

# The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity

*Edited by*

E. Grypeou & H. Spurling

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BRILL

The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and  
Christians in Late Antiquity

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# The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity

*Edited by*

Emmanouela Grypeou  
Helen Spurling



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## EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Judaism and Christianity share much of a heritage. There has been a good deal of interest in this phenomenon lately, examining both the common heritage, as well as the elements unique to each religion. There has, however, been no systematic attempt to present findings relative to both Jewish and Christian tradition to a broad audience of scholars. It is the purpose of the Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series to do just that.

Jewish and Christian Perspectives publishes studies that are relevant to both Christianity and Judaism. The series will include works relating to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the Second Temple period, the Judaeo-Christian polemic (from Ancient until Modern times), Rabbinical literature relevant to Christianity, Patristics, Medieval Studies and the Modern period. Special interest will be paid to the interaction between the religions throughout the ages. Historical, exegetical, philosophical and theological studies are welcomed as well as studies focusing on sociological and anthropological issues common to both religions including archaeology.

The series is published in co-operation with the Bar-Ilan University and the Schechter Institute in Israel, and the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the Tilburg University in the Netherlands. It includes monographs and congress volumes in the English language, and is intended for international distribution on a scholarly level.

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## PREFACE

Edward Kessler

This book represents a meeting ground for the study of the Bible and Jewish-Christian relations. Both have changed dramatically in recent years.

The editors, Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, have brought together a collection of papers which were originally delivered at a conference they organized under the auspices of The Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations and the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Cambridge in June 2007.

Since the Bible includes the Scriptures both of the Jewish People and the Church, its interpretation is a crucial factor in understanding Christian-Jewish relations. Of course, as a classical text of Antiquity, the Bible invites and requires interpreting. In the last decade or two, scholarship has come to show that the encounter between Judaism and Christianity has been two way. Previously, it had generally been assumed that Judaism influenced Christianity, but the possibility of the ongoing influence of Christianity upon Judaism was ignored or even dismissed. The research project which prompted this volume challenges such presuppositions, demonstrating many examples from over nearly a millennium when Jewish and Christian interpreters continued to interact on the basis of scriptural interpretation.

By shedding light on the encounter between Jews and Christians in the first millennium and challenging previously held assumptions, *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* will ensure that, henceforth, a study of the vigorous ongoing Jewish-Christian encounter is essential in our understanding of Rabbinics and Patristics. As Philip Alexander has stated in this volume 'there is a powerful intertextuality between the two exegetical traditions, which students of each should always bear in mind. Broadly speaking, the history of Christian Bible-exegesis cannot be properly understood without taking into account the history of Jewish Bible-exegesis, and vice versa: only when one is read against the other do many of the exegetical moves that each makes begin to make sense' (Alexander 2009, 1). This is a significant departure from traditional patristic and/or rabbinic

studies and might be compared to the transformation in New Testament studies caused by the ‘rediscovery’ among scholars of the Jewishness of Jesus some thirty years ago. New Testament scholarship no longer ignores or denigrates the Jewishness of Jesus or first-century Judaism as it once did.

Such dramatic changes in scholarship also mirror the seismic shift in modern Christian-Jewish relations, which as a result of studies in the first half of the twentieth century, eventually led to the realization among Christians, for example, that Jewish interpretation of scripture could no longer be considered as ‘false.’ This is illustrated by the contemporary teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which now states that, ‘The Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures (...) a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion’ (*The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 2002).

For their part, Jews initially responded with distrust to the modern changes in Christian teaching about Judaism. There were, of course, individual Jewish figures who promoted a positive view of Christianity, such as Martin Buber who reminded Jews that Jesus was a fellow Jew, their ‘great brother.’ But in recent years there have been stirrings of a more widespread interest in Christianity, illustrated by the publication in 2000 of *Dabru Emet* (‘Speak Truth’), a cross-denominational Jewish statement on relations with Christianity which asserts that ‘Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book—the Bible (what Jews call “Tanakh” and Christians call the “Old Testament”).’

In other words, both Jewish and Christian scholars of early Judaism and Christianity take more seriously than ever before the role of the Christian-Jewish encounter. What makes Grypeou’s and Spurling’s volume especially significant is that it demonstrates that the Jewish-Christian encounter continued to play an important role in biblical interpretation for many centuries, not just during the New Testament period. *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* uncovers elements of a long and continuing relationship, which contributes to an improved understanding of the process of biblical exegesis as well as the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

The editors and contributors of this book provide us with a remarkable collaboration in the study of biblical interpretation; a collaboration, which does not aim to resolve the differences that shape the particularities of each community, but rather recognizes and analyzes significant commonalities and differences as well as depicting a sur-

prising number of exegetical encounters. Indeed, this publication is an example of the vitality of contemporary Jewish-Christian relations, which is dependent in large measure on each community understanding and appreciating interpretative similarities and dissimilarities, without exaggerating either.

I am grateful to both Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling for their hard work to prepare this publication and also to the three major funders of the multi-year research project: The Leverhulme Trust, The Newton Trust and The Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations. We are also grateful to the Faculty of Divinity, for its encouragement and support.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to all the contributors for having created a volume for which I (and I am sure also you, the reader) can be truly grateful.

Edward Kessler  
Director, Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths  
Fellow, St Edmund's College, Cambridge



## INTRODUCTION

Helen Spurling and Emmanouela Grypeou

The study of the relationship between Jewish and Christian exegesis, expressed here as 'exegetical encounter' has had a long and varied past reflecting both social and historic changes and progression in academic methods. The centrality of biblical exegesis for Jewish-Christian relations today is clear due to a shared Bible which provides a basis for discussion and debate. However, the current situation is also influenced by the history of interpretation, which makes study of the character of past interpretations and the relationship between exegetes of the different groups of utmost importance.

This volume addresses the topic of the relationship between Jewish and Christian exegesis in Late Antiquity, a formative period for the two religions. It examines the work of the Rabbis and Church Fathers, but also considers material broader than the classical literature to include for example the *piyyutim* or Gnostic writings. The unifying theme of the work is focus on examination of interpretations of the book of Genesis, a book of theological significance to both Jewish and Christian traditions.

The occasion for this book was provided by the conference entitled 'The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity' held at the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Cambridge in June 2007. The conference was organized in connection with a research project of the same title examining the relationship between Jewish and Christian biblical interpreters on Genesis. Scholars with expertise in rabbinic and patristic exegesis were invited, along with those who could contribute to the discussion of related literature such as Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and Gnostic writings. In this way, a range of scholars with different perspectives and interests in aspects of Genesis exegesis were brought together to promote debate. The participants could speak on any topic of relevance to the question of the relationship or 'encounter' between Jewish and Christian exegesis of Genesis up to Late Antiquity, with welcome to both positive and critical approaches. Following the success of the conference, the organizers have worked to prepare the papers presented at that time for publication in order

to disseminate further the ideas raised and the contributions made to the field, and to further explore the possibility of exegetical encounter between Jewish and Christian biblical commentators.

PHILIP ALEXANDER opened the conference, as his contribution now begins the volume with “‘In the beginning’: Rabbinic and Patristic Exegesis of Genesis 1:1.’ Following useful preliminary remarks on the concept of ‘shared Bible’ and the history of the relationship between Jewish and Christian exegesis, he examines the intertextuality of Jewish and Christian traditions on Gen 1:1. He explores the *locus classicus* for the identification of Torah as the agent of creation in GenR 1:1, and also interpretations found in texts such as the piyyutim and targumim. On the Christian side, he investigates the *locus classicus* for Christ as the agent of creation in Col 1:15–17 along with exegesis in the work of Church Fathers such as Origen. His examination of the texts leads to the proposition that the material presents evidence of an interactive, dialectical process over time.

DMITRIJ BUMAZHNOV begins the assessment of Adam in his chapter ‘Adam Alone in Paradise. A Jewish-Christian Exegesis and Its Implications for the History of Asceticism.’ In this work he explores the relationship between exegesis, ecclesiology and the theology of asceticism in the first four centuries CE. In particular, he focuses on the late second—early third century ‘The Word of Saint Barsabas,’ and a letter to monks probably written by the fourth century Egyptian bishop Serapion of Thmuis. The topic of exegesis under investigation is God’s command to Adam to work and to guard Paradise in Gen 2:15. The essay explores the adoption and adaptation of a Jewish interpretation of the biblical text, as found in apocryphal writings, Philo and the targumim, and how approaches to this Jewish tradition may to a certain extent have depended upon the trajectories of the development of the ascetical movement.

The title of BURTON VISOTZKY’s contribution is ‘Will and Grace: Aspects of Judaizing in Pelagianism in Light of Rabbinic and Patristic Exegeses of Genesis.’ In this essay, Visotzky addresses the thorny theological problems of Free Will, God’s Grace and Original Sin, as based on exegesis of the creation of humanity in Genesis. The paper examines the nature of the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine on these topics, with reference to parallel developments in rabbinic sources including Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah and Pirque Abot. He illustrates how Augustine considered the Pelagian position to be

‘judaising’ and, indeed, that it does show affinity to rabbinic thought of the period, but a number of parallels with Augustinian exegesis are also drawn which may be a reflection of *Zeitgeist*.

Visotzky’s treatment of Free Will and Original sin is followed thematically by HANNEKE REULING’s work on ‘The Christian and the Rabbinic Adam: Genesis Rabbah and Patristic Exegesis of Genesis 3:17–19.’ Reuling outlines and contrasts Jewish and Christian ‘fall’ traditions, with specific reference to Didymus the Blind, Pelagian theology, John Chrysostom and Genesis Rabbah. In particular, she contrasts the patristic concern with sin and punishment with the ‘multifocality’ of interpretation in the midrash. Reuling concludes that Church Fathers and Rabbis interpreted the figure of Adam from a deeply different perspective and so the Christian and the rabbinic Adam parted ways. She suggests that this separation may be explained by internal theological reasons, although the ‘silence’ on the rabbinic side may also be a response to the way Christians appropriated the Eden account.

GERARD LUTTIKHUIZEN contributes to the study of exegetical encounter by examining the role of Gnostic ideas in Jewish and Christian interpretation of Genesis in his work ‘Critical Gnostic Interpretations of Genesis.’ He examines the biblical Paradise story as it is explained and rewritten in Gnostic Christian texts, focusing on the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth*, with the aim of elucidating the historical context and the possible purpose of these interpretations. Luttkhuizen draws attention to the critical depiction of the biblical God in these texts, and goes on to challenge the prevailing opinion that this interpretation originated in Jewish circles. Rather, he proposes that the criticism came from second century Christian circles and represents Christian debates about the interpretation and theological significance of the Old Testament.

MICHAEL STONE also discusses Genesis 3, but from the point of view of the roles of Satan and the serpent in Armenian sources in his chapter on “‘Be You a Lyre for me’: Identity or Manipulation in Eden.’ Stone focuses on Armenian Christian sources in comparison with the rabbinic tradition, and asks questions such as: what was the relationship between Satan and the serpent, where did Satan originate, and why did he deceive Adam and Eve according to this literature? Jewish material is addressed from the point of view of these topics with particular reference to pre-rabbinic Jewish literature and Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer. This leads to his conclusion that the concept of Satan and the serpent

in the Armenian texts resemble those in the primary Adam books and Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer, which could indicate the existence of a common tradition that may be traced to Wisdom of Solomon.

ROBERT HAYWARD focuses on detailed examination of the Cain and Abel story in early Jewish and Christian sources in his essay 'What did Cain do wrong? Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 4:3–6.' He begins with study of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel according to the Septuagint, Philo and Wisdom of Solomon. This is followed by investigation of New Testament writings on Cain and Abel, the work of Josephus, and Irenaeus on the sacrifices of Cain and Abel. The targumim are discussed throughout the chapter in relation to the texts under consideration. Hayward makes reference to evidence of continuity and discontinuity of interpretation with the earliest Jewish sources, and the modifications and expansions of the Cain and Abel story and its interpretations according to theological or homiletical needs.

SEBASTIAN BROCK addresses the role of women in Syriac poetry in his essay on 'Creating Women's Voices: Sarah and Tamar in some Syriac Narrative Poems.' The focus of his contribution is the role and character given to the figures of Sarah and Tamar in Syriac poetry, with particular reference to Abraham and Sarah in Egypt as depicted in an Anonymous poem attributed to Ephrem, Sarah and the Akedah as described in two anonymous Syriac narrative poems and Tamar and Judah as found in a verse homily by Jacob of Serugh. Throughout the paper reference is made to indirect links with Jewish tradition and parallel passages. Brock's chapter concludes by noting that it is the Syriac tradition that provides some of the strongest connections to Christianity's Jewish roots.

GÜNTER STEMBERGER writes on 'Genesis 15 in Rabbinic and Patristic Interpretation.' He carefully outlines rabbinic tradition on three key themes, namely, problems raised by the biblical text with regard to questions of chronology, Abraham's belief as mentioned in Gen 15:6, and the sacrificial scene with its interpretation of history. He refers to a wide ranging number of Jewish sources including Targum, Talmud and Midrash, and they are compared and contrasted with Church Fathers such as Augustine, Origen, Aphrahat and Ephrem the Syrian. The chapter concludes by drawing out three essential points of contact between Christians and Jews in exegesis of Genesis 15: a common hermeneutic universe; dialogue and polemic; and differences of argument as seen in the discussion of the sacrifice and the vision of Abraham.

JUDITH FRISHMAN writes on “‘And Abraham Had Faith’: But in What? Ephrem and the Rabbis on Abraham and God’s Blessings.’ In this chapter, Frishman compares how the promises made to Abraham by God and his faith in them are understood in Ephrem the Syrian’s *Commentary on Genesis* and *Genesis Rabbah*. Ephrem’s portrayal of this topic is considered in reference to the election of Abraham, the covenant of Genesis 15, the chastity of Abraham, the laughter of Abraham in Genesis 17 and the blessings in Genesis 22. *Genesis Rabbah* is examined for its portrayal of Abraham’s faith with emphasis on the meritorious actions of Abraham, such as with regard to proselytism, hospitality and circumcision, which are an indication of his righteousness. Overall, Frishman shows how Ephrem’s commentary and the Jewish tradition on Abraham are very close, partly based on the biblical text itself, but also reflecting a shared heritage even if different theological ideas are emphasized in the respective interpretations.

EMMANOUELA GRYPEOU and HELEN SPURLING titled their contribution ‘Abraham’s Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18–19.’ It focuses on detailed examination of the interpretation of Abraham’s angelic visitors in both Jewish (Helen Spurling) and Christian (Emmanouela Grypeou) tradition, followed by discussion of the points of exegetical encounter. The approach taken here was to examine the Jewish and Christian exegesis within its own internal context, before turning to comparative analysis. A range of material from Late Antiquity is assessed, but particular attention is given to *Genesis Rabbah* and the targumim and Justin Martyr, examining questions such as the development of ideas through the process of transmission. They argue for evidence of potential dialectic between Jewish and Christian exegesis of Genesis 18–19 on the topics of angelology, the pre-incarnate Christ and the Trinity.

ALISON SALVESEN discusses Ephrem the Syrian’s *Commentary on Genesis* and *Genesis Rabbah*, along with the targumim, in her paper ‘Keeping it in the Family? Jacob and his Aramean Heritage according to Jewish and Christian Sources.’ She considers the question of ‘encounter’ through examination of the themes of identity, ethnicity and nationhood in the stories of Jacob and his dealings with Laban and his family. Ephrem’s commentary and *Genesis Rabbah* are investigated for their respective attitudes to Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Laban and the land they live in. She concludes that *Genesis Rabbah*’s mixture of positive and negative views of Laban and his family is based on the theological agenda

of its editors. On the other hand, Ephrem may be reacting specifically to the negative aspects of the Jewish attitude towards Aram, because of his claim to an ancestral link to the people of God that cannot be shared by non-Syriac Christians.

STEFAN REIF's contribution is on 'Early Rabbinic Exegesis of Genesis 38.' He approaches the question of exegetical encounter by opting to analyze closely the relevant sources within the Jewish tradition in order to fully comprehend the range of material on Judah and Tamar, which he sees as a necessary foundation before turning to comparative study of the Christian material. His analysis of the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 characterizes and contextualizes each rabbinic tradition, and indicates how they represent aspects of the religious practice and theology of their composers. This analysis is presented through a thematic treatment of the midrashic material with discussion on how the traditions relate to the original biblical text and the issues raised by Genesis 38. His investigation continues with reference to Medieval Exegesis and closes with a summary of exegetical questions and responses.

MARC HIRSHMAN closes the volume with an alternative approach to the question of exegetical encounter. He conducts a comparative study of the methods used by Jewish and Christian exegetes in their interpretation of Genesis in his work on 'Origen's View of "Jewish Fables" in Genesis.' In particular, Hirshman draws a contrast between examples of Origen's exegesis where he describes other interpretations of a biblical story negatively as 'mythos' with the treatment of those biblical passages in Genesis Rabbah. He notes that Origen criticizes interpretations that do not follow the appropriate allegorical method. Hirshman concludes that Origen distinguishes his spiritual understanding of the biblical text from everyday stories on the one hand and Jewish fables on the other hand, and so we find evidence of polemic over the issue of method.

The variety of different topics considered in this volume from the point of view of the question of exegetical encounter provides a profound indication of the complexity of the material and depth of analysis required to present a serious investigation of the relationship between Jewish and Christian exegesis of Genesis. What we hope to contribute with this volume is to bring to light material previously neglected in discussion of exegetical encounter and to present new ideas, such as through demonstrating the significance of Christian interpretations for the understanding of rabbinic exegesis as well as vice versa. The issue of methodology has plagued discussion of the relationship between Jewish and Christian exegesis, and what is particularly important in

this volume is the contribution made to the field through the expression and explication of the variety of methodological approaches adopted from chapter to chapter. The papers are also of significance for the different types of encounter they espouse—whether polemic, silence, difference, parallels, borrowing or dialectic. It is hoped that the contributions will complement existing work and promote further discussion on these issues.

Finally, it remains our pleasure to thank the many people who were involved in this volume and brought its publication to fruition. First of all, our thanks go to the contributors in this volume; their participation in the conference in 2007 made the occasion a great success, and their dedicated efforts to revise their conference papers for this volume is much appreciated. The editors at Brill have proven to be patient and incredibly helpful with the final editing of papers. Thanks to those who attended the conference and contributed to the discussions provoked by the papers. Our grateful appreciation goes to the Faculty of Divinity for hosting the conference. Our special thanks to Dan Avasilichioaie who helped us with the organisation of the conference and throughout the ‘Exegetical Encounter’ project. Also, many thanks to Chris Carman, Lucia Hidveghyova and Marilyn Motley who helped with the practical side of the arrangements. We would particularly like to thank the Leverhulme Trust, the Newton Trust and the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies whose generous support of the ‘Exegetical Encounter’ project enabled the research upon which our own contribution is based. Finally, our thanks go to all at the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations of the Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths; the continued support offered by the team at the Institute has been of immense value during the editing of this volume. The vision of Ed Kessler has in large part facilitated our work both on this volume and during the course of the ‘Exegetical Encounter’ project, and his personal support and encouragement has been unfailing.



‘IN THE BEGINNING’:  
RABBINIC AND PATRISTIC EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 1:1

Philip Alexander  
*University of Manchester*

Since Late Antiquity the major Christian churches and the Synagogue have acknowledged the same corpus of texts—the Tanakh/Old Testament—as the Word of God. Since Jerome, many Christian authorities have conceded that inspiration inheres primarily in the *Hebraica veritas*, providentially preserved by the Synagogue, and turned gratefully to Jewish scholarship to help them understand it. This shared Scripture is often seen as a force for unity, as the bedrock of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There is obvious truth in this claim, but it should not obscure the fact that the common Bible is also a source of division and controversy. Each religion has interpreted the same Scripture in very different ways. Indeed—and this is a major claim of the present paper—each religion has tended to interpret the shared Bible in a way aimed precisely at excluding the other’s interpretation and thus destroying the biblical foundations of its faith. What this often means is that Christian readings of key Old Testament passages are forged with explicit or implicit reference to Jewish readings of the same passages, and are designed to validate Christianity and to deny any advantage that Jewish opponents might seek to derive from them. And vice versa. In other words there is a powerful intertextuality between the two exegetical traditions, which students of each should always bear in mind. Broadly speaking, the history of Christian Bible-exegesis cannot be properly understood without taking into account the history of Jewish Bible-exegesis, and vice versa: only when one is read against the other do many of the exegetical moves that each makes begin to make sense. This comparative reading has been practised surprisingly little. Few experts in the one tradition have competence in the other, and when comparisons are made they are usually in terms of influences and borrowings (normally from Judaism to Christianity), rather than in terms of a radically dialectical hermeneutic.

The debates between the two faiths around their shared Bible may seem, on the face of it, a positive exercise. At least the disputing parties acknowledge a common point of reference, a common court of appeal,

and by the very act of debating appear to concede that their differences can be settled by reasoned argument aimed at discerning the mind of God in Scripture. Whichever side can prove its case from Scripture wins, and the other is obliged to bow to the truth. Of course it never actually works like this. Quite apart from the problem of deciding the meaning of *any* text, a problem made critical by post-modernism, it is hard to find many on either side of this particular controversy who have been convinced by the exegesis of the other. The exegetical arguments *appear* to be designed to win over opponents, but in fact they serve other purposes—assuring those already committed that their faith is grounded in revelation, or using Scripture as a theological resource.

Both traditions are clear-sighted on this point, and have constructed fall-back positions which allow them to assert the correctness of their exegeses *a priori*, irrespective of the strength of the exegetical arguments. On the Jewish side the doctrine of the Oral Torah serves this purpose. Though recognized as a fundamental article of faith, this dogma is seldom mentioned explicitly in Rabbinic literature and remains annoyingly hard to define. It tends to emerge only in polemical contexts, and it amounts to little more than an assertion that only those within the Rabbinic tradition, who have studied with the right masters in an allegedly unbroken chain of tradition going back to Moses, can have the right interpretation. Everyone else lacks authority, and is simply wrong if he fails to agree with the Rabbis. Similar doctrines exist on the Christian side, where the Church or some ‘inner light’ (depending on one’s ecclesiastical adherence) gets to decide in the end what Scripture means. For a time, in the wake of the Enlightenment, liberal Christianity thought it had found a way out of this impasse through the historical, critical and philological study of the Bible, but the faith of the critical scholars in their own neutrality and objectivity, and in the self-evident priority of the historical, and even authorial sense, now looks naïve, and has long ago vanished into the fog of post-modernism.

I want to explore the intertextuality between the two exegetical traditions with regard to a particular period and a particular biblical text. The period is the first few centuries of the current era when the ways were parting between the two faiths, and when exegetical debates were particularly sharp as each jockeyed to define and defend itself against the other. The biblical text which will claim our attention will be the opening verse of the account of creation in Genesis 1. This text does not immediately present itself as potentially disputed ground between the two faiths, at least not in the way that texts that appear to imply the existence of two Powers in heaven, or suggest that the Torah of Moses

might one day be abrogated, or predict the coming of the Messiah, or discuss the nature of the covenant between God and Israel, would be predictable hotspots of debate. I have investigated these themes elsewhere, and shown that in these cases the dialectical hermeneutic is palpable (P.S. and L.C.A. Alexander, forthcoming). What I will explore in this paper is whether even on apparently neutral, uncontested ground the two traditions can sometimes be detected as moving in mutual awareness and subtly taking up positions relative to each other. On questions of the unity of God, the abrogation of the Torah, the Messiah, and the nature of the Sinai covenant the two camps were at open war: there is, therefore, an *a priori* presumption in favour of the view that their exegesis of the relevant biblical passages will reflect this fact. But they did not obviously disagree on the doctrine of creation. Did a dialectical hermeneutic operate here too, and if it did, how can we detect it?

The opening verses of Genesis, so clear and simple in the classic English versions, have proved deeply problematic. Do they support a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, as has usually been assumed, or do they actually represent creation as the divine ordering of pre-existent chaotic matter, the origins of which are indeterminate? This question has immense theological significance—at stake would seem to be theism itself—but curiously, taken as a whole, it does not much trouble either the Jewish or the Christian exegetical tradition. There are both Jewish and Christian exegetes who support the view that creation in Genesis 1 involves the ordering of pre-existent matter, and not *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>1</sup> In other words, this particular debate, theologically important though it is, cuts across the confessional divide. The confessional disagreement is located elsewhere—in the meaning of the opening word *bereshit*. The majority on both sides agree that this has a strictly temporal sense—‘in the beginning,’ but a significant minority on both sides argue that this temporal meaning does not do justice to the unusual word *reshit*: rather *reshit* here points to an agent or instrument through whom God created the world. This initial agreement is astonishing, because its basis is far from obvious, but then they crucially diverge: the Christian exegetes claim that the *reshit* is the pre-incarnate Christ, the Rabbinic exegetes that it is the Torah.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Schäfer offers an excellent overview of the *creatio ex nihilo* debate from the Jewish side (Schäfer 1971, 161–166). See also Kister 2007, 229–56.

There is clear parallelism here, but proving that some form of intertextuality is involved is far from easy. Might not one expect that if intertextuality exists in a case like this it would be made explicit? Neither side, surely, has anything to gain by being oblique: it will set up the other point of view and then triumphantly knock it down. Alas, it is not as simple as that. Christianity is generally noisy in its refutation of Judaism: it is happy to prove the Jews wrong. But in some of the most compelling cases of intertextuality in Patristic literature there is not a Jew in sight. The problem of silence is even more acute on the Rabbinic side of the debate. It is a well known and puzzling fact that Christianity is openly referred to surprisingly rarely in classic Rabbinic literature, despite the fact that much of that literature was composed at a time when Christianity was spectacularly triumphing in the political sphere, and, with a massive Church-building programme, vigorously colonizing Palestine as Christian holy space. There are indeed explicit references to Jesus and Christians in Rabbinic texts, but they are few and far between and the degree of understanding that they show of Christianity seems low.<sup>2</sup> They tend to be scurrilous or to score cheap debating points. The general silence of Rabbinic literature on Christianity and the superficiality of such open references as there are have led some to suppose that Rabbinic Judaism was actually little concerned with Christianity: the Rabbis carried on serenely with their own spiritual programme, and found little need to engage with Christian theology. Given the historical realities, I find this hard to believe. I have argued elsewhere that the silence should not be taken at face value: it is a 'loud' silence, a polemical ploy intended to deny Christianity the oxygen of publicity, to suggest that Christianity is an upstart movement which the Rabbis, the manifest bearers of the ancient Jewish faith founded by Moses, do not need to refute (Alexander 1992a, 1–25). Time and again when we read Rabbinic exegesis of contested biblical texts against Christian exegesis they light up: there seems to be a much profounder engagement and meeting of minds than the superficial references to Christianity in Talmudic literature would suggest. The evidence is,

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Schäfer has re-evaluated the traditions about Jesus in the Talmud and argued that they show more knowledge of Christianity than has often been supposed (Schäfer 2007). This claim, if correct, would bring the direct and indirect references to Christianity in Rabbinic literature into closer alignment, and help bridge the puzzling gap that opens up between them on the traditional view.

therefore, largely indirect and so to an uncomfortable degree subjective and speculative.

One example will prove little: it is the cumulative effect of many examples which make the case. Having intensively read over the past decade the two exegetical traditions against each other in a significant number of key biblical texts I feel the case can be made, and that it needs now to be tested by a comprehensive and detailed comparison. Curiously, I suspect that the project on ‘The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity’ will have more significance for the understanding of Rabbinic midrash than of Christian Bible interpretation, and will demonstrate that Christianity played a much more significant role in the definition of Rabbinic Judaism than is often supposed. To use an astronomical metaphor, Christianity may well prove to be the hidden planet or the dark star whose presence we need to postulate to explain the historical trajectory of Rabbinic Judaism.

### *Jewish Exegesis: Reshit = Torah*

The *locus classicus* for the identification of Torah as the agent of creation is GenR 1:1:

Rabbi Hoshaiah opened with the verse: ‘Then I was with him as an *amon*; and I was daily a delight’ (Prov 8:30).

*Amon* means tutor (*paidagōgos*); *amon* means covered; *amon* means hidden; and some say, *amon* means great.

*Amon* means tutor, as you read, ‘As an *omen* (nursing father) carries the sucking child’ (Num 11:12).

*Amon* means covered, as in the verse, ‘*Ha’emunim* (those who were covered) in scarlet’ (Lam 4:5).

*Amon* means hidden, as in the verse, ‘And he concealed (*omen*) Hadasah’ (Esth 2:7).

*Amon* means great, as in the verse, ‘Are you better than No-*amon*?’ (Nah 3:8), which the targum translates, ‘Are you better than Alexandria the Great, that is situated among the rivers?’

Another interpretation: *amon* means a craftsman (*uman*). The Torah declares: ‘I was the working tool (*keli umanut*) of the Holy One, blessed be he.’

In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own knowledge but with the knowledge of a craftsman. The craftsman, moreover, does not build it out of his own knowledge, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and

the doors. Thus the Holy One, blessed be he, was looking into the Torah (*hayah mabbitt baTorah*) and creating the world, and this is why Torah declares, 'In the beginning God created' (Gen 1:1)—'beginning (*reshit*)' referring to the Torah, as in the verse, 'The Lord made me as the beginning (*reshit*) of his way' (Prov 8:22).<sup>3</sup>

This is a much studied text, but it will bear further analysis.<sup>4</sup> The exposition is attributed to a third century Caesarean scholar, Rabbi Hoshaiiah, and it takes the form of a Petihah, a widespread homiletical genre which involves linking a base verse in the Torah with a remote verse from elsewhere in the Tanakh, usually in the Writings, the Ketuvim. The base verse here is Gen 1:1, the remote verse Prov 8:30, where Wisdom says, 'Then I was with him (God), as an *amon*; and I was daily a delight.' The rhetorical effectiveness of the Petihah turns on the apparent lack of connection between the base verse and the remote verse. The preacher then proceeds to demonstrate that in fact the two *are* closely linked. Hoshaiiah begins to play with the word *amon*, and suggests various ways of interpreting it. This functions rhetorically to build a climax by delaying the denouement. His preferred interpretation is that *amon* in Prov 8:30 is really the same as *uman*, 'craftsman, artificer.' He assumes that the Wisdom mentioned in Proverbs 8 is the Torah (an assumption that would appear self-evident to any Rabbi), and so he concludes that Wisdom/Torah declares that she was 'the working tool' (*keli umanut*) which God used to create the world. He then proceeds to read this idea into Gen 1:1, through exploiting the fact that the word *reshit* occurs in both passages (the hermeneutical principle here is known as *gezerah shavah*). The Craftsman-Torah of Proverbs 8 is called the '*reshit* of God's way' (Prov 8:22). So *bereshit* in Gen 1:1 can now be understood as meaning, 'through the agency of the Craftsman-Torah God created the world.'

The idea that Torah was the agent of creation is found also in early synagogue poetry—*piyyut*. The synagogue poets were fond of the theme of creation, and loved to recount the work of the six days in a highly ornate and dramatic style. Yose ben Yose, who lived in the fourth or fifth century CE and is the first *paytan* known to us by name, in his famous *Avodah* for Yom Kippur, *Azkir gevurot Eloha* ('Let me recount

<sup>3</sup> Translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately the fine recent study by Peter Schäfer of this passage (Schäfer 2008) came to hand too late for me to take account of it.

the wonders of God'), opens his account of the story of the creation with the words:

The Craftsman (*amon*) was His amusement  
 The Law (*dat*) His delight,  
 She [the Law] was His study,  
 Till [the] Treasure (*segullah*) arose.

Then, a thousand generations before,  
 She [the Law] had arisen in [His] thought,  
 [And] from her came the plan (*tekhunah*)  
 For all [His] works of construction (*mal'akhot tavnit*).  
 (text and trans. Swartz and Yahalom 2004, 221–290)

The language is typically compressed and allusive, but it is not hard to unpack. Torah (here for metrical reasons called *dat*) is identified with the *amon* of Prov 8:30, and thus seen as the 'Craftsman,' i.e. God's agent in creation. Before the world was created, Torah existed with God: she was his sole companion, his delight, and he spent all his time studying her. The personification of Torah is strong, and with a few swift brush strokes the poet creates a charming picture of her intimate communion with God. She was his study 'till [the] Treasure arose.' The 'Treasure' (*segullah*) is, of course, Israel (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; Mal 3:17; Ps 135:4). God was subsequently to give that very same Torah which he had studied in eternity to Israel at Sinai, and it was her duty to study it as he studied it. The study of Torah could not be more powerfully validated than to depict it as an *imitatio Dei*. The thought here recalls Akiva's dictum: 'Beloved are Israel for to them was given the precious instrument (*keli hemdah*); still greater was the love in that it was made known to them that to them was given the precious instrument by which the world was created' (MAbot 3:15; also see below). Israel's election, her status as God's *segullah*, is sealed by the fact that she was given the eternal Torah.<sup>5</sup>

If the first of our quoted stanzas is mythological in tone, the second is abstract and philosophical. It speaks of the origin of the Torah. A thousand generations before the picture sketched in the preceding stanza the Torah 'had arisen in God's thought.' The Torah was not 'created,'

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<sup>5</sup> There is an interesting implication that Israel replaced Torah as the centre of God's affection: Torah became the handmaid of that relationship. But note how Ben Sira links the giving of Wisdom-Torah precisely with Israel's status as God's special possession (Ben Sira 24:12).

any more than a thought is created. And from that Torah emerged the ‘plan’ or ‘disposition’ (*tekhunah*) of all the works of creation. Philo would have readily understood this: the ‘thought’ is God’s Logos, the ‘plan’ the ideas that inhere in the Logos (*de Opificio Mundi* 1–20; also see below). The Torah is both the Craftsman and the blueprint of creation. But once again the language is highly compressed and allusive. There can be little doubt that *mal’akhot tavnit* denotes in general the created world, but it does so in language that simultaneously alludes to the Temple. The clue lies first of all in the word *tavnit*, which is memorably used in Exod 25:9 for the heavenly ‘pattern’ after which the Tabernacle was constructed, and in association with it *mela’khah* suggests not just God’s work in creation (Gen 2:2–3), but the ‘work’ of making the Tabernacle (Exod 36:2). But what is the link between the Tabernacle and creation? Two possibilities come to mind. The first is that the Tabernacle is a microcosm, in which is contained an image of the world, a tradition which may be found in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.<sup>6</sup> The second is that we have here an allusion to the idea that it was not until the Tabernacle was erected and a means of atoning for human sin was provided that the stability and future of God’s creation was assured (GenR 1:11).

The theme of the Torah as the blueprint of creation is found also in the long and highly impressive *piyyut Az be’ein kol* (‘When all was not’), the date of which is unknown, though it certainly belongs to the Talmudic era. Swartz and Yahalom suggest it influenced Yose ben Yose’s *Azkir gevurot Eloha*, and the Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer (Swartz and Yahalom 2004, 95–209). It opens with an account of the origin of the world, which contains a somewhat fragmentary and highly allusive passage on the pre-existent Torah’s role in creation:

You relied on Your knowledge;  
 You trusted Your discernment;  
 in Your power You were revealed;  
 and on Your strength You depended.

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<sup>6</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah* 38 is the *locus classicus* for the idea (Hayman 2004, 130–33). Peter Hayman has collected earlier Jewish sources on the Temple as a microcosm (Hayman 1986, 176–182). *MidrPss* 50:1 links the creation of the world with the making of the Tabernacle through the fact that Scripture says their respective makers (God and Bezalel) employed the same ‘three attributes (*middot*)’—*hokhmah*, *tevnah* and *da’at*; cf. Prov 3:19–20 with Exod 31:3. Bezalel was imitating God! See further Schäfer 1974, 144–53.

With that which is longer than the earth,  
 with that which is wider than the sea,  
 with Your primordial possession (*bekinyan kedem*),  
 with that which is the beginning of all action (*bereshit [lekhoh poal]*),

with the measuring line of judgment,  
 and with the scales of mercy,  
 with the right hand of life,  
 with riches and honour;

It was hidden in Your heart  
 and brought forth from Your mouth.  
 By Your hand [     ]  
 as [by the hand of a] craftsman (*harash*).

Looking into it, You carved out (*bemareha hazavtah*)  
 The pillars of the heavens  
 before there was primordial chaos (*ad lo tohu vabohu*)  
 on which the rafters could rest.

By [its] weaving  
 Loops and twisted chains  
 until You were to [     ]  
 to build Your Tent (*oholakh*).  
 (trans. Swartz and Yahalom 2004, 104–105)

The first quoted stanza emphasizes the self-sufficiency of God, but the poem then goes on to reveal that he nevertheless employed an agent/instrument in creation—the pre-existent Torah. The Torah is never named, but referred to obliquely by a series of aggadic epithets. Of these the most significant for our purposes is found in the last two lines of the second stanza. These contain a clear allusion here to Prov 8:22, *YHWH kanani reshith darko kedem mifalayv meaz*. It seems clear from this allusion that the *paytan* is not only identifying Torah with Wisdom in Proverbs 8, but also identifying it with *reshith* in Gen 1:1.

Stanza 5 reveals how Torah assisted in the creation of the world. The idea is basically the same as in GenR 1:1: it served as the blueprint, and it is clearly in the light of this parallelism that Swartz and Yahalom translate ‘looking into it,’ echoing *hayah mabbith baTorah* in Hoshaiiah’s midrash. But it is important to note that, although the idea is similar, the words are quite different: *bemareyha* would be more literally rendered, ‘in its likeness.’ The idea is vaguely Platonic: the Torah provided the paradigm for creation. The stanza refers to the creation of the heavens, which are here held to have been fashioned before the earth. In the next stanza, defective though it is, we have, as in the *Azkir*

*gevurot Eloha*, an allusion to the Tabernacle. Since we are still dealing with the heavens in this part of the poem this Tabernacle is probably the celestial Tabernacle on whose structure (*tavnit*) the earthly tabernacle was modelled.<sup>7</sup> The preservation of the text is poor and the language is problematic, but we can make out enough to be sure that we have here the same doctrine of Torah as the agent of creation that we found in GenR 1:1 and in *Azkir gevurot Eloha*.

The theme of a pre-existent Torah involved with God in the creation of the world is also found in a series of *piyyutim* for Shavuot in the form of *Kedushtaot* for the Amidah. Beginning with the classical *paytan* Qillir and running through to the Middle Ages, these take the form of a dialogue between God and the Torah in which God plays the role of matchmaker for the Torah. Leon Weinberger has made a study of this tradition, which he summarizes as follows:

The story is set in the year 2000 before the creation of the world, which is then inhabited only by God and the Torah. She (Torah, a feminine noun) is lodged near Him in her chamber and ‘plays on His lap’ (Q[illir version] 1: *mišta’sá’at ‘al birko*<sup>8</sup>). Now God decides to create the world for the Torah’s sake and ‘consults with her as if seeking her permission’ (...), adding ‘If it meets with your approval, then I will create the world’ (...) The Torah is not too eager to share God with the world, and argues that the world’s inhabitants will fail to live by her commandments. At last the Torah agrees to the world’s creation, but only on condition that she be given to angels and not to humans. God reminds the Torah that her commandments are designed to guide only humans. Very well, says the Torah, but who will be worthy to take me down to earth? When God suggests Adam, the Torah objects, ‘If he could not keep one commandment, how will he observe many!’ God then presents Noah to the Torah; he too is rejected, because of his drinking habits. Abraham is next offered as a suitor to the Torah, and is also found wanting because he sought proof that he would inherit Canaan (Gen. 15:8). Moreover, Abraham was too eager to shed the blood of his son: ‘He should have appealed to You and begged for mercy.’ When Isaac is presented to the Torah and praised for his willingness to be offered up as sacrifice, she faults him for his preference of Esau over Jacob. Jacob, too is refused because he deceived

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<sup>7</sup> I am not sure Swartz and Yahalom have got the translation of this stanza quite right. I would suggest: ‘By its [ ] was the weaving of/ the loops and twisted chains/ before there was [ ]/[ ] to build Your tent.’ I suspect that the sense of the end of the line 3 and beginning of line 4 was something like, ‘before there was [a world in which] to build Your Tent.’ In other words the reference is to the building of the pre-mundane celestial Tabernacle, on which the terrestrial Tabernacle was modelled.

<sup>8</sup> Note the verbal allusion to Prov 8:30, *sha’ashuim*.

his father Isaac in order to obtain his blessings. God then brings forward Moses and at last the Torah is satisfied. 'Him I desire (...),' she says, and consents to be his bride (Weinberger 1998, 69–70; cf. Weinberger 1998, 53–54 and Weinberger 1972, 238–244).

Here Torah's creative role is much more ambiguous than in Yose ben Yose: in Yose, Torah is the demiurge, from whom the plan of creation derived. In the Qillirian tradition, the Torah is reluctant to agree to the creation of the world, and is finally only persuaded when God offers her Moses as her bridegroom.<sup>9</sup> But the world is still said to have been created for the sake of Torah, and she was consulted before it was made. Qillir, I would suggest, offers a playful, highly mythologized reworking, adapted for Shavuot, of the form of the tradition found in GenR 1:1, in Yose, and in *Az be'ein kol*, though it would be rash to assume that the midrash must here have priority over the *piyyut*, and would have been directly known to the *paytanim*.<sup>10</sup>

The targumim to Gen 1:1 should also be noted: their textual confusion hints at how contested the rendering of *bereshit* became. Basically they offer two ways of understanding this phrase: (1) as referring to time, 'in/from the beginning' (so Onkelos, *bekadmin*; Neofiti 1 and Fragmentary Targum (Paris), *millekadmin*; Pseudo-Jonathan, *min avla*); and (2) as referring to an agent/instrument, specifically Wisdom (so Fragmentary Targum [Vatican], Fragmentary Targum [Paris] and Neofiti 1, *beḥokmah*). The contrasting renderings are seen at their purest in Onkelos (*bekadmin bera YWY yat shemayya veyat ara*) and Fragmentary Targum (Vatican) (*beḥokmah bera H' yat shemayya veyat ara*). Neofiti 1 and Fragmentary Targum (Paris) offer both interpretations. Neofiti 1 as it stands is startling: it reads: *millekadmin beḥokmah bera deYYY shakhlel yat shemayya veyat ara*, which translates as: 'From the beginning with wisdom the son of the Lord perfected the heavens and the earth!' But the text has been tampered with, and the copula erased before *shakhlel*. When this is reinstated it suggests that *bera* should now be read as a verb ('created and completed'), and that a word indicating the subject of the verbs has dropped out before *deYYY*. Díez Macho in the *editio princeps* restored *Memra* (Díez Macho 1968, 2–3), but this still leaves us with an unparalleled translation: 'From the

<sup>9</sup> The Torah's reluctance to give herself to humanity surely contains a strong echo of the motif of the angels resisting the giving of the Torah to Moses on Sinai. On this see Schäfer 1975.

<sup>10</sup> See further below.

beginning with wisdom the Word of the Lord created and completed the heavens and the earth.<sup>11</sup>

The textual history of the targum here is clearly very complex, but I would suggest the most likely scenario is that the Old Targum, preserved by Onkelos, had the temporal interpretation (*bekadmin*). This temporal sense is also found in the LXX and (probably) also in Aquila.<sup>12</sup> It was replaced in the Palestinian recension of the targum by *beḥokmah*, though some mss of the Palestinian targum were subsequently contaminated by the Onkelos rendering, or, perhaps for theological reasons, deliberately corrected to conform to Onkelos, creating the current doublets in Neofiti 1 and Fragmentary Targum (Paris). Pseudo-Jonathan marks a late emphatic reassertion of the temporal sense, in reaction to the Palestinian targum, though not in the precise wording of the Old Targum.

From what we have seen so far it will be at once obvious that the targum's substitution of *reshit* by *ḥokmah* must be based on Prov 8:22. This echo of Proverbs 8 rules out any possibility that the targumist might simply have meant *beḥokmah* here in a weak, adverbial sense ('wisely').<sup>13</sup> He surely intended *ḥokmah* in the strong sense of

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<sup>11</sup> I must confess I remain sceptical even about the restored text. Codex Neofiti 1 was copied for the great Christian Hebraist Egidio de Viterbo, and some of the Latin marginalia in it may actually be in his hand. I wonder if the good cardinal was responsible for erasing the *vav* before *shakhlel*. In Jewish-Christian theology *bereshit* was sometimes translated 'in the Son' (Diez Macho 1964, 173–74; Daniélou 1964, 166–68). Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus super Psalmos: Psalm 2* (PL IX, col. 263B): 'Bereshith... tres significantias in se habet, id est 'in principio' et 'in capite' et 'in filio.' The rendering 'in capite' may reflect Aquila's *en kephalaiō(i)*, but note the Christian Palestinian Targum *mn rysh* (Goshen-Gottstein 1973, 1), and the *piyyut*, *Attah konanta olam merosh* (Swartz and Yahalom 2004, 71). On the translation 'in filio fecit deus caelum et terram' see further Jerome, *Hebraicae Quaestiones in Genesim* to Gen 1:1 (with the fine note *ad loc.* in Hayward 1995, 100–02).

<sup>12</sup> The LXX's *en archē(i)* is clearly intended in a temporal sense, though it has chosen a Greek word which has more than temporal connotations: cf. Vulgate *in principio*. Aquila's *en kephalaiō(i)* is a typical piece of Aquilan literalism which draws out the *rosh* which he sees in *reshit*. He probably also intended it in a temporal sense, unless he wanted to designate the first verse of Genesis 1 as a 'summary' of the whole chapter. Peshitta *breshith* simply borrows the Hebrew word. All the ancient versions strikingly reflect the absence of the article with *reshit*, as in the MT. Like the targumists, the other ancient translators struggled with *bereshit*: there was simply no obvious translation of it.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ps 104:24, 'How manifold are your works, O Lord! In wisdom (*beḥokmah*) have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.' Here *beḥokmah* was presumably originally meant adverbially ('wisely'): the stress in this Psalm is so much on *God's* actions that to introduce even a hint of agency would jar. Of course, there is nothing to stop *ḥokmah* here being later hypostasized through a homiletical reading

Proverbs 8, as designating the agent of God in creation, and it is a reasonable assumption that he would have further identified that agent as Torah. In other words his basic interpretation was probably the same as Rabbi Hoshaiiah's. Interestingly, if our history of the targum text at this point has any force, it suggests that this strong targumic reading of *bereshit* emerged in the third century, roughly in the time of Hoshaiiah. I shall return to this point later.

Finally, it is worth revisiting briefly MAbot 3:15. The 'precious instrument (*keli hemdah*)' is clearly the Torah and inevitably recalls the 'working tool (*keli umanut*)' of GenR 1:1. But it is interesting that there is no linguistic allusion here in the Mishnah to either Prov 8:22 or Gen 1:1—the two key biblical verses for the doctrine of the Torah as the agent/instrument of creation.<sup>14</sup> The doctrine is bluntly stated, on the apparent assumption that it will be understood. If the attribution of this saying to Rabbi Akiva is sound, then we can trace the idea of Torah as the agent/instrument of creation within the Rabbinic tradition back to the early second century. But, I would suggest we should be cautious about accepting the attribution at face value. It is hard to envisage a context for the doctrine of the instrumentality/agency of Torah in creation in Akiva's day, or to imagine he could have so casually introduced it, as if it were already well known.<sup>15</sup> The saying, however, makes excellent sense in the third century when Pirque Abot

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in the light of Proverbs 8. That creation manifests God's wisdom is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: e.g., Prov 3:19–20: 'The Lord with wisdom (*beḥokhmah*) founded the earth; with understanding (*betevunah*) he established the heavens. By his knowledge (*beda'at*) the depths were broken up, and the skies drop down dew.'

<sup>14</sup> The choice of the phrase *keli hemdah* is rather puzzling. It is, of course, biblical (Jer 25:34; Hos 13:15; Nah 2:10; 2 Chron 32:27), but none of the biblical references has any conceivable link with Torah. In other words, Akiva's use of the phrase seems to be simply a case of linguistic borrowing, not midrashic allusion. It is also odd that Akiva's striking description of the Torah as the 'precious instrument by which the world was created' does not seem to be picked up in later Rabbinic literature until we come to the Middle Ages, when it features in the Maḥzor Vitry, and in the commentaries on Pirque Abot. The medieval commentators clearly understood it in the sense of instrument/agent.

<sup>15</sup> Unless he has Ben Sira 24 in mind, and his saying embodies his understanding of that text! Note especially Ben Sira 24:8–10: 'The Creator of the universe laid a command upon me; my Creator decreed where I should dwell. He said, "Make your home in Jacob; find your heritage in Israel." Before time began he created me, and I shall remain for ever. In the sacred tent I ministered in his presence, and so I came to be established in Zion.' Ben Sira is the one Second Temple apocryphon that we know for certain circulated in Rabbinic circles. But there are no verbal echoes, and the agency of Torah in creation is not clearly stated in Ben Sira 24 (see below).

was compiled, the period when this doctrine was being advanced also in targum and midrash, which make its biblical basis clear.

*Christian Exegesis: Reshit = Christ*

The *locus classicus* for Christ as the agent of creation is Col 1:15–17:

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (*prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*); for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He is himself before all things, and in him all things hold together.

This remarkable passage comes from a primitive Christian confession of faith (Col 1:15–20) which has been incorporated, possibly with modifications, into the Colossian letter. I cannot go into the numerous debates which it has engendered. Suffice to say that I am convinced that C.F. Burney, despite somewhat overplaying his hand, long ago made a plausible case for seeing the striking christological claims here as having an exegetical basis, which involved identifying Christ with Wisdom in Proverbs 8, and then, because Wisdom/Christ is called in Prov 8:22 the ‘*reshit* of God’s way,’ interpreting *bereshit* in Gen 1:1 as meaning ‘in/through Christ God created the heavens and the earth’ (Burney 1926, 160–177).<sup>16</sup> In other words, we have precisely the same exegetical move that we find in GenR 1:1, although with Christ and not Torah as the referent of *reshit*. Thus, the pre-incarnate Christ becomes the agent of creation.

This understanding of *reshit* in Gen 1:1 also seems to be implied

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<sup>16</sup> Burney was hardly the first to make this suggestion. Many Patristic writers, as Burney himself notes, clearly saw the underlying exegesis of Col 1:15–17. Although strongly endorsed by W.D. Davies, Burney’s proposal has not met with universal acceptance (Davies 1970, 147–77). However, the alternatives, such as the attempts to demonstrate Stoic influence, are less convincing. Actually it is not necessarily a question of either/or. There is no reason why we cannot have both biblical and Stoic influences. Too much of the discussion has been conducted on the basis of an outmoded essentialist distinction between Judaism and Hellenism. A strong argument in favour of Burney’s thesis is that it provides a source for the doctrine of Christ’s agency in creation. Where did this extraordinary idea come from? What authority was there for it? Would anything fundamental have been lost by asserting that the Father alone had created the world? Of all the New Testament references, Col 1:15–17 hints most clearly that the doctrine originated in exegesis; it arose out of searching the Scriptures. For a survey of the debate on Col 1:15–20 see O’Brien 1982, 32–57; Hagermann 1961; Aletti 1981; van Kooten 2003.

elsewhere in the New Testament, notably in John 1, which weaves together elements drawn from Proverbs 8 and Genesis 1, in the process equating, very reasonably, the concept of Wisdom with the Greek concept of the Logos, and then this divine Logos with the pre-incarnate Christ: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. *Through him all things were made*; without him nothing was made that was made' (John 1:1–3; cf. 1:10).

It is implied in the enigmatic title of Christ, *hē archē tēs ktiseōs*, 'the *reshit* of the creation,' in Rev 3:14 (cf. Rev 21:6; 22:13). Indeed, it has been argued that this reflects dependence on Col 1:15, which could have been known to the Laodiceans, since the churches of Colossae and Laodicea may have exchanged letters (Col 4:16). If this is the case, then it supports Burney's contention that *archē* in Gen 1:1 is in view in Col 1:15.<sup>17</sup>

Christ's agency in creation is mentioned in Heb 1:1–2: 'At many times and in various ways God spoke in the past to our forefathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and *through whom he made the worlds*.' It comes up in 1 Cor 8:6, again, possibly, in the context of a primitive confession: 'For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things [came into being] and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom all things [came into being]* and through whom we live.'

Two general points can be made about these references. First, it is striking how widely scattered they are: they are found in writers as diverse as Paul, John, and the authors of Hebrews and Revelation, which suggests the doctrine formed part of the primitive Christian creed. Second, it is equally striking how casually the doctrine is introduced: with the possible exception of Col 1:15, no biblical justification is offered. This recalls the way Akiva in MAbot 3:15 bluntly asserts the agency

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<sup>17</sup> See Aune 1997, 256 for a discussion. Patristic commentators regularly understood the title in this way. E.g. Primasius and Oecumenius link Rev 3:14 with Col 1:16 and Prov 8:22 (see the quotations from their commentaries in Weinrich 2005, 50). For *Archē* as a title of Christ see Justin, *Dialogue* 61:1; 62:4; Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* II.10; II.13; Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* V.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Eclog.proph.* IV.1; *Strom.* VI.58.1; VII.1; Origen, *Hom.Gen.* I.1; *Comm.John.* I.19 (Lampe 1961, 235a). However, I find forced and over-ingenuous Silberman's suggestion that Christ's title 'the Amen' in Rev 3:14 is a mistranslation of *amon* in Prov 8:30 (Silberman 1963, 213–15; cf. Trudinger 1972, 277–79).

of *Torah* in creation without biblical proof. The assertion might seem to follow inevitably from identifying Christ with Wisdom, whose role in creation is postulated in Hellenistic Jewish texts, but that doctrine is not as widespread in Second Temple Judaism as is often supposed, and really only firms up when we link the *reshit* of Prov 8:22 with the *reshit* of Gen 1:1.<sup>18</sup>

Col 1:15–17 was to prove important in later christological debates, and it established as a central dogma the belief that Christ was the agent of creation. Proverbs 8 also played a key role in later Christology.<sup>19</sup> All sides took it for granted that Wisdom in this chapter is the pre-incarnate Christ: the debate tended to focus on whether Prov 8:22 (Hebrew *kanani* = LXX *ektisen*; Vg *possedit*) proved that Christ was a subordinate, created being. The Arians argued that it did; the orthodox that it did not.<sup>20</sup> Only a few specifically linked the Wisdom/Christ of Proverbs 8 with the *reshit* /*archē*/ *principium* of Gen 1:1, though many teeter on the edge of the making the connection.

Origen in the *de Principiis* 1.2.1 identifies Christ and the Wisdom of Proverbs 8:

We have first to ascertain what the only-begotten Son of God is, seeing he is called by many different names, according to the circumstances and views of individuals. For he is called Wisdom, as Solomon says: ‘The Lord created me—the beginning of his ways, and among his works, before he made any other thing; he founded me before the ages. In the beginning, before he formed the earth, before he brought forth the fountains

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 7:22, ‘Wisdom, the fashioner of all things’; 8:5–6, ‘Wisdom, the active cause of all things (...) the fashioner of what exists.’ But many of the references often cited are not really all that explicit, but speak of Wisdom’s association with God in creation in some rather vague and unspecified way. This is true of Ben Sira 24 and even of Proverbs 8. Hagermann overstates the case for a widespread doctrine of Wisdom’s agency in creation in Hellenistic Judaism (Hagermann 1961).

<sup>19</sup> See Burney 1926, 170–73; Simonetti 1965, 9–87; van Parys 1970, 363–79; Del-Cogliano 2008, 183–190.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Athanasius, *de Decretis* 3.13–14, where he says the Arians ‘were putting about in every quarter this passage (Prov 8:22), and saying that the Son was one of the creatures, and reckoning him with things originated.’ Basil, *Contr.Eunomium* 2.20–25 makes the same point, comparing Prov 8:22 to a military base from which the Arians launch an assault on the faith. Further: Athanasius, *Orat. Contr. Arianos* 2.1, 44; Hilary, *de Synodis* 16, 17; *de Trinitate* 1.35; 12.1, 35; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 2.69.25, 2.83.20; Athenagoras, *Supplic.* 10.2,3; Tertullian, *Contr.Hermog.* 18; Didymus, *Frag. in Prov.*; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 30.2; Augustine, *de Trinitate* 1.12 (24); Eusebius, *Eccl.Theol.* 3.1.1–3.2.8 (a rich discussion which refers to the Hebrew); Gregory of Nyssa, *Contr.Eunomium* 1; Jerome, *Comm.Eph.* 2.10; *Comm.Micah* 4.8, 9; *Comm.Isa.* 26.13; *Epistle 140 ad Cyprianum*.

of waters, before the mountains were made strong, before all the hills, he brought me forth' (LXX Prov 8:22–25). He is also styled First-born, as the apostle has declared: 'who is the first-born of every creature' (Col 1:15). The first-born, however, is not by nature a different person from the Wisdom, but one and the same. Finally, the Apostle Paul says that 'Christ (is) the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:24).

And, in *de Principiis* 2.9.4, he designates Christ as the agent of creation on the basis of Colossians 1:

All things which have been created are said to have been made through Christ, and in Christ, as the Apostle Paul most clearly indicates, when he says, 'For in him and by him were all things created, whether things in heaven or things on earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or powers, or principalities, or dominions; all things were created by him, and in him' (Col 1:16); and (...) in his Gospel John indicates the same thing, saying, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God: the same was in the beginning with God: all things were made by him; and without him was not anything made' (John 1:1–3); and (...) in the Psalm also it is written, 'In wisdom have you made them all' (Ps 104:24).

Finally, in his *Homily I on the Pentateuch* (translated by Rufinus) he makes the crucial link with Gen 1:1:

'In the beginning (*in principio*) God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1). What is the 'beginning' (*principium*) of all things if it be not our Lord and the Saviour of all Christ Jesus, 'the firstborn of every creature' (Col 1:15). Therefore in this 'beginning,' that is in his Word, God made heaven and earth, as John the Evangelist also says at the opening of his Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word, etc.' (John 1:1). So here it does not intend some sort of temporal 'beginning'; rather it means that 'in the beginning,' that is 'in the Saviour,' heaven was made, and earth and all other things that were made.<sup>21</sup>

### *Was there an 'Exegetical Encounter'?*

Both Rabbinic and early Christian tradition, then, agree that God created the world through an agent—a momentous theological claim not at all evident from Genesis 1, though possibly just about arguable from the plural of Gen 1:27. Both reach this conclusion by making the same

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ambrose, *Hexaemeron* 1.4.15; Augustine, *de Genesi ad litteram* 1.2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 2.73.7.

far from obvious exegetical move which involves linking *reshit* in Prov 8:22 with *reshit* in Gen 1:1, and thus provides grounds for introducing the figure of Wisdom into the creative process described in Genesis 1, a chapter from which all agency (with the possible exception of Gen 1:27) is so conspicuously absent. To press the parallelism further: both held that this pre-existent Wisdom ‘incarnated,’ i.e. entered the world it had made, and played a key role in the history of redemption.<sup>22</sup> So far the two traditions are in step, but then they abruptly part company: for Christianity this Wisdom is Christ, for Rabbinic Judaism it is Torah. The traditions on both sides are rich and active, attested in a wide variety of sources: we are clearly dealing with an idea that was made to do heavy theological lifting.

What do we make of this? It would be hard to deny that there is intertextuality of some sort here, but, as Genette has taught us, intertextuality comes in many different guises, and presupposes many different life-settings (Genette 1997). The key question is not the parallelism *per se* but whether the parallelism is such as to suggest mutual interaction. Was each tradition aware of the other? Was each staking out the exegetical ground in such a way as to reject and exclude the other? Is their relationship dialectical? Was there an exegetical encounter?

We must be careful not to jump to conclusions. Is it possible that each developed independently, through exploiting the exegetical potential inherent in the biblical texts? Both start from the same Scriptures, both make the same assumptions about the revealed nature of the texts, and, broadly speaking, apply to them the same hermeneutical methods,

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<sup>22</sup> The theme of ‘incarnation’ is already implicit in Proverbs 8. The creative, cosmic Wisdom ‘delights in humankind’ (Prov 8:30), and her role in the world is redemptive: if humanity listens to her they gain ‘life and favour from the Lord’ (Prov 8:35). The theme is developed in Ben Sira 24: the pre-mundane Wisdom-Torah looks for a place in the world, and finally finds her home in Israel (Ben Sira 24:7–13), where she brings blessing. It is dramatically elaborated in the Qillirian *Kedushtaot* for Shavuot, in which the Torah is reluctant to enter the world. On the Christian side the most striking statement of it is in John 1:14 ‘The Word became flesh, and dwelt (*eskēnōsen*: cf. Ben Sira 24:8, *kataskēnōsen*) among us.’ Interestingly the fragment of a Wisdom poem in 1 Enoch 42:1–3 denies that Wisdom ever found a home on earth. The doctrine of the incarnation of Torah tends to remain implicit in main-line Rabbinic theology, which does little to clarify the relationship between the Torah found in the Synagogue Torah-scroll and the pre-mundane cosmic Torah. We are led to assume that they are identical, but this raises acute theological problems, since the Torah of Moses legislates for a sinful, fallen world. Was sin, then, part of the divine plan? The question is more directly addressed in medieval Jewish thought: see for example the striking passage in the Zohar, *Beha’alotekha*, III 152a, on the incarnation of the Torah.

which were largely common scribal practice in their time. Both work within their own *regulae fidei* which will ensure that they come up with exegetical results consonant with their basic theologies. When we put the two traditions side by side it might *look* as if they were consciously shaped to refute each other, but appearances can be deceptive: each may, in reality, have evolved in isolation and followed its own inner exegetical logic without any cross-referencing. This possibility should not be too quickly discounted. It should act as a constant brake on over-enthusiasm for intertextual reading of early Jewish and early Christian Bible commentary. Illuminating comparisons can be drawn between texts which we know have absolutely no historical connection with each other: the whole discipline of comparative literature is predicated on this fact. Moreover, we should bear in mind that exegetes themselves can create the false impression of dialogue. There are times when they see in a biblical text alarming exegetical possibilities which they wish to deny. They may draw these out and attribute them to heretics or other opponents in order to refute them, but this does not necessarily mean that they knew people who had actually propounded these interpretations to them. This is a constant problem with references to 'Jews' in early Christian literature: are the Jewish opponents always real, flesh-and-blood Jews, or can they sometimes be rhetorical constructs designed to be the bearers of unpalatable views? Similar problems bedevil Rabbinic references to 'heretics,' 'philosophers,' 'Roman emperors' and 'matrons.'

Parallel, independent development is, then, always a theoretical possibility, but sometimes when we study the traditions side-by-side the conviction grows that each must surely be aware of the other, and be manoeuvring for exegetical advantage. Since we have undeniable evidence that exegetical encounters did take place, I can see no *a priori* presumption in favour of either position.<sup>23</sup> All things considered, it strikes

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<sup>23</sup> Note, for example, the famous story in AZ 4a about how the Babylonian sage Rav Safra, who had moved to Palestine, was unable to hold his own in exegetical debate with the Minim (here surely Christians). Used to tougher opposition, the Minim are puzzled, but the Palestinian scholar Rabbi Abbahu explains to them that Rav Safra is learned 'in Tannaitic teaching, not in Scripture.' 'We (Palestinian Jewish sages),' he continues, 'who are frequently with you (Minim), set ourselves the task of studying Scripture thoroughly, but the others (the Babylonian Jewish sages) do not study it carefully.' That the exegetical encounter with Christianity was more intense in the west than in the east is borne out by the simple fact that all the major Rabbinic midrashim that have survived from Late Antiquity are all Palestinian in origin.

me as plausible that a dialectical relationship does exist in the present case, and I can tell a more plausible story if I assume that the Rabbinic claim that Torah was the agent of creation is a reaction to the Christian claim that Christ was the agent of creation than vice versa. This is the opposite of what has sometimes been supposed. Some have assumed that Torah's role as the agent of creation was already widespread in late Second Temple Judaism, and that the author of Colossians consciously substituted Christ for Torah, following an early christological strategy of transferring the attributes and functions of Torah to Christ.<sup>24</sup> But the evidence, I would suggest, is not clear. We are dealing, to be sure, with very fine distinctions, but the nuances matter.

Few if any, I imagine, would argue that the author of Proverbs 8 had the Torah of Moses in mind when he spoke of Wisdom. For him, Wisdom is something like the Logos of his near contemporary, the Ionian philosopher Heraclitus: it is the rationality that underlies the world, a rationality which originates in the mind of God, but which is also accessible to the mind of man. This view, as I have argued elsewhere, means that the laws of nature are not intrinsically mysterious, as the author of Job would have us believe (Job 38:1–6), but are open to discovery by rational inquiry, and so science is possible (Alexander 2002, 224–243, esp. 236–243). Though it was later included in the canon with the Torah of Moses, Proverbs belongs to a canon of humanistic writings attributed to Solomon, which originated in circles very different from those which canonized the Pentateuch (de Pury 2007, 41–56).

