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
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The Forbidden Knowledge of Creation:
A Study of Ma'aseh Bereshit

Brenner J. Glickman

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination.

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion

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Referee, Professor Edward Goldman

Digest

In the past few decades, rabbinic esotericism has received much attention among contemporary scholars. Each year finds a new book published on some matter of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the presumably mystical study of Ezekiel's vision. However, *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the rabbinic study of creation, has been virtually ignored. Several scholars have written a chapter or an article on the subject, but no one has published a single, comprehensive study of rabbinic cosmogony. It has been my goal with this thesis to provide the first study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* with significant breadth and depth. This includes a summary and analysis of rabbinic cosmogony, rabbinic restrictions of cosmogony, and why the Rabbis simultaneously restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

This thesis attempts a systematic study of rabbinic cosmogony. Chapter One explores the many different meanings of the rabbinic term *ma'aseh bereshit*. Chapter Two discusses the ambiguous and varied prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* (capitalization intentional). Chapter Three demonstrates that the mysterious *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of the tannaitic texts is indeed the rabbinic cosmogony of the amoraic texts. Chapter Four illustrates some major themes of this corpus of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Chapter Five speculates upon why the Rabbis both prohibited and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Finally, Chapter Six applies the findings from this study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to the contemporary debate over *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

In the course of its progression, this thesis yields several new and important conclusions about *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, some of which contest the assertions of leading scholars. One, the term *ma'aseh bereshit* supports a wide range of usage, and can have

both exoteric and esoteric meanings. Two, one of these meanings, denoted by capital letters in this thesis, refers to a discipline and corpus of study restricted to a select group of individuals. In this way, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is like *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Three, though the tannaitic texts which discuss *Ma'aseh Bereshit* do not define or exemplify *Ma'aseh Bereshit* explicitly, we find definition and exemplification of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in the amoraic texts. The amoraic sources preserve pre-tannaitic and tannaitic cosmogony. This cosmogony, though not so stated explicitly, is *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Four, the essence of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is power. The utilization and protection of that power motivated the Rabbis both to engage in and restrict the study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Five, unlike *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is probably not magic or mysticism. And six, these new insights into *Ma'aseh Bereshit* may provide further understanding of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. These six assertions represent the most significant contributions of this thesis to the contemporary study of rabbinic esotericism.

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Brenner J. Glickman

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Table of Abbreviations

BR	Genesis Rabbah (Bereshit Rabbah)
BT	Babylonian Talmud
Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Ex.	Exodus
Gen.	Genesis
Hag.	Hagigah
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
JT	Jerusalem Talmud (Palestinian Talmud)
Lev.	Leviticus
M.	Mishnah
Meg.	Megillah
Num.	Numbers
Ps.	Psalms
T.	Tosefta

Introduction

What is too wonderful for you, do not seek, nor search after what is hidden from you. Meditate upon that which is permitted to you. Do not occupy yourself with mysteries. -Ben Sira¹

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was unformed and void, and darkness covered the face of the depths; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was light." These opening words of the Bible are an account of the primordial history of the universe, a testament to God's first dramatic acts of creation. What is immediately striking about these first verses in the Bible is their scarcity of words. Although this is arguably the grandest, most important series of events in the entire biblical narrative, it is described in but three short verses. More suggestive than explanative, the biblical creation account raises more questions than it answers. Why did God create the world? How did God create the heavens, the earth, and light? According to what principles did God create them?

These are but a few of the many questions asked by each generation that has grappled with these cryptic verses and sought to decode their mysteries. The passion to understand these mysteries is not driven by mere historic or scientific curiosity. No, what is at stake here is something far greater. Generations have yearned to know the mysteries of creation not out of a desire to understand the past, but out of a need to understand the present. To know how the world was created is to know the world as it is today.

¹Sira 3, 21:f. See also JT Hagigah 77c; BT Hag. 13a; and Genesis Rabbah 8:2. Translation from Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, p. 62.

Furthermore, to know creation is to know the Creator. The stakes in any cosmogonic inquiry are nothing less than the nature of the world and the nature of God.

The tannaitic and amoraic Rabbis in the first five centuries of the Common Era understood fully the significance of creation. Recognizing its power and importance, they forbade cosmogonic inquiry into the secret meaning of the Genesis account. However, the same Rabbis who spoke against this inquiry also actively engaged in it. Such is the case with Genesis Rabbah 8:2. Here, the midrash cites the words of Ben Sira, who warns "Do not engage yourself in mysteries." More specifically, the Rabbis rule in this midrash that one should not inquire about the mysteries of creation except regarding matters after the sixth day when humans were created. Any speculation about what occurred before that day is explicitly forbidden. However, in this same midrash, the Rabbis plainly state that the Torah preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years!

Why were the Rabbis so careful to prohibit cosmogonic inquiry? Why did they engage in it, nonetheless? What was the nature of their inquiry? We will explore the answer to these three questions in the course of this thesis. In Chapter One we will examine the rabbinic term *ma'aseh bereshit* and how it refers to an esoteric inquiry into the mysteries of creation. Chapter Two will catalog the numerous rabbinic prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*², both in terms of content and those who may engage in it. In Chapter Three, we will demonstrate how tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is preserved in the amoraic cosmogony. Chapter Four will catalog some major themes of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as preserved in the amoraic texts. By the fifth chapter, we will begin to explore why the Rabbis so meticulously prohibited *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and then violated their own prohibitions. In the sixth chapter, we will apply our findings from this study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to the contemporary debate over *Ma'aseh Merkava*.

² I shall use capital letters when this term applies to esoteric practice. When it is used generally, or refers specifically to exoteric practice, I shall write *ma'aseh bereshit* in small letters.

During the course of this thesis, one should keep in mind the tenuous nature of the answers we seek. We will be speculating on a practice that occurred almost two thousand years ago, while we rely upon, in most cases, texts that were compiled centuries later. Furthermore, the extant texts we possess are purposefully vague on the issue of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* because it was, in its own time, an esoteric study of secret knowledge. Therefore, throughout this course of inquiry we shall see that *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the rabbinic study of creation's mysteries, is itself a mystery.

And so, just as the Rabbis did before us, we shall ignore the advice of Ben Sira, and occupy ourselves in mysteries.

Chapter One

The Terminology of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

The term that the Rabbis use to identify the restricted inquiry into the mysteries of creation is *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. An attempt at a literal translation of this term into English would yield "the doings of in the beginning." Of course, this literal translation is nonsense. In order to make any sense of this term, we cannot translate either "*ma'aseh*" or "*bereshit*" into any single, literal equivalents. Instead, we must take into account the rich, symbolic meaning that these terms held in the rabbinic mind. Let us begin with "*bereshit*," the first word in the Torah. Though it means literally "in the beginning," the Rabbis use it to refer to what occurred "in the beginning," according to the Genesis account that begins "In the beginning." Let us translate, therefore, "*bereshit*" as "creation." The term "*ma'aseh*," however, will not allow such a singular translation because the Rabbis do not use it in a singular way.³ In the numerous occurrences of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* throughout rabbinic literature, the Rabbis give the term five different meanings. On different occasions, *ma'aseh bereshit* refers to the account of creation, the deeds of creation, the works of creation, the natural laws of creation, and the esoteric study of creation.

This final definition of *ma'aseh bereshit* has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Two of the leading scholars in the field of *ma'aseh bereshit*, Alon Goshen Gottstein and David Halperin, deny that the term *ma'aseh bereshit* refers to any

³ For a list of the diverse uses of *ma'aseh* in rabbinic literature, see C. J. Kasowski's *Otzar Leshon HaMishnah*, III, 1426-7.

esoteric discipline of cosmogony. It will be my ultimate intention in this chapter to refute their conclusion and demonstrate that *ma'aseh bereshit* can refer to a specific, esoteric study of creation. Since the heterogeneous usage of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* will play such an important role in this discussion, let us take a moment to catalog each of these definitions.

I. The Four Exoteric Meanings of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

a. "The Genesis account of creation."

One of the most common uses of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* is to refer to the narrative account of creation as told in the first two chapters of Genesis. An early usage of this term can be found already in the Mishnah regarding the observance of *Ma'amadot* festivals.

The earlier prophets instituted twenty-four *mishmarot*, and each *mishmar* was represented in Jerusalem by its own *ma'amad* of priests, Levites and Israelites. When the time came for the *mishmar* to go up, the priests and Levites went up to Jerusalem and the Israelites of that *mishmar* assembled in their cities and read from *ma'aseh bereshit*.⁴

Though we plainly learn from this citation that *ma'aseh bereshit* is a written text that can be read, this mishnah does not state exactly which text comprises *ma'aseh bereshit*.

Although the first two chapters of Genesis may be the only scriptural passage that describes creation in a systematic narrative, these are not the only scriptural verses that speak of creation. Many other, disparate verses, particularly in Psalms and Proverbs, describe the wondrous doings of creation. To discover which text the Rabbis consider to

⁴ M. Ta'anit 4:2, Soncino translation. See also M. Megillah 3:6; T. Ta'anit 3:3; BT Ta'anit 26a, 27b, Megillah 30b, 31b; and JT Ta'anit 67b, 67d, Megillah 73d.

be *ma'aseh bereshit*, we must look to other rabbinic sources for clues. The Tosefta provides us with such a clue:

There are some texts which may be read and translated, some which may be read but not translated, and some which may not be read and not translated. *Ma'aseh bereshit* may be read and translated, the story of Lot and his two daughters may be read and translated, the story of Judah and Tamar may be read and translated . . .⁵

This Tosefta excerpt has *ma'aseh bereshit* heading a list of biblical readings that may or may not be read and translated to the public. This citation narrows the scope of our search to those texts which are part of the liturgical cycle, and it strongly suggests the account from the first two chapters of Genesis due to its chronological place in the liturgical calendar before the stories of Lot and Judah.⁶ What is implied in these sources is stated explicitly in other sources.

It is written: "Who appointedst the moon for seasons; the sun knoweth his going down" (Psalm 104:2). Moses wrote many things in the Torah without explaining them; it was left to David to clarify them. Thus we find in *ma'aseh bereshit* that, after He had created the heavens and the earth, He created the light, for it says: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1); afterwards is it written: "And God said: Let there be light" (ib. 3). But David explained that it was after He had created light that He created the heavens, for it says: "Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment" (Ps. 104:2), and after this we read: "Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain" (ib.)⁷

⁵ T. Megillah 3:31, my own translation. See also BT Megillah 25a.

⁶ The implications of these restrictions and the exemption of *ma'aseh bereshit* will be discussed later in this thesis.

⁷ Exodus Rabbah 15:22, Soncino translation. See also Numbers Rabbah 11:2. For a similar citation from a tannaitic source, see Mechilta, Amalek, chapter 2.

Here, we finally see *ma'aseh bereshit* refer specifically to the Genesis account of creation, in contrast to the description of creation found in the verse from Psalms. In the above citations from Mishnah Ta'anit 4:2, Tosefta Megillah 3:31, and Exodus Rabbah 15:22, we should translate *ma'aseh bereshit* as "the Genesis account of creation."

b. "The acts of creation."

In other places in rabbinic literature, the term "*ma'aseh bereshit*" is used to refer not to any account of creation, but rather to the actual deeds of creation that may be described in such accounts. For example, Mishnah Berachot 9:2 includes the admonition:

[Upon seeing] a mountain, a hill, a sea, a river, or a wilderness, one should recite [the formulaic blessing]: Blessed is the One who performs *ma'aseh bereshit*.

Here *ma'aseh bereshit* is a performative act of creation. We find similar usage in Exodus Rabbah 19:7:

Warn Israel that just as I, who created the world, commanded them to observe the Sabbath as a memorial of *ma'aseh bereshit*, as it says: "Remember the Sabbath day" (Exodus 20:8), so also do ye remember the miracles I performed for you in Egypt and the anniversary of the day of your departure.⁸

Again *ma'aseh bereshit* refers to performative acts of creation; only this time we see a comparison to the similarly performative acts of miracles. Our final example of this use of *ma'aseh bereshit* is found in a popular motif repeated in various works of rabbinic literature.

⁸ Translated by S. M. Lehrman.

Any judge who judges fairly even for one hour, Scriptures regards him as if he were a partner with the Holy One, Blessed Be He, in *ma'aseh bereshit*.⁹

In all of these above examples, the term *ma'aseh bereshit* refers to God's acts of creation. We would therefore translate the term *ma'aseh bereshit* in these cases as "the deeds of creation."

c. "The products of creation."

