

RABBINIC LITERATURE

THE BIBLE AND WOMEN

An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History

Edited by Mary Ann Beavis, Irmtraud Fischer,
Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Adriana Valerio

Volume 4.1: Rabbinic Literature



RABBINIC LITERATURE

Edited by

Tal Ilan, Lorena Miralles-Maciá, and Ronit Nikolsky





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Contents

Abbreviations	vii
Introduction	
Tal Ilan, Lorena Miralles-Maciá, and Ronit Nikolsky	1
Women Quoting Scripture in Rabbinic Literature	
Tal Ilan	45
Gender, Biblical Law, and Rabbinic Halakah	
Remaking or Unmaking? Levirate in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature	
Dvora Weisberg	73
“With Her Consent or without It” (Mishnah Yevamot 14:1): Divorce in Rabbinic Literature	
Olga I. Ruiz-Morell	91
Seen, Not Felt: The Gaze at Skin in Tractate Nega'im	
Christiane Hannah Tzuberi	111
Talmudic Legal Methodology and Gender: The Case of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael Reconsidered	
Alexander A. Dubrau.....	133
Biblical Women and Rabbinic Representations	
Biblical Women in Mishnah and Tosefta	
Cecilia Haendler.....	161

The Hagar(s) of Rabbinic Imagining: At the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Genesis Rabbah Gail Labovitz	189
Alterities in the Midrash: Leviticus Rabbah on Biblical Women Lorena Miralles-Maciá	211
Supernatural Beauty, Universal Mother, and Eve's Daughter: Sarah in Genesis Rabbah and in the Babylonian Talmud Susanne Plietzsch	241
Female Prophets in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a–15a Judith R. Baskin	263
Seduction for the Sake of Heaven: Biblical Seductive Women in the Rabbis' Eyes Yuval Blankovsky	281
Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan Natalie C. Polzer	299
Midrash Sarah and Abraham: A Lost Rabbinic Interpretation of the "Woman of Valor" Song Ronit Nikolsky	323
Switched before Birth: Dinah and Joseph in Bible and Midrash Devora Steinmetz	359
The Midwives in Egypt's Nationality: Recovering a Lost Rabbinic Midrash from the Cairo Genizah Moshe Lavee	371
Contributors	391
Ancient Sources Index	393

Abbreviations

1Q20	Genesis Apocryphon
4Q277	Tohorot B ^b
AB	The Anchor Bible
<i>AJSR</i>	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
Arakh.	Arakhin
<i>ARJ</i>	<i>The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern</i>
ASLRL	Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature
Avod. Zar.	Avodah Zarah
Avot. R. Nat.	Avot de-Rabbi Nathan
b.	Babylonian Talmud
B. Bat.	Bava Batra
B. Metz.	Bava Metzi'a
B. Qam.	Bava Qamma
<i>B.J.</i>	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>Beit Mikra</i>	<i>Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World</i>
Bekh.	Bekhorot
Ber.	Berakhot
Bik.	Bikkurim
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>ConJud</i>	<i>Conservative Judaism</i>
<i>Contemplate</i>	<i>Contemplate: The International Journal of Cultural Jewish Thought</i>
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
<i>CurBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>

<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
Ed.	Eduyyot
<i>EJJS</i>	<i>European Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
Eruv.	Eruvin
ESV	English Standard Version
FCBT	A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud
frag(s).	fragment(s)
Git.	Gittin
Hag.	Hagigan
<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HB	Hebrew Bible
Hor.	Horayot
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
Hul.	Hullin
<i>IMF</i>	<i>‘Tyunei Miqra u-Farshanut</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JLAS</i>	<i>Jewish Law Association Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of New Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRB</i>	<i>Jewish Review of Books</i>
<i>JSem</i>	<i>Journal of Semitics</i>
<i>JSIJ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
Jub.	Jubilees
<i>Judaica</i>	<i>Judaica: Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums</i>
KAY	Kovetz Al Yad
Kelim	Kelim
Ketub.	Ketubbot
KS	<i>Kirjath-Sepher</i>
l(l).	line(s)

LAB	Liber antiquitatum biblicarum
LDiff	<i>Lectio Difficilior</i>
Lěšoněnu	<i>Lěšoněnu: A Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects</i>
LXX	Septuagint
m.	Mishnah
Ma'as. Sh.	Ma'aser Sheni
Mak.	Makkot
Mas. Semah.	Massekhet Semahot
MEAHh	<i>Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos. Sección hebreo</i>
Meg.	Megillah
Me'il.	Me'ilah
Mek. R. Shim. bar Yoh.	Mekilta of Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai
Mek. R. Yishm.	Mekilta of Rabbi Yishmael
Menah.	Menahot
Mid.	Middot
Midr.	Midrash
Mikan	<i>Mikan: Journal for Hebrew and Israeli Literature and Culture Studies</i>
Mikw.	Mikwa'ot
Mo'ed Qat.	Mo'ed Qatan
MS	manuscript (see end for specific manuscripts)
MT	Masoretic Text
Nashim	<i>Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues</i>
Naz.	Nazir
NDEJ	<i>Notre Dame English Journal: A Journal of Religion in Literature</i>
Ned.	Nedarim
Neg.	Nega'im
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NT	New Testament
Ohal.	Ohalot
Or.	Orlah
OT	<i>Oral Tradition</i>
PA	<i>Pathways through Aggadah</i>
Parah	Parah

PC	<i>Passions in Context, Journal for the History of Philosophy of the Emotions</i>
Pesah.	Pesahim
Pesiq. Rab Kah.	Pesiqta of Rab Kahana
Pirqe R. El.	Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer
<i>Proof</i>	<i>Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i>
PT	<i>Poetics Today: International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication</i>
Qidd.	Qiddushin
QP	<i>Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences</i>
Rab.	Rabbah
RHT	<i>Revue d'histoire des textes</i>
Rosh Hash.	Rosh Hashanah
RRJ	<i>The Review of Rabbinic Judaism. Ancient, Medieval, and Modern</i>
S. Olam Rab.	Seder Olam Rabbah
Sanh.	Sanhedrin
<i>Sef</i>	<i>Sefarad</i>
Shabb.	Shabbat
Sheqal.	Sheqalim
Shnaton	<i>Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies</i>
Sotah	Sotah
Sukkah	Sukkah
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word
t.	Tosefta
T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
T-S	Taylor-Schechter Genizah
Ta'an.	Ta'anit
Tamid	Tamid
TanB	Tanhuma of the Buber edition
TanP	printed Tanhuma
Tanh.	Tanhuma
<i>Tarbiz</i>	<i>Tarbiz: A Quarterly for Jewish Studies</i>
Ter.	Terumot
Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
<i>Tikkun</i>	<i>Tikkun: A Quarterly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture & Society</i>
<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought</i>

<i>Trumah</i>	<i>Trumah: Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg</i>
v(v).	verse(s)
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WIJ	<i>Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal</i>
y.	Jerusalem Talmud
Yad.	Yadayim
<i>Yeda-Am</i>	<i>Yeda-Am: Bama Lefolklor Yehudi</i>
Yelam.	Yelammedenu
Yevam.	Yevamot
Yoma	Yoma
Zevah.	Zevachim

Manuscripts

Cambridge UL, T-S 6-H: MS Cambridge University Library, T-S collection 6H. Cambridge, University Library.

Firenze 7: Manuscript Firenze 7. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale.

Firkovitch II: Manuscript Firkovitch II. St. Petersburg, National Library of Russia.

Ginzburg 1134: Manuscript Ginzburg 1134. Moscow.

Jerusalem—YHH 1: Manuscript Jerusalem—Yad Harav Herzog 1. Jerusalem, Yad Harav Herzog Institute.

Kaufmann: Manuscript Kaufmann. Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

London 406: MS London 406. London.

London BL Harl. 5508 (400): Manuscript 5508 (400). London, British Library.

Munich 95: Manuscript Munich 95. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

Munich 140: Manuscript Munich 140. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

Oxford 2637: Manuscript Oxford 2637. Oxford, Bodleian Library.

Oxford, Bodl. Libr. 154: Manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library 154. Oxford, Bodleian Library.

Oxford Opp. Add. 23: Oppenheimer collection, folio 23. Oxford, Bodleian Library.

Paris 1137: Manuscript Paris 1137. Paris.

Parma 3010: Manuscript Parma 3010. Parma.

Vatican 30: Manuscript Vatican 30. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Vatican 111: Manuscript Vatican 111. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Vatican 132: Manuscript Vatican 132. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Vatican 134: Manuscript Vatican 134. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Vienna 20: Manuscript Vienna 20. Vienna, Austrian National Library.

Introduction

Tal Ilan, Lorena Miralles-Maciá, and Ronit Nikolsky

1. Prologue

This volume of the international editorial project “The Bible and Women—An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History” is devoted to rabbinic literature. It originated in an international conference held at the Freie Universität Berlin, 4–5 December 2017, with the title Reception of Biblical Women and Gender in Rabbinic Literature. Most of the papers presented there are included in this book in a reworked and expanded version. Other authors were specifically invited to contribute new studies not presented in the conference in order to cover some missing but important aspects related to biblical women and gender in rabbinic literature. This literature, also known as the literature of the sages, encompasses Jewish textual corpora from the period of classical Judaism (from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages), as explained later in this introduction.

Rabbinic literature is male conceived and male expressed. When the rabbis directed their attention to women, they did so in order to regulate how and to what extent women, the “other” with whom they were obliged to live, affected the lives of men. The rabbis considered the biblical text, describing their past, as a mirror in which to reflect on their ideals. In this past, they put biblical women in their places, under their control, according to the rabbinic perception of the world. In their interpretations, they subjected biblical women to a process of rabbinization: On the one hand, they used biblical women to tackle legal issues that affected women in their society (e.g., marriage, divorce, and sexuality, among others). On the other hand, they developed new story lines for the biblical plots, endowing biblical women with additional characteristics and sometimes a new family, or another ethnic and religious identity. As instructive models, the roles of biblical women were revised and, to a greater or lesser extent,

rewritten from a rabbinic perspective: these women exemplified behaviors or demeanor worthy of imitation or disapproval, and were accepted, or not, into the fold. As in all patriarchal societies, the rabbis placed biblical women in the category of the other. For them, biblical women, though considered part of the same society, represented otherness not only as against male biblical figures, but also as against ideal Jewish men, embodied by the rabbis themselves. The characteristics of alterity with which the sages endowed biblical women shed light on the question of how women should—or should not—behave in the ideal rabbinic society, and which values women should—or should not—strive for from a manly, rabbinic point of view. This book explores both the legal aspects that concern women and the psychological, physical, and behavioral patterns that biblical women acquire in rabbinic exegesis and narrative: When are they given a voice? Why are they silenced? Which new roles do they assume? How do the rabbis harmonize biblical laws with their interests? and so on. What we find in the rabbinic texts is not a reading of the biblical law but its updating to fit rabbinic standards; we do not encounter the biblical Eve, Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, and so on, but rather the rabbinized Eve, Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, and so on.

This volume consists of fifteen contributions that feature different approaches to the question of biblical women and gender, and that encompass a wide variety of rabbinic corpora from diverse periods (Mishnah-Tosefta, halakhic and aggadic midrashim, Talmud and late midrash). Some essays analyze biblical law, gender relations, and regulations according to the sages' argumentation: Dvora Weisberg and Olga I. Ruiz-Morell, respectively, examine levirate marriage and divorce in biblical and rabbinic literature; Christiane Hannah Tzuberi looks at how gender works in the inspection of skin afflictions according to the rabbis; and Alexander A. Dubrau analyzes the suspected adulteress rite and exclusion/inclusion of women in the rite of the red heifer in halakhic midrashim and the Babylonian Talmud.

A second group of studies examines either the rabbinic portrayal of a certain figure or a group of women or the role of biblical women in a determined rabbinic context: Cecilia Haendler scrutinizes the information about female figures in the Mishnah and Tosefta; Gail Labovitz focuses on Hagar in *Genesis Rabbah*; Lorena Miralles-Maciá offers a general look at the more outstanding aspects of biblical women in *Leviticus Rabbah*; Susanne Plietzsch analyzes Sarah in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud; Judith R. Baskin discusses female prophets in a Babylonian

Talmud passage; Yuval Blankovsky studies a talmudic section on seductive women who albeit were viewed positively because they did what they did “for the sake of heaven”; Natalie C. Polzer focuses on Eve in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*; Ronit Nikolsky inspects the way the “woman of valor” (Prov 31) is connected with Sarah in *Tanhuma Yelammedenu*; Devora Steinmetz considers the tradition of Dinah and Joseph being switched before birth; and Moshe Lavee is concerned with the nationality of the midwives in Egypt in a midrash from the Cairo Genizah. Tal Ilan, who is the author of the first contribution in this volume, inquires into rabbinic episodes in which women show acquaintance with Scripture. The following section of this introduction provides a general description of rabbinic literature, illustrated through references to the biblical prophetess Miriam, which it traces by demonstrating the approaches and methodologies represented in this book from the Bible through early and late rabbinic compositions, down to Arab conquest.

As noted above, this book brings together most of the contributions presented at the international congress held in Berlin, where a number of us had the opportunity to exchange opinions and plan this project. Irmtraud Fischer, one of the principal editors of *The Bible and Women*, joined us, as did several students and assistants, who took part in many productive discussions. We are grateful to all of them for giving us the opportunity to learn from each other. Special thanks go to Hannah Tzuberi and Marcel Gaida, who helped organize the congress and sessions.

We want to express our gratitude to the editors of the *The Bible and Woman* editorial project for their guidance: Irmtraud Fischer (Graz, Austria), Mercedes Navarro Puerto (Madrid), and Adriana Valerio (Naples).¹ We would also like to thank SBL Press (Atlanta). This volume, as others in the project, is translated into three other European languages: German (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021), Spanish (Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2021), and Italian (Trapani: *Il pozzo di Iacobbe*, forthcoming). We thank the editors of the project for taking on this difficult challenge, the translators, and the contributors who made an effort to submit their texts in two languages. We are quite aware of the challenge inherent in this translation work, due to the difficulties that the rabbinic literature entails.

1. More information about this project is available at “The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History,” bibleandwomen.org, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019a>.

2. Methodological Introduction: The Case of Miriam in Rabbinic Literature

Rabbinic literature is a name for a very large corpus that was produced by Jews in Hebrew and Aramaic (the two languages spoken and written by the Jews) in the land of Israel and Babylonia in late antiquity (roughly between the end of the second century and the advent of Islam in the seventh century).² Although at the time of the composition of rabbinic literature Jews were living not just in the land of Israel and Babylonia but also in other diaspora centers, such as Egypt, North Africa, Asia Minor, Rome, and in other locations along the Mediterranean, and although these Jews probably also produced literatures in these and other languages (mostly Greek but perhaps also Latin), only rabbinic literature was eventually canonized by the Jews the world over and became authoritative.

Rabbinic literature began with the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE), as an attempt at a codification of biblical and postbiblical legal traditions. The ideology behind this composition was that God had given the Jews at Sinai two codes of law, a written and an oral one, and the Mishnah was an attempt to collect the latter and harmonize it with the former. It is a sustained attempt to justify the divine origin of Jewish law, not just the one found in the Bible but also all the legal traditions that accumulated over the years until the Mishnah was compiled and edited at the end of the second century.³

Alongside the Mishnah, contemporary compositions have come down to us: the Tosefta and the midreshei halakhah, which are running commentaries on the legal books of the Torah (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), in which an attempt is made to show that the oral law is already evident in the written law. Midrash is in principle a

2. For a good introduction see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

3. There are many introductions to the Mishnah. Two very different examples are, on the one hand, Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and, on the other hand, Abraham Goldberg, "The Mishnah: A Study Book of Halakha," in *The Literature of the Sages, First Part: Oral Torah, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 211–62. Slightly newer is Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Judean Legal Tradition and the Halakhah of the Mishnah," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121–43.

rabbinic form of creative biblical exegesis. All these compositions, namely, Mishnah, Tosefta, and midreshei halakhah, are known as the literature of the Tannaim (literally, “repeaters”). They were all composed in the land of Israel and feature sages who predate or are contemporary with Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (also known as the Patriarch), the sage who reportedly edited the Mishnah. All these compositions can be subsumed under the category of halakhah (literally “the way of walking,” implying legal issues). Yet from its very inception, the Mishnah did not really succeed in creating a philosophical, impersonal codex of law. Next to its legal parts, nonlegal narratives, legal precedents, proverbs, folk sayings, and even historical anecdotes made their way into the text.⁴ In this, the Mishnah was a true foreparent of all other rabbinic compositions that combine in them halakhah and aggadah (literally “what is told,” that is, stories, implying all that is not halakhah).

Immediately with the conclusion of the editorial work on the Mishnah, it was recognized as canonical and distributed throughout the Jewish world. Study houses were founded in which the Mishnah was taught and interpreted, and in two separate centers official commentaries were produced on it: the two talmudim (plural for *Talmud*; literally, “learning”). One was in Galilee, in the land of Israel, not far removed from where the Mishnah itself was edited, but the other was in a far-off land and under another empire, in Mesopotamia, the land into which Jews were exiled after the destruction of the first temple (sixth century BCE) and where many of them continued to reside. The two commentaries are the Talmud Yerushalmi (fourth/fifth century) and the Babylonian Talmud (sixth/seventh century). It is interesting, perhaps even ironic, that several centuries later it was this second composition that gained the status of a canon and became the standard work studied in the standard Jewish study house (*beit ha-midrash*), a position which it continues to hold today.

The rabbis who produced the talmudim became known as Amoraim (literally, “sayers”), and they described themselves as following in the footsteps of the Tannaim. They were a large group of named sages, and they produced, aside from the two talmudim (which are basically halakhic but include a fair amount of aggadic material in them), also a large array of compositions (that were not canonized but were studied and transmitted)

4. On which see now Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

that are exegetical and homiletical works on various books of the Bible. These are called aggadic midrashim, and they began being composed in the land of Israel at the same time as the Talmud Yerushalmi but continued way beyond late antiquity. Opinions are divided about which compositions still belong to this genre and which postdate it.

In this book, we follow the most recent philological and structural parameters employed by scholars of rabbinic literature, in order to reconstruct the historical background of the various traditions, their relationship with one another, especially chronologically but also geographically. Consequently, we inquire about the possibility of tracing ideological, theological, and literary developments that reflect the changing historical circumstances of traditions on the reception of biblical women.

The Hebrew Bible constitutes, of course, the theological, historical, and cultural foundation of Judaism. Rabbinic literature took it for granted and built its entire worldview based on the veracity and God-given origin of every single word or syllable in this text. When these somehow contradicted themselves, or failed to meet with the Jewish world view of the rabbis, the latter harmonized and explained these textual difficulties away. Gender played a central role in this process—both because gender norms had changed dramatically from the ancient Near East, in which the Bible was composed, and the Roman world, in which the Mishnah was composed (and the Iranian-Sasanian world, in which the Babylonian Talmud later came into being); and because the Bible itself is full not just with contradictory explanations, views, and legal rulings touching on women, but also with many influential women, whose actions contradicted and continue to contradict the views of later Jewish generations on proper gender hierarchies.

One such woman is the prophetess Miriam, Moses's sister, who already in the Bible is an imposing figure, celebrating the victory of Israel on Egypt on the shores of the Red Sea, and at the same time one punished by God with *tzaraat* (leprosy?) for forgetting her subordinate position in comparison with her brother Moses. In the following lines we will trace the major trajectories we have tried to emphasize in this book, showing in each case how Miriam can demonstrate this phenomenon.⁵ But first, the biblical Miriam.

5. Some of the conclusions presented here derive from the different places in which Tal Ilan discussed the Miriam traditions. See Ilan, "Biblische Frauen in Schrift und Tradition in jüdischer Perspektive," in *Geschlechtergerechtigkeit: Herausforderung*

A sister is mentioned in the story of Moses's birth (Exod 2:4). She stands on the shore of the Nile in order to watch over her baby brother, and then she recommends to Pharaoh's daughter, who finds him, her mother as wet nurse. We cannot be certain that in this story the same sister is intended who is later explicitly named Miriam, although later sources connect the two unquestioningly. As Miriam, she is first mentioned after the crossing of the Red Sea. There she is designated a prophetess, is described as the sister of Aaron, and leads the women of Israel in a victory song and dance (Exod 15:20–21). Next, she is mentioned in an enigmatic tradition in Num 12, where she complains to Aaron about Moses's marriage to an Ethiopian woman (אִשָּׁה כּוּשִׁית) and claims for herself and for Aaron prophetic powers similar to those of Moses (Num 12:1–2). She is afflicted with *tzaraat* as a punishment for this action (Num 12:10). Rita Burns suggests that these traditions contain traces of the dangerous memory of a woman leader from the ancient past who had to be tamed.⁶ This was done by making her the sibling of the two other leaders of the day, and by telling a story of how God himself asserted the superiority of Moses (and Aaron) and punished the woman. In Burns's opinion, the way this story is told in the Bible is already a taming of a really wild tradition about a strong and unusual woman.

Indeed, in later layers of the Bible itself there are competing traditions concerning Miriam, one of them certainly bent on taming her. In Deuteronomy, she is only mentioned once in a negative statement. Following a discussion of *tzaraat* we read: "Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt" (Deut 24:9).⁷ For those who had intended Deuteronomy to supersede earlier versions of the Torah,⁸ this verse would completely erase Miriam's important role as prophetess, while only her punishment would have been remembered. However, the

der Religionen, ed. Christoph Elsas, Edith Franke, and Angela Standhartinger (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2014), 143–56; Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, FCBT 2/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 132–40; Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, FCBT 5/3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 418–23.

6. Rita Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical and rabbinic translations are ours.

8. As formulated by Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, AB 5.1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 19: "This does not mean that the author of Deuteronomy sees his code as of lesser value. On the contrary ... Deuteronomy would be seen as replacing the old book of the covenant and not complementing it."

prophet Micah records the trio Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as equal saviors of Israel. He states emphatically: “I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Mic 6:4). This interpretation recognizes the biblical story of Exodus and Numbers as binding, and does not seek to transform or replace it. And because it is short, it includes no value judgment. Note, however, that in the ordering of the three siblings Miriam, the woman, is placed last. And since we do not know the birth order of Moses and Aaron, but we do know that Moses had an elder sister, it is clear that this ordering is not chronological, according to birth order. Obviously it refers to a descending order of importance. Moses the leader comes first, Aaron the priest second, and Miriam the sister, the woman, last.

All these traditions are repeatedly discussed and interpreted throughout rabbinic literature. In the following lines they will accompany us as we outline the concepts that have shaped the way this book is conceived, and they will demonstrate concisely the gendered ideas that are evident in different and more sporadic ways in the chapters commissioned for it.

2.1. Mishnah

Gender plays a significant role in rabbinic halakhah, as seen from the fact that one of the six orders (*sedarim*) of the Mishnah is called “the Order of Women” (Seder Nashim). Although it has been demonstrated that it is actually less about women and more about the relations between a man and his wife (how she is acquired, what are his responsibilities toward her, and how she is divorced),⁹ this order certainly demonstrates well the relationship between the written, that is, biblical laws regarding women, and oral, that is, rabbinic laws on them. We have tried to include in this book a fair number of presentations of the tractates of this order that are based on biblical law. The first tractate in this order (Yevamot, so located because it is the longest tractate in all the order) deals with a very biblical institution—levirate marriage: the obligation of the brother to marry the childless widow of his deceased brother. Weisberg’s contribution in this volume contrasts how the rabbis of the Mishnah incorporate rabbinic views on this institution with the biblical formulation. The second tractate

9. Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Women* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 5:13–16; see also Judith R. Wegner, *Chattel or Person: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

(Ketubbot) deals with marriage contracts, an issue that is not mentioned in the Bible at all and therefore presents a significant contribution of the oral law to the Mishnah. In this book, which is about biblical reception, we do not discuss this tractate. Other tractates in this order, a fine example of which is Gittin (divorce—on which see in this volume the contribution by Ruiz-Morell), are a balanced mix of biblical and postbiblical law.

One contribution in this volume is devoted to a tractate of the Mishnah that is not in the Order of Women and is not, at first sight, gender relevant. This contribution, by Tzuberi, is devoted to tractate Nega'im (skin afflictions) and offers a rabbinic interpretation of this phenomenon in Leviticus. The importance of this contribution is in that it shows that gender is at play in rabbinic thinking even where the Bible had not seen it as such. Tzuberi shows that, even though Miriam is herself afflicted with a skin disease (*tzaraat*), she is not mentioned in this mishnaic tractate.

Miriam does not show up in any of the mishnaic tractates discussed in individual contributions in this volume; she does show up in tractate Sotah of the same order. This tractate, as has been shown,¹⁰ follows very closely the biblical ritual of the suspected adulteress, described in Num 5, whose suspicious husband brings her to the temple to prove her guilt (or innocence). Chapter 1 in this mishnaic tractate begins by explaining that the *sotah* ritual is built on the divine principle of measure for measure and elegantly shifts its focus from a halakhic discourse into aggadah (which of course makes God's justice of measure for measure serve as inspiration for the human justice system). This, as Haendler shows in her contribution to this volume, is where Miriam shows up, in her only appearance in the Mishnah. She is presented as one of several examples of the principle. On the negative side, the suspected adulteress (the *sotah*) is punished in the temple, detail for detail, as she had betrayed her husband. On the positive side, Miriam is rewarded for a good deed she performed (watching over her brother Moses the infant when he was put in a basket on the Nile) by the good deed the Israelites did on her behalf. When punished by God with *tzaraat*, they waited for her to recover before moving on (Num 12:15). Note that according to this tradition the nameless sister who watched over Moses on the Nile is identified with Miriam. This is something that rabbinic literature never questions.

10. Neusner, *History of the Mishnaic Law*, 140; but see contra this view, and more recently, Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Gender, Temple and Midrash* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), esp. 5–11.

2.2. Mishnah-Tosefta

An important principle in the way rabbinic sources are studied, as shown in this book by the contribution of Haendler, is the comparison between the Mishnah and the Tosefta. Both compositions are halakhic Tannaitic, and both are organized topically, according to the same six orders. Yet one—the Mishnah—is canonical, and the other not. The relationship between these two compositions is the topic of much debate: Is the Mishnah older or younger? Are they complementary or oppositional?¹¹ Finally, from our point of view, is one of them more woman-friendly than the other? If so, why? In a series of articles written several decades ago, Judith Hauptman argued that the Tosefta is more woman-friendly than the Mishnah, and described the traditions present in the Tosefta and absent from the Mishnah as “the way not taken.”¹² It should be stated, though, that this picture is not consistent. One can certainly show places where the Tosefta, because it is more extensive than the Mishnah, includes material hostile to women that is absent in the parallel mishnah, as in, for example, the citation of the text of the prayer a man should utter every morning: “Blessed be He who did not make me a woman” (t. Ber. 6:18; see its absence in m. Ber. 9).

In the present volume, Haendler takes it on herself to compare the presentations of biblical women in the Mishnah and the Tosefta and comes out squarely on Hauptman’s side, namely, that the Tosefta is more

11. See Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta Translated from Hebrew: Zera'im* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1986), ix–xi; Shamma Friedman, *Tosefta Atiqta: Pesah Rishon* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 9–13; and more recently Robert Brody, *Mishnah and Tosefta Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2014), 111–14, 141–54.

12. Judith Hauptman, “Mishnah Gittin as a Pietist Document” [Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), 1:23–30; Hauptman, “Maternal Dissent: Women and Procreation in the Mishnah,” *Tikkun* 6.6 (1991): 80–81, 94–95; Hauptman, “Women’s Voluntary Performance of Commandments from Which They Are Exempt” [Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994), 1:161–68; Hauptman, “Women and Inheritance in Rabbinic Texts: Identifying Elements of a Critical Feminist Impulse,” in *Introducing Tosefta: Textual, Intratextual and Intertextual Studies*, ed. Harry Fox and Tirzah Meacham (New York: Ktav, 1999), 221–40; Hauptman, “Women in Tractate Pesahim” [Hebrew], in *Atara L’Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, ed. Daniel Boyarin et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 63–86.

woman-friendly. She claims that “the Mishnah consistently avoids mentioning female characters. When choosing from toseftan material, the Mishnah makes a gendered selection. When adding to the toseftan material, the Mishnah almost never thinks of biblical women as relevant and pertinent examples for its rulings and discourse.” Haendler emphasizes that her conclusions are both quantitative and qualitative. In other words, at least when it comes to the reception of biblical women, the Tosefta is by far more woman-friendly than the Mishnah. This is also true when it comes to our role model, Miriam.

As in the Mishnah, in the Tosefta Miriam is only mentioned in tractate Sotah, in the most extended aggadic section in the entire compilation. As Haendler notes, her appearance in the Tosefta is completely different from her appearance in the Mishnah: “The Tosefta ascribes ... to Miriam an active role in the narrative of Israel’s redemption, associating her with the well that provided water for Israel in the desert (t. Sotah 11:8), where Miriam is described as righteous and as a ‘provider’ of Israel’s needs, together with her brothers, Moses and Aaron.”

The idea that water was supplied to the Israelites in the desert by Miriam is repeated often and in many ways in rabbinic literature, but its basic formulation is found in the Tosefta:

Said Rabbi Yosi ben Rabbi Yehudah: When Israel left Egypt three faithful providers were nominated for them. And these are they: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. For their sake three gifts were bestowed on [Israel]: The pillar of cloud, manna and a well—the well for the sake of Miriam; the pillar of cloud for the sake of Aaron; manna for the sake of Moses. (t. Sotah 11:8)

If we compare this reference to Miriam from the Tosefta, which (although not directly cited) is obviously a midrash (i.e., a rabbinic exegesis) on Mic 6:4—the positive memory of Miriam in postexodus biblical literature—with the reference to Miriam in the Mishnah, which references specifically Deut 24:9—the negative memory of Miriam—we observe that even though in both compositions Miriam is viewed positively, the choice made by the two, concerning what should be remembered about Miriam, shows a basic difference between the two that we saw also in the Bible. Here again we can claim that Mishnah deliberately chose a tradition that disadvantages a woman compared to the Tosefta. It probably implies that whoever canonized the Mishnah was less woman-friendly than other members of the rabbinic circle, and we find this phenomenon repeating itself also where other acts of canonization in rabbinic literature occur.

2.3. Midreshei Halakhah

The third group of Tannaitic texts are, as said, midreshei halakhah—compositions that attempt to ground all rabbinic law in the legal biblical text from Exodus to Deuteronomy. They are divided between two schools of thought about how one is to interpret the texts, that of Rabbi Akiva (perhaps the most prominent rabbi of the second century, who allegedly died a martyr's death in the aftermath of the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt) and his nemesis, Rabbi Yishmael. The compositions that have come down to us in this group divide neatly: two to Rabbi Yishmael (Exodus—Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, and Numbers—Sifre Numbers) and two to Rabbi Akiva (Sifra on Leviticus and Sifre Deuteronomy).¹³ Scholars identify the differences between them as based on two differing exegetical techniques: Rabbi Yishmael uses logical inferences, while Rabbi Akiva prefers extreme, out-of-context verbal analogies.

As Tal Ilan has shown, there are also gendered differences between the two schools. While the school of Rabbi Akiva uses exegetical methods in order to exclude women, the school of Rabbi Yishmael uses techniques that are slightly different in order to include them.¹⁴ Ilan argues that this exclusion/inclusion is reflected also in the canonicity of the texts. Although none of the midreshei halakhah became authoritative, Rabbi Akiva is a much more influential sage than Rabbi Yishmael, and the bulk of the mishnaic material is assigned to him, and many of its rulings feature in the midreshei halakhah of Rabbi Akiva. Obviously, it is his (exclusive) approach to women that won the day. Again we see that when canonization could have chosen a more woman-friendly approach, it chose instead the less woman-friendly one.

In his contribution to this volume, Dubrau brings two examples of traditions touching on biblical law and gender. With the first one he suggests somewhat modifying Ilan's conclusions. He shows that, even while applying Rabbi Akiva's exegetical methodology, sometimes his verbal analogies can lead to more women-friendly rulings. Interestingly, he too shows this

13. On these texts, see Menahem I. Kahana, "The Halakhic Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions*, ed. Shmuel Safrai et al., ASLRL (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 3–105.

14. Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 124–59.

by looking at the *sotah* ritual, which he presents in a synopsis between the Sifre Numbers of the school of Rabbi Yishmael and Sifre Zuta on Numbers from the school of Rabbi Akiva (which has survived only in fragments). In his second example, Dubrau verifies Ilan's observations.

Following Miriam in the midreshei halakhah can also demonstrate the differences between the two schools and show again that the school of Rabbi Yishmael is friendlier. We mention here two traditions that fulfill the elementary function of the midreshei halakhah, that is, to learn rabbinic law from the Bible (and in this case from Miriam's actions). The first of these traditions touches on Miriam's substantial presence in the celebrations following the crossing of the Red Sea. This episode ends famously with the Song of the Sea composed by Moses, following which Miriam and the women sing and dance with musical instruments. The midrash in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael has much to say about this, but for our purpose one sentence is important: "And Miriam chanted for them" (Exod 15:21). Scripture tells us that just as Moses sang to the men, Miriam sang to the women" (Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10). Although the biblical story does not actually imply this, this foundational text has for generations served to justify the separation of men and women in Jewish prayer and celebrations.

The second text from the halakhic midrashim that serves our purpose as we follow Miriam is a synopsis of a tradition connected with her rebuke of Moses in Num 12. We bring the conclusion of this tradition in a midrash from the school of Rabbi Akiva and in a midrash from the school of Rabbi Yishmael:

Sifra metzora parashah 5:7–8 (Akiva)	Sifre Numbers 99 (Yishmael)
<p>"Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam" (Deut 24:9). Why is this [verse] connected to the previous? This proves that she was punished for slander [לשון הרע].</p> <p>This is a case of a fortiori: If Miriam, who did not</p> <p>speak in Moses's presence, was (punished), so</p> <p>whoever disgraces his fellow</p>	<p>This is a case of a fortiori: If Miriam, who did not intend to disgrace her brother but to praise him, and not to reduce but to increase procreation, and who spoke with herself, was so punished</p> <p>whoever intends to disgrace his fellow and not praise him, and to reduce instead of increase procreation,</p>

in his face, how much more so.

and with others instead of only with
himself, how much more so.

This pericope in Sifre Numbers is located exactly at the point where the story of Miriam's criticism of Moses is related (Num 12:1–2). In Sifra, however, it is told in association with the description of the affliction of *tzaraat* (the disease with which God punishes Miriam for speaking against her brother). This suggests that the original position of this text is Sifre Numbers.

In both texts presented above, the halakhic principle of a *fortiori* (traditionally assigned to the logical principles favored by the school of Rabbi Yishmael) is used, but there is a difference. In Sifre Numbers it is employed to teach a lesson from the story of Miriam about how God punishes even those whom he loves and who have positive intentions, and therefore one can only imagine how much worse will be the punishment of those he does not favor and whose intentions are not pure. In fact, it seems to be another measure-for-measure lesson, like the one in the Mishnah that employs Miriam, which also derives originally from Sifre Numbers.

In the Sifra on Leviticus,¹⁵ the *a fortiori* principle is utilized in order to turn this story into a halakhic precedence. It comes to teach that slander (לשון הרע) is punishable (by God?). Therefore, it begins with a general introduction about slander, absent from the Sifre Numbers version. Then the Sifra further modifies the Sifre Numbers text, so that only one issue—slandering, and more so to one's face—becomes the issue. Miriam's merit is completely erased. Here we see that, in comparison with the school of Rabbi Yishmael, the school of Rabbi Akiva is less careful about the honor of Miriam.

2.4. Between Tannaitic and Amoraic Literature

Amoraic literature is full of cited Tannaitic traditions, sometimes with slight but other times with substantial differences. When manifestations of Tannaitic traditions in Amoraic compilations differ from their original form not just in minor “corrections” or “errors,” it makes sense to try to explain the differences, and scholars have argued that the best way to explain them

15. See also, from the school of Rabbi Akiva, Sifre Deut. 1, which we consider secondary.

is on both chronological and geographic levels. Since Amoraic literature was composed both in the land of Israel and in Babylonia, the differences between Tannaitic sources and Amoraic sources in the land of Israel could be explained as resulting only from chronological changes, but the difference between them and their appearance in the Babylonian literature results both from the chronological and from the geographical divide.

Gender, too, plays an important role in the way Tannaitic texts are reworked in Amoraic ones.¹⁶ In this volume, Ilan shows how a Tannaitic tradition from Sifre Deuteronomy 307, about a woman quoting Scripture, is used in two completely different ways, both in a aggadic midrash from the land of Israel (Lam. Rab. 3:6) and in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Avod. Zar. 17b–18a). Dubrau shows how a tradition from the midreshei halakhah on the *sotah* in the book of Numbers (5:5–31) is quite surprisingly employed in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Ber. 31b) in a aggadic section on the biblical Hannah.

In the previous sections we had occasion to look at some but not all traditions about Miriam, whose origins are with the Tannaim. Many Tannaitic Miriam-traditions appear in revised and “improved” versions in Amoraic literature, and we will be looking at one of them in order to demonstrate one of the principles of the study of rabbinic literature employed by scholars today.

The tradition about Miriam’s well will be investigated, in order to demonstrate how it changes as it moves from Tannaitic to Amoraic sources. As we saw, in the Tosefta, Miriam is associated with a well that provided water for the Israelites in the Desert, next to her two siblings—Moses, who provided them with nourishment, and Aaron, who provided them with protection. This tradition is further transmitted only in the Amoraic Babylonian Talmud (b. Ta’an. 9a). In the following, the Babylonian give-and-take is presented. The mention of the language in which each part is transmitted shows what tradition the Babylonians received (in Hebrew) and what is their addition to it (in Aramaic).

Statement (in Hebrew): Said Rabbi Yohanan: Rain [is sent by God] to an individual, [but] economic relief [only] for the many. Rain to an individual, as it is written: ... economic relief for the many, as it is written: ...

16. Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women’s History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 85–120.

Authoritative tradition contradicts the statement (in Aramaic): But there is an answer [מִיָּחִיבִי]:

The tradition from Tosefta Sotah 11:8 about Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and their supplying nurture for the whole community, is cited (in Hebrew).

Explanation of how the tradition contradicts the statement (in Aramaic): If you say [אֶלְמָא] [from this tradition] that the individual can bring economic relief [to the whole community].

Counterargument, supporting initial statement (in Aramaic): Moses is different [שְׂאֵנִי], since he asked for the many, he is like the many.

The statement that precedes this discussion is by the most important Amora from the land of Israel, Rabbi Yohanan, who claims that the merits of an individual will preserve him/her from the effects of famine, but these will not save the entire community. The Babylonian editor (sometimes designated in scholarly literature as the *stama*) now asks: Did not the merits of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam save the entire community of Israel from hunger and thirst and other dangers? This argument is presented with the help of an almost exact citation of the Tosefta Sotah tradition cited above. The tradition is based, as already stated, on the verse from Micah, where the three siblings are described as equal providers. In order to harmonize Rabbi Yohanan's statement with the Tosefta Sotah tradition, the Babylonian anonymous editor counters with the statement that Moses was different: "Since he asked for the many, he is like the many." The individual who sustained the nation, according to this answer, is only Moses. Aaron, and especially Miriam, have disappeared. The Babylonian rabbis often cite Tannaitic traditions correctly but interpret them with new emphases. In our opinion gender plays a very important role in this new interpretation.

The reason we think gender is important here is that, even though the entire tradition from the Tosefta about the gifts of the three siblings is not cited in Palestinian Amoraic sources, one part of it appears both in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in the aggadic midrashim from the land of Israel. In the Talmud Yerushalmi we read: "Said Rabbi Hiyah bar Abba: Whoever climbs the Yeshimon mountain sees a sort of sieve in the Sea of Tiberias, and this is Miriam's well" (y. Kil. 9:3, 32c; y. Ketub. 12:3, 35b). In aggadic midrashim, also from the land of Israel, this tradition is associated with another, according to which sick people (with a skin disease [שִׁחִי], or stricken by blindness) went down to the Sea of Tiberias and because they encountered Miriam's well, and they were healed (Lev. Rab. 22:4; Eccl.

Rab. 5:5; TanP, Huqat 1). In other words, Miriam's well (and not Moses's manna or Aaron's protection) was transmitted separately from the Tosefta tradition. Even the Babylonian Talmud knows it as a separate tradition. In a tradition unique to it we learn the following:

It was taught in the name of the school of Rabbi Yishmael: As a reward for three, three were bestowed. As a reward for "curds and milk" (that Abraham provided the angels—Gen 18:8) the manna was bestowed; as a reward for [Abraham having] "waited on them" [Gen 18:8] the cloud was bestowed; as a reward for "a little water be brought" (Gen 18:4) Miriam's well was bestowed. (b. B. Metz. 86b)

In this tradition, the three gifts—manna, clouds (of protection), and water—are tied together, but only water is tied with one of the three siblings, and in a very specific way—it is tied to Miriam, in the form of a well. It appears that the association of manna with Moses and protection with Aaron, which first appears in the Tosefta, was secondary and serves to belittle the role of Miriam, who was, in an initial tradition, the only sibling who was associated with a gift provided to the whole nation in the desert. Thus if, in the end, the Babylonian Talmud uses only Moses to argue about merit of an individual who sustains the whole community, the disappearance of Miriam from a tradition that was initially her own is very significant in terms of gender. Ilan calls this phenomenon, of depriving women their tradition and assigning it to men, "silencing."¹⁷

2.5. The Amoraic Midrashim of the Land of Israel

The Amoraic period in the land of Israel (200–400 CE) is, as stated above, characterized by two forms of literary production: halakhic (the Talmud Yerushalmi) and aggadic (midreshei aggadah, especially Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah, but also Pesiqta of Rab Kahana and perhaps also Lamentations Rabbah).¹⁸ Several contributions in this volume discuss the way biblical women are portrayed in the first two mentioned midrashim. Miralles-Maciá inspects the way Leviticus Rabbah portrays biblical

¹⁷ Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 35–42.

¹⁸ On aggadic midrash, see Marc Hirschman, "Aggadic Midrash," in Safrai et al., *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 107–32; Myron B. Lerner, "The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim," in Safrai et al., *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 133–229.

women in general, and Labovitz investigates how the biblical Hagar is portrayed in *Genesis Rabbah*. The sort of conclusions one can reach when the investigation concentrates on women in general or on a specific midrash do not seem to differ much. Miralles-Maciá concludes, concerning all the women that show up in *Leviticus Rabbah*, that the midrash “represented the women based on their perception as ‘the other’ versus the norm (a Jewish man) and on their importance, depending on the role that they played in the male-written past.” Similarly, Labovitz concludes concerning Hagar in *Genesis Rabbah*: “The rabbinic exegeses of Hagar’s story and the additional legends about her found in *Genesis Rabbah* are animated by and embody themes of gender, ethnicity, and class.... Sarah and Hagar compete in the social and religious sphere, but are said to do so in particularly gendered ways.” In other words, regardless of whether the women come from within Judaism or from without, they are viewed as “other” because the rabbinic norm is the male Jew.

Miralles-Maciá already devotes space to Miriam in *Leviticus Rabbah*. We will therefore shortly investigate what role Miriam plays in *Genesis Rabbah*. It should be stated at the outset that, in the Bible, Miriam is never mentioned in the book of Genesis. Thus, wherever she is mentioned in the midrash on this book, it is not a direct but rather a derived reference. Miriam is mentioned three times in *Genesis Rabbah*—once in a neutral context, citing the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* (Gen. Rab. 80:10; see *Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata* 10), and twice in a very positive context. The two positive traditions are unique to *Genesis Rabbah* and are not derived from earlier sources.

The two positive traditions both associate Miriam symbolically with Moses and Aaron, as provider for Israel in the desert, as in Micah. *Genesis Rabbah* 70:8 interprets Gen 29:2:

“There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was very large” (Gen 29:2). Hama bar Hanina interpreted it [...] “a well in the open” (Gen 29:2): this is the well. “Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it” (Gen 29:2): Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. “For the flocks were watered from the well” (Gen 29:2): From there each would lead water to his banner and tribe and family. “The stone on the mouth of the well was very large” (Gen 29:2): Said Rabbi Hanina: Like the opening of a small sieve.

Note that the real well Jacob saw when he fled from his brother to Haran is interpreted symbolically. Although in the present allegorical interpreta-

tion Miriam is not identified with the well but rather with one of the three flocks of sheep kneeling next to it (her two siblings representing the other two flocks), it seems beyond doubt that it is her well that is implied here, because it is described as having a stone block the size of a sieve. These are exactly the dimensions of Miriam's well, which can be seen from Mount Yeshimon, given in the Talmud Yerushalmi just cited. The term *sieve* (כברה) is rare in Amoraic literature from the land of Israel, and most often it is used in citations from the Mishnah. If a well and Miriam are mentioned next to this term, they probably derive from the same source and describe the same thing. We see here that Genesis Rabbah has maintained Miriam next to the well and next to its unique dimensions and next to her brothers but not as the provider of the well. The well here is taken away from her.

The last unique text in which Miriam is mentioned in Genesis Rabbah is also an allegoric-symbolic interpretation of a verse. On Gen 40:9–10, in which Pharaoh's cupbearer tells his dream, an alternative interpretation to the one found in the Bible is offered in Genesis Rabbah 88:5:

“Then the chief cupbearer [told his dream to Joseph. He said to him: In my dream], there was a vine in front of me” (Gen 40:9): These are Israel [as it is written:] “You plucked up a vine from Egypt” (Ps 80:9). “On the vine were three branches” (Gen 40:10): [These are] Moses, Aaron and Miriam. “It had barely budded” (Gen 40:10): The buds are Israel's redemption; “when out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): the blossoms are Israel's redemption.

The allegoric interpretation offered here, unlike the previous one, which was historical, is apocalyptic. Yet just as the three siblings (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam) functioned as the saviors of Israel in the realm of history, in this tradition they function as important components of Israel's future redemption. The three branches in Pharaoh's cupbearer's apocalyptic dream are the three siblings. There is no gender difference suggested here. Thus we can conclude with Labovitz that Genesis Rabbah offers a complex message on biblical women and gender. While it can be very negative and judgmental, it can also be very positive, allowing Miriam an exceptionally important role in Israel's *Heilsgeschichte*.

2.6. Amoraic Literature between the Land of Israel and Babylonia

The transition of Amoraic traditions from the land of Israel to Babylonia was frequent, and scholars have often showed the way in which these traditions

underwent changes from subtle to dramatic. Scholars have been looking intently at these changes and interpreted them as based on the different historical and cultural contexts in which the two literatures were produced, and have worked hard to uncover these different contexts.¹⁹

Ilan had suggested that gender plays an important role in this transmission process and showed that many stories in the Talmud Yerushalmi that involve contemporary women of the rabbinic milieu undergo a devaluation on the way from the land of Israel to Babylonia, and these women, instead of being smart or interesting, as in the Talmud Yerushalmi, become dumb and dull in the Babylonian Talmud.²⁰ This, she claimed, is not because Jewish women in Babylonia were worse off than in the land of Israel, but rather because each rabbinic culture that was on the receiving side (Mishnah from Tosefta, Amoraic from Tannaitic, Babylonia from the land of Israel) found some of the women mentioned in the traditions they received too powerful and sought to cut them down to size.²¹ In her essay in this volume, Ilan shows something like this happening to a woman—Matrona—mentioned often in the aggadic midrash Genesis Rabbah as very learned in the biblical texts, when she arrives in Babylonia.

Ilan does, however, argue that this belittling process in the way women are presented from earlier to later texts is not the fate of biblical women, who were always seen as inimitable. In fact, she shows that when contemporary women acted in ways unsuitable to women according to the gendered perception of the rabbis, they were transformed into biblical women of the mythical past.²² Thus, Michal bat Kushi, who appears in Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael *pisha* 17 as donning phylacteries, is transformed in the Talmud Yerushalmi to the biblical Michal, daughter of Saul (y. Ber. 2:3, 4c; y. Eruv. 10:1, 26). Can this argument be sustained? This is what we are asking in this book. In her chapter on Sarah in Genesis

19. See, e.g., Alyssa M. Gray, *A Talmud in Exile: The Influence of Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah on the Formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2005); Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan, eds., *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

20. Tal Ilan, “‘Stolen Water Is Sweet’: Women and Their Stories between Bavli and Yerushalmi,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 3:185–223.

21. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 276–78.

22. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 30, 198.

Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud, Plietzsch argues that, while Genesis Rabbah allows Sarah a role as prominent as if not more prominent than Abraham, “in the Babylonian Talmud, Sarah’s relative predominance over Abraham is reduced,” and Plietzsch brings many examples to show this. Also Miriam traditions traveled from Amoraic midrashim and from the Talmud Yerushalmi to Babylonia. Here are two examples—one from the former and one from the latter.

2.6.1. From Midreshei Aggadah to the Babylonian Talmud

We begin with the tradition from Genesis Rabbah just discussed about Pharaoh’s cupbearer’s dream in a synopsis with its Babylonian parallel. The Babylonian tradition presents itself as a Tannaitic one, but we have no proof from any known Tannaitic composition that it is. We can see that the issue of a historical versus an apocalyptic interpretation is present in the Babylonian Talmud as in Genesis Rabbah. We will not be discussing all its details,²³ only those that highlight the role of Miriam. The text in bold is a précis of a longer rabbinic discourse, which we do not discuss.

Babylonian Talmud Hullin 92a

Genesis Rabbah 88:5

Rabbi Eliezer: The vine is the world; the three branches—the patriarchs; its blossoms—the matriarchs; the grapes—the tribes.

Said Rabbi Yehoshua to him: Does (God) show a person what has already come about? (God) only shows a person what is destined to happen. Rather “a vine” (Gen 40:9): this is the Torah.

“Three branches” (Gen 40:10): **these are Moses, Aaron, and Miriam**. “It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): these are the Sanhedrin. “Its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): these are the righteous of every generation.

“On the vine were three branches” (Gen 40:10): **these are Moses, Aaron, and Miriam**; “it had barely budded” (Gen 40:10): the buds are the redemption of Israel.

23. For which see Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 418–23.

Rabbi Eleazar ha-Modai: The vine is Jerusalem; the three branches—the temple, the king, and the high priest; its blossoms—the apprentice priests; its grapes—the libations.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi interprets these with relation to [divine] gifts, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: “Vine” (Gen 40:9): this is the Torah; “three branches” (Gen 40:10): **these are the well, the pillar of cloud and the manna**; “it had barely budded, when out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): these are the first fruits [*bik-kurim*]; “its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): these are the libations.

Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba: The vine is Israel; the three branches—the three festivals; its blossoms—Israel’s time to be fertile and proliferate, as is stated: “and the children of Israel were fruitful and multiplied” (Exod 1:7).

“When out came its blossoms . . .” (Gen 40:10): Israel’s time of redemption has come, as it is said: “Their life-blood bespattered my garments and all my clothing was stained” (Isa 63:3); “its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): Egypt’s time has come to drink the goblet of poison (see Isa 51:17, 22).

“There was a vine before me” (Gen 40:9): this is Israel, as it is written: “You plucked up a vine from Egypt” (Ps 80:9).

“When out came its blossoms” (Gen 40:10): the redemption of Israel blossoms. “Its clusters ripened into grapes” (Gen 40:10): the vine that budded, immediately blossomed, grapes that budded immediately became ripe.

The midrash on Pharaoh’s cupbearer’s dream has, in the Babylonian Talmud, a gendered framing. The first interpretation, assigned to Rabbi Eliezer, claims that “The vine is the world, the three branches—the patriarchs, its blossoms—the matriarchs.” The cosmic parameters of this interpretation are that, while the three pillars of the world are the patriarchs, in order for them to bud and blossom and give fruit, the matriarchs are necessary. And indeed, the interpretation ends with the words: “‘Its clusters ripened into grapes’: these are the tribes.” The role of the matriarchs in this salvation history of Israel is to ensure its survival through procreation.

The last of the series of interpretations of this verse concludes the gendered framing: Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba describes the blossoms of

the vine as Israel's time to be fertile and proliferate. The general pattern is the same—Israel is in the center, and its blossoming is Israel's fruitfulness. This process is made possible first by the matriarchs and in later generations by the childbearing women of Israel. Men are the pillars of Judaism, women enablers of its survival, all the way down to the time of salvation.

The case of Miriam, in the middle of this midrash, breaks this pattern down completely. She is not inserted in the enabler part of the metaphor, but rather in the pillars-of-the-world part. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the first midrash, she is found in the second midrash, together with her two brothers, as representing the three branches on the vine, which blossom and bring forth fruit. The same can be said about the fourth interpretation, assigned to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, which mentions Miriam like her two brothers only by implication: “‘Vine’: this is the Torah; ‘three branches’: these are the well, the pillar of cloud, and the manna.”

The bare-bones structure of the midrash on the cupbearer's dream, as it is preserved in *Genesis Rabbah*, indicates that this was the kernel of the Babylonian composition. The salvation of Israel in the desert included a woman leader, who was responsible for the most vital element for survival in such a hostile environment—water. The Babylonian midrash has not deleted this woman but, placing her in the middle of the midrash, on whose two extremes women are viewed as enablers rather than upholders of the nation, reduces her important role.

What the Babylonian text has failed to do, however, two of its manuscripts make explicit. In Manuscript Hamburg 169 only Moses and Aaron are mentioned. Miriam disappears. While we could have seen this absence as a scribal error, executed in haste, the same cannot be said for the text in Manuscript Munich 95, where next to Moses and Aaron instead of Miriam we find Joshua. Both scribes had evidently felt the Babylonian Talmud's discomfort with a woman as one of the pillars of the world.

2.6.2. From the Talmud Yerushalmi to the Babylonian Talmud

The following example from the Talmud Yerushalmi about Miriam, in comparison with its (quite faithful) parallel in the Babylonian Talmud, will further demonstrate this argument. Jerusalem Talmud Yoma 1:1, 38b is a lengthy text that bewails the death of the righteous and what one can learn from it. Among the righteous Miriam is also mentioned. This text is repeated in the Babylonian Talmud but in a different context. We present the two texts in a synoptic table.

Jerusalem Talmud Yoma 1:1, 38b (see
Lev. Rab. 20:12; Pesiq. Rab. Kah. 26:11)

Babylonian Talmud Mo'ed Qatan
27b–28a

Context: Yom Kippur

Context: “And one does not place a [dead] woman[’s bier in the street] ever, on account of honor” (m. Mo’ed Qat 3:8).

Babylonian response: Those of Nehardea say: This is only taught concerning women (who died) in childbirth, but concerning other women—one places.

Land of Israel response: Rabbi Eleazar says: Even other women, as it is written: “Miriam died there and was buried there” (Num 20:1): next to death, burial.

Another tradition on Miriam by the same Amora: And Rabbi Eleazar [also] said: Miriam also died with a kiss, as it is written “there” (Num 20:1) and “there” (Deut 34:5), as with Moses. And why is “by the mouth of God” (Deut 34:5) not said of her? Since it is obscene.

Said Rabbi Hiyya bar Ba: The sons of Aaron died on the first of Nisan. Why is their death mentioned on Yom Kippur? To teach you that just as Yom Kippur atones for Israel, so too the deaths of the righteous atone.

Said Rabbi Ba bar Bina: Why does Scripture present the death of Miriam next to the episode of the red heifer? To teach you that just as the ashes of the red heifer atone for Israel, so too the death of the righteous atones for Israel.

Said Rabbi Yudan ben Rabbi Shalom: Why did Scripture present the death of Aaron next to the breaking of the [covenant] tablets? To teach you that the deaths of the righteous is hard for the Holy One, blessed be He, as the breaking of the tablets.

Imported tradition: Said Rabbi Ami: Why is Miriam’s death located next to the episode of the red heifer? To tell you, just as the red heifer atones, so too the death of the righteous atones.

Babylonian reworking of the imported tradition: Said Rabbi Eleazar: Why is the death of Aaron located next to the priestly garments? Just as the priestly garments atone, so too the death of the righteous atones.

The differences between the two occurrences of the tradition about Miriam's death as an example that the death of the righteous atones for Israel are quite striking, even though this is clearly the same tradition. In the Talmud Yerushalmi the context is tractate Yoma (or, as it is called in the Yerushalmi, Kippurim), devoted to Yom Kippur. The Amoraic editor of this Talmud inquires why one mentions the death of the sons of Aaron in the tent of meeting on Yom Kippur, in the month of Tishrei, when they had died in the month of Nisan (see Seder Olam Rab. 7).²⁴ The Amora Rabbi Hiyya bar Ba explains this as resulting from the fact that the death of the righteous atones for Israel. This is rather a strange conclusion in light of the fact that according to the explicit biblical account "Nadab and Abihu ... offered before the Lord alien fire ... and fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them" (Lev 10:1–2). This of course will be one of the reasons for the omission of this tradition from the Babylonian Talmud.

Following this statement about the "righteous" sons of Aaron, another one is presented, this time about the righteous Miriam. Her death is related in chapter 20 of Numbers. Chapter 19 is devoted to the ritual of the red heifer, which is burned and whose ashes constitute the most central component of the cleansing potion sprinkled on any person who has contracted corpse impurity. The proximity of the two chapters is interpreted by the Amora Rabbi Ba bar Bina as an indication that the righteous Miriam's death has a cleansing momentum for the entire community of Israel.

From the death of Miriam the text goes on to the death of Aaron. Here again textual proximity is applied. The Amora Rabbi Yudan son of Rabbi Shalom claims that Aaron's death is situated next to Moses's breaking of the tablets of the law to show how the two events caused God pain. Again there is a problem with this assertion, since Aaron's death is not really mentioned next to the breaking of the tablets, although in one place they are related four verses away from each other (Deut 10:2, 6). This is, of course, also something the Babylonian Talmud will address.

The Babylonian version of this tradition is a typical example of how it treats its sources. The only part of this tradition that it has left intact is the one about Miriam. It begins by fully omitting the tradition that designates the sons of Aaron righteous. In fact, the entire tradition is not told in the context of Yom Kippur, but rather in the context of the funeral rites

24. On this composition see Chaim Milikowsky, "Seder Olam," in Safrai et al., *Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, 231–37.

of women. The citation of *m. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:8, which states that during a woman's funeral one does not lay down her bier to eulogize her, is followed by an anonymous Babylonian observation, assigned to the people of the Babylonian town of Nehardea, suggesting that the Mishnah refers only to a certain group of women who died in childbirth. This is an excellent example in which a Babylonian praxis is wrestling with a law (and perhaps praxis), imported from the land of Israel. Here Rabbi Eleazar, obviously an Amora from the land of Israel, interposes, rejecting the Babylonian qualification and using the verse about Miriam's death ("Miriam died there and was buried there" [Num 20:1]) to justify this rejection.

At this point something very typical of the way the Babylonian Talmud works happens. The editors feel it their duty to cluster together a number of traditions they have from elsewhere about Miriam's death. The first one seems to be a uniquely Babylonian tradition,²⁵ taken from elsewhere in this Talmud (*b. B. Bat.* 17a). In this tradition, Miriam, with her two siblings, was God's chosen leader. All three died similarly, as do the righteous, through a kiss of death from the mouth of God. This interpretation is based on the verses describing the deaths of Moses and Aaron "according to the mouth of God" (על פי ה'). Rabbi Eleazar further asserts that Miriam too died with God's kiss. He derives this from the linguistic principle (גזירה שווא) in which a word referring to her death is also present in the description of Moses's death—"there" (שם). Rabbi Eleazar explains the difference between the way her death is described in Scripture and the way her siblings' death is described based on his claim that the image of God kissing a woman is obscene. This is a strong gendered observation, because only in kissing her (but not her brothers) God's actions are viewed as obscene.

Following this Babylonian tradition, our small snippet from the Talmud Yerushalmi tradition is imported. The editor begins, of course, with Miriam, since her death ties this small tradition to the previous ones. Her tradition is followed, as in the Talmud Yerushalmi, with the tradition about Aaron's death. Note, however, that the editor of the Babylonian Talmud "corrects" this second tradition—instead of the breaking of the tablets, which is not found directly next to the report of Aaron's death, the Babylonian Talmud associates it with the priestly garments. In Num 20:28

25. Although in the Babylonian Talmud it is cited as though it were a Tannaitic tradition, for it begins with the words "Our rabbis taught" (תנו רבנן). This is a typical Babylonian strategy in which it presents its own traditions as old and revered.

we read: “Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there.”

From the point of view of the figure of Miriam, even though the tradition about her is transmitted faithfully from the Talmud Yerushalmi to the Babylonian Talmud, associating it with the gendered and segregated character of women’s funerals—along with pointing out that the death of a woman, even a righteous woman, cannot be described in the same terms as that of a man because of its sexual obscenity—certainly takes away from her something of the universal righteousness assigned to her by the Yerushalmi. She is of course still righteous, but only as far as women go.

2.7. The Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud is a unique composition—it combines halakhah with aggadah like no other, and it is fond of creating aggadic anthologies devoted to a certain topic or event or biblical hero. These anthologies collect older traditions (Tannaitic, but also Amoraic, from the land of Israel, and even from elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud itself), but their placement together creates an entirely new context and range of meaning for them. These anthologies, like all discrete sections in the Babylonian Talmud, are called sugyot (or sugya in the singular), and they are unique literary units that deserve a rigorous literary analysis.²⁶ In this book, two contributions are devoted to two separate aggadic sugyot in which biblical women play a major role. Blankovsky discusses a sugya in Babylonian Talmud Horayot that lumps together several biblical women who seduced biblical heroes but were viewed favorably. He shows that the bulk of the material on these women is already found in Genesis Rabbah, but there it is dispersed throughout the composition. It is the Babylonian Talmud that brings all the traditions together in one sugya and adds to them other women of his volition. Baskin discusses a sugya in Babylonian Talmud Megillah that collects together all earlier traditions about prophetesses and adds some thoughts and ideas about biblical women whom it classes as prophetesses, though the Bible suggests nothing of the sort.

Miriam is mentioned in the prophetesses sugya in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a, as one who prophesied about Moses’s birth. This tradition

26. For a good general introduction on the Babylonian Talmud, see David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah and Gemarah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

is imported from the midrash halakhah Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (Shirata 10). It is also cited in full one more time in the Babylonian Talmud,²⁷ and we now turn to it. Like the other aggadic Babylonian sugyot discussed in this book, one long aggadic sugya, located as exegesis on the reference to Miriam in the mishnaic tractate Sotah (b. Sotah 11b–13a), collects an impressive number of traditions about her. There they are organized according to the order of the verses in Exodus, so as to create a sort of biography for her. Since this sugya is discussed in detail in an article published many years ago by Steinmetz,²⁸ we will only list the traditions grouped together here and conclude with some general remarks.

1. (11b) On Exod 1:15–7, Miriam and her mother, Jochebed, are identified as the midwives Shifrah and Puah. Their names are interpreted according to what they did: Shifrah (שפרה)—Jochebed—because she improved (משפרת) the newborns, or because she allowed Israel to multiply (שפרו ורבנו) in her days; Puah (פועה)—Miriam—because she would coo (פועה) and bring forth the child or because she cooed (פועה) in the Holy Spirit and prophesied Moses's birth. This idea is already voiced in the midrash halakhah Sifre Numbers 78.
2. (11b–12a) On Exod 1:21, on the claim that God rewarded the midwives with “houses” (בתים), the rabbis argue that these are genealogies of priest and kings, and identify Miriam as the one destined to bring forth kings. This is performed by a complex and imaginative midrash on the genealogy of Caleb in 1 Chr 1:18 and 4:5–7, which interprets all women's names in that list as referring to Miriam, asserting that she married Caleb and became a fore-mother of the Davidic royal house. This idea too is taken from Sifre Numbers 78. In this volume, this tradition is discussed in some detail in Tzuberi's contribution.
3. (12a) On Exod 2:1, that Amram, Miriam and Moses's father, “went,” it is argued that he “went” after his daughter's advice. Miriam is said to have rebuked her father for having put away

27. And once by allusion; see b. B. Bat. 120a.

28. Devora Steinmetz, “A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash,” *Proofs* 8 (1988): 35–68 (on the Babylonian Talmud, see 40–48). See also Bracha Elitzur, “Marriage and Childbirth in Exegesis of Chazal on Miriam the Prophetess” [Hebrew], *Massekhet* 14 (2018): 11–46.

her mother because of Pharaoh's orders to kill all the Israelites' newborns. This tradition is tied elsewhere and here too, but not in direct sequence, to her prophecy that her father is destined to give birth to the savior of Israel (see Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10).

4. (12b–13a) On Exod 2:7, where Miriam asks Pharaoh's daughter whether she should bring for her a Hebrew wet nurse, in a flash-back we hear that Miriam prophesies to her father that he will give birth to the savior of Israel, but when it transpires that the baby has to be thrown into the Nile, he rebukes her. For this reason she goes to the Nile to see what befalls Moses (see also Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10).

In her analysis of this sugya in the Babylonian Talmud, Steinmetz notes that “the Bavli seems to have had before it both the notion that Miriam was the ancestress of David and the idea that she interfered in her parents’ separation and was concerned about the birth of the Israelites’ redeemer.”²⁹ This seems correct, because all the stories brought here are already found in midreshei halakhah from the school of Rabbi Yishmael. The merit of the Babylonian Talmud here (and also often elsewhere) is the order it brings to disparate traditions, collecting them together in a running commentary, interlaced with Amoraic comments. Miriam herself is not the subject of the commentary but rather Exod 1–2, and her prominence here indicates not so much the Babylonian Talmud's concerns as the prominence of Moses's sister in the narrative of chapter 2 in the biblical book of Exodus, and her association in earlier midrash with the Hebrew midwives of 1:15.

2.8. Late Midrash

Late midrash is the name of the part of rabbinic literature that includes compositions that are perhaps or certainly dated to the post-Amoraic period, that perhaps or certainly knew the Babylonian Talmud, that perhaps or certainly were composed at the end of late antiquity before the advent of Islam, or very shortly thereafter.³⁰ These compositions may contain earlier material, but their final redaction can be quite late, start-

29. Steinmetz, “Portrait of Miriam,” 47.

30. The most updated overview is Tamar Kadari, “Amoraic Aggadic Midrashim” [Hebrew], in *Palestinian Rabbinic Literature: Introductions and Studies*, ed. Menahem Kahana et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben Zvi, 2018), 297–349; see also Anat Reizel,

ing directly after the Amoraic period but extending at times well into the medieval period, even up to the tenth or eleventh centuries. Mostly these compositions are running commentaries on biblical books,³¹ in particular the books beyond the Torah; thus we find running commentaries on Esther (Esther Rabbah) or Proverbs (Midrash Mishle) for the first time only in the late midrash. At times, what are called the late midrashic compositions are organized according to the reading cycle of the Torah (e.g., Tanhuma, Aggadat Bereshit, or Pesiqta Rabbati—the latter, according to the readings of the holidays). Once in a while a late-midrashic composition is a commentary not on a biblical book but on another canonical composition (e.g., Avot de-Rabbi Nathan on tractate Avot of the Mishnah).

In late midrash we sometimes find traditions that are not found in earlier rabbinic compositions, and sometimes we even find among them prerabbinic traditions. These midrashim might exhibit attitudes toward women different from those evident in early or classical rabbinic sources. For example, in Midrash on Proverbs, after a long exposition (interlaced with biblical verses) that proves that Miriam was a true prophet(ess) just like Moses and Aaron, we find the statement from Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (Shirata 10, discussed above) in the name of Rabbi Eleazar that, “just as Moses was singing, so was Miriam; how do we know this about Moses? As it says: ‘then Moses and the children of Israel sang’ (Exod 15:1); how do we know this about Miriam? As it says: ‘and Miriam answered and sang to them: Sing to the Lord’ (Exod 15:21)” (Midr. Prov. 14:1). This midrash then leaves out the words “with the men” for Moses and “to the women” for Miriam, which, as we saw above, are found in Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael. This is certainly not an accidental omission, after Midrash Mishle had gone to great lengths to prove Miriam’s prophetic qualities (Midr. Prov. 14:1).

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus has a special status within late midrash. This is an extended literature of Palestinian origin that developed over time, incorporating materials from the fourth–fifth centuries, peaking in the seventh–eighth, with even later additions and developments.³² It

Introduction to the Midrashic Literature [Hebrew] (Alon Shevut: Midreshet Herzog, 2011). On late midrash see esp. 155, but also selectively earlier in the book.

31. Arnon Atzmon termed this type neoclassical midrash. See Atzmon, “Old Wine in New Flasks: The Story of Late Neoclassical Midrash,” *EJS* 3.2 (2009): 183–203.

32. Marc Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2003), 173–88. On the structure of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu sermons see also Yaakov Elbaum, “From Sermon to Story: The

consists of sermons for the weekly reading portions of the Torah according to the land-of-Israel cycle, which lasted about three and a half years (unlike the current cycle, which is one year long and originated in Babylonia).³³ In many cases, these sermons may have contained an initial paragraph explaining halakhic issues before attending to the reading portion.

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus is, overall, of Palestinian origin; it exhibits a good acquaintance with Palestinian geography, and a sound knowledge of Palestinian rabbinic literature. However, it also displays familiarity with the Babylonian materials.³⁴ The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus demonstrates a strong affinity to the synagogue culture of late antique Palestine, both in its homiletic arrangement and in its linguistic and thematic closeness to the Palestinian *piyyut* corpus.³⁵ The Tanhuma Yelammedenu may have served as a handbook for preachers, providing them with material for their weekly sermon. Originally, it may have circulated as separate pamphlets for the weekly readings.³⁶

Tanhuma Yelammedenu material is scattered in many fragments and compositions, but there are three large collections of mostly Tanhuma Yelammedenu material: the printed Tanhuma (TanP), the Tanhuma of the Buber edition (TanB), and fragments of a composition called Yelammedenu. There are also compositions that are heavily influenced by Tanhuma Yelammedenu and are therefore described as adjacent to Tanhuma Yelammedenu; these are Aggadat Bereshit, Pesiqta Rabbati, and Midrash Hadash Al Hatorah. Medieval midrashic collections (Lekah Tov, Sekhel Tov, and the very late Yalqut Shimoni) include much Tanhuma Yelammedenu material, and midrashic collections of the Midrash Rabbah that are not just post-Amoraic but actually medieval (parts of Exodus

Transformation of the Akedah,” *Proof* 6.2 (1986): 97–100; Arnon Atzmon and Ronit Nikolsky, “Let Our Rabbi Teach Us: An Introduction to Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature,” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Arnon Atzmon (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–17.

33. Shlomo Naeh, “The Torah Reading Cycle in Early Palestine: A Re-examination” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 77 (1998): 167–87; Yosef Ofer, “The Haftarah for Shabbat Hagadol” [Hebrew], *Hamaayan* 36.3 (1996): 16–20.

34. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 183–84; Ronit Nikolsky, “From Palestine to Babylonia and Back: Parallel Narratives in the Babylonian Talmud and in Tanhuma,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 284–305.

35. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 182.

36. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 180.

Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah, and Deuteronomy Rabbah) also contain much Tanhuma Yelammedenu traditions. Tanhuma Yelammedenu also influenced material found in extant fragments, mainly from the Cairo Genizah.

The material in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus comprises midrashic material that is known from the Tannaitic or Amoraic periods, but in many cases the Tanhuma Yelammedenu reworks it by either reorganizing and adding to it, or by combining it with other traditions in order to construct a meaning that would fit a synagogue audience. As mentioned above, Tanhuma Yelammedenu also contains halakhic material, which is reworked to fit the same synagogue audience. This material mostly opens with the formula *yelammedenu rabbenu* ("let our rabbi teach us"), explicating Tannaitic halakhah. The composition Yelammedenu, mentioned above, is organized according to such halakhic questions.

In this volume, several essays address late midrash. Polzer discusses Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, concentrating especially on version B. Nikolsky reconstructs a unique midrashic text, in which Prov 31 on the woman of valor had once been interpreted verse by verse about Sarah, but the midrash is only partially preserved in both Tanhumas and parallel literature. Steinmetz bases her analysis on the twin properties of Joseph and Dinah first and foremost on a tradition embedded in the late Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis.³⁷ Lavee shows a unique interpretation of the midwives of Exod 1 in an otherwise-unknown midrash that was discovered only in the Cairo Genizah.

2.8.1. Miriam in Late Midrash

Of course, Miriam shows up also in late midrash. In the following lines we trace both the tradition about her speaking ill of Moses and the tradition about her well as they are reworked in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus. As we saw above, in the biblical tradition of Num 12, Miriam the powerful leader is transformed into a tamed sibling.³⁸ This is expressed *inter alia* in the motif of Miriam slandering Moses and being punished with *tzaraat* for it, as also found in the Tannaitic as well as in the Amoraic midrash.³⁹

37. Steinmetz's contribution is unique in this book, in that she follows a certain midrashic motif over a long span of midrashic time, ending with the post-Islamic Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer.

38. See Burns, *Has the Lord*.

39. Tannaitic: in the biblical context of *tzaraat* laws both in Sifre Num. 99

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus also preserves and transmits this tradition, but the discussion about Miriam's slander of Moses and the following *tzaraat* punishment is reworked in it in a way that alters its original meaning. This happens in one of two ways: The first connects to the slander and story about *tzaraat* to the following story, about sending out the twelve men to spy on the land of Canaan in Num 13 (Yalkut Talmud Torah, Shalah 51a;⁴⁰ TanB, Shalah 6; TanP, Shalah 5); these men later returned and slandered the land. Miriam's punishment had been intended as a warning to them that whoever speaks ill of another is punished; however, the spies failed to learn the lesson, slandered the land, and as a result all the Israelites rebelled against God and were punished (Num 14:28–9). The connection between slander and *tzaraat* is reworked here in a new context. The harshness of Miriam's punishment is explained as a didactic act on God's part, and while not less horrible, the blame is removed from Miriam and put, surprisingly enough, on God himself.⁴¹

The second way this narrative is reworked in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus involves more than recontextualizing. We find a tradition both in Tanhuma Buber (Metzora 6) and the printed Tanhuma (Metzora 2) repeating the Tannaitic midrash but reintroducing the biblical aspect of the story, according to which not only Miriam spoke against Moses but also Aaron. The Tanhuma Yelammedenu texts assert that Aaron was also stricken by *tzaraat*, the only difference being that he was healed immediately, while Miriam's recuperation took seven days. The Tanhuma Buber

(according to Rabbi Yishmael), and in Sifra *metzora parashah* 5:7–8 (according to Rabbi Akiva). Amoraic: Leviticus Rabbah, as discussed by Lorena Miralles-Maciá in her contribution: “Most of the passages present her [i.e., Miriam] as an example of someone who sinned through her mouth and was therefore struck by leprosy (Lev. Rab. 16:1, 5; 17:3) and recovered from this illness (Lev. Rab. 15:8).”

40. Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue: A Study in the Cycles of the Readings from Torah and Prophets, as well as from Psalms, and in the Structure of the Midrashic Homilies*, vol. 2, *The Palestinian Triennial Cycle: Leviticus and Numbers to Seder 106* (Cincinnati: Beit Midrash Le-Rabbanim, 1966); in the Hebrew section, p. קמז.

41. See on the Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature's oft-repeated bold accusations directed against God in Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 161–82; Ronit Nikolsky, “Parables in the Service of Emotional Translation,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheim and Marcel Poorthuis (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 37–56.

also suggests that Aaron and Miriam were stricken not because they said anything bad (since they only expressed their worry that Moses had no intention of procreating any further), but because they experienced a divine revelation, after which they, as anyone else who experiences something like this, needed to be purified by water.

From this material, one gets the (in our opinion correct) impression that the Tanhuma Yelammedenu holds a more favorable view of the woman leader of the biblical Israelites than the Tannaim or the Amoraim. However, the tradition about Miriam the slanderer from Num 12:1 is added elsewhere into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus in a different context, now with a negative tone; this case can exemplify nicely the intricate relationship between Amoraic midrashic material and Tanhuma Yelammedenu.

Genesis Rabbah argues in a few places (18:2, 80:5) that God created Eve from Adam's rib and no other body part so that she would be modest. Had Eve been created from any other limb, claims Genesis Rabbah, she could have had negative character traits: from the head—she would have been rude; from the ear—she would have been an eavesdropper; and so on. Each of these traits is then demonstrated by reference to a biblical woman with a proof verse (missing a biblical woman and a verse regarding the mouth). Yelammedenu and the printed Tanhuma, apparently based on Genesis Rabbah, bring the same tradition, not in the context of the creation of Eve but when talking about the negative characteristics of women in general:⁴²

When the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to create Eve, he was pondering from which limb [lit. place in Adam's body] to create her.... He did not create her from the eye, so that she would not be curious; [however,] Eve did turn out to be curious, as it says: "and the woman saw that the tree was good for food [and delight for the eye] etc." (Gen 3:6). He did not create her from the mouth, so that she would not be talkative; [however,] **Leah was talkative, as it says: "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband [and now you take my son's mandrakes also?!]" (Gen 30:15). And also: "And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses"** (Num 12:1). He did not create her from the ear, so that she would

42. On Yelammedenu here see Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue: A Study in the Cycles of the Readings from Torah and Prophets, as well as from Psalms, and in the Structure of the Midrashic Homilies*, vol. 1, *The Palestinian Triennial Cycle: Genesis and Exodus* (Cincinnati: Beit Midrash Le-Rabbanim, 1940), in the Hebrew section, p. שלד (106a to Gen 39:12).

not be an eavesdropper; [however,] Sarah was an eavesdropper, as it says: "And Sarah was listening at the tent door" (Gen 18:10). He did not create her from the hand, so that she would not be a thief; [however,] Rachel was a thief, as it says: "And Rachel stole her father's household gods" (Gen 31:19) etc. (TanP, Va-yeshev 6)

The sentences in bold are of interest to us. This tradition is similar to the traditions found in Genesis Rabbah 18:2 and 80:5, but here we find a woman and a verse, even two women and two verses, regarding the mouth, the second being Miriam and our verse from Numbers. The example of Miriam gives the impression of being a later addition, primarily because it begins with the words "and also" (וְכֵן). However, once this addition was inserted, it became an integral part of the narrative, and Tanhuma Buber (Va-yishlah 17) even removes Leah (who fits well with the original Genesis context), leaving Miriam alone as an example of a talkative woman. We thus observe a progression from a tradition about the creation of Eve, not mentioning Miriam (in Genesis Rabbah), to her being added as a second example of talkativeness (printed Tanhuma), to one where Leah is removed, leaving Miriam alone as the only such example (Tanhuma Buber).

This, however, is not where the story ends. Aside from Gen. Rab. 18:2 and 80:5, a similar tradition is also found in Gen. Rab. 45:5, in the context of Sarah's complaint to Abraham regarding Hagar (Gen 16:5). This tradition, unlike Gen. Rab. 18:2 and 80:5, shares with the traditions from Tanhuma Yelammedenu just cited the identification of Miriam (and not of Leah) as talkative:

The rabbis say: There are four traits in women: greediness, eavesdropping, laziness, and jealousy. Greediness: "and she took of its fruit" (Gen 3:6); eavesdropping: "and Sarah was listening" (Gen 18:10); laziness: "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour!" (Gen 18:7); jealousy: "Rachel ... envied her sister" (Gen 30:1). Rabbi Yehoshua bar Nehemiah said: Also vengefulness and talkativeness. Vengefulness: "Sarai said to Abram, May the wrong done to me be on you!" (Gen 16:5); talkativeness: "And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses" (Num 12:1). (Gen. Rab. 45:5)

The verse proving the talkativeness of women, as in the printed Tanhuma and Tanhuma Buber cited above, is the one about Miriam slandering Moses. Here also, as in the case of the printed Tanhuma discussed above, talkativeness is an addition to the original tradition, which spoke of four negative traits. The addition is clearly marked with "Rabbi Yehoshua bar Nehemiah

said: Also vengefulness and talkativeness.” Since, as was concluded above, Genesis Rabbah is typically positive with regard to Miriam, in contrast to the Tannaitic and the Babylonian literature, and since the additional (and probably late) material is here clearly marked, we think that the extant version of Gen. Rab. 45:5 is influenced by Tanhuma Yelammedenu, and the original tradition did not include Miriam as the example of a talkative woman. We even have a clue as to what the original tradition had been: it is the one found in the Yelammedenu and in the printed Tanhuma as the first case of a talkative woman: Leah’s talk to her sister in Gen 30:15, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband [and now you take my son’s mandrakes also]?” This process exemplifies the intricate textual relationships within rabbinic literature, which result from constant interaction between textual witnesses and from active scribes who add and correct traditions according to their cultural understanding and knowledge.

This example shows a typical late antique Jewish cultural process, where a narrative that was initially composed in one context, and in relation to a specific biblical verse, acquires a life of its own and is utilized for making statements in other contexts. The pool of narratives and verses being used to make such changes was part of the cultural canon of Jewish culture of late antiquity, and it was used by the various social groups within this society in a way that answered their cultural needs. Compositions of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus represent a social sector that is not, strictly speaking, a rabbinic *beit ha-midrash* context. Its community is much better defined as that of synagogue-goers and their preachers, who viewed the strict legalistic or intellectual approach of the rabbis as a source of authoritative knowledge. We were able here to follow the process of elite Jewish knowledge being translated into the wider Jewish society, because we are observing a culture that persisted, albeit in a transformed form, for a relatively long stretch of time.

However, there are also cases in which early traditions disappear in late midrash. The tradition about Miriam and Jochebed being identified with the midwives Puah and Shifrah, which is widespread in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, is almost nonexistent in the current Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpora. It is only hinted at once, in order to explain something completely different: a passage in Tanhuma Buber, Va-yaqhel 5, focuses on one verse, “and he [i.e., God] made houses [i.e., important offspring] for them [i.e., the midwives]” (Exod 1:21), and explains that this refers to Bezalel the artist, Miriam’s offspring, who built the tabernacle in the desert.

In this context the midrash discussed by Lavee in this book is of special interest, because, in his words: “The existence of the tradition of Shifrah and Puah ... the midwives as Egyptians is novel.” Miriam, as we saw above, is interpreted in most rabbinic compositions as being one of these midwives. In other words, this late midrash erases Miriam from a tradition that is clearly assigned to her elsewhere. As Lavee points out, however, rather than seeing this as a removal of Miriam and Jochebed, one should perhaps view it as a return to an interpretive tradition that predates the identification of the midwives with Miriam and Jochebed. The interpretation of the midwives as Egyptian is evident in the LXX translation of Exodus, in Josephus, and in Christian circles.

2.8.2. Miriam in Nonrabbinic Sources: Pseudepigrapha and Piyyut

The identification of an earlier Jewish interpretive tradition in rabbinic literature is of great interest to many scholars.⁴³ In this book, several scholars mention such possible parallel interpretations: Concerning Tamar of Genesis, Blankovsky mentions Jubilees and the Testament of Judah. Concerning Hagar, Gail Labovitz mentions the Qumranic Genesis Apocryphon, Josephus, and Philo. Both, however, come to negative conclusions concerning any parallel interpretations between the rabbinic compositions and the apocryphal ones.

In the case of Miriam, however, a positive parallel with a nonrabbinic tradition can be shown. In the book known as *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, the following tradition is found. We present it parallel to the tradition from the *Tosefta* presented at the head of this introduction.

Liber antiquitatum biblicarum 20.8
(see LAB 20.7)

And these are the three things that God gave his people for the sake of three persons, that is, the well of the water of Mara for the sake of Maria [Miriam], and the pillar of cloud for the sake of Aaron, and the manna for the sake of Moses.

Tosefta Sotah 11:8

Said Rabbi Yosi ben Rabbi Yehudah: When Israel left Egypt three faithful providers were nominated for them. And these are they: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. For their sake three gifts were bestowed on [Israel]: the pillar of cloud,

43. See, e.g., Steven Fraade, “Rabbinic Midrash and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation,” in Fonrobert and Jaffee, *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud*, 99–120.

manna, and a well. The well for the sake
of Miriam. The pillar of cloud for the sake
of Aaron. Manna for the sake of Moses.

The similarity between the texts is striking.⁴⁴ Most scholars have defined *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* as a prerabbinic composition of the type usually known as “rewritten Bible.” The similarities between it and many rabbinic texts have been described as resulting from this composition being the “missing link” between Second Temple Literature and the rabbis. Ilan, however, has argued that one should place *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* in the context of the Jews of Rome in late antiquity and date it as post-Amoraic and influenced by rabbinic tradition.⁴⁵ In this case we only point out that it is hard to decide who influenced whom here, but there is no doubt that the texts are closely connected.

As has often been argued, rabbinic literature worked hard to erase from Jewish consciousness prerabbinic biblical interpretations, but late midrash evidences the return of the repressed.⁴⁶ Lavee’s example is an excellent one for this trend. The openness of late midrash to other influences is demonstrated by Polzer, Steinmetz, and Nikolsky, but from another direction. All three show that late midrash was in dialogue with very early, pre-Islamic *piyyut*—a liturgical genre that is post-Amoraic but contemporary with late midrash, that, like late midrash, spills over into the Middle Ages and continues to be composed throughout Jewish history, and that, like late midrash, is in direct dialogue with all strands of rabbinic literature.

Miriam’s well tradition, as reworked in the *Tanhuma Yelammedenu*, also demonstrates well the connection between this corpus and the genre of *piyyut*. As we saw above, there was a tradition about Miriam providing the Israelites in the desert with water from a well. In Tannaitic literature this tradition is coupled with two other benefits the people received from

44. For another very good parallel about Miriam, see LAB 9.10 versus, e.g., Mek. R. Yishm. Shirata 10.

45. Tal Ilan, “The Torah of the Jews of Ancient Rome,” *JSQ* 16 (2009): 363–95, and see there a full bibliography of previous scholarship on the book.

46. This is also the title of a book on a well-known late midrash *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*. See Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). On a similar observation concerning the midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati* see Rivka Ulmer, “The Culture of Apocalypticism: Is the Rabbinic Work *Pesiqta Rabbati* Intertextually Related to the New Testament Book *The Revelation to John*?” *RRJ* 14 (2011): 37–70.

Miriam's two siblings. We have also seen that, in the Amoraic period, while Miriam is still one of the three siblings that sustained the Israelites, she is no longer asserted as providing the well (Gen. Rab. 70:8), and in spite of the fact that in Palestinian Amoraic traditions there are references to "Miriam's well" (in the Yerushalmi), in the Babylonian Talmud Miriam is not associated with the well at all. However, in the late midrash Miriam's well makes an impressive comeback. Not only is it described in detail (TanP and TanB, Ba-midbar 2), together with its beneficial qualities (being buried in the Sea of Galilee, TanB, Huqat 1), it is also coupled with a positive view of Miriam's singing: "The well [was given] because Miriam sang on the water [of the Red Sea]" (והבאר בזכות מרים שאמרה שירה על המים, TanB and TanP, Ba-midbar 2). Precisely because Miriam sang the Song of the Sea, she merited endowing the Israelites with a well. This is an example of how late midrash creates a new tradition by combining two old ones. The prominence of Miriam's well in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus can perhaps be explained by the connection of this well to the synagogal liturgy: Miriam is mentioned in a *piyyut* for the third day of the Hoshaanot celebration in the festival of Sukkot, in which it is customary to ask for beneficial winter rain. The following *piyyut* is attributed to Eleazar berabbi Qillir, a poet from the sixth–seventh century, and in it Miriam is celebrated as a prophetess, as the provider of a well, and possibly as a leader.

למען נביאה מחולת מחנים
 לכמהי לב הושמה עינים
 לרגלה רצה עלות ורדת באר מים
 לטובו אהליו, הושע נא והושיעה נא,
 אבינו אתה

For the prophetess—camp dances
 For those with wishful hearts she was placed as eyes
 to her feet, the well of water rises and falls [lit. runs up and down]
 to the goodness of his tents *hoshaanna*, please save,
 you are our father.⁴⁷

And another example: this poem is the work of Pinhas ha-Kohen, who is mentioned by Saadya Gaon among the earliest *paytanim*, and indeed from the contents of his poems (all discovered in the Cairo Genizah) he is

47. This *piyyut* is discussed by Yael Levine, "Lemaan Neviah Meholat Mahanayim: Miryam Be-Fiyutei Sukkot U-va-Hoshaanot" [Hebrew], *Yeda-Am* 69–70 (2010): 63–73.

clearly of the eighth century.⁴⁸ In his composition on the month of Nisan we read:

פסח ודרור בא בו
צום מרים בעשרה בו
ניסן / קבוע עשות ניסים בו
רגלי מבשר בוא יבוא

Pesah and Freedom come in it
The fast of Miriam is on its tenth
Nisan / Constantly miracles are performed in it
The feet of the savior will come⁴⁹

The tradition that Miriam died on the tenth of Nisan is found in Seder Olam Rabbah 10. It is a rather unorthodox composition, positioned somewhere between the late rabbinic and earlier Hellenistic Jewish literature.⁵⁰

Here we end this introduction, which is at the same time an overview of rabbinic literature and an overview of Miriam in it. The case of Miriam has proved indicative to both the manner in which various strata of rabbinic literature dealt with women, and to the differences between its attitude and that of other parts of Jewish society.

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48. Shulamit Elizur, *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Pinhas ha-Kohen: Critical Edition, Introduction and Commentaries* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004), 4–9.

49. Elizur, *Liturgical Poems*, 690.

50. See Milikowsky, "Seder Olam."

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Women Quoting Scripture in Rabbinic Literature

Tal Ilan

Did the women of the rabbinic world know Scripture? And if they did, from whom did they learn it? Do the rabbis record women quoting Scripture? And if they do, is it so as to learn from them or to mock them? Are the rabbis surprised at the level of Scripture knowledge among women, or do they take it in stride? Do the rabbis present women quoting Scripture in a different way from how they imagine men doing it? In the following chapter I will attempt to answer some of these questions based on the forty or so traditions I have collected over the years, in which women may be understood as quoting or alluding to Scripture. I have discussed many of these traditions in other contexts in the past, and this chapter is sometimes a revisit of those traditions, hopefully always with new insights.

The traditions I have collected can be divided into roughly three categories: (1) texts in which women directly quote Scripture, (2) traditions in which women ask rabbis questions about difficult scriptural verses, and (3) traditions in which women allude to specific (but do not actually quote) biblical episodes, indicating an acquaintance with them. I will discuss each of these categories, while paying attention to whether they are earlier or later, to the traditions, to the location of the compositions (land of Israel or Babylonia), and to attitudes of the texts in which women directly quote Scripture to the woman in question.

1. Texts in Which Women Directly Quote Scripture

The oldest rabbinic tradition that assigns to women the quotation of Scripture is found in the Tannaitic halakhic midrash *Sifre Deuteronomy*. This midrash recounts the story of the martyrdom of Hananiah ben Tardiyon. In the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt, he is found teaching Torah in public and is condemned to burning with his Torah scroll. His wife is

likewise condemned to death (by strangulation), and his daughter is condemned “to do work,” whatever that means.¹ All three quote verses from Scripture to justify their punishment:

When Rabbi Hananiah ben Tardion was arrested, it was decreed that he be burned with his [Torah] book. He quoted this verse: “The Rock, his work is perfect” (Deut 32:4); they told his wife: It has been decreed that your husband be burned and you executed. She quoted this verse: “A God of faithfulness and without iniquity” (Deut 32:4); they told his daughter: It has been decreed that your father be burned, and your mother executed, and you be forced to do work. She quoted this verse: “Great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man” (Jer 32:19). (Sifre Deut. 307)²

Following this story we find a comment of Rabbi (who is Yehudah ha-Nasi, i.e., the Patriarch), who states: “How great are these righteous [people], who in the hour of their suffering found three verses that justify the judgment, such as found nowhere else in Scripture.” The fact that, of the three quoting Scripture, only one is a man, is taken by the rabbi in his stride. Before we commence to examine the history of this tradition, let us look for a moment at the verses quoted: The reason this story is related in a midrash on the book of Deuteronomy is that the verse the father quotes comes from the Song of Moses at the end of the book (Deut 32). The father quotes the verse, “The Rock, his work is perfect” (v. 4), but it is not clear how this verse justifies the horrid punishment meted out to him by the Romans. The truth is that the answer to this query is only borne out in the second, unquoted part of the verse: “for all his ways are justice.” From this part of the verse it transpires that the execution of Hananiah is justified, since God is never unjust. This is a very common rabbinic technique, intended, according to my reading, to conceal from the uninitiated what this rabbinic story is about. Only people who are part of the rabbinic world can understand where to look in order to find the answer the text is purporting to give. The same is true for his wife. She quotes the next strophe in the same verse: “A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,” for

1. I have discussed this text previously, together with suggestions for the interpretation of this phrase, in Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 169–70; 190; see also David Goodblatt, “The Beruriah Traditions,” *JJS* 26 (1975): 73–75.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical and rabbinic translations are mine.

which too the decisive part of the verse is left unquoted: “just and upright is he.” In other words, she is quoting the same verse as her husband; just as he quotes it to justify his punishment, so too she quotes it in order to justify her impending execution. Is the situation imagined here of a man instructing his wife what to say, showing her what to read, and in case she is unable to read, making her repeat his words? This is not stated in the story, but the fact that the woman is citing the same verse as her husband allows for such a scenario and implies perhaps that the woman does not know Scripture.

The daughter, however, is different. She quotes a verse from a completely different part of Scripture, not even from the Torah, like the verse the parents quote; she is citing the prophet Jeremiah, and she too is only citing its first, irrelevant part: “Great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man.” The significant part of the verse, relevant for the occasion, is, “rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.” Again, when this part of the verse is applied to Hananiah’s execution, it transpires that it is a just act, and God knows how Hananiah sinned and is in charge of punishing him. The implication is that the daughter herself knows the verse and is able to quote it, though it is found somewhere else entirely in Scripture. Where did she learn this? Who taught her the words of the prophet Jeremiah? We simply do not know, and the rabbis are unhelpful in explaining this to us.

