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# Facing Omnipotence and Shaping the Sceptical Topos

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

## The Prototype and Its Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

וְעָשָׂה ה צְבָאוֹת לְכָל-הָעַמִּים, בָּהָר הַזֶּה,
מִשְׁתֵּה שְׁמָנִים, מִשְׁתֵּה שְׁמָרִים: שְׁמָנִים,
מְמֻחֲיִם, שְׁמָרִים, מְזֻקָּקִים.

The Lord of Hosts will make on this mount
for all the people a banquet of rich viands,
a banquet of choice wines—
of rich viands seasoned with marrow
of choice wines well refined.

The rabbinic parables relating to the royal banquet usually provide no explicit reference to the verses in Isaiah. The structure of these texts, however, points to Isaiah's eschatological banquet as an underlying foundation.[9] The sumptuous eschatological banquet Isaiah describes is an expression of divine triumph and victory. I believe that this motif, which makes its first appearance in the prophet's words, proliferates and expands in the later phase of the Second Temple period,[10] becoming widespread in rabbinic literature.[11] However, in rabbinic literature, it is seldom a story of celebrating the victory of a glorious king. There, rather, it is typically a scene of embarrassment, making the story more of a trial. The royal banquet parables include additional motifs such as the invitation to the banquet, dismissal from the banquet, refusal to participate, and guests arriving in inappropriate dress. The honour of the banquet's host is represented as something that could either increase or diminish, while the composition of the guest list receives additional weight. However, in the parable that I want to discuss here, the scenario of the royal feast will include some details that are difficult to explain. We will address the question of what they indicate regarding the relationship between the host and the guests.

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

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

**10** 4Ezra 6:52, En 60:24.

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

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

## The *Mashal* in Context

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

*Gen. Rab.* 62:2[14]

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

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

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

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

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

ליתן להם לעתיד לבוא, ונפשם שביעה והן ישינים.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Story in its Palestinian Context

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

## The Story in the Babylonian Talmud

*b. Ta'an.* 25a

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|---|---|
| Rabbi Ele'azar ben Pedat was in great need.[22] He had nothing to eat. | רבי אלעזר בן פדת דחיקא ליה מילתא טובא (עבד מלתא ו)לא הוה ליה מידי למטעם, |

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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|---|---|
| do you want me to return the world to its beginning, so that perhaps you may be born[25] in an hour of plenty?" | מרישא אפשר (דמתליד) [דמתילדת] בשעתא דמזוני |
| I said to Him: "All this and [then only] perhaps?" | אמרי לקמיה כולי האי ואפשר |
| I said to Him: "Is [the time] I have lived more than [the time] I shall live?" | אמרי ליה דחיי טפי או דחיינא |
| He said to me: "That which you have lived." | אמ' לי דחיית |
| I said to Him: "In that case, I do not want it." | אמרי לקמיה אם כן לא בעינא |
| [I said to Him: "What would You give me in the world to come?"][26] | [ אמרי קמיה לעלמא דאתי מאי יהבת לי ] |
| He said to me: "As a reward for saying 'I do not want it'[27] I shall give you in the world to come thirteen streams of pure balsam oil[28] like the Euphrates and the Tigris, in which to indulge yourself." | אמר לי בהאי אגרא דאמרת לא בעינא יהיבנא לך לעלמא דאתי תליסרי נהרוותא כפרת ודיגלת דשפלי בהו אפרסמא דכיא דמענגת בהו |
| I said to Him: "That and no more?" | אמרי לקמיה האי ותו לא |
| He answered me: "And what would I [then] give to your colleague?" | אמ' לי ולחברך מאי יהיבנא |
| I retorted: "Have I asked this from one who has nothing?" [29] | אמרי ליה ואנא מגברא דלית ליה[קא]בעינא |

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

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

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

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

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

מחיין[32] באסקוטלא [דנורא] אפותאי ואמר לי אלעזר ברי [אי]גרו בך גירי

He hit me on my forehead with his finger bone [of fire][30] and said: "Ele'azar my son, let the arrows be shot at you!"[31]