However, increasingly the Torah sages appropriated for Torah the attributes which Wisdom circles claimed for Wisdom (Alexander 1998, 87–122; cf. Schäfer 2003, 26–44). A turning point is reached in the second century BCE with Ben Sira 24, which clearly states that the Torah of Moses is the supreme manifestation of cosmic Wisdom. There are numerous echoes in this noble hymn to Proverbs 8; indeed the whole passage can be read as a meditation on this biblical chapter, designed specifically to identify its Wisdom with the Torah: Proverbs has Wisdom universally delighting in the sons of men, but this has been particularized by Ben Sira to the giving of the Torah to Israel: 'Then the Fashioner of all gave me [Wisdom] his command, and my Creator chose the spot for my tent, saying, "In Jacob make your dwelling, in Israel your inheritance"' (Ben Sira 24:8). If Wisdom in Proverbs 8 is

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<sup>24</sup> The classic statement of this position is Davies 1970, 147–77.

identical with the Torah then it might seem to follow inevitably that Torah was the agent of creation, but this point is not explicitly made, and we should hesitate to assume that it would have been drawn. Exegetical possibilities, which with hindsight seem obvious, can actually remain dormant for a long time, and are usually activated only by specific needs and circumstances. I have grown increasingly sceptical of the idea of a 'pure exegesis': religious texts are always in the end read in the light of the experiences of a specific faith community. The creative agency of Wisdom is actually not at all obvious in Proverbs 8: it is effectively confined to the word *amon* (Prov 8:30) and, possibly, to *reshit* (Prov 8:22), if one links the latter with *reshit* in Gen 1:1. But that *amon* indicates agency is by no means certain, nor does it seem to have been always understood in this way in antiquity.<sup>25</sup> Ben Sira set the stage for Torah to play a role in creation, but he does not himself assign that role. The absence of any explicit reference to Genesis 1 in Ben Sira 24 is surely significant. In fact, Ben Sira 24 seems to go out of its way to stress the creative act of God alone (see Ben Sira 24:8–9).

Another Second Temple text which comes close to seeing the Torah as the agent of creation is Philo's exposition of Genesis 1 in *Opif.Mund.* 1–20. Philo opens his treatise by asking why Moses began his law book with an account of the creation of the world. Why not plunge straight into the legislation which is his main concern? His answer is that Moses

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<sup>25</sup> The scholarly consensus now agrees with Rabbi Hoshaiah that *amon* means 'craftsman, artificer.' It is taken as a loanword from the Akkadian *ummānu*, 'workman'; cf. Jer 52:15, *yeter ha'amon*, 'the rest of the master workmen,' and Cant 7:2, *omman*, 'craftsman' (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001, 1:62), but dissenting voices remain, e.g., Fox 2000, 286–87, who argues for the sense, 'growing up.' Cf. Fox 1996, 699–702. Few of the ancient versions recognize the word in the sense of a craftsman. The LXX has *harmozousa* (possibly reading the participle *omen*, though with breach of concord, since *hokhmah* is the subject), which, on the face of it, should mean something like: '(I was) suited to/in harmony (with him)' (see Lust et al. 1992, 1:62). So Brenton: 'I was by him, suiting myself to him, I was that wherein he took delight; and daily I rejoiced in his presence continually,' but in a footnote he offers as an alternative to 'suiting myself to him' the rendering 'arranging all things' (Brenton 1870, 795). Johann Cook takes the latter view: 'I was beside him, fitting together' (in Pietersma and Wright 2007, 629). Vulgate 'cum eo eram, cuncta componens' and Peshitta 'mh mthqn' hwyth ('with him I was fashioning/ordering/creating') support the idea of agency, but Aquila, *tithēnoumenē*, 'nursed, nursling,' Symmachus, *estērigmenē*, 'set firm,' and targum, *mhyment*, 'trusted one' (Healey 1991, 26: 'Then I was beside him, a faithful handmaid') do not. The LXX is particularly puzzling, for if the translator had understood *amon* in the sense of 'craftsman,' there were plenty of unambiguous words he could have chosen: *architektōn* (cf. *architektonikos* in Philo, *Opif.Mund.* 17, 20; loanword in Rabbinic Hebrew, GenR 24:1), or *technitis* (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 7:21; 14:2; Philo, *Opif.Mund.* 20), or even *dēmiourgos* (Philo, *Opif.Mund.* 10).

wanted to imply ‘that the world is in harmony with the Law and the Law with the world, and that the man who obeys the Law becomes at once a citizen of the world, regulating his actions in accordance with the will of Nature, by which the whole world is itself administered’ (*Opif.Mund.* 3). This reads like a Hellenistic restatement of the idea that the Torah of Moses (here = the Law, *ho Nomos*) is the manifestation of Wisdom seen as the divine ground or divine order of creation: to live *kata nomon* is, therefore, to fulfil the Greek ethical ideal of living *kata physin*. But once again Philo does not explicitly assert that the Torah of Moses was the *agent/instrument* of creation. Elsewhere in his discourse he passes up a golden opportunity to do so, one which Hoshaiiah was later to exploit. He takes Gen 1:1 as referring to God’s creation first of the noumenal template for the world, which was then copied in the material creation outlined in the subsequent verses. Like Hoshaiiah he employs the metaphor of the king building a great city. Before the city of wood and stone can be raised the king must first draw up a plan (*paradeigma*, *Opif.Mund.* 16, 18), and to do this he needs a skilled architect (*anēr architektonikos*, *Opif.Mund.* 17, 20). The city is the world, the king God, the architect the Logos (the divine reason), and the plan the Platonic ideas. The claim that to live according to the Torah is to live according to ‘the will of Nature, by which the whole world is itself administered’ may contain a hint that the Torah correlates in some way with the divine ‘plan,’ but the idea, if it was intended, is very obscurely expressed.<sup>26</sup> And though the relationship of Philo’s exposition to Genesis 1 is clear, its relationship to Proverbs 8 is not. The word ‘architect’ could be seen as an allusion to *reshit* in Prov 8:22. Elsewhere Philo speaks of ‘Wisdom, through whom the universe (*ta hola*) came into existence’ (*de Fuga et Inventione* 109), so presumably he would have been comfortable with equating Logos and Sophia, and with regarding Sophia as the architect. This whole opening passage, then, of the *de Opificio Mundi* could be read as an extended meditation on Wisdom as the architect of creation in Proverbs 8.

But there are problems. Despite distinguishing in the simile between the king and the architect, Philo constantly stresses that it is God *himself* who created the world: the agent terms he uses in connection with the

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<sup>26</sup> It is curious how closely Philo’s *apoblepōn eis to paradeigma* (*Opif.Mund.* 18) is paralleled by Hoshaiiah’s *mabbat baTorah* (GenR 1:1). But this parallelism proves nothing.

act of creation—*poiētēs*, *dēmiourgos*, *technitis*—apply to *God himself*, not to some delegate, and this is why he can say that God made the world ‘with no counsellor (*oudenī paraklētō(i)*) to help him (who was there beside him?), but relying on himself alone’ (*Opif.Mund.* 23). He certainly knew Proverbs 8: he quotes from Prov 8:22 in *de Ebrietate* 31, and alludes to the same passage in *de Virtutibus* 62, but the source of his agent language and many of his key ideas here is more obviously to be found in Plato’s *Timaeus* 27c–40d than in the biblical book.<sup>27</sup> In fact, there is a hint in *de Ebrietate* 31 that he did not understand *amon* in the sense of craftsman or architect. There he calls Wisdom ‘the mother and nurse of all’: nurse (*tithēnēs*) may allude to *amon*, vocalized as the active participle *omen* (cf. Num 11:12, Isa 49:23, and fem. *omenet* in Ruth 4:16, 2 Sam 4:4, as well as GenR 1:1 quoted above); Aquila’s rendering *tithēnoumenē*, ‘nursed, nursling,’ probably reflects a vocalization as the passive participle, *amun*. In short, as with Ben Sira, although Philo’s words are fraught with suggestiveness, they are no clearer in asserting that *Torah* acted as God’s agent in the creation of the world.

So when the author of Colossians claims that Christ is the agent of creation he is certainly identifying Christ with Wisdom in Proverbs 8, but he is not necessarily substituting Christ for a well known concept of the *Torah* as the agent of creation. We should not underestimate the originality of his underlying exegesis. Indeed, I think he may be the first exegete we know to have linked Proverbs 8 closely with Genesis 1, and in particular to have interpreted the *reshit* of Gen 1:1 in the light of the *reshit* of Prov 8:22, so that the former comes to mean ‘through Wisdom God created the heavens and the earth.’

What then is our earliest unambiguous reference to the *Torah* as the agent of creation? I think it may be GenR 1:1. The Rabbis were happy enough, like their Second Temple period forebears, to identify *Torah* with Wisdom in Proverbs 8 (see for example Sifre to Deut 11:10), but what we are looking for are *explicit* statements to the effect that the *Torah* of Moses was the agent of creation, and the earliest of these appears to be GenR 1:1. The idea may be hinted at in the dictum attributed to Rabbi Akiva in MAbot 3:15, but, as I suggested earlier, prudence counsels that we date this tradition no earlier than the period of the document in which it is found. In other words, it belongs to the third century, along with Hoshaiiah’s and the Palestinian targum’s

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<sup>27</sup> There are also clear traces of Stoic influence.

exposition of the same doctrine—to a time when christological debates were coming to the boil, debates which regularly exploited Prov 8:22 and Gen 1:1, following Col 1:15–16’s implicit linking of these two texts. It is surely a reasonable hypothesis that it may have been this flurry of Christian exegesis around these verses that provided the crucial stimulus that led to the Rabbis firming up their position.

It is tempting to see Hoshaiiah as playing the key role on the Rabbinic side, assuming the attribution of GenR 1:1 to him is correct: certainly once his exegesis got incorporated into Genesis Rabbah it proved influential for later Rabbinic tradition, standing as it does as the grand opening declaration of one of the greatest of the Rabbinic midrashim. But I am not sure that we can take it for granted that Hoshaiiah *invented* this interpretation. GenR 1:1 is, as we noted, a *Petihah*, a homiletic form that originated in synagogue. In other words, it may belong originally to synagogue preaching, rather than to learned exposition of Scripture in the Beit Midrash. This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that the strongest and closest parallels to it are to be found in other synagogue genres, *piyyut* and *targum*, rather than in the midrashim. Swartz and Yahalom suppose that the *piyyutim* are dependent on GenR 1:1 (Swartz and Yahalom 2004, 27, 224). Their idea of Torah as the agent of creation is certainly similar, but we should be careful not to assume that where a parallel exists between midrash and *piyyut*, or for that matter *targum*, the Rabbinic midrash should automatically be accorded the priority. I find it slightly surprising that if Hoshaiiah’s *Petihah* was the *paytanim*’s source, they did not exploit his *mashal* of the king. And, as we saw, even where the ideas are very close, the precise language is subtly different.<sup>28</sup> However, if the interpretation did originate in synagogue preaching, Hoshaiiah may well have played a crucial role in domesticating it in the Beit Midrash. For what purpose? In the light of all we have seen, a plausible answer surely is: to counter Christian claims that *Christ* was the agent of creation.

A number of considerations point to the essentially polemical function of this exegesis:

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<sup>28</sup> For an attempt to diversify the intellectual history of Judaism after 70 CE, and to argue that it should not simply be identified with the history of Rabbinism, see P.S. Alexander, “What Happened to the Jewish Priesthood after 70?” in: Zuleika Rodgers (ed.), *Festschrift for Sean Freyne* (forthcoming).

- (1) First, it is hard to see any inner-Rabbinic theological logic in the idea of the Torah as the agent of creation. Indeed it creates problems. One of the major purposes of Rabbinic exegesis of Genesis 1 *taken as a whole* was to deny that God had *any* assistance in creation; his creative act was *unmediated*. Note how in GenR 1:3 it is asserted that God had no associate (*shutaf*) in the work of creation, 'he alone created his world, he alone is glorified in his universe.'<sup>29</sup> But this midrash sits uneasily with Hoshaiiah's assertion, even though it is Torah who is the helper.<sup>30</sup> This may indicate it served a very precise polemical function, namely, I would suggest, to counter Christian exegesis that aimed to prove Christ was the agent of creation.
- (2) Second, as I have argued elsewhere, Genesis Rabbah's detailed exposition of the account of creation as a whole is a classic case of 'pre-emptive exegesis,' that is to say it is essentially a polemical exercise, the aim of which is to occupy the exegetical space of the text with rabbinically acceptable interpretations, in order to exclude interpretations which the Rabbis rejected (Alexander 1992b, 230–45). We must remember that the Rabbis saw the study of the Account of Creation as dangerous, presumably because it could engender, and indeed *had* engendered, heresy (MHag 2:1). Hoshaiiah's exposition, on my reading, fits this pattern of pre-emptive exegesis, but this makes it reactive to an external point of view.
- (3) Third, there is a curious incoherence in Hoshaiiah's exposition which may point to adaptation. In the *mashal* we have three elements:

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Philo, *Opif.Mund.* 23, quoted above: Philo's *paraklētōs* = GenR's *shutaf*.

<sup>30</sup> It might seem innocuous, and possibly even desirable, from a Rabbinic perspective to posit Torah as the agent/instrument of creation, but the dangers of hypostasizing Torah into a 'second power' should not be underestimated. It is precisely the link with Wisdom in Proverbs 8 which opens up this possibility, because there Wisdom is so strongly personified—a personification which is carried even further by Ben Sira and the *paytanim*. Sophisticates like Philo and Hoshaiiah may never have lost sight of the fundamentally metaphorical nature of their language, but there is a real danger that it can be lost and Torah metamorphosed into a goddess who consorts with God (in the way that Sophia becomes a hypostasis in Gnosticism). That there are powerful tendencies towards binitarianism within Judaism, from antiquity to modern times, has been amply documented: see Patai 1990; Schäfer 2002; Idel 2008. The Rabbinic denial that God created the world through agents is usually seen as having an anti-Gnostic thrust, though for the Gnostics the Creator-God (the Demiurge) does not act as God's agent, since God did not will the creation of the material world. An anti-Gnostic thrust is certainly possible, but so also is an anti-Christian. Introducing personified Torah as an agent of creation unquestionably weakens the polemic.

the king, the architect and the plans. In the *nimshal* we have only two: God and the Torah. Is the Torah the architect or the plans? When Philo used the same parable he did have three elements in the *nimshal*: God, the divine Logos and the ideas. That Hoshaiiah could have known the Philonic passage seems unlikely: there is no evidence elsewhere that the Rabbis had direct access to Philo. That he could have heard the Philonic simile second-hand through his contemporary in Caesarea, Origen, who certainly knew Philo, and who would have identified the Philonic Logos with Christ, is an interesting possibility. There are excellent grounds for thinking that Origen was in contact with Jewish scholars in Caesarea, possibly even with Hoshaiiah (de Lange 1976, 21–28, 92, 203 [n.19]): it is intriguing, to say the least, that the clearest parallelism between the Patristic and Rabbinic traditions comes about when we juxtapose Origen's homily on Gen 1:1, with Hoshaiiah's Petihah on the same verse. The texts are almost mirror images. But when all is said and done, the case for direct contact is still only circumstantial. The fact remains that Hoshaiiah's *mashal* is mildly incoherent, which might suggest it is being somewhat awkwardly adapted from elsewhere.

*Reading Rabbinic and Patristic Exegesis Dialectically*

Nothing can be proved, but a pattern can be postulated which makes excellent sense of the evidence. Early Christian exegesis of Gen 1:1 identified the pre-mundane Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with the pre-incarnate Christ, and then, through the use of *reshit/archē* in Prov 8:22 and Gen 1:1, read the pre-incarnate Christ as the agent of creation into the Genesis account of the origin of the world. This exegesis proved theologically fruitful in the christological debates that raged in the early Church, and it became known, somehow, to Jewish scholars. They, also drawing on antecedent Jewish tradition (attested as early as Ben Sira) which identified Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with Torah, were inspired to make the exegetical counter-move of reading *Torah* into Genesis 1 as the agent of creation, in order to negate the Christian point of view. If this is what happened, then we are faced with an interactive, dialectical process, spun out over a long period of time.

We have considered only one small example, but the same pattern emerges again and again when we read the two exegetical traditions intertextually. The social settings in which these exegetical encounters

took place remain obscure, and are beyond the scope of the present paper, but that they happened, and that minds engaged at levels of theological understanding hitherto largely unsuspected, is, I would suggest, the clear and steady outcome of such analysis. The implications are profound, and open up a new approach to the history of early Bible exegesis. They mean that to study Patristic and, even more, Rabbinic Bible interpretation in isolation makes little sense. Each needs to be read dialectically: students of patristic Bible commentary should consult midrash; students of midrash should consult the Church Fathers—not just to note parallels or to identify borrowings of this or that individual motif or *aggadah*<sup>31</sup> but to understand how a mutually aware Bible exegesis profoundly shaped the theologies of both traditions.

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<sup>31</sup> Over the years, of course, parallels between Rabbinic and Patristic Bible exegesis have been industriously collected, beginning at least as early as Heinrich Grätz (1854 and 1855) continued by Louis Ginzberg (1898 and 1899) and by Jean Bonsirven (1939), though Bonsirven’s competence on the Rabbinic side leaves much to be desired. More recent notable studies are those of S.P. Brock (1979), A. Kamesar (1993 and 1994), C.T.R. Hayward (1995), M.G. Hirshman (1996), G. Stroumsa and B.L. Visotzky (1995), Judith Frishman and L. Van Rompay (1997) and E. Kessler (2004). But what I miss in much of this work, learned and important though it often is, is close analysis of the intensely dialectical nature of the exegetical processes on both sides.

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ADAM ALONE IN PARADISE.  
A JEWISH-CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS  
FOR THE HISTORY OF ASCETICISM

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In this communication I wish to illustrate a case of interdependence between exegesis, ecclesiology and the theology of asceticism in the first four centuries CE. The focus of my analysis will be on a Christian adoption of a Jewish explanation of God's command to Adam to work and to guard Paradise in Gen 2:15. Its purpose is to show that some approaches to this Jewish legacy may to a certain extent have depended upon the dynamics of the development of the ascetical movement.

The two main pieces of evidence that I am going to present are taken from 'The Word of the Saint Barsabas, archbishop of Jerusalem, about our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Churches [and about the chief priests]' as well as from a letter to the monks probably written by the fourth century Egyptian bishop, St. Serapion of Thmuis.

The only manuscript to which we owe 'The Word of Saint Barsabas' is the old Georgian manuscript *Athos Ivion* 11 dating from the tenth century.<sup>1</sup> The text was published with a French translation and introductory notes in 1982 in *Patrologia Orientalis* by the Belgian Jesuit, Michel van Esbroeck. However, this publication seems to have produced only little reaction in the scholarly world apart from the registration of this writing in the *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (No 1685) and some other patristic handbooks (see, however, Manns 1984, 165–180; Bumazhnov 2008(b); Bumazhnov 2008(a), 260–264).<sup>2</sup>

Besides, the editor's claims concerning the date of the probably Greek original of the text (second century) and its place of provenance (Palestine, possibly Jerusalem, see van Esbroeck 1982, 55–60), as well as its archaic theology together with the considerable length of the document (over 40 *Patrologia Orientalis* pages), invite a renewed consideration of this neglected piece of early Christian literature.

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<sup>1</sup> The words 'and about the chief priests' are a later addition to the title, cf. van Esbroeck 1982, 29–31.

<sup>2</sup> In the present article I partly use materials discussed from the other points of view in my publications mentioned above.

As this is not the place to attempt a comprehensive presentation of the work of Barsabas, I will simply say a few words about its content, presumed dating and its localization.

### *Content*

The genre of early Christian testimonies, according to Kamptner, includes ‘Bibelkommentare, die entweder eine Folge von Zitaten mit jeweils daran anschließenden Interpretation oder lediglich interpretierende Paraphrasen der entsprechenden atl. Texte bringen’ (Kamptner 2002, 674). Although the exact relationship of the ‘Word of Saint Barsabas’ to this genre is a matter for further investigation, the *Word* can be described to some extent as a collection of Old Testament testimonies about Christ and the Church. With this hermeneutical principle in mind, the author recounts several biblical stories, starting with the first chapter of Genesis and closing his discourse with the Exodus and Moses. In particular, he deals with the stories of Adam in Paradise, Noah and the flood, the foretelling of the birth of her son to Sarah, Isaac’s blessing of Jacob with Esau’s reaction, Jacob’s blessing of his sons, the stories of Joseph, and Moses and the Exodus. Thus, the continuous typological exegesis of the Old Testament or, in his own words, ‘the elucidation of the whole Scripture’ (ყოველი წერილი (...) გამოხსნდებიან; *Word* 1.9–10, 64)<sup>3</sup> in relation to Christ and the Church can be seen as the author’s primary concern.

### *Dating*

In addition to van Esbroeck’s considerations concerning the dating (van Esbroeck 1982, 59–60), it can be observed that the terminological distinction between the Gospels and the ‘Writings’ (meaning the Old Testament), as made in chapter 42, fits the second century situation with the canon of the Holy Scripture and is less likely the more we move

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<sup>3</sup> ‘They (i.e. the prophets) elucidate the whole Scripture,’ the English translation here and in the following excerpts is mine, unless the translator is named. On the term ‘Scripture(s)’ (წერილი / წერილები) as a name for the Old Testament in contrast to the Gospel(s) (სახარება / სახარებანი), see below.

away from this period (cf. Lampe 1961, s.v. γραφή). Barsabas' usage of the terms 'Scripture(s)' and 'Gospel(s)' corresponds approximately to that of St. Irenaeus of Lyon as described by von Campenhausen: 'Einige Male nimmt er diese Bücher (i.e. the Gospels) auch mit dem Alten Testament zusammen und bezeichnet sie dann ohne Unterschied mit den altgeheiligten Namen als "Herrenschriften", "die Schriften" oder "die Schrift". Doch geschieht dies nicht regelmäßig, sondern nur gelegentlich und fast wie im Versehen. Im allgemeinen hängen diese Begriffe (...) immer noch an den Büchern des Alten Testaments. Man erkennt daraus beides: einerseits die tatsächliche Bedeutung, die die neutestamentlichen Schriften für Irenäus bereits besitzen, und andererseits die Neuheit und fehlende Sicherheit ihres Geltungsanspruchs und ihrer Autorität' (von Campenhausen 1968, 220).

The fact that most of the traditions which Barsabas shares with other Christian authors can be found in St. Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235 CE) and other second century Christian writers (see Van Esbroeck 1982, 37–42) makes a dating in the late second–early third century an acceptable starting point to continue our efforts in seeking a balanced approach to the problems of the work of Barsabas.

### *Localization*

The localization of the *Word* is much more a matter for discussion. Van Esbroeck's claim for Palestine and Jerusalem do not seem impossible though not absolutely conclusive (van Esbroeck 1982, 55–56). Even if Barsabas, as van Esbroeck suggests, uses in chapter 43 traditions connected with the Cave of Treasures and Adam's grave at Golgotha (which is questionable in itself), it does not necessarily imply that the *Word* of Barsabas was written in Palestine. Some details, on the contrary, leave open the possibility of a localization alternative to the Palestinian one. So commenting on Joseph's coloured robe from Genesis 37, Barsabas says in chapter 39 that it prefigured the incarnation of Christ who in His human body, put on like a garment all nations believing in His name. He gives as examples of these nations: 'Jews and Gentiles, Assyrians and Persians' (*Word* 39.18–19, 102). Although the acquaintance with both latter nations is not impossible in Palestine, their mention might sound more natural closer to the borders of the Persian empire, for example in Syria or Mesopotamia. As in the case with the dating, we shall consider the question as a matter for further research.

*Jewish Exegesis of Gen 2:15 in Chapter 4  
of the Word of Barsabas*

In chapter 4 of his work, Barsabas quotes Gen 2:15 and provides an explanation of this biblical verse. The passage we are interested in reads as follows:

„დაადგინა ადამი სამოთხესა საქმედ და ცვაღ.“ ვის თვს სცვიდა? ვინ იყვნეს მპარავ? ადამ მარტომ იყო ცოლითურთ. ანუ რასა იქმოდა სამოთხესა შინა? რაიმეთუ სრულიად სიტყვთა ღმრთისაითა აღშენებულ იყვნეს ნერგნი იგი, არამედ საიდუმლოდ წერილ არს, რაიმეთუ დაადგინა იგი სამოთხესა შინა, ესე არს ეკლესიაჲ, რათა იქმოდის სიმართლესა და დაიმარხნეს მცნებანი.  
(*Word* 4:11–18, 66)

‘He (i.e. God) put Adam in Paradise to work <it> and to guard <it>’ (Gen 2:15). What did he guard against? Who were the thieves? Adam was alone with <his> wife. Or, what did he work at in Paradise? For these plants were edified (made to grow?) by the word of God alone. But, what is written is a mystery. For He put him in Paradise, that is, the Church, for working <at> righteousness and for keeping the commandments.

This passage is of interest in several respects. First, the understanding of working and keeping Paradise as referring to ‘righteousness and commandments’ is more Jewish than it might seem at the first look. A widespread Christian exegesis of Adam’s task has in view the charge not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Gen 2:16–17. We find it, for example, in the second century in St. Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* II.24, in the second part of the fourth century in St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Comm.Gen.* II.7 as well as in Severian of Gabala, *In mundi creationem* V.5, and also in the sixth century in Procopius of Gaza, *Ad Gen.* 2:15.

A Jewish antecedent to this tradition is the so called Slavonic book of Enoch 31:1, a Jewish apocryphal writing of the first century CE (Böttrich 1995, 813):

And I (i.e. God) created a garden in Eden, in the east, so that he (i.e. Adam) might keep the agreement and preserve the commandment. (trans. Andersen 1982, 152)<sup>4</sup>

The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 2:15 has a parallel to this exegesis with a characteristic shift from the particular commandment in Gen 2:15 to the law and *its commandments* in the whole:

<sup>4</sup> Kronholm 1978, 76, n. 96 gives a list of parallel rabbinical evidences.

The Lord God took Adam (...) and made him dwell in the garden of Eden to labour in the law and to keep its commandments. (trans. Maher 1992, 23)

As we can see, Barsabas does not follow the Slavonic Enoch and the well established Christian tradition, but agrees with the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan with its typical stress on the Torah. Barsabas' questions 'What did he guard against? Who were the thieves? <...> Or, what did he work at in Paradise?' have a parallel in the *Quaest.Gen.* I.14 by Philo of Alexandria:

Why does (God) place the man in Paradise for two things, to work and guard it, when Paradise was not in need of work, for it was complete in all things as having been planted by God, and was not in need of a guardian, for who was there to be harmed? (trans. Marcus 1961, 9; from the ancient Armenian)

A similar set of questions is also to be found in the Syriac commentary on Genesis by St. Ephrem, *Comm.Gen* II.7.

A second characteristic which makes Barsabas' exegesis of Gen 2:15 unique in early Christian literature—provided that the *Word* is really early—is the author's stress on Adam being alone in Paradise (Eve does not play any role in the *Word*). This feature is not an accidental by-product of the author's argumentation on the meaning of the keeping and guarding of Paradise, but on the contrary appears to be a consequence of his decision to confront Adam with righteousness and commandments instead of giving another possible explanation of the trees of the divine garden. This is perfectly clear from the following exhortation in chapter 10.16–21:

უკუეთუ სამოთხე იგი ეკლესია არს ღმრთისად, შენ ხარ ადამი, პირველი იგი ჯორციელი. შეიმოსე შენ დიდებად, იქმენ ფრთხილ და ნუ გარდახუალ მცნებათა, არამედ იქმოდე სიმართლესა, და ყავ მშვედობად, რადთა შეხვდე სამოთხესა მას შინა, რომელ არს ეკლესია ღმრთისად, და მოვიდეთ სასუფეველსა მას ცათასა. (*Word* 10.16–21, 70)

If Paradise is the Church of God, you are Adam, the first carnal <man>.<sup>5</sup> Put on the glory, be vigilant, do not offend the commandments, but work <at> righteousness and make peace so that you will come into Paradise which is the Church of God and we shall reach the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> Van Esbroeck 1982, 71 n. 46 suggests that the Greek original text rendered at this place πρωτόπλαστος.

Thus, explaining Paradise as the Church and making Adam a model and type for every Christian, Barsabas confronts Adam, and respectively, each member of the Church, only with the commandments of the Lord and the working of righteousness and fails to set them in any relationship to other human beings. This is the consequence of his explanation of the plants in Paradise.

The difference between Barsabas and the main stream of the early Christian exegesis of Paradise is easy to demonstrate. What they have in common is the connection with the Church. On the other hand, the mainstream characteristic which *differs* from Barsabas is the interpretation of the trees of the garden of Eden in their multiplicity as an allusion to the Church as the society of the holy ones. A conclusive example can be advanced from the third century *Commentary on the book of Daniel* 1.18 by St. Hippolytus of Rome:

“Ὅτι δὲ ὁ παράδεισος ἐν Ἐδέμ ὑπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ φυτευθεὶς εἰς τύπον καὶ εἰκόνα ἐγένετο τῆς ἐκκλησίας, σαφέστατά ἐστιν ἐπιγνώναι τοὺς φιλομαθεῖς <...> Ἐδ<ἐ>μ οὖν <εἰ>ρηται τόπος τρυφῆς, τ<ουτέστ>ι<ν> παράδεισος· „κατὰ ἀνατολὰς“ ἐφυτεύετο, ξύλοις ὡραίοις καὶ καρποῖς παντοδαποῖς κεκοσμημένος, ὥστε ἔστι νοῆσαι τὸ σύστημα τῶν δικαίων τόπον εἶναι ἅγιον, ἐν ᾧ ἡ ἐκκλησία ἐφυτεύετο. οὔτε γὰρ ψιλὸς τόπος δύναται καλεῖσθαι ἐκκλησία, <οὔτε> οἶκος διὰ λίθου καὶ πηλοῦ ὀικοδομημένος· οὔτε αὐτὸς καθ’ ἑαυτὸν ἄνθρωπος δύναται καλεῖσθαι ἐκκλησία· οἶκος γὰρ καταλύεται καὶ ἄνθρωπος τελευτᾷ. τί οὖν ἐστιν ἐκκλησία; σύστημα ἁγίων ἐν ἀληθείᾳ πολιτευομένων, ἢ οὖν ὁμόνοια καὶ ἢ ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ τῶν ἁγίων ὁδὸς τοῦτο γίνεται ἐκκλησία (...)

(*Comm.Dan.* 1.18, 40.19–21, 42.6–15)<sup>6</sup>

Those who love learning can clearly realize that the Paradise in Eden planted by God became a type and an image of the Church (...) So Eden means ‘a place of delight,’ that is Paradise. It was planted ‘in the east’ and adorned with frugiferous trees and fruits of every kind, so that one can understand that the congregation of the righteous ones is <that> holy place where the Church was planted. For neither bare land nor a house built of stones and clay can be called ‘the Church,’ not even a man by himself can be called Church: since a house is exposed to destruction and a man is subject to death. What, then, is Church? It is the community of the saints living according to the truth. Therefore, it is the unanimity and the common way of the saints in the unity which makes up the Church.

<sup>6</sup> On the Church as society in St. Hippolytus’ ecclesiology, see Hamel 1951, 42–46.

This imagery of the community as a group of plants cultivated by God has biblical roots (cf. e.g. Isa 60:21) and was explored in the Essene literature from Qumran, where it takes clear paradisiacal traits: the members of the Qumran community are described as trees of life watered with the waters of holiness (cf. 1QH VIII.4–13). Another pre-Christian evidence is the Psalms of Solomon 14:2 ὁ παράδεισος τοῦ κυρίου, τὰ ξύλα τῆς ζωῆς, ὅσοι αὐτοῦ ‘The Paradise of the Lord are the trees of life, His holy ones.’

The Christian usage of this imagery belongs to the very centre of the mystery of baptism; the person being baptized is spoken to as a tree which will be planted by God in His Garden, i.e., the Church.<sup>7</sup> One of the earliest witnesses of this idea is found in the eleventh Ode of Solomon with its unmistakable baptismal context (see Daniélou 1960, 682–683), as in Ode 11.16.18–19:

And He took me to His Paradise,  
Wherein is the wealth of the Lord's pleasure (...)  
And I said, Blessed, O Lord, are they  
Who are planted in Thy land,  
And who have a place in Thy Paradise;  
And who grow in the growth of Thy trees,  
And have passed from darkness to light.  
(trans. Charlesworth 1973, 52–53)

Another important early Christian model of the Church was the primitive community as described in Acts 2 of which the Epistle of Barnabas provides an illustrative evidence:

μὴ καθ' ἑαυτοὺς ἐνδύνοντες μονάζετε ὡς ἤδη δεδικαιωμένοι, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ συνεργόμενοι συζητεῖτε περὶ τοῦ κοινῆ συμφέροντος  
(*Ep.Barn.* 4.10, 146.19–21)

Do not shut yourselves up and court solitude as though your justification were already assured. On the contrary, attend the common meetings and join in discussing what contributes to the common good. (trans. Kleist 1961, 41–42)

The author of the Epistle opposes deliberate solitude (μονάζειν) and the gathering of the Church community (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ συνεργόμενοι) together with its management of the common good (συζητεῖτε περὶ τοῦ

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Daniélou 1950, 16; Daniélou 1963, 42ff; Miquel 1984, 193; *Ep.Barn.* 11.10–11; Origen, *Commentarius in Canticum canticorum* 3.8–9.

κοινή συμφέροντος). These two last activities are explicitly recommended whereas the first one is no less explicitly rejected (μὴ...μονάζετε). Being alone is thus contrasted with the ideal of a Christian community coming together ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, an expression which in this case unmistakably points to chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles as the author's ecclesiological pattern (see Bumazhnov 2008, 252–254). The concept of the original Church community, with its emphasis on fellowship, would seem to make it more difficult to accept the idea and terminology of a religiously motivated solitude, as far as it stresses the value of a secluded way of life.

Similarly, the ecclesiological imagery of the garden of reborn people planted by God, as we find it in the Odes of Solomon, St. Hippolytus of Rome and other early Christian writings, strongly emphasizes the communal character of the Church and contradicts the idea of being alone even within this community. As I argued elsewhere (Bumazhnov 2008, 263–264), the lack of such imagery in the *Word* of Barsabas with its image of a lonely Adam in Paradise as a model for everyone in the Church allows for the possibility of the *Word's* role in transmitting the idea of religiously motivated solitude.

As far as it concerns the exegesis of Gen 2:15, in chapter 4 of the *Word*, we have evidence corroborating to a certain extent this thesis. The text I am referring to is taken from the *Epistle to the Monks*, ascribed to St. Serapion of Thmuis. Though recently questioned by Klaus Fitschen, the authorship of St. Serapion seems still to be a more convincing alternative to other suggestions (Fitschen 1992, 79–84). If it is a work by him, the Epistle could have been written shortly after the death of St. Antony the Great in 356 CE. In chapter 8 the author says:

οὕτω τοίνυν καρποφοροῦντες λόγῳ καὶ ἔργῳ παρρησιαστικώτερον δύνασθε λέγειν Θεῷ· Καταβήτω ἀδελφιδός μου εἰς κήπον αὐτοῦ, καὶ φαγέτω καρπὸν ἀκροδρύων αὐτοῦ· ἕκαστος γὰρ ὑμῶν, ὃ ἀξιόποθητοι Θεῷ μονάζοντες, κηπὸς ἐστε Χριστοῦ παντοδαπῶν δένδρων εἶδη περιέχων, ταῖς τοῦ νόμου φυλακαῖς καὶ ἐντολαῖς γεωργοῦμενος  
(*Epistle* 8, PG 40, 933C–D)

Therefore, bearing fruit in <your> word and work, you can say to God more frankly: 'Let my beloved come down into his garden, and eat the fruit of his choice berries.'<sup>8</sup> For every one of you, O monks desired by God, is a garden of Christ, full of trees of every kind, cultivated by keeping the law and commandments.

<sup>8</sup> LXX Cant 5:1, English translation according to Brenton.

The image of a spiritually advanced Christian being himself the Paradise of God is not unknown in times earlier than fourth century and provides in itself *no parallel* to the lone Adam in Paradise, see Epistle to Diognetus 12.1:

οἷς ἐντυχόντες καὶ ἀκούσαντες μετὰ σπουδῆς εἴσεσθε, ὅσα παρέχει ὁ Θεὸς τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν ὀρθῶς οἱ γινόμενοι παράδεισος τρυφῆς· πάνκαρπον ξύλον εὐθαλοῦν ἀνατείλατε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ποικίλοις καρποῖς κεκοσμημένοι.  
(*Ep.Diogn.* 12.1, 338.17–20)

If you who became a Paradise of delight read this and listen attentively, you will find out what God bestows on those who love Him as they should. Cultivate in yourselves a fruitful tree in fullest bloom <and> adorn yourselves with a variety of fruit. (trans. Kleist 1961, 146 [with some modifications])

The connection to the *Word* of Barsabas chapter 4 is, however, established by the last words of the passage saying that each μονάζων, being the garden of God, does cultivate himself by keeping the law and—as we probably have to understand the Epistle—the commandments:

ἕκαστος γὰρ ὑμῶν, ὃ ἀξιοπόθητοι Θεῷ μονάζοντες, κήπος ἐστε Χριστοῦ παντοδαπῶν δένδρων εἶδη περιέχων, ταῖς τοῦ νόμου φυλακαῖς καὶ ἐντολαῖς γεωργούμενος  
(*Epistle* 8, PG 40, 933D)

For every one of you, O monks desired by God, is a garden of Christ, full of trees of every kind, cultivated by keeping the law and commandments.

Thus, the missing connection to fellow human beings, found by implication in the targumic exegesis of Gen 2:15, comes by Serapion to its full development: every monk is, as such, both a ‘Paradise’ as well as an ‘Adam,’ who is concerned only with the commandments and the law. The Church, that is Paradise as a community, does not play any role here.

My conclusion would be the simple observation that the developing ascetical movement in the fourth century put new wine into the old wine-skins of the Jewish targumic exegesis of Gen 2:15 which had been known in the Church at least since the second part of the second century. Needing new forms in order to express the new self-knowledge of the monks, bishop Serapion goes back to traditions which in their original—Jewish or Christian—contexts were far from intending any individualistic interpretation and develops them so that they can fit into the situation of the monks. The first step in this direction was made by Barsabas of Jerusalem with his concept of Adam being alone in Paradise.

Whether or not his writing was really known to Serapion or any other early monastic writer is a question which is yet to be resolved.

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WILL AND GRACE:  
ASPECTS OF JUDAISING IN PELAGIANISM IN LIGHT OF  
RABBINIC AND PATRISTIC EXEGESIS OF GENESIS

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Pelagius lived at Kardanoel  
And taught a doctrine there  
How, whether you went to heaven or to hell  
It was your own affair.  
It had nothing to do with the Church, my boy,  
But was your own affair.  
No, he didn't believe In Adam and Eve  
He put no faith therein!  
His doubts began  
With the Fall of Man  
And he laughed at Original Sin.<sup>1</sup>

Poor Pelagius. It was not enough that he and his followers were roundly thrashed by the invective of St. Jerome and the political manoeuvres of St. Augustine in the scrum of Church doctrine; but even the likes of Hilaire Belloc felt free to lampoon him in the ensuing ruck centuries later. Pelagian theology may have helped shape Augustinian doctrine on Free Will, God's Grace, and Original Sin, as Augustine reacted to the Pelagian challenge.<sup>2</sup> Despite the Pelagian loss of the battle for

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<sup>1</sup> Belloc 1912, 'The Song of the Pelagian Heresy for the Strengthening of Men's Backs and the very Robust Out-Thrusting of Doubtful Doctrine and the Uncertain Intellectual.' Belloc has a character reply to the song: 'there is no such place as Kardanoel, and Pelagius never lived there, and his doctrine was very different from what you say.'

I first came across this ditty in 1985–86 during a sabbatical in Cambridge and Oxford, when I participated in Christopher Stead and Henry Chadwick's 'Senior Patristics Seminar.'<sup>2</sup> During those halcyon days, I wrote the better part of my collection, *Fathers of the World: Essays in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures* (1995). I hoped then to write on the current topic, but thought at the time that the matter was too complex and I did not know enough. (The matter remains too complex and I still do not know enough; but as Hillel used to say, 'If not now, when?') I am grateful to the organizers of the conference on 'The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity' for the opportunity to engage this topic. I am acutely aware of Belloc's less-than-philosemitic reputation, and open my essay with his Pelagian Drinking Song as an homage to the irony of history.

<sup>2</sup> But see the argument of Clark 1988, esp. 100.

doctrinal orthodoxy, they may have won the war of ideas regarding these essential notions of religion. It behooves us to begin with a very brief overview of Pelagius' and Augustine's ideas on these topics in order to explore my thesis that rabbinic literature of early fifth century Palestine parallels Pelagian ideology on these topics and, when compared with Church discourse, that they will prove mutually illuminating.<sup>3</sup>

Pelagius is generally depicted as believing that God's Grace was manifested through the dual gift of Free Will and the Law (and Gospel); so that one would know what is best to freely choose and would sin if, when choosing freely, one nevertheless disobeyed God. According to Pelagius, there is no indelible stain of Original Sin; rather, Adam's error might be imitated by those who followed, but they in no way participated in the sin of Adam and Eve, either through the contagion of sex (as we will characterize later Augustinian thought about Original Sin as a sexually transmitted disease), or through some form of spiritual participation in sin with our common progenitor.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine, on the other hand, demurred. Adam's sin brought mortality and libidinous sexual desire upon all humanity, depriving all subsequent generations of Free Will, leaving them unable to perform God's laws without God's Grace, freely given—independently of obedience or even faith—to an undeserving elect. Since all humanity is conceived through sexual desire, semen transmits the stain of Adam's Original Sin and all (with certain doctrinal exceptions among the Holy Family) are born into a sinful state.<sup>5</sup> Jerome, in Bethlehem, contributes his part

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<sup>3</sup> Rather than include a lengthy footnote of bibliography on these issues, I have included a selected bibliography below. While there is a plethora of scholarship on patristic doctrine, there is a paucity of writing on rabbinic views on the subject. Worse, the two works which do seem to take up these topics, Cohon 1948 and Urbach 1969, each may be characterized with Jacob Neusner's review of Urbach, 'methodologically, it is a giant step backward' (Neusner 1978, 190 n. 20). Urbach takes up relevant subjects in chapters 11 (divine providence), 15 (sin and death, two inclinations) and 16 (Free Will) of his book. Yet Urbach mixes early and late texts, so long as they quote a common rabbinic attribution. This gives rise to an utterly a-historic survey. Cohon capably traces the idea of Original Sin from the OT through patristic literature before turning to rabbinic comparisons. When he surveys the rabbinic literature he mixes early with late, citing second century sources and thirteenth century sources as an undifferentiated whole. Neither of these secondary works can be used without extreme caution and thorough source analysis.

<sup>4</sup> *Inter alia*: Frend 1985, 122; Kelly 1959, 358–361; Anderson 2001, 65–66; Brown 1967, 340–352; Brown 1988, 411; Pagels 1988, 129–131; Rees 1988, *passim*, esp. 135–142.

<sup>5</sup> Pagels 1988, *ibid.*; Brown 1988, 387–427; Kelly 1959, 361–69; Clark 1996, 5–10; and Reuling 2006, 159–220. See also Schreiner who notes that Augustine 'stressed the absence of concupiscence in paradise (...) sexual procreation was literally commanded

to the high-toned theological argument by calling Pelagius, then also in Palestine, ‘a huge, bloated, Alpine dog, weighed down with Scottish oats’ (*Comm.Jer.* III).<sup>6</sup>

Augustine was the first to intimate that Pelagian theology smelled too Jewish. Through a series of innuendos and juxtapositions, he hints at Pelagius’ Judaizing, writing for example, in *On the Spirit and the Letter* chap. 13 against Pelagianism, ‘he is not a Jew who is one outwardly (...) but he is a Jew who is one inwardly.’<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Augustine writes, ‘(...) the Jewish people having become reprobate. We must not divide the times, as Pelagius and his disciples do (...)’ (*On Original Sin* chap. 29–30). When writing of the Pelagian, Julian of Eclanum, Augustine argues, ‘the Lord was consulted by the Jews whether it was lawful to put away a wife (...) [Julian] seeks to twist what he reads into another meaning. But I wrote my book (...) after the condemnation of Pelagius and Caelestius’ (*A Treatise Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* chap. 9). And in Augustine’s *On Grace and Free Will* he writes, ‘Why, therefore, do those very vain and perverse Pelagians say that the law is the grace of God by which we are helped not to sin? (...) Such are they of whom the apostle speaks as “being ignorant of God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:3) (...) He said this of the Jews, who in their self-assumption rejected grace, and therefore did not believe in Christ’ (*On Grace* chap. 23–24). Augustine’s winks and nods and guilt by association were more than sufficient. For centuries after, Pelagianism was considered a Judaizing heresy.

Which leads me back to my thesis, now refined: perhaps Augustine was not merely engaged in smear,<sup>8</sup> but accurately reflected a truth of Pelagian theology—it *was* too Jewish. After all, when Jerome and Augustine took on Pelagius he was in Palestine, first at Jerusalem, then at Lod (Lydda or Diospolis). Pelagius was in the Holy Land from c. 413–418 CE,<sup>9</sup> which approach the dates that scholars assign for the redaction of the great rabbinic collections: the Palestinian Talmud,

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in paradise. Libido or concupiscence, not sexuality, resulted from the fall’ (Schreiner 1988, 152).

<sup>6</sup> Pref. apud Rees 1988, 7. The *Commentary on Jeremiah* usually dated c. 417–419 CE, although the identification of the Scottish oat-eater is debated.

<sup>7</sup> *On the Spirit and the Letter* Chap. 14 is explicitly directed against the Pelagians.

<sup>8</sup> There is debate on Augustine’s attitude toward the Jews. See Blumenkranz 1958, Dubois 1989, Fredriksen 1995 and 2001, and more recently, Harkins 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See Rees 1988, for the dates when Pelagius was in Palestine.

Genesis Rabbah, and Leviticus Rabbah.<sup>10</sup> Do not those works themselves repeatedly suggest that humanity has Free Will, that God's Grace was manifest through the giving of the Torah, that sin committed willingly and wittingly is truly heinous, and that Adam and Eve's sin extended only as far as themselves without any notion of contagion, participation, or Original Sin?

Before we examine these signal ideas of Christian and Jewish doctrine and their intertwined fate in the early fifth century, we need to spend a moment on comparative methodology. I think there is a distinction between an 'exegetical encounter' and a more general *Zeitgeist*.<sup>11</sup> In order for there to be an actual encounter, we need what I have called 'a smoking gun' (Visotzky 2007, 301). I recognize that I am somewhat conservative in this regard, but to consider interaction among Augustine, Jerome, Pelagius, and the rabbis of Roman Palestine requires certain conditions that would make such interactions possible. The first is temporal, and I will stipulate that the Church Fathers under consideration lived at the right moment of history for there to be a possibility of encounter with the rabbis of the Land of Israel. The next is geographic, and I have noted that Jerome is in Bethlehem, Pelagius in Jerusalem and Lod, and Augustine is in North Africa. The rabbis who composed the great rabbinic works I propose to examine lived, for the most part, in the Galilee. Which is to say that the likelihood of actual physical encounter is somewhat minimized. Now it is true that Lod (where Pelagius was cleared of heresy by the bishops' synod), if alas no longer Jerusalem, was an early rabbinic locus. It is certainly true that Jerome had contacts within the Jewish community (Kelly 1975, 153–167; Kamesar 1993, 176–191; Braverman 1978, 3–10). It is even possible that Augustine had contacts with the Jews of North Africa.<sup>12</sup> So, whilst less compelling than the temporal argument, the spatial dimension does not preclude a possible encounter. There is, however, a third criterion, which is linguistic. Each of the three Fathers discussed (and

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<sup>10</sup> I.e. the first half of the fifth century. See Stemberger 1992, 189, 304, 316; Visotzky 2003, 37.

<sup>11</sup> See Kessler 2004. I recognize that 'exegetical encounter' can be used as an heuristic rather than as an assumption of historic occurrence. I distinguish between actual 'encounter,' which seems to require the latter, and *Zeitgeist* which might be closer to Kessler's intention, but to my mind, runs the risk of de-linking the material under study from its historic context. Nevertheless, 'exegetical encounter' remains valuable as a mutually illuminative heuristic.

<sup>12</sup> See n. 8, *supra*.

also Caelestius and Julian of Eclanum) were Latin speakers and writers. This minimizes to a great extent the probability of these great churchmen (except, perhaps Jerome) having read the works of the rabbis in Hebrew and Aramaic, and how much the more so, vice versa. It is, at best, very difficult to get past the language barrier.

Which leaves us with *Zeitgeist*. Here I am more prepared than usual to concede that the rabbis might well have heard of the goings-on in the Church community of Palestine. I accept this as a possibility because I believe that the rabbis were all too ready to hear about schism and scandal in a Christian community which loomed ever larger as a potent force in the Holy Land.<sup>13</sup> There also could have been some intellectual interest in the potential (if not actual) 'exegetical encounter' on verses of Genesis, as well as some theoretical interest in the ideas and theology discussed so vehemently by the Church regarding Original Sin, humanity's exercise of Free Will, and the nature of God's Grace. In practice, the abstract nature of these discussions, carried out in Latin, would have rendered exegetical or any other encounter moot for the rabbis. But encounter or none, the *Zeitgeist*, as it were, produced a parallel series of ideas in Church and Synagogue in the early fifth century. I emphasize that 'parallel' by definition precludes 'encounter'—but nonetheless, allows the two disparate sets of ideas, *mutatis mutandis*, to mutually illuminate one another.

So let us return to a more detailed examination of the various Pelagian and Augustinian ideas on Original Sin, Will, and Grace (with occasional kibbitzing from Jerome, Julian of Eclanum, and Caelestius). Following this survey of material—which, given the topic of this volume happily centres on exegeses of Genesis—I will turn to comparison with rabbinic textual traditions. To that end, my survey is not meant to give an exhaustive or even balanced overview of the various Patristic positions, but rather to highlight those opinions which will, perhaps, mutually illuminate one another.

### *Pelagianism*

I will begin with Pelagius and his discomfort with Augustine. In the latter's justly famous *Confessions*, composed at the end of the fourth

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<sup>13</sup> On receptiveness of the rabbis see Visotzky 1995, 93–107, esp. 101–105; on growing Christian power in Palestine see Wilken 1992, and Linder 1987, *passim*.

century,<sup>14</sup> Augustine had prayed, ‘Strengthen me, that I may be able. Give what You command, and command what You will’ (*Confessions* Book X, chap. 31; 45). Pelagius has been characterized as ‘deeply annoyed’ (Brown 1967, 177) by these words, finding them to be just so much ‘pious self-indulgence’ (Pagels 1988, 117), which ‘particularly distressed him, for it seemed to suggest that men were puppets wholly determined by the movements of divine grace’ (Kelly 1959, 357). Augustine’s snappish retort was that Pelagius ‘means by grace nothing else but law and teaching’ (*On The Grace of Christ*, chap. 11). Here ‘law’ has a Pauline overtone of works-righteousness—in other words, again through innuendo and implication, Pelagius is a bit too Jewish.<sup>15</sup> And what in fact does Pelagius say about Judaism? He writes, ‘As for the Jewish people, whom, being out of the seed of Abraham, God desired at first to belong to him above all other races, it is right and proper that we should know how he taught them and what he commanded them to do and to observe’ (*On the Christian Life* 8.1).<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Pelagius does seem to mean that God’s Grace is manifest through the law. Augustine notes that, at his trial in Lydda, Pelagius ‘stated that a man can be [easily] without sin and keep the commandments of God, if he wishes, for God has given him this possibility.’ To which the accusing bishops replied, ‘With the assistance and grace of God man can be without sin’ (*Proceedings of Pelagius* 6 [16]). Augustine drives home the Pelagians’ belief in the power of the commandments, when he quotes them saying, ‘We confess that even the old law, according to the apostle, is holy and just and good, and that this could confer eternal life on those that kept its commandments (...)’ to which Augustine notes, ‘They praise the law in opposition to grace’ (*Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* chap. 10). I am not sure whether Augustine’s antinomy is accurate, but Pelagius does seem comfortable with the salvific power of Old Testament law in a way generally not found in the Church post-Paul. Pelagius and his followers evince a sympathy reminiscent of rabbinic pronouncements on God’s graciousness in giving the Torah.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Generally dated to 397 CE, a decade after Augustine’s conversion. Here it is worth remembering that in his pre-conversion life Augustine had been Manichean for a time—a position which profoundly affected his subsequent thought.

<sup>15</sup> Unquestionably, a great deal of the debate between Augustine and the Pelagians depends upon their interpretations of Paul—a task which I strenuously avoid here.

<sup>16</sup> Following Evans’ attribution of this work to Pelagius. See Rees 1988, 114.

<sup>17</sup> For rabbinic comments on God’s graciousness in giving the Torah, see the end of this essay.

The law is important to Pelagius precisely because, through its instruction, humanity is offered a choice of ways. For him, this is the second manifestation of God's Grace: that, 'when our nature was created, it received the possibility of not sinning, because it was created with a free will' (*Proceedings of Pelagius* 10 [22]). Pelagius' insistence on Free Will allows the individual to choose to conform his own will to God's. 'The man,' says he, 'who hastens to the Lord and desires to be directed by Him, that is, who makes his own will depend upon God's, who moreover cleaves so closely to the Lord as to become, as the apostle says "one spirit" [1 Cor 6:17] with Him, does all this by nothing else than by his freedom of will' (quoted by Augustine in *On the Grace of Christ* chap. 24). And the power of Free Will is such that even if a man sins, he yet may change his erring ways, 'that pardon is given to those who repent, not according to the grace and mercy of God, but according to their own merit and effort, who through repentance will have been worthy of mercy' (*Proceedings of Pelagius* 35 [65]). On the subjects of Free Will, God's law, merit and repentance, Pelagius sounds quite rabbinic—a subject I will return to when I briefly take up the rabbis' teachings on these subjects.

Of course, all this talk of Free Will undermines the Augustinian notion of Adam and Eve's Original Sin and its subsequent genetic transmission. Before we turn to Augustine for the details of his interpretations of Genesis, let us sample a few observations by Pelagius on the topic. Pelagius begins by observing that 'Adam and Eve were virgins when they sinned but when they sinned, the perfect purity of their bodies did not profit them; a virgin who sins should be compared to Eve, not to Mary' (Pelagius, *On Virginité* 8.1; following Evans' attribution). According to Pelagius, Adam and Eve neither offered a model of the benefits of virginity, nor did they pass sin on to those who followed.

In Rom 5:2, Paul writes, 'Therefore, just as through one person sin came into the world, and through sin, death; so death passed on to all people, in that all sinned.'<sup>18</sup> Pelagius comments, "'Therefore, just as through one person sin came into the world, and through sin, death.'" By example or by pattern. Just as through Adam sin came at a time when it did not yet exist (...) "So death passed on to all people, in that all sinned" As long as they sin the same way, they likewise die' (Pelagius,

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<sup>18</sup> The final phrase, 'in that all sinned' is a particular crux. See De Bruyn 1993, 92 n. 23, and Pagels 1988, 109, and esp. 143 with the bibliography she cites 174 n. 51. Now see Reuling 2006, 201 nn. 96–98.

*Comm. Ad Rom*, ad loc.; trans. De Bruyn 1993, 92). Augustine succinctly characterizes Pelagius' commentary, 'death passed to us by Adam, not sins' (*Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* chap. 6).

Pelagius' disciple, Caelestius, perhaps goes even further as he explicates his reading of the Genesis story:

That Adam was created mortal, and, whether he had sinned or not, he would have been going to die. That the sin of Adam injured only himself and not the human race. That the law leads to the kingdom just as does the gospel. That before the coming of Christ there were men without sin. That newborn infants are in the same condition in which Adam was before his transgression. That the race of man as a whole does not die through the death of transgression of Adam. (Augustine, *Proceedings of Pelagius* 11 [23])<sup>19</sup>

Peter Brown puts this into further perspective when he explains that Pelagius' other well known disciple, Julian of Eclanum, believed that 'sexuality was amenable to the will (...) sex was therefore what free choices made it. Good choices made it for marriage and children' (Brown 1988, 413).<sup>20</sup> William Frend explained Julian thusly:

As his own marriage had been touched by *simplicitas* he believed that this had been the original state of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a harmless pastoral existence. It would have ended anyhow, for Adam and Eve were created mortal and would have died whether they had sinned or not. Marriage and the engendering of children were not the results of sin, but aimed at maintaining the continuance of the human race. (Frend 1985, 137)<sup>21</sup>

We now have the essentials of the Pelagians on Will and Grace, and on Adam's sin and its subsequent consequences (or lack thereof). It is time to turn to Augustine, for as Peter Brown eloquently puts it, 'Pelagianism, as we know it, that consistent body of ideas of momentous consequences, had come into existence; but in the mind of Augustine, not Pelagius' (Brown 1967, 345).

### *Augustine*

Although scholars distinguish between early and late Augustinian pronouncements (and I am not suggesting that his thought did not show

<sup>19</sup> See the discussion in Reuling 2006, 205–208.

<sup>20</sup> This is in stark distinction from Augustinian views, see below.

<sup>21</sup> See Reuling 2006, 202–203, who follows Lamberigts 1990.

development from his Manichean to orthodox Christian years) there is a consistency on the issues under discussion.<sup>22</sup> As early as his *Confessions* he writes, ‘Before Thee none is free from sin, not even the infant which has lived but a day upon the earth’ (*Confessions* Book 1, chap. 7.11).<sup>23</sup> In *City of God*, written two decades later, Augustine explains, ‘The process of birth rightly brings perdition on the infant because of the Original Sin by which God’s covenant was first broken (...) in Adam he himself also sinned, along with the rest of mankind’ (*City of God* xvi.27). How can this be the case? ‘The whole human race was in the first man, and it [sin] was to pass from him through the woman into his progeny’ (*City of God* xiii.3). Were Augustine to have spoken English, he would have loved the palindrome, ‘Madam, in Eden, I’m Adam.’ That sin in Eden, passed down congenitally, is ‘what the whole batch or [dough-like] lump of the human race contracted from the sin of our first parents’ (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* vi.9,16; trans. Hill 2002, 310).<sup>24</sup> ‘Sin and death came on the human race through one man (...) Adam’ (*On the Spirit and the Letter* chap. 9). ‘This race would not have been destined for death (...) had not the first two human beings (...) incurred death as the reward for disobedience; and so heinous was their sin that man’s nature suffered a change for the worse’ (*City of God* xiv 1; cf. Reuling 2006, 190–193, 206–208).

At first, ‘Adam was made without any growing pains in adult manhood’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis* vi.14,25). ‘Only after sin did the human body begin to be fragile and subject to decay and destined to die’ (*On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees* 7.8). ‘It was, in fact, after their sin that (...) lust arose’ (*City of God* xiv.21). It could have been otherwise. Augustine insists that the ‘bodies of those two established in Paradise, not yet having been condemned by the law of death, were such that they did not have the same lust for carnal pleasure as these bodies of ours do now’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis* ix.10,16). Indeed, Augustine goes so far as to suggest that had there been no sin, ‘the man would have sowed the seed (...) when their sexual organs had been aroused by the will (...) and had not been excited by lust’ (*City of God* xiv.24; cf. Frend 1985, 137 on Julian). Without sin, Augustine writes, Paradise would have been a place ‘without any restless fever of lust,

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<sup>22</sup> Clark 1988 claims that most of Augustine’s doctrines on these matters are pre-Pelagian. See the discussion in Reuling 2006, 164–166.

<sup>23</sup> I am not here considering the debate on the role of infant baptism in the formation of Augustine’s thought on these issues.

<sup>24</sup> See Hill 2002, 310 n. 11 on the ‘lump’ being a bakery metaphor.

without any labour and pain in childbirth, offspring would be brought forth from their sowing. This would not be in order that children might take the place of their parents when they died (...)’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis ix.3,6*). Augustine dryly notes, they did ‘not in fact couple until they had departed from Paradise (...) because no sooner was the woman made than before they came together the transgression occurred, which earned them their sentence of death and their departure from that place of felicity’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis ix.4,8*).

J.N.D. Kelly (1959) aptly summarizes Augustine on sex in the Garden:

It is misleading to interpret him (...) as in effect equating original sin with sexual passion. This disorder in our physical nature (...) is itself the product of our primeval willful rebellion (Kelly 1959, 365). The essence of original sin consists in our participation in, and co-responsibility for Adam’s perverse choice. We were one with Adam when he made it (...) all sinned in Adam on that occasion (...) as a consequence of Adam’s rebellion which (...) is ours too, human nature has been terribly scarred and vitiated (Kelly 1959, 364).

Augustine does not sing along with Joni Mitchell that ‘we’ve got to get back to the garden.’ He condemns those who say, ‘He should have made man (...) such that he would have no will to sin at all’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis xi.7,9*). And, sinners that we are, Augustine also rejects as ‘pointless to say, “God should not have created people.” He knew beforehand we were going to be bad’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis xi.6,8*). Augustine allows himself to ponder whether it would have been better not to have women, rather than as Genesis has it, ‘male and female He made them’ (Gen 1:27). He wonders ‘whether that formula, which God “concreated” with the first works of the world and set fermenting<sup>25</sup> in them, was programmed to mean that it was now necessary for the woman to be made from the man’s side’ (*Literal Meaning of Genesis xi.6,8*).

In the end it is moot, for everything is a matter of God’s Grace. As for our ability to ignore our lustful urges toward women, Augustine writes to Juliana, ‘No one can possess (...) continence unless God give it to him’ (Letter *To Juliana* 188.8). And as for whether man can ever exercise any Free Will, J.N.D. Kelly aptly paraphrases Augustine’s distinction between Free Will and freedom, ‘Freedom is Free Will put to

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<sup>25</sup> *Concrevit*, which means condense, curdle, congeal. See *Literal Meaning of Genesis ix.17, 31*, Hill 2002, 394 n. 33.

good use (...) man is free (...) to live the life God desires him to live' (Kelly 1959, 368 at n. 5). 'Man's Free Will is most completely itself when it is in most complete subjection to God' (Kelly 1959, 368 at n. 7).

For Augustine, humanity comes closest to God in subjugation to Him, and in recognition that Original Sin has condemned us to mortal life in lust-filled bodies. How then are we, mired in sinful bodies, created in God's image? Augustine suggests, 'Just as God, after all, surpasses every kind of creature, so the soul by the very worth of its nature surpasses every bodily creature' (*Literal Meaning of Genesis* vii.19,25). 'And so if we were to say that God is something like the soul of this bodily, material universe, the universe itself being for him like the body of a single animating principle, we would be right in saying (...) he only made a bodily material soul for the man (...)' (*Literal Meaning of Genesis* vii.4,6).<sup>26</sup>

I cannot claim to have done justice to the complexities of either Pelagian or Augustinian thought on the issues raised by Christian readings of Genesis. While I have noted some distinctions between these schools of thought, I close this section with Peter Brown's perspicacious observation, 'For a sensitive man of the fifth century, Manichaeism, Pelagianism, and the views of Augustine were not as widely separated as we would now see them: they would have appeared to him as points along the great circle of problems raised by the Christian religion' (Brown 1967, 370). We turn now to see how contemporaneous rabbinic literature compares with the various points along that circle.

### *Rabbinic Literature*

I survey here two early fifth century Galilean collections, Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah,<sup>27</sup> with a focus on their comments on the creation of humanity in the Genesis account and the particular places where they parallel the patristic thought under consideration. I will also make reference to Pirque Abot, an early third century Palestinian rabbinic compilation. Rabbinic literature generally holds, in the words of Louis Ginzberg, 'that "no death occurs without sin." Adam is not responsible for any other death except his own. Every man could live forever, if he

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<sup>26</sup> Augustine is writing about God's creation of a separate soul for human bodies which is a distinct creation, and not literally part of the divine self.

<sup>27</sup> See n. 10, supra. For Genesis Rabbah see Reuling 2006, 220–277.

should live a sinless life' (Ginzberg 1909–1938, 5:129 n. 142). While at first blush this appears to be a concurrence with most of the Pelagian brief, we will see that in the details the picture is somewhat more nuanced.

In a startling passage, Genesis Rabbah teaches that 'in the Torah of Rabbi Meir it was written, "And behold, it was very good [*tov me'od*]" (Gen 1:31)—behold death is very good [*tov mot*] (...) Adam should not have had to taste death (...) (GenR 9:5). Here the midrash wants it both ways. On the one hand, Adam should have been immortal, but for sin. On the other hand, death is a good thing. The tension between human mortality and immortality is contrasted further: '[Humanity was] created with four attributes from Above and four from Below. From Below: [humans] eat and drink like animals, copulate like animals, defecate like animals, and die like animals (...) The Blessed Holy One said, "If I create humanity from those Above, he will live and not die; if from those Below he will die and not live [forever]. Behold, I will create humanity from Above as well as from Below, if he sins he will die, and if he dies he will live"' (GenR 14:3).<sup>28</sup> Yet the *Editio Princeps* and Genizah manuscripts of this text read the last passage as, 'if he sins he will die, and if he does not sin, he will live.' The first reading presumes that one will be eventually granted life eternal in the World to Come following bodily resurrection and appropriate punishment. The latter reading may assume the ability, absent sin, to attain eternal life in this world.

Elsewhere, Genesis Rabbah imagines Eve worrying about Adam's future without her, after she had eaten of the forbidden fruit, 'Shall I die and you [Adam] dwell immortal?' (GenR 19:5).<sup>29</sup> And still, the same midrash can imagine Adam and Eve reckoning with the long-range consequences of their sin, "'The man and his wife hid from God among the trees of the garden" (Gen 3:8) (...) a hint to future generations that they would be put in coffins of wood' (GenR 19:8). When Gen 2:17 states the punishment for eating the fruit in the infinitive absolute as 'die, you shall surely die [*mot tamut*]' Genesis Rabbah interprets, 'death for Adam, death for Eve, death for his line (lit. generations)' (GenR 16:6 end). On the issue of human mortality, these texts seem, as it were,

<sup>28</sup> For the variant readings see Theodor and Albeck 1965, 128 at line 8. See the brief treatment by Reuling 2006, 272–74.

<sup>29</sup> The term for immortal is transliterated from the Greek, *ατελειως*.