As far as I know, these are the only two women in the entire Tannaitic corpus who quote Scripture, and only the daughter is shown as a virtuoso in her own right. Who is this knowledgeable daughter? The apocryphal wisdom is that the daughter of Hanina ben Tardiyon is none other than the famous Beruriah—the only woman sage about which rabbinic literature has anything to say—based on the assumption that if a woman quotes Scripture, she cannot be just anybody; she has to be a special person. The Babylonian Talmud, for reasons I have explained elsewhere, indeed identifies the daughter of Hanina ben Tardiyon with Beruriah.³ However, Tannaitic literature, and the sources from the land of Israel in general, never identify this daughter of Hanina with Beruriah. Beruriah is a Tannaitic woman, mentioned in the Tosefta, and the way other Tannaitic sources, especially the Mishnah, deal with her, as I have

3. Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 177–78.

shown elsewhere, is to make her disappear.⁴ Interestingly, precisely in sources from the land of Israel, the wife and daughter of Hanina ben Tardiyon have an afterlife, albeit a short one. Since they know how to quote Scripture, they may as well do it again. In a midrash that appears in two compilations from the land of Israel—Lamentations Rabbah and Massekhet Semahot—this is what they do. I bring here the Lamentations Rabbah version.⁵

There was the case of the son of Rabbi Hanina ben Tardiyon, who joined robbers and [then] disclosed their secrets, and they killed him, and filled his mouth with earth and pebbles. After three days [when he was found] they put him on a bier and wished to praise him on account of his father, but he forbade it. He said: Leave him, I will say [something] about my son. He began and said: “I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation” (Prov 5:13–4). And his mother read over him: “A foolish son is a grief to his father and bitterness to her who bore him” (Prov 17:25). And his sister read over him: “Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel” (Prov 20:17). (Lam. Rab. 3:6)⁶

Many questions can be raised about this story, some of them in the realm of political history. Who are these robbers whom the son of the sage joined? The word in Hebrew for robbers is the Greek *λῆστές*/*lēstēs*, a term used by Josephus continually in order to describe Jewish guerrilla fighters in their war with Rome (e.g., when describing the freedom fighters besieged in Machaerus, Herodion, and Masada, *B.J.* 4.555). Are the *lēstēs* here such political agitators, or are they mere robbers in the nonpolitical sense of the term? If the former, why is Hanina ben Tardiyon, who himself dies a martyr’s death at the hands of Rome, so opposed to his son’s actions? Is it because he has disclosed their secrets? What secrets require lynching, and why is the father of the opinion that the robbers’ secrets were so important that he sides with them against his own son? And what is the purpose of filling the victim’s mouth with earth and stones?

4. Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 179–81.

5. And see also Mas. Semah. 12:13.

6. For a discussion of this tradition within the context of the identification of the daughter of Hanina ben Tardiyon with Beruriah see Goodblatt, “Beruriah Traditions,” 73–75.

Scholars have attempted to answer these questions in some given historical context,⁷ and of course the questions are legitimate, but from our perspective, what is important is that this story is a mirror image of the previous one—someone is being put to death, and three members of the same family—the sage, his wife, and his daughter—react by citing biblical verses. The verses here too all justify the punishment the son had received, just as in the previous text they all justified their own punishment at the hands of Rome. Again, even though it is the mother and daughter quoting Scripture, gender is not an issue. All three cite the book of Proverbs, which is full of maxims against disappointing sons, and the mother here, unlike in the previous tradition, quotes independently of the father, and her verse even mentions the mother's role: "A foolish son is ... a bitterness to her who bore him" (Prov 17:25). The daughter's verse is again the most sophisticated—she finds one that actually connects the action of deceit of the son with the punishment he received: "His mouth will be full of gravel" (Prov 20:17). It must remain a mystery, whether filling the mouth of a person who was provisionally executed with gravel was a recognized message for those who found the body, labeling him an informer, or whether this action was chosen here so as to fit the daughter's verse. In either case, in *Lamentations Rabbah* the story is presented as a comment on another verse (Lam 3:16) mentioning the grinding of one's teeth with gravel as punishment: "He has made my teeth grind on gravel" (ויגרס בחצץ שני).

Because the two traditions we have looked at up to now derive from the land of Israel, we are justified in asking, Do they indicate that the rabbis of the land of Israel had no problem with women quoting Scripture? Did they imagine a community in which this was the norm? The answer is not so simple, and I will have more to say about this further down. For now I want to understand what happened to these Scripture-quoting women once they traveled to Babylonia. As I have stated above, the Babylonian Talmud makes the daughter into Beruriah, the female Bible quoter par excellence. Aside from the verse quoted in *Sifre*,⁸ three additional verses

7. See Gedaliah Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 2:570–72.

8. The Babylonian Talmud also cites the tradition from *Sifre* Deuteronomy with the daughter of Hanina ben Tardiyon in b. Avod. Zar. 18a. This is the most discussed story about Beruriah in rabbinic literature, but because she does not quote Scripture in it, it will not detain us here. For some discussions of it see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA:

are assigned to her in the Babylonian Talmud: Ps 104:35; Isa 54:1 (b. Ber. 10a); and 2 Sam 23:5 (b. Ned. 53b–54a). I would like to discuss the first of these in some detail. Here is the story:

Certain bandits who were in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir troubled him much. He prayed that they might die. Beruriah his wife said to him: Do you base your prayer on what is written: “Let sins cease” (Ps 104:35)? Is “sinners” written? “Sins” is written. Furthermore, cast your eyes to the end of the verse “and they are wicked no more.” Since sins will cease, they will be wicked no more? Rather, pray for them to repent “and they are wicked no more.” He prayed for them, and they repented. (b. Ber. 10a)⁹

The woman here is not just able to quote a biblical verse; she can also interpret it in the rabbinic style. First, she finds a verse that she thinks her husband thinks is the grounds for praying for the death of bothersome neighbors. Then, by close reading of the words in the text, she shows him

Stanford University Press, 1999), 67–92; Yifat Monnikendam, “Beruria and Rabbi Meir: Parallels and Contrasts” [Hebrew], *PA* 2 (1999): 50–51. This story is most often tied to the malignant story Rashi tells about Beruriah, which has been the topic of most studies associated with her. See most notably Rachel Adler, “The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah,” *Tikkun* 3.6 (1988): 28–32, 102–5; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 184–96. I have refuted the connection in Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 189–94. For a study that argues similarly, see recently Naomi Cohen, “Beruria in the Bavli and in Rashi Avodah Zarah 18B,” *Tradition* 48 (2015): 29–40. According to the way this text is interpreted in the Babylonian Talmud today, the woman who quotes Scripture is not Beruriah but her sister. However, see my suggestion for an alternative reading in Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 190–91.

9. See also on this tradition Monnikendam, “Beruria and Rabbi Meir,” 42–43; Federico Dal Bo, “Legal Transgressive Sex, Heresy and Hermeneutics in the Talmud: The Cases of Beruriah, Rabbi Meir, Elisha ben Abuyah and the Prostitute,” *JLAS* 26 (2016): 138–41. Beruriah is said to quote at least two more verses: also in b. Ber. 10a, in another episode she quotes Isa 54:1, on which see now Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, “‘Rejoice O Barren One Who Bore No Child’: Beruria and the Jewish-Christian Conversation in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *The Faces of Torah: Studies in the Texts and Contexts of Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade*, ed. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Tzvi Novic, and Christine Hayse (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 199–219 (note that the gender question, namely, why it is a woman who represents Judaism, in this tradition is not raised once); and b. Eruv. 53b–54a, where she quotes 2 Sam 23:5.

that he has misinterpreted the verse—he should not pray for the death of sinners but for the death of sins. Finally, she uses overtly exactly the same principle we encountered covertly in the first example quoted above—the important information for understanding the verse is found in its second part that is not cited. Here the mention of the wicked as ceasing to exist is understood as resulting from their repentance.

At this juncture I note that the Babylonian Talmud here has perhaps commandeered a completely different tradition about a righteous woman and her husband, and has altered it so that the woman becomes Beruriah, and her actions are made into a lesson in Bible and midrash. It may have looked like this: “[Abba Hilqiah said]: There were once bandits in our neighborhood. I prayed that they might die, but [my wife] prayed that they would repent” (b. Ta’an. 23b).¹⁰

In this quote from tractate Ta’anit in the Babylonian Talmud, Abba Hilqiah is described as the grandson of Honi Ha-Meagel, who was a mega-rainmaker and, therefore, must have passed on these abilities to his grandson. Yet in this story rain comes from his wife’s side of the roof, where they both pray. How is this possible? Two explanations are offered. According to the first one, the rain came from her side because she gives beggars food. This is the second explanation the Babylonian Talmud provides for this phenomenon. The wife was more righteous than the husband, for she prayed that bothersome neighbors repent, while he prayed that they die. The most logical explanation for the parallel between this story and the story about Beruriah is that this tradition is the raw material on which the Scripture-quoting wife is mounted. However, there is a problem with this interpretation. Not only is it the second explanation for why rain came from the wife’s side, it is also absent from most manuscripts and from a Genizah fragment of the text.¹¹ It could, thus, be secondary and late, in which case it is a reworking of the Beruriah tradition. If this is the explanation, we could argue that when the Babylonian Talmud took the story from Beruriah and transferred it to this pious woman, it removed the

10. I have discussed this text in some detail in Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*, FCBT 2/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 222–23, and see bibliography there.

11. It is found in MS Munich 140 and in all the prints beginning with the Spanish print of 1480; it is not found in MS Munich 95, MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23, MS London BL Harl. 5508 (400), MS Vatican 134, MS Jerusalem—YHH 1, and in Genizah fragment Cambridge—TS F2 (2) 2.

verse. Only very specific women in the Babylonian Talmud are permitted to quote Scripture.

I wish to argue that both identifying Beruriah with Hanina ben Tardion's daughter and making her a great Scripture-quoting sage are typical moves of the Babylonian Talmud. This composition has created a biography of sorts for about a dozen women.¹² They are discussed repeatedly in its pages (and occasionally named), under the assumption that we all know who they are. The Babylonian Talmud has created the biographies of these women from disparate sources, mostly from the land of Israel but occasionally also from Babylonia. Only women from among this pool of biographed women, and only from the land of Israel, are permitted

12. Here is my list with selected bibliography: (1) Bat Rav Hisda. On her see Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, FCBT 4/3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 232–37; and see also the historical novel by Maggie Anton, *Rav Hisda's Daughter*, 2 vols. (New York: Plume, 2012–2014). (2) Em. On her see Charlotte E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 151–59; Shulamit Valler, *Women in Jewish Society in the Talmudic Period* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hillel ben Hayim, 2000), 161–72. On her recipes see Giuseppe Veltri, *Magie und Halakha* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 230–38. (3) Ifra Hormiz, on whom see Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 252–23 and bibliography there. (4) Imma Shalom. On her see Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 110–18. (5) Martha bat Boethus. On her, see Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers*, 88–97; Shulamit Valler, *Massekhet Sukkah*, FCBT 2/6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 189–94; and recently Liat Sobolev-Mandelbaum, “The Figure of Marta bat Baitus as a Religious ‘Other’” [Hebrew], *Masekhet* 13 (2017): 71–94 with updated bibliography. (6) Rabbi Akiva's wife. On her see Shulamit Valler, *Women and Womanhood in the Talmud* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 1999), 51–76; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 146–56; Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers*, throughout; and also the historical novel by Yochi Brandes, *Akiva's Orchard* [Hebrew] (Or Yehuda: Kinneret-Zmura-Bitan; 2012). (7) Rabbi's servant (on whom see Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers*, 97–107; Valler, *Women in Jewish Society*, 152–60; Gail Labovitz, *Massekhet Mo'ed Qatan*, FCBT 2/10 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021], 255–67). (8) Shelamzion (queen). On her see Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), throughout. (9) Yalta. On her see Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers*, 121–29; Tamara Or, *Massekhet Besah*, FCBT 2/7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 122–33; Charlotte E. Fonrobert, “Yalta's Ruse: Resistance against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel R. Wasserfall (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 60–81; and also the historical novel by Ruhama Weiss, *Yalta: A Talmudic Novel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 2017).

to quote Scripture.¹³ The Babylonian Bat Rav Hisda, mentioned more than any other woman in the Babylonian Talmud, never quotes Scripture. Yalta, the second most mentioned women, may be understood as alluding to biblical law that forbids the mixing of milk and meat (b. Hul. 109b). She does not quote a verse.¹⁴ The Scripture-quoting women in the Babylonian Talmud are heroines from the land of Israel, like Beruriah. Here is one quote assigned to one of these heroines of the Babylonian Talmud, the maidservant of Rabbi (Yehudah ha-Nasi): “A maidservant of the house of Rabbi saw a person beating his adult son. She said: Let that man be excommunicated, since he has transgressed the commandment: ‘You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind’ (Lev 19:14)” (b. Mo’ed Qat. 17a).

The maidservant of Rabbi is a favorite paradox of the rabbis. While she herself is a slave, she is more learned than the rabbis, and this gives her power. She uses wisdom speech (b. Eruv. 63b); she corrects the rabbis’ Hebrew (b. Rosh Hash. 26b; b. Meg. 18a). Here she excommunicates a man who beats his son and does so while quoting a biblical verse. Yet this story has a *Vorlage* in the Talmud Yerushalmi, and there it looks different on three counts—she is not Rabbi’s maidservant; she excommunicates one who beats a child, not an adult; and she does not quote Scripture: “Once the maidservant of Bar Pata walked by a synagogue. She witnessed a scribe beating a child [תינוק] excessively [יתיר מן צורכי]. She said [to the scribe]: Let that man be excommunicated” (y. Mo’ed Qat. 3:1, 81d).

I have discussed this story elsewhere.¹⁵ Its Babylonian Talmud parallel has undergone the same processes we saw above concerning Beruriah. There, an anonymous woman (the wife of Abba Hilqiyah) has become the scholar Beruriah. Here, a story about an anonymous slave woman with a highly developed sense of social justice has become the story of the quint-

13. The exception, as there invariably is, to the phenomenon of only a small group of biographed women who may quote Scripture, is the wife of a pious man (*hasid*) who died in his prime. She quotes Deut 30:20, in order to complain about his untimely death; see b. Shabb. 13a–b. This story is of a land-of-Israel origin; see Avot R. Nat. A 2; B 2; Seder Eliyahu 16.

14. See Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 487–92. Elsewhere I have argued that Yalta does quote Ben Sira (see Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 171–74). However, she does so in Aramaic, and Ben Sira was written in Hebrew. On another place where the Babylonians imagine an ignorant woman (an *am-haaretz*) misquoting Scripture in Aramaic Targum, see b. Hul. 5a; Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 113.

15. Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 192–96.

essential rabbinic maidservant—that of Rabbi (Yehudah ha-Nasi). In the process, both women receive a biblical verse to quote. Both quotes are devoid of gender aspects. The Babylonian Talmud lets the women quote them in order to show what unusual woman (from the land of Israel) can do. This is not telling us something about women in general. It is telling us about very specific and unique women.

The last example I wish to bring is taken from a story about another unique woman, but it is highly gendered. The story is that of Rabbi Akiva's wife—this Babylonian paragon of self-sacrifice, who sends her husband away to study for twenty-four years and lives in destitution. When he comes back, so we hear, the following occurs: “When he came he was accompanied by twenty-four thousand pairs of students. His wife heard and was going out to meet him. Her [female] neighbors said to her: Borrow fine clothes to cover [yourself]. She said to them: “A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast (Prov 12:10)” (b. Ketub. 63a).¹⁶ The gendered aspect of this quotation is the comparison the wife makes between herself and a beast. It is not absolutely clear whether the verse in Proverbs spoke originally of the humane treatment of beasts by righteous persons, or whether it is, even in the original, a metaphor about desirable power relationships among people. Every master must be benevolent. It is clear, however, that in no earlier midrash from the land of Israel is this verse used to describe the rule of men over women. This is a remarkable Babylonian Talmud innovation. It employs the classical method of placing in the mouth of the oppressed the justification for and acceptance of their oppression. It is not the rabbis who claim that women compared to men are like beasts. It is the woman herself who does this.

I sum up this part of my essay: in a highly stylized literary creation, a Tannaitic text describes a mother and daughter quoting Scripture. Is this a reflection of a historical situation? We cannot know, but we can see that later rabbinic texts have taken this tradition in two directions. A text from the land of Israel uses this story as a model to tell another story: the same two women quote Scripture, even though they do it under different circumstances. The Babylonian Talmud takes this story to a completely different place. It forms the basis for the identification of the nameless daughter with a named woman of Tannaitic times—Beruriah.

16. See also in b. Ned. 50a. I have written extensively on this source in Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers*, throughout, and especially 39–48, 206–15.

2. Traditions in Which Women Ask Rabbis Questions about Difficult Scriptural Verses

The vast majority of traditions that associate women with the knowledge of Scripture are those in which a woman asks a rabbi to explain to her a difficult verse. The locus classicus where this discussion should begin is with *Matrona* of *Genesis Rabbah*. In this rabbinic composition there are seven traditions in which *Matrona* asks Rabbi Yose questions about biblical texts. She asks him why it is not written “it was good” about the second day of creation, why death is not mentioned concerning Enoch, how is it possible that Joseph was not tempted by the wife of Potiphar, and so on. Already in 1994 I published an article about this woman, which I will now revisit.¹⁷ I quote here what had been the general opinion about these traditions before I wrote my article and what my innovation was: “Based on her title—*Matrona*—scholars from the very beginning assumed that the woman must be a high-class Roman matron residing in the land of Israel, whose queries represent typical polemical questions set to Jews by various groups of philosophical gentiles and heretics familiar with the Jewish Holy Scriptures.”¹⁸ I, however, pointed out one aspect—the gender aspect—that had been ignored by previous scholars. I wrote:

Since in purely literary compositions every component is functional to the narration, if the *Matrona*-and-Rabbi-Jose traditions were purely fiction, their contents should entail issues which are of special interest to women. Otherwise it is odd that the heroine is a woman. However, except for one tradition (to which we shall return presently), all the questions set by *Matrona* are of no special interest to women.¹⁹

I therefore proposed a radical thesis according to which *Matrona* is not necessarily the title of a Roman woman, as previously claimed, but could have served as the personal name of a Jewish woman. I distinguished between the seven earliest traditions of *Matrona* and Rabbi Yose found in *Genesis Rabbah* and the thirteen other traditions of the same cloth found in later compilations, and argued that only concerning the first seven we can be sure of their authenticity: The traditions, so I argued,

17. Tal Ilan, “*Matrona* and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation,” *JSJ* 25 (1994): 18–51.

18. Ilan, “*Matrona* and Rabbi Jose,” 19.

19. Ilan, “*Matrona* and Rabbi Jose,” 20.

disclosed to us a teacher-student relationship between a Jewish sage and a Jewish woman who is groping through her first biblical lessons, reading carefully and asking questions. Rabbi Yose, her mentor, is doing his best to keep his answers to her simple and within the scope of her academic achievements. Naturally, the questions involve those aspects in Scripture where the text is obscure, its meaning dubious or ambiguous.²⁰

I even suggested how the editor of *Genesis Rabbah* had worked: "It appears that the redactor of *Genesis Rabbah* was in possession of a rare source: a collection of discussions between Rabbi Jose and Matrona, which probably covered all the book of Genesis, and he chose selected sections from it at various points during his editorial work."²¹

Concerning the other thirteen traditions, I identified in them the same trend we find in modern scholarship: the name of the woman was understood as a noble Roman title, the woman was identified as pagan, and the questions she asked were formulated more and more as polemics against Judaism. I wrote: "The many authentic traditions found in *Genesis Rabbah* fired the imagination of redactors and compilers, who saw the literary possibilities available in this formula,"²² and this had brought about the invention of similar texts recorded in midrashim such as *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Qoheleth Rabbah*, *Tanhuma*, and even a text of a more obscure origin such as *Pesiqta Rabbati*.

In other words, I suggested that an ancient text we no longer possess had catalogued questions that a certain Jewish woman by the name of Matrona had asked Rabbi Yose, about verses from Genesis, together with the answers he provided for her. The redactor of *Genesis Rabbah* had access to this source and employed it. I realized then and I realize now that what I suggested was in the realm of speculation. Yet since the publication of this article twenty-three years ago, two independent discoveries I made, in unrelated fields, have fortified these theses considerably. The first is in the field of onomastics. In volume 2 of my *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, which documents named Jews from 200 to 650 CE (the period in which Matrona of *Genesis Rabbah* had lived), I could show that Matrona was one of the ten most popular female names used for Jewish women in the land of Israel (and this without counting our

20. Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose," 41.

21. Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose," 42.

22. Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose," 49.

Matrona, who for reasons of caution I omitted in my lexicon). The name is recorded on epitaphs in Jewish cemeteries such as Beit Shearim, in synagogue inscriptions, and on amulets written in Hebrew. This sort of evidence certainly lends strong support to the thesis that Matrona was the name of a Jewish woman.²³

Evidence for the existence of a source that listed traditions continuously, and that the editor of *Genesis Rabbah* dispersed them according to the location of the relevant verse in his composition, I discovered in another completely different study that I undertook. In the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* (Pisha 14), a Tannaitic tradition of an older date than *Genesis Rabbah*, a list of changes that the seventy elders who translated the Torah into Greek made in the text is to be found. Part of the list is relevant to the book of Genesis. In the *Mekilta* the changes are presented in a list. In *Genesis Rabbah*, however, these traditions are dispersed throughout the book according to the relevant verses, just like the Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose traditions.²⁴

I have brought these two pieces of evidence in order to explain why I stick by my twenty-three-year-old thesis. If I am right, and Matrona was a Jewish woman who asked Rabbi Yose questions about the book of Genesis and had them (or he had them) recorded, with his answers, we need to ask, Was Matrona a normal woman, or was she unique? Was her desire to study Scripture accepted by the society in which she lived, or was it shunned? We have seen that Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose traditions continued to be invented by the editors and compilers of other aggadic midrashim in the land of Israel. But what about the more halakhically minded talmudim? First we note that in neither talmudim are Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose traditions preserved. In other words, all twenty Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose traditions are extra-talmudic. Is this intentional or is it a coincidence? I think the former. A famous tradition in the Talmud Yerushalmi runs as follows:

Matrona asked Rabbi Eliezer: Why was there but one sin in the case of the [golden] calf but they were punished with three forms of death? He

23. Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, part 2, *Palestine 200–650* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 47, 305–6.

24. See Yael Fisch, “The Septuagint” [Hebrew], in *Josephus and the Rabbis*, vol. 1, *The Lost Tales of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Tal Ilan and Vered Noam (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2017), 151 n. 48.

said to her: A woman's wisdom is only in her distaff, as it is written: "And every skillful woman spun with her hands" (Exod 35:25). His son Hyrcanus said to him: So as not to answer her, you have made me lose three hundred measures of tithes every year? He said to him: Rather should the words of Torah be burnt than given to women. (y. Sotah 3:4, 19a)

Let us begin with some historical observations. Is Matrona, who approaches Rabbi Eliezer here, the same woman who asks questions of Rabbi Yose? Chronologically this is almost impossible. Rabbi Eliezer was the mythical teacher of Rabbi Akiva, who was Rabbi Yose's teacher. There is a gap of two generations between the two rabbis, and Rabbi Eliezer was certainly not alive when Rabbi Yose was a famous teacher. Thus, historically, we are looking at either another woman named Matrona or indeed a Roman matron. However, from a literary perspective, there is no reason not to identify the two. As is well known, there is a close relationship between the editorial work on the *Genesis Rabbah* and on the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, and the editorial teams of the two works probably worked simultaneously. However, it is doubtful that they were the same team. If the editor of the *Talmud Yerushalmi* knew the work of the *Genesis Rabbah* editor, or even knew its source for the Matrona traditions, perhaps this is its statement of disapproval, as it sends the same woman to ask such a question (albeit about verses from the book of Exodus) of Rabbi Eliezer, who is famous for his mishnaic statement (exactly in m. Sotah 3:4, about which this section comments): "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as though he taught her nonsense." A woman has no right to ask such questions. By telling this story, the *Talmud Yerushalmi* is making a statement about women and Scripture: they should not be allowed to ask rabbis about Scripture. Thus no Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose traditions found their way into this composition. In fact, no other woman that I know quotes Scripture in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*.²⁵

As an aside we should add that the question Matrona asks is indeed legitimate. In Exod 30, after the episode of the golden calf, we learn in verse 20 that Moses grinds the golden calf in water and makes the Israelites drink the poisoned water. In verse 28 we hear that the Levites killed three thousand people. Then in verse 35 we hear that God himself sent a plague.

25. I know of one case where a rabbi's slave shows herself aware of biblical law, see y. Ber. 3:4, 6c, and further on this tradition, Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 188–92.

The Talmud Yerushalmi itself acknowledges the legitimacy of the question when it adds the following epilogue:

When she went out his disciples said to him: You have rejected her, but what do you answer us? Rabbi Berekhiah in the name of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: Whoever had witnesses and was warned was executed by a court of law. Whoever had witnesses, but was not warned was tested like the *sotah*. Whoever had neither died in the plague. (y. Sotah 3:4, 19a)

The answer supplied here uses the rabbinic concept of evidence that is valid in court. If such exists, the people who were guilty were killed by the Levites. If the evidence was inconclusive, the people were tested by an ordeal similar to the one used on a wife suspected of committing adultery. This is the drinking of water with dust from the ground golden calf mixed in it. If there was no evidence, God meted out the punishment. As we can see, this interpretation is assigned to Rabbi Eliezer, but it is not part of the story, since the tradition is transmitted through two later Amoraim. What this epilogue shows is that it is not the question that is wrong but the one who puts it.

The Babylonian Talmud in this respect follows in the footsteps of the Talmud Yerushalmi. It also tells this same episode, albeit with some differences:

A wise woman asked Rabbi Eliezer: Since the golden calf sin was one, why were they not executed in the same way? He said to her: A woman's wisdom is only in her distaff, as it is written: "And every skillful woman spun with her hands" (Exod 35:25). It was said in the name of Rav and of Levi. One said: One who sacrificed and spread incense was killed by the sword, one who hugged and kissed was strangled, one who rejoiced in his heart died of *hadraḡon*. The other said: Witnesses and warning, with the sword, witnesses but no warning by strangulation, no witnesses and no warning, by *hadraḡon* (i.e., a name of a disease). (b. Yoma 66b)

Since this essay is about women quoting Scripture, I wish to emphasize only one difference between this tradition and the one in the Talmud Yerushalmi (though there are more). Note that the female inquirer is not described as Matrona but as a "wise woman." This is because, as I have shown elsewhere, in the Babylonian Talmud (in which there are no Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose traditions), Matrona means a non-Jewish noble

woman.²⁶ The woman here is evidently Jewish and thus cannot be called *Matrona*. In fact, according to the Babylonian Talmud, it is not women in general who are expected to keep away from studying; it is Jewish women.

Curiously, the Babylonian Talmud conforms to the genre of women asking questions on Scripture only when the women are non-Jewish. I offer here the three examples I know of this genre. I will not discuss them but note the range of verses being quoted in them. Queen Cleopatra quotes Psalms (72:16) to Rabbi Meir (b. Sanh. 90b). A female proselyte juxtaposes two verses in the Torah (Deut 10:17; Num 6:26) to Rabban Gamaliel (b. Rosh Hash. 17b). The emperor's daughter quotes another verse from Psalms (104:3) at Rabbi Yehoshua (b. Hul. 60a).²⁷ All these traditions are unique to the Babylonian Talmud, yet all three are about mythical Tannaim from the land of Israel. There is no corresponding tradition of Sasanian royal women (such as Ifra Hormiz, King Shapur's mother, of whom the Babylonian Talmud is fond and mentions once in a while) quoting Scripture.²⁸ The Babylonian imagination, which only allows non-Jewish women to ask sages questions about Scripture, does not extend this prerogative beyond the boundaries of the Land of Israel either.

Did the Babylonian Talmud, then, not know the *Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose* genre, which was so popular in the midrashim of the land of Israel? I think it did know it, but, like the Talmud Yerushalmi, chose not to employ it. My proof for this contention comes from a tradition from the original *Genesis Rabbah*. I had previously mentioned this tradition, in order to state that there is but one question that *Matrona* sets to Rabbi Yose, which is gender relevant. It is a question on the creation of women, and it goes like this:

Matrona asked Rabbi Jose: Why [was woman created] by theft? He replied: Imagine ... a man depositing an ounce of silver with you in secret and you returning him a pound of silver openly; is that theft? She pursued: Yet why in secret? He answered: At first he created her for him and [Adam] saw her full of slime and blood; thereupon he removed her from himself and [God] created her a second time. She retorted: I can corroborate your words.... It had been arranged that I should be married to my mother's brother, but because I was brought up with him in the

26. I have written on this in Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 181.

27. On this I wrote in Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 274–81.

28. See Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 252–53.

same home, I became plain in his eyes and he went and married another woman, who is not as beautiful as I. (Gen. Rab. 17:7)

Of this tradition I had written:

In this tradition Matrona questions Rabbi Yose on the seemingly crooked way in which woman was created. Rabbi Yose, answering her with the help of a parable (the thief) and an expansion of the Biblical account (the creation of the second Eve), convinces her that this is not the case. Matrona then produces a story from her own biography, with which she corroborates Rabbi Yose's explanation.²⁹

The subject of this midrash is of special interest to women, since it deals with the question of their creation. Although a question on the way in which woman was created could just as easily have been put forward by a man, the fact that it is a woman who poses it adds a personal dimension to the narration. Rabbi Yose's answer, however, is not provocative or hostile, as befits the battle between the sexes, but, rather, it is accommodating, even complimentary to women. In fact, it would have been more artistic if such an answer could have been put in the mouth of a woman. And indeed, this is exactly what happened to the tradition in the Babylonian Talmud.³⁰

Said the emperor to Rabban Gamaliel: Your God is a thief, as is written: "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept [took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh]" (Gen 2:21). Said his daughter to him: Let me answer him. She said [to the emperor]: Lend me one dux. He asked her? Why? [She answered:] Robbers came on us tonight and took a bag of silver and left us a bag of gold. He said to her: May they come on us every day. [She replied:] And was it not good for Adam that they took from him one rib and gave him a maidservant to serve him? He said to her: This is as you say, but he should take it publicly. She said to him: Bring me some meat. They brought her. She placed it under her armpit and took it out. She said to him: Eat from this. He said to her: It disgusts me. She said to him: Adam too, had it been taken publicly, it would have disgusted him. (b. Sanh. 39a)

We can see in this text how a simple question-and-answer session between Matrona and Rabbi Yose has become a contest on two levels—between

29. Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose," 29.

30. Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose," 30.

Jews and non-Jews and between men and women. The person setting the question is the Roman emperor. Obviously he is setting the question to the most prominent rabbinic personality in the Tannaitic world, often described in the Babylonian Talmud as *nasi*—Rabban Gamaliel. He is taunting him: “Your God is a thief,” he says, and in order to prove it he quotes Scripture. In the imaginary world of the Babylonian Talmud, non-Jews (and not just non-Jewish women) know Scripture and can quote it. The form of this question is, of course, challenging in general, but it is no less challenging in the realm of gender relations. The woman was created, so this text, by robbing the first created man. As is fitting—the daughter picks up the challenge. She is a woman, and so it is fitting for her to defend God’s actions in this realm. By allowing her to answer, Rabban Gamaliel demonstrates that in this struggle, even a mere Jewish woman is superior to a Roman emperor. She will answer him so decisively that he will have no other question to ask. But, even more to the point, she will defend the existing power system within Judaism—the rib was taken from the man in order to create for him a servant. This is the order of things—women serve men. The woman herself says so. Just as in the wife-of-Rabbi-Akiva tradition, it was the woman who compared herself to a beast. Women in the Babylonian Talmud defend their subordinate position in Judaism as just, by referring to Scripture.

Compared to the Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose tradition, several things have happened here. First of all, we do not have a man who has to justify to a woman the relationship between the sexes, but the other way around. Thus, she can be much more outspoken than Rabbi Yose in the treatment of her sex. Rabbi Yose merely compliments Matrona (and women in general) by stating that the rib is silver but woman are gold. Rabban Gamaliel’s daughter states that women, as slaves of men, are worth more than silver. Second, and more to the topic of this chapter, by having the emperor ask the question, the woman is robbed of the quote. She knows the biblical story and she is smart, but she does not demonstrate knowledge of the actual biblical verse. This brings me to the last category I listed above.

3. Traditions in Which Women Allude to Specific Biblical Episodes, Indicating an Acquaintance with Them

The knowledge of specific biblical episodes is not the same as quoting verses. A woman who quotes verses knows the actual text. A woman who

alludes to events described in the Bible could indicate a different sort of education—women were told the stories, as part of their cultural heritage, but not taught them as a text in an academic or semiacademic setting. Rabban Gamaliel's daughter of the previous tradition knows the story of woman's creation. We do not know in what words she was taught the story, or what words she would use to retell it, because even if she knew verses from the story, they are not cited. I have found three additional examples, in rabbinic literature, of women alluding to biblical stories—all of them from Genesis—without actually quoting a verse. Two of these three traditions come from sources from the land of Israel, and are then more or less dramatically altered by the Babylonian Talmud as we saw his free hand in the Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose tradition. In the last case, however, the tradition is, as far as we know at this point, a Babylonian composition, although it too speaks about a woman from the land of Israel.

My first (and second) example comes from *Lamentations Rabbah*. In a famous chain of six stories about encounters between Rabbi Yehoshua and wise people of Jerusalem, including women and children (about which we will not have time to elaborate),³¹ in the fifth story the following conversation with a young girl is recorded:

Once [Rabbi Yehoshua] entered the city, he encountered a young girl drawing water from the spring. He said to her: Let me drink water. She said to him: Both you and your donkey. When he had drunk his fill he said to her: My daughter, you have done the deed of Rebekah. She said to him: I did the deed of Rebekah, you have not done the deed of Eliezer. (Lam. Rab. 1:1)

The story to which the girl here is referring is found in Gen 24. Abraham's slave goes to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, and at the village well he encounters Rebekah, who provides water for him and for his camels. Then he pays her and takes her as wife to his master's son. In Gen 24 the slave is not named, but rabbinic midrash identifies him with Eliezer, Abraham's agent of Gen 15:2 (see primarily Gen. Rab. 70 and b. Ta'an. 4a). In our midrash, the girl who answers Rabbi Yehoshua knows the story, but instead of citing the Bible itself, she tells the story from a rabbinic perspective. She acted like the biblical Rebekah, but Rabbi Yehoshua had not paid

31. See on this chain of stories Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 191–201.

her with gifts, or found her a husband, like the rabbinic Eliezer did for Rebekah. She may not know the correct verses here, but she knows the rabbinic retelling of the story.

This story too has a parallel in the Babylonian Talmud. The stories on Rabbi Yehoshua's encounter with wise women and children are shortened in the Babylonian Talmud to three only and told in Eruvin 53b, in close proximity to one of the sources where we find Beruriah quoting Scripture. Note, however, what has happened to the story here:³² "By a girl, how? Once I was walking on my way and I saw a path traversing a field and I took it. One girl said to me: Is this not a field? I said to her: Is this not a trodden path? Said she to me: Bandits like you trod it." This story is of course not a parallel to the land-of-Israel one. It is in fact a parallel of another story in the Lamentations Rabbah chain—the first story, which looks like this: "There was the case of Rabbi Yehoshua, who was walking along the way. A person met him on the way. He said to him: What are you doing? He said to him: I am walking along the way. He said to him: You have spoken well, for you are walking on a way that bandits like you trod" (Lam. Rab. 1:1).

Why has the Babylonian Talmud chosen to tell this story about the young girl instead of telling it about just any man, and taken away from the young girl the one assigned to her in Lamentations Rabbah? Perhaps the answer has to do with the girl's knowledge of Scripture. In Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 53b there are several smart women—our little girl, the woman Rabbi Yehoshua encounters, Rabbi's maidservant, and Beruriah. However, only the latter is allowed to quote Scripture. This could be an intentional literary buildup—many women are smart, but only one is also Torah learned. Knowledge of the scriptural story is taken away from the girl in order to achieve this goal.

But the Babylonian Talmud is not consistent, so I end this essay with two stories found in the same cluster, and in both women refer to biblical stories from Genesis. The cluster is part of the long collection of destruction stories found in tractate Gittin. One story is also taken over from Lamentations Rabbah (in which destruction stories are also clustered), but the other is found only in the Babylonian Talmud, although it obviously refers to events that occurred in Jerusalem close to and as a result of the destruction of the temple.

32. I wrote on this chain of stories in Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 185–86.

The first tradition is the rabbinic retelling of the mother-and-seven-sons martyr story of 2 Maccabees.³³ In 2 Macc 7 we are told of a woman whose seven sons were martyred because they refused to bow to idols in the time of the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes. The story is relocated by Lamentations Rabbah to the Hadrianic persecutions following the Bar Kokhba revolt and then retold in the Babylonian Talmud. The mother of Lamentations Rabbah says to her youngest son at the end of the story: “Go to your father Abraham and say to him: So said my mother: Do not be pleased with yourself, saying: I built an altar and sacrificed my son, Isaac. Our mother built seven altars and sacrificed seven sons in one day. For you it was only a test, but in my case it was real” (Lam. Rab. 1). Second Maccabees 7 makes no comparison between the death of this woman’s seven sons and Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 21), but before it was retold in Hebrew in Lamentations Rabbah, this chapter was retold in 4 Maccabees, and there, interestingly enough, a comparison is made: “But sympathy with her children didn’t turn away the mother of the young men, who had a spirit kindred with that of Abraham” (4 Macc 14:20).

The allusion here to the Akedah story is implicit, but further down in the book, it is much more explicit: “For whom also our father Abraham was forward to sacrifice Isaac our progenitor, and shuddered not at the sight of his own paternal hand descending down with the sword upon him” (4 Macc 16:20). The author of 4 Maccabees here compares the mother of the seven sons to Abraham, like in Lamentations Rabbah, but he does not go so far as to say that the mother’s sacrifice is considerably greater than Abraham’s. The audacity to make this comparison is reserved for the author of this Lamentations Rabbah tradition. He claims the superiority of the mother over Abraham on two counts—first, in the number of sacrifices she made, and second, in that she actually saw her sons die. Was Lamentations Rabbah then influenced by 4 Maccabees, or did the comparison spring independently to the minds of the two authors? We will never know, but it is certainly only the author of Lamentations Rabbah who places the comparison in the mouth of the mother. She is the one who knows the Akedah story, and she makes the comparison in which, in her mind, she has outdone Abraham.

33. Much has been written on this tradition. For a summation, see recently Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

The story is retold in the Babylonian Talmud, but the words of the mother are subdued. This is what she says in this composition: “My sons, go say to Abraham your father: You bound one altar. I bound seven altars. She also went up on the roof and fell and died” (b. Git. 57b).

As we can see, in this version the mother does not taunt Abraham, and she does not push the comparison too far. She does not mention the fact that Abraham did not actually sacrifice Isaac.³⁴

However, the theme of comparison with a biblical figure in her story is surprisingly similar to the other story found in this destruction-of-Jerusalem cluster in the Babylonian Talmud, in which another woman displays knowledge of a story from Genesis.

There was case of a betrothed couple who was taken captive among the gentiles, and they were married one to the other. She said to him: Please, do not touch me, for I have no *ketubbah* from you. And he did not touch her until the day he died. When he died she said to him: Weep for this one who suppressed his desire more than Joseph, for in the case of Joseph it was just for an hour, and for him it was every day. In the case of Joseph it was not in the same bed, and here, in the same bed. In the case of Joseph, she was not his wife, and here it is his wife. (b. Git. 57a)

In this story, the woman is referring to Joseph’s attempted seduction by the wife of Potiphar. She is comparing her husband’s resistance to sexual seduction favorably to Joseph’s, like the mother of the seven sons, who is compared favorably to Abraham in the following page in this story cluster.

As a conclusion, it seems to me that we do right to divide the information at our disposal between traditions from the land of Israel and traditions from Babylonia. From the earliest, Tannaitic tradition that lets women quote complicated biblical verses, through the traditions of Matrona-and-Rabbi-Yose, in which the sage teaches the woman Bible; to the girl who knows the rabbinic midrash on Eliezer, Abraham’s slave, and Rebekah; the case of the women knowing and quoting Scripture in the land of Israel—when it arises at all, is tackled unproblematically. That is not to say that this phenomenon had no opponents. The Talmud Yerushalmi tells no stories about women quoting Scripture, except for one, in which her

34. For more on this story see Robert Doran, “The Martyr: A Synoptic View of the Mother and Her Seven Sons,” in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. George W. E. Nickelsburg and John J. Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 189–221.

question is left unanswered; the more halakhically minded rabbis of the Talmud were obviously not so happy with the prevailing situation.

In Babylonia the issue is completely literary and more complex. Not one identifiable Babylonian woman is said to quote Scripture. The women who do quote Scripture on the Babylonian Talmud pages are all from the land of Israel. Even pagan queens, who quote Scripture, all converse with rabbis from the land of Israel. The Babylonian Talmud is very structured—only very specific women, foremost among them Beruriah, quote Scripture. The Babylonian Talmud even prefers non-Jewish women quoting Scripture to Jewish ones. However, literary structure and themes are everything, and if in a literary cluster one woman compares herself favorably to Abraham, in another story of the same cluster another can compare her husband favorably to Joseph.

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Gender, Biblical Law, and Rabbinic Halakhah

Remaking or Unmaking? Levirate in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature

Dvora Weisberg

This essay considers rabbinic reshaping of the biblical law of levirate, with an emphasis on the impact of that reshaping on levirate widows. My interest in levirate marriage began when I noticed something surprising in several biblical passages dealing with a threat to family continuity due to the death of a childless man. These biblical passages, despite being generated by a patriarchal, patrilineal culture, suggest that men were less concerned than women with preserving the lineage and legacy of their dead kinsman.¹ Moreover, this was true even though the men involved were directly related to the deceased, sharing a common father or other male ancestor, while the women were related to the deceased only by marriage. That is, the continuation of the deceased's patrilineage was of less concern to those who shared that lineage than to those who entered into a family by marriage.

In setting forth the law of levirate, Deut 25 acknowledges that a man might be less than eager to enter into a levirate union with his brother's widow. In Gen 38, it is Tamar, not Judah or Onan, who displays the greatest commitment to preserving the lineage of her first husband, Er. The nameless kinsman in the fourth chapter of Ruth is willing to forgo his duty as a redeemer to avoid taking the widow of his relative as his wife. After exploring these biblical texts, I was curious to discover whether the rabbis, in their treatment of levirate marriage and *halitzah*, were aware of this problem and, if so, whether they shared it or responded to it. Additionally, I wanted to learn how the rabbis treated the levirate widow, whom the Bible portrays as the primary advocate for levirate marriage.

1. Dvora Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," *JSOT* 28 (2004): 405–6.

My research here, on levirate, explores the way that the rabbis of the land of Israel and Babylonia between the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE and the Muslim conquest of the Near East in the seventh century responded to a short biblical passage. This passage, Deut 25:5–10, lays out the procedure by which the widow of a childless man and her husband's brother should consummate a union intended to produce a son and heir for the deceased. I demonstrate that, although rabbinic law preserves the practice of levirate (in Hebrew *yibbum*, יִבּוּם), it does so in a way that completely overturns the stated goal of a levirate union as described in Deuteronomy.² This has an impact on the two parties to a levirate union, a man and his brother's widow, as well as implications for the children of their union and for the woman's now-deceased husband.

In societies that practice levirate, it serves first and foremost, in the words of anthropologist Jack Goody, as “a strategy of continuity.”³ These societies tended to be patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal; they were also largely agricultural.⁴ In these societies, the death of a childless man posed a dilemma: the deceased, having died without offspring (or, more pointedly, without sons) had no one to inherit his property or carry on his name and lineage. Levirate, whether treated as marriage or a less formal union between a man's widow and a member of his patrilineage, allowed another man to sire posthumous prodigy for his kinsman.⁵ In societies where women left their families of origin and became part of their husband's clan, levirate could also provide a childless widow with security. In communities where a man's family paid a bride price to obtain a wife for him, levirate also allowed the family to pass the widow on to another male in the family, obviating the need to pay for another woman.

Based on the legal material in Deut 25:5–10, we can assume that levirate in ancient Israel served the same function that it did in many other cultures, namely, providing offspring, and thus continuity, for a man who died without children. At the same time, levirate marriage as described

2. Dvora Weisberg, “Levirate Marriage and *Halitsah* in the Mishnah,” *ARJ* 1 (1998): 60–68.

3. Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient, and the Primitive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 206–7.

4. Dvora Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 2009), 5–7.

5. Betty Potash, ed., *Widows in African Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 5–10.

by the rabbis differs from the institution of levirate in most other cultures in which it is practiced. One major distinction is that in rabbinic Judaism, levirate was a form of marriage, while in most cultures that practice levirate, the widow and her husband's relative do not marry; rather, their sexual relationship is an informal one that exists alongside the levir's marriage to another woman or women.⁶ The widow does not necessarily live with the levir. Additionally, rabbinic law mandated levirate only when the deceased left no descendants. The rabbis prohibited levirate when the deceased left offspring, even if the widow and her brother-in-law wished to marry; such a union was regarded as incestuous (m. Yevam. 4:2; 10:3).⁷ Finally, while in other cultures the children of a levirate union were regarded as the legal offspring of the deceased, rather than their biological father, the levir, in rabbinic Judaism, the children born of a levirate union were considered the legal offspring of the levir. It is the levir, and not the children he has with his brother's widow, who inherits the property of his deceased brother (m. Yevam. 4:7).

These differences between levirate in postbiblical Judaism and levirate in other cultures can be seen in the earliest rabbinic discussions of levirate, found in early Tannaitic midrash, particularly Sifre Deuteronomy, and in Mishnah/Tosefta. The early rabbis read and interpreted Deut 25:5–10, shaping an understanding of levirate marriage that was to influence all later rabbinic responses to the practice. I begin by bringing the biblical text:

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no offspring, the wife of the deceased shall not become another householder's [wife], outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. The first child that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.⁸

What questions would the early rabbis need to resolve to adapt levirate to their cultural milieu? What lacunae in the text required interpretation and offered openings for the rabbis to shape or reshape levirate to

6. Potash, *Widows in African Societies*, 5–10.

7. The couple is guilty of incest even if they married unaware that the widow was pregnant with the child of her deceased husband and the child is born alive.

8. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of biblical passages are taken from David E. S. Stein, trans., *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

accord with their reality? These questions assume that the rabbis were committed to drawing on the Torah to shape their vision of Judaism, while at the same time arguing that all interpreters, including the rabbis of the first four or five centuries of the Common Era, lived in a world quite different from that of the Torah's authors. In order to live out the laws and values of the Torah in a new era, the rabbis, whether or not they acknowledged it, had to read the Torah through the lens of their time and place.

1. When Is Levirate Mandated?

One important question that the rabbis address is when to require levirate. According to Deut 25, levirate is mandated when a man dies without a son (בן) but is survived by his wife and a brother (אח). The use of the singular “brother” and “wife” could allow for a more restrictive interpretation, limiting levirate to situations when the deceased left only one brother and one wife. However, Gen 38 describes a situation in which there are two surviving brothers, allowing for the argument that levirate is not restricted to a situation in which only one brother remains. This would necessitate some discussion of how the obligation is negotiated when there is more than one surviving brother. In the case of a man leaving more than one wife, we would need to ask whether the levir must choose a particular wife (i.e., the senior wife, the wife most likely to be fertile, etc.), whether he is expected to marry all of his brother's widows, or whether widows are to be distributed among the deceased's surviving brothers.

Additionally, the word אח can be read as “brother” in the narrow sense of a male sibling, or more expansively as a kinsman.⁹ The ambiguity of this word could allow the sages to impose the levirate obligation on any (patrilineal) male relative of the deceased, or to limit the obligation to male siblings.¹⁰ The word בן literally means “a son,” which would allow for interpretation requiring levirate even when a man left daughters. Alternatively, בן can be understood as “a child” or “offspring,” further limiting cases that necessitate levirate.

9. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage*, 99–101.

10. Both models exist in cultures that practice levirate. See, e.g., Potash, *Widows in African Societies*; Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient*.

Both Sifre Deuteronomy and the Mishnah address these questions. In doing so, the rabbis opt for readings of Deut 25 that restrict the situations in which levirate will be mandated or permitted.

“And he has no offspring [בן]” (Deut 25:5). This might apply only to a son. Where do we learn about a son’s son, a son’s daughter, a daughter’s son and a daughter’s daughter? The verse says: “And he has no son” (Deut 25:5), in any way. If so, why does it say: “And he has no son” (Deut 25:5)? To exclude his offspring from a female slave or foreigner. (Sifre Deut. 288)

“When brothers dwell together” (Deut 25:5). This excludes [from the obligation of levirate] the wife of his brother not in his world. From here, they said: If there are two brothers and one of them dies, and then another brother is born, and after that the second one enters a levirate union [with the wife of his brother] and then he dies, the first one is freed from the levirate obligation because she is the wife of a brother not of his time/world and the second one [too is freed] because of her co-wife. (Sifre Deut. 288; see m. Yevam. 2:1)

“Together” (Deut 25:5). This excludes a brother from the same mother [but not the same father]. We find that there are situations in which the Torah treats a brother from the same mother like a brother from the same father. You might think that is the case here, so the verse says: “together” (Deut 25:5) to exclude a brother from the same mother. (Sifre Deut. 288)¹¹

These texts clarify when levirate is mandated and who is obligated to enter a levirate union. The rabbis’ interpretive choice regarding the meaning of בן in Deuteronomy limits levirate marriage to a case when a man leaves no “legitimate” descendants.¹² If the deceased is survived by a daughter, or a grandchild of either gender, levirate is not required (and is, in fact, forbidden). This reduces the instances in which levirate would be mandated and at the same time shifts levirate away from its original purpose as stated

11. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

12. The word *illegitimate* here is not to be associated with marriage per se. The child of a Jewish man and a non-Jewish mother, whether a free woman or a slave, is not considered a man’s descendant for the purposes of levirate, because no union between a Jew and a non-Jew is recognized as legally possible. However, if a man had a child by a Jewish woman to whom he was not married, but that woman was someone whom he could legally have married, the child would exempt his brother and his widow from levirate.

in Deuteronomy. If the goal of levirate is to continue the direct line of descent from father to son, the goal is not achieved through a daughter or her children, who in a patrilineal society are not seen as part of her father's lineage.

An eligible levir must share a father with the deceased and must have been born before his brother's death. Although there is no explicit mention of the restriction of levirate to siblings, the Mishnah and Sifre Deuteronomy take for granted that only a man's brothers may perform levirate marriage; other male relatives have no such duty (and therefore any marriage between a widow and her husband's relatives would be restricted by incest laws). Additionally, the two brothers must have been alive at the same time; if a man dies leaving no children and no surviving brother, his widow is not bound by levirate law to wait indefinitely on the possibility that her father-in-law might father additional sons.¹³

The rabbis also legislate for situations in which a man dies leaving more than one brother, as well as situations in which several brothers die one after another, leaving a surviving brother to enter into more than one levirate marriage. These rules, while at times almost comical in their implausibility, provide structures to ensure orderly responses to complicated family situations.

It is appropriate [*mitzvah*] for the eldest [of the deceased's brothers] to enter into a levirate union. If he does not want to, we go to each of the brothers. If none of them want to, we go back to the eldest and say to him: The responsibility is yours—either release her or marry her. (m. Yevam. 4:5)

"And one of them dies" (Deut 25:5). This might only apply when there are two and one dies. Where do we learn that even if there are many? The

13. Although, in Ruth 1, Naomi's admonition to her daughters-in-law to leave her and seek husbands mentions the possibility that any sons she might have in the future could be their husbands, this need not be read as a suggestion that levirate might be performed even by a brother who shares only a mother with the deceased. It is more likely that Naomi is simply pointing out that despite their attachment to her, Ruth and Orpah should not look to Naomi for future husbands. Whatever the import of her words, the rabbis do not treat the book of Ruth as a source for levirate law. A brother born under the circumstances Naomi describes would be ineligible to perform levirate marriage on two counts: the absence of a shared father and the requirement for some shared time alive. Ruth's marriage to a more distant relative of her deceased husband is not viewed by the rabbis as levirate either.

verse says: “And one of them dies” (Deut 25:5). Where do we learn that even if they all die [and there is one surviving brother, he must enter a levirate union with a wife of each brother]? The verse says, “And one of them dies” (Deut 25:5). If so, why does it say: “One of them”? The wife of one [brother] enters into a levirate union, but not the wife of two [of the brothers]. From here they said: Three brothers married to three unrelated women—if one of them died and the second made a declaration [of his intent to marry his widowed sister-in-law] and then he died, these [i.e., the wives of both the deceased brothers] do *halitzah* and not levirate marriage. (Sifre Deut. 288)

Levirate applies whether the deceased left one brother or several. Levirate can be fulfilled by any one of the brothers. In Mishnah Yevamot, the primary responsibility is placed on the oldest surviving brother, but if he is unwilling and another brother is prepared to marry his sister-in-law, the latter may do so. Sifre Deuteronomy and the Mishnah teach us that one brother may marry the wives of several brothers, but that the levirate bond is fulfilled when one of a man’s widows marries her brother-in-law. There is no indication who would determine which of a man’s several widows would be chosen for a levirate union; one assumes that choice would be made by the levir. Mishnah Yevamot 4:9 does make recommendations when a strategic choice would resolve other family or marriage choices. Levirate marriage is not possible when the two parties are related to each other beyond their relationship as in-laws, so in situations complicated by multiple marriages within families, the Mishnah seeks outcomes that resolve levirate bonds without compromising the relationships of other family members.¹⁴

2. Is Levirate a Form of Marriage or an Irregular Union?

The language that Deut 25 employs to describe the union of the levir and his widowed sister-in-law parallels language used elsewhere in Deuteronomy to describe marriage. In Deut 24:1, we read, *בי יקה איש אשה*, “When a man takes a wife.” In Deut 25, speaking of a levirate union, the language is *ולקחה לו לאשה*, “And he shall take her as a wife.” While Deut 24 uses the verb *בעל*, “to possess,” and Deut 25 uses the verb *יבם*, “to form a levirate

14. See the third chapter of Mishnah Yevamot. Many of the cases described there may be purely hypothetical; the Mishnah often presents complicated situations that may have been crafted to clarify the principles behind laws.

union,” the primary verb לקח with אשה suggests that a levirate union is a type of marriage. If that is the case, the Israelite understanding of levirate differed from that of many other societies in which levirate was a sexual relationship between a widow and one of her husband’s male relatives that did not have the status of a marriage.

Rabbinic law viewed levirate as a form of marriage. It differed from other marriages in two ways. One of those was the way it was initiated and formalized. While rabbinic marriage began with an act of betrothal that had legal consequences, the initial bond between a levir and his brother’s widow was created without any act on the part of the former. The moment a childless man died, his widow was “bound” to her husband’s brother (or brothers), and that bond had the same force as betrothal, rendering her forbidden to other men. Betrothal requires intent on the part of the man and consent on the part of the woman.¹⁵ In the absence of betrothal, the levirate widow has no opportunity to consent to marry her brother-in-law. According to Mishnah Yevamot 6:1, levirate marriage, with its preexisting bond (Hebrew זיקה) could be formalized through sexual intercourse, even against the woman’s will.

According to m Yevam. 4:4, “Once [the levir] married [his sister-in-law], she is like his wife in every way,” with one exception. The *ketubah*, the marriage settlement to which every woman is entitled by rabbinic law, is debited against the property of the deceased husband, rather than the levir. The Mishnah does not elaborate on “every way” in which a woman in a levirate marriage is like any other wife; we can assume that this refers to the responsibilities and rights accorded to husbands and wives in Mishnah Ketubbot and elsewhere.

3. Who Is the Intended Beneficiary of Levirate?

There are several parties who might be said to be the intended beneficiaries of a levirate union. The first is the deceased, a man who has died leaving no offspring. In a society in which a man’s offspring were the guarantors of his continuity—the heirs to his property, the carriers of his name, and the transmitters of his lineage—dying without children (or perhaps, more specifically, without sons) could be regarded as a double death. By

15. For the necessity of intent, see b. Qidd. 6a. The requirement that the woman consent to betrothal is discussed at b. Qidd. 8b–9a.

entering a union with his widow, a man's brother, or other male relative in his patrilineage, ensured that the deceased would be remembered and that his name and estate would be continued into the next generation.

A second potential beneficiary of levirate might be the man who "inherits" the widow of the deceased, or, more broadly, the deceased's family. In a society that required men or their families to transfer property or money to the family of their chosen wife, a man's death without children could be seen as a major loss of labor. If the widow returns to her family of origin, her husband's family has, in effect, lost the investment they made when she married into the family. If the marriage had produced children, the deceased's family could expect to retain the woman's labor; she would be likely to remain with them to care for and be with her children. By providing her with a new husband, the deceased's family retains the woman and avoids the need to amass the funds or goods to obtain a wife for the family member who takes the deceased's widow.¹⁶

Finally, the widow herself is a potential beneficiary of levirate law. In a patrilocal society, a childless widow may find herself an unwanted guest in the home of her late husband's family. In a culture that values women in large part for their fertility, she may be seen as a failure. A levirate marriage offers the widow a second chance to integrate into the family into which she has married. It ensures her support and the opportunity to have children.¹⁷ It is worth noting that one of the assumptions of levirate is that the lack of children is not necessarily the woman's fault.

The language of Deut 25:5–10 and of Gen 38 suggests that for the authors of the Hebrew Bible the primary goal of levirate is to provide offspring for the deceased. This is made explicit in Deut 25:6–7 and 9, and in Gen 38:8–9. It is also implicit in Tamar's seduction of her father-in-law, Judah, which is presented as a ploy to secure offspring.

How does privileging the claim of the deceased affect his widow? I would argue that it makes her desires essentially irrelevant. One could make a similar claim on behalf of the deceased's brother; however, Deuteronomy's understanding of levirate allows him the option to reject a levirate union. It is true that his refusal results in public shaming, but it is nonetheless an

16. G. Robina Quale, *A History of Marriage Systems* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988), 75.

17. For the case that the primary beneficiary of levirate is the widow, see Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *HTR* 72 (1979): 144.

option accorded to him; at least according to Deuteronomy, it is not an option for his sister-in-law.

The rabbinic reading of levirate found in the Mishnah affirms that levirate is a response to the death of a childless man. Tannaitic traditions in the Mishnah and in Sifre Deuteronomy teach that levirate is only mandated—and, in fact, only permitted—when a man dies leaving no descendants. It reduces the likelihood that levirate will be necessary by including daughters and grandchildren as offspring that obviate the need for levirate. This suggests that the main goal of levirate remains the engendering of a child. The rabbis hold that the death of a childless man, assuming he leaves at least one surviving brother and one widow, generates a bond, *זיקה*, between the levir and his sister-in-law. That bond can only be resolved in two ways: levirate marriage or *halitzah*. The levir and the widow are bound to each other, or, more precisely, she is bound to him (*זקוקה לו*). This suggests that, like the Torah, the rabbis privilege the claim of the deceased on his surviving relatives over concerns for the levir or the widow.

However, the rabbinic understanding of levirate can be said to undermine that claim. The biblical law of levirate is fueled by the recognition that a man needs a son to inherit his name and his estate. Rabbinic constructs of levirate deny the deceased that son by assigning the paternity of children born to a levirate union to their mother's new partner. Thus, rabbinic levirate weakens the "value" of levirate to the deceased. This raises the question: Does levirate now serve the interests of the levir and/or the widow instead of the deceased?

4. The Levir and the Widow: Incentive and Agency

The Torah does not claim that men are eager to provide children for their dead brothers. Deuteronomy 25 imagines a brother who resists marrying his widowed sister-in-law even though his refusal means public humiliation and a permanent badge of shame: his line is to be known as "the house of the unsandaled one." Onan, aware that any child he fathers with Tamar will "not be his," avoids impregnating his brother's widow. Perhaps in response to these indications that levirate is not viewed favorably by the men who are tasked with carrying it out, the Mishnah makes levirate a more attractive option for the deceased's brothers while also maintaining their right to avoid levirate if they choose. By assigning the property of the deceased to the levir, or to all the brothers should none of them be willing

to marry the widow, the Mishnah makes levirate financially desirable for men, but also allows the brothers to inherit the deceased's estate even if they opt to release their sister-in-law. Children born to a levirate union are regarded as the levir's, not the deceased's.

Upon the death of a childless brother, men have options. Brothers can agree together that one of them will marry the widow. If a man leaves several wives, the levir can decide which one he wishes to marry. One brother can agree to undergo *halitzah* while still receiving his share of the deceased's estate. Moreover, as men consider their options after a brother's death, their lives continue without any consequence or interruption. If they are married, their marriages are undisturbed by the levirate bond that is created between them and their widowed sister-in-law. If the widow is closely related to the wife of one of the brothers, that brother is excused from the levirate obligation in favor of another brother, or he may perform *halitzah*. While there may be economic incentive to make a decision, or to choose levirate over *halitzah*, a man incurs no financial penalty for avoiding a levirate union.

The levirate widow, on the other hand, is in limbo while her brother-in-law weighs his options. As noted by Judith Wegner, there are significant distinctions between the autonomy of a widow whose husband died leaving offspring and a levirate widow.¹⁸ A "normal" widow may remarry after a three-month interval (m. Yevam. 4:10) and may choose her new husband. She is entitled to maintenance from her husband's estate as long as she remains single, and may collect her marriage settlement (כתובה) when she wishes to leave her late husband's house and remarry (m. Ketub. 4:12). Property that she brought into her marriage reverts to her control; she may now buy, sell, or mortgage her property (m. Ketub. 11:2–3). In contrast, the levirate widow has essentially no control over her marital and economic status. She cannot remarry until her brother-in-law decides to marry her or to release her through *halitzah*. While the latter choice frees her to marry outside her husband's family, it also renders her ineligible to marry into a priestly family; her status is like that of a divorcee (m. Yevam. 6:2). She cannot collect her marriage settlement. Her property is subject to the interest of her brother-in-law (m. Yevam. 4:3), while a widow has complete control of her property.

18. Judith R. Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16–17.

Additionally, the Mishnah accords the women little or no agency around the question of levirate marriage versus *halitzah*. The decision about which of the deceased's brothers and/or which of his widows will enter a levirate union rests solely with men: the brothers of the deceased (and the rabbis). The right of refusal rests solely on the brother or brothers of the deceased. If a widow prefers levirate but her brother-in-law prefers *halitzah*, his preference will be honored. Finally, unlike standard betrothal, which requires the consent of the bride, levirate marriage does not require a woman's consent. There is no need for betrothal, because the widow is tied to her brother-in-law by her husband's death. And, as mentioned earlier, levirate marriage could be formalized through sexual intercourse, even against the woman's will; that is, an act of rape can be the vehicle through which a man marries his widowed sister-in-law.

On the surface, rabbinic laws regarding levirate seem to shift the focus of levirate, or its primary beneficiary, from the deceased to his brother or brothers. Once a strategy to ensure that a man has descendants, even if they were brought into the world after his death, is made redundant in this way, rabbinic levirate seems almost without purpose. It does result in a new marriage and the possibility of children. In that sense, we might see rabbinic levirate as an attempt to repair a family broken by death. The family comprising a man and wife can be re-created by pairing the widow with her husband's brother. She remains part of her first husband's family and may yet bear children who will be part of his extended lineage. Her brother-in-law acquires a wife and his brother's property. But unlike the biblical understanding of levirate, in which the union between the widow and her brother-in-law was essential, a levirate union as understood by the rabbis is unnecessary. Biblical levirate is the only option that affords the deceased the possibility of continuity. Rabbinic levirate, even when it leads to children, fails to provide an heir for the deceased. Moreover, there is no indication that the rabbis saw levirate marriage as the only or even best option for childless widows. The emphasis on the levir's right to choose *halitzah* over levirate, and the apparent absence of pressure regarding his choice, suggest either that the rabbis were not concerned with the future of a childless widow or that they believed such a woman had other options.

The Torah imagines women as promoters of levirate, not for their own sake but on behalf of their late husbands. The widow of Deuteronomy serves as the advocate of her late husband when she accuses the reluctant levir not of rejecting her but of abdicating his responsibility to his brother.

Whether or not the possibility of marriage to her brother-in-law was in her best interest or an attractive prospect, the widow focuses on his duty to preserve the name of the deceased. This raises the question: If rabbinic levirate no longer achieves its goal as stated in Deuteronomy, is there any willingness on the part of the rabbis to give women, as well as men, a way to avoid levirate marriage?

5. The Response of the Babylonian Talmud to the Reluctant Widow

In my work, I have argued that the Babylonian Talmud demonstrates no clear preference for either levirate marriage or *halitzah*. As is the case in the Mishnah, the Talmud regards the two practices as equally effective in resolving the levirate bond. However, it is clear that some sages prefer one or the other. It is not difficult to understand why some rabbis might prefer levirate marriage: after all, it is prescribed by the Torah. In Deut 25, *halitzah* hardly receives a recommendation; it is a concession to a man's lack of a sense of familial obligation, as the nature of the ceremony indicates that the refusal to perform levirate marriage is shameful. The question then that we must ask is not why do some sages prefer levirate marriage, but why do others prefer *halitzah*?

Clearly some of the rabbis who privilege *halitzah* are concerned about a levir's motives for performing levirate marriage. "Abba Shaul says: A man who marries his sister-in-law for the sake of her beauty, for the sake of matrimony, or for the sake of another matter, is like one who has intercourse with a forbidden relative, and I am close to regarding the child [of such a relationship] as a bastard" (b. Yevam. 109a). Elsewhere, in Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 93b–94a, questions are raised about the motives of both the levir and the levirate widow. These questions are raised in a discussion of whose testimony may free a woman to remarry. Aware that the Mishnah allows a woman to remarry on the testimony of one witness, the Babylonian Talmud asks whether a woman may enter into levirate marriage on the testimony of one witness. The discussion acknowledges that there might be a preexisting relationship between a woman and her brother-in-law, and that this relationship, positive or negative, might influence the woman's vigilance in investigating reports of her husband's or brother-in-law's death. While married, a woman might come to admire her brother-in-law and find the idea of marrying him attractive. Should we be concerned that her feelings for this man might cause her to be less meticulous in ensuring that her

husband is dead before remarrying? It is also possible that familiarity with her brother-in-law might breed contempt, and that a woman would be eager to believe reports of his death rather than contemplate levirate marriage with him. Later in the sugya, the sages consider the possibility that a man or woman might even lie in court to enter into or avoid a levirate marriage or a marriage to another in-law. Clearly, the attraction to an in-law might even, in the sages' opinion, override one's feelings for one's spouse or sibling.

Another sugya, Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 106a–b, which deals with the status of *halitzah* performed under incorrect assumptions, suggests that the rabbis were well aware that men's reasons for entering into levirate marriage were sometimes inappropriate. Moreover, the sugya indicates that in such cases, the rabbis were willing to deny men the right to perform levirate marriage, resorting to trickery if necessary.

Our rabbis taught: *halitzah* performed under a false premise is valid. What constitutes *halitzah* performed under a false premise? Resh Laqish said: They say to him: Perform *halitzah* and you may marry her [in such a case, despite the fact that the levir is now forbidden to marry the widow, the *halitzah* is valid]. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: I have learned: Whether he intended [to perform *halitzah*] and she did not or she intended [to perform *halitzah*] and he did not, *halitzah* is invalid until both intend [to perform *halitzah*]. Yet you say the *halitzah* is valid? Rather, [this is a case in which] they say to him: Perform *halitzah* and she will give you two hundred *zuz* [in such a case, even though she does not give him the money, the *halitzah* is valid]. There was a case of a woman who found herself with an unsuitable levir. They said to him: Perform *halitzah* and she will give you two hundred *zuz*. The case came before Rabbi Hiyya and he validated [the *halitzah*].

A man came before Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba [regarding levirate marriage]. [Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba] said to [the widow]: My daughter, stand up. She said to him: Say: Her sitting is her standing up. He said to her: Do you know something about him [that pertains to this matter]? She said to him: Yes, he sees the money and wants to possess it. He said to her: Is the matter not acceptable to you? She said to him: No. [Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba] said to [the levir:] Perform *halitzah* with her and through doing so you may marry her. After he performed *halitzah*, [Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba] said to him: Now she is unfit for you; perform a proper *halitzah* so she can marry anyone else.

Rav Pappa's sister-in-law fell before a levir who was unsuitable for her. The matter came before Abbaye. He said to [the levir:] Perform

halitzah with her and through doing so you may marry her. Rav Pappa said [to Abbaye:] Does the master not accept the teaching of Rabbi Yohanan? Then what should I say to him? He said to him: Perform *halitzah* and she will give you two hundred *zuz*. After he performed *halitzah*, [Abbaye] said to [the widow:] Go, give him [the money]. [Rav Pappa] said [to Abbaye]: This is a case of “I was only kidding” [and she has no legal obligation to pay him].

This sugya opens with a theoretical discussion regarding *halitzah* performed under a false assumption. We learn that *halitzah* is valid even when it is conditional on payment to the levir by the widow and the payment is not made. There is no question here that the payment is a bribe; the levir would prefer levirate marriage, and the widow does not wish to marry him. The sages are willing to participate in a ruse whereby the levir agrees to *halitzah* believing that he will afterwards be able to marry his sister-in-law; while this ploy is rejected for technical reasons, the tone of the decision indicates that the sages have no ethical problem with the idea.

The sugya then records several cases in which the sages employed a ruse to free a woman from an unwanted levirate marriage. In the first and the third incidents, the Babylonian Talmud reports that the levir was “unsuitable.” There is no indication as to the nature of the unsuitability; perhaps the couple was unsuited for reasons of age or temperament, or perhaps the levir was an unsavory character. In the second incident, we are told that the levir’s motives for entering into the marriage are financial; either the widow has money or the deceased left an impressive estate. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba is approached by the levir, but when he summons the widow, she is reluctant. She says, “Say: Her sitting is her standing up,” asking him to understand her reluctance to approach the judge as an indication of her feelings about the proposed marriage. When Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba asks whether the widow has any information about the levir, presumably regarding his motives, she tells him that the levir simply wants her money and that she has no desire to marry him. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba tells the levir to perform *halitzah* and then to marry the woman. After the *halitzah*, the rabbi informs the levir that his brother’s widow is now forbidden to him, and the levir performs a second *halitzah* “so that she will be eligible to remarry.” These discussions and the incidents described suggest that men did indeed contemplate levirate marriage because of their desire for their brothers’ wives or for monetary gain. It is not absolutely clear whether the rabbis induced these men to perform *halitzah* because they

disapproved of their motives or because the women involved were reluctant to enter into marriage under these circumstances. Even upon learning that a levir was motivated by greed, Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba inquires of the widow, "Is this not acceptable to you?" He tricks the levir into performing *halitzah* only after the widow indicates that her unwillingness to marry the levir, suggesting that it is not the levir's motive but the widow's objections that prompt Rabbi Hiyya to take the course of action described in the sugya.

The same sugya raises questions about the status of "compelled *halitzah*." *Halitzah* is invalid without the levir's consent, but consent may be obtained through intimidation or threats: "They press him until he says: I want [to perform *halitzah*]." This discussion suggests that the rabbis were willing to force men to submit to *halitzah* against their will, either because their motives for a levirate marriage were unacceptable to the rabbis or because the women involved wished to avoid levirate marriage. This sugya provides evidence that the rabbis were sympathetic to women's concerns about levirate marriage.

Conclusion

I would argue that levirate as described in the Torah is a vehicle to assure the continuity of a man even after his death without offspring. Deuteronomy imagines his widow as the agent of the deceased, pressing her brother-in-law to meet his obligations; although she may have an interest in the levirate marriage, she does not make that interest explicit. In shifting the rules around paternity and inheritance in levirate unions, the sages of the Mishnah create inducements for the deceased's brother to marry his widowed sister-in-law. Those inducements reduce any need or incentive to make levirate attractive to women, or to imagine them as supporters of levirate marriage for the sake of the deceased. Levirate as described by the Mishnah can be imposed on women, even by force. In another shift, at least in part, the Babylonian Talmud expresses some concerns about levirate marriage, particularly around the motives of either or both parties. This leads to a willingness to promote *halitzah* when a levirate marriage seems less than ideal, even if the unwilling partner is the woman.

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“With Her Consent or without It”
(Mishnah Yevamot 14:1):
Divorce in Rabbinic Literature

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1. Introduction

“A woman may be divorced with her consent or without it” (m. Yevam. 14:1) are the words of men. They are neither words of censure nor a veiled recrimination of female voices. On the contrary, this is a succinct assertion, lacking emotion, in a prescriptive-descriptive discourse. The legal texts from classical rabbinic Judaism are, by nature, male texts, written by men for men. This restricted, male, and academic circle defines not only the discourse but also the interests and perspectives of their contents.¹ For this reason, the rules surrounding divorce are depicted from a male perspective. The process in and of itself is conceived from the male perspective and coupled with a male consideration of the procedure. Women are the object, not the subject, of divorce.²

1. See Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 16–18.

2. However, it is important to bear in mind that this does not necessarily reflect real situations, at least in texts from the early centuries of classical Judaism. Rabbinic sources generally correspond to the views of the sages from the said era regarding what is appropriate in the proper legal system. It is not so much a question of what is practiced as what is purported to be practiced; not so much a reflection of reality as a plan to implement. On the debate around this idea, I recommend Tal Ilan, “On a Newly Published Divorce Bill from the Judean Desert,” *HTR* 89 (1996): 195–202; Adiel Schremer, “Divorce in Papyrus Se’elim 13 Once Again: A Replay to Tal Ilan,” *HTR* 91 (1998): 193–202; Ilan, “The Provocative Approach Once Again: A Response to Adiel Schremer,” *HTR* 91 (1998): 203–4; David Instone-Brewer, “Jewish Women Divorcing Their Husbands in Early Judaism: The Background to Papyrus Se’elim 13,”

As presented in the rabbinic laws, the divorce process is quite a simple procedure. The desire of the man and a drafting, delivery, and the receipt of a document by the woman are sufficient. In this very simple way, marriage is terminated. Whether the husband can pay the sum stipulated in the marriage contract is another question altogether. As discussed below, this is possibly the only limitation facing a man who is seeking to divorce his wife.³

The simplicity of the procedure may largely be due to the very simplicity of the biblical text. The brevity of an account in the Bible did not usually hold the sages back from constructing complex webs in which they fleshed out the law in long, convoluted tractates in highly diverse circumstances. However, on this occasion, the fundamental focus is on the document that validates divorce—which, in fact, gives the rabbinic treatise its name—and less on the circumstances justifying it or its consequences.

2. Divorce in the Bible

While the biblical text does not provide any set of laws to establish the union of a couple, it does regulate separation. In addition to various references scattered throughout the books of the Bible,⁴ the guideline for divorce is found in Deuteronomy. The text reads as follows:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds in her indecency in anything, and he writes her a document of separation, gives it to her, and sends her away from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband,

HTR 92 (1999): 347–57; Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 253–62.

3. See Aurora Salvatierra Ossorio and Olga I. Ruiz Morell, *La mujer en el Talmud: Antología de textos rabínicos* (Barcelona: Riopiedras, 2005), 81–98.

4. These references fundamentally correspond to different legal points, as in Exod 21:11; Lev 21:7; Deut 22:13; or to the allegory employed by the prophets in their words referring to the intimate crisis between God and his people, as in Isa 50:1 and Jer 3:8; but not so much in the biblical stories. On these occasions, the allusions are either few, referring to Abraham and Hagar (Gen 21:14) or to impossible marriages with foreign women (Ezra 10:19), or veiled (or even questionable, as they dissent from the law established in Deuteronomy), such as the stories of Samson (Judg 15:2) and King David (1 Sam 25:43).

who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deut 24:1–4 NIV)

The text is brief and the wording quite concise. Despite the importance of the contents, just enough text is employed to depict a simple procedure in which the actors’ roles, both active and passive, are perfectly drawn. The man carries the procedure out and entitles the woman to be taken by another man.

However, given this simplicity, it is surprising that two-thirds of the section is devoted to a very specific aspect of the law: the circumstances that preclude a husband from taking back a wife whom he has renounced and who then remarried another man and was divorced from him. The connotations of this suggest certain very important perspectives about relations between men and women. There is a key principle: a man cannot take a woman whom he has divorced beforehand, if she has been taken by another man in the meantime. There is no problem with taking back a wife who has been renounced, but this reconciliation has an unassailable limit, which is the intervention of another man. What could simply be a rule to avoid a hasty decision to separate is actually a warning that when a wife is lost, she is lost forever, and this occurs because of another man.⁵ This is not a mere infraction but an abomination, which equates the wife with a sullied possession.

The terminology used seems to describe a social act in a particular situation more than a public law. The discourse is completely descriptive. The man “sends her away from his house” (שלחה מביתו) with a “document of separation” (ספר כריתת). At no time does the root גרש, the term used to refer to divorce, appear in this passage, although it is found in other parts of the biblical text; for example, the term גרושה, divorcée, is used five times in the Bible (Lev 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num 30:10; Ezek 44:22) in a repeated pattern referring to women who cannot be married by priests.

5. To a large extent, this is seen in the prohibition related to wives after foreigners invade a city. Lacking impartial evidence, the decision is made to recognize the suspicion. The presumption of innocence is not provided, given the debacle that this would entail for the relationship between husband and wife. Recall the sorrow of Rabbi Zachariah ben Ha-Qasav when he is urged to separate from his wife after gentiles enter Jerusalem (b. Ketub. 27b).

Moreover, the nuance denoted by the verb גרש in the Bible is more closely related to the act of being contemptuously thrown out of a home than with making someone leave a home. God, for instance, “cast out” (ויגרש) Adam from Eden (Gen 3:24). In the story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:9–14), Sarah sternly asks Abraham to cast out (גרש) Hagar, while a few verses later, a somewhat skeptical Abraham simply sends her away (ישלחה). The negative nuance of גרש is not seen in the wording of the law.

The document that validates the separation is not yet a גט, or “certificate of divorce,” but a separation document known as ספר בריתות, which is mentioned here twice, as well as in Isaiah and Jeremiah.⁶

3. Divorce in Rabbinic Literature

In rabbinic literature it appears that the procedure continues to be a private act, although further important legal consequences and circumstances are incorporated into it that involve the intervention of witnesses and/or courts. The need to review, complete, and update the legal text entails a transition from the brief biblical passage to a lengthy formulation contained in a specific tractate, Gittin, on certificates of divorce.

This law in rabbinic literature suggests a procedure in which certain factors and circumstances confirm the recognition of an extension and rethinking of the terms in the biblical text. Beginning with the terminology, there is a detectable evolution with respect to the simplicity of the biblical discourse that develops into a revision⁷ of the circumstances and factors that the sages considered worthy of developing, such as authority and the scope of action of each of the figures involved in the process, as well as the reasons that justify separation. They formulate a possible legal procedure that gives divorce a public dimension not mentioned in the Bible, as well as the verification of this procedure with a document given an executing power and name: *get*.

6. See n. 4 above.

7. Divorce is not an exception. The review of marriage laws, abstracted in the Order of Nashim, is a notable undertaking within the halakhic work of the sages of classical Judaism. Not only divorce, but also the couple's sacred commitment (*qiddushin*) that consecrates the woman; the marriage contracts (*ketubbot*) that regulate the couple's status, in addition to other biblical laws such as the levirate (*yevamot*); and the establishment of the guilt or innocence of a woman suspected of adultery (*sotah*) were of profound interest in rabbinic Judaism.

3.1. Divorce and the Sages

Before inquiring into the review of the sages’ reading of this law, a brief reflection on the ethics of the rabbis regarding the dissolution of marriage is appropriate.

Divorce was allowed by the rabbis, although they do not fully condone it. Many voices and opinions are averse to the dissolution of a marriage. I highlight two passages from the Talmud that illustrate these negative positions regarding divorce or, at least, its abuse. Here is the first one, from b. Git. 90b:

Rabbi Yehudah said: If you hate her you should put her away. Rabbi Yohanan says: It means: He that sends his wife away is hated. There is really no conflict between the two, since the one speaks of a first marriage and the other of a second, as Rabbi Eleazar said: If a man divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears, as it says: “And this further you do, you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with sighing, insomuch that he regards not the offering any more, neither receives it with good will at your hand. Yet you say Wherefore? Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, whom you have betrayed, though she is your companion and the wife of your covenant” (Mal 2:13–4).⁸

This passage defends the model of the first wife, who was a companion and suffered the betrayal of desertion. What is most notable about this passage is the rabbis’ pretension to put themselves in the wife’s shoes, echoing her sorrow. However, although they had the text from the prophet Malachi with which to fantasize about the virtues of the wife from a man’s youth, they do it without pausing at all to opine on the divorce of a wife taken in maturity. The second passage that is of interest in the same direction is from b. Pesah. 113b:

Four are impossible for the mind: a poor man who is arrogant, a wealthy man who flatters, a lecherous old man, and a leader who lords it over the community without cause. Some say: Also he who divorces his wife a first and a second time and takes her back. And the first *Tanna*? It may be that her *ketubbah* is large, or else he had children from her and cannot divorce her.

8. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

This passage criticizes those who take divorce lightly. This text is remarkable because of the mention of children, which is not the case in other texts. Moral reflection invites considering them and consequently mentioning them. In no other legal case are the consequences of divorce on children contemplated; however, in this paragraph it seems decisive and accepted that the presence of minors in the family leads to a reconsideration of the decision of separation. The insensibility of the law disappears to give way to the empathy generated by moral review. Once again, rabbinic norms construct a theoretical revision of biblical law, in the face of their own reality, which is not always reflected in their law.

In short, even though the sages did not support divorce, they viewed it with contained benevolence and in some cases even recommended it. On that basis, they review male regulation of the subject.

3.2. Terminology

As expected, the terms used in legal discourse take on important connotations because of their contents and meanings. The role played by the people involved in the process, as well as the nature of the actions carried out, is reflected both semantically and grammatically in the language used by the sages in their texts.

3.2.1. The Semantic Field

The terminology applied to divorce is analogous to that used for the union of the couple. Opposing נשא (נסה), “to marry,” is גרש, “to divorce;” and opposed to בנס, “to bring in,” is יצא, “to go out.” Like the dichotomy of marriage and divorce, both pairs of words connote the public and private aspect of the couple’s relationship.

As noted above, גרש in the Bible has negative implications (e.g., Gen 3:24; 21:10; Exod 2:17; 6:1; 23:30), marked by contempt that leads to expulsion (as punishment or rejection). In rabbinic Hebrew, the use of גרש is normalized to refer to the separation of a married couple. The implicit negative meaning of expulsion disappears, and it becomes devoid of emotion. In the same way that נשא indicates the formalization of a marital union, its opposite involves the end of that bond.

The terms בנס and יצא, in turn, acquire meaning in the private sphere of the home. When the man “brings” the women “into” the conjugal home, he is accepting her as his wife, and when he “takes her out,” he renounces

her and sends her away. These terms refer to the beginning and end of the couple's cohabitation, which is represented by entering and leaving the house (or the *huppah*, the wedding canopy that symbolizes the home or the conjugal bed). Language describes the couple's domestic privacy. The home belongs to the man, and if he brings the woman into it, they validate the marriage and this place is their home, but if he terminates the personal relationship, she has to leave it.

3.2.2. The Grammatical Connotation

The quotation that begins the title of this work bases its argument on verb forms. Thus, the issue is broached: אינו דומה האיש המגרש לאשה המתגרשת, “There is no similarity between the man who divorces and the woman who is divorced” (m. Yevam. 14:1). As it is the husband who can divorce by exercising the action, an active verb (*qal*, *piel*, *hiphil*) is used for him. The woman, on the other hand, can never exercise this right, as manifested in the fact that active verb forms are never used in the feminine. In the text here, there is a *hithpael* מתגרשת that, rather than expressing a reflective action, qualifies the situation or status of the woman.

To refer to a divorced woman, the passive participle of *qal* is used, גרושה, “divorcée,” or the variant of the participle of the *pual* passive form, מגורשת. The second term establishes the position recently acquired by the woman, and more specifically, the very moment that the divorce is validated, and should therefore be translated as “becomes divorced.” This term confirms the validity of the act. Particularly through the verb forms, the discourse of the sages provides information about the active role of men as opposed to the passive role of women in marriage laws in general and in divorce in particular.

3.3. The Reasons for Divorce

The reasons for divorce are not specified in the Bible. The allegations a man can use to decide to divorce his wife are not identified, and this allows rabbinic literature to open up the debate. The argument between the schools of Hillel and Shammai is well known,⁹ as is the more inclusive approach taken by Rabbi Akiva. Everything depends on the interpretation of the

9. See Ilan, “Provocative Approach,” 50–52; Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 43–81.

expressions ערות דבר, “something indecent,” and שנאה, “he dislikes her,” which are found in the biblical text, the former receiving greater emphasis in rabbinic literature. For the Hillel school, the core of the formula is *dabar*, “something,” which mitigates the reasons, while the Shammai school focuses on the term *ervat*, “indecent,” making a reprehensive act on the part of the woman a precondition.

The school of Shammai says: A man should not divorce his wife unless he has found her guilty of some unseemly conduct, as it says: “because he finds in her *indecent* in anything” (Deut 24:1). The school of Hillel says: [He may divorce her] even if she has merely spoiled his food, since it says: “because he finds in her indecent in *anything*” (Deut 24:1). Rabbi Akiva says: [He may divorce her] even if he finds another woman more beautiful than she is, as it says: “she becomes displeasing to him” (Deut 24:1; m. Git. 9:10).

It has been taught: The school of Hillel said to the school of Shammai: Does not the text distinctly say “anything”? The school of Shammai rejoined: And does it not distinctly say “indecent”? The school of Hillel replied: Had it said only “indecent” without “anything” I should have concluded that she should be sent away on account of indecent, but not of any [lesser] thing. Therefore “anything” is specified.

Again, had it said only “anything” without “indecent,” I should have concluded that [if divorced] on account of “anything” she should be permitted to marry again, but if on account of “indecent,” she should not be permitted to remarry. Therefore “indecent” is also specified. (b. Git. 90a)

Notably, after all these arguments and disquisitions, it is the husband alone who makes the allegation. The wife is the responsible party who provokes the desire to separate in her husband, whether by committing adultery,¹⁰ because of doing sloppy domestic work, or simply because she has ceased to be attractive in the eyes of her husband. In any case, the Hillel school famously defeated the school of Shammai, and when Akiva’s contribution is added to the mix, a certain laxity in the justification for separation is established. In fact, the document validating the act does not even have to mention a reason.

10. The conclusion is arrived at from the manipulative interpretation of the term *ervah* (lit. “nakedness”), giving it the implication of sexual transgression. See Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 142–43; Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 50–52.

The sages fully trust the husband’s prudence and morality, convinced that he would not part with his wife lightly and that there would always be something to justify the separation. The clear conclusion, then, is that in the thinking behind rabbinic law, no specific circumstance is required for demanding a divorce; the desire of the husband, whose capacity to decide is recognized, is enough.

However, some limitations—more mundane than moral—do exist: finances.¹¹ The existence of the *ketubbah*, the contract that sets the conditions for marriage regarding both what is delivered and what is received, seems to have been designed to constrain the proliferation of divorce. While the system gives the husband *carte blanche* to divorce his wife at will, it also sees a problematic aspect of divorce. The rabbis championed marriage, as seen in this passage from the Tosefta:

In early times, when [property set aside for payment of] her marriage contract was in her father’s hands, it was a light thing in [the husband’s] view to divorce her. Shimeon ben Shatah therefore ordained that [that property to cover] her marriage contract should be with her husband and he therefore writes for her: All property that I have is liable and obligated for the payment of your marriage contract. (t. Ketub. 12:1)

This text suggests that the obligation to pay out an amount of money or goods is sufficient to stop the husband from considering divorce, an obstacle or restraint that reduces the number of marital desertions. The story of Rabbi Yossi ha-Galili and his “insufferable” wife illustrates this financial restriction:

Rabbi Yossi had a wife—who was his niece—whom he disparaged in front of his students. They said to him: Why don’t you divorce her; she does you no honor! He said to them: She has a large dowry, and I cannot divorce her. One time he was sitting and teaching with Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, and when they finished, Rabbi Eleazar suggested that they go to Rabbi Yossi’s house. Rabbi Yossi agreed, and so they went. When they got there, Rabbi Yossi’s wife was scornful, and when she had left [the room] Rabbi Yossi looked in the pot. He said to her: There is nothing in the pot. She said to him: There is breadcrumbs and vegetables. He went and found chickens. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariyah knew what he heard. They

11. See Günter Stemberger, “Los derechos de las mujeres en el mundo rabínico,” *MEAHH* 54 (2005): 50.

sat and ate. Rabbi Eleazar said to Rabbi Yossi: Rabbi! You said that there was only bread and vegetables, and there was chicken! He replied: It was a miracle. When the meal was over, he said: Rabbi, you should leave this woman, she does not bring value to your life. He replied: Her dowry is large, and I cannot divorce her. He said: We will cover the dowry, and you can divorce her. They did this, and he divorced her, and he found another woman to marry, who was better than the first. (Gen. Rab. 17:3)

This text, despite its agenda, which decries the difficulties of an easy divorce imposed by an expensive *ketubbah*, actually shows that this document protects and shelters women, giving them a bargaining tool with which to battle their husbands' unrestricted authority with regard to divorce.

3.4. The Legal Procedure

Neither biblical precedent nor the rabbinic texts seem to speak of a formal petition or process for divorce before a court. Rather, as noted above, it appears to have been a more private than public act, more domestic than social. The man takes the decision and resolves the process. This simplicity seems to fall short of being called a legal process or procedure, and the greater complexity lies in the particularities related to witnesses for the drafting, pronouncement, and delivery of the divorce document. However, the possibility of any other intervention is affected by the legal authority of the husband, the wife, or even the court involved in the case.

3.4.1. The Legal Authority of the Husband

As the Bible affirms, and the sages of classical Judaism express throughout tractate Gittin and its ancillary texts, the legal authority belongs to the husband. "A man who gives a divorce is not like a woman who is divorced. For while a woman may be divorced with her consent or without it, a man can give divorce only with his full consent" (m. Yevam. 14:1). The wife does not participate in the decision. She may or may not agree to be divorced, but in no case does she have the power to decide, at least according to the halakhic texts.

In context, the cited text corresponds to a fundamental issue regarding the abilities of husbands and wives. In the case of a man, it is established that if he loses his ability to hear after marrying, he cannot divorce his wife. Hearing loss was believed to limit his ability to understand, making it impossible to ensure that he is aware of his actions. In the case of the woman, there is

no situation where she has this authority, and her physical conditions have no influence on her status. Deafness does not alter the situation.

However, the husband’s unilateral decision-making authority could be reviewed. Specific cases exist in which the husband’s authority is compromised by the intervention of a court. On occasion, the woman is even given a voice. Indeed, some documentary remains suggest a more active participation on the part of women in marriage procedures, including divorce, before rabbinic orthodoxy was established (first, in their minds, with the redaction of the Mishnah at the end of the second century; and then when the rabbinic revolution took over Judaism sometime toward the end of late antiquity).¹² Nonetheless, for the most part, while these outside interventions may have, at most, enticed a husband to act in one way or another, the sages in their legal proposal will finally assign to him the definitive decision and faculty.

3.4.2. The Legal Authority of the Court

The regulations applying to the court, its authority, and the circumstances in which its decisions are applied are not clear. However, it appears that courts could intervene, or at least tried to, in some procedures, which the sages considered a type of arbitration. The Mishnah contains a clear and concise declaration in this respect:

The following are compelled to divorce [their wives]: a man who is afflicted with sores or has a polypus, or gathers or is a coppersmith or a tanner, whether they were before they married or whether they arose after they had married. And concerning all these Rabbi Meir said: Although the man made a condition with her, she may nevertheless plead: I thought I could endure him, but now I cannot endure him. The sages, however, said: She must endure, despite her wishes, the only exception being a man afflicted with sores, because she will enervate him. (m. Ketub. 7:10)

Although quite restricted, these exceptions open a door that seemed not to exist in the biblical tradition: there is room for divorce unrelated to the husband’s desire, and a court can intervene in this process. Two issues are resolved by this halakhah: a man may be forced to divorce, not by his own decision, but by a court; and, even in these cases, it is the man who handles the divorce.

12. See above, n. 2.

The exceptional case referred to in the *ketubbah* text concerns a husband afflicted by an illness or whose profession negatively affects his physical state or appearance to the point that it becomes difficult for his wife to bear. The fact that this possible displeasure (or rather, repugnance) on the part of these women toward their husbands is considered at all is surprising, or at least striking, since feelings and emotions are not considered in legal texts in general, and in rabbinic literature in particular.¹³ Empathy is not integral to regulation. However, to a certain point, this position is understandable, because two fundamental realities can be intuited in this decision: the need for sexual relations in marriage for the purpose of procreation and a substantial fear of impurity. Intimacy that is difficult to endure for one of the spouses because intimate contact is unbearable requires the consideration and participation of a court as an impartial, outside party. Moreover, the importance of impurities in illnesses that secrete fluids—in addition to the predictable, albeit natural, impurity of seminal fluid—and substances such as animal excrement used on a daily basis in the aforementioned professions (e.g., tanner), complicates the normalization of any relationship. Despite this prediction, the excuse used by the sages suggests that their concern is for the husband's health and that the exhaustion resulting from sexual relations could cost him his life. For this reason, the proposal is made to restrict cases in which the court intervenes to the one “who is afflicted with sores.”

In any case, even if the initial desire to divorce does not come from the husband, the text indicates that he should accept the court's order and undertake the divorce. He continues to handle the process, and therefore, when it says, “they are compelled to divorce,” the real meaning of the imperative expression must be put into context. It corresponds more to social pressure than to any legal obligation. No more references to this formula are found in the Mishnah or elsewhere in rabbinic literature, and although this is not sufficient proof, it is undeniably untenable, given the rest of the sages' discourse in which they endow the husband with sole executor authority.

A similar circumstance is found in the case of marriages that have no descendants after ten years of the couple living together. The recommendation for separation is argued under the guise that “a man cannot abstain

13. See Natalie C. Polzer, “‘I Thought I Could Endure Him but Now I Cannot’: Gendered Sensory Landscapes in *MKetubot* 7.7–10 and Parallels,” *WJ* 12 (2015), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019b>.

from procreation" (m. Yevam. 6:6). This motivation can be promoted by a court, reminding the couple, and more specifically the wives, of their duty. Again, the husband need not present a reason for divorce beyond the court's instructions, but he must handle the proceedings.

The most delicate and painful case involving outside intervention is that of the wife with no husband, referred to as an *agunah*. This sad, if not tragic, situation comes with terrible personal consequences. Here, the sages would be expected to call for a court intervention to force the husband to initiate divorce, as in the prior case. However, the issue is developed in a way that raises more questions than solutions. The greatest difficulty with respect to the *agunah* in texts of classical Judaism, at least among the Tannaim, is that the woman is not even discussed. In the case of a missing husband (whether with, or not against, his will) whose death cannot be determined, there is broad legal coverage in the final chapters of tractate Yevamot, in the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Talmudim. However, in these situations, the court does not have to decree a divorce; it only needs to certify the death of the husband so that the wife can be declared a widow. In these cases, the sages are extremely strict, since the catastrophe that could result from the return of a supposedly deceased husband who finds his wife with a new family overrides the distress of a woman bound to an absent husband.¹⁴ It is for this reason that men who went to war were urged to write a conditional divorce document to their wives.¹⁵

With respect to a husband who does not want to grant a divorce to a wife from whom he is separated, the legal position of the sages is not known, or, at least, there are no extant declarations. Only in the Talmudim does the term *agunot* appear, referring to women who find themselves in a state of standby, bound to their husbands because they lack a certificate of divorce. The Hebrew *יושבת עגונה* and Aramaic *מיעגנא ויתבה* expressions are used to represent a woman seated and chained to a situation that restrains her while she waits. This problem is a result of an incorrect

14. In these cases, the woman must be divorced from both men, and the children she might have had with the second husband are considered *mamzerim* (illegitimate children subject to specific, restrictive social and marriage laws; see m. Yevam. 10:1). See Judith R. Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64–70.

