nuance the understanding of their respective problems. Each knows the desired answer: there is only one supreme power in heaven, and human beings have both good and bad elements mixed in. Those two characters are vehicles for the expression of an anxiety that seeks resolution in a dialectical move.⁹⁰ Caught up in the world of either/or, Elisha suffers condemnation rather than relief of anxiety; open to dialectical development, God's thesis is countered by the antithetical argument that rather than praise or condemn the whole person, (mature) individuals accept the good aspects and reject the evil ones⁹¹ (the dialectical synthesis).

The "Concluding results" (segment 5) present a stark contrast between the fates of the sages in the various realms represented in the action. A Divine declaration (*bat kol*) excludes Elisha from the (other) sons (*banim*), while God himself restores Meir, calling him His own son (*beni*). This in effect reverses the rejection of Elisha, for God recites Meir's teaching that He empathizes with those suffering punishment for their sins (which in Elisha's case is purging him, preparing the way for his restoration and acceptance into heaven).⁹²

⁹⁰ See n. 12 above.

⁹¹ The notion that God models concern for human needs irrespective of His own is thematized in the parable of the king who ordered his servants to pay his customs impost from his own funds so that others will see and do so (bSuk 30a).

⁹² This multi-layered divine affirmation of Meir and Elisha is similar to the divine approval observed by Lindbeck 1999, 274, in four of the seven TB *ashkeheh ... le-Eliyahu* stories in which God approves and supports rabbinic midrashic and halakhic creativity and innovation.

2.5. Apparent gratuitousness of the last narrative unit, scene 8 a clue to its compositional function and to the nature of Stammaitic composition

The final narrative unit undoubtedly serves at least three obvious narrative purposes. The empathic acceptance of Elisha's suffering at the very end provides closure for the overall narrative; it balances the comprehensive, "woven" structure of this binary, eight-unit composition; finally, it mirrors the very first scene, providing comparison and contrast that support and underscore the meaning. It is a parade example of scribal revision, where the reviser reframes the new version with an anticipatory opening and summary closing passage. However, it is full of redundancies. We have already been informed that mature scholars will not be confused by a learned sage's sinfulness, we know that God understands this without Rabbah bar Sheila, and we know that God accepts Meir, whose presence in the Mishnah is manifest.

Actually, this narrative is handicapped by the penultimate unit as well. In questioning Meir's attachment to Elisha, units **7** and **8** both distend and misshape the narrative unity of the story. Like the Yerushalmi version, the Bavli one should have left off with the daughter's confrontation of Rabbi (scene **6**). Moreover, that very scene represented the divine acceptance of Elisha. Is that not sufficient to defuse the whole problematic of unit/scene **7** and **8**? Indeed, a narrative of Elisha should end at unit **6**.

The resolution of those questions lies in the understanding that aggadic compositions can be thinly disguised dramatizations of abstract investigations. That is why so little space is devoted to character development and plot even in complex compositions such as this one. Those investigations will be pursued even if they result in a distended narrative structure. In the present case, the approbation of Elisha in unit **6** arouses the second-level question addressed in scene **7**, viz., if God accepts Elisha, that may endanger Meir and other humans who lack the sophistication to take the good and reject the bad. Having worked that out on the earthly level, the *ba'al aggadah* must have felt the anxiety of hubris. In reversing the condemnation of Elisha, and through him of Meir, that author desired divine recognition of the ethos of His creatures' discriminative

sophistication.⁹³ This *ba'al aggadah* accomplished that by inventing scene 8, thereby completing the dialectical progression.

Two considerations imply that this handicapped narrative strategy is intentional. Not only does the dialectical development show careful planning, but the overall structure of eight units divided in two requires the presence of units 7 and 8. One must conclude, therefore, that the author favored a dialectical treatment and synthesis of various issues arising from Elisha's situation over a cohesively plotted storyline. On the contrary, the latter served as a jumping-off point to explore the implications of Elisha's story as reconfigured by this Babylonian *ba'al aggadah*.