Augustinian. Stated another way the midrash suggests that ‘God gave him [Adam] two paths: life and death. He chose the wrong path’ (GenR 21:5). Here, Adam makes a choice of his own Free Will, but chooses death. As a result, ‘God showed them [Adam and Eve] how many generations they destroyed’ (GenR 19:6). God laments, ‘Woe that I created him [Adam] with [attributes from] Below, for had I created him from Above, he would not have rebelled against Me’ (GenR 27:4).<sup>30</sup>

For all that some rabbis imagine God lamenting the creation of a rebellious Adam, others glory in the Free Will humanity was granted. On the verse, ‘And behold, it was very good’ (Gen 1:31), Genesis Rabbah comments, “Behold it was very good” refers to the inclination to do good. “And behold it was very good,” refers to the inclination to do evil [*yezer hara*] (...) were it not for the inclination to do evil no man would build a house or marry a woman or give birth to children’ (GenR 9:7). The sages imagine an ‘inclination to do evil’ like Freud’s libido, that can be channeled to do God’s commandments. This inclination is not only the sexual urge, but also the desire to out-do one’s neighbour by building a bigger house.

Free Will is a good thing and is granted even acknowledging God’s foresight. Pirque Abot says, ‘All is foreseen, yet free will is given’ (MAbot 3:16).<sup>31</sup> The point of Free Will is that it allows Jews to freely choose to conform their will to God’s. Again, Pirque Abot, ‘Make God’s will like your will, so that God will make your will like His will. Suspend (lit. make void [*batel*]) your will before God’s will, so that God will suspend the will of others before your will’ (MAbot 2:4).<sup>32</sup> While this suggests pragmatic motives for conforming human will to God’s, it does not obviate the thought that an act of Free Will can lead to doing the will of the Creator. For the rabbis, freedom came through observance of the law. On the verse stating that the Ten Commandments were incised

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<sup>30</sup> This calls to mind the much later report (Erub 13b) of the two and a half year debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai on whether humanity should have been created or not. They voted that man should not have been created, but since he had been, he better watch his step. This tradition is reported in the Babylonian Talmud as a tannaitic (viz. early) tradition, but has no parallel in any source earlier than the sixth century redacted Talmudic text. Cf. Augustine, *supra*.

<sup>31</sup> See also ARN A 39. The remainder of the Pirque Abot quote: ‘The world is judged in goodness and everything is [judged] according to the majority of deeds.’ This presumes an ability to do God’s will more so than to sin.

<sup>32</sup> See the medieval commentary in ARN B 32, ‘If you made your will like God’s will, you haven’t done God’s will AS God’s will. If you have done God’s will against your own will, then you have done God’s will AS God’s will.’

[*harut*] on the tablets Moses brought down, the rabbis comment, ‘read it, rather (as though it were written) Freedom [*heirut*] is on those tablets’ (LevR 18:3).<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Torah study (leading to performance of the commandments) and, in particular, observance of the commandment of circumcision, is the rabbinic antidote to hell-fire (GenR 21:4).

Humanity can choose to sin, but it also can repent and return to God. Genesis Rabbah imagines God showing Adam ‘the door to repentance’ (GenR 21:6). Adam may serve as a bad example, however, as GenR 21:7 has God scold him, ‘Adam, you could not even stand the commandment given to you for one hour (...) while your offspring will be able to wait three years to consume fruit [when observing the prohibition against eating from “uncircumcised” trees].’ Here, subsequent generations are not only depicted as free from any taint of Adam’s sin; they are better equipped than he to observe God’s commandments. Elsewhere in Genesis Rabbah, Adam and his offspring are compared and contrasted, so that he serves as an hortatory example to them, much as the Pelagians would have it, ‘Just as with Adam, [says God], I brought him into the Garden of Eden, I commanded him, he transgressed My commandment, I punished him with exile, and lamented, “Where are you [*ayyekah*]?!” (Gen 3:9) (...) so his children, I brought them into the Land of Israel, I commanded them, they transgressed My commandments, I punished them with exile, and I lamented them, “How [*ekhah*] (does the city sit bereft)!?” (Lam 1:1)’ (GenR 19:9; cf. Reuling 2006, 268–270).

Nevertheless, in a passage that seems to respond directly to the essence of the Pelagian-Augustine debate, the rabbis comment on a verse dear to these Church Fathers, ‘Indeed, I was born with iniquity, with sin my mother conceived me’ (Ps 51:7). The rabbis say, ‘Even for the most pious, it is impossible that he not have one side [of sin]’ (LevR 14:5).<sup>34</sup> Does this mean that some rabbis did have a notion of Original Sin? Augustine suggests that humanity participated in Adam’s sin in that he was like a lump [of dough]. Presumably Adam was the sour-dough, the starter that imparted its sinful taste to all subsequent loaves.

<sup>33</sup> The midrash continues with the suggestion that the freedom gained is ‘freedom from the angel of death.’ For the notion that following the commandments brings eternal life, *supra*.

<sup>34</sup> The bracketed words are in *ed. princ.* Other texts read ‘one side of lust’ or ‘one side of abomination,’ see Margulies 1960, 308. For a fuller discussion of the passage and its possible encounter with Christianity, see Visotzky 1995, 101–105.

In rabbinic literature we find a similar trope, when the rabbis ask why women are tasked with performing the commandment of separating the Hallah, the portion of dough for the priesthood. The answer is because Adam was ‘the completion of the world’s loaf’ (GenR 14:1). Since Eve ‘destroyed Adam, who was the Hallah of the world, she was commanded to separate Hallah’ (GenR 17:8).<sup>35</sup>

A similar metaphor, also found in Augustine, illustrates the dangers of presuming too much of the exegetical encounter. Augustine refers to God, as it were, setting Adam to ferment, and, once completed, Adam congeals or solidifies.<sup>36</sup> The rabbis refer both to the earth being wiggly like jelly and only solidifying later, and again to humanity’s creation starting somewhat wobbly and then solidifying—just like milk in a bowl remains liquid until rennet is added and then it congeals (GenR 4:7; 14:5; LevR 14:9). While it is tempting to see some sharing of metaphor between Augustine and the rabbis, we must note that this very image was also used in Manichean literature. In fact, all three literatures likely take the trope from Job 10:10, ‘You poured me out like milk, You congealed me like cheese.’<sup>37</sup>

Whether as a lump of dough or a blob of soft cheese, Augustine theorizes that humans could have willed themselves to procreate without lust in the Garden, if only they had the time before they were expelled.<sup>38</sup> The rabbis do not share Augustine’s squeamishness about sex in the Garden. They imagine that the very reason the serpent tempted Eve to sin in the first place was because the snake ‘saw them engaged in intercourse and lusted after Eve’ (GenR 18:6). It was the serpent’s subsequent discussion with Eve that led her to sin. ‘Where was Adam

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<sup>35</sup> Compare this with LevR 23:12 which likens the fetus to a lump of dough whose features can be changed in the womb to resemble the paramour of an adulteress, thus revealing her sin! For Augustine, *supra*, n. 24.

<sup>36</sup> *Supra*, n. 25.

<sup>37</sup> See Henrichs 1973, 77, 57 n. 132 and see Visotzky 1983. Cf. Aristotle, *Gen. An.* 729a 10ff., 739b 21ff. (Thanks to Prof. Gwynn Kessler for this last reference).

<sup>38</sup> Augustine suggests that Adam might have willed an erection without lust, much as one can will a finger to move (*City of God* xiv.24). Cf. the later rabbinic text in Nid 13b, where the rabbis also consider a man who wills an erection. For them, however, this act of will is considered an incitement to the evil inclination. In another late text, ARN A 16, it is suggested that the evil inclination is transmitted through ‘the first drop of sperm that a man deposits in a woman.’ Although this does not impute sexual transmission of the evil inclination all the way back to Adam, it is similar to Augustine’s idea of Original Sin being transmitted through sex in general, and sperm in particular (*City of God* xiii.14; Pagels 1988, 109 nn. 53–54).

when this discussion was taking place?’ asks Genesis Rabbah. They answer with a worldly wink, ‘Since they [Adam and Eve] had been busy having sex, he was napping afterward’ (GenR 19:3).

The rabbis imagine ‘that Adam and Eve were created as twenty-year olds’ (GenR 14:7). Old enough to have sex, to be commanded by God, and, alas, by virtue of the Free Will God graced them with, to sin. As a result of that sin, they are expelled from the Garden. All in all, a busy day. Both the rabbis and the Church Fathers divide that first day of human existence into twelve daylight hours, as was the Roman custom. ‘In the first hour of that day the creation of humanity arose as a thought in God’s mind, in the second hour God took counsel with the ministering angels, in the third hour God kneaded (the lump),<sup>39</sup> in the fourth hour God shaped it, in the fifth hour God made it a lifeless human shape [*golem*], in the sixth hour God blew a soul into him, in the seventh hour God stood him on his feet, in the eighth hour God brought him into the Garden of Eden, in the ninth hour God commanded him, in the tenth hour he transgressed the commandment, in the eleventh hour he was judged/punished, in the twelfth hour God granted him pardon. The Blessed Holy One said to him, “Adam, you are an example [*siman/semēion*] to your offspring, just as you entered into judgment before Me and I granted you pardon [*dimos/dimissus*], so your offspring will enter into judgment before Me and I will grant them pardon”’ (LevR 29:1).<sup>40</sup>

This rabbinic text is emphatically non-Augustinian and appears to agree with Pelagian thought. Adam is an example to future generations, not the source of their besmirchment through Original Sin. Adam is granted pardon and so, too, Adam’s offspring may be granted pardon for transgressions. For the rabbis, there is always the possibility of

<sup>39</sup> For the image of the lump of dough, *supra*.

<sup>40</sup> Margulies 1960, 668–69. For ‘pardon,’ the midrash uses the transliterated term, *dimos/dimissus*, which is a release from judgment, a grant of freedom; see Lieberman 1944, 21 n. 140. The text is paralleled in the contemporary PRK 23:1 with minor variation. But, see Augustine on Gen 3:23, ‘*bene dictum est: dimisit*,’ apud Reuling 2006, 184–186, esp. n. 60, *ibid*. Cf. the medieval ARN A 1 and ARN B 1 where no pardon is granted at the end. For ARN more broadly on Adam and Eve, see Reuling 2006, 279–330. Also see Sanh 38b, where the twelve hours includes first sex, then the commandment, and then sin. Again, no pardon is granted. Parallels to ‘the Twelve Hours of Adam and Eve’ can be found in the Syriac Cave of Treasures 4.15–5.2, cf. Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* XXII; Ephrem, *Comm.Gen.* II.14–23 and in Irenaeus *Adv.Haer.* V.22.2; see Ginzberg 1909, 5:106 n. 97, and see Anderson 2001, 81–84, for a discussion of somewhat later sources. These traditions merit a full treatment elsewhere.

repentance and of pardon, even unto the moment of death (Visotzky 1995, 41–60, esp. 54–58). In part, this is because the rabbis believed in the purity of the human soul and its ability to repent. As an indication of this privileging of the soul, the rabbis were comfortable analogizing the soul within the body to God in the universe:

The soul fills the body and the Blessed Holy One fills the universe (...) Let the soul which fills the body come and praise the Blessed Holy One Who fills the universe. The soul suffers the body and the Blessed Holy One suffers the universe (...) The soul is pure in the body and the Blessed Holy One is pure in the universe (...) The soul does not sleep in the body and the Blessed Holy One does not sleep in the universe, as it is written, ‘The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers’ (Ps 121:4). (LevR 4:8)<sup>41</sup>

### *Conclusions*

This paper has surveyed a broad swath of early fifth century debates on Adam and Eve’s sin, Free Will and the role God’s Grace played for them and for subsequent humanity. For the Church, the stances of Augustine and the Pelagians were contrasted to one another. Augustine’s implication that the Pelagians ‘judaised’ was offered as a possible matrix for examining textual parallels in rabbinic thought. On the whole, the rabbinic material, as it were, skews Pelagian. Or, one might as readily characterize the Pelagians as indeed sharing a *Weltanschauung* with rabbinic literature of the period. Yet, along the way, a number of Augustinian opinions were echoed or otherwise paralleled in rabbinic thought of that era. In retrospect, this should not be all that surprising, for as the rabbis say, ‘“All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full” (Eccl 1:7)—this refers to rabbinic learning which has many types of wisdom’ (MidrProv 10).<sup>42</sup>

This essay only maps the surface of a vast territory. There has been little in-depth analysis here regarding the meaning of this ‘exegetical encounter’ precisely because of the methodological issues discussed at the outset. Although the mapping of Augustine and the Pelagians on the one hand, and that of the rabbis, on the other, seems similar on these issues, it remains unclear whether the territory mapped is congruent,

<sup>41</sup> See Visotzky 2003, 90–98.

<sup>42</sup> Following the readings of Ms. Escorial G IV 11 and Ms. Paris 152,3. See Visotzky 1990, 84.

contiguous, or—to utterly stretch the metaphor—even on the same continent. The questions asked here were posed, essentially, from the perspective of what Peter Brown has aptly called ‘the great circle of problems raised by the Christian religion’ (Brown 1967, 370). Despite our having found echoes of and parallels to these topics in rabbinic literature, Original Sin is emphatically not a subject in the broad rabbinic purview. In general, Free Will is not a subject of discussion; rather, the rabbis frame humanity’s penchant for sinning non-philosophically, through the trope of the ‘evil inclination.’ Finally, God’s Grace is manifest to the rabbis through the study of Torah. They neatly epitomize this thought with a statement that expresses their relationship with God, and with which we conclude:

Humanity is beloved for it was created in God’s image. An even greater act of love is that it was made known to humans that they were created in God’s image, as it is said, ‘For in God’s image God did make humanity’ (Gen 9:6). Israel is beloved for they were called children of the Omnipresent. An even greater act of love is that it was made known to them that they were called the children of the Omnipresent, as it is said, ‘You are the children of the Lord your God’ (Deut 14:1). Israel is beloved for they have been given a precious vessel. An even greater act of love is that it was made known to them that they were given a precious vessel, by which the world was created, as it is said, ‘For I give you good instruction, do not forsake my Torah’ (Prov 4:2). (MAbot 3:15)<sup>43</sup>

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THE CHRISTIAN AND THE RABBINIC ADAM:  
GENESIS RABBAH AND PATRISTIC EXEGESIS OF GEN 3:17–19

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The heritage of ancient Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation embodies the intricate relationship of similarity and divergence between the two religions. Often the two meet, sharing exegetical motifs and theological concerns. But, as often they differ fundamentally, even while sharing a lot of common exegesis. In this paper, I will focus on a case in which the exegetical ways parted considerably, which is Genesis Rabbah's reading of Gen 3:17–19 as contrasted to patristic interpretation of the same verses. The Hebrew biblical text formulates God's response to Adam, who had eaten from the forbidden tree:

(3:17) And to Adam he said: because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree, concerning which I commanded you saying: 'You shall not eat of it!', cursed be the earth on your account; in toil you shall eat (of) it all the days of your life. (3:18) And thorns and thistles it shall produce for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. (3:19) In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the earth; for out of it you were taken, for you are dust and to dust you shall return.

When commenting upon this text, Church Fathers and Rabbis operated on the common ground of biblical and post-biblical tradition. Naturally, their exegetical efforts often produced the same sort of interpretations. Yet as regards the possibility of mutual influence, at least in this case the divergences are more telling than the similarities. While the latter do indeed sometimes point to a shared tradition and as such are likely to establish an 'encounter,' the differences are far more prominent and suggest a deliberate change of route on the side of the Rabbis. I will start with a 'nutshell' overview of the patristic reading of the punishment of Adam and then turn to Genesis Rabbah's reading of the relevant verses.

*Patristic Interpretation of Gen 3:17–19*

The Church Fathers have richly commented upon the book of Genesis. The multiformity of the exegetical tradition should be stressed in the

first place. There is no such thing as *the* Christian interpretation of Eden. Let me illustrate this point by shortly discussing the differences between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The best documented Antiochene vision is that of John Chrysostom, the later bishop of Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom is an ardent moralist, and Adam and Eve's fault is, for him, primarily an example of common human failure. In his eyes, the punishment of Adam and Eve is essentially a means of correction, which helps the first humans to regain the way to the good life. The punishment, as such, is understood in a rather straightforward way. Adam is to work the land and labour in sweat, and his effort will remind him of his sin, thus ensuring that he will keep on the right path. The deeper basis of this moral reading of Eden is Antiochene eschatology. Perfect life, John Chrysostom insists, is not behind us, but it has only arrived in promise and is yet to arrive in full. The ultimate future is not in the Paradise Adam left, but in the heaven Christ promised (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* VII).

In the Alexandrian school of theology and exegesis, we find a quite different view of Eden. As Didymus, the blind teacher of Alexandria states, Paradise has been re-opened for us because Christ reversed the curse of Adam. Just as Adam voluntarily followed his wife in sinning, thereby causing a great trauma in human nature, so Christ voluntarily assumed the human condition and repaired the rupture (Didymus the Blind, *In Genesim*, ad Gen 3:12 and iter ad Gen 3:17). The Alexandrians tend to see the fall from Paradise as a fall into the human body, more precisely, as a change in the bodily condition of mankind. Whereas the ideal, that is paradisiacal, state is an angelic form of corporeality, the material body can only be considered as a deprived state of being. Hence, the 'thorns and thistles' of Gen 3:18 are interpreted not as physical labour, but rather as the troubles of corporeal life that keep the soul away from its proper purpose, which is to contemplate God in an untroubled vision.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the place for a full exposition of the patristic exegesis of Gen 3:17–19. For the present purpose, these short descriptions should

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller treatment of the patristic heritage, see Reuling 2006.

<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom wrote two complete series of homilies on Genesis, the *Sermones in Genesim* and the *Homiliae in Genesim*.

<sup>3</sup> Didymus' Genesis commentary is an important source for the Alexandrian interpretation of the first book of the Bible, as it supplements the scarce evidence that remains from Origen.

serve to illustrate the multivocality of the Christian exegetical tradition. There is, however, a common perspective that unites all Christian interpretation of Eden, however different it may be. I refer to the underlying vision of salvation history in which Adam and Christ are pivotal figures. Already in the earliest Christian documents it is suggested that the ultimate significance of Christ can only be fully grasped against the background of the first creation. Christ is the *typos*, Adam the *anti-typos*.<sup>4</sup> A well designed example of this interpretative paradigm is the passion narrative in the gospel of John. Although never mentioning Adam by name, John 19–20 describes both the passionate and the glorious Christ against the background of the biblical story of Eden. Just as Adam’s side had been opened, so is Jesus’; just as Adam was put in a garden, so the risen Christ is found in the garden—‘mistaken’ by Mary Magdalene for the gardener, or rather, on a deeper level, not mistaken, but quite correctly understood. Jesus *is* the new gardener, the new Adam, the true human.

This paradigm of interpretation informs all Christian exegesis of the Eden account, even if some authors have difficulties with its implications. Notably, the Antiochenes, with their moral reading of Adam’s fall and punishment, find it hard to explain the universality of the penalty (cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* V.13–31). Yet also for Chrysostom, the Eden account is part of an unquestioned bipolar model of salvation history, in which the primordial ordeal represents a diminution of the original divine image, which only can be restored in the image of Christ (*ibid.* II and VII). Perhaps the only Christian author who outspokenly disputed the model is the Pelagian theologian Julian of Eclanum. Against Augustine of Hippo, Julian defended the common nature of Adam’s sin and punishment over and over again.<sup>5</sup> Julian of Eclanum, however, is the proverbial exception that confirms the rule. His arguments did not convince Augustine. Rather, Julian of Eclanum’s perseverance would seem to have stimulated his opponent to fully unfold his theory of original sin, which is by far the most articulate—and most influential—expression of paradigmatic Christian interpretation of Eden.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See already the letters of St. Paul: 1 Cor 15:21–22; 15:45–49; Rom 5:12–21.

<sup>5</sup> For Julian’s argument see Augustine, *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*, 6.21–27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* This series of books against Julian remained unfinished because of Augustine’s death.

By contrasting Christ and Adam as counter poles in salvation history, the one causing the fall of humanity and the other its restoration, the nascent church elaborated upon a pre-Christian, Jewish interpretative tradition of the Eden account.<sup>7</sup> As the church appropriated this tradition and widely elaborated upon it, Genesis 3 and more specifically the punishment of the first humans became a biblical *locus* of special importance; a key-text in the Christian conception of salvation history. While the fall-tradition was generally adopted by Christian authors, in rabbinic Judaism it came to be overshadowed by other perspectives on Adam.

### *Gen 3:17–19 in Genesis Rabbah*

Genesis Rabbah is the encompassing midrashic collection of Genesis interpretation. As such, it is the prime source for any study of rabbinic Genesis interpretation. The date of redaction (first half of the fifth century) is relatively close to the patristic writings discussed above. For these reasons, Genesis Rabbah is a valuable source for possible exegetical encounters between Church Fathers and Rabbis. Further, as has been noted by several scholars, Genesis Rabbah not only collects diverse midrashic traditions on the first book of the Bible, but it also presents an integrated rabbinic view on Genesis.<sup>8</sup> In my view, this also pertains to Genesis Rabbah's dealing with the primordial ordeal. More clearly than in other rabbinic sources, Genesis Rabbah's perspective on

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<sup>7</sup> James Kugel states that the idea of a 'fall' was the result of early Jewish exegesis of Gen 2:16–17 (Kugel 1998, 98). The contradiction in the biblical text, i.e. that God announces Adam's death on the day he was to eat from the tree, while according to the same Bible Adam lived for 930 years, was solved by equating death with mortality in texts as early as Ben Sira (e.g. Sira 25:24). The subsequent problem, i.e. how mortality came to affect all of Adam's offspring, was then solved by declaring either mortality or sinfulness to be hereditary. It should be noted, however, that Kugel adduces little evidence for the idea of an inherited sinfulness (mainly 4 Ezra 3:21–22, 4:30, 7:118) and the Latin Life of Adam and Eve 44:2), while many sources support the idea of inherited mortality (e.g. Wisdom 1:13, Philo *Quaest.Gen.* I.45, Symmachus ad 2:17)

<sup>8</sup> So J. Neusner who stresses the theological character of the work. In Neusner's view, Genesis Rabbah transforms the book of Genesis from a genealogy and family-history into a book of laws and rules with respect to the salvation of Israel (Neusner 1997, xliii ff.). P. Alexander finds that the purpose of Genesis Rabbah is to present a 'rabbinized' reading of the first book of the Bible, with a fundamental polemical interest, i.e. countering Gnostic and esoteric interpretations (Alexander 1992, 230–244). See also Morris 1992, 117–166.

Adam's punishment diverts from Christian paradigmatic interpretation, as described above.

That there is an editorial perspective to be found in Genesis Rabbah's discussion of the primordial ordeal is not a matter of immediate perception. In fact, the section dealing with Gen 3:17–19 would rather seem to be devoid of any sort of documentary identity at all (GenR 20:8–10).<sup>9</sup> The interpretation has an exceptional level of exegetical detail and precision. This results in a multifocal presentation, which more often than not neglects the narrative context of the debated phrases. Let me support this observation with two examples taken from the opening section of GenR 20:8:

R. Simlai said: She came upon him with her answers all ready, saying to him, 'What do you think? That I will die and another Eve will be created for you? *There is nothing new under the sun* (Eccl. 1:9). Or do you think that I will die and you will live on your own? *He created it not a waste, he formed it to be inhabited.* (Isa. 45:18).' The Rabbis said: 'She began howling aloud over him; hence it is written: *And to Adam he said: because you have listened to the voice of your wife:* it is not written, "To the words of your wife," but to the voice of your wife.' (trans. Freedman and Simon 1961, 166–167)<sup>10</sup>

In response to the biblical phrase 'because you have listened to the voice of your wife' (Gen 3:17), the midrash explores Eve's methods for seducing Adam. R. Simlai suggests that Eve pressed Adam to follow her example by telling him that he would remain alone and without offspring if he would not join her in transgression. The majority position maintains that Eve succeeded because of her voluminous 'sound.' The play is, of course, on the somewhat peculiar expression of the biblical verse, i.e. the Bible states that Adam listened to Eve's 'voice,' while one would have expected him to listen to her 'words.' Of course, this is a perfectly typical method of rabbinic interpretation. However, by applying this reading strategy, the focus of interpretation shifts from Adam's mistake to Eve's performance. GenR 20:8 continues as follows:

*And have eaten of the tree:* this supports the view of R. Abba of Acco that it was an etrog. (trans. Freedman and Simon 1961, 167)

<sup>9</sup> The observation also pertains to the earlier parts, dealing with Eve's punishment.

<sup>10</sup> English quotations are taken from the translation of Freedman and Simon (1961), but sometimes have been slightly adapted by myself.

Again, a remarkable choice of wording occasions the specific interpretation of the midrash. The Bible states that Adam has eaten of the tree (that is, not the fruit he ate, but the tree itself), and this peculiar statement urges the Rabbis to specify the species, rather than to expand on the fact that Adam ate it.

When compared to the patristic interpretation of Gen 3:17–19, which always exploits the narrative context of sin and punishment, the multifacetedness of the midrash is striking. This is not to say that the penal context is absent in the midrash, but it is certainly not the dominant line of interpretation. See, for instance, R. Judah and R. Isaac on Gen 3:18, who, in slightly differing exegetical variants, proclaim that Adam had not the merits to enjoy the paradisiacal delights (GenR 20:8). One might argue that the context of sin and punishment is presupposed, even if not explicitly addressed. This is very well possible, but it does not explain another observation to be made, i.e. that several of the midrashim included in GenR 20:8–10 tend to mitigate or even subvert the penal character of the biblical source.

The most obvious point in case is the well known midrash on Gen 3:18–19 in GenR 20:10, which turns the penalty into a blessing:

*(And you shall eat the herb of the field)* When the first man heard this, his face broke out into a perspiration and he exclaimed, 'What! shall I be tied to the feeding-trough like a beast!' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him, 'Since your face has sweated, *you shall eat bread.*' R. Issi said: 'It had been better for him to remain with the first curse.' (trans. Freedman and Simon 1961, 168–169)

When Adam received the divine ordeal, the midrash suggests, he understood that by transgressing the command, he willingly degraded to an animal state. He then repented and turned to God, who granted him the honour of labour. Adam's position is restored: he will no longer eat grass, but he will have bread for food, that is, the result of cultivation and production. Thus, he will be distinguished from the animals.<sup>11</sup> This midrash mediates two important rabbinic concepts, i.e. the perpetual possibility of doing *teshuvah* and the blessing of labour (although the latter is the idea being debated by R. Issi). It counters

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis Rabbah's version differs from other variants of this midrash as regards its compact formulation that keeps close to the biblical text. The message, however, is identical. Cf. Pes 118a, Tg Neofiti Gen 3:18, Tg PsJon Gen 3:18, Fragmentary Targum Gen 3:18, ARN A 1.

the idea that labour should be understood as a reward for the first sin, or that Adam's sin caused a perpetual disarrangement of the cosmic order of creation (a 'fall').

This is certainly the most explicit example to support the claim that there is, in this section of GenR, a notable hesitation to acknowledge the penal or troublesome nature of Adam's punishment and its universal significance. But, other midrashim fit into this pattern as well. I mention the optimistic-humorous note added by R. Isaac of Magdala when discussing the curse on the earth, suggesting that one sells the plague and takes the profit (GenR 20:8), or the insertion of the associated tradition stating that sweat (among other symptoms) announces the recovery of a sick person (GenR 20:10). Evidently, each of these midrashim result from common rabbinic hermeneutics and techniques. Several have parallels in other sources. As such, these interpretations are no indication of editorial interest. Yet by including these midrashim, the editors built a framework of interpretation that clearly suggests a specific perspective on the text.

So far, we have dealt with the interpretation of our verses in GenR 20. Let us now compare these data with other parts of the text discussing the first humans' original glory and decline. First of all, there are some interesting examples of fall traditions in Genesis Rabbah. The most powerful expression of the idea is the midrashic tradition on Gen 2:4: 'These are the generations of heaven and earth when they were created.' From the fact that the word *toledot* is written *plene* here and in Ruth 4:18 only, the Rabbis deduce that Adam deprived humanity of six things, which will eventually be restored in the days of the Messiah. These are his splendour, his immortality, his gigantic size, the fruit of the earth and the fruit of the tree, and the primordial lights (GenR 12:6). Other examples of fall traditions include the midrashic traditions on the first Shabbat (GenR 11–12) and, possibly, on the garments of light (GenR 20:12).<sup>12</sup> Although Gen 3:17 and 3:19 do occur as proof texts (thereby illustrating that a straightforward penal reading of our verses was indeed available), the fall traditions are never associated with the discussion of Adam's punishment, but merely occur in the narrative context of creation.

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<sup>12</sup> Garments of light: this is a phonetically equivalent alternative for the masoretic reading 'garments of skin' (Gen 3:21). It is a matter of interpretation if the midrash on this verse transmits the idea of a fallen humankind. See Reuling 2006, 252–258, for a discussion of the relevant sources and the literature.

Adam's sin is also invoked in another set of midrashim, with a different approach to primordial sin. This is a dialectic model of sin and restoration, which is in fact far more frequent than the fall traditions. An excellent example of this model is the midrash on Gen 3:8, which takes it that the Shekinah left the world in seven steps. Each further step was the result of the sins of a generation, until seven righteous men (from Abraham to Moses) brought it back to earth again (GenR 19:7). There is no fall from glory in this model and it is taken for granted that merit is able to restore the damage done by sin. Here again we find an example of the rabbinic concept of *teshuvah*. We may further note that Adam's role is rather limited: he is primarily one of the pre-Abrahamite generations. The focus of the midrash is on Abraham and Moses, who personify Israel. Another tradition presents Abraham as the midpoint of the generations, the one who was able to reverse the turn history had taken in Adam and to undo the damage done by Adam (GenR 14:6). The topic of these traditions is, in fact, not Adam or the beginning of humanity, but rather Israel and its place in the universal world of creation.

The emphasis on Israel is even more manifest in the third *locus* of reflection on the first humans' sin and its consequences. I refer to the discussion of the expulsion scene in GenR 21, a remarkably coherent chapter. Here, Adam's fate is presented as comparable to Israel's. Just as Adam was placed in the land, received his commandment and was expelled, so Israel was placed in its land, received the commandments which it transgressed, and was sent into *galut*. But, Adam is also Israel's counter pole: what Adam destroyed will be restored by Israel. GenR 21 speaks quite extensively about Adam's original glory and his fall. Although a sad story, the chapter is filled with hope for restoration. Major subjects are Torah (acceptance and keeping of the commandments) and temple (hope for restoration). The last midrash of this chapter relates how Adam, considering what sort of life his children were to live, planned not to procreate. He only changed his mind when he learned that Israel in the future was to accept the Torah and thus would open new perspectives (GenR 21:9).

It appears, then, that the discussion of Adam's sin and penalty is related to the context of creation and expulsion, rather than to the context of divine ordeal in Genesis 3. Creation and expulsion are far more developed *loci* of interpretation than the punishment of the first humans. Even if Genesis Rabbah does preserve a number of fall traditions that include the loss of immortality, these are not connected to

the account of the divine speech in Genesis 3. Further, fall traditions are but one approach to primordial sin. In addition to the dynamic model of alienation and restoration, mentioned above, I may here point to the idea of creation itself. Several midrashim transmit an anthropology in which the ambiguous human condition, far from being the result of a primordial sin, is intrinsically grounded in the order of creation. Neither his bodily existence, nor his inclination to evil are accidental for a human being, but they are part and parcel of his very existence. An example is the midrash on Gen 2:7 concerning the double act of creation (the upper and the lower world). Human beings have the traits of both worlds, they are angel and animal in one, and as such they are perfect (GenR 8:11).

How can these observations help us explain the hesitation of GenR 20:8–10 to address the lasting or universal consequences of Adam's punishment? Although there is no ground for firm conclusions, some hypotheses may be suggested.

First, we might think of dogmatic impediments. The rabbinic conception of labour as a divine gift for humankind, hinders the reading of Gen 3:17 as a burden inflicted for sin.<sup>13</sup> More profoundly, the idea of a lasting and universal penalty for all humanity is not easily reconciled with the possibility of doing *teshuvah*. Although straightforward etiological interpretation of our verses is clearly present in the rabbinic tradition, this is not what the editors of Genesis Rabbah chose to emphasize.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, we have noted that Genesis Rabbah reads the first book of the Bible as concerning Israel and its place and mission in the world. The original condition and the subsequent fallen state of humanity as a whole is not the prime focus of interpretation, as it is in the Church Fathers. Within this overall hermeneutic frame, the decrees against the first humans are of less significance than the expulsion scene. In other words, the punishment for the first humans' sin is the expulsion, and not an ontological fracture in the human condition.

Lastly, it would seem far from improbable that inter-religious polemics had their impact on the reading of the primordial ordeal in Genesis Rabbah. Gnostic contempt for the bodily condition, or even Christian ascetic attitudes towards corporeality, may have fuelled the rabbinic

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<sup>13</sup> A similar observation may be made as regards the rabbinic esteem of marriage and procreation, which affects the interpretation of Gen 3:16.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. the fall traditions in Genesis Rabbah noted above, but more particularly in ARN B 42 and PRE 14.

hesitation to elaborate on the penal character of the text. Even more important, I would suggest, is the general Christian appropriation of Adam as the counter pole of Christ, implying an undisputed and widespread reading of the primordial decrees as pivotal for Christian doctrine. In this sense, the text was 'occupied' and loaded with unwanted interpretation. Genesis Rabbah's reading strategy would seem to counter the emphasis on the text as one of central importance quite effectively.<sup>15</sup> Against this background, it is not unlikely that the remarkably extensive rabbinic exploration of these verses is to be seen as a form of 'pre-emptive exegesis,'<sup>16</sup> which distracts the attention of the reader from the narrative context of sin and punishment and leads it in other directions.

### *Of Differences and Similarities*

In this paper, I have contrasted the rabbinic and the Christian Adam as quite different *dramatis personae*. By doing so, I have underemphasized the similarities between the two traditions. The most obvious congruency between rabbinic and patristic interpretation of the primordial ordeal is the Antiochene tendency to nuance the uniqueness of Adam's sin by emphasizing the moral significance thereof. This comes very close to certain midrashic interpretations we have seen. A remarkable shared exegetical motif is found in the reading of Gen 3:19. Genesis Rabbah associates the phrase 'dust you are and to dust you will return' with the resurrection from death, rather than with mortality (GenR 20:10). This is an exceptional interpretation, which is also found in the Christian author Didymus the Blind, *In Genesim* 104.17–22. It is very well possible that the correspondence hints at a Jewish-Alexandrian origin of this motif. A less expected similarity may be found between the interpretations of Gen 3:18–19 by Ambrose of Milan and Genesis Rabbah. Just as the midrash maintains that Adam found restoration by doing *teshuvah*, Ambrose emphasizes the possibility of restoration by

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<sup>15</sup> If this is so, this is another example of rabbinic 'withdrawal' from biblical *loci* that were strongly received by Christians. This process of removal was noted, amongst others, by J. Baskin, who found that the Rabbis tended to remove attributes and honour from non-Israelite biblical figures to Abraham in reaction to Christian appropriation of these figures (Baskin 1983).

<sup>16</sup> A term coined by Philip Alexander (1992) with respect to the interpretative strategies of Genesis Rabbah.

*conversio*. Both find a perspective of hope and restoration in the text, rather than a curse.<sup>17</sup> These are only a few examples of similarity in the exegetical traditions of Jews and Christians on our verses.

Yet similarity itself incorporates difference. When Didymus appeals to the scriptural proof he finds in Gen 3:19, his aim is to demonstrate that the resurrected body will be of the same angelic quality as was paradisiacal corporeality. In Genesis Rabbah, Gen 3:19 is invoked to support the concept of the resurrection from death with a proof text from the Torah. Thus, each interpretation is informed by larger concepts that attribute a different significance even to identical motifs. In this paper, I have tried to illustrate that—at least by the late fourth and early fifth century—Church Fathers and Rabbis interpreted the figure of Adam from a fundamentally different perspective.

What does this reveal about the exegetical encounter over Gen 3:17–19? Christian paradigmatic interpretation was developed on the basis of an existing Jewish fall-tradition, which was adopted in the earliest phase of emerging Christian identity and which was strongly appropriated and hardly debated. As far as I can see, there are no traces of any encounter with Jews on this point, either positive or negative. It is all very self-evident. The rabbinic tradition, as found in Genesis Rabbah but also in other sources, preserves a number of fall traditions, but these are supplemented and overruled by other views. Thus, the Christian and the rabbinic Adam parted ways. This separation may very well be explained by internal theological reasons, as I argued above. Nevertheless, it seems probable that the editors of Genesis Rabbah also responded to the way Christians appropriated the Eden account. This they did not by means of overt polemic, but rather in the majestic yet deafening silence of midrashic interpretation.

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<sup>17</sup> Primarily, the idea is related to Gen 3:16, which in Ambrose's Latin text reads: *ut ad virum suum conversa serviret* (*De Paradiso* 14.72). It is presupposed and further expanded upon in Ambrose's treatment of Adam's sentence. Cf. GenR 20:10 (see discussion above).

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## CRITICAL GNOSTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF GENESIS

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This essay discusses the biblical Paradise story as it is explained and rewritten in two Gnostic Christian texts, the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth*. Special attention will be given to the historical context and the possible purpose of these Gnostic interpretations.

### *The Apocryphon of John*

No less than three of the 13 codices of the Nag Hammadi collection of early Christian writings open with the *Apocryphon* (or *Secret Book*) of *John*, a document which in scholarly literature is sometimes referred to as ‘the Gnostic Bible.’<sup>1</sup> A fourth copy is included in the so-called Berlin Codex.<sup>2</sup> The Coptic texts are fourth century translations of a lost Greek original, probably dating from the second half of the second century. Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons summarized passages from an early Greek version in his *Adversus Haereses*, composed around 180 CE (*Adv.Haer.* I.29).<sup>3</sup>

In the first main part of the *Apocryphon* (BG 19.6–36.15), the Gnostic Christ reveals to his disciple John the eternal reality of a completely transcendent God and his hypostasized thoughts or qualities, referred to as God’s aeons. In the third and last part (BG 44.19–77.5), Christ teaches John the Gnostic truth about the creation of man and the earliest history of humankind. This part of the *Apocryphon* is replete with quotations from—and allusions to—the Septuagint version of the first chapters of Genesis. The remarkable thing is that time and again the information in Genesis is corrected and revised, if not refuted altogether. More than once the correction of Genesis is introduced by Christ with

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<sup>1</sup> Tardieu 1984, 26: ‘la Bible gnostique par excellence’; cf. Williams 1996, 8 and 198.

<sup>2</sup> The Berlin Codex is abbreviated as BG (*Berolinensis Gnosticus*). See the synoptic edition of the four Coptic copies in Waldstein and Wisse (1995).

<sup>3</sup> This part of Irenaeus’ work survives in a Latin translation.

the formula: 'it is not as Moses said (then a Genesis text is quoted) but (followed by a Gnostic interpretation of what allegedly happened).'<sup>4</sup>

In what can be seen as a transition from the first to the last part (BG 36.16–44.19), Christ relates the tragic story of Sophia ('Wisdom'), one of God's eternal aeons. Christ blames her for the coming into existence of an inferior Godhead, called Yaldabaoth, who turns out to be the Creator and Ruler of the present physical world. As such, he is identified with the Creator God of Genesis. Of course, this identification had far-reaching consequences for the Gnostic interpretation of Genesis.

We read how the inferior demiurgical God—whom Christ describes as a demonic figure, having the appearance of a lion-faced serpent—from his position outside the divine world of light, generated various other cosmic powers and angels. Christ concludes this section of his mythological teaching with the following ironical statement:

And he (the demiurgical God) saw the creation and the numerous angels around him, who had sprung from him. And he said to them: '*I am a jealous God* (cf. Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9); *there is no other God apart from me*' (cf. Isa 43:11; 44:6, 8, etc.). But by stating this he indicated to the angels who attended him that another God does exist. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous? (BG 44.9–19; cf. NHC II,1.13.5–13)<sup>5</sup>

Remarkably enough, the self-proclamations of the biblical God are quoted just to expose the inferior qualities (jealousy, ignorance, arrogance) of the Creator and Ruler of the world. This highly critical use of biblical texts sets the tone for the subsequent interpretations and rewritings of Genesis stories. In effect, the Paradise story has been transformed into a story of doom and foreboding:

<sup>4</sup> BG 45.9; NHC II,13.20 (God's Spirit moving upon the waters); BG 58.17; NHC II,1.22.22; NHC III,1. 29.5 (Adam's sleep); BG 59.17; NHC II,1.23.3; NHC III,1.29.22 (Adam's rib); BG 73.4; NHC II,1.29.6; NHC III,1.37.23 (the redemption of Noah).

<sup>5</sup> Biblical quotations are *italicized*. Very similar references to these self-proclamations of the biblical God can be found in various other Gnostic writings (*Test Truth* NHC IX,2.48.4f [cf. below]; *Hypostasis of the Archons* NHC II,4.94.23; *OrigWorld* NHC II,5.103.11–14; *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHC III,2.58.24–59.1; *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* NHC VII,2.64.19–26; *Trimorphic Protennoia* NHC XIII,1.43.35–44.2; *Excerpta ex Theod* 28; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.5.4 (Valentinians); I.29.4; I.30.6 (Ophites); Hippolytus, *Ref VII.25.3* (Basilides). In all these writings, the proclamations of the biblical God are quoted without their original context. It can be doubted therefore that the Gnostic authors in question had first-hand knowledge of the biblical texts. We might be dealing with a Gnostic *topos*, a frozen tradition handed over from one generation of Gnostics to the other, see Tröger 1981, 91.

The Chief Ruler took him (Adam) and placed him in Paradise. And he said to him: 'Let it be a delight for him,<sup>6</sup> but actually (he said this) in order to deceive him. For their (the cosmic powers') delight is bitter and their beauty is depraved (...)' (BG 55.18–56.6; cf. NHC II,1.21.16–21)

Subsequently, the tree of life in Paradise is interpreted allegorically as the counterfeit spirit who allegedly was created by the cosmic powers in order to lead human beings astray:

As for their tree, which they planted (claiming), 'It is the tree of life,' I shall teach you (plural) about the mystery of their (the cosmic powers') life. It is the counterfeit (ἀντιμίμος) spirit from within them, in order to lead him (Adam) astray, so that he might not know his perfection. That tree is of this sort: Its root is bitter, its branches are shadows of death, its leaves are hatred and deception. (...) The underworld is the dwelling place of those who taste it. (BG 56.10–57.8; NHC II,1.21.24–22.2)

In contrast, the tree of knowledge (*gnosis*) is conceived as a materialization of the good female spirit of the transcendent God, Epinoia, who, as the Christ of the *Apocryphon* explains, time and again revealed to Adam and his progeny the divine truth about the transcendent God, about the real nature of the Demiurge and his powers and about the origin and destination of spiritual humanity. It supposedly was because of Epinoia's presence in this tree that the demiurgical God and his powers forbade the first humans to eat from it:

As for the tree which they call, 'The tree of knowledge of good and evil,' which is the reflection (Epinoia) of the Light, about whom they gave the commandment not to taste, that is, not to obey her, because the commandment was being given against him (Adam) in order that he might not look up to his perfection and recognize that he was stripped of his perfection. (BG 57.8–19; NHC II,1.22.3–9)

Eating from the tree of knowledge is explained allegorically as listening to the voice of Epinoia. If Adam listened to her, he would be reminded of his divine origin and nature (his 'perfection').

This Gnostic interpretation of the two trees in Paradise ends rather unexpectedly with Christ's disclosure that it was he himself who prompted Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. And when John asks him, 'Was it not the serpent who did this?' Christ smiled and said that the serpent taught Eve about sexual desire, about pollution

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<sup>6</sup> The idea of Paradise as a place of delight/τρυφή stems from the LXX version of Gen 3:23.

and destruction because these are useful to him (BG 58.1–7; here the serpent acts as a servant and ally of the Creator-God).<sup>7</sup> This was obviously because by means of sexual reproduction the spiritual substance in the first humans is further divided and spread in the physical world. In another passage of the same book, Christ reveals to John that it was not the serpent but the Creator-God himself who planted the sexual desire in the first human beings (BG 63.1–9; NHC II,1.24.26–29).

### *The Testimony of Truth*

Whereas in the *Apocryphon of John*, the serpent is presented as a helper of the Creator-God and therefore as an evil figure, in the *Testimony of Truth* from Nag Hammadi Codex IX (Pearson 1981, 122–203), dating from the end of the second or the beginning of the third century, the serpent is described as the Creator-God's opponent and therefore as a positive figure. Small alterations to the biblical text contribute to this favourable picture.

First of all, in a subtle way, the serpent is upgraded. It is not a beast of the earth (θηρίον τῆς γῆς, cf. LXX Gen 3:1) but an animal (ζῷον) in Paradise (NHC IX,2.46.1). More importantly, the serpent did not seduce Eve but 'persuaded' her (NHC IX,2.46.2 and 8) and 'informed' her (NHC IX,2.47.1 and 4).

On the other hand, the anthropomorphous features of the biblical God are emphasized. NHC IX,2.46.17: he came walking 'through the middle of' Paradise. NHC IX,2.46.23–24: 'in that moment God knew' that Adam had eaten from the tree (the subsequent comment will conclude from this passage that God had no foreknowledge). And, in NHC IX,2.47.24, the expulsion from Paradise is presented as a conscious act against Adam: God 'said, Let us' throw him out of Paradise, whereas the LXX version reports: 'The Lord God threw him out of Paradise' (LXX Gen 3:23).

(45.19) Why do you [err] (20) and not seek after these mysteries which were prefigured for our sake?<sup>8</sup> It is written in the Law concerning this, when God gave a command to Adam, 'You may eat from every tree, but

<sup>7</sup> In the other three copies, the serpent taught the (wickedness of) sexual desire not to Eve but to Adam or to both Adam and Eve.

<sup>8</sup> This introductory question reveals that the subsequent Paradise story is no longer addressed to Gnostics but to outsiders who allegedly do not yet have the correct understanding of the events mentioned in the Jewish Scriptures ('the Law').

*do not eat from the tree in the middle of Paradise. For on the day that you eat from it you will surely die* (Gen 2:16–17).

*Now the serpent was wiser (46.1) than all the animals in Paradise (Gen 3:1a).*

And he persuaded Eve, saying, *'On the day that you eat from the tree in the middle (5) of Paradise, the eyes of your mind will be opened.'* And Eve was persuaded, and *reached out her hand (10) and took from the tree and ate. And she gave to her husband who was with her. And immediately they realized that they were naked. They took fig leaves and put them on themselves as aprons. (15) And in the [evening] God came walking through the middle [of] Paradise.* And when Adam saw him he hid himself. (20) And he said, *'Adam, where are you?' And he answered and said, '[I] have gone under the fig tree.'* And in that moment God knew that *he had (25) eaten from the tree of which he had commanded him not to eat. And he said to him, (47.1) 'Who informed you?' Adam answered, 'The woman whom you gave me.' And the woman said, 'It was the serpent who informed me.'* (5) And he *cursed the serpent and called him 'devil'* (Gen 3:4–14).

*And he said, 'Behold, Adam has become like one of us, knowing evil and (10) good.'* So he said, *'Let us throw him out of Paradise lest he take from the tree of life and eat and live forever'* (Gen 3:22–23). (NHC IX,2.45.19–47.14)

This rewritten story of the events in the Paradise garden is followed by some highly critical comments relating to the biblical God:

What kind of a (15) God is this? First [he] was envious of Adam that he should eat from the tree of knowledge. And secondly he said, *'Adam, where are you?' (20)* So God did not have foreknowledge? That is, he did not know this from the beginning? And later on he said, *'Let us throw him out of (25) this place lest he eat from the tree of life and live for ever.'* Thus he has shown himself to be a malicious (30) envier.

(48.1) What kind of a God is this? Indeed, great is the blindness of those who read (this) and have not recognized him!<sup>9</sup> And he said, *'I am (5) a jealous God. I bring the sins of the parents upon the children for three, four generations'* (Exod 20:5). And he said, *'I will (10) cause their heart to become hardened and I will cause their mind to be blind, so that they might not understand or comprehend what is said'* (cf. Isa 6:10). These are the things he said to those who believe in him (15) and serve him! (NHC IX,2.47.14–48.15)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The Coptic text of this sentence (NHC IX,2.48.2–4) allows other translations. Kaestli 1976, 51: 'Grand est en effet l'aveuglement de ceux qui lisent (cela) (ou: qui l'invoquent) et qui (pourtant) ne le connaissent pas!'; Koschorke 1978, 108: 'Denn gross ist die Blindheit derer, die (zu ihm) rufen; nicht haben sie ihn erkannt (oder: die [dies] lesen und ihn doch nicht erkannt haben)'; Pearson 1981, 165: 'For great is the blindness of those who read. And they did not know it.'

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the quotation of Isa 6:10 in *ApJohn*, NHC II,1.22.25–28; BG 59.1–6.

When and where could this critical attitude towards the God of the Jewish Bible originate and develop? In my recent book, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories*, I propose that we are dealing with a second century Christian phenomenon and, furthermore, that the Christians who voiced this criticism of the Old Testament God had an ideological background in pagan schools of Platonic philosophy (Luttikhuisen 2006, esp. 78–81). But, I should add that this is not a consensus view. The prevailing view among scholars of ancient Gnostic literature still is that this criticism of the biblical God was first worded by Jews (See, e.g., Smith 2004, 44–71, and the literature mentioned there). I will briefly mention the arguments in favour of a Jewish origin or background and then add my counter-arguments.<sup>11</sup>

### *Jews or Christians?*

In the critical comments found in the *Testimony of Truth* ('What kind of a God is this? [...] These are the things he said to those who believe in him and serve him!'), Birger Pearson, the editor of the Coptic text, recognizes an exclamation of despair by Jews who felt abandoned by their God: 'One can hear in this text echoes of existential despair arising in circles of the people of the Covenant faced with a crisis of history, with the apparent failure of the God of history: "What kind of a God is this?"' (Pearson 1990, 39–51).

Pearson's opinion is in line with a suggestion made already at the end of the nineteenth century by Moritz Friedländer in his *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (1889). Friedländer was probably the first to advance the thesis that Gnostic doctrines developed from allegorical interpretations of the ancient Jewish Scriptures. He located this development in the Diaspora community of Alexandria. In his view, Alexandrian Jews would have become 'heretical' (Gnostic)—in pre-Christian times—because their allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures eventually caused them to dissociate themselves from the biblical Creator and his laws.<sup>12</sup>

For a comparatively long period, Friedländer's suggestions were more or less completely ignored, but from the mid-twentieth century onwards, after the discovery of many authentic Gnostic writings in the

<sup>11</sup> For the following see also King 2005, 175–190.

<sup>12</sup> See my discussion of Friedländer's thesis (Luttikhuisen 2007, 750–752).

neighbourhood of Nag Hammadi, his suggestions began to be taken very seriously, notably by Pearson, as is clear from his article, 'Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins' (1973). In this essay, Pearson states, among other things:

The evidence continues to mount that Gnosticism is not, in its origins, a Christian heresy, but that it is, in fact, a Jewish heresy. Friedländer's arguments tracing the origins of Gnosticism to a Hellenized Judaism are very strong indeed, and are bolstered with every passing year by newly discovered or newly studied texts, the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic Library providing the bulk of this evidence (Pearson 1973, 35; republished 1990, 26).

Gedaliahu Stroumsa, another influential scholar of ancient Gnosticism, concludes his study of Gnostic mythology with the statement, 'the emergence of Gnosticism was strongly related to *exegetical* problems of the first chapters of Genesis' (his emphasis; Stroumsa 1984, 170). As far as I see, recent Gnostic scholarship adduces two arguments in favour of the assumption that Jews made the first steps in the process leading to the transformation of the biblical Creator into an ignorant and malicious Demiurge.

First of all, it is pointed out that the Gnostic authors under discussion applied basically the same allegorical method of Bible interpretation as a Jewish author like Philo of Alexandria, and, furthermore, that they were familiar with various extra-biblical Jewish texts and traditions. But how valid is this argument if we reckon with the fact that the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth* were written in the second half of the second century (the *Testimony of Truth* perhaps even later)?

As far as Philo's biblical hermeneutics is concerned, it can be doubted that after the first century CE, Philo was still read and studied by Jews, while, at that time, as is very well known, his works, notably his allegorical explanations of the Scriptures, were a rich source of learning for Christian exegetes and theologians. For the rest, the allegorical method was not invented by Philo. Gnostic authors could have become familiar with this approach to foundational texts elsewhere in the lettered world of their time (see the exhaustive study by Pépin 1958). In this connection, it is worth mentioning, too, that recent studies by Kraft (2001), De Jonge (2005) and Davila (2005) argue that early Christians not only read and copied but also rewrote and to an extent even composed several of the so-called Old Testament pseudepigrapha. It should further be noted that in the second century, the Greek version underlying virtually all Gnostic references to the Old Testament, was not transmitted

and studied by Jews but by non-Jewish Christians. In sum, I do not see reasons to believe that either application of the allegorical method of interpretation, or familiarity with extra-biblical traditions, or detailed knowledge of the Septuagint points to a Jewish origin or background of second century Gnostic interpretations of the book of Genesis.

Secondly, the hypothesis of the Jewish roots of the critical Gnostic interpretations is based on source-critical studies of such books as the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth*. For one thing, it cannot be doubted that the extant versions of these writings were written by Christians. After all, the bringer of the Gnostic revelation is Jesus Christ and his revelation is addressed to his disciple John. As to the *Testimony of Truth*: it is evident that the extant text addresses Christian readers. But it is a great possibility that these writings were composed from heterogeneous materials. Now the question is: were the hypothetical sources and earlier versions also written by Christians or rather by Jews?

As to the *Apocryphon of John*, Pearson and others argue that when we leave aside the narrative framework speaking of an appearance (or audition) of the exalted Christ to John, the remaining text—i.e. the actual teaching—does not mention Jesus Christ or contain other Christian signature features. For this reason, they trace the body of the teaching back to one or more pre-Christian (or at least non-Christian) Jewish sources. These texts supposedly were secondarily ‘Christianized’ (Schenke 1981, 607; Krause 1983; Turner 1986; Pearson 1990). Likewise, scholars assume that the Gnostic Paradise text of the *Testimony of Truth* was borrowed from a Jewish source.<sup>13</sup>

But this reasoning does not convince me. First of all, we should consider that early Christians did not exclusively think and write about distinctly Christian themes. Here I would like to refer once again to recent studies by Kraft (2001), De Jonge (2005) and Davila (2005), because these scholars demonstrate convincingly that early Christians wrote ‘Old Testament pseudepigrapha’ without alluding explicitly to Christian traditions.<sup>14</sup> Absence of distinct marks of the Christian religion

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<sup>13</sup> See esp. Pearson 1990, 40. Pearson is right insofar as he characterizes the Paradise text as a *Fremdkörper* in *TestTruth* for, as already noticed above, n.8, this passage no longer addresses Gnostics but people who did not seek seriously after the meaning of the events mentioned in Genesis. But why should we assume that this hypothetical source text was written by a (non-Christian) Jewish author?

<sup>14</sup> Davila states: ‘(...) the danger of Christian works being mistaken for Jewish ones is real: Christians could write works that contained no Christian signature features

in a text about the creation of man, Paradise and other protological issues does not necessarily mean that it could not have been written by a Christian author.

Note further that we do not have sources about ancient Jews speaking in such a critical, and even deprecating and disapproving terminology about the biblical God. For Pearson this is not a problem as it is part of his hypothesis that Jews ceased to be Jews when they became Gnostics by distancing themselves from their own tradition (cf. King 2003, 183): 'it is axiomatic that once Gnosticism is present Judaism has been abandoned' (Pearson 1990, 51). This is not unimportant for it, at least, implies that the Gnostic thought world did not originate and develop *within* some form of Judaism.

We can approach this issue in another and more positive way. It is well known that the meaning of individual Scriptural passages and the reliability of the Old Testament revelation as a whole were heavily debated by various groups of second century Christians. One of the chapters in Hans von Campenhausen's classical study, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (1972), is entitled 'The Crisis of the Old Testament Canon in the Second Century.' The central question in these second century debates was apparently: what is the significance of the ancient Scriptures after—and in the light of—the new revelation brought by Jesus Christ?

Von Campenhausen discusses a whole series of second century Christian documents: texts that were regarded later as orthodox—notably the letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch and writings by Justin Martyr—as well as texts which emerging mainstream Christianity designated as heretical—the Letter of Pseudo-Barnabas, Pseudo-Clementine writings, a Letter of Valentinus to Flora, and, last but not least, Marcion's biblical criticism (Von Campenhausen 1972, 62–102). Von Campenhausen deals briefly, too, with the *Apocryphon of John* and a few other Gnostic documents from Nag Hammadi.<sup>15</sup>

In my opinion, these second century Christian debates about the interpretation and theological significance of the Old Testament are, so to speak, the natural biotope, where the critical Gnostic attitude towards the Old Testament and its God could develop and prosper.

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whatever; Christians could be concerned primarily with exegetical issues rather than homiletic ones (...)' (Davila 2005, 76f; cf. Layton 1987, 21).

<sup>15</sup> The publication of these texts had only begun when Von Campenhausen finished his study (1967).

This observation means that Pearson and others are wrong in stating that the Paradise text of the *Testimony of Truth* and the body of the teaching of the *Apocryphon of John* do not contain any traces of Christian thought: precisely the critical approach to the revelation of the Old Testament is a Christian feature.

*The Ideological Background of the  
Critical Gnostic Interpretations of Genesis*

Why did Gnostic authors express themselves in this highly critical manner about the biblical God? First of all, it should be emphasized that they were not the only ones to take offence at aspects of the Paradise story and other biblical texts (Koschorke 1978, 150f; Cook 2004, esp. 72–82 and 172–174). The obvious reason was that the anthropomorphic appearance of the biblical Creator was not in accordance with a philosophical conception of God stamped by (Middle-) Platonic thought.<sup>16</sup> This philosophical theology draws a principal distinction between a completely transcendent God—who as such cannot be approached by discursive reasoning, let alone described in human language (cf. Luttkhuizen 2006, 108–116)—and a demiurgical God, the Creator and Ruler of the physical and perishable world.

Apparently Gnostic Christians did not hesitate to expose the supposed ignorance, the vicious character and the wrongdoings of the demiurgical God with reference to the first chapters of Genesis and a few other biblical traditions (notably Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; Isa 6:10; 44:6). They could do so because they regarded Jesus Christ as a bringer of revelation from—and about—the fully transcendent true God.

Although the Gnostic deprecation of the biblical God was a more or less logical consequence of the theological dualism that Gnostics shared with many contemporaries, it was unavoidable that their ideas should bring them into conflict with emerging mainstream Christianity. The author of the *Testimony of Truth* had these Christians in mind when he states: ‘What kind of a God is this? Indeed, great is the blindness of those who read this (the Paradise story) and have not recognized him’ (NHC IX,2.48.1–4). I add that this hypothesis involves not only that the critical attitude towards Jewish Scripture and its God was not worded

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<sup>16</sup> We know this concept from Philo, Plutarchus, Celsus and several other first and second century philosophers. See e.g. Dillon 1996; Athanassiadi and Frege 1999.

by Jews (or disappointed ex-Jews), but also that it was not necessarily fostered by anti-Jewish feelings or by a 'revolt' against Jewish oppression, as is sometimes conjectured in several scholarly studies.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wilson 1958, 188: 'the fact that the Demiurge is frequently equated with the God of the Old Testament suggests the influence of anti-Semitism'; Jonas 1965, 288: 'the nature of the relation of Gnosticism to Judaism (...) is defined by the *anti-Jewish animus* with which it is saturated'; Armstrong 1978, 92, n. 7: '(...) it might be possible to look for the origins of Gnosticism (...) among the peoples forcibly Judaized by John Hyrcanus and Aristobulus in the 2nd century B.C. (...)'; Dahl 1981, 701: 'Under the attack of strict Jewish monotheism (...), some early form of gnosticism was radicalized, and speculative, probably esoteric, Genesis interpretation was turned into a gnostic myth.' Cf. the discussion of some of these and other studies by Desjardins 1994 and Smith 2004 (Smith speaks of theories providing 'some compelling scenarios for his rise of Gnosticism from within Judaism itself'; Smith 2004, 70).

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‘BE YOU A LYRE FOR ME’:  
IDENTITY OR MANIPULATION IN EDEN\*

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The words of the title above, according to the Books of Adam and Eve, were spoken by Satan, not to Eve, but to the serpent. Playing on its ego, Satan convinces the serpent to provide a body and a voice for him. This story is reminiscent of the legend of the Blind Man and the Lame Man, an image for the soul and the body, in both Jewish and Christian transmission of the Apocryphon of Ezekiel and repeated in Rabbinic literature (Stone, Wright and Satran 2000, 9–19).

The Story of the Blind Man and the Lame Man is about the relationship of soul and body, spoken of as a ‘horse and rider’ (citing Exod 15:1; so Mekhilta *Shirata* [trans. Goldin 1971, 103]). Here, we are interested in a different horse and rider, the serpent and Satan, the two dubious characters found in the Garden. Or are they both there? The serpent certainly is, as any reader of Genesis knows. Is Satan there too? Not explicitly in the biblical versions in any case, and there is the crux of this essay.

We will look first at some Armenian Christian sources dealing with these two mischief-makers, and then consider the Rabbinic tradition. We do not seek derivation but comparison, and if we start from the Armenian sources, this will be evident. This is not a paper in Armenology, and we shall not make a great amount of technical detail explicit. Details of the various Armenian authors may readily be retrieved from R. Thomson’s *Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature* (1995). The Armenians were, to judge from the richness of their discussion of the topic, fascinated by this conundrum. But the Rabbinic sources are strikingly different and, somewhat surprisingly, the issue of Satan and the serpent is scarcely dealt with by them at all. That is more than intriguing.

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The biblical story does not mention Satan as the agent of the proto-plasts' sin, but only the serpent, and nor do the earlier, pre-Rabbinic Jewish sources, excepting the *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Life of Adam and Eve* (if indeed it is a Jewish source). The only Rabbinic source to address the issue of Satan and the serpent is *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* of the late first millennium CE. The basic question that emerges from this is 'why'? Did the role of Adam's sin take on cosmic dimensions in the Christian sources because of its connection to the economy of salvation, which is not an issue in the Jewish material, and certainly not for the Rabbis? If so, then Satan's role, even if already present in earlier material, would have taken on redoubled significance for Christians.

By the fifth century CE, at the inception of Armenian written culture, Armenian Christianity took Satan's role in the fall for granted. So, how were Satan and the serpent related, where did Satan originate, and why did he deceive Adam and Eve according to this literature? Descriptions of Satan occur in many sources (Stone 2002, 17–21),<sup>1</sup> and it is beyond the limits of this paper to present even an overview of them. An example, however, of the way Satan and his host were perceived is the following.

A late medieval tale from 1428 CE on the origin of Satan and his hosts describes him as commander of the fallen angels and builder of Hell. The demons say that they were angels who fell since they were unwilling to glorify God, and that they were responsible for Adam's expulsion. This tale contains the chief elements of the narrative: prideful rebellion before creation and the fall; the honour given to Adam; the building of Hell;<sup>2</sup> the deception and expulsion of Adam; and the imprisonment in Hell of his soul and those of all the saints up to John the Baptist. This story, embedded in a magical text, is complete and coherent, in small compass.<sup>3</sup>

The serpent is characterized in various ways. The encyclopaedic theologian, Grigor (Gregory) of Tat'ew, in the fourteenth century, says that the serpent was the beginning of death. Satan's forked tongue speaks in two ways, false and true (Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1993, 1:218–219).

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on Satan is extensive. Much is assembled in the three volumes by Russell 1977, 1981 and 1984; also see Forsyth 1987.

<sup>2</sup> On Satan's kingdom in Hell, see Zak'aria Catholicos (C 9) below.

<sup>3</sup> 'And we envied his honour, and we gave (him) to eat of the fruit /55/ which He ordered him not to eat, and we brought him out of paradise, and we deceived all his descendants to idol worship, to various sorts of sins. Our commander, Satayël, built /60/ a palace and named it "Hell."' (Loeff 2002, 35–36).

Moreover, evoking ancient associations, he says the serpent symbolizes deceptive, lascivious desire (Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1998b, 211). Such overall condemnations of the serpent are quite frequent. The serpent, snake and dragon have been objects of much research, and we shall not set it all forth here. Even the writing on the specific Edenic serpent is voluminous. Our interest is focused, however, not on the serpent itself, but on the ways in which the relationship between Satan and the serpent was depicted. Were they the same being, or two different beings and, if different, how related? This is what we have set out to investigate.

### *The Serpent and Satan*

Early Armenian literature used diverse metaphors to describe the relationship between Satan and the serpent. A fifth century source says that the serpent was a pack animal upon which Satan rode (Agath-angelos §141)<sup>4</sup> and a fourteenth century author says that the serpent was Satan's arms and legs (Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1993, 218–219).<sup>5</sup> Both of these writers, separated by nearly a millennium, see the serpent in the same way, as Satan's tool.

From a quite different perspective, the fifth century writer Eznik (§§46, 48 and 60) and many after him simply regard them as identical.<sup>6</sup> Their relationship is the subject of discussion in subsequent centuries and we shall focus first on the metaphors used for it in Armenian literature. In any case, often the selection of 'Satan' or 'serpent,' seen as very closely related, is determined by the literary context rather than by any deliberate, theologically driven choice.