15. Tradition attributes to Rabbi Yonatan the legend that the soldiers of the house of David did not go to battle without first leaving their wives a document of divorce (see b. Ketub. 9b).

drafting, testimony, or delivery of the divorce document. There is a perceptible reaction on the part of the sages in the Babylonian Talmud to the situation of “chained” women, and their discourse is aimed not so much at rectifying as at preventing it. Thus, some rabbis consider the possibility of leaving a written divorce document that would be valid in these cases.

It should be permitted to the scribe to write [beforehand] even the substantive part, but in that case it might happen that a woman might hear a scribe declare what he had written and she might think that her husband had told him to write and so fall out with him. Rav Hisda said in the name of Abimi: It is for the relief of deserted wives. (b. Git. 26b)

It is nonetheless surprising that they try to prevent the occurrence in advance but without suggesting an a posteriori solution. And while they tell stories about women whose husbands have disappeared, there is nothing to be found about husbands who desert their wives. A court could easily resolve the latter case, since they must only prove death, while granting a divorce is beyond their competencies. However, is that sufficient reason for the sages to abstain from providing a response? It is difficult to imagine them wordless.

3.4.3. The Legal Authority of the Wife

As seen thus far, wives have no legal agency. In the cases discussed here, the husband acts, and on occasion, the court proposes and he acts, but in no case is the woman’s opinion included; the only exception is the case cited above from Mishnah Ketubbot 7:10. However, there is one situation in which women may be given a voice and, more importantly, be heard: the right of renunciation on the part of a young woman. Here, the active participation of women in renunciation is indisputable, at least with regard to the power of their declaration. Called *מציאן*, the right to refuse considers the possibility that a minor girl orphaned on her father’s side and married as a result of arrangements made by other family members, such as brothers or mother, can express, orally or in writing, that she rejects her husband, by this annulling the marriage. “Who is the minor who can exercise the right to refusal? Any whose mother or brothers have, with her consent, given her in marriage. If they did so without her consent, she need not exercise the right of refusal” (m. Yevam. 13:2).

Two conclusions can be drawn here. The first is the confirmation of the power of paternal authority, replaced only by the authority of the husband

or by the young woman once she reaches adulthood. This power cannot be replaced by the other members of the family, including the mother, whose authority is in no way equivalent to the father's.¹⁶ The second is that, more than a divorce, this is an annulment of a marriage. When the young woman states the formula established for this situation, “I do not want this so-and-so, my husband,” or the court sentence, “On such day, so-and-so daughter of so-and-so made a declaration of refusal in our presence,” and this is accepted, it is not really a divorce.

Originally, a certificate of refusal was drafted: “I do not like him and I do not want him and I do not desire to be married to him.” When, however, it was observed that the formula was too long and it was feared that people might mistake it for a letter of divorce, the following formula was instituted: “On such day, so-and-so daughter of so-and-so made a declaration of refusal in our presence.” (b. Yevam. 107b–108a)¹⁷

The woman in this situation does not even receive the *ketubbah*; the court simply voids the marriage. She is not recognized as a divorcée, as confirmed by the fact that her capacity to be married to a priest is not invalidated. Therefore, the man has not been divorced without his consent or by the action of an external agent like a court, because there can be no divorce without a marriage. If the husband delivered an act of divorce, it would no longer be a renunciation, as the following mishnah demonstrates:

If she exercises the right of refusal against a man, he is permitted to marry her relatives and she is permitted to marry his relatives, and he has not thereby disqualified her for marriage with a priest. If he gave her a bill of divorce, he is forbidden to marry her relatives and she is forbidden to marry his relatives, and he thereby disqualifies her for marriage with a priest. (m. Yevam. 13:4)

3.5. The Document

The circumstances surrounding divorce most systematically and extensively dealt with in the rabbinic literature are the certificate or document

16. See Ilan, *Integrating Women*, 48–50.

17. In addition to any resemblance to a certificate of divorce, it appears that conveying a woman's written statement in the first person provoked anxiety. When speaking out loud, she declares in the first person, but this alternative declaration is evidence of a court—or male witnesses—in texts in which the men recover and confirm their voices.

that verifies this separation. In fact, it is the executing instrument of the divorce. Now called a *get*, the characteristics of this separation document are specified in terms of its base, the writing materials, the contents, and the delivery. It is the central focus of the tractate that bears its name, more so than the divorce itself. The base and writing materials are specified in detail:

It may be written with anything—ink, caustic, red dye, gum, copperas, or with whatsoever is lasting; but it may not be written with liquids or fruit juice or with whatsoever is not lasting. It may be written on anything—on an olive leaf or on a cow’s horn, although you should give the calf, or on the hand of a slave, and he must give her the slave. Rabbi Yossi Ha-Galili says: It may be written on naught that is living or foodstuff. (m. Git. 2:3)

The contents must specify the date, husband and wife, witnesses, and the declaration of divorce, and must include the signature of the husband and witnesses, without leaving any room for confusion, especially with regard to the names of the couple divorcing:

Any bill of divorce that has not been written expressly for the woman is not valid. How is this? If a man passes through the market and heard the scribes calling out: “Such a man is divorcing such a woman of such a place,” and he said: That is my name and that is the name of my wife, it is not a valid document wherewith to divorce his wife. Moreover, if he had drawn up a document wherewith to divorce his wife and he changed his mind, and a man of his city found him and said to him saying: My name is like your name and my wife’s name like your wife’s name, it is not a valid document wherewith to divorce his wife; moreover if he had two wives and their names were alike and he had drawn up a document wherewith to divorce the elder, he may not therewith divorce the younger; moreover if he said to the scribe: Write it so that I may divorce therewith whom I will, it is not a valid document wherewith to divorce anyone. (m. Git. 3:1)

However, it is the signature that validates the document, and its delivery the act that verifies the divorce. When the man places the document in the woman’s hands, the marriage is formally dissolved. Although messengers can deliver the document, it is the husband’s intention and the wife’s receipt that are essential to the procedure. Precisely because of this consideration, two key acts perfectly express how the sages of classical Judaism

echoed biblical law: the man decides and the woman receives the document as a result of that decision.

3.5.1. The Signature

The person who writes the divorce text is not as important as the person who wishes to do so. The signature verifies the husband's desire: “All are qualified to write a bill of divorce, even a deaf-mute, an imbecile, or a minor. A woman may write her own bill of divorce and a man may write his own quittance, since the validity of the writ depends on them that sign it” (m. Git. 2:5). The wife can participate in the decision and the procedure—“with her consent or without it”—but only the husband's consent is required, meaning that his (and other witnesses') signature confirms the decision. Thus, the simplicity of the process described in Deuteronomy is discharged.

3.5.2. The Delivery

The woman must take the document and thus validate and conclude the act. This procedure could suggest that the woman is responsible for the final gesture that consummates the divorce and, therefore, plays an active role in the process. Its importance is in the fact that the woman must be aware of the document she has received in her hand, although this can occur after she has taken it. In such a case, if she took and was surprised to find that it is a divorce document, it is not valid:

If he said to her: Collect this bond of indebtedness, or if she found it behind him and read it and, lo, it was her bill of divorce, it is not valid unless he shall say to her: Here is your bill of divorce. If he put it into her hand while she was asleep and she awoke and read it, and, lo, it was her bill of divorce, it is not valid unless he shall say to her: Here is your bill of divorce. (m. Git. 8:2)

While the Tosefta (t. Git. 6:1) includes a tradition attributing this halakhah to Rabbi (Yehudah the Patriarch), in turn rejected by Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar, who believed that the declaration must accompany the delivery, the official recognition as conveyed in the mishnaic text expresses the version preferred by the sages.

3.5.3. The Formula¹⁸

One of the most interesting references with regard to the certificate of divorce concerns the text contained in this document, considered essential by the sages: “The essential formula in the bill of divorce is: ‘Lo, you are free to marry any man.’ Rabbi Yehudah says: ‘Let this be from me your writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that you may marry whatsoever man you wish’” (m. Git. 9:3). The central, fundamental sentence that defines the decree is the declaration by the former husband that his wife is now free to be with another man. There are two issues to be noted here. On the one hand, the significance of the document is to ensure that the woman is no longer bound to any husband and can marry another man. The sentence that defines the woman’s freedom and verifies that there is no longer any relationship with the man who has been her husband is absolutely essential. If any doubt remained in this respect, or if her capacity to marry another man were in any way limited, this would mean that a bond remained with her first husband. Thus, the document certifies the end of the legal authority of this man over this woman. Now she is free, although not for herself—actually as is specified in the manumission document of a slave mentioned below in the same passage of the Mishnah—but free to be taken by another man. On the other hand, one of the most significant aspects of the adaptation that the sages make on the praxis of divorce has one of its main references in this text. The formula is presented in Aramaic, a language the Tannaim seldom employed, except on very particular and specific occasions. These are quotations from non-rabbinic documents. The language used here, together with the divorce documents found in the Judean desert,¹⁹ determine that we are facing the formula employed in real-life divorce bills. The rabbis elaborate their ritual based on the biblical text (מקרא), using their own argumentation (הלכה), but contemplating the common practice (מנהג).

After reading and reflecting on divorce in the legal texts of rabbinic Judaism, it is clear that this was a private act that continued to unfold in the home, where the legal authority of the husband was indisputable to the point that it was legally institutionalized, while court intervention

18. For a closer look at the precedents for the formula, see Shalom E. Holtz, “‘To Go and Marry Any Man That You Please...’: A Study of the Formulaic Antecedents of the Rabbinic Writ of Divorce,” *JNES* 60 (2001): 241–58.

19. See n. 2, above.

was merely arbitration in the thorniest cases. Women were only conceded more active participation in extreme, isolated cases, and even then, they were never the executor in the process, only the recipient. A male voice had to assert a claim on her behalf or ratify her petitions. While the Bible makes no mention whatsoever of the opinions and feelings of the women in these procedures, they are recognized in the talmudic texts, although in a very restricted role that is interpreted from the male mind.

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Seen, Not Felt: The Gaze at Skin in Tractate Nega'im

Christiane Hannah Tzuberi

This chapter zooms into the rabbinic interpretation, adaption, and transformation of a set of laws commonly referred to as Levitical purity legislation. I will focus here on one subset of these laws, namely, those that deal with skin afflictions (Lev 13:1–14:57). These form the basis of tractate Nega'im in the Mishnah, the third tractate of the Order of Purities.

Levitical laws of ritual impurity related to skin, as also tractate Nega'im, do not at first sight lend themselves to an inquiry of their underlying gendered nature. Firmly rooted in the Levitical account of skin afflictions, the tractate scrutinizes various kinds of skin afflictions that can become a source of ritual impurity and require a visual investigation by a priest (or by the rabbis, who translate Levitical impurity into rabbinic halakah). The priest's (or rabbi's) gaze, however, is directed at both male and female bodies: nothing in the Levitical text or the Mishnah seems to imply a gendered difference between the gaze's objects.

I focus on this tractate, nonetheless, because gazes are, as various feminist scholars have demonstrated, per definition much more than a description of the mechanism of sight, vision, and light. They are part and parcel of broader cultural formations and their reading traditions, which nurture and inform the gaze, determine the things one is able to see—the things one finds important to see—and therefore also observe, name, and categorize.¹ Gazing is, in

1. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18; see also David Frederick, ed., *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). The assumption that "phallogocentrism" is a transhistorical phenomenon has been criticized: the whole point of, e.g., Foucault's analysis of the medical gaze is to show that contemporary vision is not a "natural," ever-existent way of seeing, but the result of a particular change of discourse, which he locates in time and space. See Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Random Books, 1994). For an overview

other words, an activity that establishes a subject-object relation, inevitably entrenched in and determined by sociocultural context. In light of the apparent gender neutrality of Levitical laws on skin afflictions, my question then is: How does gender work in a tractate that, on the one hand, envisions the subject of the law as a thoroughly gender-neutral object, while it is, on the other hand, entrenched in a context that de facto presupposes gender as one of its primary structuring elements, and specifically presupposes women's categorical exclusion from rabbinic knowledge production and hence from authoritative, legitimate gazing? Where is gender when it is, on the face of it, invisible?

In order to tackle this question, I will make use of a textual approach, which moves away from a reading of purity legislations and procedures as positivist legal facts that are logically dependent on the existence of the temple and the class of priests, and instead advances a reading that focuses on the emergence of a "mishnaic self."² In this line of reading, mishnaic texts related to ritual purity are not utilized for a historical reconstruction of actual practices, but rather are read as "a discourse that made history by getting its readers to conceive of people, places, things, and their interrelations in terms of purity and impurity."³ Also after the destruction of the second temple, purity and impurity:

of different feminist engagements with vision, see Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003). For an analysis of the rabbinic gaze, see Rachel R. Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2. Over the past decade this shift in text approach has led to an interest-revival in the Order of Purities among scholars and went along with the realization that the discourse on (im)purity remained entrenched in Jewish societies well after the destruction of the temple. Before this revival, the Order of Purities had, with the exception of tractate Niddah, only little appeal even to those scholars who approached the text not only as a literary production of Jews in late antiquity but also as informing, challenging, or countering the contemporary. For a historical overview on different scholarly approaches to ritual purity, see Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1. New publications are, e.g., Stuart S. Miller, *At the Intersection of Texts and Material Finds: Stepped Pools, Stone Vessels, and Ritual Purity among the Jews of Roman Galilee* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); Yair Furstenberg, *Purity and Community in Antiquity: Traditions of the Law from Second Temple Judaism to the Mishnah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2016). For an overview see Shai Secunda, "Purity and Obscurity," *JRB* (Summer 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019c>.

3. Secunda, "Purity and Obscurity."

live on as powerful conceptual and hermeneutical tools through which ideas about self and other are manifested, through which one's body and environment can be scrutinized and defined, and one constitutes and forms oneself as a subject.... Whereas in the Bible and in Second Temple literature the dominant focal points of the discourse on purity and impurity are the sancta and the Temple, and by extension the camp, the city and the community insofar as those bear sanctity of their own, *the Mishnah's Order of Purities introduces the self, the individual subject of the law, as a new focal point*.⁴

The maintenance of ritual purity and the treatment of ritual impurity thus become "a mode of living," a means of self-shaping, self-scrutiny, and self-perfection, that requires an attentive, reflexive subject, characterized by its constant vigilance against impurity and an examination of both self and surroundings.⁵ In this chapter, I will utilize this shift from "what does purity mean" to "what does this discourse do,"⁶ because it opens up a space in which I can ask whether and how a concern for purity informs

4. Balberg, *Purity, Body and Self*, 2, 5, emphasis added. Joshua Levinson likewise proposes that "instead of asking about the reflection of the world in the text, I focus on the work of the text in the world.... My working assumption is that a legal discourse constructs a specific type of subject which is interpellated not only as subject-to-the-law, but is also called upon to assume a certain subject identity through-the-law, a subject of the law." See Joshua Levinson, "From Narrative Practice to Cultural Poetics: Literary Anthropology and the Rabbinic Sense of Self," in *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters*, ed. Maren R. Niehoff (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 345–46. See also Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "The Mishnaic Mental Revolution: A Reassessment," *JJS* 66 (2015): 41.

5. As Balberg argues, the Tannaim, for instance, greatly expand the realm of impurity, not by adding new sources of impurity but rather by devising new and far-reaching modes and processes of transmission of impurity to secondary and tertiary contractors. Balberg argues that the rabbis turned the contraction of impurity from "a noticeable event into an ongoing reality" (*Purity, Body and Self*, 19). Balberg's approach resonates with what is known as the ethical turn in cultural anthropology and religion studies, which received its critical impetus from Talal Asad's critique of dominant (Geertzian) conceptions of religion. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993). For Asad, the question is not so much the cultural meaning of whatever practice, but rather the ethical self-formation. See Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *QP* 17.2 (2009): 23.

6. For a review of ritual studies and scholarship on rabbinic literature see Mira Balberg, "Ritual Studies and the Study of Rabbinic Literature," *CurBR* 16 (2017): 71–98.

the making of female personhood/subjectivity, and whether and how that concern itself becomes gendered. If the Order of Purities establishes a discourse through which the law's subjects relate to themselves, their bodies, and their material surroundings, then I am interested in the kind of subject—and specifically, the gendered subject—that the rabbinic discourse of ritual skin im/purity presupposes and generates.

I will proceed as follows: I will first turn to one basic feature underlying both tractate Nega'im and its Levitical source text, namely, objectification. I will demonstrate how the Tannaim, in line with Leviticus, turn the body into an object of knowledge through its separation from the person who inhabits this body. My argument here is that in both Mishnah Nega'im and in Leviticus, ritual purity requires objectification, for without objectification there is no ritual purity. I will then turn attention to what distinguishes the Mishnah's discussion of skin affliction from its Levitical foundation. Whereas Leviticus describes an encounter between a carrier of knowledge and a two-dimensional, mute object, the ritual status of which depends on its surface's legibility, the Mishnah is no longer concerned with the question of whether skin can be read, but with how exactly the correct reading is carried out. In the Mishnah, the inspection of skin is imagined as a more extensive and all-encompassing procedure than in Leviticus. I will argue that specifically in later Amoraic sources, this characteristic of complete accessibility is used as a rhetorical device through which also female bodies—bodies that are practically and epistemologically inaccessible to a rabbinic (male) gaze—are imagined as accessible.

In the final part of my essay, I will follow up on the rhetorical afterlife of skin's ritual impurity in a realm coined by Christine Hayes as "moral impurity," that is, a kind of impurity that is "not communicable to other persons and is not removed by rituals of purification." In this realm, impurity "does not arise from certain unavoidable natural processes and is never intrinsic, but is conditioned on behavior, and as such, avoidable."⁷ In contrast to ritual impurity, the person who inspects the skin as well as the skin's carrier become three-dimensional, acting characters, and a skin affliction is accordingly interpreted as a punishment for a transgression. As I will demonstrate with recourse to a midrash on Miriam's affliction, the hierarchical relationship between the priestly/rabbinic

7. Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 193.

gazer and the laity, defined by its being-looked-at-ness, is here reiterated as a gendered hierarchy. In the midrash, Miriam's skin is a canvas that, at the gazer's discretion, is evaluated as beautiful or ugly. Whereas in tractate Nega'im the objects of the gaze consist of degendered surfaces that are excluded from the camp as a result of their impurity, in the context of moral impurity, a skin affliction can be translated into ugliness and exclude women from marriage. The gaze at skin here subjects women to an evaluation of physical attractiveness, with a skin affliction being the antithesis of beauty.

Objectification: Seeing Skin and Unseeing Gender

Tractate Nega'im's main organizing principle and reference point are chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Leviticus (Lev 13:1–14:57; Lev 13 deals with the different types of skin afflictions, in biblical Hebrew *tzaraat*, *צרעת*;⁸ Lev 14 turns to the afflictions' process of purification). The context in which the passages on skin afflictions appear is a delineation of human beings who can be sources of impurity according to the Levitical code: women after childbirth, men and women with abnormal genital discharges, and menstruating women.⁹ Unlike all these human sources of

8. In line with medical positivism and the Septuagint's translation of *צרעת* as *lepra*, the term is sometimes translated "leprosy," even though scholars early on pointed out that the Levitical description of skin afflictions does not match the symptoms of leprosy. Although some use circumventions such as "skin disease" or "scale disease," a largely medical-positivist reading of Leviticus is often upheld. See, as an example of this approach, Joseph Zias, "Lust and Leprosy: Confusion or Correlation?," *BASOR* 275 (1989): 27–31. For a contestation of this approach, see John J. Pilch, "Biblical Leprosy and Body Symbolism," *BTB* 11 (1981): 108–13. Pilch attempts to understand Levitical skin afflictions with Mary Douglas's reading of the body as a "model, which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.... We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva, and the rest, unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body." See Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002), 115. However, as far as an affliction of skin is concerned, there is no bodily boundary being crossed; in addition, it is precisely not gentiles but Jews who can be ritually impure.

9. For an analysis of the structure of this list, see Charlotte E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

impurity, an affliction of the skin is the only form of humanly generated impurity that explicitly needs to be diagnosed by a priest's gaze. The biblical text, accordingly, stresses over and over again the importance of a visual inspection: the verb "seeing" (ראה) appears in Lev 13 no fewer than thirty-three times.¹⁰

In the Levitical description of skin afflictions, the priest's gaze at an Israelite's skin never switches into a communication with the one who is being inspected. The Israelite whose skin has an affliction is "brought unto the priest," and the priest "looks" and "makes him" impure or pure, respectively. The priest does not interrogate the Israelite for other symptoms, such as itching or burning, but undertakes an exclusively visual investigation. There is no difference between an inspection of clothes, of walls, or of skin: all are inanimate objects and mute. It seems as if the priest's gaze even *causes* impurity: When the priest declares the Israelite to be impure, he does not endow that which is "there in any case" with an official seal. He does not diagnose a spot on the skin as impure; rather, it is his gaze and declaration that constitute the status of impurity in the first place: "The priest looks and impures him" (ראהו הכהן וטמא אתו). Impurity seems, in this sense, not so much an essential characteristic of the affliction, but is rather a ritual status that is intrinsically bound to the priest's gaze and his pronouncement of impurity. Without having the affliction inspected by a priest, there is no impurity.¹¹

Inasmuch as the investigated Israelite does not exist as a three-dimensional subject, it is also entirely irrelevant whether the investigated is a man or a woman. When inspecting skin, the priest investigates a "surface" as if it were a piece of cloth or a wall. There is, accordingly, also no moralist twist lurking behind the Levitical account of skin afflictions. A skin affliction has neither cause, nor cure; it just happens. It can potentially happen

10. Mira Balberg, "Rabbinic Authority, Medical Rhetoric, and Body Hermeneutics in Mishnah *Nega'im*," *AJSR* 35 (2011): 323–46.

11. Reading biblical skin afflictions in line with a modern understanding of disease is, accordingly, difficult, as Levitical skin afflictions are not about the malfunction of biological processes in the body. For example, a person whose skin is entirely covered by an affliction is, according to Lev 13:13, pure and does not even require a purification ritual. According to a modern medical plausibility framework, this person would have to be considered entirely "sick." The categories "pure" and "impure" thus do not map on "healthy" and "sick." Rather, the primary concern of Levitical purity regulations is sociocultural-legal: the safeguarding of the temple's ritual purity. In Leviticus no mention at all is made of a possible cure.

anytime, to any kind of boundary encircling an Israelite: skin, clothes, or walls. Whereas in the biblical story of Miriam's affliction (Num 12:10–15), the sudden "whiteness" of her skin is related to God's anger at her and Aaron's behavior, in Leviticus no such associations are made: in order for the inspected Israelite to be turned into a transgressor, a priest would have to encounter him or her, either through an interrogation or through some kind of assessment of his or her personae, delineating the exact outlines of the transgressors' deeds. In order for the priests to form a moral judgment, they would have to engage the patient, and the investigation would necessarily cease to be purely visual.¹² In order to read the body's skin like a blackboard, one thus has to silence its carrier and privilege vision in the hierarchy of senses.

In Mishnah Nega'im, the authoritativeness of sight is affirmed. As in Leviticus, also in the Mishnah an impurity of the skin comes into being only through the declaration of impurity: without an inspection, there is no impurity. Hence, the Mishnah stipulates that one does not expect skin afflictions on festival days and wedding nights (m. Neg. 3:2; see also b. Mo'ed Qat. 7b and b. Bekh. 34b). There may well be an affliction on these days, of course, yet it "does" nothing as long as it has not been investigated and declared to be impure. As in Leviticus, here too the declaration of impurity does not diagnose but constitutes impurity in the first place.

Accordingly, in tractate Nega'im, too, neither observer nor observed are ever transformed into three-dimensional beings but are described solely in terms of their respective functions: the rabbi as professional observer, and the lay Jew as observed. The Mishnah does not equalize gender; it does not see gendered persons to begin with: the process of skin inspection entails neither men nor women.¹³ An example: Sifra, the hal-

12. Elaine Scarry describes the inexpressibility of pain and the political ramifications of deliberately inflicted pain as follows: "For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty,' while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to be in doubt.' Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language." See Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

13. Mira Balberg sets rabbinic skin-impurity discourse in the context of Galenic medicine and argues that it is shaped by this contemporaneous medical discourse. She

akhic midrash on Leviticus, stipulates that like all other Israelites, also a *tumtum* (a person with unknown genitalia) and an *androgynos* (a person with dual genitalia) are to be investigated for an affliction. In other halakhic contexts, a *tumtum* and an *androgynos* are turned into halakhic objects through regulating them, depending on context, as “like a woman” or “like a man.” *Tumtum* and *androgynos* are not regulated as gender hybrid—the male/female binary is principally being upheld—but they are halakhically bifurcated as “sometimes like men” and “other times like women.” In contrast to these “managements” of a *tumtum* and an *androgynos*, in the context of an inspection of skin no such bifurcation takes place: they are not categorized as “in this and that respect like a man” or “in this and that respect like a woman.”¹⁴ As far as skin afflictions are concerned, they are included and investigated as *tumtum* and *androgynos*, without any need of reading and categorizing them as gendered men or women.¹⁵ They matter as surface, skin, not as women, men, *tumtums*, or *androgynoses*.

Excluded from an investigation are, accordingly, those whom one presumably cannot objectify. The Mishnah stipulates that one may not investigate one’s own afflictions and, according to Rabbi Meir, those of one’s relatives (m. Neg. 3:5).¹⁶ One would not be capable of upholding a

focuses on its rhetoric rather than on concrete parallels between medical concepts: “Rather than suggesting that the physical body has a legal aspect to it—that is, that purity and impurity are legal phenomena manifested in the body—the rabbis maintain that the *Jewish body as a whole is a legal entity*.... The rabbis put forth that examining the bodies of Jews is by definition a juristic activity, and is thus to be entrusted into the hands of the legal specialists” (“Rabbinic Authority,” 345). The relationship between examiner and examined, as imagined in this tractate, thus markedly differs from the relationship between judge and client (or a rabbi and a lay Israelite) in that all those factors that crucially inform a “judge’s” actions, such as context, intention, etc., do not inform the case’s outcome.

14. E.g., the work of Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim” (unpublished paper), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019d>. See also Charlotte E. Fonrobert, “The Semiotics of the Sexed Body in Early Halakhic Discourse,” in *How Should Rabbinic Literature Be Read in the Modern World?*, ed. Matthew Kraus (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006), 79–105.

15. See Sifra, *tazria negaim*, *parashah* 5:1 (“‘And a man or a woman—if there be in it a spot, in the head or in the beard’ (Lev 13:29): ‘And a man’ to include a *neteq* [נֶתֶק] within a *neteq* (as being impure). ‘A man or a woman,’ this tells me only of a (distinct) man or woman. Whence do I derive for inclusion a *tumtum* or an *androgynos*? From ‘or.’”

16. “A man can examine all *nega'im* except his own *nega'im*. Rabbi Meir says: Not even the *nega'im* of his relatives.”

neutralized gaze upon oneself or upon the skin of someone whom one knows as a person, rather than as mere skin. Skin is thus made into an externally accessible object of knowledge through the erasure of everything that might blur vision, and consequently, through a separation of skin from the person who feels the skin. The subjectivity of the skin's carriers is present insofar as their self-objectification is taken for granted.¹⁷

Legibility: Reading the Invisible like Skin

While the Mishnah affirms this basic dynamic set forth in Leviticus, it also transforms the encounter between investigator and investigated. I will delineate this transformation in what follows and begin with a close reading of Lev 13, outlining two paradigmatic skin afflictions (in Lev 13:2–8 and 9–17, respectively).

Leviticus 13:2–8 describes the affliction of someone whose skin has an irregular, abnormal bright spot (called *se'et*, שַׁאֵת; *sapahat*, סַפְחַת; or *baheret*, בְּהֶרֶת). Particular symptoms, which classify such a spot immediately as impure, are listed: if a hair within the spot has turned white and the spot looks “deeper than the skin of his flesh,” no further investigation is needed. The spot is per se impure. If, however, these symptoms are absent, the spot is possibly pure: if during a period of fourteen days it does not spread (עָמַד בְּעֵינָיו) and eventually “gets darker,” it is pure. A spot on one's skin thus can be neutralized through immovability and a change of its color. Even if it is still visually identifiable as an “other,” abnormal kind of skin, it is pure if it gradually resembles the surrounding, nonafflicted skin. The section concludes, logically, that if such a spot spreads again after the priest's final inspection, it is declared immediately impure.

Leviticus 13:9–17, the second paradigmatic kind of affliction, follows the pattern of the first case: The passage opens with a description of an affliction and its symptoms that qualify it as per se impure. It then proceeds to delineate the conditions under which this affliction is to be considered

17. Ishay Rosen-Zvi stresses that ritual purity is not “just another expression of the ‘rise of the subject,’” but is intimately connected to a legal discourse and is formed along with the law. “Understanding this self thus cannot,” so Rosen-Zvi, “be disconnected from the halakhic context; nor can halakha be seen as but a medium for the exposure of the rise of the subjective” (“Mental Revolution,” 44–45). The “*mishnaic* self” is thus fundamentally different from an individual, inner self as it emerges in Hellenistic Roman and classical Greek sources.

pure and closes with the affliction's lapse into impurity. As before, the passage is structured according to the categories (1) *per se* impure, (2) pure if xyz, and (3) a lapse into impurity. The affliction is *per se* impure if it is a "white rising" (השאת-לבנה) that has white hair and healthy living flesh in its midst. It is neutralized through a development that mirrors the neutralization of the affliction described before: just as a spot becomes pure through gradually resembling the surrounding skin, here it becomes pure through covering the entire body.¹⁸ (The text closes logically, again, with stating that once a piece of "living flesh" appears upon the body that is otherwise fully covered by *se'et*, it is immediately impure again.¹⁹)

Skin impurity seems not to consist here in an essential characteristic intrinsic to a specific kind of skin but is a result of mixture: an affliction is declared impure when it is visually identifiable as a different skin in the midst of normal skin, and it is declared pure if it either covers the entire body, so that there is no mixture anymore, or when it ceases to develop and gradually resembles the skin that surrounds it. Put differently, skin is pure when it is homogenous, when its spots visually assimilate or entirely displace the other skin. A spot can take over or make itself invisible, but once it exists as a visibly identifiable, independent other in the midst of normal skin, it is impure.²⁰ If so, skin impurity concerns the visual communication between the priest's eyes and the skin he investigates: it is imposed when the priest cannot read skin.

18. A spot that eventually covers the entire body does not require any closing off, and not even, as in Lev 13:6, the washing of clothes.

19. For a different reading, see Boris Ostrer, "Leviticus 13:13 and Its Mishnaic Parallel," *JJS* 53 (2002): 18–26.

20. There are some subvariants in the Levitical text. First, Lev 13:40–44 concerns a man (איש) with a bald head. This one is *per se* pure. He does not need to be seen by a priest, and it also does not matter whether the hair fell out at the front or the back of the head. Only an affliction that spreads over the bald head requires inspection. Further subvariants concern burned skin (מכות אש) and a skin infliction called *shehin* (שחין) that has healed, whereupon an affliction spreads over the healed flesh. If there are the usual signs of impurity discernible (such as white hair and a spot that is "deeper than the skin"), the affliction is *per se* impure. If, however, no such signs of impurity are discernible, and the spot looks dim, then purity or impurity is declared according to the affliction's development or recession: If it does not spread within a period of seven days, it is declared pure (Lev 13:23, 28) even if it is still discernible as a white spot.

Notably, unlike any other kind of impurity to which an Israelite may be subjected, the priest's declaration of skin impurity turns the Israelite into a liminal, spatially separated figure. The person with skin affliction has to perform acts akin to those performed by a mourner:

The afflicted, in whom the *nega* is, his clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall go loose, and he shall cover his upper lip, and shall cry: "Impure, impure." All the days wherein the affliction is in him he shall be impure; he is impure; he shall dwell alone; outside of his camp shall his dwelling be (Lev 13:45–46).²¹

In Numbers 12:12, too, in Aaron's plea on behalf of Miriam, her skin affliction is associated with death: "Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away" (NJPS). *Tzaraat* is associated, alongside childlessness, poverty, and blindness, with a "living death" in b. Ned. 64 as well. Other impurities of which the human body can be a source are not described that way. Mostly, one simply happens to be impure, and actions leading to impurity, such as sex or childbirth, are obviously not discouraged.

In line with my reading described above, the distancing of the Israelite with impure skin from the camp is not related to a community's need for protection from contamination—if that were the case, a person entirely covered by an affliction would surely require quarantine, instead of being declared wholly pure. Rather, if impurity of skin is a result of the priest's incapability to decipher the skin, it is, accordingly, illegibility of skin that has explicit social relevance and results in spatial exclusion. In the same vein, if it is skin's illegibility that results in spatial exclusion, then (halakhic, social, and spatial) inclusion is premised on legibility. The illegible Israelite's expulsion toward the margins of the camp stages the conditions of inclusion: the expelled is ritually impure and hence belongs to the Israelites' collective; s/he is very much part of the priest's scope of jurisdiction, who, consequently, regularly inspects her skin.²² Yet her skin is illegible,

21. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine. See also Num 5:1–3: "The LORD said to Moses, Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has a defiling skin disease [צָרַעַת] or a discharge of any kind, or who is impure because of a dead body: Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them" (NIV).

22. The biblical text indeed does not hint at the possibility of a perpetual, everlasting impurity. Either the impurity is eventually declared pure or it simply remains impure and the priest keeps on checking the spots "forever."

and hence she moves toward the spatial margins of the collective, her spatial movement paralleling her movement toward the margins of rabbinic jurisdiction's scope: she moves close to the boundary separating Israelites from gentiles, separating those who can become ritually impure from those who cannot. Mira Balberg, in her discussion of tractate Nega'im, argues along these lines that "in the mishnaic system the bodies of Gentiles cannot be read as impure because they cannot be read at all. Rather than being seen as less than human, gentiles are viewed as uninterpretable humans."²³ In the association of ritually impure skin with death and mourning, it is thus the Israelite's life in a halakhic-communal sense that is mourned: in resembling a gentile, who is categorically illegible (and hence, excluded from ritual impurity or rabbinic jurisdiction more broadly), the Israelite comes close to categorical illegibility and therewith to losing that which constitutes her body.

When moving from a priestly to a rabbinic purity discourse, the Tannaim expand their inspection's scope by developing an entire field of knowledge that evolves around the ranges of colors and spots that potentially could be categorized as impure. In the Mishnah, reading skin is expert knowledge, conveyed through concomitant expert language. For instance, in m. Neg. 1:4, Rabbi Hanina, "head of priests," is quoted stipulating that there exist sixteen colors of skin afflictions, only to be topped by the superior virtuosity of Rabbi Dosa, who claims that he can identify thirty-six colors, and Aqaviah ben Mehalalel, who counts seventy-two colors.²⁴ If in

23. Balberg, "Rabbinic Authority," 342. For an analysis of different ritual impurity discourses and their relation to questions of identity and difference, see Hayes, *Gentile Impurities*.

24. In m. Neg. 3:1 a general remark postulates that "all are fit to investigate a *tzaraat*." Yet at the same time, the tractate minimizes the ability of "all" to investigate. Mira Balberg observes: "I suggest that what we have here is not an affirmation of the laymen's prerogative to inspect skin afflictions, as Fraade argues, nor an effort to extend the sanctity of the priests to all of Israel, as Neusner argues. Rather, by depersonalizing the inspecting agent in such way, while at the same time emphatically stressing that rabbinic knowledge is indispensable for the inspection process, the rabbis present the power invested in the sage as the presumed inspector as objective and as received strictly because of skill and merit" ("Rabbinic Authority," 337–38). When the Tannaim state that "all are fit to investigate a *tzaraat*," the rabbis affirm their own status as the quintessential knowers of the body, but detach this status from their own personhood and thus present it as an objective result of skills. This formula could also be intended as an antisectarian polemic, since the sectarians (foremost in Qumran) reserved this

Leviticus the inspection itself constitutes skin impurity, in the Mishnah the act of naming an immense variety of potentially impure spots fortifies the grip of the gaze on skin, and the relationship between rabbinic expert knowledge and self-consciousness. Salman Sayyid has theorized the force of naming:

A name is not only a shorthand expression of something that already exists but, more profoundly, *it is through the process of naming that the thing being referred to enters our consciousness*. A name is not just a label that can simply be attached to something that is already there: it is the means by which heterogeneous elements are marshaled together to become the intrinsic feature of the named entity.²⁵

As a correlative of this intensification, in the Mishnah also the inspection itself seems to be much more all-encompassing than the one implied in Leviticus. Whereas the latter suggests that the afflicted spot itself is investigated and a spot not visible to the eye is not at all inspected (Lev 13:12), the Mishnah seems to envision an investigation of the entire body:

How is the *nega* displayed [during the examination]? The man is displayed as if he were hoeing or picking olives. A woman [is displayed] as if she were kneading dough or nursing her child, [or] like a weaver who stands [and displays] her armpit on her right arm [while weaving]. Rabbi Yehudah says: Even as if she were spinning flax by her left hand. In the way that he is displayed for [the examination of] his *nega*, thus is he displayed for his shaving [after completing his purification process]. (m. Neg. 2:4)

This text about the body positions in which the investigation is being carried out is the only passage in the tractate in which an explicit differentiation between women and men is made. Men are positioned as if doing agricultural labor, women as if doing domestic labor. Miriam Peskowitz has analyzed this passage regarding its association of women with domesticity and men with publicity in a context that is not about labor at all.²⁶ Within the context of tractate Nega'im, however, I would

right only to priests. On sectarian polemics in relation to *tzaraat*, see also Yitzhaq Feder, "The Polemic Regarding Skin Disease in 4QMMT," *DSD* 19 (2012): 55–70.

25. Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and the World Order* (London: Hurst, 2014), 2.

26. Miriam Peskowitz remarks regarding this passage: "The rabbis knew well that men could bake bread, and that women could harvest olives, because they wrote about

read this mishnah as emphasizing the gaze's access to the entire body, regardless of the investigated body's sex and regardless of the spot's position on body parts that are normally not accessible to the bare eye. It functions like a *hava amina* (הוה אמינא), that is, a text that displays a reasonable initial assumption in order to *refute* it: according to m. Miqw. 8:5, body parts that are normally invisible (lit. the "house of hiddenness," בית הסתרים) are not susceptible to ritual impurity, and one could therefore reasonably assume that one does not need to inspect those normally invisible body parts—yet as m. Neg. 2:4 teaches, both men and women are to be inspected along the lines delineated above.²⁷ In line with this, in the toseftan parallel to this mishnah (t. Neg. 1:5), the passage concerning the body position in which the investigation is being carried out is preceded by the question of the inspection of houses with closed windows and a folded sheet: "As to a dark house the windows of which are closed, they open those windows and examine its *nega*. A sheet which is folded over, they smooth out its folds and examine its *nega*." We thus understand that one has to also "open" normally hidden body parts, just as one has to open the house's windows and smooth out the sheet's folds.²⁸

The extension of the investigation matters, moreover, because it seems to imply a transformation of ritual purity's subject: if, according to Leviticus, the inspection concerns those parts of the body that are visible, that

them doing so in their own texts. They knew that men worked as weavers and would be familiar with how to position one's arms at the loom.... Despite their knowledge of a variety of overlapping tasks done by women and men, the passage marks out a clear distinction between tasks done by women and men. Men are outdoors doing agricultural tasks, and women are in domestic settings where they nurse children, knead bread, weave, and spin." See Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 86.

27. See also Balberg, "Rabbinic Authority," 334–36.

28. The continuation of t. Neg. 1:5 reads as follows: "If the *nega* is seen in the rooms or in the cracks, it does not require [an investigation]. If he has removed it, it is like a folded [sheet] that is smoothed out. And like a hidden area [בית הסתרים] that was uncovered. Like a [female] weaver who stands [and displays] her armpit on her right arm [while weaving], says Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yehudah says: As if she was spinning by her left hand. In the way that he is displayed for [the examination of] his *nega*, thus is he displayed for his shaving [after completing his purification process]." This could mean that one investigates the entire body except of the genitalia; however, Maimonides in his commentary on m. Neg. 2:4 understands this passage to imply that the investigation requires one to be naked.

is, uncovered, then the inspection of the priest is directed at those parts that are relevant for a person's social self. Whatever part of oneself is *invisible* to one's surroundings is, after all, irrelevant to one's social self.²⁹ If in the Mishnah, however, the inspection concerns the *entire* body, including its normally covered parts (but not necessarily the genitalia), it thereby intensifies the proximity of rabbinic knowledge and the subjectivity of the inspected: the legal subject the Mishnah presupposes is one who regards the accessibility of the body *beyond* the regularly visible parts as a self-evident given and experiences the entire body as constituted by rabbinic knowledge. The entire body can be spread out "like a sheet," be read, and therewith regulated and dominated.³⁰

Charlotte Fonrobert, in her work on menstrual impurity, accordingly suggests reading tractate Nega'im as a sort of blueprint for tractate Niddah that equally expands and transforms Levitical purity laws: while Levitical menstrual purity does not require any outside authority, leaving the determination of menstruation essentially in the hands of women, tractate Niddah develops an extensive, specialized taxonomy of shapes, locations, and colors that demand a rabbinic expert to assess whether or not a stain is menstrual blood.³¹ In line with this relationship between tractate Niddah and tractate Nega'im, it may not be coincidental that specifically in later Amoraic sources an affliction of skin is commonly associated with nonobservance of the *niddah* precepts, primarily the prohibition of intercourse with a menstruating woman:³²

Who causes a newborn child to be afflicted with *tzaraat*? Its mother, who did not observe the days of her menstruation. (Lev. Rab. 15:5)

29. In b. Ber. 5b, it is suggested that an invisible skin affliction is a "torment of love," that is, a torment that was mercifully brought upon a person by God.

30. This echoes Ishay Rosen-Zvi's observation that in rabbinic halakhic discourse, "There is no 'inner person,' a soul or logos that stands in contrast to 'external' parts of 'me' such as my body or my appetites, as in Plato or Paul.... The Mishnaic truth cannot be found by looking inwards—as in Augustine—and there is no hidden 'inner truth,' known only to 'me,' of the type which created the modern radical dichotomy between inside and out.... It is a simple world that merely replicates the outer one and is subject to its rules" ("Mental Revolution," 54).

31. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 108–9.

32. In medieval Jewish literature an affliction of skin is almost exclusively read as a punishment. See James A. Diamond, "Maimonides on Leprosy: Illness as Contemporary Metaphor," *JQR* 96 (2006): 95–122.

Rabbi Aha said: If a man has intercourse with his wife when she is menstruating, the children will be afflicted with *tzaraat* (TanP, Metzora 1).

In moralizing statements such as these, the association between non-observance of the laws of menstruation and an affliction of skin serves, I think, a didactic purpose. In the realm of the laws of *niddah*, women necessarily have “privileged access” to knowledge of their (own) menstruations and are responsible for observing those halakhic regulations that are related to menstruation. Anybody but the menstruating woman herself has an ultimate practical ability to “supervise” her observance of the laws of *niddah*.³³ The *non*visibility of menstruation and the inaccessibility of the female body’s interior to an exterior gaze make it difficult to regulate this interior halakhically, and to ensure and foster observance in this realm from without. When a skin affliction is associated here with a punishment for just this kind of difficult-to-supervise field, then the very visibility of skin and the rabbinic grip on skin rhetorically complement the lack of visibility in the sphere of menstruation.

The rhetoric of impurity can thus move beyond the context of ritual purity into a context of moral impurity:³⁴ in the above-quoted statements, the spots’ shape, color, development over time, or ritual status are of no concern. Here, the spot on the skin is presented as a public disfigurement, and the prospect of such public humiliation functions like a warning against a “hidden” transgression³⁵ that is related to the practical inaccessibility of female bodies to an exterior gaze. The visibility of skin is evoked in order to suggest the epistemological visibility also of the female body’s interior; it rhetorically functions like a mirror that turns outward the inaccessible and private.

33. See also the contribution of Ronit Nikolsky, “Midrash Sarah and Abraham: A Lost Rabbinic Interpretation of the ‘Woman of Valor’ Song,” in this volume.

34. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities*, 193.

35. Ishay Rosen-Zvi argues that the mishnaic development of the *sotah* ritual is a manifestation of power and control over the woman’s body, attained (among other things) by exposing it to be looked at. See Rosen-Zvi, “The ‘Sotah’ in the Temple: A Well-Ordered Choreography,” in *Introduction to Seder Qodashim*, ed. Tal Ilan, Monika Brockhaus, and Tanja Hidde (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 71–84; and see also Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Temple, Gender and Midrash* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

Skin Affliction as Ugliness

I will now turn to a midrash that features a skin affliction, yet is—at first sight—not synchronized at all with the Tannaitic discourse as recorded in tractate Nega'im: a skin affliction is described here as a disfigurement that makes men not want to marry a woman, even as prestigious as Miriam, Moses's sister. The midrash relates to several verses from the biblical book of Chronicles, and they do not mention Miriam:

“And Caleb the son of Hezron begot the woman Azuvah and Jerioth, and these are her sons: Jesher and Shobav and Ardon” (1 Chr 2:18).

Azuvah is Miriam. And why was she called Azuvah [עזובה]? Because everyone left her [עזובה] at the beginning. “Begot”—but he was married to her! Rabbi Yohanan said: Whoever marries a woman for a higher purpose, the text considers it as if he begot her. “Jerioth [יריעות]”—because her face resembled curtains [יריעות]. “And these are her sons”—do not read “her sons” [בניה], but “her builders” [בונים]....

“And Ashur the father of Tekoa had two wives, Helah and Naarah” (2 Chr 4:5).

Ashur is Caleb. [...] “The father of”—because he became like a father to her. [...] “Had two wives”—Miriam became like two women. “Helah and Naarah”—not Helah [חלה] and Naarah [נערה], but in the beginning she was sickly [חולה], and afterwards she was youthful [נערה].

“And the sons of Helah were Zereth, Tzohar and Ethnan” (1 Chr 4:7).

“Zereth [צרת]”—[Miriam was so called] because she became the rival [צרה] of her contemporaries [in beauty]. “Tzohar [צוהר]”—because her face was [beautiful] like the noon [צהריים]. “Ethnan [אתנן]”—because whoever saw her took a present [אתנן]³⁶ to his wife. (b. Sotah 12a)

This midrash is part of a group of midrashim that focus on Miriam's place within her family (b. Sotah 11a–12b). Midrashic interpretations often create family relations between characters of the Hebrew Bible, linking minor figures to more famous ones and finding meaning in the smallest genealogical details. Devora Steinmetz, in an extensive discussion of this group of midrashim, contends that the midrashim dealing with Miriam's

36. *Etnan* denotes money given to a prostitute for sexual services. Possibly this word is used in the midrash in order to imply that whoever saw her was reminded of sexual intercourse with his wife, enticed her with a present, or straightforwardly paid his wife for sex.

relation to her family constitute the largest group of midrashim related to her in the rabbinic corpus and entail a single basic plot: Miriam's commitment to birth, in a concern for the continuity of leadership, and her related intervention in the abandonment of women by their men (which, of course, poses a danger to continuous leadership that relies on the birth of sons).³⁷ Miriam's reward for her commitment to continuity is, according to this series of midrashim, God's establishment of the institution of kingship with Miriam as the founding mother of King David (b. Sotah 11b). In order to sustain this genealogical claim, the Babylonian Talmud tells a story about Miriam's own abandonment by men and her subsequent marriage to Caleb. The identification of Miriam as wife of Caleb and as the ancestress of David appears already in Sifre Numbers 78, which does not, however, explain the etymology of the name Azuvah as being related to the idea of abandonment by men. Steinmetz thus concludes that "there is little evidence that the full narrative told by the *Bavli* antedates the composition of the *Bavli* passage."³⁸ It is consistent with the Babylonian Talmud's reading of Miriam as a figure whose primary concern is the continuity of leadership through the enablement of birth: "If the story of Miriam's desertion by men is the *Bavli*'s own innovation, it most probably emerges from the *Bavli*'s desire to expand the portrait of Miriam so that a single pattern shapes each of Miriam's experiences."³⁹

In this midrash, Miriam's abandonment is related to her skin affliction. When Miriam had an affliction, namely, "in the beginning," she was deserted by men and is hence called Azuvah, עֲזוּבָה, "deserted." The skin affliction here is considered ugly, a source of shame, echoing the description of Miriam's affliction in the book of Numbers, where she is referred to "like one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb" (Num 12:12), and as someone whose "father spat in her face" (Num 12:4). Caleb nonetheless marries her "for a higher purpose"—in order to

37. Devora Steinmetz, "A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash," *Proof8* (1988):

38. For example, the Hebrew midwives Shifrah and Puah mentioned in Exod 1:15 are identified in b. Sotah 11b as "Miriam and Yocheved." For more on this see Moshe Lavee, "The Midwives-in-Egypt's Nationality: Recovering a Lost Rabbinic Midrash from the Cairo Genizah," in this volume. Here the rabbis tie the midwife episode to the scene depicted before: a girl, whom the rabbis identify as Miriam, watches over Moses's fate when being displaced in the river following Pharaoh's decree.

38. Steinmetz, "Portrait of Miriam," 47.

39. Steinmetz, "Portrait of Miriam," 47.

beget children. Caleb is referred to as her “father,” since without him, she would still be *azuvah*: an unmarried women, metaphorized here as “not yet born.” Matters change quite drastically when cured of her affliction. She becomes “youthful,” a rival of any co-wife, her face shining “like noon,” and whoever saw her brought an *etnan* to his wife.

This midrash is distinct from yet also related to skin afflictions as captured in tractate Nega'im. I have demonstrated above that in tractate Nega'im halakhic, social, and spatial inclusion is premised on the skin's (or more broadly bodies') legibility, and that the assumption of bodies' legibility constitutes a hierarchical, social relationship: ritual impurity comes into being the moment the surface of the skin is exposed to the priest's or the rabbi's gaze, and does not exist as a private, individual bodily state. Without the moment of inspection there is no impurity. In this midrash, too, a gaze is described as having a constitutive function: Miriam is depicted as “not existing” without a man, who marries her despite her skin affliction. The hierarchized social relationship of gazer and gazed-at is here explicitly gendered, whereby the gaze is not taken to constitute a ritually im/pure Israelite but a woman. Whereas being looked at in the context of ritual impurity makes an Israelite part of the collective, being looked at here lets Miriam come into being as a married woman and a mother of sons. Reversely, if ritually impure skin leads to an Israelite's dwelling at the outskirts of the camp, then here it is ugliness that leads to Miriam's exclusion from the “tent” of married life and specifically of childbearing. If in tractate Nega'im skin is objectified and read in line with the “manual” of ritual impurity, in this midrash skin is read in line with a male gazer's sentiments and preferences: skin affliction, when defined as ugliness, encroaches on Miriam's social self and becomes a source of vulnerability.

Notably, while this midrash echoes, as analyzed by Steinmetz, the other midrashim that highlight Miriam's commitment to childbearing,⁴⁰

40. In b. Sotah 12a a midrash depicts Miriam as challenging her father's decision to divorce his wife Yocheved, urging him to resume marital relations with her since God spoke to him. In Sifre Zuta 12:1, the biblical story about Miriam and Aaron's gossip about Moses is read as being inspired by this same concern: Zipporah tells Miriam that Moses did not resume martial relations with her since God spoke to him, and Miriam conveys this to Aaron. The midrash is ambivalent about her action, as her gossip is, in this line of reading, motivated by an intention the rabbis endorse (enabling birth, continuity, leadership), while on the other hand, Moses was a leader so extraordinary that celibacy was indeed required of him.

here the enabler of continuity is, strictly speaking, Caleb; in the other midrashim Miriam intervenes on behalf of abandoned women and persuades men to retain marital relations with them, while here no one seems to intervene in her favor. It is not Miriam who appears as an enabler of collective continuity through commitment to birth, but Caleb who “begets” her despite her affliction. Indeed, in line with tractate Nega’im, here too the afflicted is reintegrated into society, be it the family or the larger collective, by an act of subjection to a gaze.

It thus seems that, in a world in which the very *raison d’être* of ritual purity, the temple and its utensils, no longer exists, ritual impurity retains its legibility in ways that fundamentally differ yet also overlap with ritual im/purity: objectification and legibility, the basic structural elements of tractate Nega’im, can migrate into a different epistemological realm and become constitutive of a gendered hierarchy that is premised, just like in tractate Nega’im, on the primacy of vision as a mediator of knowledge and as constituting the thing that is inspected. The moment that skin’s ritual impurity is translated into ugliness (or matters as ugliness), an Israelite’s exclusion from the camp is translated into a woman’s exclusion from marriage; and it is this aspect of tractate Nega’im that can function without the physical existence of a temple.

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Talmudic Legal Methodology and Gender: The Case of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael Reconsidered

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In the chapter “Daughters of Israel, Weep for R. Yishmael” of her book *Silencing the Queen*, Tal Ilan argues, on the basis of several textual examples, that the school of Rabbi Akiva, as described in talmudic literature, has in most cases a stricter view regarding women than the opposing school of Rabbi Yishmael.¹ This approach is based on the fact that a number of statements by Rabbi Akiva represent a position detrimental to women in terms of gender. This position, however, is best expressed when the statement of the rabbinic authority, in this case Rabbi Akiva, is juxtaposed with a counteropinion representing a more positive attitude toward women, which is often attributed to Rabbi Yishmael. Therefore, it is precisely the discourse between these two opposing statements that opens up the discussion for gender issues.

Rabbinic legislative argumentations in talmudic texts are characteristically formulated as scholarly discourses. A statement by a certain rabbinic authority often appears in rabbinic texts alongside the contradictory opin-

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1. Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 124–59. This contribution is based on Ilan’s two articles, which were thoroughly reworked for the book: Ilan, “‘Daughters of Israel, Weep for Rabbi Ishmael’ (*mNed* 9:11): The Schools of Rabbi Aqiva and Rabbi Ishmael on Women,” *Nashim* 4 (2001): 15–34; Ilan, “The Wife of Tinius Rufus and Rabbi Akivah” [Hebrew], *Masekhet* 3 (2005): 103–12. The school of Rabbi Akiva and the school of Rabbi Yishmael are student circles, which followed and developed the doctrine of their teachers.

ion of an opponent (in Hebrew *bar plugta*, a disputing colleague). According to rabbinic chronology, this type of correlation occurs for the first time in the controversies between Hillel and Shammai and their schools.² An argumentative structure of this kind enables an exploration of the exegetical characteristics. From this continuum of doctrines and beliefs, a certain worldview can be asserted, also in relation to gender questions.

Based on the disputations between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, the present chapter aims to show, on the basis of two textual examples, to what extent the hermeneutical perspectives of different schools of thought instigate questions regarding gender. In other words, for the evaluation of rabbinic gender discourses, the basic hermeneutic principles attributed to rabbinical authorities are of fundamental importance. The first textual example shows how the hermeneutical perspective attributed to Rabbi Akiva in the rabbinic debate about the *sotah* rite (Num 5:11–31) allows for a more active role for women than the statement attributed to Rabbi Yishmael. For Rabbi Yishmael, the consequences of exegetical decisions are the main justification for his decision, but this is not the case for Rabbi Akiva. While Rabbi Yishmael's position combines factual arguments with exegetical considerations, Rabbi Akiva's position applies only to exegetical argumentation. The second example deals with Rabbi Akiva's statement about excluding women from certain cultic activities in the rite of the red heifer (Num 19). I wish to show, however, that in a further textual development based on Rabbi Akiva's exegetical techniques, the rabbis do include women in the cultic process to a limited extent. This could be interpreted as a concession to the position of Rabbi Yishmael, who integrates women through his exegetical approach and worldview from the very beginning.

2. For the debate in talmudic methodology and its historical manifestation in the Tannaitic era, see Hanina Ben-Menahem, Neil Hecht, and Shai Wosner, eds., *Controversy and Dialogue in Halakhic Sources* [Hebrew], vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Alfil Electronic, 1991); vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Nevo, 1993), vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Graphit, 2002); Benjamin De Vries, "The Dispute" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 53 (1963): 296–301; Shlomo Naeh, "Make Your Heart into Rooms within Rooms: Further Considerations on Rabbinic Thought Regarding Disputes" [Hebrew], in *Renewing Jewish Commitment: The Work and Thought of David Hartman*, ed. Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 851–75; Chana Safrai and Zeev Safrai, "The Dispute Culture" [Hebrew], in *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: A Jubilee Book in Honor of Yosef Ahituv*, ed. Avi Sagi and Nahem Ilan (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2002), 326–44.

Both textual analyses show the significance of exegetical techniques regarding women in terms of gender within rabbinic literature. The hermeneutic position of Rabbi Akiva with respect to gender may imply a friendly or a hostile attitude toward woman, although, as Tal Ilan has proved, the latter clearly outweighs the former. I will argue that the reason for this is that gender as such was not an issue for Rabbi Akiva, in contrast to Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Akiva shapes a hermeneutic-centered approach that does not consider gender issues. Therefore, the misogynistic approach of Rabbi Akiva is a product of his exegetical methodology, which in itself was a point of attack for Rabbi Yishmael.

1. Can Ritually Pure Women Give Birth to a Son through the *Sotah* Rite? Hannah, Female Fertility, and the Rite of *Sotah* in Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 31b

Talking about the biblical *sotah* rite with regard to gender is a foolhardy enterprise. Hardly any biblical tradition has more to offer on the subject of gender than the *sotah* rite as described in Num 5:11–31. The rite, which aims to prove whether a married woman suspected by her husband of adultery is guilty, has been the subject of the keenest feminist critics.³ Various rabbinical statements, discourses, and traditions have been highlighted regarding the rite, which, according to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, ceased to be performed “when the adulterers multiplied” (m. *Sotah* 9:9). However, a closer look at rabbinic interpretations of the *sotah* rite reveals the creative approach

3. In recent decades, important studies on the *sotah* rite have taken a completely new approach to rabbinic ritual descriptions. See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Gender, Temple and Midrash* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Lisa Grushcow, *Writing the Wayward Wife: Rabbinic Interpretations of Sotah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Michael L. Saltow, “‘Texts of Terror’: Rabbinic Texts, Speech Acts, and the Control of Mores,” *AJSR* 21 (1996): 273–97; Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); Moshe Halbertal, *Interpretative Revolutions in the Making: Values as Interpretative Considerations in Midrashei Halakhah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 94–102; Daniel Boyarin, “Women’s Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis: The Case of *Sotah*,” in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Franke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88–100. For gender issues in the *sotah* rite see especially Rosen-Zvi, *Mishnaic Sotah Ritual*; Judith Hauptmann, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 15–29; Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 136–41; Judith Baskin, “Rabbinic Reflections on the Barren Wife,” *HTR* 82 (1989): 101–14.

of the rabbis to this issue, which led to new, gender-relevant controversies, such as the one over women studying Torah (b. Sotah 20a and parallels).

I wish to focus on a story in b. Ber. 31b about Hannah, wife of Elkanah and mother of the prophet Samuel. Based on exegetical assumptions that can be traced back to Tannaitic sources, the *gemara* states that Hannah intended to use the *sotah* rite as a way to become pregnant. Hannah's reading of the *sotah* rite for her purposes, as reported in b. Ber. 31b, requires two different legal interpretations perspectives on Num 5:28, already discussed in Tannaitic literature. The controversy based on this verse concerns female fertility, and the rite's antenatal influence on the fetus of the ritually pure *sotah* is best understood as a struggle between a teleological approach by the school of Rabbi Yishmael, on the one hand, and an exclusively exegetically oriented approach by the school of Rabbi Akiva, on the other.⁴ While the former legal approach combines factual arguments with exegetical considerations, the latter negates this possibility by applying only exegetical argumentation. Both approaches shaped the rabbinical claim regarding female fertility, embryogenesis, merit (*zekhut*), and gender issues.⁵

Hannah's prayer as described in 1 Sam 1 ends her long period of barrenness, which sent her into deep despair. Hannah weeps bitterly and prays earnestly for the birth of a male child. She makes a vow to give her future son to the Lord, to be trained as a *nazir*. For the rabbis, the figure of Hannah serves as an inspiration for the reverent frame of mind before and

4. For legal-teleological reflections from a jurisprudential perspective, see Fernando Leal, *Ziele und Autorität: Zu den Grenzen teleologischen Rechtsdenkens* (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2014). For a detailed discussion about the terms *deontology* and *teleology* in Christian theology see the anthology by Adrian Holderegger and Werner Wolberg, eds., *Deontologie und Teleologie: Eine normethische Grundsatzdiskussion*, 2nd ed. (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2013). Many rabbinic discourses exemplify a conflicting field of emphasis on exegetical reasoning on the one hand and rabbinic argumentation based primarily on factual causes on the other. This article takes a research direction that seeks to understand processes of transmission in rabbinic literature in light of rabbinic legal history and methodology. For this issue, see Ronen Reichman, "Von vier und mehr Gründen, warum man die *Pe'a* für die Armen am Feldende stehen lassen soll," *Trumah* 15 (2005): 79–98.

5. For a discussion of the sources of the Hannah story in b. Ber. 31b from hermeneutical and medical-historical perspectives, see Alexander A. Dubrau, "'So bleibt sie unversehrt und empfängt Samen'. Weibliche Fertilität, Embryogenese und Rechtsdenken in rabbinischer Auslegung am Beispiel von Numeri 5,28," *Judaica* 72 (2016): 49–84.

during the prayer, and her deep and earnest prayer as described in 1 Sam 1:10–19 presents the role model for the obligatory daily prayers of men. In the context of the debate about Hannah's prayer in the Shiloh temple, where the high priest Eli officiates, we read in b. Ber. 31b:

- a "אם ראה תראה" (שמ"א א יא)—אמר ר' אלעזר:
אמרה חנה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם אם "ראה" (שם)—מוטב, ואם
לאו "תראה" (שם)—אלך ואסתתר בפני אלקנה בעלי. וכיון דמסתתרנא משקן
לי מי סוטה.
ואי אתה עושה תורתך פלסתר 'שנאמר: "ונקתה ונזרעה זרע" (במדבר ה כח).⁶
- b1 הניחא למאן דאמר: אם היתה עקרה נפקדת, שפיר;
אלא למאן דאמר:
אם היתה יולדת בצער יולדת בריוח
נקבות יולדת זכרים
שחורים יולדת לבנים
קצרים יולדת ארוכים
מאי איכא למימר?
- b2 דתניא: "ונקתה ונזרעה זרע" (שם)—מלמד שאם היתה עקרה, נפקדת; דברי רבי
ישמעאל.
- b3 אמר ליה ר' עקיבא:
אם כן, ילכו כל העקרות כולן ויסתתרו, וזו שלא קלקלה נפקדת.
אלא מלמד
שאם היתה יולדת בצער יולדת בריוח
קצרים יולדת ארוכים
שחורים יולדת לבנים
אחד יולדת שנים
- b4 מאי אם "ראה תראה" (שמ"א שם)?—דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם.

- a "If you will indeed look" (1 Sam 1:11)—Rabbi Eleazar said:
Hannah said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the
universe, if "you look" (1 Sam 1:11)—it is well, and if not—"you will
look" (1 Sam 1:11), I will go and shut myself up with someone else with
the knowledge of my husband Elkanah, and as I will have been hidden
they will make me drink the water of the suspected wife.
[But] you will not falsify your Torah, which says: "She shall be free and
shall conceive seed" (Num 5:28).
- b1 Now this would be effective in the view of him who says that if the
woman was barren she is visited.
But in the view of him who says that if she used to give birth in pain, she
will give birth in comfort; if she used to give birth to females, she will

6. MS Firenze 7: דכת' ואם לא נטמאה האשה וטהורה היא ונקתה ונזרעה זרע.

give birth to males; if she used to give birth to black [children], she will give birth to white ones; if she used to give birth to short [children], she will give birth to tall ones. What can be said?

- b2 As it has been taught: “She shall be free and shall conceive seed” (Num 5:28)—this teaches that if she was barren she is visited, in the words of Rabbi Yishmael.
- b3 Rabbi Akiva said to him:
 If that is so, all barren women will go and shut themselves in with someone, and she who has not misconducted herself will be visited.
 Rather, it teaches that if she used to give birth with pain, she will give birth in comfort; if she used to give birth to short [children], she will give birth to tall ones; if she used to give birth to black [children], she will give birth to white ones; if she used to give birth one at a time, she will give birth to twins.
- b4 What then does it mean: “If you will indeed look” (1 Sam 1:11)?—The Torah speaks the language of human beings.⁷

Hannah’s story in b. Ber. 31b illustrates the transference of the merit of the ritually pure, that is, innocent *sotah* from the power of the priestly circle, represented by the priest who deals, according to the biblical narrative, with the suspected woman, to rabbinic authority. This transference of the conflict into a new source of rabbinic knowledge within the realm of exegesis envisages the possibility of female autonomy by allowing the rite to be partially controlled by women.

According to this text, a woman suspected of adultery is not a priori negatively assessed. This attitude is by no means self-evident. Rabbi Shimeon ben Eleazar, for example, learns in t. Sotah 2:3 from the lemma with regard to the pure *sotah* in Num 5:28, “she shall be free (and shall conceive seed),” that a woman who undergoes the *sotah* ceremony in a state of ritual purity is not to be punished, although she deserves punishment due to the act of segregation from her husband, which triggered the *sotah* ceremony.

In the story of the Babylonian Talmud, however, it is female infertility that is considered unacceptable. In this situation the *sotah* rite can help. Hannah tells God that if she continues to be barren, she will seclude herself with a stranger to cause the initiation of the *sotah* rite. In an exegetically trained manner, Hannah interprets the scriptural verse (1 Sam 1:1) in relation to her purpose: if God in the Torah speaks about the ritu-

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

ally pure *sotah*, that is, a woman who did not have sexual relations with any man outside her marriage, and claims that she will receive seed (Num 5:28), this means that the *sotah* rite, in which her ritually pure status is confirmed, will lead to her desired pregnancy.

A key position in this context is the conclusion in b4: the statement that the Torah speaks the language of humans (בני אדם) is attributed to the school of Rabbi Akiva and not to Rabbi Yishmael, as is usually the case in rabbinic literature. According to this reading, Rabbi Akiva criticizes Hannah's non-contextualized interpretation of 1 Sam 1:11 in favor of an understanding of the *sotah* rite as oriented toward a teleological interpretation.

The statements in b1–b4 point to traditions that have to be analyzed in the context of their Tannaitic origins. Based on the understanding of verse 28, the rabbis conduct a controversial discussion on the influence of bitter water on female fertility and embryogenesis, and question female fertility and antenatal influence on the gender and appearance of the child. Numbers 5:27–28 reads:

(כז) והשקה את המים והיתה אם נטמאה ותמעל מעל באישה ובאו בה המים המאררים למרים וצבתה בטנה ונפלה ירכה והיתה האשה לאלה בקרב עמה (כח) ואם לא נטמאה האשה וטהרה הוא ונקתה ונזרעה זרע

(27) And when he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people. (28) But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive seed.⁸

According to the Bible, the uterus of the wife proven guilty of adultery by the bitter water will be destroyed. The Bible does not explicitly speak about the wife's death as the rabbis do, but it is more than obvious that the water eliminates any possibility of future pregnancy.

However, if she is innocent, she will receive seed, as it is written in verse 28: "She [the woman] shall be free and shall conceive seed" (ונקתה ונזרעה זרע). Verse 28 continues the statement from verse 19, where the ritual purity of the innocent *sotah* is mentioned for the first time: "If no man has lain with you ... be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse" (אם לא שכב איש אתך ... הנקי ממי המרים המאררים האלה). In

8. Scripture quotations usually follow the ESV.

addition to the issue of physical integrity of the ritually pure *sotah* mentioned in verse 19, verse 28 raises the issue of female fertility. According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, it is even conceivable that the biblical formulation attributes the possibility of inducing pregnancy to the water itself, based on the (magical) properties of the bitter water—a substance mixed with dust from the tabernacle floor and pure water with the erased name of God—and thus enables fertilization without male semen: “We cannot discard the further possibility that the waters themselves, coming from the sacred realm (holy water, with dust from the tabernacle floor) and bearing the name of God, were believed to function as an impregnating force, and that the woman was believed to become pregnant as a direct result of this trial.”⁹ The hypothesis of an asexual reproduction is highly doubtful, at least on the basis of the Levitical purity system of the Bible.¹⁰ However, the *niphal* form of זרע used in verse 28, “to be sown,” here “to become pregnant,” requires further explanation.

It is not clear from the biblical text whether the recovery of fertility referred to in verse 28 can be reconciled with the concept of merit (*zekhut*) for the ritually pure *sotah* as compensation for this ceremony, in which the woman was shamed and cursed in public. The purpose of the *sotah* rite is to establish the ritual purity of the *sotah* and—with regard to her ritual-sexual purity—to restore the legal status of the union between a man and the woman. Thus, when the ritual purity of the woman is assured, a (renewed) pregnancy is to be expected and testifies to her innocence.

According to biblical understanding, the bitter water transfers the woman from the state of doubtful ritual impurity to the status of definite categories, either *pure* or *impure*. A (renewed) pregnancy would thus be understood as the ultimate proof of the ritual purity status of the *sotah*. Moral implications such as the concept of merit, which is obvious with

9. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11–31),” *VT* 34 (1984): 19.

10. If the Bible assumes that pregnancy can be triggered by the bitter water, it would be natural to integrate the bitter water into the biblical system of pure and impure. There is no evidence in the Bible, however, for ritual contamination of those who touch or handle the bitter water, nor is there any evidence in it for changing or washing clothes, an immersion bath, or a cultic defilement until sunset. These rites, which are applied for example in the burning ceremony of the red heifer to obtain sprinkling water, would specify the cultic status of the bitter water in the biblical purity system, and thus strengthen the hypothesis of asexual reproduction initiated by the ingestion of the bitter water.

regard to the degrading ritual procedure for women, do not necessarily play a role in the Bible.

The rabbinic references to the *sotah* rite paint a picture that differs in detail from the one conveyed in Scripture. The topos of merit (*zekhut*) for the ritually pure *sotah* reflected in the rabbinic commentaries on verse 28 is integrated into a discourse on merit addressed in talmudic literature in various thematic contexts. In the case of the ritually pure *sotah*, however, the merit applies only in this world (העולם הזה) and not, as is the case in other rabbinic discussions about merit, in the world of come (העולם הבא).¹¹ Sifre Numbers and Sifre Zuta comment on the positive effects of the bitter water, addressed in 5:28, as follows:

Sifre Numbers §19 (5:28) ¹²	Sifre Zuta to Num 5:28 ¹³
a "ונזרעה זרע" (במדבר ה כח) – שאם היתה עקרה, נפקדת, דב' ר' עקי'. b1 א' לו ר' ישמעאל: אם כן, ילכו כל העקרות ויקלקלו בשביל שיפקדו, וזו שישבה לה הפסידה. b2 מה ת"ל ונקתה ונזרעה זרע? אלא שאם היתה יולדת בצער יולדת בריוח נקבות יולדת זכרים אחד יולדת שנים שחורים יולדת לבנים קצרים יולדת ארוכים	a "ונזרעה זרע" (במדבר ה כח) – [ר' אלעזר או:]: כדיי הוא הצער, שינתן לה שכרה בנים. b1 ר' יהודה או: ¹⁴ b2 היתה יולדת כאורים, ¹⁵ תלד ¹⁶ נאים שחורים תלד לבנים קצרים תלד ארוכים נקבות תלד זכרים היתה יולדת ¹⁷ לשתי שנים יולדת בכל שנה יולדת אחד ¹⁸ תלד שנים ¹⁹

11. While the rabbis disagree over the meaning of the statement concerning the ritual pure *sotah*, "and shall receive seed" (Num 5:28), they interpret the wording on the impure *sotah*: "her womb as her abdomen will swell and her hips fade" (Num 5:27) as death, even though in the interpretation to v. 15 they discuss the question of whether merit earned before adultery was committed postpones the date of her death.

12. According to MS Vatican 32.

13. According to Yalqut Shimoni Numbers §709 (MS Oxford 2637). See also Midrash ha-Gadol ad. loc., Num. Rab. 9:25 and 9:41.

14. Missing in Midrash ha-Gadol.

15. Midrash ha-Gadol: בעורים.

16. Here and in the following, the Midrash ha-Gadol reads יולדת.

17. Midrash ha-Gadol adds אחת.

18. Midrash ha-Gadol: אחד אחד.

19. Midrash ha-Gadol: שנים שנים.

c ר' שמעון או: אין נותנים לעבירה שכר.²⁰

Sifre Numbers	Sifre Zuta
a ("But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, then she shall be free) and shall conceive seed" (Num 5:28)—so that if she had been barren, now she will be visited with children, the words of Rabbi Akiva.	a ("But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, then she shall be free) and shall conceive seed" (Num 5:28). Rabbi Eleazar says: The affliction that comes upon her is worthwhile, for she is rewarded with sons.
b1 Rabbi Yishmael said to him: If so, all barren women will go and get themselves into trouble so that they will be visited with children, while the one who sat [inactively] loses out!	b1 Rabbi Yehudah says: ²¹
b2 [Rather], what is the sense of the statement "then she shall be free and shall conceive seed" (Num 5:28)?—that if	b2 (This means),
she used to give birth in pain, she will give birth in comfort;	if she used to give birth to ugly [children], she will give birth to beautiful ones;
if she used to give birth to females, she will give birth to males;	if she used to give birth to black [children], she will give birth to white ones;
if she used to give birth to black [children], she will give birth to white ones;	if she used to give birth to short ones, she will give birth to tall ones;
if she used to give birth to short [children], she will give birth to tall ones.	if she used to give birth to females, she will give birth to males;
	if she used to give birth every year, she will give birth annually;
	if she used to give birth one at a time, she will give birth to twins.

20. Midrash ha-Gadol: שיפקדו בשביל ויקלקלו הנשים כל ילכו כל הנשים ויקלקלו בשביל שיפקדו.

21. Missing in Midrash ha-Gadol.

- c Rabbi Shimeon says: There is no reward for a transgression.²²

According to Rabbi Akiva in Sifre Numbers a, a ritually pure, childless woman gives birth to a child after the *sotah* rite; Rabbi Yishmael contradicts this interpretation. Thus Rabbi Akiva's position follows the plain wording of the biblical verse, like the anonymous statement in Sifre Zuta a. Rabbi Yishmael's position in Sifre Numbers b and Rabbi Yehudah's statement in Sifre Zuta b are at odds with the model conveyed in Scripture. It is noticeable that Sifre Zuta a, unlike Sifre Numbers a, does not consider the childlessness of the *sotah* a criterion for future pregnancy and mentions the subject of affliction, which is missing in Sifre Numbers a.

In Sifre Numbers b, Rabbi Yishmael justifies his rejection of the literal interpretation of Num 5:28—a *sotah* test passed without “damage” for the woman leads to pregnancy—in a teleological manner: childless, ritually pure women who do not intend to use the *sotah* rite in order to become pregnant induced by the bitter water are at a disadvantage to those who follow this practice. In other words: Rabbi Yishmael rejects Rabbi Akiva's scriptural exegesis on the basis of the overriding ethos of Scripture. Rabbi Yishmael in b1 therefore does not refute Rabbi Akiva's exegesis of Num 5:28 on the basis of an alternative exegesis of Scripture, nor does he argue strictly teleologically, declaring the usability of the *sotah* rite per se to be inadmissible. In a further step in b2 he concludes from the grammatical interpretation of the lemma that it has a positive influence of future pregnancies and future children.

Rabbi Yishmael's position combines objective reasoning (b1) and an exegetical conclusion (b2). It does not entirely contradict Rabbi Akiva's opinion. On a scale between approval and rejection of a literal understanding of the lemma “she shall conceive seed,” Rabbi Yishmael's position appears as a compromise: the bitter water has a positive effect on possible birth and pregnancy complications, gender, number, and appearance of the children. Although Rabbi Yishmael's eugenics-oriented interpretation of the lemma, like Rabbi Akiva's exegesis, aims at a future pregnancy of the *sotah*, it is not necessarily concluded from Num 5:28: Rabbi Yishmael's exegesis, unlike Sifre Zuta a, covers no binding statements about future

22. Midrash ha-Gadol: “Rabbi Shimeon said: If so, all barren women will go and get themselves into trouble so that they will be tested.”

pregnancies for childless women. With the premise of a limiting positive effect of the bitter water on the fertility of the ritually pure *sotah*, Rabbi Yishmael wishes to avert the danger of a personal interest in the rite by barren women.

Both interpretations of Num 5:28 transmitted in Sifre Numbers, Rabbi Yishmael's objective reasoning (b1) and exegetical conclusion (b2), and Rabbi Akiva's word exegesis merge in Sifre Zuta in the topos of distress (צער) through a coherent argumentation figure: since the *sotah*, despite her innocence, was forced to undergo the degrading rite, she earns reward that is manifested in giving birth to children who are more beautiful than and much improved compared to her previous children. According to this reading, the differences between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael conveyed in Sifre Numbers appear in a new exegetical context. Sifre Zuta does not associate the controversy with the names of authorities such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael. The controversy in Sifre Zuta is conducted between the anonymous part and the position of Rabbi Yehudah in Sifre Zuta b. The controversy is more differentiated than in Sifre Numbers: due to the distress the rite induces, ritually pure women will give birth to sons (in the plural). According to Rabbi Yehudah, however, the positive influence of the bitter water comes into play only for women who have already given birth to children.

The argumentation in Sifre Numbers and Sifre Zuta directs the discussion on the topos of the merit of the ritually pure woman (Sifre Numbers a) as well as on the premise of the childlessness of the *sotah* as a condition for future children. If the biblical text rewards the ritually pure woman because of the distress caused by the rite, it is not easy to understand why future fertility applies only to barren women and not to women who have given birth before. As can be seen from the comparison of both texts, the childless woman is central to Rabbi Yishmael's argumentation, since the danger of abuse of the rite comes especially from childless women (Sifre Numbers b1). Therefore, his exegetical conclusion on the improvement of pregnancy and children in b2 is aimed primarily at women who have already had children, while childless, ritually pure women are not explicitly taken into account.

The exegesis of the lemma "then she shall be free and shall conceive seed" in 5:28 illustrates how Rabbi Akiva evokes a more women-friendly interpretation than Rabbi Yishmael due to his solely exegetical approach. The teleological approach represented by Rabbi Yishmael has in mind a meta-halakhah whose ideological core can be concisely rendered in the

words of Antigonos, man of Sokho, in m. Avot 1:3: “Do not be as servants who are serving the master in order to receive a reward; rather, be as servants who are serving the master not in order to receive a reward; and may the fear of heaven be upon you.”²³

Rabbi Akiva’s position is taken up again in b. Ber. 31b in the Hannah narrative, where the *sotah* rite is used as a possibility to give birth to a son. The Talmud welcomes Hannah’s creative activism. The positive attitude of the Bavli toward Hannah must be emphasized. Hannah’s prayers serve for the rabbis as a precedent for further determinations concerning prayer and liturgy.²⁴ To that end, b. Ber. 31a–b highlights the role model of Hannah’s personal prayer in detail. Her active intervention provides for several halakhic assumptions regarding prayer, such as the regulation for the silent praying of the Shmoneh Esre, in which the words must be framed distinctly with the lips and it is forbidden to raise one’s voice. In addition, the rabbis learn from Hannah that one who prays has to direct his heart (b. Ber. 31a with regard to 1 Sam 1:13), that it is forbidden to sit within four cubits of a person who is praying (b. Ber. 31b with regard to 1 Sam 1:26), that a drunken person is not allowed to pray (b. Ber. 31a with regard to 1 Sam 1:1), and that one who prays when drunk is like a person who serves idols (b. Ber. 31a with regard to 1 Sam 1:16). Moreover, Rabbi Eleazar learns the following moral principles from Hannah’s prayer described in the first chapter of 1 Samuel: one who sees in his fellow something unseemly must reprove him (b. Ber. 31a–b with regard to 1 Sam 1:14), one who is suspected wrongfully must clear himself (b. Ber. 31b with regard to 1 Sam 1:15), and one who suspects his fellow of a fault he has not committed must beg his pardon and bless him (b. Ber. 31b with

23. Günter Stemberger summarizes the discourse of merit in rabbinic literature as follows: “die klassischen rabbinischen Texte in Talmud und Midrasch, sind von einer unauflösbaren Spannung bestimmt, die aus zwei Grundüberzeugungen hervorgeht: einerseits der Haltung, dass die Erfüllung der Tora und jedes sittliche Tun um seiner selbst willen, aus Liebe, erfolgen muss, andererseits dem Glauben, dass Gott ein gerechter Richter ist, der – ob im Diesseits oder Jenseits – jedenfalls das Gute belohnt.” See Stemberger, “Verdienst und Lohn – Kernbegriffe rabbinischer Frömmigkeit? Überlegungen zu Mischna Avot,” in *Judaica Minora*, vol. 2, *Geschichte und Literatur des Rabbinischen Judentums*, ed. Günter Stemberger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 452.

24. For this issue see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “‘The Woman Who Stood’: Hannah’s Prayer in Rabbinic Midrash” [Hebrew], in Sagi and Ilan, *Jewish Culture in the Eye*, 675–98.

regard to 1 Sam 1:17).²⁵ It is also Hannah who is associated with the three well-known criteria recited in the liturgy on the Sabbath eve (m. Shabb. 2:6): “For three transgressions woman die in childbirth; because they are not careful with *niddah*, with *hallah*, and with the kindling of the light.” According to b. Ber. 31b, Hannah asks God rhetorically whether she has committed these three sins. This tradition provides a model for the so-called Hannah literature of the Middle Ages (*Hannah* being an acronym for *hallah*, *niddah*, *hadlakat ha-ner*).²⁶

The following textual example deals with the exclusion of women from cultic activity according to Rabbi Akiva in the rite of the red heifer (Num 19). This stands in contrast to Rabbi Yishmael’s approach. In this case Rabbi Yishmael favors a more woman-friendly approach than Rabbi Akiva in terms of gender. However, in the further development of this halakhic tradition, based on Rabbi Akiva’s exegetical techniques, the rabbis do partially include women in the cultic process.

2. Who Is Allowed to Sprinkle the Purifying Water? The Participation of Woman in the Rite of the Red Heifer

The midrashic tradition outlines in detail the question of who can undertake the sprinkling of the water of purification in the rite of the red heifer (Num 19). Sifre Numbers and Sifre Zuta comment on the lemma “man” (אִישׁ) in Num 19:18 (“And a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the vessels, and upon the persons that were there, and upon him that touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave”) as follows:²⁷

25. It is again Rabbi Eleazar who tells a parable comparing Hannah’s praying to God with the actions of a poor man. The king, who stands symbolically for God, prepares a feast for his servants. A poor man came, stood by the door, and asked for bread, but no one took any notice of him. Thus he forced his way into the presence of the king and said to him: “Your Majesty, out of all the feast which thou has made, is it so hard in your eyes to give me one bite?” (b. Ber. 31b).

26. See Rosen-Zvi, *האישה הנצבת*, 675–98. Nevertheless, the rabbis also quarrel with the figure of Hannah, not least due to her bold nature, or, as some rabbis tend to emphasize, her insolent mind. This aspect of Hannah’s nature is expressed in b. Ber. 31b, where the rabbis emphasize the grammatical structure in 1 Sam 1:10: “Hannah prayed unto the Lord” (להתפלל אל- instead of להתפלל על ה’). Again, it is Rabbi Eleazar who deduces from this verse that Hannah spoke in an insolent manner toward heaven.

27. For this tradition see Ilan, *Silencing the Queen*, 129–30.

Sifre Numbers §129 (19:18) ²⁸	Sifre Zuta to Num 19:18 ²⁹
1 "איש" (במדבר יט יח) –	1 "ולקח אז' [וט] בל במים איש טהור" (במדבר יט יח) –
2 להוציא את הקטן.	2 "איש" –
3 משמע מוציא את הקטן	3 פרט לאשה.
4 ומוציא את האשה?	4 או "איש" –
5 ת"ל "טהור" (שם) –	5 פרט לקטן?
6 להביא את האשה, דב' ר' ישמעאל.	6 א': "טהור" –
7 ר' עקיבה או': "טהור" (שם) ל'מ' נא?	7 לרבות {לרבות} ³⁰ את הקטן.
8 עד שלא יאמר: יש לי. בדיון, אם האוסף	8 אמרו: מסעדת האשה את הקטן והוא
9 טהור המזה לא יהא טהור? הא מה ת"ל	מזה, אבל לא תיטבול את האיזוב ותתן
"טהור" (שם)?	לו. אם טבלה ונתנה לו הזיתו פסולה.
10 טהור מכל טומאה.	
11 ואי זה זה? זה טבול יום.	

Sifre Numbers	Sifre Zuta
1 "A man" (Num 19:18)—	"Then a ritually pure man takes hyssop" (Num 19:18)—
2 to exclude a minor.	"A man" (Num 19:18)
3 This means, [Scripture] excludes a minor	to exclude a woman.
4 and [Scripture] excludes a woman?	Or "man" (Num 19:18)—
5 Scripture says: "pure" (Num 19:18)—	to exclude a minor?
6 to include a woman; these are the words of Rabbi Yishmael.	[Scripture] says: "pure" (Num 19:18)—
7 Rabbi Akiva says: "pure" (Num 19:18), why is this written?	to include a minor.
8 As long as Scripture does not teach us, I can conclude this with an argument: If someone who collects [the ashes] must be pure, then is not someone who sprinkles [the water] pure?	They say: The woman helps the minor and he sprinkles, but she should not dip the hyssop and give it to him. If she dips [the hyssop] and gives him, his sprinkling is ritually unfit.

28. According to MS Vatican 32.

29. MS Firkovitch II A 31343.

30. Incorrect duplication in MS Firkovitch.

- 9 What, then, does Scripture mean
by “pure” (Num 19:18)?
10 [pure] of all impurity.
11 Who is he [who is not pure of all
impurity]? This is a *tevul yom*.³¹

Sifre Numbers mirrors a controversy between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva on the lemma “man,” which refers to two groups: minors and women. While Rabbi Yishmael includes the woman in the ritual act due to the (in his opinion otherwise redundant) lemma “pure” ([איש] טהור), Rabbi Akiva indicates the lemma “pure” only in the sense of the cultic state of someone who immersed in the daytime (*tevul yom*). Thus, he contradicts Rabbi Yishmael’s interpretation and excludes the woman from the activity of sprinkling the water of purification.³²

Sifre Zuta 2–3 excludes women from the rite of the red heifer—a statement attributed to Rabbi Akiva in Sifre Num. 19:9 in relation to the question of who collects the ashes of the red heifer. Sifre Zuta 4–7 includes the minor in the rite, a dictum also known from Sifre Zuta 19:9. According to Sifre Zuta 8, however, a woman is not allowed to dip a bunch of hyssop for the sprinkling of the water of the red heifer and hand it over directly to the minor who is performing the rite, but she is allowed to help him in performing the rite. The description of the inclusion of the woman and the minor in the rite of sprinkling the water of purification in Sifre Zuta 8 (which is formally underlined by the introductory אמרת) makes the series of inclusions and exclusions in 4–7 understandable: the minor is only admitted to the rite when he performs the actions in the described manner.

31. The terminus *tevul yom* refers to a person who has immersed in a *mikveh* but will not become pure until the evening. This concept was derived by the rabbis from Lev 11:32; 22:6–7.

32. This controversy is also known from Sifre Numbers to Num 19:9. For this issue see also Menahem I. Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers: An Annotated Edition*, part 4, *A Commentary on Piska’ot 107–161 (The Portions of Shelah-Masei)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015), 1068–70. The tradition is discussed inter alia from a legal-methodological perspective in Alexander A. Dubrau, *Der Midrasch Sifre Zuta: Textgeschichte und Exegese eines spätantiken Kommentars zum Buch Numeri* (Berlin: LIT, 2017), 424–32.

It is interesting that the Mishnah, like Sifre Zuta, recognizes the partially integrated role of a woman in the rite of the red heifer. On the question of sprinkling the water of purification by women, the Mishnah says in Mishnah Parah 12:10 (according to MS Kaufmann):

הכל כשירין להזות,
חוץ מטומטום ואנדרג'נס והאשה. ותינוק שאין בו דעת,
והאשה מסעדתו ומזה.
ואוחזת לו במים, והוא טובל ומזה.
(ו) אם אחזה בידו אפילו
בשעת הזייה—פסול.

1. Anyone is valid to sprinkle,
2. except for a *tumtum*,³³ an *androgynos*,³⁴ a woman, and a child who is not reasonable.
3. A woman may assist him in the sprinkling ceremony, and she can hold the water while he dips and sprinkles.
4. [And] if she held his hand [during the process], even
5. during sprinkling [and not just when he dips], it is invalid.

The text lists most of the groups of people mentioned in m. Parah 5:4 and t. Parah 5:7 in relation to the question of the mixing of the ashes of the red heifer with pure water. However, in contrast to Sifre Zuta, only the Mishnah refers to a child “lacking understanding.”³⁵ The formula “all” (הכל) in conjunction with a verb (such as כשרים, נאמנים, or חייבים) and a list of exclusions often shows a resistance of the rabbis to priestly circles.³⁶ The present tradition also displays a tension between rabbinic and ancient priestly traditions, as is evident in the Mishnah.

33. A *tumtum* is a person with recessed sexual organs, whose gender is therefore impossible to determine by external examination.

34. A *androgynos* is person with both male and female sexual organs.

35. Since in Mishnah Parah the terms תינוק and קטן are used interchangeably (תינוק in m. Parah 3:4; 12:10, קטן in m. Parah 5:4, in t. Parah only קטן), the term is not differentiated in the following. According to rabbinic tradition, a child is considered a minor until the age of nine (תינוק or קטן).

36. Thus, m. Yoma 6:3 reads, with regard to the rite on the Day of Atonement: “Anyone can lead the goat out; however, the leading priests fixed a procedure [that a priest would lead it out] and would not allow an Israelite [not a member of the tribe of Levi] to lead it out.” For this tradition see Meir Bar-Ilan, “Polemics between Sages and Priests towards the End of the Days of the Second Temple” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 1982), particularly 26–29, 262–63.

Mishnah Parah 5:4, m3–5 explains the role of the woman in a way similar to Sifre Zuta 8: the minor can sprinkle the water of purification; the woman may help the minor, giving him the water in the sprinkling ceremony, but she is not allowed to touch him during the rite.³⁷ The same concept of the participation of the woman in this rite is transmitted in b. Yoma 43a.³⁸ As in Sifre Zuta, the anonymous *baraita* excludes women (“‘man’ [אִישׁ]—to exclude woman”), but Rabbi Yehudah includes women with reference to the lemma “pure” (טהור).

Unlike a possible inclusion of the woman in the rite of the red heifer, there is nonrabbinic evidence for the inclusion of the minor in it.³⁹ A pseudepigraphic Christian source, the Epistle of Barnabas, from the first half of the second century CE (see Acts 4:36–37; 9:27; 11:22–30; 13–15), that is, contemporary with the Mishnah, also mentions the inclusion of the children in the rite of collecting the ashes of the red heifer and sprinkling the water of purification.⁴⁰ While according to Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

37. The presence of the purity provisions in m. Parah 3–5 points to Rabbi Akiva’s exegesis in Sifre Num. 19:9 and 19:19 against the exegetical inclusion of the woman attributed to Rabbi Yishmael: “Pure’—to include woman.”

38. הכל כשרין להזות חוץ מטומטום ואנדרוגינוס ואשה וקטן שיש בו דעת—אשה מסייעתו. ומזה.

39. In addition to the ceremony of collecting the ashes of the red heifer, the mixing of the ashes with the ritually pure water and the sprinkling of the water of purification (m. Parah 12:10), rabbinic literature also discusses the inclusion of minors in drawing water for the rite (see especially m. Parah 3:2; t. Parah 3:2). Mishnah Parah 3:1 explicitly refers to underage boys (בנים) who are born and raised in the pure place for the purpose of preparing the ashes. This chapter of the Mishnah uses also the term תינוק. Tosefta Parah 3:2 gives the age of eighteen years (MS Vienna 20 and *editio princeps*), referring to the criterion of the “understanding” of the child. This recalls of the issue of the knowing of the child, but contradicts the tradition in the Mishnah. According to Lieberman, the scribes dissolved the abbreviation י”ח incorrectly; originally the tradition refers to boys at the age of seven and eight years. This is according to Rashi, ב”ז שנה, ד’ שנה; Saul Lieberman, *Tosefeth Rishonim*, part 3, *Kelim–Niddah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1939), 215–16. Rashi to b. Sukkah 21a demonstrates that this interpretation is correct, giving the age of these children as seven or eight.

40. Epistle of Barnabas, translated from Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, *Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache, Barnabas* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 369–70: “And the boys then take the ashes and put them into the vessels and bind scarlet wool on sticks [...] and hyssop, and then the boys all sprinkle the people thus one by one in order that all be purified from their sins. [...] The boys who sprinkle are they who preached to us for forgiveness of sin [...]. But why are there three boys who sprinkle? As a testimony to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” For the halakhah in the Epistle of

to Num 19:18 the sprinkling of the water of purification, as well as the collecting of the ashes (Tg. Ps.-J. to Num 19:9), should only be performed by a pure priest (גבר כהן דכּי), a Qumran fragment (4Q277 1, II 7) claims regarding the rite of the red heifer: "And the minor should not go beyond an impure one" (ועולל אל יז על הטמא).⁴¹ It is clear that Qumran responds to an ancient practice of including minors in the ceremony. Interestingly, these interpretations clearly argue for the inclusion of minors in the cult from a historical perspective, a position represented exegetically by Rabbi Akiva.

Only the Mishnah discusses the case of a minor who has reason. Like the beginning of the Mishnah (m2: "Except for [...] a child who is not reasonable"), the continuation (m3: "A woman may assist him in the sprinkling ceremony") also deals with a child who does not yet possess understanding. Yet, the latter refers to a child who has reason and therefore implies a continuation of the inclusion and exclusion of the minor, as evidenced by Rabbi Akiva not in the Mishnah but the halakhic midrashim. This is where the woman comes into play. In the mishnaic context it is unclear why the woman should help the child. If the reasonable child according to m2 is allowed to sprinkle the water of purification, why is the woman's assistance necessary? This textual problem does not arise in the Sifre Zuta tradition, since Rabbi Akiva's distinction between a child who possesses reason and one who does not is not mentioned there.

It can be argued that on the editorial level, the mishnaic tradition was derived from two different exegetical sources. On the one hand, Sifre Zuta transmits a (probably old) tradition, according to which a woman helps the minor in performing the rite. On the other hand, a later tradition, known from Sifre Num. to 19:18 and 19:9, distinguishes between a child who has reason and one who does not. These two traditions are not convincingly brought together from an editorial point of view in the Mishnah.

Barnabas see Gedaliahu Alon, "The *Halakhah* in the Letter of Barnabas" [Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple, the Mishna and the Talmud* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1967), 1:295–312.