2.6. The overall composition and the final unit are late Stammaitic inventions

The aforementioned factors suggest that the Bavli Elisha ben Avuyah narrative is a late Stammaitic composition. It resembles late Stammaitic *sugyot*, e.g., bKid 34-35 or bNid 31-32,⁹⁴ in the complexity of its design and carefully controlled structure. The same holds true for the carefully worked out argument expressed through that design and structure.

Considerations such as that of the authorial intentionality displayed in the overall structure and dialectical progression suggest the possibility that the Rabbah bar Sheila episode is an invention of the Stammaitic author. This is strengthened by other considerations. The first scene is the creation of the authorial imagination, and the last one was carefully constructed to parallel and contrast with the first one.

⁹³ God, like Elisha, is not troubled by the substance (He knows all about discriminating), rather He just wants reassurance that sages and mature students can do so (cf. n. 85 above).

⁹⁴ I have several analyses of the complex style and architecture of late Babylonian Talmudic *sugyot* in progress, and have presented preliminary findings including a differentiation from "early" stammaitic compositions in a lecture, "What do Stammaim Want? Towards a Differentiation and Characterization of the Stammaitic Components of the Talmud Bavli," a lecture delivered at the conference Creation and Composition: the Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggadah (New York University, Feb. 9-10, 2003) (article in preparation); "Metasystemic concerns as indicators of late-stage Babylonian stammaitic compositions, both halakhic and aggadic," lecture delivered at the Fifteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 2-6, 2009 (article in preparation).

One implication is that the chronological disparity noted above is an anachronistic overlay, a product of contemporary historiographic concerns not shared by the author of this piece. Although I am unable to explain why he chose Rabbah bar Sheila as the protagonist in the final scene,⁹⁵ it seems that the author had an entirely different and intentional chronological anomaly in mind, that is, the effect of having God overlook R. Meir's teachings until the fourth Amoraic generation, a span of two centuries, dramatizes the problematic seriousness of the Torah of the sinning sage.⁹⁶

2.7. Further implications for the attribution of certain aggadic narratives to late Stammaitim

A mutuality of strategies suggests that a similarly complex and carefully structured narrative is also a late Stammaitic invention. The sages in that story, as R. Meir in ours, have the audacity to define what God is like or what He really wants from humans (sages). The same technique of allaying theological anxiety in the face of possible rabbinic overreaching was employed in the story of the oven of Achnai.⁹⁷ There, the sages having rejected miracles and, as in our case, a *bat kol*, to refute R. Eliezer's ruling,⁹⁸ R. Nathan receives a visit from Elijah⁹⁹ and, like Rabbah bar Sheila, asks him what God is doing. The answer, He is laughing and exclaiming, "my sons have vanquished me, my sons have vanquished me," affirmed the rabbis' actions in reversing what would have seemed the theologically conservative and ostensibly correct conduct, underlining that acceptance by calling them *banai* ("my sons/children"). The conclusion of our narrative is audacious: God recites a teaching of R. Meir's that articulates His nature and feelings, thereby empowering the sages, allowing them to define His nature and characterize His attitudes.

⁹⁵ All textual witnesses read Rabbah/Rav bar (Rav) Sheila (mss. Goett. 3, BL Harl. 5508 [400], Mun. 6, Oxf. Opp. Addl. fol. 23, Vat. 134, a Span. Incunabulum and ed. Pesaro 1514) with the exception of ms. Mun. 95 (Rabbah bar Rav, a name unattested elsewhere, as observed in *Dikduke Soferim* ad loc. – the father's name evidently dropped out) and ms. Vat. 171 (Rabbah bar Rav Hanan).

⁹⁶ See n. 99 below.

⁹⁷ bBM 59.

⁹⁸ See n. 48 above.

⁹⁹ Again, as in the case of Rabbah b. Sheila, several generations had elapsed (two in the case of R. Nathan) before this conversation took place.

Appendix A: Could the Rabbis Have Been Involved in Ascent (Merkavah and Hekhalot) Mysticism (continuation of n. 4 above)?