In yet another usage of *ma'aseh bereshit*, the Rabbis refer not to the deeds of creation, but to the result of those deeds. On such occasions, we would translate *ma'aseh bereshit* as "the products of creation" or "created entities." For instance, in an oft-used motif, the Rabbis will declare the greatness of a particular subject by stating that it is equivalent to all the works of creation. Such is the case in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:1:7:

R. Yehoshua said, "So great is the day when rain falls that it is equal to all *ma'aseh bereshit*."¹⁰

This formula can be found throughout rabbinic literature applied to a myriad of subjects which the Rabbis deem important. Thus we find that the sea equals all the works of creation,¹¹ as does peace,¹² and each Israelite,¹³ and sustenance,¹⁴ and the Tabernacle.¹⁵ In any case, what is relevant to our discussion is that the Rabbis use the phrase "*kol*

⁹ BT Shabbat 10a, my own translation. See also Mechilta, Amalek, chapter 2; Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 18:13; and Seder Eliyahu Zuta, chapter 23. For a similar use of this motif, see BT Shabbat 119b for those who pray on Shabbat eve the formulaic prayer "*Vayechulu*."

¹⁰ My own translation. See also Genesis Rabbah 13:4.

¹¹ Mechilta, Bahodesh, chapter 7.

¹² Sifrei, Piska 42.

¹³ Mechilta, Bahodesh, chapter 4.

¹⁴ Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor 24:4

¹⁵ Otzar HaMidrashim, p. 222.

ma'aseh bereshit" to mean "all the works of creation." We find similar usage of the term in an amusing account from Leviticus Rabbah:

If a man acts meritoriously, they say to him: "You preceded all *ma'aseh bereshit* [in the order of creation];" but if not, they say to him: "A gnat preceded you, a snail preceded you."¹⁶

As a final example, we have an occurrence in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah in which *ma'aseh bereshit* refers not to the past, but to the Messianic future:

For in the sight of heaven and earth, of sun and moon, of stars and planets, indeed in the sight of all *ma'aseh bereshit* - all without exception - plain are the deeds of the righteous. In the sight of heaven and earth, of sun and moon, of stars and planets, indeed in the sight of all *ma'aseh bereshit* - all without exception - plain are the deeds of the wicked. The righteous will collect the reward for their deeds, and the wicked will collect the reward for their deeds.¹⁷

This understanding of *ma'aseh bereshit* is divorced from any temporal association with the act of creation itself. Of interest here is not the time of creation, but the products of creation at any given time. The subject is not the process, but the product of creation. Therefore, in the three excerpts quoted above, we should translate *ma'aseh bereshit* as "the products of creation."

d. "The laws of nature."

A fourth definition of "*ma'aseh bereshit*" that is used rarely by the Rabbis is distinct enough to merit its own category. In this use of the term, the Rabbis refer to

¹⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 14:1, based on Soncino translation. See also T. Sanhedrin 8:8; and BT Sanhedrin 38a.

¹⁷ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah chapter 5, translated by Braude. See also chapter 18.

"*ma'aseh bereshit*" as "the laws of creation" or "natural law." I have found but one example of this usage, though it does appear in three sources.

R. Simon b. Gamaliel says: Come and see how much beloved the Israelites are by Him by whose word the world came into being. Because they are so much loved by Him, He made for them a change in *ma'aseh bereshit*. For their sake He made the upper region like the lower and the lower like the upper. In the past the bread came up from the earth and the dew would come down from heaven, as it is said: "The earth yielding corn and wine; yea, His heavens drop down dew" (Deut. 33:28). But now things have changed. Bread began to come down from heaven and the dew came up from the earth, as it is said: "Behold, I will cause to rain bread from the heaven," and it says: "And the layer of dew came up" (Ex. 16:14).¹⁸

In this account, God does not retroactively alter creation. Instead, God disrupts the laws of nature that have been established since the time of creation, in a time that is completely disassociated with that act of creation. *Ma'aseh bereshit*, used in this context, does not really have anything to do with the act of creation. The best translations of this usage of the term, such as "the laws of nature," do not even mention the word "creation."

II. The Esoteric Meaning of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

Throughout this exercise in the rabbinic usage of *ma'aseh bereshit*, we have found that the term is rich in meaning. The rabbinic sources refer to *ma'aseh bereshit* as (1) the narrative account of creation as told in the first two chapters of Genesis, (2) the performative acts of creation, (3) the products of creation, and (4) the laws of nature established at the time of creation. In addition to these meanings, there is a fifth definition that will be the subject of our inquiry. That is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as an esoteric study of the mysteries of creation. To distinguish this usage from the other four, I will capitalize the

¹⁸ Mechilta, Vayasa, chapter 3, translated by Jacob Lauterbach. See also Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 16:4; and Tanhuma Warsaw, Beshalach, 20.

term when it is used specifically to refer to esoteric inquiry. Where the use is questionable, or where the term refers to both exoteric and esoteric usage, I will write the term in its more general application without capitals. Of course, the Rabbis themselves did not distinguish between their uses of the term, and certainly not in this manner considering that there are no capital letters in Hebrew. Capitalizing this particular usage of the term is merely an artificial, pedagogical device for the sake of clarity. Hopefully, this will make it easier to distinguish between the esoteric discipline of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and the four other exoteric uses of *ma'aseh bereshit*.

One of the earliest hints that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* might have some esoteric meaning comes from the strange and intriguing story of Ben Zoma.

There is a story concerning R. Joshua, who was walking in the highway, and Ben Zoma was walking toward him. He reached him, and did not greet him. He said to him, "Whence and whither, Ben Zoma?" He said to him, "I was looking at *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and there is not between the upper waters and the lower waters even a handbreadth. As it is said, 'And the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters' (Gen. 1:2). And it says, 'As an eagle stirs up its nest, etc. [over its young it hovers,' Deut. 32:11]. As an eagle flies over its nest, touching and not touching, so there is not between the upper waters and lower waters even a handbreadth." R. Joshua said to his disciples, "Ben Zoma is already outside." Hardly a few days passed before Ben Zoma departed [i.e., from the world].¹⁹

The overall significance of this puzzling and cryptic account will be discussed in detail throughout the course of this thesis. At the moment, let us concern ourselves only with how this account from Tosefta uses the term *ma'aseh bereshit*. One could argue that this is actually an exoteric use of *ma'aseh bereshit* as the creation narrative from Genesis. Ben Zoma explicitly cites this text, forming a *gezerah shavah* with a verse from Deuteronomy.

¹⁹ T. Hagigah 2:6, translated by Halperin, in *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 67. See also JT Hagigah 77b; and Genesis Rabbah 2:4. BT Hagigah 15a gives a parallel account, but it does not use the term *ma'aseh bereshit*.

This is standard rabbinic exegesis, and thus the term *ma'aseh bereshit* would refer simply to the Genesis narrative. The foundation of this argument is sound, and the conclusion that the term refers in some way to the Genesis account is undeniable. However, there is in this account an implication there is something particular about this use of *ma'aseh bereshit*. It may refer to the creation narrative, as in the case of the *Ma'amadot*, but it does so in a specific way. When Ben Zoma looked at *ma'aseh bereshit*, he looked at the Genesis narrative in a way that was not standard rabbinic exegesis. R. Judah recognized this and pronounced that Ben Zoma was "outside." We do not really know what R. Judah meant by "outside." Ben Zoma might have been out of his mind in a crazed delirium, or maybe he was outside of this world in a stage of death, or maybe he was outside the established boundaries of rabbinic interpretation. Whatever the case may be, it seems that, according to R. Judah, Ben Zoma is engaged in a particular, esoteric activity. Pertinent to our discussion here, the text describes an esoteric study of creation by means of the Genesis account and it uses the term *ma'aseh bereshit*. Whether or not the Rabbis considered *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as an established discipline of esoteric cosmogony cannot be determined from this text alone. This account only suggests that possibility by linking Ben Zoma's strange exegesis with the term *ma'aseh bereshit*. To draw any further conclusions, we must examine other sources.

Another account associating particularistic knowledge of creation and the term *ma'aseh bereshit* can be found in similar versions from the Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah 77c and Genesis Rabbah 1:5. The text from the Jerusalem Talmud reads as follows:

["Let the lying lips be dumb which speak arrogantly against the righteous] in pride and contempt" (Ps. 31:19) - this is one who boasts, saying, "I expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit*," believing himself to be like one who exalts [his Creator], though in reality he is like one who despises Him.²⁰

²⁰ My own translation.

As in the passage before about Ben Zoma, the use of *ma'aseh bereshit* here can be compared to previous discussed usage. Here, too, *ma'aseh bereshit* may simply mean the Genesis account. This interpretation of *ma'aseh bereshit* as text fits with the terminology in which the boastful person brags of his ability to *doresh* (expound) *ma'aseh bereshit*. Nonetheless, here as above, the Genesis text is expounded in a specific fashion. The focus of this midrash is to condemn those who have a special knowledge of creation and brag about it. There is an implicit assumption that there is some kind of knowledge about creation that only a certain few know. This is, by definition, esoteric knowledge since it is not known by all. This midrash, like the one before it, links some special knowledge of creation with the term *ma'aseh bereshit*. These two texts by themselves do not warrant a new, fifth classification of the term *ma'aseh bereshit*, but the evidence toward that end is building.

There is another pattern developing that is worth noting. For some reason, the creation and its mysteries are singled out, and there is a certain wariness about them. One could imagine the story of Ben Zoma and the midrash about the boaster being retold without mentioning Genesis at all. However, in each of these cases of particularistic knowledge, the subject of creation is explicitly mentioned. In addition, there is a tone of suspicion about this type of knowledge. One should not engage in it in whatever manner that Ben Zoma did, and one should not brag about it. The general tone of wariness expressed implicitly in these midrashim is expressed explicitly in other sources. In *Pesikta Rabbati*, we find an explicit interdiction against certain forms of cosmogonic inquiry, and then a model of ideal practice.

Bar Kappara derived the degree of limitation upon the exposition from the verse "For ask now of the first days, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon earth" (Deut. 4:32) . . . In short, you are not to expound publicly on whatever took place before the six days of creation. You might think one is permitted to expound publicly on what is above the heavens and what is below the deep. Hence the verse goes on to limit you,

saying, "Ask now . . . from the one end of heaven unto the other" (ibid.). In short, you are not to expound publicly on anything except the world in which you live. In keeping with the opinion of Bar Kappara, R. Yudah b. Pazzi expounded *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.²¹

Postponing our discussion of the nature of this interdiction to the next chapter, let us maintain our focus now on the use of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* in this passage. Bar Kappara strictly limits the content and scope of proper cosmogonic inquiry. This proper cosmogonic inquiry is exemplified by R. Yudah b. Pazzi who "*doresh b'ma'aseh bereshit* (expounds *ma'aseh bereshit*)." Again, one could argue that *ma'aseh bereshit* refers here simply to the first chapters of Genesis, considering that the term *doresh* is usually associated with a scriptural text. I do not deny this meaning of *ma'aseh bereshit* in this context, but this is not the complete picture. The term *ma'aseh bereshit* used in this passage does refer to the Genesis narrative, but it also conveys an overtone of specific cosmogonic inquiry. The specification is defined by Bar Kappara's interdiction.

The most famous and significant interdiction regarding *Ma'aseh Bereshit* should enhance our understanding of this rabbinic term. Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 reads:

One may not expound [the laws of] illicit sexual practice before three [people], and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two, and *Merkavah* before one, unless he was wise and understands on his own accord. Anyone who looks into these four matters, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what before and what after. Anyone who does not respect the honor of his Maker, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world.²²

²¹ Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 21, translated by Braude.

²² My own translation. See also T. Hagigah 2:1 for an almost identical prohibition. See BT Hagigah 11b and JT Hagigah 76d for commentaries on these passages. I will discuss the nature of these interdictions in detail in Chapter Two.

The significance of this mishnah is threefold. Like the passage from *Pesikta Rabbati* above, it narrows the scope of appropriate cosmogonic study, further specifying what it means to *doresh b'ma'aseh bereshit*. In addition, it restricts the number of people who may study *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, thus explicitly making the cosmogonic study esoteric. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it associates *Ma'aseh Bereshit* with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. This association with *Ma'aseh Merkavah* may shed some light on the nature of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, but we should be wary of such illumination on two counts. First, the nature of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is as confounding as that of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Second, the relationship between *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is uncertain. Despite these two significant obstacles, we shall attempt to derive some understanding of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* from *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

III. The Association of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

The meaning of the rabbinic term *ma'aseh merkavah*²³ is as heterogeneous and obscure as the term *ma'aseh bereshit*. Because the Rabbis strictly forbade the public exposition of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, our extant texts from the tannaitic and amoraic periods consciously avoid describing *Ma'aseh Merkavah* explicitly. Instead, the Rabbis allude to it indirectly, speaking of its dangers and rewards, who can engage in it and who cannot. They do not tell us what *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is, or how to engage in it. Later, in the *Hechalot* texts, we find fantastic and explicit descriptions of the nature and practice of

²³ I will treat the term *ma'aseh merkavah* as I treat *ma'aseh bereshit*, capitalizing it when it refers specifically to esoteric practice, and not capitalizing it when it refers to more exoteric practices (the reasoning for this will be explained in Chapter Six). One should note that the Rabbis do not use this term consistently, at times writing *ma'aseh merkavah*, *ma'aseh hamerkavah*, or simply *merkavah*. These three terms are interchangeable. For instance, the account of R. Eleazar b. Arak and R. Johanan in BT Hag 14b uses all three terms alternatively to refer to the same practice (see Chapter Two).