41. For this tradition see Joseph M. Baumgarten, "The Red Cow Purification Rites in Qumran Texts," *JJS* 46 (1995): 119: "The Qumran texts now corroborate that the use of young boys described in the Mishnah and in the Epistle of Barnabas was a prevalent practice in the days when the Temple was standing. Qumran exegesis, however, emphatically opposed the use of minors for what they deemed to be a priestly rite of כפרה."

Therefore, perhaps the editorial clues in the Mishnah can be traced back to the context in which the text was written, and allow the assumption that the traditions of Sifre Zuta and Sifre Numbers influenced the mishnaic version. The differentiation between the reasonable and nonreasonable child proves to be a mishnaic innovation, which—regardless of historical temple practice—aims to set and reshape it on the basis of exegesis.⁴² The tradition of excluding the woman from the rite of the red heifer, attributed to Rabbi Akiva, is at least partially verified. This finds its expression in the Mishnah, which usually continues the exegetical line of Rabbi Akiva.

3. Conclusion

Returning to the Hannah story in b. Ber. 31b, the argumentation in the Babylonian Talmud regarding Hannah's prayer is based on Rabbi Akiva's purely exegetical approach but explicitly contradicts Rabbi Yishmael's and Rabbi Shimeon's teleological understanding of Scripture. Both legal methodologies shape halakhic decisions concerning woman in the *sotah* rite. In this regard, the final sentence of the *baraita* is significant: "The Torah speaks the language of the human beings." This means that the Torah prefers a reading not exclusively oriented to the grammatical verbal exegesis of Scripture. The emphasis on an inconsistency between the literal meaning of a verse and a reasoning superior to a grammatical interpretation is considered characteristic of Rabbi Yishmael's approach, while Rabbi Akiva is known for his decontextualized exegesis. In contrast to the parallel Tannaitic sources and the hermeneutical methods attributed to each school by the rabbis, the statements of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael are exchanged in the Babylonian Talmud. This attribution of the statements in the Babylonian Talmud may be explained by the fact that the Amoraim of the Babylonia did not conform to the legal understanding of the position attributed to Rabbi Akiva in Tannaitic sources—a previously childless pure *sotah* will give birth to a male child—at least to its outcome as it is presented in Hannah's prayer. The Babylonian Talmud prefers to

42. Another explanation is given by Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yohanan ben Baroqa. For him, the mixing of the water with the ashes of the red heifer is permissible for an *androgynos* (and hence also of women), a deaf-mute, a madman, and a minor, on condition that this labor be carried out under observation (t. Parah 5:7; also the anonymous Tosefta and m. Parah 5:4 agree that a woman may mix the water with the ashes, while Rabbi Yehudah disagrees).

associate the teleological argumentation in the Hannah story with the halakhic authority of Rabbi Akiva rather than with Rabbi Yishmael.

Although the fictional elements of the *sotah* purity rite cannot be realized without the priesthood, the rabbinic interpretation of Num 5:28 generates a discourse that implies concrete actions initiated by women. Even if the activity of the woman is limited within a fictional narrative with regard to childbirth, it is crucial that such a rite, especially in the way it is described in the Mishnah, loses its misogynistic aura through a story such as the one found in Babylonian Talmud Berakhot. From the biblical perspective, Hannah's initiative to utilize the *sotah* rite as a means of becoming pregnant is to be seen as a law-extending legal development. However, the rabbinic exegetical approach represented by Rabbi Akiva's use of a legal lacuna stands in contrast to the divine legislature (*contra legem*). The opposite rabbinic exegetical approach, represented by Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimeon, argues for a theological approach with regard to the scriptural ethos of the *sotah* rite.⁴³ In his exegesis of Num 5:28 in Sifre Zuta, Rabbi Shimeon goes even beyond Rabbi Yishmael's mediating position by denying merit to the ritually pure *sotah* per se. Rabbi Shimeon is already considered in the Talmud as a representative of the teleological approach par excellence.⁴⁴

With regard to the inclusion and exclusion of woman regarding the rite of sprinkling the water of purification, both Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva only use exegetical argumentation. In the halakhic midrashim, women were included by the school of Rabbi Yishmael and excluded by the school of Rabbi Akiva. The Mishnah involves women in the rite of the red heifer, contrary to the text layer attributed to Rabbi Akiva. The mishnaic approach uses the exegetical discourse of partial inclusion of women known also from Sifre Zuta. However, the mishnaic layer of the

43. While the latter position challenges the reward of the pure *sotah*, in contrast to the scriptural ethos of the rite, the opposite side takes Num 5:28 literally: "She shall be free and shall be conceive seed." The teleological view of the law justifies the positive antenatal influence on the child to be born.

44. His methodological approach is defined in several places as *דריש טעמא דקרא* (expounds the foundation of Scripture). With this formula, the Amoraim designate an interpretation that combines logical reasoning with a literal interpretation of Scripture and places in opposition to the exclusiveness of an exegetical claim regarding Scripture. The tension between a teleological approach and an approach oriented exclusively to the primacy of exegesis is not unique to rabbinic literature. In Tannaitic discourse, there are juxtapositions of both interpretations.

text differentiates between a child who is reasonable and a child who is not reasonable. The Mishnah thus combines the traditions of exclusion and inclusion of the child attributed to Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, respectively—the involvement of children in this rite is also mentioned in a non-Jewish source, the Epistle of Barnabas, regarding similar criteria of the child's level of understanding. While Rabbi Yishmael completely integrated women in the rite, the Akivan midrashic and mishnaic tradition shifts from a general rejection of women in the rite to a partial involvement. Thus, this example represents a development within Tannaitic lines of exegesis related only to the Akivan school, where a woman-friendly development has taken place.

With regard to Rabbi Yishmael, the Tannaitic discussion about the positive effect of the bitter water on the pure *sotah* and the inclusion of women in the rite of the red heifer examined above is not based solely on methodological approaches of legal issues that differ from that of Rabbi Akiva. It is often Rabbi Yishmael, or one of his disciples, such as Rabbi Yohanan ben Baroqa, who contradict Rabbi Akiva's methodological approach in the sense of a more woman-friendly interpretation of the *sotah* rite and beyond. For example, regarding Num 5:18 ("And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head") Rabbi Yishmael states: "The priest turns to her and bares her only so far that the commandment of her divestment was fulfilled." With regard to the Mishnah's rigid display of the ugliness of the *sotah* (she is not to be shown in her beauty), Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroqa says: "One does not dishonor the daughters of Israel any more than the Torah writes: 'And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head' (Num 5:18)."⁴⁵ These statements, attributed to the school of Rabbi Yishmael, present a woman-friendly interpretation vis-à-vis the authoritative text of the Torah or the Mishnah.⁴⁶ Rabbi Yishmael's decision about the inclusion of women in the rite of the red heifer is clearly committed to that.

45. Sifre Num. 11 to Num 5:18.

46. For the different methodological approaches of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael see Menachem I. Kahana, "The Halakhic Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 26–28, 35–39.

Rabbi Akiva's purely exegetical approach was even criticized by the rabbis for its extreme positions, for example in the story that Moses was astonished to hear Rabbi Akiva say this is a "halakhah given to Moses at Sinai" (b. Menah. 29b) or when Rabbi Akiva establishes a new halakhah resulting in the death penalty, on the basis of the letter *waw* (b. Sanh. 51b). Rabbi Akiva traditionally verifies the exegetical discourse of exclusion of woman and sets new variations or emphasizes a less woman-friendly interpretation than Rabbi Yishmael. Nevertheless, this outcome can be attributed wholly to the methodological approach of the school of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Yishmael, on the other hand, who is ideologically closer to a consideration of the woman's side, argues conservatively in the spirit of the Torah. He fully accepts the role of woman given in the literal wording of the scriptural text, but argues in the framework of his exegetical possibilities for a greater integration of woman. This, however, does not contradict his teleological approach with regard to the verbal interpretation of the verse in Num 5:28, which results in a much more passive role for women than Rabbi Akiva argues for.

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Biblical Women and Rabbinic Representations

Biblical Women in Mishnah and Tosefta

Cecilia Haendler

This essay is a study of how the Mishnah and Tosefta use the biblical material in which female characters appear. Such an analysis contributes both to our understanding of the relation between the Mishnah and Tosefta and to their respective positions toward gender. It is important to track these sightings and map them, since a biblical female protagonist is a strong hermeneutical marker within Tannaitic texts, for several reasons:

1. Biblical material is authoritative; it is canonical material with normative power; its figures are heroes, models, and ideal examples for moral conduct. When the reader or the listener rediscovers them in rabbinic texts, they function both as catchwords and as a form of legitimation, like any biblical quotation.

2. As with any character, they have a stronger capacity to engage the reader/listener than abstract concepts or general categories. They open a narrative and imaginative process with all its emotional force, thereby becoming markers that are easily remembered. Characters are a central element of storytelling. They prefigure the audience's lives and speak to their public on a personal level. They enchant and arouse particular interest.

3. Women, in a text that is declined in male language, predominantly with male subjects and a huge number of male names and protagonists—biblical, rabbinic, and otherwise—versus a tiny number of female ones, are undoubtedly markers. Or, in the words of Michael Satlow, “The appearance of women in these stories functions as a kind of flare for the reader.”¹

1. Michael Satlow, “Fictional Women: A Study in Stereotypes,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 3:232.

Since we have identified three flares—or flags—waving at us in one single literary element, biblical women, they were most probably employed by the Tannaitic authors/editors with much caution and self-consciousness.

A central question in Mishnah and Tosefta studies concerns their redactional relations.² Another one is whether their respective canonical/noncanonical positioning reveals a different approach toward women and gender topics.³ Contradictory conclusions have been reached with respect to both questions, due to the difficulty of reconstructing the redactional history of these texts. In light of these reflections, I propose no diachronic analysis (what precedes what), but rather a synchronic one, based on the two redacted end-texts we have today. Due to the preliminary character of this analysis, manuscript evidence and textual variants were not considered.⁴ The results I will present are fascinatingly unambiguous. In other

2. See, e.g., Robert Brody, *Mishna and Tosefta Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2014), 111–54; Joshua Kulp, “Organizational Patterns in the Mishnah in Light of Their Toseftan Parallels,” *JJS* 58 (2007): 52–78; Shamma Friedman, *Tosefta Atiqta: Pesah Rishon* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002); Friedman, “The Primacy of Mishnah to Tosefta in Synoptic Parallels,” in *Introducing Tosefta*, ed. Harry Fox and Tirtzah Meacham (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), 99–121; Alberdina Houtman, *Mishnah and Tosefta: A Synoptic Comparison of the Tractates Berakhot and Shebiit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996).

3. Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 73–116; Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Mishnah: A New Approach to Ancient Jewish Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Hauptman, “The Tosefta as a Commentary on an Early Mishnah,” *JSIJ* 4 (2005): 109–32; Hauptman, “Mishnah as a Response to Tosefta,” in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2000), 13–34.

4. This next step is surely desirable in future research. This discussion relies for the Mishnah on the standard Vilna Romm edition (based on the Heller edition) and for the Tosefta on the Lieberman edition (until Bava Batra) and on the Zuckerman-del edition as reported in the Global Jewish Database (פרוייקט השו"ת—The Responsa Project Bar Ilan University). See Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, ed., *Mishnayot Tosefot Yom Tov* (Prague, 1614–1617); Saul Lieberman, ed., *Tosefta 'a.p. ketav yad Vinah: The Tosefta according to Codex Vienna, with Variants from Codices Erfurt, London, Genizah MSS and Editio Princeps* (Venice 1521) (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955–1967); Moshe Shmuel Zuckerman, ed., *Tosefta 'al pi kitve yad 'Erfurt ve-Vien: Tosefta nach den Erfurter und Wiener Handschriften mit Parallelstellen und Varianten* (repr. with Lieberman's supplement, Jerusalem: Bamberger & Vahrman, 1937). See also Jason Kalman, “Building Houses on the Sand: The Analysis of Scripture Citation in the Mishnah,” *JSem* 13 (2004): 186–244. There it is argued

words, there is a clearly recognizable pattern of difference between Mishnah and Tosefta concerning biblical women.

1. Biblical Women in the Mishnah: Quantity

I have found few texts mentioning biblical women in the Mishnah. The assessment of “few” is determined in relation to the number of women in the Hebrew Bible, to the size of entire Mishnah, to the number of biblical quotations therein,⁵ and to the number of all biblical characters it mentions. Depending on how the counting is done, one can arrive at different

that about 20 percent of the biblical citations in the Mishnah are later additions, and examination of biblical citations in the Mishnah manuscripts is required for future research. The work of Alexander Samely and the related online Database of Midrashic Units in the Mishnah were consulted, although the focus in his work is not on biblical characters but on biblical quotes. See Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Database of Midrashic Units in the Mishnah, University of Manchester, <http://mishnah.illc.manchester.ac.uk/search.aspx>. For example, m. Naz. 1:2 mentioning “Samson, the son of Manoah, the husband of Delilah, who uprooted the doors of Gaza and whose eyes the Philistines put out,” since it does not contain a direct biblical quote, is absent in the database and the book, but relevant for the present inquiry. Note that Samely’s work is based on the MS Kaufmann of the Mishnah (*Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture*, 21). There m. Nazir 1:2 with its biblical figures is attested. See “Mishnah,” David Kaufmann, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress6019a1>. This means that the database lacks this Mishnah because the biblical figure is not related to a biblical quote.

5. “The Mishnah, in the generally accepted printed text, contains almost six hundred biblical citations [600]” (Kalman, “Analysis of Scripture Citation,” 191). Kalman refers to Hanokh Albeck, ed., *Shisha Sidrei Mishnah: The Six Orders of the Mishnah* (repr., Jerusalem: Bialik Institute; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2008); *The Talmud* (Vilna: Romm Widow and Brothers, 1908–1909). Herbert Danby also lists these in the “Index of Biblical passages quoted in the text of the Mishnah” (807–11). See Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). On the number of women in the HB, see See Carol Meyer, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 34. In calculating the number of named individuals in the HB and the NT, despite the disparities among different possible calculations, this study lists distinct women’s names in a number around 162 (approximately 70 percent found in the HB), whereby “women or women’s names represent between 5.5 and 8 percent of the total” of all named individuals depending on the calculation. In addition to these, unnamed women must also be considered.

totals; I thus report some numbers in order to give a general idea about the proportions.

There are only five passages/mishnayot that mention biblical women in the entire Mishnah that have no parallel in the Tosefta. Of these five passages, only two feature women as central and significant characters:

1. A mishnah citing the biblical story of an unnamed sister of Moses who helped deliver him, watched for him when he was a baby on the Nile, and whom the rabbis identify as Miriam (מרים). According to rabbinic mishnaic exegesis, in return for Miriam's waiting for Moses, the people of Israel waited for her in the desert (m. Sotah 1:9, quoting Exod 2:4; Num 12:15). Note that Miriam is mentioned in the Tosefta in two additional significant passages in other contexts.

2. An interesting text about Esther (אסתר, m. Avot 6:6), where she is praised and compared to a rabbinic scholar who quotes another scholar: "You learned that one who says something in the name of the one who said it brings redemption to the world, as it says: 'Esther told the king in Mordechai's name' (Esth 2:22)."⁶ It is important to bear in mind, though, that the sixth chapter of Avot is a later addition to the whole tractate.⁷

The other three female figures are merely mentioned as appellatives: "the husband of Delilah" (דלילה, m. Naz. 1:2); "Joav, the son of Zeruiah" (צרויה, m. Mak. 2:7, interpreting Num 35:25–26, 28 // Deut 19:4);⁸ and in

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

7. Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 115.

8. As pointed out to me by Tal Ilan, this cannot even be considered an example: he is not known by any other name, and his mother's figure does not come to mind, which is most probably the case for the Mishnah authors when his name is encountered. Zeruiah and Abigail are sisters of King David and mothers of the rivals Amasa (commander of Absalom's army) and Joav, respectively (2 Sam 17:25). Zeruiah had three sons, all soldiers in David's army and all invariably named with the matronymic "son of Zeruiah." See Diana Vikander Edelman, "Zeruiah," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 168. The names of Esther, Delilah, and Zeruiah are not mentioned at all in the Tosefta.

Delilah (Judg 16) "is the only woman in the Samson story whose name is given.... She is not, as biblical women typically are, identified in terms of a man (husband, father, or brother).... She and Samson are apparently lovers but not married.... [She] is not called a harlot." See J. Cheryl Exum, "Delilah," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 68. The Mishnah makes her the wife of Samson and merely part of her husband's appellative, whereby the one mentioning this phrase refers to Samson, not to her, but remembers her name (rather than his).

the reference “the love of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam 13)” (תמר, m. Avot 5:16), which is characterized negatively as a form of love that is not destined to survive. The Mishnah calls it love (אהבת אמנון ותמר), but from the biblical account it is clearly a case of rape.⁹ The story of Amnon and Tamar, the son and daughter of King David, is mentioned in the Tosefta in another context as an “incident, story” (מעשה).

There are six additional passages in the Mishnah mentioning biblical women that have parallels in the Tosefta, of which again only in two are they as protagonists and positive examples: (1) the daughters of Zelophead (בנות צלפחד, m. B. Bat. 8:3 and t. B. Bat. 7:8, referring to Num 27, esp. verse 7, with no biblical text quoted) and (2) Abigail, David’s wife (אביגיל, m. Sanh. 2:4 and t. Sanh. 4:5, in an exegesis of Deut 17:17, referring implicitly to 1 Sam 25). (For an analysis of the positive content of these mishnayot see section 3 below.)

Tamar (Gen 38) is mentioned in m. Meg. 4:10 in the phrase “The story of Tamar [מעשה תמר] is read and translated,” while the t. Meg. 3:31 parallel reads, “The story of Judah and Tamar is read and translated.” The texts refer to the biblical narrative about Tamar tricking Judah into having sexual intercourse with her, whereby the Mishnah clearly sees Tamar as the active agent in the story. This event, however, constitutes a link within a chain of embarrassing and shameful occurrences (see below). It is possible to evince from the text that this biblical section is read and translated because its end is to Judah’s credit (see analysis below). Tamar of Genesis is mentioned in other additional units in the Tosefta.

The remaining three passages are similar in content and the female biblical characters seem merely incidental to them:

- ♦ Absalom having relation with ten concubines of David, his father (עשר פלגשי אביו, m. Sotah 1:8 and t. Sotah 3:16, referring to 2 Sam 16:21–22)
- ♦ David marrying the widow of Saul (אלמנתו של שאול, m. Sanh. 2:2, quoting 2 Sam 12:8: “And I gave ... your master’s wives [נשי אדוניך] into your embrace”) against the prohibition of remarrying for a king’s widow, and the act of David of imprisoning his ten concubines, as quoted in t. Sanh. 4:2, “So they were shut up to the

9. I am thankful to Tal Ilan for pointing this out to me.

day of their death, living in widowhood [אלמנות חיות]” (2 Sam 20:3)

- ◆ The mention of the daughters of the Philistines (בנות פלשתים) in m. Ned. 3:11 within the quote “Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult” (2 Sam 1:20), which is brought to show that “Philistine” and “uncircumcised” are equivalent, because of the typical equivalence between the two halves of the verse. The daughters of the Philistines are also mentioned in t. Sotah 3:15 (see below), again as a non-Jewish paradigm, in this case as one of temptation and sin for male Israelites: “Samson rebelled by using his eyes, as it is said: ‘Then Samson said to his father [and mother, I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah;] now get her for me as my wife.... Get that one for me, for she is fitting in my eyes’ (Judg 14:2–3).” In the parallel mishnah to this tosefta, m. Sotah 1:8, the female figures are merely implicit: “Samson went after [the desire of] his eyes.”

In none of these three traditions is the female figure of central interest, but rather the actions of the male characters active in the corresponding biblical stories. In these mishnaic/toseftan texts biblical women are mere shadows in the background, although their staging has much to say about gender. However, I would not list them in a catalogue of biblical women as subjects in the Mishnah.

Another biblical quote mentioning “the daughters of Israel” (בנות ישראל) is reported in the Mishnah. This figure is generic, collective, and gendered. The “daughters of Israel” are both protagonists, and they appear in storytelling in order to highlight the destiny of a male figure, King Saul. In quoting 2 Sam 1:24, “Daughters of Israel, weep for Saul,” m. Ned. 9:10 shows how the behavior of Rabbi Yishmael was modeled on that of King Saul. The lament of “the daughters of Israel” for the death of Saul is echoed in the lament of “the daughters of Israel” for Rabbi Yishmael. In the biblical text the mention of gender reflects the role of women in mourning and funerary practices; in the Mishnah it exalts the goodness of the rabbi/king. The “daughters” mourn those who help them. Also note that this is the final mishnah of a chapter and could well be a secondary editorial addition.

I put in a last group four other biblical references found in the Mishnah, containing indirect or metaphorical/interpretative allusions to feminine

figuring in the Bible. Both *m. Yevam.* 6:6 and *t. Yevam.* 8:4 quote Gen 5:2, the biblical verse about the first human being as *זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה*, namely, “male and female [He created them],” as the basis for the obligation to have at least a son and a daughter in order to fulfill the commandment of procreation. In the same inclusive vein, although here with a rabbinic interpretative creation, *m. Ma’as. Sh.* 5:13 interprets the biblical blessing for Israel, “Look down from your holy abode, from heaven, and bless your people Israel” (Deut 26:15), as meaning: “[Bless Israel] with [both] sons and daughters [בבנים ובבנות].”

The other two traditions are purely metaphorical: (1) *m. Ber* 9:5 and *t. Ber.* 6:23 use Prov 23:22 (*אֵל תְּבוֹז כִּי זָקְנָה אִמְךָ*, “Do not despise your mother when she is old”) to describe the rabbis/elders as an old mother, inviting the reader of the Mishnah not to shame the elders of Israel (the biblical “your mother”) by refusing to rely on their practice and injunctions;¹⁰ (2) *m. Ta’an.* 4:8 concludes tractate Ta’anit with a midrash that is missing in manuscripts and is thus not original, containing a feminine metaphor:

“O maidens of Zion [בנות צִיּוֹן], go forth and gaze upon King Solomon wearing the crown that his mother [אִמּוֹ] gave him on his wedding day, on the day of the gladness of his heart” (Song 3:11). “On his wedding day” this refers to the giving of the Torah [ביום חתונתו זו מתן תורה]. “And on the day of the gladness of his heart”: this refers to the building of the temple; may it be rebuilt speedily in our days, Amen.

This last group may be considered not completely part of the category “biblical women mentioned in the Mishnah” since the figurative constructions in it, although relevant from a gender perspective, are allusive and do not explicitly refer to a biblical female character.

Thus, from the point of view of quantitative analysis, we can count merely five significant female biblical figures in the Mishnah: Miriam (*m. Sotah* 1:9), Esther (*m. Avot* 6:6, surely a later addition), the daughters of Zelophehad (*m. B. Bat* 8:3 and *t. B. Bat.* 7:8), Abigail (*m. Sanh.* 2:4 and *t. Sanh.* 4:5), and Tamar of Genesis (*m. Meg.* 4:10 and *t. Meg.* 3:31)—although this last unit voices a negative Tannaitic (not necessarily biblical) connotation regarding its female character.

10. See my PhD dissertation, “Women-Related Images as Metaphorical Source Domain in Tannaitic Corpora” (Freie Universität Berlin, 2022). The toseftan material seems to predate the mishnaic in this case.

I will now analyze this quantity and attempt to evaluate its meaning. From this survey one could receive the impression that biblical figures are not important for the mishnaic authors and redactors, and therefore they are only extremely sparsely mentioned. However, this is not the case since, if we switch gender, we encounter an abundance of biblical figures within the Mishnah, and many significant stories that are used as models for halakhic rulings or moral conduct. I have counted ninety-two mishnayot mentioning named significant male biblical figures (whereby many mishnayot mention several male figures or long sections about these characters) versus five mishnayot about significant, named women (i.e., 5.2 percent of the total of mishnayot mentioning biblical characters). We find in the Mishnah sixty-nine names of biblical men (see appendix) versus only eight names of biblical women.

Summing up, the Mishnah contains, according to my research, sixty-nine names of biblical men (90 percent of the total of named biblical figures) and eight names of biblical women (10 percent of the total); each woman is named only in one mishnah, contrary to the majority of the male names, which appear in several mishnayot. This proportion is close to the biblical one mentioned above, where women's names represent between 5.5 and 8 percent of the total. When looking at the Mishnah, we thus find a significant number of biblical male figures in contrast to an extremely small number of female ones, and, on top of this, the greater elaboration on stories with male characters and the reiteration of male names in different texts amplify the gap between their mention and the mention of female ones. The data can be understood in different ways, but we remain with the data that shows that the Mishnah makes a clear-cut gendered choice in the selection and quotation of biblical personalities, building on the biblical imbalance and reinforcing it.

In other words, although less than in the Tosefta, we still find aggadic material in the Mishnah, but this aggadic material mentions almost exclusively male biblical figures. There is almost no mention of female figures.

Moving to the Tosefta, we understand better the way the Mishnah works. For example, in the Tosefta we find Abraham twenty-eight times and Sarah five times. In the Mishnah, Abraham is mentioned in fourteen mishnayot and Sarah not even once. The Mishnah works the same way as the Tosefta regarding Abraham—although quantitatively much less than in the Tosefta—explaining biblical verses about the patriarch and using these biblical texts as the basis for legal rulings. However, the Mishnah brings no example of the biblical figure of Sarah. This example is indicative

of the way the Mishnah makes gendered choices to the point of making biblical women almost completely disappear.

2. Biblical Women in the Tosefta: Quantity and Comparison to the Mishnah

The Tosefta has much more material about biblical women than the Mishnah, in a proportion of about ten to one. The women in the Tosefta represent a significant 25 percent of the named women appearing in the Hebrew Bible. I have collected about forty-three unique Tosefta passages that mention biblical women, completely absent in the parallel mishnah (of these about nineteen, i.e., about half, are found in Tosefta Sotah). Aside from five female figures (found in other contexts: Miriam, Tamar of Genesis, Tamar of 2 Samuel, “the Philistines’ daughters,” and “David’s concubines”), all the other women listed here (in this and the next list, in total twenty-six women) are not mentioned at all in the Mishnah:

- ◆ Eve (חוה, Gen 3:20, in t. Sanh. 8:9; t. Sotah 4:16–17 quoting Gen 3:15)
- ◆ “daughters of Adam” (בנות האדם, Gen 6, in t. Sotah 3:9 quoting Gen 6:2)
- ◆ Sarah (שרה, Gen 11:29–13:1, in t. Ber. 1:13 quoting Gen 17:15; t. Rosh Hash. 2:13 quoting Gen 21:1; t. Meg. 3:6 quoting Gen 21:1; t. Sotah 5:12 quoting Gen 16:5; 21:10–12; t. Sotah 6:6 quoting Gen 21:9–10)
- ◆ Hagar (הגר, Gen 16, in t. Sotah 5:12)
- ◆ Ba-Kol the daughter of Abraham (בתו של אברהם בכל, in t. Qidd. 5:16–21 quoting Gen 24:1)¹¹
- ◆ Tamar (of Genesis) (תמר, Gen 38, in t. Ber. 4:17–18 quoting Job 15:18–19; t. Sotah 9:3 quoting Gen 38:25–26)
- ◆ Serah the daughter of Asher (סרה בת אשר, Gen 46:17; Num 26:46, in t. Sotah 4:7)
- ◆ the story of Miriam’s well (מרים, Exod 15, in t. Sotah 11:1 quoting Num 20:1–2; t. Sotah 11:8 quoting Zech 11:8)
- ◆ women listen to the Torah (Deuteronomy) (נשים באו לשמוע, in t. Sotah 7:9 quoting Deut 31:12)

11. This figure is invented by the toseftan authors.

- ◆ Rahab (רחב, Josh 2, in t. Sotah 8:4 quoting Josh 2:10–11)
- ◆ the mother of Sisera, his wife, and daughters-in-law (אמו של סיסרא, Judg 5:28–30, in t. Sotah 9:4 quoting Judg 5:28–31)
- ◆ Philistines' daughters (בנות פלשתים, in t. Sotah 3:15 quoting Judg 14:3)¹²
- ◆ Hannah (חנה, 1 Samuel, in t. Ber. 3:6 quoting 1 Sam 1:13; t. Hag. 1:1 quoting 1 Sam 1:22; t. Sanh. 13:3 quoting 1 Sam 2:6)
- ◆ Merav, Michal (Saul's daughters, 1 Samuel), and Naomi of the book of Ruth (מירב, מירב, מירב, נעמי, in t. Sotah 11:17–20, quoting 2 Sam 3:14, 21:8, 25:4; 6:23; Ruth 4:17)
- ◆ the wise woman of the city (of Abel Beit Maakah) (ותבא האשה אל, כל העם בחכמתה, 2 Samuel, in t. Ter. 7:20 quoting 2 Sam 20:22)
- ◆ Jezebel (איזבל, 1 Kgs 16:31, in t. Sanh. 4:5 quoting Deut 17:17)
- ◆ Athaliah, queen of Judah (עתליה, 2 Kgs 8:18, in t. Sanh. 4:11)
- ◆ the daughter of Omri (בתו של עמרי, 2 Kgs 8:26, in t. Sotah 12:3 quoting 2 Chr 22:7)
- ◆ Huldah the Prophetess (חלדה הנביאה, 2 Kgs 22:14–20, in t. B. Bat. 1:11, t. Neg. 6:2)¹³
- ◆ Maakah, mother of King Asa (מעכה, 1 Kgs 15:2, in t. Avod. Zar. 3:19 quoting 2 Chr 15:16)

In addition to these characters, a toseftan passage (t. Meg. 3:31–36), whose topic is a list of “embarrassing biblical stories,” mentions several female figures:

- ◆ Lot's daughters (לוט ושתי בנותיו, Gen 19)
- ◆ Bilhah (בלהה, Gen 29:29; 30:3–7)
- ◆ Tamar (of Genesis) (תמר, Gen 38)
- ◆ the concubine of Gibeah (פלגש בגבעה, Judg 19–20)
- ◆ Bathsheba (בת שבע, 2 Sam 11:2–27)

12. As already pointed out, t. Sotah 3:15, has a parallel in m. Sotah 1:8, where there is no explicit mention of the “daughters of the Philistines.”

13. The Mishnah mentions merely the “Huldah Gates” in the temple (m. Mid. 1:3). It asks about the name of another gate that bears the name of a biblical male character, Jechoniah, in m. Sheqal. 6:3; m. Mid. 2:6: “And why was it called the Jechoniah's Gate? Because through it Jechoniah went out into his captivity.” On the Huldah Gates in m. Mid. 1:3 see Dalia Marx, *Tractates Tamid, Middot and Qinnim*, FCBT 5/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 131–40.

- ♦ Tamar (of 2 Samuel) (תמר, 2 Sam 13:1–22)
- ♦ David's concubines with Absalom (פילגשי אביו, 2 Sam 16:21–22)

Of these figures in Tosefta Megillah, only Tamar (of Genesis) is mentioned in the parallel mishnah (m. Meg. 4:10; see above); in the other cases only the male protagonists are mentioned.

The Tosefta also creates several female metaphors (in at least seven passages), which are constructed using biblical verses but are absent in the specific biblical texts themselves (and in the Mishnah):

- ♦ the Divine creating the world compared to a wise woman settling her house (t. Sanh. 8:9, adapting Prov 9:1–5; 14:1)
- ♦ manna as breast milk for suckling and the divine as a breastfeed-ing mother (t. Sotah 4:3, based on Num 11:8)
- ♦ Jerusalem as a mother (t. Sotah 15:15, using Ezek 16:2) and adding the mother image to it
- ♦ Israel in Babylonia as a woman who went back to her father's (Abraham's) home (t. B. Qam. 7:3; see Gen 11:27–28)
- ♦ Israel as a woman applying for a writ of betrothal (t. B. Qam. 7:4, based on Exod 32:16)
- ♦ Israel as a *sotah* drinking the water (t. Avod. Zar. 3:19 on Exod 32:20)
- ♦ Torah as Queen Esther (t. Ber. 5:2, quoting Esth 7:8)

The Tosefta not only quotes biblical women but also invents new female characters for the biblical narrative, expanding on the biblical stories (such as the daughter of Abraham Ba-Kol, or the wife and daughters of Sisera for the biblical “wisest of her princesses,” whereby the Bible speaks only of “Sisera's mother”).

Counting the metaphorical constructions, the Tosefta contains fifty passages about biblical female characters absent in the Mishnah. It is true that generally the Tosefta includes more aggadic material and biblical references than the Mishnah and includes much aggadic material about biblical figures with no parallel in the Mishnah. In particular, Tosefta Sotah consists of much narrative material, also specifically about biblical women. However, aside from the fact that the Mishnah does make use of biblical male figures extensively, other details indicate that the Tosefta mentions more biblical women not merely because it has more space for biblical material. A significant detectable pattern is of material in the Tosefta

before and after a gendered passage or of the same passage itself, often found in the Mishnah but without the female character, as I list below:

Table 6.1. Parallel text, same topic, but the Mishnah lacks the biblical woman

	Tosefta	Parallel mishnah
Creation of humanity	t. Sanh. 8:9 Adam and Eve	m. Sanh. 4:5 Adam ha-Rishon
Peace between wife and husband	t. Sotah 5:12 Heaven in favor of Sarah <i>A positive</i> message about wives	m. Ned. 11:12 No mention of Sarah <i>A negative</i> message about wives
Samson was punished through the eyes	t. Sotah 3:15 Philistines' daughters	m. Sotah 1:8 No daughters mentioned
Pilgrimage to the temple for women	t. Hag. 1:1 Hannah did not go up	m. Hag. 1:1 Hannah is not mentioned
Giving over one person or all the group will be raped/killed	t. Ter. 7:20 The wise woman of the city (of Abel Beit Maakah) a group of men to kill	m. Ter. 8:12 No mention of the wise woman a group of women to rape
Graves in cities	t. B. Bat. 1:11 The grave of Huldah the prophetess	m. B. Bat. 2:9 Huldah is not mentioned
destroying Avodah Zarah	t. Avod. Zar. 3:19 Maakah, mother of King Asa	m. Avod. Zar. 3:3 Maakah is not mentioned

In all the examples, the Tosefta makes use of a biblical quotation with a female character to explain its ruling. The parallel Mishnah has the same ruling but without the biblical example. In other instances with male subjects, the Mishnah does make use of biblical examples.

Table 6.2. Same section, but the Mishnah lacks the aggadic example with a female character

A <i>sotah</i> is prohibited to her husband and to her lover	Eve and the snake (t. Sanh. 4:17–18)	m. Sanh. 5:1 parallel to t. Sanh. 4:16 about the halakhic rule; lacks the example about Eve
Abraham was blessed with everything (<i>ba-kol</i>)	Ba-Kol—the daughter of Abraham (t. Qidd. 5:16–21)	m. Qidd. 4:14 In the Mishnah the daughter is not mentioned
Confession about the righteousness of Tamar	t. Ber. 4:17: Hannah is not mentioned	t. Ber. 4:16 parallel m. Ber. 6:8; biblical examples not parallel
Hannah and Daniel's prayers as models	t. Ber. 3:6	t. Ber. 3:5 and 3:7 (halakhic rulings) have parallels in the Mishnah
Embarrassing stories	t. Meg. 3:31–36 Lot's daughters Bilhah and Reuben Tamar and Judah (Genesis) The concubine of Gibeah Bathsheba and David Tamar and Amnon (2 Samuel) David's concubines and Absalom	m. Meg. 4:10 Reuben Tamar David Amnon

In the last parallel, Mishnah Megillah explicitly favors the mention of male subjects, who are probably considered as the active agents in the story.

Table 6.3. Aggadic parallel before and after, but not the passage with the female character

	Tosefta	Parallel mishnah
Joseph buried his father	t. Sotah 4:7	m. Sotah 1:9
Serah daughter of Asher	t. Sotah 4:7	
Moses took care of Joseph's bones	t. Sotah 4:8	m. Sotah 1:9

Here the Mishnah makes use, like the Tosefta, of biblical characters and expounds on the biblical text, but it has only male subjects.

Table 6.4. Mishnah has only one biblical example (male)

male biblical subject	elders and decapitated heifer	t. Sotah 9:2	m. Sotah 9:6
same principle but no parallel	"Similar you say for ... Tamar"	t. Sotah 9:3	

In sum, the Mishnah consistently avoids mentioning female characters. When choosing from toseftan material, the Mishnah makes a gendered selection. When adding to the toseftan material, the Mishnah almost never thinks of biblical women as relevant and pertinent examples for its rulings and discourse.

3. Quotation of Biblical Women: Quality

Another question to pose is a comparison of the quality of the material about biblical women between Mishnah and Tosefta. Unique to the Mishnah, only the story about Miriam (m. Sotah 1:9) is qualitatively relevant. This narrative is part of a pericope on the topic "by the same measure by which a person metes out, one metes out to her/him." The Mishnah connotes Miriam as righteous: "And so on the good side: Miriam waited a while for Moses (Exod 2:4), therefore Israel waited for her seven days in the wilderness (Num 12:15)." This passage is absent in the Tosefta. It is the only significant positive evaluation of a biblical woman unique to the Mishnah. It seems that the Mishnah needs Miriam at this point in order to build a harmonious structure, namely, for compositional purposes:

Mishnah Sotah	Three sinful people (one woman, two men):	Three righteous people (one woman, two men):
	the <i>sotah</i> (1:7)	Miriam (1:9)
	Samson (1:8)	Joseph (1:9)
	Absalom (1:8)	Moses (1:9)

Moreover, the story of Miriam is necessary to show how Divine reward is several times greater than the good deeds accomplished by the righteous. Miriam waited shortly for her brother, while all Israel, the Divine presence, and the clouds of glory waited for her seven days until she was healed.

Two biblical female figures are mentioned in parallel texts between the Mishnah and the Tosefta, which are from the point of view of quality equal.

1. The positive light cast by the Bible on the daughters of Zelophehad is in both collections (m. B. Bat. 8:3; t. B. Bat. 7:8) enhanced with an identical image: the daughters of Zelophehad took three portions in the inheritance of land: the portion of their father, and two portions of their grandfather Hephher, a firstborn. All over rabbinic literature the rabbis have only praise for the daughters of Zelophehad, and this tradition conforms to this attitude. In the words of Sifre Numbers 133:

When the daughters of Zelophehad heard that the land Israel was to be apportioned to the tribes in accordance with the men and not the women, they gathered together to take counsel. One said to the other: The Omnipresent's compassion is not like that of flesh and blood. Flesh-and-blood creatures have greater compassion for males than for females. But the One who spoke and the world came into being is not like that. Rather, His mercy extends to all, to the males and to the females.

2. Both the Mishnah and Tosefta (m. Sanh. 2:4; t. Sanh. 4:5) praise Abigail, David's wife, as unique and as an example of goodness and righteousness.¹⁴ Interpreting the biblical verse in Deut 17:17 about the injunction that a king in Israel "shall not have many wives," the rabbis state in the Mishnah that "even though they are like Abigail," namely, even if the

14. See Tamar Kadari, "Abigail: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019e>.

king's wives were like the ideal woman Abigail, the king should not have many of them. In the Tosefta, however, it is stated that if the king's wives are as Abigail and would not let him wander from the path of piety, he may take as many as he wishes. In both, Abigail "is the only one of David's wives mentioned in this context and she symbolizes positiveness."¹⁵

In the textual traditions unique to the Tosefta, some negative connotations of female characters are attested:

1. The theme of women as sexual temptation: Eve (t. Sotah 4:17), as temptation for the snake who wanted to marry her; "daughters of men" as temptation for the men of the flood (t. Sotah 3:9); the Philistines' daughters as temptation for Samson (t. Sotah 3:15). All those who were tempted were then accordingly punished.
2. Jezebel (t. Sanh. 4:5); Athaliah, queen of Judah (t. Sanh. 4:11); the daughter of Omri (t. Sotah 12:3); Maakah, mother of King Asa (t. Avod. Zar. 3:19) are described as evil women.
3. According to t. Meg. 3:31–36, the (sex/rape) stories of Lot's daughters, Judah and Tamar, Amnon and Tamar, Absalom and David's concubines, and the concubine of Gibeah and Jerusalem's abominations (Ezek 16:2) are read during the public reading of the Torah, along with their Aramaic targum. The story of the concubine at Gibeah is one of the most horrible narratives in the Bible, but the Tosefta is not troubled about reading it for the masses. The story of the rape by Amnon is embarrassing for the house of David, but the Tosefta has no problem with its public reading. The story of Judah is read because it is understood, as stated in another passage in the Tosefta (t. Ber. 4:17–18), as highlighting Judah's righteousness, who confessed concerning Tamar. However, the story of Reuben, who "lay with Bilhah his father's concubine," is read but not translated, and "the story of David and Bath Sheba is neither read nor translated." From the Babylonian Talmud (b. Meg. 25b) we can evince that this is done to protect David's and Jacob's reputations. The story with Bathsheba is embarrassing to David. The story of Reuben is not translated so as not to shame Reuben and his father. The story of the golden calf (Exod 32:1–20) is not translated in order not to embarrass Aaron,

15. Kadari, "Abigail: Midrash and Aggadah."

who was accused by Moses. Thus we see that the Tosefta mentions here female figures not in their own interest, but in the interest of the male protagonists within the same story.

4. Based on Deut 31:12 (“Assemble the people, men, women, and children, that they may hear and learn to fear G-d”), t. Sotah 7:9 states that women came merely to listen to the Torah and that the men are those who came along to engage in its study.

On the other hand, the positive connotations of female characters largely outnumber the negative ones in the Tosefta: We find Sarah described as a ruler (t. Ber. 1:13): “At first she was the ruler of her people [שרי על עמה]. Now she rules over the entire world [שרה על כל באי עולם].” Her change of name, like that of Abraham (from “father of Aram” to “father of many nations”; see t. Ber. 1:12), indicates how her teachings are transformed from local to universal. She earns the distinction of name changing and, according to the Tosefta, this means something about her mission as well. She plays a role in the dissemination of monotheism. G-d’s remembering of Sarah and of the promise to her is mentioned by the Tosefta to support the rule that verses about visitations are equivalent to verses about remembrance (t. Rosh Hash. 2:13). The Tosefta states that the Torah reading on Rosh Hashanah is about Sarah (Gen 21:1–34; t. Meg. 3:6), and it is the same text read today on this occasion. For the toseftan authors, Heaven decided in favor of Sarah against Abraham twice: “The Omnipresent decided between her view and his, since it is said: ‘All which Sarah tells you hearken’ (Gen 21:12),” and Sarah is called the matriarch/our mother Sarah (אמינו שרה) in this context (t. Sotah 5:12).¹⁶ With the phrase “Sarah saw” (t. Sotah 6:6), which is interpreted to mean “she understood the truth,” four different interpretations and a long passage on this figure are constructed. Hagar is defined as a queen (מלכה), and the toseftan authors have Abraham say that treating her badly would be a profanation of the name of Heaven (t. Sotah 5:12). Ba-Kol the daughter of Abraham (t. Qidd. 5:16–21) is a character created by the Tosefta, as proof for the opinion that having a daughter is a blessing, fulfillment, and goal in life. Tamar (of Genesis) is considered an example of morality:

16. On this text, see Ronit Nikolsky, “Ishmael Sacrificed Grasshoppers,” in *Abraham, the Nations and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, ed. Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten, and Jacques T. A. G. M. van Ruiten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 259–62.

“He confessed concerning Tamar’s righteousness” that she is more righteous than him (t. Ber. 4:17; t. Sotah 9:3). The verse Tamar utters, “Mark, I pray you, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff (Gen 38:25),” is used to explain an exegetical principle (t. Sotah 9:3). The text in t. Sotah 4:7 about Serah the daughter of Asher¹⁷ is a complete narrative on this character: “How did Moses know where Joseph had been buried? They relate: Serah daughter of Asher was [a survivor] of the generation [of Joseph], and she went and said to Moses: In the River Nile Joseph is buried. And the Egyptians made for him metal spits and affixed them with pitch (to keep him down).”

As with Serah, the Tosefta ascribes also to Miriam an active role in the narrative of Israel’s redemption in the story of Miriam’s well (t. Sotah 11:1, 8), where Miriam is described as righteous and as a provider of Israel together with her brothers, Moses and Aaron (see m. Avot 5:6, where the well is mentioned but not in relation to Miriam). Also worth quoting is the passage about “children on their mother’s lap, infants at their mother’s breasts” (עולל מוטל בין ברכי אמו ותינוק יונק משדי אמו) and “fetuses in their mothers’ wombs singing at the exodus” (עוברין שבמעיי אמותן אמרו שירה) in t. Sotah 6:4, which is related to Miriam’s singing with the other women in the Bible, whereby the parallel mishnah (m. Sotah 5:4) talks only about the children of Israel (either the men or the people in neutral terms) and Moses who are singing.

Regarding Rahab (t. Sotah 8:4), we hear that she saw the miracles that were done to the Israelites like “all the kings of the nations of the world saw them,” mentioning her righteousness and fear of G-d. Hannah is mentioned as an example and model for the *amida* prayer (t. Ber. 3:6), for the halakhic ruling about women’s exemption from pilgrimage (t. Hag. 1:1), and as describing the afterlife in her song (t. Sanh. 13:3): “An intermediate group go down to Gehenna and scream and come up again and are healed.

17. “Serah daughter of Asher is mentioned in the Bible in the count of the Israelites who went down to Egypt (Gen. 46:17) and in the enumeration of the Israelites at the steppes of Moab (Num. 26:46). Aside from this, she takes no part in any narrative, nor is anything said about her. In contrast, there are a plethora of midrashic traditions about this woman and thus the faceless Biblical character becomes a fascinating personality.” See Tamar Kadari, “Serah, Daughter of Asher: Midrash and Aggadah,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019f>. See also James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Text* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 134–46.

[...] And concerning them did Hannah say: 'G-d kills and brings to life, brings down to Sheol and brings up' (1 Sam 2:6)."

Merav and Michal (Saul's daughters) and Naomi are mentioned together in t. Sotah 11:17–20 in a long passage about the two daughters of Saul/wives of David/sisters and rivals, whereby it is stated "Michal raised them, so they were called by her [Michal's] name [although they were not her children]," like Naomi named Ruth's son. Naming is an important act, and it is significant that important female figures, who are not the actual mothers of those children, are honored by allowing them the privilege of naming the newborn. The wise woman of the city (of Abel Beit Maakah; 2 Samuel) is mentioned in t. Ter. 7:20 in supporting the halakhic ruling: "And so it says [in Scripture]: 'Then the woman went to all the people in her wisdom' (2 Sam 20:22)." Huldah is mentioned with her title of prophetess in the Tosefta, comparing her grave to the graves of the house of David (t. B. Bat. 1:11, t. Neg. 6:2): "All graves are subject to removal except for the grave of a king and the grave of a prophet. ... There were the graves of the house of David and the grave of Huldah the prophetess in Jerusalem, and no one ever laid a hand on them [to move them]."

In conclusion, I have counted as significant and positive female figures for the Tosefta fifteen women (several mentioned several times) (of whom six are found only in Tosefta Sotah): Sarah, Hagar, Ba-Kol, Tamar (of Genesis), Serah the daughter of Asher, Miriam, the daughters of Zelophehad, Abigail, Rahab, Hannah, Merav and Michal (Saul's daughters), Naomi, the wise woman of Abel Beit Maakah, and Huldah the prophetess. We have a proportion of five to one between the Tosefta (fifteen) and the Mishnah (three), and without Tosefta Sotah it would have been three to one—Tosefta (nine) and Mishnah (three)—of biblical women with a positive attitude toward them. Additionally the mishnaic women are mentioned only once, while many of the toseftan ones more than once. Since the Tosefta is about three times as large as the Mishnah, the number of passages mentioning biblical women as heroes is significantly more than would be expected by this proportion (thirteen passages in the Tosefta versus three passages in the Mishnah), and this without counting Tosefta Sotah. This suggests that, although the toseftan attitude may be largely attributed to the particular section represented by Tosefta Sotah and its more aggadic nature, even when these are removed, the Tosefta, transversally, as a redacted end-corpus, still has, both numerically and proportionally, decisively more—and more significant—material on biblical women than the Mishnah. Both Mishnah and Tosefta (1) are based on the biblical disproportion between

male and female characters, and (2) have a limited, though not irrelevant, use of biblical figures in general. Still, the Mishnah has reduced the number of biblical women to such an extent that it is almost nonexistent, while the Tosefta has employed them in a relevant and noteworthy way both quantitatively and qualitatively.

I have also suggested that biblical women in Tannaitic literature represent an especially marked literary element, permitting us to see clearly the choices the Mishnah and Tosefta make in their employment of gendered models. The Tosefta makes use of biblical female characters in a relatively significant measure and expands/expounds on their figures with a generally positive attitude. The Mishnah clearly does not. Does this phenomenon depend on the question of canonicity of the Mishnah and its authoritative status? We can only speculate, but probably yes. We must also consider the fact that the toseftan texts about biblical women are integrated and made relevant in later midrashic and Amoraic canonical corpora. However, in the historical moment when the Mishnah was redacted, biblical women are not engaged with by the text. Judith Hauptman has suggested that a general different approach exists between the Mishnah and Tosefta on gendered issues.¹⁸ This has been revealed to be not always the case. However, in this analysis, which considers the literal content and end-redactional aspect of these corpora, a discrepancy in the use of authoritative, literal biblical heroes and villains emerges, and it is a discrepancy on gender lines.

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18. See, e.g., Judith Hauptman, "Women in Tractate Pesahim" [Hebrew], in *Atara L'Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, ed. Daniel Boyarin et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 63–86.

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Appendix: Biblical Male Figures in the Mishnah
(69 names, 92 mishnayot):¹⁹

Genesis

- ♦ Adam (אָדָם, Gen 3:17; 4:25; 5; in m. Avot 5:2²⁰)
- ♦ Cain (קַיִן, Gen 4, in m. Sanh. 4:5)
- ♦ Noah (נֹחַ, Gen 5–6, in m. Ned. 3:11, m. Avot 5:2, m. Shabb. 12:3²¹)
- ♦ Shem (שֵׁם, Gen 5:32, 6:10, son of Noah, in m. Shabb. 12:3)
- ♦ Nahor (נָחוֹר, Gen 11:26–32, brother of Abraham, or his grandfather, in m. Shabb. 12:3)
- ♦ Abraham (אַבְרָהָם, Gen 12, in m. Ta'an. 2:4, 5 אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ, "Abraham our father," m. Ned. 3:11 quoting Gen 17:1, mentioned twice,²² m. Sotah 7:5 "Abram," quoting Gen 12:6 about the terebinth of

19. Kalman claims that the Mishnah mentions "the names of various biblical characters in one hundred and forty [140] different mishnayot," on the basis of the "General Index" in Danby, *Mishnah*, 812–44 (Kalman, "Analysis of Scripture Citation," 189). I have not included in my counting references such as "the book of Ezra," or neutral ones such as "the people of Nineveh" and "the generation of the flood," or generic ones such as "the spies of Num 13" (although these are all male), "our fathers in Egypt," and "the sons of Qehat" (Levites), although gendered. With these additions one reaches the numbers of Danby. Kalman then adds: "Multiple references may appear in each chapter but this phenomenon has not been calculated. Were one to tally the times each name actually appears, the number of references could very well double or triple" ("Analysis of Scripture Citation," 189, n. 7). This calculation is addressed here.

20. This mishnah seems to use the proper name *Adam* and thus to speak of the first man (not the first human being), as it can be evinced from the context: "Ten generations from Adam to Noah.... Ten generations from Noah to Abraham."

21. M. Shab. 12:3 reads: "We find a short name [as part] of a long name: 'Shem' as part of 'Shimon' or 'Shmuel,' 'Noah' as part of 'Nahor,' 'Dan' as part of 'Daniel,' 'Gad' as part of 'Gaddiyel' [one of the spies]." The text speaks about names, but these are all names of biblical male characters. I think that the concentration of names makes this text significant in evoking biblical images that do not go unnoticed. I have thus included these names.

22. M. Ta'an. 2:4, with the model "He who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah," creates a list, for a liturgical text, about biblical figures who made petitions to the Divine and were answered. In this list, biblical women's petitions that were answered would have fit well (for instance, Hannah, whom the Tosefta mentions as an exemplary prayer; see below), but the Mishnah mentions none of them, choosing only male examples: "Abraham on Mount Moriah, our fathers at the Red Sea, Jehoshua in Gilgal,

Moreh, m. Qidd. 4:14 “Abraham our father,” quoting Gen 24:1; 26:5, mentioned 4 times, m. B. Qam. 8:6, m. B. Qam. 8:7 quoting Gen 20:17, m. B. Metz. 7:1, m. Avot 3:11 “Abraham our father,” m. Avot 5:2 mentioned twice, m. Avot 5:3 “Abraham our father,” mentioned twice, m. Avot 5:6 “Abraham our father,” m. Avot 5:19 “Abraham our father,” mentioned 4 times, m. Avot 6:10 quoting Gen 15:19, mentioned 3 times)

- ◆ Abimelech (אַבִּימֶלֶךְ, Gen 20:17, in m. B. Qam. 8:7)
- ◆ Isaac (יִצְחָק, Gen 18, in m. B. Qam. 8:6, m. B. Metz 7:1 אֲבִרְהָם בְּנֵי יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב, “the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”²³)
- ◆ Jacob (יַעֲקֹב, Gen 25, in m. B. Qam. 8:6, m. B. Metz. 7:1, m. Hul. 7:6 בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב “children of Jacob”)
- ◆ Reuben (רְאוּבֵן, Gen 35, in m. Meg. 4:10, m. Qidd. 3:4 בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן “children of Reuben”)
- ◆ Simeon (שִׁמְעוֹן, Gen 29, in m. Shabb. 12:3, m. Sotah 8:1 referring to the tribe²⁴)

Shmuel in Mitspah, Elijah on Mount Carmel, Jonah in the belly of the fish, David and Solomon his son in Jerusalem.”

23. The Mishnah uses often expressions as “son/sons of Levi” for male Levites (e.g., m. Pe’ah 2:2, m. Ter. 2:2, cf. m. Shabb. 11:2, where the service of the Levites is used as model for halakhic ruling), “sons of Qehat” (the Levites who carried the tabernacle; m. Shabb. 10:3 referring to Num 7:9), and “sons of Aaron” (e.g., m. Ta’an. 2:5), as well as “children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” here, “children of Jacob” in m. Hul. 7:6, and “children of Reuben and Gad” in m. Qidd. 3:4, using always the term בְּנֵי (*bnēi*), which can ambiguously be either male or gender neutral (whereby, since priests and Levites serving in the tabernacle were only men, in that case I translate with “sons”). In naming the forefather in the name of a group, the connection to him and the derived legitimation through male genealogy is emphasized. In the same way, the expression “our fathers” (אֲבוֹתֵינוּ), referring to the biblical forefathers, is often employed by the Mishnah: we find it twenty times in the Mishnah and only eight times in the Tosefta (see, e.g., m. Ber. 9:1, m. Ma’as. Sh. 5:13, m. Or. 1:2, m. Bik. 1:4, m. Pesah. 10:5–6). Sometimes the term refers to the patriarchs, sometimes to the people of Israel in general (see also the expression “A wandering Aramean was my father” from Deut 26:6 in m. Bik. 3:6 and m. Pesah. 10:4). These phrases place an emphasis on the connection between named forefathers and their “sons,” a connection declined in male terms, which evokes the biblical male character in the name of his descendants. Note that the Tosefta, on another tone, calls Sarah “our mother” (t. Sotah 5:12; see below).

24. This mishnah states: “Hear, O Israel, you are about to join battle with your enemy (Deut 20:3): with your enemy but not against your brother, not Judah against Shimon nor Shimon against Benjamin.” Although referring to the tribe, I inserted this quote in the counting, since in this text (see the term *brother*) and in general, the con-

- ♦ Judah (יהודה, Gen 37,38, in m. Sotah 8:1, m. Ta'an. 4:5 both texts referring to the tribe²⁵)
- ♦ Dan (דן, Gen 30, in m. Shabb. 12:3)
- ♦ Gad (גד, Gen 30, in m. Shabb 12:3, m. Qidd. 3:4 בני גד "children of Gad")
- ♦ Joseph (יוסף, Gen 30, in m. Sotah 1:9, quoting Gen 50:7, 9; Exod 13:19)
- ♦ Manasseh (מנשה, Gen 41, in m. Menah. 11:5 about the tribe, quoting Num 2:20)
- ♦ Benjamin (בנימין, Gen 35, in m. Sotah 8:1, m. Ta'an. 4:5 both texts referring to the tribe)

Exodus

- ♦ Moses (משה, Exod 2:10, in m. Pe'ah 2:6, m. Yoma 3:8; 4:2; 6:2, m. Rosh Hash. 2:9 quoting Exod 24:9, repeated 3 times, m. Rosh Hash. 3:8 quoting Exod 17:11, mentioned twice, m. Meg. 3:6 quoting Lev 23:44, m. Ketub. 7:6 law of Moses twice, m. Ned. 3:11 Moses the righteous, m. Sotah 1:9 mentioned 6 times, m. Sotah 5:4 quoting Exod 15:1, mentioned twice, m. Qidd. 3:4 quoting Num 32:29–30, m. Sanh. 1:6 on Num 11:16, m. Ed. 8:7, m. Avot 1:1, m. Avot 5:6, m. Avot 5:18, m. Kelim 17:9 mentioned twice, m. Parah 3:5, m. Yad. 4:3, m. Yad. 4:8)
- ♦ Joshua ben Nun (יהושע, Exod 17, Num 11; 13, Joshua book, in m. Ta'an. 2:4, m. Meg. 1:1, m. Sanh. 1:6 on Num 14:27, m. Sanh. 6:2

nection between the patriarch, son of Jacob, and his tribe is very strongly brought to the foreground. Moreover, when criteria that I employ in the selection of discussable passages for the list are discarded, the general proportion between male and female figures does not dramatically change in a way that affects the conclusions reached in this paper.

25. M. Ta'an. 4:5 reads: "The family Arah of Judah [mentioned in Ezra 2:5; Neh 7:10], the family of David of Judah, the family of Parosh of Judah [mentioned in Ezra 2:3; Neh 7:5], the family of Jonadav of Rechav [Jer 35], the family of Snaah of Benjamin [mentioned in Ezra 2:35; Neh 7:38], the family of Zattu of Judah [mentioned in Ezra 2:8; Neh 7:13], the family of Pahat Moav of Judah [mentioned in Ezra 2:6; Neh 7:11], the family of Adin of Judah [Ezra 2:15; Neh 7:20]." Also here I found the connection between the figure of Judah and the tribe visible enough to include this text as alluding to the biblical character as well.

on Josh 7:19–20, mentioned twice, m. Avot 1:1, mentioned twice, m. Arakh. 9:6–7)

- ◆ Aaron (אהרן, Exod 4, in m. Ta'an. 2:5 sons of Aaron, m. Rosh Hash. 2:9 quoting Exod 24:9, m. Sotah 7:6 quoting Lev 9:22, m. Avot 1:12, m. Zevah. 12:1 quoting Lev 7:33 sons of Aaron, m. Hul. 10:1 quoting Lev 7:34, m. Tamid 7:2 quoting Lev 9:22, m. Yoma 4:2 sons of Aaron twice on Lev 16:30, m. Ned. 2:1 the hallah of Aaron, m. Mid. 5:4 sons of Aaron 3 times)
- ◆ Nadab and Abihu (נדב ואביהוא, Exod 6:23; 24:1, in m. Rosh Hash. 2:9 quoting Exod 24:9)
- ◆ villains such as as Pharaoh (פרעה, Exod 1:8–11, in m. Yad. 4:8 quoting Exod 5:2; 9:27)
- ◆ Amalek (עמלק, Exod 17, in m. Meg. 3:6 quoting Exod 17:8, m. Qidd. 4:14)

Numbers

- ◆ Israel's princes (נשיאים, Num 7, in m. Meg. 3:6)
- ◆ Caleb (כלב, Num 13, in m. Sanh. 1:6 about Num 14:27)
- ◆ Gaddiel (גדיאל, Num 13, in m. Shabb. 12:3)
- ◆ Korah (קרח, Num 16, in m. Sanh. 10:3, m. Avot 5:17)
- ◆ Balaam (בלעם הרשע, Num 22–24, in m. Avot 5:19, m. Sanh. 10:2²⁶)
- ◆ Hephher (חפר, Num 27, in m. B. Bat. 8:3)

Neviim Rishonim

- ◆ Achan (עכן, Josh 7, in m. Ohal. 15:7, m. Sanh. 6:2 quoting Josh 7:19–20 mentioned twice)
- ◆ Samson (שמשון, Judg 13; 16, in m. Naz. 1:2, m. Naz. 9:5 quoting Judg 13:5, m. Sotah 1:8)
- ◆ Manoah (מנוח, Judg 13–14, in m. Naz. 1:2)
- ◆ Samuel (שמואל, 1 Sam 1:20, in m. Ta'an. 2:4, m. Naz 9:5 quoting 1 Sam 1:11; 16:2, m. Shabb. 12:3)

26. M. Sanh. 10:2 lists several biblical figures: “Three kings and four commoners have no portion in the world to come: The three kings are Jeroboam (1 Kgs 13:34; 14:10), Ahav (1 Kgs 21:21–22), and Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1–3). [...] The four commoners are: Bilaam (Num 22–24), Doeg (1 Sam 22:9–22), Ahitofel (2 Sam 17:1–23), and Gehazi (Elisha's servant, 2 Kgs 5:20–27).”

- ♦ uncircumcised Philistine (הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי הָעֶרְלִי, 1 Sam 17:6, in m. Ned. 3:11)
- ♦ Saul (שָׂאוּל, 1 Sam 9, in m. Ned. 9:10 quoting 2 Sam 1:24: *Daughters of Israel, weep for Saul*, m. Naz. 9:5 quoting 1 Sam 16:2, m. Sanh. 2:2 quoting 2 Sam 12:8)
- ♦ David (דָּוִד, 1 Sam 16, in m. Ta'an. 2:4, m. Meg. 4:10 referring to 2 Sam 11:2–27, m. Sanh. 2:2 quoting 2 Sam 12:8, m. Sanh. 2:3 quoting 2 Sam 3:31, mentioned twice, m. Avot 3:7, quoting 1 Chr 29:14, m. Avot 5:16, m. Avot 6:3 quoting Ps 55:14, m. Avot 6:9 the book of Psalms by David, king of Israel, m. Mid. 4:7 quoting Isa 29:1)
- ♦ Abner (אַבְנֵר, 1 Sam 14, in m. Sanh. 2:3 quoting 2 Sam 3:31)
- ♦ Jonathan (יְהוֹנָתָן, 1 Sam 18:1, in m. Avot 5:16)
- ♦ Goliath (גִּלְיָת, 1 Sam 17, in m. Sotah 8:1 quoting 1 Sam 17:4–58)
- ♦ Joab the son of Zeruiah (יֹזָבָב, 1 Sam 26; 2 Sam 2, in m. Mak. 2:7, m. Sotah 1:8 quoting 2 Sam 18:15)
- ♦ Shobach (שׁוּבַךְ, 2 Sam 10, in m. Sotah 8:1, quoting 2 Sam 10:16–18)
- ♦ Amnon (אַמְנוֹן, 2 Sam 13:1–39, in m. Meg. 4:10, m. Avot 5:16)
- ♦ Solomon (שְׁלֹמֹה, 2 Sam 12, 1 Kgs 1, in m. Ta'an. 2:4, m. B. Metz. 7:1)
- ♦ Ahitophel (אַחִיתוֹפֵל, 2 Sam 17:1–23, in m. Avot 6:3, quoting Ps 55:14, m. Sanh. 10:2)
- ♦ Absalom (אַבְשָׁלוֹם, 2 Sam 15, in m. Sotah 1:8, quoting 2 Sam 15:6; 18:14, 15, mentioned 3 times)
- ♦ Doeg (דּוֹאֵג, 1 Sam 22:9–22, in m. Sanh. 10:2)
- ♦ Gehazi (גִּחְזִי, Elisha's servant, 2 Kgs 5:20–27, in m. Sanh. 10:2)
- ♦ Jeroboam (יִרְבֵּעָם, 1 Kgs 13:34, 14:10, in m. Avot 5:18 quoting 1 Kgs 15:30, mentioned twice, m. Sanh. 10:2)
- ♦ Ahab (אַחָאָב, 1 Kgs 16, in m. Parah 8:11, m. Sanh. 10:2)
- ♦ Elijah (אֵלִיָּהוּ, 1 Kgs 17, in m. Sheqal. 2:5, m. B. Metz. 1:8; 2:8, 3:4, 5 until Elijah comes, m. Ta'an. 2:4, m. Sotah 9:15, m. Ed. 8:7 quoting Mal 3:23–24)
- ♦ Hezekiah (חִזְקִיָּה, 2 Kgs 18–20; Isa 36–39; 2 Chr 29–32, in m. Pesah. 4:9 the entire Mishnah relates about him, referring to 2 Chr 29:27; Num 21:6–9; 2 Kgs 18:4, 16; 2 Chr 32:30; 30:2–3)
- ♦ Sennacherib, the king of Assyria (סְנַחֲרִיב מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר, 2 Kgs 18:13, in m. Yad. 4:4, quoting Isa 10:13)
- ♦ Manasseh the king (מְנַשֶּׁה, 2 Kgs 21:1–3 in m. Sanh. 10:2)
- ♦ Jeconiah (יְכֹנִיָּה, 2 Kgs 24, in m. Sheqal. 6:3, m. Mid. 2:6)

Neviim Aharonim

- ♦ Jeremiah (ירמיהו, book of Jeremiah, in m. Ta'an. 2:3 quoting Jer 14)
- ♦ Ezekiel (יחזקאל, book of Ezekiel, in m. Tamid 3:7, m. Mid. 4:2 quoting Ezek 44:2)
- ♦ Gog and Magog (גוג ומגוג, Gen 10:2; Ezek 38–39; Gog is a king and Magog is his people, in m. Ed. 2:10)
- ♦ Jonah (יונה, book of Jonah, in m. Ta'an. 2:4)
- ♦ Helem (חלם, a returned exile in the time of Zechariah; also spelled Heldai, in m. Mid. 3:8 quoting Zech 6:14)
- ♦ Tobijah (טוביה, a chief of the returning exiles, in m. Mid. 3:8 quoting Zech 6:14)
- ♦ Jedaiah (ידעיה, Zech 6:10; Ezra 2:36; Neh 7:39; 1 Chr 9:10, a man who returned with Zerubavel, in m. B. Qam. 9:12 mentioned twice, m. Mid. 3:8 quoting Zech 6:14)
- ♦ Hen the son of Zephaniah (חנ בן צפניה, a contemporary of Zerubavel, in m. Mid. 3:8 quoting Zech 6:14)

Ketuvim

- ♦ Job (איוב, book of Job, in m. Sotah 5:5 where the entire mishnah is about him, quoting Job 13:15; 27:5; 1:8, m. Ed. 2:10)
- ♦ Boaz (בעז, book of Ruth, in m. Ber. 9:5 quoting Ruth 2:4)
- ♦ Mordechai (מרדכי, book of Esther, in m. Avot 6:6 quoting Esth 2:22)
- ♦ Jehoiaarib (יהויארב, 1 Chr 24:7, in m. B. Qam. 9:12 mentioned twice)
- ♦ Daniel (דניאל, book of Daniel, in m. Shabb. 12:3)
- ♦ Ezra (עזרא, book of Ezra, in m. Sheqal. 1:5 quoting Ezra 4:3, m. Parah 3:5)²⁷

27. About the biblical books, Mishnah Megillah is dedicated to reading the book of Esther, m. Yoma 1:6 mentions Job, Ezra, Chronicles, and Daniel, m. Mo'ed Qat. 3:7 the book of Ezra, m. Yad. 3:5 Shir haShirim and Qohelet, m. Yad. 4:5 Ezra and Daniel. It seems that also, taking away all the later, not original redactional additions (as often mishnayot with biblical citations at the end of chapters), there would remain enough texts about biblical male figures versus almost nonexistent texts about female ones.

The Hagar(s) of Rabbinic Imagining: At the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Genesis Rabbah

Gail Labovitz

A prominent theme of the narratives of the early familial history of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Israelite people is that of infertility. This manifests itself in each generation. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, the reader is told immediately at the moment she is introduced that Sarah (while still named Sarai) is barren (Gen 11:29–30). It is because of Sarah, and Sarah and Abraham's childlessness, then, that the character of Hagar comes into the narrative. As a slave woman in Abraham and Sarah's household, she may be utilized by the matriarch and patriarch for a form of surrogate motherhood; Sarah suggests that Abraham impregnate Hagar, he does so, and she bears him Ishmael. Yet over the course of the two episodes in which she appears (Gen 16 and 21), she emerges as more than an available womb or an object of Sarah's (and Abraham's) efforts to create a family, and is characterized as an independent actor and sometimes an agent in her own right within the story, rebelling, running away, encountering divine emissaries.

Although the biblical narrative is far from simplistic in its presentation of these characters and the relationships between them, Jewish texts of the prerabbinic period tend toward a broad pattern in their readings and interpretations of the passages, and particularly the conflict that arises between Hagar and Sarah as a result of Hagar's pregnancy and Ishmael's birth. In these early interpretations and retellings—such as Jubilees, the Genesis Apocryphon, and Josephus—the conflict is typically framed as one in which Sarah and Hagar are dichotomous opposites. Hagar, as an outsider by virtue of both nation (Egyptian) and class (slave), is constructed as the clear antagonist, while the behavior of Sarah is justified

and presented in a positive light.¹ At the end of this period, Philo, followed (and also significantly adapted) by Paul in Gal 4, gives the story a new allegorical interpretation, but again with a strong binary relationship between Sarah and Hagar, in which “Hagar represents the lower entity and Sarah embodies the higher qualities.”² A rather more complicated picture emerges when one turns to the earliest known sustained rabbinic discussion of these episodes, found in the Palestinian Amoraic collection *Genesis Rabbah*.³

Midrashic literature reads these episodes, and hence the character of Hagar and the other people who figure in the story (including even Abraham’s later concubine Keturah [Gen 25:1–4], who is merged with Hagar in some rabbinic readings), in a very different manner than do other Jewish and early Christian texts stylistically, even prior to a consideration of any ideological implications that may emerge.⁴ First, to say both “sustained” and yet also “collection” in the same sentence, as in the previous paragraph, is to point to a fundamental difficulty in speaking of anything approaching

1. As Troy A. Miller concludes from his survey of these materials, “The predominance of Jewish tradition reflects Hagar to be the antagonist, or even the villain, in the stories.... Though all of these writings cannot be dated with precision, it is apparent that later in the Second Temple period ... the negative characterization of the figure of Hagar is quite thorough.” See Miller, “Surrogate, Slave and Deviant? The Figure of Hagar in Jewish Tradition and Paul (Galatians 4.21–31),” in *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality*, ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 2:148.

2. “Though the form in which the Philonic tradition on Hagar is found is a *novum* in Jewish tradition, the use or functions of the figures (as higher and lower) reflect the same basic interpretive thrust” (Miller, “Surrogate, Slave and Deviant,” 148).

3. The term *Amoraic* is used to designate rabbinic figures and their literary and intellectual activity in the period after the redaction of the Mishnah (approximately the beginning of the third century CE) until the close of the Babylonian Talmud, likely sometime between the mid-sixth century and the Muslim conquest in the early seventh century. Amoraic activity generally ceased—or at least Amoraic works were redacted—earlier in the land of Israel than in Babylonia; the most commonly accepted theory for dating the close of *Genesis Rabbah* is in the early to mid-fifth century, although the work anthologizes materials attributed to rabbis from significantly earlier periods. See Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 279–80.

4. As will be seen, I find Miller’s claim that “Hagar is also negatively characterized in the Targums and early Midrashim ... and is consistently caricatured as ‘the other’ throughout the rabbinic literature” to be overstated, or at least incomplete (“Surrogate, Slave and Deviant,” 148 n. 19).

the rabbinic image of Hagar, in this text or elsewhere. Midrashic exegesis in the classical rabbinic period is typically atomistic, rarely addressing a unit longer than a few words or phrases or a verse. It often relies on careful, even obsessive, attention to language and word usage, and engages in techniques such as hyperliteral readings and wordplay. Also undergirding midrashic techniques is an assumption that all of Scripture (i.e., the Hebrew Bible) is interrelated, is the work of a single author, and hence verses from seemingly diverse locations and genres within the biblical canon may be used to explicate each other or may be read in reference to one another. At the same time, as Carol Bakhos writes,

Rabbinic exegesis betrays few hermeneutic constraints, and many factors—from theological to philological—give rise to various interpretations.... In some cases extra-textual factors such as the need to whitewash the behavior of a biblical hero, or to highlight rabbinical ethical principles are more discernible than in other examples and play a more significant role in the interpretation of a specific word.⁵

The results are anthological and even disjointed; they cannot be automatically expected to provide a unified picture and interpretation of an episode or a character. In fact, these elements of midrashic technique(s) and the complications they engender can already been seen when *Genesis Rabbah* takes up the first introduction of Hagar in the biblical account, in Gen 16:1: “She [Sarah] had an Egyptian slave woman whose name was Hagar.” I will thus use the two comments on this verse to frame the central issues of this paper.

The first of these is: “‘She had an Egyptian slave woman’—she was a *melog* slave, and [Abraham] was obligated regarding her maintenance and was not permitted to sell her” (Gen. Rab. 45:1).⁶ The midrash first notes that Hagar is introduced as a slave who belongs to Sarah. That is, the midrash takes notice of what might seem to be a minor linguistic feature (“*she* had”), but one that can be read as having import within the interlocking regulations of marital property—in which the property of a married woman was under the control of her husband to a significant

5. Carol Bakhos, “The Family of Abraham in ‘Genesis Rabbah,’” in *Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context*, ed. Sarit Kattan Gribetz et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 126.

6. All translations of primary and secondary sources are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Citations from *Genesis Rabbah* are based on J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 3 vols. (repr., Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965).

degree—and slavery, as imagined in the rabbinic legal system;⁷ the rabbis thus read the story through the lens of their own social and legal institutions, such as marriage, marital property, and slave holding. This move serves to situate Abraham and Sarah within the proper normative bounds for Jewish men and women, as understood by the rabbis, and to identify them as righteous persons (often, but not always, in contrast to Hagar, as will be seen below) and justify the actions they take, thereby highlighting the religio-ethnic distinctions between characters.⁸ Moreover, both servitude and gender are foregrounded. Hagar is enslaved to Sarah, but both must relate to Abraham from a position of subordination.

In the continuation of the explication of verse 1, which turns to the introduction of Hagar's Egyptian identity and addresses the implicit question of why this point should be worthy of note, the midrash is working all the more on multiple levels and taking on multiple points of possible interest at once:

Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai said: Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh.⁹ When Pharaoh saw the things that were done on Sarah's behalf in his house,¹⁰ he took his daughter and gave her to [Sarah]; he said: Better that my daughter be a slave woman in this house, rather than the mistress in another household. This is what it says: "She had an Egyptian slave woman and her name was Hagar" (Gen 16:1). He said: "This is your reward [אגריך]."

7. As Adin Steinsaltz explains *melog*: "All this property remains hers even after she is married, and the husband is not permitted to sell it, although he is entitled to benefits from its ... 'fruits' (profits). The husband must take care of this property, although he is not responsible if it decreases in value, provided that the loss was not caused intentionally by him. The property is returned to the wife ... and any increase or decrease in its value ... is *her* profit or loss." See Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide* (New York: Random House, 1989), 230.

8. See also Chana Safrai, "The Image of Hagar in Rabbinic Literature" [Hebrew], in *Kor'ot miBereshit: Nashim Yotsrot Kotvot al Sefer Bereshit*, ed. Ruti Ravitsky (Tel Aviv: Sifre Hemed, 1999), 166.

9. The parallel/adaptation in the later Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer (approximately eighth–ninth century) suggests that Hagar's mother was of the status of concubine, rather than wife, to Pharaoh (see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 328–30).

10. "And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (Gen 12:17). See also Gen. Rab. 40:17, in which the nature of what happened to Pharaoh and his house is imagined.

Also Abimelech, when he saw the miracles that were done for Sarah in his house (Gen 20), he took his daughter and gave [her] to her [Sarah]. [He said: Better that my daughter be a slave woman in this household, rather than the mistress in another household.] This is what it says: “Royal princesses are among your favorites” [—(these are) the daughters of (two) kings]; “the consort stands at your right hand, decked in gold of Ophir” (Ps 45:10)—this is Sarai. (Gen. Rab. 45:1)

Several common midrashic techniques are evident here. The notion that Hagar was a gift from Pharaoh to Sarah in connection with the events of Gen 12 does not originate with rabbinic midrash—indeed, it is a reasonable derivation from the explicit identification in the biblical account of Hagar as Egyptian—and is found in the Genesis Apocryphon, a pseudopigraphical composition known from Qumran.¹¹ The midrash, however, includes wordplay, that is, it is built on the similar sound of Hagar’s name and the Hebrew/Aramaic word for “reward” or “wages”—*agar*—to bolster the identification of Hagar as gift from Pharaoh to Sarah, if not necessarily her further identity as his own daughter. The way in which the verse from Psalms functions here must also be noted. It may be that the verse in some way generates the midrashic motif, that is, it drives the development of the theme from Hagar being a “common” slave gifted by Pharaoh to Sarah, to being his own daughter and a princess. Alternately, the relationship can be understood inversely; having developed this theme for other, external reasons, the midrashist might then have recalled a verse that could be applied to the theme already established. Or something in between: Does the creation of theme and then its linkage to the verse perhaps drive, in a more limited way, the extension of this theme to encompass Abimelech’s

11. “It seems reasonable to assume that [this motif] did not originate from any narrative necessity in this context ..., but from the problems posed by an entirely different verse”—i.e., Gen 16:1—“Now how could Hagar have come into her possession if not in Egypt.... Thus we have a simple *midrash* that answers the question of how Sarah acquired an Egyptian maidservant.” See Joshua Levinson, “Bodies and Bo[a]rders: Emerging Fictions of Identity in Late Antiquity,” *HTR* 93 (2000): 350. See also Miller, “Surrogate, Slave and Deviant,” 145; Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 111. Bakhos also notes, “According to *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, Hagar is Nimrod’s granddaughter”—i.e., in addition to Pharaoh’s daughter (Nimrod, a minor figure mentioned in Gen 10:8–12 becomes, in rabbinic legend, an antagonist of Abraham in his years before migrating by divine command to Canaan; see, e.g., episodes described in Gen. Rab. 38–39).

(otherwise nameless and biblically unattested) daughter?¹² In any case, in adding the dimension of Hagar's royal birth, the passage amplifies class as a central element of the story and of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. Additionally, Hagar (and the unnamed daughter of Abimelek), regardless of her social status as birth, functions here by virtue of her gender as a commodified object of exchange, who can be bestowed by her father as a gift. One wonders (though not really) whether the rabbis could conceive of a foreign ruler giving over his son in the same way.

Thus, even in what we have seen thus far, the midrashic material suggests that even if it is unlikely for there to be such thing as *the* rabbinic attitude or approach toward these characters, nonetheless rabbinic readings of the narratives in which Hagar appears (and also those in which Hagar reappears in the guise of Keturah) seem an obvious site for seeking out the multiple and intersectional issues of identity and social positioning to which these episodes and these characters may lend themselves, perhaps *precisely* because they resist privileging a single aspect of the story or creating a neat dichotomy between Sarah and Hagar.¹³ Thus, in this essay I hope to follow in a similar path to that of Bakhos, who writes in her survey of midrashic works (though not limited to Genesis Rabbah) on Abraham's family, "We do have some license to make observations about the attitudinal nature of interpretations.... We can observe portrayals in the aggregate and note what portrayals, if any, are, in fact prevalent or at least possible."¹⁴ That is, even if other elements—language, intertextual readings—provoke some of the midrashic moves here, there are also certainly issues of ideology and culture being expressed. In keeping with my title, these might be divided into questions about class and Hagar's status within the family,

12. Note that this is presented as the opinion of a single specific rabbi, albeit one widely recognized as an outstanding figure of the Tannaitic (early rabbinic) period: Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai. Does its inclusion here and/or its attribution signal that the redactor(s) of Genesis Rabbah felt that it nonetheless should be received as a more generally held and received understanding of Hagar's identity? Although this is a significant question, it is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately answer it.

13. See also Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 109: "Rabbinic approaches to biblical figures must take into account philological as well as theological factors; it is not simply a matter of exonerating Jewish ancestors. Perhaps predictably, given the different textual and extratextual factors at play, the rabbinic attitude toward Hagar is inconsistent and nuanced. That is, her depiction in rabbinic literature does not fit neatly into a dyadic framework that deems her entirely good or completely wicked."

14. Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 126.

such as in the contrast established in the midrash between slave woman (*shifhah*) and mistress/wife (*matrona* or *gevirah*); ethnicity and religious identity, that is Hagar's Egyptian origins and her integration, or not, into the faith of Abraham and Sarah; and gender, since both Sarah and Hagar live as women in a patriarchal system, indeed in the ur-patriarchal narratives of Israelite culture. These are, of course, deeply intertwined in this midrash and throughout the commentary of *Genesis Rabbah*, but in the rest of this essay I will endeavor to briefly isolate and examine each.

1. Class/Slavery/the Family Unit

As in the biblical text, there is tension in the midrashic materials as to the nature of Hagar's status, relative to the two primary members of the household, Sarah and Abraham, and her place in the family unit, given her shifting roles as Sarah's slave and then mother of Abraham's child. As just discussed, Hagar is first introduced in *Genesis Rabbah* as a slave who belongs particularly to Sarah, but at the same time imagined as one who was raised as the daughter of Egyptian royalty; these contradictions of Hagar's status persist throughout passages that discuss her in *Genesis Rabbah*. Hagar is a woman who could have been a mistress in her own home and culture, but instead has been enslaved, a slavery that is apologetically presented as a benefit to her.

Chana Safrai notes another (perhaps concurrent) motivation for this exegetical move, in addition to those already suggested, that may be based as much in concern for the status of other characters, particularly Abraham, as for socially locating Hagar herself: "If Hagar is an Egyptian, then it is fitting for Abraham to be connected to the best that is of Egypt—to Pharaoh, in his honor and in himself."¹⁵ Indeed, in addressing Gen 16:3, an anonymous comment claims she is given to Abraham in the status of wife (this is the word used in Gen 16:3) rather than a lesser status: "And

15. Safrai, "Image of Hagar," 171. Although Safrai does not make this point explicit, note how she frames the woman (Hagar) as the object of exchange (of status as well as of her person) between men (Abraham and Pharaoh). Irene Pabst makes a similar point about the identification elsewhere of Hagar as a proselyte: "even if the interest behind this interpretation might have been that Abraham's wife should not be a gentile woman." See Pabst, "The Interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar Stories in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature: Sarah and Hagar as Female Representations of Identity and Difference," *LDiff* 1 (2003), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019g>.

she gave her to Abram [her husband as a wife]' (Gen 16:3)—and not to another; 'as a wife' and not as a concubine" (Gen. Rab. 45:3). Through her relationship with Abraham, Hagar seems to regain her earlier status as a woman destined by her elevated birth to be a mistress.

Yet this is ambivalently so, at best. Already in the biblical account, Hagar's reaction to her pregnancy is described as "her *mistress* became lowered in her eyes" (Gen 16:4); Sarah is still the mistress in relation to Hagar, and ought to be respected as such. The midrash elaborates:

Noblewomen would come [to Sarah] to ask after her well-being, and she said to them: Go out and ask after the well-being of this poor woman [Hagar]. And Hagar would say to them: Sarai, my mistress, is not inwardly what she appears outwardly; she looks righteous, but is not. If she were righteous—look how many years she did not become pregnant, and I became pregnant in one night!¹⁶ (Gen. Rab. 45:4)

Hagar both misunderstands the situation and speaks insolently about Sarah. For the moment, I want to note that she does not "know her place" socially (nor religiously, a point I will take up below), referring to Sarah still as her mistress even as she impugns Sarah before other noblewomen—noblewomen who are clearly meant to be Sarah's peers in this narrative rather than Hagar's. The author of this midrash assumes Sarah's socially superior position, and thus may provide justification for her subsequent acts against Hagar.

Indeed, from Hagar's unstable place in the household follows a later passage that suggests that when dispute arises between Sarah and Hagar, Abraham feels constrained in how he may treat her:

Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave woman is in your hands..." (Gen 16:6). He said: I am concerned [to act] neither to her benefit nor to her detriment.... This woman [Hagar]; after we have afflicted her, can we [again] enslave her? ... After we have made her a mistress, can we make her a slave? (Gen. Rab. 45:6)¹⁷

These passages, then, model the ways in which the terms *slave woman* and *mistress*, the tensions between them, and Hagar's shifting status between

16. This detail is presented, and debated, in the passage immediately preceding this one.

17. For a fuller version of this passage (and regarding the toseftan parallel), see below.

one and the other function as a recurring theme for the rabbinic interpreters of Genesis Rabbah.

Sarah, in any case, appears to have no compunction in treating Hagar primarily as a slave, either in the biblical account or in the rabbinic portrayal(s) of her in Genesis Rabbah. Explicating what is meant by the statement in Gen 16:6 that “Sarai dealt harshly with her,” two Amoraic rabbis offer the following suggestions:

It is written, “Sarah treated her harshly and she fled . . .” (Gen 16:6). Rabbi Abba said: She [Sarai] prevented her [Hagar] from [having] sexual contact [with Abraham]; Rabbi Berekhiah said: She slapped her in the face with [her] slippers; Rabbi Berekhiah in the name of Rabbi Abba [said]: She gave her buckets and bath clothes [to carry] for the bathhouse. (Gen. Rab. 45:6)

While Judith Baskin states, “Sarah’s less than admirable behavior is justified: a mistress may, after all, do as she wishes with her servant,”¹⁸ I would suggest that the midrash can also be read as more straightforwardly “illustrative.” Each of these comments operates with an underlying understanding that one of the definitional aspects of slavery is to be person without bodily integrity; the owner may exert control over the slave as a sexual being, or otherwise freely molest the slave’s body (as by beatings). Alternatively or in addition, Rabbi Berekhiah’s comment in the name of Rabbi Abba suggests that Sarah demanded that Hagar perform tasks (carry things to the baths for Sarah) that would have been readily recognized in the rabbinic and surrounding Greco-Roman milieu as particularly appropriate for slaves. Perhaps the onerousness of the tasks (such as carrying heavy buckets) is also intended to induce a miscarriage.¹⁹ The biblical text states that Sarah dealt “harshly” with Hagar; the midrash delineates measures that are indeed harsh, but that are also known to be within the power of a slaveholder to impose on a slave. It is not clear whether Sarah is right, but she is within her rights.²⁰

18. Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 152.

19. I thank Tal Ilan for this insight. See also below for a source in which Sarah seeks this very outcome by another means.

20. But see also Gen. Rab. 45:5; 53:13, cited below, in which Sarah’s response to Hagar (and Ishmael) functions in a rather less legal manner.

That said, Hagar's relowered status is also presented (in an anonymous voice) as appropriate in the commentary to Gen 16:7–8, when Hagar flees Sarah's treatment:

"[An angel of the Lord found her ...] and said: Hagar, slave woman of Sarai, etc." (Gen 16:7–8). A proverb says: If one person says you have donkey's ears, do not believe it; if two [tell you], get yourself a halter. Thus Abraham said: "Your *slave woman* is in your hands ..." (Gen 16:6), the angel said: "Hagar, *slave woman* of Sarai, etc." (Gen 16:8), [and therefore] "And she said, 'I am fleeing from Sarai *my mistress*'" (Gen 16:8). (Gen. Rab. 45:7)²¹

Nor does the onus for treating her in accordance with her earlier status as a slave fall entirely on Sarah. When Hagar is banished from Abraham's household in Gen 21, the midrash notes the pitcher of water given to her by the patriarch (Gen 21:14) and states that carrying the pitcher is meant to make visible her status as a slave:

"And Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water" (Gen 21:14)—the household of Abraham were indulgent [in giving to and doing for others], as it is said: "And Abraham rose early ..." [and yet] "and he placed upon Hagar" [just the bread and water] (Gen 21:14)—for that was the way of slaves, that they would have [to carry] water in pitchers. (Gen. Rab. 53:14)²²

The explanation of his act not only deems this an appropriate way to treat slaves but proposes that it serves the additional purpose of visually marking Hagar as a slave to others she might encounter, not to be mistaken for a mistress of the patriarch's household, if ever she was one.

2. Ethnicity/Religious Identity

To be an Egyptian in the framework of the patriarchal narrative is to be both an ethnic and a religious other (though this is true of Canaanite peoples as well). Our opening passage and others repeatedly emphasize, in

21. The angel also refers to Sarah as Hagar's mistress in Gen 16:9, confirming Hagar's (re)acceptance of the nature of the relationship. See also b. B. Qam. 92b.

22. See also Pirke R. El. 30, which suggests that Abraham gave Hagar a formal divorce before sending her out, but also describes a visible sign of servitude he placed on Hagar.

varying ways, that association with Abraham and Sarah's household, whatever Hagar's original status, ought to be seen as a benefit for this Egyptian woman. So, for example, one comment imagines Sarah attempting to persuade Hagar that willingly becoming Abraham's sexual partner is also a great advantage and honor for her: "'And Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian ...' (Gen 16:3). She persuaded [literally: took] her with words:²³ How happy [it would be] for you to be joined to such a holy person!"²⁴ (Gen. Rab. 45:3). But what exactly is the nature of such a "benefit"? To what extent does Hagar become integrated not only into Abraham's family (as discussed in the previous section) but also in the divine destiny set out for Abraham and the religious commitments it entails—or to what extent does she remain and/or by what means is she further marginalized? In this realm particularly, there seems to be no clear single answer or approach.

Joshua Levinson notes concerning our opening passage, imagining Hagar's royal lineage as Pharaoh's daughter, that "What is illustrated here ... is the emergence of a new type of character and plot, wherein a religious experience brings about a double transformation: the crossing of religio-ethnic boundaries coupled with the acceptance of a subservient social status."²⁵ That is, while this may appear on the surface to be a kind of conversion story, it is in fact, he claims, something somewhat different:

In this narrative, a character, usually of prominent social standing, crosses ethno-religious boundaries by virtue of a religious experience. This character, however, does not convert, but rather assumes some relationship of affiliation to the Jewish community. This relationship is composed of two characteristics: a familial affinity, coupled with subordinate status.²⁶

23. This is a known trope in Tannaitic midrash as well, as, e.g., that when a biblical text mentions a person "taking" another/others, this should be understood as verbal persuasion. See examples in Mek. R. Yishm., *massekhta de-va-yehi* 1 (and similarly Mek. R. Shim. bar Yoh. 14:6), Sifre Num. 92; 141, and particularly Sifra, *tzav*, *mekhilta de-miluim* 2.

24. The word used here, *guf*, most often means body. The passage thus deftly catches both the physical and spiritual joinings that are meant to take place simultaneously. I will return below to the anomaly here that an enslaved person has to be persuaded at all, rather than simply compelled to comply.

25. Levinson, "Bodies and Bo(a)rders," 350.

26. Levinson, "Bodies and Bo(a)rders," 351. Note that at least one additional version of this theme appears in Gen. Rab. 82, in the identification of Timna, a concubine of one of Esau's sons who is mentioned by name (rather anomalously) in Gen 36:12.

Focusing on this motif (together with other themes in Genesis Rabbah that are not discussed in this essay), Levinson reads it in light of the phenomenon of Godfearers within the Jewish community of Roman Palestine and the western Jewish diaspora in the early centuries of the Common Era.

Yet in one location, commenting on Gen 21:16 (which speaks of Hagar in her despair after being banished from Abraham's household), Hagar is referred to as גֵּר (*ger*; indeed, her very name, הֵגֶר, can be taken as "the *ger*"), a term that biblically denotes a resident alien but that had already gained the additional meaning of "proselyte" in Tannaitic rabbinic Hebrew:

This is what was written: "You keep count of my wanderings" (Ps 56:9)—you have kept count of my wanderings; "put my tears into your flask" (Ps 56:9)—in reference to that very carrier of a water skin [Hagar]. "Into your record" (Ps 56:9), as it is written [elsewhere] in the book of Psalms: "Hear my prayer, oh Lord, give ear to my cries, do not disregard my tears" (Ps 39:13)—if you will say that because she was a stranger/proselyte she was [*particularly*] beloved, so too regarding me, "for I am a stranger, resident with you, like all my forbearers" (Ps 39:13).²⁷ (Gen. Rab. 53:14)

Much as Safrai (cited in the previous section) suggests that imaging Hagar as a royal daughter means that Abraham thus associates only with the "best" of Egypt, so too Irene Pabst observes that "the interest behind this *midrash* might have been that Abraham's wife should not be a Gentile woman"; nonetheless, she concludes that this theme may also be read positively:

This attribute stresses Hagar's faith and strengthens her positive image. Remarkably the *midrash* narrows the difference between Hagar as non-Israelite and Sarah as Israelite.... In the rabbinic interpretation, Hagar becomes a symbol for outsiders ... who can have access to the community. This interpretation reflects the openness of Judaism towards proselytes and also its interest in attracting them.²⁸

Safrai adds, "Hagar as a proselyte is especially beloved to the Holy Blessed One specifically in the time of her distress ..., and she serves as a prototype

27. That is, the author of this midrashic passage is suggesting that God's mercy toward Hagar is a model for God's mercy toward all who cry out in need; and if one might think that God shows special mercy to Hagar as a convert/stranger, then Ps 39:13 allows all to claim the status of converts/strangers and thus demand similar mercy.

28. Pabst, "Interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar Stories," 11.

of the convert both by virtue of her name [Ha-ger] and by the force of her place biblically, as the first convert in the tradition of Jewish culture.”²⁹

Safrai also hints at the connection between enslavement and conversion in rabbinic law/thought: “As we have seen, the two components are connected as one. Foreignness/Conversion (*ha-gerut*) is joined to sale and loss of freedom. Hagar is sold by her father for a righteous reason.... There is, as it were, benefit in the status of a slave woman in the household of Abraham!”³⁰ Thus, whereas Levinson seems to insist that Hagar has to be something other than a convert if she is enslaved, the dichotomy might not be so neat. Indeed, as has been well documented, slavery and manumission functioned in both rabbinic and Roman culture as a site of acculturation/conversion for those from foreign backgrounds.³¹

Hagar is also able to participate at least to some degree in the privileged relationship between the household of Abraham and Sarah and God:

Rabbi Hiyya said: Come and see how great [is the difference] between earlier and later [generations]. What did Manoah [father of Samson] say to his wife? “We shall surely die because we have seen God” (Judg 13:22). Yet Hagar is a slave woman, and sees five angels,³² and is not afraid of them! ... Rabbi Yitzhaq said: “She sees to the ways of her house” (Prov 31:27)—the members of Abraham’s household were seers, and [thus] she was used to them. (Gen. Rab. 45:7)

As Safrai notes, however, once again this interpretation might be read as much (or more) to Abraham’s credit as to Hagar’s:

At first glance this is an additional merit of Hagar, yet it is of interest to examine what the exegetes conclude from this literary-*midrash* treatment. In their assessment, the matter testifies to the special status of Abraham—

29. Safrai, “Image of Hagar,” 166. She goes on to also consider the connection of Hagar to the biblical concept of the “resident alien” (גר תושב).