Exegetes discerned in Ps 91:13 terminology analogous to the Genesis language. The verse reads, suggestively from the perspective of Genesis, 'You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot' (NRSV). A fourteenth century *Commentary*

<sup>4</sup> In PRE 13 we read, '[i]ts appearance was something like that of the camel, and he [i.e., Sammael = Satan] mounted and rode upon it' (trans. Friedlander 1981, 92).

<sup>5</sup> թօ՛ւր could also be translated 'wings.' Grigor Tat'ewac'i (1740a, 324–325) says that the serpent is the feet of the Enemy (a title of Satan).

<sup>6</sup> M. Alexandre (1988, 297), observes that Cyril of Alexandria says that Satan is transformed into the serpent and speaks as such (*Contra Julianum* III [PG 76, cols 632 B–C]). Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer identifies it with Sammael (chaps. 13–14), as does the Zohar I, 37a, while Nahmanides in his commentary to Lev 16:8 identifies it with Satan. Note that the serpent is Azazel in Apocalypse of Abraham 13.23. On the names, see n. 23 below and compare also Satayēl in n. 3 above.

on *Matthew* says, ‘And besides, it (i.e., Scripture) calls Satan ‘adder’, according to David, “You shall tread on the (...) adder”’ (Yovhannēs Erznkac’i Corcorec’i 1825, 281). It is intriguing to see this verse, from the well known apotropaic Psalm 91, exegetically related to the trampling of Satan. Surely intertextual with Ps 91:13 are Ps 73(74):13–14, which speaks of God trampling the head of the *višap* dragon-snake (‘[13] You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. [14] You crushed the heads of Leviathan’), and perhaps Gen 3:14–15 which speaks of the crushing (laying in wait for) the head of the ‘serpent.’ Thus, the exegesis of Ps 91:13 introduces the term ‘adder’ into the arsenal of Satan’s identifications. The background of the biblical material, especially of Ps 73(74):13–14, lies in old, mythological themes. The Armenian biblical translation has added to them, as we shall show below, a pre-Christian Armenian mythical association with the water dragon-snake known as a *višap*, which joins this procession of satanic reptiles.

In the twelfth century, the distinguished churchman and poet Catholicos Grigor Pahlavuni dubbed Tłay, i.e., ‘the Child,’ says that ‘Satan goes into the serpent’ (Palian 1912, 177–179). He is speaking as if Satan possessed the serpent in the way of demonic possession (cf. also Murdoch 1967, 133). Satan’s domination of the serpent in this fashion is even more explicit in a statement in the later apocryphal work called *Adam, Eve and the Incarnation*. It says that Satan entered the belly of the serpent and spoke from the serpent’s belly ‘with a human voice’ (§2; Stone 1996b, 22–23). This evokes descriptions of ventriloquism, which is frequently an aspect of demonic possession.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, the serpent was said to be recipient and instrument of the Evil One: the term ‘recipient’ most probably referring to possession (Grigor Tat’ewac’i 1998a, 324–325).<sup>8</sup> An isolated ninth century source, T’ovma Arcruni, says that Satan ‘nested’ (ըռնեալ) in the serpent (Vardanyan 1985, 22: perhaps a serpent’s nest), another image that implies indwelling or possession. In a society in which demonic possession is a known phenomenon and in which Satan was believed to be prince of demons, possession is an obvious way of describing the relationship between Satan and the serpent.

<sup>7</sup> For descriptions of demonic possession see Eshel 1999, 136–144; cf. Riley 1995, 453.

<sup>8</sup> Tat’ewac’i does not make explicit the metaphor that stands behind ‘recipient.’

The title of this paper quotes Satan's words to the serpent when he is inveigling it to serve as his vehicle or his arms and legs (*Life of Adam and Eve* 44.16.4). St. Nersēs the Graceful from the twelfth century calls the serpent Satan's instrument or tool of lawlessness (Nersēs Šnorhali in Bałdasaryan 1995, 161). In the texts we are studying, this is the first time that it is called an 'instrument' or 'tool' (cf. Grigor Tat'ewac'i 1998a, 324–325) but this idea, which has forerunners in ancient patristic sources,<sup>9</sup> is not explored much further. Intriguingly, in addition, 'instrument' also has a musical aspect. According to the Armenian Adam books, Satan plays upon the serpent like on a lyre.<sup>10</sup> This metaphor implies the same sort of dominance by Satan, as does possession.

In a passage of Ełišē's *Commentary on Joshua and Judges* 3:10, we find what is basically an allegorical interpretation of the Genesis story:

The serpent became pregnant with the forms of the invisible evil and he became the male nature through the mediation of the fruit of the tree. He seduced and stripped naked the five senses of the female part. He instructed the woman's mind in stupidity and caused (her) forgetfulness of the commandments of God. Before she entered the war, she was vanquished by the looking, of which you must be wary.<sup>11</sup>

Sexual imagery permeates the passage. The serpent first ate and then conceives or becomes pregnant with the forms of evil (presumably due to its possession by Satan) and in this the serpent is female. This pregnant, female serpent then becomes male and overcomes the female part (= Eve) and stripped her senses naked (again a sexual evocation)

<sup>9</sup> According to some of the Greek and Latin fathers the serpent was the instrument (ὄργανον) of the enemy of truth (Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Quaest. Gen.* XXXII; Theophilus, *ad Autolyicum* II.28; Irenaeus, *Dem.* 16; et al., cited by Alexandre, *ibid.*). Ephrem's poem (see n. 10) is reminiscent of the Story of the Blind Man and the Lame Man, attributed to Pseudo-Ezekiel: this story and its Rabbinic parallels are discussed in Stone, Wright and Satran 2000, 9–19. It seems likely that a comparative study of Satan's relationship to the serpent and the soul's relationship to the body and the metaphors used to describe the two relationships would yield important insights into ancient anthropology. See also the next note.

<sup>10</sup> The language used in the Penitence of Adam is that the serpent is a lyre upon which Satan plays: '[b]e you, in your form, a lyre for me and I will pronounce speech through your mouth' (Penitence of Adam [44]16:4b). Ephrem, *Hymns of Paradise* 8.2 talks of the soul without the body as being 'without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre' (trans. Brock 1990, 132).

<sup>11</sup> The exact date of this composition is uncertain, depending on its authenticity which is debated. It may be of the fifth century and is certainly early.

causing the abeyance of the intellect (therefore ‘stupidity’). The serpent is said to use the fruit as its instrument for Eve’s transformation. Once the serpent overcame the woman Eve, using the fruit as a tool, it is said to become male. This implies the superiority of the male, and the serpent plays the male role in contrast to Eve. The role of the five senses through which Satan deceived Eve, comes to the fore in the thirteenth century and is further stressed a century later by Grigor Tat’ewac’i (1998a, 324–325).<sup>12</sup> Eve is particularly susceptible through her five senses. This reflects specific attitudes to men and women and the connection of the five senses with Eve is old, going back as far as Philo (e.g., *Quaest. Gen.* I.49).

It is an open question whether, behind this formulation, lay the myth according to which Satan had intercourse with Eve and begat Cain. It is certainly possible that the passage of Ekišē is a retelling of some such myth, although it would be an isolated instance in the Armenian literature we have examined.<sup>13</sup>

When we examine the material presented above, we are struck by the variety of language and metaphor used to describe the relationship of Satan and the serpent. Beyond simple equivalence, seven different types of language describe this relationship: pack animal, sexual, nesting, possession, instrument, associate and dwelling.<sup>14</sup> Even more surprising is the temporal distribution. The relationship between Satan and the serpent, except for one instance, is not mentioned from the sixth to the eleventh centuries. We have no explanation for this.

### *The Višap-Dragon and its Identification with Satan*

In this and the succeeding sections, we shall discuss a number of specific aspects of our main theme. The *višap*-dragon was an Armenian,

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<sup>12</sup> He says that the serpent makes five circular movements symbolizing the five senses (Yovhannēs Erznkac’i 1998, 324–325).

<sup>13</sup> *Hypostasis of the Archons (The Reality of the Rulers)* NHC II.4.91.11ff in Layton 1992, 72; Saltair na Rann in Seymour 1922, 129; see line 1957–1958 in Green and Kelly 1976, 91 and Murdoch 1976, 133; Schwartz 2004, 447–448; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.3 in Layton 1992, 197.

<sup>14</sup> We readily admit that our evidence is partial. We only collected statements directly relating to Gen 1–3. It is more than likely that an even greater number of metaphors was used. Moreover, the frequency should only be taken as indicative, and numerous instances may occur in other contexts than the Genesis stories.

pre-Christian water monster (see Ališan 1910, 163–165; Russell 1987, 205–211), and its name is included in the Armenian biblical translation at a number of points. It is also connected with Satan and the serpent. Thus, for example, Aaron’s and the magicians’ serpents (׀׀׀׀—δρόκος) in Exod 7:9, 10, and 12 are translated *višap*. In Job 26:13(12) it translates Greek ‘τὸ κῆτος’ and Hebrew ‘Rahab,’ one name of the primordial sea dragon of pre-Israelite mythology. Moreover, this is the term for the dragon in Rev 12:4, 7, 9, 13, etc. Thus, in the Armenian version of Rev 12:9 we read: ‘The great *višap*-dragon was thrown down, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.’ Such uses as these led to the *višap*’s identification with the Genesis serpent and with Satan.

Early on, Satan is called ‘rebel dragon’ based on the incident in Rev 12:17 and a seventh-eighth century author refers to the ‘dragon serpent’ (*višap ōj*) who wishes to become ‘god of the material world.’<sup>15</sup> This latter role, ‘god of the material world,’ is, of course, Satan’s.<sup>16</sup> This might just be a restatement of Lucifer’s ambition to become God (Isa 14:13–14) but perhaps the serpent-dragon in the material world is deliberately modelled after Satan-Lucifer who aspired higher. In the eighth century, we find the idea that the dragon is Satan and is said to have fallen. Clearly, the fall from glory, here predicated of the dragon, is Satan’s (Yovhannēs K’orepiskopos 1966, 24). The identification of the two seems certain. Once clearly established, this identification recurs, and so, in the ninth century, T’ovma Arcruni calls the serpent that pours bitter advice into Eve’s ear *višap* ‘dragon.’<sup>17</sup>

### *Satan Deceives the Serpent*

The author of the tenth century biblical epic poem *To Manuč’ē*, Grigor Magistros, says that Satan deceived the serpent into conniving in his attack on Adam and Eve (Grigor Magistros 1868, 7). This event is narrated in the primary Adam books (Penitence of Adam 44.16.3), where Satan plays on the serpent’s pride to gain his co-operation in

<sup>15</sup> ‘So our human nature wanted to hear the story of the dragon serpent who wished to become the god of the material world which God created by his wonderful wisdom’: see Č’rak’ean 1964, 183.

<sup>16</sup> Compare ‘ruler of this world’ in John 12:31, 14:30 and 16:11.

<sup>17</sup> T’ovma Arcruni 1985, 18–22; see Constan 2003, 273–313 on the *conceptio per aurem* of which this may be a reversal.

deceiving Adam and Eve, just as his own pride motivated him to hate Adam (Anderson and Stone 1999, 50E). The same view, that Satan deceived the serpent, occurs in later authors as well (Kirakos Erznkac'i [C 13–14]; apud K'yurtyan 1965, 97).<sup>18</sup>

In his 'Poem on the Lord Coming to Lazarus' the tenth century poet Grigor Narekac'i seems to distinguish between the 'first serpent (*or*: dragon, i.e., *višap*)' and Adam's Deceiver, who is the serpent identified as Satan,<sup>19</sup> leader of the host of demons. This identification follows from the parallelism that characterizes this poem. Subsequent writers, however, seem to identify Satan and the serpent (see, for example, Vardan Arewelc'i 1797, 455–456 and Karapet Bališec'i apud Akinean 1937, 328).

In Karapet Bališec'i's *Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the Nativity and Baptism* we find the expression, 'liberating the first Adam from the curse of the first one' (Sahakyan 1986, 132). In context, the phrase 'the curse of the first one' refers to Satan, yet there is no biblical curse of Satan, only of the serpent. Either these two figures fell together in the Armenian source, or else an apocryphal tradition added a curse of Satan to the curses of the serpent, Eve, and Adam (Gen 3:14–19).<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, it refers to the curse (death) that came upon Adam because of the activity of Satan.

Thus, in many texts Satan is equivalent to the serpent, while in others, a number of metaphors describe Satan as manipulating the serpent, and in all Satan is dominant. All these relationships, except identification, imply that there are two entities involved, Satan and the serpent (the latter identified as the dragon *višap*, itself sometimes identified with Satan).

Oftentimes, it seems that the choice between identification of Satan and the serpent or maintenance of them as separate beings is less an

<sup>18</sup> Kirakos Erznkac'i says: 'Having taken of the animals the serpent as partner in his plans' (K'yurtyan 1965, 97). The same sort of relationship is implied by Kostandin Erznkac'i (C 14) when he says, 'because of envy of tempter, they were deceived by serpent' (Srapyan 1962, 220–223). This is, of course, reminiscent of Wisdom of Solomon 2:24. Satan envied, but it was the serpent that acted on his behalf (Kostaneanc' 1910, 276).

<sup>19</sup> 'He (i.e., Christ) chains the first dragon, delivers him over into the fire of Gehenna; And his (i.e., Adam's) Deceiver, along with his (i.e., Satan's) servants' from Grigor Narekac'i 'Poem on the Lord Coming to Lazarus: another Tune by Grigor Narekac'i' (1874, 139). Interestingly, Rev 12:9, reads *ōjn arājin* 'first serpent' and not *višapn arājin* 'first dragon' as does Narekac'i. Yet, Narekac'i's source must be Rev 12:9.

<sup>20</sup> Such a tradition, with a fourfold curse, is found in Greek folktales, but is not known to us in Armenian (see Stone 2002, 101–102).

ontological assertion than a strategy adopted for rhetorical purposes in the particular context of the parenthesis that the text is forwarding. This raises intriguing issues about how, in fact, we are to assess the statements made about Satan, and implies the need for a sensitive and nuanced reading of the texts.

### *Jewish Material*

In contrast with these rich and complex Armenian expressions of the relationship between Satan and the serpent, strikingly the corpus of 'classical' Rabbinic literature completely lacks this linkage. Satan is not mentioned in connection with the Edenic serpent, he is not the motivator, nor the one who possesses the serpent.

In pre-Rabbinic Jewish literature, however, the picture is different. Perhaps the best known reference to Satan and the serpent is implied by Wisdom of Solomon 2:24 'but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it' (φθόνῳ δὲ διαβόλου θάνατος εἰσηλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, πειράζουσιν δὲ αὐτὸν οἱ τῆς ἐκείνου μερίδος ὄντες). In the present context, three different points in this verse demand to be noticed. The first and the most significant for our study is that the actor is the διάβολος, the normal Greek translation for יָטָוּ in the Hebrew Bible (only twice does it translate another root). Now, in the biblical text the actor is the serpent and Satan is not mentioned at all. Consequently, Wisdom of Solomon, probably in the last century BCE or the first century CE, knows a tradition that the instigator of the serpent's seduction of Eve was in fact Satan. This is, indeed, the oldest attestation of this idea. The second intriguing point is the word φθόνος 'envy.' There is no mention of envy in the biblical text, not even on the part of the serpent. In post-biblical traditions, however, Satan's envy of humans is a well known theme. It is connected with the legend of the fall of Satan, and is found as such in the primary Adam books (Anderson and Stone 1999, 17–17E). 'I do not have it within me to worship Adam. (...) I will not worship him who is lower and later than me (...) He ought to worship me,' and the same theme is used there by Satan to seduce the serpent (Anderson and Stone 1999, 49–50). We have also shown that the envy of Adam was known to the author of 2 Enoch 31:5–6 (Stone 2000, 43–56, esp. 47–48).<sup>21</sup> It is cognate with

<sup>21</sup> For this theme, see also Qur'an Suras 2.34, 7.11, 15.29–33, 38.73–76.

the idea of angelic opposition to the creation of Adam, a subject that recurs in Rabbinic literature (Ginzberg 1909, 69–71).<sup>22</sup> Some Rabbinic texts also imply the serpent's sexual jealousy of Eve, as noted above. Consequently, it is notable that 'classical' Rabbinic literature is quite silent about any relationship between Satan and the serpent.

Thus, in Wisdom of Solomon there is a virtual identity of Satan and the serpent. In the primary Adam books, to which we referred above, Satan says to the serpent, according to the Greek, 'be my vessel and I will speak through your mouth words to deceive them.' The word 'vessel' (σκεῦος) seems to imply the idea of possession and also in the Armenian, Georgian and Slavonic versions of the Primary Adam Book 17:1–2 the possessed serpent is able to take on the form of an angel. In the Armenian of the Primary Adam Book [44]16:4b Satan says, 'Be you, in your form, a lyre for me and I will pronounce speech through your mouth' (Anderson and Stone 1999, 50E). Here we have the same ideas as in certain of the Armenian texts in which these developments also occur: Satan is identical for all practical purposes with the serpent; Satan enters or possesses the serpent and speaks through its mouth; the serpent is Satan's instrument or tool.

The only text of Rabbinic literature, if it is such, that deals with this issue is Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer. This document is usually dated to the late first millennium CE and is known to include many traditions otherwise attested in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, but not in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature. Chapter 13 opens with the theme of angelic jealousy of Adam and Adam's superiority to the angels in his ability to name the animals.<sup>23</sup> The fall of the archangel Sammael<sup>24</sup> is described, together with his host. He found the serpent, and 'its likeness was like a sort of camel and he mounted it and rode it.' This relationship is likened to that of a horse and a rider (cf. Exod 15:1, 21).<sup>25</sup> This

<sup>22</sup> See also Ginzberg 1909, 84 and his comparison with Heb 1:6. Another old tradition may be reconstituted, which speaks of Satan's sexual intercourse with Eve, the offspring of which was Cain. His name is related to the Hebrew root *qn'*. Some such tradition is behind the odd passage on the birth of Cain in the Primary Adam Books 21:3a–c.

<sup>23</sup> This theme is much developed in the Armenian tradition, see Stone 2007.

<sup>24</sup> We cannot deal here fully with the complex matter of the names of Satan, a subject discussed briefly above: here Sammael is mentioned.

<sup>25</sup> A similar image, supported ultimately by this verse, is found in Rabbinic midrashim about the relationship of the soul and the body. This is mentioned above in the discussion of the Armenian sources. It occurs similarly in Pseudo-Ezekiel, and see Stone, Wright and Satran 2000, 9–19.

again resembles certain of the Armenian texts. The same issue arises in the case of 4QNaphtali and Midrash Bereshit Rabbati of R. Moses the Preacher as in the instance of Satan and the serpent in PRE. Here we encounter the mystery of the channels of transmission of Second Temple traditions (and sometimes texts) down to the early Middle Ages, when such traditions do not appear in Tannaitic and Amoraic sources (Stone 1996a, 20–36; cf. Spurling and Grypeou 2007, 220–224).

It seems to us worthwhile to highlight three points here. (1) The basic series of images in the Armenian texts (and many of them also occur in preceding patristic texts) resemble those in the primary Adam books and Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer, which fact bespeaks a common tradition, that may be traced as far back as Wisdom of Solomon. (2) The absence of this material from Tannaitic and Amoraic sources is unlikely to be happenstance and it should be considered together with those sources' treatment of Enoch, the Watchers and other similar traditions. (3) As a result it seems that we should consider the likelihood that extra-Rabbinic tradents in the first millennium CE cultivated and transmitted material known otherwise only from the Second Temple period. The identity and context of such tradents remain to be isolated.

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WHAT DID CAIN DO WRONG?  
JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 4:3–6

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Ancient commentators, like their modern counterparts, confronted many puzzles and difficulties in seeking to elucidate the story of Cain and Abel, whose fraternal strife culminated in the latter's violent death following the first sacrifice recorded in the Bible. Prominent among these puzzles is the Bible's apparent failure to explain why Cain's offering was rejected, and how Cain realized that it had not met with divine approval. The narrative is 'extraordinarily terse and sketchy' (Sarna 1989, 31), and thus encouraged rich developments in post-biblical treatments of the story (Aptowitz 1922). The account of the sacrifice is preceded simply by a brief notice of Cain's birth, and his mother's words on that occasion; by a further short report of his brother Abel's birth; and by the information that Abel was one who pastured sheep, while Cain was one who tilled the ground (Gen 4:1–2). Without further preamble, the Hebrew Bible continues with its account of the sacrifice:

And it happened, at the end of some days, that Cain brought some of the fruit of the ground as an offering to the Lord; and Abel, he also brought from the firstlings of his sheep and from their fat. And the Lord had regard to Abel and to his offering; but to Cain and to his offering He did not have regard. And Cain was very angry, and his face fell. (Gen 4:3–6)<sup>1</sup>

A subsequent conversation between Cain and the Almighty yields no immediately obvious reason why Cain's offering was rejected. Indeed, Cain does not seek an explanation; although it might be assumed that he tacitly accepts that in some respect he has done wrong, for he makes no demur when God addresses him using the words 'if you do well (...) but if you do not do well' (Gen 4:7). Since there is no other reference in the Bible to this incident, the rest of Scripture throws no direct illumination on the narrative. What, then, were Jewish exegetes, and early Christian commentators who so often followed in their footsteps, to make of all this? The question was crucial; for if it were to turn out

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<sup>1</sup> Translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

that God had rejected Cain's offering for no particular reason, then the Almighty might appear as a capricious, unjust deity, partial in judgement and unequal in the treatment of his creatures. Indeed, we shall see presently that Cain, according to some traditional interpretations of this chapter, directed this very criticism towards God; and Jewish and Christian interpreters were consequently faced with the responsibility for ensuring that God's reputation as a righteous judge was safeguarded. Thus, in the Palestinian targumim of Gen 4:8 (namely Targum Neofiti, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and the Fragmentary Targum) Cain is presented as denying divine justice, Abel as maintaining it, in a debate which has engendered much discussion (Aptowitz 1922, 11, 122; Vermes 1961–1962, 81–114; Isenberg 1970, 433–444; Brayer 1971, 583–585; Bassler 1986, 56–64).

The oldest datable Jewish interpretation of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel is given by the Old Greek translation of the Bible commonly called the Septuagint. It was this ancient version, not the Hebrew Bible, which effectively constituted Holy Scripture for the majority of Gentile Christians, who used it either in the particular Greek form which had become traditional in their Churches, or in a translation such as the *Vetus Latina* or the Coptic version (Dines 2004, 81–107). The differences between the Hebrew parent text and the LXX are very noticeable, and seem to be directly related to the two central questions: what was wrong with Cain's sacrifice, and how did he know that God had not accepted it? Careful consideration of the LXX is thus called for, with reference to Jewish sources surviving in Greek from Second Temple times which depend on that version.

*The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel according to the  
LXX and Jewish Texts in Greek*

The Hebrew Bible does not distinguish between the offerings brought by Cain and Abel: both are described in Gen 4:3–5 as *minḥah*, a word with a range of meanings which may nonetheless be used as a quite general term to signify a 'sacrifice' (Milgrom 1991, 196–201): here it comprehends both Cain's cereal and Abel's animal offerings. The LXX, however, clearly distinguished between the offerings of the brothers. Cain's fruits of the earth they designated (Gen 4:3, 5) as *thysia*, a general word meaning 'sacrifice,' while Abel's animal sacrifice they called (Gen 4:4) *dōra*, 'gifts.' By selecting these particular terms, the translators

suggested that what Cain offered was something in which he himself would have a share, *thysia* indicating an offering divided between the altar and the worshipper; whereas Abel, bringing ‘gifts,’ had handed over his entire offering to God (Daniel 1966, 209–210; Rösel 1994, 103; Harl 1994, 113). This translation, therefore, may further hint at a lack of generosity in Cain, a concern with himself and his possessions possibly representing a defect in his character contrasted with Abel’s open-handedness.

The Almighty’s reaction to both offerings is expressed in the Hebrew by the one verb *sh’h*, used positively of Abel’s offering, negatively of Cain’s (Gen 4:4–5). It is a rare word, probably best understood as meaning that God ‘had regard to’ Abel’s offering, but not to Cain’s (Lundbom 2006, 349–351). The LXX, however, explained that God *epiden*, ‘looked upon’ Abel’s gifts, but in respect of Cain’s sacrifices *ou proseschen*, ‘he paid no attention.’ This is an important distinction, underlined by the fact that the verb which the translators used to express God’s regard for Abel’s gifts is one they used very sparingly elsewhere in the Pentateuch. Apart from this verse, it is found only on three other occasions, two of which associate it with the vision of God. Thus, Hagar designated God at LXX Gen 16:13 as *ho theos ho epidōn me* ‘the God who looks upon me’ because she had seen openly the One who appeared to her; and Laban named the heap of stones recording his covenant with Jacob in Gilead as ‘the Vision,’ remarking ‘may God look upon (*epidoi ho theos*) me and you,’ (LXX Gen 31:49). This verb, then, indicating God’s oversight, providence, and care, is also associated with the vision of God; and its use in LXX Gen 4:4 opens up the possibility that in some sense the Almighty appeared to Abel, while Cain had no such experience. Indeed, the LXX translators appear to have associated the notion of ‘seeing God’ quite closely with the service of the sanctuary (Hayward 2005, 385–400). In any event, the LXX of Gen 4:5 noted that Cain ‘was very sorrowful,’ an expression which may include some element of anger, but more strongly conveys a sense of grief (Sarna 1989, 33; Harl 1994, 113–114). Yet even if this is so, it does not occasion comment in God’s words to Cain. The LXX translated in such a way that a clear reason for the failure of Cain’s offerings was provided.

The Hebrew text of Gen 4:7 presents God’s reflection on Cain’s state of mind. The Almighty has asked why Cain is sorrowful, and continues with the observation:

Is it not the case that, if you do well, there is uplift? But if you do not do well, at the door sin crouches, and its desire is towards you; but you shall rule over it. (Gen 4:7)

The LXX rendered these words as follows:

Is it not the case that, if you have offered rightly but have not divided (the sacrifice) rightly, you have sinned? Be tranquil. Its/his turning shall be towards you, and you shall rule over it/him. (LXX Gen 4:7)

The inference is clear: Cain has seemingly made a proper offering but, given that it was brought as a *thysia*, he has apportioned it incorrectly, thereby depriving God of something due to Him, and in the process being guilty of a sin. The translators' procedure can be discerned fairly easily. The first part of the Hebrew, 'if you do not do well (there is) uplift (*se'et*)' they understood as exactly parallel to the following 'but if you do not do well at the door (*lapetah*)' taking the last words in each of these sections as infinitives construct. The LXX translators were thus able to perceive in these words the following sense: 'Is it not the case that, if you do well in lifting up (that is, in offering up sacrifice), but if you do not do well in dividing (reading the word *lapetah* as *liptoah*, 'to open,' and making it refer literally to the opening up or division of the sacrificial victim), you have sinned?' Individual details of the translators' procedure may be explained in other ways, but there is little doubt that they have dealt with the Hebrew in general as we have described it here (Harl 1994, 114–115). God's subsequent command to Cain that he 'be tranquil' or 'be silent' is disregarded: he invites his brother Abel into open country, and there he murders him.

The LXX interpretation of these verses will have been current around the year 250 BCE at the latest, and close reading of it reveals that the translators have carefully elaborated upon the tantalizingly short Hebrew text, filling in a number of perceived gaps in the narrative. Abel's offering, they suggest, was a gift devoted entirely to God; by contrast, Cain's was a sacrifice in which he, too, had a share. The implication that Cain might be selfish or greedy is then confirmed by God's observation that he had not divided the sacrifice rightly, presumably keeping for himself things which by rights belonged to God, and as a result God had not looked providentially upon his sacrifice. Cain is thus unlike Hagar, who was aware of the Divine Presence when God looked upon her. Profound sorrow, rather than open anger, marks Cain's reaction to God's disapproval: the subsequent divine command that he remain tranquil, however, he ignores, inviting his brother into open country where he proceeds to kill him.

The eventual influence of these Septuagintal elaborations upon later Jewish and Christian exegesis we shall explore presently, but in the period immediately preceding the beginnings of Christianity, Jewish literature has almost nothing to say about the sacrifices of the two brothers, with reasons for the acceptance of the one and the rejection of the other. The principal exception to this state of affairs is Philo, whose treatise *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* uses the LXX as its foundation text. Yet this writing, while noting those distinctive elements of the LXX that differentiate that version from the Hebrew, instead developed ideas which are rooted either in the original Hebrew which the Greek translators have faithfully reproduced in their translation, or in other traditional material available to the writer. Thus, explanation of the names Cain and Abel as, respectively, 'possession' and 'one who raises up, offers to God' (*De Sac.* 2) Philo most likely derived from a traditional onomasticon (Grabbe 1988; Colson 1968, 97); these etymologies inform his presentation of the brothers as representative types, Cain standing for vice and self-centredness as a tiller of the land (*De Sac.* 14), Abel signifying virtue (*De Sac.* 51). Philo deduced what Cain did wrong in respect of the sacrifice from information given both in the Hebrew and in the LXX: he did not offer at once, but only 'after some days,' and his offering was merely 'from the fruits,' not from the choicest fruits (*De Sac.* 52, citing Gen 4:3), this last fault indicating that he was more concerned to honour created things rather than the Creator (*De Sac.* 72). Abel's offering was a living animal, first in age and worth, strong and superior in its rich fatness: Cain's was lifeless, second-rate, and typical of weakness (*De Sac.* 88). All of this could be deduced from material found in the Hebrew Bible; but Philo also cited Cain's incorrect division of his sacrifice, as reported by the LXX, as yet another instance of his wrong-doing (*De Sac.* 72–87). Interestingly, he affirms the superior quality and status of an undivided sacrifice (*De Sac.* 110, 139) without, however, explicitly drawing attention to the LXX's distinction between Abel's offering as gift, and Cain's as sacrifice. Indeed, Philo used the word 'gift' only twice, the first relating Abel's gift to the first-born animals required by the law of Exod 13:11–13 (*De Sac.* 89), the second quoting LXX Num 28:2, which *en passant* indicates the superiority of Abel's gift as an undivided offering, signifying virtue (*De Sac.* 111).

In his *Quaest. Gen.* I.62, however, he explicitly noted the difference between a sacrifice, involving division of the offering, application of blood to the altar, and retention of a part of the victim by the offerer, and a gift, which is offered in its entirety (Marcus 1961, 38). It may be,

therefore, that in writing *De Sacrificiis* he either assumed that his readers knew the different meanings of the two words, or that his exposition made sense without giving detailed explanation of them. On the other hand, he may eventually have felt the need to deal explicitly with this point, just as in the following question (*Quaest. Gen.* I.63) he asks bluntly how Cain knew his sacrifice was not accepted, a matter ignored in *De Sacrificiis*. Philo's reply to this question indicates that the grief which Cain felt was a sign of his having offered something not pleasing.

In Philo's writings, therefore, we encounter an emphasis on Cain's character which is not apparent in the LXX. The Greek translators may imply a certain selfishness on Cain's part on which Philo could build, but they do not give an unflattering etymology of his name to support a presentation of him as the very type of the self-centred, this-worldly materialist whose main concern is created things rather than their Author. This sense that Cain was firmly planted on the side of vice rather than of virtue, even before the offering of his sacrifice, colours Philo's entire description of him: it is as if his sacrifice were doomed to failure from the outset. Perhaps something of Philo's appraisal of Cain is heard later in Origen's remark that God knew Cain's wickedness before he killed his brother (*De Oratione* 29.18). Unlike the Greek translators, whose use of the verb *epeiden*, 'looked upon' at Gen 4:4 suggested a sense of divine presence at Abel's offerings to indicate acceptance of his sacrifice, and a corresponding lack of divine attention to Cain's worship to signify its rejection, Philo interpreted Cain's own feelings of sorrow as demonstrating to him that God was not pleased with his enterprise. Finally, Philo insisted that the poor quality of Cain's sacrifice presaged its failure: in every sense, it consisted of second rate produce offered without due care. Church Fathers would repeat this last point, adducing it as a major cause of Cain's rejection: as typical examples, we may cite Ephrem, *Comm. Gen.* III.2 and particularly Ambrose, *De Cain et Abel* 1:7, the whole of this treatise drawing heavily on Philo's work and including Philo's detailed observations about Cain and Abel set out here (Siegfried 1875, 371–387).

Together, the LXX and Philo represent a substantial elaboration of the very brief biblical verses; both, however, are silent about an aspect of the story which would concern some later commentators. This is the matter of Cain's anger, which the Hebrew text of Gen 4:5 had recorded. For the author of Wisdom of Solomon 10:3, Cain's anger was apparently a key element in his downfall:

But when in his anger (*orgē*) an unjust man fell away from her (Wisdom), he himself perished in the wrath (*thymos*) which murdered (his) brother. (Wisdom of Solomon 10:3)

This anger is the cause of Cain's departure from Wisdom, which would have preserved him in peace: such is the sense of the whole chapter, and we may perhaps assume that the Wisdom of Solomon writer attributed the failure of Cain's sacrifice to this same departure from Wisdom and her guidance. The anger is heavily emphasized, and related to two other items of significance. The first is the description of Cain's wrath as *adelphoktonos*, literally 'brother-murdering': as David Winston has noted, this word seems to have its background in classical Greek tragedy, Philo three times describing Cain as a fratricide at *De Cher.* 52, *De Fug.* 60 and *De Praem.* 68 (Winston 1979, 213–214). His observation is confirmed by Philo's use of the word *adelphoktonia* at *De Spec. Leg.* III.16 in what seems clearly to refer to well known material in the tragedies of Sophocles (Colson 1968, 483). The suggestion, noted by Winston, that Philo may be allegorically explaining a tradition according to which Cain never died is telling in the light of Philo's remark in *De Praem.* 72 that Cain the fratricide continues eternally dying (Winston 1979, 213–214). The second is the qualification of Cain as *adikos*, 'unjust,' with its corresponding implication that Abel was just (Vilchez 1990, 300–301). Cain's fratricide is a biblical datum, but the Greek term which the Wisdom of Solomon writer used to define it places Cain on the world stage, as it were, part of a Greek drama. The Bible does not, however, declare that Cain was unjust or that Abel was correspondingly righteous; the reader is left to wonder whether the author of Wisdom of Solomon was personally responsible for applying the word 'unjust' to Cain, or whether a tradition of interpretation is preserved here. Cain's injustice and Abel's justice, however, were to feature in New Testament writings, and Cain's anger would come to exercise Cyprian (*De Zelo et Livore* 10.4–5), Ephrem (*Comm.Gen.* III.3) and John Chrysostom (*Hom. Gen.* 18.24) in particular among the Church Fathers.

From the days before the emergence of the Christian Church, these Jewish-Greek writings (the LXX, the works of Philo, and the Wisdom of Solomon) have survived to represent how Jewish interpreters explained difficulties inherent in the story of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel. We must now turn to the New Testament, where we shall observe a degree of continuity with the Jewish traditions discussed to date, and some new features whose origins and nature pose some further problems.

*The New Testament*

Abel's name features four times in the New Testament. In a series of criticisms directed at the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus holds them responsible for all the 'just blood' shed on the earth, 'from the blood of the just Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah,' according to Matt 23:35. The parallel passage in Luke 11:51 names Abel without qualification (Allison 1997, 316–318). Both Gospel passages seem to regard Abel as first in a long line of pious ones, described at Luke 11:50 as 'prophets,' and in Matthew 23:35 as characterized by 'just blood,' which highlights his further definition of Abel as 'just.' Luke's implied designation of Abel as a prophet is particularly significant, given that prophets in first century Jewish thought are often associated with the handing on of ancient sacred tradition (see, e.g., Josephus, *Contr.Ap.* I.29, 37–41), and the transmission of a body of teaching (see, e.g., Josephus, *Contr.Ap.* II.218, 286). In none of these Gospel passages is the sacrifice of the two brothers specifically under consideration, nor do the Hebrew Bible, the LXX, or Philo account for the association of Abel with prophets or with the term 'just.' Matthew's designation of Abel as 'just,' however, is quite likely to represent some affinity with Wisdom of Solomon 10:3 and its insistence on Cain's injustice.

The two remaining passages which mention Abel, Heb 11:4 and 12:24, also introduce Cain, explicitly in the first passage, by implication in the second. Cain otherwise is named twice elsewhere. In Jude 11 we hear of 'the way of Cain,' which is placed cheek by jowl with 'the error of Balaam' and 'the rebellion of Korah.' Nothing is said of Cain's sacrifice, nor is the 'way' of Cain explained, but it should be noted how Cain here serves as a type of a wicked man in a context that is specifically concerned with false teaching, and which may have associations with the portrayal of Cain's views as reported by the Palestinian targumim (Bauckham 1983, 79–81). The writer of this epistle has emphasized Cain's character, and a similar approach to the fratricide is apparent in 1 John 3:12, whose author informs us that Cain *ek tou ponērou ēn*, 'was from the evil one' and killed his brother, because *ta erga autou ponēra*, 'his deeds were evil' whereas his brother's were just. This seems to suggest that Cain's very origin was evil, bad, villainous, either in the sense that he was 'from what was evil,' or in the sense that his progenitor was the evil one, the devil: the Greek is patient of both senses. A bad character, his deeds were also bad, and that much could be deduced from a reading of LXX Gen 4:7, as we have seen. Philo, too,

had indicated serious defects in Cain's character; but he had stopped short of supplying him with a diabolical ancestry.

This emphasis on the characters of Abel and Cain, the former as 'just,' the latter as bad and typifying villainy, is explicitly related to their sacrifices by Heb 11:4, the Greek text of which presents difficulties. The author has begun a discourse on faith, whose meaning is demonstrated by selected biblical examples, Abel heading the list:

By faith Abel offered to God a more (substantial) sacrifice than Cain, through which it was attested that he was just, God bearing witness over his gifts: and through it, although he is dead, he still is speaking. (Heb 11:4)

According to this verse, what Abel offered was a *thysia*, so there is no dependence on LXX Gen 4:3–5 at this particular point. It is tantalizingly described as *pleiona thysian*, literally 'a more sacrifice,' which would indicate a more substantial and satisfactory offering than Cain's. The verse also presents textual and exegetical issues which have long been debated (Attridge 1989, 305, 316–317). Whether we retain this verse as translated here (it represents the reading of all the textual witnesses at this point), or resort to conjectural emendation and read *hēdion thysian*, 'a more pleasing sacrifice,' however, the result is the same: Abel's sacrifice was accepted because in some sense it was superior to Cain's (Bruce 1964, 282; Attridge 1989, 305). Through Abel's sacrifice, or through his faith—the Greek is ambiguous and may refer to either one, or even both of these things—he was attested as being 'just' (Attridge 1989, 316). As we have seen, the same epithet was applied to Abel in Matt 23:35, yet this passage differs from the passage in the Gospel in its explicit association of Abel's sacrifice with his status as just. The following clause, 'God bearing witness over (or: in respect of) his gifts,' is plagued with textual uncertainty, though the reading adopted here is generally accepted (Bruce 1961, 282; Attridge 1989, 316–317). Here the author seems to recall the description of Abel's offering as 'gifts' in LXX Gen 4:4, and, if the LXX is in mind here, as would seem probable, then the notion that God bore witness or attested to Abel's offering would be doing duty, as it were, for the LXX's declaration that God *epeiden*, 'looked upon' Abel's gifts. Cain, we may infer, was given no such divine 'witness' regarding his offering. In the concluding remark, however, the author of the epistle takes leave of the LXX altogether, declaring that through his faith or his sacrifice—the language is again ambiguous—Abel still speaks (Attridge 1989, 317, 376–377). In the

following chapter (Heb 12:24), the author will refer to the blood of Jesus, which speaks better than Abel; this, taken in conjunction with the information supplied by Heb 11:4, that Abel still speaks through his sacrifice, strongly suggests that the author regarded Abel as a martyr, and that his offering to God involved the offering of his own life at Cain's murderous hands, which was preceded by a material sacrifice that was attested as acceptable to God.

The dates of these New Testament documents cannot be determined with any certainty, but if we repeat the widely held view that Hebrews was composed sometime before 95 CE, and that Jude and 1 John were written sometime in the second half of the first century CE, we should find ourselves on reasonably firm ground (Attridge 1989, 6–9; Smally 1984, xxxii; Bauckham 1983, 8–16). They are concerned mostly with Abel, and only by implication with Cain. Of Cain it may be said that all these writings suggest that he was 'unjust': Hebrews further indicates that his sacrifice was unsatisfactory; and 1 John describes him as of evil origin and one whose deeds were evil. The LXX, Philo, and the Wisdom of Solomon may have provided these New Testament authors with some of the language and the general ideas which they could use. But the probable date of composition of these documents requires us to consider the possible influence of traditions recorded by another Jewish writer, whose work was more or less contemporary with them: Flavius Josephus.

#### *Cain and Abel according to Josephus*

Josephus' version of events is found in *Ant.* I.52–59, published around 93 CE (Schürer 1973, 48; Rajak 1983, 237–238; Feldman 2000, xxxiv). It expands the biblical narrative, while contriving at the same time to omit details of the story. Thus, the first two verses of Genesis 4 are re-cast in *Ant.* I.52 to tell how two males were born to Adam and Eve: Cain, whose name means 'possession'; and Abel, the explanation of whose name is given as 'grief' in some manuscripts and 'nothingness' in others (Nodet 1992, 16–17; Feldman 2000, 18–19). Adam and Eve also had daughters (Feldman 2000, 19). In other words, Josephus omitted reference to Eve as Adam's wife, and left aside the biblical note that Adam knew Eve, who conceived and bore Cain, saying that she had acquired a man with the Lord's help (Gen 4:1), a statement whose linguistic and exegetical difficulties were well known to the ancient interpreters. Mention of the daughters is an addition to biblical information, as

are the etymologies of the names. The next section at *Ant.* I.53 begins with a further addition, telling us that the brothers rejoiced in different occupations or customs:

For Abel, the younger, was engaged in justice, recognized that God was present with all things that were done by him, and took thought for virtue; and his way of life was that of a shepherd. But Cain was most evil in every way, and looked only to profit: he was the first to plan to plough the land and he killed his brother for such a reason as this. (*Ant.* I.53)

The literary arrangement of all this should be carefully noted: first, the etymologies of the two names are given, balanced but opposing; this scheme is then reinforced with the balanced but contrasting accounts of the brothers' occupations, even to the choice of individual words: Abel *proenoei*, 'took thought' for virtue, while Cain *epenoēse*, 'planned' to plough the land. Abel's engagement with justice is tied to his recognition (*nomizōn*) of the divine presence in his deeds; Cain is very wicked, and is looking only (*apoblepōn*) for gain. The characters and occupations of the two men are integral to Josephus' account of their sacrifice, and why Cain's was rejected. Both brought offerings, while Cain's was fruits of the cultivated land and of plants, Abel's was milk and firstlings of the flocks (Nodet 1992, 17; Feldman 2000, 20). Josephus continues:

But God was pleased (*hēdetai*) rather with this sacrifice, since He is honoured by things which grow of themselves and are born according to nature, but not by things produced through the design (*epinoia*) of a greedy man (and) by force. (*Ant.* I.53)

New here is the expression of God's *pleasure* in acceptance of Abel's offering, with its corresponding implication that Cain's was not pleasing: this terminology is not found in sources so far examined, and represents an interpretation of the Hebrew *vayyisha* (Gen 4:4). Familiar, however, is the distinction between Abel's offering of something with its own natural powers of growth, and Cain's produce gained by greedy planning: it recalls the similar contrast which Philo made in *De Sac.* 88, although Josephus says nothing which might relate this contrast to the different terms *thysia* and *dōron*. Indeed, Josephus appears to have composed a carefully structured account which owes little to the LXX and its wording: indeed, he omits Gen 4:7 altogether, and with it the LXX's explanation of God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice (Feldman 2000, 20).

On one level, this account most resembles Philo's approach to the story: etymology of names establishes two contrasting characters, whose

offerings are judged physically and morally as reflecting their different occupations and dispositions. But Josephus further defines things. Abel, he says, was engaged in *justice*, recognized the presence of God in his *deeds*, and exercised *pronoia* in respect of virtue. Philo has none of this. New Testament reports, however, agree with Josephus in individual points of detail: Abel was *just* (Matt 23:35; Heb 11:4), while Cain was *evil* (1 John 3:12) and performed evil *deeds* (1 John 3:12; cf. Jude 11). The earliest Christian references to the two brothers and their sacrifice seem, then, to have something in common with Jewish traditions on the topic.

It may be possible to go further. In declaring that God was *hēdetai*, ‘pleased’ with Abel’s sacrifice, Josephus brings to mind the language of Tg Onkelos, Tg Neofiti, Tg PsJon and Fragmentary Targum of Gen 4:4–5, all of which use the noun *rava*, ‘acceptance, pleasure’ in their interpretations of the Hebrew root *sh’h*. He also recalls the targumim in particular by presenting Abel as exercising *pronoia* in respect of *justice*, recognizing divine cooperation in his *deeds*, and Cain cultivated while planning for profit on his own account. *Deeds* is the key term, lacking in the LXX, Philo’s writings, and the Wisdom of Solomon, but present in Josephus, 1 John 3:12, and in Tg Onkelos, Tg Neofiti, Tg PsJon and Fragmentary Targum of Gen 4:7, where significantly it is found in God’s words addressed to Cain. Here is Targum Onkelos:

Is it not the case that, if you make good *your deeds*, it will be forgiven you? But if you do not make good *your deeds*, for the day of judgement sin is stored up. Punishment is to be exacted of you if you do not repent; but if you repent, it shall be forgiven you. (Tg Onkelos Gen 4:7)

It should also be observed that Josephus records a further sacrifice offered by Cain, in consequence of which God *ēphiei*, ‘remitted’ the punishment due for the murder (*Ant.* I.58). Josephus thus implies that Cain could have repented, an option envisaged also by the targumim and the Greek version of Symmachus (Salvesen 1991, 20–21), entirely consonant with the business of *deeds*.

Perhaps more strikingly, *deeds* play a major role in the famous dispute between Cain and Abel recorded in all the Palestinian targumim of Gen 4:8, where the brothers appear as protagonists for two opposed philosophies or teachings. For example, Targum Neofiti of that verse makes Cain assert that Abel’s offering had been received *berava*, ‘with pleasure, favour’ because the world was not created in mercy, nor is it governed according to the fruits of good *deeds* and there is partiality in divine judgement. Abel then refutes this, asserting the precise opposite

of what Cain has said, and declaring that because his *deeds* were better than Cain's, his offering was accepted *berava*, while Cain's was not. The teachings which Cain and Abel represent we shall consider presently: for the moment, it is sufficient to note that they represent particular doctrinal positions.

The writings of Josephus and the New Testament, therefore, suggest that by the second half of the first century CE the biblical account of the brothers' sacrifices could be interpreted to include talk of justice and deeds, which determined whether the sacrifice was pleasing to God. This interpretation is accompanied by further emphasis on the characters and personal dispositions of Cain and Abel. Mention of deeds, absent from the LXX, recurs in the Greek version ascribed to Theodotion, whose translation of Gen 4:7 makes God warn Cain:

Is it not the case that if you do well (*agathōs poiēs*) it is acceptable, and if you do not do well (*mē agathōs poiēs*) sin is sitting at the door (...)? (Theodotion Gen 4:7)

Furthermore, the versions of Aquila and Symmachus both translated the Hebrew *tetiv* of Gen 4:7 with *agathynō*, which can have the sense of 'do well,' although the verb lacks the clear expression of 'doing' so evident in Theodotion's version (Lust 1992, 2; Salvesen 1991, 21). When set alongside the information gleaned from the New Testament and Josephus, the evidence of these three Greek versions and the targumim suggests a larger, continuing post-biblical exploration of the Cain and Abel sacrifice. Surprisingly, however, only one of them explicitly tells how Cain knew that Abel's offering was accepted, while his was not. Theodotion's version of Gen 4:4 states that God *epyrisen*, 'sent forth a flame' over Abel's sacrifice, but not over Cain's (Salvesen 1991, 19–20; Hayward 1995, 119–129; ter Haar Romeny 1997, 223–224). If this translation belongs to the so-called *Ur-Theodotion* (Tov 1992, 145), it may belong in the pre-Christian period; but given its striking absence in the sources we have so far examined such an opinion must be treated with reserve. Nonetheless, Theodotion represents the earliest more or less datable source using 'fire from heaven' to explain how the brothers knew which sacrifice had been accepted, an explanation grasped both by many Church Fathers including Ephrem (*Comm.Gen.* III.3), John Chrysostom (*In Epistolam ad Hebraeos Homilia* 22), Jerome (*Quaestiones Hebraicae* on Gen 4:4–5) and by Jewish commentators including Rashi on Gen 4:4. These names bring us to later times, and an investigation of further Jewish and Christian developments. For convenience's sake, we may begin with the latter.

*Irenaeus and the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel*

The earliest Church Father to discuss the Cain and Abel story was Clement of Rome, who cited Gen 4:3–8 in the LXX version simply to illustrate the dangers of jealousy and envy (1 Clement [Epistle to the Corinthians] 4; see also Cyprian, *De Zelo et Livore* 10:4–5, and Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III.23.4). He shows no concern with the sacrifice as such. Indeed, the sacrifices of the two brothers receive no mention in the writings of the other Apostolic Fathers, or those of Justin and the other Christian Apologists of the second century, although Theophilus preserves a tradition that God offered Cain a chance to repent of his wickedness, which he refused (*Ad Autolyicum* II.29C). It would seem that Irenaeus (c. 135–200 CE), who was born in Asia Minor (Grant 1997, 1–2), was the first Church Father to offer detailed interpretation of the episode, in a section devoted to sacrifices and offerings in *Adv.Haer.* IV.18.3, where the superiority of the Christian sacrifice of the Eucharist to all other offerings is championed. Using the LXX throughout his discussion, he declares that God looked upon Abel's gifts because he offered them with simplicity and justice, whereas Cain's sacrifice went unnoticed because his heart was divided in envy and malice against his brother. Irenaeus deduced this from LXX Gen 4:7, understanding the verse to mean that Cain's offering was outwardly and technically correct, but in his soul he did not 'divide' to his neighbour right and proper fellowship, and thus harboured a secret sin which could not deceive God. Such dispositions Irenaeus applies to scribes and Pharisees condemned by Jesus in Matthew 23. Outwardly correct, they were inwardly jealous, like Cain; again like Cain, who refused God's command to be quiet, they killed the Just One. But Abel, the just one who offers with simplicity, is like the Church, offering a pure sacrifice to God (*Adv.Haer.* IV.18.4). In other words, Cain's sacrifice was rejected because of his bad inner dispositions, and Cain knew the reason for God's refusal of his sacrifice, because the Almighty Himself drew his attention to it:

He had no regard for Cain's offering, because with jealousy and malice which was against his brother he had division in his heart, as God declares when he denounces his hidden dispositions: 'Have you not sinned if you offer correctly, but do not divide correctly? Be tranquil.' (*Adv.Haer.* IV.18.4)

The idea that LXX Gen 4:7 indicates that Cain offered his sacrifice 'with a divided heart,' that is, with bad intentions amounting to jealousy

and malice which bring about its rejection, we have not encountered before, but it reappears in the writing of Eusebius of Emesa (d. c. 359 CE), who represents the verse as meaning that if the heart is just, the offering is acceptable; if it is not just, it is not acceptable (ter Haar Romeny 1997, 227).

It is clear, however, that Irenaeus' interest in this sacrifice does not end here. Following a lengthy discourse on sacrifice in the Law and the Prophets, he eventually turns to the Eucharist (*Adv.Haer.* IV.17.5). Christ, he declares, commanded his disciples to offer to God the *first-fruits* of His own creation when he gave thanks over bread and wine and instituted the Eucharist. In so doing, Christ taught 'the new oblation of the new covenant,' which the Church received from the Apostles and offers throughout the world to God who gives as food the *first-fruits of His gifts*. This, says Irenaeus, fulfils the prophecy of Mal 1:11, which he interprets as foretelling the end of Jewish sacrifice, but the continuing offering of a pure sacrifice among Gentiles. Irenaeus then explains the relationship of the Name of God to the Name of Jesus, indicating how the imposition of the Divine Name upon the Church's offerings of bread and wine gives effect to the Eucharistic sacrifice (*Adv.Haer.* IV.17.6). This leads to further consideration of this offering: Christ, Irenaeus affirms, willed it to be offered 'in simplicity and innocence,' citing as proof Matt 5:23–24, where Jesus teaches that *disputes between brothers* should be resolved before sacrifice is offered. Irenaeus continues immediately:

We are bound, therefore, to offer to God *the first-fruits of His creation*, as Moses also says: 'Thou shalt not appear in the presence of the Lord Thy God empty (...)' (Deut 16:16). (*Adv.Haer.* IV.17.6)

After a section contrasting the Jewish sacrifices, which are offered by a subject nation, with the Christian Eucharist offered by free people (*Adv.Haer.* IV.18.2), he introduces Abel, who offered with simplicity and justice: this recalls the Church's offering 'in simplicity and innocence' (*Adv.Haer.* IV.18.1), and is contrasted with Cain's essentially hypocritical offering, as we have seen. The contrast is developed at some length, before Irenaeus returns to the Eucharist which, he says, the Church offers with simplicity, her gift being reckoned a pure sacrifice and consisting of *the first-fruits of those created things* which are God's (*Adv.Haer.* IV.18.4).

Abel's offering of *first-fruits* plays a crucial role not simply in Irenaeus' fundamental and over-arching anti-Gnostic polemic, evident throughout his writings, but also in his expression of a complex and

sophisticated exposition of the Eucharist as sacrifice. This sacrifice was commanded and expounded by Christ himself, who in the thought of Irenaeus is the new head of a renewed creation and restored humanity. It is entirely fitting, then, that it should have close affinity with the very first recorded sacrifice offered to and accepted by God, a gift of *first-fruits* offered in simplicity by a just man who himself is killed though jealousy and envy of a brother. Similar thoughts about Abel's sacrifice are expressed by Cyprian (*De Oratione Dominica* 24), but without any mention of *first-fruits*, creation or the Eucharist. Abel's acceptable offering thus readily finds a place prepared for it in Irenaeus' famous notion of 'recapitulation,' with its focus on beginnings and summations (Grant 1997, 50–53, 113–115, 139–142; for an overview of the theology of Irenaeus, including his doctrine of recapitulation, see Minns 1994).

Irenaeus' integration of Abel's sacrifice into Eucharistic theology is not peculiar to him. It is strikingly expressed in a section of the Canon, or Eucharistic Prayer, of the Roman church (a scholarly analysis of the Canon is given by Botte 1935), close investigation of which will lead us back directly to Jewish traditions about Abel and Cain. A characteristic feature of this Roman prayer, which it shares only with the Eucharistic Prayer of the church of Milan, is a petition to God to accept the oblations, as once He accepted the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek:

Supra quae propitio ac sereno vultu respicere digneris: et accepta habere, sicuti accepta habere dignatus es munera pueri tui justii Abel, et sacrificium Patriarchae nostri Abrahamae, et quod tibi obtulit summus sacerdos tuus Melchisedech, sanctum sacrificium, immaculatam hostiam. (Missale Romanum 289)

A literal English translation of this might read as follows:

Upon which [sc. the oblations] may You deign to have regard with a favourable and serene countenance, and to hold them as accepted, as You deigned to hold as accepted the gifts of your just child/servant Abel, and the sacrifice of our Patriarch Abraham, and what Your high priest Melchizedek offered to You, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.

Although the final words of this prayer, *sanctum sacrificium, immaculatam hostiam*, were added by Pope Leo I (440–461 CE), the substance of it, including the mention of Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek, was quoted by Ambrose (bishop of Milan, 374–397 CE) in his treatise *De Sacramentis* IV.6 as already traditional in his time (Mazza 1986, 79–83).

There are indications that the prayer is older than the fourth century. The description of Melchizedek as high priest, absent from the Hebrew Bible, the LXX and the VL, is characteristic of Jewish tradition, and is recorded in Tg Neofiti and Fragmentary Targum Paris Ms 110 of Gen 14:18 and strongly implied in GenR 46:5. This may suggest that the description of Melchizedek in the prayer *Supra Quae* is ultimately of Jewish origin (le Déaut 1962, 222–229; Díez Macho 1970, 76\*–78\*). This suggestion is strengthened by the wording of the prayer's opening clause. The plea that God *respicere*, 'have regard to' the offerings is especially significant as relating in the first instance to Abel's sacrifice, which both the VL and Jerome's Vulgate declare that God *respexit*, 'had regard to' while Cain's He did not regard (VL and Vg Gen 4:4–5). The prayer qualifies that divine regard, petitioning that it should be 'with a favourable and serene countenance.' No such expression is found in the Hebrew, the LXX, the VL, or the Vg of Gen 4:4–5; but Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of these verses affirms that for Abel's *first-fruits* 'there was acceptance/pleasure (*rava*) before the Lord and brightness of countenance (*sevar appin*) upon Abel and upon his sacrifice, but for Cain and for his sacrifice He did not make bright his countenance (*lo asbar appin*)' (Bengtsson 2001, 32–48).<sup>2</sup> The language of holding the gifts as accepted, too, recalls the wording of all the extant Aramaic targumim of Gen 4:4–5, but is not encountered in the LXX, the VL, or the Vg.

The attention which this draws to Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is suggestive in light of further observations: (1) According to Tg PsJon Gen 4:1, Cain's father was not Adam, but the evil angel Sammael. Irenaeus, whose interest in Cain and Abel we have already noted, was aware of a tradition of this sort (*Adv.Haer.* I.30.7, 9). The possibility that some such notion lies behind 1 John 3:12 should not be discounted (Aptowitz 1922, 20, 128–130; Bengtsson 2001, 32–33); (2) The sacrifices of Cain and Abel were offered at *Pesah*, according to Tg PsJon Gen 4:3. Abel's offering of a lamb thus exactly corresponds with what

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<sup>2</sup> Unique among the targumim, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's version of the Priestly Blessing makes use of this same phraseology: 'May the Lord light up the brightness of His countenance for you when you labour in the Torah (...) May the Lord make bright the brightness of His countenance towards you in your praying (...)' (Tg PsJon Num 6:25–26). This places the blessing of the Lord's Name upon Israel, as in Num 6:27. Irenaeus, like other early Christian authors, attributes the consecration of the Eucharist to the Name which is imposed on the offerings (see *Adv.Haer.* IV.17.6); the appearance of related language in *Supra Quae* which may be linked with the Divine Name via Jewish tradition of the acceptance of Abel's offering is, to say the least, interesting.

the Torah requires and Abel, in so offering, is revealed as being 'just.' Targum Pseudo-Jonathan further states that Cain offered flax-seeds: this is an improper offering for *Pesah*, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan alone of Jewish exegetical sources describes these seeds as 'first-fruits' (Bengtsson 2001, 34, 44–45; Aptowitz 1922, 28–40). In so doing, the targum presents Cain's offering as a bad reflection of Abel's: flax seed is an inferior offering, being used as food only in cases of necessity (Aptowitz 1922, 37–39; Bengtsson 2001, 42–43), and this serves to highlight the genuine character of Abel's offering of *first-fruits*; (3) According to Tg PsJon Gen 8:20, Adam had built the one altar which Cain and Abel used. By offering flax seed, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan implies that Cain had broken the laws of *kilayim*, unlawfully mixing with Abel's lawful sacrifice species which should have been kept separate. Furthermore, Cain offered produce of the earth before the waving of the *omer* had released grains for consumption: this ceremony would have taken place after *Pesah* (Aptowitz 1922, 39; Bengtsson 2001, 45). In all this, Cain is revealed as a serial Law-breaker; (4) Cain's sacrifice, as portrayed in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, betrays a radical contempt for creation, which God had made with careful regard for order, an order which He repeatedly affirmed to be good. Cain's disregard of commandments relating to this order in created things goes hand in hand with his notorious denial that the world is governed according to the fruits of good deeds, and his refusal to accept that there is a judge and another world (Tg PsJon Gen 4:8).

Cain's origin, activities, and stated beliefs as represented by Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and other Palestinian targumim set before us a character who stands opposed to the order of things required by God and His Torah. His dispute with Abel, recorded by all the Palestinian targumim as a common tradition with significant variations, has been understood as a clash between Pharisee and Sadducee, between authentic Judaism and an Epikoros, or between adherents of the teaching that there were 'two powers in heaven' and their opponents (Vermes 1961–1962, 81–114; Isenberg 1970, 433–444; Fischel 1973, 37; Bassler 1986, 56–64). Given the differing targumic accounts of the debate, any or all of these explanations can claim some support. Josephus, it will be recalled, had no reservations about describing Cain as 'most evil in every way,' and setting him in stark opposition to his brother's belief in justice and divine co-operation in his deeds. This delineation of Cain's beliefs could be developed in a number of complementary directions to yield the variety of targumic presentations of Cain now extant; for our

purposes it is sufficient to note that there is enough of the anti-nomian Gnostic about Cain's stance in the Palestinian targumim, and in particular in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, to allow the suggestion that behind all the present targumim lies a basic understanding of Cain as a false teacher. The nature of the false teaching could be developed as times and circumstances dictated, Cain becoming now more of a Sadducee, now more of an Epikoros, now favouring two powers in heaven, now more of an anti-nomian—or a mixture of all these. Bassler's remarks that Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's presentation of Cain's beliefs seems to combine features of polemics and does not correspond to any actual heresy (Bassler 1986, 64) might well indicate that Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is at pains to cast the net wide and to include a number of false teachings under Cain's umbrella.

To return to Irenaeus. This Christian author allows us to see how, in the course of the second century CE, Cain in particular might come to be held as a typical representative of Gnostic views, since Irenaeus himself gives a description of a Gnostic group whom he calls Cainites (*Adv.Haer.* I.31.1–2). His younger contemporary Tertullian (c. 160–225 CE) confirms their existence (*De Bapt.* 1); apparently, they held that all evil in the world derived from the God of Israel, and consequently revered those, like Cain, who could be taken as opposing Him. Irenaeus thus permits, even invites us to consider how the figure of Abel could have been developed specifically as an anti-Gnostic hero who had paid the price for his fidelity to God: both Jews and Christians could claim him as an upholder of fundamental religious truths. And there is one particular item in Irenaeus' account of the Cainites which may provide a further link to material preserved in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. Irenaeus tells us that the Cainites called the maker of heaven and earth Hystera, a Greek term for 'womb,' and they encouraged their adherents to destroy the works of Hystera.<sup>3</sup> Now 'womb' in Hebrew is *rehem*, and in Aramaic *raḥama*, and, according to Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Cain had asserted that the world was created *beraḥamin*, a term most naturally translated 'by mercy.' This has long troubled interpreters, for the world's creation 'by mercy' sits most uneasily on Cain's lips, and the word has sometimes consequently been understood as meaning, in this

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<sup>3</sup> See *Adv.Haer.* I.31.2, which reads: *Iam autem et collegi eorum conscriptiones, in quibus dissolvere opera Hysteræ adhortantur; Hysteram autem fabricatorem coeli et terræ vocant.*

particular context, 'by whim' or 'by caprice' (see discussion in Bassler 1986, 60).<sup>4</sup> But if *beraḥamin* in this verse of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is understood as a play on words with *raḥama*, 'womb,' in mind, much becomes clear: Cain is represented as father of the Cainites, holding that the creation of the world through such an entity as a 'womb' is contemptible and to be rejected (cf. Grant 1975, 145–149).

Arthur Marmorstein's perception, first articulated nearly eighty years ago, that the targumic disputes between Cain and Abel were directed against Gnostic opinions, may therefore still have something to commend it (Marmorstein 1931, 235–237). The writings of Irenaeus, set alongside the information about Cain preserved in the Palestinian targumim in general, and in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan in particular, and the prayer *Supra Quae* in the Roman Canon, seem naturally rooted in a common Jewish-Christian concern to oppose Gnosticism: they may spring from a common Jewish source, and offer us important insights into the ways the two faiths worked side by side against a common enemy.

### *Conclusions*

1. The LXX demonstrates the antiquity of the notions that: (a) Abel offered a 'better' sacrifice than Cain; (b) Cain was either ignorant or unobservant of laws relating to sacrifice; and (c) Cain may have been selfish in disposition. He deliberately flouted God's command that he be silent, or remain tranquil.
2. Philo greatly elaborates the view that Cain's offering was second-rate in quality, and suggests that he was cavalier in his attitude to the laws of sacrifice. He heavily stresses Cain's defects of character, presenting him as a self-centred, this-worldly individual as the etymology of his name suggests. Cain's sadness and depression informed him that his sacrifice had not been accepted.

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<sup>4</sup> The targum fragment of Gen 4:8 preserved in Leningrad, Saltykov-Schedrin MS Antonin Ebr. III B 739r (Klein 1986, 6–7), puts in Cain's mouth a similar assertion that the world was created by *raḥamin* (which Klein translates as 'partiality'), but continues unlike Targum Pseudo-Jonathan with the declaration that the world is also governed by *raḥamin*. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the verse further has Cain deny that the world is governed by justice. The Genizah fragment is concerned for correct understanding of the relationship of the two divine attributes of mercy and justice, a matter which seems not to trouble Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Bassler 1986, 64).