Ma'aseh Merkavah as mysticism, magic and revelation. Whether or not the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmuds practiced this kind of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* has been the subject of heated scholarly debate. Given the dearth and mystery of the pertinent material from this period, it is impossible to say with any certainty whether or not the Tannaim and Amoraim engaged in a magical and mystical practice of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, though it seems likely that they did. Reserving further discussion of this matter to Chapter Six, let us refocus now on how the earlier rabbinic sources use the term *ma'aseh merkavah*.

Though we do not know for certain whether or not the term has any mystical connotations, we can deduce other insights with a greater degree of certainty. Like *ma'aseh bereshit*, the term *ma'aseh merkavah* has a myriad of meanings. At times it refers specifically to the biblical description of Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot found in Ezekiel 1, and perhaps Ezekiel 10 and 43:1-3 as well.²⁴ At other times, *ma'aseh merkavah* refers to the scriptural exegesis of these and other passages having to do with the divine chariot, or it may refer to the general topic of theosophy.²⁵ On other occasions, it refers simply to the chariot itself.²⁶ Most importantly, there is a fifth usage that will be particularly relevant to my argument. This definition is that of a discipline of esoteric study. An example of this usage can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 28a:

They said of R. Yohanan b. Zakai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture, Mishnah, *gemara*, *halachah*, *aggadah*, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, inferences *a minori ad majus*, analogies, calendrical computations, *gematria*, the speech of the Ministering Angels, the speech of the spirits, the speech of palm trees, fullers' parables, and fox fables,

²⁴ David Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 25.

²⁵ The term *Merkavah* in Mishnah Hag. 2:1 has often been interpreted to refer to scriptural exegesis or to the general topic of theosophy. The distinction is moot, since any rabbinic study of theosophy would include exegesis.

²⁶ Tosefta Megillah 3(4):28 reads: "many have expounded the *merkavah* without having seen it." In this case, *merkavah* refers both to theosophic study of the chariot and to the actual chariot itself.

great matters or small matters. "Great matters" mean *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, "small matters" the discussions of Abaye and Raba.²⁷

In this excerpt, we find *Ma'aseh Merkavah* included in a list of scholarly fields that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai had mastered. We learn from this that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was indeed a discipline of study as were Scripture, Mishnah, *gemara*, *halachah*, *aggadah* and others. Among these disciplines, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is singled out for special mention as a "great matter." We learn from other sources that its greatness is firmly associated with the interdiction from Mishnah Hagigah 2:1, strictly reserving the study of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to the select few.²⁸ *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is, therefore, an esoteric discipline of study.

Having established that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is an esoteric discipline of study, let us examine now what implications this may have for our understanding of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The question at hand is whether we can draw any conclusions regarding *Ma'aseh Bereshit* from its association with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. In "Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" Gottstein argues that the connection between *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not strong enough to make such deductions. While I agree that we cannot attribute to *Ma'aseh Bereshit* the same mystical aspects that may comprise *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, I must disagree with Gottstein's complete denial of their mutuality.

Several factors suggest a strong relationship between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. First of all, though it is easy to overlook, we should not ignore the fact that structurally these two terms are similar, using the vague term *ma'aseh* in construct with a modifier. Second, the terms *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* have similar heterogeneous meanings, both referring to general topics (cosmogony and theosophy), specific scriptural passages (chapters from Genesis and Ezekiel) and the

²⁷ Soncino translation. See also BT Bava Batra 134a.

²⁸ In BT Hagigah 14b, R. Yohanan cites this ruling and dismounts from his donkey out of deference to the greatness of the subject matter.

exegesis of these passages. No other rabbinic term comes to mind which shares this construct and diversity of meaning. Finally, and most importantly, the two terms are associated in several rabbinic texts. In the Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 8d, the Rabbis discuss the subject of Elijah and Elisha's final conversation. R. Yudah b. Pazzi suggests that they were discussing *beriat olam* (the creation of the world). Later, the majority of Sages rule that they were discussing *merkavah*. While there is some sense of equivalence here of subjects that are worthy of this famed conversation, the connection between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is diluted. To begin with, the text does not even use the term *ma'aseh bereshit*, but *beriat olam*. What is more, the subject of cosmogony and theosophy are only two of several subjects listed in this passage, and they are not even immediately juxtaposed. As the two are not paired together, the connection is weak. Stronger is the association established in Mishnah Hagigah 2:1, in which both the terms *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* are juxtaposed. In this ruling, both subjects are considered esoteric and the exposition is restricted to the presence of a select few. Nonetheless, the presence of a third subject, *arayot* (illicit sexual relations), complicates the matter.²⁹

In order to establish firmly the relationship between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, we must look at two passages that specifically pair these two terms. One of these passages is an interpretation of Daniel 2:22:

"He [God] reveals the deep thing and the secret thing . . ." (Dan. 2:22).
 "The deep thing," this is the depth of the *Merkavah*. "The secret thing,"
 this is *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.³⁰

²⁹ While I argue that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is an esoteric discipline of study as *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is, I do not claim that the Rabbis engaged in a similar discreet discipline of illicit sexual relations. For a discussion of what might link these three topics, see Chapter Two.

³⁰ My own translation of Seder Olam Rabbah, chapter 30 (two occurrences). See also Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, chapters 17 and 25.

This verse from Daniel does not, on its own, imply a discussion of either *Ma'aseh Merkavah* or *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The Rabbis purposefully inserted these two topics into the text, and thereby purposefully paired them. Gottstein states that "the homily demonstrates no thematic link between the two realms, and the juxtaposition of the motifs here seems to be founded on the mishnah, even if we consider the homily to be tannaitic."³¹ Assuming that the mishnah (Hag. 2:1) predates the origination of this homily, I do not see how Gottstein can assert a causal connection or chain of influence. In fact, the absence of *arayot* in this passage suggests that it is not derived from the mishnah. While the mishnaic authors may have considered *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to be paired disciplines, Hag. 2:1 itself does not demonstrate that. However, the Seder Olam Rabbah homily adds a novel construction not found in the mishnah, and that is the specific pairing of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in the absence of *arayot* or any other subject. Therefore, this homily represents a new and distinct tradition augmenting that of the mishnah. We have before us two separate traditions, one weak and one strong, linking *Ma'aseh Bereshit* with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

Understanding the nature of this link will be the key to unlocking the riddle of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Gottstein declares that the Daniel homily "demonstrates no thematic link between the two realms." While this is true, Gottstein does not address the true nature of the link. Gottstein confuses character and kind. The character of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* are distinct, one is a study of theosophy and one is a study of cosmogony. Nonetheless, they are both of the same kind; they are both established topics of study. So, while there is no thematic link between the two realms, there is a substantive link, and this is what really matters.

³¹ "Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" p. 196.

The other passage pairing *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is found in the commentaries on our mishnah from the Babylonian Talmud Hag. 13a:

R. Joseph was studying *Ma'aseh haMerkavah*; the elders of Pumbedita were studying *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The latter said to the former, "Let the master teach us *Ma'aseh Merkavah*." He replied, "Teach me *Ma'aseh Bereshit*." After they taught him, they said to him, "Let the master instruct us in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*." He replied, "We have learned concerning it: 'Honey and milk are under your tongue' (Song 4:2) - the things that are sweeter than honey and milk should be under your tongue."³²

In this charmingly human portrayal, R. Joseph beguiles the elders of Pumbedita. He tricks them into teaching him *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, but when it comes time for him to reciprocate, he claims that it is not proper for him to disclose a matter as esoteric as *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. For our purposes, the significance of this midrash lies in the pairing of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and in their substantive link as mutual disciplines of study. As with the previous midrash, Gottstein denies any substantive link here. Since the passage is part of the talmudic corpus of commentary of Mishnah Hag. 2:1, Gottstein suggests that the combination of the two terms is simply a product of their juxtaposition in the mishnah. Again, I do not understand how Gottstein can assert a causal connection or chain of influence from one text to another. Since the Rabbis did not document their own motives and influences, any conjecture of this nature is pure speculation. As speculation, Gottstein's assertion is suspect. The fact that this midrash has come down to us as part of a redacted collection of commentaries on M. Hag. 2:1 does not prove that the midrash was originally a commentary on that mishnah or was originally associated with it in any way. In fact, given the absence of *arayot* in the midrash, it seems more likely that the midrash is not based on the mishnah. As was the

³² Translated by Gottstein, p. 196. There are further pairings of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in Seder Rabbah di Bereshit, found in Wertheimer, Vol. 1, pp. 3ff. However, this source is unreliable and its redactor suspect. See Gottstein, p. 197, footnote 58.

case with the Daniel homily, the talmudic account of R. Joseph is distinct from the mishnah in that it specifically pairs *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. The connection with the mishnah is most likely the work of a redactor.

Gottstein further denies a relation between the two realms by focusing on R. Joseph's refusal to teach *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Indeed, R. Joseph's refusal clearly distinguishes *Ma'aseh Merkavah* from *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. According to R. Joseph, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is esoteric and forbidden, while *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not. However, the view expressed by R. Joseph is not the view implicit in the midrash. R. Joseph is making a polemical statement contrary to the view of the elders of Pumbedita. The elders of Pumbedita, the leaders of the preeminent academy in Babylonia, clearly assume that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* are equivalent and worthy of equal barter. In truth, the midrash itself assumes that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* are equivalent, and it is only in the context of this assumption that R. Joseph's deceptions provide such a dramatic surprise. R. Joseph expresses a radical, minority viewpoint in this midrash. The viewpoint of the midrash is the viewpoint of the elders: *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is equivalent to *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

The opinion articulated by R. Joseph actually marks a turning point in the rabbinic conception of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. As we shall see in Chapters Two and Three of this work, the Tannaim considered *Ma'aseh Bereshit* esoteric and so they restricted its exposition. However, the Amoraim would later ignore the restrictions on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as they no longer considered it to be esoteric. The misunderstanding between R. Joseph and the elders of Pumbedita marks the bridge between these two periods. As an early amoraic master, R. Joseph expresses a radical viewpoint that will soon become mainstream. This change in viewpoint may explain why the terms *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* are never paired in the literature of the Hechalot. By the time of the Hechalot, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* were not at all equivalent, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was

esoteric and dangerous, while *Ma'aseh Bereshit* had been exoteric and mundane for centuries.

It is important to note that even in tannaitic times, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* were not exactly equal. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was like *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, but only more so. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was esoteric and its exposition was forbidden before two; *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was even more esoteric and its exposition was forbidden before one, unless he proved to be exceptionally wise. We find more stories about *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and its fantastic rewards and punishments, and more mentions of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in rabbinic literature than we find of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was a degree more powerful and a degree more glamorous. Accordingly, we should not be surprised to find occasions where *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is mentioned, and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* should likewise be mentioned, but it is not. Such is the case with BT Sukkah 28a, where *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is mentioned among Yohanan b. Zakkai's numerous courses of study, and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is conspicuously absent from the list. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is the brightest jewel, and as such, it gets the preponderance of attention, both by the Rabbis then and scholars today. Nonetheless, this does not mean *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not likewise a jewel and likewise worthy of attention. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is equivalent to *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, but not in every sense of the word. It is equivalent, but not equal. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is more esoteric and more respected even among the Tannaim. Nonetheless, despite this distinction, the two disciplines are equivalent in terms of form, effect and function. Though they may differ by degree, they are equivalent as esoteric disciplines of study.

IV. Conclusion

As a final thought in this chapter, I would like address one more statement made by Gottstein. He writes:

Finally, we should note that the term [m]a'aseh [b]ereshit itself is not suited to a description of esoteric teaching. Ma'aseh [b]ereshit indicates, in rabbinic parlance, the story of Creation in the book of Genesis or its result - the creation of the world. It is hard to believe that an esoteric teaching would be signified by the same term used to refer to physical reality revealed to all.³³

In this passage, Gottstein is willing to recognize two definitions of the term *ma'aseh bereshit*, but not a third. The question is, "Why not?" If Gottstein acknowledges that the term can have multiple meanings, why is it so hard for him to believe that it can have yet one more?³⁴ This position is exacerbated by our findings from the beginning of this chapter. There we clearly cataloged four distinct uses of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* before we began to question the existence of a fifth usage as *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. A term that is capable of having four distinct definitions is capable of supporting a fifth. Of course, the existence of these four definitions does not prove that a fifth in fact exists, but it does prove that it is possible. It is not hard to believe.