30. Safrai, “Image of Hagar,” 166.

31. See particularly Natalie Dohrman, “Manumission and Transformation in Jewish and Roman Law,” in *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context*, ed. Dohrmann (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 51–65, for a discussion of this process in the rabbinic/Jewish context.

32. See the comments immediately preceding this one for a discussion of how many angels communicated with Hagar. Similarly, see also Gen. Rab. 75:4 and b. Me’il. 17b.

if the slave woman in his household can reach an honored standing of this sort, how much more is the master of the household great.³³

Similarly, Hagar's contact with the divine also becomes for one rabbi an expression of Hagar's misguided hubris in relation to Sarah, connecting this theme to our previous one. After she receives the revelation of Ishmael's birth and future (Gen 16:9–10), Hagar is imagined as noting her privilege to see an angel even when not in the presence of Sarah, which further elicits a rabbinic comment in the form of a parable:

“For she said: Have I not gone on seeing after he saw me!” (Gen 16:13). She said: Is it not enough for me to have spoken with angels, but also [to be promised] royalty? ... Is it not enough to have engaged in communication [with the divine] with my mistress? But [also] on my own! Shmuel said: This is like a noblewoman, to whom the king said: Pass before me. She passed before him, leaning on her slave woman and pressing her face [against the slave woman, so that the king would not see her]. [Thus], the slave woman saw him, and she did not see him. (Gen. Rab. 45:10)

The midrash links Sarah's social status as a noblewoman with her religious superiority; the slave's social presumptuousness and insolence (in gazing at the king) becomes her religious presumptuousness vis-à-vis the God of Abraham. It is actually the modest mistress who is the one who properly approached royalty/the divine, and thus the credit is due not to Hagar but rather to Sarah.

Elsewhere, Egyptian ethnicity and/or polytheistic origins remain potentially threatening, so that, for example, Hagar's continued piety and loyalty to monotheism and the Israelite God after her banishment are open to disputing views. Hagar's statements and actions at the well after her banishment with Ishmael are interpreted by some as demonstrating a lack of proper faith in divine providence:

“And she went and sat opposite [מנגד] at a bowshot away [קשת]” (Gen 21:16). ... Rabbi Berekhiah said: Like one who speaks rebelliously [כמטחת]³⁴ against on High; she said: Yesterday you said to me: “I will

33. Safrai, “Image of Hagar,” 167.

34. The midrash is a wordplay on the root *tvh* in Gen 21:16, which has, according to Marcus Jastrow, two distinct (if related) families of meanings, one “to press,” including pressing the bow string, i.e., shooting an arrow from a bow (as in the verse), while

greatly increase your offspring” (Gen 16:10); now he is dying of thirst (Gen. Rab. 53:13). “She went and filled the water skin” (Gen 21:19)—this states that she was lacking in faith (Gen. Rab. 53:14).³⁵

Similarly, Hagar’s origins reassert themselves in the raising of her son after their expulsion:

“He lived in the wilderness of Paran . . .” (Gen 21:21)—Rabbi Yitzhaq said: Throw a stick into the air and it will rest at [the place of] its origins. Thus, as it is written: “And she had an Egyptian slave and her name was Hagar” (Gen 16:1); therefore it is written: “and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt” (Gen 21:21). (Gen. Rab. 53:15)

For those who associate Hagar with Keturah, however, the new name is read as a hint at Hagar’s fine qualities and her faithfulness to God, and to proper Israelite behavioral expectations during her banishment:³⁶

“Abraham yet again took a wife [whose name was Keturah]” (Gen 25:1)—Rabbi Yehudah said: This is Hagar. Rabbi Nehemiah said to him: But it is written: “Abraham yet again [ויסף] took a wife!” [He answered:] [He took her] in accordance with the divine word, as you say: “And the Lord [ויסף] spoke to me” (Isa 8:5). He said to him: But it is written: “her name was Keturah” (Gen 25:1)! He said to him: Because she was perfumed [מקושרת] with commandments and good deeds. He said to him: But it is written: “but to the sons of the concubines [פילגשים]³⁷ that were Abraham’s . . .” (Gen 25:6)! He said to him: it is written [i.e., may be pronounced as] פילגשם [likely reading the word as “the concubine/*pilegesh* there/*sham*”]—[regarding] she who sat at

the other (activated in the midrash by Rabbi Berekhiah) includes “to speak rebelliously,” derived from a meaning of “coat, or cast (as with mud).” See Morris Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (repr., New York: Judaica, 1996), 522–23.

35. Pirque R. El. 30 goes so far as to suggest that Hagar’s “wandering” (Gen 21:14) indicates a return to idolatrous practices.

36. And her faithfulness to Abraham—see the continuation of Gen. Rab. 61:4, cited below. Again, see Pirque R. El. 30 (note that this text contains some of the same ambivalence found in Genesis Rabbah). See also Tanh. Yelam., *hayyei Sarah* 8.

37. That is, “concubines” in the plural—whereas if Hagar and Keturah are the same person, the Bible would provide evidence only of a single concubine.

the well (see Gen 16:14) and said to the Life of the universe: See my humiliation!³⁸ (Gen. Rab. 61:4)

Hagar/Keturah is a woman of piety and righteous deeds, one who beseeched the one God in her time of need and was duly rewarded as such in Abraham's ultimate reembrace of her.

Yet the stories about Hagar in the Bible also present religious challenges to the authors who are cited in and who redacted *Genesis Rabbah*, which have as much to do with the righteousness of Abraham and Sarah as they do with Hagar. Why were Abraham and Sarah unable to have children together, while Hagar became pregnant with apparent ease? And how could they act as they did, Abraham in taking her as a wife, Sarah in her subsequent harsh treatment of Hagar (and Abraham in failing to intervene), and both in her final banishment? The story in Gen. Rab. 45:4 (cited in the previous section), of Sarah, Hagar, and the noblewomen who come to visit, is an attempt to answer several of these questions at once, suggesting that Hagar brought her treatment on herself by religious (as well as social) presumptuousness: "Sarai, my mistress, is not inwardly what she appears outwardly; she looks righteous, but is not. If she were righteous—look how many years she did not become pregnant, and I became pregnant in one night!" (Gen. Rab. 45:4). Yet the author of this particular midrash more readily presumes than explains Sarah's righteousness. Sarah's subsequent acts against Hagar are justified but do not directly answer Hagar's original challenge: Why shouldn't Sarah's barrenness be understood as divine disfavor? Likely the rabbinic interpreter here relies on a reader's familiarity with the rest of the *Genesis* narrative, in which God declares that Sarah will be the mother of Abraham's true heir (that is, Isaac); when this in fact happens, Sarah's status as the righteous woman worthy of bearing him is (retroactively) confirmed.

However, Abraham and Sarah's behavior is not always justified or presented positively, especially when Hagar and Ishmael are later banished. In this vein we may recall that in Gen. Rab. 53:14 (cited above) Abraham is faulted for apparently giving Hagar only a bottle of water and some bread, despite his largesse in other situations. Sarah's morally dubious behavior against Hagar, meanwhile, is in some locations exacerbated rather than justified by the rabbis of the midrash. While she may have been within

38. See also the partial parallel in Gen. Rab. 60:14.

her rights to abuse Hagar as a slave (as in Gen. Rab. 45:6), it is also twice suggested that Sarah cast an evil eye on others in the story, first Hagar and then Ishmael:

“[The Lord decide] between me and you [ובינך] (Gen 16:5)... Rabbi Hoshiaia said: It is written (as) “your son” [ובנך]. It is already written: “And he cohabitated with Hagar and she conceived” (Gen 16:4). [Thus] what does [the following phrase] mean to teach: “Behold, you are pregnant” (Gen 16:11)?³⁹ Rather, it teaches that [Sarah]⁴⁰ cast an evil eye on her and she miscarried her [first] fetus. (Gen. Rab. 16:5)⁴¹

“He placed (them) over her shoulder [together with the child] ...” (21:14)—he was twenty-seven years old,⁴² and you said “He placed [them] over her shoulder [together with the child] ...”?! Rather, it teaches that [Sarah]⁴³ cast an evil eye on him, and fever and vomiting came upon him. Know that this is so, since it is written “when the water was gone from the skin” (21:15) for it is the way of the sick person to drink constantly. (Gen. Rab. 53:13)

The idea that Abraham returned Hagar (in the guise of Keturah) as his wife after the death of Sarah is, then, perhaps an attempt to mitigate his original behavior in the banishment, if not Sarah's.

39. Note that this midrash builds both on wordplay and on what may be understood as a genuine gap in the text: Why must Hagar be informed by a divine messenger that she is pregnant if her pregnancy is already known to her and to the other actors in the story (and indeed seems to have precipitated the following events of the story)?

40. Sarah's name is missing in the Theodor-Albeck edition but appears added in brackets in the commonly used Vilna printing. Also, the two elements of the midrash (the revocalizing and rereading of Gen 16:5, the juxtaposition and harmonization of Gen 16:4, 11) are reversed in the two versions; my translation follows Theodor-Albeck.

41. Recall also that onerous tasks placed by Sarah on Hagar might be understood to have had an intent to induce miscarriage.

42. It is a common midrashic move, in this collection and well beyond, for the rabbis to attempt to calculate (and often disagree about) exactly when biblical events took place relative to each other, where the Bible itself is silent on the matter. The means by which this age for Ishmael is calculated is not directly relevant here, however.

43. Again, the name is absent from Theodor-Albeck and bracketed in the Vilna printing. See *The Talmud* (Vilna: Romm Widow & Brothers, 1908–1909).

3. Gender

In addition to noting what is and what is not stated in the opening midrash about Hagar's religious identification, Levinson cogently writes, "It is worth noting that, whereas Pharaoh is the beneficiary of this new religious experience, his daughter is the coin of its expression."⁴⁴ It is no new insight that women have often served as objects of exchange in relations between men.⁴⁵ Indeed, imagining Hagar as the daughter of Pharaoh, given over by her father into servitude, has echoes of the biblical and rabbinic law that an Israelite father has this control over his daughter to sell her into servitude (Exod 21:7–11), and that one outcome might be marriage to her new master or to his son. It is this very law, in fact, that is one of the two put into Abraham's mouth in the midrash to Gen 16:6, in which he attempts to avoid responsibility for a decision as to Hagar's status as mistress or slave:

"Abram said to Sarai: Your maidservant is in your hands ..." (Gen 16:6)—He said: I am concerned (to act) neither to her benefit nor to her detriment. It is written, "Since you had your will of her, [you must not enslave her]" (Deut 21:14)—and this woman [i.e., Hagar], after we have afflicted her, can we [again] enslave her? I am concerned [to act] neither to her benefit nor to her detriment. And it is written: "he shall not have the right to sell her to outsiders, since he broke faith with her" (Exod 21:8)—and this woman, after we have made her a mistress, can we make her a slave [again]? I am concerned neither with her benefit nor with her detriment. (Gen. Rab. 45:6)⁴⁶

Indeed, the other passage cited is that of the "beautiful woman" captured by an Israelite man in war (Deut 21:10–14), a law that also polices the strange and

44. Levinson, "Bodies and Bo(a)rders," 350. I have already hinted at this point in the introduction above. Note that this gendered aspect is also present in the midrashic take on Timnah, mentioned in the notes above.

45. Levinson cites theorists such as Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray, who have addressed this topic.

46. See also the parallel version of this story/tradition in t. Sotah 5:12; note that neither of the verses from Exodus or Deuteronomy are quoted, and that Abraham suggests that they have made Hagar a "queen" as well as a "mistress" (and there are several other additional elements). On these toseftan materials regarding the expulsion of Hagar, see Ronit Nikolsky, "Ishmael Sacrificed Grasshoppers," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, ed. Martin Goodman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 243–62.

complex boundary between exploitation of the female body and ensuring her “rights” of protection in patriarchal terms, that is, in marriage to her captor.

As already noted above, one of the hallmarks of slavery is a lack of bodily autonomy, and for female slaves particularly, though hardly exclusively, this has meant that the rights and privileges of the free over the enslaved include sexual (ab)use of the enslaved body. As such, it is not surprising, from a historical perspective, that biblical characters—not only Abraham but similarly his grandson Jacob (Gen 30)—should make use of female slaves in their households as sexual objects and objects of impregnation and procreation. In Gen. Rab. 45:6 Rabbi Abba bar Kahana imagines that Sarah is able to keep Hagar from sexual contact with Abraham (and that this constitutes treating Hagar harshly). Yet in the explication of Gen 16:3 in Gen. Rab. 45:3, Sarah has somewhat less than full control, it would seem, over the sexual disposition of her slave, and instead attempts, as already mentioned, to persuade Hagar that having offspring with her master is to her own benefit. Is this a function of Hagar’s unstable positioning between being a slave and being a princess/mistress? Or might it reflect on a gendered differential in power over slaves even among the free persons in a patriarchal household?⁴⁷

The religious competition between Sarah and Hagar also plays out against the background of rabbinic concepts about gender, gender roles, and appropriate gendered behavior. Sarah is not just a noblewoman before the king while Hagar is a servant, but Sarah’s nobility is exemplified in modesty, a trait heavily gendered in rabbinic thought. Similarly, for those who identify Hagar with Keturah, the merit that thereby accrues to her is also understood in a particularly gendered way, one that emphasizes not just her religious fidelity to Abraham’s God, but, as significantly, her sexual fidelity to Abraham himself:

Rabbi Berekhiah said: Even though it says: “and she went and wandered [in the wilderness]” (Gen 21:14), shall you say that anyone was suspected [of illicit behavior] because of her? Thus, it teaches “and her name was

47. It may be noteworthy that a midrash to Gen 30:2–3 in Gen. Rab. 71 relates that it was Jacob who reminded Rachel of what his grandmother had done in introducing her slave woman to Abraham as a surrogate mother, thereby suggesting that Rachel could do the same; that is, the impetus comes from him rather than her.

Keturah" (Gen 25:1) like one who seals up a treasury and finds it [later] with its seal [intact].⁴⁸ (Gen. Rab. 61:4)

Of course, such exclusivity is not expected of a man in the biblical system; indeed, the whole story and set of relationships it engenders presume a sex right granted to men and denied to women. Against this background, the midrash also presents interpretations that construct a more fundamental competition between women, one contested on the playing field of male attention and bearing children/sons for men. The evil eye that the midrash imagines Sarah casting not once but twice on Hagar and her offspring obviously fits this pattern. Not only does antagonism over social positioning and status in the household trump any solidarity between the two, but gender itself seems to mitigate against common cause or even expressions of goodwill of one toward the other.

Finally, even in light of the religious as well as social competition between the two, both Sarah and Hagar stand in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the God of Abraham. Hagar's encounters with angels, whether understood to her credit, or to the credit of Abraham's household, or as a vehicle of her misguided presumptuousness, are in any case a secondary form of communication with the divine at best. Nor is Hagar so limited only on account of her national, religious, or social status, but additionally and even primarily by virtue of her gender. In this, Sarah shares her disadvantage, as in this commentary to Gen 16:13: "God never engaged in conversation with a woman except with that righteous woman,⁴⁹ and that was by circumvention.... But it is written: 'And she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her' (Gen 16:13)! Rabbi Yehoshua ben Rabbi Nehemiah said in the name of Rabbi Idi: [That was] by means of an angel" (Gen. Rab. 45:10). To be female, whatever one's ethnic and religious origins, whatever one's status within the patriarchal household, is ultimately to be in a diminished position in relationship to God, who grants women only limited access, if that, to Himself.

48. Likely playing on the root קתר in the meaning of "to tie," in Aramaic, hence "seal."

49. From what follows (in the segment elided here), it seems that this refers to Sarah, but context also allows for it to indicate Hagar.

Conclusion

Classical rabbinic midrash here in *Genesis Rabbah* and elsewhere is generated by many forces; innertextual and intertextual exegetical and ideological impulses meet and interact. Whatever its generating forces, though, clearly, the rabbinic exegeses of Hagar's story and the additional legends about her found in *Genesis Rabbah* are animated by and embody themes of gender, ethnicity, and class. Imagining Hagar as the daughter of Pharaoh given over by her father into servitude raises grounds for speculation on her religious, social, and gendered identity. More difficult, however, is to disentangle these themes, and in truth these function intersectionally in culture and the rabbinic imagination. Sarah's social superiority to and control over Hagar is also her religious superiority. Sarah and Hagar compete in the social and religious sphere, but are said to do so in particularly gendered ways, expressed through particularly "feminine" virtues such as modesty and sexual faithfulness. Just as the midrashic text is multivocal, and in it rabbis dispute, offer multiple interpretations, and generally do not seek consistency, so, too, we can and must find ways to cogently read the complexities and complications of Hagar's story.

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Alterities in the Midrash: Leviticus Rabbah on Biblical Women

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The midrash *Leviticus Rabbah*, a rabbinic commentary on verses in *Leviticus*, whose final version dates back to fifth-century Palestine,¹ contains passages that refer to biblical women in various hermeneutical contexts. These references either represent the oldest known sources—that is, they are from the Amoraic period (third–fourth centuries)—or they are even earlier traditions that underwent a process of reformulation, or at least recontextualization, when incorporated into this midrash. As expected by its considerable length (thirty-seven chapters), the number of references to biblical women is significant. At times these figures are simply mentioned in passing (such as in the verses where the rabbis refer to these women to support their arguments), but on other occasions, the biblical women are the focus of interpretations and, therefore, merit a more comprehensive study. It is not possible to examine all the information in each interpretive context in only a few pages. For that reason, the focus of this article is on the most representative aspects of biblical women, illustrating them with some examples.

More than fifteen years ago, Burton Visotzky dedicated one of the chapters of his book *Golden Bells and Pomegranates* to the study of women in *Leviticus Rabbah*. He saw women as a “special category” from an anthropological point of view and treated biblical figures on the same level as nonbiblical figures. As he noted, his aim was “to set the texts about

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1. Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 288–91.

women into the context of *Leviticus Rabbah* as a whole.” Visotzky classified the texts according to whether the rabbis’ attitudes toward women in them were generally positive, neutral, or negative.² The present chapter deals solely with biblical women. Their midrashic representation does not only reveal some (positive/negative) ideas about how the rabbis perceived them, but also shows how they updated their profiles when they submitted biblical women to a process of “rabbini- zation,” turning them into role models for their own standards.³ The biblical figures mentioned in *Leviticus Rabbah* were endowed with additional qualities or defects and, in certain cases, new religious, gentile/tribal, and family ties were established for them. In these “fictions,”⁴ the rabbis placed biblical women into the category of the “other” with respect to the normative, Jewish man. As women they were considered, using the words of Tal Ilan, as “belonging to categories that deviate from the normal.”⁵ In the case of foreign women, they played an additional role by filling the position of “external others” as well, since they could also be a religious “other.”⁶

This study, then, will show that biblical female figures are characterized in *Leviticus Rabbah* by particular features of alterity, since the rabbis’ interest in them was related to their roles as women and to the relationships they had established with their male relatives, both in their natal

2. Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 99–100.

3. According to Isaiah Gafni, the rabbis chose to represent “earlier figures or institutions of Jewish history ... in the image of the rabbinic world in which the sages functioned.” See Gafni, “Rabbinic Historiography and Representations of the Past,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 305. See also Günter Stemberger, *Das klassische Judentum: Kultur und Geschichte der rabbinischen Zeit* (Munich: Beck, 2009), 168.

4. Chaim Milikowsky, “Midrash as Fiction and Midrash as History: What Did the Rabbis Mean?,” in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, ed. Jo-Ann A. Brant, Charles W. Hendrick, and Chris Shea (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 117–27.

5. Tal Ilan, “The Woman as ‘Other’ in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripentrog (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 78.

6. Here I apply Christine Hayes’s terminology to the case of biblical women, when speaking of “internal others” “as mirror opposites of the rabbis” and “external others” “as mirror opposites of Israelites.” See Hayes, “The ‘Other’ in Rabbinic Literature,” in Fonrobert and Jaffee, *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud*, 243, 246.

family and in their adoptive one. From this perspective, the accounts about these women are classified according to the emphasis placed on (1) family ties (including those on their maternal side), (2) their sexuality, and (3) regarding foreign women, their influence on the people of Israel through a variety of mechanisms.

The references and traditions regarding biblical women in *Leviticus Rabbah* are found throughout the work in both sections into which the chapters are divided: the *petihta'ot* and the *gufa* ("proems" and "main text," respectively).⁷ In each chapter, a rabbinic commentary is offered for a verse from *Leviticus*, and it is associated with other biblical verses, usually from the Writings, originally without any apparent thematic connection. The verse (or verses) from *Leviticus*, the lemma of the chapter, is the (usually explicit) point of departure and arrival for the commentary, with opinions, stories, and other rabbinic materials interlaced in a web of interpretations that reveal the connection between the verse from *Leviticus* and the other verses. These interpretations are occasionally illustrated with examples related to female biblical characters. The allusions to them do not usually rely directly on the lemma verse (i.e., on *Leviticus*), but rather on the issue discussed in the different interpretative contexts (introduced or enlightened by other verses), in which aggadah plays an important role.⁸

1. The Visibility of Women in the Biblical Past

When the rabbis looked to the biblical past, they often made women clearly dependent on one or more male figures or, in the best of cases,

7. On the literary structure, see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 289–90, and the bibliography on 288; Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, 23–30; Burton L. Visotzky, "The Misnomers 'Petihah' and 'Homiletic Midrash' as Descriptions for *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana*," *JSQ* 18 (2011): 26–28.

8. There are few examples directly related to the lemma verse/s, as will be discussed below.

In her reading of a draft of this study, Tal Ilan brought to my attention the remarkable number of references to biblical women in *Leviticus Rabbah*, especially considering the fact that very few female characters are mentioned in *Leviticus* itself.

About the complexity of aggadah when it came to accommodating biblical figures within the parameters of the rabbinic present, see Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 5.

positioned them in terms of mutual dependency.⁹ The rabbis intrinsically linked their fate, whatever it was, to that of the men with whom they were associated. Among other roles, biblical women in rabbinic literature were mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, or lovers; in other words, the “other” in relation to men and, therefore, treated in the words of Judith Baskin, based on Simone De Beauvoir, as the “second sex.”¹⁰ Thus, in the rabbinic updating of the history of Israel, the existence of biblical women was often conditioned by how they were identified on the basis of their ties with a man, who gave them visibility.

1.1. Kinships that Confer Visibility

Perhaps the most representative example from the midrash of female visibility subordinated to a family relationship with male figures is the case of Elisheba in Lev. Rab. 20:2. The passage is found in the last interpretation offered for Ps 75:5, which leads directly back to the lemma verse of the chapter (Lev 16:1):

Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab (see Exod 6:23), did not rejoice in My world and you want to rejoice in My world? Elisheba saw five crowns in a single day: her brother-in-law (Moses) was king; her brother (Nahshon), prince; her husband (Aaron), high priest; her two sons, heads of the ministry; and Phinehas, the son of her son, was anointed for war. When her sons (Nadab and Abihu) entered to make an offering, they came out burnt (Lev 10:1–2) and her rejoicing turned into mourning; this is what is written: “After the death of the two sons of Aaron” (Lev 16:1).¹¹

In this text, Elisheba is recognized for being the daughter of Amminadab (from the tribe of Judah), the sister-in-law of Moses, the sister

9. The texts from Leviticus Rabbah are based on the edition by Mordechai Margaliot, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993). The manuscript synopsis by Chaim Milikowsky and Margarete Schlüter is also taken into account. See Milikowsky and Schlüter, *Synoptic Edition of Wayyiqra Rabbah*, <https://www2.biu.ac.il/JS/midrash/VR/about.htm>.

10. Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 2; see also 13.

11. On this episode with variants and in different contexts, see, among others, Pesiq. Rab Kah. 26:2; Tanh., Shemini 2 (TanB, Shemini 3); Tanh., Aḥarei 1 (TanB, Aḥarei 2); b. Zevah. 102a; Eccl. Rab. 2:2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

of Nahshon (“prince” of the tribe of Judah), the wife of Aaron (the high priest), the mother of Nadab and Abihu (her oldest sons, the priests who died for offering before the Lord a foreign fire that was not commanded), and the grandmother of Phinehas (the priest, son of Eleazar, one of her two youngest sons). In rabbinic eyes, Elisheba’s social worth and her place in the biblical past are connected to the rank of her male kin as well as their actions, at the same time that the emotional effect of the death of Nadab and Abihu is described in this midrash through her feelings (“her rejoicing turned into mourning”).¹² Her fate—her happiness and suffering—was not determined by her personhood, but by family ties with significant figures, because of whom she was remembered in history.

The importance of women in the biblical past in connection with male figures is also seen in cases where the attitude toward the female figure in the midrash is more ambivalent. One of the most recurrent examples in rabbinic literature is that of Eve, who is referred to several times in *Leviticus Rabbah*, always as part of the formula “Adam and Eve.” In *Leviticus Rabbah* 11:1, the two figures are viewed as equal, both with regard to their positive characterization and their privileged position in the creation and with regard to their mutual sin. Commenting on Prov 9:3–4,¹³ both are called “divinities” and both are said to have defied God’s command by following the advice of the serpent. Thus, “Adam and Eve” share status and responsibilities. Other passages emphasize only the negative consequences of their actions. For instance, *Lev. Rab.* 12:1 explains that “wine caused separation between Adam and Eve,”¹⁴ since Adam ate from the tree that, in the opinion of Yehudah bar Rabbi Ilai, was a vine of “poisoned grapes, bitter clusters” (*Deut* 32:32), vines that “brought bitterness to the world.”¹⁵ In another text, *Lev. Rab.* 18:2, Eve represents the self-destruction of Adam, according to a midrashic reading of *Hab* 1:7: “His justice and ruin”¹⁶

12. I am grateful to Tal Ilan for bringing this fact to my attention.

13. See, among others, *t. Sanh.* 8:9; *y. Sanh.* 4:13, 22c; *b. Sanh.* 38a.

14. The tradition appears in one of the interpretations of *Lev* 10:9: “Do not drink wine or other liquor, etc.” through the midrashic reading of *Prov* 23:32: “In the end it bites like a serpent and causes separation [יפריש] like a viper.”

15. On the type of tree and the opinion of the rabbi mentioned, see *Gen. Rab.* 15:7; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 20:6. On the consumption of wine in the context of the creation, see *Num. Rab.* 10:4, 8; *b. Ber.* 40a; *b. Sanh.* 70a.

16. Reading שאת (“ruin”), in the place of שאת (“dignity”), as in the MT.

proceed from himself.” The existence of Eve, who plays the role of companion, is dependent on that of Adam, but at the same time, she is his ruin: “The women you gave me [to be] with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate it” (Gen 3:12).¹⁷ In all three passages, the rabbis’ interest in Eve is, then, connected to the fate of the male figure, whom she accompanies and complements.¹⁸

Another pairing that places female characters in relationship to male ones is that of the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah/Rachel) with respect to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), who are mentioned before the matriarchs in all cases in *Leviticus Rabbah*.¹⁹ Of all the references to female biblical figures, the matriarchs, especially Sarah, are the most common in the midrash.²⁰ However, their perception as a group gives them a special status. The accounts emphasize the merit of the matriarchs, which is directly tied to that of the patriarchs. In *Lev. Rab.* 21:11, for example, it is stated that the linen of the priestly garments is mentioned four times in *Lev* 16:4 for the four matriarchs, just as the offering of three animals (according to *Lev* 16:3, 5) is related to the three patriarchs. *Lev. Rab.* 36:5 mentions the three occurrences of the accusative particle (נָא) in *Gen* 49:31, representing the three matriarchs,²¹ as are the patriarchs in *Lev* 26:42 (see *Sifra*, *beḥuqqotai pereq* 8:7). The following paragraph, *Lev. Rab.* 36:6 (like its talmudic parallel in *y. Sanh.* 10:1, 27d), draws a comparison between the merit of both groups, identifying the patriarchs with the mountains (which are

17. Conversely, in other traditions both are created equal, and an androgynous being is described (*Lev. Rab.* 14:1; *Gen. Rab.* 8:1). See Lieve Teugels, “The Creation of the Human in Rabbinic Interpretation,” in *The Creation of Man and Woman: Interpretations of the Biblical in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 107–27; and see also Natalie C. Polzer, “Eve in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*,” in this volume.

18. Adam is mentioned without Eve in other passages: *Lev. Rab.* 1:9; 2:7, 8–10 (in some manuscripts and editio princeps); 10:5; 14:1; 20:2; 25:2; 27:4; 29:1, 12.

19. See Sarit Kattan Gribetz, “*Zekhut Imahot*: Mothers, Fathers, and Ancestral Merit in Rabbinic Sources,” *JSJ* 49 (2018): 263–96.

20. Sarah: *Lev. Rab.* 2:1; 9:9; 16:1; 19:2; 20:2; 27:4; 31:9; 32:5; Rebecca: *Lev. Rab.* 18:2; 23:1; 37:4; Leah and Rachel: *Lev. Rab.* 37:1.

21. The text indeed mentions only three matriarchs, though it is not clear which of the four is missing. Perhaps the mention of the burial of Sarah immediately following suggests that the missing matriarch is Rachel, who was not buried in the Machpelah cave. I thank Ronit Nikolsky for this observation.

high) and the matriarchs with the hills (which are less prominent) from Isa 54:10:²²

Rabbi Yudan bar Hanan in the name of Rabbi Berekhiah said: If you see that the merit of the patriarchs is failing and the merit of the matriarchs is slipping away, go and occupy yourself with deeds of loving kindness; this is what is written: "For the mountains will depart [ימושו] and the hills will be removed" (Isa 54:10). The "mountains" are the patriarchs and the "hills" are the matriarchs. Henceforward: "My love will not depart [ימוש] from you" (Isa 54:10).

Even in Lev. Rab. 30:10, where the title "matriarchs" is not used, these figures are perceived as a group in correlation to the patriarchs. The paragraph offers two parallel interpretations of the two stanzas in Lev 23:40. In the first interpretation, these apply to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and (note the inclusion of) Joseph; and in the second to Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel.

Another biblical woman who forms part of a group in some contexts is Miriam, who is associated with Moses and Aaron. By examining all the references to her transmitted in Leviticus Rabbah by topic, it is possible to see that the rabbinic perception of Miriam differs between texts that directly link her to her brothers and other accounts. When on her own, most of the passages present her as an example of someone who sinned through her mouth and was therefore struck with leprosy (Lev. Rab. 16:1, 5; 17:3) and recovered from this illness (Lev. Rab. 15:8). Another account, Lev. Rab. 20:12, explains the reasons for placing the passage about Miriam's death in Scripture (Num 20) next to the section about the red heifer (Num 19): both involve atonement.²³ These texts present Miriam as a negative role model or, in the best of cases, as neutral. However, on two occasions, she forms part of the Moses-Aaron-Miriam triad. The first is the passage from Lev. Rab. 27:6 on Mic 6:3 ("My people ... how have I wearied you?"). In the *nimshal* (application) of the preceding parable about three emissaries sent to a city by a king, God reproaches the Israelites, saying that the three emissaries were not a burden but a benefit: "Manna [came to Israel] through the merit of Moses, the well through the merit of Miriam, and the clouds of glory through the merit of Aaron."²⁴ In the second text, Lev. Rab.

22. See Gribetz, "Zekhut Imahot," 271.

23. There is also a reference to "Miriam's well" in Lev. Rab. 22:4.

24. See, among other passages, Num. Rab. 1:2; 13:20; Song Rab. 4:5; b. Ta'an. 9a. The association between the three figures and the three benefits to Israel is found in

31:4 (also as a *nimshal* of another parable, about a king who remembers the injuries suffered by his son in an accident every time that he passes by a certain place), God recalls the waters of Meribah three times in his Torah: “Here I killed Moses, here I killed Aaron, here I killed Miriam” (see Num 20:13; 27:14; Deut 32:51). In these two final passages, the three figures form a group that suffers a similar fate, establishing a three-way relationship of dependency in which Miriam plays her role in the biblical past as a key figure within this trio of siblings in equal conditions.

1.2. Being a Mother; Becoming a Woman

One facet of biblical women that rabbinic literature often invokes is motherhood, frequently associated with the topic of female fertility/sterility. From the rabbinic point of view, giving birth ensured a place in the history of Israel for specific women as mothers of figures or generations who stood out for one reason or another. In these cases, the sages offered interpretations that justified and resolved uncomfortable situations in the biblical narrative.

The motif of infertility, overcome by divine intervention, is already well developed in the biblical text itself, and the cases of the matriarchs serve as representative examples (Gen 18; 25; 30). The rabbis strove to explain the topos of barren women who then conceived, using their interpretations to reconcile verses that offer different explanations for the lack of children. Examples of this are found in Lev. Rab. 9:9 with regard to Sarah and the wife of Manoah.²⁵ The last paragraph in chapter 9 brings together a number of traditions about peace,²⁶ including several opinions attributed to the sage Bar Qappara. Two of the three refer to barren women:

earlier sources (e.g., t. Sotah 11:8). According to Tal Ilan, the tradition about Miriam’s well was older than the other two. See Ilan, “Biblische Frauen in Schrift und Tradition in jüdischer Perspektive,” in *Geschlechtergerechtigkeit: Herausforderung der Religionen*, ed. Christoph Elsas, Edith Franke, and Angela Standhartinger (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2014), 151–53.

25. On the topic of this passage, see, among others, Sifre Num. 42; Gen. Rab. 48:18; Num. Rab. 11:7; b. Yevam. 65b; Tanh., Zav 7 (TanB, Zav 10).

26. See Miguel Pérez Fernández, “Shalom: El modelo rabínico de la paz,” in *Cosmovisiones de Paz en el Mediterráneo Antiguo y Medieval*, ed. Francisco Muñoz and Beatriz Molina (Granada: EUG, 1988), 63–122.

Bar Qappara said: Great is peace, for Scriptures spoke with misleading words in the Torah to bring peace between Abraham and Sarah; this is what is written: "After I have become old, will I have pleasure? And my lord is old" (Gen 18:12). But to Abraham he only said it this way: "And I am old" (Gen 18:13).

Bar Qappara said: Great is peace, for Scriptures spoke with misleading words in the Prophets to bring peace between a man and his wife: "Behold now, you are barren and have not borne, but you will conceive and bear a son" (Judg 13:3). But to Manoah he only said it this way: "Of all that I have said to the woman let her beware" (Judg 13:13). For all that, she needs some medicines.²⁷

Bar Qappara was aware of the contradictions in the biblical narrative about the sterility of both Sarah and the wife of Manoah, even affirming the existence of "misleading words" in Scripture intended to maintain peace within the family. Where, then, is the deception in the words regarding Abraham or Sarah, Manoah or his wife? Although it is recognized that the text in both cases is different, according to whether the wife or the husband is being addressed, the lack of children is due to the wife's condition. Consequently, who is infertile is not the source of the contradiction; rather, for Bar Qappara, Scriptures are sensitive to the reaction of the husband and the wife. It tells the wife that she is infertile, but it only tells the husband that she will conceive. In other words, it is better that the husband does not know who is to blame, though the wife should. In any case, from the rabbinic point of view, the woman must experience motherhood in order to find her rightful place alongside her husband.

At the other extreme, Leviticus Rabbah presents a case of striking fertility—that of the women of the generation of the flood. It transmits several accounts about the antediluvian generation that offer complementary information about their qualities and defects (as opposed to the sober biblical narrative, where only Noah receives attention; see Lev. Rab. 4:1; 5:1; 7:6; 10:1; 11:7; 12:5; 22:3; 23:3, 9; 27:1, 5). Of all the passages, Lev. Rab. 5:1, a paragraph entirely devoted to explaining Job 34:29 and applying it to the generation of the flood, is most notable (see also Gen. Rab. 36:1). The text discusses the times of plenty that God allowed humankind to enjoy before the flood, during which time this generation was able to see generations of their descendants (according to the reading of Job 21:8).

27. In other words, she is not sterile but needs help to conceive.

Rabbi Levi and the rabbis attribute this circumstance to the fertility of the women:²⁸

Another interpretation [of] “But if he [God] remains quiet, who can condemn them?” (Job 34:29). [This refers to] when he gave tranquility to the generation of the flood, who would condemn them? What kind of tranquility did he give them? “They see their children established [נכון] around them, their offspring before their eyes” (Job 21:8).

Rabbi Levi and the rabbis [differ]. Rabbi Levi said: In three days a woman became pregnant and gave birth. It says here [in Job 21:8] “established” [נכון] and it is said there: “Be established [נכונים] by the third day” (Exod 19:15). Since the נכון mentioned there [refers] to within three days, the נכון mentioned here also [refers] to within three days.

The rabbis said: On a single day, a woman became pregnant and gave birth. It is said here “established” [נכון] and it is said there: “Be established [נכון] by morning” (Exod 34:2). Since the נכון mentioned there [refers to] a single day, the נכון mentioned here (in Job 21:8) also [refers to] a single day.

The midrash incorporates another tradition about children and women in these mythical, prosperous times that emphasizes the strength of both groups after childbirth. This tradition corresponds to other texts about the extraordinary nature of men.²⁹ It is said of their newborns that they “dance” (Job 21:11) like “demons,” and of their women, it says: “When one of them gave birth during the day, she said to her child: Go out and get me a flint to cut your umbilical cord; at night she said to her child: Go out and light a candle for me to cut your umbilical cord.”

Despite the fact that Sarah and the wife of Manoaah, on the one hand, and the antediluvian generation, on the other, are at opposite extremes, from the rabbinic perspective, the feature of alterity that characterizes them as women is their reproductive potential. Their female nature is based on their motherhood.

2. Female Sexuality from a Midrashic Perspective

Sexuality (understood as both the physiological aspects that mark sexual difference and behavioral patterns related to this difference) is another

28. Lorena Miralles-Maciá, “La generación del diluvio según la descripción del Midrás *Levítico Rabbá*,” *Sef* 67 (2007): 297–300.

29. E.g., Lev. Rab. 12:5 calls members of the antediluvian generation “kings.”

aspect of biblical women that drew the attention of the rabbis. Some of the sages' interpretations refer to this aspect of the female figures in the Bible, highlighting either their behavior—whether favorable or objectionable—or their relationship with the male figures. Several questions are posed in *Leviticus Rabbah* on this topic, where the women are sometimes active agents and sometimes passive subjects.

2.1. Desired Women and Contained Men

Some texts emphasize the merit of an outstanding figure in the biblical past because he abstained from having sexual relations with a woman in a specific situation.³⁰ In such a case, rabbinic interest focuses on the reaction of these men and their compliance with the law, while the woman, who is the object of male desire, remains in the background. At times these examples mention scenes described—or at least insinuated—in the biblical text, but on other occasions they are the product of an aggadic creation.

One of the most famous episodes in the history of biblical tradition is that of Potiphar's wife and Joseph (Gen 39), who, according to the midrash, was rewarded for refusing her (Lev. Rab. 23:9–11).³¹ The same hermeneutic context includes the cases of Palti son of Laish, also known as Paltiel, and Michal, the wife of David (Lev. Rab. 23:9–10),³² and Boaz and Ruth (Lev. Rab. 23:11; see *Sifre Deut.* 33). In fact, in Lev. Rab. 23:11, Rabbi Yosi mentions Joseph and Boaz among the three men (along with David) who had to take a vow to contain their desire.³³

Another example of desire contained is King Jeconiah of Judah, who, according to the midrash, was rewarded for avoiding relations with a menstruating woman (Lev. Rab. 19:6; in connection with Lev 15:25). The episode describes Jeconiah's opportunity to have relations with his wife in the prison where he was held by Nebuchadnezzar. According to the story,

30. One example to the contrary is King Jehoiakim, who had forbidden sexual relations with the women in his family (Lev. Rab. 19:6).

31. Lev. Rab. 32:5 says that "Joseph went down to Egypt and was fenced off from indecency."

32. According to the midrash, God bore witness to the fact that Palti did not lay a hand on Michal while they were married, and, consequently, he added the divine epithet to Palti's name: Palti in 1 Sam 25:44 and Paltiel (Palti + El) in 2 Sam 3:15 (see b. Sanh. 19b).

33. On this type of vow, see *Sifre Num.* 88; Num. Rab. 15:16; Tanh., Be-haalotekha 10; TanB, Bo 16.

when his wife appeared, Jeconiah observed the prohibition regarding relations with a *niddah* (menstruating woman) and abstained, pulling away from her at least twice, as she mentioned that she had seen a stain “like a red lily.” He only had relations with his wife once he was certain that she was no longer *niddah*, for which he was rewarded with the birth of his son Shealtiel (1 Chr 3:17). The image of this woman contrasts with that of Nebuchadnezzar’s wife, who is also mentioned in the episode in an active role, as discussed in section 3.2 below.

This section must also include “the case of the Shunammite woman” in Lev. Rab. 24:6, a segment that justifies why the passage on the regulation of prohibited sexual relations (Lev 18) is adjacent to the passage on holiness (Lev 19). The explanation is summarized in the words of Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazzi: “Anyone who fences himself off from indecency [גודר עצמו מן הערוה] is called holy.” He then presents the example of the episode of the Shunammite and the prophet Elisha, who visited her from time to time (2 Kgs 4), and his servant Gehazi:³⁴

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of Rabbi Levi offers [proof] of this from [the episode of] the Shunammite woman; this is what is written: “She said to her husband: Behold, I know this man of God [who always comes our way] is holy” (2 Kgs 4:9). Rabbi Yonah said: He is holy, but his servants are not holy; this is what is written: “Gehazi came over to push her away” (2 Kgs 4:27). Rabbi Yosi bar Rabbi Hanina said that he pushed her away [הדפה] by the splendor of her beauty [הוד יופיה], [that is], between her breasts. Rabbi Abbin said: This (2 Kgs 4:9) shows that [Elisha] never looked at her again. And the rabbis said that she never saw a drop of pollution on his sheet.

The interpretation of 2 Kgs 4:9 praises Elisha’s lack of sexual interest in the Shunammite as proof of his holiness, which is contrasted with the immoral approach of his servant Gehazi, whose attraction for this woman is made clear in the midrashic reading of 2 Kgs 4:27. The midrash, therefore, attributes unseemly sexual conduct to Gehazi, exacerbating his bad reputation.³⁵ The Shunammite, in turn, is accorded physical characteristics that create

34. The episode with variants, see y. Yevam. 2:4, 3d; y. Sanh. 10:2, 29b; b. Ber. 10b; Pirque R. El. 33.

35. In the Bible this is simply caused by his greed and disobedience to the prophet (2 Kgs 5:20–27).

attraction but are nonexistent in the biblical text, making Elisha's asexual response to her even more impressive.

Consequently, the main focus of attention of the rabbis in these passages is not the women but the male figures, who place compliance with the law above letting their instincts run wild. From this point of view, the women are passive subjects who put the moral fortitude of the men to the test.

2.2. Exemplary Female Behavior

Some accounts call attention to the exemplary demeanor of biblical women who, from the rabbinic perspective, chose chastity or avoided sexual relations under certain circumstances. For this reason, the sages highlight the trustworthiness of these women, who observe Jewish law or respect a divine mandate. Thus, Sarah and the women of the generation of the desert are role models, as is Jael, who will be discussed in section 3.2 below.

In the chapter devoted to the commentary on Lev 24:10–11 (“son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father”), Lev. Rab. 32:5 explains Song 4:12–13 (“a garden locked up ... your shoots”) in relation to the people of Israel (the women, men, and their descendants). Different interpretations of these verses justify the fact that they fenced themselves off from sexual indecency in Egypt. By avoiding cohabitation with the Egyptians, they merited redemption. Among the different opinions, Rav Huna in the name of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba places Sarah in this setting:³⁶ “Sarah went down to Egypt and fenced herself off from indecency [וגדרה עצמה מן הערוה],³⁷ and all the women were fenced off through her merit.” Here, Sarah actively embodies the role model par excellence for the women who were in Egypt, just as Joseph, who is mentioned immediately after her, served as the paradigm for the men.

Another case of exemplary behavior is that of the women of the generation of the desert mentioned in Lev. Rab. 2:1 (on Lev 1:2). Regarding

36. On Sarah's time in Egypt, see Gen 12:10–20. On the parallels to the text, see Pesiq. Rab Kah. 11:6; Song Rab. 4:12. On the redemption of Israel in Egypt because of her acts, see, among others, Num. Rab. 3:6; 20:22; TanB, Balaq 25.

37. The verb גדר has the meaning of “enclose, fence off” as a way of protection. Those who keep apart (“fence themselves off”) do not become accustomed to engaging in forbidden sexual relations; see Lev. Rab. 24:6, discussed in 2.1 above.

the percentage of success for men who enter into the study of Torah, Eccl 7:28 is cited as proof: “One man among a thousand³⁸ have I found, but one woman among all of them I have not found.” In this context, the first part of the verse is applied to a man considered outstanding because of his justice/wisdom and the second to a female figure (Abraham and Sarah, Amran and Jochebed, and Moses and the women of the generation of the flood),³⁹ emphasizing that not even these exceptional women can be included in the quota. However, on the women of the generation of the desert, Rabbi [Yehudah the Patriarch] adds: “The women of the generation of the desert were worthy;⁴⁰ when they heard that they were forbidden to their husbands, they immediately closed their doors.” It was in the generation of the desert, the one that had received the Torah on Sinai (see Lev. Rab. 13:2), that women avoided sexual relations with their husbands during the time when it was forbidden to the latter, as Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch explains metaphorically with the words “they closed their doors.” Although the text does not state this explicitly, the midrashic argument was probably based on Exod 19:15: “Be prepared by the third day; do not go near a woman,” which is the condition required of the Israelites before they could receive the law (Exod 19).⁴¹ As in the case of Sarah, these women assumed an active role by abstaining from sexual practices, such that their demeanor fulfills a divine mandate.

2.3. Condemnable Women

Leviticus Rabbah also draws attention to the biblical women who engaged in forbidden sexual relations, portraying them as unfortunate examples of female behavior. In the midrashic context, they are presented as respon-

38. מֵאֶלֶף can be understood as *me-elef* (“among a thousand,” thus in the MT) and *me’allef* (“who teaches”): “One among a thousand” is “one who can teach” because they successfully completed the study of every subject.

39. Also in the parallel to Eccl. Rab. 7:28.

40. כְּשִׁירוֹת, here perhaps with the meaning of “worthy, courageous” and also “honest, decent,” i.e., they knew how they should behave.

41. This could also be the result of having heard the passage on forbidden sexual relations in Lev 18 (see Margaliot, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 36 nn.). In other versions, the attitude of the Israelite women is correlated to the episode of the golden calf, for whose creation the women refused to provide their jewelry (see Exod 32:2), thus hoping to keep their husbands from falling into idolatry (Song Rab. 4:9; 6:4; see also Pirke R. El. 45).

sible for unfortunate unions, as in the cases of Shelomith (see Lev 24:11) and Dinah (see Gen 34).

The end of the paragraph in Lev. Rab. 32:5, a passage on the situation of the Israelites in Egypt (see section 2.2 above), lists the reasons for their redemption. One of these is the fact that they avoided immoral sexual conduct, with a single exception; in Lev 24:11 we read: "His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan." The rabbis interpret this to mean that she freely greeted everybody (that is, she drew men's attention):

[Regarding] "Shelomith" (Lev 24:11), Rabbi Levi said: Because she chattered: Peace [*shalom*] to you, peace to you all, peace to you all! [On] "Daughter of Dibri" (Lev 24:11) Rabbi Yitzhaq said: Because she brought a plague [*deber*] upon her son. "Of the tribe of Dan" (Lev 24:11) [means]: disgrace for him, disgrace for his mother, disgrace for her family, disgrace for the tribe from which she came.⁴²

According to this midrash, Shelomith took the lead in reaching out to men (i.e., Egyptian men), which resulted in the birth of an Egyptian son. In contrast, the case of Dinah is different. In one of the only two references to her in the entire work,⁴³ her behavior is closely tied to the actions of her father, Jacob. The account appears in Lev. Rab. 37:1 (on Lev 27:2) in the commentary on Eccl 5:4: "It is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it." In this context, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman asserts that delaying the fulfillment of a vow instead of discharging it in due time entails idolatry, sexual immorality, and the shedding of blood (i.e., the three cardinal sins according to rabbinic Judaism). He then explains this assertion using the example of Jacob (in connection, respectively, with Gen 38:2; 34:1–2, 25). The sexual immorality into which Jacob stumbled is deduced from two verses: "Dinah went out ... and Shechem, the son of Hamor, saw her" (Gen 34:1–2).⁴⁴ Although only the biblical passage is cited, with no additional interpretation, the combination of these verses suggests that, by "going out," Dinah assumed an active role, exposing her-

42. See also Sifra, *emor parashah* 14:4; Tanh., Va-yaqhel 4 (TanB, Va-yaqhel 3); Exod. Rab. 1:28; 48:2.

43. In Lev. Rab. 14:8, in a citation from Gen 46:15 (one of the verses that justifies the assertion that a girl comes from the seed of a man), and Lev. Rab. 37:1.

44. See also Eccl. Rab. 5:4; Tanh., Va-yishlah 8 (TanB, Va-yishlah 20).

self to Shechem.⁴⁵ Therefore, although the ultimate responsibility lies with Jacob for delaying his vow,⁴⁶ it is Dinah who is involved in illicit sexual practices because of her demeanor.

3. The Role of the Foreigner

The biblical women mentioned in *Leviticus Rabbah*, whose behavior and relationships served as a point of contact between the people of Israel and other nations, deserve their own section. The midrash includes the cases of a Jewish woman (Esther) engaging in sexual relations with a gentile man, and several cases of foreign women likewise with Israelites (portrayed from different viewpoints). The characteristic shared by these women in rabbinic representations is the fact that all of them were important figures, because of their origins or demeanors, and their presence marked a turning point in biblical history. Therefore, along with the features of alterity, which often set them apart from the men, other aspects related to the question of whether they belonged to Israel also come into play. From these distinctive features, the rabbis gave them roles—whether positive or negative—that went beyond the normative boundaries of female action, even granting them a more significant leading role than they have in the Bible.

3.1. A Jewess among Gentiles: Esther

Although the case of Sarah in Egypt has already been discussed (*Lev. Rab.* 32:5, section 2.2 above), probably the most representative example of a Jewish woman married to a gentile is that of Esther, who became queen of Persia after marrying Ahasuerus. How did the rabbis interpret this union? In addition to highlighting the role that Esther played in saving her people (or Mordecai's life) or destroying Haman, their traditions also emphasize her Jewish origins. A good example of this is found in the references in *Leviticus Rabbah*.

45. For an explicit reading of “went out,” see *Gen. Rab.* 80:1 (relating to Leah's punishment). In some traditions, Dinah is openly responsible for showing herself in public, e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 8:12. In this volume, see Devora Steinmetz, “Switched before Birth: Dinah and Joseph in Bible and Midrash.”

46. Jacob promised to set up a pillar in Bethel (*Gen* 28:22), which he did not do until much later (*Gen* 35:7).

Several passages mention Esther in this midrash (Lev. Rab. 13:5; 26:8; 28:4, 6). For example, Lev. Rab. 28:4 lists “Mordecai and Esther and all their followers” in reference to those who brought about the ruin of Haman, while Lev. Rab. 28:6 places Esther in an episode about how Mordecai, the protagonist of a relatively long aggadah, cleverly managed to mock Haman, by avoiding going with him. In this context Esther is referred to twice: once when she orders the baths closed so that Mordecai will not be able to wash himself to go with Haman,⁴⁷ and again at the end of the story, echoing Mordecai’s success (by intoning Ps 30:9–10).

Two other accounts (in Lev. Rab. 13:5; 26:8) focus on the question of Esther’s origins. In relation to Lev 21:1 (“Say to the priests ... and say to them”), Lev. Rab. 26:8 asserts that every passage in which the verb *say* appears twice requires interpretation. To illustrate this opinion, several verses where this phenomenon occurs are discussed, including Esth 7:5.

Like this: “King Ahasuerus said and he said to Queen Esther” (Esth 7:5). What does “And he said” “and he said” twice [mean]? Rabbi [Yehudah the Patriarch] in the name of Rabbi Eleazar said: As long as he did not realize that she was Jewish, he had spoken to her directly, but when he realized that she was Jewish, he spoke to her through an interpreter. The king “said” to the interpreter and the interpreter “said” to Queen Esther.⁴⁸

In the rabbinic reading of this verse, King Ahasuerus’s recognition of Esther’s Jewish origins indicates a major cultural difference between them, with all that this implies. Additionally, in the other episode, Lev. Rab. 13:5, this difference is measured in qualitative terms, with more information about how the rabbis saw this union. In the text, different animals are identified with “the empires” that “Moses foresaw.” An argument arises over the “rock badger” mentioned in Deut 14:7 (in relation to Lev 11:5) that represents Media, in which the exceptional nature of Esther’s case is highlighted:

47. On the scene, see also Esth. Rab. 10:4; b. Meg. 16a; Pirque R. El. 50.

48. See also Lam. Rab. 1:13. By contrast, b. Meg. 16a suggests that he first spoke with her through an interpreter and then addressed her directly, after he learned that Esther was royal: “Queen Esther” (of the house of Saul). This interpretation agrees with the *editio princeps* of Leviticus Rabbah. Tal Ilan pointed out to me that this edition is probably influenced by the authoritative Babylonian Talmud.

“The rock badger” (Deut 14:7) [refers to] Media.⁴⁹ The rabbis and Rabbi Yehudah bar Rabbi Simon [differ]. The rabbis said: Like this rock badger has signs of impurity and signs of purity, so had the empire of Media produced a just part and an evil part.⁵⁰ Rabbi Yehudah bar Rabbi Simon said: The last Darius, son of Esther, was pure because of his mother and impure because of his father.⁵¹

Just as the rock badger looks pure because it chews the cud but is impure because it does not have a split hoof (Lev 11:5), Darius looks pure because his mother belongs to the Jewish people (i.e., Esther) and is impure because his father is Persian (i.e., Ahasuerus). However, according to rabbinic legal decisions, his maternal origins take precedence over the royalty of his father.⁵²

3.2. Gentile Women at the Service of the Biblical Past

For the sages, some foreign women played a determining role in the biblical past, since their involvement in certain episodes signaled an outcome favorable to the Jewish people or harmful to their enemies. From a rabbinic perspective, these women fulfilled a purpose, divine or human, without their actions implying any adherence to Israel or the abandonment of their beliefs. They were, in short, an essential tool in the development of a strategic plan, as can be seen in the examples in *Leviticus Rabbah*.

In the same aggadah in *Lev. Rab.* 19:6 on Jeconiah in exile (see §2.1 above), the idea that his wife was brought to him while he was in prison takes shape in a gathering of the Sanhedrin, now settled in exile, to ensure the Davidic line. To reach their objective, they draw on a number of influential figures who exercise power over others, until arriving at Nebuchadnezzar:

At that time, the Great Sanhedrin went into session [to deliberate] on this question and they said: Will the house of David come to an end in our days, that upon which it is written: “And his throne will be like the sun

49. See *Tanh.*, *Shemini* 8 (*TanB*, *Shemini* 14).

50. Either Mordecai and Haman or, perhaps, Darius (= Cyrus; Dan 6:1; 11:1) and Haman.

51. The same assertion in *Esth. Rab.* 8:3.

52. See *Lev. Rab.* 32:3 on the right conferred by the paternal house versus the maternal house. On this question, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law,” *AJSR* 10 (1985): 35, 52.

before Me" (Ps 89:37)? What shall we do? Let us persuade the governess [of the queen], and the governess—the queen, and the queen—the king!

What was the name of Nebuchadnezzar's wife? Rabbi Hananiah said: Shemiram was her name. Rabbi Abin said: Shemiramoth was her name. And the rabbis said: Shemiram was her name, because she was born in a thunderstorm [*ra'am*].

When Nebuchadnezzar came to have sexual relations with her, she said to him: You are a king. Is not Jeconiah a king, too? You want [to satisfy] your desire, and does not Jeconiah want [to satisfy] his desire? Forthwith [Nebuchadnezzar] gave orders and they gave him a wife.

In this story, Shemiram, thus identified by the rabbis,⁵³ is characterized as an easily influenced woman, who in turn exercises her influence over Nebuchadnezzar using sex. From the rabbinic point of view, it is the Sanhedrin who receives merit for achieving this objective, using the active role of Shemiram in her married life to do so.⁵⁴

Another example of a foreign woman acting to the benefit of Israel is Jael, whom the midrash lists in Lev. Rab. 23:9 among the three who were rewarded in the words: "'I am the Lord' (Lev 18:4)... I am he who paid a reward to Joseph, Jael, and Palti; I will pay a reward to whomever acts according to their deeds" (see §2.1 above). Jael's deed was the killing of Sisera (Judg 4:17–21; 5:24–27). In fact, the midrash mentions these figures again in the following paragraph as the "three" who "fled from committing a transgression, and the Holy One, blessed be He, joined his name with theirs" (Lev. Rab. 23:10). The following explanation is offered about Jael's case:

From whence is Jael [deduced]? "Jael went out to meet Sisera, etc. and covered him with a *semikhah* [שמִיכָה]" (Judg 4:18). What does "with a *semikhah*" [mean]? Our rabbis here [in Palestine] said: With a scarf. Our rabbis there [in Babylonia] said: With a blanket. Resh Laqish said: We have searched through the entire Scripture and we have not found any object whose name is *semikhah*. What is *semikhah*? It is written with ש,

53. In rabbinic literature, she is known by different variants of her name; see Tanh., Va-yiqra 6 (TanB, Va-yiqra 10); Esth. Rab. 3:2. Shemiram is obviously a reference to the mythological queen of Assyria, Semiramis.

54. A reference to another aggadah on Nebuchadnezzar is transmitted in Lev. Rab. 18:2, in which a woman represents the connecting link between him and Hiram, king of Tyre.

[which means:] “My name here” [שמי כה], [in other words,] My name bears witness that this wicked man did not have any contact with her.

The midrashic reading of the *hapax legomenon* in Judg 4:18 (שמיכה) explains how God joined his name with that of Jael, but also provides an additional piece of information about Jael’s conduct: she did not have sexual relations with Sisera.⁵⁵ Therefore, her behavior can be equated with that of the women (of the people of Israel) whose conduct was exemplary (see section 2.2 above).

3.3. Foreign Women Who Became Israel

Another facet of biblical women is represented by foreign women who established familial and emotional ties with some notable members of the people of Israel. These women were often perceived as having a beneficial influence on the men they came into contact with, and even on Jewish history itself. Their characterization in the midrashic traditions is marked, to a greater or lesser extent, by their degree of closeness to Judaism in the eyes of the sages. In fact, their acts of bravery or generosity toward some Israelite man, in contrast to their gentile origins, made them exemplary role models from the biblical past and unique female paradigms in the rabbinic present. From this perspective, they were exceptional women who, in accordance with these new ties, were made by the rabbis to behave according to Jewish beliefs and customs, bequeathing them with the same moral fortitude as—or one even greater than—their male Israelite counterparts.

One of the most notable women from among the gentile nations who married into Israel was Ruth the Moabite, whose fate is explicitly tied to this people in her homonymous book. In addition to the passage discussed above, which addresses the way Boaz controlled his desire for Ruth (Lev. Rab. 23:11, §2.1 above), the midrash also mentions Boaz and Ruth in Lev. Rab. 34. In Lev. Rab. 34:8, Rabbi Simon in the name of Rabbi Eleazar names Boaz as an example of kindness, whose gesture was well rewarded:

Rabbi Simon in the name of Rabbi Eleazar offers another reason in this respect: Who had shown kindness for the person who needed kindness?

55. In contrast to other traditions; see, e.g., b. Yevam. 103a; b. Naz. 23b. In this volume, see also Yuval Blankovsky, “Seduction for the Sake of Heaven: Biblical Seductive Women in the Rabbis’ Eyes.”

Boaz with Ruth, as it is said, “And Boaz said to her at mealtime: גַּשְׁי הַלּוֹם” (Ruth 2:14); [that is,] come over here. “You will eat bread” (Ruth 2:14): from the bread of the reapers. “And you can dip your morsel in vinegar” (Ruth 2:14), because this is how the reapers dip their morsel in vinegar at the time of dry heat. Rabbi Yohanan said: Hence [it is deduced] that different types of vinegar were brought to the threshing floors. “And she sat down next to the reapers” (Ruth 2:14): next to the reapers indeed!⁵⁶ “And he gave her *qalli* [קָלִיל]”⁵⁷ (Ruth 2:14); [meaning] he gave her a pinch [*qalil*, קָלִיל] with his fingertips. But it is written, “She ate, was satisfied, and had some left” (Ruth 2:14)! Rabbi Yitzhaq said: You may deduce two things from here: either a blessing rested in the hand of a righteous man [Boaz] or a blessing rested in the belly of a righteous woman [Ruth]; but from what is written, “She ate, was satisfied, and had some left” (Ruth 2:14), it seems that a blessing rested in the belly of a righteous woman.⁵⁸

In the midrashic interpretation of Ruth 2:14, the act of kindness on the part of the Moabite, who is content with very little, surpasses that of Boaz; in fact, according to rabbinic standards, Ruth is qualified as “righteous.”⁵⁹ Her behavior is recognized as an example of female conduct, but above all, it is associated with values of Jewish female modesty. At the end of the paragraph in Lev. Rab. 34:8, Ruth says to Naomi that she carried out many good deeds with Boaz “on account of the morsel he gave me.”

Another case of a foreigner with ties to Israel is the daughter of Pharaoh who rescued Moses from the waters (Exod 2).⁶⁰ In rabbinic sources, she is known by the name of Bityah from a midrashic reading of 1 Chr

56. She did not mix with them, indicating the extent of her discretion.

57. In the MT, “toasted grain.”

58. See the parallel in Ruth Rab. 5:6. On Ruth’s demeanor, see, among others, Pesiq. Rab Kah. 6:2; Num. Rab. 21:20; TanP, Pinhas 13.

59. See also the end of the paragraph in Lev. Rab. 34:8.

60. On rabbinic traditions and the names given to this figure in Jewish sources, see Tal Ilan, “Biblical Women’s Names in the Apocryphal Tradition,” *JSP* 11 (1993): 24–25, 42; Lorena Miralles-Maciá, “Judaizing a Gentile Biblical Character through Fictive Biographical Reports: The Case of Bityah, Pharaoh’s Daughter, Moses’ Mother, according to Rabbinic Interpretations,” in *Narratology, Hermeneutics, and Midrash: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Narratives from the Late Antiquity through to Modern Times*, ed. Constanza Cordoní and Gerhard Langer (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2014), 145–75 with bibliography; and also Ilan, “Flavius Josephus and Biblical Women,” in *Early Jewish Writings*, ed. Eileen Schuller and Marie-Theres Wacker, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History* 3.1 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 181–84.

4:18. In fact, Lev. Rab. 1:3 says: “The book of Chronicles was given only to be interpreted,”⁶¹ an assertion followed by a series of explanations about the identification of names in this verse. Two references in 1 Chr 4:18 apply to women: “His wife Jehudijah” is identified with Jochebed, the biological mother of Moses (see Exod 6:20),⁶² while Bityah is identified with the Egyptian princess, his adoptive mother according to the biblical text. Moreover, the paragraph provides other data that relate Bityah to Israel and its God by family ties and, therefore, distance her from her gentile origins:

“These are the sons of Bityah, the daughter of Pharaoh” (1 Chr 4:18). Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of de Rabbi Levi said: The Holy One, blessed be He, told Bityah [reading *bat-Yah*], the daughter of Pharaoh: Moses was not your son, but you called him your son; neither are you my daughter, but I will call you my daughter [*bity*].

In the first reference in the paragraph, Bityah is identified as the “daughter of God” through the hermeneutic rule of *notarikon*, which divides her name into two parts (*bat-Yah*). The epithet is not superfluous, as it implies a religious reorientation; it appears from the scene that Bityah has accepted new beliefs and, consequently, abandoned those of her people of origin. In fact, in some traditions, Bityah explicitly repudiates idolatry (see b. Meg. 13a; b. Sotah 12b). Thus, the Egyptian princess not only establishes an emotional tie with Moses, recognizing him as her son, but becomes, in rabbinic eyes, part of Israel.⁶³

Leviticus Rabbah 1:3 continues with two interpretations that link Pharaoh’s daughter to another biblical figure, Caleb, one of the scouts of the

61. See Isaac Kalimi, “Biblical Text in Rabbinic Context: The Book of Chronicles in the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash,” in *Midrash and the Exegetical Mind: Proceedings of the 2008 and 2009 SBL Midrash Sessions*, ed. Lieve Teugels and Rivka Ulmer (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 21–39.

62. “It was said of Jochebed: Was she really from the tribe of Judah? But was she not from the Levites? Then, why is she given the name of the Jewess [יהודייה]? Because she introduced the Jews [יהודים] into the world,” referring to Jews by religion. However, see b. Meg. 13a, where “Jewess” is identified with Bityah.

63. On Moses’s role in attracting her to God, see Deut. Rab. 7:5. On the ways of showing affection for Judaism, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82 (1989): 14–15.

generation of the desert who inspected the land of Canaan (Num 13), as a wife:

“These are the sons of Bityah ... which Mered took” (1 Chr 4:18). This one [refers to] Caleb. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana and Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon [differ]. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: This one [Caleb] rebelled [מרד] against the counsel of the spies, and she [Bityah] rebelled [מרדה] against the counsel of her father. Let him who rebels take in marriage her who rebels!⁶⁴ Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon said: This one [Caleb] delivered [הציל] the flock, and that one [Bityah] delivered [הצילה] the shepherd. Let he who delivered the flock take in marriage her who delivered the shepherd!

In the opinion of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, Bityah rebelled against the order to kill the children of the Israelites (Exod 1:22; see also the targum to 1 Chr 4:18) and Caleb against the general opinion of the group of scouts not to enter Canaan (Num 13:30), a deed for which he was rewarded (Num 14:24, 30). For Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon, Caleb delivered the people of Israel from the desert, encouraging them to go and conquer Canaan, and Bityah saved Moses from drowning in the Nile. In short, Bityah also became related to Israel by wedding a key figure in the salvation history of the Jewish people and by playing a comparable role.

One last account about Bityah appears in Lev. Rab. 1:3 at the end of the paragraph relating to the name of Moses, which reinforces the importance of calling someone by a specific name. This interpretation expresses the divine preference for the name given to the Hebrew child by Bityah, placing her in a unique position: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: By your life, of all the names you have been called, I shall only call you by the name which Bityah, the daughter of Pharaoh, did: ‘And she named him Moses’ (Exod 2:10). [Therefore,] ‘The Lord called him Moses’” (Lev 1:1).⁶⁵

We can therefore see that in the traditions about Ruth and Bityah transmitted in Leviticus Rabbah, the rabbis explain how two gentile women were given the opportunity to become part of Israel and how they took advantage of this with their gestures and demeanors. The

64. This interpretation is also transmitted in b. Meg. 13a and b. Sanh. 19b. Babylonian Talmud Megillah says that Bityah “rebelled against the idols of her father’s house.”

65. See also Exod. Rab. 1:26.

advantages that the sages perceived in accepting them into the fold not only transcended their gentile origins, but also reinforced their ties to Israel and its God.

3.4. Exotic Love Derailed Solomon

Another case of a gentile woman related to an Israelite man is that of the daughter of Pharaoh whom Solomon took as wife. The rabbinic representation of this figure can be compared neither with the wife of Potiphar, since Joseph did not have contact with her (section 2.1 above), nor with the examples from the previous section, since her character in rabbinic sources is fundamentally negative. Why does this woman belong to a different category? Because, despite sharing essential features of alterity with Ruth and the other daughter of Pharaoh in Exod 2 (including origins and status with the latter), she continued to be loyal to her customs even after establishing a close link with the people of Israel.

The theme of Solomon's desire to increase the number of his wives is often criticized in rabbinic sources (as in Lev. Rab. 19:2) for becoming involved in idolatrous practices under the influence of his wives (as in b. Sanh. 21b). Of all of his wives and concubines, the one who aroused the most interest was the Egyptian princess, who is given a prominent position in the Bible itself (see 1 Kgs 11:1–2, where she is explicitly mentioned). Out of the six references to this figure in Kings and Chronicles (1 Kgs 3:1; 7:8; 9:16, 24; 11:1; 2 Chr 8:11), only in one is the marriage between Solomon and the Egyptian considered a transgression (1 Kgs 11:1). Nevertheless, rabbinic traditions usually based their interpretation of her on this last perspective.⁶⁶ Indeed, one of the most elaborate (and amusing) accounts about her is transmitted in Lev. Rab. 12:5, in the commentary on the proscription regarding drinking wine in Lev 10:9.⁶⁷ The aggadah pres-

66. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Solomon and the Daughter of Pharaoh: Intermarriage, Conversion, and the Impurity of Women," *JANES* 16–17 (1987): 23–37; Lorena Miralles-Maciá, "Doubly the Other: An Egyptian Princess for King Solomon in Rabbinic Traditions," in *Biblical Women in Patristic Reception*, ed. Agnethe Siquans (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 104–26.

67. For a study of the complete paragraph, see Lorena Miralles-Maciá, "Salomón, la hija del Faraón y la dedicación del Templo de Jerusalén. La versión de Levítico Rabbá 12:5," in *Ierà kai logoi: Estudios de literatura y de religión en la Antigüedad Tardía*, ed. Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas (Zaragoza: Pórtico, 2011), 13–31.

ents several scenes that recreate the wedding night of King Solomon and the daughter of Pharaoh, the consequences of which had repercussions for the fate of the temple. The paragraph begins by describing the nuptials themselves:

Rabbi Yudan said: During all the seven years that Solomon was building the temple, he did not drink any wine. When he built the temple and took the daughter of Pharaoh to his wife,⁶⁸ on that very night he drank some wine. Two celebrations took place there, one, the rejoicing for the construction of the temple, and the other, the rejoicing for the daughter of Pharaoh. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Whose [rejoicing] shall I admit? Of these ones or of the others? At that very moment it came to his mind to destroy it. This is what is written, “For this city has been my anger and my wrath [חַרָּא]” (Jer 32:31). Rabbi Hillel bar Rabbi Vallas said: It is like someone who passes by a filthy place and turns away his nose.⁶⁹

Here we learn that on the very same day that construction of the temple of Jerusalem, the symbol of Israelite religiosity, was completed, Solomon became related to a foreign princess by marriage. The rejoicing of the daughter of Pharaoh implied Solomon’s acceptance of idolatry, planting the seed of his own and of the temple’s destruction.

The passage continues with a second tradition about the wedding night, also transmitted in other works (Num. Rab. 10:4; b. Shabb. 56a). Concerning the distractions that the princess offered her husband, “Rabbi Hunia said: Eighty sorts of dances the daughter of Pharaoh danced on that very night. Rabbi Yitzhaq ben Eleazar said: Three hundred sorts of dances the daughter of Pharaoh danced on that very night.” Were these dances mere entertainment, an example of the charms of the daughter of Pharaoh? Parallel texts explain that these dances involved idolatrous practices, since the princess brought Solomon a considerable number of musical instruments and told him which one was used to adore which idol (e.g., Num. Rab. 10:4; b. Sanh. 21b; y. Avod. Zar. 1:2, 39c).⁷⁰

68. In some manuscripts, “Bityah, the daughter of Pharaoh” with the same name as the princess in Exod 2.

69. The word here, חוּטִים, is a synonym for “nose.” The word חַרָּא in Jer 32:31, which is being interpreted here, has a double meaning (anger and nose) as a gesture of contempt.

70. In b. Shabb. 56a the story continues: “When Solomon took the daughter of Pharaoh as his wife, Gabriel descended and stuck a reed in the sea, and a sand bank

The passage then goes on with the story of the next morning, when Solomon slept until the fourth hour with the keys to the temple under his head and thus did not allow the daily offering (*tamid*) prescribed in the Mishnah (m. Ed. 6:1) to take place: “How is this [possible]? She [the daughter of Pharaoh] made him a sort of covering and fixed in it stars and planets, and spread it over him. When he wanted to get up, he saw them and thought that it was still night, and slept until the fourth hour. His mother [Bathsheba] came in and reprimanded him.” For the midrash, the princess is the main obstacle to the inauguration of the temple, not only because of her female weapons of seduction, but because of her own intentions (motivated by her pagan beliefs), delaying the final step of Solomon’s temple project and leading him down the wrong path. Consequently, the rabbis turned this figure, whom they viewed as potentially favorably disposed toward Israel and the acceptance of its God (as other foreigners had done), into a negative role model, characterizing her by her elements of alterity, as a woman and a gentile. In short, from the rabbinic point of view, the daughter of Pharaoh did not take advantage of the opportunity she was given to convert in Israel.

Conclusion

From only a few examples transmitted in a single midrash it is not possible to obtain a complete overview of how the rabbis conceived of biblical women. However, we can see that certain themes that appear in *Leviticus Rabbah* interested the sages of the Amoraic period. In their interpretations, they represented the woman according to their perception of the “other” versus the norm (a Jewish man) and according to the woman’s importance in the role that she played in the male-written past. Therefore, the woman’s visibility was linked to her family ties with important male figures from the Bible. Similarly, through these figures the rabbis were able to convey aspects related to female sexuality that, from their perspective, directly affected the lives of men. Moreover, in the case of foreign women, other features of alterity came into play, because the rabbis needed to explain their connection to the people of Israel, as women and as gentiles. Thus, they endeavored to positively or negatively characterize those women, who were in a position to accept their system of beliefs according

rose up in it on which the great city of Rome was built.” In other words, this marriage had consequences also for the second temple.

to their parameters. In short, when the rabbis looked back at their biblical past, they did it based on diverse marginalities in accordance with their own values and concerns, as shown in *Leviticus Rabbah*.

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Supernatural Beauty, Universal Mother, and Eve's Daughter: Sarah in Genesis Rabbah and in the Babylonian Talmud

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In rabbinic literature, Sarah appears as characterized by her extraordinary beauty and her motherhood of all living things.¹ The way in which the rabbinic authors shape the profile of biblical Sarah and adopt appropriate points of reference from the biblical text—such as that of returning from old age to youth (including her supernatural fertility and nursing capacity)—makes this matriarch sometimes appear like a mythical goddess.² Was such a reception common in late antiquity or even in the biblical text itself—and if yes,

1. For an overview of midrashic motifs connected to Sarah see Tamar Kadari, "Sarah: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019h>. See also Kadari, "The Beauty of Sarah in Rabbinic Literature," in *Hebrew Texts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Surroundings*, ed. Klaas Spronk and Eveline van Stalduine-Sulman (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 65–82. See also Gary G. Porton, "How the Rabbis Imagined Sarah: A Preliminary Study of the Feminine in Genesis Rabbah," in *A Legacy of Learning: Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner*, ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 192–209.

2. On the congruence of rabbinic Sarah with the motifs of (Canaanite) Asherah and Astarte/Anath see, e.g., Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 37, 55, 61; Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer, *Eva – Mutter alles Lebendigen: Frauen- und Göttinnenidole aus dem Alten Orient*, 2nd ed. (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2006), 10–11, 30–31; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 156–59 (on Asherah, Astarte, and Anat being connected to the topic of abundance, of nourishment, and of the female breast). Maren Niehoff demonstrates that in Philo, Sarah is identified with Athena, particularly her renewed "virginity," as turning away from bodily femininity. See Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden, Sister and Spouse: Sarah in Philonic Midrash," *HTR* 97 (2004): 413–44, esp. 438–39.

did this not necessarily pose a problem for the rabbis? In the following, some examples from midrash Genesis Rabbah³ will be discussed demonstrating the elevation and even the positive mythologizing depictions of Sarah in it. Some of these Genesis Rabbah traditions, however, undergo transformations in later rabbinic traditions (especially the Babylonian Talmud) that reduce the importance of Sarah or reprimand her, which seems to contradict her significance as a matriarch. To get an idea of the process the traditions underwent, some of the motifs initially present in Genesis Rabbah will be further pursued in their new forms in the Babylonian Talmud.

1. Genesis Rabbah 18:2: Sarah the Eavesdropper

As pointed out by Gary Porton, it is in Gen. Rab. 18:2 where Sarah is mentioned for the first time in this midrash, in the context of interpreting Gen 2:22: “And the Lord God made [“built”] the rib that had he taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man.”⁴ Despite her particular relevance as a matriarch, Sarah appears in this midrash as an example of the woman in general who, made of a rib, is supposed to behave virtuously and modestly—but does not. The question Gen. Rab. 18:2 asks in an elaborate way is why the original woman was created from a rib and not from any other part of the body. This allows for the answer that the rib is characteristic of the ideal woman. The verb form וִיבֵן (which can be read either as *va-yiven*, “he built,” or as *va-yaven*, “he understood”) is interpreted as referring to God’s purposeful, thoughtful, weighing action:

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in Rabbi Levi’s name: וִיבֵן is written, signifying that he [God] considered well [*hitbonen*],⁵ from what part to create her.

3. See Sarit Kattan Gribetz and David M. Grossberg, “Introduction: Genesis Rabbah, a Great Beginning,” in *Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context*, ed. Sarit Kattan Gribetz et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 1–21; see Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 9th ed. (Munich: Beck, 2011), 306–11.

4. See Porton, “How the Rabbis Imagined,” 198. The translations of the Bible verses are taken from the ESV or are based thereupon. On Gen. Rab. 18:2 see Susanne Plietzsch, “Warum gerade die Rippe? Die Auslegung von Gen 2,22 in GenR 18,2,” in *Ein pralles Leben: Alttestamentliche Studien für Jutta Hausmann zum 65. Geburtstag und zur Emeritierung*, ed. Petra Verebics, Nikolett Móricz, and Miklós Kőszeghy (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 159–67.

5. The succinct Hebrew-Aramaic formulation might be paraphrased as follows: The form *va-yiven*, which may also be read as *va-yaven*, is written there. From this

He [God] said:

We will not create her from the head, lest she raises up her head;
 nor from the eye, lest she looks around;
 nor from the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper;
 nor from the mouth, lest she be a gossip;
 nor from the heart, lest she be prone to jealousy;
 nor from the hand, lest she be light-fingered,
 nor from the foot, lest she be a gadabout—
 but from a part that is hidden in humans;
 even when a person stands naked this part is covered. And over every
 limb that he created in her,
 he said to her: A modest, modest woman [אשה צנועה אשה צנועה].⁶ (Gen.
 Rab. 18:2)⁷

The biblical notion that the woman is made of a rib (of her future companion) is transferred to a statement on her essential characteristics: coveredness. From this coveredness, the adjective צנוע, “modest, virtuous,” is derived. Somewhat sardonically, this might be paraphrased as: the ideal woman is like a rib—invisible. Her only function is to provide stability, and in the ideal case she is not even perceived while doing so!

However, apart from the undeniably misogynous aspects of the text—after all, it symbolically negates any physical, intellectual, and emotional activity of women—also its ambivalent-humorous qualities deserve consideration. They find expression most clearly by the quote from Prov 1:25 later on in the midrash,⁸ though they can already be perceived in the present passage: a woman who is curious? Unimaginable—after all, God did not create her from the eye!

Later in Gen. Rab. 18:2 the idea is developed that God’s plan did not work: for each body part mentioned, one can point to (at least) one biblical

we may conclude that it should be understood as הִתְבּוֹנֵן: he considered, he invented, he differentiated.

6. MS Vatican 30 reads אשה צלועה צנועה. This reading even derives צנוע (*tzanuah*) or צנועה (*tzenuah*) by way of phonetic connotation from צלע (*tzela*, “rib”), by creating the transition form צלועה צנועה (*tzeluah—tzenuah*). צלועה seems to be a *hapax legomenon* in rabbinic literature. It might be an untranslatable ad hoc form, צלע (“rib”), being used as an adjective “ribbed.” According to this reading, woman is urged to consider all parts of her body as in some way a “rib.”

7. Translations of Genesis Rabbah are taken from or based on Harry Freedman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, 3rd ed. (London: Soncino, 1983).

8. Plietzsch, “Warum gerade die Rippe?,” 166–67.

woman who made use of it in very individual and self-determined ways: for example, Sarah, who at the entrance of the tent heard what the angel announced to her and to Abraham: “[I did] not [create the woman] from the ear, yet she is an eavesdropper: ‘And Sarah listened at the entrance of the tent’ (Gen 18:10).” The midrash states in a very complex and ambivalent way that women should “actually” be innocent, passive, invisible, unperceivable—but that this is not what they are. By eavesdropping at the entrance of the tent Sarah, in spite of being a matriarch, represents a woman who, although made from the rib precisely for this purpose, is not as virtuous as one would have expected. The authors’ ironic, self-critical arguments put any misogynic perception of the passage into question again; however, the concept of the “virtuous” woman, that is, the woman whose uninhibited liveliness is put into question, is maintained, even if it proves to be unrealistic. In the minds of the rabbinic authors, ideal Eve, the virtuous woman, seems to be less a reality than a model that is fascinatingly unachievable—and thus a ready tool for criticism of real women. In a way, interpretations such as this one are a category of their own, wherein biblical heroines, notwithstanding their significance, may be particularly addressed and criticized as mere women.⁹

2. Genesis Rabbah 39:14: Abram and Sarai “Create” Proselytes

In the Hebrew Bible, as well as in rabbinic thought, Sarah as the foremother of Israel is the first woman who actively works as the God of Israel intended. She and Abraham are functionally equal,¹⁰ an equality that becomes a literary challenge. In the following example the couple, Abram and Sarai, appears in analogy to Adam and Eve; whereas the latter created physical life, Abram and Sarai “create” proselytes, that is, humans who follow the one God. Genesis Rabbah 39:14 discusses Gen 12:5:

“And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the souls that they had ‘made’

9. See, e.g., the section on the seven female prophets b. Meg. 14a–b, which concludes with a “criticism” of Huldah’s and Deborah’s pride. On this see Judith R. Baskin, “Female Prophets in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a–15a,” in this volume. See also Gen. Rab. 45:5, discussed in the introduction in this volume.

10. See also Ronit Nikolsky, “Midrash Sarah and Abraham: A Lost Rabbinic Interpretation of the ‘Woman of Valor’ Song,” in this volume

in Haran [וְאֵת הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ בַּחֲרִין], and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. And they came to the land of Canaan” (Gen 12:5).

Rabbi Leazar [said] in the name of Rabbi Jose ben Zimra: If all inhabitants of the world assembled to create one mosquito, they would not be able to endow it with life. Yet you say: “And the souls that they had made”? It refers, however, to the proselytes [which they converted].

Then let it [the scriptural verse] say: “That they had converted”; why: “that they had made”? That is to teach you that the one who brings a gentile near [to God], is as though he created him [כְּאִילוֹ בְּרָאוֹ].

So let it say: “That *he* had made” why: “That *they* had made”? Said Rabbi Hunia: Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women.

“And Abram took Sarai his wife.” At this stage of the biblical narrative the creation of Israel begins, even before the begetting of Isaac; it is started by a couple, though without sexuality. The midrash has humans “created” in a purely spiritual way, taking care that the sexes are strictly separated both among the creators and the created. By pointing out the verb “to make” (עָשָׂה), the authors associate Gen 12:5 with 1:26: “Then God said: Let us make [נַעֲשֶׂה] *adam* in our image, after our likeness.” The above-discussed motif of Sarah being more valued than Eve is here referred to indirectly and extended on both partners: like God, Abraham and Sarah are capable of making humans (see Gen. Rab. 8).

Also this interpretation has no parallel in the Babylonian Talmud, where we only find an allusion to the verse in b. Sanh. 99b. There the topic of conversion, predetermined in the midrash, transgressing the boundaries between outside and inside, is changed and now appears, as Moshe Lavee points out, as an internal event within the rabbinic community itself¹¹—or even an intrapersonal process:

Resh Laqish said: Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another, the verse ascribed him [credit] as though he formed him [that student], as it is stated: “And the souls they made in Haran” (Gen 12:5).

Rabbi Eleazar says: As though he fashioned the words of Torah [themselves], as it is stated: “Observe the words of this covenant and do them [וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אוֹתָם] (Deut 29:9).

11. Moshe Lavee, “No Boundaries for the Construction of Boundaries: The Babylonian Talmud’s Emphasis on Demarcation of Identity,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 107–9. See also Lavee, *The Rabbinic Conversion of Judaism: The Unique Perspective of the Bavli on Conversion and the Construction of Jewish Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 176.

Rabba said: As though he fashioned himself, as it is stated: “do them.” Do not read “and do *them* [*otam*],” but: “and do yourself [*atem*].”¹²

It seems as if the Babylonian authors felt the need to correct not only the openness toward converts in Gen. Rab. 39:14 but also the idea of Abraham and Sarah’s creative power. Did they want to prevent a mythological understanding of this motif, for example in the sense of Abraham and Sarah as a divine couple? In b. Sanh. 99b, Gen 12:5 is discussed completely without mentioning Abraham and Sarah. Its creative meaning is taken from Gen. Rab. 39:14 but is now restricted to the Torah-teaching process and related to its three instances: the student, the Torah, and the teacher.

3. Genesis Rabbah 40:5: The Measure of all Beauty: Sarah, Eve, and Abishag of Shunem

In Gen. Rab. 40:5, the idea of Sarah’s supernatural beauty is narrated,¹³ based on Gen 12:14, which makes Sarah’s beauty a topic:

And it happened when Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful [כי יפה היא מאד, Gen 12:14].¹⁴

(1)¹⁵ “When Abram entered Egypt, etc.” (Gen 12:14). And where was Sarah? He had put her in a box and locked her in. When he came to the customs-house, they [the customs officers] said to him: “Pay the custom dues!” He [Abram] said: “I will pay.” They said to him: “You carry garments?” He said: “I will pay the dues on garments.” They said to him: “You are carrying silks?” He said: “I will pay on silks.” They said to him: “You are carrying precious stones?” He answered them: “I will pay on precious stones.” They said to him: “You cannot [pass] unless you open it and we see what it contains.” As soon as he opened it, the land of Egypt was irradiated with the lustre [מאורה].

(2) Rabbi Azariah and Rabbi Yonathan in Rabbi Yitzhaq’s name said: Eve’s image [איִקוּיִן שֶׁל חוּה] was transmitted to the rulers of each

12. The translations of the talmudic passages are taken from or based on the Koren edition, *Talmud Bavli*.

13. On Gen. Rab. 40:5 and (in the following) b. Sanh. 39b, as well as b. B. Bat. 58a, see Kadari “Beauty of Sarah,” 68–69.

14. The pun with מאד in the midrash verse and עַד מֵאֵד in 1 Kgs 1:4 cannot be translated in the common way—“very”—in both cases. Thus, here מאד is translated as “beyond all measure” and עַד מֵאֵד as “in abundance.”

15. My structuring of the sections.

generation [לראשי דורות]. Elsewhere it is written: “And the young woman was very beautiful” (1 Kgs 1:4), which means that she attained to Eve’s beauty; but here [it is written]: “(The Egyptians saw that the woman) was very beautiful,” which means, even more than Eve’s image.

(3) “And the princes of the Pharaoh saw her and praised her” (Gen 12:15). Rabbi Yohanan said: They went on outbidding each other for her [lit. she was progressively raised (in price)]: one said: I give a hundred dinars that I may enter [Pharaoh’s palace] with her [ועלל עימה];¹⁶ another one said: I give two hundred dinars to enter with her.

The motif of supernatural beauty is here integrated into a biblical-rabbinic discourse (see also b. Meg. 15a; Gen. Rab. 38:14; 45:4). In particular the overabundant radiance suggests the adoption of goddess attributes, such as that of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who represented beauty, love, and fertility and is compared to the Greek Aphrodite.¹⁷

In the first part (1), Sarah’s hiddenness and revelation is discussed. Sarah was not even supposed to be seen; the motif of being covered appears quite explicitly, though in a different context from in Gen. Rab. 18:2. Only after protest does Abraham open the container in which he had locked his wife, and thus it becomes obvious why he had done so: Sarai/Sarah possesses a supernatural light, which now was shining over all Egypt. In this way the episode could have come to its end, but there follows a further explanation (2), that what was shining was Sarah’s beauty, which even outshone Eve’s. Eve represents the original woman, the woman of creation who is here mentioned in a completely positive sense: she represents the measure of beauty as such. The midrash even mentions a statue (*ikonin*/εἰκότιον) that displays Eve’s beauty. The controlling intention of the interpretation is evident: the “image of Eve,” the midrash tells, was handed down from generation to generation; its function was to provide the measure of a woman’s beauty. The idea of Eve’s beauty produces the assumption of a control value, even if the absurdity of such an

16. Michael Sokoloff reads ועלל עימה as “to have sexual relations with her.” See Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 409. See also Jakob Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (Berlin: Harz, 1924), 3:654. See also Esth. Rab. 6:10.

17. See Deborah Vischak, “Hathor,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:82–85; Claas J. Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth: Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 26, 66.

assumption is easily figured out. It does allow one to state that Abishag of Shunem (1 Kgs 1:4) *almost* equaled Eve's beauty, whereas Sarah was even more beautiful.

It is hardly possible to read Sarah's comparison to Eve in (2) other than as a depiction of the theological relationship of creation and revelation, which is communicated here by an example of two female characters. The light shining within and out of Sarah is the wonder of the covenant, representing the original light of creation (see, e.g., Gen. Rab. 12:6) or, later, the light of the Torah, which is revealed and shines on faraway regions. In Gen. Rab. 40:5 Sarah's extraordinary beauty is derived from the word מְאֹד, "very," "extraordinary," "strong" (or "excessive"), which is also an anagram of אָדָם, "man," appearing frequently in Genesis Rabbah (see Gen. Rab. 8:5; 9:12). Sarah is more beautiful than Eve, insofar as she is the woman Eve was actually supposed to be. The concept of beauty in a theological sense is found in several passages of the rabbinic tradition. Here, however, comparing Eve and Sarah implies a somewhat erotic perspective, in the sense of the male interpreters judging (biblical) women's beauty. We can only assume that this way of interpreting is due to traditions in which these female characters were the objects of unrestricted admiration and exaltation.¹⁸

In (3) an episode is added that refers back to (1). The motif of Sarah's "pricelessness," which was initially meant in a positive sense—Abraham would have paid any price because it would always have been too little—is now modified by the way the Egyptian customs officers offer money for her. Whereas (1) signals an awareness of Sarah's immeasurable value and is characterized by Abraham's attitude of adoration and protection toward her, for the court officials of the Pharaoh it is—depending on the interpretation of ועָלָי עִמָּה ("I will enter with her"/"I will have sex with her")—a vulgar power struggle at play: Who offers most to receive Sarah? This creates the impression that the idealization of the heroine in

18. See, e.g., the passage 1Q20 XX, 2–8 (Genesis Apocryphon), which is frequently quoted in this context; Kadari, "Beauty of Sarah," 79–80; Max Küchler, *Schweigen, Schmuck und Schleier: Drei neutestamentliche Vorschriften zur Verdrängung der Frauen auf dem Hintergrund einer frauenfeindlichen Exegese des Alten Testaments im antiken Judentum* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 131–33. Küchler's comment on this text, "Die Beschreibung läuft von oben nach unten, den Körperteilen nach," allows for a structural analogy between 1QapGen XX, 1–8 and Gen. Rab. 18:2 (*Schweigen, Schmuck und Schleier*, 133).

(1) provoked the authors or editors to invent a broken version of Sarah's immeasurable value.

Apart from Genesis Rabbah, the episode about Sarah in the chest is only found in the late midrashic work of Tanhuma Buber (Lekh lekha 8). However, an abridged reference to this tradition, that is, a comparison of Abishag and Sarah, is found in b. Sanh. 39b: "‘And the young woman was very beautiful’ (1 Kgs 1:4). Rabbi Hanina bar Pappa says: She still did not reach half the beauty of Sarah, as it is written: ‘up to very [beautiful]’ [עד ממש] and not including ‘very [beautiful]’ (Gen 12:14b).” The talmudic passage does not adopt the story from Gen. Rab. 40:5 but only the exegetical pun; and Eve is deleted from the original comparison of three—Abishag, Eve, Sarah. Thus, from this text alone we can hardly understand why Sarah is supposed to be more than double as beautiful as Abishag of Shunem. However, if Eve is considered a “criterion for comparison,”¹⁹ we may deduce that Sarah is double as beautiful as Eve and that Abishag almost achieved Eve’s beauty. This text gives the impression that the Babylonian authors tried to avoid describing the special character of Sarah’s beauty in terms of natural femininity as represented by Eve, and therefore limited their comparison to Sarah and Abishag.

However, in b. B. Bat. 58b, Eve is given priority over Sarah:

All [people] compared to Sarah [are] like a monkey compared to a human.

Sarah compared to Eve [is] like a monkey compared to a human.

Eve compared to Adam [is] like a monkey compared to a human.

Adam compared to the Shekinah [is] like a monkey compared to a human.

Here the criterion of physical beauty is not (or at best indirectly) applied. Instead, a hierarchy of being close to the image of God is given, in which Eve is perceived as a figure in the transition zone between humanity and God. In this hierarchy, Adam, the sole male character, is only mentioned when it comes to a comparison with the Shekinah (i.e., the presence of God). Appearing “like a monkey” in comparison to the latter is certainly not shameful! At the lower levels of the hierarchy we find Sarah and Eve. A statement such as “compared to Eve, Sarah looks like a monkey compared

19. That Eve is implicitly present is evident from the fact that b. Sanh. 39b is a discussion of m. Sanh. 4:5 and thus of fundamental anthropological questions.

to a human” must be called a subtle vilification of Sarah, a sort to which Abraham probably would not have been subjected. Both Babylonian texts quoted here have in common their avoidance of depicting Sarah as “more beautiful than Eve,” in contrast to the original tradition in Gen. Rab. 40:5. There, Sarah’s beauty has no limits, which may be seen as a trace of a mythological perception.

4. Genesis Rabbah 47:2 and 48:19: God Lays the Foundations for Conception

To the midrashic characterization of Sarah belongs the miraculous reversal from old age to youth. Genesis Rabbah discusses this topic in sections 47:2 and 53:8, among others, interpreting Gen 17:16 and 21:1. Both verses consist of a parallelism, in which God’s blessing to Sarah is twofold. In Gen. Rab. 47:2 and 53:5 this parallelism is explained in a similar way: in a first round (1) it is explained as referring to Sarah’s pregnancy and her capability to lactate. In the second round (2), the interpretation is completed by the idea that this parallelism is a warning to no longer disparage Sarah as being infertile. Finally, in the concluding sequence (3), the double blessing is presented as a metaphor for God providing Sarah, in addition to her pregnancy, with a womb she had not had before.