3. Wisdom of Solomon portrays Cain as an irate fratricide: his anger causes his departure from Wisdom. This is the oldest datable source to describe Cain explicitly as unjust, thereby implying that Abel is just; and Wisdom's use of language often associated with Greek tragic plays suggests that the writer understood the biblical story as having significance beyond the boundaries of Israel.
4. The New Testament regards Abel as just, and because of this he dies a martyr's death. For Luke, he is also by implication a prophet, which suggests that he had a particular body of teaching to transmit. Cain may also be a teacher (Jude 11), handing on falsehoods in cahoots with those other notorious error-mongers Balaam and Korah: his origin is evil (1 John 3:12). The Epistle to the Hebrews agrees with Philo that Abel's sacrifice was 'better' than Cain's.
5. Josephus apparently makes no use of the LXX's information about the brothers, while having some affinities with information given by Philo. Abel, for him, typifies justice: he is one who sees God as present with his deeds, and takes forethought for virtue. The language he uses to present the story of the two brothers suggests that Abel is a thinker, a philosopher, and thus has a teaching, while Cain is greedy, scheming and gross. God took pleasure in Abel's sacrifice.
6. Church Fathers both before and after the Council of Nicaea felt able to draw freely upon these post-biblical developments, modifications, and expansions of the Cain and Abel narrative, each according to his doctrinal or homiletical needs. Examples illustrating the Fathers' use of such material have been given above, most of them excerpted from writings dated before 400 CE. The pre-Nicene period, however, is especially significant for Jewish-Christian exegesis of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel because of one outstanding Christian author's discussion of it.
7. Alone of the pre-Nicene Church Fathers, Irenaeus of Lyons treats of the sacrifices offered by Cain and Abel. He regards Abel's sacrifice as a type of the Eucharist, but the setting in which he discusses it shows that it plays a major part in his wider concern to refute the Gnostics, some of whom, he tells us, could be described as Cainites. The Roman Canon, virtually alone among ancient Eucharistic Prayers, invokes Abel as a type of the Eucharist in the prayer *Supra Quae*, which modern scholars have perceived as owing some of its ideas to Jewish tradition. Indeed, the language of this prayer uncannily resembles Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's words about the divine reactions to the sacrifices of Cain and Abel; it would seem that the

targumim, Irenaeus and the prayer *Supra Quae* may all derive, in the last resort, from Jewish sources which presented Cain as a teacher of error, and Abel as a true worshipper of the One God. Thus, in this particular matter, Judaism and Christianity seem to have taken similar steps to counter one of their deadliest foes, the Gnostic doctrine which denigrated Israel's God and denied the goodness of God's work in the creation of the world.

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## CREATING WOMEN'S VOICES: SARAH AND TAMAR IN SOME SYRIAC NARRATIVE POEMS

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Women are only rarely given a voice in the biblical narrative. In the case of Sarah and Tamar, the two women discussed in this paper, we indeed find them making a few interventions, but these are always only short ones. In Gen 16:2 and Gen 21:6–7, 10, Sarah is represented as speaking directly to Abraham, and in Gen 18:12 the words she speaks laughingly to herself are provided. In the case of Tamar, we have her words to her father-in-law Judah, both at the encounter by the way-side (Gen 38:16–17), and when she produced her three pledges (Gen 38:25). When we come to the examples of the 'rewritten Bible' from the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, some new developments are observable. Whereas Jubilees is normally content just to reproduce, or slightly paraphrase Sarah's words in Genesis (Gen 16:2 ~ Jub 14:22; Gen 21:10 = Jub 17:4),<sup>1</sup> the author of the Book of Biblical Antiquities (Pseudo-Philo) not only sometimes expands on biblical direct speech, most notably in the case of Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:36), adding a long lament into the bargain, but he also gives a voice to a number of minor female characters, such as Sisera's mother (Pseudo-Philo 31:8) and Elkanah's wife Peninnah (Pseudo-Philo 50:1–2). A similar sort of procedure can be seen in a Qumran fragment (4Q215) where words are put into the mouth of Bilhah's mother at Bilhah's birth.

### *Abraham and Sarah in Egypt: Genesis 12*

Similar developments can also be seen in the Genesis Apocryphon's handling of Abraham and Sarah's visit to Egypt (Genesis 12). Already in this text several features from the similar episode in Genesis 20 have been taken over, including Sarah's direct speech, 'He is my brother'

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 18:12, however, is put in the third person; this also happens to all of Sarah's biblical words in Josephus' retelling of the biblical narrative in his *Ant.* I.187–8, 198, 213–7. By contrast, later on in Jubilees Rebekah's words to Jacob, foretelling her death, go beyond anything in the biblical narrative (Jub 35:6).

(1Q20, col. XX.10), which is taken over from what is reported by Abimelech as her direct speech in Gen 20:5 (in Gen 12:13 Abraham simply tells Sarah, ‘Say you are my sister’).

Early Christian sources rarely show much interest in this episode, but an exception is provided by a Syriac narrative poem attributed to Ephrem (d. 373 CE), but almost certainly an anonymous work of the fifth century.<sup>2</sup> In this poem of 180 lines there are a number of individual features: The reason for Abraham and Sarah’s journey to Egypt is religious persecution, as well as famine. The background for this is the traditions of Abraham’s escape from his father Terah’s idolatry; Sarah tries to hide her beauty by dressing in rags (in Jewish tradition she is hidden in a chest; GenR 40:5); Most remarkable of all, however, is the very prominent role that is given to Sarah. Thus, in contrast (for example) to Artapanus (apud Eusebius, *Praep.Ev.* IX.18.1) who stated that God’s purpose for their visit to Egypt was so that Abraham might be a ‘teacher to Egypt,’ in the Syriac poem it is Sarah who takes on this role:

Sarah was journeying to Egypt to teach Egypt of her Lord,  
and like the Samaritan woman telling the Samaritans, she showed them  
the truth.  
(Lines 35–36; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 108)

When Abraham, on reaching Egypt, has forebodings, it is Sarah who provides comfort:

What saddens you?  
For during the journey you were rejoicing, but now your tears are flowing.  
With courage relate to me why your mind is saddened,  
for God will not abandon us, since his bidding extends to every place.  
By the God whom you worship, tell me the reason for your weeping,  
for I am grieved by your tears, my mind has gone astray at your sufferings.  
(Lines 39–44; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 110).

Abraham then explains to her that he had not realized the wickedness of the Egyptians until they arrived, adding:

When they catch sight of you they will go crazy and kill me because of you.  
Who in all the world will avenge my blood? Who will give sentence  
concerning my death?  
(Lines 51–52; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 112)

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<sup>2</sup> Edition and translation in Brock and Hopkins 1992. For the various different genres employed for the retelling of biblical narrative, see Brock 1987 and 2009.

Sarah again comforts him, reassuring him a second time that God will not abandon them:

Come, let us weep,  
 for I was unaware of such things, and they never entered my mind.  
 For if I have come to witness your death, then death is preferable to me  
 to life.  
 If people are going to vaunt it over you, then I wish I had been tormented  
 by the famine;  
 if, then, Egypt is filled with sin, let us return to our inheritance,  
 for God will not abandon us, since his bidding extends to every place.  
 If Egypt is filled with wickedness, then accursed be Egypt with its wheat!  
 (Lines 54–60; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 112).

Abraham rejects her proposal to return to Canaan, and bids her to say to the Egyptians that Abraham is her brother: ‘perhaps on your account I shall be saved and my honour will grow in Egypt’ (line 65; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 114). Sarah is horrified that then she might be married off to an Egyptian:

No, by God our Fashioner, who is ministered to by the heavenly beings,  
 no, by the Lord whose will it was to give me to your couch in marriage  
 with you,  
 I will not acquire another husband in your place: besides you I will know  
 no other.  
 I will strip off my garments and wrap myself in rags,  
 cast dust on my head, and thus let us enter at evening time.  
 (Lines 67–71; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 114)

Her strategem fails to work, since her beauty shone out through the rags. When the couple are taken off to Pharaoh, Abraham tells Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister, and she obediently confirms this. Then, as she is led away and decked up in finery, she prays to God to come to her aid:

O Lord God, upon whom I have called, come to my aid, and let me see  
 your glory.  
 The pagans want me as a bride, but you are the Husband of my youth.  
 Either send death to take me, or send an angel to rescue me.  
 (Lines 108–110; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 120)

When all the nobles were gathered for ‘the joyful wedding feast’:

Sarah called out to Abraham and knelt in obeisance at his feet.  
 “See,” she said to him, “What are you going to do? For they are taking  
 me straight away;  
 What are your thoughts occupied with? For while we are eating and  
 drinking,

I know very well that they will take me off. Help me, and let me see your mind.”  
 When Sarah had spoken these things silence gripped Abraham.  
 (Lines 114–118; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 122)

The Egyptians turn up to collect her, at which:

the just pair sat down to weep, their minds quite dazed.  
 She placed her head between his knees and addressed him with a groan,  
 “O heart that I have loved ever since I was a child, listen to me and I will  
 instruct you what to do.  
 Cry out to God and do not desist; fall down before him and supplicate him,  
 for if it is that he does not deliver my life, then he will have taken me  
 from you.  
 Alas, my lord, how much you have tested me, and how much I have  
 loved you:  
 when I recognized God to be with you, I went forth from my parents,  
 and to wherever it pleased you, willingly I went with you.  
 But now you have laid for me a trap, while knowing that it would be to  
 me a stumbling-block,  
 for here I stand, about to go off today as a wife for a pagan.  
 Perhaps it was because I did not have any children that you have separated  
 me today from your side.  
 But I know, by God, that I am more sad than you.  
 Alas, that news of you is going out in the land, how you have sold me  
 for the bread of your mouth!  
 Men much desired my youth, but I considered them as dung;  
 may the Lord requite this at my hand if I should ever have put another  
 man in your place.  
 O my fair wedding crown, farewell, for the unbelievers are mocking at me.”  
 (Lines 120–136; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 122–124)

Sarah embraces Abraham as she is snatched away by Pharaoh’s men. When Pharaoh catches sight of her ‘his heart rejoiced like the rose blossoms of April’ (line 142; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 126). He sits down beside her, ‘smiles at her, and she smiles back at him; he embraces her, as she weeps in her heart’ (line 145; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 126). She prays to God<sup>3</sup> with the same words as before, and her prayers, along with her husband’s, ‘reached the throne of the Divinity’ (line 151; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 126), and divine intervention occurs just as Pharaoh is entering the bridal chamber with

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<sup>3</sup> GenR 41:2 also provides Sarah with a prayer at this point (‘I went forth with faith [...]’); some further sources are listed by Ginzberg 1968, 221 n. 73.

Sarah. Having been struck by an angel and told not to touch her,<sup>4</sup> but to let her go to her husband, Pharaoh, pleading his ignorance of their relationship, is told 'Sarah has a God, and that Lord of hers has sent me to you, to smite you with this blow' (lines 161–162; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 128). Pharaoh, having been told that his cure 'lies with Abraham,' summons him and restores Sarah to him.

What is so surprising about this narrative poem is the prominence given to Sarah: she is the one who takes control of the situation, confident that God will not abandon them; it is she who feels herself 'tested' (line 125; trans. Brock and Hopkins 1992, 122) by Abraham's actions. By contrast, Abraham is portrayed as primarily being interested only in his own safety and honour.

Although the degree of prominence accorded to Sarah in this episode by the Syriac poet seems to be without parallel in ancient literature, it could be noted that TanB *Ḥayye Sarah* 3 seeks to enhance her role here by associating her with Prov 31:11–12, the wife who benefits her husband.

### *Sarah and the Akedah: Genesis 22*

Abraham's 'Tenth Trial,' as recounted in Genesis 22, 'that marvel of minimalist narrative,' as Burton Visotzky so aptly described it (Visotzky 1991, 78), has given rise, over the centuries, to a vast number of different, and sometimes completely conflicting, interpretations. Many modern readers are apt to take the narrative as a straightforward account of God's dealings with humanity, and so are profoundly shocked by such a portrayal of the Divinity and might well feel considerable sympathy with the approach of the author of Jubilees, who radically altered the scenario by having it instigated by Mastema (Jub 18, modelled on Job 1). Such a reading, however, ignores the key to a totally different understanding of the whole episode, provided by the earlier promise made by God to Abraham that he would have progeny through Isaac (Gen 21:12): with this in mind, the narrative is primarily intended to illustrate how Abraham's faith in God's promise held out even in what are portrayed as the worst possible circumstances that could be

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<sup>4</sup> The exegetical tradition, both Jewish and Christian, was divided over whether or not Pharaoh had intercourse with Sarah: for the differing views in Syriac and Greek sources, see Brock and Hopkins 1992, 93–94.

imagined. This is certainly how the majority of Jews and Christians in Antiquity understood the passage, and often it is Abraham's love of God, as well as his faith, which is emphasized.

Sarah, of course, does not receive any mention at all in the sparse narrative of Genesis 22. But, just as in minimalist music silences can be just as important as notes, so too in the minimalist account of this chapter silences can be seen to speak, inviting the question asked by Abraham's angelic visitors, 'Where is Sarah?' (Gen 18:9).<sup>5</sup>

This is not, in fact, a question ever asked by any of the authors of the 'rewritten Bible' of the Hellenistic and early Roman period, although Josephus does add the comment that Abraham 'concealed God's command even from his wife' (*Ant.* I.25).<sup>6</sup> Nor does the question get asked in the earlier midrashim; it does, however, become a concern in several later ones, such as in Midrash ha-Gadol (on Gen 22:3),<sup>7</sup> and it may be the case that here, as sometimes elsewhere, the later midrashim preserve earlier traditions that had been excluded by the earlier Rabbinic sources.

One of the first people to pose the question seems to have been the Syriac poet Ephrem. In his *Commentary on Genesis* (which is certainly genuine) he writes, after quoting Gen 22:1–2, as follows: 'Abraham got up early, split wood and took his young men and Isaac, and set off.' He then adds: 'As for Sarah, the fact that he did not reveal the matter to her was because he had not been told to reveal it,' and goes on: 'But (if Abraham had told her) she would have been urging him that she might share in his sacrifice' (*Comm.Gen.* XX.1). As we shall see, this hint was taken up and developed by several subsequent Syriac writers, in particular by two anonymous poets.

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<sup>5</sup> The Alexandrian Homeric scholars recognized 'the figure of silence' as a rhetorical feature in Homer, and this was applied to the Bible by Origen and others. Theodoret of Cyrhus was to state that 'one should not investigate matters left in silence by the biblical text (*Quaest.Gen.* XLV), but, since he is talking about the place to which Enoch was taken, this veto was probably meant to apply only to the heavenly realm. For a discussion of different attitudes to silence in the biblical text, see Kamesar 1994, 53–4.

<sup>6</sup> The mysterious third figure in the depiction of the Akedah on the walls of the Dura Europos synagogue (destroyed in 256 CE) has been variously interpreted; one possibility is that it could be Sarah, remaining behind in a tent. For a definite depiction of Sarah at the Akedah, see n. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Some examples are given in Brock 1974 (written before I had come across the two poems published in Brock 1986).

Sarah also features in a poem attributed to Ephrem, but in Greek (Mercati 1915, 43–83). Although the attribution cannot be correct, the poem probably dates from the fourth or fifth century, and is of interest here, being a representative of a different approach that proved to be more characteristic of the Greek homiletic tradition. In this Greek poem, some 50 stanzas, out of a total of 172, are devoted to Abraham's reactions to God's fearsome command. First, the author asks what would have been the audience's reaction to such a command; he then goes on to present the words that one might have expected Abraham to reply to God in such a situation. This speculation is abruptly brought to an end with the words 'But the just man said nothing of the sort.' Instead, he acted swiftly, and, recalling Eve, decided not to tell Sarah, since she would only cause a stir and try to hide Isaac. The poet then provides the words that Sarah *might* have said *if* she had been told.

This general pattern, with fictive speeches (*ethopoia*) indicating what Abraham and Sarah might have been expected to utter, was taken up in a number of Greek writers and homilists of the fifth and sixth century, whose background lies in the rhetorical schools of the time.<sup>8</sup> Generally the attitude towards Sarah is negative, and the purpose of these imagined speeches is to explain why Abraham does not tell her anything. There are, however, some notable exceptions to this negative portrayal of Sarah, and noteworthy amongst these are two anonymous Syriac narrative poems, both of which probably date from the fifth century (Brock 1986). As was the case in the poem on Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, we are presented with a highly positive portrayal of Sarah. Indeed, in the later of the two poems Sarah actually emerges as the true hero of Genesis 22, having been doubly tested, whereas Abraham was tested only once.

In these two narrative poems, instead of fictive speeches of what Sarah *might* have said, speeches are put into Sarah's mouth of what she is being portrayed as *actually* saying.

The two poems have different approaches. In the first, Sarah is alarmed when she sees Abraham take Isaac off, and questions him, 'Where are you taking my only-begotten? (...) Why are you not revealing your secret to me, Sarah, your faithful wife?' (lines 15, 25; trans.

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<sup>8</sup> Imagined speeches, answering the question 'What might N say' (on such and such an occasion) were standard exercises in rhetorical schools (see, e.g., Cribiore 2001).

Brock 1986, 108). When Abraham tells her that he is just going off to sacrifice a lamb, Sarah then wants to know why Isaac has to go too; she is fearful:

You are drunk with the love of God, who is your God and my God,  
and if he so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without  
hesitation.

(Lines 37–38; trans. Brock 1986, 109)

Abraham eventually persuades Sarah to let him go off with Isaac, without her realizing what her husband's real purpose was.

The second poem (whose author knows the first one) provides a much more dramatic scenario:

God called out to Abraham and spoke with him and said,  
“Offer up to me your son as a whole offering on one of the mountains  
I shall tell you of.”

Abraham heard his word and brought a knife and sharpened it.  
Sarah saw, and her heart groaned, as she began to speak to Abraham,  
“Why are you sharpening your knife? What do you intend to slaughter  
with it?”

This secret today, why have you hidden it from me?”

Abraham answered and said to Sarah in reply to her words,  
“This secret today, women cannot be aware of.”

Sarah gave answer to Abram with a groan and great feeling,  
“When you brought in the poor and gave me joy when I was downcast  
—for even the poor whom we received turned out to be angels—  
they can testify to my mind, if what you had in mind was not the same  
as I.

You are drunk with the love of God, who is the God of gods,  
and if he so bids you concerning the child you will kill him without  
hesitation:

let me go up with you to the burnt-offering and let me see my only child  
being sacrificed;

if you are going to bury him in the ground, I will dig the hole with my  
own hands,

and if you are going to build up stones, I will carry them on my shoulders;  
the lock of my white hairs in old age will I provide for his bonds.

But if I cannot go up to see my only child being sacrificed  
I will remain at the bottom of the mountain until you have sacrificed  
him and come back.”

She embraced him and kissed him in tears, and said to him, “Go in  
peace:

may God who gave you to me return you to me in safety.”

She took Isaac by his right hand and handed him over to the upright  
Abraham.

(Lines 11–42; trans. Brock 1986, 123)

In contrast to the first poem on Sarah and the Akedah and to almost all other early Christian treatments,<sup>9</sup> Sarah is aware, and sends Isaac off willingly. The unknown author thus treats as reality what Ephrem had pointed to as a hypothesis, *if* Abraham had told her.

The second poem on Sarah and the Akedah is even more extraordinary at the end. Both poems in fact are highly unusual in Christian tradition in that the return of Abraham and Isaac to Sarah plays a large role: this is much more characteristic of Jewish tradition, which normally linked Genesis 22 chronologically with Genesis 23 (which opens with Sarah's death), whereas Christian writers were much more apt to link the chapter with the infancy stories of Isaac<sup>10</sup> (this of course heightened the problem of how Abraham could have taken Isaac off without Sarah's knowledge).

In the first of the two poems featuring Sarah, she asks Isaac what has taken place, and when he tells her, she faints, probably a reflection of the Jewish tradition that she died of shock (MHG on Gen 22:19). In the second poem, however, Sarah has to undergo a second trial, this time initiated by her own husband:

Once he had arrived and reached home Abraham said to his son,  
 "My son, please stay back for a little: I will go in and return to your  
 mother,  
 and I will see how she receives me. I will spy out her mind and her  
 thought."

The old man returned and entered in peace: Sarah rose up to receive him,  
 she brought him a bowl to wash (his feet) and she began to say as follows:  
 "Welcome, blessed old man, husband who has loved God;  
 welcome, O happy one, who has sacrificed my only child on the pyre;  
 welcome, O slaughterer, who did not spare the body of my only child.

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<sup>9</sup> A notable exception is a recently published short Greek acrostic poem (Hurst and Rudhardt 1999, 37–56). The prominence given to Sarah in this hexameter poem may be due to the influence of the role of the mother of the seven Maccabean martyrs (2 Macc 7), since all the poems in the papyrus seem to be connected with the theme of persecution and martyrdom. For the treatment of Genesis 22 in Amphilochius (employing high irony) and Romanos, see Brock 1974. It is interesting that Sarah features, not only in the depiction of the Akedah in the early Christian chapel at Bagawit, but also in the accompanying inscription.

<sup>10</sup> This can be observed from the different ages accorded to Isaac at the Akedah: 37, which became the standard figure in most Jewish sources, was reached by linking the information in Gen 17:17 and 21:5 with 23:1, and assuming that Sarah died at the time of the Akedah. Christian sources give a variety of much lower figures, and Ephrem (*Hymni de Ecclesia* 24:4), by giving Abraham's age as 100, even implies he was an infant.

Did he weep when he was bound, or groan as he died?  
 Was he greatly looking out for me? But I was not there to come to his side.  
 His eyes were wandering over the mountains, but I was not there to  
 deliver him.

By the God whom you worship, relate to me the whole affair.”  
 (Lines 94–105; trans. Brock 1986, 124–125)

To which Abraham replies:

Your son did not weep when he was bound; he gave no groan when he died.  
 You have put me under an oath by God, (saying) Did he ask to see you  
 on the pyre?

When the pyre was built and set up, and the bonds were on his hands  
 and the knife above his neck, then did he remember you there,  
 and he asked to see you on the pyre.”

“May the soul of my only child be accepted, for he hearkened to his  
 mother’s words.

If only I was an eagle, or had the speed of a turtle-dove,  
 so that I might go and behold that place where my only child, my beloved,  
 was sacrificed,

that I might see the place of his ashes, and see the place of his binding,  
 and bring back a little of his blood to be comforted by its smell.

I had some of his hair to place inside my clothes

and when grief overcame me I placed it over my eyes.

I had some of his clothes so that I might imagine him, putting them in  
 front of my eyes,

and when suffering sorrow overcame me, I gained relief through gazing  
 up them.

I wish I could see his pyre and the place where his bones were burnt,  
 and could bring a little of his ashes, and gaze on them always and be  
 comforted!”

As she stood there, her heart mourning, her mind and her thought  
 intent,

greatly upset with emotion, her mind dazed as she grieved,

the child returned, entering safe and sound. Sarah rose up to receive him,  
 she embraced him and kissed him amid tears, and began to address him

as follows:

“Welcome, my son, my beloved, welcome, child of my vows;  
 welcome, O dead one come to life!”

(Lines 107–128; trans. Brock 1986, 125)

Isaac’s brief reply includes a couplet which is remarkably similar to the  
 words ascribed to him at his homecoming in Pesiqta de Rab Kahana  
 26:3 (Brock 1986, 88):

But for the voice which called out “Abraham, hold off from the child,”  
 I would yesterday have died and my bones would have been consumed  
 by fire.

(Lines 132–133; trans. Brock 1986, 125)

The relevant passage in PRK 26:3 reads:

My father (...) took the knife into his hand to slay me. Had not the Holy One said to him, *Lay not your hand upon the lad* (Gen 22:12), I would have been slain. (trans. Braude and Kapstein 1975, 398)

The earlier of the two poems is in fact even closer to PRK:

(my father) stretched out his hand to the knife, and it reached the very neck  
of your darling,  
and had there not been the voice saying "Abraham, raise your hand  
from the child,"  
I would yesterday have been killed, and they would have been looking  
for my bones in the fire.  
(Lines 168–170; trans. Brock 1986, 111)

One might ask, what was the second author's aim in this representation of Sarah? Do we just have a highly imaginative writer at work here, displaying the rhetorical possibilities provided by the use of fictive speeches and the silence of the biblical text? Or could it be that, totally exceptionally in Syriac literature, the author was a woman? A grammatical form in the opening lines where the author speaks in the first person could suggest this, but unfortunately the evidence is ambiguous. Among roughly contemporary Greek authors one thinks of Eudokia as being a parallel, but the highly cultured Greek context in which she was writing was entirely different. Or do these three poems tell us something about a changed status of women in society, or just within the author's own Christian community? Here one might adduce Jacob of Serugh's panegyric on Ephrem in which he gives great prominence to Ephrem's role in initiating the use of women's choirs in church services, even writing some of his hymns in the voice of women. Or again, looking at the matter from a completely different angle, might the author's hidden purpose be to criticize, and at the same time subvert, some exaggerated earlier portrayal of Abraham? Such an interpretation might find some support in the very negative portrait of Abraham in the poem on Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, where Abraham is portrayed as only being concerned with his own personal safety and reputation.<sup>11</sup> This, however, would not fit either of the two poems on the Akedah, where Abraham is by no means treated in a hostile manner (it is probably only the modern, and not the ancient, reader who finds Abraham's testing of Sarah at the homecoming so horrifying).

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<sup>11</sup> For some much later sources that are critical of Abraham's visit to Egypt, see Ginzberg 1968, 220 n. 66.

It would be premature even to attempt to offer any answers to these and to other such questions at the present time when research into the cultural background of Syriac literature in general, and poetry in particular, in Late Antiquity is so undeveloped, with major questions about possible interaction with contemporary Greek literature unanswered (and in some cases, indeed, not even yet asked). The same equally applies to the study of the literary treatment of women in ancient literature in general.<sup>12</sup>

*Tamar and Judah: Genesis 38*

The episode concerning Tamar and Judah<sup>13</sup> in Genesis 38 is, on any surface reading, hardly a very edifying one: Tamar dresses up as a prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law, an action for which (according to Lev 20:12) both parties should have been put to death—yet the biblical narrative offers no hint of any reproach. Here too, as in Genesis 22, it is the silence of the biblical text that speaks, or rather, invites interpretation. How did ancient exegetes make sense of the chapter and meet the challenge its silence imposed?

Esther Menn's *Judah and Tamar in Ancient Jewish Exegesis* (1997) helpfully explores the ways in which three different types of text, the Testament of Judah, Targum Neofiti, and Genesis Rabbah, dealt with the problem. The common starting point for their differing treatments lies in Judah's words in Gen 38:26, 'she is more righteous than I,' where מִמֶּנִּי has been reassigned as belonging to a divine utterance, to the effect that 'These matters were *from me*' (thus, for example, GenR 85:12); in other words, Tamar's ardent desire to be incorporated into the Israelite royal and messianic lineage is now seen as the honourable reason for her action. Hints of such an explanation are actually already to be found in the fact that Tamar is included in the genealogies of 2 Chronicles and Matthew.

In early Christian homiletic texts, Genesis 38 rarely receives any detailed treatment. There is, however, one notable exception to be found, in a verse homily by the Syriac poet Jacob of Serugh (d. 521 CE). But before turning to Jacob of Serugh, it is important to look

<sup>12</sup> For some general considerations on the study of the voices given to women in Greek literature, see Lardinois and McClure 2001, 3–16, esp. 6–11 on different modern approaches. For Syriac, see especially Harvey 2001.

<sup>13</sup> For this chapter see also S. Reif's contribution to this volume.

briefly at a few of the short references to Tamar in Ephrem.<sup>14</sup> In his *Commentary on Genesis*, he presents Tamar as herself speaking, 'It is for what is hidden in the Hebrews that I thirst' (*Comm.Gen XXXIV.3*) while in the *Hymns on the Nativity* Ephrem states 'Since the King (i.e. the Messiah) was hidden in Judah, Tamar stole him from his loins' (*Hymns on the Nativity 1:12*).

Jacob of Serugh's verse homily on Tamar (ed. and trans. Brock 2002) is but one amongst the very large number of verse homilies that he wrote on biblical persons or passages. As is frequently his practice, he opens with an extended introduction asking for inspiration in expounding this problematic chapter. At the end of this introduction he addresses Christ directly as he gives the short answer, 'It was for you, O Son of God, that Tamar was looking out' (line 129; trans. Brock 2002, 296). He then goes on to emphasize the need to read such biblical passages with a right disposition:

In the case of all the mystery-filled narratives of the Only-Begotten  
it is right to listen with great love, O discerning reader,  
for if love does not open the gate of your ear  
then there is no passing to your hearing for the words.  
In the case of the story of Tamar, unless a mind that has faith  
listens to it, the discerning woman will seem worthy of reproach,  
whereas, if an intellect that loves to listen to the mysteries  
should hear this tale, it will render back in return for it praise.  
All the words that the Spirit of God has placed in Scripture  
are filled with riches, like treasures, hidden in the different books.  
(Lines 137–146; trans. Brock 2002, 296)

He goes on to point out that Moses must have had some special purpose in including the episode and leaving both Tamar and Judah without any reproach; this is all the more the case seeing that elsewhere he condemned such actions:

Tamar's faith was beautiful to God,  
and this was what set aright an ugly affair that would otherwise have  
been corrupt.  
For had her faith not been filled with mysteries,  
Moses would not have reserved a portrait of beauty for a woman who  
played the prostitute,  
nor would Judah have escaped from blame,  
seeing that his path to the prostitute resembled that of a debauched man.  
(Lines 165–170; trans. Brock 2002, 297)

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<sup>14</sup> For Tamar in Ephrem, see further Kronholm 1991 and Botha 1995.

With these preliminaries, Jacob of Serugh now gets down to recounting the biblical narrative in his own words. He opens with a reminder that discernment is a prerequisite for understanding the story:

Therefore listen now in a discerning way concerning Tamar,  
 look at the radiant woman, filled with all the beauty of faith.  
 This woman entered Judah's household and became a daughter-in-law,  
 as faith in the house of Abraham was burning within her.  
 She took pride in the blessed seed of the great race  
 and held in expectation that from her the Messiah would shine forth  
 when he came.  
 (Lines 179–184; trans. Brock 2002, 297)

When her first two husbands, Judah's sons, both die leaving her still childless, and when her marriage to Shelah is put off:

she felt pained, broken and afflicted,  
 and because the family of Judah had cut her off from them entirely  
 yet the woman was burning with a desire for fruit, what should she do?  
 (...) She felt constrained to begin to seek out how she might find a way  
 of surreptitiously acquiring the blessed seed, and so be comforted by it.  
 With a plan that was full of hope and faith  
 she set a trap to enmesh Judah himself  
 and so from the very treasure store itself to bring out the treasure that  
 is full of riches,  
 from which there would shine forth great wealth for the entire world.  
 So it was from God that she asked in prayer that he would give her  
 the treasure she wanted from the clan of upright men.  
 (Lines 206–208, 215–222; trans. Brock 2002, 298)

Emphasis is laid again on Tamar's prayer and 'her intention, so full of beauty' (line 261; trans. Brock 2002, 299). Accordingly:

God saw how much she was longing for the Epiphany of his Son,  
 and because she was worthy, he granted her to find what she wanted.  
 Her heart rejoiced at intercourse with the righteous man,  
 for she had snatched wealth from the merchant, and he then passed on.  
 The Lord granted to her, because he had seen her faith,  
 that she should give birth to two sons, seeing that she had buried two  
 husbands.  
 The upright Lord, because he had taken her husbands away from her,  
 granted her children, and so provided the reward for her faith.  
 (Lines 263–270; trans. Brock 2002, 299)

Jacob of Serugh continues with the biblical narrative, expanding and embroidering it as he goes along. Finally, when Tamar is being taken

out to be burnt, she produces the three pledges she had received from Judah, and addresses Judah in the following words, significantly the only occasion in the poem where Jacob of Serugh allocates direct speech to her:

My lord judge, I have witnesses: summon them and let them attend.  
 Look at them, and if they are genuine, accept them.  
 Ask the staff and the scarf about the affair;  
 examine the ring, whose seal-stone it has: it will not deceive.  
 That you are upright and just everyone knows (...).  
 (Lines 341–345; trans. Brock 2002, 301)

At this point Jacob of Serugh depicts the pledges themselves as taking on human speech, thus fulfilling the same role as the *bat kol* in Targum Neofiti (e.g. Tg Neofiti Gen 38:28) and the Spirit of Holiness in Genesis Rabbah (e.g. GenR 85:9):

The staff indicated to him, “I am yours; leave off judgement.”  
 The scarf cried out, “Hold back the fire from the wretched woman,”  
 while the ring says, “I am inscribed, and have been kept intact;<sup>15</sup>  
 my master knows me, and if I get lost, his name will testify for me.  
 Stop the conflagration; remove the fire from this freeborn woman.  
 Take the pledges, abandon the case, and pronounce innocence.  
 (Lines 351–356; trans. Brock 2002, 301)

Judah acts accordingly, ‘acknowledging openly, “She is more innocent than I; let her not be abused”’ (line 360; trans. Brock 2002, 301). Whereupon Jacob of Serugh addresses Tamar directly, congratulating her. He then goes on to end his poem with a brief comparison between Tamar and the Church, Judah and Christ, also providing an allegorical interpretation of the three pledges as representing ‘faith, baptism and the cross of light’ which the Church will present as her pledges at the Last Judgement.

Jacob of Serugh’s poem is very much an exegetical homily, where the authorial voice is every now and then specifically present. It is definitely not an imaginative retelling of the biblical narrative such as we find in the three poems concerning Sarah. But more importantly, from our present point of view, unlike the authors of the anonymous poems,

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<sup>15</sup> There are no doubt deliberate resonances with the imagery of the seal of virginity, regularly used in connection with Mary, mother of Jesus.

Jacob of Serugh shows no particular interest in exploring Tamar's feelings by means of putting speeches into her mouth;<sup>16</sup> indeed, she is only given some direct speech once, appropriately enough at the climax of her ordeal. Thus, although Jacob of Serugh's poem is a particularly fine example of his creative approach towards the biblical text, his interest in Tamar as the protagonist lies primarily in what she is yearning for, namely the Messiah, her future descendant. By contrast, the anonymous authors of the three poems on Sarah seem to me to exhibit a real empathy for Sarah, as well as a specific desire to give her a meaningful voice in the course of interpreting the biblical text by drawing out her hidden role. In this respect, these Syriac poets would appear to be unique among writers of Late Antiquity: even though they are writing very much in the tradition of Ephrem, who likewise often portrays biblical women in a very favourable light, nevertheless it is only they who exploit the silences of the biblical text by giving a voice to Sarah to such dramatic effect.

In this paper the main focus of interest has been on a particularly distinctive aspect of these Syriac poems. At the same time various indirect links with Jewish tradition and traditions have been noted in passing, and it is worth ending by emphasizing the significance of these. The links can be classified as falling under two main headings, general exegetical approach, and particular exegetical traditions. As far as the former is concerned, it is interesting to see how closely the first two poems fit within Adam Kamesar's discussion of the narrative aggadah and attitudes to it in early Greek and Latin Christian writers: he shows how the Greek and Latin writers, even if they accept certain aspects of the narrative aggadah, have a reserved attitude towards it; although he does not include any discussion of the Syriac tradition, at one point he mentions that, if he had included it, it would have been necessary to add a new category, namely those Syriac writers who were writing very much *within* the exegetical tradition of the narrative aggadah (Kamesar 1994, 70). Our first two poems fit this category exactly, apart of course from their verse form, which from this perspective is not of any particular significance.<sup>17</sup> Although quite a number of individual exegetical traditions in all three poems have close parallels in Rabbinic literature

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<sup>16</sup> In other verse homilies, Jacob of Serugh quite frequently makes use of fictive speeches.

<sup>17</sup> This aspect is further developed in Brock 2009.

which (for the most part) are not to be found in Christian authors writing in Greek or Latin, it is in the third poem, Jacob of Serugh's verse homily, that this feature is perhaps most prominent: exactly as in Jewish tradition, it is Tamar's yearning to be incorporated into the ancestry of the Messiah which provides the essential hermeneutical key to what is otherwise a highly problematic chapter. All this fits in eminently well with the recognition in much recent scholarship (e.g. Murray 2006, 18) that, of all the early Christian traditions, it is the Syriac which provides some of the strongest links with Christianity's Jewish roots.

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## GENESIS 15 IN RABBINIC AND PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION

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In modern research on Genesis, chapter 15 is certainly not the most central text of the book, but, as most recently Ruth Fidler has observed, ‘The bibliography on Genesis XV in some commentaries on Genesis would suffice to show that the “Covenant between the Pieces” has received its fair share of scholarly attention’ (Fidler 2007, 162; cf. Schmitt 2006, 251–267). Aspects of the chapter regularly discussed are its apparent lack of unity and, consequently, its history of redaction and its date. Central among its theological aspects is, most of all for Christian exegetes because of its repeated quotation in the New Testament, Gen 15:6 on Abraham’s faith. In early Jewish and Christian interpretation, this verse also receives much attention, but other aspects are also frequently discussed, although—as is to be expected—the points of emphasis differ. My contribution concentrates on the rabbinic sources; patristic texts are adduced selectively; for comparison I concentrate on authors roughly contemporary with the main rabbinic text, *Genesis Rabbah*, i.e. authors of the fourth and fifth century.

The contents of chapter 15 are well known: it follows the account of Abraham’s successful campaign against the kings of the north and his encounter with Melchizedek (Genesis 14). ‘After these things’ (Gen 15:1), Abraham receives in a vision God’s promise of great reward. God takes him outside and promises him descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven, and Abraham believes. Only then God introduces himself to Abraham as the Lord who brought him from Ur of the Chaldeans to give him this land. As a sign that this promise is to become true, Abraham is told to offer several animals and to cut them in two, but not the birds. Birds of prey come down upon the carcasses and Abraham chases them away. Then Abraham is overcome by sleep in which God reveals to him that his ‘descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years’ (Gen 15:13), but God will bring them back in the fourth generation and give them the land.

In the following paper, I shall deal with only some central points of the text and its interpretation: first, questions of chronology; secondly, Abraham's belief; thirdly, the sacrificial scene and its meaning.

### *Questions of Chronology*

The rabbis find in this chapter two chronological problems that are closely connected with each other. At what stage of his life did Abraham have this vision? How can the 400 years during which Abraham's descendants will be oppressed and enslaved (Gen 15:13) be harmonized with the 430 years of Israel's stay in Egypt (Exod 12:40)? The general solution is that 430 years is the time between Abraham's vision and the Exodus, whereas the 400 years are to be counted from Isaac's birth until the Exodus. Thus, we read in Mek *Pisha* 14:

'Now the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years'. One passage says: 'Four hundred and thirty years,' and one passage says: 'And shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years' (Gen 15:13). How can both these passages be maintained? Thirty years before Isaac was born the decree was issued at the covenant between the parts. (trans. Lauterbach 1933-5, I:111)

GenR 44:18 similarly explains the 400 years:

Your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and they will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years' (Gen 15:13) It is four hundred years from the point at which you will produce a descendant. Said R. Yudan, "The condition of being outsiders, the servitude, the oppression in a land that was not theirs all together would last for four hundred years, that was the requisite term. (trans. Neusner 1997, II:200)

Here, the solution is simply stated without addressing the chronological problems this implies, namely that since Isaac was born when Abraham was a hundred years old, Abraham's age at the time of the vision between the pieces must have been seventy. The vision, therefore, must have occurred five years before he was told to leave his country and his family at the age of seventy-five (Gen 12:4)!

SOR 1 provides a fuller chronology:

Our father Abraham was forty-eight years old at the time of the Dispersion (...) seventy years old when He spoke with him (at the Covenant) between the Pieces, as it says, 'And at the end of four hundred and thirty years (...) all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt' (Exod

12:41). He returned to Haran and spent five years there, as it says, 'And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran' (Gen 12:4). It turns out that there were twenty-six years from the Dispersion until Abraham left Haran. These are the 'twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer and thirteen years they had rebelled. And in the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer came' (Gen 14:4-5). That year, in which Abraham our father left Haran, was a year of famine; he went down to Egypt and spent three months there. He came and dwelt at Elone Mamre which is at Hebron. That is the year in which he defeated the kings (...). It turns out that there were fifty-two years from the Dispersion until Isaac was born. (trans. Milikowsky 1981, 449-450)

In SOR 3 we find the explicit statement that the 400 years are to be counted from the birth of Isaac and a detailed reckoning of these 400 years. This is not the place to enter into these details or into a separate, but connected problem: Gen 11:26 states that 'when Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.' In Gen 11:32 we read: 'The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.' Immediately afterwards Abraham is told to leave his country. 'Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran' (Gen 12:4): This implies that Abraham left Haran not after his father's death, as the end of Genesis 11 insinuates, but many years earlier! How could Abraham have left his old father alone?

This last problem vexed the rabbis as well as the Church Fathers who both wanted to defend Abraham as an example of filial piety. Thus, we read in GenR 39:7:

Now what is written prior to the passage at hand? It is this verse: 'And Terah died in Haran' (Gen 11:32). Then comes: 'And the Lord said to Abram, 'Go' (Gen 12:1). Said R. Isaac, As to the chronology involved, another sixty-five years are needed. But to begin with you must interpret the passage to indicate that wicked people are called dead while they are yet alive. For Abraham was concerned, reckoning, If I leave, through me people will execrate the Name of heaven, saying, 'He abandoned his father in his old age and went away. The Holy One, blessed be he, said to him, You in particular I shall free from the responsibility of paying honor to your father and your mother, but I shall never free anyone else from the responsibility of paying honor to his father and his mother. And not only so, but [in order to do so] I shall move up his death to before your departure. Accordingly first comes: 'And Terah died in Haran' (Gen 11:32). Then: 'And the Lord said to Abram, Go' (Gen 12:1). (trans. Neusner 1997, II:137-138)

According to Gen 12:4 Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran, i.e. 60 years before Terah's death, but the rabbis apparently

count from the vision between the pieces (Genesis 15) when Abraham was seventy years old; already then he had left Haran to return only briefly. To this we shall return later.

Augustine deals with the problem in his *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, *Genesis Quaest.* 25.1:

Only by the summary is it shown that the Lord spoke when Thare was still alive, and that Abraham, while his father was alive, went forth from Haran according to the commandment of the Lord, when he was seventy-five years old. (my trans.)

Augustine takes it up again nearly word for word in *Civ.Dei* XVI.15. His solution is that Abraham departed when his father was one hundred and forty-five years old, i.e. 60 years before Terah's death mentioned in Genesis 11:

However, we need not suppose that the sequence of the narrative corresponds to the chronology of the events. Else, we should be faced with an insoluble problem (...) This we must suppose is a case not unusual in Scripture, of returning to a date already covered by the narrative (...) something which had been omitted in order to finish the account of Terah. (trans. Walsh – Monahan 1952, 516–517)

Augustine continues, referring to another solution of the problem, 'namely, to suppose that Abraham's seventy-five years, at the time when he left Haran, are reckoned, not from his birth, but from his escape from the fire of the Chaldeans, as though this escape were his real birth' (*Civ.Dei* XVI.15; trans. Walsh – Monahan 1952, 518).<sup>1</sup>

Another solution would be to assume that not all three sons of Terah were born in the same year, and that Abraham was the youngest of them, although because of his importance he is mentioned first. In *Civ. Dei* XVI.16 (trans. Walsh – Monahan 1952, 519–520; cf. *Quaest.Hept.*, *Genesis Quaest.* 25.3), Augustine then sums up, following Eusebius' *Chronology* and including the data of Stephen's speech in Acts 7: The 430 years mentioned in Genesis 15 are to be reckoned from the promises made to Abraham until the revelation of the Torah. They begin with the promises made before Abraham came to Haran; his arrival in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Quaest.Hept.*, *Genesis Quaest.* 25.2: 'The years of Abraham's age are to be reckoned from the time when he was freed from the fire of the Chaldeans into which he was thrown to be burnt because he did not want to venerate this fire according to the Chaldean superstition, and from which he was freed. This cannot be read in the Scriptures, but is transmitted in Jewish accounts.' (my trans.)

Haran and departure from Haran—all three events have to be placed in the very same year, in order not to contradict Stephen.

We see how Christian and Jewish authors had to struggle with the chronological indications of the Abraham story; the sources come up with different solutions. SOR 1 quoted above, for example, dates only Genesis 15 before Genesis 12, but keeps Genesis 14, the campaign against the kings and the scene with Melchizedek, in its place—a solution contradicted by most rabbinic sources which relate Gen 15:1 ‘After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield”’ to Abraham’s fears about what he might have done in the campaign (GenR 44:4; trans. Neusner 1997, II:190–191). We cannot discuss the details here. Important is the fact accepted by both the rabbis and the Church Fathers that the events of Genesis 15 must have occurred earlier than their place in Genesis suggests, and that the narrative of Genesis does not follow the chronological order.

We have seen how St. Augustine solves the problem by the assumption of a *recapitulatio*, a summary that anticipates later events; much later, Barhebraeus appealed to the same principle: ‘for many earlier and later events are transposed in narrative’ (trans. Brock 1978, 143). The rabbis know the principle that ‘there is no earlier and later in the Torah,’ attested several times in the Mekhilta de R. Ishmael, rarely in the Talmudim, but really popular only in the Middle Ages (Schlüter 2003a; 2003b; 2005). As M. Schlüter has shown, the maxim has undergone considerable change over time, first being used in Mek *Shirata 7* in a rather defensive manner ‘as a refutation of an opinion postulating a different order of the Torah as we now have it’ (Schlüter 2003b, 91–92), whereas ‘the *darshan* in SifBam 64 had no problem whatsoever with the reversed chronology of the biblical verses Num 1:1 and Num 9:1;<sup>2</sup> to him, they were a classic example of the maxim of there being neither earlier nor later in the Torah that simply made its self-evident validity explicit’ (Schlüter 2005, 63). Its use is different again in the Talmudim and even more so in the late Baraita of the 32 rules (Enelow 1933, 40–41), where Genesis 15 alone is used to illustrate the ‘rule’ in order to explain a sequence of the biblical text different from what could be expected:

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<sup>2</sup> Explicitly stated in the Biblical text: ‘on the first day of the *second month*, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt’ (Num 1:1); ‘in the *first month* of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt’ (Num 9:1).

‘By means of earlier and later concerning the [Torah] pericopes.’

How so?

‘And he (the LORD) said unto him (Abram), Take me a heifer of three years old [and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old (...)] (Gen 15:9)’

When was this pericope (*parashah*) written?

After the war of the kings (cf. Gen 14:1–12).

After this event it was five years before Abraham went out from Haran, as it says (in Exod 12:41): ‘And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, [even the selfsame day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt]:’

R. Yose said: You do not find [a confirmation of] this count, unless [you count] from the seventieth year of Abraham when the decree of the oppression [in a foreign country] was decreed between the pieces.

Therefore you learn that the decree of the oppression took place five years before Abraham’s exodus of Haran, but [that it] was written later on. (trans. Schlüter 2005, 73)

For both Christians and Jews, the traditional sequence of the biblical text, especially of the biblical narrative, is not irrelevant. They accept the conclusion that the events related by a biblical book took place at a different time than that suggested by the Bible only when they are forced to; after all, a phrase like ‘after these things’ is also part of God’s words and should be true. There are attempts to arrive at a linguistic basis for deciding for or against a chronological sequence, but without reaching unanimity:

R. Yudan and R. Huna both in the name of R. Yose b. R. Yudan:

The former said, In any passage in which the word ‘after’ occurs in the spelling, *ahare*, the sense is, ‘forthwith and in consequence,’ while when the word ‘afterward’ occurs with the spelling, *ahar*, it does not mean there is a connection between what follows and what has preceded.

R. Huna said, When the word occurs as *ahar*, it means, in consequence of, and where it occurs as *ahare*, it means there is no connection. (GenR 44:5; trans. Neusner 1997, II:191)

The solution that a text does not follow the right temporal sequence is accepted only where it can save the biblical text from the objection of internal contradictions and incoherence. But it is not only some formal necessity, and even less so pure curiosity, that drives rabbis and Church Fathers to study chronological questions. Chronology, at least in its crucial moments, is central to the understanding of sacred history. In our case, the sacrifice between the pieces is the beginning of a whole era that leads up to the Exodus and the revelation of the Torah.

It has its meaningful place in a history governed by symmetry: It is not fortuitous that a number of texts let Israel's stay in Egypt begin exactly in the middle of the 430 years of Exod 12:41: Thus already Josephus who says that Israel stayed in Egypt for 215 years (*Ant.* II.318), and still PRE 48 where it is stated in the name of Johanan ben Zakkai: to the rabbinically traditional 210 years of Israel's stay in Egypt one has to add five years which have passed between the birth of Ephraim and Manasseh and the arrival of Jacob and his sons.

It is also significant that in Mek *Pisha* 14 the vision between the pieces is one of several events that took place on the fifteenth of Nisan (the others are: the announcement of the birth of Isaac, the birth of Isaac and the redemption from Egypt; see also SOR 5). The Song of the Four Nights in Tg Neofiti and Tg PsJon Exod 12:42 also implies the same date for these nights (creation; revelation to Abraham; the death of the first-born of the Egyptians; the final redemption). Some texts combine Genesis 18 with Genesis 15, as MS Vatican Ebr. 440 of the Fragmentary Targum: 'The second night: when the *memra* of the Lord was revealed upon Abraham between the pieces; Abraham was one-hundred years old' (trans. Klein 1980, II:126). The insertion 'between the pieces' seems to be a mistake of the copyist, or rather born from the wish to combine as many events as possible; it would postpone Genesis 15 to a much later date than usual.

On the Christian side, a particularly striking, although very late, example of taking Genesis 15 as the starting point of a significant period in history, is the quotation from Severus of Ashmunain (ibn al-Muqaffa'; tenth century) in the *Amharic Andemta Commentary*:

He told him to bring a heifer 3 (years old), a goat 3 (years old), a sheep 3 (years old). When he divides (lit. makes) each of them into two, it becomes 18, and when one adds the turtle-dove and the pigeon, it becomes 20. This is a sign that Our Lord, becoming a man, should be born of the house of Abraham 2000 years later. (trans. Stoffregen Pedersen 1997, 259)

### *Abraham's Belief*

In Christian tradition, Gen 15:6 is the most important verse of the chapter: *והאמין ביהוה ויחשבה לו צדקה*. The Jewish Study Bible translates: 'And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.' It is quoted several times in the New Testament, in nearly exactly

the wording of the Septuagint: καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην. Thus we find it in Rom 4:3 (only δε is added before Abraham's name): 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (NRSV). The whole chapter insists on the efficacy of Abraham's faith before he was circumcised, i.e. without works. This is also the tendency of Gal 3:6 against Jas 2:23 which emphasizes the necessity of both faith and works.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how far Ἰουδαῖα and ἐπίστευσεν are equivalent or differ. But given the importance of this verse in the New Testament it may be expected that Christian theologians from the very beginning used it as 'proof' for justification apart from the law of the Torah. Justin Martyr writes in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 92.2–3:

For should anyone desire to inquire of you—since Enoch and Noah, together with their children and others (...) pleased God without either being circumcised or keeping the Sabbath—why was it that, after so many generations, God thought it proper that, with different leaders and new laws, those who lived from the time of Abraham until that of Moses should attain righteousness through circumcision (...)? (...) Not even of Abraham did God testify that he was righteous because of being circumcised; rather, it was because of Abraham's faith. Even before he was circumcised, it was said of Abraham: 'And Abraham believed in God and this was credited to him for righteousness' (Gen 15:6). (quoted in Rokéah 2002, 56–57; cf. also *Dialogue* 119.3–6)

The same argument can be found in later Fathers of the Church, as, e.g., in Aphrahat *Dem.* XI.3:

When he chose Abraham, he was not in the circumcision. He called, chose, and named him father for all the peoples. [It was not through circumcision] but through faith. After his believing, then he commanded him to circumcise. But if [men] were living through circumcision, first Abraham should have circumcised and then believed. If circumcision were given as an advantage for eternal life, the Scripture should have announced that Abraham circumcised, and circumcision was regarded for him as righteousness. But thus it was written, 'Abraham believed in God and his believing was reckoned as righteousness' (Gen 15:6). Thus those who believed even while not circumcised lived, but those who circumcised but did not believe—their circumcision availed them not at all. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Shem, and Japheth were not in the circumcision, [yet] were pleasing before God, for each one of them kept their covenants in their time and believed that one is he who gave his covenants in each generation as he willed. Melchizedek was the priest of God the most high. He blessed Abraham although he was not circumcised, and this matter

is known, that the lesser will be blessed by him who is greater than he. (trans. Neusner 1971, 22)<sup>3</sup>

In *Dem.* XIII.8, Aphrahat contrasts justification by faith with justification obtained by keeping the Shabbat:

Abraham, who kept the law [even] before the law was given. He fathered Isaac, the son of the promise, and Jacob, the head of the people. These righteous fathers did not keep the Sabbath, but it was through faith they were justified, as it is written, 'Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned for him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6). Isaac, Jacob, and their sons walked in the commandment and law of their father, and they were justified through faith, and not through the Sabbath. Joseph in the midst of the land of Egypt was not a Sabbath-observer, [but] was justified by his righteousness, for when the wife of his master raised her eyes to him so that he might do with her an unclean thing, he spoke, saying to his mistress, 'How shall I do this great and evil thing, and sin against God?' (Gen 39:9). In this way was Joseph justified, and not by the Sabbath. (trans. Neusner 1971, 46)

Similarly, we read in Ephrem the Syrian *Comm.Gen.* XII.1:

*Abraham believed and this too was reckoned to him as great righteousness.* Because he believed in a matter that was so difficult that few would have believed, it was reckoned to him as righteousness (trans. Mathews and Amar 1994, 152).

It would be easy to adduce numerous texts from other Church Fathers from this period: John Chrysostom, Augustine or Ambrose. It would only show how common this Christian understanding was and would not add anything new. But by emphasizing so much Abraham's belief, they had difficulties to explain how only two verses after this central text, Abraham could ask after the promise of the land: 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' (Gen 15:8). As an example among many, let us take again Ephrem's *Comm.Gen.* XII.2–3:

There are those who say that it was because Abraham doubted this that it was said to him, '*Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs*' (Gen 15:13). But let those who say this know that at that same time Abraham believed his descendants would become like the sand. If Abraham believed a matter so great as that from one old

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<sup>3</sup> See also Augustine, *Civ.Dei* XVI.23: Paul quotes Gen 15:6 against those who would refuse to admit uncircumcised Gentiles into the faith of Christ: 'The point here is that, at the time when Abraham believed and his faith was reputed to him "as justice," he was not yet circumcised' (trans. Walsh – Monahan 1952, 527).

sterile woman his descendants would become like the sand, would he have any doubts, then, about such a little matter as that of the land?

If Abraham, who had not doubted about that great matter, was in doubt [about this small matter], why did [God] say to him, *‘Take a three-year old goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove and a pigeon?’* (...) If God had spoken to Abraham as if to punish him, He would not have accepted his sacrifice, nor would He have established a covenant with him on that day, nor would He have promised him that ten nations would become servants to his descendants, nor would it have been said that he would be buried at a ripe old age.

If all these good things came to him on that day because *he believed and it was accounted to him as righteousness*, then how can anyone say that on the very same day a man became worthy of great rewards because of his faith, his seed received punishment because of his lack of faith?

(...) With respect to the matter of the land Abraham did not question *if* it would come to pass but asked *how* it would come to pass. Abraham had seen the land of Canaan with its kings and its armies and had seen how populated it was, filled with its inhabitants (...). Abraham thought, Perhaps these kings will destroy each other or other people might rise up and destroy them and empty the land for us. (trans. Mathews and Amar 1994, 152–153)<sup>4</sup>

According to this interpretation, Abraham wanted to know only which of these and other possibilities would be realized. But *that* the promise will be fulfilled was for him beyond any possible doubt.

In Jewish tradition the interpretation is quite different, as may be expected. With regard to Gen 15:6 that because Abraham ‘put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit,’<sup>5</sup> early rabbinic tradition, as represented by the two Mekhiltot, emphasizes it properly:

Rabbi says: ‘The faith with which they believed in Me is so deserving (כדי היא האמנה שהאמינו בי) that I should divide the sea for them (...).’ R. Eleazar the son of Azariah says: For the sake of their father Abraham I will divide the sea for them’ (...). Shemayah says: ‘The faith with which their father Abraham believed in Me is deserving (כדי היא האמנה) that I should divide the sea for them (...).’ Abtalyon says: ‘The faith with which they believed in Me is so deserving that I should divide the sea for them’. (Mek *Beshallah* 4; trans. Lauterbach 1933–5, I:219–220; cf. MRS Exod 14:15, 102)

<sup>4</sup> Very similar is the treatment of this passage by Theodoret of Cyrillus in his *Quaest. Gen.*, *Quaest.* LXVI, or see Ambrose, *De Abraham* II.8.49 who points to Mary’s comparable question in Luke 1:34).

<sup>5</sup> Thus the more recent translation of the Jewish Publication Society, whereas its version of 1917 still read: ‘And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness.’

In the context of Exod 14:31 (the Song at the Sea), the Mekhilta de R. Ishmael has a long discussion regarding the merit of faith and trust in God:

‘And They Believed in the Lord and in His Servant Moses.’ (...) This is to teach you that having faith in the shepherd of Israel is the same as having faith in Him who spoke and the world came into being (...). Great indeed is faith before Him who spoke and the world came into being. For as a reward for the faith with which Israel believed in God, the Holy Spirit rested upon them and they uttered the song; as it is said: ‘And they believed in the Lord (...) Then sang Moses and the children of Israel’ (Exod 14:3; 15:1). R. Nehemiah says: Whence can you prove that whosoever accepts even one single commandment with true faith is deserving of having the Holy Spirit rest upon him? We find this to have been the case with our fathers. For as a reward for the faith with which they believed, they were considered worthy of having the Holy Spirit rest upon them, so that they could utter the song (...). And so also you find that our father Abraham inherited both this world and the world beyond only as a reward for the faith with which he believed, as it is said: ‘and he believed in the Lord,’ etc. (Gen 15:6). And so also you find that Israel was redeemed from Egypt only as a reward for the faith with which they believed (...). And thus it says: ‘The Lord preserves the faithful’ (Ps 31:24). He keeps in remembrance the faith of the fathers (Mek *Beshallah* 7; trans. Lauterbach 1933–5, I:252–253; cf. MRS Exod 14:31, 118).

This line of thought of the Mekhilta de R. Ishmael is continued in later midrashim on Exodus, as, e.g., in ExodR 23:5 where Abraham is called the leader in faith (רֵאשִׁית אֱמוּנָה). Thus, the midrash reinterprets Cant 4:8, ‘the peak of Amana’ as referring to Abraham who had ‘believed in the Lord’ (Gen 15:6; for parallels see CantR 4:8:3, Tan *Mezora* 4 and ExodR 3:12). The Israelites could sing the Song at the Sea only because of the merit of Abraham who had believed in God; they are believers, sons of believers.

In the Yerushalmi, Gen 15:6 is never quoted, in the Bavli only once, here again as in the Mekhilta de R. Ishmael, Exodus Rabbah and Canticles Rabbah in the context of Israel’s faith during the Exodus. Abraham’s role, still prominent in the Mekhilta, is hardly apparent here:

Said R. Simeon b. Laqish, He who casts suspicion on genuinely upright people is smitten in his body, for it is written, ‘And Moses said, but behold, they will not believe me’ (Exod 4:1). But it was perfectly clear to the Holy One, blessed be He, that the Israelites were faithful. He said to him, ‘They are faithful, children of the faithful (הֵן מֵאֱמוּנִים בְּנֵי מֵאֱמוּנִים), but you are the one who in the end will prove unfaithful. They are faithful: ‘And the people believed’ (Exod 4:31); they are the children of the faithful:

‘And Abraham believed in the Lord’ (Gen 15:6). But you are the one who in the end will prove unfaithful: ‘And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you didn’t believe in me’ (Num 20:12). (Shab 97a; trans. Neusner 2005, II:427–428)<sup>6</sup>

Considering the prominence of Gen 15:6 in the context of the Exodus, it comes as a surprise that in the rabbinic traditions on Genesis this verse is without importance. GenR 44:13 quotes Gen 15:6–7 together as a single lemma, but passes Gen 15:6 over in silence and only briefly comments on Gen 15:7 ‘I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans (מֵאֹר כַּשְׂדִּים),’ meaning that God saved him from the furnace (מֵאֹר) of the Chaldeans. The targumim translate the verse nearly literally; thus Targum Onkelos: ‘And he trusted the Memra of the Lord, and He considered it for him as a meritorious deed’ (Tg Onkelos Gen 15:6, trans. Grossfeld 1988, 70). Targum Neofiti, usually quite expansive, adds nothing. Only Targum Pseudo-Jonathan adds: ‘He had faith in the Memra of the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as merit because he did not speak rebelliously against him’ (Tg PsJon Gen 15:6, trans. Maher 1992, 60).

Gen 15:8 ‘How am I to know that I shall possess it’ is explained in the midrash in the same way as in the patristic texts, although very briefly:

R. Hama bar Haninah said, It was not as though he were complaining but he said to him, On account of what merit [shall I know it? That is, how have I the honor of being so informed?]

He said to him, ‘It is on account of the merit of the sacrifice of atonement that I shall hand over to your descendants (GenR 44:14; trans. Neusner 1997, II:196).

In Taan 27b (cf. Meg 31b) the possibility of a doubt does not even come up; Abraham’s question concerns the future behaviour of his descendants; God answers—well within the context of this chapter—with a reference to the possible atonement through the sacrifices:

Said R. Jacob bar Aha said R. Assi, Were it not for the priestly watches, heaven and earth could not endure: ‘And he said, O Lord God, how shall I know that I shall inherit it’ (Gen 15:8). Said Abraham, Lord of the world, What would happen if the Israelites were to sin against you? Would you treat them as you did the Generation of the Flood and the Generation of the Dispersion? He said to him, No.

<sup>6</sup> All Bavli-translations Neusner 2005, slightly adapted where necessary.

He said before him, Lord of the world, Let me know how I shall inherit it. He said to him, 'Take for me a three-year-old heifer and a three-year-old she-goat' (Gen 15:9). He said before him, Lord of the world, that works so long as the Temple is standing, but when the Temple is no longer standing, what happens to them then? He said to him, I've already instituted for them the order of the offerings. When they read in those passages before me, I credit it to them as though they had offered those sacrifices before me, and I shall forgive them for all their sins. (Taan 27b; trans. Neusner 2005, VII:147-148)

But other texts understand Abraham's question as an expression of unbelief:

Said R. Abbahu said R. Eleazar, How come our father Abraham was punished and his children subjugated in Egypt for two hundred and ten years? Because he imposed the corvée on disciples of sages: 'He armed his dedicated servants born in his own house' (Gen 14:14).

And Samuel said, Because he exaggerated in testing the traits of the Holy One, blessed be He (מפני שהפריז על מדותיו של הקב"ה): 'And he said, Lord God, how shall I know that I shall inherit it' (Gen 15:8).

And R. Yohanan said, It is because he kept people from coming under the wings of the Presence of God: 'And the king of Sodom said to Abraham, give me the persons, and you take the goods' (Gen 14:21). (Ned 32a; trans. Neusner 2005, X:86)

Asking for a sign is the central of three reasons why Abraham's children had to serve for 210 years in Egypt. In late rabbinic texts, it becomes common to see God's answer to Abraham's question 'How shall I know?' in Gen 15:13: 'Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them (...).' Abraham's question was sinful. Several texts state that when Israel was offered the Torah, they were asked for a guarantor that they would really observe it. When they named the patriarchs as their guarantors, God immediately objected: 'Your fathers needed guarantors for themselves; Abraham asked: 'How shall I know?' (...)' (Tan *Vayyiggash* 2 [my trans.]; cf. CantR 1:3; EcclR 4:3; MidrPss 7:6). God had permitted him to ask, but the way Abraham asked, was faulty: 'Woe to the man who utters a word and does not know how to utter it. Because Abraham said: "How shall I know," [God] answered him: "Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs (...)"' (Tan *Kedoshim* 13 [my trans.]). SER 14, 65 considers Abraham's fault a venial sin with, nevertheless, dire consequences: 'A man should always take care not to yield to the power of sin, and be it the slightest

sin. Come and learn from our forefathers: They went down to Egypt only because of a slight word (דבר קל) which Abraham spoke: “How shall I know?” (my trans.). SEZ 2, 174 repeats the thought: ‘Because he said something improper (דבר לא מהוגן), his sons went down to Egypt’ (my trans.).

Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer becomes more explicit. It is not only an awkward and improper word addressed to God for which Abraham is punished in his descendants; it is his unbelief with which God reproaches him: “The entire world stands by my word, and you do not believe in my word (ואין אתה מאמין בדברי), but say: “How shall I know?” (PRE 47, trans. Friedlander 1965, 374). The same idea returns in Tg PsJon Gen 15:13:

Know for certain that your children will be residents in a land that is not theirs, because you did not believe, and they will be enslaved and afflicted four hundred years. (trans. Maher 1992, 61)

This is exactly the position mentioned and rejected by Ephrem that Abraham’s question ‘How shall I know?’ expresses disbelief.

The development of rabbinic interpretation of Gen 15:6–8 may at least to some extent be understood as a reaction to Christian interpretation. At first (Mekhilta de R. Ishmael) Abraham’s faith is discussed positively; it is his great merit and by it he becomes the father of the believers. Later texts (e.g. Genesis Rabbah) pass over this text in silence, and, even later, Abraham’s doubt, expressed by his question ‘How shall I know?’ becomes ever more prominent. It is the sin that determines the whole history of Israel and without it, Israel would never have been enslaved in Egypt. Abraham, in Christian (and early rabbinic) thought ‘the father of the believers,’ thus becomes the man who through his disbelief causes the history of oppression of his descendants.