Proof of the existence of this fifth definition came from the culmination of diverse sources. The story of Ben Zoma first demonstrated that the term *ma'aseh bereshit* can convey connotations of a particular speculation that is not condoned by the Rabbis. Next, the midrash regarding one who boasts about his knowledge of creation implied that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* can refer to cosmogonic knowledge known only by few. In both of these midrashim, the Rabbis single out knowledge of creation as a subject of suspicion. In the passage from *Pesikta Rabbati*, that suspicion is manifested in an explicit interdiction regarding the appropriate content of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. *Mishnah Hag. 2.1* further restricted the exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* by limiting the number of individuals who

³³ Pages 197-8.

³⁴ In *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 23, Halperin enumerates three different meanings of the term *ma'aseh bereshit*, but he, too, is unwilling to acknowledge its use as an esoteric topic of study.

may engage in it. These texts together demonstrated that the term *ma'aseh bereshit* has an esoteric dimension.

Proof that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was a discipline of study came by association with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. First, we established that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was an esoteric field of study through Mishnah Hag. 2:1 and the passage listing the numerous disciplines that Yohanan b. Zakkai had mastered. Next, we established that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was related to *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Both terms shared similar constructs and similarly diverse usage. The two terms were juxtaposed in Mishnah Hag. 2:1, and then purposefully paired in the distinct homily on Daniel 2:22. Finally, the account of R. Joseph and the elders of Pumbedita demonstrated the tannaitic assumption that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* were equivalent. Of course, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* were not equal in every way. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was cosmogony; *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was theosophy. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was esoteric; *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was even more so. Nonetheless, despite these distinction, they are equivalent as esoteric disciplines of study.

Though Gottstein concludes his article by stating that "*Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not part of ancient Jewish esoteric teaching," I must conclude this chapter by stating that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is, indeed, an established part of ancient Jewish esoteric teaching.

Chapter Two

The Prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

We have concluded from Chapter One that there existed an early rabbinic discipline of cosmogonic study known as *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Some of our textual examples illustrating this particular use of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* restricted this form of inquiry to a select few individuals. Meanwhile, other sources restricted the scope of this study of creation, regardless of who was engaged in it. The reasons for such restrictions are many, and we will reserve the entire fifth chapter to address the motives for these prohibitions, as well as the motives for their subsequent violation. For now, we will occupy ourselves in this chapter with the task of outlining the network of rabbinic prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, paying special attention to their development and ultimate collapse.

There are two types of restrictions on cosmogonic inquiry: those that limit the number of individuals who may study the topic, and those that limit the scope of such inquiry. Of course, the Rabbis were not concerned with systematic presentations of their legislation, and, therefore, did not distinguish between these two distinct types of prohibition. Throughout the rabbinic literature, the Sages simultaneously or alternately address both topics. In this discussion, I will attempt to address these two types separately, though in the process I will unavoidably and artificially dissect individual *midrashim* into component parts. The two distinct forms of restriction divide cosmogonic inquiry into three separate categories. These are: the study of creation that is limited to the few, the study of creation that is open to all, and the study of creation that is forbidden to all. I will address each of these categories in turn.

The most significant and influential *halacha* restricting cosmogonic inquiry is Mishnah Hagigah 2:1. It is the foundation of all the talmudic commentary on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and the focal point of all rabbinic interdiction on the subject. Therefore, it will be the centerpiece of this discussion, and its structure will guide the structure of this chapter.

- [A] One may not expound *arayot* [the laws of illicit sexual practice] before three [people], nor *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two, nor *Merkavah* before one, unless he was wise and understands on his own accord.
[B] Anyone who looks into these four matters, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what before and what after.
[C] Anyone who does not respect the honor of his Maker, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world.³⁵

Halperin makes a convincing case for this being an independent *mishnah*, unassociated with that which precedes and follows it.³⁶ As such, we cannot date its origin, except to state obviously that it must predate the final codification of the Mishnah.³⁷ Halperin also argues persuasively that this *mishnah* actually contains three separate segments that the redactor assembled and fused together.³⁸ I distinguish these three sections with capital letters, and will address them each separately as they apply to each of the three categories of cosmogonic speculation.

I. The Study of Creation Limited to the Few

Section A of the *mishnah* is the segment which specifically restricts the number of individuals who may study *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Unfortunately, in classic mishnaic style, it is

³⁵ My own translation.

³⁶ Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 20.

³⁷ Circa 200 C.E., *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22. BT interprets section C with no regard for its relation to sections A and B. It must have been known as an independent teaching prior to the formation of this *mishnah*. See p. 22, n.13 for citations.

terse to the point of being cryptic. With its dearth of words, the *mishnah* does not explain the reasoning for these specific numbers, what it means for such a specific number to study these disciplines, nor why the three subjects of *arayot*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Merkavah* are grouped together. Before we can begin to analyze the significance of this *mishnah*, let us first pause to analyze what it means. Perhaps more appropriately stated, let us pause to analyze all of its potential meanings.

a. The significance of the numbers.

The exact reasoning for the numbers three, two and one is not stated in the *mishnah*, and it remains a mystery. It seems most likely that these specific numbers are insignificant, their usage being rhetorical. Presumably, the *mishnah's* intent is not literally to limit the number of people who can expound *arayot*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Merkavah* to fewer than three, two and one respectively, but rather to articulate the more abstract idea that *arayot* is esoteric, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* more so, and *Merkavah* even more so. Contrary to this, BT gives particular explanations why these subjects cannot be studied by these particular numbers.³⁹ However, the *gemara's* explanations seem so contrived that they serve to suggest further the rhetorical functioning of the numbers three, two and one.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, while the original intention of the Tannaim may have been rhetorical, it is significant that at least some Amoraim ultimately interpreted the numbers literally.⁴¹

³⁹ BT Hag. 11b and subsequent passages.

⁴⁰ Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 36.

⁴¹ Regarding the formulation of the numbers in section A, Halperin offers a provocative and inventive explanation of why these particular numbers were used [see pp. 34-35]. In his self-proclaimed "alternative theory," Halperin suggests that prohibition of studying *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was originally independent, and a later redactor added the components of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *arayot*. This original formulation prohibited the solitary study of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, unless one was wise and understands on one's own accord. [The *bet* in *b'yanid* gives the term numerous possibilities of meaning (see my subsequent discussion). Here Halperin interprets it to mean "alone."] Such a restriction is internally logical, for it stands to reason that one should only study an important matter alone if one is capable and has a good understanding, and if not, one should find a teacher who does. Halperin suggests that the author of section A of the *mishnah* knew this original interdiction, and fused to it new prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *arayot*. This author started with *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as one, and added up from there. While this "alternative theory" has an internal logic, it does not account for the transformation of

b. The ambiguous preposition *bet*.

Assuming, as the Amoraim do, that the numbers in section A are meaningful, the meaning of those numbers is clouded by the ambiguous preposition *bet* before them. The question is whether or not the teacher is included in the sum of those who cannot expound. Accordingly, in the case of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, if we understand the *bet* to mean "with," then a teacher is not allowed to teach *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to a student. However, if we understand *bet* to mean "to," then it is permissible to teach *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to a single student. This second interpretation seems the more reasonable, and it is explicitly supported by BT Hag. 11b, which restates the *mishnah* with the letter *lamed* in place of the *bet*. This position is corroborated by the story of R. Eleazar b. Arach and his master, R. Yohanan b. Zakkai found in T Hag. 2:1, BT Hag. 14b, and JT Hag. 77a. The BT text reads:

Our Rabbis taught: Once R. Yohanan b. Zakkai was riding on an ass when going on a journey, and R. Eleazar b. Arach was driving the ass from behind. [R. Eleazar] said to him: Master, teach me a chapter of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. He answered: Have I not taught you thus: "Nor *Merkavah* in the presence of one, unless he is a Sage and understands of his own knowledge?" [R. Eleazar] then said to him: Master, permit me to say before you something which you have taught me. He answered, Say on! Immediately, R. Yohanan b. Zakkai dismounted from the ass, and wrapped himself up, and sat upon a stone beneath an olive tree. Said [R. Eleazar] to him: Master, why did you dismount from the ass? He answered: Is it proper that while you are expounding *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and the Divine Presence is with us, and the ministering angels accompany us, I should ride on the ass? Immediately, R. Eleazar b. Arach began his exposition of *Ma'aseh haMerkavah*, and fire came down from heaven and encompassed all the trees in the field; [thereupon] they all began to utter [divine] song. What was the song they uttered? - "Praise the Lord from the earth, ye sea-

the meaning of the interdiction on *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to its present form in the *mishnah*. In order to add *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *arayot* according to Halperin's theory, the redactor would be forced to alter radically the nature of the prohibition from one of solitary study to pedagogical transmission. Such a transformation seems unlikely, and the evidence for it is lacking. Halperin's alternative theory may be possible, but it seems far-fetched.

monsters, and all deeps . . . fruitful trees and all cedars . . . Hallelujah."⁴²
 An angel [then] answered from the fire and said: This is truly *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. [Thereupon] R. Yohanan b. Zakkai rose and kissed him on his head and said: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, Who has given a son to Abraham our father, who knows to speculate upon, and to investigate, and to expound *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. There are some who preach well but do not act well, others act well but do not preach well, but you preach well and act well. Happy are you, O Abraham our father, that R. Eleazar b. Arach has come forth from your loins.⁴³

The story understands "*doresh Merkavah b-*" to mean "teach *Merkavah* to." R. Eleazar asks R. Yohanan to teach him *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, but R. Yohanan refuses, citing section A of the *mishnah*. R. Eleazar then proves that he is wise and understands on his own, and is therefore worthy of being taught *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. This is further conformation of our understanding of *bet* as "to."⁴⁴

c. *Arayot*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and *Merkavah*.

The enumeration of these three particular subjects has been the source of much scholarly inquiry. Many have asked whether these terms refer to general subjects or to specific scriptural texts.⁴⁵ Since rabbinic Judaism is so bound by scriptural interpretation, this question is moot. A rabbinic study of any of these general subjects would necessarily include the exegesis of scriptural texts. Another question that the *mishnah* leaves unanswered is why each of these three disciplines is singled out and not others. We are left pondering what it is that they have in common. A popular scholarly explanation has

⁴² From Psalm 148:7,9,14.

⁴³ Based on Soncino translation.

⁴⁴ We may be tempted to deduce another insight from this account. If we were to assume the historicity of this occurrence, then we could date section A of the *mishnah* back to the time of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai. Unfortunately, we cannot responsibly assume such historicity or historical accuracy of this fantastic story.

⁴⁵ *Arayot* most likely corresponds to Leviticus 18 and 20, in which illicit sexual practices are proscribed and punishment is prescribed, respectively.

been that these three subjects are all associated with Gnosticism, and that their restriction was a specifically anti-Gnostic polemic and prevention of Gnostic heresy among Jews.⁴⁶

Halperin has proposed a theory that relates the three subjects without constructing such a unified connection as Gnosticism.⁴⁷ Halperin was the first to notice that only four texts can be found both in a list of texts that the Rabbis find questionable, and a list of texts that they prescribe for special occasions. Tosefta Megillah 3:31-38 and BT Meg. 25a-b list a series of texts which may or may not be read and translated publicly. Although *ma'aseh bereshit* (the Creation narrative) is leniently allowed to be both read and translated publicly on both lists, its very presence on such a list shows that it was questionable. If no one suspected any reason to restrict its recitation, there would be no reason for it to be on this list. Of the more than dozen such "questioned" texts listed in these sources, only four are likewise prescribed for special Sabbath or festival reading. These are: *ma'aseh bereshit* (M. Meg. 3.6), "blessings and curses"⁴⁸ (M. Meg. 3.6), *arayot* (BT Meg. 31a), and the *merkavah* (BT Meg. 31a).⁴⁹ For only three of these four texts, the Rabbis feared that their content would lead to forbidden sexual or heretical activity.⁵⁰ They are especially cautious since these texts would attract particular attention as special festival readings. Therefore, according to Halperin's ingenious observation, what unites these three texts is that they are the only three texts which are both highlighted in the lectionary cycle and capable of inspiring illicit activity. It may still be the case that all three subjects are related to Gnosticism, but Halperin demonstrates that such dramatic synthesis is not necessary to explain their presence in section A of Mishnah Hag. 2:1.

⁴⁶ See Gottstein, p. 187, citing A. Buchler. The relationship between Gnosticism and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and its restrictions will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

⁴⁷ Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, chapter 2, section II.