The midrash in Gen. Rab. 47:2 is structured by the repeated formulation “I will bless her” in Gen 17:6:

“And I will bless her, and also from her I will give you a son; / and I will bless her, and she will become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (Gen 17:6).

(1) Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Nehemiah [disputed about this verse]; Rabbi Yudan said: This means, “and I will bless her [וּבֵרַכְתִּי אוֹתָהּ]” (Gen 17:6a), that she should give you a son; “and I will bless her [וּבֵרַכְתִּיהָ]” (Gen 17:6b) to the blessing of milk. Said Rabbi Nehemiah to him: Had she then already been informed about her milk? This teaches, however, that the Holy One, blessed is He, brought her back to her youth!

(2) Rabbi Abbahu explained it thus in the name of Rabbi Yose bar Rabbi Hanina: I will inspire all people with awe of her, so that they should not call her barren woman any more.

(3) Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Resh Laqish: She lacked a womb, but the Holy One, blessed is He, fashioned a womb for her.

This passage makes obvious what may be called the actual rabbinic interpretative interest when it comes to the character of Sarah: procreation, exclusively intended and guided by God for the purpose of begetting Isaac. All the traditional subject matter, each of which may originally have had an independent existence, is made subject to this overall intention. Sarah's fertility, and perhaps even her entire sexuality, is the result of God's working. And there is more: "And the Lord visited Sarah" (Gen 21:1)—he is the one responsible for conception.

But Genesis Rabbah also knows a tradition of both Abraham and Sarah returning to youth. In Gen. Rab. 48:19 Abraham and Sarah are compared to a damaged lock made of chains. What makes the miracle performed by God so incredible is that he is capable of arranging the two to fit again:

"Is anything too miraculous for the Lord? / At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son" (Gen 18:14).

Rabbi Yudan (said) in the name of Rabbi Shimeon: This [may be compared] to one, who had in his hand two parts of a lock שתי קופליית/copula] and he brought them to a smith and asked him: Can you repair these for me? He replied: I can make them from the outset and [you think] I cannot repair them? So here: [God said:] I can create them from the beginning, yet [you would say that] I cannot restore them to their youth?

Whereas for both partners in this Genesis Rabbah tradition, this is about the restitution of the functional state of youth—with the focus on complementarity, as in Gen 1:27b: "male and female he created them"—the Babylonian Talmud emphasizes that both Sarah's and Abraham's sexual organs had not been operational since their birth and became so only after God's intervention at old age. In b. Yevam. 64a–b Sarah's fertility at old age is discussed in light of the halakhah in m. Yevam. 6:6, where a period of ten years is fixed, after which a man should leave his wife if she had by then not given birth: "If somebody has married a woman and has been living with her for ten years and she has not given birth, he is no longer allowed [to neglect the commandment of fertility]" (m. Yevam. 6:6). In the related Gemara we find an aggadic sequence on the lack of fertility of Isaac, Abraham, and their wives. There, elaborating the motif from Gen. Rab. 47:2 of Sarah lacking a womb, Abraham and Sarah are classified under two nonbinary rabbinic gender categories:²⁰

20. See Charlotte E. Fonrobert, "Gender Identity in Halakhic Discourse," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019i>.

Rabbi Ami said: Abraham and Sarah were *tumtumin* as it is stated: “Look to the rock from where you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from where you were dug” (Isa 51:1). And it is written: “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you” (Isa 51:2).

Rav Nahman said that Rabba bar Avuh said: Our mother Sarah was an *aylonit*, as it is stated: “And Sarah was barren, she had no child” (Gen 11:30). She did not even have a place for a child. (b. Yevam. 64a–b)

At first both Abraham and Sarah are counted among the so called *tumtum(im/n)*. This is a category the rabbinic authors use for people whose sexual organs are not accessible but “enclosed” into their bodies, so that at birth their biological gender is not clear. Once again, we encounter the motif of being covered! Abraham and Sarah are presented as keeping a considerable distance from anything sexual; Abraham’s and Sarah’s sexual organs are said to have been “opened up” only at old age. After that, using another approach, Sarah is said to have been an *aylonit*, that is, she had clearly been born a female yet did not develop any female secondary sexual organs in the course of puberty.²¹ As evidence Gen 11:30 is enlisted—the double statement (“infertile” and “no child”) is interpreted as the lack of a womb. This way the motif already available in the Palestinian tradition is included in the exegesis. Both the Genesis Rabbah traditions and b. Yevam. 64a–b convey a miraculous intervention of God; but whereas Genesis Rabbah works with mythological motifs, as the ability to return from old age to youth, or the overabundant nursing capacity, the Bavli presents Abraham’s and Sarah’s miraculous fertility as part of a halakhic discourse.

5. Genesis Rabbah 53:6: God Alone Is the Cause of Conception

The motif of the pregnancy of an old woman who originally even lacked a womb appears to inflate when Genesis Rabbah states that this pregnancy happened without any sexual desire on the side of Sarah. All these themes together with this last one are taken together to demonstrate that it was exclusively God’s power that caused Sarah to conceive. The concept of the “woman under suspicion of adultery [*sotah*]” (Num 5) is taken up in Gen. Rab. 53:6, so as to demonstrate that Sarah’s child was undoubtedly Abraham’s (or at least must be taken as his). This idea

21. See Sarra Lev, “How the ‘aylonit’ Got Her Sex,” *AJSR* 31 (2007): 297–316.

concludes the interpretation of Gen 21:1, which is crucial for the rabbinic understanding of Sarah:

“And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.”

(1) Rabbi Yitzhaq said: It is written: “But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children” (Num 5:28). Then she who had entered the house of Pharaoh and emerged undefiled; the house of Abimelech and emerged undefiled; is it not but right that she should be remembered?

(2) Rabbi Yehudah ben Rabbi Shimeon said: Although Rabbi Huna said, that there was an angel appointed over desire, Sarah had no need [for any] but he in his glory [made her conceive]; hence: “And the Lord visited Sarah” (Gen 21:1).

(3) “And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son” (Gen 21:2). This teaches that she did not steal seed from elsewhere. “A son of his old age [לזקוניו]” (Gen 21:2). This teaches that his [Isaac’s] features [זיו איקוניו] were like his own.

The first dictum (1) understands “being visited” as the legal consequence of the fact that Sarah had been faithful to Abraham. The midrash takes up those situations that might give cause to the suspicion that Sarah had had sexual intercourse with other men—with the pharaoh (Gen 12:14–20) or with Abimelech (Gen 20). Even had this happened against her will, it would have been held against her. Thus, Sarah is under suspicion of adultery, although the suspicion is not confirmed. In the sense of Num 5:28, her pregnancy may be read as a reward for behaving according to the norms imposed on women.²² The dictum of Rabbi Yitzhaq may be counted among those passages from which we learn that women are supposed to be controlled, as once again Sarah (or the reader) is told that any experience of sexual violence would have resulted in social condemnation. The midrash builds an arc of tension: In the first section (1) we learn that both

22. See b. Ber. 31b; there Hannah “threatens” God that, if she does not become pregnant in the near future, she will act so that a suspicion of adultery will fall on her so that she will, according to Num 5:28, be tested for unfaithfulness, and then she will have to conceive. See Susanne Plietzsch, “Zwischen Widerstand und Selbstaufopferung. Die rabbinische Rezeption der Gestalt der Hanna (bBerachot 31a–32b),” *LDiff* 2 (2006), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019j>, 7. See Alexander Dubrau, “Talmudic Legal Methodology and Gender: The Case of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael Reconsidered,” in this volume.

the pharaoh and Abimelech were not responsible for Sarah's pregnancy. In (2) also the opinion that Sarah's visitation had been the work of an angel (who had awoken desire between Abraham and Sarah) is rejected: it had been God himself. "And the Lord visited Sarah": this means that Sarah had encountered God himself, as a result of which she became pregnant. In (3) the interpreters use the next verse—"And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son of his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him" (Gen 21:2)—to emphasize that there is no doubt that Abraham (whose age has just been underlined) is actually Isaac's father.²³ In this way, the verse is artistically read against the grain and particularly emphasizes the overall statement. There are—and this is the analogy to the woman under suspicion of adultery—many doubts about Abraham's paternity. The gravest cause of doubt is his age. Then there are Sarah's sojourns with the pharaoh and Abimelech. But the child, which is the result of God's actions, looks like Abraham! The midrash concludes this from the formulation לִזְקוּנָיו (*lizequnav*), "[a son] of his old age" in Gen 21:2, which it reads as זֵיו אִיקוּנִין שֶׁלוֹ (*ziv ikonin shelo*), "the sparkle of his appearance" (literally, "the sparkle of his image"). Isaac's sparkle is like Abraham's; it is thus ruled out that he comes from an alien seed. However, this formulation avoids any statement that Isaac is the product of Abraham's seed and allows for references to a spiritual-physical conception. For the latter indeed no sexual desire is necessary, and the miracle is that such a child is *actually* Abraham's son and indeed shows his sparkle.

6. Genesis Rabbah 53:9: The Milk Miracle

In Gen. Rab. 53:9 we once again encounter the motif of making the hidden Sarah visible. Unlike in Gen. Rab. 40:5, here it is not the shining beauty that is made visible but rather the nakedness of her breasts when nursing! Here the concept of being covered, illustrated in Gen. Rab. 18:2 by the example of the rib, is taken to its limits. Even more clearly than in Gen. Rab. 40:5 (Sarah in the box), however, covering and uncovering are connected to control: it is Abraham and not Sarah herself who decides when and in which ways her breasts will be hidden or visible. Genesis Rabbah 53:9 interprets Gen 21:7: "And she said: Who would have said to Abraham

23. Interestingly, Gen. Rab. 53:6 connects the motif of Isaac's resemblance to Abraham with Gen 21:2, whereas b. B. Metz. 87a uses it for the explanation of Gen 25:19: "Abraham begot Isaac."

that Sarah would nurse children [בָּנִים]? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”²⁴ The exegetical problem chosen as the starting point for the debate is that the verse uses the plural—“children/sons” (בָּנִים). Who are these “sons”?

“And she said: Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons?” (Gen 21:7). She nursed builders [*banaim* instead of *banim*—“sons”].

(1) Our mother Sarah was extremely modest. Said our father Abraham to her: This is not the time for modesty! But: Uncover your breasts so that all may know that the Holy One, blessed be He, has begun to perform miracles. She uncovered her breasts and two fountains came forth. Noble ladies came and had their children nursed by her, saying: We do not merit, that our children should be nursed with the milk of the righteous Isaac.

(2) The rabbis and Rav Aha [disputed on this]; the Rabbis said: Whoever came for the sake of heaven, became God-fearing. Rav Aha said: Even one who did not come for the sake of heaven, was given dominion in this world. Yet they did not continue to enjoy it, but: When they stood aloof at Sinai and would not accept the Torah, that dominion was taken from them. Thus, it is written: “He looses the bonds of kings and binds a waistcloth on their hips” (Job 12:18).

Genesis Rabbah 53 interprets the entire section of Gen 21:1–21; the main emphasis, however, is on Gen 21:1: “And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.” This verse is discussed in Gen. Rab. 53:1–6, that is, in six out of a total of fifteen subsections of the chapter. The interpretations of this verse consist mostly of other verses read together with Gen 21:1 according to different analogy assumptions, adding short topical statements. It is a poetic collage about the ever-renewed facets of God’s miraculous acts. Genesis Rabbah 53:9 (1) is different insofar as we find in it only one, comparably long, narrative focusing on Sarah. She appears (for the first time) in public as a nursing mother. Here the unheard-of event is less that of an old woman giving birth to a child than the fact that she is able to breastfeed. As already in Gen. Rab. 40:5, this is a miracle story that would work just as well without any scriptural verse or without any theological reference: an old woman

24. On Gen. Rab. 53:9 see Joshua Levinson, “Bodies and Bo(a)rders: Emerging Fiction of Identity in Late Antiquity,” *HTR* 93 (2000): 352–54, 365–71.

not only gives the breast but also has enough milk both to feed and to nourish, in a much broader sense, all infants taken to her!

The inclusion of this narrative is based on the plural “sons” (*banim*) in Gen 21:7, although it is well known that Sarah had only one son, Isaac. The explanation offered is that Sarah had indeed only one biological son, but those called the “builders” (*banaim*) of Israel²⁵ are her children in a wider sense, having suckled from Sarah. Here the already-mentioned motif of conversion, which is associated with Sarah in Gen. Rab. 39:14, is connected to the metaphor of nursing. Sarah appears as a universal mother, again comparable to the Egyptian goddess Hathor²⁶ or to Isis, who suckles her son, Horus. On this text Levinson references the popularity of the Isis cult in the Roman Empire.²⁷ In the narratives connected to these goddesses, being suckled by a divine mother results in acquiring a divine-royal identity.²⁸

In what way, then, can Job 12:18 be understood in this context? The verse itself seems not to really fit into its immediate context, according to which peoples who did not adopt the Torah were deprived of their dominion. Rather, it appears that Job 12:18 was chosen to demonstrate the overall passage, for Job 12:1–25 takes up several of the latter’s topics, such as the loss of power of the nations (Job 12:18–25),²⁹ Abraham’s and Sarah’s age (12:12), or the suffering of the righteous, as Abraham and Sarah had suffered from childlessness (12:1–15). In a metaphorical sense, Job 12:18 (“He looses the bonds of kings and binds a waistcloth on their hips”) might represent Sarah half-bare for breast-feeding, which could also be supported by 12:15: “If he withholds the waters, they dry up; if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land.”³⁰

25. Or as those “building” Sarah, see Gen 16:2.

26. Vischak, “Hathor,” 85.

27. See Levinson, “Bodies and Bo(a)rders,” 367–68. See Othmar Keel, *Gott weiblich: Eine verborgene Seite des biblischen Gottes* (Freiburg: Bibel+Orient Museum, 2008), 72–75.

28. See Joachim Kügler, “Why Should Adults Want to Be Sucklings Again? Some Remarks on the Cultural Semantics of Breastfeeding in Christian and Pre-Christian Tradition,” in *Exegese zwischen Religionsgeschichte und Pastoral*, ed. Joachim Kügler (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2017), 61–84, esp. 68–73; Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth*, 52.

29. On the peoples of the world, who now can no longer mock Abraham and Sarah, see b. B. Metz. 87a in the following.

30. See Gen. Rab. 53:1; there the metaphor of the formerly dry and now blossoming trees is applied to Sarah.

Whereas Gen. Rab. 53:9 presents a female miracle story and endows Sarah with characteristics of a fertility goddess, the Babylonian version of this tradition in b. B. Metz. 87a has an interest in describing the miracle on equal terms, as if attempting to bring about gender justice. The miracle happening to Abraham is here made superior to the one that happened to Sarah:

And she said: "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah should nurse children?" (Gen 21:7) How many children did Sarah nurse?

Rabbi Levi said: That day when Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he prepared a great feast. All of the nations of the world were gossiping, saying: Have you seen that old man and woman who brought a foundling from the street, and are saying: He is our son. And what is more, they are making a great feast, to bolster their claim?

What did our father Abraham do? He went and invited all the great men of the generation, and our mother Sarah invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her, but did not bring her wet nurse. And a miracle occurred to our mother Sarah, her breasts were opened like two springs, and she nursed all.

Yet they still were gossiping, saying: Even if Sarah at ninety years of age can give birth, can Abraham at hundred years of age father a child? Immediately the countenance of Isaac's face transformed, and appeared like that of Abraham. Everyone exclaimed and said: "Abraham begot Isaac" (Gen 25:19).

We may presume that the Babylonian authors were familiar with the Palestinian tradition of the universal mother Sarah, the timeless nursing and caring woman. It is thus worth noting how Abraham is assimilated into each step of the miracle story. Even if in the nursing scene Sarah still stands for herself, in the entire section she is no longer the independent heroine she was in Gen. Rab. 53:9. To begin with, the tradition is incorporated into the context of the feast of the weaning of Isaac, initiated by Abraham (Gen 21:8; instead of 21:6–7, which speaks of Sarah's miraculous fertility)! Weaning implies that henceforth all children are to be breastfed by Sarah, except Isaac. The hosting couple invites members of each sex separately (see also the separation of the sexes in Gen. Rab. 39:14), whereas in Gen. Rab. 53:9 only the women visiting Sarah are mentioned.

But probably the most striking difference between the two versions is the hierarchy of the miracles: the nursing miracle, on which the tradition is based, is mentioned, but no conclusions are drawn from it; instead, there is a claim that Abraham's fertility is a greater miracle than Sarah's nursing. With Isaac's sudden resemblance to his father (a motif that appeared

before in *Genesis Rabbah*),³¹ the Babylonian authors create a situation in which Abraham's fatherhood can be proved in subsequent times—in the same way as Sarah's nursing proves that she had given birth. While *Gen. Rab.* 53:6 connected the motif of Isaac's resemblance to Abraham with *Gen* 21:2, b. B. Metz. 87a uses it for explaining *Gen* 25:19: "Abraham begot Isaac." On the one hand, a parity can be seen in that; on the other, Abraham receives primacy over Sarah, as *Gen* 25:19 concludes the section and is topically made superior to *Gen* 21:7. The initial verse ("Sarah nurses sons") is thus transferred into "Abraham begot Isaac."

Conclusion:

Sarah's Beauty, Motherhood, and Sexuality in Rabbinic Thought

Following the biblical story, the rabbinic reception of Sarah focuses on her role as the female representative of Abraham's covenant, as the mother of the first child born under the covenant and thus as the ancestress of the people of the covenant. By their characters, she and Abraham (as literary-theological figures) unite the physical and the metahistorical dimensions of the covenant. Both aspects become recognizable—already in the Hebrew Bible, but even more in the rabbinic interpretations—with Sarah as a woman. Her return from old age to youth, her pregnancy, her giving birth and nursing provide the physical foundation for the people of Israel while at the same time representing life as a universal quality. To this universal or even cosmological context belongs first and foremost the motif of Sarah's beauty, but also her (near) equal status to Abraham. Her and Abraham's complementarity reminds one of the different but equal status between the sexes in *Gen* 1:27. Both the biblical text and the rabbinic authors almost always treat Sarah's beauty, motherliness, and sexuality positively, although this causes problems: Sarah's beauty makes her attractive also for other men apart from Abraham, and Sarah's near-equal status to her companion is in stark contrast to the authors' everyday experience and ideology. Most of all, Sarah's sexuality is challenging. The Hebrew Bible refers to it openly (e.g., *Gen* 18:11–12), but the contrast to reality, which disallows an old woman to conceive, makes a distancing from this claim possible at the same time. Thus, rabbinic tradition emphasizes certain features that move Sarah's sexuality into the

31. See above the discussion of *Gen. Rab.* 53:6.

realm of the surreal. In this context, the texts discussed above show how the Babylonian interpretations are partly based on but partly rework the Palestinian ones, aiming at the downgrading of mythological motifs that might make Sarah appear too much like a goddess, and also of Sarah's independence from Abraham.

Genesis Rabbah speaks uninhibitedly and at the same time poetically about the body, for example about Sarah's (and Eve's) beauty and attractiveness, or about the milk miracle, which is described in detail. The narrative is very lively, for example, when telling the story of Sarah hidden in the chest on the borders of Egypt. This results in the impression that prerabbinic, even folkloristic material was adopted and reworked into the structural setting of the midrash. Each small narrative is completed by a rabbinic-theological reflection relating what is told to a biblical verse as well as to the rabbinic worldview. One mythological aspect is crucial for the understanding of Sarah in Genesis Rabbah: "being visited" is very much—in particular in Gen. Rab. 53—worked out as a matter between Sarah and God. The God of Israel is capable of making the old woman flourish and shine again.³² He is the one who determines Sarah's fertility, as originally she had lacked even a womb, and this God then made particularly for her. Finally, it is God who begets a child with Sarah. Abraham stays in the background—both in the biblical story and in the midrash—even though Scripture says that Sarah gave birth to "Abraham's child" (Gen 21:2), or even though some passages claim that both Sarah and Abraham were given back their youth.

In the Babylonian Talmud it is conspicuous that the individual passages are less dramatic. Short narrations that are complex yet simple—such as the one of Sarah in the chest (Gen. Rab. 40:5)—are dropped altogether, next to subject matter in which Sarah's and Abraham's actions are compared to those of God (Gen. Rab. 39:14). The rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud find it much more difficult to deal with immediate analogies between God and humans. It is particularly conspicuous that in the Babylonian Talmud a tendency to desexualize Abraham and Sarah is evident.

32. Bleeker emphasizes Hathor's having been considered a life-creating tree goddess, and this reminded me of Gen. Rab. 53:1: "In a land such as Egypt, where the sun can shine mercilessly, the tree provides a refreshing shadow that is beyond estimation; and that, not only during life, but after death as well. The bestower of this benefaction is the tree-goddess Hathor, who reveals her power of renewal in the tree" (see Bleeker, "Hathor," 37).

There the motif of being covered is, in a surreal way, referred to Abraham's and Sarah's sexual organs, which are hidden within their bodies. The sheer existence of their sexuality is, as much as possible, reduced to their conceiving Isaac. Furthermore, in the Babylonian Talmud, Sarah's relative predominance over Abraham is reduced. If we may assume that the narrative of the milk miracle, the idea of Sarah as a nursing mother, relies on popular traditions, in the Babylonian Talmud it is decidedly connected to Abraham's fertility.

The question about mythological motifs in the midrash can only be touched on in passing here. We have referred to Sarah's supernatural beauty and sparkle, to her being taken back from old age to youth and fertility, and to her universal, nourishing motherliness as well as, most of all, to her conception with divine involvement. In my opinion we should not rule out that there might be a connection between these motifs in rabbinic literature and the history of biblical editing. It seems at least possible that the two literatures are related to each other, as the rabbinic tradition preserves material that was perhaps right from the beginning connected with a certain biblical topic and was basically already existent in the biblical text itself, although coded. When the Bible says about Sarah "that the woman was very beautiful" (Gen 12:14), readers and listeners familiar with the tradition may have understood that this could not just refer to any empirical beauty but rather to a divine one. The rabbinic texts do not give the impression that the authors believed these motifs to be problematic in any way—at least not because of their "pagan" origin or character. At best this required some kind of a regulation because otherwise they would have provided the protagonist with a momentum of her own and a significance that, at least potentially, would have competed with the absolute authority of the God of Israel. In this sense only, we must read those passages as reprimanding or limiting Sarah, and thus even as standing in contrast to their plain meaning in the biblical narration. In this context, calling Sarah an eavesdropper, the episode of Egyptian officials bargaining for her favors, or the fact that she is connected to a possible suspicion of adultery should be mentioned. Also the fact that Abraham, and not Sarah herself, demonstrates the miracle of nursing belongs to this category. Such literary strategies make sure that the Israelite-Jewish-monotheistic frame is maintained and that female beauty and fertility stay in the hands of the one God.

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Female Prophets in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a–15a

Judith R. Baskin

The large sugya extending from folio 10a to 17a in tractate Megillah of the Babylonian Talmud provides a running commentary on verses from the biblical book of Esther. Since this passage contains a number of traditions not found in sources from the land of Israel, it is sometimes called the Babylonian Esther midrash. In what follows, I examine one exegetical unit within this larger sugya, folios 14a to 15a, which discusses female biblical prophets. I focus on what Babylonian Talmud Megillah has to say about the women it identifies as prophets and also how these remarks diverge from Seder Olam Rabbah, a Palestinian precursor of this material. Since the Babylonian Talmud preserves these traditions within a larger midrash on the book of Esther, a further theme of the essay is how allusions and parallels to Esther play a role in the portrayals of some of these female prophets.

1. Female Prophecy in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a

According to b. Meg. 14a, there were forty-eight male prophets and seven female prophets. This tradition first appears in Seder Olam Rabbah, a Tannaitic chronological work from the land of Israel. Chapter 21 of Seder Olam Rabbah provides terse justifications by means of biblical prooftexts for the prophetic credentials of these seven women, who are identified as Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. Bavli Megillah follows this source in explaining that, in fact, there were many more than forty-eight male biblical prophets, citing the following statement from S. Olam Rab. 21 as a baraita (i.e., an early tradition from the land of Israel, not recorded in the Mishnah): “Many prophets arose for Israel, double the number of those who left Egypt. However, [only those]

prophecies needed [for future generations] were written down, but those that were not needed were not recorded.”

Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah are specifically called prophets in the Hebrew Bible,¹ and Seder Olam Rabbah and Bavli Megillah quote the biblical verses in which they are so designated. The prophetic bona fides of the other four women, however, are more challenging to identify. Moreover, b. Meg. 14a–b evinces significant discomfort with the very notion of female prophecy. Thus, some of the prooftexts cited in the Babylonian Talmud differ from those in Seder Olam Rabbah, and these comments seem intended to infantilize, domesticate, or sexualize six of the seven acknowledged female prophets. It is also noteworthy that in several instances the representations of female prophets in b. Meg. 14a–15a express not only rabbinic ambivalence about female prophets in general but particular misgivings about Esther.

Discussion of female prophecy in b. Meg. 14a is prompted by the following verse from the book of Esther: “Thereupon the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews” (Esth 3:10).² In its context, this statement refers to King Ahashuerus’s approbation of Haman’s declared plan to annihilate Persia’s Jews, the event that sets in motion the heroic and salvific actions of Esther and Mordechai. Their successful efforts in saving the Jewish communities of the Persian Empire result in the establishment of the festival of Purim and the commandment of reading or hearing the reading of the Esther scroll (*megillah*). The initial rabbinic response to this verse is attributed to Rav Abba bar Kahana: “The removal of the ring was more effective than the forty-eight male prophets and seven female prophets who prophesied on behalf of Israel. They were all unable to return [Israel] to the right way, but the removal of Ahashuerus’s ring returned them to the right way.” This is a rueful acknowledgement that people do not listen to prophetic warnings; it takes an actual death sentence to rouse a community to repentance. A second interpretation, which is said to derive from a baraita and is unique to the Babylonian Talmud, follows: “Forty-eight male prophets

1. A fourth woman, Noadiah (Neh 6:14), is also called a prophet (*nevi’ah*) in the Hebrew Bible. She is described as among those who were hostile to Nehemiah’s plans to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

2. Biblical quotations generally follow the NJPS, unless the rabbinic context demands otherwise; translations of rabbinic texts are my own or are based on the Soncino Press Babylonian Talmud translation (1935–1952).

and seven female prophets prophesied on behalf of Israel and they did not subtract from or add anything to what is written in the Torah except for the reading of the *megillah*.”

This surprising assertion declares that the only addition to the pentateuchal commandments that can be attributed to biblical prophets after the death of Moses is the commandment of either reading the Esther scroll or listening to its reading, a central ritual requirement of the postpentateuchal festival of Purim. Essentially denying any other prophetic contribution to Jewish practice, this statement strongly affirms the import and uniqueness of the Sinai revelation. Some scholars have also understood it as part of the larger rabbinic polemic against Christian claims of a new and superseding prophetic message.³ This thematic thread demonstrates that the relative novelty of Purim and the canonical status of the book of Esther were of concern to the rabbis. As Tal Ilan has pointed out, a similar anxiety also lies at the center of a tradition in b. Hul. 139b, in which the rabbis provide verses from the Pentateuch that are said to refer to Haman, Mordechai, and Esther in order to demonstrate that the festival and its major characters were already referred to in the Torah.⁴

2. Sarah

The female prophets are discussed in chronological order in b. Meg. 14a, beginning with Sarah. She is said to be the same woman as Iscah, Abraham's niece, who is mentioned only once in the Torah. In a comment on Gen 11:29, “Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah,” Rabbi Yitzhaq is quoted as saying: “Iscah is Sarah. And why was she called Iscah? She saw [*sakhtah*] by means of divine inspiration, as it is stated: ‘Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you’ (Gen 21:12).”

Another interpretation using the same linguistic analogy is also brought to demonstrate that Sarah was Iscah, this time on the basis of

3. Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 2:146; and see Amram Tropper, “A Tale of Two Sinais: On the Reception of the Torah according to *bShab* 88a,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 147–57.

4. Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, FCBT 5/3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 596–600.

Sarah's well-known pulchritude: "All looked [*sokhin*] upon her beauty." In the first identification with Iscah, Sarah is shown to have been a prophet: she demanded that Abraham expel Hagar because she saw by divine inspiration that the covenant would be passed on through Isaac. The second proof-text, emphasizing her beauty, seems irrelevant to female prophecy. This comment, which sexualizes Sarah and subtly undercuts her privileged status, appears to reflect rabbinic discomfort with Sarah's dominance in this passage, as indicated in the divine commandment to Abraham to obey his wife. It is the first of a number of times in b. Meg. 14a–b where the rabbis diminish the power of female prophets and criticize their arrogance in overriding male authority. The emphasis on women as objects of the male gaze is also a leitmotif throughout this unit.

Seder Olam Rabbah 21, the precursor of the tradition about female prophets in Bavli Megillah, also validates Sarah's prophetic status with two proof-texts. The first is Gen 11:29, an indication that the identification of Sarah with Iscah, Abraham's niece, is an ancient tradition.⁵ The second supports the teaching that all of the patriarchs and matriarchs "were called prophets" and is based on the following verses:

Wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another
He allowed no one to oppress them;
He reproved kings on their account,
"Do not touch My anointed ones; do not harm My prophets." (Ps
105:13–15)

This affirmation of Sarah's prophetic ability, and that of the other matriarchs as well, does not appear in b. Meg. 14a.

The insistence that Sarah was Iscah and that Abraham, therefore, was her uncle, found in both S. Olam Rab. 21 and b. Meg. 14a, was important for the rabbis for polemical reasons. The Esther midrash states at b. Meg. 13a that Mordechai was married to his niece Esther prior to her entering the court of Ahashuerus. As Eliezer Segal has pointed out, significant

5. This relationship is first attested in the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus 1.6.5 (151), in his version of Gen 11. It is evident that Abraham's assertion in Gen 20:12 that Sarah was his half-sister was problematic for a number of late ancient Jews. On this tradition see Eliezer Segal, "Sarah and Iscah: Method and Message in Midrashic Tradition," *JQR* 82 (1991–1992): 425 n. 26; Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:48–52; Barry Walfish, "Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle," *Proof* 22 (2002): 307, 327–28 n. 37.

evidence from the Second Temple period reveals that the Pharisees and the rabbinic sages were anxious to find scriptural backing for their support of uncle-niece marriages, a common practice that they sanctioned in the face of significant criticism from other Jewish groups such as the Sadducees and the Dead Sea sectarians. He writes: “The legal [marriage] restrictions of Leviticus 18 left little room for suitable midrashic manipulation.... If positive support was to be adduced, it was more likely to be found in the narrative sections of the Bible, by unearthing historical precedents for marriages between uncle and niece. The stories of Sarah and Esther were found to be amenable to such interpretation.”⁶

3. Miriam

Miriam is the second female prophet listed in S. Olam Rab. 21 and b. Meg. 14a. Seder Olam Rabbah establishes her prophetic status by citing the opening words of Exod 15:20: “And Miriam the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand.” This verse also begins the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud. There, however, it is taught that Miriam’s prophetic moment took place in her childhood when she predicted the birth of her brother Moses and prophesied that he would redeem Israel. This tradition originates in an explanation of why Miriam is described as Aaron’s sister and not as the sister of Moses in Exod 15:20:

Rav Nahman said in the name of Rav: For she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron and she would say: My mother is destined to bear a son who will deliver Israel. And when Moses was born the entire house was filled with light and her father stood and kissed her on the head, saying to her: My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled. When Moses was placed in the river, Miriam’s father arose and rapped her on the head, saying: My daughter, where is your prophecy now? This is why it says of Miriam: “And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him” (Exod 2:4), that is, how her prophecy would turn out.

This midrash infantilizes Miriam: since she is not called the “sister of Moses” in Exod 15, her prophecy must have taken place before his birth,

6. Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:170–71; see also 3:249. Segal suggests that “the assertion that Mordechai married Esther developed alongside the interpretation that Esther was Mordechai’s niece as a way of creating a biblical precedent for the controversial Pharisaic practice of niece-marriage” (2:51–52).

when she was still a young girl. Bavli Meg. 14a does not comment on Miriam's public leadership roles, at the sea or elsewhere, but rather draws on a rich stream of aggadic traditions about the birth and infancy of Moses.⁷ As Rachel Elior has written of Miriam's depiction here: "she is described as a child ... in a manner that seeks to deny her prophetic uniqueness and its extraordinary public mien."⁸

4. Deborah

Seder Olam Rabbah 21 simply cites the verse, "'Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet' (Judg 4:4)," to affirm Deborah's stature as a prophet. Bavli Meg. 14a quotes this verse as well, but then goes on to build a depreciating justification for this designation, based on Deborah's husband's name (Lappidot), explaining that Deborah "used to make wicks for the sanctuary." This domestication of Deborah is achieved through a clumsy connection between *lappidot*, "flames," and *petilot*, "wicks." In addition, b. Meg. 14a inquires why the biblical text records that Deborah sat under a palm tree to render her judgments (Judg 4:5). Rabbi Shimeon ben Avsa-lom explains that this was due to the prohibition of a woman's being alone with a man; by sitting in public view under a prominent tree, Deborah would never confer with men in private. Her determination and courage in leading military forces into battle at the same time that she superseded the authority of a male general is not mentioned. An alternative interpretation of Judg 4:5 leads away from Deborah entirely to focus on a patriarchal manifestation of the deity: "Just as a palm tree has only one heart, so too, the Jewish people in that generation had only one heart, directed to their Father in the heavens." The rabbis, however, have more to say about Deborah, none of it positive, later in this unit.

7. These traditions are also found in Mek. R. Yishm., *shirta* 10; m. Sotah 1:9; b. Sotah 12a–13a; Exod. Rab. 1:13. However, the teachings in Mek. R. Yishm., *shirta* 10, that Moses recited the song for the men at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 15) while Miriam recited it for the women, and that the women took their musical instruments along (Exod 15:20) on leaving Egypt, "trusting that God would perform miracles and mighty deeds," are not cited here (nor do they appear in the Moses infancy narrative in b. Sotah 11b–13a).

8. Rachel Elior, "Female Prophets in the Bible and Rabbinical Tradition: Changing Perspectives," *Contemplate: The International Journal of Secular Jewish Thought* 2 (2003), <http://jbooks.com/secularculture/Elior/Prophets.htm>.

5. Hannah

Seder Olam Rabbah 21 establishes Hannah's designation as a prophet by quoting: "And Hannah prayed, and said: 'My heart exults in the LORD, my horn is exalted in the LORD; my mouth is enlarged over my enemies; for I rejoice in Your deliverance' (1 Sam 2:1)." Bavli Meg. 14a also cites this verse and goes on to explain why the words of her prayer were prophetic: "The text says: 'My horn is exalted,' not 'my pitcher is exalted.' The kingship of David and Solomon, who were anointed from a horn, continued, while the kingships of Saul and Jehu, who were anointed from a pitcher, did not." The passage goes on to interpret other words from Hannah's prayer: "There is none sacred as the Lord; for there is none beside You" (1 Sam 2:2) is understood as praise of God's eternality, and "Neither is there any rock [צור] like our God" (1 Sam 2:2) is said to be an exaltation of divine artistry.⁹

Unlike the other female prophets who are discussed in this sugya, Hannah is in no way diminished in b. Meg. 14a–b. Indeed, she is a biblical character whose transcendence of her gender elevates her beyond rabbinic reproach. As Ilan has written: "Although not common, once in a while the rabbis use a biblical heroine as a prime example of how to conduct oneself correctly within a Jewish living framework."¹⁰ She goes on to say that the best example of this is the evocation of Hannah as a model of how to pray (y. Ber. 4:1, 7a; b. Ber. 31b). However, Ilan cautions that "Hannah is not a model of how Jewish women should pray. She is a model of how Jewish men should pray. And indeed, from most prayers for which she forms a model, Jewish women are anyway exempt."¹¹ The examples of Hannah and a few other biblical women who are cast as paradigmatic models of specific desirable halakhic behaviors "are not a demonstration of how the rabbis were willing to give women a meaningful role in the formulation of halakhah, but much more an indication of the total sanctity of the Bible."¹²

9. The proof of divine artistry is God's forming (צר) of the fetus inside a form (צורה) and endowing it with breath and soul and inner organs.

10. Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 465.

11. Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 465.

12. Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 463–65. Interestingly, the two other biblical women whom Ilan cites here as rabbinic models of exemplary male behavior, Rahab as a paradigm of the proselyte and Esther as the paradigm of citing an authority for a statement (b. Hul. 104b), are also central to the discussion of female prophets in b. Meg. 14a–b.

Since biblical testimony cannot be questioned, female biblical characters whose praiseworthy behaviors transgress normative gender roles must be reimagined and rendered acceptable beyond the immediate social context of the exegete. Thus, Hannah's prophetic designation is not destabilized in any way in this sugya since in some sense she is not seen as a woman.¹³

6. Abigail

The fifth woman on the list of seven female prophets is Abigail, wife of the foolish Nabal; her story is related in 1 Sam 25. When her husband refused to provision David and obtain his protection, Abigail acted on her own to help David and to shield her husband and household. Recognizing that David will ultimately become king, Abigail advises him that he should restrain from killing Nabal, since such an act would stain his future triumph: "And when the Lord has accomplished for my lord all the good He has promised you, and has appointed you ruler of Israel, do not let this be a cause of stumbling and of faltering courage to my lord that you have shed blood needlessly and that my lord sought redress with his own hands" (1 Sam 25:30–1). A strong erotic element is present in the biblical account of this encounter; indeed, Abigail ends her plea to David by saying: "And when the Lord has prospered my lord, remember your handmaid" (25:31). When David hears of Nabal's death, shortly after these events, he sends for Abigail and takes her as one of his wives (25:39–42).

Seder Olam Rabbah 21 confirms Abigail's prophetic status with the statement, "Abigail prophesied to David, and David said to her: 'And blessed be your prudence, and blessed be you yourself for restraining me from seeking redress in blood by my own hands' (1 Sam 25:33)." In this text, Abigail is a prophet because she predicted David's future advent to the kingship and she deterred him from killing Nabal. Bavli Meg. 14a, however, chooses a different proof-text to confirm Abigail's prophetic status, citing instead: "She was riding on the ass and going down by the hidden

13. Ilan suggests that certain biblical women "somehow become male" when their paradigmatic actions become exemplary for male piety and practice (*Massekhet Hullin*, 465). On a similar transformation of Rahab, see Adriel Kosman, "The Woman Who Became a Man: The Figure of Rahab in Midrash" [Hebrew], in *Blessed Is He Who Made Me a Woman: The Woman in Judaism from the Bible to Our Days*, ed. David Yoel Ariel, Maya Leibovich, and Yoram Mazor (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 1999), 91–102. For further discussion of Rahab, see below.

part [בסתר] of the mountain, when David and his men appeared, coming down toward her; and she met them” (1 Sam 25:20). This verse introduces a discourse in which Abigail’s encounter with David is sexualized and the book of Esther is evoked:

The sages query: “[בסתר] by the hidden part of the mountain”? It should have said: From the mountain. Why does it say סתר? Rabba bar Shmuel said: Abigail [is a prophet] on account of blood that comes from the hidden parts [סתרים]. She showed it to [David], [presumably, from the rabbis’ perspective, to indicate that she was not sexually available to him] and he said to her: Is blood shown at night? She said to him: Are capital cases tried at night? He said to her: [Nabal] is a rebel against the throne and there is no need to try him judicially. She said to him: Saul is still alive and your seal has not yet spread across the world. [David] responded to her: “And blessed be your prudence, and blessed be you yourself for restraining me from seeking redress in blood [דמים] by my own hands” (1 Sam 25:33).

The rabbis are intrigued that the word דמים (literally, “bloods”) appears in the plural, and they explain that this form indicates two kinds of blood: menstrual blood and the life of Nabal. Thus, Abigail deters David from a sexual encounter due to her ritual impurity at the same time as she negotiates to save her husband’s life from David’s wrath and David from the guilt of Nabal’s death.

The reference here to menstrual blood is both striking and disturbing, and it is a clear demonstration of the extent to which rabbinic views of women are inextricably linked to female sexuality and women as sources of ritual pollution. Also, of note is the unspoken analogy between Abigail and Esther that attaches to the word סתר, understood in this context as “secret.” In 1 Sam 25:20, the meaning of סתר, while unclear, appears to indicate a covert pathway or trail. It may also mean that Abigail set out in secret. But the rabbis understand the word as alluding to Abigail’s “hidden parts” (סתרים). In an analogous aggadic tradition about Esther earlier in this sugya, at b. Meg. 13a, the word סתר is seen as an etymology for her name: “Why then was she called Esther? Because she concealed [מסתרת] the facts about herself, as it says: ‘But Esther still did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordechai had instructed her; for Esther obeyed Mordechai’s bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage’ (Esth 2:20).” Midrash on Psalms 22:3 similarly relates: “Esther means ‘the hidden one,’ for she remained hidden fast in her chambers; but she came

forth into the world when there was need of her to give light to Israel.” A larger implication of this etymological comment is that women are prone to keep secrets and make plans for themselves that are not known to their husbands or guardians, a theme that will emerge further as the rabbis continue their discussion of Abigail.

Menstrual blood is also directly alluded to in the rabbis’ exposition of Esther’s defining moment: “When Esther’s maidens and eunuchs came and informed her [that the king had ordered the destruction of the Jews of Persia], the queen was greatly agitated [וּתְתַחֲלַחַל]” (Esth 4:4). According to b. Meg. 15a, the sages asked: “What is the meaning of וּתְתַחֲלַחַל? Rav said that it means she began to menstruate; Rabbi Yirmiyah said that her bowels were loosened.” Here, as she risks her life to save her people, the heroic Esther is, like all women, defined and objectified by her body, its functions, and their disturbing impact on men. One cannot help but be reminded of the rabbinic saying in b. Shabb. 152a: “A woman is a pitcher full of filth with blood at its mouth, yet everyone runs after her.”

In an additional interpretation of Abigail’s prophetic status, the Esther midrash suggests that דַּמִּים indicates that Abigail revealed her “thighs” to David; the text reports that on seeing her private parts, “he went three parasangs by their illumination,” an indication of his desire for her. The rabbis imagine that David tried to seduce her, but Abigail deterred him from adultery in her reply: “Do not let this be a cause of stumbling” (1 Sam 25:31). Bavli Meg. 14a goes on to say: “By inference [Abigail’s words mean that she would not be an impediment to David], but there is someone else [who would be an impediment]. And what does this refer to? The incident involving Bathsheba. And in the end, this is what happened.” In the context of the Esther midrash, it is Abigail’s prediction of David’s later sexual stumbling with another woman that demonstrates her prophetic credentials.

The discussion of Abigail in b. Meg. 14b concludes with several remarks on the verse, “When she left him she said to him, ‘And when the Lord has prospered my lord, remember your handmaid’” (1 Sam 25:31). Rav Nahman, reflecting a general disapproval of Abigail’s audacity and forwardness in looking toward her husband’s death and an eventual marriage with David, is quoted in regard to several sayings about women’s secret schemes: “This bears out the popular sayings: While a woman talks she spins,” that is, while a woman is engaged in one activity she is already making plans with regard to another, and “The goose stoops as she goes along, but her eyes peer far.” Bavli Meg. 14b recasts Abigail in explicitly

sexualized terms, rendering even her unambiguous prophecy of David's ultimate succession to the kingship as a prediction of his eventual fall into sexual immorality with another woman. At the same time, this segment of the discourse on the seven women prophets also diminishes Esther's moment of decision by casting her response in terms of female embodiment and a womanly predilection for secret schemes.

7. Huldah

Huldah is explicitly called a prophet in 2 Kgs 22:14–20 and 2 Chr 34:22–28. *Seder Olam Rabbah* 21 simply says of her: “It is written about Huldah: ‘to Huldah the prophet’ (2 Kgs 22:14).” This verse is cited in *b. Meg.* 14b as well, but the rabbis have more to add. They first inquire how this woman could have had the presumption to prophesy in place of her male contemporary Jeremiah. The answer, attributed to the school of Rav in Rav's name, is that Huldah was a close relative of Jeremiah and he did not object to her prophesying. The rabbis then ask why Josiah, the king, would have sent emissaries to Huldah rather than to Jeremiah. The school of Rabbi Sheila responds that Huldah was selected for prophecy by Josiah because women are “compassionate,” a description at odds with Huldah's severe predictions for Israel. Another suggestion is attributed to Rabbi Yohanan, to the effect that Josiah applied to Huldah only because Jeremiah was absent, retrieving the ten lost tribes from exile. In all three explanations, we see a domestication and diminution of a strong and independent biblical woman and an undermining of her prophetic integrity. Further negative remarks about Huldah, as well as speculations about her ancestry, appear later in the sugya and are discussed below.

8. Esther

In verification of Esther's prophetic role, *S. Olam Rab.* 21 cites the verse: “Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordechai the Jew” (*Esth* 9:29). In this text it is Esther's biblical role as co-composer of the book that bears her name that is central in defining her prophetic status. The brief remarks on Esther's prophecy in *b. Meg.* 14b obscure this entirely. In a weak explanation of why Esther is a female prophet, the rabbis cite: “On the third day, Esther put on royalty [מלכות]” (*Esth* 5:1). According to the rabbinic commentators, the verse should have

said that Esther clothed herself in royal garments. Therefore, they declare that מלכות indicates that Esther clothed herself with the רוח הקודש, the “spirit of holiness.” The prooftext is based on an analogy with “And the spirit clothed Amasai” (1 Chr 12:19), since both verses use the verb לבש, “to clothe.” What Esther’s prophecy might actually have been is not elucidated.

However, Esther’s possible role in composing the biblical book that bears her name is addressed directly in a comment in b. Meg. 16b, where further evidence of rabbinic discomfort with Esther’s public power and autonomy is evident. Remarking on the final verse of the biblical book: “And Esther’s ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll” (Esth 9:32), the rabbis expressed astonishment that Esther appears to have had the last word as the authoritative voice on a Jewish festival. They ask: “[Does this refer] only [to] the ordinance of Esther and not [to Mordechai’s] words about the fastings?” This is an allusion to the preceding verse: “These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordechai the Jew—and now Queen Esther—has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations” (Esth 9:31). According to Rabbi Yohanan, Esth 9:32 cannot stand on its own but must be read as completing verse 31, as follows:

These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordechai the Jew—and Queen Esther—have obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants; the obligations of the fasts, with their lamentations, *and the ordinance of Esther confirming these observances of Purim were recorded in a scroll.*

Clearly, the closing words of the book of Esther, which unambiguously declare Esther’s royal authority in ordaining the observance of the feast of Purim for the Jews of Persia, and for all Jews subsequently, were unacceptable in a Babylonian rabbinic culture that did not accept female hegemony in the public domains of communal leadership and ritual observance.

9. Female Arrogance Condemned

The implication that Esther acted inappropriately in independently ordaining the regulations pertaining to observing Purim prompts the concluding segment of the discussion of the seven female prophets in b. Meg. 14a–15a. It begins in b. Meg. 14b with the following declaration attributed to Rav Nahman:

Haughtiness does not befit women. There were two haughty women and their names are hateful, one [Deborah] is called a *ziburta*, a hornet, and the other [Huldah] is called a *karkushta*, a weasel [or pestilence carrying rodent]. Of the hornet it is written: “And she sent and called Barak” (Judg 4:6), instead of going to him. Of the weasel it is written “Say to the man” (2 Kgs 22:15), instead of “Say to the king.”

In similar vein, b. Pesah. 66b remarks that Deborah’s gift of prophecy was taken from her because of her arrogance. There, Rav Yehudah is cited in the name of Rav: “Anyone who acts haughtily, if he is a scholar, his wisdom departs from him, and if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him.... This second statement is learned from Deborah.” The passage goes on to say that Deborah’s arrogance was evident when she said: “Deliverance ceased, ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose; I arose as a mother in Israel” (Judg 5:7). The subsequent verse, “Awake, awake Deborah, utter a song” (Judg 5:12), is cited as proof that her prophetic powers disappeared.¹⁴ These rabbinic remarks are explicit objections to female performances of public power. In the context of the Babylonian Esther midrash, they support Ahashuerus’s directive in Esth 1:22 that each man is to be master in his own home, both in the domestic and the communal sense. Moreover, in such harsh critiques of two admirable biblical women who were chosen by God to further Israel’s destiny, it is evident that Esther is being disparaged, as well, for her presumptuous behavior in entering the king’s presence uninvited, for attempting to determine Israel’s fate, and for issuing ritual ordinances on her own authority.

The attack on female expressions of power continues in the next passage of b. Meg. 14b, where Rav Nahman claims that Huldah was a descendant of Joshua. This seeming non sequitur is based on a linguistic analogy that establishes a tenuous connection between them. However, Rav Eina the Elder is cited as objecting to Rav Nahman’s teaching on the grounds of a baraita indicating that Huldah was in fact a descendant of Rahab the harlot (Josh 2).¹⁵ The baraita states that eight prophets, who were also priests, were descendants of Rahab, and these included Jeremiah. Rav

14. It should be noted that the criticism of Deborah in b. Pesah. 66b is part of a larger discussion criticizing haughtiness and anger in men as well as women.

15. On the representations of Rahab in midrashic literature, see Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 154–60; Kosman, “Woman Who Became a Man.”

Yehudah adduced the following proof-text: "So too, Huldah the prophet was a descendant of Rahab the prostitute, as it is written here with regard to Huldah: 'The son of Tikvah' (2 Kgs 22:14), and it is written elsewhere in reference to Rahab's escape from the destruction of Jericho: 'This cord [תקוֹת] of scarlet thread' (Josh 2:18)." But Rav Naḥman responds that there was no contradiction since Rahab became a proselyte and married Joshua, a tradition that appears in midrash collections from the land of Israel, including Sifre Numbers 78.

Rav Nahman's explanation is problematic in several ways; one immediate objection is raised when the *gemara* inquires: "Did Joshua have any descendants? Is it not written in the genealogical list of the tribe of Ephraim: 'Nun his son, Joshua his son' (1 Chr 7:27)?" Since this line of offspring in Chronicles does not continue beyond Joshua, the implication is that he had no sons. The conciliatory response, which affirms Rav Nahman's statement that Joshua and Rahab were married, is: "Indeed, he did not have sons, but he did have daughters"; thus, it would appear that the Bavli affirms that Huldah was a descendant of this union. I have argued elsewhere that the purported marriage of Rahab and Joshua, as well as related rabbinic traditions that Rahab was not a prostitute at all but simply an innkeeper or maker of linen, resulted in her domestication and seriously undercut her representation as a repentant harlot who recognized the sovereignty of Israel's God and became a paradigmatic proselyte.¹⁶ Indeed, one strand of traditions about Rahab stresses the staggering degree of her past excesses in order to emphasize the magnitude of her subsequent repentance and redemption.¹⁷ It seems likely that the emphasis in b. Meg. 14b on Rahab's marriage to Joshua and her subsequent representation as a mother in Israel is also intended to diminish the significance of her descendant Huldah's prophetic role.

The mention of Rahab prompts the citation in b. Meg. 15a of another baraita in which a number of formidable biblical women are reduced to sexual objects: "The rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world: Sarah, Rahab, Abigail, and Esther. And if

16. Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 154–60; Ilan, *Massekhet Hullin*, 465. See Mek. R. Yishm., Amalek 3 for a statement of Rahab's preeminent standing among converts, and above, 269 n. 12 and 270 n. 13. On Rahab as not a prostitute, see Sifre Numbers 78 and Sifre Zuta on Numb 10:28; and see Judith R. Baskin, "The Rabbinic Transformations of Rahab the Harlot," *NDEJ* 11 (1979): 141–57.

17. Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 156–67.

you object that Esther was *sallow*,¹⁸ Vashti may replace her [on the list].” This substitution is of particular interest. The enumeration of “women of surpassing beauty,” that is, of women who stimulate male sexual desire, now consists of two Israelite women and two from outside the ethnic community. Certainly, on the biblical evidence, these figures are united not so much by their pulchritude as by the fact that they did not, by rabbinic standards, show proper respect for male authority. Moreover, all of them could be said to have, at the least, given the appearance of inappropriate sexual behavior.¹⁹ On these grounds, Esther, too, could have remained on the list, but, once more, the rabbinic preference is to criticize her indirectly.

Esther, Sarah, and Vashti are not mentioned further in the discussion of the “four women of surpassing beauty.” Instead, b. Meg. 15a moves on to the seductive qualities of Rahab and Abigail and two additional biblical women: Jael (Judg 4–5) and Michal, the daughter of Saul, who was one of David’s wives. All of them are challenging for rabbinic exegetes because their behavior included independent action and assertions of sexuality, at least implicitly, as demonstrated through Rahab’s profession, Jael’s mode of pacifying Sisera, and Abigail’s veiled proposition to David. Michal seems an unusual addition to this list since she is nowhere praised in biblical sources for her beauty. However, a number of her actions were disquieting to the rabbis. These include making her love for David known prior to their marriage (1 Sam 18:20), her deception of her father on David’s behalf (1 Sam 19:11), her troubling marital history (being returned to a first husband after being married to a second in 2 Sam 3:13–16), and her rebuke of David in 2 Sam 6:14–22.²⁰ The baraita, which is deliberately titillating at the same time as it impugns the virtue of the women involved, reads:

18. Bavli Meg. 13a attributes the remark that “Esther was *sallow* but was endowed with great charm” to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha. She was apparently described as *sallow* or *greenish*, since green coloring is a characteristic of the myrtle plant, the *hadassah*, Esther’s Hebrew name (Esth 2:7).

19. The implication of sexual misconduct on Sarah’s part refers to the episodes in Gen 12 and 20 when Abraham lies about their relationship and she is taken into the houses of Pharaoh and Abimelech, respectively, as a wife, before the falsehoods are discovered.

20. There is a reference to Michal’s perceived arrogance in y. Eruv. 10:1, 26a, where she is said to have put on phylacteries (*tefillin*) daily and it is noted that the sages of the time did not protest.

Rahab inspired lust by her name; Jael by her voice; Abigail by her memory;²¹ and Michal, daughter of Saul, by her appearance. Rav Yitzhaq said: Whoever says, “Rahab, Rahab” at once ejaculates. Rav Nahman responded: I say “Rahab, Rahab” and nothing happens to me. He replied: I was speaking of one who knows her and has been intimate with her.

This lewd exchange between Rav Yitzhaq and Rav Nahman also appears in b. Ta’an. 5b, where it is the last of eight traditions that Rav Yitzhaq is said to have shared with Rav Nahman in conversation, in this case at a feast. This tradition about Rahab is “purely Babylonian,”²² and, Ilan suggests, Rav Nahman’s use of it is deliberate. While the original midrash emphasized that God rewarded Rahab’s actions by making her the mother of priests and prophets, Rav Nahman’s statement that Rahab married Joshua calls this teaching into question. Since Joshua was not from a priestly family, his progeny with Rahab could not have been priests.²³ Ilan argues that the placement of Rav Nahman’s tradition in this context in b. Meg. 14b is intended to reverse the positive trend about Rahab found in traditions from the land of Israel that represent her “as a penitent convert whom God favors.” Rather, Rahab is now portrayed “in an especially negative, seductive sexual role.”²⁴ Ilan suggests that a “mild anti-Christian polemic appears to be operative here against the Christian literary model of the repentant prostitute,” which became popular as the apocryphal early Christian stories about Mary Magdalene spread. She writes: “It may be against this background that the *Bavli* chose to emphasize Rahab’s sexual exploits over and in opposition to her repentance.”²⁵ While I agree that this is likely the case, I would argue, as well, that the desire to diminish Huldah’s stature by association with this foreign harlot also played a significant role in the emphasis on Rahab’s lurid past in this specific context in b. Meg. 14b.

The juxtaposition of the seven female prophets and the four women of surpassing beauty (and dubious morality) in b. Meg. 14a–15a served to

21. Although nothing more is said about Abigail here, she was already discussed in detail in the remarks on the seven female prophets. She alone appears on both lists: the female prophets and the final iteration of women who were distinguished for their beauty.

22. Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*, FCBT 2/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 93–94.

23. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*.

24. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*, 94.

25. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*, 94–95; on representations of Rahab in early Christianity, see Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 200–201 n. 29.

illuminate what remained unsaid, that Esther, too, used deception, arrogance, and sexual seductiveness to achieve her ends. These were evident in her success in positioning herself within the palace, in her supposed marriage to Mordechai and subsequent relationship with Ahashuerus, and in engineering the downfall of Haman. Thus, the sugya emphasizes that she should be regarded as only a secondary player in ensuring her own and her people's survival and in the institution of Purim.

Conclusion

I have argued elsewhere that rabbinic exegetes were deeply disturbed by Esther and found her actions troubling, yet they were unable to criticize her directly given her salvific role in the biblical book named for her.²⁶ Instead they subverted her strength and authority by eroticizing many of her actions and by making it clear that Mordechai was actually the force behind her throne. Although Esther's reputation remains unsullied in the discussion of the seven female prophets, it is evident that the other women who are disparaged in b. Meg. 14a–15a serve, in part, as surrogates for Babylonian rabbinic disapproval of Esther's power and her willingness to assert it, as well as of her marriage to a gentile while still married to her uncle, Mordechai. Thus, Sarah is reduced to an object of male desire, who also has the temerity to overrule her husband; Miriam is infantilized; Abigail is castigated for her ambition and sexual allure; and Deborah and Huldah are both diminished and vilified for their arrogance in assuming roles that are usually gendered as male. These comments reveal a general rabbinic discomfort with any biblical woman, including Esther, who displayed leadership and bravery in the public sphere and they demonstrate how rabbis in the Babylonian domain used midrashic techniques to reshape such women to fit their own conceptions of appropriate female behavior.

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Seduction for the Sake of Heaven: Biblical Seductive Women in the Rabbis' Eyes

Yuval Blankovsky

There is a surprising interpretive pattern in some of the sages' commentary to several biblical seduction stories. The rabbinic commentary tends to view the (mostly foreign) women in these stories in a positive way by ascribing to them an intention for the sake of heaven, while the males are condemned by the rabbis. This pattern, which has not been discussed before, is unique to rabbinic literature¹ and is not present in nonrabbinic compositions of the period. For example, we do not find nonrabbinic commentaries that condemn Lot for sleeping with his daughters but praise his daughters. Similarly, we do not find commentaries that praise Tamar for seducing Judah but condemn Judah as we find in rabbinic literature. Instead we find in the Testament of Judah and in Jubilees the message that Judah is innocent, while Tamar in the Testament of Judah, and Judah's wife—the daughter of Shua—in Jubilees, are blamed (see Jub. 41.1–28; T. Jud. 12–13).² And finally and most surprising, in rabbinic literature we even find a commentary that praises Potiphar's wife and claims that she intended to seduce Joseph for the sake of heaven. This, again, is

1. Throughout this essay, if not otherwise noted, I speak about “classic rabbinic literature,” sometimes also named in this paper as “talmudic literature” or “the sages' literature,” and it consists of rabbinic compositions from the first eight centuries CE.

2. For a discussion about Jubilees' perception of this matter, see Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology and Theology* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), 58; Betsy Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 113–16. For a detailed discussion of the perception of the author of the Testament of Judah, see Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 107–211.

an idea that, as far as I know, is not present in nonrabbinic commentaries of the period.

This essay has two aims: introducing this unnoticed interpretive pattern of praising seductive foreign women and condemning men, and explaining its presence in rabbinic literature. Why do the rabbis, a group of Jewish males, suggest an interpretation that praises biblical non-Jewish women? Several explanations are possible. We can suggest that the rabbis were philogynists rather than misogynists (as would be the intuitive interpretation). As I will show, this view is one-dimensional and does not capture the full context and nuance that the sources encompass. Another possible explanation is that this commentary aims to justify the genealogical line of the royal family of King David, from which the Messiah is believed to come in the future.³ There are two problems with this suggestion, first that the idea of seduction for the sake of heaven is not limited to women who are connected to the genealogical line of King David, and second that the rabbis condemn the male figures who are connected to the same genealogical line. If one wishes to protect and justify the roots of the Messiah, one should offer a commentary that justifies both sides—male and female—who are involved in the seduction. A positive view of these seductive women is expressed in midrash Genesis Rabbah by attributing to them an intention “for the sake of heaven” (לשם שמים). I will presently explain the meaning of this intention in the rabbis’ perception.

However, before going into detail, it is important to frame my argument with several insights about the characteristics of rabbinic literature. It is well known that the sages’ literature encompasses many voices of hundreds of people over hundreds of years. I do not claim that there is one perception in talmudic literature of, for example, Lot and his daughters’ story. In the sources I present there are several contradictory appreciations of these women’s part in the seduction of their father. Nonetheless, we do find in the rabbis’ commentaries a basically positive view of the women in these stories. This interpretive pattern correlates with the state of affairs in the biblical stories themselves. Thus, for example, I will present a teaching (*drashah*) that attributes to Ruth an intention to tempt Boaz for the sake

3. This line was advanced by Ruth Kaniel Kara-Ivanov, “Gedolah averah lishmah,” *Nashim* 24 (2013): 27–52. About the possible connection to Jesus’ genealogy in Matt 1, which highlights the Davidic lineage as Jesus’s main characterization, see Kara-Ivanov, “The Myth of the Messianic Mother in Jewish and Christian Traditions: Psychoanalytic and Gender Perspectives,” *JAAR* 82 (2014): 1–48.

of heaven. However, Boaz is not condemned in classic rabbinic literature: both Boaz and Ruth are presented positively, following their presentation in the Bible. On the other hand, concerning Lot and his daughters, the biblical story portrays their actions as a comedy of errors—a mutual miscommunication between daughters and father: they think he is the only man on earth, while he is drunk and does not notice the incest in which he is involved.⁴ In the sages' literature, there are many statements that condemn Lot's part in the incest event while the part of his daughters, as we shall soon see, is disputed—did they have a positive intention, for the sake of heaven, or a negative one? To sum up: the interpretive pattern of praising these seductive women and condemning the men is not found in the same manner in each of the biblical stories in question, but rather it correlates with the biblical presentation of the characters. Nonetheless, the pattern exists and is worthy of an explanation.

I will first present this interpretive pattern in rabbinic teachings taken from *Genesis Rabbah*. Then I will present one talmudic discussion (*sugya*) from the Babylonian Talmud that exhibits its own take on this interpretive pattern. I will try to explain why this surprising interpretive pattern was formed and what we can learn from it about the sages' perception of biblical seductive foreign women and on women and sexuality in general.

1. Seduction for the Sake of Heaven in *Genesis Rabbah*

1.1. Condemning Judah

As mentioned above, in the sages' literature we do not find a teaching that condemns Tamar, while we find a range of teachings about Judah, some justifying him while others inflate his blame beyond the biblical story.⁵ The following teachings, which discuss Judah's confession when

4. Various explanations have been offered for this biblical story and the miscommunication between Lot and his daughters. See Talia Sutscover, "Lot and His Daughters (Gen. 19:30–38): Further Literary and Stylistic Examinations," *JHS* 11 (2011): 1–11.

5. This conclusion emerges in several academic works on the sages' commentary on this story, but none of them points out that the rabbis' attitude toward Tamar's role is different from their attitude toward Judah's. See Menn, *Judah and Tamar*; Stefan Reif, "Early Rabbinic Exegesis of Genesis 38," in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 221–44.

the personal items he gave Tamar as security for payment are brought to him, are an example of teachings that increase Judah's blame:

"As she was being brought out [וְהָיָה מוֹצֵאתָ] (Gen 38:25). Rabbi Yudan said: They had been lost [i.e. Judah's personal items] and God replaced them. As is written: "or by finding something lost [אוּ מֵצֵא אֶבְדָּה] (Lev 5:22).

Said Rabbi Huna: "As she was being brought out" (Gen 38:25) [should be read] with a question mark. [Both] she and he should have been brought out [and punished].

"And she sent to her father-in-law" (Gen 38:25). He [Judah] wished to deny [her claim]. She said to him: Acknowledge your Lord, those [the items] are yours and your creator's. (Gen. Rab. 85:1)⁶

The first teaching is based on the connection between the verb מֵצֵא, which is used in Scripture to indicate the finding of lost objects, and the word מוֹצֵאת (from the root יָצָא), which is used to indicate that Tamar was brought out. According to Rabbi Yudan, this similarity teaches that the items that Tamar received from Judah were lost and other items, similar to the lost ones, were given to her instead by God. Taking the first teaching on its own, it expresses the divine interference in the story of Judah and Tamar, an idea that is also attested in other rabbinic teachings that clear the biblical figure of blame (Gen. Rab. 85:15). I present this teaching because the third teaching, which increases Judah's blame, builds on it. The second teaching obviously emphasizes Judah's blame by saying that he should have been punished like Tamar. The third teaching further blames Judah by claiming that his intention was to lie and deny Tamar's claim. Tamar rebukes Judah, asking him to acknowledge God and admit that he was the one who had sexual relationship with her, because the items he gave her were miraculously found. The question is then: What is the motivation of the rabbis to compose such a commentary? Why do they make the effort to increase Judah's blame, and why we do not find the same type of effort regarding Tamar's part in the affair?

1.2. Praising Tamar and Potiphar's Wife

The following teaching not only praises Tamar and attributes to her seduction of Judah an intention for the sake of heaven, but ascribes a similar

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

intention to Potiphar's wife in her seduction attempt of Joseph. This is the sole teaching in rabbinic literature that offers a positive view of Potiphar's wife; other teachings view her negatively.⁷ Therefore, this surprising teaching deserves an explanation: Why do the rabbis praise Potiphar's wife when the biblical story presents her in a negative way? The teaching answers the question, Why does the story of Joseph's failed seduction by the wife of Potiphar begin with the words "At that time" (וַיְהִי בַעַת הַהִיא)? For our purpose these answers are relevant:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman says: To present Tamar's story next to Potiphar's wife story: as she [Tamar] acted for the sake of heaven [לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם], so that one [Potiphar's wife] acted for the sake of heaven [לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם].

As Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: She saw in her astrology that she will share descendants with him, and she did not know whether they descend from her or from her daughter. (Gen. Rab. 85:1)

The teaching addresses the question of why the story line of Joseph in the Bible is interrupted by the story of Judah and Tamar.⁸ Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman explains that it teaches us that Tamar and Potiphar's wife share a common feature—both their intentions were for the sake of heaven. But what is exactly the content of such an intention? The second teaching of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains that the intention "for the sake of heaven" in Potiphar's wife's case means that she seduced Joseph in order for him to impregnate her. This explanation of "intention for the sake of heaven" fits the next teaching, which ascribes this intention to Lot's daughters.

1.3. Lot and His Daughters

The next teaching, which interprets the origin of the nation of Moab, one of the biblical opponents of Israel and a descendant of the incest between

7. For an analysis of rabbinic teachings to the biblical story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph, see Joshua Levinson, "An-other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: Staging the Body Politic," *JQR* 87 (1997): 269–301. Levinson does not discuss the next teaching, which praises Potiphar's wife. A justification for Potiphar's wife is found Midr. Tanh. on Gen 39:7, and in the Qur'an, *sura* 12:30–32. These sources maintain that Joseph's beauty was irresistible. See James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 28–51.

8. Several academic answers were suggested for this question. See Yairah Amit, "Hidden Polemics in the Story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38:1–30)," *Shnaton* 20 (2010): 22 n. 37.

Lot and his older daughter, contrasts two kinds of intention: “for the sake of heaven” and “for lust:”

It is written: “I know his insolence, declares the Lord, his arrogance will not do”⁹ (Jer 48:30). Rabbi Hanina bar Papa and Rabbi Simon.

Rabbi Hanina bar Papa said: The birth of Moab was not for lust but for the sake of heaven. “His branches did not do like that” (Jer 48:30), but for lust: “While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women” (Num 25:1).

Rabbi Simon said: The birth of Moab was not for the sake of heaven but for lust. “His branches did not do like that” (Jer 48:30), but for the sake of heaven: “She [Ruth] went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her” (Ruth 3:6). (Gen. Rab. 51:36)

The intention of Lot’s daughter is under rabbinic dispute. Rabbi Hanina bar Papa maintains that their intention was for the sake of heaven, but Rabbi Simon maintains that they acted in this manner to fulfill their lust. In this *drasha*, the intention for the sake of heaven is presented as the opposite of the intention of fulfilling sexual lust (לשם שמים versus לשם זנות). As mentioned above, several rabbinic teachings emphasize Lot’s blame and clear his daughters of guilt; soon I will present such a teaching, which is part of the *talmudic* discussion I intend to explore.

After clarifying the meaning of intention for the sake of heaven and acknowledging that this intention is contrasted with seduction out of lust, we can offer an explanation for the interpretive pattern of praising (foreign) seductive women and condemning males. I suggest that the above teaching advances the following messages that the rabbis wanted to transfer to their audience: (1) the rabbis know the will of God; (2) having sexual relations for the purpose of becoming pregnant is a positive act and is in concert with the will of God; (3) having sexual relations for the satisfaction of lust is negative and condemned. Besides the message that sexual relations for the purpose of having descendants is appropriate, there are additional messages in the seduction stories of Jewish men by foreign women. In their commentary about Tamar and Potiphar’s wife, the rabbis transfer the following messages: (1) the culture of the Jews is superior to other surrounding non-Jewish cultures; (2) foreign women acknowledge the superiority of Jewish culture; (3) women who have a sexual relationship

9. The NJPS translation does not capture the syntax of the verse on which the rabbinic teachings are based. Hence I offer my own translation to the verse.

with appropriate intention can give birth to highly respected descendants. By attributing intention for the sake of heaven to foreign women, the rabbis are empowering their self-perception and especially their sexual image. The rabbis claim that not only is Jewish culture superior to other cultures, but also that foreign women acknowledge this superiority. Therefore biblical foreign women try to seduce mythical Jewish males such as Judah and Joseph, because they wish to become a part of the Jewish nation. The rabbis use the biblical stories of seduction to fantasize about non-Jewish women. In rabbinic fantasy, foreign women are attracted to Jewish males not for lust but in order to have descendants who will be part of the Jewish nation. On the other hand, the rabbis do not refrain from criticizing the Jewish males in these stories, in order to warn their audience away from the danger of sexual sins—even model figures such as Judah can fail and follow their desires.

Concerning Lot and his daughters, who are all gentiles, there is another explanation for the rabbis' praise of the daughters. This seems to be connected with the rabbis' interpretation of the biblical prohibition to allow Moabite converts, which they interpret as applying only to male Moabites, while females are permitted (see m. Yevam. 8:13; Gen. Rab. 51:36; Sifre Deut. 249; Ruth Rab. 7:9). This rabbinic interpretation was informed by the story of Ruth, a Moabite who joined the Jewish nation.¹⁰ In the Bible, there are many more stories of foreign women who marry a Jew and join the Jewish nation than stories in the other direction, in which non-Jewish males marry Jewish females and join the Jewish nation. That is probably connected to the patriarchal structure of biblical society, which aimed to make more women available for Jewish men, both Jewish and non-Jewish, while limiting the legitimate options for Jewish women.¹¹ In the sages' time, the permission to marry Moabite women and the prohibition to marry Moabite men were no longer relevant, since this biblical nation did not exist anymore (see m. Yad. 4:4). However, the sages follow this patriarchal biblical message because it fits their own patriarchal worldview and differentiates between the men and women of Moab.

10. On the message of Ruth's story see Amit, "Hidden Polemics," 11–25.

11. This point has clearly been made in Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social and Literary Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 116.

2. The Talmudic Sugya: Babylonian Talmud Horayot 10b

In the Babylonian Talmud, there is a talmudic discussion in which all the cases of the same pattern of praising women and condemning men are lumped together. The talmudic discussion is organized in a tripartite structure and lists three couples of praised women and condemned men.¹² The talmudic discussion starts with an investigation about the verse “For the paths of the Lord are smooth, the righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble on them” (Hos 14:10).¹³ The sugya assumes that the just and the transgressors walk in the *same* way, but nonetheless the result is different.

2.1. Lot and His Daughters’ Intention

The sugya seeks to explicate the way in which the just walk and transgressors stumble, and concludes with the following evaluation of the incest between Lot and his daughters: “Rather [the verse] is illustrated by Lot and his two daughters; to the daughters, whose intention was to fulfill a commandment: ‘the righteous can walk on them’ (Hos 14:10), whereas to him, whose intention was to commit a transgression: ‘sinners stumble on them’ (Hos 4:10)” (b. Hor. 10b; see also b. Naz. 23a). Lot’s intention is presented as the opposite of his daughters’ positive intention. Interestingly, the Talmud does not use the term “for the sake of heaven” (לשם שמים), which is used in Genesis Rabbah, and instead claims that Lot’s daughters intended “to fulfill a commandment” (לשם מצווה). This has troubled some scholars; what commandment had Lot’s daughters intended to fulfill? These scholars explained the expression “to fulfill a commandment” as identical in this context to the expression “for the sake of heaven” (לשם שמים).¹⁴ Indeed, one finds “for the sake of heaven” replacing “to fulfill a commandment,” in

12. On the phenomenon of the tripartite structure of talmudic discussions and its connection to the oral form of the Talmud, see Yaakov Elman, “Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud,” *OT* 14 (1999): 52–99.

13. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations follow the NJPS.

14. See Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), 341; Oriel Neuwirth, “Between Intention and Action: An Ethical and Theological Analysis of the Conception of Mitzvah in Rabbinic Literature” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2012), 305; Kaniel, “Gedolah averah lishmah,” 27.

several manuscripts of talmudic aggadic collections and in the commentaries of Tosafot (see Tosafot b. Naz. 23a, s.v. *vedilma*).¹⁵ Nonetheless, these seem to be a secondary version, aiming to solve the problematic nature of the original version, which we find in all the manuscripts of this talmudic passage.¹⁶ The expression “intention to fulfill a commandment” is unique in rabbinic literature; originally it applied solely to the intention required in entering a levirate marriage. Thus we learn in the Mishnah:

At first, when they intended to [do so in order to] fulfill a commandment—the commandment of levirate marriage [*yibbum*] took precedence over the commandment of removing the sandal [*halitzah*], but now that they do not intend [to do so in order] to fulfill a commandment—the commandment of removing the sandal takes precedence over the commandment of levirate marriage. (m. Bekh. 1:7)¹⁷

The narrator of this sugya, who attributes to Lot’s daughters an intention to fulfill a commandment, surely knew this Mishnah and alluded to it. Levirate marriages aim to maintain the name of the brother who died without heirs, and so too Lot’s daughters aimed to maintain humanity, which they thought had been exterminated. The talmudic discussion shifts from the view we previously saw in Genesis Rabbah, which attributes to Lot’s daughters intention for the sake of heaven; instead their action is presented as similar to the halakhic ruling of levirate marriage.

2.2. Tamar and Zimri

The next statement in the sugya about Tamar and Zimri is made by Ulla, a rabbi who used to travel between Babylonia and Palestine: “Ulla said:

15. This variation is also found in other indirect textual witnesses of b. Nazir: MSS Parma 3010 and London 406, which are manuscripts containing talmudic aggadot; and in the first printed edition of *Haggadot ha-talmud* (Constantinople, 1511), which is another corpus of talmudic aggadot attributed to an unknown Spanish scholar.

16. This talmudic discussion appears in two places, in tractates Nazir and Horayot, each one available in four textual witnesses. Nazir’s textual witnesses are MS Munich 95; MS Vatican 111; MS Ginzburg 1134; Bomberg Talmud for Nazir. Horayot’s textual witnesses are MS Munich 95; MS Paris 1337; Modena Archivio Storico Comunale 26.1 (fragment from the Italian Genizah, which covers only part of the talmudic discussion); Bomberg Talmud for Horayot.

17. This translation follows MS Kaufmann; other manuscripts present a different order of sentences, but these do not affect my argument.

Tamar committed adultery; Zimri committed adultery. Tamar committed adultery and gave birth to kings and prophets. Zimri committed adultery and on his account many tens of thousands of Israel perished” (b. Hor. 10b). Ulla does not mention Judah; following the pattern of praising women and condemning men, he mentions instead Zimri, who is blamed in Scripture (Num 25:14) for having had sexual intercourse with a Moabite woman and worshiping idols. In this manner, the talmudic discussion refrains from condemning Judah, whose share in Tamar’s story is disputed in rabbinic literature.

The connection of Tamar’s behavior to levirate marriage is explicit in Scripture: “Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was displeasing the Lord, and the Lord took his life. Then Judah said to Onan: Join with your brother’s wife and do your duty by her [ויבם אותה] as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother” (Gen 38:6–8).

We notice that the sugya employs a unique literary device: the repetition of a word or several words within a pair of clauses or sentences. It begins by illustrating the verse, “For the ways of the Lord are right and the just walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them” (Hos 14:10), which uses an epiphora: the repetition of a word at the end of two successive clauses. The sugya illustrates this verse with the incest of Lot and his daughters, and it employs literary repetition to formulate this. The next statement of Ulla employs literary repetition in contrasting Jael with Zimri. This literary device leads the audience to understand Ulla’s statement in the same paradigm; that is, Tamar’s intention is similar to that of Lot’s daughters. This estimation is reinforced by the classic mediaval commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot. As stated, according to Tosafot’s version of the talmudic text, the sugya ascribes to Lot’s daughters an intention “for the sake of heaven” similar to the teaching in Genesis Rabbah. In their commentary to Ulla’s statement, the Tosafists ascribe a similar intention to Tamar—“for the sake of heaven.” In a similar manner, Rashi holds with the common version according to which Lot’s daughters’ intention was “to fulfill a commandment” and ascribes a similar intention to Tamar.

2.3. Jael and Sisera

The last statement in the sugya, which praises seductive women, is the following ambiguous declaration: “Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq said: A sin for the sake of heaven [עבירה לשמה] is greater than a commandment that

is fulfilled not for the sake of heaven [מצווה שלא לשמה], as it said: ‘Most blessed of women be Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of women in the tents’ (Judg 5:24)” (b. Hor. 10b).¹⁸ Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq praises Jael the wife of Heber and calls her deed “a sin for the sake of heaven” (עבירה לשמה), but the exact meaning of this expression is unclear at first sight. The various translations offered for Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq’s statement illustrate its ambiguous character and the radical potential inherent in it:

1. Horayot, Schottenstein: “A transgression committed for the sake [of heaven] is of greater merit than a *mitzvah* performed for ulterior motives.”
2. Jeffrey Kalmanofsky: “A sin done for God’s sake is greater than a commandment done for ulterior motives.”¹⁹
3. Nazir, Soncino: “A transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention.”
4. Martin Jaffee, Horayot: “A transgression committed for the sake of fulfilling a commandment is greater than a commandment which is not fulfilled for its own sake.”²⁰
5. Proposed translation: “A sin committed for the sake of heaven is greater than a commandment fulfilled not for the sake of heaven.”

The advantage of my proposed translation is that the word *lishmah* (לשמה), which appears twice in the original statement, is translated the same way both times.²¹ The reasonable explanation of Jael’s sin is that Rav Nahman

18. This translation is according to Horayot’s textual witnesses. Nazir’s textual witnesses present a question-and-answer that interrupts Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq’s statement. I elaborate on the matter in Yuval Blankovsky, “A Transgression for the Sake of God—‘Averah Li-shmah: A Tale of a Radical Idea in *Talmudic Literature*,” *AJSR* 38 (2014): 321–38.

19. Jeffrey Kalmanofsky, “Sins for the Sake of God,” *ConJud* 54 (2002): 11.

20. Martin Jaffee, trans., *Horayot, the Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

21. In this context, it is worth noting that the word *lishmah* (לשמה), meaning *leshem shamayim* (לשם שמים, “for the sake of heaven”) already appears in y. Hag. 2:1, 77c. See Yehuda Liebes, *Elisha’s Sin* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1990), 79 n. 22. Testimony to the interchangeability of the two terms may be found in a baraita that underwent the journey from Palestine to Babylonia, i.e., t. Bik. 2:16 in b. Pesah. 50b. Another option is to translate the word *lishmah* as “proper intention” or “good inten-

bar Yitzhaq maintains that Jael had sexual intercourse with Sisera before she killed him in his sleep. Sexual intercourse between Jael and Sisera is not explicit in Scripture. The story of Jael appears twice in the book of Judges, as part of the biblical story (Judg 4) and in the Song of Deborah (Judg 5). There are more explicit hints to an erotic relationship between Jael and Sisera in the Song of Deborah, which is considered part of an ancient layer of scriptures, than in the prose version. Therefore some scholars suggest that the latter is a modification of the ancient story, in which Jael did sleep with Sisera.²² In the following statement in the sugya, Rabbi Yohanan condemns Sisera: "That wicked wretch had sevenfold intercourse [with Jael]." In this manner the sugya follows the interpretive pattern of praising women and condemning men and accomplishes its tripartite structure. Rabbi Yohanan provides evidence for his reading from a verse in Deborah's song. In Leviticus Rabbah, Rabbi Yohanan's counterpart, Resh Laqish, maintains that there was no sexual relationship between Jael and Sisera, and he provides evidence for his argument from a verse in the prose version (see Lev. Rab. 23:10). It seems that Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq maintains, like Rabbi Yohanan in our sugya, that Jael, a married woman, had sexual relations with Sisera.

The meaning of the expression *averah lishmah* (עבירה לשמה) in Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement is "sin for the sake of heaven," and this statement challenges a basic rabbinic dogma of avoiding sin. According to Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq, there could be a situation in which a sin would be considered congruent with God's will. Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq praises Jael for sacrificing her body and her sexuality in the interest of the Jewish nation. The radical potential of this statement is obvious, and therefore, perhaps Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq deliberately formulates this message in a vague way. Instead of using the expression *leshem shamayim* (לשם שמים), he uses the word *lishmah*, which, although interchangeable from time to time with the expression "for the sake of heaven," has a literary meaning of "for its own sake."²³

tion." The translation "for the sake of heaven" is preferable because of the linguistic connection we mentioned between *lishmah* and *leshem shamayim* (לשם שמים) in rabbinic literature.

22. See Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, *That's Not What the Good Book Says* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Mischal, 2005), 223–29.

23. As indicated in all dictionaries.

Similar to the previous statements, which contrast Lot with his daughters and Tamar with Zimri, Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement contrasts sin with appropriate intention with a commandment without appropriate intention. This leads the audience to identify the positive intention in Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement as equivalent to the positive intention of Lot's daughters and Tamar, an intention to fulfill a commandment. I suggest that the narrator of this talmudic discussion places Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement in the context of this talmudic sugya in order to mitigate its radical potential, and for this reason he presents Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement in the context of the appropriate intention in levirate marriage. The inclusion of Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement in this passage leads the audience to understand that both it and levirate marriage follow the same principle: just as the law of levirate marriage suspends the prohibition against marrying one's sister-in-law, in order to achieve a sanctified goal, so too Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq can legitimize Jael's adultery, because it was performed in order to achieve a sanctified goal—killing an enemy of Israel. By presenting Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's statement in the context of levirate marriage, a commandment anchored in the biblical legal canon, the redactor subtly and cleverly persuades his audience to believe that, far from contradicting the law, Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq's message is an integral component of it.

After acknowledging the tripartite structure of the sugya and the theme of levirate marriage, which stands behind it, we can offer an explanation for the absence of Esther's story in our sugya, which seems, from a rabbinic perspective, most similar to the biblical story of Jael.²⁴ The comparison between Jael and Esther was first raised by the Tosafsits (Tosafot, b. Naz. 23a, s.v. *veha ka mithanya me-aveirah*).²⁵ Both are considered, according to some rabbinic commentaries, women who sacrificed their sexuality to promote the interests of the Israeli nation.²⁶ Indeed some

24. Indeed, Esther is Jewish, while the women discussed by the sugya are not. Nonetheless, despite this fact, the rabbis do not shun the idea that she sacrificed her sexuality in the interest of the Jewish nation. See Christiane Tzuberi, "Rescue from Transgression through Death; Rescue from Death through Transgression," in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 147–61. Therefore, it is necessary to explain the reason she is excluded from the sugya, despite the fact that her sexual sin is similar to Jael's.

25. The Tosafot concludes that Esther, as opposed to Jael, was raped.

26. On the rabbinic perception of this aspect of Esther's acts see Tzuberi, "Rescue from Transgression."

commenters suggested that Esther's sexual relationship with King Ahasuerus in the interest of the Israelite nation has the status of "sin for the sake of heaven" (עבירה לשמה).²⁷ However, Esther's acts are not connected to levirate marriage and therefore, despite the similarity between Esther and Jael, the narrator in the talmudic sugya had no interest in including Esther's story in our talmudic discussion. Of course, this did not prevent rabbinic commenters in later generations from expanding the idea of "sin for the sake of heaven" and applying it to Esther.

Another expansion, this time of the midrashic idea of seduction for the sake of heaven, is found in Midrash Hanukah, which presents a Hebrew version of the book of Judith. In this midrash we find the following dialogue: "They told her [Judith]: Do not fear the Lord, maybe you are attracted to this impure gentile? She answered them: Not at all; I do not have any evil intention in the world, but for the sake of heaven" (Midr. Hanukah 133). This source indicates that the idea of seduction for the sake of heaven was expanded in later generations.

3. Ending

In both the teachings of Genesis Rabbah and in the talmudic discussion, we find the same pattern of praising biblical seductive women and condemning males. However, each of the sources has its own distinct motivation for formulating this interpretive pattern. Each of the sources applies this interpretive pattern to a specific group of biblical women. Genesis Rabbah attributes to Lot's daughters, Tamar, Potiphar's wife, and Ruth seduction for the sake of heaven, and the talmudic discussion mentions Lot's daughters, Tamar, and Jael. There are many academic works that discuss women in biblical seduction stories and attempt to identify groups of women who share common features. Interestingly, none of these academic works define these groups of women we find in Genesis Rabbah and in the talmudic sugya as a distinct group.²⁸ This leads to the conclusion that rabbinic literature has its own motivations for organizing seductive biblical

27. See Rabbi Zadok Ha-Cohen Me-Lublin, *mehshevet harutz*, 20#; Rabbi Zvi Alimelech Me-Dinov, *benei isaschar*, *mamarei hodesh nisan* 4:7.

28. See, e.g., Levinson, "An-other Woman"; Brenner, *Israelite Woman*; Johanna Bos, "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17–22; Ruth 3" *Semeia* 42 (1988): 37–67. I elaborate on this issue in Yuval Blankovsky, *Sin for the Sake of God: A Tale of a Radical Idea in the Talmudic Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2017), 80–83.

stories the way it does. To acknowledge the sages' thinking on the matter, we should enter into their world of beliefs and values. In *Genesis Rabbah* the rabbis attribute seduction for the sake of heaven to biblical women in order to transmit the patriarchal message that having sexual relations for the purpose of procreation is appropriate and that foreign women desire Jewish men, because they acknowledge these men's cultural superiority. The talmudic discussion, on the other hand, is interested in locating the idea of sin for the sake of heaven, which was formulated around Jael's story, in the context of levirate marriage, and therefore the talmudic discussion mentions also Lot's daughters and Tamar but not Potiphar's wife, and interestingly not Ruth, although her story is connected to levirate marriage. This is because in classic rabbinic literature Ruth did not commit any sexual sin.²⁹

Several scholars hypothesized that attributing intention for the sake of heaven to biblical seductive women in rabbinic literature was formulated to defend the royal family line of King David and the Messiah.³⁰ According to this hypothesis, this idea should have been created solely around the biblical stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, and Ruth. It is true that the idea of sin for the sake of heaven and the contradictory idea that the biblical characters in the seductive stories were forced to act the way they did by God (see *Gen. Rab.* 85:16) are among the tools the rabbis use for defending the genealogy of the Davidian royal family. However, in classic rabbinic literature we do not find that the idea of seduction for the sake of heaven was particularly formulated in connection with the genealogy of this royal family. In addition, as mentioned above, condemning Lot and Judah, who play a major role in these seductive stories, does not fit the agenda that defends David's genealogy. Only in later midrashic compositions is the idea of seduction for the sake of heaven attributed to the distinct group of women who are connected to the royal family (see *Pirke Rabeinu Ha-Qadosh* 30b).

Gender differentiation is found in the application of the idea of sin for the sake of heaven. There are several talmudic stories in which rabbis enable themselves not to follow stringent halakhic rulings on sexual issues,

29. Indeed, Ruth is mentioned in the later variation of the sugya in Nazir, but she is not considered part of the group of three women who committed a sexual sin, which is recognized in the earlier variation of the sugya in Horayot.

30. See Kaniel, "Gedolah averah lishmah," 27–52; Menn, *Judah and Tamar*.

such as the prohibition against touching a women.³¹ These stories seem to apply to their heroes the practice of “sin for the sake of heaven.” In all of these stories, male rabbis allow themselves not to follow halakhic rulings because they are certain that their intention is pure. Interestingly, an opposite-gendered reading to our sugya is offered in later generations by kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Haim Lozato. Following the cases in the talmudic discussion, he maintains that only women and not men can sin for the sake of heaven (see *Kinat Ha-Shem Zevaot* 96).³²

The rabbinic idea of sin for the sake of heaven is related to the rabbis’ perception of biblical seductive women. It expresses the rabbis’ attitudes toward women and sexuality. Their specific world of beliefs and ideas created an amazing interpretive pattern of praising seductive (foreign) women and condemning the men they seduce. The rabbis are thus the authors of this original interpretive pattern that promotes the message that women should use their sexuality to benefit the Jewish group, empowering their sexual self-perception, and providing a basis for a radical thinking that legitimizes, to some extent, sins that are committed with positive intention.

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31. For such stories, see b. Ketub. 17a; b. Shabb. 13a; b. Qidd. 81b.

32. This passage is discussed in Jonathan Garb, *Kabbalist in the Eye of the Storm* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2014), 168–71.

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Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan

Natalie C. Polzer

Western, Scripture-based religious cultures have generally represented Eve as a paradigmatic model for a broad spectrum of normative ideologies and practices concerning the essential nature of women, their social roles, and appropriate gender relations.¹ Most of these representations have been misogynistic, holding Eve responsible for primal sin, sexual temptation, and bringing death into the world, and considering childbearing and women's social subordination to men as her punishments.² Predictably, Eve is normatively represented in rabbinic aggadic tradition as one of a couple with her husband, Adam. Indeed, a Babylonian tradition counts Adam and Eve as one of the four patriarchal couples buried in the Machpelah cave of Kiriath-arba, literally, "the city of the four" (Gen 23:2; see b. Eruv. 53a; b. Sotah 13a). Even the few early rabbinic interpretations of the biblical statement of Eve's uniqueness, "she was the mother of all life" (Gen 2:20), do not focus on Eve alone but view her in relation to Adam.³

1. Translations of Hebrew texts are my own.

2. Traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations of Eve most often associate her with moral weakness, sexuality, and sin. She is socially and physically subordinate to Adam, owing to her secondary place in creation. See Pamela Norris, *Eve: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 163–94; John A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 16–37, 78–95. For a comparative discussion see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Rabbinic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 78–95.

3. For instance, the phrase alludes to Adam and Eve's abstinence from sexual relations during 130 years after the expulsion from Eden, when they cohabited with incorporeal spirits (female spirits for Adam, male for Eve). See J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 1:195–96.

Given Eve's normative representation in rabbinic tradition, she is portrayed in a remarkable manner in the aggadic compilation *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, which has been preserved in two distinct versions: *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A* and *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B*.⁴ *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B*'s representation of Eve is especially singular, in that it presents her as an independent speaking agent and grants Jewish women the power to atone for her primal sin, in part through the ritualized shedding of the female blood. Indeed, Eve's primordial female biological functions, menstruation and childbirth, which are normatively understood as part of her punishment, are arguably transformed in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B* into expiatory blood sacrifices that enable the continuation of Jewish life and community. To my knowledge, this radical understanding of the expiatory power of female blood appears in only two premedieval Jewish texts: *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B* and a *piyyut*, or Jewish liturgical poem, by Eleazar berabbi Qillir, *aḥat sha'alti* ("I have one supplication").⁵ A feminist reading of these two texts explores their remarkable presentation of Eve, and Jewish women after her, as agents who atone for primal sin through the performance of three commandments reserved for women and through the ritualized shedding of female blood of childbirth and menstruation, which *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B* presents (by implication through redactional artistry) as expiatory sacrifice that outlasts the destruction of the temple.⁶ This representation radically deviates from the normative rabbinic representation of Eve as the paradigmatic model for

4. So designated by Solomon Schechter in his critical edition: *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan: Solomon Schechter's Critical Edition with Notes Indicating Variants in the Versions and Additional Notes from Schechter's Edition* [Hebrew], ed. and annotated by Menahem Kister (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997).

5. Critical edition: Shulamit Elitzur, "'I Have One Supplication': A *Kedushah* for *Shabbat Parah* by Rabbi Eleazar berabbi Qillir" [Hebrew], *KAY NS* 10 (1986): 11–56. For the *piyyut*'s exegetical creativity see Michael Fishbane, "Piyut and Midrash: Between Poetic Invention and Rabbinic Convention," in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99–135. The *piyyut*'s allegorical comparison between Eve and the red heifer also appears in a later medieval commentary, which clearly used it as a direct source. See Ephraim E. Urbach, *Sefer Pitron Torah: A Collection of Midrashim and Interpretations* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), 178–79.

6. For a discussion of the transformation of the theological meaning of blood sacrifice in postsacrificial forms of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity, see Raanan Boustán, "Confounding Blood: Jewish Narratives of Sacrifice and Violence in Late Antiquity," in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, ed. Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 265–86.

women's subordinate social roles and from ideological constructs of essential female nature, experience, and gender relations assigned to her.⁷

1. Methodology

This feminist exploration of the representation of Eve utilizes current normative disciplinary tools to evaluate the form, the genre, the ideological content, and the historical and cultural contexts of rabbinic texts and the traditions contained within them. The feminist-theoretical perspective explores the representations of women, gender, and gender relations historically and cross-culturally, with two main goals: (1) to distinguish normative from extraordinary representations of women and gender, and (2) to trace these representations historically and to locate them in a cultural and historical context, as far as is reasonably possible, given the limitations of the manuscript evidence and our limited knowledge of the transmission history of the majority of rabbinic documents.⁸ Two assumed, interrelated feminist presuppositions are supported by the textual analysis: (1) that “editing and copying worked in a specific direction—to belittle, denigrate and silence women”;⁹ and (2) that a process of censorship occurred during textual transmission, transforming and eliminating content concerning women and gender, biblical figures included.¹⁰ A critical analysis of rabbinic literature, conducted in light of these feminist presuppositions, evidences a process in which attitudes toward women and gender became progressively more conservative and monolithic as rabbinic texts were transmitted over time.

2. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan Versions A and B

Forming any general hypotheses about Avot de-Rabbi Nathan presents greater than usual difficulties, owing to a lack of clarity concerning its ori-

7. I have discussed Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's representation of Eve in a recent article. For more detail than the summary presented here, see Natalie C. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited: the Eve Traditions in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, Versions A and B,” *AJSR* 36 (2012): 207–55.