Another aspect of GenR 44, becomes important in this context. The chapter begins with a proem which might at first seem far-fetched:

‘After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision’ (Gen 15:1).

‘As for God, his way is perfect, the word of the Lord is tried’ (צרופה: 2 Sam 22:31).

If his way is perfect, how much the more so is he! Rab said, The religious duties were given only to purify humanity (לצרוף את הבריות). For what difference does it make to the Holy One, blessed be he, if one slaughters a beast at the throat or at the nape of the neck? Lo, the sole purpose is to purify humanity. (GenR 44:1; trans. Neusner 1997, II:189)

This interpretation of the proem gives an unexpected turn to a text read by Christians mainly for Abraham's justifying faith. It offers instead a true understanding of the mitsvot and their meaning, which is to try and purify humanity. The text continues:

Another matter: 'His way is perfect' (2 Sam 22:31) refers to Abraham, for it is written in his regard, 'You found [Abraham's] way faithful before you' (ומצאת את לבבו נאמן) Neh 9:8).

'The word of the Lord is tried' (2 Sam 22:31): For the Holy One, blessed be He, tried him in the fiery furnace. (GenR 44:1; trans. Neusner 1997, II:189)

Abraham's way is perfect; he was tried and found faithful before God. 'He believed' (האמין) has to be read in connection with his being faithful (נאמן) after God had purified him (צורפו) in the furnace. Abraham faithfully keeps the mitsvot, his belief is not one without works!

### *The Sacrificial Scene and the Interpretation of History*

In Gen 15:9–10 Abraham is told to offer a heifer, a she-goat, a ram, a turtle-dove and a pigeon, and to divide their dead bodies, except those of the birds. Christian interpreters see in these animals symbols, as, e.g., Augustine:

Possibly, the cow was a symbol of his people put under the yoke of the law; the she-goat, of the people's future sinfulness; the ram, of their future realm. The animals were three years old to symbolize, perhaps, the three main epochs, first from Adam to Noe, then, from Noe to Abraham, and third, from Abraham to David who was the first to be made a king of the people of Israel (...). It was in the third of these periods (...) that the people passed into the third period of life, into full maturity (...) in the symbolism the addition of the turtle-dove and pigeon was prophetic of the future spiritual progeny of Abraham (...) although carnal people can be divided, this is by no means so of those who are spiritual (...) as each of these birds is simple and without guile, so among the people of Israel who were to inherit the land there would be individual sons of the promise and heirs of that kingdom that is to continue even in eternal beatitude" (Civ. Dei XVI.24; trans. Walsh – Monahan 1952, 529–530).

On the rabbinic side, the animals slaughtered by Abraham are referred to the Temple and the order of sacrifices (Mek *Bahodesh* 9); in more detail we find the same theme in GenR 44:14:

‘And he said to him, Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove and a young pigeon’ (Gen 15:9):

He showed him three kinds of bullocks, three kinds of goats, and three kinds of rams.

Three kinds of bullocks, the bullock of the day of atonement, the bullock that is brought on account of the inadvertent violation of any of the religious duties, and the heifer whose neck is to be broken.

He further showed him three kinds of goats, the goats to be offered on the festivals, the goats to be offered on the occasion of the new moons, and the goat to be offered for an individual.

He further showed him three kinds of rams, the one for the guilt offering that is brought in a case of certainty [that one is liable to such an offering], the one that is to be brought as a suspensive guilt offering, and the lamb that is brought by an individual.

‘(...) a turtledove and a young pigeon’ (Gen. 15:9); that is as is stated, a turtledove and a young pigeon [stated in Aramaic]. (trans. Neusner 1997, II:196–197)

But the dominant motif in the interpretation of the scene is Abraham’s vision of history; the animals represent the four empires that will subdue Israel:

‘Bring me a heifer three years old’ refers to Babylonia, that produced three [kings important in Israel’s history], Nebuchadnezzar, Evil Merodach, and Balshazzar.

‘(...) a she-goat three years old’ refers to Media, that also produced three kings, Cyrus, Darius, and Ahasuerus.

‘(...) a ram three years old’ refers to Greece (...).

‘(...) a turtledove, and a young pigeon’ (ותור וגוזל: Gen 15:9) refers to Edom. It is a turtledove but one that would rob (תור הוא אלא גוזלני: GenR 44:15; trans. Neusner 1997, II:197–198)

The pigeon, interpreted by Augustine as the spiritual progeny of Abraham, the Christians, here becomes a symbol of the rapacious Christian empire. In the interpretation of Gen 15:12, ‘And it came to pass, that, when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, a dread, even a great darkness, fell upon him,’ GenR 44:17 again takes up the theme of the four empires:

‘Lo, a dread’ refers to Babylonia, as it is written, ‘Then was Nebuchadnezzar filled with fury’ (Dan 3:19).

‘and darkness’ refers to Media, which darkened the eyes of Israel by making it necessary for the Israelites to fast and conduct public mourning.

‘great’ refers to Greece (...).

‘fell upon him’ (גופלת עליו) refers to Edom, as it is written, ‘The earth quakes at the noise of their fall’ (מקל נפלים: Jer 49:21).

Some reverse matters:

‘fell upon him’ refers to Babylonia, since it is written, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylonia’ (Isa 21:9).

‘great’ refers to Media, in line with this verse: ‘King Ahasuerus did make great’ (Est 3:1).

‘and darkness’ refers to Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel by its harsh decrees.

‘lo, a dread’ refers to Edom, as it is written, ‘After this I saw (...) a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible’ (Dan 7:7). (trans. Neusner 1997, II:199–200; cf. Mek *Bahodesh* 9)

Edom, i.e. Rome, by now the Christian Rome, is the fourth beast, more dreadful than her predecessors, but it will surely fall, as its equation with ‘fell upon him’ and the added verse of Jer 49:21 insinuates.

In GenR 44:21, the interpretation of Gen 15:17, namely, the vision of the smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, the text turns a third time to the theme of the empires:

Simeon bar Abba in the name of R. Yohanan: He showed him four things, Gehenna, the [four] kingdoms, the giving of the Torah, and the sanctuary. He said to him, So long as your descendants are occupied with these latter two, they will be saved from the former two. If they abandon two of them, they will be judged by the other two.

He said to him, What is your preference? Do you want your children to go down into Gehenna or to be subjugated to the four kingdoms?

R. Hinena bar Pappa said, Abraham chose for himself the subjugation to the four kingdoms.

R. Yudan and R. Idi and R. Hama bar Hanina: Abraham choose for himself Gehenna, but the Holy One, blessed be he, chose the subjugation to the four kingdoms for him. (trans. Neusner 1997, 201–202)

GenR 44:23 closes the chapter with another hint to Rome:

Said R. Isaac, The pig grazes with ten of its young, but the sheep does not graze with one of its young. Thus: ‘The Kenite, the Kenizzite,’ and so on [were promised to Abraham’s children] (Gen 15:19), but still: ‘Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children’ (Gen 16:1). (trans. Neusner 1997, II:204)

The pig is, of course, a symbol of Rome. Rome, the Christian empire, flourishes, whereas the Jewish people has ‘no children,’ is in a much worse position, but all the same trusts in God’s promises.

The dominance of the theme of the four empires is evident. As Jacob Neusner has pointed out, this preoccupation of Genesis Rabbah (and of the Yerushalmi and of Leviticus Rabbah, as well) with Israel’s history and with the topic of the four empires reflects, together with

other emphases in these rabbinic works, the rabbinic reaction to the situation of the fourth century when, since Constantine, the Christian Church became a political power (Neusner 1987, 29–58). But, the theme occurs already in the *Mekhilta de R. Ishmael*, interpreting Gen 15:12, and has only been expanded in *Genesis Rabbah*. This midrash takes up the already traditional interpretation, but emphasizes it much more than the earlier text. The change is only relative.

Another point in GenR 44 also deserves attention. In his *Homilies on Genesis*, Origen deals with the repetition of the promises in Genesis. God showed Abraham:

in the first place, that he is to be the father of those who are circumcised ‘according to the flesh’ (Gal 4:29), the promise which should affect the people of circumcision is given to him at the time of his circumcision. In the second place, because he was to be the father also of those who ‘are of faith’ (cf. Gal 3:9) and who come to the inheritance through the passion of Christ, the promise which should apply to that people which is saved by the passion and resurrection of Christ is renewed at the time, no less, of the passion of Isaac (...).

For these things which are said first and apply to the previous people, are said on earth. For thus the Scripture says: ‘And he brought him forth’—from the tent, of course,—‘and said to him: ‘Look at the stars of heaven. Can they be numbered in their multitude?’ And he adds: ‘So shall your seed be’ (15:5). But when the promise is repeated the second time, the text designates that it is said ‘from heaven’. The first promise was given from the earth, the second from heaven (...) [cf. 1 Cor 15:47]. This latter promise, therefore, which applies to the faithful people is ‘from heaven’, the former from the earth. (*Hom.Gen.* IX.1; trans. Heine 1982, 149–150)

Origen thus attributes higher value to the second promise, given from heaven at the time of the passion of Isaac, giving it special strength because of the sacrifice or passion of the son. This evidently signifies, as Origen continues, ‘that the promise remains steadfast because of the passion of Christ for the people of the Gentiles “who are of the faith of Abraham”’ (cf. Rom 4:16; trans. Heine 1982, 150–151).

GenR 44:5 might be read in this context:

[Abraham] said before the Holy One, blessed be he, Lord of the ages, you made a covenant with Noah that you would not wipe out his children. I went and acquired a treasure of religious deeds and good deeds greater than his, so the covenant made with me has set aside the covenant made with him.

Now is it possible that someone else will come along and accumulate religious deeds and good deeds greater than mine and so set aside the

covenant that was made with me on account of the covenant to be made with him.

Said the Holy One, blessed be he, Out of Noah I did not raise up shields for the righteous, but from you I shall raise up shields for the righteous. And not only so, but when your children will fall into sin and evil deeds, I shall see a single righteous man among them who can say to the attribute of justice, Enough. Him I shall take and make into the atonement for them all. (trans. Neusner 1997, II:191–192)

It is very intriguing to read the two texts together, not as a direct response of one to the other, but as a rabbinic reaction to the Christian claim in general that their new covenant has superseded the covenant in the circumcision.

### *Conclusion*

Let us briefly summarize our main results. Our analysis of some aspects of rabbinic and patristic interpretation has produced three essential points of contact between Christians and Jews in the exegesis of Genesis 15, but they are not on the same level.

1. The chronological problems and their respective solutions point to a common hermeneutic universe: Both sides take for granted that there are no contradictions in Scripture; its text is fully coherent and has to be read as such.
2. The question of Abraham's faith lets us discover a dialogue and a polemic, but on different levels. Christians use the text to counter Jewish claims and to attack Judaism as a religion of the law. Rabbinic texts do not answer directly, but play down the importance of Abraham's faith in later texts and emphasize the commandments of the Torah, and also Abraham's disbelief in Gen 15:8.
3. The strongest differences are to be seen in the discussion of the sacrifice and the vision of Abraham. The Christian side completely allegorizes the sacrificial cult. The rabbis, on the other hand, see here the sacrifices in the Temple foreshadowed, but above all think of the four empires, the oppression of the Jews in history with Edom equalling Rome as the fourth empire, the pig, the worst of all. But ultimately the fourth empire will fall and Judaism will prevail. The covenant with Abraham has not been replaced by a new covenant, but endures forever.

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‘AND ABRAHAM HAD FAITH’:  
BUT IN WHAT? EPHREM AND THE RABBIS ON  
ABRAHAM AND GOD’S BLESSINGS

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The figure of Abraham and the promises made to him by God in the book of Genesis are central to the formation of Jewish and Christian identities. Jewish literature of the Second Temple period tends to emphasize Abraham’s turn from idolatry to monotheism whereby his faith in God is more often than not expressed by obedience to the commandments. The letters of Paul too stress Abraham’s faith and rejection of idolatry yet Paul is ambivalent about the significance of the law for Abraham’s righteousness, tending to stress faith without the law (Calvert-Koyzis 2004, 85–139). Linked to the different interpretations of Abraham’s faith is the question of his offspring: who are Abraham’s true heirs? Between Paul the apostle and Justin Martyr a definite shift takes place from the inclusion of non-Jews in God’s promises to the exclusion of the Jews. Abraham is first introduced in defence of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the covenant by Jewish-Christians, and subsequently serves in the arguments of non-Jewish Christians for the exclusion of the Jews from salvation (Siker 1991, 185–198). By the year 150 CE, Abraham is no longer the father of the Jews but the father of Christians, a claim that was to be relinquished only in the post-Shoah era.

Although Paul’s presentation of righteousness as faith became common stock in the writings of the Church Fathers, the interpretation of just what that faith entailed is in no way uniform. In what follows, I hope to illustrate how Abraham’s promises and faith are understood in St. Ephrem the Syrian’s *Commentary on Genesis* and the midrashic collection *Genesis Rabbah*. This selection was based on the assumptions that these two sources are most likely to share a common idiom and in some way reflect an exegetical encounter between Jews and Christians, although not necessarily a direct encounter between the very authors or editors of these works.

*Part I: Ephrem the Syrian's Commentary on Genesis*

That Jewish traditions may indeed be found in Syriac sources has been demonstrated by several scholars in the course of the past three decades, among them Sebastian Brock (Brock 1979). This is especially true for Ephrem the Syrian, fourth century author and poet and, according to many of those familiar with his works, the greatest writer in the history of the Syriac speaking church.<sup>1</sup> In his dissertation on Genesis 12–25 in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, Ad Janson notes that there are variants in the biblical text employed by Ephrem that are closer to the original Hebrew text than to the Peshitta or are parallel to the targumim (Janson 1998, 23–89, 239). In addition, Edward Mathews and Joseph Amar, translators of selected prose works by Ephrem, state that Ephrem's Genesis commentary 'offers interpretations of many passages that are otherwise attested only, or primarily, in Jewish tradition' (Mathews and Amar 1994, 62–63; cf. Féghali 1987). The commentary, moreover, as opposed to Ephrem's poetry, makes little reference to New Testament texts, symbols or typology. However, despite its similarity to Jewish traditions and lack of typology, I would like to suggest that Ephrem's retelling<sup>2</sup> of the Abraham story is motivated by Gen 15:6 and its New Testament counterpart Rom 4:3–5. In fact, the question of faith and its implications may be the key not only to Ephrem's understanding of Abraham and the other actors in this biblical section, but to his interpretation of the main figures—praiseworthy or reprehensible—in the whole of Genesis as well. In order to support my suggestion I will undertake a programmatic study, surveying some of the major passages in the Genesis commentary on Abraham, focusing mainly on the blessings in chapters 12, 15, 17 and 18. In the course of this survey I will provide comparative rabbinic material where available and relevant. Finally, I will briefly sketch some programmatic developments or, if you will, important themes in Genesis Rabbah on these biblical chapters, particularly those barely touched upon or absent in the targumim.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For this qualification as well as an introduction to the life and theological method of Ephrem, see the general introduction in Mathews and Amar 1994, 3–56.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kamesar has recently characterized Ephrem's commentary as standing between commentary and 'rewritten' Bible (Kamesar 2005, 27).

<sup>3</sup> I am aware of the fact that programmatic studies of commentaries often ignore certain features in favour of others, depending on the researcher's bias. The dangers are greater in the case of rather piecemeal compilations such as Genesis Rabbah as opposed to highly developed commentaries written by one author.

*Election*

God first appears to Abraham in Genesis 12, telling him to 'Go out of your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation.' Ephrem comments that Abraham left his family, who did not wish to go out with him, and took Lot, who believed the promise made to him (*Comm.Gen.* IX.2).<sup>4</sup> It is immediately clear that a matter of faith concerning three parties is involved here: 1) in the first instance Abraham, whose faith is not mentioned but implicit; 2) followed by Lot who believed the promise, even though he was not to partake of the promise; 3) and finally Abraham's family or parentage who either do not believe, or whose belief is not strong enough to override other considerations that make them stay where they are.

Ephrem, like the biblical text, is silent about the reason for Abraham's election. Not so the rabbinic texts in *Genesis Rabbah* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, which inform us how Abraham had realized there is a creator and God of the world (*GenR* 39:1), stored up pious acts and good deeds and was cast into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship idols yet remained unscathed (*GenR* 39:3; *Tg PsJon Gen* 11:28; *Tg Neofiti Gen* 11:28).<sup>5</sup> Abraham's election in the Jewish tradition is thus contingent upon his prior belief, a belief which would subsequently recruit proselytes from the peoples surrounding him, a theme touched upon in the targumim, but prominent in *Genesis Rabbah* on Genesis 12–22.<sup>6</sup> But for Ephrem knowledge of the Creator was no new thing, for:

The Creator had been manifest to the mind of the first generations, even up to the Tower. And it was general knowledge that the creatures were created things. And even from (the time of) the Tower until Moses there was no lack of men among the sons of Shem to preach these things. (*Comm.Gen.* Prologue 2)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> References to Ephrem note the section of the commentary in the edition of Tonneau with all translations taken from Mathews and Amar 1994.

<sup>5</sup> See *GenR* 39:3 on Abraham's good deeds and the furnace. *Tg PsJon Gen* 11:28 explains Haran's death by way of the story of the furnace. *Tg Neofiti Gen* 11:28 does not relate the story of Abraham in the fiery furnace, but this midrash is clearly hinted at in the name given to Haran's birthplace, 'the furnace of fire of the Chaldeans' (Hebrew 'Ur' of the Chaldeans).

<sup>6</sup> The theme of proselytizing may be found in *GenR* 39:14, 39:16, 43:4, 46:2, 46:3, 46:10, 47:10, 48:2, 53:9. For the same theme in the targumim see Hayward 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Here Ephrem's conviction that the Creator was known to the world from the start is probably inspired by *Rom* 1:18–20. Eusebius of Emesa on *Genesis* 11:31 explains

Ephrem is also silent on the subject of Abraham's blessings in Gen 12:2,7.<sup>8</sup> His comment on Gen 13:17, 'Arise, walk through the land, its length and its width, for I will give it to you,' is one of the rare instances involving symbolism: Abraham's trajectory depicts the cross. In what immediately follows, the promise of the land and the cross symbolized are treated in a negative context: 'That land, promised to the forefathers through the symbol of the cross, repudiated the later heirs on account of the cross' (*Comm.Gen. X.2*).

### *The Covenant of Genesis 15*

The promise and covenant of Genesis 15 are considerably more problematic for Ephrem than the election in chapter 12 and the promises in chapter 13, for Abraham seems, at least initially, to be unconvinced of the fulfilment of the promises in chapter 15. When God tells Abram that he will greatly reward him (Gen 15:1), Abram's reaction, 'What will you give me? I have no standing among men, for the heir to my household is Eliezer of Damascus' (Gen 15:2) implies that the patriarch considers whatever God will give him to be of little or no value because he is childless. The targumim and Genesis Rabbah sense that Abram is too brazen here and soften his words. Targum Neofiti, for example, writes: 'You have given me much and have much in store for me in the future.'<sup>9</sup> Ephrem explains the reason for God's reward—his

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that Abraham, like Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, was sent to Canaan to enlighten those who were slowly recognizing God and to convert those who had abandoned God (Hovhanessian 1980, 55). Eusebius of Emesa (Hovhanessian 1980, 60) and Procopius (PG 87, col. 344 A–B) note in their commentary on Gen 15:15–16 concerning Melchizedek—identified as Shem by Ephrem—that he, like others living in Palestine at the time of Abraham, was just. This was true of Abimelech (Gen 20:2–18) as well. If ten just men could save a town (a reference to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:32), then there must have been no less than ten just at the time of Abraham.

<sup>8</sup> GenR has very few midrashim on the promise of the land in Genesis 12 and 13. See GenR 39:15–16 and GenR 41:10.

<sup>9</sup> Tg Neofiti Gen 15:2, literally: 'Many things have you given to me and many things there are before you to give me'. Tg PsJon Gen 15:2 and GenR 44:7 treat Abraham's words in similar fashion yet Tg PsJon Gen 15:1 and GenR 44:4 seem more concerned by Abraham's fear as related by God in Gen 15:1 ('Do not fear Abraham [...]'). Abraham, they say, was afraid that he would be rewarded in this world but not in the next; or that there were some just among those slain by him; or that he had used up his merit and feared future dangers when he would no longer be protected by his own deeds. According to GenR 44:12 Abraham considers his childlessness to be written in

just treatment of those he had taken captive—but *ignores* Abraham's words in Gen 15:2–3 ('What will you give me'). He moves on to Gen 15:6 where he explains that Abraham believed in a matter that was difficult to believe, one that few would have believed, and so this too was reckoned to him as righteousness. Involved here is a matter of faith, but not simply a matter of faith: Abraham's reward had to do with his own righteous behaviour and his faith was extraordinary in kind. Thus a stereotypical 'faith versus works' understanding would seem too simple to capture Ephrem's understanding of Abraham's faith in this passage.

Abraham's overt question in Gen 15:8: 'How shall I know that I will inherit it?' is problematic for Ephrem but surprisingly not so for the targumim or midrash.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Ephrem argues, Abraham simply wanted to know how the question of the land would come to pass. 'If Abraham believed something so great that from a sterile woman his descendants would be like sand, would he have *doubts* about a little matter as the land?' (emphasis J.F.). Therefore, those who maintain that the prediction 'Know your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs' (Gen 15:13) was punishment for his doubt are wrong. Otherwise, God would surely not have accepted his sacrifice, made a covenant with him, promised that ten nations would be subjugated to his offspring and that he would be buried at a ripe old age (*Comm.Gen.* XII.2).

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the stars! God explains that prayer, repentance and righteousness override the planets and nullify decrees, as do a change of name (Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah) and good deeds (e.g. in the case of the Ninevites). The connection between Abraham and astrology may also be found in Philo (*De Abrahamo* 68–70; *De Virtutibus* 212–213), where Abraham is described as migrating away from Haran and astrological knowledge to Canaan and knowledge of God, and in the Apocalypse of Abraham 7.7–12) (for a discussion of these texts see Calvert-Koyzis 2004, 24–26, 71–83). Cf. Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 44, lines 7–10: 'Although you (Jonah) are suitable by virtue of your lineage, and although they (Ninevites) are rejected, their election is in them. Election, therefore, is not a (matter) of names, for deeds enter and dismiss the names. The furnace of testing of the name is the deed. In it is tested whether it is the true name' (McVey 1989, 443–455). At the outset of this hymn, Jonah is compared negatively to Abraham who prayed on behalf of Sodom's salvation while Jonah prayed for the destruction of the Ninevites.

<sup>10</sup> In GenR 44:14 Abraham does not complain but asks by what merit he will inherit the land. Only Tg PsJon Gen 15:13 states that Abraham's doubt is the cause of his descendants' enslavement. Eusebius of Emesa argues similarly against those who say that Abraham doubted (Petit 1986, G20 and G22).

*Faith and Chastity*

As proof that Abraham believed, Ephrem informs us that Abraham counselled Sarah to be patient and only when she refused did he consent to take Hagar (Gen 16:1–2; *Comm.Gen.* XIII.1). Abraham's hesitation about having more than one wife, however, is not only due to his faith, which is implicit, but to his chaste way of life. Ephrem's position obligates him to explain Abraham taking a concubine after Sarah's death. His lengthy reasoning is threefold: 1) there was no law about virginity or chastity at that time; 2) the promise that from Abraham kings of nations would come forth (Gen 17:6, 16) was not yet fulfilled; and 3) Abraham would command his children to keep God's commandment (Gen 18:19) and these upright sons, scattered throughout the earth, would spread knowledge and worship of the one God (*Comm.Gen.* XXII.1). Here we touch upon another key concept in Ephrem's thought: the link between faith and sexual purity. Thus, the just such as Abel, Seth, Enosh, Enoch and Noah are all described as chaste in both soul and body. They contrast greatly with the licentious generations about whom it is said 'All flesh had corrupted its ways' (Gen 6:12).<sup>11</sup> Their state, resembling Adam's virginal state at creation, caused them to be victorious and proves that Adam too was able to be perfect, for they are of the same nature as he was.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps more convincing than the righteous or at least equal to them in setting an example are those who have strayed from the right path but regret their behaviour and repent, like the Ninevites, for example.<sup>13</sup> In the case of women, it is most often sexual immorality followed by remorse that is highlighted by Ephrem. Thus, Lot's daughters, who tricked their father into getting drunk in order to have sexual relations with him and bear children, are excused by Ephrem; not only had they undergone disgrace twice, they never married:

As brides of the moment they took on a life of widowhood (...) The two condemned themselves and because they rashly did what was not right, deprived themselves of what they ought to have had. By this last solemn

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. among others *Comm.Gen.* III.9; VI.3; VI.11 for the licentiousness of the antediluvian generations and Noah's chastity.

<sup>12</sup> For Ephrem's concept of the righteous see Frishman 1992, part 3, 52–59, 86–101 and Kofsky and Ruzer 2000, 315–332. For righteousness and the link between chastity and faith cf. Frishman 1992, 52–58 and Frishman 1997, 171–186, esp. 181–186.

<sup>13</sup> See n. 9 above.

modesty, however, their previous rashness was greatly pardoned. (*Comm. Gen.* XVI.9–XVI.13)<sup>14</sup>

So too Tamar, who, according to Ephrem, sought neither sexual union nor marriage but desired that God's promise be fulfilled (*Comm. Gen.* XXXIV). Thus, despite her 'fornication,' it was Judah who, like Lot's daughters, was to remain unmarried for the rest of his days. And finally Sarah, who was taken forcibly by Pharaoh to be his wife (Gen 12:10–20). Here Ephrem is unlike any of the Jewish sources, which deny that Sarah was sullied. Abraham, he says, allowed her to be taken for understandable reasons (having no recourse to a lie even if it were little and white).<sup>15</sup> But the real reason, i.e. the reason God allowed this to happen, was partly to Sarah's detriment and partly in her favour: 1) Sarah thought Abraham was sterile, but by being taken to the palace yet not becoming pregnant, she learned that it was she who was barren;<sup>16</sup> 2) she demonstrated her love for her husband in her refusal to exchange the sojourner (i.e. Abraham) for a king (*Comm. Gen.* IX.3). Surely Ephrem's commentary is inspired by Gen 11:30 and 16:1 where, prior to the election, the Bible explicitly states that Sarah was barren and that after the promises she remained childless while Hagar conceived, proving Abraham's fertility. But there is more to Ephrem's reproach than that: Ephrem adroitly unites biblical evidence with his concept of sin and, as Hannah Hunt notes, '(...) elaborates on the gynaecological metaphor by describing sin as sterility which penitence restores to fecundity (...)'.<sup>17</sup> We will see shortly that this is not the only instance of Sarah's lack of faith.

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<sup>14</sup> GenR 52:3 condemns Lot for his relationship with his daughters, in terms reminiscent of Ephrem's style of argumentation: Abraham took good deeds and left Sodom to continue them while Lot was foolish of tongue, 'for he should have said to his daughter, "Shall we commit that sin for which the whole world was punished!" What did it lead to?—*He shall fall* (Prov 10:8): he brought upon himself fall after fall.' (All translations of *Genesis Rabbah* quoted in this paper are taken from Freedman 1961).

<sup>15</sup> Ephrem accepts Abraham's explanation as stated in the parallel event in Gen 20:12. According to GenR 52:11, Abraham's explanation accorded with the views of Abimelech and his nation, implying that this marriage may have been acceptable for others but was not an acceptable Jewish alliance.

<sup>16</sup> GenR is ambivalent about which of the two was barren. Cf. GenR 45:1, 45:2, 45:4, 48:17. GenR 53:6 comments that Gen 21:2 ('Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age') proves that Sarah 'did not steal seed from elsewhere.'

<sup>17</sup> Hunt 1998, [13] and n. 33 where the barrenness of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, is presented in these terms.

*'And Abraham fell on his face and laughed'*  
(Gen 17:17) or didn't he?

The most troublesome passages on the topic of faith for all commentators are Gen 17:17 and Gen 18:12–15, where both Abraham and Sarah laugh when told that they will have a son. Abraham mentions the problem of his and Sarah's age; Sarah is more sexually explicit in her statement of incredulity. The main difficulty is, of course, that the word *zḥk* appears in all instances in the Hebrew text, yet only Sarah is admonished for her disbelief, which is then compounded by untruthfulness.<sup>18</sup> Ephrem and the targumim offer similar solutions to the problem: Abraham was amazed.<sup>19</sup> As at Genesis 15, Ephrem enumerates the reasons why doubt is out of the question here: 1) God would not have sworn to him in truth; 2) or heeded him concerning Ishmael (i.e. his request out of love for his son 'O might Ishmael live before you' [Gen 17:18]); 3) or announced that in a year a child would be born (*Comm.Gen.* XIV.2). To eliminate all doubt (the reader's as well as Abraham's) our commentator concludes with one more parallel to Genesis 15: just as Abraham reviewed the possibilities of how the promise of the land would come about (*Comm.Gen.* XII.3), so too he reflected on when he would be blessed, seeing that God had promised the gift to Abraham the following year (*Comm.Gen.* XIV.3–4).<sup>20</sup>

The wording of the biblical text brings Ephrem and the rabbinic traditions very close here; so too both realize that the promises to Ishmael and those to Isaac are (almost) identical. Ephrem stresses this, undoubtedly to indicate that God's blessings are not limited to the

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<sup>18</sup> Tg Neofiti translates 'Sarah wondered' at Gen 18:12 but 'laugh(ed)' at Gen 18:13 and 15; Tg PsJon substitutes 'wondered' when Sarah speaks and renders 'laugh' when God speaks in Gen 18:13.

<sup>19</sup> Gen 17:17 in Tg Onkelos 'rejoiced,' Tg Neofiti 'was astonished,' Tg PsJon 'was amazed,' Ephrem *Comm.Gen.* XIV.2, '(...) "he laughed in his heart", i.e., that the Lord would do these two things for him was a marvel to him.' GenR 47:3 implies that Abraham's astonishment concerned Sarah and not himself. GenR 46:6 on Gen 17:3 and GenR 47:3 on Gen 17:17 consider Abraham's two prostrations the cause of his children being deprived of circumcision twice. Although not explicitly stated, it seems that the act of falling on his face was a sign of lack of faith (as was, according to some, Abraham's question concerning the promise of the land in Gen 15:8. Cf. n. 10 above).

<sup>20</sup> Abraham's reflections in this passage and *Comm.Gen.* XII.3 are the positive counterparts of the rabbinic '*hirkhurei devarim*' (misgivings) found in the commentary of Genesis Rabbah on the words of the biblical text '*aḥar ha-devarim ha-eleh.*' Cf. e.g., GenR 44:5 on Gen 15:1 and GenR 55:4 on Gen 22:1.

one nation but intended for the nations.<sup>21</sup> For the rabbis this equality is troubling and they conclude that whereas twelve tribes will emerge from both Isaac and Ishmael, the *nesi'im* or princes from Esau will be as the wind and vapour (Prov 25:14) while the *mattot* or tribes of Isaac, son of Sarah, are the staffs of the word (Hab 3:9).

As for circumcision, Janson, in his study of the Abraham stories, has already pointed out that, for Ephrem, circumcision plays a minor role in his commentary on the covenant (Janson 1998, 128).<sup>22</sup> The mark in itself is nothing to be proud of, a claim Ephrem makes over and over again in his hymns, evoking the Pauline contrast between circumcision of the flesh and circumcision of the heart;<sup>23</sup> but it apparently served its purpose in its time. Thus, Ephrem chides Moses' neglect of the covenant in Exod 4:24–26, contrasting his unnecessary discontinuance of the practice while the Hebrews in Egypt persisted in the practice despite their children's being put to death (*Comm.Ex.* IV.4–5).<sup>24</sup> The significance of the rite may, however, be sought elsewhere, namely at Gen 24:2–3

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<sup>21</sup> *Comm.Gen.* XIV.1: 'When Abraham was ninety years old, the Lord appeared to him and said "Be blameless" (Gen 17:1) in the "covenant that I am about to make with you" (Gen 17:4) "and I will multiply you and set you up as many nations" (Gen 17:6), that is, tribes. But this was also fulfilled concerning the sons of Esau, the sons of Keturah, and Ishmael who became nations. "And kings shall come forth from you," that is from the house of Judah and Ephraim and the Edomites. But "this is my covenant: you shall circumcise every male in the flesh of the foreskin" (Gen 17:10).'

<sup>22</sup> Circumcision does indeed play a minor role despite the fact that the Prologue indicates that this section of the commentary will deal with circumcision (*Comm.Gen.* Prologue 5). Other elements as well, such as the name change, are passed over in silence. Cf. Janson 1998, 128–131 where he also emphasizes Ephrem's desire to detract from the significance and exclusivity of the covenant.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Rom 2:19; 2:28; Col 2:11; Gal 5:6; Phil 3:3. For Ephrem see for example, *Hymns on Virginity* 44, lines 17–21: 'He whose body is circumcised but whose heart is uncircumcised, is circumcised outwardly but uncircumcised in secret. But he whose heart is circumcised but whose flesh is uncircumcised, is circumcised for the Spirit but uncircumcised for the eye. In the name of circumcision the circumcised fornicates. With the cup of his purity he drinks ire. By a circumcised heart the uncircumcised becomes holy (i.e. chaste). In the bridal chamber of his heart dwells his Creator' (trans. McVey 1989, 444–445); cf. *Hymns on the Nativity* 26, lines 11–12 (idem, 208–209).

<sup>24</sup> That Moses' son was not circumcised was due to Zipporah who, according to Ephrem, had agreed to marry Moses but not to take on his faith. She allowed only one son to be circumcised and the other she withheld. Cf. *Comm.Ex.* II.8. In *Comm.Ex.* IV.4–5 Zipporah is vexed because she had had no sexual union with Moses since God spoke to him at Horeb and she put no stock in Moses' words. Having circumcised her son out of fear for the angel, Moses asks her: 'If you are so afraid of him who appeared for a brief moment, how much should I fear and sanctify myself (*etkdsh*) to God who appears to me constantly.' Here the link between circumcision and chastity or *kadishuta* already established in the covenant with Abraham is reinforced, as is the (heathen) woman's lack of faith followed by insight.

where Abraham tells Eliezer to ‘Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear (...).’ Here Ephrem comments:

Abraham made him swear by the covenant of circumcision. Because God saw that the two heads of the world had dishonored this member, He set the sign of the covenant on it so that that member which was the most despised of all the limbs would now be the most honored of all the limbs. The sign of the covenant that was set on it bestowed on it such great honor that those who take oaths now swear by it and all those who administer oaths make them swear by it. (*Comm.Gen.* XXI.2)

The implication is that Abraham, in his holiness or chastity has undone the transgression of Adam and Eve who, through their transgression, were stripped of the glory in which they were clothed at creation, became ashamed and, in Ephrem’s words, covered their shameful members with leaves (*Comm.Gen.* II.14). Thus, the link between faith and spiritual and physical excellence is present in this covenant although not immediately evident in the commentary on Genesis 17.

*‘I Will indeed Multiply your Seed and All Nations of the Earth Shall Be Blessed in your Seed’ (Gen 22:17–18)*

As Genesis 22 in the Syriac tradition has been treated at length in various articles by Sebastian Brock (Brock 1974; 1981a; 1981b; 1986; 1992), I will limit my remarks here to the question of Abraham’s faith and the blessings in Genesis 22. That Abraham had faith is of course inherent in Abraham’s obedience in the biblical story itself. Reading the text closely, Ephrem notes that the fact that God detained Abraham for three days (Gen 22:4) makes clear that Abraham did not heed God’s word because he was taken by surprise; he had previously had plenty of opportunity to think things over yet did not waver (*Comm.Gen.* XX.1). The trial, thus, was not for the omniscient God’s benefit, but allowed Abraham to demonstrate his love for God ‘in the one who was more beloved to him than anything else’ (*Comm.Gen.* XX.2).<sup>25</sup> This he did by killing his

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<sup>25</sup> Mathews and Amar’s translation ‘Now I know,’ referring to the angel or God, is a translation of the MT, but does not reflect the ambivalence of the Syriac verb of the Peshitta *d’t* which can mean ‘You have made known/shown’ or ‘I have made known,’ both of which better suit the context here. The question of God’s omniscience is a recurring theme in the commentary, as it is in the Jewish tradition, often linked to God’s desire for repentance. For Ephrem cf. *Comm.Gen.* I.31: God knew Adam would

son while not killing him and believing that Isaac would be raised up again after he died and descend with him from the mountain. As he believed in God's blessings, he 'was firmly convinced that He who said to him, "through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gen 21:12; Rom 9:7) was not lying' (*Comm.Gen.* XX.2).<sup>26</sup> Only at the very end of the narrative are we made aware of the fact that Abraham's trial has something to do with Christ. The ram hung in the tree signified Him who would hang on the wood and taste death for the sake of the world (*Comm.Gen.* XX.3); Him to whom refers the blessing 'all nations of the earth shall be blessed in your seed' (Gen 22:18; *Comm.Gen.* XX.3).

### Summary

The specific details of Abraham's blessings are of far lesser interest to Ephrem than Abraham's steadfast faith in God who bestows these blessings. This faith is manifested not only spiritually but is mirrored physically as well. Ephrem's fascinating character study is not limited to Abraham but extends to other righteous men before him as well to reprehensible men and women, starting with Adam and Eve. More

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sin and blessed him beforehand; *Comm.Gen.* III.6, and *Comm.Gen.* III.7: God asked Cain what he had done because although he already knew the answer, he hoped for Cain's contrition; *Comm.Gen.* VI.7: Out of love for the sinners, that they would repent, God said he was sorry he created mankind; *Comm.Gen.* XVI.1: God knew what the Sodomites had done, but descended in order to set an example for judges; *Comm.Gen.* XV.3: God, by indicating to Sarah that he knew she had laughed, gave her a sign which she then denied. For similar texts in Eusebius of Emesa see Hovhanessian 1980, 38 on Gen 4:7 (where Gen 2:18, 11:5, and 18:21 are also discussed), *ibid.* 39 (on God's prescience in Gen 3:8 and 4:9), *ibid.* 44 (on Gen 6:6 where God's regret is understood to be reflection), *ibid.* 60 (on Gen 15:15–16 referring back to Gen 6:6 God's regret is meant to manifest the wickedness), and *ibid.* 62 (on Gen 18:21 God descends to set the example for just judgment). For Jewish tradition cf. GenR 19:11 on Genesis 3:12 (God's questioning Adam as to what he had done is a test); GenR 22:9 on Gen 4:8 (God grants Cain the opportunity to confess), GenR 27:4 on Gen 6:6 (God of course knew what the generation of Noah would do but grieved nonetheless) and GenR 49:6 on Gen 18:21 (God's descent to Sodom was to offer the inhabitants the opportunity to repent). On the matter of penance see too Tg Neofiti and Tg PsJon on Gen 18:20–21 (Tg Onkelos implies that whether the Sodomites repent or not their deeds will be required. However, alternate readings follow the sense of Tg Neofiti, Tg PsJon and GenR).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. GenR 56:10 where Abraham says: 'When you ordered me, "take now your son, your only son" I could have answered, "Yesterday you promised me, 'For in Isaac shall seed be called to you' and now you say "Take now your son"'. I did not do this but suppressed my feelings of compassion in order to do your will. So may it be your will, when Isaac's children are in trouble (...).'

than anything else, it is the contrast between the two groups and the call to imitate or repudiate their behaviour that guides the reader on the path to salvation, from the fall to the return to Paradise. In his commentary—rather than in any other of his writings where symbolism plays such an important role—Ephrem adheres closely to the text. Yet the choice of passages upon which he comments and those he refrains from mentioning are ultimately determined by his faith in Christ and His significance for the world; for it is Christ, more than any of the Old Testament personalities, who has lived an exemplary life. In this sense, Ephrem's commentary may be said to be no less pedagogical and no less successful in its purpose than his poetic oeuvre.

*Part II: The Physical is the Spiritual:  
Genesis Rabbah on Abraham*

At the very outset of the Abraham cycle in Genesis Rabbah, the rabbis are eager to explain why Abraham was elected. Some abstract form of belief or belief in a promise is simply not enough. As already noted above, it is Abraham's rejection of idolatry and his recognition of the Unique, Creator God that distinguished him from all others in his surroundings. Therefore, God rescued him from the fiery furnace of the Chaldeans, an event Abraham will remember and that will convince him that God's promises are true.<sup>27</sup> But Abraham's recognition of the one God and faith in him are always linked to the acceptance of the Torah and doing of good deeds. This is not unique to the rabbis but a common theme developed in Jubilees, Philo and Josephus, linked to the theme of the rejection of idolatry (cf. Calvert-Koyzis 2004, 6–40, 65–69). That the rabbis mould Abraham into a halakhic or rabbinic Jew comes as no surprise, and here we encounter in a sense the old faith versus works ideology. However, I would like to be more specific about Abraham's meritorious acts, having discerned three elements that are touched upon only briefly in the targumim, but have become major themes in Genesis Rabbah: 1) the spreading of faith in God or

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<sup>27</sup> This is the interpretation given by GenR 44:13 on Gen 15:6–7: 'And Abraham believed (...) I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans (...).' Note that this is a reversal of Gen 15:6–7 where Abraham believes prior to the reminder about who God is and their personal encounter in the past!

proselytism;<sup>28</sup> 2) hospitality;<sup>29</sup> and 3) circumcision.<sup>30</sup> The theme of circumcision is directly related to the covenant in Genesis 17; that of hospitality is derived from Abraham’s hosting the three men/angels in Genesis 18 (see Grypeou-Spurling 185–189, in this volume) and the theme of proselytism is less directly text-related, but based on Abraham’s own ‘conversion’ pending his election in Genesis 12. These themes occur independently but are often found in combination with each other.

### *Proselytism*

Not only is Abraham created anew in Gen 12:2 (*e’eskha le-goi gadol*), but he is a blessing for others (*heyeh berakhah*): by healing the sick and the barren and through contact with those who buy and sell from him, he draws others near to God. Proselytes themselves, Abraham and Sarah become successful missionaries and in turn create others anew, whom they then take with them on their journey from Haran to Canaan (Gen 12:5).<sup>31</sup> Abraham does this by professing God’s name in public during his journey (i.e. calling upon the name of the Eternal, Gen 12:8) and later by receiving wayfarers. This oft repeated theme of hospitality stands for Abraham’s eagerness to do good deeds in general. Yet when linked to proselytism it gains extra charge: Abraham was so anxious to help others and thereby convey his knowledge of God, that, after Sodom was destroyed, Abraham moved on to Gerar for lack of potential converts. How did he go about his task? After having fed his guests, Abraham requested that they thank God from whose bounty they had eaten, thereby acknowledging the one God as Creator of the world.<sup>32</sup>

When God tells Abraham to circumcise himself, Abraham is confronted with a dilemma: circumcision would mean removing the only

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<sup>28</sup> GenR 39:11; 39:14; 39:16; 43:7; 48:8; 49:4. For proselytism in the targumim see Hayward 1998.

<sup>29</sup> GenR 43:7; 48:9; 50:7; 52:1; 52:3; 54:2; 54:6; 56:5.

<sup>30</sup> GenR 42:8; 43:6; 46:1–6; 46:9–10; 46:12–13; 47:7; 47:9–10; 48:1–2; 48:4–5; 48:8; 55:4.

<sup>31</sup> The unusual expression *‘hannefesh asher asu’* leads the rabbis by way of association to the notion of creation. Seeing that creation is only something God is capable of, Abraham and Sarah may be said to have metaphorically ‘created people anew’ by proselytizing.

<sup>32</sup> According to GenR 49:4 if they refused, he then demanded the price of the meal.

blemish Abraham had (walk before me and be *tammim* [whole]).<sup>33</sup> Yet circumcision also means self inflicted pain—and that at an old age—and alienation from his surroundings. Would proselytes continue to come and join him? God's answer to Abraham's quandary is: the world has been without circumcision long enough (*El shadai*). And if men no longer wish to join Abraham, it is enough that God is his Patron; moreover it is enough for the world that God is its Patron (GenR 46:3). The texts regarding the foreskin as an imperfection (GenR 46:1; 46:4) and those on the effects of circumcision on proselytism and identity (GenR 46:2–3) seem to imply several things: 1) that the very act of circumcision as some form of painful operation and perhaps even bodily mutilation may have prevented gentiles from enacting it;<sup>34</sup> 2) the theological significance of circumcision as a distinguishing mark—i.e. that one had to be separated from others or Jewish in order to be part of God's covenant—worked as a deterrent for Jews in their missionary work and as an obstacle for non-Jews to become part of the covenant; 3) circumcision is perfection (*tammim*) with the implication that non-circumcision, and the foreskin in particular, is a sore or 'a reproach'.<sup>35</sup> This sign is so powerful that it overrides conduct: even those who have sinned will not enter Gehenna unless their circumcision is undone.<sup>36</sup>

We might rightly say that in Genesis Rabbah the physical has become the spiritual (cf. Wolfson 1987). In view of this fact, I would argue against those who suggest that the focus on circumcision in Genesis Rabbah is a reaction to Hellenism and Hellenising Jews. This may be true

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<sup>33</sup> Ephrem *Comm.Gen.* XIV.1: 'Be blameless in the covenant that I am about to make with you (...). Blamelessness is linked to the covenant yet it becomes clear elsewhere in Ephrem's commentary that blamelessness is not solely moral rectitude but also physical perfection, in some sense connected to the glorious state of Adam and Eve before their transgression. For *tammim* as perfection and specifically innocence in virginity, see Koltun-Fromm 1997.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Boyarin claims 'it is absurd to imagine that circumcision would have stood in the way of conversion for people who were willing to undergo fasts, the lives of anchorites, martyrdom, and even occasionally castration for the sake of God' and suggests that the objections were cultural (Boyarin 1994, 36). The midrash here suggests otherwise. Perhaps the specific location of this mutilation is what posed the problem. For an extensive study of circumcision, including the reaction it provoked in non-Jews, see Cohen 2005.

<sup>35</sup> GenR 46:1: a blemish; GenR 46:10: a sore hanging from the body; GenR 47:7: a pile of foreskins putrefied in the sun. For a discussion of the foreskin as foreign, impure and disgusting in the Talmud see Kraemer 1996, 109–123.

<sup>36</sup> GenR 48:8 Abraham will remove the foreskin from babies who died prior to being circumcised and set them on the circumcised sinners in Israel.

of Jubilees and Philo and perhaps of the Mishnah as well.<sup>37</sup> However, this would not account for the rabbis' almost obsessive pre-occupation with circumcision in Genesis Rabbah. The concern about the isolation and even survival of Judaism and the Jewish people is obviously fuelled by a new reality: Christianity was steadily gaining ground, conversion to Judaism was becoming more difficult but also less attractive and circumcision (and other Jewish practice) was often subject to Roman repression. While Christians had disinherited the Jews as children of Abraham, the Jews in turn would hardly be eager to include the Gentiles in Abraham's blessings. As Boyarin notes (Boyarin 1994, 23), the allegorical meaning of genealogy as opposed to the literal meaning was already hinted at in the Bible itself: 'In Abraham/in your offspring will all nations be blessed' (Gen 12:3/22:18); 'You will be a father of many nations' (Gen 17:4). Bearing this in mind, it will come as no surprise that the rabbis offer no commentary on these verses. Whereas Ephrem ignored the verses concerning the blessing of the *people* while commenting precisely on Gen 22:18, the rabbis chose to ignore the repercussions of Abraham's blessings for the *peoples*.

### Conclusion

Ephrem's commentary and the Jewish tradition on Abraham have proven to be very close indeed. The similarities are due, first, to the biblical text itself, which raises certain questions and poses certain problems for its readers. This holds especially true for the Peshitta text or the version of it used by Ephrem, which is often closer to the Masoretic text than the Greek and naturally supplies Ephrem and the rabbis with a common idiom. Furthermore, Ephrem approximates the targumim, but if his knowledge was not firsthand, the correspondences indicate that there must have been a shared heritage.<sup>38</sup> Comparing Genesis Rabbah with the Syriac *Commentary on Genesis* has proved enlightening: here

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<sup>37</sup> The importance of Israel's separation from the gentiles may be found in Jub. 7, 20–22, 25, 30, 36. For circumcision as one of the stipulations of the covenant to be obeyed by Israel see Jub. 15.25–34. For circumcision in Philo and the Mishnah see in particular *Quaest. Gen* 3.45–50, 3.52, 3.62; *De Specialibus legibus* 1.9 and MNed 3:11. According to Cohen, the praise of circumcision in these texts is not part of anti-Christian polemics but targeted at "Hellenized" Jews (Cohen 2005, 26–28). The material in GenR is not discussed by Cohen.

<sup>38</sup> See Ter Haar Romeny 1997 for the use of Greek, Hebrew and Syriac texts in Eusebius of Emesa's *Commentary on Genesis*.

too there is much in common, far more than has already been noted by my predecessors in this comparative endeavour. But, it is also clear that these commonalities have, nevertheless, been used to emphasize different themes, reflecting theological developments in rabbinic Judaism and fourth century Edessene theology. These developments are at least partly due to an ongoing Jewish-Christian polemic, traceable through that which is said as well as that which is not said. But, it is not just a Christian Abraham who is being portrayed. Ephrem's Abraham is an example of the ideal type of the righteous as Ephrem sees them, someone whose faith comes first, but whose perfection is reflected both in deeds and in his physical demeanour or chastity. As for the rabbis, their discussion of Abraham may give us insight into their views of marital relationships and other halakhic questions, yet most striking is the uncertainty about their own identity and increasing isolation which comes to the fore.

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ABRAHAM'S ANGELS:  
JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 18–19

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One of the most famous icons of all time is the depiction of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev from the early fifteenth century, known as the only authentic work of this legendary iconographer. Reportedly, this subtly painted scene is based upon an earlier icon known as the 'Hospitality of Abraham' which represents an episode from Genesis 18. By focusing on the guests of Abraham, depicted as angels in the icon, Rublev transformed the subject of the icon from Abraham's hospitality to a representation of the Trinity. Rublev's icon reflects a typical Christian approach to exegesis of Genesis 18. This biblical episode has been treated in a number of different ways in Jewish and Christian tradition of Late Antiquity, and, in the following, we are going to present examples of exegetical encounter which focus on the topic of Abraham's guests. It is essential for the traditions under analysis for evidence of 'encounter' to be assessed and understood within their respective internal contexts before turning to comparative analysis. As such, we will first examine rabbinic sources on this subject followed by the corresponding patristic material. Then we will complete the analysis with discussion of the points of exegetical encounter.

*Rabbinic Literature on Abraham's Angels*

The biblical episode describing the אנשים 'men' who visited Abraham in Gen 18:1–3 and went on to destroy Sodom raised a series of exegetical queries for the Rabbis. In Gen 18:1–3 it states that the Lord appeared to Abraham at Mamre, along with the appearance of three men:

וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום וישא עניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים עליו וירא וירץ לקראתם מפתח האהל וישתחו ארצה ויאמר אדני אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבר מעל עבדך

(18:1) *The LORD [Y'] appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. (18:2) He lifted his eyes and saw and behold three men were standing near him. When he*

*saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them and bowed down to the ground. (18:3) He said, 'My lord [adonai], if I have found favour in your eyes, do not pass by your servant (...).'*<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew creates some ambiguity as to whether God belonged to the party of three 'men' or not. The use of the divine name at God's appearance in Gen 18:1 is followed by subsequent references to אֲדֹנָי 'my lord' beginning at Gen 18:3 when Abraham apparently addresses the leader of the party of 'men.' This use of the term אֲדֹנָי could be understood as addressing God. This ambiguity is compounded by Gen 19:1, which identifies two of the אַנְשֵׁים 'men' as מַלְאָכִים 'angels.' This leaves the identity of the third 'man' more open, including the possibility that the third man was God, especially as the two angels of Gen 19:1 reach Sodom following Abraham's debate with God in Gen 18:16–33.<sup>2</sup> This exegetical problem is dealt with at length in rabbinic tradition with discussion focussing on the identity of the men/angels along with their specific roles and activities.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the earliest midrash, in terms of redaction, to discuss this ambiguity is the fifth century Genesis Rabbah:<sup>4</sup>

אמר עד שלא מלתי היו העוברים והשבים באים אצלי עכשיו שמלתי לא יבואו  
אמר לו הקב"ה עד עתה היו בני אדם ערלים באים אצלך עכשיו אני ופמליא שלי  
נגלים עליך הה"ד וישא עיניו וירא וירא בשכינה וירא במלאכים [והנה שלשה  
אנשים נצבים עליו] (...) ר' שמעון בן לקיש אמר אף שמות מלאכים מיכאל  
וגבריאל ורפאל (GenR 48:9; Theodor and Albeck 1965<sup>2</sup>, 485)

He (Abraham) said: 'While I was not circumcised travellers used to visit me; now that I am circumcised, they might not come.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'Up to now uncircumcised people were visiting you; but now I and My retinue will appear to you.' This is what is written, *And he lifted his eyes and saw* (Gen 18:2)—he saw the Shekinah and he saw the angels. *And behold three men were standing near him*

<sup>1</sup> Translations of Hebrew and Greek text are our own.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Sullivan notes that 'It is not entirely clear whether the Lord appears to Abraham separately from the three "men," but later we find that "two" men = angels go on to Sodom (Gen 19:1a, 5, 8, 12, 16), while Abraham debates with the Lord (Gen 18:22). This suggests that one of the three "men" is meant to be the Lord' (Sullivan 2004, 38).

<sup>3</sup> This topic of exegesis is found in a wide variety of rabbinic sources (e.g. Tg Neofiti Gen 18:1–2; GenR 48:9–10; 50:2; 51:2; PRE 25; Tg PsJon Gen 18:2, 16; 19:17; TanB Vayyera 20; Tan Vayyera 2 and 8). Sources later than Pirqē de Rabbi Eliezer and Tanhuma are not discussed in order to maintain a broad temporal equivalence with the patristic literature under analysis.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of redaction and dating see Stemberger 1996, 279–280.

(Gen 18:2): (...) R. Simeon b. Lakish said: 'Also the names of the angels were Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael.'

GenR 48:9 describes God along with his retinue coming to visit Abraham following his circumcision, an event meriting divine attendance, thus linking Abraham's circumcision in Genesis 17 with the appearance of God and the men in Gen 18:1–2. Genesis Rabbah refers to the Shekinah and the angels, which could suggest that together they made up the group of three 'men.' However, based on Gen 18:2, the text continues by stating that Abraham saw the Shekinah *and then* saw the angels, the repetition of the verb ראה 'see' clearly defining two separate actions and therefore showing God to be separate from the angelic group. This analysis is confirmed by the interpretation in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish of the specific naming of the three angels as Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. Finally, GenR 48:9 continues with an interpretation in the name of R. Levi that the three angels are disguised as men, particularly traders, and Abraham decides if they are distinguished based on whether the three are acknowledged by the Shekinah.<sup>5</sup> Thus, GenR 48:9 asserts: 1) that all three of the 'men' of Genesis 18 were angels, not just the two who arrived in Sodom in Gen 19:1; and 2) that God was not a part of this group, but appeared to Abraham separately in Gen 18:1.

This tradition is paralleled in the later redacted TanB *Bereshit* 4 (cf. Tan *Vayyera* 2), which states that God took his angels with him to visit Abraham following his circumcision.<sup>6</sup> The distinction between the angels and God is clearly maintained by careful separation of the Lord's appearance to Abraham in Genesis 18:1, from the vision of three men in 18:2: '*The LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre* (Gen 18:1), and after that (ואחר כך), *He lifted his eyes and saw (and behold three men were standing near him)* (Gen 18:2).' This provides the basis for the interpretation in the text, which states of the visitors that: 'As they were proceeding, God was revealed to him and after that (ואחר כך), the angels.'

<sup>5</sup> The angels are identified as a Sarki (סרקיי), namely from a nomadic trading tribe (see Jastrow 1996, 1030), a Nabatean (נווטי) and an Arabian (ערבי), Cf. BM 86b and Qid 32b for similar identifications.

<sup>6</sup> The passage is part of a discussion on the humility of God, and here R. Judah bar Shallum the Levite brings to the discussion the example of the visit to Abraham where God proceeds before his angels.

Other aggadic expansions on the visitors of Abraham also maintain the distinction between his divine and angelic guests. The sixth century redacted CantR 1:13:1 describes how Abraham was clasped between the Shekinah and an angel based on Cant 1:13 and Gen 18:2.<sup>7</sup> However, the text disassociates the two figures, also based on exegesis of Gen 18:2, as Abraham *saw* God, but *ran* to the angel, creating a distinction between the two: *‘That lies between my breasts* (Cant 1:13). He was placed between the Shekinah and the angel, as it is said, *And he saw and he ran to meet them* (Gen 18:2): *“and he saw”* the Shekinah, *“and he ran”* to the angel’ (CantR 1:13:1). From the Babylonian Talmud, BM 86b, Yoma 37a and Qid 32b all state that Abraham was visited by three angels or the Ministering Angels, as if this interpretation was generally understood.<sup>8</sup> The exegetical problem is also dealt with in certain gaonic tractates. The distinction between God and the angelic visitors is emphasized in Kallah Rabbati 7, paralleled in Derekh Eretz Rabbah 4, by stressing the inferior status of the angels in comparison to God. It describes the three Ministering Angels who met Abraham; Abraham was also graced separately by the Divine Presence, and he requests of the angels that they wait for him until he has taken leave of the Divine Presence, who is of greater significance than the angels.

The separation between God and the angels is also found in the targumic traditions. Targum Neofiti reverses Abraham’s visitations as it states in Gen 18:1 that ‘three angels were sent to our father Abraham’ and later that ‘the Memra of the Lord was revealed to Abraham.’ Targum Neofiti is often dated to the third or fourth century<sup>9</sup> and so this is one of the earliest sources to make a distinction between God and the angelic ‘men’ with the reversal of the order of their appearance emphasizing this fact. The late Targum Pseudo-Jonathan maintains the entirely angelic nature of the three visitors throughout the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, describing the angels, their identities and roles at Gen 18:1–3, 18:10, 18:16, 18:22 and 19:17. In particular, 18:1–2 states that ‘The Glory of the Lord was revealed to him’ and then

<sup>7</sup> For dating cf. Stemberger 1996, 315.

<sup>8</sup> BM 86b refers to the Ministering Angels in its exposition and explicitly names all three of them; Yoma 37a names the three Ministering Angels in a discussion on positions of honour; Qid 32b describes the three Ministering angels as Arabs.

<sup>9</sup> The dating of Targum Neofiti is much discussed and a variety of opinions on its dating have been offered since its discovery from pre-Christian to the third or fourth century. A summary of these views is provided by McNamara in his introduction to the text (McNamara 1992).

he saw 'three angels in the form of men,' thus also explaining why the Hebrew text simply uses the term אנשים 'men' at Gen 18:2, 16 and 22, but מלאכים 'angels' at Gen 19:1; they were disguised as men.<sup>10</sup>

The distinction made between God and the group of angels in exegesis of Genesis 18–19, however, created further exegetical problems. The Rabbis needed to explain uses of the term אדני 'my lord' in connection with the three men/angels throughout the rest of the Sodom and Gomorrah stories. For example, in interpretation of the use of אדני in Gen 18:3: ויאמר אדני אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבר מעל עבדך 'He said, "My lord [adonai], if I have found favour in your eyes, do not pass by your servant (...)." The interpretation of who is meant by אדני here varies in rabbinic sources. Again, the earliest midrashic text in terms of redaction to discuss this issue is Genesis Rabbah. Following the line of thought in GenR 48:9 already discussed, GenR 48:10 understands the אדני in Gen 18:3 to be the address for Michael the leader of the three angels: 'He said, "My lord [adonai], if I have found favour (...)." R. Hiyya taught: He said this to the greatest that was among them: Michael.'<sup>11</sup> The problem is also debated in the Babylonian Talmud. Shebu 35b (cf. Shab 127a) contains the interpretation that all names of God used in connection with Abraham do refer to the deity, except in the instance of Gen 18:3 where a secular lord is meant, i.e. as a reference to one of the men/angels. However, Shebu'ot records the disagreement of certain Rabbis, who understand this reference to אדני to refer to God. They interpret the address as an aside spoken to the Divine Presence, while the three angels are waiting to receive Abraham's hospitality. Despite the disagreement, in both interpretations, the use of אדני maintains the division between the three angels

<sup>10</sup> This explanation of the description of the angels as men is also given in GenR 48:9 and 50:2; cf. Loader 1990, 108. TanB *Vayyera* 20 states that the angels appeared as men because Abraham was commonly among angels!

<sup>11</sup> Michael is mentioned in Dan 10:13 as 'one of the chief princes.' He is counted as one of the most important archangels in early Jewish tradition (e.g. 1 Enoch 9:1 et passim; 1QM IX.15–16; 3 Bar. 11:2ff and T. Abr. A 1:4) and throughout rabbinic literature (e.g. Ber 4b, Yoma 37a and PR 46:3). In Dan 10:21, Michael is described as 'your prince,' the prince of Israel who fights against the princes of Persia and Greece. In Dan 12:1, Michael 'the great prince, the protector of your people' arises and his role is understood as both advocate and bringer of judgement. This sets the pattern for Michael's position in Jewish tradition as the advocate of Israel (cf. 1 Enoch 20:5; T. Abr. A 14:5–6, 12f; Tg PsJon Gen 32:25 and 38:25; Yoma 77a, RuthR proem 1; ExodR 18:5; EsthR 7:12; PR 44:10; PRE 26; 33; 36; 37; 38; 42; 50). He is also often identified with the 'Angel of the Lord.' As such it is not surprising that Michael takes the role of the leader of the three angels. Cf. Hannah 1999.

and God. The late Targum Pseudo-Jonathan also addresses this issue. Tg PsJon Gen 18:3 interprets אֲדֹנָי to refer to God rather than one of the angels, with Abraham addressing God before he offers hospitality to the three visitors.<sup>12</sup> These interpretations are indicative of the way the rabbinic exegetes have maintained the distinction between God and the group of three angels in their explanations of ambiguous uses of אֲדֹנָי. The term is understood to refer to either God as distinct from the three angels, or to one of the angels themselves.

Having established that Abraham's three visitors were angels, the Rabbis also discuss in detail their identity, nature and roles. Texts that name the angels consistently refer to them as Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.<sup>13</sup> The three angels also have a specific mission to carry out, as outlined in GenR 50:2:

[ויבאו שני המלאכים וגו'] והוא באחד ומי ישיבנו ונפשו אותה ויעש  
 תני אין מלאך אחד עושה ב' שליחות ולא ב' מלאכים  
 עושים שליחות אחת ואת אמרת שני אלא מיכאל אמר בשורתו ונסתלק גבריאל  
 נשתלח להפוך את סדום ורפאל להציל את לוט ויבואו שני המלאכים וגו'  
 ישלח במ תרון אפו וגו' ואת אמרת שני אלא מיכאל אמר בשורתו ונסתלק  
 גבריאל נשלח להפוך את סדום רפאל להציל את לוט ויבואו שני המלאכים  
 (GenR 50:2; Theodor and Albeck 1965<sup>2</sup>, 516–517)

*Then the two angels came, etc. (Gen 19:1). But he is at one with himself, and who can turn him? And what his soul desires, that he does (Job 23:13).* It was taught; one angel does not do two commissions, and two angels do not do one commission, yet you say 'two (angels came to Sodom)'? But, Michael announced his tidings and left, Gabriel was sent to destroy Sodom, and Raphael to save Lot; (thus it is written), *Then the two angels came, etc. (Gen 19:1).* (It is written), *He sent against them the fierceness of his anger, etc. (Ps 78:49);* yet you say, 'two (angels).' But, Michael

<sup>12</sup> This exegetical problem is also dealt with in rabbinic exegesis of Gen 19:18–19 and 24. Interestingly, the 'adonai' in Gen 19:18, which could easily be understood as an address to one of the angels, is actually interpreted as a sacred use of 'adonai' in both Shebu 35b and Tg PsJon Gen 19:18. Both texts understand the use of 'adonai' in the context of prayer to God. As such, Lot is conversing with the two angels, but addresses God when he begs for the chance to flee to Zoar. With respect to 'adonai' in Gen 19:24, the destruction of Sodom by God is reinterpreted in GenR 51:2 to refer to the work of an angel; in particular, 'adonai' in this verse is understood to refer to Gabriel, which is in line with the tradition that it was in fact Gabriel's task to destroy Sodom.