⁴⁸ This might correspond to Lev. 26 and/or Deut. 28. See *ibid.*, p. 43, n. 98.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ In the case of "blessings and curses," the question is not about the content of the text but its recitation. There was a fear that a public reading of the curses might inadvertently cause them to occur. There was no fear, however, that the content of such texts would lead one to illicit activity.

Having analyzed section A of the *mishnah* and many of its complexities, we turn now to its interpretation in other texts. Here we shall find the source and limits of the *mishnah's* authority. At the same time, we will gather clues revealing to what extent *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was actually practiced and to what extent its restrictions were actually observed.

d. The Tosefta's support of section A.

Support for the *mishnah's* ruling on these three subjects can be found in two of the most important extra-mishnaic halachic sources. In its brief comments on section A of the *mishnah*, Tosefta Hag. 2.1 simply restates the *mishnah*, adding only a few insertions for clarification. It reads:

One may not expound *arayot* before three, though one may expound before two, nor *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two, though one may expound before one, nor *Merkavah* before one, unless he was wise and understands on his own accord.⁵¹

The word-for-word repetition of section A of the *mishnah* is a sign of the Tosefta's affirmation of the *mishnah*. The redactor of the Tosefta apparently found the *mishnah* to be authoritative, though perhaps ambiguous. Therefore, the redactor adds brief interpretations inserted into the retelling of the *mishnah*. These insertions serve two functions. First, they demonstrate that the *mishnah's* numbers represent the maximum, and not minimum number of individuals who may engage in these esoteric matters. One could mistakenly interpret the *mishnah's* interdiction to be against the private study of these matters, with *arayot* being the most dangerous and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* being the least.⁵² The Tosefta's additions rule out this potential reading. The second function of the

⁵¹ My own translation.

⁵² According to Halperin's "alternative theory," this was the original intention of the prohibition regarding *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, before the Mishnah's redactors added *arayot* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to it.

insertions is to state explicitly and positively that these three esoteric matters may indeed be expounded to a select few. This is a subtle but important distinction. In conclusion, these enhancements of the *mishnah*, along with the word-for-word repetition of the *mishnah*, together affirm and validate section A of the *mishnah*.

Tosefta Hag. 2:1 continues with a formulation of the fantastic story of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai and his disciple, R. Eleazar b. Arach. As was seen above, R. Yohanan specifically quotes part of section A of the *mishnah*. The *mishnah* is thus shown to be applicable in a real-life situation. Indeed, in keeping with the *mishnah*, R. Eleazar must prove that he is wise and understands on his own accord before he is allowed to learn *Ma'aseh Merkavah* from his teacher. We learn from the fire, the trees, and the angel that R. Eleazar more than passes his test. Lastly, in further accordance with the *mishnah*, the two are alone. It is but one student of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* expounding to another, both of whom are wise and understand on their own accord.

The Tosefta continues in Hag. 2:2 with a rather cryptic statement regarding the transmission of knowledge over several generations of Tannaim.

R. Yose b. Judah says: R. Joshua lectured [*hirtzah*] before Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai. R. Akiba lectured before R. Joshua. Hananiah b. Kinai lectured before R. Akiba.⁵³

The subject matter of these lectures is not stated. One clue to the mystery may be found in the fact that in each of these cases it is the junior Sage lecturing before his master, just as R. Eleazar did before his master. Many modern scholars have concluded that the subject of these lectures is esoteric mysticism.⁵⁴ To prove this assertion, they note that the Tosefta uses the term *hirtzah* regarding these lectures as well as in the story of R. Eleazar

⁵³ Almost identical versions occur in BT Hag. 14b and JT Hag. 77b, though JT does include a concluding addition that implies that the line of transmission ended with Hananiah b. Kinai.

⁵⁴ W. Bacher, J. Neusner, N. Séd and Arnold Goldberg, cf. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 84.

and R. Yohanan where the subject matter was explicitly esoteric and mystical. However, Halperin demonstrates that the term *hirtzah* is used throughout rabbinic sources to refer to lectures on *halachah* given by a junior Tanna before his master.⁵⁵ In fact, Halperin argues convincingly that the original meaning of this segment on the three lectures was strictly about *halachah* and was not esoteric or mystical. Nonetheless, its current placement in the discussion of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 in Tosefta, JT and BT demonstrates that the redactors of these texts meant it to be viewed as esoteric teaching. Of course, we still do not know to which of the three subjects, or combination thereof, it refers. Still, relevant to our discussion here, this midrash on the lectures corroborates the rulings of segment A of the *mishnah*. In its context here, it demonstrates the transmission of esoteric knowledge from one, single wise scholar to another, single wise scholar. Section A of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 is therefore validated by Tosefta Hag. 2:2, just as it was validated by the previous *midrashim* in section 2.1.

e. The Babylonian Talmud's support of section A.

Certain portions of BT's commentary on the *mishnah* adamantly affirm the prohibition from section A. We have already discussed how the *gemara* makes strained attempts to explain the literal meaning and significance of the numbers three, two and one.⁵⁶ In addition, BT Hag. 11b supports the quantitative restrictions of who may engage in cosmogonic inquiry in its unique commentary on Deut. 4:32. The Tosefta and JT contain similar accounts of this commentary, but only the version in BT explicitly notes the scriptural verse's use of the second person singular.

"Nor *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two." From where [in Scriptures do we infer this teaching]? Here our Rabbis taught, "For ask thou now of the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁶ See above, and BT Hag. 11b and subsequent passages.

days past . . ." (Deut. 4:32). A lone person may inquire, but two may not inquire.⁵⁷

With acute hermeneutical skill, the Rabbis found confirmation of the *mishnah* in the particular grammar of the deuteronomic verse. Their reading affirms the *mishnah's* restriction of cosmogonic inquiry, limiting it to one student asking and one teacher answering. Furthermore, corollary support of section A of the *mishnah* can be found in BT Hag. 13a, which reads:

R. Yohanan said to R. Eleazar. Come, I will instruct you in *Ma'aseh haMerkavah*. He replied: I am not old enough. When he was old enough, R. Yohanan died. R. Assi [then] said to him: Come, I will instruct you in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. He replied: Had I been worthy, I should have been instructed by R. Yohanan, your master.⁵⁸

While this midrash does not speak directly about numerical restrictions, it nonetheless affirms the *mishnah* in its rhetorical sense. In essence, the *mishnah* states that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is an esoteric matter reserved only for the initiated. Here R. Eleazar suggests a distinct but related regulation restricting the age of one who can study *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Such a minimum age restriction would likewise help prevent the uninitiated from such esoteric inquiry. It is therefore an affirmation of section A of the *mishnah* in its rhetorical sense.⁵⁹ Curiously, there are few such references to minimum age restrictions of these matters in rabbinic literature. However, the ruling is confirmed in a Christian source. In his introduction to Song of Songs, Origen of Caesarea (d. ca. 253) writes that the "Hebrews" do not allow anyone to study the Song of Songs, the beginning of Genesis, and

⁵⁷ My own translation.

⁵⁸ Based on Soncino translation.

⁵⁹ Halperin argues that this midrash actually undercuts the authority of the *mishnah*. According to Halperin, R. Yohanan is unaware of this restriction that R. Eleazar cites. However, it seems unlikely that R. Eleazar would know of a regulation or custom about which his master did not know. It seems more likely that R. Yohanan knows of the regulation, but simply does not know R. Eleazar's age.

the beginning and end of Ezekiel, "unless he has reached a full and mature age."⁶⁰ With the sexually explicit Song of Songs substituting for the sexually explicit *arayot*, the correlation between Origen's observation and section A of the *mishnah* is striking.

The evidence for the authority of section A of the *mishnah* is slowly mounting. The first part of Tosefta Hag. 2:1 restates, elaborates and adamantly supports the *mishnah*. In the second part of T. Hag. 2:1, the story of Eleazar b. Arach and Yochanan b. Zakkai both explicitly and implicitly affirms the *mishnah's* interdiction. T. Hag. 2:2, in its present context, further demonstrates the transmission of these esoteric topics from a single wise, initiated scholar to another. Furthermore, portions of the Babylonian Talmud strongly maintain the *mishnah's* prohibition. BT Hag. 11b and subsequent passages go to great lengths to attempt to rationalize the specific numbers in section A of the *mishnah*. Also in BT Hag. 11b, the special attention paid to the second person singular from Deut. 4:32 adds further support to the *mishnah's* interdiction on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Finally, BT Hag. 13a supports a rhetorical reading of the *mishnah* with its reference to an age restriction. This age restriction is confirmed in the independent writings of Origen of Caesarea. It would seem from all of these sources that section A of the *mishnah* was absolutely authoritative *halachah*.

f. The Jerusalem Talmud's rejection of section A of M. Hag. 2:1.

Contrary to the sources above, there is evidence that suggests that the *mishnah's* interdiction might not have been respected by many Tannaim, and further evidence that it was rejected by the Amoraim. The most explicit statement of tannaitic controversy can be found in the JT's commentary on Mishnah Hag. 2:1:

[Regarding "One may not expound *arayot* before three."] R. Ba [said] in the name of R. Judah: [this *mishnah* is] from R. Akiba, however R. Ishmael

⁶⁰ Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 38. Other Christian sources cite specific ages, but their credibility is doubtful.

[disagrees] R. Ishmael taught that warnings [should be given] about the act [of expounding *arayot*]. From where [is this teaching demonstrated]? R. Ammi sat teaching: [One gives] warning to the active partner and warning to the passive partner. This says that the halachah is according to R. Ishmael.

"nor *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two." R. Ba [said] in the name of R. Judah: this is from R. Akiba, however R. Ishmael [disagrees]. They expound the matter [it is contemporary practice to expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit*]. From where [is this demonstrated]? From R. Yudah b. Pazzi who sat and expounded, "In the beginning, the world was water within water." This says that the halachah is according to R. Ishmael. [The halachic discussion is interrupted with a discussion of R. Yudah b. Pazzi's and others' interpretation of Gen. 1:2]

"nor *Merkavah* before one." Is this, too, according to R. Akiba? It is the opinion of all [the Sages], so that a man knows to have care for the honor his Maker. Is this not what Rav said? No one should begin to speak a word [about the *Merkavah*] before his master unless he has seen or served.⁶¹

A pattern appears in the commentary on the first two segments of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 that is conspicuously broken in the third case. Regarding *arayot* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, early amoraic sources say that Akiba and Ishmael differed. R. Akiba upholds the view of the *mishnah*, and he may or may not be its original source. R. Ishmael disagrees with Akiba, and therefore he rejects the *mishnah*. It is then demonstrated by a late Amora that the halacha is according to R. Ishmael.⁶² Finally, in the third case regarding *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, Akiba, Ishmael and all the Sages are in accordance in support of the *mishnah* as it is stated in section A.

This passage from JT represents a significant detraction of the *mishnah's* authority, both in the tannaitic and amoraic periods. First of all, it states that two leading tannaitic Sages, each head of his own school of tradition, fundamentally disagreed regarding the interdiction. This tannaitic dispute, attested here by an early Amora in a late amoraic

⁶¹ My own translation.

⁶² See Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, pp. 27-28.

source, is corroborated by Sifra. This tannaitic commentary to Leviticus follows the hermeneutical traditions of the school of Akiba, except for the chapters of *arayot* which follow the traditions of Ishmael's school. This suggests that the Akiban authors of the Sifra would not discuss *arayot* in accordance with Akiba's position as stated in JT, whereas members of the school of Ishmael were willing to expound upon *arayot*, in accordance with Ishmael's position stated in JT. Sifra reveals implicitly what JT reveals explicitly: There was no unanimous support of the regulation of *arayot* in the tannaitic period. Because of Sifra's corroboration of JT regarding *arayot*, we have reason to trust JT's similar assertion regarding the tannaitic dispute over *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

While JT reports that the Sages merely disagreed in the tannaitic period, regarding the amoraic period, JT speaks of unanimous rejection. After reporting that Akiba and Ishmael disagreed on the *mishnah's* interdiction, JT continues with a general statement in the present tense: "*dorshin le'ovadah* (they expound on this matter)." The anonymous attribution of this statement bespeaks a certain unanimity in support of its truth. The anonymous subject of the statement suggests a wide and general practice of expounding *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The verb's present tense refers most likely to the late fourth, early fifth century, since Yudah b. Pazzi was a late fourth-century Amora. Yudah b. Pazzi serves as an example of those who expound on this matter, for he explicitly addresses the topic of cosmogony in his statement, "In the beginning, the world was water within water." From the case of Yudah b. Pazzi, JT deduces that this is general practice, and it states explicitly that the halacha is in accordance with R. Ishmael against the *mishnah*. This position is surprising since the Mishnah is normally the basis of halachah. Surprising as it may be, however, JT's language is explicit and its position is certain. The interdiction against *Ma'aseh Bereshit* from M. Hag. 2:1 section A was openly rejected by the Palestinian Amoraim.

g. The Babylonian Talmud's rejection of section A of M. Hag. 2:1.