8. The earliest extant manuscripts of entire rabbinic texts are medieval; for the methodological problems, see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 52–54.

9. Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, FCBT 2/9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 8.

10. Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 51–84.

gins and its idiosyncratic genre and content.¹¹ Indeed, according to the editors of the *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*: “One of the compilations that has best resisted all efforts to locate it in space, time and literary genre is the companion to *Mishnah Avot* itself, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*.”¹² What can be said about *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* with certainty is that in an earlier form it was the first sustained commentary on *Mishnah Avot* and that it evolved, sometime in the premedieval period, into two distinct versions, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A* and *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B*. While they share a basic structure (a running commentary on m. *Avot*) and a substantial amount of parallel content, they are designated two distinct versions, rather than two recensions of the same text, by virtue of distinctive redactional and textual development, distinct manuscript traditions, and unique contents and stylistic features. Scholarly consensus holds that *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B* has preserved a less developed form, and thus, evidences an earlier text.¹³ *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A* circulated more widely than *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B*, attested by its number of extant manuscripts. Owing to its popularity, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A* was printed as an extra-canonical tractate of the Babylonian Talmud in the sixteenth century, a sort of *gemara* to *Mishnah Avot*. Subsequently, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B*’s presence faded from traditional circles; it was reintroduced into scholarly circulation by its inclusion in Solomon Schechter’s first critical edition of a rabbinic text in 1887.¹⁴

Before Menahem Kister’s late twentieth-century reevaluation of *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, it was accepted as an Amoraic commentary on *Mishnah Avot* that was assumed to authentically reflect Tannaitic Palestinian rabbinic culture, history, and religious thought.¹⁵ This assumption is based on

11. For a summary of these issues, see Schechter’s introduction to the critical edition and Myron B. Lerner, “The External Tractates,” in *The Literature of the Sages: The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, CRINT 2/3.1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 369–79.

12. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee, eds., *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8.

13. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, xx–xxiv.

14. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*. Critical work has been facilitated by a recent synoptic edition: Hans-Jürgen Becker and Christoph Berner, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan: Synoptische Edition beider Versionen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

15. For instance: Louis Finkelstein, *Introduction to the Tractate Avot and Avot de-Rabbi Natan* [Hebrew] (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950); Anthony Saldarini, *Scholastic Rabbinism* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982). This per-

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's language of composition (mishnaic Hebrew, with only a few Aramaic words) and its almost exclusive focus on Tannaitic figures. Owing to its simple, popular style, aggadic content, and its many narratives featuring Tannaitic rabbinic figures, it was viewed as a pedagogical text that was used to teach the values and hierarchical order of a community of rabbis to rabbis in training in the context of a Tannaitic or Amoraic Palestinian rabbinic school.¹⁶ Kister's painstaking textual analysis has demonstrated that: (1) Avot de-Rabbi Nathan is not Amoraic; and (2) both versions of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan have developed so unevenly that it is impossible to generalize about their processes of redaction and textual transmission.¹⁷ Although Schechter's view that Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B evidences a less developed version still stands, Kister has demonstrated that it is impossible to designate one version, or even one manuscript of a version, as evidence of a more accurate text; moreover, the uneven development of both versions restricts valid statements about redaction and transmission history to discrete sections, and nothing conclusive can be said about the texts as a whole.¹⁸

3. Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan: An Overview

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's representation of Eve must be contextualized in its general treatment of issues concerning women, gender, and gender relations. To my knowledge, my 2012 article is the only publication to date based on a comprehensive examination of patterns of the representation of

spective is also assumed by the English translations: Judah Goldin, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Natan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); Anthony Saldarini, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Natan (Aboth de-Rabbi Natan): Version B* (Leiden: Brill, 1975). The tendency to view Avot de-Rabbi Nathan as authentic evidence of the early rabbinic period is even evident in recent scholarship. Jonathan Schofer believes that it reflects the hegemonic presence of the classical Roman Empire. See Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 27–28, 31–34.

16. For a summary of this view see Natalie C. Polzer, "Interpreting the Fathers: A Literary-Structural Analysis of Parallel Narratives in Avot de-Rabbi Natan, Versions A and B" (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1991), 42–44 and notes.

17. Menahem Kister, *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Natan: Text, Redaction and Interpretation* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak ben-Zvi, 1998), 5–7.

18. Kister, *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 5–7, 13–22.

women and gender in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan.¹⁹ Previous feminist scholarship on Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's Eve traditions considers them inherently misogynistic, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B extremely so.²⁰ This is owing to its exaggerated articulation of the tradition of the three women's commandments as atonement for Eve's primal sin: *niddah* (ritual immersion after menstruation and childbirth), *hallah* (the dough offering), and the kindling of the Sabbath lights.²¹ Although I embrace the feminist view that Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's overall perspective on women and gender, and on Eve in particular, is misogynistic, I believe that Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's traditions must be viewed in a broader textual and ideational context in order for them to be judged appropriately. If Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's Eve traditions are considered in their overall redactional context, conclusions about Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's relative misogyny must be reconsidered. Indeed, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's version of the Eve traditions is unique, if not radical, in its portrayal of Eve as a proactive agent and of its representation of Jewish women's ritual agency to atone for her sin, granting them an enhanced level of halakhic obligation and a crucial role in divine service.

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's version of the Eve traditions is unique in two ways: (1) it is the only place in rabbinic literature where a sustained sequence of traditions describing the destruction of the Second Temple

19. For some of the general data, see Polzer, "Misogyny Revisited," 225 n. 79. An analysis of the data in its entirety is a work in progress. It was presented in a paper titled "Patriarchal Stewardship: Women and Gender Relations in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, A and B" (presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Washington, DC, 21–23 December 2008). Schofer briefly considers Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's treatment of gender as one of the ways it presents rabbinic values as distinct from the Roman hegemonic culture of the land of Israel (*Making of a Sage*, 36–38).

20. Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formation of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 44–87; Baskin, "'She Extinguished the Light of the World': Justifications for Women's Disabilities in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B*," in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 277–98; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 77–106; Charlotte E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 29–34.

21. The earliest formulation of this tradition is m. Shabb. 2:6, which has no explicit association with Eve but with prevention of death in childbirth: "For three transgressions do women die in childbirth: if they are not meticulous in the performance of *niddah*, *hallah*, and the kindling of Sabbath lights." For a detailed comparison of parallel traditions see Polzer, "Misogyny Revisited," 234–46.

(henceforward “the destruction cluster”) is redacted in juxtaposition to a sustained sequence of traditions about the creation of Adam and Eve, their sin, and its consequences;²² (2) through redactional artistry, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B presents an explicit correspondence between the three commandments that Jewish women perform to atone for Eve’s primal sin and the three men’s commandments in the Mishnah Avot 1:2’s maxim of Shimeon the Righteous: “The world stands on three things; on the Torah, the temple service, and acts of loving-kindness” (Avot R. Nat. A 4 / Avot R. Nat. B 8–9).²³ This correspondence is embedded in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s redactional structure by thematic and linguistic associations of the destruction of the temple with the Adam and Eve traditions.²⁴ Thus, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B grants Jewish women agency, in the form of both halakhic responsibility and spiritual empowerment, by placing the performance of the three women’s commandments, *niddah*, *hallah*, and the kindling of the Sabbath lights, in the cosmic scheme of things, according “Jewish women a critical place in the perpetuation of the cultural world of Jewish men.”²⁵

Both versions of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan pay a remarkable amount of attention to Eve, considering that it exhibits little explicit interest in women and gender relations, generally speaking. This is not surprising in a commentary on Mishnah Avot, which contains few references to women and gender relations.²⁶ Indeed, only two Mishnah Avot maxims provide explicit teachings about such issues.²⁷ Given the scant attention to women and gender relations in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan at large, it is striking that Eve’s textual presence rivals that of many key male figures; “only Adam,

22. To my knowledge, the only other place with a similar juxtaposition is the Avodah service of Yom Kippur, which associates the creation and the sins of Adam and Eve with the temple service. See Philip Birnbaum, ed., *High Holiday Prayer Book: Yom Kippur* (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1980), 528–46. For scholarship on the destruction cluster in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan and parallel rabbinic traditions, see Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 246 n. 119; also Polzer, “Interpreting the Fathers,” 68–100, for Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s unique redactional artistry.

23. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 21–25.

24. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 249–53.

25. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 255.

26. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 225–26.

27. “Don’t talk to your wife any more than is necessary” (m. Avot 1:5); “The more wives, the more witchcraft, the more maidservants, the more licentiousness” (m. Avot 2:7).

Moses, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus have more textual space devoted to them.”²⁸

The Adam and Eve traditions appear as commentary to two Mishnah Avot maxims: (1) the first maxim transmitted in the name of the Men of the Great Assembly: “Make a fence around the Torah” (m. Avot 1:1; Avot R. Nat. A:1, Avot R. Nat B:1);²⁹ and, (2) the maxim of Shimeon the Righteous: “The world stands on three things: the Torah, the temple service, and acts of loving-kindness” (m. Avot 1:2; Avot R. Nat. A 4, Avot R. Nat. B 8–9).³⁰ Two lists enumerating Eve’s sins and their consequences also appear in Avot R. Nat. B 42.³¹ Generically speaking, in both versions the Adam and Eve materials are anthologies of traditions compiled from other sources.³² Especially in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B, these anthologies exhibit enhanced narrativity; the generically diverse individual units (scriptural narrative, scriptural commentary, parables, direct commentary, enumeration lists) relate, in the haphazard manner of composite rabbinic narrative, the story of Adam and Eve’s creation, their Eden experience, and their disobedience and its consequences.³³ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan’s enhanced narrativity is also evidenced by the literary form of its individual traditions. For the most part, exegetical traditions have been disengaged from their scriptural rubrics and have been linked together by the addition of language of narrative sequence (“at that time”) or of rhetorical questions that propel the narrative forward (“What did the serpent think?”). Moreover, although both versions do contain some attributed traditions, they evidence far fewer rabbinic attributions than parallel sources. All things considered, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan’s Adam and Eve traditions, in terms of narrativity, read more like the genre of retold Scripture than exegetical commentary.

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan’s remarkable attention to Eve exhibits an ideology of gender relations that I call patriarchal stewardship. Patriarchal stewardship instructs Jewish men to be the masters of their homes by

28. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 226.

29. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 4–8.

30. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 21–25.

31. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 231–33.

32. The details of the source relationships are far too complex to discuss here. For details see the notes to individual traditions in Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, and in Saldarini, *Fathers according to Rabbi Natan*; also Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 230–8.

33. Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 227.

maintaining an appropriate moral climate therein, which necessitates treating the women for whom they are responsible as vulnerable dependents requiring moral guidance and protection.³⁴ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's Adam is the paradigmatic patriarchal steward, responsible for the moral integrity of his household, Eve. Indeed, he is held ultimately responsible for Eve's vulnerability to the serpent's wiles, since he misled her by not transmitting God's prohibition to her verbatim: "Adam did not wish to speak to Eve the way the Holy One, blessed be He, had spoken to him.... What led to Eve touching the tree? It was the hedge that Adam had put around his words" (Avot R. Nat. A 1).³⁵

4. Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A and Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B: A Comparison

4.1 Censorship in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A

A sustained comparison of the textual evidence in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan confirms Tal Ilan's thesis that a historical process of censorship of materials concerning women and gender occurred as rabbinic texts were transmitted over time.³⁶ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's preservation of a less developed form of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan correlates with its inclusion of more material about women and gender relations in the direct commentary.³⁷ A comparison of parallel traditions in the two versions evidences concrete cases of censorship. An interesting example is the commentary on the maxim of Aqavyah ben Mehallelel, which in the received Mishnah reads:

Consider three things and you will not fall into the hands of transgression. Know from where you have come and where you are going and before whom you are about to give account and reckoning. From where have you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To the place of dust and worm and maggot. And before whom are you about to give

34. Polzer, "Misogyny," 226–28, especially 227 n. 84.

35. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 4.

36. See above, nn. 9 and 10.

37. See above, n. 13. However, the more developed Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A has accreted fourteen narratives featuring anonymous women that have no parallel in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B. These stories usually show the exemplary moral qualities of famous rabbinic figures.

account and reckoning? Before the King of the Kings of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. (m. Avot 3:1)

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's commentary on this maxim is especially interesting, since it shows how the transmission of the received Avot text was affected by the process of censorship. Indeed, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B has probably preserved a less developed version of the Mishnah Avot maxim than the received text, cited above.

Both Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A and the received m. Avot 3:1 reference male semen, the "putrid drop," as the place from which humans come, rather than the female womb. By contrast, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's version of the maxim has no reference to male semen: "Aqavyah ben Mehallelel says: Consider four things and you will not fall into the hands of transgression. Know from where you have come, where you are going, what you are destined to become, dust, worm, and maggot, and who is the judge of all deeds, blessed be He" (Avot R. Nat. B 32).³⁸ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's following commentary on the maxim is a sustained comparison between the womb and the grave: "Rabbi Shimeon ben Eleazar said: From where did he come? From a place of fire, and he returns to a place of fire ... from a compressed place, and he returns to a compressed place ... from a place that no creature can see, and he returns to a place that no creature can see ... from a ritually contaminating place, and he will contaminate others [after his death]" (Avot R. Nat. B 32).³⁹ Granted, the equation between the female womb and death projects a negative view of female reproductive body parts; however, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B lacks any reference to male powers of reproduction. By contrast, only a remnant of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's sustained comparison between the grave and the womb has been preserved in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A, the reference to "a place of darkness" as man's place of origin. Here, semen, the impure fluid of male reproduction, has replaced the womb as the impure place of darkness (Avot R. Nat. 19).⁴⁰ I presume that the text of the received Mishnah was at one point reworked to accord with Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A, thus obliterating references to female reproduction and substituting them with the male "putrid drop."

38. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 69.

39. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 69.

40. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 69.

4.2. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's Remarkable Eve

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's remarkable treatment of Eve is evident on two textual levels: its explicit content and its overall redactional structure. A comparison of the content of the composite scriptural narrative shows that Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A pays much more attention to Adam, and Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B to Eve. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B not only has more material about Eve, including a substantial number of unique traditions, but it also presents her as an independent character with an active speaking role: "It is from the words of Eve that we learn about the fence with which Adam the First encircled her" (Avot R. Nat. B 1).⁴¹ By contrast, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A's Eve is silent and passive, engaging in internal dramatic monologue: "What did Eve say in her heart? All of the things which my master commanded me from the outset are but lies" (Avot R. Nat. A 1).⁴²

This pattern of the representation of Adam and Eve is clearly demonstrated in the temptation scene. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B presents a dramatic dialogue between Eve and the serpent, from which Adam is absent. By contrast, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A's Adam is the prime target of the serpent's guile, and Eve is his second choice: "At that time the wicked serpent took counsel with himself and thought: Since I am unable to trip up Adam, I will go and trip up Eve" (Avot R. Nat. A 1).⁴³ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A alone describes Adam and the serpent as sexual and political rivals: "What did the serpent plan at that time? I will go and kill Adam and marry Eve and be king over the whole world" (Avot R. Nat. A 1).⁴⁴ While Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A likens Adam to the temple (Avot R. Nat. A 1),⁴⁵ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B likens Eve to the temple, as will be demonstrated below. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A's blatant preference of Adam over Eve is also evident in two parables of allegorical reflection on Eve's seduction by the serpent. Although the parables are virtually identical, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A explicitly applies them to Adam, and Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B to Eve (Avot R. Nat. A 1 // Avot R. Nat. B 1).⁴⁶

41. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 4. On the unique traditions, see Saldarini, *Fathers according to Rabbi Natan*, 76 n. 9.

42. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 4.

43. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 4.

44. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 5.

45. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 8.

46. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 6–7.

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's special attention to Eve is further evidenced in its unique exegetical commentary on Ps 139:5: "Behind [before] and in front [after] you have hedged me in [created me]; you placed your hand upon me." The many interpretations of this verse usually read as a description of the creation of Adam and Eve. This is achieved by identifying the verbal root of "hedged me in" (צרתני) as יצר instead of צור, thus reading the verse as "you have created me," rather than "you have hedged me in." Compared with the parallel versions of this exegetical tradition found in Genesis Rabbah (8:1; 21:3; 24:2), Avot R. Nat. A 1, the Babylonian Talmud (b. Ber. 61a; b. Eruv. 18a; b. Hag. 12a; b. Sanh. 38b), Leviticus Rabbah (14:1; 18:2), and Midrash Tehillim 139:5, only Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B interprets Eve's creation (in accordance with the first creation story in Gen 1:27) as cotemporaneous with Adam's and offers no suggestion of her inferiority (Avot R. Nat. B 8).⁴⁷ Two of Genesis Rabbah's exegetical traditions present the physical and sexual unity of the first human, who was (1) created as an androgyne and (2) created with two faces; neither interpretation explicitly mentions the creation of Eve. A stammatitic exegesis of Ps 139:5 in the Babylonian Talmud does mention Eve; however, it does so to emphasize the subservient position of women in the created order of things (b. Ber. 61a; b. Eruv. 18a).⁴⁸ Leviticus Rabbah adds a gloss to Genesis Rabbah's two exegeses, which refers to the creation of woman but which does not mention Eve explicitly. The medieval interpretation in Midrash Tehillim also glosses one of the Genesis Rabbah traditions,⁴⁹ indicating that when man and woman were initially created as an androgyne with two faces, Eve's face was at the back, thus stressing her subordination to Adam. Only Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B interprets the verse to designate the cotemporaneous creation of Eve and Adam: "This refers to Adam and Eve, who were created at the same time [as one—באחת]" (Avot R. Nat. B 8).⁵⁰ Here, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A shows signs of possible censorship; it

47. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 22–23.

48. An argument about whether Eve is a "tail" or one of two "faces" ends up irrelevant, since men precede women anyway.

49. For information about Midrash Tehillim see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 350–51. The commentary on Ps 119–50 is extant only in an early 1515 printed edition. It probably dates from the thirteenth century; by contrast, the commentary on Ps 1–118 is accepted as premedieval.

50. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 23. Although "as one" might be understood as an oblique reference to creation as an androgyne or to two faced creation, the commentary following clarifies that it means "at the same time."

interprets the verse not to refer to the act of human creation but to God's protection of the first man from the hostility of the jealous ministering angels (Avot R. Nat. A 1).⁵¹

Although both versions blame Adam for misleading Eve with the "fence he put around his words" (Avot R. Nat. A 1 // Avot R. Nat. B 1),⁵² Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B consistently presents Eve as more responsible for the consequences of her act of disobedience. Eve's enhanced responsibility is clearly expressed in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's enumeration lists that itemize the sins of Adam, Eve, and the serpent and their consequences. Two types of enumeration lists itemize the consequences of Eve's sin: a list of ten curses in Avot. R. Nat. B 42, and the lists in Avot. R. Nat. B 9 and 42 that link the three transgressions causing women to die in childbirth with three sins of Eve, presented under the rubric of m. Shabb. 2:6: "For three transgressions women die in childbirth: if they are not meticulous in the performance of *niddah*, *hallah* and the kindling of Sabbath lights."⁵³ Feminist scholars consider these traditions as particularly problematic, "not only as to their view of women's mythological role in the origin of human civilization, but also as to their punitive framing of the rabbinic ritualization of menstruation."⁵⁴ These traditions articulate some of the core misogynist rabbinic ideologies of gender: "the belated and secondary nature of female creation and the negative results, ... women's inherent physical and moral disabilities, the divine punishments under which they labor, and the 'curses' that characterize their lot."⁵⁵

Although I agree with the feminist evaluations of these lists, I do not believe that they do justice to the nuances of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's unique formulation that actually enhances Eve's status and, by extension, that of all Jewish women. Comparison with the parallel sources shows that although Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's lists render Eve more sinful, they also extend to all Jewish women the halakhic agency and the spiritual power to atone for her primal sin by performing the three women's commandments. For instance, compared with its parallels in Genesis Rabbah

51. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 8.

52. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 4–5.

53. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 25, 117. Parallels appear in the Talmud Yerushalmi (y. Shabb. 2:6, 5b) and in Gen. Rab. 17:8. Full texts and translations of these lists and parallels appear in Polzer, "Misogyny Revisited," 230–38.

54. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 13.

55. Baskin, "She Extinguished the Light," 277–78.

and the Talmud Yerushalmi, Avot. R. Nat. B 9's lists reveal two unique features: (1) the greater number and severity of Eve's sins, and (2) the identification of the performance of the three women's commandments as atonement. While the former two sources deem Eve guilty of only one sin, Adam's death, Avot. R. Nat. B 9 holds her guilty of the three cardinal sins of Judaism: murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry (or willful rejection of God).⁵⁶ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's unique formulation appears to have been motivated by a precise application of the rabbinic hermeneutical strategy *middah ke-neged middah*, or "measure for measure," which dictates that if Jewish women were given three distinct commandments to atone for Eve's actions, she must have committed three sins, not one. Furthermore, alone among the parallel sources, Avot. R. Nat. B 9's list includes the verb "to atone," repeated three times, to emphasize the purpose of their performance.

The status of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's Eve is elevated in the theological context of the paradoxical logic of covenantal exclusivism, in which the more one is favored, or chosen, by God, the more commandments one must perform. According to this logic, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's list enhances not only Eve's status but also that of Jewish women, who are granted the halakhic agency to atone for primal sin on a daily (the dough offering), weekly (kindling the Sabbath lights), and monthly (ritual purification) basis. Moreover, the list subsumes women's biological role in childbearing into a covenantal framework, enhancing women's spiritual agency, rather than their biological destiny. Unlike the early Christian belief expressed in 1 Tim 2:15,⁵⁷ it is not the biological act of childbirth that ensures women's salvation, but rather their performance of commandments, which ensures not only their own salvation but also that of the entire Jewish people through the birth of Jewish children. Thus, female biological processes involving blood, menstruation, and childbirth become integrated into a theological economy of atonement and salvation. A feminist reading of this engagement recognizes its problematic gendered essentialism; nevertheless, in the context of normatively androcentric rabbinic theology, Avot

56. She murdered Adam, contaminated him with sexual impurity, and defaced God himself by murdering a man made in his image. For details see Polzer, "Misogyny Revisited," 243.

57. For a discussion of 1 Tim 2:15 and the Talmud Yerushalmi source, see Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 142–43.

de-Rabbi Nathan B uniquely represents Jewish women, the covenanted descendants of Eve, as proactive agents in atonement and salvation.

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's redactional structure also presents Eve in a remarkable way through its unique juxtaposition of the Adam and Eve traditions with its destruction (of the temple) cluster. There is an unusual difference between the redactional structure and position of these units in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A and Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B, suggesting some conscious purpose behind the redaction process.⁵⁸ Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's redactional order effects a sustained comparison between (1) Eve and the temple, (2) the expulsion of Adam and Eve and the destruction of the temple, and (3) the three women's commandments and Yohanan ben Zakai's perpetuation of Judaism after the destruction. These comparisons are achieved by the redactional juxtaposition of units linked by thematic and lexical cues. A simplified overview is as follows: Avot. R. Nat. A 1: Adam and Eve traditions; Avot. R. Nat. A 4–5: destruction cluster; Avot. R. Nat. B 1: Adam and Eve traditions; Avot. R. Nat. B 5–8: destruction cluster; Avot. R. Nat. B 8–9: Adam and Eve traditions. Whereas Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A's redactional order separates the Adam and Eve traditions and the destruction cluster, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B has redacted the Adam and Eve traditions in two locations so that the destruction cluster is framed by them. Thus, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's redactional order directly affects its representation of Eve, through its textual juxtaposition of two cataclysmic events in history and their consequences: the sin of Adam and Eve and the destruction of the Second Temple.

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's redactional structure effects a comparison between, and proposes remedies for, these two cataclysmic events, both of which ruptured the natural and/or the historical order and threatened the continuity of human/Jewish life. In Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B alone, the fulfillment of two complementary, gendered sets of three ritual commandments constitutes the remedy for the threat of discontinuity: for Jewish men—the study of Torah, divine service, and acts of loving-kindness specified in the maxim of Shimeon the Righteous (m. Avot 1:2); for women—the three women's commandments. The balanced complementarity of the two sets of commandments is illustrated by their redactional position. The maxim of Shimeon the Righteous, articulating the three (men's) command-

58. A detailed comparative description and analysis of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan's destruction clusters appears in Polzer, "Interpreting the Fathers," 68–100.

ments, begins the unit (Avot R. Nat. B 5); the tripartite list of the three women's commandments is placed at its very end (Avot R. Nat. B 9). Thus, in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B alone, Jewish women, as well as Jewish men, have been given three ways to make the world stand or endure.⁵⁹

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's redactional artistry is accentuated by a sustained homology between Eve and the temple that is signaled by lexical cues, namely, the repetition of key phrases in different units of tradition.⁶⁰ A short rabbinic narrative constitutes the very last unit of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's destruction cluster (Avot R. Nat. B 8);⁶¹ it describes the consequences of the destruction of the temple for the continuity of Jewish worship. Here, the despairing Rabbi Yehoshua declares to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai: "Woe to us because the house of our life [בית חיינו] has been destroyed, the place that was an atonement [מכפר] for our sins!" Rabban Yohanan answers: "We have another atonement [כפרה אחרת] in its place [תחתיה]...: 'For I desire loving-kindness and not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6)." The phrase "in its place" has a strong association with Eve, for it appears in Gen 2:21, a verse describing her creation from Adam's side—God filled the missing limb with flesh "in its place" (תחתנה). The phrase is picked up later in Avot R. Nat. B 8 in two parables (with no Avot Rabbi Nathan A parallels) about Eve's creation, which teach that she was a superior replacement for the rib out of which she was constructed.⁶² In the first parable, a polemical narrative, a gentile matron provocatively asks Rabbi Yehoshua why God is not considered a thief for taking Adam's rib to make Eve.⁶³ Rabbi Yehoshua counters by likening Eve to a brick of gold given in place of (תחתיה) a brick of clay. The second parable likens Eve to a piece of meat given by a butcher to a customer in place of (תחתיה) a bone. In both cases, the substitutions are superior to the original item. The significance of the parabolic comparison can be extended to the unit at large by virtue of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's speech in the short rabbinic narrative. Although temple sacrifice is no longer possible, superior commandments have been given in its place

59. Polzer, "Misogyny Revisited," 246–8.

60. See Polzer, "Misogyny Revisited," 248–53, for detailed analysis.

61. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 22.

62. Schechter, *Aboth de-Rabbi Natan*, 23–24. A version of the first parable also appears in Gen. Rab. 17:7.

63. The polemical nature of this narrative is debatable; it depends on whether the matron is identified as a gentile or a Jewish woman. See Tal Ilan, "Matrona and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation," *JSJ* 25 (1994): 18–51.

(תחתיה): for men, Torah study and acts of loving-kindness; for women, the three commandments that atone for the sin of Eve.

The second key phrase that links Eve and the temple is “the house of our life” (בית חיינו), Rabbi Yehoshua’s unusual designation for the temple in the short rabbinic narrative. This phrase, too, is highly associative with Eve, whose name is understood to mean “life” in Gen 3:20 when Adam names her “the mother of all life.” Metaphorically resonant, the word “house” (בית) itself bears a range of multilayered, interwoven aggadic and halakhic associations of the “woman as house,” including the female matrix, the womb as the source of human life.⁶⁴ Finally, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s repetition of the word “atone” (מכפר) strengthens the connection between Eve and the temple. A form of the verb appears twice in the rabbinic narrative, and again at the end of the unit in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s list of Eve’s three sins and the three women’s commandments. Thus, through redactional artistry that incorporates carefully placed, repeated lexical cues, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B analogizes Eve and the temple and, by extension, the female womb and the altar. By implication, women’s blood is analogized to a “brick of gold,” an effective agent of divine mediation and atonement.

The representations of Eve in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A and Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B are so different that I cannot believe them to be accidental. Probably, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s less conventional—hence more difficult—representation of female agency is earlier; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A, the more popular text, edited out difficult material concerning women and gender in a process of redactional reorganization and censorship. Exactly how this occurred cannot be reconstructed. But, given the evidence at hand, we can assume that Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A’s transmission process eliminated the connection between Eve and the temple and the atoning power of the three women’s commandments that are preserved in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B.

5. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s Eve: Historical and Cultural Context

The only premedieval thematic parallel to Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B’s representation of Eve appears in a *piyyut* by Eleazar berabbi Qillir, *Aḥat Sha’alti*,⁶⁵

64. See discussion in Polzer, “Misogyny Revisited,” 251–52 n. 133.

65. See n. 5 above for a critical edition.

composed for the *qedushta* (the hymns embellishing the Amidah) of Shabbat Parah. This is the Sabbath when Num 19 is read, which describes the preparation of the waters of purification from corpse impurity made with the ashes of a ritually slaughtered red heifer. The *piyyut* presents Eve positively, comparatively speaking,⁶⁶ as “the mother of all life,” with the agency to atone for severe sin and impurity. Qillir, a popular liturgical poet, lived in Byzantine Palestine before the Muslim conquest, in what is considered the classical period of *piyyut* (sixth–eighth centuries).⁶⁷ He was a highly original and sophisticated poet, well versed in biblical and rabbinic halakhic and aggadic sources, allusions to which were expertly woven into his compositions. Regretfully, it is impossible to give *Aḥat Sha’alti* the attention it deserves in this essay,⁶⁸ not to mention the representation of gender in *piyyut* with regard to biblical figures.⁶⁹

In the baroque, allusive, rhymed style typical of *piyyut*, heavily interlaced with midrashic and biblical references, the thirteen stanzas of *Aḥat Sha’alti* systematically compare Eve to the red heifer. Both are presented as paradoxical figures who simultaneously create impurity and enable purification and atonement for severe sin. Each stanza presents a typological or analogical correspondence between Eve and the red heifer, sometimes displaying close attention to the biblical text, more often assuming midrashic interpretations of the biblical story.⁷⁰ *Aḥat Sha’alti* and Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B share three themes: (1) the centrality and comparatively positive presentation of Eve, (2) the notion that childbirth is both a punishment

66. For instance, references to Eve in the *piyyutim* of the Avodah liturgy, recited in the Musaf of Yom Kippur, present her in conventionally negative terms. See Michael D. Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, eds., *Avodah: An Anthology of Ancient Poetry for Yom Kippur* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) 134–35, 138–40, 142, 300–302.

67. For a recent survey of *piyyut* and its scholarship see Wout Van Bekkum, “The Hebrew Liturgical Poetry of Byzantine Palestine: Recent Research and New Perspectives,” *Proof* 28 (2008): 232–46.

68. An English translation and further exploration of Qillir’s sources is a desideratum, building on Elitzur’s critical notes and on Fishbane’s short analysis.

69. Recent research suggests this to be a fruitful area for future research. For instance, Ophir Münz-Manor, “All about Sarah: Questions of Gender in Yannai’s Poems on Sarah’s (and Abraham’s) Barrenness,” *Proof* 26 (2006): 344–74.

70. Such as Adam’s being a priest and offering up sacrifices and Adam’s enduring sexual abstinence for 130 years after the expulsion from Eden. For sources, see notes in Elitzur, “One Supplication.”

and an atonement for Eve's primal sin (stanza 3), and (3) a correspondence between the blood of menstruation and sacrificial blood, explicit in the poem (stanzas 1, 7), and implied in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B by the association of Eve and the temple. Like Avot. R. Nat. B 8's tripartite list, the poem exaggerates both Eve's sin and her ability to atone.⁷¹ The poem's refrain, "like the mother who..." "like she who..." repeated in every stanza, stresses the positive side of Eve's paradoxical, uniquely female ability to atone through childbearing and motherhood.

It is impossible to ascertain whether the poem's correspondence between childbirth, menstruation, and atonement is Qillir's idiosyncratic invention or whether it was influenced by an extant midrashic tradition. Certainly, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B existed in anything like its present form during Qillir's lifetime. Generically, stylistically, and functionally speaking, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's Eve traditions and *Aḥat Sha'alti* are not comparable texts, which is not surprising considering how Hebrew liturgical poets reworked their biblical and midrashic sources into new artistic forms.⁷² However, although the origins and function of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan are obscure, the authorship and function of *Aḥat Sha'alti* are indubitable. It is a poetic liturgical homily, embedding the themes of the Torah and *haftarah* readings into the prayer experience of, perhaps, the most normative, popular audience imaginable, the Jewish prayer community.⁷³ Although Qillir's precise dates and provenance are under some dispute, there is consensus that he lived in a Christian environment between the fifth and seventh centuries before the rise of Islam.⁷⁴ *Aḥat Sha'alti* may well be an anchor with which to historically and culturally contextualize Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B's unusual representation of Eve and of Jewish women. A question emerges from this hypothesis that offers a tantalizing avenue for future research. If, as

71. The *piyyut* also describes Eve's negative actions: she brought contradiction into the world (stanza 2); she disobeyed God (3), she shamed Adam (4), she heeded the serpent (5), she defiled the purity of her husband (10), she "drank from the cup of death" (13).

72. See Fishbane, "*Piyyut* and Midrash," for a discussion and examples.

73. The *Haftarah* reading is Ezek 35, which conflates ritual and sin impurity and alludes to the garden of Eden. Scholars disagree about whether *piyyut* was intended for a popular or an elite audience. In either case, the social normativity of the audience would be identical, in my view; see Wout-Jacques Van Bakkum, "Hearing and Understanding *Piyyut* in the Liturgy of the Synagogue," *Zutot* 1 (2001): 58–63.

74. Van Bakkum, "Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," 233.

Raanan Boustan holds, “the symbolic function of sacrificial blood provided an increasingly charged domain of contact and competition across of the full spectrum of religious groups in the Mediterranean world,”⁷⁵ what can be deduced from Qillir’s proposition of the atoning power of women’s blood in a Byzantine Christian context? The suggestion that Qillir’s oeuvre evidences attacks against what he considered to be idolatrous practices of Byzantine Christianity⁷⁶ prompts the question: How is Qillir’s explicit statement of the sacrificial function and atoning power of Eve’s female blood to be understood against the hegemonic Christian belief in the atoning, sacrificial power of the blood of the crucified Christ?

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B and *Aḥat Sha’alti* share one other feature. Both fell out of popular circulation after the advent of printing in the sixteenth century. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A, not Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B, was chosen to be included in the first printed editions of the Babylonian Talmud, a choice that led to the disappearance of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B from circulation until it was included by Schechter in his critical edition. A companion poem to *Aḥat Sha’alti*, *Atzulat Oman* (which contains no references to Eve), was included in the printed editions of the Ashkenazi prayer book for Shabbat Parah, where it can still be found in some editions.⁷⁷ Although the early popularity of *Aḥat Sha’alti* is unequivocally attested by the large number of Cairo Genizah fragments,⁷⁸ it was not included in the printed Ashkenazi prayer book and had to be resurrected as an item of scholarly interest in Elitzur’s critical edition. It is, perhaps, sheer coincidence that the two texts in which Eve and Jewish women appear as powerful figures of atonement were removed from popular circulation at the advent of printing—and then again, perhaps not.

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77. E.g., Ber Zeligman, ed., *Seder Avodat Yisrael* [Hebrew] (New York: Schocken, 1937), 691.

78. Elitzur, “One Supplication.”

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Midrash Sarah and Abraham: A Lost Rabbinic Interpretation of the “Woman of Valor” Song

Ronit Nikolsky

1. Introduction

The recognition of and theorizing on the silencing of women is at the heart and core of women studies. This holds true also for Jewish studies scholarship on women.¹ While power play and hegemony aim at voicing the one and silencing the “other,” women are a case where a social group is more necessary and visible than any other “other,” since being half of the population, they are visible on a daily basis (at least at home).² What brought about this *condition féminine*? Obviously, no full answer will be given in this essay, but as has been shown by Tal Ilan in *Silencing the Queen* and other works, one factor that contributes to the silencing of women is the passing of time: women who were visible in earlier manifestation of the culture are being erased in later ones.

A closer look at how societies are structured reveals one more aspect of silencing women: the more official the social institution is, the more silenced are the women; for example, the role of cooking at home versus the

I would like to thank Tal Ilan and Joseph Yahalom for making very useful suggestions on earlier versions of this paper and Constanza Cordoni for her careful reading and helpful remarks. Errors are, of course, my own.

1. See primarily Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), throughout.

2. Christine Hayes, “The ‘Other’ in Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 243, 246. I thank Lorena Miralles-Maciá for this reference.

public official role of a chef.³ Apparently, in spite of the change in the status of women, to this day, the former is mostly relegated to women while the latter is the domain of men. And since officiality commonly uses the tool of writing as a form of authority and approval, women are missing more in written documents than in oral (and thus less preserved) accounts. Thus, in the context of Jewish society of late antiquity we can make a distinction between silencing women in society and silencing them in texts (though, in the end, often the difference is not that great).

Change over time and the change across social groups accounts for the loss of a text I call Midrash Sarah and Abraham and seek to reconstruct in this essay. My aim is twofold: first to expose and reconstruct an independent text that is now found in a fragmented way in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus. The text explains each verse from the song of the virtuous woman found in Prov 31:10–32, the *Eshet Hayil* song, by using verses from the story cycle of Abraham and Sarah found in Gen 12:1–25:10. My second aim is to typify the milieu both of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu and of the one in which Midrash Sarah and Abraham was created, by analyzing how Midrash Sarah and Abraham was first introduced into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus and then distorted to such a degree that it became unrecognizable. My argument about how this came about is that the manner in which women are introduced and agented depends on the subculture we study.

Arguably, the context in which classical rabbinic literature was created was one in which women were othered. In spite of being the object of halakhic discussions, women were not the principal members of the *beit-midrash* (the rabbinic study house) and were possibly not even allowed to enter it at all.⁴

The Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus, on the other hand, stands out within rabbinic literature (as do other corpora of the later period) in not being a hardcore product of the rabbinic *beit-midrash*. The Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature is a corpus that has developed over several centuries, with origins in fourth-century Palestine, peaking in the seventh

3. This was already the case in rabbinic culture, as the word for “baker” exists only in the masculine form (נַחְתוּם), while obviously women did much of the baking at home.

4. Except, perhaps, very few who stood out and engaged the rabbis in debates. See Tal Ilan, “Women Quoting Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in this volume.

century.⁵ It is similar to midrashic literature in being organized according to the biblical pericopes; it exhibits knowledge and influence of both Tannaitic and Amoraic Palestinian literature, and some acquaintance with Babylonian materials.⁶ The material of Tanhuma Yelammedenu crystallized in two parallel collections, the “regular” or printed Tanhuma, which seems to have developed in an environment influenced by the Babylonian Talmud, and Tanhuma Buber, which was finalized in a southern European Jewish-cultural environment.⁷ Materials from these compositions are found in other Jewish Byzantine literature, sometimes to such an extent that they can be called adjacent literature, such as Aggadat Bereshit and Pesiqta Rabbati; some medieval Jewish compositions contain large chunks of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu material, such as Exodus Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah, and Deuteronomy Rabbah, and also others.⁸

While apparently being a “handbook for *darshanim*,”⁹ the Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature exhibits a broad knowledge of earlier rabbinic literature, mainly midrash but also halakhic literature, but it reworks

5. Mark Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2003), 1–5; Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 302–6; Arnon Atzmon and Ronit Nikolsky, “Let Our Rabbi Teach Us: An Introduction to Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature,” in *Studies in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Arnon Atzmon (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–17.

6. Ronit Nikolsky, “From Palestine to Babylon and Back: The Place of the Bavli and the Tanhuma on the Rabbinic Cultural Continuum,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 284–305.

7. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, 173–88, especially 186.

8. See Atzmon and Nikolsky, “Let Our Rabbi Teach Us”; Bregman offers the authoritative and most detailed study of Tanhuma Yelammedenu in his *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*. Midrash Hadash, which also has material similar to the Tanhuma Yelammedenu, is probably a parallel development to the known collections of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu. See Gila Vachman, *Midrash Hadash al Hato-rah, also Known as Tanhuma Mann, Based on JTS Rab. 1671, with an Introduction, Reference and Notes* (Jerusalem: Midrash Project of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2013), לֹהֵל (in the introduction), which drew on raw material from which TanP and TanB also drew.

9. I agree here with Bregman, less than with Elbaum, who suggests that the latter is less organized Tanhuma Yelammedenu material, because it is a literary composition, and no longer connected to synagogue life. See Jacob Elbaum, “How Many Benedictions Does One Say Every Day? Methods of Forming a Tanhuma Homily”

these traditions and creates its own profile, in which, as others and I have shown in previous works,¹⁰ women are more visible and audible. I ascribe this quality to the fact that in spite of the *beit-midrash* background of its author(s), the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus is not a *beit-midrash* text but belongs to the social context of the synagogue.

Social context is the key here. Historical and women studies are not always careful in recognizing that social context is an important component regarding how visible women are and what the attitude is toward them. This holds true not only with regard to women; it is a general social and cultural phenomenon: while a society is described as sharing a semiotic (cultural) canon, various groups within the same society engage differently with the canon, in terms of attitude and values.¹¹ Barbra Rosenwein coined the term “emotional communities” to refer to the combination of a social group and its ideology or set of values. The term is a bit misleading, because the concept refers not only to emotions but also to attitudes and engagements of a group of people, and this fits the purpose of this essay well.

1.1. Emotional Communities

This is how Barbara Rosenwein, a historian from Loyola University specializing in medieval Europe, describes emotional communities:

Emotional communities are largely the same as social communities: families, neighborhoods, syndicates, academic institutions, monasteries, factories, platoons, princely courts. But the researcher looking at them seeks above all to uncover systems of feeling, to establish what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them (for it is about such things that people express emotions); the emotions that they value, devalue, or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and

[Hebrew], in *Knesset Ezra: Literature and Life in the Synagogue; Studies Presented to Ezra Fleischer*, ed. Shulamit Elizur et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994), 166–67.

10. See, e.g., Ronit Nikolsky, “Are Parables an Interpretation?,” in *Sources and Interpretations in Ancient Judaism: Studies for Tal Ilan at Sixty*, ed. Meron M. Piotrkowski, Geoffrey Herman, and Saskia Dönitz (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 289–315; Nikosky, “Parables in the Service of Emotional Translation,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, ed. Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 37–56.

11. Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” *PT* 1 (1979): 293–95.

the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore.¹²

Rosenwein emphasizes the fact that the concept of emotional communities is a new way of typifying a social group, and the innovative aspect is that it looks into the values that the group shares, their attitudes, and their emotionality. It is different from external characterizations, as it talks about content, engagement, and attachment, namely, the group's worlds of meaning. These are internal and thus leave only indirect marks in the real world. Many aspects of the emotional community are hegemonic, in Antonio Gramsci's sense of the word; that is, they are so self-evident and so commonsensical within the group that they are transparent.¹³

Thus it could very well be that members of the *beit-midrash* groups silenced women not even being completely aware that this was what they were doing. Therefore, and this is a general remark, relating not only to this essay and its subject matter, the image we have of late antique Judaism is skewed because most written information about this society originates in one subculture, namely, the *beit-midrash*.

1.2. The Emotional Community of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu

Some work has been done regarding the emotional community of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature by earlier scholars, whether they used this concept or not. In his 2016 book *Pious Irreverence*, Dov Weiss shows how challenging God is more prominent in Tanhuma Yelammedenu than in any earlier rabbinic compositions.¹⁴ He tackles this as a theological issue, which of course it is, but it is certainly also relevant for characterizing the emotional community that gave rise to the Tanhuma Yelammedenu. In my work on parables, I show how the Tanhuma Yelammedenu "emotionally translated" midrashic material away from halakhic discussions and into humane stories more engaging for its audience.¹⁵

12. Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions," *PC 1* (2010), <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019k>.

13. On Gramsci's concept of hegemony, see Dick Hebdige, "From Culture to Hegemony," in *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 5–19.

14. Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 131.

15. See, e.g., Nikolsky, "Are Parables an Interpretation?"; Nikolsky, "Parables in the Service."

Yet, earlier than both of us, Ilan's work on Jephthah's daughter was a step in the direction of characterizing the emotional community of Tanhuma Yelammedenu:

It is surprising to note that this text [i.e., Tanhuma] makes Yiftah's daughter into its heroine, giving her a voice and allowing her to speak for herself against her father and against the entire establishment which conspires to kill her.... She quotes scripture in order to prove that the God of Israel did not institute human sacrifice.... Thus the *Tanhuma* is employing here an important principle taken from feminist reading strategies of placing the woman at the center and giving the marginalized a voice. That she is not heard is, in their opinion, a strong indictment of a system that ignores the words of a wise woman.¹⁶

From Ilan's word it transpires that the community connected to the Tanhuma Yelammedenu is different from the *beit-midrash* culture represented in the classical rabbinic texts; in the latter, the voice and presence of women were silenced and put down. However, in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu culture, women play an essential, active, nonapologetic part.

2. Midrash Sarah and Abraham

Eshet Hayil is an alphabetical song found in chapter 31 of the biblical book of Proverbs. It describes the merits of a woman of valor, enumerating her many activities, behaviors, and attitudes, especially toward her husband and family. It begins with the words, "A woman of valor [*eshet hayil*] who can find? for her worth is far above rubies," and it goes on to describe how trustworthy she is, how she conducts business (sells and buys), performs household chores, feeds her family, and so on.¹⁷ The song is acrostic, that is, it is organized in an alphabetical order, with verses beginning with a letter of the alphabet according to order: the first verse begins with a word that starts with *aleph*, the second with a word that starts with *bet*, and so on.

Today this biblical song is associated with the ritual of welcoming the Sabbath, and it is read or sung by the man to his wife in observant Jewish

16. Tal Ilan, "Gender Difference and the Rabbis: Bat Yiftah as Human Sacrifice," in *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange, and K. F. Diethard Römheld (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183, 186, 188–89.

17. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of ancient texts are mine.

families, or by the whole family every Sabbath eve before the *qiddush* (i.e., the blessing on the wine). This custom dates from the sixteenth century, originating in the kabbalistic circle of HaAri (Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi from Safed), where the praise for the woman was understood metaphorically as referring to the Sabbath or the Shekinah (i.e., God's presence, declined in Hebrew in the feminine).¹⁸ In late antique Jewish society, the milieu in which the Tanhuma Yelammedenu was put together, there is no evidence for such a custom.

The most certain thing we can say about the reception of the song from Proverbs in early and classical midrashic material is that it is not frequently cited or interpreted.¹⁹ This is not surprising, because, as a rule of thumb, the further the biblical book is from the Torah, the later it is interpreted in rabbinic compositions; the Torah is most frequently interpreted in the earlier rabbinic sources, and the wisdom books are interpreted only much later.²⁰

This proverbial chapter has a more pronounced presence in the later midrash. Thus, in the postclassical midrash, to which also the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus belongs, we find an interpretation of this biblical song in the midrash on Proverbs.²¹ The material in this midrash is not related to what we find the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus. Further, our text, a relatively long midrash on this biblical song, is found in three interrelated version in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu corpus and adjacent literature; the witnesses to this are Tanhuma Buber, Hayei Sarah 3; the printed Tanhuma,

18. Yael Levine, "Eshet Hayil in Jewish Ritual" [Hebrew], *Beit Mikra* 31 (1985): 339–47.

19. Shulamit Valler, "Who Is the *ēšet hayil* in Rabbinic Literature," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 87.

20. Yonah Frenkel, *Darkei ha-Aggadeh ve-Hemidrash* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Modan, 1995), 8; and see Timothy H. Lim, "The Origins and Emergence of Midrash in Relation to the Hebrew Scripture," in *The Midrash: An Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 595–612, for an overview of the relationship between midrash and Scripture.

21. Burton Visotzky, the editor of *Midrash Mishlei*, ascribes the text to the ninth century but asserts that the part that talks about the *eshet hayil* is later. See Visotzky, *Midrash Mishlei: A Critical Edition Based on Vatican MS Ebr. 44, with Variants Readings from All Known Manuscripts and Early Editions, and with an Introduction, References and a Short Commentary* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990), 197.

Hayei Sarah 4; and Aggadat Bereshit 34.²² The composition seems to have been an independent continuous midrash on Prov 31:10–31, in which each verse is interpreted; the first half verse is interpreted as referring to Sarah, and the second half to Abraham. I name this text Midrash Sarah and Abraham, and the following lines are devoted to reconstructing this short composition.

2.1. Parallels of Proverbs 31:10–31 in Rabbinic Literature

Before we turn to study the text that connects the *Eshet Hayil* Song with Sarah, let us look at the cases where verses from this biblical chapter appear in early and classical rabbinic sources.²³

1. An early Tannaitic midrash, Sifre Deuteronomy (*parashat ekev, pisqa* 48), interprets verse *heh*, לחמה תביא ממרחק סוחר באניות (“She is like the merchant-ships; she brings her food from afar”): “You should study [Torah] from the teacher in your own town, and then move away [to study in other places], as it says: ‘she is like the merchant-ships.’” The “she” here, the *eshet hayil*, is understood as the Torah.

2. The words from verse *aleph*, מכרה רחוק מפנינים (“For her price is far above rubies”), in Gen. Rab. 45:1 do associate Sarah with *eshet hayil*, but only with regard to her inability to conceive (“price,” מכרה, referring to offspring).

3. The words from verse *lamed*, לבוש לא תירא לביתה משלג כי כל ביתה לבוש שנים (“She does not fear the snow for her household; for all her household are clothed with scarlet”), in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana (*pisqa* 10 *aser te’aser*, 4) are associated with the commandment of circumcision, scarlet referring to the blood of circumcision.

4. Also in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana (*pisqa* 12 *bahodesh hashlishi*, 1), in verse *resh*, רבות בנות עשו חיל ואת עליית על כלנה (“Many girls have done valiantly, but you excel them all”), the *eshet hayil* is interpreted as the whole of Israel.

5. Verse *shin* is also interpreted in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana (*pisqa* 12 *bahodesh hashlishi*, 1), שקר החן והבל היופי אשה יראת ה' היא תתהלל (“Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised”), but as referring to Noah, Adam, and Moses.

22. According to Buber, this section is missing in printed Tanhuma, in the Constantinople and Venice prints, and in MSS Oxford ב and ה of printed Tanhuma.

23. For an overview of the *eshet hayil* in rabbinic literature see Valler, “Who Is the *ēšet ḥayil*.” Valler does not discuss Midrash Sarah and Abraham.

6. Midrash on Proverbs is considered by Burton Visotzky, its editor, as originating in the ninth century. The midrash on the *Eshet Hayil* song is embedded in this midrash, but, according to Visotzky, it is a later addition and not found before medieval times.²⁴ It is therefore known separately as Midrash Eshet Hayil.²⁵ This midrash includes a selection of letters only, and in most cases it is interpreted as referring to the Torah, like in Sifre Deutoronomy. In some cases we find other stories and interpretations, but none of them is about Sarah (*parashah* 31).

7. Some parallels to Midrash Eshet Hayil are found in Midrash ha-Gadol (a Yemenite collection from the thirteenth century).²⁶

8. In the Midrash Zuta on Ruth (*parashah* 4:11), of which the oriental version is of the eleventh century, we learn that the *Eshet Hayil* song is written alphabetically because a pious woman is like the Torah (which is written with the alphabet).

This short overview of late antique and early medieval interpretations of the *Eshet Hayil* song shows that the text we find in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu, while acquainted with rabbinic literature, is unique. The only reference to Sarah as the *eshet hayil* in the *beit-midrash* context is the case of Genesis Rabbah, which focuses on a problematic, if not to say negative, aspect of her life. In all other references the *eshet hayil* is allegorized or metaphorized, and this results in erasing the real woman found in the biblical song.

Midrash Sarah and Abraham turns all these interpretations on their head, and while all versions of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu frame the text as referring to Abraham being old, that is, the beginning of Gen 24, the original Midrash Sarah and Abraham focuses on Sarah, whose death is reported at the end of Gen 23.

9. It should be noted, though, that outside the *beit-midrash* context, we find a *piyyut* of Yannai (sixth century),²⁷ which explains each verse from the Proverbs song as referring to a woman's role in marriage, especially in relation to menstrual purity. It describes a good woman as one who observes these rules perfectly, to the trust and enjoyment of her husband and herself. Here is a selected section (ll. 1–8 and 33–40):

24. Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle*, 197.

25. Valler, "Who Is the *ēšet ḥayil*," 87.

26. Strack and Stemmerger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, 354.

27. MS Cambridge UL, T-S 6H, 6 1, *Maagarim*, where it is attributed to Yannai.

"אשת חיל מי ימצא".
 ארחה לא טועה.
 כגפן נטועה.
 לא חטאה ולא החטיאה.
 לא נטמאה ולא טימאה.
 "בטח בה לב בעלה".
 בשלטון אשר נתן לה.
 ברשיון אשר הואמן לה.
 לומר טמאה אני.
 ולומר ט>הו<רה אני.
 ...
 "ט?ע?מה כי טוב סחרה".
 טוב וגם נעים.
 היא ואישה נחים.
 זה בזה שמחים.
 במצות רם מס<י> חים.
 "ידיה שילחה בכישור".
 יד לבדוק מושלחת.
 למאד משובחת.
 היתה מקורה ברוך.
 ושלחנא בטוהר ערוך.

"A woman of valor who shall find" (Prov 31:10).

She makes no mistake about her period.

Like a [well]-planted vine.

She does not sin, and causes no sin [to others],

is not defiled and not defiling.

"Her husband's heart trusted in her" (Prov 31:11),

in the sovereignty which he gave her,

in the authority which he entrusted in her,

to say: "I am impure"

and to say: "I am pure."

...

"She tastes that her merchandise is good" (Prov 31:18).

Nicely and pleasantly,

she and her husband are resting.

Happy with each other,

they converse about the commandment of the High One.

"She laid her hand to the distaff" (Prov 31:19).

[If] her hand is stretched out to check,

in a very good [manner,

then] her source is blessed,

and her table is laid in purity.

2.2. The Context of Midrash Sarah and Abraham in the Tanhuma

Midrash Sarah and Abraham is found in the Tanhuma Buber in a pericope on the *parashah hayei Sarah* (life of Sarah), which interprets the biblical pericope of the same name, found in Gen 23:1–25:18. This pericope relates the death of Sarah, Abraham's acquisition of a burial place for her, her burial, Abraham's life after her death, taking a wife for Isaac, Abraham's death, and the life of Ishmael. The verse next to which we find Midrash Sarah and Abraham is Gen 24:1: "Abraham is old." This verse allows for the (hypothetical) midrashic question, Why is the phrase about Abraham's old age found here? Was he not old already? The answer to this question comes in the form of a proem, a typical midrashic poetic technique, which connects the verse from the weekly reading portion of the Torah (*parashah*) to a verse from another place in the Bible (usually from the Prophets or Writings), and the interrelation between the verses serves as a locus for the *darshan* to present interesting sermons that also have a pedagogical goal: the verse "Abraham is old" is juxtaposed with Prov 31 verses *aleph* to *nun* (10–23), the last verse being *נודע בשערים בעלה, בשבתו עם זקני ארץ* ("Her husband [of the *eshet hayil*] is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land"). The midrashist needed the *nun* verse, because it speaks of the honor of an old husband, which connects to the first verse of the reading portion (Gen 24:1), about Abraham being old. This explains the move to include Midrash Sarah and Abraham here. It is common practice in midrashic literature to incorporate an external text only until the point where it is relevant.

It is possible, even likely, that this unit continued until the letter *tav* like the biblical chapter, but we have no evidence for this.

In spite of the fact that Midrash Sarah and Abraham was quoted in the Tanhuma for the sake of the verse *nun*, which fits the context of Abraham being old (Gen 24:1), each of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu versions argues this nexus differently: Tanhuma Buber begins: "of whom were these words said," and explains that they are said about Sarah, and that they are the eulogy of Abraham for Sarah. Printed Tanhuma follows the mourning argument, but Aggadat Bereshit explains the proximity by saying that Abraham became old because Sarah died, making Sarah's death and not old age the connecting point, and the reason for incorporating Midrash Sarah and Abraham.

This framing, that is, within the discourse of Sarah's death, changes our expectations about what the quoted text should contain. First, there is

no need to stop at verse *nun*: a text that mourns Sarah and compares her to *eshet hayil* could continue until the end of the alphabet. And indeed, this is what the two other witnesses do. Printed Tanhuma and Aggadat Bereshit both fill in the rest of the verses all the way down to *tav*.

The second expectation is that, when the text is not about Abraham being old but about the recently deceased Sarah, it will talk about Sarah, and not about Sarah and Abraham. And indeed this is what we find in all witnesses, Tanhuma Buber, printed Tanhuma, and Aggadat Bereshit: in most verses only Sarah is mentioned, and not Abraham.²⁸ Thus, the midrash in question fits the context of the death of Sarah, and not of the old age of Abraham. Yet the existing witnesses reveal the original reason for incorporating Midrash Sarah and Abraham into the Tanhuma: it was put there next to the verse about Abraham being old, as the text is incorporated until the verse *nun*, and that the additions from *samek* to *tav* in printed Tanhuma and Aggadat Bereshit do not belong to it, because they are of a different style and content.

There are also other reasons for preferring the Tanhuma Buber version, but I will leave the arguments to a later opportunity. Here I will just mention that comparing the three versions of Midrash Sarah and Abraham in the Tanhuma literature allowed me to conclude that Aggadat Bereshit is dependent on the Tanhuma Buber version, and that probably both Tanhuma Buber and printed Tanhuma used a similar source. Original material, however, had probably been preserved in all the witnesses, so that Midrash Sarah and Abraham can be reconstructed to a certain degree from its three parallels in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature.

2.3. Discovering the Independent Text

I will now introduce the text in more details. I will first explain why I conjectured the existence of an independent midrash, Midrash Sarah and Abraham. I will then explain my method in reconstructing it, I will present the reconstructed text, and I will then shortly analyze it.

28. I explain the fact that also in Tanhuma Buber the text mostly talks about Sarah, as a development depending or paralleling the other two witnesses, i.e., after the incentive for including the text changed from Abraham's old age to Sarah's death, the incorporated Midrash Sarah and Abraham changed to match this context.

Here is the beginning of the interpretation of the song from Proverbs, which led me to conjecture that there existed an earlier independent composition. This is the interpretation of the first three verses in Tanhuma Buber:

(On verse *aleph*, Prov 31:10)

“A woman of valor”—*this is Sarah, as it says*: “I know that you are a beautiful woman” (Gen 12:11).

“[For] her price is far above rubies”—that she came from afar, *as it says*: “calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My counsel from a far country” (Isa 46:11).

(On verse *bet*, Prov 31:11)

“The heart of her husband trusts her”—*this is Sarah, as it says*: “[say that you are my sister] ...” (Gen 12:13).

“And he shall miss no profit”—*this is Abraham our father, as it says*: “Abraham was heavy [with riches]” (Gen 13:2).

(On verse *gimel*, Prov 31:12)

“She repays him with goodness, not evil”—*this is Sarah, as it says*: “Abraham benefited because of her” (Gen 12:16).

(TanB, Hayei Sarah 3 [according to MS Oxford, Bodl. Libr. 154, in *Maagarim*, which is also the manuscript used by Buber])

Let us look first at the section interpreting Prov 31:11, the verse on the letter *bet*: the first half of the verse from Proverbs, “The heart of her husband trusts her,” is interpreted concerning Sarah in the story of her adventures in Pharaoh’s palace (Gen 12, to be described in more detail below); the word *trust* from the Proverbs verse refers to the fact that Abraham trusted his wife when he asked her to lie about being his wife (Gen 12:13).

The second part of the verse, “and he shall miss no profit,” is interpreted as referring to the fact that following the story of Sarah in the palace of Pharaoh, Abraham became a very rich man, as the second verse (in the next chapter) states: “And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold” (Gen 13:2). This is understood as resulting from the cattle and slaves he received when Sarah was taken to the palace (Gen 12:16).

The structure of the midrash here is thus as follows:

1. One strophe of a verse from Proverbs is quoted.

2. It is interpreted with the opening statement “this is Sarah, as it is said,” quoting a verse from Genesis referring to something relating to Sarah.
3. The second strophe of the verse from Proverbs is quoted.
4. It is interpreted with the opening statement “this is Abraham, as it is said,” then quoting a verse from Genesis referring to something relating to Abraham.

If we look at the interpretation of the previous verse (Prov 31:10), on *aleph*, bearing this structure in mind, we find the first two elements present (i.e., the first strophe of a verse from Proverbs, reference to Sarah, and a verse from Genesis). However, regarding the second strophe of the Proverbs verse, about bringing bread from afar, a verse from Isaiah, not Genesis, is quoted, about someone who indeed comes from afar, but it is a man of God’s counsel. We find no reference to Abraham. This is an example of how the text was distorted, that is, by inserting a verse from Isaiah instead of the original one from Genesis. However, this verse from Isaiah is interpreted in the Amoraic midrash Genesis Rabbah (15:4 and 49:2) as referring to Abraham. It thus appears that someone erased Abraham’s name and replaced the verse from Genesis about him with a verse from Isaiah, which is not explicitly about Abraham but is so understood by the select few who know Amoraic midrash.

If we now turn to the text, to the verse on *gimel*, we again find only the first strophe from the Proverbs verse and an interpretation, including a verse from Genesis, about Sarah. The second half verse from Proverbs is absent from Tanhuma Buber.

Verse *bet* is thus the only interpreted Proverbs verse that maintains the complete structure, interpreting each strophe from a Prov 31 verse separately, the first regarding Sarah, the second regarding Abraham, in both cases supporting the interpretation with verse a from the Sarah-and-Abraham story cycle in Genesis.

I named this lost independent composition Midrash Sarah and Abraham. Sarah’s name appears first because she is the first to be interpreted. I will now attempt to reconstruct the original composition based on the evidence from the three Tanhuma Yelammedenu literature witnesses at my disposal. I will study each verse from Proverbs based on the Tanhuma Buber text and attempt to reconstruct using the information in the other witnesses and in earlier rabbinic literature. I will only reconstruct the text until the letter *nun*, since from this point onward no witness seems to preserve original material.

So first explanation about the principles of reconstructing, then the reconstruction itself, and then I will discuss the poetics of Midrash Sarah and Abraham, its cultural background, and why it was distorted.

2.4. Principles of Reconstruction

The principles I use for the reconstruction of the connection of a verse from the Genesis story to the first or second Proverbs strophes are the following:

1. Irrelevant and added material and explanations are erased.
2. A verse on Sarah should relate to the first strophe from Proverbs, and about Abraham to the second strophe.
3. If the primary witness (Tanhuma Buber) retains part or all this pattern, it is preferred, because the assumption that the primary witness a priori retains the original tradition; if verses found in this version are rejected, this should be explained.
4. Midrashim or verses formulated in the feminine in Prov 31 can relate to Abraham.
5. If there is a midrash and verse in the primary witness, but the verse is not from the Genesis stories, I replace it with a verse from the story that fits the midrash.
6. If (2) is true, and another witness (printed Tanhuma or Aggadat Bereshit) has a fitting verse from the Genesis story, this is the one to be used.
7. Reconstructed verses can be either based on a common word with the Proverb chapter or not (the latter option being an Ishmaelite-type midrashic creation, based on the story and not on the word).²⁹
8. Statements or midrash that are of general puritan theological nature are suspected as later interpolations.

2.5. Reconstruction of (Part of) Midrash Sarah and Abraham

In this subchapter I follow the text of Midrash Sarah and Abraham verse by verse, reconstructing it according to the principles laid out above. I

29. Menahem I. Kahana, "The Hahakhic Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 3–105.

bring the Hebrew reconstruction and the English translation, and explain my reconstruction after each verse.

2.5.1. Verse *Aleph* (Proverbs 31:10)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“אשת חיל” זו שרה, שנאמר: “הנה נא ידעתי כי אשה יפת מראה את.” “ורחוק מפנינים מכרה,” שבאת ממרחק, שנאמר: “קורא ממזרח עיט מארץ מרחק איש עצתי” (ישעיהו מו יא).</p>	<p>“אשת חיל [מי ימצא]” (משלי לא י) זו שרה, שנאמר: “הנה נא ידעתי כי אשה יפת מראה את” (בראשית יב יא). “ורחוק מפנינים מכרה” (משלי שם), [זה אברהם] שנאמר: “וישא אברהם עינו וירא את המקום מרחוק” (בראשית כב ד).</p>
<p>“A woman of valor [who shall find?]” (Prov 31:10), this is Sarah, as it is said: “I have known that you are a beautiful woman” (Gen 12:11).</p>	<p>“A woman of valor who shall find?” (Prov 31:10), this is Sarah, as it is said: “I have known that you are a beautiful woman” (Gen 12:11).</p>
<p>“For her price is far above rubies” (Prov 31:10), that she came from afar, it is says: “Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country” (Isa 46:11)].</p>	<p>“For her price is far above rubies” (Prov 31:10), [this is Abraham], as it is said: [“and Abraham lifted his eyes and he saw the place from afar” (Gen 22:4)].</p>

The first strophe is from the Tanhuma Buber, and there is no need to make any changes; I only erased some additions and added the formulaic expressions “this is Sarah, as it is said” and “this is Abraham, as it is said.”

The second strophe, which relates to the words “for her price is far above rubies,” as it stands in Tanhuma Buber, speaks of Sarah coming from afar, and the prooftext for it is a verse from Isaiah (Isa 46:11). This same verse is used in Genesis Rabbah 15:20 to refer to Abraham as the man who came from afar (“[God created] Adam because of the merit of Abraham ... because of the merit of the one who came from afar, as it says: ‘calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country’”). Apparently, as discussed above with regard to emotional communities, someone found it strange that this strophe, which clearly describes the *eshet hayil* in feminine terms, relates to Abraham, and he changed it to relate to Sarah by saying that *she* came from afar; however, not allowing himself to deviate too much from his source, he used a verse associated with Abraham

to denote his coming from afar, not one from Genesis (which is obviously about Abraham) but the one from Isaiah, which does not directly refer to Abraham in the biblical text, and only in Genesis Rabbah the connection is made. Here is what happened in the form of a table.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Proverbs verse	Proverbs verse	Proverbs verse
Reference to Abraham	Reference to Sarah	Reference to Sarah
Genesis verse about Abraham	Genesis verse about Abraham	An obscure verse about Abraham (from Isaiah) that could also be interpreted about Sarah

Stage 1, being the original, had in the second strophe a reference to Abraham and a verse about him from Genesis as proof-text (possibly the one I reconstructed]). In stage 2 Abraham's name was omitted by someone who did not find it proper that the proverbial feminine song would relate to Abraham, and the strophe then became irrelevant, because it talked about Sarah. In stage 3, the irrelevant verse from Genesis, which talked about Abraham, was replaced with a verse from Isaiah that relates to Abraham but does not directly mention him.

We are left with an obscure, not to say meaningless, midrash: it says that Sarah came from afar, which is of course logical, since she came from Mesopotamia together with Abraham in the biblical story, but the proof-text about "a man of my counsel," which had originally been interpreted about Abraham, now refers to Sarah, and it is slightly unusual to talk of Sarah as a man.

My decision to use Gen 22:4 as the original proof-text for Abraham also finds support in Leviticus Rabbah, which states: "Rabbi Nathan said: we consider [מחשבין] for the name of Abraham our father 'the one who came from afar,' (Isa 46:11) as it says: 'and on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar' (Gen 22:4)" (Lev. Rab. 14:2).

2.5.2. Verse *Bet* (Proverbs 31:11)

"בטח בה לב בעלה" (משלי ל יא), זו שרה, שנאמר: "למען ייטב לי בעבורך" (בראשית יב יג).
 "ושלל לא יחסר" (משלי שם) זה אברהם אבינו, שנאמר: "ואברם כבד מאד" (בראשית שם).

“Her husband’s heart trusted in her” (Prov 31:11), this is Sarah, as it is said: “[tell that you are my sister] so that it will benefit me because of you” (Gen 12:13).

“And no gain shall lack” (Prov 31:11), this is Abraham our Father, as it is said: “And Abraham was very rich [in cattle, in silver, and in gold]” (Gen 12:13).

Here there is no reconstruction because the *bet* verse was preserved fully. The first strophe, relating to Sarah, quotes a verse from the biblical story of how Sarah and Abraham went down to Egypt, and because Sarah was a beautiful woman, Abraham asked her to say that she was his sister. He feared that, if she was known as his wife, the Egyptians would kill him to have her. Regardless of the complicated moral issues in the story, Sarah did as she was asked and was taken to the house of Pharaoh, where she was almost sexually defiled by the king, and after miraculously being saved and returned to her husband, Pharaoh endowed Abraham with presents and property. In this respect, by trusting Sarah (to lie, or to keep her purity) Abraham became richer, as the second strophe indicates, by coupling the Proverbs verse about the husband of the *eshet hayil* not lacking gain with the verse from Genesis about Abraham gaining riches.

2.5.3. Verse *Gimel* (Proverbs 31:12)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“גמלתהו טוב ולא רע”, זו שרה, שנאמר “ולאברם היטיב בעבורה”.</p>	<p>“גמלתהו טוב ולא רע” (משלי לא יב), זו שרה, שנאמר: “ולאברם היטיב בעבורה” (בראשית יב טז), [“כל ימי חייה” (משלי שם) זה אברהם, שנאמר: “שמענו אדני, נשיא אלהים אתה בתוכנו” (בראשית כג ו)].</p>
<p>“She dealt him good and not evil” (Prov 31:12), this is Sarah, as it is said: “and it was good with Abram for her sake.”</p>	<p>“She dealt him good and not evil” (Prov 31:12), this is Sarah, as it is said: “and it was good with Abram for her sake” (Gen 12:16). [“All the days of her life” (Prov 31:12), this is Abraham, as it is said: “Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us” (Gen 23:6)].</p>

The first strophe is about Sarah benefiting Abraham (“she dealt him good”), and the proof verse from Genesis describes the presents endowed on Abraham by Pharaoh after the incident described above.

The second strophe has no proof verse; in Tanhuma Buber and Aggadat Bereshit there is no trace of the strophe at all, not even the Proverbs verse. I therefore reconstructed the second strophe. The Proverbs verse reads “all the days of her life.” I suggest that the midrash had employed here a verse that shows how Sarah benefited Abraham (even) after her death. When Abraham engaged the people of Heth, buying a burial place for Sarah, he was honored by them, being called “our lord” and “prince.” This shows how Sarah benefited Abraham *all* the days of her life and even after.

2.5.4. Verse *Dalet* (Proverbs 31:13)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“דרשה צמר ופשתים”, בין ישמעאל ליצחק, שנאמר: “ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית וגו' ותאמר לאברהם גרש (את) האמה הזאת וגו'” (בראשית כא ט-י).</p>	<p>“דרשה צמר ופשתים” (משלי ל יג) זאת שרה, שנאמר: “ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית” (בראשית כא ט). [“ותעש בחפץ כפיה” זה אברהם, שנאמר: “כל אשר תאמר אליך שרה שמע בקולה” (בראשית כא יב)].</p>
<p>“She seeks wool and flax” (Prov 31:13) [this is Sarah,] as it says: “and she saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, etc., and she said to Abraham: Expel this slave-woman, etc.” (Gen 21:9–10).</p>	<p>“She seeks wool and flax” (Prov 31:13), [this is Sarah,] as it says: “and she saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian” (Gen 21:9). [“And she works with the will of her hands” (Prov 31:13), this is Abraham, as it is said: “in all that Sarah says to you, hearken to her voice” (Gen 21:12)].</p>

The first strophe refers to the issue of *shaatnez*, mingled cloth that combines wool and linen. Such a combination is forbidden according to the biblical law: “There shall not come upon you a garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together” (Lev 19:19). This verse is interpreted in Tanhuma Buber with reference to the story of Abraham conceiving Ishmael from

Hagar and Sarah's demand to expel him, though the phrase that claims that this verse from Prov 31 refers to Sarah is missing.

The prooftext I added in the reconstruction of the part of the strophe describing Abraham is also from the story of Sarah demanding to expel Hagar and Ishmael. The reason I chose this verse is that we find the issue of separating Israel from the nations connected with avoiding *shaatnez* in the Tannaitic midrash Sifra, where it is stated, in the name of Rabbi Eleazar: “‘Let not a man say It is impossible to wear *shaatnez*, it is impossible to eat pork, it is impossible to fornicate; rather: It is possible [to do all these things], but what can I do, my Father in heaven commanded me so [i.e., not to do them],’ as it says: ‘and have set you apart from the peoples’ (Lev 20:26).” Avoiding *shaatnez*, among other commandments, is required not on essentialist grounds regarding these activities, but on the basis that they are God’s commandments. Keeping them is required in order to separate God’s people from the other nations (quoting Lev 20:26).

Unlike in the Sifra, where it is not a metaphor but tool for separating Israel from the nations, Midrash Sarah and Abraham uses *shaatnez* explicitly as a metaphor for separating Jews and gentiles.

I reconstructed the second strophe according to Aggadat Bereshit. The second strophe of Prov 31:13 reads, “And she works with the will of her hands.” The verse from Genesis, “in all that Sarah says to you, hearken to her voice,” also entails that, like the *eshet hayil*, Sarah’s will was done, albeit by Abraham. In Aggadat Bereshit the formula “this is Abraham, as it is said” is dropped, and this results in this prooftext being connected to the first strophe and thus not adding anything meaningful to the interpretation.

2.5.5. Verse *Heh* (Proverbs 31:14)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“היתה כאניות סוחר”, שהיתה מטלטלת ממקום למקום וממדינה למדינה, כספינה הזאת ההולכת ממקום למקום בים.</p>	<p>“היתה כאנית סוחר” (משלי לא יד) [זאת שרה, שנאמר: “ותוקח האשה בית פרעה” (בראשית יב טו)].</p>
<p>“ממרחק תביא לחמה”, שנאמר: “הנה נתתי אלף כסף לאחיד וגו’.”</p>	<p>“ממרחק תביא לחמה” [זה אברהם, שנאמר: “הנה נתתי אלף כסף לאחיד וגו’” (בראשית כ טז)].</p>

“She is like the merchant ships” (Prov 31:14) because she was moved from place to place and from city to city as a ship that is going from place to place in the sea.

“She brings her food from afar” (Prov 31:14), as it is said: “Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver” (Gen 20:16).

“She is like the merchant ships” (Prov 31:14), [this is Sarah], as it is said: “and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house” (Gen 12:15).

“She brings her food from afar” (Prov 31:14), [this is Abraham], as it is said: “Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver” (Gen 20:16).

The first strophe has no prooftext in Tanhuma Buber and Aggadat Bereshit. Instead, both witnesses have a short narrative explaining that Sarah is like a ship because she moved around (Aggadat Bereshit: from Mesopotamia to Canaan; Tanhuma Buber: simply moved from place to place). Printed Tanhuma, on the other hand, has a prooftext here, one that refers to Sarah being taken to the house of Pharaoh; this event exemplifies well Sarah’s journey. I use this verse in my reconstruction.

We can understand why such a verse may have been intentionally eliminated: it poses a threat to the purity of Sarah, as I have said above. The narratives inserted by Tanhuma Buber and Aggadat Bereshit in place of the verse present a milder version of Sarah’s journey of toil: simply being moved from one place to another.

Ideally, the proof verse for the second strophe, “She brings her food from afar,” should have been a verse about Abraham’s gaining capital from the misadventure in Egypt, such as Gen 12:16. But this verse is already used in Midrash Sarah and Abraham, in the letter *bet*, which is the only strophe that is intact in our text. So here I used a verse from the parallel story about Sarah in the house of Abimelech. Indeed, printed Tanhuma adds here another verse, from this parallel story (Gen 20:2), that relates Sarah being taken to the house of Abimelech. This may have been the original verse used in this midrash.

2.5.6. Verse *Vav* (Proverbs 31:15)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“ותקום בעוד לילה”, אימתי “וישכם אברהם בבוקר וגו’.”</p> <p>“ותתן טרף לביתה וחק לנערותיה”, “בעצם היום הזה נמול אברהם וגו’” (בראשית יז כו), ואין חק אלא מילה, שנאמר: “ויעמדה ליעקב לחק לישראל ברית עולם” (תהלים קה י).</p>	<p>“ותקום בעוד לילה” (משלי לא טו) [זאת שרה שנאמר: “וישכם אברהם בבוקר” (בראשית כב ג)]</p> <p>“ותתן טרף לביתה [וחוק לנערותיה” (משלי שם) זה אברהם שנאמר: “בעצם היום הזה נמול אברהם וגו’” (בראשית יז כו)].</p>
<p>“She rises while it is yet night” (Prov 31:15), when? “And Abraham woke up in the morning” (Gen 22:3).</p>	<p>“She rises while it is yet night” (Prov 31:15), [this is Sarah, as it is said:] “And Abraham woke up in the morning” (Gen 22:3).</p>
<p>“And she gives food to her household, and a portion [<i>hoq</i>] to her maidens” (Prov 31:15), “in this very day Abraham was circumcised” (Gen 17:26). The meaning of “portion” [<i>hoq</i>] is nothing else but circumcision, as it is said: “And he established it unto Jacob for a statute [<i>hoq</i>], to Israel for an everlasting covenant” (Ps 105:10).</p>	<p>“And gives food to her household, and a portion to her maidens” (Prov 31:15), [this is Abraham, as it is said:] “in this very day Abraham was circumcised” (Gen 17:26).</p>

In the first strophe I added the formulaic words “this is Sarah” and “this is Abraham,” which were dropped when the structure of the midrash was lost, and I wiped out some words that were added. Otherwise, this strophe in Tanhuma Buber remained close to the original.

The prooftext of this strophe, “And Abraham woke up in the morning” (Gen 22:3), is difficult, because in the Genesis story it refers to Abraham and not to Sarah. Verses about Abraham do refer to Sarah in some of the strophes above: in verse *gimel* (Prov 31:12), “and it was well with Abram for the sake of her” (Gen 12:16), which talks about the benefit for Abraham on account of Sarah, and also in verse Prov 31:11, letter *bet*, “And Abraham was very rich [in cattle, in silver, and in gold]” (Gen 12:13), but there the message is still that something that Sarah did benefited Abraham. Here I could not find a tradition that explains this verse in this manner. On the contrary, I found a tradition that assures the reader that Sarah was still

asleep when Abraham set out to sacrifice Isaac (TanP, Vayera 22), but I remained loyal to the principle that, if a verse appears in the Tanhuma Buber and there is no grave reason to reject it (and the reason here is not grave), I keep it.

The second strophe is here reconstructed with a proof-text about Abraham's circumcision (Gen 17:26), a verse that was already there in the Tanhuma Buber witness. The connection between waking up in the morning and circumcision, and indeed with this particular verse, is established in the Tannaitic midrash Sifra, where it says: "This teaches us that the whole day is proper for [performing] circumcision, but the diligent ones perform this commandment early, as it says: 'and Abraham woke up in the morning and saddled his ass' (Gen 22:3)" (Sifra, *tazria pereq* 1:3; see b. Pesah. 4a; b. Yoma 28b).³⁰ A semantic sphere that includes circumcision, waking up early, and Gen 22:3 is thus established, at least among some groups of late antique Judaism, and this is what we find in Midrash Sarah and Abraham as well.

The connection established in Tanhuma Buber between חוק (law), which is found in the Proverbs verse (31:15), and circumcision, in the proof-text, is repeated in the Tanhuma elsewhere, but is also found in earlier sources: it is the blessing recited during the ritual of circumcision, and it parallels the word *hoq* with the circumcision:

המברך מהו או' אשר קדש ידיד מבטן וחק בשארו שם (וח') וצאצאיו חתם באות
ברית קדש

What should the one who blesses [over the circumcision] say? "[Blessed be the Lord, King of the universe] who sanctified a loved one already in the womb, put the *law* upon his kin, and stamped his offspring with the sign of the holy covenant [ברית] ..." (t. Ber. 6:13)

2.5.7. Verse *Zayin* (Proverbs 31:16)

The two strophes of the letter *zayin* then preserve quite a big chunk of the original material.

30. See also Midr. Aggadah (Buber's edition), *shemini-tazria*, ch. 12.

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“זממה שדה ותקחהו”, שעד שהיא בחיים זממה ליטול את מערת המכפלה, ”ותקחהו” שהרי נקברה בה. ”מפרי כפיה נטעה כרם”, שנאמר: “ויטע אשל”. מהו ויטע? כד”א “ויטע כרם” (בראשית ט כ).</p>	<p>”זממה שדה ותקחהו” (משלי לא טז) [זו שרה, שנאמר: “ויקם השדה והמערה אשר בו לאברהם” (בראשית כג כ)]. ”מפרי כפיה נטעה כרם” (משלי לא טז) [זה אברהם, שנאמר: “ויטע אשל” (בראשית כא לג)].</p>
<p>“She calculates a field, and buys it” (Prov 31:16), that as long as she was alive she calculated to buy the cave of Machpelah, “and buys it” (Prov 31:16) since she was buried in it.</p>	<p>“She calculates a field, and buys it” (Prov 31:16), [this is Sarah, as it says: “And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made secure unto Abra- ham” (Gen 23:20)].</p>
<p>“With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard” (Prov 31:16) as it is said: “he planted a tamarisk” (Gen 21:33). What does “plants” mean? As it is said: “and he planted a vineyard” (Gen 9:20).</p>	<p>“With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard” (Prov 31:16) [this is Abra- ham], as it is said: “and he planted a tamarisk” (Gen 21:33).</p>

I reconstructed the first strophe with a verse from printed Tanhuma. Aggadat Bereshit refers to the biblical story of buying Sarah’s burial cave, but it quotes a different verse from it: Gen 23:20. I picked the verse quoted from printed Tanhuma because the same verse is used in Genesis Rabbah in the following traditions.

After Sarah’s death, Abraham lived for many years and had another wife and other children. However, according to the biblical story, although they died many years apart, Sarah and Abraham were buried in the same grave. On its own, this detail implies that in some way Sarah had influence regarding Abraham’s place of burial: by having a place bought for her own burial, Sarah indirectly bought one, so to speak, for her husband too. The common burial is therefore recognized in the midrash as something special and presented as a miracle. Genesis Rabbah pinpoints the special quality of the grave, which originally was intended for a small person but miraculously turned into one sufficient for a great person: “‘So the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah ... was made secure [lit. rose]’ (Gen 23:17): [This means] that it was fallen and it rose, that is, it was intended for a small person, and became [fitting] for a great person” (Gen. Rab. 58:8). By “a great person,” whether physically or more probably of a high

social status, Genesis Rabbah refers to Abraham, who would be buried in the cave in the future. Elsewhere Genesis Rabbah also reports that when Abraham's funeral passed by the cave of Machpelah, his sons saw that a space was there ready to receive Abraham's body, and so they buried him there (Gen. Rab. 62:3).

Another midrash in Genesis Rabbah explains how buying the cave of Machpelah was indirectly a good deed performed by Sarah for Abraham, as Abraham himself benefited from buying the cave for Sarah. This midrash is constructed around the same verse I used to reconstruct the first strophe here: "[And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah] (Gen 23:19)].... This is what is written: 'He that follows righteousness and mercy finds life, prosperity, and honor' (Prov 21:21). 'He that follows righteousness' is Abraham ... and 'mercy [finds life]'" (Gen. Rab. 58:9). In light of all these traditions, which describe the acquisition of Sarah's grave as beneficial to Abraham, it makes sense for a verse from the biblical story of (Abraham) buying the cave to be understood as referring to Sarah.

The reconstruction of the second strophe entailed erasing one of the verses cited by Tanhuma Buber, about Noah planting a vine (Gen 9:20). The second verse talks about Abraham planting, but it is not a vine but a tamarisk tree (Gen 21:33). The common word for "plant" and the word for "vine" found in Proverbs are the source of the added (but irrelevant) verse on Noah.

2.5.8. Verse *Het* (Proverbs 31:17)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
"חגרה בעז מתניה", שאמר לה אברהם, "מהרי שלש סאים קמח סלת" וגו'	"חגרה בעז מתניה" (משלי לא יז), [זו שרה], שנאמר: "מהרי שלש סאים קמח סלת וגו'" (בראשית יח ו). [ותאמץ זרועותיה] (משלי לא יז), זה אברהם, שנאמר: "וישלח אברהם את ידו ויקח את המאכלת" (בראשית כב י).
"She girds her loins with strength" (Prov 31:17) as Abraham told her: "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal etc." (Gen 18:6).	"She girds her loins with strength" (Prov 31:17), as it says: "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, etc." (Gen 18:6).

[“And strengthens her hands” (Prov 31:17), this is Abraham, as it says: “and Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife” (Gen 22:10)].

The reconstruction of the first strophe is based on the evidence of all three witnesses. The reconstruction of the second strophe is totally conjectural, because none of the witnesses provides any evidence for it. I chose Gen 22:10 because it mentions Abraham’s “hand,” which corresponds to the word *hands* from Proverbs.

2.5.9. Verse *Tet* (Proverbs 31:18)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“טעמה כי טוב סחרה,” “ותאמר מי מלל לאברהם הניקה בנים שרה.” “לא יכבה בלילה נרה,” אימתי “ויחלק עליהם לילה”</p>	<p>“טעמה כי טוב סחרה” (משלי לא יח), [זאת שרה, שנאמר:] “ותאמר מי מלל לאברהם הניקה בנים שרה” (בראשית כא ז). “לא יכבה בלילה נרה” (משלי לא יח), [זה אברהם שנאמר:], “ויחלק עליהם לילה” (בראשית יד טו).</p>
<p>“She tastes that her merchandise is good” (Prov 31:18), “and she said: Who would have said to Abraham, that Sarah should suckle children?” (Gen 21:7).</p>	<p>“She tastes that her merchandise is good” (Prov 31:18), [this is Sarah, as it says:] “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah should suckle children?” (Gen 21:7).</p>
<p>“Her lamp does not go out by night” (Prov 31:18), when? “and he divided himself against them by night” (Gen 14:15).</p>	<p>“Her lamp does not go out by night” (Prov 31:18), [this is Abraham, as it says:] “and he divided himself against them by night” (Gen 14:15).</p>

Tanhuma Buber seems to conserve the original text. I added only the formulaic words “this is Sarah” and “this is Abraham.”

No traces are left in Tanhuma Buber from verses *yod* (Prov 31:19) and *kaph* (Prov 31:20), and the other two witnesses differ completely in their evidence, so there is no way even to conjecture the original text.

2.5.10. Verse *Lamed* (Proverbs 31:21)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“לא תירא לביתה משלג”, אימתי? כשהראה לו הקדוש ברוך הוא גיהנם, בישרה שאין אחד מבניה יורד לתוכו, שנאמר: “והנה תנור עשן ולפיד אש”. למה? לפי שהם מקיימים שני דברים.</p>	<p>“לא תירא לביתה משלג” (משלי לא כא), [זו שרה] שנאמר: “והנה תנור עשן ולפיד אש” (בראשית טו יז).</p>
<p>“כי כל ביתה לבוש שנים”, אלו שבת ומילה.</p>	<p>“כי כל ביתה לבוש שנים” (משלי לא כא), [זה אברהם, שנאמר: “והוא יושב פתח האהל כחום היום” וגו’ (בראשית יח א)].</p>
<p>“She does not fear the snow for her household” (Prov 31:21), when? When the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him hell, he announced to her that none of her children will go down to it, as it says: “... and behold a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch ...” (Gen 15:17). Why? Because they follow two things.</p>	<p>“She does not fear the snow for her household” (Prov 31:21), [this is Sarah], as it says: “... and behold a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch ...” (Gen 15:17).</p>
<p>“For all her household are clothed with scarlet” (Prov 31:21), the Sabbath and circumcision.</p>	<p>“For all her household are clothed with scarlet” (Prov 31:21), [this is Abraham, as it says: “...as he sat in the tent entrance in the heat of the day” (Gen 18:1)].</p>

The text in Tanhuma Buber explains the verse from Proverbs, “She does not fear the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet,” by stating that the “she” of the discourse was not afraid that her offspring would descend to hell; the proof-text for this is Gen 15:17: “and behold a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch.” While it is understandable why furnace and flaming torch are connected to hell, it is not clear what this has to do with the verse from Proverbs about snow. It is also not completely clear what all of this has to do with the next sentence in Tanhuma Buber, which asserts that “they” (the offspring) do not descend to hell because they keep the Sabbath and the commandment of circumcision. Again, with great effort, one can connect all these elements: snow, hell, Sabbath, and circumcision, but not very convincingly.

There is a midrashic tradition in Genesis Rabbah that connects these elements to each other, and this tradition is found in relation to the verse about Abraham:

“As he sat in the tent entrance in the heat of the day” (Gen 18:1). Rabbi Levi says: In the end of the world [לעתיד לבוא] Abraham will be sitting at the gate of hell, and he will not let any circumcised person of Israel descend into it. But those [of Israel] who have sinned too much, what does he do with them? He takes the foreskin of babies that died without being circumcised and puts it on them and lets them descend to hell, as it says: “He put forth his hands against those that were at peace with him; he has profaned his covenant” (Ps 55:21). “In the heat of the day” [refers to] when that day comes about which it says: “For, behold, the day comes, it burns as a furnace” (Mal 3:19). (Gen. Rab. 48:18)

This text associates the verse about Abraham sitting at the entrance of the tent with the image of Abraham at the end of days guarding the gate of hell and not allowing circumcised Jews to enter it. Further, the text connects the verse about the Abraham sitting at the entrance of the tent and the heat of the day with Mal 3:19, speaks of the end of days, and includes the word “furnace.”

This text is important because it contains many loosely connected elements found in Tanhuma Buber, providing a narrative that could have existed in the original Midrash Sarah and Abraham, and explains how hell, circumcision, and furnace are brought together in Tanhuma Buber. On the basis of this narrative, and the verses used in it, I reconstructed the two strophes.

2.5.11. Verse *Mem* (Proverbs 31:22)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“מרבדים עשתה לה”, אימתי? כשאמרו לו: “איה שרה אשתך”, אמר לה מבושרת את שאת יולדת, ומהם יוצאים כהנים גדולים שמשמשין באהל מועד, שש וארגמן לבושה, שנאמר “(שש) [תכלת] וארגמן” וגו’ (שמות כח ו).</p>	<p>“מרבדים עשתה לה” (משלי לא כב), [זו שרה, שנאמר: “איה שרה אשתך [ואמר הנה באהל”] (בראשית יח ט). “שש וארגמן לבושה” (משלי לא כב), [זה אברהם, שנאמר: “ויצא העבד כלי כסף וכלי זהב ובגדים” (בראשית כד נג)].</p>

“She makes for herself coverlets” (Prov 31:22), when? When they told him: “Where is Sarah your wife?” (Prov 31:22). He said to her: you are announced that you will give birth, and from them you come forth chief priests that serve in the tent of meeting.

“Her clothing is fine linen and purple” (Prov 31:22), as it is said: “[And they shall make the ephod of gold], of blue and purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen ...” (Exod 28:6).

“She makes for herself coverlets” (Prov 31:22), [this is Sarah, as it says:] “Where is Sarah your wife? [and he said: here in the tent]” (Gen 18:9).

“Her clothing is fine linen and purple” (Prov 31:22), [this is Abraham], as it is said: “[And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment” (Gen 24:53)].

The reconstruction of the first strophe is based on Tanhuma Buber. The second strophe is conjectural, connecting the word for “clothing” in Proverbs with the word for “raiment” in Gen 24:53. I do not think that the topic of the priestly sons who will be the offspring of Sarah was there in the original text.

2.5.12. Verse *Nun* (Proverbs 31:23)

Tanhuma Buber	Midrash Sarah and Abraham (reconstruction)
<p>“נודע בשערים בעלה”, כשמתה שרה קפצה זקנה על אברהם ונקרא זקן, שנאמר: “שמעני אדני נשיא אלהים אתה בתוכנו”, הוי “נודע בשערים בעלה”, מיד “כשבתו עם זקני ארץ” הזקין, לכך נאמר “ואברהם זקן”.</p>	<p>“נודע בשערים בעלה” (משלי לא כג), [זו שרה], שנאמר: “שמעני אדני נשיא אלהים אתה בתוכנו” (בראשית כג ו). “בשבתו עם זקני ארץ” [זה אברהם שנאמר: “ואברהם זקן” (בראשית כד א)].</p>
<p>“Her husband is known in the gates” (Prov 31:23), when Sarah died, Abraham grew old, all of a sudden, and he was called “old,” as it says: “Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us” (Gen 23:6). This is the meaning of “Her husband is known in the gates” (Prov 31:23).</p>	<p>“Her husband is known in the gates” (Prov 31:23) [this is Sarah], as it says: “Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us” (Gen 23:6).</p>

Immediately [it says]: “when he sits among the elders of the land” (Prov 31:23) he became old, therefore it says: “and Abraham was old” (Gen 24:1). “When he sits among the elders of the land” (Prov 31:23) [this is Abraham, as], it says: “and Abraham was old” (Gen 24:1).

Most of my work here was to erase added explanations and to insert the formulaic words “this is Sarah, as it says” and “this is Abraham, as it says.” The first strophe, “her husband is known in the gates,” is about Abraham being treated respectfully, and the verse is from the story of buying Sarah’s burial place from Ephron the Hittite.

3. Analysis and Conclusions

3.1. About the Poetic Technique

Two poetic techniques connecting the verse from Proverbs to a verse from the Abraham and Sarah story cycle from Genesis are characteristic of Midrash Sarah and Abraham. The first one is the making of a connection on the basis of a similar word that is found in both verses, either the exact same word, words of the same root, or words that sound the same. An example for this is verse *gimel*: “‘She dealt him good and not evil’ (Prov 31:12), this is Sarah, as it is said: ‘and he dealt good with Abram for her sake’ (Gen 12:16)” (גמלתהו טוב ולא רע, זו שרה, שנאמר ולא ברם היטיב) (בעבורה), where the word “good” from Proverbs is connected to the verb “he dealt good” (היטיב), which is from the same root. The second way of connecting the verse in Proverbs and a verse from the Genesis story is based on similar topic, either in that a similar sequence of events is pointed out, or the Genesis story exemplifies a topic from the Proverbs verse. An example is verse *bet*: “‘Her husband’s heart trusted in her,’ this is Sarah, as it is said [‘tell that you are my sister’] so that it will benefit me because of you’ (Gen 12:13).” The verse in Proverbs talks about the husband trusting his wife, and the Genesis verse refers to a story where Abraham had to trust Sarah. There are no connecting words or roots in the verses from Proverbs and Genesis, but the connecting factor is the trustworthiness of the wife stated in Proverbs, and the example for the trustworthiness of Sarah in Genesis. Both examples given here are from the Tanhuma Buber and are not a reconstruction. I therefore allow myself to assign Genesis verses to the Proverbs verses on the basis of both linguistic similarity and a similar topic.