<sup>13</sup> The three names are found in texts such as GenR 48:9, 50:2, BM 86b, Yoma 37a, TanB Yayyera 20, Kallah Rabbati 7 and Derekh Eretz Rabbah 4.

announced his tidings and left, Gabriel was sent to destroy Sodom, (and) Raphael to save Lot. (Thus, it is written), *Then the two angels came.*

In GenR 50:2, the fact that two rather than three angels came to Sodom is under consideration. The text teaches that one angel can only have one commission and that a commission cannot be shared with another angel. In light of this, the question arises as to why two angels came to Sodom, if in fact two angels cannot perform the same mission. Ps 78:49 is also brought to bear on this question, as the verse seems to support the notion that more than one angel could be involved in the outpouring of God's anger. The verse is speaking of God's actions against Egypt, but is associated with the destruction of Sodom through the reference to destruction by a band of evil angels (plural) in connection with the sending of God's anger: '*He sent against them the fierceness of his anger, his wrath, indignation and hostility—a band of evil angels (משלחת מלאכי) (רעים).*' The Rabbis answer that in fact the three angels of Genesis 18–19 each had their own specific mission, and after a mission had been completed, the relevant angel would return to heaven. In this case, Michael had announced his good news to Sarah and so returned to heaven leaving Gabriel to destroy Sodom and Raphael to save Lot.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, part of the aim of claiming that the angels had individual missions was to explain the exegetical problem of why three men/angels visited Abraham in Genesis 18, but only two angels arrived in Sodom in Gen 19:1; Michael had fulfilled his role and so returned to heaven. However, there are differing traditions over the roles of the angels in rabbinic sources. As noted, in GenR 50:2 (paralleled in the later TanB *Vayyera* 20 and Tan *Vayyera* 8) it was Michael's role to bring the news of Sarah's forthcoming birth, Gabriel's mission was to destroy Sodom, and the role of Raphael was to rescue Lot. These roles are also identified in Tg Neofiti Gen 18:1 and Tg PsJon Gen 18:2 and 18:16, but without mention of the specific angels. Targum Neofiti may be the earliest identifiable source to discuss this issue, which could suggest that the roles were attributed to the three angelic guests before they were named in rabbinic tradition. Furthermore, an alternative outline of the angelic

<sup>14</sup> The concept of angelic missions is also found in Josephus, *Ant.* I.11.2 which records of the angels that: 'they could maintain dissimulation no longer but confessed themselves messengers of God, of whom one had been sent to announce the news of the child and the other two to destroy Sodom' (Thackeray 1967, 99).

missions is found in BM 86b, where Michael and Gabriel's missions remain the same, but Raphael's role is to heal Abraham following his circumcision.<sup>15</sup>

A further problem addressed by the Rabbis in exegesis of Genesis 18–19 is that the angels are said to be on the receiving end of the hospitality of Abraham and Lot, with the biblical text specifically describing them consuming food at Gen 18:8: *והוא עמד עליהם תחת העץ ויאכלו* 'and he stood by them under the tree, and they ate,' and again at Gen 19:3.<sup>16</sup> The notion that angels do not eat is found in a number of early sources and seems to have been a well known tradition, for example, in Tobit 12:19 the angel Raphael states that when he appeared to be eating it was only a vision.<sup>17</sup> A number of rabbinic texts emphasize that even on the occasions in Genesis 18–19 the angels did not eat, and either told their hosts they would not eat or even pretended to eat.<sup>18</sup> In GenR 48:11, for example, the dining of the angels in Gen 18:8 is refuted. The angels openly declare that they do not eat or drink, but tell Abraham to do so. This is understood from Gen 18:5 *כִּן תַּעֲשֶׂה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ* 'do as you have said,' which is interpreted as an instruction to Abraham to eat rather than as an agreement by the angels to take up Abraham's hospitality. An alternative tradition is represented in GenR 48:14:

למעלה שאין אכילה עלה משה ונדמה  
להן ואשב בהר ארבעים יום וגו' למטה שיש אכילה והוא עומד עליהם תחת  
העץ ויאכלו וכי אוכלים היו אלא נראים כאוכלים ראשון ראשון מסתלק  
(GenR 48:14; Theodor and Albeck 1965<sup>2</sup>, 491)

Above there is no eating; Moses ascended and he appeared like them (i.e. the angels), (as it says), *And I dwelt on the mountain for forty days*, etc. (Deut 9:9). But below, there is eating, (as it is written), *And he stood by*

<sup>15</sup> Thus, the two angels who arrived at Sodom were Michael and Gabriel; Raphael had completed his mission and departed, and Michael accompanied Gabriel in order to rescue Lot. Michael was not involved in the destruction of Sodom, based on the singular of *הפך* 'destroy' in Gen 19:25. Cf. *Derekh Eretz Rabbah* 4; Raphael is mentioned in Tobit 3:17 as the healer of Tobit's blindness, and is identified as an angel in Tobit 5:4. He later reveals himself to Tobit as 'one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord' (Tobit 12:15) and is also identified with an 'angel of God' (Tobit 12:22). This early tradition of Raphael the angelic healer may be reflected in the missions described in BM 86b.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Goodman 1986, 160–175, esp. 168. Gen 19:3: 'and he made them a feast, and he baked unleavened bread, and they ate.'

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also Philo, *Quaest. Gen.* IV.9; *On Abraham* 118; T. Abr. A 4.4ff and Josephus, *Ant.* I.11.2.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Tg Neofiti Gen 18:8; GenR 48:11; 48:14; LevR 34:8; BM 86b; Tg PsJon Gen 18:8; 19:3; Tan *Vayyera* 11; ExodR 47:5.

*them under the tree, and they ate* (Gen 18:8). Did they really eat? They only appeared like they were eating, removing one (course) after the other.

GenR 48:14 contains the tradition that the angels only pretended to eat in Gen 18:8. It is emphasized that they do not eat in heaven, just as Moses behaved like the angels and did not eat or drink on the mountain in Deut 9:9. However, as the rites of hospitality were important on earth, the angels pretended to eat in front of Abraham in order to preserve the custom.

Thus, it is clear from all the rabbinic sources discussed that the Rabbis emphasize that God followed by three angels visited Abraham, with God appearing to Abraham in Gen 18:1 followed by the visit of the three angels in Gen 18:2. Such exegetical agreement across a range of rabbinic sources of varying date and place of redaction is surprising. One would normally expect to discern different streams of thought within the variety of rabbinic interpretation on a given issue.<sup>19</sup> Having established the angelic nature of Abraham's guests, the Rabbis then expand further on the names and roles of these figures. Again there is broad consensus that the angels were Michael, Gabriel and Raphael with the targumic tradition remaining silent on this issue, perhaps reflecting an early stage in the development of the exegetical process in Targum Neofiti. When it comes to the roles of the three angels, we see a division between Palestinian sources, which claim that Michael's role was to bring the news of Sarah's forthcoming birth, Gabriel's mission was to destroy Sodom, and the role of Raphael was to rescue Lot, and Babylonian sources, where Michael announces the birth of Isaac and Gabriel's mission is to destroy Sodom, but Raphael's role is to heal Abraham following his circumcision. Finally, there is broad agreement that the angels did not eat and either refused Abraham's hospitality, or merely pretended to eat.

### *The Patristic Exegetical Approach to Abraham's Angels*

The three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah and announced the birth of Isaac have been the object of considerable speculation and

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<sup>19</sup> We find different streams of thought on the interpretation of יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי 'my lord' passages, as noted above, but the varieties in argumentation still support the consensus view that God followed by three angels visited Abraham.

theological argumentation in the patristic literature.<sup>20</sup> In the sixth century, Procopius of Gaza summarized the Christian views about the identity of Abraham's guests as follows:

Τοὺς τρεῖς ἄνδρας οἱ μὲν τρεῖς ἀγγέλους φασίν, οἱ δὲ Ἰουδαίζοντες ἓνα μὲν τῶν τριῶν εἶναι λέγουσι τὸν Θεὸν, ἀγγέλους δὲ τοὺς δύο, οἱ δὲ τύπον ἔχειν φασὶ τῆς ἀγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου Τριάδος, πρὸς οὓς εἰρησθαι μοναδικῶς τὸ Κύριε· (*Commentary on Genesis XVIII*; PG 87, 364AB)

Some consider the three men to be three angels, the 'Judaizers' allege that one of them is God and the other two are angels; and there are also those, who suggest that they (the men), who are addressed as 'Lord' in the singular, are a type for the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity.

As we will see in the following, this statement reflects various stages in the development of the exegesis of this passage in the patristic literature.

According to the text of Gen 18:1–3 in the Septuagint:

(18:1) Ὡφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς πρὸς τῇ δρυὶ τῇ Μαμβρη καθημένου αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς θύρας τῆς σκηνῆς αὐτοῦ μεσημβρίας. (18:2) ἀναβλέψας δὲ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ εἶδεν, καὶ ἰδοὺ τρεῖς ἄνδρες εἰστήκεισαν ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ· καὶ ἰδὼν προσέδραμεν εἰς συνάντησιν αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τῆς θύρας τῆς σκηνῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ προσεκύνησεν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν (18:3) καὶ εἶπεν Κύριε, εἰ ἄρα εὗρον χάριν ἐναντίον σου, μὴ παρέλθῃς τὸν παῖδά σου·

(18:1) God revealed himself to him near the oak of Mambre, while he was sitting by the door of his tent at noon. (18:2) And he lifted up his eyes and he saw, behold! Three men stood over him; and as he saw them, he ran to meet them before the door of his tent, and he fell down to the ground to worship. (18:3) And he said, Lord, if I have indeed found grace before you, do not pass by your servant.

Justin Martyr is the earliest source that deals with this episode extensively. In the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, he understands the episode at the oak of Mamre as an appearance of God accompanied by two angels (*Dial.* LVI). The Jewish interlocutors of Justin, however, insist that this passage refers to angels. As Trypho stresses:

ἀλλὰ ὥπτο μὲν αὐτῷ ὁ Θεὸς πρὸ τῆς τῶν τριῶν ὀπτασίας· εἶτα οἱ τρεῖς ἐκεῖνοι, οὓς ἄνδρας ὁ Λόγος ὀνομάζει, ἀγγελιοὶ ἦσαν, δύο μὲν αὐτῶν πεμφθέντες ἐπὶ τὴν Σοδόμων ἀπόλειαν, εἰς δὲ εὐαγγελισόμενος τῇ Σάρρα

<sup>20</sup> The focus of the present analysis is on the eastern tradition of Christianity, where Church Fathers are generally in closer proximity both geographically and linguistically to the main centres of rabbinic Judaism, namely Palestine and Babylonia. Consequently, the main body of the discussed literature consists of works of Church Fathers in Greek and in Syriac. Latin Church Fathers are excluded with the exception of Jerome.

ὅτι τέκνον ἔξει, ἐφ' ᾧ ἐπέεμπετο, <ὸ> καὶ ἀπαρτίσας ἀπήλλακτο (Marcovich 1997)

But God appeared to him before the apparition of the three. Then those three, whom the Scripture calls men, were angels; two of them were sent for the destruction of Sodom, one of them to bring to Sarah the good news, that she would have a child, and as he was sent because of this, he departed after accomplishing it.

Trypho explains to Justin that the three men who visited Abraham, according to the phrasing of the Scripture, were angels and more specifically two of them were given the mission to destroy Sodom, while the third one was sent to announce Isaac's birth and he left after accomplishing his mission. This interpretation can be found *verbatim* in the rabbinic sources, as outlined above. The fact that Trypho, according to Justin, adopts this particular explanation of the angels indicates that this tradition must have been a widespread as well as early exegetical approach to this scriptural passage.

Trypho accepts that God had appeared to Abraham before, but not in this episode of Genesis. Biblical theophanies in general are not rejected altogether by Trypho, but he argues that this passage does not provide any evidence that there is any other God or Lord, as claimed by Justin. According to Trypho's exegetical approach, the angel who was sent to announce Isaac's birth and is called 'Lord' by Abraham cannot be identified with God.

However, Justin maintains on account of other scriptural references that only God the Father and Christ can be addressed as 'Lord.' Justin consequently applies all references to 'Lord' in Genesis 18 to God, so also when Abraham is trying to persuade God, the 'Lord,' not to destroy Sodom. Furthermore, he applies Ps 110:1 (LXX: 109:1) and Ps 45:5–8 (LXX: 44:4–8) in order to emphasize the scriptural evidence. Justin argues that it is God who speaks to Abraham later, when Isaac is born, thus keeping His promise to return in one year when the announcement of Isaac's birth would have been fulfilled (Gen 21:9–12). Justin believes, finally, that there is another Lord subject to the Father, who is also called an Angel, because he announces God's plans.<sup>21</sup>

Justin's argumentation aims to prove Christ's pre-existence through the biblical theophanies. The interpretation of biblical theophanies as

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<sup>21</sup> See D. Hannah: 'this title (ἄγγελος) was more indicative of function than ontology' (Hannah 1999, 202 cf. 205). Cf. Gieschen 1998, 214.

manifestations of the Son depends on a transcendental understanding of God the Father. So, Christ is attributed, among other functions, with the role of God's messenger. As Justin stresses, God the Father 'dwells ever in the super celestial places, invisible to all men' (*Dial.* XLVI). Consequently, all divine appearances in the Scripture have to be understood christologically. According to D. Trakatellis, 'the concept of the pre-existence of Christ functions as an exegetical guide. At the same time it becomes the object and the purpose of the exegesis of the theophanic texts because of theological and apologetic reasons. Justin appropriates for the Son all the appellations used in the corresponding passages of Gen 18–19: θεός, κύριος, ἄγγελος, ἀνήρ. A fundamental exegetical method in order to establish his Christological interpretation of the theophanies' (Trakatellis 1976, 67).

Irenaeus of Lyon, in the late second century, follows Justin's theophanic interpretation very closely. In *Demonstrations* 44 he maintains that Abraham talked with God by the oak of Mamre, in accordance with the scriptural phrase: 'God appeared unto him by the oak of Mamre.' He explains the identity of the three visitors as two angels and the Son of God. The two angels were sent to destroy Sodom; Abraham, however, conversed with the Lord in human form, the Son of God. So, according to Irenaeus of Lyon: 'So Abraham was a prophet and saw what was to come to pass in the future, the Son of God in human form that He was to speak with men, and eat food with them, and then to bring down judgement from the Father...' (ebd, see Smith 1952, 76).

Irenaeus also explains elsewhere that the biblical theophanies were manifestations of the Son (cf. *Adversus Haereses* IV.7.4 and IV.10.1). According to this tradition of interpretation, all divine appearances in human form were actually manifestations of the Son. Furthermore, Irenaeus claims that the 'Jews departed from God in not receiving His Word' although 'God spoke evidently in human shape with Abraham.' God the Father was actually teaching in the Scripture about the advent of His Son, foretelling the Salvation (*Adv.Haer.* IV.10.1). In the same passage, Irenaeus stresses that created beings, such as the angels, serve and are subject to the pre-existent Son (*Adv.Haer.* IV.7.4).

Similarly, Eusebius, in the beginning of the fourth century, explains the episode with the three angels as another example of theophany. It is proven because Abraham, although he sees a 'man,' worships him as a God, falling down immediately and addressing him as 'Lord, the judge of all earth' (Gen 18:25). Additionally, Eusebius points out, as did

Justin earlier, that when the two angels leave for Sodom, the biblical text mentions that 'Abraham was still standing before the Lord' (Gen 18:22). Accordingly, when there is an explicit reference to 'Lord' appearing in the Scripture it is understood to refer to Christ and it is considered as evidence for the pre-existence of Christ (*Church History* 15.1).<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Eusebius regards Abraham as a prophet, in particular, because he converses with the Lord about the upcoming destruction of Sodom, a decision which could not be attributed to angels or ministering spirits, but only to God. Further, Eusebius applies a transcendental understanding of God the Father, similar to that of Justin, and he argues that it would be impious to think that God the Father would put on the form and shape of a man (*Evangelical Demonstrations* 5.9).

Interestingly enough, Eusebius testifies that there exists a sacred place where it is believed that Abraham met the angels and that there is also an image of the angels there, and 'he in the midst surpasses them in honour.' Eusebius understands this person to be, of course, Christ (ebd.). In the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius even records the building of a Church at Mamre, as ordered by the emperor Constantine, to commemorate the apparition of Christ accompanied by two angels at this very place. The building of the Church on this spot was considered by Constantine to be of major importance, as a pagan altar had been built in the same place, which needed to be destroyed as it defiled the sanctity of the place (*Vit. Const.* III.53).

Origen in his *Fourth Homily on Genesis* explicitly states that Abraham provided a meal for the Lord and the angels. This statement is christologically understood. Origen connects the washing of the feet of Abraham's guests with the relevant New Testament episode in John 13:6. According to Origen, Abraham performed this gesture because 'he knew that the mysteries of the Lord were not to be completed except in the washing of the feet' (ebd., see Heine 1982, 105).

A christological interpretation based on the New Testament was brought forward also by Jerome. Jerome, in his *Commentary on Daniel* II.7.15–16, emphasizes that the men were angels accompanying Christ, according to John 8:56: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Eusebius, *Eclogae Propheticae* I; *Commentarius in Isaiam*, PG 23, col. 952; See Miller 1984, esp. 124.

of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.<sup>23</sup> However, John does not explicitly associate this statement with Genesis 18.

Another common point in the patristic literature is that Abraham received these revelations of God because he was perfect. There are certain patriarchs who according to the Church Fathers were worthy of theophanies. According to Eusebius, it is the 'divine men' who see the Logos, as testified also in 1 John 1:1 (*Ecl.Proph.* I). According to Origen, Abraham's merit and prophetic vocation made him worthy of receiving God and his angels as guests, while Lot was worthy only of having the angels as guests (*Hom.Gen.* IV).

Abraham's hospitality is much discussed in the patristic sources and he is described as a model for the ideal treatment of guests. His generous hospitality was another proof of his exceptional character. The sharing of food by his divine guests, and especially by the accompanying angels who have accepted his hospitality, posed a problem however, because it contradicted common beliefs on the nature of the angels. Accordingly, the Church Fathers stressed that the angels did not really eat, but only 'appeared' or 'pretended' to eat, as they also appeared as men but they only 'pretended' to be men. This tradition is common especially in the Antiochean tradition. Theodoret of Cyrrihus in his *Commentary on Daniel* XI mentions that Abraham encountered the angels as men and conversed with them as with men. Earlier, Justin stated that 'the angels are nourished in heavens and cannot be nourished by food similar to that which human use.' Justin understands the description of the angels eating as an allegorical mode of expression (*Dial.* LVII).

On the other hand, there was no difficulty in accepting that the Lord did eat, as He also did when he was incarnated. The nature of the angels and the question of their partaking of food were also the subject of docetic speculations. According to Pseudo-Athanasius, the Manicheans argued that as the angels were invited by Abraham to eat, they only pretended to eat, as this would not have been appropriate for their nature and the same was true for Christ. Pseudo-Athanasius opposes the idea that the angels only appeared like men but they were not men, while Jesus had a human body and was indeed a man (*Confutationes Quarundam Propositionum*, PG 28, cols 1377ff).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> D. Hannah (1999, 112) suggests that the patristic exegetical tradition in general on the interpretation of Abraham's visitors as the Lord and the angels 'may have begun in the first century for the Fourth Gospel records Jesus' claim that he had previously revealed himself to Abraham (John 8:56).'

<sup>24</sup> See Thunberg 1966, 562.

The same interpretation of this episode can also be found in the Cappadocean (Basil of Caesarea, *Adversus Eunomium*, Lib.V), the Antiochian and the Syriac exegetical traditions. An interesting development of this interpretation can be found in the writing of John Chrysostom and in the writings of Syriac Fathers, such as Ephrem and Ishodad of Merv. According to John Chrysostom, God came in human form to Mamre in the company of angels (*Hom.Gen.* LVIII.11–12). John Chrysostom reads in this episode a revelation of Christ in the shape of man to Abraham regarding His divine and redemptive mysteries (*Spuria Contra Theatra*, PG 56, col. 564). Ephrem the Syrian explains that God revealed Himself to Abraham in one of the three angels and Abraham fell down and worshipped him (*Comm.Gen.* XV.1). According to Ishodad of Merv, in his *Commentary on Genesis*, God's appearance to Abraham was a prefiguration of Christ's coming. The meaning of this theophany was that God would reveal himself in human nature through Christ at the end. The two angels accompanied God not just to honour him and to show that they are ministers to His majesty, but also in order to demonstrate that angels accompany Our Saviour during His salvation economy. Abraham called God 'Lord' first of all because of his majestic and glorious appearance and also because the angels were standing in reverence in front of God (Vosté- van den Eynde 1955, 171f). As we observed, the christological exegetical approach of Genesis 18 was prominent in patristic tradition. A Trinitarian interpretation, which appeared from the fourth century onwards, became also very influential. Cyril of Alexandria in *Contra Julianum* I establishes that the episode at Mamre was a revelation of the Holy Trinity and accordingly Abraham, although he saw three persons, addressed them as if they were one. The three men also talked as one person. Abraham was therefore aware of the mysteries of the Trinitarian nature of God. Thus, it appears that the Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 18 can be found not earlier than the fifth century. A similar interpretation can be found as late as the seventh century. Maximus the Confessor notes that Abraham was taught the Trinity in the unity, as God appeared to him as three and conversed to Him as one (*Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 28). As Thunberg notes: 'the fact that Abraham addressed his guests as one person (...) is the basis of the Christological and Trinitarian interpretations of Gen 18' (Thunberg 1966, 562).

In the *Anonymous Dialogue with Jews*, a text edited by J.H. Declerck in 1994, of possible Egyptian provenance and dating to the sixth century, Abraham saw God appearing as three men, which is a self-evident truth of the Trinitarian presence of God, who is one God but perceived

as three persons. Accordingly, Abraham addresses the three persons as one, but at the same time he is also taught through this appearance about the difference between the three. According to this text, another proof of the divine presence was that Abraham washed the feet of his visitors, an honour which would not have been appropriate for angels. Furthermore, it is revealing in this text that Abraham orders Sarah to take three measurements of flour to bake bread that is hidden. Here the author makes a pun on the word *ἐγκρυφίας* meaning 'bread baked covered in ashes' and *κρυφίας* meaning 'hidden.' The meaning of this is that the teachings about the Trinity are difficult to accept and need to be hidden for the time being, but there will come a time in the world when they will be preached to everybody.

The interpretation of the episode of Mamre as a revelation apparition of the pre-incarnate Christ accompanied by two angels was widely accepted in the patristic literature. The Trinitarian interpretation, which regarded this episode as a symbol for the Holy Trinity, became more prominent in the later exegetical tradition. Cyril of Alexandria understood in this passage a prefiguration of the Trinity and similarly also the author of the *Anonymous Dialogue with Jews* and later Maximus the Confessor. This approach takes its starting point from the fact that Abraham addressed his guests as 'Lord' and in singular, thus hinting at the mystery of the Trinity whose nature is one.

A number of scholars, such as Thunberg (1966, 567) and Trakatellis (1976, 66ff), believe that the Christian Trinitarian interpretation of the episode at Mamre may have been influenced by Philo. In Philo's treatise *On Abraham* 121, we read that 'Abraham believed that his guests were some of the prophets or of the angels who have changed their spiritual and soul-like essence and assumed the appearance of men.' But Philo later observed that the actual truth is that 'the one in the middle is the Father of the Universe, and the beings on each side are those most ancient powers which are always close to living God, one of which is called his creative power, and the other his royal power.' So, the two accompanying visitors—although being angels—represent aspects of God Himself.

If we consider Procopius' statement quoted at the beginning of this section, the interpretation of the episode at Mamre as a revelation of the Trinity was well established by the sixth century, while the idea that the visitors were the Lord and the angels was attributed to 'Judaisers,' possibly because of an alleged rejection of the Trinity. The interpretation of this passage served from its early exegesis very specific christological

purposes and intentions. It was based on a close and consistent reading of the Scripture based on certain exegetical principles, including the interpretation of the use of the word 'Lord' in the singular, the introductory sentence of the passage: 'God revealed himself to Abraham' and Abraham's reverence towards the Lord. These principles were accepted and applied by almost the entire patristic exegetical tradition. It is interesting to note finally that Church Fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyon refer explicitly to the Jews departing from God for not accepting self-evident truths of the Scripture, such as the revelation of God's Word, the Son, to Abraham.

The Church Fathers, as illustrated by Justin and others, show knowledge of Jewish traditions in their exegetical approaches to this scriptural passage, which they accept or reject depending on their exegetical intentions. The exegetical traditions on Gen 18:1–3 interpret Abraham's guests as the appearance of God's Word in human shape accompanied by two angels. These traditions aimed to prove the pre-existence of Christ, who was the agent of the theophanic revelations to the Patriarch. This idea was later modified into the revelation of the Mystery of the Trinity. The polemical tone applied by Irenaeus proves that this exegetical issue was a crucial theological matter of concern for the Great Church and possibly also a matter of open controversy with the Jewish communities.

### *The Exegetical Encounter*

Having outlined rabbinic and patristic thought on Abraham's Angels, we now turn to the question: is this an exegetical encounter? An encounter is here defined as *an exegetical tradition which appears to show awareness of, or a response to, a tradition from the other faith group*. This can either be reflected by borrowing (not necessarily consciously), or through polemic and apologetic. The nature of an exegetical encounter is much discussed in the secondary literature (e.g. Hirshman 1996; Kessler 2004; Reuling 2006; Stemberger 1996), as they are rarely explicitly signposted in the Jewish and Christian literature of Late Antiquity. Indeed, in the majority of cases the actual means by which awareness of another group's exegetical tradition has developed is unknown. Some possibilities include: general knowledge of a subject of controversy between the two groups; perhaps an actual dialogue (if the social context can be established and allows for this as a possibility);

or knowledge of oral traditions. The existence of exegetical encounters in rabbinic and patristic literature suggests that Jewish and Christian exegetes were involved in an ongoing debate (although not necessarily direct dialogue) over the 'true' interpretation of Scripture.

A significant consideration in the search for encounters is the relationship of a tradition to the biblical text. In other words, it is essential that we consider whether an interpretation may simply represent a logical interpretation following from the biblical verses. By addressing this question at the forefront of the analysis, we can avoid the problem of reading too much into parallel ideas in the rabbinic and patristic literature.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Genesis 18–19, we have already noted in detail the ambiguity caused by the biblical text (both MT and LXX) in terms of the identity of Abraham's visitors. As such, the nature and identity of the guests in rabbinic and patristic tradition is not simply a logical conclusion from the text, but a matter of interpretation. It is true that one of the main aims of the Rabbis and Church Fathers was the attempt to resolve difficulties caused by the biblical text, but what is of interest for the encounter is the theological perspective they emphasize in doing so (see below).

Even if an interpretation is found in both the work of the Church Fathers and the Rabbis, it is possible that the commentators may have developed their exegesis from an earlier set of traditions. In other words, an encounter may not really have occurred, as the interpretation could have been reached independently by the Jewish and Christian commentators through the use of a source that is held in common, such as the apocryphal or pseudepigraphical literature.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, in the case of interpretation of Genesis 18–19, it is likely that rabbinic traditions regarding Abraham's angels were influenced by or represent a development of earlier Jewish tradition. The rabbinic interpretations discussed clearly have precursors in earlier Jewish sources. For example, the identification of the three 'men' of Genesis 18 as angels is also found in Josephus, *Ant.* I.11.2, where it states that 'Abraham, while sitting beside the oak of Mambré before the door of his court-yard, espied three angels, and, taking them for strangers, arose and saluted

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<sup>25</sup> The 'problem' of parallels has been extensively discussed in the secondary literature e.g. Kessler 2004, 9–10 and in this volume Alexander 2009, 1–30.

<sup>26</sup> Although scholars are in dispute over the extent to which these texts were circulated within both groups (Davila 2005).

them and invited them to lodge with him and partake of his hospitality' (Thackeray 1967, 97). The visitors later reveal themselves to Abraham as angels of God. K. P. Sullivan has outlined the Second Temple literature on this theme and notes that from the evidence, 'it seemed probable that most interpreters in that period understood these "men" to be angels' (Sullivan 2004, 182; cf. Loader 1990). There is thus a potential basis in pre-rabbinic tradition for the rabbinic insistence that God was not one of the three visitors offered hospitality by Abraham. We can also find pre-rabbinic parallels for the missions assigned to each angel. For example, Josephus, *Ant.* I.11.2 records of the angels that: 'they could maintain dissimulation no longer but confessed themselves messengers of God, of whom one had been sent to announce the news of the child and the other two to destroy Sodom' (Thackeray 1967, 99).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the fact that the angels do not eat was a widespread tradition found, for example, in Philo, *Quaest. Gen.* IV.9; *On Abraham* 118; and Josephus, *Ant.* I.11.2. Similarly, the Christian Trinitarian interpretation of the episode at Mamre might have been influenced by Philo, *On Abraham* 121, as discussed above.

How does this affect the possibility of encounter? In the first instance it seems improbable that there would ever be just one influence on the development of a tradition and so the existence of earlier parallels does not automatically negate the possibility of encounter with exegesis of the 'Other,' especially if there is a compelling argument in favour of such an encounter. In other words, it is perfectly possible that a rabbinic tradition could be influenced by both earlier Jewish tradition *and* Christian exegesis, and vice versa. Also, there does not have to be a single aim or use of the exegesis as the process of transmission makes clear. A particular tradition can be re-used and developed over time for different needs whether that be internal teaching or instruction of a more polemic or apologetic nature.

In terms of an encounter between the rabbinic and patristic exegesis of Genesis 18–19, a possible (not exclusive) motivation is that the rabbinic emphasis on the identification of the 'men' as angels and their specific roles in the Sodom and Gomorrah story represents a refutation of the patristic tradition that the three 'men' represent the pre-incarnate

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<sup>27</sup> Although a close similarity between the rabbinic sources and Josephus can be seen, the tradition in Josephus does contrast with rabbinic tradition in details, as the rabbinic sources we have examined describe individual missions for the angels, and in particular only the angel Gabriel is said to destroy Sodom.

Christ and two angels, or the later idea that they represent the Trinity. In particular, where the biblical text refers to a 'lord' this is understood by the Rabbis to refer to one of the named angels, or God as distinct from the three angels, in contradistinction to the patristic viewpoint that 'lord' refers to a person of the Godhead as represented by the three 'men.' What makes this a strong possibility of encounter is the surprising unanimity evidenced in the rabbinic interpretations on the identity of Abraham's visitors, in combination with the fact that this would clearly have been a controversial theological issue between Rabbis and Church Fathers likely to provoke a response.

Darrell Hannah has drawn attention to the parallels that exist between rabbinic and Christian exegesis of 'Angel of the Lord' passages, such as in Genesis 18–19 (Hannah 1999, 111–114). However, although Hannah states that 'One cannot, then, rule out the possibility that the Rabbinic and Christian interpretations of these OT מלאך יהוה passages are in some way related' (Hannah 1999, 113), he goes on to dismiss the obvious parallels between the two traditions, and especially with that of Justin Martyr, for two main reasons. First, he states that the rabbinic texts are free of polemic, which would be expected if the מלאך יהוה interpretations, including the angels at Mamre, were a response to Christian claims. Secondly, and more particularly, Michael, and the other angels, are not named by Justin even though he records other aspects of Jewish tradition, and so 'he provides no evidence that he knew of the Michael identification' (Hannah 1999, 113).<sup>28</sup> As a result of these objections, Hannah states that 'it seems best to conclude then that the two tendencies are probably independent of each other' (Hannah 1999, 114). These objections are easy to counter. First of all, it is the nature of rabbinic polemic to be implicit rather than openly aggressive (cf. Alexander 1992a, 1–25; Alexander 2009, 4–5). Secondly, Hannah's objection that Justin did not know the names of the angels is based on the assumption that the Jewish tradition of naming the angels is early, when it could in fact be a counter-response to the pre-incarnate Christ as one of Abraham's three visitors. The fact that Targum Neofiti does not name the angels supports the possibility

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah also rejects a connection on the basis that Justin did not equate Michael with Jesus in the passages under discussion, but this point was related to his argument considering Michael traditions as a background for Christology.

that the names were introduced at a later stage. Even Hannah admits, earlier in his argument, that 'Trypho, and through him Justin, may have been familiar with an earlier form of the tradition contained in bBM 86b and GenR 50.2, one to which the names of Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael were not yet attached' (Hannah 1999, 113).

Thus, the evidence presented here illustrates several strong points of exegetical encounter and evidence of potential dialectic between Jewish and Christian exegesis. First, we have the universal distinction in rabbinic sources between God and the three angels, which may represent in the first instance an alternative to the patristic exegesis that the three 'men' were either the pre-incarnate Christ and two angels (as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Eusebius), or, later, an alternative to the Trinitarian interpretation (as Cyril of Alexandria and Maximus Confessor). The naming of the angels, first found in Genesis Rabbah, may represent consolidation of the rabbinic position that all three 'men' were angels. As part of this general approach, we also have the interpretation of **יְיָ** passages in Genesis 18–19 to refer to either one of the named angels or to God separately from the three angels, again stressing that the three angels are not divine beings. The emphasis on this stream of thought brings to mind Philip Alexander's 'pre-emptive exegesis'; the attempt to exclude potentially heretical ideas by emphasizing a particularly rabbinic tradition (Alexander 1992b). The ambiguity created by the biblical text in the verses discussed here may also have led to the possibility of encounter, as the verses are more open to interpretation and as such 'heretical' ideas—who and what was the role of **יְיָ** 'my lord' in the Sodom and Gomorrah stories?

The encounter is particularly strong with Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* as not only is the identity of Abraham's visitors discussed, but we find further points of awareness of Jewish tradition. The common rabbinic idea that the angels had a specific mission is found in the words of Trypho, along with the fact that once the first angel had completed his mission of announcing Sarah's forthcoming birth, he returned to heaven and therefore only two angels went on to Sodom. We can see that all the key points of Jewish tradition are described by Trypho, but the encounter is further compounded by the fact that Justin goes on to explain that actually God was one of the three visitors. Thus, first, the rabbinic tradition is represented accurately, but is then refuted by Justin. The fact that Justin refers to the rabbinic tradition without the names of the angels could suggest that he knew an early version of the tradition, such as found in Targum Neofiti, in which the angels were

not named.<sup>29</sup> Finally, that the nature and actions of Abraham's visitors was a topic of discussion in both rabbinic and patristic traditions is highlighted by the controversies over the angels consuming the meal prepared by Abraham.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. discussion on the relationship between Michael traditions in rabbinic teachings and Christology in Christian writings (Stuckenbruck 1995, Hannah 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Bowker 1969, 211.

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KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY?  
JACOB AND HIS ARAMEAN HERITAGE ACCORDING TO  
JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN SOURCES

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In an article on the biblical Jacob Cycle, Michael Fishbane argues that ‘the first preserved interpretations of the narratives dealing with the patriarch Jacob are already textured into various biblical reflections on the moral and historical relations found in the Cycle’ (Fishbane 1975, 15). He also notes that ‘because Jacob was Israel, every reading of the particular life history of Jacob could be deepened by a national reading of the same contents.’ Fishbane relates this to the well known allegorization of the Jacob–Esau relationship seen in later biblical interpretations, where Jacob represents the Jewish people and Esau Rome and Christianity (*ibid.*).<sup>1</sup>

On the specific theme within the Cycle of the wooing of Rebekah and Rachel, Fishbane remarks, ‘the factor of ethnic continuity is thus built into the text as a primary element and, as we noted, was a motivational factor in Rebekka’s ploy to convince Isaac to send Jacob to Aram.’ He also speaks of a ‘concern with ethnic continuity and purity’ and ‘the fear of intercourse with the uncircumcised Philistines and Shechemites in Gen. 26 and 34 (...)’ (Fishbane 1975, 35–36). However, it may be that the biblical writer or editor was more concerned for endogamy than fearful of uncircumcision, given that the menfolk in Laban’s family were not circumcised either.

Another aspect of the Jacob Cycle brought out by Fishbane is the ‘binary geographical pairings’ of the Jacob Cycle in the Hebrew Bible, namely profane space/exile versus sacred space/homeland. This is marked by Jacob’s ‘encounter with the divine at a border shrine,’ at

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<sup>1</sup> More recently Carol Bakhos (2007, 250–62) has argued against what she sees as ‘an overly determined reading of Esau in rabbinic literature,’ ‘retroactively imput[ing] an understanding of Esau as Rome to most, if not all, references to Esau in the vast sweep of rabbinic literature as if he always represented Rome’ (261), but though this is a helpful corrective to a blanket and polarising identification, Fishbane’s argument still stands.

Bethel and then on his return at Mahanaim, where angels appear to him (Fishbane 1975, 36).

In rabbinic Judaism these stories were already part of a narrative of nationhood, since according to Scripture Jacob was named Israel by God himself, and was the ancestor of the Jewish people. Less obviously, some outside the Jewish fold also felt a strong connection to the Jacob Cycle. Syriac Christians from northern Mesopotamia had good reason to feel an affinity to the land of Paddan-aram and its language, and the city of Haran was still very much in their midst. A number of questions deserve examination: how these two groups regarded the narrative within their own tradition; to what extent it shaped a concept of ethnicity or identity for them; how far they interpreted features of the story in accordance with the ideals of their own group; and their views of the various protagonists.

The key texts surveyed are Genesis Rabbah; the Palestinian targum tradition represented by Neofiti and the Fragmentary Targum; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan; and the Genesis commentary of St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE). These all derive roughly from the period of the late fourth to early sixth centuries, a significant period in the formation of both Palestinian rabbinic Judaism and Syriac Christianity. Obviously, targum is more difficult to date precisely, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan undoubtedly includes later, Babylonian features,<sup>2</sup> but its frequent links with Palestinian targum and its expansive aggadic nature make it worth including. Genesis Rabbah along with the Palestinian targum on the one hand, and Ephrem's commentary on the other, may reflect the respective geographical perspectives of the writers or editors as they consider the land of Paddan-aram. While Ephrem is a Christian, it has long been acknowledged that his surviving prose commentaries have been strongly influenced by Jewish aggadah in terms of both method and content.<sup>3</sup> So his interpretive choices may be telling.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Kaufman 1994:124–25, who states that ‘careless writers have long mistakenly labelled Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch a Palestinian Targum (...) Most workers in the field, though, have recognized the composite nature of that document—a kind of compote of Onqelos, the Palestinian Targum, midrashim and even the Babylonian Targum, a compote in terms of both language and content; a document, therefore, post-talmudic in date at the very earliest, in spite of the presence of admittedly early traditions within it.’

<sup>3</sup> See the foundational article by Sebastian Brock 1979, esp. 225–32.

*Jews and Arameans*

In his book *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (1994), Sacha Stern notes the rabbis' tendency to use the term 'Aramean' to mean 'non-Jew.' He notes that 'Arameans are never described as an ethnic group with a distinct identity of their own' (Stern 1994, 17–18 and n. 111). However, in GenR 74:14 there is rabbinic recognition of the importance of the Aramaic/Syriac language. In a comment on Laban's naming of the pillar at Mizpah in Gen 31:47, R. Samuel b. Nahman admonishes his hearers not to think lightly of the 'Syrian' language, סורסי, for God pays honour to it by using it in the Torah, Prophets and Writings (i.e. in Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Dan 2:4ff).

Significantly, Syriac Christians in the early period, who were essentially Arameans by language and geography, developed two distinct vocalizations of the word ܐܪܡܝܐ to mean either 'Aramean' (*Aramaya*) or 'pagan' (*Armaya*).<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the vocalized text of the Peshitta New Testament, Timothy's father and Titus are described as *Armaye*, not Greeks (Acts 16:1, 3; Gal 2:3), and several times in the Acts and Epistles Jews and *Armaye*, 'Gentiles,' are contrasted.<sup>5</sup> In Luke 4:27 Naaman is described as an *Armaya*, apparently meaning 'Gentile, pagan.' However, this word renders ὁ Σύρος in the original Greek of Luke, so it may have originally been vocalized as *Aramaya* meaning an ethnic Aramean before it took on a specifically religious connotation. Later authors are aware of the ambiguity of the term 'Aramean.' Hence Ephrem speaks of Laban the ܐܪܡܝܐ, the pagan, instead of Laban the Aramean (*Comm.Gen.* XXVII.3).<sup>6</sup>

Stern comments on the polar opposition of Jews and the nations in rabbinic literature, describing it as 'vividly impersonated by the biblical figures of Jacob and Esau,' (Stern 1994, 18). He argues that just as the rabbis equate biblical Israel with contemporary Jews, rabbinic literature also fails 'to distinguish between the non-Jews of the Bible and those of

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Sokoloff suggests two different vocalizations for ארמא in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, corresponding to the distinction found both in Syriac and in Targum Aramaic of Onkelos and Jonathan, but admits that it cannot be proved for Babylonian Jewish Aramaic (Sokoloff 2002, 169).

<sup>5</sup> Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; Acts 19:10, 17; 20:21; Rom 1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:9; 10:12; 1 Cor 1:22–24; 10:32; 12:13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mark 7:26, where the Syrophoenician woman who accosts Jesus is said to be ܐܪܡܝܐ, 'pagan,' since the corresponding Greek Ἑλληνική must refer to her religious outlook, not to her race.

their contemporary reality' (Stern 1994, 20). (Of course, this is also very common in the other direction, where Christian anti-Jewish literature portrays Jews as found in the pages of the Old and New Testaments). The rabbis also assume that all non-Jews are wicked and halakhically suspect of major offences such as murder, adultery and idolatry (Stern 1994, 18–21 [on Jacob and Esau], 22–29 [on the non-Jews as wicked: murder, sexual offences, *avodah zarah*], 29–30 [on theft, lies, corruption]).

The attitude described by Stern is illustrated well by the sources under examination, where it is back-projected into the Genesis story, for instance in the margin to Tg Neofiti Gen 24:31. Here Laban tells Eliezer on his arrival that he has emptied his house of idolatry, sexual misconduct and the shedding of innocent blood.<sup>7</sup> (Later in the story, according to Tg PsJon Gen 28:20, Jacob prays that the Memra of the Lord will protect him from precisely those three abominations). According to Tg PsJon Gen 24:33, the food that is placed before Eliezer in Laban's house contains poison, but Eliezer senses this and insists on completing his mission of betrothal before he eats, thus saving himself. Instead, it is Laban's father Bethuel who eats the poisoned food and dies (Tg PsJon Gen 24:55). The idea of poison in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan may derive from a play on the word **שׁוּמ**<sup>8</sup> and the word for a drug, **סׁס** (cf. Aramaic **סמא**), and also from the desire to portray Laban's household (and thus non-Jews generally) as negatively as possible. In contrast, according to GenR 60:12 Bethuel does die suddenly in the night, but there is no mention of poison. The tradition of his sudden death presumably arose to explain why only Rebekah's mother and brother were mentioned in Gen 24:55 and not Bethuel, but Targum Pseudo-Jonathan provides a harsher interpretation for his absence.

In GenR 70:13–14, Laban is depicted as 'frisking' Jacob for his possessions while pretending to embrace him. When Jacob turns out to be poor, Laban hints that he will crush him. Laban is also identified with another family member, Kemuel (Gen 22:21), whose name is explained as meaning that he rose up against the people of God (GenR 57:4).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A briefer version occurs in GenR 60:7, Tg Neofiti and Tg PsJon Gen 24:31, where Laban only mentions his removal of the idol cult.

<sup>8</sup> The Qere: the Ketiv is **שׁוּשׁ**.

<sup>9</sup> R. Judan and R. Judah bar Simon in name of R. Joshua: Uz is Laban who is Kemuel, because he rose against the people of God (**שקם על אומתו של אל**).

How far are such depictions of Laban a portrayal of an individual villain and how far do they represent a caricature of the archetypal treacherous non-Jew? Moreover, how could such a man be the brother of the women who were destined to be the mothers of the nation? By presenting Laban and his family in such a negative light, Jewish exegetes created a problem for themselves which they were also quick to resolve.

### *Rebekah*

The biblical formulation describing Rebekah as ‘a virgin, whom no man had known’ (Gen 24:16) is taken in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and one strand of Genesis Rabbah as meaning that she was both a virgin in the conventional sense and that no man had had any other form of intercourse with her either (Tg PsJon Gen 24:16 and GenR 60:5). This must be read in the light of Resh Lakish’s allegation that the daughters of the heathens indulged in unnatural sexual acts while preserving their technical virginity, unlike Rebekah who was pure in both respects (GenR 60:5; cf. Teugels 2004, 201).<sup>10</sup> So, despite Rebekah’s immoral peer group, she herself was untainted, and thus fit to be Isaac’s bride. However, in spite of R. Johanan and Resh Lakish’s negative view of ‘Aramean’ morality, a passage further on in GenR 70:12 says that when the men of Haran saw Jacob kiss Rachel at the well, the men of Haran were worried that Jacob had come to introduce immorality among them, because—says the midrash—after the Flood the nations of the world had been careful not to act in an immoral fashion: ‘this shows that the people of the East keep themselves from sexual impropriety.’ So the attitude towards non-Jews in Genesis Rabbah is not entirely negative.

Going back to the difficulties of Rebekah’s kinship, in Tg Neofiti (text and margin) and Tg PsJon Gen 24:60 Laban and Rebekah’s mother address her, ‘Until now you have been our sister: now you are going away to be married to a just man.’ There is no textual warrant for such a change, and it is as though Rebekah is severing her dubious family connections and becoming part of the righteous offspring of Abraham,

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<sup>10</sup> Lieve Teugels’ study includes two chapters on Rebekah’s virginity and its discussion in halakhah and aggadah covering the concept of the *mukat ez* (i.e. a girl whose hymen has been ruptured by injury rather than intercourse) and Rebekah’s age at betrothal (Teugels 2004, 193–226).

as one manuscript of the Fragmentary Targum tradition more or less states.<sup>11</sup> At the very time of her arrival in Canaan, according to Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan (Gen 24:62–63), Isaac is just leaving the Beit Ha-Midrash of Shem the Great and praying in the countryside, like a good rabbinic Jewish husband-to-be. In Tg PsJon Gen 24:67, Rebekah is transformed into the good rabbinic Jewish wife: as she enters the tent that had belonged to Sarah, the lamp there that had been extinguished at Sarah's death relights. Isaac loves her because her deeds are as righteous as those of his mother. A similar comparison of the virtues of Sarah and Rebekah can be found in GenR 60:16. Here it seems to be the overall agenda of the compilers of Genesis Rabbah that dictates the midrash: Isaac and Rebekah are held up as moral exemplars to contemporary Jewish readers (Teugels 2004, 190).

### *Rachel*

In the next generation, though Rachel has the misfortune to have Laban as brother and guardian, midrash takes a positive attitude to her general situation. Thus R. Simon b. Gamaliel compares Rachel's neighbourhood favourably with that of Zipporah and her sisters in GenR 70:11: whereas the seven Midianite girls were molested by the shepherds at the well, no one touched Rachel even though she was alone, because 'the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him and he delivers them' (Ps 34:8). Does R. Simon mean that the locality of Haran is morally superior to Midian?<sup>12</sup>

Jewish treatments of Gen 29:10, where Jacob rolls the stone away from the well, focus on the feat of strength involved. So in Tg PsJon Gen 29:10, Jacob demonstrates his status by moving the heavy stone from the well using only one hand while according to R. Johanan in GenR 70:12, he removes it as easily as a stopper from a phial. Similarly, in Ephrem Jacob betroths Rachel to God by the wonder of heroically removing the stone from the well. However, in contrast to the Jewish

<sup>11</sup> MS 110 reads at Gen 24:60, 'Our sister, you are leaving us to be joined to just men, and you are a just woman'.

<sup>12</sup> Neusner (1995, 111) goes so far to imply that Aram/Haran can be seen as a 'Jewish neighbourhood,' and thus a safe area, whereas R. Simon seems to suggest only that the locals are godfearing.

sources, Jacob is said to perform this feat through the agency of the Son of God who was hidden within that stone.<sup>13</sup>

Jacob's next action in the biblical text is to kiss Rachel. This is problematic for both Jewish sources and Ephrem, as it suggests impropriety on Jacob's part.<sup>14</sup> Thus R. Tanḥuma in GenR 70:12 defends him by pointing out that it is acceptable to kiss one's kin. In contrast, Ephrem interprets the kiss as demonstrating that by this action Jacob married Rachel (*Comm.Gen.* XXVII.1). This is a crucial point for Ephrem's interpretation of the story for Christian consumption, because it means that effectively Jacob is already married to Rachel when he is tricked into marrying her sister. Therefore, Jacob did not willingly become polygamous.

The closest point of comparison to Ephrem on this betrothal of Rachel to God at the well occurs in the scene in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan between Eliezer and Rebekah at the well. In what is actually a betrothal by proxy, Gen 24:22 describes Eliezer presenting Rebekah with a gold ring. Whereas in the other targumim to Gen 24:22 this ring is translated as אֶשְׂרָא, in Tg PsJon Gen 24:22 it is compared to the coin offered by each Israelite male for the building of the sanctuary in Exod 38:26. Eliezer also gives her two gold bracelets which both Tg PsJon Gen 24:22 and GenR 60:6 compare to the weight of the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments (R. Huna in the name of R. Joseph). Thus, by their betrothal, the two matriarchs, Rachel in Ephrem and Rebekah in Jewish tradition, are brought out of paganism to join the people of God.

### *Leah*

As one of the matriarchs, Leah also is presented positively in Jewish sources. The biblical description of her eyes as רְכוּת (Gen 29:17), perhaps 'weak' or 'delicate,' is interpreted as a sign of her moral rectitude. She believes that as the elder sister she is obliged to marry Jacob's elder brother Esau, and her eyes are blurred from weeping in supplication to God to prevent this match (R. Johanan in GenR 70:16, Palestinian targumim and Tg PsJon Gen 29:17). For Ephrem, Leah's appearance

<sup>13</sup> For Syriac writers, stones, حِجَارَة, in the biblical text often become symbols of Christ or the Church: see Murray 1975, 205–38.

<sup>14</sup> As noted above, according to GenR 70:12 the men of Haran are shocked by the act.

is not a problem, although he says that her ugliness is the reason why no one else had married her during the seven years that Rachel was betrothed to Jacob. Ephrem is more concerned about the incident with the mandrakes, which she uses to ensure that Jacob will sleep with her for one night instead of Rachel. Ephrem stresses that she took him 'with joy that was seasoned with faith,' meaning that she did not act out of lust, but from the conviction that she would bear more sons in return for selflessly offering her maid Zilpah to Jacob (*Comm.Gen.* XXVIII.3).

### *Marriage and Polygamy*

There are certain episodes where Jacob's own sexual behaviour raises questions. In GenR 70:18 on Gen 29:21, Jacob demands 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her.' R. Aibu expresses shock at Jacob's coarse way of expressing his wish, but then defends him by explaining that Jacob knew that he had to produce twelve tribes, and since he was by then eighty-four years old, he was anxious to get on with the task of procreation.

For Ephrem, it is Jacob's polygamy that poses a problem. His solution draws on the theme found in Jewish sources, namely the notion of removing the matriarchs from their pagan environment. Thus, by marrying both Leah and Rachel, Jacob removes Leah from Laban's pagan sphere of influence while remaining faithful to Rachel to whom he is already wed since the kiss at the well. How the two maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah fit in is more difficult to explain for both Jewish and Christian sources, though for different reasons. According to R. Reuben in GenR 74:13, all four of Jacob's wives are Laban's daughters (Bilhah and Zilpah through Bethuel's concubine), by taking what Laban says in Gen 31:43, *הַבָּנוֹת בְּנוֹתַי*, as meaning 'all the girls are my daughters'. In this way the purity of family descent from Abraham's kin is preserved, and Jacob is not marrying 'out'. Ephrem either does not know or does not use this tradition. He describes Bilhah as a foreigner, and Jacob agrees to take her with reluctance since his parents told him only to marry a daughter of Laban. Ultimately, his polygamy is justified by his desire to treat everyone, maidservants and sons, as fairly as possible (*Comm.Gen.* XXVIII.1).

As for Jacob's preference for Rachel, Ephrem plays this down by denying Rachel's physical attractions. When Jacob meets her she is a

shepherd girl with bare feet, ugly clothing, and sunburnt face, yet she is destined for him in the way that his mother Rebekah had been for his father (*Comm.Gen.* XXVII.1).<sup>15</sup> Ephrem says that Jacob loves Rachel very much because she loves his God and steals her father's idols in order to dishonour them by sitting on them while menstruating (*Comm.Gen.* XXIX.4). This goes further than the mere excuse offered by Rachel in the Hebrew Bible for not rising from the saddlebags to greet her father. It also goes further than Genesis Rabbah's defence of her theft as noble, to prevent Laban from practising idolatry (GenR 74:5). However, R. Jose gives Jacob's rash curse of the one who has stolen the idols (Gen 31:32) as the reason for Rachel's tragically early death (GenR 74:4).

### *Laban*

Karin Zetterholm has written a recent monograph where she usefully covers all Jewish sources on Laban the Aramean into the medieval period. She notes that the key passage on Laban's character is not found in interpretations of Genesis itself, but in the famous saying from the Passover Haggadah, which she dates to the Tannaitic period, following S. and Z. Safrai.<sup>16</sup> The passage from the Haggadah reads:

Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to Jacob our father: for Pharaoh issued his decree only concerning the males, but Laban wished to uproot all, as it is said, **אֲרָמִי אֲבָד אָבִי**, and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there with a few; and became there a nation great, mighty and numerous (Zetterholm 2003, 62).

Thus, the phrase **אֲרָמִי אֲבָד אָבִי** in MT Deut 26:5 (often understood in modern translations as 'my father was a wandering or perishing Aramean' etc.) becomes 'an Aramean tried to destroy my father.' The verb **אֲבָד** is treated as a causative piel, and Laban is understood as the subject: Zetterholm believes the interpretation originally arose because the rabbis were 'disturbed by the designation of Jacob as an Aramean in Deuteronomy when Genesis seems to go out of its way to emphasize that

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<sup>15</sup> Ephrem says Rachel was no different from a blackened stick taken from the fire (*Comm.Gen.* XXVII.1). Compare Peshitta Amos 4:11, 'a brand saved from the flames.'

<sup>16</sup> Some traditions identify Laban with Balaam, whom they also see as the Aramean who tried to destroy Israel, but Zetterholm is inclined to see this as a secondary development (Zetterholm 2003, 65–69).

he was not an Aramean' (Zetterholm 2003, 79–80). The targum tradition to Deut 26:5 gives a similar interpretation to that of the Passover Haggadah: 'Laban the Aramean tried to destroy my father' (Targum Onkelos), 'Laban the Aramean tried at the beginning to destroy Jacob our father, but you saved him from his hand' (Targum Neofiti), and the more embellished version of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, 'our father Jacob went down in the beginning to Aram Naharayya and Laban tried to kill him, but the Memra of the Lord saved him from his hand.' The Haggadah also states that Laban was worse than Pharaoh, because Laban 'tried to uproot everything' **בקש לעקר את הכל**.<sup>17</sup>

This is the light in which Zetterholm understands the comments of R. Isaac and R. Berechiah in GenR 60:7 on Laban's name: 'a paradox' **פרדיכסוס**, and 'refined in wickedness', **מלובן ברשע**, explanations arising from 'a preconceived idea about his character on the part of the rabbis' which then produces a dissonance between his character and his name (Zetterholm 2003, 93–95). Here it should also be noted that the gentilic **ארמי** encourages an extended play on 'deceive,' **רמה**, and so on, in GenR 70:19,<sup>18</sup> which is fair enough in view of the biblical portrayal of Laban.

However, even though the Peshitta Syriac translation seems to have been largely the work of Jewish translators, it has a very different rendering for Deut 26:5, namely, 'my father was taken to Aram [**ארבן ארמון לרומק**], and went down to Egypt and resided there briefly.' This must refer to the story of Abraham being taken to Haran by his father in Gen 11:31, and then going down to Egypt because of the famine. So the Syriac translator does not portray Laban as bent on killing Jacob, but neither does he offer any scope for ethnic identification between Israelites and Arameans that Syriac Christians from the same region could have exploited in a later period.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. LXX Deut 26:5 *Συρίαν ἀπέβαλεν* (= θ') ὁ πατήρ μου, 'my father cast off, rejected Syria (and went down to Egypt).' However, there are also many variant readings recorded in the apparatus of the Göttingen edition of the Septuagint (Wevers and Quast 1977, 281), including *ἀπέλαβεν*, 'took'; *ἀπέλιπεν* and *κατέλιπεν* 'left behind.' We also find the anonymous marginal reading *Μεσοποταμίτην ἀπόλεσεν*, '(my father) destroyed Mesopotamia.' Aquila has *ἀπόλλυτο* and Symmachus *ἀπόλλυσεν*. In the absence of the full phrase in each case, the subject of the verbs preserved for Aquila and Symmachus is unclear. Aquila may have intended, 'my father was perishing in Syria,' and Symmachus 'Syria was destroying my father.' See also Dogniez and Harl 1992, 275–6, for comments on Philo's very different interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. GenR 70:17: **אמר ליה בגין דאנא ידע שאנשי מקומך רמאין לפיכך אנא מברר עייסקי מך**.

In Ephrem's work, Laban comes off not much worse than in the text of the Hebrew Bible. He is merely described as 'loving not Jacob but himself' and cheating (*Comm.Gen.* XXIX.1–2), being deceitful and cunning (*Comm.Gen.* XXVII.2), a pagan (*Comm.Gen.* XXVII.3), and wanting his prosperity to be guaranteed through Jacob's continuing presence (*Comm.Gen.* XXIX.1). Laban is described as stubborn when God appears to him in a dream (*Comm.Gen.* XXIX.4). Yet he is not the villain of Jewish sources of the same period.

In this regard, we should note James Kugel's observation that one basic assumption about the Bible shared by all ancient interpreters is that biblical figures are 'not merely historical but instructional.' Hence we find 'the tendency of interpreters to present biblical figures as either all [i.e. wholly] good or all bad' (Kugel 2001, 17, 21). Kugel notes that the most problematic figures in the Hebrew Bible were those like Lot or Balaam, 'whom the Bible itself clearly seems to put in the middle, with both good and bad traits. Such figures were nevertheless squeezed into the all-good or all-bad moulds—in fact sometimes into both by different interpreters in the same period' (Kugel 2001, 22; cf. also Kugel 1999, 182–85, 482–89).

Yet morally complex characters are much more satisfying than monochrome portrayals, which is why the biblical Genesis narratives are often more satisfying than the pious interpretations of Jews and Christians in Antiquity. Instead, it is the ingenuity and virtuosity of rabbinic midrash with regard to the details of the biblical text, and the way in which it harmonizes seemingly incompatible elements, that the reader finds satisfying. In the case of Christian exegesis, the symbolism and typology drawn from their reading of the text may offer a similar attraction, although this is a spiritual rather than a literary merit. We have moved from literary appeal to spiritual instruction, and this is something that is already happening in the Bible itself, of course, particularly in the books of Chronicles.

### *Sacred Geography?*

As Fishbane observed, the Genesis Jacob Cycle also offers the idea of significant spaces (Fishbane 1975, 36). Ephrem speaks of Isaac sending Jacob to Haran for a wife: 'The day came to an end and he spent the night there' (*Comm.Gen.* XXVI.1). Ed Mathews glosses his translation of the Syriac as meaning 'where he was,' but this is not necessarily the most obvious translation, and may mean that Jacob spent the

night virtually at Haran, and that the vision of the ladder with angels ascending and descending therefore took place close to Haran. This is in fact one opinion in GenR 68:8 on Gen 28:10, where the rabbis say that Jacob reached Haran on the same day that he left home (בג יומו), which would seem to imply that his dream at Bethel must have taken place just outside Haran.<sup>19</sup> A different slant is seen in GenR 69:7, where, using the wordplay on מקום, two different rabbis state that the ladder either ran from Beersheba as far as the Jerusalem Temple (R. Leazar in the name of R. Yose b. Zimra), or that it stood in the Temple and reached Bethel (R. Judah b. R. Simon).<sup>20</sup>

For Ephrem, the pillar Jacob anoints has hidden within it the mystery of Christ, who was concealed inside it (*Comm.Gen.* XXVI.2).<sup>21</sup> The pillar of stone is also a representation of the mystery of the Church. This concept seems to be a mirroring or reflex of the idea in Palestinian targum and Tg PsJon Gen 28:11, especially the margin to Neofiti, that Jacob placed four stones under his head (symbolizing his four wives), and during the night they became one, i.e. the nation Israel. Alternatively, as in GenR 68:11 according to R. Judah, he used twelve stones representing the tribes which joined together to become one, also indicating Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Jacob Neusner comments on the way in which Genesis Rabbah ‘transforms the book of Genesis from a genealogy and family history [of the patriarchs] into a book of the laws of history and rules of the salvation of Israel: there the deeds of the founders become omens and signs for the final generations (...) the deeds of the founders supply signals for the children about what is going to come in the future’ (Neusner 2000, 169–70).

In the case of the incident at Bethel, Neusner’s observation about Genesis Rabbah also applies to Ephrem’s Genesis commentary, where the biblical narrative provides the writer with omens and symbols

<sup>19</sup> See also Tg PsJon ad loc., where he arrives at Haran the same day he set out, and ‘prays at the place of the sanctuary.’

<sup>20</sup> Eyal Ben Eliyahu argues that their interpretation asserts the primacy of the Temple over other religious sites in Israel (unpublished seminar paper given at the University of Oxford, 13th June 2007).

<sup>21</sup> The same idea occurs in Ephrem’s older contemporary, Aphrahat *Dem.* IV.145. 15–25 (ed. Parisot). See Murray (1975, 45).

<sup>22</sup> R. Nehemiah, however, speaks of three stones, which Jacob hopes will unite and thus indicate that his name will be united with God’s name, as had Abraham and Isaac (‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac [...]’).

of the coming of Christ and the Church. Also, Ephrem and Genesis Rabbah originate at a broadly similar period and stage in the formation of their respective and competing religious traditions. Thus, this experience of the divine at Bethel is deeply significant for both Jewish and Christian exegetes and both see within it symbols of the future of Israel/the Church. For both it represents a threshold, but what lies beyond is portrayed rather differently.

Some rabbis give Haran a particularly negative aspect by associating the name with חרון, 'wrath,' and they see the episode as a detailed prefiguring of the Exile in Babylon (GenR 68:13; cf. 70:10). It is not clear whether this was because Aram and Aramaic were associated with Lower as well as Upper Mesopotamia, or merely because Jacob was effectively in exile from the Promised Land. However, it is evident that Paddan-aram was regarded as not just a profane space but also a dangerous one, both morally and physically, for the patriarch Jacob and his household. Hence, as mentioned earlier, we find the reference in some Jewish sources to Laban reassuring Eliezer that he has cleansed the house of idolatry, and to Jacob praying to be kept from idolatry, sexual sin and bloodshed while on his journey: Aram and the house of Laban are places of peril and pollution for the righteous.

Predictably, such polarity of place is not found in Syriac Christian sources, for whom the region of Aram was effectively the heartland of Syriac Christianity, despite Haran's notoriety as a pagan city in Ephrem's time and beyond. In a passage discussing the role and nature of angels in the Bible in his *Hexaemeron*, the late seventh century author Jacob of Edessa mentions Jacob's encounter with angels in Gen 28:10–13 and Gen 32:1–2 (*Hexaemeron*, memra 1, *On Angels and their Nature*; Chabot 1928, 19). As in rabbinic sources, his treatment of the passage suggests that the episode with the ladder occurs just before his namesake<sup>23</sup> reaches Haran, partly because he omits the name Bethel which would link it to the Land of Israel. The Mahanaim encounter happens just as the patriarch leaves Paddan-aram. Thus, for Jacob of Edessa, these liminal places can be seen as gateways into the sacred space of Aram, rather than places of divine reassurance as the patriarch leaves the 'safe' area of the Promised Land of Canaan. Going back in time to Ephrem, in one of his hymns he refers to Aram as 'our land,' and

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<sup>23</sup> It may be no coincidence that several important Syriac writers from this region were named Jacob.

claims that Aram is superior to Zion, because Abraham, Jacob and the matriarchs all walked there, and eleven of the heads of the twelve tribes were born there, one of whom (Judah) was the ancestor of Christ himself. Therefore, salvation comes ultimately from Aram, not from the land of Israel:

Let a myriad tongues give thanks for our land  
 In which walked Abraham and his [grand]son Jacob  
 Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel,  
 and eleven heads of the tribes.  
 Out of this your treasury Zion was enriched by the sons of Jacob:  
 The name of our land is greater than that of its fellow.

For in it was born Levi, origin of priesthood  
 And Judah, source of kingship  
 And Joseph, the boy who left but became lord of Egypt.  
 By the light from you [Aram], the world was enlightened.

The trickle from our land has watered every region  
 Since from it Abraham the great river traveled  
 And poured forth springs and fountains  
 and streams. From that River  
 Gushed forth the great Sea [Christ] that was concealed in it.  
 (*Hymn on Julian Saba* IV:8–9, 11; Beck 1972, 46–47)

In terms of supersessionist claims, this is ingenious and unexpected.

Thus, although Aram symbolizes gentile territory for both rabbis and Syriac writers, for Ephrem and Jacob of Edessa it holds significance as holy and blessed space, the eventual heartland of the Syriac Christians, blessed by the presence of Jacob the patriarch, his wives and eleven of his children.

### *Conclusion*

In general, Genesis Rabbah's view of Laban and his family (and by extension, of non-Jews generally) is a little more nuanced than one might have supposed, since the compiler has included a variety of opinions. Thus, there are some positive notes. For instance, we find a reference to the moral uprightness of the Haranites, scandalized by Jacob kissing Rachel (GenR 70:12). And where the biblical text describes Laban and his mother giving Rebekah the power to decide whether she wants to go with Eliezer to marry Isaac, the rabbis in GenR 60:12 use it as the precedent for the principle that a fatherless girl has to give her own consent to a proposed marriage (Zetterholm 2003, 96).

On the negative side, in the very next section in GenR 60:13, with reference to Laban's blessing of Rebekah in Gen 24:60, R. Hama b. R. Hanina states that the reason Rebekah needed Isaac's prayers in order to conceive was so that Gentiles could not say that it was *their* prayer that had made her fertile. R. Berechiah in the name of R. Levi even cites Job 29:13, 'the blessing of the destroyer came upon me' **אובד עלי תבוא** as an allusion to Laban, connecting it to Deut 26:5 (interpreted as in the Passover Haggadah). As with several cases we have seen here, does this instance resolve a difficulty in the text (here, the barrenness of a virtuous woman) or does it make a broader theological point? I would say (pace Zetterholm 2003, 97) that the rabbis use the opportunity afforded by the text to make a theological point at the expense of Gentiles.