The poor and suffering Rabbi Ele'azar ben Pedat[33] did not have any suitable food to eat on account of his poverty,[34] and he therefore ate something inappropriate. The expression ברא דתומא/תומה, *bara' de-tuma'*/*de-tumah*, is relatively rare and not easy to translate.[35] This is the one and only *locus* in which someone is depicted eating a *bara' de-tumah*. Simply eating garlic is referred to as *akhlah tuma'* (אכלה תומא) (*b. Yebam.* 106b). A single (piece of) garlic is usually designated as תומא יחידיא, *tuma' iḥidaya'*, or שופתא דתומא, *šufta' de-tuma'* (*b. Giṭ.* 69a). Even though the literal translation of *barʾa de-tumah* would be "something external to the garlic," here I translate it as "something belonging to garlic," according to the usage of this expression in *b. Šabb.* 139b, where it means something that is large enough to absorb leaking liquid. It was translated by the medieval commentator Rabbenu Ḥananel as *roš šum*, meaning the whole head of garlic. Another translation, from gaonic writings, is the Arabic *ḥabb al-ṯum*, meaning "a clove of garlic," which might also be the meaning of the expression in *b. Šabb.* 139b.[36] Both meanings are difficult to support here since one might wonder why a person would eat either a clove or a whole head of garlic. This translation could only make sense if this was the one and only edible substance he could find. The results of this, however, go well beyond his

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

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

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

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

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

**34** See above notes 22 and 33.

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

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

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

*b. Nid.* 16b[41]

| | |
|---|---|
| As Rabbi Ḥanina bar Papa expounds: The angel who governs over conception is named Laylah (night). And it takes a drop and places it before the Holy One, blessed be He, and says before Him: Master of the Universe, what will become of this drop? [Will the person born from it be] strong or weak, foolish or | דדריש ר׳ חנינ׳ בר פפ׳ אותו מלאך הממונ׳ על ההריון לילה שמו ונוטל טיפ׳ ומעמיד׳ לפני הק״ב ואו׳ לפניו רבו׳ ש״ע טיפ׳ זו מה תה׳ עליה גבור או חלש טפש או חכ׳ עני או עשיר אבל רשע וצדי׳ לא כדר׳ חנינ׳ דא״ר חנינ׳ הכל בידי שמי׳ חוץ מירא׳ שמים שנ׳ ועתה ישר׳ מה יי׳ אלהיך שואל מעמך כי אם לירא׳ וגו |

**37** See *t. Yoma* 2:7 (par. *y. Yoma* 3:9 [41a], *b. Yoma* 38a); *b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 20a; *Sifre Deut.* 43 (*b. Sanh.* 101a).

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

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

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

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

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

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

*b. Šabb.* 146a

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

It was written on R. Joshua b. Levi's wax tablet: He who [is born] on the first day of the week] shall be a man without one [thing] in him.
What does "without one [thing] in him" mean?
Shall we say, without one virtue? Surely R. Ashi said: I was born on the first day of the week!
Hence it must surely mean one vice. But surely R. Ashi said: Dimi b. Qaquzta and I were born on the first day of the week:

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

I am a king[43] and he is the head of thieves!—Rather it means either completely virtuous or completely wicked. [What is the reason? Because light and darkness were created on that day.]

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

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

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

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

**44** See Wilfand, *Poverty*, 80.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This very interesting and highly enigmatic story[49] evokes many questions. Why did this strange incubatory dream happen? How was this vision actually induced by the consumption of a *bara*' *de-tumah*, such an innocent agent? Did our hero take it by accident, or was it, as it seems, deliberate—was he seeking an encounter with God? For what reason did our hero want to meet God? What is the meaning of the strange reward of the flowing balsam oil? Why is God actually unable to resolve the pious scholar's financial problems? And what does the strange phrase at the end of the story mean? The story clearly has a strong theological message, albeit a rather obscure one.

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

The story's exposition bears a broad resemblance to the beginning of the Middle Persian story of the pious Ardā-Wīrāz. The latter was chosen from the entire community assembled at the fire temple of Ādur-Farnbag on account of his virtue[50] and was ordered to drink the narcotic *mang*.[51] His seven sisters, who were also his wives (according to the pious practice of consanguineous marriage, *xwēdōdah*) strongly objected to his being subjected to this ordeal, but eventually assented to it. Ardā-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**54** See *Dēnkard* 7.4.83–86, in Marijan Molé, ed. and trans., *La légende de Zoroastre selon les textes pehlevis* (Paris: Librarie C. Klincksieck, 1967).

**55** See M. F. Kanga, "Barsom," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica, Volume 3*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1988), 825–27, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/barsom-av (19. 06. 2020).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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