[Two essays relevant to concerns of this article published late in 2011 came to my attention while I was awaiting a copy for proofreading, viz., Michael Swartz' chapter cited further on in this appendix, and Ra'anana Boustán's illuminating "Rabbinization and the Making of Early Jewish Mysticism," *JQR* 101 (2011) 482-501. Boustán's sophisticated tracing of cultural permeability, convergence and the corresponding ideological shifts as *hekhalot* mysticism became rabbinized, while itself penetrating into rabbinic teachings, greatly facilitates discussion of those two ideological approaches and their evolving relations in the fifth-eighth centuries. While his observations and conclusions have much to commend them, his treatment of Elisha's initial downfall illustrates some pitfalls of the techniques of cultural criticism as Boustán employs them. The Elisha story undoubtedly underlies his observation "that...cases, such as the relationship between Bavli Hagigah and 3 Enoch, can best be understood as examples of ideological convergence that illuminates the continuing diversity of Jewish literary culture in the sixth to eighth centuries..." (p. 494), i.e., although they are converging ideologically, the two approaches express themselves in different literary genres and forms. "The catalog of passages that originate within the context of what might call *Hekhalot* style discourse but somehow made their way into rabbinic writings...is rather impressive" (p. 495). The comparison with 3 Enoch is problematic in several respects. To begin with, 3 Enoch lifted only scene 1 from this aggadic complex, and it made the radical change of Elisha's *הם ושלום* to *וודאי* (more purely "either/or" than the Bavli!). So Boustán is treating this incident out of context (cf. my cautionary comments on p.3 above), and without closely reading the two versions to account for their differences. The Bavli narrator sets scene 1, where he does make use of *merkavah* motifs, as a foundation for a carefully contrived and devastating rejection of *hekhalot* ideology and practices, a process in evidence throughout the first half of the overall narrative, and in the angelic gridlock portrayed in scene 5. Indeed, this story dramatizes not "ideological convergence," but its opposite. It is one of several indications that the Bavli is not at all ready to accept *hekhalot* ideology. That moment would not come until later, as evidenced in the curriculum rehearsed in the eighth or ninth-century Midrash Mishle (pp. 496-497). Boustán does not attempt to decide whether the Talmud borrowed from 3 Enoch or vice versa (pp. 498-499), although his

approach evidently should require intimate engagement with literary texts, for a determination of the direction of the influence, would materially affect the characterization of where and how the “ideological convergence” occurred. The evidence laid out in part two of this article demonstrates the intimate, complex and painstaking artistry of the Bavli aggadist as he creatively designed and wove the contrasting first and final scenes and integrated them into the traditions he incorporated and adapted into his narrative. Moreover, had this scene originated in a *hekhalot* milieu, one would expect Elisha the human encroacher’s punishment to be immediate and violent. The Bavli is not in conversation with *hekhalot* ideology or permeated by it; rather, it is using *hekhalot* motifs as a foil to forward an internal conversation and critique].

Locating Elisha’s fall in the course of a heavenly vision or ascent as practiced or narrated in *merkavah* and *hekhalot* mysticism raises several questions. When did such experiences enter the Jewish religious and literary milieu? When were the *merkavah* and *hekhalot* texts that record such ascents themselves composed? Were members of the rabbinical movement implicated in such experiences? The answers put us at two extremes, for ascents are known from apocalyptic literature (*Book of Watchers*, 1 *Enoch* 14.8-25, pre-Maccabean, third century BCE) and Dead Sea Scrolls (Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice; cf. L. Schiffman, ספרות ההיכלות וכתבי קומראן, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, 1985/1986, 121-138), while the *merkavah* and *hekhalot* works were still in a fluid redactional state when they were copied into the medieval Ashkenazic codices that are their primary textual witnesses, which suggests that they were subject to late editorial activity outside of the Middle East, although some Oriental Genizah fragments have been identified as well. Thus, there is much middle ground to account for, both in the ongoing recording of ascent experience, its contextualization with various adjurational texts and techniques, and the earlier textualizations of the *hekhalot* writings.