BT does not contain a parallel to the R. Ba tradition found in JT, but it does contain the account of R. Joseph and the elders of Pumbedita. From BT Hag. 13a, it reads:

R. Joseph was studying *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the elders of Pumbedita were studying *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The latter said to the former, "Let the master teach us *Ma'aseh Merkavah*." He replied, "Teach me *Ma'aseh Bereshit*." After they taught him, they said to him, "Let the master instruct us in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*." He replied, "We have learned concerning it: 'Honey and milk are under your tongue' (Song 4:2) - the things that are sweeter than honey and milk should be under your tongue."⁶³

We saw above how BT Hag. 11b and subsequent passages had strained to show the significance of the specific numbers mentioned in the *mishnah*. Here, however, these numbers are blatantly ignored. The elders of Pumbedita, as a group, teach *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to R. Joseph. Then, they ask R. Joseph to teach them, as a group, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. These actions demonstrate a complete disregard for a literal interpretation of the numbers found in 11b. However, this story of Pumbedita does maintain a rhetorical reading of the *mishnah*, implying that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is esoteric and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is more so. Actually it is the elders who assume that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is esoteric and equivalent to *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and it is R. Joseph who asserts that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is more esoteric.

As mentioned in Chapter One, this story represents a turning point from tannaitic to amoraic sensibilities, from prohibition to leniency. This story does not reflect the tannaitic dispute between R. Akiba and R. Ishmael as found in JT. In fact, this hints at a more unified appreciation of the *mishnah*. The surprising plot of this story functions only if the elders and the reader both assume that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is the esoteric equivalent of (if not entirely equal to) *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. The elders exhibit no awareness of the R. Ba

⁶³ Translated by Gottstein, p. 196.

tradition which distinguishes between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. What is more, if the intended contemporary reader of this story assumed Ishmael's ruling, then the request of the elders would be absurd, the tension of the story would be lost, and the reply of R. Joseph would lose all of its sense of drama. However, if the contemporary reader were to assume the *mishnah's* authority, then the request of the elders is reasonable, R. Joseph's hesitancy builds tension, and his final refusal is a surprising climax. The narrative and drama only work if the author assumes that the general view is that the halachah is according to Akiba and the *mishnah*. Therefore, the story of Pumbedita supports section A of the *mishnah* regarding the Tannaim.

However, given these assumptions, the actual message of the story is an ultimate denial of the *mishnah*, as it pertains to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. R. Joseph, among the earliest generations of Amoraim, informs the elders of Pumbedita of a new development. The elders begin the story still clutching a tannaitic perception of the halachah. R. Joseph, an early Amora, instructs the elders in the new lenient understanding of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and the newly pronounced distinction between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. As R. Joseph informs the elders, so, too, are the readers of this story informed by its message. This story serves as a flag marking the transition from tannaitic prohibition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to amoraic leniency. All the while, in keeping with the R. Ba tradition in JT, the prohibition of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* never wavers.

h. Conclusion to this section

Our understanding of the authority of section A of the *mishnah* has become cloudy and complex. In sections "d" and "e" of this chapter, we saw how the Tosefta and excerpts from the Babylonian Talmud show unwavering support for the *mishnah* in both the tannaitic and amoraic periods. However, sections "f" and "g" present a different scenario. The R. Ba tradition from the Jerusalem Talmud asserts that there was a tannaitic controversy over section A between R. Akiba and R. Ishmael. This tradition, supported

by evidence from Sifra, claims that R. Akiba supported the *mishnah* while R. Ishmael opposed it. In addition, the JT text asserts that the *halachah* in amoraic times is according to Ishmael against the *mishnah*, and this is supported by contemporary examples. Meanwhile, the story of R. Joseph and the elders of Pumbedita in the Babylonian Talmud maintains that in tannaitic times the *halachah* was according to Akiba and the *mishnah*. However, the story demonstrates that the dawning of the amoraic period brought an end of the *mishnah's* authority regarding *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The story of Pumbedita marks the beginning of the exoteric status of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and a newly enhanced distinction between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. This BT text is distinct from the previous ones which strongly support a literal reading of the *mishnah's* prohibition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

We are left with a complex collection of paradoxical and dynamic views of the *mishnah*. It is difficult, though possible, to present a unified analysis of the *mishnah's* authority that incorporates all of these disparate elements. With one exception, all of the pertinent texts suggest a strong support of the *mishnah* in tannaitic times. Only the R. Ba tradition in JT asserts that there was disagreement over this, and its assertion is corroborated by Sifra. Though the R. Ba tradition exists in such isolation, we cannot discard or ignore it. Therefore, let us conclude that there indeed existed a controversy between Akiba and Ishmael over the mishnaic restriction of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, but that the majority of the Tannaim supported the position of Akiba and the *mishnah*. Later, in the beginning of the amoraic period, the majority of the Rabbis gradually reversed their position and sided with Ishmael against the *mishnah*. By the middle of the amoraic period, the Rabbis freely engaged in public exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, though they continued to restrict the exoteric study of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

II. The Study of Creation Open to All

We have no explicit assertion in the literature that any form of exoteric cosmogonic inquiry was permitted and practiced in the tannaitic period. On the contrary, we have explicit testimony from Mishnah Hag. 2:1 section A that the Rabbis restricted public inquiry and exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis. Furthermore, we have seen above that the Tannaim held this *mishnah* as authoritative. Nonetheless, despite this explicit *mishnah* and its support in other sources, it seems likely that there existed an exoteric study of creation and the creation texts even in the tannaitic period.

Such a statement is mere speculation, but we have cause to make this assertion. First of all, we find preserved in JT the minority view of R. Ishmael. Though his view on this point is not authoritative in the tannaitic period, it does represent a significant minority in that Ishmael headed an entire school of tannaitic scholars. Therefore, one can assume from his stature that this was not the view of a lone scholar, but the view of an entire school of Sages. This assumption is supported by the ultimate success of Ishmael's position and its acceptance by the Amoraim. It is more likely that the reversal of the majority opinion on this issue from the Tannaim to the Amoraim was a matter of degree and not a matter of total transformation. It is hard to believe that the Amoraim would adopt a view that was not maintained by at least a significant minority of Tannaim. This significant minority, following the teachings of the revered R. Ishmael, allowed free cosmogonic inquiry.

Still, in addition to the leniency of R. Ishmael and his followers, it seems likely that some form of cosmogonic inquiry was permitted by the majority of the Rabbis. One has an intuitive sense that common Jews engaged in a certain innocuous cosmogonic inquiry that even R. Akiba could condone. We know with some degree of certainty that the Genesis creation account was often read publicly. As Torah, it was part of the annual or triennial cycle of public Torah readings. What is more, we know that the Israelite laity were specifically required to read the creation narrative (*ma'aseh bereshit*) as their way of

participating in the sacrificial cult of the *Ma'amadot*.⁶⁴ On these occasions, it seems impossible that some harmless or naive questions did not arise in response to these public readings. One can imagine a genre of simple questions and answers about creation that do not enter higher realms, nor offend the sensibilities of the Rabbis, nor dishonor the glory of God. To be sure, we have no direct evidence that such innocuous cosmogonic inquiry existed. However, our intuition suggests that it did.

In addition to the implications of Ishmael's authority and our sense of intuition, there is at least one form of indirect evidence that the Tannaim condoned a specific kind of public exegesis of the Genesis narrative. We learn from Tosefta Meg. 3:31 that the Genesis account of creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*) may be publicly read and translated. We know from Targum Onkelos that the creation narrative was indeed translated into the popular vernacular of Aramaic. It may be that the tannaitic Sages did not consider such translations to be exegesis and cosmogonic inquiry. However, it is certainly the consensus of modern scholars that any translation is itself a commentary and exegesis of the text. With every word choice, the translator asserts his own interpretation of the text. Subsequently, any translator of the cryptic Genesis narrative necessarily engages in cosmogonic speculation.⁶⁵ Therefore, translators and their readers engaged in public cosmogonic inquiry in the heart of the tannaitic period. To be sure, such translations were a low order of exegesis and cosmogonic inquiry. As such, they were distinct from higher ordered and more explicit studies of creation that the *mishnah* explicitly restricted.

⁶⁴ See M. Ta'anit 4:2, Megillah 3:6; T. Ta'anit 3:3; BT Ta'anit 26a, 27b, Megillah 30b, 31b; and JT Ta'anit 67b, 67d, Megillah 73d.

⁶⁵ For example, this can be seen clearly with the first word of Genesis, *bereshit*. In its Genesis context, *bereshit* is a problematic word. It is a noun in the construct form, but it is not matched with another noun. We do not know what it modifies. Is it the beginning of time? Is it the beginning of creation in general? Is it the beginning of the creation of this heaven and earth? Countless commentators, grammarians and translators have belabored these questions and have offered a myriad of responses. Onkelos translates it as *bekadmin* (In ancient times), and in doing so he engages in commentary, exegesis, and cosmogonic inquiry. See Aberbach-Grossfeld, pp. 20-21.

Through intuition and the indirect evidence of translations, we have seen that there existed a certain tolerable form of exoteric cosmogonic inquiry even in the tannaitic period. These innocuous exoteric teachings were distinct from the esoteric teachings restricted in the *mishnah*. The former class we shall call *ma'aseh bereshit*, the latter we shall distinguish as *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

III. The Study of Creation Forbidden to All

In Section I we discussed the study of creation that was reserved for the few. In Section II, we speculated about a form of cosmogonic inquiry that was permitted for all. There remains a third category of cosmogonic inquiry distinct from these. We find evidence of this category in the curious story of Ben Zoma.⁶⁶ Ben Zoma speculates on the details of primordial creation, and R. Joshua pronounces him to be "outside." The scope of Ben Zoma's inquiry was apparently outside the realm of inquiry that was permitted for all. In addition, Ben Zoma does not violate the prohibition of section A of Mishnah Hag. 2:1. As a member of the elite inner circle of Sages, Ben Zoma is clearly among the initiated. He does not preach his insights publicly, but rather shares them with a single other elite Sage. Indeed, Ben Zoma is following the restriction of section A perfectly. Nonetheless, he is castigated by R. Joshua. Ben Zoma must have engaged in a form of study that was forbidden even to the most initiated, even in private. Some cosmogonic topics were forbidden to all.

The explicit prohibition of such topics can be found in the latter parts of Mishnah Hag. 2:1, particularly section B. To review, the entire *mishnah* reads:

[A] One may not expound *arayot* [the laws of illicit sexual practice] before three [people], nor *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two, nor *Merkavah* before one, unless he was wise and understands on his own accord.

⁶⁶ As told in Chapter One. For a detailed discussion of this account, see below, section IIIe.

[B] Anyone who looks into these four matters, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what before and what after.⁶⁷

[C] Anyone who does not respect the honor of his Maker, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world.

Like section A before them, these sections suggest a complex origin. As mentioned above, it is likely that each section existed separately before a redactor assembled them into the form found in the Mishnah. Once the form of this *mishnah* was sealed with the canonization of the Mishnah, the intrigue and development of these interdictions continued in the realm of interpretation and observance. Its terse language became fodder for interpretation, and its authority became a matter of dispute. Now, in Section III of this chapter, we will chronicle these developments.

a. A spatial versus temporal interpretation of "before" and "after."

The structure of section B of the *mishnah* is simple. A hyperbolic statement introduces four realms of inquiry into which one should not venture: what is above, what is below, what before and what after. The complexity of section B comes from the terse enumeration of the four matters. We are given four prepositions, but not the object of the prepositions. Subsequently, we are left asking, "Above what? Below what?" The *mishnah* gives us no frame of reference with which to understand the boundaries of proper cosmogonic study.

This ambiguity is particularly perplexing in the case of the final two matters. Here, the prepositions *lifanim* (before) and *la'ahor* (after) are themselves ambiguous, since they can be interpreted either spatially or temporally. If understood spatially, the *mishnah* prohibits the study of the present existence of that which is in front of something (i.e. God, the Throne, or the Chariot), and that which is behind something (i.e. God, the Throne, or

⁶⁷ I have deliberately omitted some of the verbs from this translation to preserve the ambiguity of *mah lifanim umah la'ahor*.

the Chariot). If understood temporally, the *mishnah* prohibits the study of what existed before something in the past (i.e. creation), and that which will exist after something in the future (i.e. the messiah, the end of days, or the world to come). The implications of this distinction are enormous, for it determines the very subject and essence of these prohibitions. If these ambiguous prepositions are interpreted spatially, then the prohibition of the four matters is theosophical. If they are interpreted temporally, then the prohibition of the four matters is cosmological and cosmogonical. If theosophical, then section B is a limitation of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. If cosmological and cosmogonical, then section B is a limitation of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The very subject of this prohibition depends upon how one views the ambiguous terms *lifanim* and *la'ahor*.