As for the targumim, between them they paint a very unflattering picture of Laban's house, where guests may be poisoned by the food or polluted by idolatry, sexual misconduct or bloodshed (e.g. Tg PsJon, Tg Neofiti and its margin to Gen 24:31, 33, 55). Nevertheless, it has to be borne in mind that the translational nature of targum does not allow the same degree of multivalent interpretation of the biblical text that is possible in midrash.

Ephrem may be claiming an ancestral link to the people of God that cannot be shared by non-Syriac Christians, and he may even be reacting specifically to the negative Jewish attitude towards Aram. However, even he is hardly well-disposed towards Laban, whose double-dealing towards the hero Jacob is clear in the text of the Bible itself.

A major question in studies of midrash is whether it is a pre-existing theological agenda or the details of the biblical text that dictates the midrash (e.g. Neusner 1986, 10; Kugel 2001, 18). To an extent, there must be a certain amount of truth in both positions, depending on the midrashic work under discussion. But, in all these cases regarding Jacob, Laban and Aram, whether we are speaking about rabbinic Hebrew, targumic Aramaic or Christian Syriac sources, it seems abundantly clear that it is indeed the theological agenda of the authors or editors that is creating the midrash or comment, although often using a gap or difficulty in the text in a creative way as a peg for that opinion. For both Jewish and Christian sources, denigrating Laban may serve the purpose of distracting from Jacob's own moral ambiguity in the biblical narrative. Yet it also contributes greatly to the rabbinic and targumic readings of the story not just as a national aetiology but as a symbol of relations between Jews and non-Jews.

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## EARLY RABBINIC EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 38

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Any attempt at explaining how the exegetical encounter between Jews and Christians is exemplified in their respective approaches to a particular passage in the Bible must (to my mind, self-evidently) begin by eschewing any comparative study of these spiritual competitors and opting to analyze closely the relevant sources within one or other of the two sets of traditions. Such an analysis should ideally characterize, date and contextualize each block of material, compare and contrast the diverse approaches and explain how they, each in its own way, represent specific elements of the religious practice and the theology of their composers. As far as Jewish literature is concerned, such an exercise may fairly successfully be undertaken in the case of the earliest biblical versions, the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical works, the hellenistic literature and the texts from Qumran. Such Second Temple contexts are, after all, not too difficult to define geographically, historically and even—though perhaps to a lesser extent—theologically. Similarly, in the case of the more literal and systematic medieval exegetes, who can be traced from as early as the tenth century but who do not deprive the process of midrash of its central role until at least two hundred years later, enough is known about their background, education and outlook to permit some reasonably accurate definitions of their work. A more serious problem arises when the researcher attempts to exploit the midrashic corpora which range over a period of almost a thousand years and cover almost every aspect of Jewish religious thought.<sup>1</sup>

Although the situation with regard to midrashic texts is well known, a brief rehearsal of the major problems will no doubt help to explain and justify the necessary methodology. Imagine, if you will, making a circuit of all one's favourite places of worship in a large metropolis on

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<sup>1</sup> There is a vast body of recent scholarly literature on midrashic exegesis. Among some of the published work that provides sound guidance are the volumes and articles of Vermes 1973, Bloch 1978, Porton 1985, Kasher 1988, Stern 1991, Weiss Halivni 1991, Jacobs 1995 and 2006, Hirshman 1996, Fishbane 1998, Kessler 2004 and Kugel 2001 and 2006.

December 31 in any year, and collecting one paragraph from each of the sermons delivered in the course of the previous twelve months by diverse preachers on a wealth of topics and with various homiletical styles. Place these in a box, in no particular order, and without any reference to their date, provenance or overall theme and leave them for at least a century before attempting to explain them. Serious students of midrash face a somewhat analogous set of circumstances. What has been fortuitously preserved is generally incomplete; the original context can rarely be identified; and the underlying intent may remain obscure. Indeed, the preachers or teachers may have been anxious to present their messages not as *ad hoc* responses to external sets of circumstances, but as authoritative pieces of exegesis with eternal value. Add to this *mêlée* of problems the fact that representatives of the midrashic genre may be expository, homiletical, halakhic, folkloristic or, simply, entertaining, and you swiftly become aware of the challenge facing those who wish to use them in any sort of historical examination. It is true that by and large it is the Jewish homeland—whether as Eretz Yisrael, Judaea, Syria Palestina or Es-Sham—that constitutes the crucible in which these midrashim are moulded and refined, but its cultural and political milieu begins by being Jewish, then becomes Roman, is subsequently Byzantine, and finally reflects Islamic and Crusader conquests, all before these collections of biblical exegesis acquire a fairly stable form and content.<sup>2</sup>

If, then, to be more specific, I wish to compare and contrast early Jewish and Christian treatments of the story of Judah and Tamar as told in chapter 38 of Genesis, I have to summarize what we know from the raw text itself, allude to the evidence from the Second Temple and early Christian periods, and explain what the issues were for those aggadists or midrashists expounding the text and for the students and/or congregants whom they were addressing. I should attempt to itemize the numerous themes that occur in the various midrashim, to explain briefly how they relate to the original biblical text, as well as to each other, and to indicate how this might convey to us what overall religious messages were being transmitted. It may also then be possible to touch on, at least cautiously and possibly chronologically, some adjustments in overall method as well as in specific exegesis on the part of Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> On the dating, provenance and study of the whole range of midrashim, see Stemberger 1996, 233–359.

commentators through the ages. I would then require my colleague with specialization in the area of Christian biblical interpretation to do something similar so that we could then compare notes on the broader sweeps of historical and theological development. In this connection, it should be borne in mind that treating the encounter between Jewish biblical exegesis and its Christian (and, indeed, pagan) counterparts during the first few Christian centuries is at least as challenging as attempting to explain the cultural interplay of English, French, German and Italian ideas and ideologies between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. Fortunately, as Sebastian Brock points out in his contribution to this volume, the Syriac Fathers have geographical and linguistic affinities with the midrashic rabbis which makes it a little less difficult to identify similar themes and treatments, but this is only one section of a complicated historical and theological jigsaw puzzle (Brock 2009, 140–141).

#### *Summary of Genesis 38*

Judah moves away from his brothers and takes up with Hirah the Adullamite, as a result of which he marries the daughter of the Canaanite, Shua (or the Canaanite woman, Bat-shua), who bears him three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah, the last at Chezib. Judah arranges a marriage for Er with a certain Tamar, but his firstborn displeases God and forfeits his life. In order to ensure Er's dynastic continuity, Judah instructs his second son, Onan, to conduct a levirate marriage with Tamar. Unenthused with this idea, Onan consistently practises *coitus interruptus*, which further displeases God and also leads to his premature departure from this life. Since Shelah is still too young to conduct a levirate marriage (and Judah is apprehensive about his fate), Tamar follows Judah's advice to remain a widow in her father's home, ostensibly until Shelah matures enough to fulfil this function.

Although the necessary years pass, Judah apparently forgets (or chooses not to implement) his plan for Tamar and Shelah and, following the death of his Canaanite wife, takes consolation in renewing his friendship with Hirah the Adullamite with whom he sets out to attend the sheep-shearing in Timnah. Tamar is told of his presence in that neighbourhood and decides to wait no longer for something to be done. Having removed her widow's clothing, she wraps herself in a veil and sits down by a crossroads on the highway to Timnah and

is thought by Judah to be a prostitute. Unaware of who she really is, he turns to her and asks for her sexual favours. As the price, Tamar elicits from him the promise of a young goat and, as surety until it is delivered, takes from him his seal, cord and cane. He has relations with her and she, having abandoned the disguise and immediately returned to her widowhood, becomes pregnant. Judah entrusts his friend Hirah with the promised young goat and the task of retrieving his personal belongings from Tamar, but the Adullamite fails to find her. When he enquires of the locals about the prostitute that was at the crossroads, they assure him that there was never any prostitute there. He duly reports this to Judah who decides that discretion is the better part of valour and abandons hope of retrieving his property.

Some three months later Judah is informed that his daughter-in-law is pregnant as a result of illicit relations and he gives a ruling that she should be publicly put to the stake. As she is being led to her execution, she sends a message to Judah indicating that she is pregnant by the man who owns these three items and invites him to identify who that might be. Judah makes the identification and declares her to be more sinned against than sinning, and himself to have failed to have arranged her marriage to Shelah. He chooses not to have any further sexual relationship with her and she duly gives birth to twins. During the delivery, one of the babies stretches out his hand and the midwife ties a red thread on it to mark him as the first-born. No sooner has he withdrawn his hand when the other baby makes his appearance in the world, leading the midwife to exclaim that he had burst on to the scene and to his being given the appropriate name of Perez. His brother, of red thread fame, then arrives and is dubbed Zerah. Given the nature of this intriguing tale, it is hardly surprising that it has formed the basis for a number of dramatic reconstructions and historical novels.<sup>3</sup>

### *Findings of Esther Marie Menn*

Before attention is given to the overall midrashic picture and how it relates to medieval exegesis, it will be useful to cite an impressive work by Esther Marie Menn that was published in 1997 as a thoroughly

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<sup>3</sup> For an alternative summary from the viewpoint of modern biblical studies, see Barton and Muddiman 2001, 61. Examples of literature based on the story are Goller 1931 and Cooper 1964. See also the summary in Kugel 2006, 169–70. On Goller, see Sivan 2007, 145–71.

revised version of a doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Michael Fishbane. Menn provides a background for ancient Jewish exegesis of Genesis 38 by analyzing the content of the chapter and pointing out the problems that face the exegete. She chooses the treatments of the subject provided by the Testament of Judah, Targum Neofiti and Genesis Rabbah and demonstrates that all three sources are well aware that the relationship between Judah and Tamar leads to the creation of the davidic dynasty, the Hebrew royalty and, ultimately, the messianic king. In the Testament of Judah, the Hebrew hero represents a warrior king with an impressive military record who, like Heracles in Greek literature, is tragically undone by his passion for the morally offensive in the shape of wine, women and wealth. The tale is transformed from a biblical to a hellenistic milieu, there are some unflattering portrayals of women, and the object seems to be to teach the reader the value of abstemious behaviour.<sup>4</sup> In Targum Neofiti the emphasis is on *kiddush ha-shem*, the sanctification of the Divine Name by offering oneself to martyrdom, and a central role is consequently given to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, the descendants of Tamar. Judah is repentant and is presented as an idealized proto-rabbinic teacher while God's presence and plan are integral to the human story. The Targum Neofiti concentrates on the climax of the story and de-emphasizes its royal and messianic implications. God's pervasive presence is also central to the midrashic teachings of Genesis Rabbah, which attempts to resolve the moral problems in the story by stressing the impressive religious standards of Judah and Tamar and how these are bequeathed to the future Hebrew monarchy, spiritual leadership and messianic redeemers. Such a message, especially as it related to the anticipated developments of the future, undoubtedly provided some comfort for those undergoing religious, political and social persecution. Menn's detailed and careful analysis provides an excellent starting point for the further study of other (and very extensive) midrashic material (Menn 1997).

### *The Issues Raised by Genesis 38*

For those Jews reading this story during the first Christian millennium, what were the issues that would obviously confront them? First of all, they might wish to know why this story is placed here in the

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to Menn's study (1997), see also Kugel 2006, 174–85.

overall Joseph narrative, and especially how it relates to earlier and later events in the tales of Jacob's family. They would certainly be aware that Judah was, according to the Hebrew Bible, the ancestor of the Israelite monarchs and would therefore be interested in dwelling on this connection in a variety of ways and in expanding on any other genealogical issues arising out of the relationship of Judah and Tamar. In addition, they might be troubled by the behaviour of Judah who was, after all, a Jewish patriarchal figure and would prefer to see him in the best possible light rather than as one who apparently engaged in intermarriage, fornication and hypocrisy. Were his troubles in this context, they might muse, perhaps the result of his actions in an earlier context? At the same time, they would be aware of the tensions between the non-Hebrew origins of Tamar and her behaviour on the one hand, and her role as a matriarchal figure for the Jewish people on the other. They would wonder precisely why Judah's sons met their deaths so young and why Judah's Canaanite wife also appears to have died prematurely. It is perfectly plausible that they were intrigued (or troubled?) by the apparently peremptory manner in which Tamar was sentenced to death, by the proposed method of execution, and by Judah's failure to resume a physical relationship with her after her innocence had been proved. Also, they would wish to understand what precisely lay behind some of the unspecific or problematic language and content, the Hebrew names and the apparently redundant phrases that occur in the chapter and whether any of these might be alluding to any of the grander notions that they might expect from the divinely revealed message. They would undoubtedly be attracted to the idea of fate, or rather heaven, taking a hand in somewhat mundane matters to ensure the correct historical outcome for their own ancestors.<sup>5</sup> It should be added that there were some Jewish commentators, such as Josephus and the compiler of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, who apparently felt so uncomfortable with the chapter on Judah and Tamar that they declined to offer it any attention.

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<sup>5</sup> The total midrashic picture is of course included in the classic work of Ginzberg 1909–38, 2:32–37, 142–43, 198–201; 5:332–37 and 367–68. While Ginzberg incorporates the midrashim into one combined narrative, I have opted rather to treat them thematically.

*Midrashic Themes*

As with most pentateuchal narratives, the rabbis of the early Christian centuries found in our chapter some halakhic guidance concerning the legal definitions to be made in the cases of levirate marriage and the birth process (e.g. Yeb 59a and Nid 28a). Since this may, however, be regarded as essentially an internal rabbinic matter and of limited relevance to the topic of the exegetical encounter between Jews and Christians, as it is played out from verse to verse or chapter to chapter, it need not receive further attention here. What should, on the other hand, be noted is the rabbinic decision about the suitability of the chapter for inclusion in the regular synagogal lectionary, not only in its original Hebrew form, but also in its Aramaic translation. There are biblical phrases and passages that the tannaitic rabbis found offensive for one reason or another, and that were adjusted or, in the case of the Aramaic translation, actually omitted. It might consequently have been argued that a chapter such as Genesis 38 that records so many religiously questionable activities on the part of an eponymous and centrally significant ancestor of the Jews should not be translated in the synagogue. The mishnaic decision is that the whole chapter is permissible for synagogal use, in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the Babylonian Talmud attributes this to Judah's exemplary behaviour in the final part of the story, which restores his reputation (MMeg 4:10 and Meg 25b; see Menn 1997, 284–85). This tension between the acknowledgment that Judah sinned and the national desire or theological need to exonerate him is one that will be encountered in a number of instances throughout this analysis.

*Judah Criticized*

Such acknowledgement of Judah's inadequate behaviour is given expression in a number of midrashic comments. Lying behind most of these comments is the awareness of the genealogy in the book of Ruth, which traces the ancestry of King David, the Hebrew monarchy and the Messiah of the future through Ruth and Boaz back to Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar. What is more, rabbinic tradition—possibly in response to a view that distinguishes between royal and prophetic authority—also identifies the father of the prophet Isaiah with King Amaziah and therefore sees Judah as the progenitor not only of the royalty but also of the

prophetic leadership (Sot 10b and Meg 10b). An assessment of Judah's activities was, therefore, very relevant to understanding the history and religion of the Jewish people from its earliest days. GenR 85:1 cites Mic 1:15 as a criticism of Judah, suggesting that 'the Glory of Israel has come to Adullam' **ישראל' כבוד יבוא עדלם** is an exclamatory reference to Judah's friendship with Hirah the Adullamite and marriage to a Canaanite. TanB *Vayyeshav* 10 spells this out more forcefully, stating that Judah, the most senior member of Jacob's household, married a Canaanite woman and that the prophet Micah had harangued him for this stating that the glorious progeny of Jacob, who was destined to be the ancestor of Israel's monarchy, descended to the level of Adullam and the local Canaanite women. MHG 643–44 goes even further and uses a parable to describe Judah's behaviour. Sometimes a lion will consume what has been rejected by a dog. Even Esau rejected the Canaanite women as evil, while Judah, the lion of Judah, opted to marry one. Are we encountering here something of a polemic against those who would prefer a more universalist, or less ethnic, stance? For MidrPss 101:2 this estimate of Judah's behaviour explains why the high priesthood was denied to his descendants, although TanB *Vayyeshav* 21, while linking the monarchy with Perez, associates a priesthood with Zerah. Treating Tamar as a prostitute was an act of calumny and having relations with her demonstrated his sexual appetite and self-indulgence, as the verse in Ps 101:5 puts it **מלושני בסתר רעהו אותו אצמית גבה עינים ורחב לבב**, midrashically expounded as 'I have to eliminate from consideration for the high priesthood one who slanders another person and abuses them proudly and voraciously.' What is more, as will become clear below when word-plays are considered, Genesis Rabbah links the very unworthy activities of Achan with his ancestor Judah.

There is yet more criticism of Judah in GenR 85:9, which notes that Judah was undone in this story in the matter of a goat as a punishment for his having deceived his father about the fate of Joseph when he brought him his coat that he had dipped in goat's blood.<sup>6</sup> Recorded in Sot 10b and in TanB *Vayyeshav* 8 and 13 is the view that Judah's descent (**ירידה**) describes his banishment by his brothers for not having completed his rescue of his brother Joseph. Once he had persuaded them not to kill him, he should then have attempted to persuade them to restore him to his father. Had he done so, they claimed, they

<sup>6</sup> See also the section entitled 'Symbolism and Genesis 38' below.

would again have listened to him. The matter of Judah's questionable honesty also exercises Rashi in the eleventh century. He explains Gen 38:11 as indicating that, given the fate of the elder two brothers, Judah had, despite what he said, no intention whatsoever of marrying her off to Shelah. Although more explicitly expressed, Rashi's explanation is effectively an expansion of comments in GenR 85:5 and Yeb 64b that had alluded to this many centuries earlier.<sup>7</sup>

TanB *Vayyeshiv* 10 claims that other events described in the chapter also represent Judah's punishment for such a failure to set the example. In a passage that occurs a number of times in the Babylonian Talmud, it is suggested that doubt hung over the head of Judah until Moses finally persuaded God to exonerate him fully by arguing that it was Judah's repentance and honesty that had set the example for Reuben to follow in connection with the latter's illicit relations with his father's concubine. Only after Moses had successfully made his representations to God was Judah finally admitted to full membership of the celestial academy (Sot 7b, BQ 92a and Mak 11b). What the aggadist is perhaps doing here is placing the ultimate power in the hands of the teacher *par excellence*, that is משה רבינו ('our teacher Moses'), rather than with the monarchy. Interestingly, Jacob of Serugh also involves Moses in this story by suggesting that Tamar's behaviour had not only invited no reproach from him but had impressed him through its spirituality (Brock 2009, 137). A hesitation about Judah's own ability to achieve forgiveness may also be detected in the claim that he was ultimately forgiven by angelic prayer. In a late midrash, there is an attempt to stress the divine love for Judah in spite of everything: 'Even when you misbehave,' says God, 'I am still with you, indicating just how much I love you.' The stress in this case is on the special relationship eternally assured by God for Judah and his people, Israel, perhaps in response to those who would deny its eternal nature (Aggadat Tefillat Shemoneh Esreh *Bet ha-Midrash* 5:xxiv, 54; Aggadat Bereshit 54b).

### *Judah Defended*

Other midrashic sources offer defence and praise of Judah's actions in spite of his apparent immorality, or in response to accusations of

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<sup>7</sup> On Rashi, see below the section entitled '*Medieval Exegesis*.'

improper behaviour. The background to this is the assumption that he was imbued with enough divine inspiration for him to be aware that his descendants would be among Israel's leaders. A rich passage in the Babylonian Talmud ascribes credit to him for that fact that he did not have intercourse with Tamar until he had, allegedly, checked that she was religiously converted, maritally available and ritually pure. It also approves of the fact that he admitted her honesty publicly (Sot 10a–b). There is also a view recorded there that Judah (perhaps to his credit?) did not abandon her but continued to have relations with her, although other early sources claim that it was the Holy Spirit that made a declaration about Judah's ceasing to have relations with her and that he desisted because she was his daughter-in-law (TSot 9:3; PT Sot 9:6 23d; Sifre §88, 87). A somewhat more historical analysis is offered in MHG 648 according to which Judah lived in pre-Torah times and that it was perfectly legitimate to have such a physical relationship.

PT Sot 1:8 17a notes that Timnah is mentioned in the stories of both Judah and Samson and explains that Judah's visit there was for religious purposes while Samson's was not, as indicated by the use of descent (וירד) in one case and ascent (ויעל) in the other! One of the problems, namely, his marriage to a Canaanite, is neatly eliminated in the Babylonian Talmud by a claim that the word is here used in its meaning of 'merchant' as in Hos 12:8 (Pes 50a; see also Tg Onkelos and Tg PsJon). In common with earlier biblical characters such as Adam, Abraham and Jacob, Judah is said in GenR 85:5 and CantR 1:2:5 to have observed some aspect of the Torah (in this case levirate marriage) before it was given to the Jewish people at Sinai, to have married off his son at the right time, and to have bequeathed to his royal descendants through Tamar his religious and physical power.<sup>8</sup> Judah is rewarded for his honesty in admitting his error and exculpating Tamar by the rewards of royalty, the lives of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the fiery furnace and David's progeny in the face of Saul, Absalom and Abishai.<sup>9</sup> If the davidic dynasty is allegedly continued in the Jewish leadership of the talmudic and post-talmudic periods, it would be

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 'Midrash Ha-Bi'ur' of Sa'adya b. David in MS cited by Kasher 1938, 1449 no. 29; GenR 85:9.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mek Lauterbach 1933–35, 1:236; Mek Horovitz and Rabin 1931, 106; ExodR 16:4; Sot 10b; 'Midrash Ha-Ḥefes,' of Zechariah Ha-Rofeh cited by Kasher 1938, 1476 no. 117.

natural for the aggadist to defend Judah's behaviour to a considerable degree. The alleged continuation of such authority would also constitute a challenge to those who might seek David's dynasty elsewhere.

### *Tamar Praised*

The midrashim of the talmudic period are united in their interpretation of Tamar's behaviour in the best possible light. Passages in the Babylonian Talmud and Palestinian Talmud comment at length on the whole story and have a fair amount to say about her actions. When in the home of her father-in-law, Judah, during her marriages to his elder two sons, she had consistently demonstrated her modesty by covering her hair in such a way that it was impossible for Judah to recognize her when he was attracted to her on the road to Timnah (Sot 10b; Meg 10b). The place that she chose in order to carry out her ruse was outside the tent of Abraham where everyone could see her (so understanding פתח עינים).<sup>10</sup> Contrary to what one might understand from the biblical text itself, her sexual impropriety was totally different from that of Zimri (Num 25:1–15) since her actions led to dynasties of kings and prophets, while his led to the deaths of thousands of Israelites (Naz 23b; Hor 10b). Before undertaking her project she looked heavenwards and prayed for success (so understanding פתח עינים) and it was she, and apparently not Judah, who raised the matter of her marital availability and ritual purity (PT Sot 1:4 16d; with parallel in PT Ket 13:1 35c; GenR 85:7). A number of passages draw attention to the fact that she set an admirable moral example in not publicly accusing Judah by drawing direct attention to his sexual involvement with her, choosing rather to be burnt to death than treat a fellow human in such an embarrassing fashion (Sot 10b; BM 59a; Ket 67b; Ber 43b).

The midrashim recorded outside the talmudic sources appear to be even more direct about her origins, motivations and religious status. As is allegedly indicated by the imposition of the death penalty by burning, she was the daughter of Shem who is regarded by the aggadah as a priest and her name indicates that she was as straight as a palm tree, that is to say that, as well as being physically beautiful, she

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<sup>10</sup> Sot 10b; see also Tg PsJon Gen 38:14 (as well as the rendering by Tg Onkelos Gen 38:14) and Kugel 2006, 178–79.

demonstrated a faultless integrity.<sup>11</sup> In addition to other examples of this integrity already included in the talmudic passages cited above, Genesis Rabbah cites the fact that she may be compared to Rebekah, since both modestly donned veils, although it also records the view that while only one of Rebekah's twins, namely Jacob (and not Esau), was righteous, both of Tamar's twins displayed high levels of piety (GenR 85:7 and 85:13). *Lekah Tov* on Gen 38:6 refers approvingly to her reluctance to leave Judah's household after the death of her first two husbands who were his sons. This is taken even further by Midrash ha-Gadol which appears to credit her with at least a degree of prophetic inspiration. Although the classic talmudic passage that lists seven women prophets does not include Tamar in the list of Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther, Midrash ha-Gadol explains that she was informed by the Holy Spirit of Judah's plans to travel to Timnah and that her dangerous plan was motivated by her hope to produce royal progeny that would ultimately include the Messiah (MHG 646; Meg 14a). It is noteworthy that the Syriac Fathers, Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Serugh in the fourth and fifth centuries, also refer to her pious motivations and her special spiritual status (Brock 2009, 136–140 and Frishman 2009, 169). There is, however, perhaps a hint of criticism in TanB *Vayyeshev* 17 (cf. GenR 85:10) which explains Gen 38:24 as an indication that she told her female friends in the bath-house that they should make way for her because she was pregnant with royalty. The action she took to ensure that she would become pregnant from her only sexual act with Judah is noted in the next section below. The overall impression is of an idealized woman of righteousness, who is worthy of initiating a dynasty that is to become central to Jewish leadership to the end of time. Any tendency to regard this righteous woman as a proto-Christian might be countered by such a stress on the link with eternal Jewish leadership.

### *Wicked Characters*

It is not an uncommon phenomenon for midrashim to dwell and expand on the disreputable activities of those biblical characters who are in some way defined in the biblical text as of questionable morality,

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<sup>11</sup> GenR 85:10; *Lekah Tov* on Gen 38:24; MHG 644; on the relationship with Shem, see also Tg PsJon Gen 38:6.

especially if there is no reason to number them among the recognized heroes of the Jewish people (see Salvesen 2009, 213–215 on Laban). Given Scripture's attribution of the premature deaths of Er and Onan to direct divine activity, the aggadists were anxious to establish that such a fate was richly deserved, and vied with each other to suggest the precise nature of the salacious behaviour that precipitated it. It is widely presupposed that Er was guilty of the same sexual immorality as his brother, Onan, and this is defined broadly as forbidden sexual relationships, as well as more precisely as masturbation, *coitus interruptus* and anal intercourse.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the notion that they were reluctant for Tamar to become pregnant because that would spoil her outstanding beauty is already found in early rabbinic sources, undoubtedly reflecting a problematic attitude, as the midrashists saw it, on the part of the Jews of their own day (Yeb 34b; GenR 85:4). Even more interesting is the assumption that Judah was the first man to have standard intercourse with Tamar. This leads to the question of how she could become pregnant from this act since it was regarded as axiomatic that pregnancies do not occur as a result of the first intercourse. The reply is offered that this is true when the first intercourse has to break the virginal hymen, but Tamar arranged matters cleverly by piercing that membrane herself before performing the act with Judah.<sup>13</sup> This appears not to have elicited any unfavourable comment among these exegetes, perhaps because they regarded it as another example of her determination to be the female ancestor of the Hebrew royalty and the davidic dynasty. The sexual immorality presupposed in the story is described in detail as characteristic of non-Hebrews in order to support the rabbinic notion that Jews have to maintain higher standards of self-control than other sects, religions and peoples in the broader world around them.

### *Meaning in Names*

Another aggadic principle is that the names of people and places that might perfectly well have been omitted from Scripture without damaging the narrative in any way are included in order to convey a special

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<sup>12</sup> 'Midrash Ha-Hefes' cited by Kasher 1938, 1450 no. 36; Nid 13a; Kallah 17–19; Yeb 34b; GenR 85:4.

<sup>13</sup> Yeb 34b; cf. also the lengthy discussion of this topic by Kasher 1938, 1453–54.

religious message. The names of Er and Onan, the two sons of Judah and his Canaanite consort, are therefore provided since they indicate that the elder was wicked (רע as the metathesis of ער) and died childless, the name ער being associated with ערירי, and that his younger brother caused much grief (אנינות) by dying so young. The birth of Shelah is associated with the name כזיב because the Hebrew root of that name alludes to 'failure,' in this case the failure of Judah's Canaanite wife to produce any more offspring.<sup>14</sup> Hirah, the Adullamite friend of Judah, is, somewhat anachronistically, identified with Hiram, King of Tyre in David's day, although it is acknowledged that he must therefore have been many centuries old by that time (GenR 85:4). Perez's name is linked with his messianic descendant by way of Mic 2:13 and Zerah's with the bright (Hebrew root זרח to shine) red thread that the midwife tied to his hand (GenR 85:13; Aggadat Bereshit 54b: Lekah Tov on Gen 38:30). Aggadic explanations of the names Timnah (contrasting Judah and Samson) and of the words פתח עינים (Gen 38:14) have already been cited above.

### *Symbolism and Genesis 38*

Similarly, the use of the same expression in different biblical accounts may indicate a link between them while a specific number of uses of the same word in a limited context may also suggest a connection with another biblical passage where that number is significant. This is part of an overall midrashic tendency to lessen the number of personalities and events mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. For example, the expression הכר נא occurs both here in Gen 38:25 and also in Gen 37:32 where Judah invites his father Jacob to identify Joseph's bloody coat, implying that this was part of Judah's punishment for that deception (Sot 10b). A red thread is part of this story and also recurs in the tale of the conquest of Jericho in which the Israelite spies invite the hospitable Rahab to save her life during the conquest by the use of a red thread. The spies must therefore be Perez and Zerah (MHG 371). In Gen 38:28–30 of the Judah story, the word יד occurs four times and this constitutes an allusion to Achan's four thefts of forbidden property (Josh 7), an appropriate reference since he was a descendant of Zerah

<sup>14</sup> Lekah Tov on Gen 38:6; GenR 85:4; all incorporated in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. Fragmentary Targum Gen 38:5 makes use of the play on the word כזיב.

(GenR 85:13). Jacob received his blessing from Isaac through the goatskins that he and Rebekah attached to his hands and neck, and Judah arranged monarchy among his descendants through a young goat (Lekah Tov on Gen 38:17).

If we may now return briefly to the actions of Judah that have not yet received attention, the matter of why he chose to offer his seal, cord and cane provides a splendid opportunity for some midrashic expositions. In Genesis Rabbah they are said to allude to the monarchy, the Sanhedrin and the Messiah, while in an Oxford manuscript of the Tanḥuma Buber they are interpreted as pointing to the basic requirements of the female from the male, namely, food, clothing and sex.<sup>15</sup> According to an unspecified midrash cited by Joshua Ibn Shuaib, they symbolize the First Temple, Second Temple and Messianic Temple, while a midrash cited as *למדנו* lays the emphasis on the cane, which it identified as the same item used by Moses for striking the rock in order to obtain water (Num 20:8) and by Jacob when he crossed the Jordan river (Gen 32:10).<sup>16</sup> Inevitably, Christian commentators also sought to symbolize these three items, and for Jacob of Serugh they represented faith, baptism and the cross (Brock 2009, 139). Do such comments represent an attempt to forestall any impact likely to be made by non-Jewish symbolism or typology? Judah's ruling that Tamar should be sent to the stake inspires Tanḥuma Buber to explain that we are of course dealing here with a properly constituted court of Shem on which Judah sat with his father Jacob and his grandfather Isaac, and leads the Palestinian Talmud to cite a difference of opinion between R. Johanan and Resh Lakish about why in that case Judah spoke first. If the practice in non-Jewish courts (i.e. courts that do not follow the Torah given at Sinai) is the same as Jewish courts then the pre-Sinaitic Judah was speaking first as the most junior member. If, on the other hand, this is not their practice, one is forced to explain that Judah spoke last, but since he convinced the others of his view the verdict is recorded in his name (TanB *Vayyeshiv* 17; PT Sanh 4:8[7] 22b; see also Kugel 2006, 171).

<sup>15</sup> GenR 85:9; TanB, introduction, 69b, referring to Bodleian, Oxford, MS Opp. 187, as described in Neubauer 1886, no. 156 col. 26, and Beit-Arié and May 1994, col. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Shuaib is cited by Kasher 1938, 1464 no. 82, the original comment occurring in his *Derashot al Ha-Torah*, Constantinople 1523, the folio marked as 10b but actually 17b, as kindly confirmed for me by Dr Dan Davies; Yalqut Shim'on 1986 on Num 20:8, section 763, 433–34. Contrast the interpretation in the Testament of Judah which relates the items to Judah's own royal status, as explained in Menn 1997, 360.

*Divine Role*

An unassailable response to all aggressive challenges to actions recorded in the Hebrew Bible is of course that this was all part of the divine plan and was consequently inevitable. This kind of response is found in a number of instances in connection with the story of Judah and Tamar. The unfortunate events that now take place in Judah's life are the punishment that has been assigned to him (Sanh 102a). When Judah uses the word צדקה to announce that Tamar is innocent (Gen 38:26), the doubt remains that he may be wrong and that someone else may be the father of her child. This leads God to intervene through a heavenly voice (בת קול) and add the word ממני, meaning that 'it is decreed so by me,' that is, by God.<sup>17</sup> Her evidence in the form of Judah's three personal belongings had gone missing at the time of the trial and was divinely restored to her just in time.<sup>18</sup> Being the righteous person he was, Judah would have ignored Tamar waiting for him on the road and not succumbed to the temptation, but God arranged for an angel to arouse his sexual desire and to challenge him on the need for future progeny to rule Israel and to provide the Messiah.<sup>19</sup> Thus it came about that the ancestor of the Messiah destined to redeem Israel was born before the ruler (apparently Pharaoh) who would attempt to enslave them forever (GenR 85:1, expounding Isa 66:7). It is not out of the question that such a reference to a non-Jewish ruler is obliquely alluding to a more contemporary non-Jewish power. Judah's attraction to the Canaanite woman, the marriage of his sons to Tamar, the death of his sons, and the loss of his wife were all directly planned by God in order to bring Tamar and Judah together, and at the birth of the twins God prevented Zerah from being born first because the Messiah was to be a descendant of Perez, as prophesied in Mic 2:13. Similar comments note that the inclusion of the word גיא in Gen 38:16 alludes to God's part in the proceedings; that when the angel Sammael tried to prevent Tamar's acquittal while his colleague Gabriel acted on her

<sup>17</sup> Mak 23b; cf. Menn 1997, 356, and Kugel 2006, 171. See also Tg PsJon Gen 38:26 and Fragmentary Targum Gen 38:26.

<sup>18</sup> Sot 10b; TanB *Vayyeshiv* 17; MHG 653–654. See also Tg PsJon Gen 38:25 at considerable length and Fragmentary Targum Gen 38:25.

<sup>19</sup> GenR 85:8; compare TanB *Vayyeshiv* 17 which stresses that Tamar prayed for such divine intervention and does not spell out the matter of the royal and messianic progeny.

behalf, God indicated to Gabriel that he should emerge the victor; and that God killed off her first two husbands so that Tamar could carry Judah's child, the ancestor of the Messiah.<sup>20</sup>

### *Medieval Exegesis*

As is well known, many of the Jewish commentators between the tenth and sixteenth centuries gradually moved away from the midrashic approach (*derash*) towards more linguistic, contextual, literary and historical approaches that may broadly be defined as *peshat* ('literal sense').<sup>21</sup> Given its more restrictive nature and its greater tendency towards the objective, *peshat* will inevitably be less inclined than *derash* to reveal the polemical and the tendentious, but the choices made by the various commentators will still be of interest to this discussion. It should also not be forgotten that midrashim also sometimes did include what the later commentators would have defined as *peshat*. Identification of those cases in which these commentators still opted for midrashic renderings will assist the researcher in assessing the degree to which they remained committed to the particular message that such renderings were attempting to convey.

Of all the commentators, Rashi is obviously the one who, despite his move towards the literal, continued to cite numerous midrashim in his pentateuchal commentary. Among midrashic comments cited above that are retained in his commentary, virtually as they were in the original works, are those relating to the reduction of Judah's status among his brothers, the translation of כְּנַעֲנִי as a merchant, the retention of female beauty by the avoidance of pregnancy, Tamar as the daughter of Shem, the name Timnah, Judah's religious and mighty descendants, God's interjection with the word מִמְּנִי, Tamar's reluctance to embarrass Judah in public, the piety of Tamar's twins, and the reference to Achan's disobedience. Rashi cites both midrashic and literal explanations in his comments on the word כְּזִיב, on the expression פֶּתַח עֵינָיִם, on the phrase כִּי כִסְתָהּ פָּנֶיהָ ('for she covered her face') in Gen 38:15, and on Judah's relations with Tamar after her acquittal. He also explains Judah's suggestion to Tamar in Gen 38:11 as specifically indicating that

<sup>20</sup> GenR 85:1; Aggadat Bereshit 54b; Lekah Tov on Gen 38:7,16; Sot 10b; and see n. 18 above.

<sup>21</sup> See Reif 1998, 143–58, and the reading list there, 159.

he had no intention whatsoever of marrying her off to Shelah because of the fate of the elder two brothers, expanding on comments in Genesis Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud tractate Yebamot that allude to this (Berliner 1905, 77–79; Chavel 1983<sup>3</sup>, 137–39; Rosenbaum and Silbermann 1929, 1:185–90).

Given his rigid and consistent preference for the *peshat*, it is only to be expected that Rashbam would specifically reject a number of the midrashic interpretations (some of them recorded by his grandfather, Rashi), and he has alternative, and more literal explanations of **כזיב**, **פתח עינים**, Tamar's face covering, Judah's personal belongings, **ממני** and the death penalty passed on Tamar. Somewhat surprisingly, however, we find that Rashbam also explains **כנעני** as a merchant, as well as including a reference to the avoidance of pregnancy for cosmetic reasons (Rosin 1882, 53–55; trans. Lockshin 1989, 261–69). Ibn Ezra also rejects outright the midrashic interpretations of **כזיב** and Judah's 'descent' but remains undecided about the word **כנעני** and about referring the phrase **כי כסתה פניה** ('for she covered her face') in Gen 38:15 to Tamar's days in the marital home and not to the incident on the road to Timnah (Weiser 1977, 1:109–111).

For his part, Hizzequni cites the reduction of Judah's status while adding a chronological note; remarks the midrashic explanation of **כזיב**, while adding a linguistic comment; refers to the avoidance of pregnancy while spelling out that Judah, therefore, married Tamar as a virgin; expands further on Rashi's explicit rendering of the midrashic comments on Judah's instructions to Tamar; spells out the Timnah midrash a little more clearly; accepts the idea that Judah, Isaac and Jacob judged Tamar, while explaining that Judah spoke first as the junior member; notes identification of Tamar as the daughter of Shem and explains the ramifications of this, including a note to the effect that priesthood was removed from Shem and given to Abraham and his descendants; explains more fully the two contrasting interpretations of the phrase **ולא יסף עוד לדעתה** in Gen 38:26, namely, either that he no longer had relations with her or that he did not refrain from having further relations with her; and that Perez anticipated his brother because his progeny was destined to be royalty (Chavel 1981, 144–47). The claim that the priesthood was transferred from Shem to Abraham may have been made in response to claims that the Christian priesthood has earlier antecedents than the Jewish one.

Nahmanides explains **כנעני** as a merchant and has a long comment on why marriage with Canaanite women must have been a rare phe-

nomenon among the Hebrews. He is clearly not entirely happy with the various midrashic explanations of names and offers some alternative reasons for their adoption. Rashi's explanation of Gen 38:11 is also unsatisfactory for him because Judah, given his anger at her alleged immorality, must originally have wanted her to remain in the family, having accepted that she was guiltless in the matter of his sons' misbehaviour. Nahmanides also questions the midrashic interpretation of Tamar's modesty in her marital home, arguing that, in that case, even if she had not covered her face, he would not have recognized her. Judah's sentence that Tamar be burnt, even if she was the daughter of Shem, has no biblical or rabbinic basis, according to Nahmanides, and must therefore be explained as an *ad hoc* decision on his part. He also provides his own clarifications of the two contrasting expositions of Gen 38:26 (Chavel 1969<sup>5</sup>, 212–19; trans. Chavel 1971–76, 463–79).

Sforno only once refers directly to a midrash and that is in his comment on Gen 38:25 where he praises Tamar for not shaming Judah in public. But elsewhere he incorporates the teaching of the aggadists. It was part of the divine plan that Tamar should have offspring from Judah since he was a more appropriate ancestor of the Messiah than Shelah might have been. The items that Tamar chose as her surety were all indicative of Judah's stature and what she had in mind was to have children of similar stature. Judah's exoneration of Tamar amounted to a recognition that her apparently immoral behaviour was not for her own benefit but for a higher and religiously adaptable purpose, that is to say, to have children from Judah (Gottlieb and Darom 1980, 91–95; trans. Pelkovitz 1987–89, 184–88).

### *Exegetical Questions and Responses*

Earlier in this essay it was suggested that certain questions, doubts and anxieties may well have occurred in the minds of those who were reading the Hebrew Scripture, or listening to its translation and interpretation. It was to such thoughts that the aggadists addressed themselves when they formulated and transmitted their exegetical comments on Scripture. In addition to points of detail, such preachers and teachers were dealing with broader questions and it is possible on the basis of a close reading of the variety of comments recorded earlier to draft a list of such questions and of the answers that they appear to be proposing. Such questions and answers may of course have changed from

generation to generation, but the occurrence of many themes that are common to various midrashim originating in different ages do permit us to identify a fair number which consistently remained at the centre of exegetical consideration.

1. Are there items that should be excluded from the synagogal readings, thus reflecting a view that a choice must be made about suitability and relevance?
  - ~ One can achieve a compromise by including all pentateuchal passages but exercising choice regarding prophets and hagiographa, as well as regarding targumic renderings.
2. Do the pentateuchal texts and the biblical characters provide guidance for contemporary Jews with regard to intermarriage, conversion or sexuality?
  - ~ Those assumed to be fine examples of proto-Jews either sinned and repented, or never actually sinned because their motives were pure, or did sin and were punished, or achieved forgiveness only through special mediation on their behalf at a later time.
3. Do the promises, genealogies and personal characteristics that are encountered in Scripture relate to the present and future as well as to the past?
  - ~ Some Jewish institutions and individuals of the present are the successors of their biblical precedents and others will enjoy such a status in the future time.
4. Does God adjust his relationship with the Jewish people and their heroes in the light of their unsatisfactory behaviour?
  - ~ There is a permanently close relationship between God and his people Israel.
5. Were the pre-Sinaitic leaders observers of the Torah or of a different set of religious traditions?
  - ~ Either they adhered to the Torah or to parts of it before it was given to Israel as a whole, or they followed the Noahite laws which constitute what is required of non-Jewish peoples.
6. Did priesthood already exist in pre-Sinaitic times and was the office held by non-Hebrews?
  - ~ There were priests such as Melchizedek, who is to be identified with Shem or one of his progeny, but their priesthood was transferred to Abraham and then later to the tribe of Levi.

7. To what extent was Tamar a religiously inspired woman, with special qualities?  
 ~ Tamar, who was a virgin when she had sexual relations with Judah, did not have prophetic stature but did receive divine guidance about how to proceed in connection with the creation of the divinely approved dynasty of Judah and David and is broadly viewed as having been well motivated in her actions.
8. Are there specific kinds of sexual relations that are more characteristic of pagans than Jewish people?  
 ~ According to some aggadists, any departure from normative intercourse that may lead to pregnancy is to be regarded as a disreputable act, unworthy of pious Jews.
9. Do names and utensils carry any significance beyond their simple nomenclature?  
 ~ Some aggadists use them as allusions to events or activities not specifically recorded in the biblical text, or to other parts of Scripture, or see them as pointers to future developments, while others are more comfortable with their more literal sense and usage.
10. How can we be sure that what is related in the text of the Hebrew Bible is not merely the story of ancient people, with their foibles and vicissitudes, which might have moved in all manner of haphazard directions?  
 ~ The biblical narrative always reflects the overall divine plan and God, as it were, takes a hand in ensuring that matters move in the right direction to ensure the future viability and loyalty of the Jewish people up to and including the messianic age.

It seems to me that one does not require a great deal of imagination to suggest how such questions might have related to the broader topic of the Jewish-Christian exegetical encounter. What undoubtedly emerges from much of the exegesis cited above is a clear endorsement of the views that intermarriage is not something to be condoned and that unqualified disapproval has to be expressed of aspects of life in the gentile world. The status of the Jewish people has not changed from ancient to current times and God still has a special relationship with the Jews. There is distinct tendency to forestall attempts at finding proto-Christians in the pentateuchal narrative or at proposing that royalty, prophecy and priesthood have moved away from those who once held them in the Jewish world. If typologies are to be employed,

they had better be Jewish ones. It seems to me that all these notions are capable of being understood in the context of the Jewish-Christian exegetical encounter. But, as I indicated early in this brief study, what must be undertaken before we can properly assess that encounter is the sound definition of what constituted broad Jewish and Christian understandings of the chapter before us. I hope that I have made some contribution to the Jewish side and that, when an equivalent essay has been completed on the Christian approaches, we may then make some further progress towards at least a degree of comparative analysis.

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## ORIGEN'S VIEW OF 'JEWISH FABLES' IN GENESIS

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In the pastoral letter to Titus, Paul is said to have warned the Cretans from heeding *ἰουδαϊκοῖς μύθοις καὶ ἐντολαῖς ἀνθρώπων* 'Jewish myths and human commandments' (Titus 1:14).<sup>1</sup> It would seem that the author is warning the audience against the Jewish misunderstanding of Scripture on two fronts, *aggadah* and *halakhah*, interpretation and observance. This passage from Titus concerning Jewish fables is cited on numerous occasions by the Church Fathers. We will investigate Origen's particular use of the notion of Jewish fables. We will briefly canvass here other pejorative invocations of myth in the New Testament, though not specifically called Jewish. In another of the pastoral epistles, we hear of a warning against *τοὺς δὲ βεβήλους καὶ γραώδεις μύθους* 'profane and old wives' myths which are to be avoided' (1 Tim 4:7). I would like to focus on Origen's usage of 'mythos' in his *Homilies on Genesis* and elsewhere, and compare those places where he denigrates interpretations as 'mythos' to the treatment of those passages in *Genesis Rabbah*. Our inquiry will proceed on two levels. The first level is the alleged content of the Jewish 'mythos,' what is it that Origen is not willing to accept and therefore relegates to 'mythos.' Secondly, but in a most lapidary manner, I would like to call for a reassessment of the function and status of biblical stories in general in the Jewish and Christian traditions. For in 2 Pet 1:16, a book whose earliest attestation is Origen himself (Grant 1963, 228), the author claims his source for the power of Jesus is not 'tales artfully spun' (NEB—*σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις*) but rather his own eyewitness testimony. In this short introductory paragraph we have mentioned three of the five usages of 'mythos' in the New Testament, all in late passages (i.e. Titus 1:14; 1 Tim 4:7; 2 Pet 1:16). We will add one more from the pastoral letter of 2 Timothy that opposes 'mythos' to 'alethos,' *καὶ ἀπὸ μὲν τῆς ἀληθείας τὴν ἀκοὴν ἀποστρέψουσιν ἐπὶ δὲ τοὺς μύθους ἐκτραπήσονται* 'instead of listening to truth people will turn to "mythos"' (2 Tim 4:4).

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

On to Origen. In his *Homilies on Genesis*, Origen is steadfast in his refusal to see the saints and the patriarchs alike as anything but paragons of virtue who achieved extraordinary levels of spirituality. When treating the binding of Isaac, Origen declares that only through Paul's mediation can he, Origen, venture to comprehend 'the thoughts of the great patriarch' (*Hom.Gen.* 8.1; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 137). But most telling is his refusal to accept the literal reading of the story of Abraham, Sarah and Abimelech and its parallels. Origen sums up his allegorical reading of the section with the following declaration:

Let the Church of God (...) in this way uphold the deeds of the fathers with a fitting and honorable interpretation, in this way not disgrace the words of the holy spirit with foolish and Jewish fables (sic uerba Spiritus sancti non ineptis et iudaicus fabulis deceloret), but reckon them to be full of honor, full of virtue and usefulness. Otherwise, what edification will we receive when we read that Abraham, such a great patriarch, not only lied to King Abimelech, but also surrendered his wife's chastity to him? In what way does the wife of so great a patriarch edify us if she is supposed to have been exposed to defilements through marital indulgence? These things are what the Jews suppose, along with those who are friends of the letter, not of the spirit. (*Hom.Gen.* 6.3; trans. Heine 1982, 126)

Interestingly, according to this allegorical thrust there is no room for any development in the characters of Scripture. Every saint, patriarch or matriarch, has to be a thoroughly pious, unflawed character in each and every verse. This radically conservative approach is even more striking when one considers, as Torjesen so masterfully showed, that Origen's works were built around a dynamic progression that the reader was supposed to undergo (Torjesen 1986). Yet in our context, Origen insisted that each of the heroes of scripture was to be a static, flawless image, for the adherent to imitate to the best of their ability. Thus, to represent a fallible patriarch or matriarch is 'disgraceful' and is one of those Jewish myths propounded by Jewish exegetes.

Later, Origen will defend Joseph with great dexterity against the charge that Joseph, the holy man according to Origen, had reduced the Egyptians to slavery and acquired all their possessions for Pharaoh. There Origen contends that:

(...) the statement itself of Scripture excuses the administration of the holy man when it says that the Egyptians sold themselves and their possessions. Blame therefore is not reflected on the administrator (...). (*Hom.Gen.* 16.2; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 216)

Origen's defense of Joseph and removal of blame is very close to the language Jerome will use to defend Sarah against charges of impropriety, as we will see.

Indeed, the ancient Rabbis did not spare Abraham, though their criticism is, for the most part, moderate. R. Pinḥas in the name of R. Reuben, the latter a younger contemporary of Origen's, lumps Abraham and Barak together as two men who were עיקר, who were principal, yet relegated themselves to a secondary position vis-à-vis a woman and therefore really became dependent and secondary (GenR 40:4). This line is continued in the Abimelech story where the 'rabbis' read the defective spelling of בעלת בעל as indicating that Sarah was the mistress or the owner of her husband. This reading is supported by God's injunction to Abraham, 'whatever Sarah tells you obey her' (Gen 21:12). In the Abimelech story, Sarah was portrayed by the anonymous midrash, summarily, as being taken, 'against her will and not in her best interest' על כרחיה בלא טובתה (GenR 52:4).<sup>2</sup> Probably the most damning of the rabbinic comments on Abraham's behavior is that of tanna R. Judah bar Ilai who has Abimelech say to Abraham:

You went to Egypt and trafficked in her and you came here and trafficked in her; if it's money you want, here take this money and cover the eye from her. (GenR 52:12)

Origen's refusal to see development in his holy characters accords well with his insistence that Scripture does not simply tell stories:

Do we think that it is the Holy Spirit's intention to write stories and to narrate how a child was weaned and a feast was made, how he played and did other childish things? Or should we understand by these things that he wishes to teach us something divine and worthy that the human race might learn from the words of God. (*Hom.Gen.* 7.1; trans. Heine 1982, 127)

Toward the end of the *Homilies on Genesis*, Origen returns to this theme and says quite bluntly, 'Nor is Scripture devoted so much to historical narratives as to things and ideas which are mystical' (*Hom.Gen.* 15.1;

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<sup>2</sup> The reading in the Vatican 30 manuscript makes it clear that the lapidary comment relates to her being taken by Abimelech. The text in Theodor and Albeck 1965, 544 only brings the first half of the verse—'Abraham said to Sarah she is my sister' but adds 'etc' in the lemma, and although it may be interpreted otherwise, should be understood as the manuscript expressly reads.

trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 203). One must see Scripture as a genre set apart, uniformly efficacious. As always, Origen is combating at least two opponents at once. At the same time that he is vociferously opposed to what he calls the Jewish ‘fabulous,’ that is fable ridden, interpretation of Scripture, he is at pains to defend Scripture from the attacks of ‘(...) the philosophers (who) despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the like of poetic fictions’ (*Hom.Gen.* 3.1; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 89). Indeed, Origen’s usage of the Greek word ‘mythos’ elsewhere in his writings is clearly in opposition to ‘truth.’ So, for example, in his *Contra Celsum* he says to the Jew:

What you adduce as myths, we regard also as such; but the statements of the Scripture which are common to us both, in which not only you, but we also, take pride, we do not at all regard as myths. (*Contr.Cels.* II.58; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* p. 455)

When Celsus claims that the biblical narrative is simply Jewish myth-making (ἐμυθολόγησαν) for little children, Origen is quick to upbraid Celsus for his hostility, unbecoming to a philosopher, and calls Scripture (τὴν ἀρχαιοτάτην Ἰουδαίων γραφήν), ancient Jewish writings (*Contr.Cels.* IV.41). So, in our example, one need distinguish between the ancient Jewish writing about Sarah and Abraham, and the Jewish false interpretation of it, ‘mythologos,’ that disparages Abraham. This ‘mythical’ reading is, as de Lange has noted, simply the Jewish literal reading of Scripture (de Lange 1976, 104–105 and n. 8). The valence of myth here is, as its usage from Plato’s time and on, falsity, the opposite of truth (Naddaf 1998, x). In effect, Origen has replaced ‘mythos’ with ‘mystikos’ and as such there is no storyline but rather mystical interpretations.

Origen is generally devoted to interpretation on three levels, the first being the historical or narrative line. Why here is he so adamant in his refusal to read the story on a literal level? Why is this gifted exegete stymied by the seemingly sordid plot which casts aspersions on the ‘great patriarch’ and raises doubts as to Sarah’s status as his wife?

These questions are even more compelling when one peruses one of Origen’s Alexandrian predecessors, Philo, on the one hand, and one of his Palestinian successors, Jerome, on the other hand. Philo’s excursus on Abraham begins by charting the three different kinds of piety evinced by Adam, Enoch and Noah, comparing the repentant soul with the one who was consistently righteous. When Philo arrives at the next trio, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he begins by praising Abraham’s two migrations in seeking God and says:

So in both our expositions, the literal as applied to the man, the allegorical, as applied to the soul, we have shewn both man and soul to be worthy of our affection (...). This is the opening of the story of the friend of God, and it is followed by actions which call for anything but contempt (...) God rewards the man of worth with a great gift; for when his marriage was threatened through the designs of a licentious potentate God kept it safe and unharmed. (*On Abraham* 88–90; trans. Colson 1966, 48–49)

Philo portrays Abraham and Sarah's reliance on God in the face of their helplessness and fear in a foreign and hostile country (Niehoff 2004). Philo sustained both the literal and allegorical reading, while dismissing any hint of wrongdoing in the actions of the patriarch, and relegating those who do not see 'their greatness' to an inferior spiritual status.

On the other hand, Jerome, over a century after Origen, had no compunctions about castigating Abraham:

(...) it is possible for Sarai to be freed from blame because in the time of famine she was alone in foreign places and unable to resist the king, and her husband was conniving at the deed (...). (*Quaest. Gen.* 12:15–16; trans. Hayward 1995, 44)

In his learned article on narrative aggadah in patristic literature, Adam Kamesar cites Origen's view that the Jews were privy to three different kinds of sources when they came to interpret scripture. These were 'unwritten tradition, conjecture, and apochrypha (i.e. apochryphal writings)' (Kamesar 1994, 59).<sup>3</sup> Both Origen and Jerome availed themselves of these traditions, after carefully weighing their validity and possible contribution to the understanding of the historical narrative. But, as the Talmud says, the question has returned to its place. Why does Origen, on the one hand, whitewash the 'sister' story, and why is the midrash, on the other hand, unusually unequivocal in its reprimanding of Abraham, and once in the most acerbic of terms?

The tenor of Origen's homilies seems to be of someone embattled, defensive of his interpretation and irritated by his audience's lack of attention to both Scripture and Origen's own words. Let me give a few examples. Homilies 10, 11, 13 and 14 all revolve around the motif of the well, first Rebekah, then Hagar, followed by two with Isaac. Origen notes this proclivity in Scripture and says in the thirteenth homily, 'We are always encountering the habitual works of the patriarchs

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Hillel Newman's chapter on Jerome's critical and selective but frequent use of aggadah in his doctorate on 'Jerome and the Jews' (Hebrew), Hebrew University 1997, 192–195.

regarding wells' (*Hom.Gen.* 13.1; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 185). And according to Origen:

(...) each of us who serves the word of God digs wells and seeks "living water", from which he may renew his hearers. (...) if I shall attempt to remove the veil of the Law and to show that the things which have been written "allegorical", I am indeed digging wells. But immediately the friends of the letter will stir up malicious charges against me (...). (*Hom.Gen.* 13.3; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 189)

The wells that Abraham dug and were filled up by the Philistines, represent, according to Origen, prophecies from Moses and on 'which the earthy and squalid understanding of the Jews had filled' (*Hom.Gen.* 13.2; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 188). They are filled with earth by 'those who teach the law carnally and defile the waters of the holy spirit' (*Hom.Gen.* 13.2; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 187). Origen declares himself a follower of Paul in his allegorical interpretation (*Hom.Gen.* 10.5; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 166). But Origen is not just waging a battle in terms of the nature of interpretation, but also vigorously combating his audience's indifference. He rails against their lack of church attendance (*Hom.Gen.* 10.1; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 157–158) as well as their inattentiveness even when they are in church—'you waste your time on common everyday stories; you turn your backs to the word of God or to the divine readings' (*ibid.*). In direct contrast, he shortly after castigates them with high rhetoric for their attitude to what is taught in Scripture:

Do you think these are tales and that the Holy Spirit tells stories in Scripture (...) All these things which are written are mysteries. (*Hom.Gen.* 10.2; trans. Heine 1982, 160)

Or in another earlier homily, cited above, but worth rehearsing in this context:

Do we think that it is the Holy Spirit's intention to write stories and to narrate how a child was weaned, and a feast was made, how he played and did other childish acts? Or should we understand by these things that he wishes to teach us something divine and worthy that the human race might learn from the words of God? (*Hom.Gen.* 7.1; trans. Heine 1982, 127)

Origen's embattled position forces him to distinguish his understanding of Scripture, indeed Scripture itself, from everyday stories on the one hand and clumsy, earthy Jewish fables on the other hand. There is room only for the mysterious and the spiritual.

Thus, the patriarchs themselves are, according to Origen, to be understood as types of Jesus (*Hom.Gen.* 14.1; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 197) and are each one comparable to the stars of creation to be planted firmly in the soul of the believer (*Hom.Gen.* 1.7; trans. Heine 1982 repr. 2002, 55). Origen's reluctance to accord to some of the stories of Genesis (some but not all—he is at pains, for example, to explain the physical construction and geometry of Noah's ark [*Hom.Gen.* 2.1–2]) any 'historical' valence is a compelling problem and has recently received a penetrating analysis in J. Christopher King's, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture* (2005). These 'bodiless texts' as he calls them (King 2005, 45–46), which Origen called *skandala*, stumbling blocks, are intended to interrupt any naive reading of Scripture and point one to a higher reading. Origen is also open to the proposition that Scripture 'recorded the acts of the righteous and the sins that these same persons occasionally committed' (King 2005, 107). King sums up Origen's view on this saying 'God has placed these in Scripture not for the edification of the mature reader, who has no need of such elementary lessons in the just life, but for the guidance and moral reproof of the beginner' (King 2005, 107–108). On the whole, the economics of Origen's view of Scripture, does not allow for an expansive treatment of the mundane and the everyday, even if the pedestrian sometimes points to the ethical. Scripture must be uniquely beneficial and is generally pointed to the higher spiritual realms. This approach can be contrasted neatly with the Jewish Sages' regaling themselves in the details of the narrative. A few examples will suffice.

In counterpoint to Origen's extended rhetorical foray against the details of Isaac's childhood, one can cite the famous statement of R. Aḥa concerning Abraham's servant and Rebekah at the well. R. Aḥa was amazed by the length and repetitiveness of that story of Abraham's servant, whom R. Aḥa identified as Eliezer. R. Aḥa remarks:

More beautiful is the discourse (*siḥat*) of the servants of the fathers' households than the Torah of the children. The section (*parashah*) of Eliezer is two or three columns, he says it and repeats it; but, the creeping creature, one of the essentials of Torah, and its blood imparts impurity like its skin only by a derivation from Scripture('s language) (...). Said R. Aḥa, More beautiful is the washing of the feet of the servants of the fathers' household than the Torah of the children, that even the washing of the feet needed to be written,<sup>4</sup> but the creeping creature (...). (GenR 60:8)

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<sup>4</sup> An unusual phrase, 'zarikh likhtov'—compare the other usage in GenR 42:16 (see

The thrust of this curious interpretation is that the repetition of one word suffices to teach an important law of purity, whereas the Torah is prolix in its repetition of the servant's discourse and, to my mind even more striking, in its detailed description of the respect accorded to him, in the washing of his feet.<sup>5</sup> The contrast of 'siḥah,' discourse or conversation, of the servant, with latter day Torah is the heart of the saying, privileging even the non-Torah statements of the servants of former generations to the actual Torah of the children.<sup>6</sup> R. Aḥa is possibly echoing another tradition, that 'even the (secular)<sup>7</sup> discourse of sages requires study' (AZ 19b and parallels) and relies on a number of sources that contrast regular discourse with that of Torah.

As an aside, we may note that the late medieval Jewish preacher Ibn Shuaib quotes a number of traditions praising Eliezer, including the place reserved for him in Eden, and concludes that because of Eliezer's stature and great wisdom Scripture goes to such lengths to tell his tale. This approach is reminiscent of Origen in that Scripture teaches only by imitation of the great and pious rather than learning also from the mistakes of our predecessors. But let us return to the Late Antique rabbinic midrash.

Eliezer the servant of the patriarch has been placed on a pedestal, in his search for a wife for his master's son, while the patriarch Abraham is himself castigated for his treatment of his own wife. To be sure, there are rabbinic interpretations that attempt to defend and excuse Abraham's behaviour, having their roots possibly in what some see as the Bible's own retelling of Sarah's abduction through Second Temple works that either omit the stories or go to great lengths to paint a sympathetic picture of Abraham (Firestone 1991, Keshet 2003).

Do Origen and the Rabbis represent diverse approaches to understandings of the sanctity and import of the 'everyday' mundane or pedestrian in the narrative of Scripture and its intent? While discuss-

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variants at Theodor and Albeck 1965, 493) and Albeck's examples of the use of the word 'zarakh' as part of the terminology of Genesis Rabbah (Theodor and Albeck 1965, 3:40).

<sup>5</sup> The two interpretations attributed to R. Aḥa appear consecutively on the verse, '(...) The camels were given straw and feed, and water was brought to bathe his feet and the feet of the men with him' (Gen 24:32). The second interpretation fits this context whereas the first certainly might have found a more appropriate lemma.

<sup>6</sup> The identification of these children is not entirely clear.

<sup>7</sup> The JTSA manuscript has the word 'secular' crossed out: see Abramson's note to the MS, 1957, 162.

ing the opposing interpretations of the narrative of the circumcision, Origen compares his interpretation 'with your<sup>8</sup> Jewish fables and disgusting stories' (*uestris iudaicus fabulis et narrationibus foetidus* [*Hom. Gen. 3.6*]). The thought of God commanding a physical circumcision disgusts the church father.

Averil Cameron has advanced the proposition that:

the stories in the apocryphal *Acts* had an important part to play in the creation of a Christian universe of myth (...). The canonical Gospels had left many loose ends and required expansion from an early date; since they themselves constituted stories—at least in part—this expansion also naturally took story form. (Cameron 1991, 113)

For the Jewish Sages, their midrashic endeavour was a continuation of Second Temple efforts to 'tie up loose ends and expand the story.' One of the ancient classifications of literature divided it into three categories: the historical, things that happened; *plasma*, things that might have been; and the mythical, things that are false and cannot have happened. Rabbinic stories seem to me to fall into the first or possibly the second category, certainly not the third. For Origen, the Old Testament story essentially pointed beyond itself. It did have historical value, a chain of tradition, but that was not its real message.

In some ways we might be able to trace the trajectory of this debate beginning again with R. Akiva and R. Yishmael's debate over the language of Scripture in its legal context. Need every word be significant and carry legal import? So too in the narrative context need every word be significant or might some of them simply serve the needs of the narrative? Origen pressed Scripture to the utmost, seeking to squeeze mystical meaning out of every passage. For the Amoraim, ethics did not take a back seat to theology. Not only did Scripture impart ethics, but it also taught everyday manners (*limedtekha Torah derekh erez*). The honor given to the servants of the Patriarch's home justifies in R. Aḥa's eyes, the extraordinary length of the Eliezer tale. For Origen, steeped in the philosophy and literature of the Greco-Roman world, these insights were readily available without reference to Scripture. Scripture had to say something beyond—he held that the story was devoted in its entirety to enabling the devout to achieving the highest understanding of the divinity.

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<sup>8</sup> Note the 'your'—is he talking to Jews?

In closing, I would like to briefly mention John Chrysostom's *Homilies on Genesis*. In stark contrast to Origen, Chrysostom goes out of his way to congratulate his audience on their enthusiastic response to his preaching and how their response energizes him. This sounds very much like the enthusiastic response to rabbinic preaching noted in different and varied sources. Interestingly, Chrysostom's comments often touch on practical lessons—such as the exemplary nature of Sarah and Abraham's mutual concern as a model for marital relations. Is Chrysostom reaping the rewards of audiences who have, after two centuries, come to appreciate the Christian homily? Or is it his golden oratory in which Chrysostom has, like the Jewish rabbis, found the recipe for intertwining the lives of his audience with that of the biblical heroes. It would seem that the nexus of the everyday, the practical, and the meaningful, interspersed with theology and/or mysticism, captured the hearts of the audience.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

HSCP	Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
J ECS	Journal of Early Christian Studies
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
NovT	Novum Testamentum
RB	Revue Biblique
RSR	Revue de Science Religieuse
VigChr	Vigiliae Christianae
VT	Vetus Testamentum
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft



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