In its Jewish form, the heavenly ascent is a visionary experience of the divinity enthroned in the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple, that structure being a literary descendent and development of Ezekiel’s vision of the heavenly *merkavah* (chariot throne), and including the supernal realms traveled to get there. Specifically, ascents of the sort described in *hekhalot* literature, i.e., those that involve negotiating passage through a series of heavens or chambers with specific seals and/or formulas are known from general Graeco-

Roman religious literature and Christian testimonies from the first to the fourth centuries, encompassing the Tannaitic period and the first part of the Amoraic one (cf. the Tannaitic- and early Amoraic-period parallels from Christian and pagan visionary and magical writings in G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965; M. Smith, "Ascent to the Heavens and the Beginning of Christianity," *Euranos* 50 (1981) 403-429; *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, ed. S. Cohen, Leiden: Brill, 1996, 47-67; N. Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity*, University State Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, 63-84; on the varied and evolving nature of the ascent experience, see also M. Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* Literature," *HUCA* 59 [1988] 73-100). It would, therefore, be reasonable for such experience to be recorded among Rabbinic Jews. Its scarcity can be accounted for by the hostility shown to such experience in the Elisha narrative, and the Toseftan account on which the latter is based, see n.26 above and Appendix C below). M. Swartz reached the conservative conclusion that "early interpretations of the *pardes* story do not constitute clear evidence that the Tannaim believed that Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues ascended through the *hekhalot*. However, the Babylonian Talmud's interpretation makes it more likely that its editors were familiar with the *hekhalot* tradition" ("Jewish Visionary Tradition in Rabbinic Literature", *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. C. E. Fonrobert and M. S. Jaffee, [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press], 2007, 218). [Added during proofreading: Swartz has recently summarized his views and the evidence for the periodization of *hekhalot* mysticism in "Piyut and Heikhalot: Recent Research and its Implications for the History of Ancient Jewish Liturgy and Mysticism," *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, ed. D. R. Blank (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 263-281].

On the other end, even though all *hekhalot* compositions are post-Talmudic, the phenomenon of "*Hekhalot* literature developed from the late amoraic times to post-Talmudic Babylonia" (M. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 13). In other words, one must separate late redactions from the possibility of earlier forms, so that it is reasonable to infer that some of the practices or texts underlying their encoding can be of Talmudic era-provenance. Thus, being that the encoding itself is a product of evolution and

development, some practices undoubtedly preceded their encoding, while the written record may also reflect textual layers of literary imagination as well as intertextual contemplation and development. Therefore, it is possible that *hekhalot* rituals were practiced in Talmudic Babylonia even if the surviving textualizations are post-Talmudic. Indeed, M. Bar-Ilan's demonstration that *hekhalot* prayers follow patterns and forms found in other prayers known from Tannaitic and Amoraic compositions, locates such literature supporting this visionary experience in Eretz Israel, and is consistent with the Graeco-Roman milieu discussed by Janowitz (*The Mysteries of Jewish Prayer and Hekhalot* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1987) [Hebrew]). See also M. Swartz' discussion of the rabbinic style of *hekhalot* poetry, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism: an Analysis of Ma'aseh Merkavah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) 190-207. Independent evidence that the works had been edited in some form sometime before the tenth or eleventh century, possibly well before then, is Hai Gaon's reference to two of them as "mishnayot" (=baraitot; see B. M. Lewin, ed., *Otzar ha-Geonim*, v. IV, Jerusalem, 1931, *Chagiga*, 14 and 61). The fluid state of the later Ashkenazic manuscripts aside, the Gaon's acceptance as authoritative Tannaitic teachings of works that would have originated outside of normative rabbinic settings, or at least circulated on their margins, indicates that their status had undergone post-compositional evolution and naturalization, which also would have taken time.