The context of section B reveals no clues regarding the proper understanding of these two final prepositions. To begin with, the first two prepositions do not rule out either a theosophical or cosmological interpretation. This is because the *mishnah* does not articulate a subject for these prepositions, thus allowing for a variety of possible subjects. If we were to interpret the *mishnah* theosophically, then we might understand the first two matters to be about what is above and below God, or the Throne, or the Chariot. However, we could likewise interpret the *mishnah* cosmologically, and thus understand the first two matters to be about what is above the highest heavens and what is below the lowest depths. Either interpretation can fit the first two prepositions, so neither is yet ruled out. In addition, the particular placement of section B in the context of the greater *mishnah* still yields no conclusive determination of the meaning of *lifanim* and *la'ahor*. Since section A mentions both *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, section B can be either cosmological or theosophical and still remain thematically linked to the section before it. Similarly, section C reveals no special insight into this matter. One may look to the particular choice of the name *Kono* (Maker) in section C, and there find an implication that the previous *mishnah* is cosmogonical. However, Gottstein has demonstrated that the

name *Kono* is used elsewhere in rabbinic literature in relation to *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.⁶⁸

Section C will not make the determination. In summary, the context of the prepositions *lifanim* and *la'ahor* in relation to the first two prepositions and the adjacent sections of the *mishnah* does not reveal whether the prepositions should be interpreted spatially or temporally. Therefore, on the basis of an isolated reading of the *mishnah*, we do not know whether the Tannaim intended and understood section B to limit *Ma'aseh Merkavah* or *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

To confound the matter further, both possible readings find support in other textual sources. S. A. Lowenstam relates a spatial interpretation of section B to Psalm 139:8-10.⁶⁹

If I ascend up into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in She'ol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell
in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there shall Your hand lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.⁷⁰

In this passage, the psalmist describes the outer limits of space in an effort to show the omnipresence and reach of God. Since the Sages were deeply influenced by scriptural literary motif, they may have intended a similar spatial understanding of section B. Further support of a theosophical interpretation comes from Exodus Rabbah 45:5. Here, in a discussion of God's revelation to Moses through the burning bush, an excerpt reads:

"And Moses hid his face" (Ex. 3:6). Moses did not act wisely, said R. Joshua b. Karhah, in hiding his face; for had he not done so, God would have revealed unto him what is above and what is below, what [before] and what [after]. Ultimately, Moses did want to see, as it says here, "Show me, I pray thee, thy Glory" (Ex. 33:18). God, however, now said: Because

⁶⁸ Gottstein, p. 194, n. 42.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 187-88.

⁷⁰ Gottstein's translation, p. 188.

when I was about [to show thee], thou didst not feel inclined [to see]]
therefore now that thou dost want to see, I am not desirous [of showing
thee].⁷¹

In this passage, Moses has an opportunity to learn the secrets of the four matters in an encounter with God. There is no mention or hint of creation in this passage. Rather, knowledge of the four matters seems to be associated with a vision of God in God's present state. Moses would have learned the secrets had he only looked upon God. The implication is that knowledge of the four matters is obtained through theosophy. The visions of Moses at the bush and at the cleft more closely resemble *Ma'aseh Merkavah* than *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. We find here support for a spatial, theosophical reading of section B.

On the other hand, there are several other rabbinical texts that suggest a temporal, cosmogonic reading of section B. Tosefta Hag. 2:7 clearly sees this section relating to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

"Anyone who looks into these four matters, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what before and what after." Is it possible that this refers to the works of Creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*)?

[The Tosefta discusses and interprets Deut. 4:32 and here]⁷²

From the day that God created man on the earth you may expound, but you may not expound upon what is above, what is below, what was and what will be in the future.⁷³

In this passage, the Tosefta clearly and directly links the four matters to cosmogony and the exegesis of the Genesis account. It focuses on only one of the four prepositions, *lifanim* (before), and it specifies from what point one may begin to speak of creation. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this midrash is the final recapitulation of the *mishnah's*

⁷¹ Soncino translation.

⁷² This omitted passage will be addressed below.

⁷³ My own translation.

enumeration of the four matters. In place of "what before, what after," it reads "what was and what will be in the future." This transformation removes the ambiguity from the statement and guarantees a temporal reading of the passage. The Babylonian Talmud likewise associates the four matters with the creation. We read in BT Meg. 25a-b:

The Genesis creation narrative (*ma'aseh bereshit*) is read and translated. Of course! You might think that this would cause people to ask what is above, what is below, what before and what after. [However, this ruling] comes to teach us [that this is not a concern].⁷⁴

As in the Tosefta, this passage from BT clearly understands section B to regard cosmogony and the study of the Genesis narrative. This is true also of BT Tamid 32a:

[Alexander of Macedon asked the elders of the south country:] Was light created first or darkness? They replied: This question cannot be solved. Why did they not reply that darkness was created first, since it is written, "Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness" (Gen. 1:2) "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (ibid., 1:3)? They thought to themselves: Perhaps he will go on to ask what is above, what is below, what before and what after.⁷⁵

In these passages from Tosefta and BT, we find clear and direct associations of section B of the *mishnah* and cosmogony. The four matters are interpreted temporally, and understood to be regarding *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The above citations demonstrate diverse and contradictory interpretations of the four matters. Exodus Rabbah understands them to be spatial and theosophical, while the Tosefta and BT interpret them to be temporal and cosmogonical. Indeed, the rabbinic literature does not maintain a consistent, uniform interpretation of section B of Mishnah

⁷⁴ My own translation.

⁷⁵ Based on Soncino translation.

Hag. 2:1.⁷⁶ There is no unanimous opinion whether *lifanim* and *la'ahor* should be understood spatially or temporally. Accordingly, some sources associate the four matters with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and some associate them with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.⁷⁷

Whether or not section B pertains to *Ma'aseh Bereshit* will remain a mystery. However, there are other, similar textual traditions that do specifically refer to creation. These sources explicitly forbid all people from engaging in certain topics of cosmogonic inquiry. While many of these *midrashim* include the wording of section B, they do contain unique aspects and thereby merit distinct mention in this chapter.

b. The tradition of the letter *bet*

One of the most graphic and popular *midrashim* that restrict cosmogonic inquiry is the *midrash* of why the Torah begins with the letter *bet*. Genesis Rabbah 1:10 relates:

"In the beginning God created." R. Jonah said in R. Levi's name: Why was the world created with a *bet*? Just as the *bet* is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above, what is below, what before and what after.⁷⁸

There is a contradiction in this midrash that is immediately apparent. The letter *bet*, being closed on three sides, does not correspond to the limitation of the four matters. In order

⁷⁶ See Gottstein, p. 186. In fact, no reliable source interprets all four prepositions as a unit. Most sources tend to focus their commentary on any single one of the prepositions.

⁷⁷ From this inconsistency, Gottstein concludes that the prohibition of the four matters originally pertained to theosophical issues, and only later was it reinterpreted to pertain to cosmogony. Gottstein asserts that the original purpose of the prohibition was to prevent those who engaged in exegesis of Ezekiel from slipping into forbidden visionary activity. However, as *Ma'aseh Merkavah* began to gain more acceptance, the Rabbis sought to free up the theosophical activity from the restraints of this prohibition. To accomplish this, the Rabbis intentionally reinterpreted the prohibition of the four matters in the context of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Thus, they artificially restricted *Ma'aseh Bereshit* at a late period for the sake of condoning the practice of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

I have no concrete grounds by which to support or refute this theory. It is certainly inventive and interesting. Nonetheless, I am skeptical of any developmental theory that is not strongly supported by the texts. I am further skeptical due to the fact that the Exodus Rabbah passage, while it may be an early tradition, is preserved in a late text.

⁷⁸ Based on Soncino translation. See also JT Hag. 77c; Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 21.

to stay consistent with the *mishnah*, the illustration would be better portrayed by the final *mem*, which is closed on all four sides. However, the purposeful choice of the letter *bet* conveys a specific message that could not be matched by a final *mem*. The letter *bet* unabashedly emphasizes one of the four matters over the others. As the first letter beginning the Genesis creation narrative, the letter *bet* stands as a bold and symbolic obstruction of any inquiry into what came before that narrative. It provides the prepositional subject missing from section B of the *mishnah*.

c. The Deuteronomy 4:32 tradition.

One finds an oft-repeated motif in the rabbinic literature of the exegesis of Deut. 4:32 in relation to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In this verse, the Rabbis find both an obligation to study creation and a restriction of the scope of that study. We receive an unintelligible and broken version of this tradition preserved in Tosefta Hag. 2:7:

One might think that one may inquire before the world was created; therefore Scripture says, "Ask concerning the first days" (Deut. 4:32). One might think that one may ask before the Creation; therefore Scripture says, "And from one end of the heavens to the other" (ibid.). For what purpose does Scripture say, "From the day that God created man upon the earth" (ibid.)? From the day that God created man upon the earth, you ask, and you do not ask what is above, and what below, what was, and what is going to be.⁷⁹

Though this text is opaque, it does reveal a boundary limiting the range of permitted cosmogonic inquiry. As the letter *bet* did above, this midrash resolves one of the ambiguities of section B of the *mishnah* by providing a subject for the preposition *lifanim* (before). We are warned not to speculate what [came] before, but we are left wondering, before *what*? This midrash, unintelligible as it is, at least answers this fundamental

⁷⁹ Adapted from Halperin's translation of the Erfurt manuscript. For this translation and a comparison of manuscript variations of this passage, see *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 100.

question. We may not inquire about what came before the day that God created man upon the earth, namely, the sixth day. The Tosefta is supported by a similar interpretation of Job 20:4 in Genesis Rabbah 8:2.

Nonetheless, this designation of the sixth day as the earliest boundary of cosmogonic inquiry was not shared by the majority of the midrash on this verse. Most interpreters ruled that one may ask since the first day of creation. By the end of the amoraic period, all agreed with this view.⁸⁰ For an articulation of this position, let us look to BT Hag. 11b:

One might have thought that one may inquire concerning the pre-creation period, therefore Scripture teaches: "Since the day that God created man upon the earth" (Deut. 4:32). One might have thought that one may [also] not inquire concerning the six days of creation, therefore Scripture teaches: "The days past which were before thee" (ibid.). One might have thought one may [also] inquire concerning what is above and what is below, what before and what after, therefore the text teaches: "And from one end of heaven unto the other" (ibid.). [Concerning the things that are] from one end of heaven unto the other thou mayest inquire, but thou mayest not inquire what is above, what is below, what before, what after.⁸¹

Whereas the first part of the deuteronomic verse states, "Since the day that God created man upon the earth," the Rabbis find in the continuation of the verse an opening for expansion. The Sages thus interpret "The days past which were before thee" as an inclusion of the earlier days of creation before man was created on the sixth day. This interpretation of Deut. 4:32 corresponds perfectly with the tradition of the letter *bet*. Both provide the same subject for the preposition *lifanim*, and that is that one may not inquire about what came before the beginning of God's creation of the world according to the Genesis account.

⁸⁰ Feldstein, p. 11.

⁸¹ Soncino translation. See also JT Hag. 2:1; Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 21; Genesis Rabbah 1:10; and Midrash Tannaim L'Devarim 18:13.

d. The Ben Sira tradition.

The Wisdom of Ben Sira (also known as Ecclesiasticus) is one of the rare works of the Apocrypha that is cited in rabbinic sources. Though this book did not become canonized into the Hebrew Bible, it was nonetheless popular among the Rabbis. The majority of the work consists of wise maxims resembling the style of the book of Proverbs. One of these maxims is a terse but articulate teaching of the essential principles of section B of the *mishnah*. It is quoted in several rabbinic sources, such as Genesis Rabbah 8:2:

The Torah knows what was before the creation of the world, but you have no business to inquire about aught save "Since man was placed upon the earth" (Job 20:4). R. Leazar said in Ben Sira's name: About what is too great for thee inquire not, what is too hard for thee investigate not, about what is too wonderful for thee know not, of what is hidden from thee ask not, study what was permitted thee: thou hast no business with hidden things.⁸²

While the actual text from Ben Sira does not specifically address the issue of cosmogony, its context in the midrashic passages gives it that meaning. The Rabbis take a general statement about the wariness of mysteries and make it apply specifically to the issue of the mysteries of creation. Ben Sira's statement does not share the hyperbole of the *mishnah*. It gives plain instruction without making dramatic statements about it being better if one had not come into the world. Nonetheless, the essential teaching and wisdom of this maxim does echo that of the *mishnah*. Its repetition in numerous rabbinic sources serves to support the authority of section B as it applies to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

e. The intriguing story of Ben Zoma.

⁸² Soncino translation. See also JT Hag. 5:1, and BT Hag. 13a.