3.2. The Possible Cultural Context of Midrash Sarah and Abraham

In the final chapter of his recent book, Joseph Yahalom studies the interrelations between *piyyut* and midrash. Yahalom shows that midrashic material can be based on earlier *piyyutim*, such as those of Yannai reworked in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer or Pitron Torah, and of other *paytanim* and post-classical midrashim, as well as on the Targum.³¹

The ways in which material from the *piyyut* is reworked into the midrash vary. One sort of reworking Yahalom points out is that, while *piyyut* complies with poetic rules, such as rhymes and meter, the midrash focuses on an interaction with the biblical text, confirming its statements by quoting a verse. Thus, the midrashist reworks *piyyut* material by adding supporting verses.³² However, without being constricted by rhyme and meter, midrash (Yahalom's example is Bereshit Rabbati) maintains the structure of the *piyyut* when reworking it into the midrash.³³

The importance of Yahalom's observation for our midrash is that it shows a lively exchange between the synagogue and the *beit-midrash* cultures that went both ways. I think the cultural interaction that Yahalom describes could very well be the one that allowed the incorporation of Midrash Sarah and Abraham into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu. Based on the structured nature of Midrash Sarah and Abraham, and on the fact that the *Eshet Hayil* song was more popular in the world of *piyyut* than in that of the *beit-midrash*, I suggest the possibility that at the basis of Midrash Sarah and Abraham there is a *piyyut* on this proverbial song, the details of which are by now completely lost.

3.3. How and Why Was the Text Distorted?

The *Eshet Hayil* song is one of the rare places in the Bible where the woman is the focus and the protagonist of a narrative. Furthermore, both in the Bible and in postbiblical Jewish culture, especially the Amoraic one, Sarah was a prominent and agented cultural figure alongside Abraham.³⁴ It is

31. Joseph Yahalom, *Sources of the Sacred Song: Crossroads in Jewish Liturgical Poetry* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2019), 239–64; on Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, see 248–49; on Pitron Torah, see 250; on the Targum, see 261.

32. See Yahalom, *Sources of the Sacred Song*, 239, 251.

33. Yahalom, *Sources of the Sacred Song*, 258.

34. "Sarah is described as preeminent in the household. Abraham was ennobled

therefore not surprising that these two were connected, the *eshet hayil*, on the one hand, and the power couple Sarah and Abraham, on the other. It is surprising that we do not find more instances of Sarah being connected to the *eshet hayil*. I think that we can ascribe this to the tendency, to which I referred above, to silence the voice of active and opinionated women in the Jewish *beit-midrash* culture. This has become the hegemonic attitude to such an extent that even today people find it “unnatural” when confronted with the composition I analyze here and name it Midrash Sarah and Abraham; people often revert the title to Midrash Abraham and Sarah.³⁵

Incorporating Midrash Sarah and Abraham into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu was probably an intentional act by some scribe, editor, or author at some point in the history of the transmission of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu text. This would have even been quite early in the history of the text, as Midrash Sarah and Abraham seems to have been well integrated into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu, given its role as explicating the verse “Abraham is old,” as discussed above.

However, the process of “destroying” the original Midrash Sarah and Abraham was not a fully intentional act by one person, and, as apparent from the evidence in the three witnesses, was taken in small, natural steps that resulted in what we see in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu now. These steps stem from an uncomfortable feeling that the original text gave to its readers, a feeling that has emerged in people whose emotional community was not the same as that of the authors of Midrash Sarah and Abraham, or of the editor who first incorporated it into the Tanhuma Yelammedenu; for example, as explained above, they found it strange that verses formulated in the feminine are related to Abraham or verses in the masculine refer to Sarah (and I will say some more about this in the next paragraph).

What were these small steps? I conjecture that at a very preliminary stage the reference to Abraham (“this is Abraham”) was eliminated. Here are two ways in which material about Abraham was omitted.

through her, and subordinated himself to her; God commanded him to heed his wife, because of her prophetic power.” Tamar Kadari, “Sarah: Midrash and Aggadah,” *Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019h>; and also Valler, “Who Is the *ēšet hayil*,” 88–91, at length with rabbinic references.

35. This has happened more than once with people who have looked at my essay before it was published.

1. By simply erasing the formulas “this is Sarah” and “this is Abraham,” which results in the whole Proverbs verse being interpreted about Sarah (in verses *vav*, *zayin*, and *tet*)
2. Erasing the second strophe, or replacing it with another verse (such as the one about Abraham, in verse *bet*), or bringing a narrative explanation without a verse. In such cases there is good reason to think that the second strophe was originally interpreted with regard to Abraham (in verses *aleph*, *gimel*, *dalet*, *heh*, *het*, *lamed*). The step taken in verse *aleph*, of replacing a tradition in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu with a more familiar one from and Amoraic midrash is known, albeit not yet systematically studied.

Following this stage, it was felt that the formula “this is Sarah” was also unnecessary, since everything now referred to her. At this point it was already possible to reframe the text as being Abraham’s obituary for Sarah instead of as explicating Abraham’s old age.

From now on, the road was open to replacing all verses referring to Abraham with other explanations for the Proverbs verses. In light of this reconstruction, it is surprising how much material from the original midrash seems to have survived the transmission process.

3.4. Emotional Communities and the Position of Women

I have talked above about the results of my previous work with regard to the prevailing ideology of the Tanhuma, pointing to its synagogue milieu, in contrast to the *beit-midrash* milieu in which classical rabbinic literature was composed and which we usually associate with Judaism of late antiquity. In this context, it makes more sense to think of the synagogue liturgical literature as the original context in which Midrash Sarah and Abraham was created. Beyond the poetics mentioned here and the previous work done on Tanhuma, also the status of Sarah points to a liturgical milieu: we find that the couple Sarah and Abraham in the midrash were nearly mythologized as a divine couple,³⁶ but that this approach was suppressed in the extreme halakhically oriented Babylonian Talmud. In the *piyyut* literature, we find a *qedushta* by Yannai (sixth century) where Sarah’s agency

36. See Susanne Plietzsch, “Supernatural Beauty, Universal Mother, and Eve’s Daughter: Sarah in Genesis Rabbah and in the Babylonian Talmud,” in this volume.

and visibility come emphatically to the fore, both as an individual and as continuing the metaphor found (implicitly) in Isaiah, which relates to the (barren) Sarah as the (exiled) Zion. This latter metaphor was taken up by Jewish literature of the Persian period as well as Hellenistic and Roman Jewish literature, but not by the rabbis.³⁷

Remembering that Yannai also composed the *piyyut* quoted above about *eshet hayil*, we recognize the synagogue discourse that must have been different from what we find in the *beit-midrash* discourse. This also makes sense, since the synagogue congregation was composed of both men and women, and an outright misogynistic approach would ill fit such a congregation. I do not argue for a feminist attitude, or for an egalitarian one, but the visibility and agency of women could not have been presented in the same disparaging manner we find in the Babylonian Talmud, for example. “Women’s issues” such as menstruation and birth had to be communicated to the audience for pedagogical purposes. A similar argument is made by Laura Lieber in her comparative study of *piyyut* and midrash: “The effective *piyyut* draws the community in, not only by means of externalized participation (through the use of refrains) but internally, by translating the stories of the Bible into the stories of the present day and making them lively and vivid.”³⁸

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37. See Ophir Münz-Manor, “All about Sarah: Questions of Gender in Yannai’s Poems on Sarah’s (and Abraham’s) Barrenness,” *Proof* 26 (2006): 348.

38. Laura Lieber, “Stage Mothers: Performing the Matriarchs in *Genesis Rabbah* and Yannai,” in *Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context*, ed. Sarit Gribetz Kattan et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 173.

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Switched before Birth: Dinah and Joseph in Bible and Midrash

Devora Steinmetz

When Leah saw that she had given birth to six sons, she said: The Blessed Holy One stipulated with Jacob that he will establish twelve tribes. And behold, I have borne six sons and the maidservants four—this makes ten. And Leah was pregnant. Our Rabbis said: With a male she was pregnant. And Leah said: Behold, I am pregnant, and my sister Rachel has not given birth. What did Leah do? She began to ask for compassion for her sister Rachel. She said: Let what is in my womb become a female, and let not my sister Rachel be deprived of giving birth to a son. (TanB, Va-yetze 19; TanP, Va-yetze 8)¹

This midrash appears, with variations, in several rabbinic texts, both Palestinian and Babylonian (for example, y. Ber. 9:3, 14a; b. Ber. 60a). Sometimes it is Leah who prays, sometimes it is Rachel, and sometimes it is all four of Jacob's wives who pray. In most sources Leah's fetus is transformed from male to female, enabling Rachel to bear a male child, ultimately *two* male children, completing the complement of twelve tribes. But Pseudo-Jonathan has an even more dynamic version of the story, recorded also in Qillir's *piyyut yotzrot* for Rosh Hashanah²—both sisters are pregnant

1. Translations of ancient texts are mine.

2. ושמיע מן קדם יי צלותא דלאה ואיתחלפו עובריא במעיהון והוה יהיב יוסף במעאה. דרחל ודינא במעאה דלאה: "And Leah's prayer was heard in the presence of the Lord and their fetuses were exchanged in their wombs, and Joseph was placed in Rachel's womb and Dinah in Leah's womb" (Tg. Ps.-J. to Gen 30:21). עבר. "He remembered her righteous ways, to exchange the fetus in her sister's stomach; he calculated today to add her memory, to perform the swap of Dinah with Joseph." See Shulamit Elizur and Michael Rand, *Rabbi El'azar Berabbi Qillir, Liturgical Poems for Rosh Ha-Shana*:

at the same time, Leah with a boy and Rachel with a girl. In response to the matriarch's prayer, the fetuses are switched: Joseph now is situated in Rachel's womb and Dinah in Leah's.

It might be intriguing to think about the difference between imaging Dinah as originally having been male and imaging Dinah and Joseph as having been switched in the womb. But in this essay I will consider these two versions of the story as variations on one theme—Dinah and Joseph are deeply intertwined, perhaps two sides of a coin. I will discuss how such an idea might have emerged from a close reading of the Bible and in what directions the Bible's rabbinic interpreters take this idea.

The mention of Dinah's birth in Genesis is remarkable in several ways. First, it goes without saying that the biblical story does not generally mention the birth of female children. This one female child of Jacob, though, *is* mentioned—her birth is noted in the midst of the story of the birth of Jacob's sons (Gen 30:21) as well as later, within the enumeration of the sons of Jacob who went down to Egypt (Gen 46:15). Dinah's birth is introduced with the word אַחֶר—“And *after*, she gave birth to a daughter” (Gen 30:21)—and comes right after Leah stated that she has borne Jacob six sons. Further, Leah is not said to have *conceived* a daughter; in contrast, the birth of each of her sons is introduced with a notice of Leah's conception. These surface features set the stage for the midrashic idea that something about having borne six sons leads to the birth of Dinah and that Leah does not actually conceive a daughter—in fact, according to the midrash, Leah originally conceives a *male* child but, *after* noting that she has already *borne six sons*, which means that bearing another son would leave at most one son to be born to Rachel, Leah's fetus becomes female and so, “*after* [that is, after bearing six sons and becoming pregnant with a seventh], she gave birth to a daughter.”

In addition, unlike the names of each of Leah's and the other mothers' sons, Dinah's name, which is not explained in the biblical text, suggests judgment. Midrashim about the switching of Leah's fetus explain the name as reflecting the judgment that Leah made about the need *not* to have a seventh son (e.g., b. Ber. 60a) or about Leah bringing God to judgment, demanding that God have compassion on her sister (Tanhuma, Va-yetze 8).

Finally, Dinah's birth is juxtaposed with the birth of Joseph.

And after, she gave birth to a daughter, and she called her name Dinah. And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and he opened her womb. And she conceived and she bore a son, and she said: "God has taken away my disgrace." And she called his name Joseph, saying: "May the Lord add to me another son" (Gen 30:21–24).

The juxtaposition of the births of these two children, the enigmatic mention of God's taking note of Rachel, and the inclusion of two explanations of Joseph's name—the removal of disgrace and the hope of having two sons—generate the idea that there is a relationship between Leah giving birth to Dinah and Rachel giving birth to Joseph. For the midrash, the relationship is a causal one—it is *because* Dinah gave birth to a daughter that Rachel was able to give birth to a son. The birth of Joseph removed the disgrace of Rachel having no sons (אסף אלהים את הרפתי) and created the possibility of Rachel bearing *two* sons (יסף ה' לי בן אחר), making her not lesser than the maidservants.

So much for the surface irregularities that serve as the foundation for the midrashic story about the switching of Dinah and Joseph. But I want to suggest that there is something deeper at play here. The midrashic tradition is pointing to a deep kinship or even an interchangeability between Dinah and Joseph. I believe that this tradition is based on a mirroring of Dinah and Joseph that is evident in the biblical narrative itself.

I have discussed elsewhere my understanding of the juxtaposition of the births of Dinah and Joseph, suggesting that Dinah's name signals God's judgment of the oppressor, leading to the deliverance of the oppressed, as promised in the covenant between the pieces (Gen 15:14). It is immediately after the notice of Dinah's birth, when Joseph is born (Gen 30:23)—note that his birth is introduced by God's remembering and hearing (Gen 30:22), terms that elsewhere are used of God's covenantal response to suffering—that Jacob decides that he must leave his place of exile and find his way home (Gen 30:25).³ I have shown as well that the episode of Dinah's rape also fits the paradigm of that covenant, as the actions of Shechem prompt the sons of Jacob—the fourth generation from Abraham—to vanquish the townspeople and take possession of the

3. Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 137–40.

land.⁴ Whether or not one accepts that interpretation of the juxtaposition of the births of these two children of Jacob, it is certainly the case that the link between Dinah and Joseph goes beyond the narrative proximity of their births.

First, both Dinah and Joseph are linked to Shechem. Dinah's rape by Shechem leads to the brothers' impassioned response to the violation of their sister (I am not discussing here whether they act out of compassion for their sister or out of concern for the stain on her family that the rape represents; in either case, they relate to her as *their sister*, a term that is repeated in the story; in fact, the final word of the narrative, in the voice of the brothers, is "our sister" [Gen 34:31]). Joseph is sent by Jacob to Shechem to seek the well-being of his brothers (Gen 37:14),⁵ but it turns out that the brothers have left this place of brotherly behavior, and instead of reaching out to their brother, they act to rid themselves of Joseph. It is Simeon and Levi who lead the attack on Shechem in response to the rape of Dinah (Gen 34:25), and it is presumably Simeon (at least) who urges the killing of Joseph—Reuben, the eldest, is opposed to killing him, and it is Simeon, the next to eldest, whom Joseph later imprisons when he learns that Reuben had tried to dissuade the brothers from violence against Joseph (Gen 42:22–24). Joseph is again linked to Shechem and to the story of Dinah at the end of Genesis, when Jacob gives his son "an additional portion [שכם] ... that I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow" (Gen 48:22). While this verse presents multiple problems of interpretation, it certainly connects Joseph to Shechem—the place in which he will finally be buried (Josh 24:32)—and echoes the taking of Shechem by sword in the aftermath of Dinah's rape.

Both Dinah and Joseph are the objects of a sexual crime or attempted crime, Dinah by Shechem and Joseph by Potiphar's wife. These two individuals are, respectively, a Canaanite and an Egyptian (i.e., from Mitzrayim in Hebrew). Canaan and Mitzrayim are brothers (Gen 10:6), the two sons of Ham (himself guilty of a sexual violation, Gen 9:22), with which the biblical narrative concerns itself and in relation to whose nations the patriarchal and national narratives unfold.

Finally, both Dinah and Joseph are associated with the word חרפה, "disgrace." Joseph's birth signals God's removal of disgrace from Rachel.

4. Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 140–42.

5. Note variations on the word שלום/שלים in the two stories.

Dinah's brothers characterize the possibility of giving their sister in marriage to an uncircumcised person—and thus, a fortiori, her rape by Shechem—as a disgrace (Gen 34:14).

So, however we understand the relationship between these two figures, for our purposes I simply want to highlight the fact that Dinah and Joseph are in fact deeply linked in the biblical narrative.⁶ The ubiquitously attested midrash about the in utero switching of Dinah and Joseph captures this linkage: Dinah and Joseph are not only connected; they are switched versions of each other. One is defended as a sister; the other is rejected as a brother. One is raped; the other manages to resist seduction and pursuit. One is the locus of disgrace; the other signifies the removal of disgrace. One *goes out* to the place where she is violated but subsequently is exclusively the object of others' actions; the other *is taken* down to Egypt and sold into Potiphar's possession but then becomes the master of his own fate.

The remainder of this essay will focus on how the mirroring of these two figures resurfaces in a variety of midrashic texts, enabling a measure of redemption of both Dinah and Joseph. It is worth noting that, while biblical texts in general are “fraught with background,”⁷ texts about Dinah are particularly silent about her feelings, motives, and reactions. Dinah is at best a kind of stick figure. Outside going out *לראות בבנות הארץ*, “to see daughters of the land” (Gen 34:1)—an act about which midrashic texts have a lot to say, as we will see—she is not a subject at all. Nor do we find out what happens to her after her brothers remove her from Shechem.

Rabbinic texts transmit three main traditions about what happens to Dinah in the aftermath of her rape by Shechem. One, which I will not be discussing, is that she marries Job.⁸ Another is that she is reluctant to leave Shechem—*ויקחו את דינה*, “and they took Dinah” (Gen 34:26), interpreted

6. In fact, the book of Samuel, alert to the parallels between these two characters' stories, combines elements of the two in the story of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam 13). I am indebted for this point to David Silber (personal communication). For parallels between the story of Amnon and Tamar and the story of Dinah, see David Noel Freedman, “Dinah and Shechem, Tamar and Amnon,” in *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:485–95; Yael Shemesh, “Rape Stories in Scripture: The Shared and the Distinctive” [Hebrew], *IMF* 6 (2002): 315–44.

7. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1953).

8. For a brief discussion of this tradition, see James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 413.

as the brothers needing to drag her out—either because she has been won over by having sex with an uncircumcised man or because, having been disgraced, she feels she has no future outside Shechem. Note that this midrash gives Dinah a voice, putting in her mouth the words that Tamar utters after being raped by Amnon, “Whither shall I bring my disgrace [חרפתי]” (2 Sam 13:13), and echoing the word חרפה, which appears in both the Dinah and Joseph narratives. Dinah is won over by Simeon’s promise to marry her and becomes the mother of one of Simeon’s sons, שאול בן הכנענית, “Saul son of the Canaanite [woman]” (Gen 46:10; Gen. Rab. 80:11).

This midrash brings Dinah back into the family. At the same time, it suggests that she would have preferred to remain with the Canaanites after she was raped, and it labels her הכנענית, the Canaanite—linking her permanently to her rapist and associating her with the accursed nation that is Israel’s nemesis. It should be noted, though, that one interpretation of הכנענית offered by this midrash is that Dinah was buried by Simeon in the land of Canaan—thus incorporating her, in her death, into the patriarchal family, and perhaps once again linking her to Joseph, who makes the brothers promise to bury him in the land of Canaan (Gen 50:24–5).

A third tradition, and the one that I want to highlight in relation to our opening midrash, is that Dinah became pregnant from Shechem. According to Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer (the story is reflected also in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and other sources),

She conceived and gave birth to Aseneth. And the sons of Israel planned to kill her, for now all the land will say that there is harlotry in the tents of Jacob.⁹ What did Jacob do? He brought a gold plate [*tzitz*] and wrote on it the holy name, and he hung it on her neck, and he sent her away, and she went. And all is foreseen before the blessed Holy One. And the angel Michael came down and brought her down to Egypt to the house of Potiphra, because Aseneth was fitting as a wife for Joseph. And the wife of Potiphra was barren, and she raised her as a daughter. And when Joseph went down to Egypt, he took her for himself, as it says: “And he gave him Aseneth, the daughter of Potiphra, priest of On, for him as a wife” (Gen 41:45). (Pirque R. El. 38)¹⁰

9. “The tents of Jacob” echo Dinah’s dwelling in tents, mentioned earlier in Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and discussed below.

10. Fascinatingly, the version of this story published in Buber’s *Midrash Aggadah* refashions the details of the story on the model of Pharaoh’s daughter finding the wailing baby Moses (*miqetz* 41).

While this story leaves unstated where Dinah herself ends up, it serves to reincorporate her into the family through her daughter, Aseneth. Interestingly, here the brothers *reject* Dinah's child, planning to kill her, much as in the biblical narrative they plan to kill their brother Joseph. By means of the interventions of Jacob and the angel Michael (perhaps parallel here to the angel Gabriel, who is midrashically identified with the unnamed man in the story of the selling of Joseph [Gen 37:15; Tanhuma, Va-yeshev 2]), Aseneth is saved from this fate—like Joseph—by being brought down to Egypt. As Joseph is sold into the house of Potiphar, Aseneth is adopted into the family of Potiphar. And finally, Aseneth and Joseph join together as wife and husband, parents of two of the tribes of Israel.

Of course, it is possible to explain this story simply as a way of having Joseph marry endogenously, rather than marrying the daughter of an Egyptian, and of a pagan priest at that.¹¹ But I think the story does more: it offers Dinah a form of redemption through her daughter and suggests that Dinah and Joseph, whose biblical stories mirror and intertwine with each other, ultimately have a shared fate and shared descendants.¹²

Which brings me to how different midrashic traditions understand the one thing that Dinah actually does: go out to see the daughters of the land. An exceedingly common tradition is that Dinah's behavior is unseemly. *ותצא דינה בת לאה*, "Dinah the daughter of Leah went out" (Gen 34:1). Dinah is a *יצאנית בת*, "one who goes out, the daughter of one who goes out";¹³ her mother Leah "went out" to tell Jacob to sleep with her (Gen 30:16), and Dinah's going out invites the sexual advances of Shechem. This tradition appears, for example, in Gen. Rab. 80:1, where Dinah is later identified as the *בנונית* who was reluctant to leave Shechem. Embedded as it is in a culture that assumes that women can be held responsible for men's misbehavior, the tradition also emerges from engagement with the ambiguous valence of "going out," with the reference to Dinah

11. This is how the tradition about Aseneth being Dina's daughter is explained in Victor Aptowitzer, "Asenath, the Wife of Joseph: A Haggadic Literary-Historical Study," *HUCA* 1 (1924): 239–306. Kugel also explains the tradition's origin in this way (*Traditions of the Bible*, 435).

12. It is noteworthy that Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer, rarely among rabbinic texts, does not include the "switched before birth" tradition, yet still appears to build on the biblical connection between the figures of Dinah and Joseph.

13. The phrase is based on Rashi's commentary on Gen 34:1, paraphrasing Gen. Rab. 80:1.

being Leah's daughter, and, I think, with the potentially negative valence of "to see." Often within biblical narrative seeing is paired with taking something that is not one's own, frequently but not always with sexual (mis)appropriation.¹⁴ Additionally, Dinah's seeing is followed in the next verse with Shechem seeing Dinah, potentially suggesting a relationship between Dinah's and Shechem's intentions or, at least, their actions.¹⁵

However, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, the midrash that has Dinah give birth to the woman who marries Joseph, imagines the opening scene of the biblical story differently. Dinah was not someone who goes out. On the contrary, Dinah was a *יושבת אהלים*, "dweller in tents:" "The daughter of Jacob was a dweller in tents, and she was not one who goes outside." Shechem, compared here to a snake (there is a play here on *חוי* [Hivite] and *חויא* [snake in Aramaic]), tricks Dinah (as the original snake used his cunning to ensnare Eve), bringing young girls to play on drums outside Dinah's tent, and Dinah goes out to see *these* girls, falling prey to Shechem (Pirke R. El. 38).

Note that Dinah here is not the going-out daughter of Leah. She is the daughter of Jacob and, like him, is a *יושבת אהלים*. This is a delightful variation on the Bible's description of the young Jacob, who is a *יושב אהלים* (Gen 25:27), which many midrashic texts, including Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, interpret as sitting in the *beit-midrash* and learning Torah (Gen. Rab. 63:9; Pirke R. El. 32—but see Luria's note). Most likely, however, Dinah is not being portrayed here as learning Torah.¹⁶ Rather, the father's youthful sitting inside tents and learning becomes the daughter's youthful modesty—like Sarah (Gen 18:9) and Rebecca (Gen 24:6), Dinah is to be found inside her tent.

It is worth noting that the negative understanding of Dinah's going out, which Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer tries to avoid by having Dinah *not* going out until she is tricked into doing so, seems to be quite ancient. In Jubilees' telling of the story, Dinah does not go out at all; the Shechemites simply

14. E.g., Gen 3:6 (Eve and the tree of knowledge); 6:2 (the sons of God and the daughters of Adam); and 12:15 (the Egyptians and Sarai). See Devora Steinmetz, "Vineyard, Farm, and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History," *JBL* 113 (1994): 193–207 n. 12.

15. See, e.g., Tanhuma Buber, Va-yishlah 19 and the more blaming Midr. Aggadah on Gen 34:1.

16. Interestingly, in Eccl. Rab. 10 that is exactly the problem: Dinah goes out while her father and brothers are sitting in the *beit-midrash*!

“carried off Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, into the house of Shechem” (Jub. 30.2). This suggests that, already in the time of Jubilees, both Dinah’s going out and the linking of Dinah with Leah were seen as negative—both details of the biblical text are omitted here in order to negate the notion that Dinah did anything wrong. In other words, Dinah here is neither a *יְצֵאֲנִית* nor a *בֵּת יְצֵאֲנִית*. Jubilees also has Dinah die when she hears that Joseph has perished (Gen 34:15), yet another linking of Dinah and Joseph, and another correlation between a positive assessment of Dinah and a linking of the fates of the two siblings.

Let me sum up before closing with one final midrash. I have offered two main observations. One is that Dinah and Joseph are closely intertwined in a variety of midrashim about Dinah’s beginnings and her ultimate fate, and I suggested that these midrashim are grounded in an interweaving of these two characters in the biblical narrative. The other is that traditions that see Dinah as being realigned with Joseph after her rape (such as in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*) correlate with interpretations of how she falls into the hands of Shechem that do not blame her for her victimization, while negative interpretations of Dinah’s going out (such as in *Genesis Rabbah*) correlate with more marginalizing views of what happens to Dinah in the aftermath of the rape.

I want to close by mentioning one final midrash that I believe is built on the biblical parallels between Dinah and Joseph. *Genesis Rabbah* tells a story about what Jacob’s sons did when they were first sent down to Egypt to buy food during the famine:

“And Joseph’s brothers went down” (Gen 42:3)—Scripture should have said “the sons of Israel”! Rather, initially they didn’t behave in a brotherly manner toward him and they sold him, and in the end they regretted it and they said: When we will go down to Egypt, we will return our brother to his father. And when their father told them to go down to Egypt, they all resolved as one to treat him as a brother. [The midrash continues to tell how Joseph sends men to search for his brothers, whom he has found out had come to Egypt.] They went and they found them in the market of prostitutes. And what were they doing in the market of prostitutes?! Rather, they said: Our brother Joseph is good-looking; perhaps he is in a brothel. [The brothers are brought to Joseph, who begins to cross-examine them. He asked:] What were you doing in the marketplace of prostitutes? [They answered:] We have lost something, and we are searching for it. He said to them: I see in my goblet that two of you destroyed a great city, and you sold your brother. (Gen. Rab. 91:6)

The midrash notes that here the sons whom Jacob sends down to Egypt are called “Joseph’s brothers.” However, when the brothers had plotted to kill Joseph, they were not called his brothers. Jacob had sent Joseph to seek the well-being of “your brothers” (Gen 37:14), and Joseph had told the man whom he meets, “My brothers I am seeking” (Gen 37:16). But when the brothers see Joseph and decide to kill him, they are not described as his brothers: “They saw him from afar ... and they plotted to kill him. And each said to his brother ... let’s kill him” (Gen 37:18–20). The biblical narrative glaringly omits the subject of the verb in the first of these verses, and in the second it makes clear that the brothers see themselves as *each other’s* brothers, but not as Joseph’s brothers. In contrast, in the Dinah story, Simeon and Levi are described as Dinah’s brothers (Gen 34:25), and Dinah is described as the brothers’ sister (Gen 34:13, 31).

Genesis Rabbah highlights this contrast in a comment on Jacob’s words before he dies: “Simeon and Levi are brothers” (Gen 49:5): “He said to them: You were brothers in relation to Dinah ... but you were not brothers to Joseph, for you sold him” (Gen. Rab. 99:7).

However, when Jacob’s sons go down to Egypt to buy food, they *are* called Joseph’s brothers. The midrash imagines a double quest: the brothers are sent down to Egypt by their father to procure food for the family, and they take advantage of this opportunity to search for their brother. In the midrashic story, the brothers imagine that Joseph has been made into a prostitute!

So while in the midrash about Dinah and Aseneth, Dinah becomes Joseph-like—her infant daughter is nearly killed by Dinah’s brothers, ends up in Egypt in the house of Potiphera, and becomes Joseph’s wife—here Joseph is reimagined as Dinah-like. In his accusation of the brothers, Joseph juxtaposes Dinah’s and his own pasts—he recalls how the brothers destroyed the city of Shechem in response to the rape of their sister, and he recalls how they sold their brother. Is Joseph simply remembering the brothers’ repeated acts of violence and how they turned the wrath that they had poured on Shechem against him? Or is he imagining that now they might be intending to use their might to *save* their brother? I am not certain what the midrash has Joseph thinking about his brothers, but I think it is quite clear what the midrash has the brothers thinking: the brothers now relate to Joseph the way they had related to Dinah—he is to be saved from becoming a prostitute (as in Gen 34:31) and brought back from his place of captivity into his father’s house.

So, if a widespread midrashic tradition asks us to imagine Dinah and Joseph as switched before birth, a variety of midrashim invite us to continue to imagine what it would mean for this switching to continue throughout these two characters' lives. What would it mean for Joseph to be treated like Dinah, or for Dinah to be treated like Joseph, or for Dinah's and Joseph's stories to fuse into a single destiny?

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The Midwives in Egypt's Nationality: Recovering a Lost Rabbinic Midrash from the Cairo Genizah

Moshe Lavee

Feminist reading of rabbinic literature does not begin with the sources themselves. It begins with contemporary values and concerns that dictate our interests and the ethical grid with which we approach the text. A generation ago such a statement would be seen as critique of the feminist practice. For me, it is an ample and honest description of the process with which we are involved. The battle for the contemporary social values of equality, deconstruction of power structures, and the dismantling of harming and violent practices—both physical and emotional—defines a set of questions about the present that may and should also be asked about the past. It constitutes an inquiry about patriarchal power structures, social hegemonies, and the relations between center and margins; it seeks to read against the grain in order to recover the perspective of the weakened and marginalized, and portray it.

I noted this tradition when working on the project “The Reception of Midrash in the Cairo Genizah.” I am grateful to the Grandchamp Foundation for the long-term support of this project. I initially read the text with Shaul Inbari; additional comments and observations were added by Yonatan Sagiv, Dan Greenberg, Vered Raziell-Kretzmer, and Shimon Fogel. A preliminary version of this essay was published in my Hebrew blog. See Moshe Lavee, “The Egyptian Midwives: A Study for Parashat Shmot,” *The Marker Café*, 2014, <http://cafe.themarker.com/post/3031653/>, and later, together with Shana Strauch-Shick, in *TheTorah.com*. See Lavee and Strauch-Shick, “The ‘Egyptian’ Midwives: Recovering a Lost Midrashic Text and Exploring Why It May Have Been Forgotten,” *TheTorah.com*, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019L>. I would like to thank Strauch-Shick and Zev Fraber, the editor of *TheTorah.com*, for their contribution to the articulations of the ideas presented here.

This essay stems from a project aimed at uncovering lost aggadic traditions preserved in the Cairo Genizah. Ever since the earliest stages of Genizah research, scholars were involved in the publication of such texts, which provide a glimpse toward a protocanonical era of midrashic activity, in which rabbinic midrashim were subject to continuous restructuring. The Genizah preserved some of the works that did not make it to the print era and were therefore lost and forgotten. Mostly, such works resemble midrashic genres already known to us, especially in the Tanhuma Yelammedenu genre; but in a few rare cases they demonstrate unique stylistic and structural features, unknown from elsewhere.

One of the most curious texts retrieved in the project provides an interesting example of a seemingly suppressed rabbinic tradition, found in a very unique semimidrashic fragment from the Genizah that may be read as undermining the lines of patriarchal hegemony. The tradition at hand provides us with a helpful opportunity to explore some key methodological questions about feminist readings of rabbinic sources. The text identifies the midwives of Exod 1:15 as Egyptian and hence includes them in a list of Godfearing non-Jewish biblical figures. This tradition differs from the prevailing and dominant one, according to which the midwives were Jewish—Yocheved and Miriam. Tracing the origins of this tradition reveals that it is rooted in a vocalization of the biblical text that differs from the one accepted in the Masoretic reading. This different vocalization was also assumed in the LXX and was known among prerabbinic Jewish communities as well as among early Christian interpretations. The Egyptian midwives' tradition did not disappear entirely from the Jewish cultural horizons over time. Some marginal rabbinic works, as well as medieval anthologies and later biblical commentaries, also preserved or reconsidered it, and might even have been familiar with the lost midrashic text retrieved here from Cairo Genizah.

From a feminist perspective, this tradition provokes the question of intent or unconscious suppression of traditions that praise the “other”—in this case both women and non-Jews—and leave space for blurred boundaries of identity. Such a tradition may be seen as challenging the dominant hegemony and undermining patriarchal hierarchy. Nevertheless, the suppression of such a tradition may also be a product of “neutral” hermeneutic considerations and of a process of literary canonization that contributed to the dominance of the other tradition in the shaping of a Jewish “collective

memory.”¹ Assessing the role of the potential subversive message in the suppression of the Egyptian midwives traditions remains open; namely, we cannot firmly establish that the tradition was suppressed because of its implied subversive message. Following the presentation of the tradition and its reception, I will add a reflection about the nature of feminist readings of seemingly suppressed midrashic traditions, moving back and forth between two alternative strategies of reading: from charitable readings to hermeneutic suspicion.

According to Exod 1:15–21, the king of Egypt, concerned about the large population of Hebrews within his borders, tells their midwives, named Shifrah and Puah, to kill any male child they deliver. The midwives, fearing God, ignore Pharaoh's orders. When Pharaoh confronts them, they make up an excuse, claiming that Hebrew women are “vigorous” (lit. “animals,” חיות) and give birth before the midwives even show up. The anecdote ends with God rewarding the midwives with “houses” (בתים), presumably a reference to offspring and/or material success.

The Hebrew text is somewhat ambiguous: are these midwives meant to be Hebrews themselves, or Egyptians who work in the Hebrew community? Traditional commentators assume that the midwives are themselves Hebrews. Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (ca. 1080–1160) states this simply and emphatically,

למילדות העבריות—למיילדות שהם העבריות.

La-meyladot ha-ivriyot—to the midwives who are themselves Hebrews.²

This is also the translation that is found in all three traditional Aramaic targumim

Onkelos: לחיתא יהודיתא, Jewish midwives

Pseudo-Jonathan: לחייתא יהוייתא, Jewish midwives

Yerushalmi: יולדתא עיברייתא, Hebrew midwives

Midrashic interpretation goes even further, identifying the two midwives with the two most famous Jewish female characters of the first chapters in Exodus, Yocheved and Miriam (Sifre Num. 78):

1. See Moshe Lavee, “Literary Canonization at Work: The Authority of Aggadic Midrash and the Evolution of Havdalah Poetry in the Genizah,” *AJSR* 37 (2013): 285–313.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

שפרה—זו יוכבד.
 פועה—זו מרים.
 שפרה—שפרת ורבת;
 שפרה—שהיתה משפרת את הולד.

Shifrah—is Yocheved.

Puah—is Miriam.

Shifrah [is called so since] she enabled procreation [*sheparat ve-ravat*].

Shifrah [is called so since] she would take care [*meshaperet*] of the infant.

The identification of Shifrah and Puah with Yocheved and Miriam became the entrenched interpretation among traditional Jews. We may even say that it shaped the Jewish collective memory, thanks to the agency of the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sotah 11b) and Rashi (Exod 1:15), the two most influential agents in the establishment of the canonicity of midrashic traditions.

1. The Egyptian Midwives: A Lost Midrash in a Genizah Fragment

A surprising text retrieved from Cairo Genizah seems to offer a different tradition from the prevailing one. The fragment T-S 20.158 is a palimpsest: a parchment that was previously used for another purpose by another community, the text of which was subsequently erased and rewritten on. This fragment dates from around 1000 CE; that is the date of the physical fragment. The dating of the unique midrash preserved in it is more difficult to establish, since it does not correspond to any of the known genres in rabbinic literature. Some late linguistic features imply that the extant text may have been *phrased* in the Gaonic era, but the content, as we shall see below, probably consists of traditions that date back as early as the tannaitic period.

In many cases, palimpsests are the earliest texts preserved in Cairo Genizah.³ In terms of its genre, it does not resemble any familiar form but contains an unusual combination of two main building blocks: lists of midrashic examples followed by lists of verses. The lists of midrashic examples describe various groups of biblical figures who share various common attributes, such as people awaiting (salvation), righteous people born from wicked ones and vice versa, kings who first had merit but later

3. Michael Sokoloff and Joseph Yahalom, "Christian Palimpsests from the Cairo Geniza," *RHT* 8 (1978): 109–32; Malachi Beit-Arieh, "The Munich Palimpsest: A Hebrew Scroll Written before the Eighth Century" [Hebrew], *KS* 43 (1967–1968): 411–28.

sinned, and so on. Lists of verses probably concluded each unit—though the bad preservation of the fragment makes this uncertain—and, when woven together with the midrashic examples, may represent a rabbinic narrative. Namely, the sequence of the verses constitutes a rabbinic reading not explicitly stated. At least in one case the verses seem to move from the sin of the daughters of Zion through their punishment, and the destruction of the city to the later agony “on the rivers of Babylon.”

The midwives are mentioned in a list of biblical examples of which the beginning and the end is missing. If my reconstruction of the original order of the text is right, the list appears on the third column of the second page. The text preserved of this section reads as follows:

באסנת אשת יוסף נאמר כן.
 במילדות, בפועה ובשפרה המצריות נ'א כן: "ויאמר מלך מצרים למילדות"
 "[ותיר]אן המילדות את האים" ויקרא מלך מצרים למילדות" כל ה'פ.
 בבת פרעה נאמר כן: "ותרד בת פרעה ל[רחו]ץ על היאור."
 [ב]צפרה אשת משה נ'א כן: "ולכהן מ[ד]ין שבע בנות" ועוד: "ותקח צפורה צר
 ותכרת את ערלת ..."

ברחב הזונה נ'א כן: "ישלח מלך יריחו אל רחב לאמר הוצאי [ה]אנשים" ועוד
 נאמר: "והמה טרם ישכבון ותאמר אל האנשים ידעתי ..."

ברות המואביה נאמר כן: "ותקם היא וכלותיה ותשב ... ותאמר רות אל תפגעי ..."
 It was said so regarding Asenath, the wife of Joseph.
 It was said so regarding the midwives, Puah and Shifrah the Egyptians:
 "and the king of Egypt said to the midwives ... but the midwives feared
 God ... and the king of Egypt called to the midwives," etc. (Exod 1:15,
 17, 18).

It was said so regarding the daughter of Pharaoh: "and the daughter of
 Pharaoh went down to bathe in the Nile" (Exod 2:5).

It was said so regarding Ziporah, the wife of Moses (Exod 2:16): "The
 priest of Midian had seven daughters," and additionally: "Ziporah took
 the knife and cut off the foreskin" (Exod 4:25).

It was said so regarding Rahab the harlot: "the King of Jericho sent this
 message to Rahab: Bring out the men" (Josh 2:3). Additionally it says:
 "Before [the spies] lay down for the night ... she said to them: I know"
 (Exod 2:8).

It was said so regarding Ruth the Moabite: "Then she arose with her
 daughters-in-law to return.... But Ruth replied: Don't urge me" (Ruth
 1:1, 16).

From here on the text is missing. After a lacuna, the following column
 contains the end of a list of verses related to Abraham, which might have
 been part of the same unit, moving from the list of Godfearing women to

Abraham, the “father of all nations” (Gen 17:4–5), hinting at the identification of Abraham as a missionary and/or archetype for converts.⁴

It seems that the text lists righteous gentile women, or at least righteous women of gentile origin about whom something “was said.” The head of the column is missing, so its opening is unknown. The list includes Asenath (Joseph’s Egyptian wife), Shifrah and Puah, Pharaoh’s daughter, Tziporah (Moses’s Midianite wife), Rahab (the Canaanite prostitute), and Ruth. The description of the midwives as “Egyptian” is incongruous with the midrashic tradition, but the fact that they are being identified as non-Jewish is very clear from the context; all the other women included in this list are non-Israelite women who acted virtuously toward Israel or God.

2. Scattered Survival of This Tradition

The tradition identifying the midwives as Egyptian was not entirely lost in midrashic literature. Rather, we find scattered references to it in the margins of the traditional Jewish canon. The medieval (fourteenth century?) midrashic anthology Yalqut Shimoni on Joshua (247:9) preserves a very similar tradition in a list of righteous female converts:

יש נשים חסידות גיורות: הגר, אסנת, צפרה, שפרה, פועה, בת פרעה, רחב, רות,
ועל אשת חבר הקניי.

There are righteous convert women: Hagar, Asenath, Ziporah, Shifrah, Puaah, the daughter of Pharaoh, Rahab, Ruth, and Yael, the wife of Hever the Kenite.⁵

Similarly, Midrash Tadshe, a previously lost midrashic work, known only in manuscript form from medieval Ashkenaz (ca. tenth–eleventh centuries),⁶ reports a strikingly similar tradition, within a wider context

4. Moshe Lavee, *The Rabbinic Conversion of Judaism: The Unique Perspective of the Bavli on Conversion and the Demarcation of Jewish Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). And see also Ronit Nikolsky, “Midrash Sarah and Abraham: A Lost Rabbinic Interpretation of the ‘Woman of Valor’ Song,” in this volume.

5. On which see Yuval Blankovsky, “Seduction for the Sake of Heaven: Biblical Seductive Women in the Rabbis’ Eyes,” in this volume.

6. Scholem locates its origins in southern France. See Gershon Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17. Midrash Tadshe was known to the author of Num. Rab. part 1, which might connect it to Rabbi Moshe Ha-Darshan, and hence to the flow of traditions from Byzantium to

of listing praised women, including a list of righteous Jewish women and a list of prophetic women:

כ"ג נשים ישרות גדולות בצדקות היו בישראל, ואלו הן: שרה, רבקה, רחל ולאח, יוכבד, מרים, ה' בנות צלפחד, דבורה, אשת מנוח, חנה, אביגיל, אשה התקועית היא אשה חכמה, האלמנה של אליהו, השונמית, יהושבע, חולדה, נעמי, ואשה אחת מנשי בני הנביאים (מל"ב ד א), ואסתר המלכה. ויש מהן נביאות ואלו הן: שרה, רבקה, רחל ולאח ומרים, דבורה, חנה, אביגיל וחולדה.

ועוד יש נשים חסידות, גיורות כשרות מן הגוים ואלו הן: אסנת, צפורה, שפרה, פועה, בת פרעה, רחב, רות ויעל. והראיה שלהן ... ועוד יש גיורות מן הגוים,

בהגר נאמר: "וימצאה מלאך ה'" (בראשית טז ז) ונאמר: "וישמע אלהים את קול הנער" (שם כא יז),

באסנת אשת יוסף נאמר: "אשר ילדה לו אסנת" (שם מו כ),

במילדות פועה ושפרה נאמר ותיראן את האלהים (שמות א טו).

There were twenty-three honest women of great righteousness in Israel, and these are they: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Yocheved, Miriam, the five daughters of Zelophad, Deborah, the wife of Manoah, Hannah, Abigail, the woman of Teqoah who is a wise women, the widow of Elijah, the Shunamite, Yehoshava, Huldah, Naomi, and one woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets (2 Kgs 4:1), and Queen Esther.

And some of them were prophetesses, and these are: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Huldah.

And there are also righteous convert women from among the gentiles: Aseneth, Ziporah, Shifrah, Puah, the daughter of Pharaoh, Rahab, Ruth, and Yael. And their evidence is ...

And there are also converts from the gentiles:

It is written regarding Hagar: "And the angel of the LORD found her" (Gen 16:7), and it is written: "And God heard the voice of the lad" (Gen 21:17).

It is written regarding Asenath the wife of Joseph: "whom Aseneth ... bore unto him" (Gen 46:20).

It is written regarding the midwives, Shifrah and Puah: "But the midwives feared God" (Exod 1:15).

The Midrash Tadshe text includes the midwives in a similar list of women, defined as "converts from among the gentiles." It also uses the same proof-

Provence/Ashkenaz/Italy. See Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed., trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 311, 345.

text as the Genizah text (Exod 1:15). Furthermore, it contains a particular terminology, *הראיה שלהן*, “and their evidence is,” to present biblical evidence. This phrase is rare in rabbinic sources. A similar phrase, however, is found in another column of the Genizah fragment in question. The first column of the second page similarly states *והראיה שלא לו*, “and the evidence of these,” preceding a group of verses regarding Hagar in another context. Moreover, the ending formula in Midrash Tadshe, which describes how we know these women converted by quoting a verse (ב ____ נאמר), sounds quite similar to what we have in the fragment (וב ____ נאמר כן). The similarity of rare technical midrashic terminology is of extreme importance in such cases. It is a strong indication that the author of Midrash Tadshe was familiar not only with the tradition in the Genizah text but also with some form of the lost midrash itself. As in other cases, a certain midrashic text was probably known and in use both in the East—as reflected in the Genizah—and in Ashkenazi circles—as reflected in this Midrash Tadshe. This midrashic text, however, did not survive in its entirety, and at a certain stage, prior to the invention of print, its transmission ceased.⁷ Hence, beyond a limited space and timeframe in medieval Ashkenaz and maybe also related Provencal circles,⁸ the tradition was lost.

3. Lost in Plain Sight

The existence of the tradition of Shifrah and Puah as (originally?) non-Israelite, in two lost midrashic texts and in the (not lost) Yalqut Shimoni, suggests that a tradition can be physically present, preserved in the margins of Jewish literature, but can nevertheless be *effectively* lost. In the collective memory of those who grew up studying Rashi’s commentary on the Pentateuch and the Babylonian Talmud, the tradition identifying the midwives as Egyptians is novel. The shared Jewish consciousness is rooted in those midrashic works that generally became part of the publicly related narratives throughout Jewish communities. It is not an essentialist concept, but rather a statistical one: what narrative is actually known to Jews, what is being taught in schools and kindergartens, what is commonly mentioned in sermons and homilies, what is printed in many books, or in

7. See Moshe Lavee, “Literary Canonization at Work.” Note especially the Yelammedenu section preserved only in the Genizah and Yalqut Shimoni on 294 n. 23.

8. Considering this Ashkenaz connection, it would not be a surprise if it turned out that Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Hasid was familiar with it. See below.

synagogue leaflets, and so on. It is possible that with the advancement of digital humanities we will be able to develop efficient means for measuring it. Whether it is due to the canonization of the Babylonian Talmud; Rashi's (unofficial) canonization as the foremost scriptural commentator, which presented the other tradition; or its absence in the printed editions of Midrash Rabbah and the Tanhuma (the most popular of aggadic midrashic collections), the Egyptian midwives tradition was forgotten.

4. A Question of Vowels

Yet there is another basic reason for the preference of the identification of Shifrah and Puah with Yocheved and Miriam and the rejection of the tradition that considers them Egyptians. At first glance, it would appear that the question of the midwives' identity can be solved by the biblical text itself. The vocalized text of verse 15 states that the king of Egypt spoke לְמִלְדֹּת הָעֵבֶרִית. Properly translated, this is “to the Hebrew midwives,” namely, midwives who are Hebrew. Grammatically speaking, since both the word “midwives” and the word “Hebrew” open with a definite article—the *patakh* under the *lamed* masks the definite article ה—the word “Hebrew” must be an adjective modifying the previous word “midwives”; hence “Hebrew midwives” in the sense of midwives who are Hebrew.

The LXX, however, reads the text differently and translates the verse “the midwives of the Hebrew [women] [μαῖαις τῶν ἐβραίων]”; this seems to reflect an understanding of two nouns in construct: “the midwives [the first noun] of [representing the construct] the Hebrews [the second noun in the construct chain].”⁹ This translation reads “Hebrews” as the identity of the women and leaves the ethnicity of the midwives unstated. Many scholars have suggested that what lies behind the LXX reading is not a loose interpretation of the text but a different vocalization: לְמִלְדֹּת הָעֵבֶרִית.¹⁰ In this vocalization, the *lamed* is punctuated with (what would later be called) a *hireq* instead of (what would later be called) a *patakh*. Since the latter word has a definite article and the former word does not, the relationship between the two words must be a construct state, yielding

9. See Jonathan Cohen, “To the Hebrew Midwives” [Hebrew], *Lēšonēnu* 55 (1991): 295–97. Cohen suggested that Rashi was also familiar with such a possible reading of the biblical text.

10. See Zev Farber, “A Torah without Vowels Brings the Man to the Carcass or the Carcass to the Man?,” *TheTorah.com*, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL6019m>.

“midwives of the Hebrews.” Thus, it would appear that the origin of the debate about the proper interpretation of the two words למילדת העבריות is not purely *exegetical* but stems from multiple traditions about the proper *vocalization* of the text.

The vocalization reflected in LXX seems to have been known and accepted for quite a while. Josephus, in his retelling, explicitly assumes that the women were Egyptians who served as midwives for the Hebrews:

[The King of Egypt commanded] ... that the midwives of the Egyptians [τὰς Αἰγυπτίων μαίας] should watch carefully the pangs of childbirth of the Hebrew women and should observe closely their deliveries. For he ordered that they should be delivered of children by these who because of kinship were not likely to transgress the wish of the king. Those, however, who disregarded the decree and dared secretly to save the child that had been born to them, he ordered to be put to death together with their offspring. (*Ant.* 2.206–207)¹¹

Josephus has embellished the story a great deal, but it is clear that he assumes that the midwives must have been Egyptian and that Pharaoh would never have entrusted such a duty to the Hebrews' own kinswomen. Such a reading was also assumed in Christian circles, as seen from Jerome's translation, and is also documented among the Samaritans.¹²

The tradition preserved in the Genizah fragment (as well as in Midrash Tadshe and Yalqut Shimoni) can be traced back to a common reading of the biblical texts in Second Temple literature. It is interesting to note that the earliest appearance of the negating, and later prevailing rabbinic reading in Sifre Numbers, may be read as an intentional subversion of an earlier list, which was based on the same tradition. The text in Sifre Num. 78, as a whole, deals with biblical figures who are considered to be converts: Yitro, his alleged offspring the Rechabites, Rahav, the Gibonites, and Ruth. Each section ends with a *qal va-homer* argument: ומה אילו שקירבו את עצמן כך (If those who drew themselves near were drawn near by God, even more so Israel, who follow the Torah,” Sifre Num. 78). When the text moves on to present Shifrah and Puah it opens the paragraph concerning them with the words: אם תאמר ... (and if בישאל לא היה כן, הלא כבר נאמר ... שפרה זו יוכבד; פועה זו מרים ...

11. Translation based on Louis H. Feldman, trans., *Judean Antiquities 1–4* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

12. In Asatir. See Cohen, “To the Hebrew Midwives,” 296 n. 3.

you may say that such cases did not occur among Israel, it has already been stated.... Shifrah is Yocheved; Puah is Miriam.... The same you may find among Israel"). The paragraph concludes with the words: **הא כל המקרב אותו** ("This teaches that whoever draws himself near among Israel is being drawn near"). One may assume that this setting was actually based on an earlier list, in which the midwives were another example of non-Jewish women who drew themselves near to Israel, and the Tannaitic midrash rearranged the list and rephrased it so that this specific example would now be read as referring to Hebrew midwives.¹³

5. Between Exegesis and Suppression

Josephus was not the last Jew to mention the Egyptian midwives' tradition (or biblical reading). The tradition resurfaced once in a while among biblical commentators, in addition to its marginal preservation in Midrash Tadshe and Yalqut Shimoni. Yehudah ha-Hasid (Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg, 1150–1217) notes that the story line implies that the midwives were Egyptians, at least at first:¹⁴

שפרה ופועה מצריות היו מתחילה ונתגירו דאל"כ היאך ציוה אותם להרוג את היהודים?

Shifrah and Puah were originally Egyptian and then converted. If this were not the case, how could it be that [Pharaoh] commanded them to kill Jews?

The known affinity between the circles of Hasidei Ashkenaz and midrashic traditions that were preserved only in Ashkenaz¹⁵ makes it reasonable

13. As noted by Menahem Kahana, the midwives are included with Rahav and the Gibonites in another tradition (Avot R. Nat. B 45): "Three rebelled and confessed." See Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers: An Annotated Edition* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2011), 3:547. Note that confession is correlated with the conversion of Rahab in other sources. See Moshe Lavee, "From Emotion to Legislation: Asenath's Prayer and Rabbinic Literature," in *Ancient Jewish Prayer and Emotions*, ed. Stefan C. Reif and Renatte Egger-Wenzel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 259–72. This is another echo of an early familiarity with an Egyptian-midwives reading.

14. From the Langa edition of his commentary (ad loc.). The same comment appears in his name in Rabbi Haim Paltiel's commentary (ad loc.) and in the Pa'aneach Raza (ad loc.).

15. Amos Geula, "Lost Aggadic Works Known Only from Ashkenaz: Midrash Abkir, Midrash Esfa and Devarim Zuta" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2007); Hananel Mack, *The Mystery of Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2010), 201.

that Yehudah ha-Hasid was familiar with this tradition, maybe through Midrash Tadshe. However, the difference between this commentary and the midrashic tradition is telling. The rhetorical question that serves to justify the claim that they were Egyptian has a very important function. It assumes that Pharaoh cannot command Jewish midwives to kill Jewish infant. The boundaries of identity are too strong: it is not possible that Jewish midwives would harm Jewish infants, just as it is beyond reason that Egyptian midwives will save Jewish infants, hence conversion is the solution. This minor comment retains the social and cultural order between Jews and non-Jews. The subversive potential of portraying God-fearing gentile women is neutralized.

Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508) makes the same point independently, but without suggesting that they converted. It is reasonable that Abrabanel was not familiar with the midrashic tradition, but rather that exegetical considerations and maybe also intellectual contacts with Christian scholars induced the reemergence of this reading:¹⁶

ולא היו עבריות כי איך יבטח לבו בנשים העבריות שימיתו ולדיהן? אבל היו מצריות מילדות את העבריות, ר"ל עוזרות אותן ללדת, כמ"ש "בילדכן את העבריות" (שמות א טז).

They were not Hebrews, since how could [Pharaoh's] mind be confident that Hebrew women would murder their own [people's] babies?! Rather, they are the "midwives of the Hebrews," i.e., they assist the [Hebrew women] in the birthing process, just as [the next] verse says: "when you deliver the Hebrew women" (Exod 1:16).

To expand on Abarbanel's final point, during their conversations with Pharaoh, both the midwives and Pharaoh speak of the Hebrews as "others," always referring to them as "the Hebrews" (העבריות), implying that the midwives were not part of that group. Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto, 1800–1865) adopts Abarbanel's reading and makes another observation about the narrative logic:

וכן נראה, כי איך יתכן שיצוה לבנות ישראל להכרית את כל בני עמם, ויאמין שלא תגלינה הדבר?

16. For the imprint of Abrabanel's intellectual contacts with Christian scholars on his commentaries, see Cedric Cohen-Skalli, *Don Isaac Abrabanel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2017), 109–13.

[Abrabanel's reading] seems correct, for how could it be that [Pharaoh] could command Israelite women to annihilate their own people [by killing all the male offspring] and believe that no one will find out about the matter?

As Shadal notes, the command was supposed to be a secret; otherwise, how could the midwives possibly be granted access to deliver the Hebrew women giving birth? Even Pharaoh, Shadal argues, must have known that Israelite women, considering what was at stake, would not keep this plan hidden from their own people. Once again, we see how the subject is treated in a manner that maintains the boundaries of identity and assumes a complete loyalty of women to the group in which they belong.

Presenting the tradition in a manner that neutralizes the subversive potential of the reading/tradition that the midwives were Egyptian, the later biblical commentators help us realize that the tradition did challenge the boundaries of identity and implied social structures. It appears, at first blush, that the tradition that the midwives were Egyptian was forgotten because it diverged from the plain sense of the MT. Yet, the fact that this interpretation existed in the *Yalqut Shimoni* implies that more than just a question of grammar was at stake here. Its presence in Josephus, which suggests the Second Temple provenance of the Egyptian-midwife tradition, indicates that the lost midrashim in the Genizah and Midrash Tadshe have preserved—or revived—a particularly old tradition.

In some cases, ancient traditions die out and are forgotten; in other cases they are actively suppressed by later sources. This was clearly the case when the Egyptian midwives' tradition resurfaced in the writings of traditionalist commentators in the modern era. The tradition that the midwives were Egyptian belongs in this second category. Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860–1941) wrote (*Torah Temima*, Exod 1:15):

ודע דבילקוט יהושע ב' חשיב בין הנשים הגיורות את שפרה ופועה, וצ"ל דפליג אגמ' דידן שהיו יוכבד ומרים או יוכבד ואלישבע, וצ"ל שנתגיירו קודם מאורע זו שבפרשה זו, אחרי דהכתוב אומר מפורש: "המילדות העבריות" (שמות א טו), דדוחק לומר דהכונה כאן המילדות את העבריות (בחסרון יחס הפעול את).

Note that the *Yalqut* to Joshua 2 includes Shifrah and Puah among women who are converts. We must say that **it goes against our Talmud**, which identifies them as either Yocheved and Miriam or Yocheved and Elisheva. And we need to say that they converted before the events described in this biblical passage, since the text explicitly reads "the Hebrew midwives" (Exod 1:15) and it does not make sense to read this

as if the text intended to say “the midwives of the Hebrews” (leaving out the sign of the accusative **את**).

Similarly, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher cites the text from the Yalqut, noting Josephus's, the LXX's, and even Jerome's familiarity with it, but stressing that it contradicts “the view of our rabbis of blessed memory and Onqelos” (Torah Shelema, Exod 1:15, n. 166).¹⁷ Here it is quite clear that the motivation behind the rejection of this tradition is mainly that of canonization. The Masoretic vocalization, Rashi, and the Babylonian Talmud are the authoritative sources, and a dissenting tradition cannot be accepted. Note the language of canonization used by Epstein (“our Talmud”) and by Kasher (“against the view of our rabbis of blessed memories”), which implies their preferences.

But, as suggested above, it is reasonable that the causes for the preference of the Hebrew midwives' vocalization, if not even an intentional move from the reading implied in LXX, were not merely grammatical. Rather, they may be seen as related to social values and concepts. In order to consider this possibility, we need to note the intricate relations between gender and Jewish identity in this tradition. Considering the midwives as Egyptians posits a double challenge over two main us-and-them divisions, constructed in rabbinic literature: Jews versus gentiles and men versus women. The depiction of the midwives as righteous non-Israelite women, reflected in Josephus and the Genizah list, conforms to a Second Temple/early rabbinic category of Godfearing gentiles, namely, those who bear some connection to Judaism, espousing aspects of either Jewish practice

17. מובא שם [בירא] ל[יה] שהמילדות היו מצריות שנתגירו והפ' למילדות העבריות למיל-
דות את העבריות. ואפשטיין בהערות שם מביא שגם דעת יוסיפוס בקדמוניות ב' ט' שהיו מצריות.
ושד"ל מביא שגם המתרגם האלכסנדרני והירונימוס מפרשים כן. ומ"ש ראייה לפ' זה מובא לפנינו
במדרש תדשא. ויש להעיר גם מהמבוא באמרי נועם וכ"ה בפענח רז אור"י מוינא: שם האחת
שפרה, מצאתי בשם ר"ח ששפרה ופועה מצריות היו מתחלה ונתגירו... וזה לא כדעת חז"ל
ואנקולוס.. The view of our text is that midwives were Egyptians who converted, and the
interpretation of “the Hebrew midwives” is “the midwives of the Hebrews.” Epstein in
his comments quotes Josephus in *Ant.* 2.9, who says they were Egyptian, and Samuel
David Luzzato comments that the Alexandrian translator (= LXX) and Jerome also
interpret in this way, and evidence for this interpretation is found in Midrash Tadshe.
It is worth adding that in the introduction to Imrei Shefer this is in the Paaneach Raza:
“Rabbi Isaac of Vienna said: I found in the name of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Hasid that
Shifrah and Puah were Egyptians who converted.... And this is not like the view of our
rabbis of blessed memory or Onqelos.”

or theology, without necessarily becoming a full-fledged Jew. Later, however, as the Bavli's dominance prevailed, this category disappeared.

The Babylonian Talmud has no place for liminal identities or blurring of boundaries when it comes to fearing God; one is either a Jew or gentile, with conversion the only bridge between them.¹⁸ Later tradition moves in one of two directions, but in each case making them unambiguously Jewish: it either casts the women as converts to Judaism (so Midrash Tadshe or Yalqut Shimoni) or conflates them with the well-known Jewish figures Miriam and Yocheved.

The portrayal of righteous gentile women also challenges the common hierarchies of men and women. As scholars have noted, Jewish texts—both Second Temple and rabbinic—tend to associate women and non-Jews, grouping them together as “other.”¹⁹ This is a deep correlation, cutting through many sources, and not necessarily reflective of a belief held by specific people. The Egyptian midwives tradition is a challenge to that correlation, undermining or subverting this common power structure and asserting that both non-Jews and women—in this case non-Jewish women!—can play a vital role in the salvation of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery and even in their birth as a nation.

These life-giving Egyptian midwives stand in diametric opposition to the image of the seductive non-Jewish temptress, who threatens the identity of the Jewish man.²⁰ The Egyptian midwives do not conform to the

18. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Moshe Lavee, “No Boundaries to the Demarcation of Boundaries: The Babylonian Talmud's Emphasis on Demarcation of Identity,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 84–116; Lavee, *Rabbinic Conversion of Judaism*.

19. Such is the case with traditions regarding Joseph and the wife of Potiphar. See Joshua Levinson, “Cultural Androgyny in Rabbinic Literature,” in *From Athens to Jerusalem: Medicine in Hellenized Jewish Lore and in Early Christian Literature*, ed. Samuel Kottke and Manfred Horstmanshoff (Rotterdam: Erasmus, 2000), 130; Tal Ilan, “The Woman as ‘Other’ in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripentrog (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 77–92.

20. See, for example, the midrash concerning the Midianite women (b. Bekh. 5b). This image has its origins in Prov 1–9, which focuses on the dangerous seductive woman. See Moshe Lavee, “The ‘Other’ Bursts from Within: Gender, Identity and Power Structures in Halakhic and Aggadic Texts” [Hebrew], *Mikan* 15 (2016): 181–208.

system that contrasts male Israelite Jews with others, in which the male Israelite Jews are always superior. These Egyptian women undermine the identity of this imagined male order and thus must be removed from it.

Another reason for the fading of the Egyptian midwife tradition might stem from a deep suspicion of non-Jewish midwives as expressed in Tannaitic halakhah. While m. Avod. Zar. 2:1 permits the use of non-Jewish midwives, the parallel Tosefta (t. Avod. Zar. 3:3) permits them only under the close watch of (presumably) Jewish bystanders:

בת ישראל לא תיילד את הנכרית מפני שמילדת בן לע' זר' ונכרית לא תיילד את בת ישראל מפני שחשודין על הנפשות דברי ר' מאיר. וחכמ' אומ': נכרית מילדת את בת ישראל בזמן שאחרים עומדין על גבה. בינו לבינה אסור, מפני שחשודין על הנפשות.

A Jewish woman should not act as midwife to a non-Jewish woman, because she would be delivering a child for idolatry. And a non-Jewish woman should not act as midwife to a Jewish woman because she is suspected of murder; these are the words of Rabbi Meir. But the sages say: A non-Jewish woman may act as midwife to a Jewish woman when others are standing by her, but if they are alone, it is prohibited because she is suspected of murder.

The Babylonian Talmud adds a story where a non-Jewish midwife boasted of shedding the blood of Jewish women (b. Avod. Zar. 26a):

ור"מ אומר: אפי' אחרות עומדות על גבה נמי לא, דזימנין דמנחא ליה ידא אפוא וקטלא ליה ולא מתחזי. כי ההיא איתתא דאמרה לחברתה: מולדא יהודייתא בת מולדא יהודייתא! אמרה לה: נפישין בישתא דההיא איתתא, דקא משפילנא מינייהו דמא כי אופיא דנהרא.

But Rabbi Meir holds: Not even if others are standing by her, for she may find an opportunity of pressing her hand on the [infant's] temples and killing it without being observed; witness the incident of that woman who, on being called by a neighbor: "Jewish midwife, the daughter of a Jewish midwife" retorted: May as many evils befall that woman, **as I have dropped the blood of [Jewish children] like lumps of wood into the river.**

This is in direct opposition to the Egyptian midwife tradition, in which non-Jews *save* the lives of Jewish babies, and thus call into question the suspicious stance found in Tannaitic law. Hence, it is clear that in certain rabbinic circles there was a discomfort with the use of non-Jewish midwives and that the image of the non-Jewish midwife is that of a threat to

the life of Jewish infants. The canonization and influence of this halakhah is thus another reason for the fading of the Egyptian midwife tradition. Both the Masoretic vocalization identifying the midwives as Jewish and the prevailing midrashic tradition considering them to be Yocheved and Miriam support a more hierarchical and patriarchal construction of society.²¹ They were not born, nor received merely out of linguistic considerations. In that sense the tradition about the Egyptian midwives may be seen as a suppressed tradition, rejected also because it posits a challenge to the patriarchal social structure.

6. Conclusion: Women in the Genizah, Hermeneutic Suspicion, and Charitable Reading

The fragment presented here is not the only case of Genizah midrash offering a more inclusive stance toward women. The Midrash Project at Haifa has encountered other midrashic texts preserved only in the Genizah, which similarly acknowledge important female characters. For example, one text promotes the perspective of Tamar over that of Judah; another portrays the mutuality in marriage demonstrated by Rebekah and Isaac in contrast to Abraham's alleged maltreatment of Sarah.²² The loss of these works might be the result of a type of traditionalist self-censorship, although whether the censorship was conscious or subconscious remains a matter of speculation.

A feminist effort of the kind presented here, to find and identify subversive traditions that undermine the patriarchal lines of hegemony, reflects a charitable reading of rabbinic sources, aimed at identifying voices that may serve and encourage contemporary goals of social justice. In an important critical article Charlotte Fonrobert suggests a hermeneutics of suspicion as a response, if not a reaction, to what she defines as "feminist valorization of midrash." Feminist readers, so she claims, tend to celebrate midrash (both as a discursive mode and as a corpus of traditions) as a means to giving a voice to the other. In a feminist context, this

21. It also decreases the number of named women—Puah and Shifrah are not independently named women. Thus, the number of named and remembered women is decreased, as noted by Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 38–39.

22. See Moshe Lavee and Shana Shick-Strauch, "Equally Good: Mutual Marriage and Proactive Women in a Midrash from the Cairo Genizah" (forthcoming).

refers to women as the others of the patriarchal hegemony dominant in biblical and rabbinic legal corpora. As a discursive mode, the midrash enables a subversive reading that challenges the power structure hidden in the biblical texts, and hence as a body of traditions it contains traditions that give voice to women's aspirations and hidden trickster modes of action. However, according to Fonrobert, when looking at the larger context of such traditions and creative exegetical arguments, one sees how they actually support patriarchal power structure. Among the specific texts with which she deals, she argues that successful woman-trickster manipulation of dominant male figures should not be seen as a model for empowering women, since they served, at the end of the day, the continuity of the existing power structure.²³ The tradition I analyze here is part of the same discourse, in which women are praised, boundaries are threatened, and patriarchal hegemony is challenged, only in cases in which the subversive model serves as a means to support the existing social structure. The midwives were there to save sons, to enable the birth of the male hero who will "let the Jewish people go."

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Ancient Sources Index

Hebrew Bible			
Genesis		12:6	183
		12:10–20	223
		12:11	335, 338
1:26	245	12:13	335, 340, 344, 352
1:27	251, 258, 310	12:14	246, 249, 260
2:20	299	12:14–20	253
2:21	61, 314	12:15	247, 343, 366
2:22	242	12:16	335, 340, 343–44, 352
3:6	34, 366	12:17	192
3:12	216	13:2	335
3:15	169	14:15	348
3:17	183	15:2	63
3:20	169, 315	15:14	361
3:24	94, 96	15:17	349
4	183	15:19	184
5	183	16	169, 189
5:2	167	16:1	191–93, 203
5:32	183	16:2	256
6	169, 183	16:3	196, 199, 207
6:2	169, 366	16:4	196, 205
6:10	183	16:5	35, 169, 205
9:20	346	16:6	196–98, 206
9:22	362	16:7	198, 377
10:2	188	16:8	198
10:6	362	16:9	198, 202
10:8–12	193	16:10	202–3
11	265	16:11	205
11:26–32	183	16:13	202, 208
11:27–28	171	16:14	204
11:29–13:1	169	17:1	183
11:29	189, 252	17:4–5	376
11:30	189, 252, 265–66	17:15	169
12	183, 193, 277	17:16	250
12:1–25:10	324	17:26	344–45
12:5	244–46	18	184, 218

Genesis (cont.)

		24:6	366
18:1	349–50	24:53	351
18:6	347	25	184, 218
18:9	351, 366	25:1	203, 208
18:10	34, 244	25:1–4	190
18:11	258	25:6	203
18:12	219, 258	25:19	254, 257–58
18:13	219	25:27	366
18:14	251	26:5	184
19	170	28:8–9	81
20	193, 253, 277	28:22	226
20:2	343	29	184
20:12	265	29:2	18
20:16	343	29:29	170
20:17	184	30	185, 207, 218
21	65, 189, 198	30:2–3	207
21:1	169, 250–51, 253, 255	30:3–7	170
21:1–21	255	30:15	34, 36
21:1–34	177	30:16	365
21:2	253–54, 258–59	30:21	360–61
21:6	257	30:22	361
21:7	254–58, 348	30:23	361
21:8	257	30:24	361
21:9–14	94, 169, 341	30:25	361
21:10	96, 169, 341	31:19	35
21:11	169	34	225
21:12	169, 177, 265, 341	34:1	363, 365–66
21:14	92, 198, 203, 205, 207	34:1–2	225
21:15	205	34:13	368
21:16	200, 202	34:14	363
21:17	377	34:15	367
21:19	203	34:25	225, 362, 368
21:21	203	34:26	363
21:33	346–47	34:31	368
22:3	344–45	35	184–85
22:4	338–39	35:7	226
22:10	348	36:12	199
23:1–25:18	333	37	185
23:2	299	37:14	362, 368
23:6	340, 351	37:15	365
23:17	346	37:16	368
23:19	347	37:18–20	368
23:20	346	38	73, 76, 81, 165, 169–70, 185
24	63	38:2	225
24:1	169, 184, 333, 352	38:6–8	290

38:25	169, 178	9:27	186
38:26	169	13:19	185
39	221	14:27	186
39:12	34	15	169
40:9	19, 21–22	15:1	30
40:10	19, 21–22	15:20	7, 267–68
41	185	15:21	7, 13, 30
41:45	364	17	185–86
42:3	367	17:8	186
42:22–24	362	17:11	185
46:10	364	19	224
46:15	225, 360	19:15	220, 224
46:17	169, 178	21:7–11	206
46:20	377	21:8	206
48:22	362	21:11	92
49:5	216, 368	23:30	96
50:7	185	24:1	186
50:24–25	364	24:9	185
		28:6	351
Exodus		30:20	58
1–2	29	30:28	58
1:7	22	32:1–20	176
1:8–11	186	32:2	224
1:15	29, 128, 372, 374–75, 377, 379	32:16	171
1:15–21	373	32:20	171
1:16	382	34:2	220
1:17	375	35:25	58–59
1:18	375		
1:21	28, 36	Leviticus	
1:22	233	1:1	233
2	231, 234–35	1:2	223
2:1	28	5:22	284
2:4	7, 164, 174, 267	7	186
2:5	375	7:33	186
2:7	29	7:34	186
2:8	375	9–17	119
2:10	185, 233	9:22	186
2:16	375	10:1–2	25, 214
2:17	96	10:9	215, 234
4	186	11:5	227–28
4:25	375	13	115–16, 119, 186
5:2	186	13:1–14:57	111, 115
6:1	96	13:2–8	119
6:20	232	13:6	120
6:23	186, 214	13:12	123

Leviticus (cont.)

		12:1–2	7, 14
13:13	116	12:4	128
13:18–23	120	12:10	7
13:24–28	120	12:10–15	117
13:28	120	12:12	121, 128
13:29	118	12:15	9, 164, 174
13:40–44	120	13	185, 232
13:45–46	121	13:30	233
14	115	14:24	233
15:25	221	14:27	185
16	186	14:28–29	33
16:1	214	14:30	233
16:3	186, 216	18:2	34
16:4	216	19	25, 217, 316
16:5	216	20	25, 217
18	222, 224, 267	20:1	24, 26
18:4	229	20:1–2	169
19	222	20:13	218
19:14	53	20:28	26
19:19	341	21:6–9	187
20:26	342	22–24	186
21:1	227	26:46	169, 178
21:7	92–93	27	186
21:14	93	27:7	165
22:13	93	27:14	218
23:40	217	30:1	930
23:44	185	32:29–30	185
24:10–11	223	35:25–26	164
24:11	225	35:28	164
26:42	216		
27:2	225	Deuteronomy	
		10:2	25
Numbers		10:6	25
2:20	185	10:17	60
5	9, 252	14:7	227–28
5:1–3	121	17:17	165, 170, 175
5:5–31	15	19:4	164
5:28	253	20:3	184
6:26	60	21:10–14	206
7:9	184	22:13	92
11	185	24:1	79, 98
11:8	171	24:1–4	93
11:16	185	24:9	7, 11, 13
12	13	25	73, 76
12:1	34–35	25:5–10	74–75, 81

26:6	184	1:22	170
26:15	167	2:1	269
29:9	246	2:2	269
30:20	53	2:6	170, 179
31:12	169, 177	9	187
32	46	14	187
32:4	46	16	187
32:32	215	16:2	186–87
32:51	218	17	187
34:5	24	17:4–58	187
		17:6	187
Joshua		18:1	187
2	275	18:20	277
2:3	375	19:11	277
2:10–11	170	22:9–22	186
2:18	276	25	165, 270
7	186	25:20	271
7:19–20	186	25:30	270
24:32	362	25:31	270, 272
		25:33	270–71
Judges		25:39–42	270
4–5	277	25:43	92
4:4	268	25:44	221
4:5	268	26	187
4:6	275		
4:18	229–30	2 Samuel	
5:7	275	1:20	166
5:12	275	1:24	166, 187
5:24	291	2	187
5:24–27	229	3:13–16	277
5:28–31	170	3:14	170
13	186	3:15	221
13:3	219	3:31	187
13:5	186	6:14–22	277
13:22	201	6:23	170
14:2–3	166	10:16–8	187
14:3	170	11:2–27	170, 187
15:2	92	12	187
16	164, 186	12:8	165, 187
19–20	170	13	165, 363
		13:1–22	171
1 Samuel		13:1–39	187
1:11	186	13:13	364
1:13	170	15	187
1:20	186	15:6	187

2 Samuel (cont.)		22:14–20	170, 273
16:21–22	165, 171	22:15	275
17:1–23	186–87		
17:25	164	Isaiah	
18:14	187	8:5	203
18:15	187	10:13	187
20:3	166	21:1–3	187
20:22	170, 179	24	187
21:8	170	29:1	187
22:9–22	187	36–39	187
23:5	50	46:11	335, 338–39
25:44	170	50:1	92, 252
		51:2	252
1 Kings		51:17	22
1	187	51:22	22
1:4	246–49	54:1	50
3:1	234	54:10	217
7:8	234	63:3	22
9:16	234		
9:24	234	Jeremiah	
11:1	234	3:8	92
11:1–2	234	14	188
13:34	186–87	32:19	46
14:10	186–87	32:31	235
15:2	170	35	185
15:30	187		
16	187	Ezekiel	
16:31	170	16:2	171, 176
17	187	35	317
18:13	187	38–39	188
21:1–3	186	44:22	93, 188
21:21–22	186		
		Hosea	
2 Kings		14:10	288
4	222		
4:1	377	Micah	
4:9	222	6:3	217
4:27	222	6:4	8, 11
5:20–27	186–87, 222		
8:18	170	Habakkuk	
8:26	170	1:7	215
18–20	187	11:8	169
18:4	187		
18:16	187	Zechariah	
22:14	273, 276	6:10	188

6:14	188	31:17	347–48
		31:18	332, 348
Malachi		31:19	332, 348
2:13–14	95	31:20	348
3:19	350	31:21	349
3:23–24	187	31:22	350–52
		31:27	201
Psalms			
30:9–10	227	Job	
39:13	200	1:8	188
45:10	193	12:1–15	256
55:14	187	12:12	256
55:21	350	12:15	256
56:9	200	12:18	255–56
72:16	60	12:18–25	256
75:5	214	13:15	188
80:9	19	15:18–19	169
89:37	229	21:8	220
104:3	60	21:11	220
104:35	50	27:5	188
105:10	344	34:29	219–20
139:5	310		
		Song of Songs	
Proverbs		3:11	167
1:25	243	4:12–13	223
5:13–14	48		
9:1–5	171	Ruth	
9:3–4	215	1	78
12:10	54	1:1	375
14:1	171	1:16	375
17:25	48–49	2:4	188
20:17	48–49	2:14	231
21:21	347	3:6	286
23:22	167	4:17	170
23:32	215		
31	3, 32	Ecclesiastes	
31:10	332, 335–36, 338	5:4	225
31:10–23	333	7:28	224
31:10–31	330		
31:10–32	324	Esther	
31:11	332, 335, 339–40	1:22	275
31:12	335, 340, 344	2:7	277
31:13	341–43	2:20	271
31:15	344–45	2:22	164, 188
31:16	345–46	3:10	264

<i>Esther (cont.)</i>		24:7	188
4:4	272		
5:1	273	2 Chronicles	
7:5	227	4:5	127
7:8	171	8:11	234
9:29	273	15:16	170
9:31	274	22:7	170
9:32	274	29–32	187
		29:27	187
Daniel		30:2–3	187
6:1	228	32:30	187
11:1	228	34:22–28	273
Ezra		Second Temple Literature	
2:3	185		
2:5	185	Deuterocanonical Books	
2:6	185		
2:8	185	2 Maccabees	
2:15	185	7	65
2:35	185		
2:36	188	4 Maccabees	
4:3	188	14:20	65
10:19	92	16:20	65
Nehemiah		Pseudepigrapha	
6:14	264		
7:5	185	Jubilees	
7:10	185	30.2	367
7:11	185	41.1–28	281
7:13	185		
7:20	185	Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum	
7:38	185	9.10	38
7:39	188	20.8	37
1 Chronicles		Testament of Judah	
1:18	28	12–13	281
2:18	127		
3:17	222	Qumran Scrolls	
4:5–7	28		
4:7	127	1Q20	
4:18	231–33	XX, 2–8	248
7:27	276		
9:10	188	1QapGen	
12:19	274	XX, 1–8	248
19:4	187		

New Testament		11:2	184
		12:3	183–86, 188
Galatians		Pesahim	
4	190	4:9	187
		10:4	184
1 Timothy		10:5–6	184
2:15	312	Sheqalim	
		1:5	188
Josephus		2:5	187
		6:3	170, 187
<i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>		Yoma	
1.151	266	1:6	188
2.206–7	380	3:8	185
		4:2	185–86
<i>Bellum Judaicum</i>		6:2	185
4.555	48	Rosh Hashanah	
		2:9	186
Tannaitic Literature		3:8	185
		Ta'anit	
Mishnah		2:3	188
		2:4	183, 185–88
Zera'im		2:5	183–84, 186
Berakhot		4:5	185
6:8	173	4:8	167
9	10	Megilah	
9:1	184	1:1	185
9:5	167, 188	3:6	185–86
Pe'ah		4:10	165, 167, 171, 173, 184, 187
2:2	184	Mo'ed Qatan	
2:6	185	3:7	188
Terumot		3:8	24, 26
2:2	184	Hagigah	
8:12	172	1:1	172
Ma'aser Sheni		Nashim	
5:13	167, 184	Yevamot	
Orlah		2:1	77
1:2	184	4:2	75
Bikkurim		4:3	83
1:4	184	4:4	80
3:6	184	4:5	78
		4:7	75
Mo'ed		4:9	79
Shabbat		4:10	83
2:6	304, 311	6:1	80
10:3	184		

m. Yevamot (cont.)

6:2	83	Neziqin	
6:6	103, 167, 251	Bava Qama	
10:1	103	8:6–7	184
10:3	75	9:12	188
13:2	104	Bava Metz'ia	
13:4	105	1:8	187
14:1	91–109	7:1	184, 187
Ketubbot		Bava Batra	
4:12	83	2:9	172
7:6	185	8:3	165, 167, 175, 186
7:10	101, 104	Sanhedrin	
11:2–3	83	1:6	185–86
Nedarim		2:2	165, 187
2:1	186	2:3	187
3:11	166, 185, 187	2:4	165, 167, 175
9:10	166, 187	4:5	172, 183, 249
11:12	172	5:1	173
13:1	183	6:2	185–86
Nazir		10:2	186–87
1:2	163–64, 186	10:3	186
9:5	186–87	Makkot	
Sotah		2:7	164, 187
1:8	165–66, 170, 172, 186–87	Eduyot	
1:9	164, 167, 174, 185, 268	2:10	188
3:4	58	6:1	235
5:4	178, 185	8:7	185, 187
5:5	188	Avodah Zarah	
7:5	183	2:1	386
7:6	186	3:3	172
8:1	184–85, 187	Avot	
9:6	174	1:1	185–86, 306
9:15	187	1:2	305–6, 313
Gittin		1:5	305
2:3	106	1:12	186
2:5	107	2:7	305
3:1	106	3:1	308
8:2	107	3:7	187
9:3	198	3:11	184
9:10	98	5:2	183
Qiddushin		5:3	184
4:14	173, 184, 186	5:6	178, 184–85, 187
3:4	184–85	5:16	165, 187
		5:17	186
		5:18	185, 187
		5:19	184, 186

6:3	187	Yadayim	
6:6	164, 167, 188	3:5	188
6:9	187	4:3	185
6:10	184	4:4	187, 287
		4:5	188
Qodashim		4:8	185–86
Zevahim			
12:1	186	Tosefta	
Menahot			
11:5	185	Zera'im	
Hullin		Berakhot	
7:6	184	1:12	177
8:6	184	1:13	169, 177
10:1	186	3:5	173
Bekhorot		3:6	170, 173, 178
1:7	289	3:7	173
Arakhin		4:16	173
9:6–7	186	4:17	173, 178
Tamid		4:17–18	169, 176
3:7	188	5:2	171
7:2	186	6:13	345
Middot		6:18	10
1:3	170	6:23	167
2:6	170, 187	Terumot	
3:8	188	7:20	170, 172, 179
4:2	188	Bikkurim	
4:7	187	2:16	291
5:4	186		
		Mo'ed	
Toharot		Rosh Hashanah	
Kelim		2:13	169, 177
17:9	185	Megilah	
Ohalot		3:6	169, 177
15:7	186	3:31–36	170, 173, 176
Nega'im		3:31	165, 167
1:4	122	Hagigah	
2:4	123–24	1:1	170, 172, 178
3:1	122		
3:2	117	Nashim	
3:5	118	Yevamot	
Parah		8:4	167
3:5	185, 188	Ketubbot	
8:11	187	12:1	99
Miqvaot		Sotah	
8:5	124	3:9	169, 176

<i>t. Sotah (cont.)</i>		Toharot	
3:15	166, 170, 172, 176	Nega'im	
3:16		1:5	124, 124
4:1		6:2	170, 179
4:3			
4:7	169, 174, 178	Halakhic Midrashim	
4:8			
4:16–17	169	Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael	
5:12	169, 172, 177, 184, 206	va-yehi 1	199
6:4		shirata 10	28, 30, 268
6:6	169, 177	Pisha 14	57
7:9	169, 177	Pisha 17	20
8:4	170, 178		
9:2		Mekhilta de Rabbi Shime'on bar Yohai	
9:3	169, 174, 178	va-yehi 14:6	199
9:4		shirata 10	13, 18, 29, 38
11:1	169, 178	Amalek 3	276
11:8	11, 16, 37, 169, 178, 218		
11:17–20	170, 179	Sifra	
12:3	170, 176	tzav, mekhilta de-miluim 2	199
15:15	171	tazria, pereq 1:3	345
Gittin		tazria negaim, parashah 5:1	118
6:1	107	metzora, parashah 5:7–8	13, 32
Qiddushin		emor, parashah 14:4	225
5:16–21	169, 173, 177	behuqqotai, pereq 8:7	216
Neziqin		Sifre on Numbers	
Bava Qama		42	218
7:3	171	78	28, 128, 276, 380
7:4	171	88	221
Bava Batra		92	199
1:11	170, 172	99	13, 32
7:8	165, 167, 175	133	175
Sanhedrin		141	199
4	175		
4:2	165	Sifre Zuta on Numbers	
4:5	165, 167, 170, 176	10:28	276
4:11	170, 176	12:1	129
4:16	173		
4:17–18	173	Sifre on Deuteronomy	
8:9	169, 171–72, 215	1	14
13:3	170, 178	33	221
Avodah Zarah		48	330
3:3	386	307	15, 46
3:19	170–72, 176	249	287

288	77, 79	Avodah Zarah	
		1:2, 39c	235
Seder Olam Rabbah	264		
7	25	Aggadic Midrashim	
10	40		
21	263, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 273	Genesis Rabbah	
		8	245
Amoraic Literature		8:1	216, 310
		8:5	248
Talmud Yerushalmi		8:12	226
		9:12	248
Zera'im		12:6	248
Berakhot		15:4	336
2:3, 4c	20	15:7	215
3:4, 6c	58	15:20	338
4:1, 7a	269	16:5	205
9:3, 14a	359	17:3	100
Kila'yim		17:7	61, 314
9:3, 32c	16	17:8	311
		18:2	35, 242–43, 247–48, 254
Mo'ed		21:3	310
Shabbat		24:2	310
2:6, 5b	311	36:1	219
Eruvin		38–39	193
10:1, 26a	20, 277	38:14	247
Yoma		39:14	244, 246, 256–57, 259
1:1, 38b	23, 24	40:5	246, 248–49, 254–55, 259
Mo'ed Qatan		40:17	192
3:1, 81d	53	45:1	191, 193, 330
Hagigah		45:3	196, 199, 207
2:1, 77c	291	45:4	196, 204, 247
		45:5	35, 36, 197
Nashim		45:6	196–97, 205–7
Yevamot		45:7	198, 201
2:4, 3d	222	45:10	202, 208
Ketubbot		47:2	250–51
12:3, 35b	16	48:18	218, 350
Sotah		48:19	250–51
3:4, 19a	58, 59	49:2	336
		51:36	286–87
Neziqin		53	255, 259
Sanhedrin		53:1–6	255
4:13, 22c	215	53:1	256, 259
10:1, 27d	216	53:5	250
10:2, 29b	222	53:6	252, 254, 258

<i>Genesis Rabbah (cont.)</i>		14:2	339
53:8	250	14:8	225
53:9	254–55, 257	15:5	125
53:13	197, 203, 205	15:8	33, 217
53:14	198, 200, 203–4	16:1	33, 216–17
53:15	203	16:5	33, 217
58:8	346	17:3	33, 217
58:9	347	18:2	215–16, 229, 310
60:14	204	19:2	216, 234
61:4	203–4, 208	19:6	221, 228
62:3	347	20:2	214, 216
63:9	366	20:12	24, 217
70	63	21:11	216
70:8	18, 39	22:3	219
71	207	22:4	16–17, 217
75:4	201	23:1	216
80:1	226, 365	23:3	219
80:5	34–35	23:9–11	221
80:10	18	23:9	229
80:11	364	23:10	229
82	199	23:11	230
85:16	295	24:6	222–23
88:5	19, 21	25:2	216
91:6	367	26:8	227
99:7	368	27:1	219
		27:4	216
<i>Leviticus Rabbah</i>		27:5	219
1:3	232–33	27:6	217
1:9	216	28:4	227
2:1	216, 223	28:6	227
2:7	216	29:1	216
2:8–10	216	29:12	216
4:1	219	30:10	217
5:1	219	31:4	217–18
7:6	219	31:9	216
9:9	216, 218	32:3	228
10:1	219	32:5	216, 221, 223, 225–26
10:5	216	34	230
11:1	215	34:8	230–31
11:7	219	36:5	216
12:1	215	36:6	216
12:5	219–20, 234	37:1	216, 225
13:2	224	37:4	216
13:5	227		
14:1	216, 310		

Lamentations Rabbah		26b	53
1	65	Yoma	
1:1	63, 64	28b	345
3:6	15, 48	66b	59
1:13	227	Ta'anit	
		4a	63
Pesiqta de Rav Kahana		5b	278
Pisqa 6 et korbanei lahmi 2	231	9a	15, 217
Pisqa 10 aser te'aser 4	330	23b	51
Pisqa 11 vayehi beshalah 6	223	Megilah	
Pisqa 12 bahodesh hashlishi, 1	330	13a	232–33, 266, 271, 277
Pisqa 20 roni aqara 6	215	14a	27, 263–69, 270, 272
Pisqa 26 aharei mot 2	214	14a–b	264, 266, 269
Pisqa 26 aharei mot 11	24	14a–15a	274, 278–79
		14b	272–76, 278
Talmud Bavli		15a	247, 272, 276–77
		16a	227
Zera'im		16b	274
Berakhot		18a	53
5b	125	25b	176
10a	50	Mo'ed Qatan	
10b	222	7b	117
31b	15, 253, 269	17a	53
40a	215	27b–28a	24
60a	359–60	92b	198
61a	310	Hagigah	
		12a	310
Mo'ed			
Shabbat		Nashim	
13a	296	Yevamot	
13a–b	53	64a–b	251–52
56a	235	65b	218
152a	272	93b–94a	85
Eruvin		103a	230
18a	310	106a–b	86
53a	299	107b–108a	105
53b–54a	50, 64	109a	85
63b	53	Ketubbot	
Pesahim		9b	103
4a	345	17a	296
50b	291	27b	93
66b	275	63a	54
113b	95	Nedarim	
Rosh Hashanah		50a	54
17b	60	53b–54a	50

<i>b. Nedarim (cont.)</i>		26a	386
64	121	Horayot	
Nazir		10b	288
23a	288		
23b	230	Qodashim	
Sotah		Zevahim	
11a–12b	127	102a	214
11b	128, 374	Hullin	
11b–12a	28	5a	53
11b–13a	28, 268	60a	60
12a	28, 127, 129	92a	21
12b	232	104b	269
12b–13a	29	109b	53
13a	299	139b	265
Gittin		Bekhorot	
26b	104	34b	117
57a	66	Me'ilah	
57b	66	17b	201
90a	98		
90b	95	Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature	
Qiddushin			
6a	80	Tanhuma-Yelammedenu	
8b–9a	80	hayyei Sarah 8	203
81b	296		
		Tanhuma (Printed edition)	
Neziqin		Genesis	
Bava Metzi'a		Vayera 22	345
86b	17	Hayei Sarah 4	329
87a	254, 256–58	Va-yetze 8	359–60
Bava Batra		Va-yishlah 8	225
17a	26	Va-yeshev 2	365
58b	249	Va-yeshev 6	35
120a	28	Va-yeshev 7	285
Sanhedrin		Exodus	
19b	221, 233	Va-yaqhel 4	225
21b	234–35	Leviticus	
38a	215, 310	Va-yiqra 6	229
39a	61	Zav 7	218
39b	249	Shemini 2	214
70a	215	Shemini 8	228
90b	60	Metzora 1	126
99b	245–46	Metzora 2	33
Avodah Zarah		Aharei 1	214
17b–18a	15	Numbers	
18a	49	Ba-midbar 2	39

Be-haalotekha 10	221	Post-Amoraic Literature	
Shalah 5	33		
Huqat 1	17	Exodus Rabbah	
Pinhas 13	231	1:13	268
		1:26	233
Tanhuma (Buber Edition)		1:28	225
Genesis		48:2	225
Lekh lekha 8	249		
Hayei Sarah 3	329, 335	Song of Songs Rabbah	
Va-yetze 19	359	4:5	217
Va-yishlah 17	35	4:9	224
Va-yishlah 19	366	4:12	223
Va-yishlah 20	225	6:4	224
Exodus			
Bo 16	221	Ruth Rabbah	
Va-yaqhel 3	225	5:6	231
Leviticus		7:9	287
Va-yiqra 10	229		
Zav 10	218	Ecclesiastes Rabbah	
Shemini 3	214	2:2	214
Shemini 14	228	5:4	225
Metzora 6	33	5:5	17
Aharei 2	214	7:28	224
Numbers		10	366
Ba-midbar 2	39		
Shalah 6	33	Esther Rabbah	
Huqat 1	39	3:2	229
Balaq 25	223	6:10	247
		8:3	228
Numbers Rabbah		10:4	227
1:2	217		
3:6	223	Avot de Rabbi Nathan	
10:4	215, 235	A 1	306–7, 309–11, 313
10:8	215	A 2	53
11:7	218	A 4	305–6
13:20	217	A 4–5	313
15:16	221	A 19	308
20:22	223	B 1	306, 309, 311, 313
21:20	231	B 2	53
		B 5	314
Deuteronomy Rabbah		B 5–8	313
7:5	232	B 8	310, 314, 317
		B 8–9	305–6, 313
Aggadat Bereshit		B 9	311–12, 314
34	330	B 32	308

<i>Avot de Rabbi Nathan (cont.)</i>		Pirke Rabbeinu Ha-Qadosh	
B 42	311	30b	295
B 45	381		
		Nonrabbinic Literature	
Massekhet Semahot			
12:13	48	Targumim	
Midrash on Psalms		Onkelos	
22:3	271	Exodus 1:15	373
139:5	310		
		Pseudo-Jonathan	
Midrash on Proverbs		Genesis 30:21	359
14:1	30	Exodus 1:15	373
31	331		
		Targum Yerushalmi	
Midrash Aggadah (Buber)		Exodus 1:15	373
<i>miqetz</i> 41	364		
shemini-tazria 12	345	Targum	
		1 Chr 4:18	233
Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer	192		
30	198, 203	Piyyut	
32	366		
33	222	Eleazar berabbi Qillir	
38	364, 366	Piyyut for the Hoshaanot	39
45	224	Piyyut <i>yotzrot</i> for Rosh	
50	227	Hashannah	359
Seder Eliyahu		Piyyut <i>ahat sha'alti</i>	300, 315–17
16	53		
		Pinhas Ha-Cohen	
Yalkut Talmud Torah		Piyyut for Nisan	40
Shalah 51a	33		
		Yannai	
Yalqut Shimoni		Piyyut on Eshet Hayil	331–32
On Joshua 9	376	<i>Qedushta</i> on Sarah	355
Midrash Hanukah			
133	294	Qur'an	
		Sura 12:30–32	285
Midrash Tadshe			
376			
Midrash Zuta on Ruth			
4:11	331		