Nonetheless, even though the TB tale, in localizing Elisha's fall within his heavenly vision/journey, presupposes a version of a *hekhalot* milieu, it is most likely that the *hekhalot* documents' versions of Elisha's fall were taken into the *hekhalot* text-tradition from the Bavli. The various *hekhalot* documents adapted relevant material from yHag and tHag as well. For instance, while the *Merkavah Rabbah* text contains the unfortunate Elisha vision, neither of the *Hekhalot Zutarti* texts do (texts cited in n.5 above, and collated and translated in C.R.A. Morray-Jones' article cited immediately below, 196-198; cf. n. 33 above). Moreover the *Hekhalot Zutarti* text contains another Elisha tradition found only in the Yerushalmi, and that *only* in the N[ew York ms.] version (the M[unich ms.] text does not have it); moreover, that tradition, which explains that Elisha's "cut[ting] the shoots" refers to his ruining the budding academic careers of successful young Torah students, is a matter drawn from the Yerushalmi and irrelevant to the concerns of the *hekhalot* text. C.R.A. Morray-Jones thinks that the earliest elaboration of Elisha's fall is

preserved in the *hekhalot* tradition, whence the Bavli borrowed and expanded on it (cf. “Paradise Revisited [2 *Cor.* 12:1-12]: The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate, Part 1: The Jewish Sources,” *HTR* 86 [1993] 177-217, and his monograph *A Transparent Illusion: the Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism: a Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry* [Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002]). However, it seems more likely that the mystical texts are consumers – and expanders – of the Talmudic ones. Cf. Goshen-Gottstein 1995, 129-132, and 2000, n. 36, 304-305, and n. 65, 329-330.

Appendix B: Mnemotechnique and Rabbinic texts (continuation of n.17 above).

In a study of memory and its methodology in rabbinic literature, אמנות הזכרון בספרות תלמודית, *Mehqerei Talmud: Talmudic Studies* 3:2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005=*Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach*) 543-589, Shlomo Naeh distinguishes between rote memorization and the methodologies of organization of information in the memory for ease of retrieval for purposes of review and communication. He observes that the Babylonians, unlike their colleagues in Eretz Yisrael, did not recommend mnemonic methodologies, possibly because they favored dialectical skill over prodigious memorization, although all require the memorizing of texts (pp.549 and n.29, and 587). Indeed, the situation is more complicated for, unless texts are formulated according to the aforementioned principles of organization, e.g., the earliest textual layers of mEduy (cf. *ibid.*, 582-586), they cannot be retrieved according to those techniques. Unfortunately, most rabbinic documents were not formulated along those lines, but see below on documents structurally/mnemonically dependent on the Mishnah or Scripture. (On the other hand, the distinction commonly drawn between Bavel and EI, the former favoring dialectics and the latter memorization could benefit from further examination in view of the textual evidence of the Yerushalmi: replete with attacks and queries, that Talmud gives a clear impression that it was heavily engaged in dialectics, albeit in a rhetorically less evolved manner than its sister, which had a few more centuries to develop. The Bavli's proverbial "sack full of books" refers to an unimaginative, passive scholar; classical and medieval memorization for Mary Carruthers is an active organic process in a society that values memory highly for making the text one's own for purposes of retrieval and utilization.)¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, since the writing down of most oral Torah was forbidden, the rabbis could not avail themselves of the techniques analyzed in M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), who was describing a manuscript culture in

¹⁰⁰ Pp. 10-13. It is unreasonable that the Bavli devalues memorization in preferring the "uprooter of mountains" to the "Sinai" because one cannot succeed in dialectics without a firm grasp of the material. Still, it is not clear how TB imagines the "uprooter's" memory. Perhaps he must expend his energy on grasping the gist of many things rather than memorizing the exact texts or organize his knowledge for efficient retrieval.

which the text, along with accompanying decorative designs and images, was arranged to facilitate contemplation and memorization. As Naeh himself notes, the image of Akiva as gathering and separating coins according to species (ARN-A 18, pp. 66-67: 'היה ר' (עקיבא עושה כל התורה מטביעות מטביעות) applies to his collection of data, not his redactional activity in editing his Mishnah or *midrashim* (566-567). Therefore, it would seem that the student of rabbinic texts had to depend upon rote memorization and, possibly, the aid of kinds of textual cues other than those identified by Naeh. Carruthers also discusses at length the Medievals' need to memorize texts, and the methods they and their classical predecessors developed and employed to accomplish this. Without faulting Naeh's important observations, one must conclude that another perspective is also required, one that is alert to the evidence of textual witnesses, both Palestinian and Babylonian, which by their very language (repetitions, puns, echoes and allusions) and literary structure (set number – and sequencing – of units, chiasms, parallels) testify to their having been formulated to ease memorizing and facilitate recall for oral performance as well as comprehension of the auditors. Many studies highlight such compositional aspects; one might refer to, e.g., M. Kline, *op. cit.* n.16 above or for *aggadah*, Rubenstein's studies cited above, and the studies cited in n.69 above.

A mnemotechnical perspective sheds light on the higher level of arrangement in Rabbinic texts, viz., the integration of individual texts or segments into Rabbinic collections such as the Talmuds and exegetical halakhic and aggadic *midrashim*.¹⁰¹ Both types of literature are anthological in nature, collections of *sugyot* and aggadic tales on the one hand, and brief (summaries of) homiletical observations on the other. In calling the Talmud a commentary on the Mishnah, many

¹⁰¹ Homiletical *midrashim* have a unique, complex three-part structure (see A. Goldberg, Review of B. Mandelbaum's ed. of *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, *Kiryat Sefer* 43, 1967/1968, 68-79, pp. 73-79). The beginning section consists of a series of proems, and functions mnemonically as an additive gathering place for several introductions to the initial verse of the week's pericope, and may have in turn engendered "literary/scribal" creativity in the manufacture of more; furthermore, the overall set structure serves as a mnemonic device. On the introductions (*petihot*), see J. Heinemann, "The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim," *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature* ed. J. Heinemann and D. Noy (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971) (= *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22), 100-122; N.J. Cohen, "Structure and Editing in Homiletic Midrashim," *AJS Review* 6 (1981) 1-20; H. L. Strack and G. Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, tr. M. Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 244-245.

founder on the fact it contains a lot of other material as well. However, seeing the individual Mishnaic paragraph or clause as a mnemonic hook, one can see how the various *sugyot* and *aggadot* were strung together, both those most directly related to the Mishnah and those tangentially so. The tangential material also required placement in some context for purposes of storage and retrieval in a culture of memory. Similarly, as they collected homilies and legal exegeses from various sages, compilers of *midrashim* chose the Scriptural phrases as the mnemonic hooks on which to hang their texts. In the case of the Talmuds it would seem that the argumentation often came after the attributed materials had been arranged, as a refinement made possible following the collection process.

Appendix C: the Structure and Development of Unit 7

Unit 7 is especially interesting for two reasons. It may contain evidence of Amoraic thinking about Elisha. And it may contain evidence of both an early and a late stammaitic *sugya*. With regard to the first point, it would help to indicate that the attributions are tradental and as reliable as such attributions are, while allowing us to suspend any search for a kernel underlying the pseudepigraphic scene 8, which is pure legend. With regard to the second point, it allows us to imagine a stage or stages in the redaction of the TB Elisha narrative just prior to its present form. This may help explain why I consider this complex a complete literary unit, whereas Rubenstein separates the fourth teaching as a distinct literary unit.

The text of the unit is as follows:

<i>Text</i>	<i>Function</i>
ורבי ¹⁰² מאיר היכי גמר תורה מפומיה דאחר?	Q1. First level stammaitic query introducing collected sources.
והאמר ¹⁰³ רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן: <u>מאי דכתיב (מלאכי ב') כי שפתי כהן ישמרו דעת ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא, אם דומה הרב למלאך ה' צבאות - יבקשו תורה מפיהו. ואם לאו - אל יבקשו תורה מפיהו!?</u>	Gloss. Secondary stammaitic support for Q1.
אמר ריש לקיש: <u>רבי מאיר קרא אשכח ודרש¹⁰⁴ (משלי כ"ב) הט אזנד ושמע דברי חכמים ולבד תשית לדעת. לדעתם לא נאמר, אלא לדעת.</u>	R1.1. First source as Reply to Q1.
רב חנינא אמר: מהכא (תהלים מ"ה): <u>שמעי בת וראי והטי אזנד ושכחי עמד ובית אביד וגו'.</u>	R1.2. Second source as Reply to Q1.
קשו קראי אהדדי!	Q2. Secondary query.
לא קשיא, הא - בגדול, הא - בקטן.	R2. Reply to secondary query.
כי אתא רב דימי אמר, אמרי במערבא: <u>רבי מאיר אכל תחלא ושדא שיחלא לברא.</u>	R1.3. Third source as Reply to Q1.
דרש רבא: <u>מאי דכתיב (שיר השירים ו'), אל גנת אגוז ירדתי לראות באבי הנחל וגו', למה נמשלו תלמידי חכמים לאגוז? לומר לך: מה אגוז זה, אף על פי שמלוכלך בטיט ובצואה -- אין מה שבתוכו נמאס.</u>	R1.4. Fourth source as Reply to Q1.

¹⁰² Stammaitic language is displayed in a smaller font to distinguish it graphically from statements formulated to convey the teachings of Amoraim. Formulations of Amoraic teachings are underlined.

The TY version valued Elisha's scholarly attainments, using them to vindicate both Meir's efforts towards his salvation and his respect for Elisha in this world and the next, as well as Elisha's daughters' claims on charity. It also began to diminish his (external) immorality in favor of his (internal) scholarly attainments (one saves the casing along with the scroll or the phylacteries within). However, as we have seen, the Bavli carried this theme one logical step further, asking whether Meir did not endanger his own spiritual or moral integrity in learning with Elisha. Actually, it seems that we must consider, as part of the prehistory of the TY and TB aggadic narratives, that Amoraim in both EI (to the extent that the attributions here are reliable) and in Bavel had engaged in such speculation, not merely in application to Elisha's case, but more generally as well (cf. the text transferred from bMK 17a in the opening query and Rava cited last), and several of their musings had been collected, possibly for the present context.

Early Stammaitic redactors¹⁰⁵ evidently decided to utilize those teachings here and organized them around the query **Q1**, "How could R. Meir learn Torah from Aher?" As formulated, Resh Lakish is responding to a preceding query, and those redactors (or subsequent expanders, see immediately below) also added "from here" to the citation of Hanina. At this point, Rava's observation, one of four teachings ("Replies," "Responses" **R1.1-R1.4**), was placed at the end for a variety of reasons. The primary one is that it could well have originated independently of speculation about Elisha, for it addresses the general question of learning from any wicked sage. A further consideration is its similarity to Rav Dimi's saying (metaphoric treatment in vegetative imagery rather than scriptural citations) that immediately precedes it. Furthermore, it is the most complex, combining the folkloristic imagery of Dimi with an initial scriptural peg as in the first two teachings. Finally, referring back to the first

¹⁰³ bMK 17a.

¹⁰⁴ This phrase must have been formulated in Bavel rather than Erets Israel (it does not appear in the Yerushalmi or in any midrash collection except *Yalkut Shimoni*), but in the four other places that it occurs, it is not cited anonymously but with attribution to the Babylonian Amoraim Shemuel, rav Hisda and rav Yosef (bBB 9a=bMen 77a, bAZ 52b and bZev 62a).

¹⁰⁵ D. Halivni, who holds that the Stammaitic authors of argumentation are post-Amoraic, finds that many questions that they used to introduce a *sugya* preserve their original, Amoraic-period, formulation, thus accounting for the fact that the answers as formulated seem to presuppose the queries (מקורות בתרא ומסורות: ביאורים בתלמוד, מסכת בבא בתרא, Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007, 44).

consideration, it makes a good conclusion because of its universal perspective, speaking of the generic *talmid hakham*.

In organizing the narrative as we have it, later *Stammaim*, whose contributions have been indented in the transcription above, added the scholastic justification for the opening question (Rabbah bar Hana in the name of Yohanan is cited from bMK 17a), thereby transforming a simple editorial query into a dialectical, learned debate. They also added **Q2** and its Reply **R2** to resolve the contradiction raised by their scholastic expansion of **Q1**. That augmentation created a division between the first two Amoraic traditions, which were based on verses, and the latter, metaphoric, ones, albeit Rava's was also based in Scripture.

However, the opening query does create a potential schism separating Rava's teaching from the other three, inasmuch as the former is not restricted to R. Meir. Perhaps this distinction moved a close reader like Rubenstein to view Rava's teaching as a separate literary unit.