As discussed above, the story of Ben Zoma corroborates section B of the *mishnah* in that it demonstrates that certain topics are forbidden to all. Ben Zoma was an elite member of the Sages and among the inner circle of the initiated. He expounds *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in perfect accordance with the section A regulation, for he shares his insight only with a single other leading Rabbi. Nonetheless, he is admonished by R. Joshua. We can only surmise that there was something about Ben Zoma's practice of expounding *Ma'aseh Bereshit* that was inherently wrong. Unfortunately, the various accounts of this story do not explicitly reveal what exactly was wrong or why it was wrong. The texts are strangely ambiguous. The story is cloaked in mystery.

There are four significant versions of the story from Tosefta Hag. 2:6, BT Hag. 15a, JT Hag. 77b, and Genesis Rabbah 2:4.⁸³ The Tosefta version, as an example, reads:

There is a story concerning R. Joshua, who was walking in the highway, and Ben Zoma was walking toward him. He reached him, and did not greet him. He said to him, "Whence and whither, Ben Zoma?" He said to him, "I was looking at *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and there is not between the upper waters and the lower waters even a handbreadth. As it is said, 'And the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters' (Gen. 1:2). And it says, 'As an eagle stirs up its nest, etc. [over its young it hovers,' Deut. 32:11]. As an eagle flies over its nest, touching and not touching, so there is not between the upper waters and lower waters even a handbreadth." R. Joshua said to his disciples, "Ben Zoma is already outside." Hardly a few days passed before Ben Zoma departed [i.e., from the world].⁸⁴

The ambiguities and mysteries of this story have provided much fodder for modern scholarly analysis. According to Henry Fischel, this episode is not about *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and forbidden mysteries. He views it as part of a popular Greco-Roman *topos*, spoofing the philosopher who is so preoccupied with higher matters that he is not aware of what is

⁸³ It will not be in the scope of this work to provide a critical analysis of their differences. Rather, we will discuss the texts more generally, referring to their differences only when it effects our analysis. For an examination of their differences, see Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, pp. 96-99.

⁸⁴ Translation by Halperin, *ibid.*, pp. 96-98.

going on in the real world around him.⁸⁵ Whether or not this clever theory is correct regarding the origin of this story, the context of the story in the four sources makes it one of forbidden mysteries. While the story may not have originally been about *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the redactors have ensured that it is about *Ma'aseh Bereshit* now in its present form.

Saul Lieberman found in the dialogue some cryptic allusions to Gnosticism.⁸⁶ While there may or may not be direct allusions to Gnosticism in the story, this may indeed be an important subtext of the story. It seems most likely that Ben Zoma's error was that he commented on the second verse of the Genesis narrative. Remarkably, this is the only example we have of a tannaitic commentary to Gen. 1:2.⁸⁷ There are, however, numerous amoraic commentaries on this verse. From the conspicuous lack of tannaitic commentaries to this verse, and from R. Joshua's contempt of its exceptional mention by Ben Zoma, we deduce that the content of Gen. 1:2 contained forbidden knowledge of what came before. Notably, while the Ben Zoma story maintains the essential spirit of the letter *bet* tradition and the Deut. 4:32 tradition, it does disagree on the specifics of such restrictions. These other traditions allowed for commentary beginning with the first verse of Genesis; the Ben Zoma account holds that commentary may not begin until after the second verse.

The question is then raised: Why was Gen. 1:2 forbidden? What about it made it dangerous or forbidden? A clue may be found in the amoraic commentaries on this verse. The verse reads, "And the earth was unformed (*tohu*) and void (*bohu*), and darkness (*hoshech*) covered the face of the depths; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters." In the numerous amoraic commentaries on this verse, the Rabbis are consumed with the interpretation of the words *tohu*, *bohu*, and *hoshech*. They take

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Gottstein, p. 98. See n 68 for an insignificant exception.

special care to demonstrate that the world was not created from improper, tainted, or negative materials. This belabored caution may have been a response to the contemporary Gnostics who held that the physical world was evil.⁸⁸ It is important to note, however, that Ben Zoma does not expound upon this part of the verse. Instead, he is concerned with a second half of the verse, drawing a *gezerah shavah* correlation between the word *rahaf* (hover) from Gen. 1:2 and from Deut. 32:11. There is, therefore, no explicit connection between Ben Zoma's exposition and the Gnostic controversy over primordial materials. Nonetheless, the controversy over primordial materials may have been so sensitive that the Rabbis built a fence around the entire verse for the sake of guarding against Gnostic tendencies and heresy.⁸⁹ In conclusion, while Ben Zoma's exposition seems to have no connection to Gnosticism, the fear of Gnostic heresy may have been the cause for his castigation.

There are other possibilities, still, for the nature of Ben Zoma's error. Indeed, it may not have so much to do with the content of Ben Zoma's exposition as with his method. There is a strong possibility that the tannaitic Rabbis engaged in a controversial, ecstatic mysticism.⁹⁰ It is possible that the reason Ben Zoma did not appropriately greet his master R. Joshua is because he was completely engrossed in a mystical trance. R. Joshua may not have approved of such mystical methods of obtaining knowledge, and for this reason he castigated Ben Zoma.

As we see from our discussion so far, we cannot determine with any certainty the nature and reason for Ben Zoma's misdeed. One aspect of the story that compounds the mystery is the variety and ambiguity of R. Joshua's final pronouncement. This is where we would logically expect to find an articulation and explanation of the offense, but none is provided. Instead, R. Joshua makes a sudden and brief pronouncement against Ben Zoma.

⁸⁸ We will discuss the Gnostics more in Chapters Four and Five.

⁸⁹ Urbach notes that R. Joshua was particularly sensitive to Gnostic dualistic heresy and anything that resembled it. *Tohu* and *bohu* may have been seen as possible co-creators of the world. See p. 191.

⁹⁰ This will be the subject of Chapter Six.

In the four versions mentioned above, we have four different articulations of this judgment.⁹¹ Though distinct in their formulation, three of the four versions declare Ben Zoma to be "outside."⁹² Unfortunately, we lack again a subject of the preposition. Ben Zoma is outside what? Is he outside his senses, or out his mind? Is he outside this world, and presently dying? Or is he outside the realm of traditional Judaism and entering into heresy? R. Joshua does not say, and we do not know. All we know for certain is that R. Joshua expresses disapproval of Ben Zoma's message or method of exposition, and that Ben Zoma dies soon thereafter. The story of Ben Zoma is too cryptic and ambiguous to reveal anything else with any clarity. Though Ben Zoma reveals certain mysteries, the account in the sources obscures them.

f. The amoraic rejection of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 section B

In Section III of this chapter, we have reviewed a variety of tannaitic and amoraic sources which have restricted the scope of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* for all. Section B of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 is the central articulation of this restriction. It explicitly forbids the inquiry into four matters, though it is not entirely clear what those four matters are. The tannaitic story of Ben Zoma corroborates this denouncement of investigation into forbidden cosmogonic mysteries, but it, too, is unclear on the particulars. The amoraic sources repeat and preserve these tannaitic passages. This, in itself, is a sign of their authority and support among the Amoraim. In addition, the amoraic sources contain new *midrashim* that confirm and explicate section B of the *mishnah*, including the letter *bet* tradition, the Deut. 4:32 tradition, and the Ben Sira tradition. From the texts that we have viewed so far, we find a multiplicitous, occasionally contradictory, but overall cohesive

⁹¹ For an analysis of the four different endings, see Feldstein p.8 and Halperin, The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature, p.98

⁹² In Genesis Rabbah, R. Joshua declares, "Ben Zoma has gone." This statement, opaque as it is, is probably not far in meaning from the other three.

collection of regulations and interpretations that forbade all people from engaging in certain subjects or forms of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

Against this strong tannaitic and amoraic tradition, we find a developing trend in the amoraic period to allow total freedom of cosmogonic inquiry. The first sign of this can be found in the Jerusalem Talmud, where R. Ba reports that the Tanna R. Ishmael allowed the public exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in opposition to section A of the *mishnah*. Though R. Ishmael's original position seems to be regarding the number of individuals who may expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the explication of his position in JT addresses the issue of forbidden subjects. We read:

"Nor *Ma'aseh Bereshit* before two." R. Ba [said] in the name of R. Judah: This is from R. Akiba, however R. Ishmael [disagrees]. They expound the matter [it is contemporary practice to expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit*]. From where [is this demonstrated]? From R. Yudah b. Pazzi who sat and expounded, "In the beginning, the world was water within water." This says that the *halachah* is according to R. Ishmael. R. Yudah b. Pazzi expounded, "In the beginning, the world was water within water." What is the scriptural proof? "And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters."⁹³

In this passage, the illustration of the authority of R. Ishmael's ruling is that R. Yudah b. Pazzi expounds upon the presumably forbidden Gen. 1:2. In fact, he cites the very portion of the verse for which Ben Zoma had been admonished. This is a rejection of the Ben Zoma story and section B of the *mishnah*, though we must be careful to note that it is an amoraic and not tannaitic position. R. Ishmael, the Tanna, addresses the issue of who can expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit* (parallel to section A). It is only the later explication in the amoraic source that addresses the permissibility of previously forbidden topics (parallel to section B). Having made this distinction, we can draw our conclusion. The tannaitic opinion of R. Ishmael preserved in JT rejects section A of the *mishnah*. The amoraic

⁹³ My own translation.

commentary additionally rejects section B.⁹⁴ Subsequently, in this section the amoraic authors and redactors of JT grant total freedom of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. We must qualify this statement to apply only to this section, for the redactors of JT also preserved the Ben Zoma story, the *bet* tradition, the Deut. 4:32 tradition, and the Ben Sira tradition.

The contradictory sections of JT are indicative of the generally schizophrenic position of amoraic texts on this issue. It is common for amoraic texts to preserve simultaneously prohibitions of certain topics of cosmogonic inquiry and midrashim that engage in such inquiry.⁹⁵ At times, such contradictory passages are even juxtaposed. Although the frequent violations of these prohibitions implicitly reject the authority of these prohibitions, we rarely find an explicit statement rejecting the kind of restriction of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* that we find in section A and B of the *mishnah*. Such a statement can be found in the opening verse of the eighth-century Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer:

Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrkanos began his discourse: "Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord, or make all His praise to be heard?" (Ps. 106:2). Is there anyone who can "express the mighty acts" of the Holy One, blessed be He, or "make all His praise be heard?" The ministering angels cannot even tell of the details of His mighty acts. [And yet it is permitted] for us to expound upon what He did, and what He will do in the future for the sake of His creations exalting the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He created from one end of the world until the other as it is said, "One generation shall laud Thy works to another, and shall declare Thy mighty acts" (Ps. 145:4).⁹⁶

In this rare statement we find explicit articulation of the usually implicit rejection of Mishnah Hag. 2:1. Here, the act of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not only permitted, but is heralded as a special privilege distinguishing humans from the angels. Though such a declaration of this position is uncommon, we can hear its message in the abundant amoraic

⁹⁴ By implication, it also rejects section C. See discussion below on the relation of section C to the previous sections.

⁹⁵ This will be the subject of Chapter Three.

⁹⁶ Translated by Friedlander.

midrashim that publicly expound upon what is above, what is below, what came before, and what will be in the future.

IV. Section C, and the Link Between Section A and Section B

[C] Anyone who does not respect the honor of his Maker, it is as if [it were better that] he had not come into the world.

According to Halperin, section C originally existed as a distinct unit independent of the first two sections, but was later fused with them by the mishnaic redactors. Proof for this assertion can be found in several BT interpretations of this section that have no regard for its context in the *mishnah*.⁹⁷ The current context of Section C, most relevant for our discussion, provides specific meaning to the general phrase "anyone who does not respect the honor of his Maker." In this context, the definition of one who does not respect the honor of his Maker is one who engages in the public exposition of one of the three restricted subjects, or one who looks into one of the four forbidden matters.

In its position at the end of the *mishnah*, section C serves as a concluding exhortation, explicating and uniting the previous two sections. It gives an official explanation as to why the Sages restricted and forbade the three subjects and the four matters, respectively. The public discussion of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is a profanation of the holy secrets of God. Arrogantly seeking forbidden knowledge of God is likewise a profanation of the holy secrets of God. Both actions show disrespect for the honor of God. Thereby, section C unites the previous two sections by giving them a single explanation and meaning.

The explanation of disrespect for the honor of God finds echoes in another midrash from Genesis Rabbah 1.5 and JT Hag. 77c. The JT version reads:

⁹⁷ Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, pp. 21-22. See p. 22, n. 13 for citations.

made dumb, bound

Rav said: "Let lying lips be dumb" (Ps. 31:19). Let them be **confounded**, ~~crushed~~, silenced. Let them be **confounded** - as you say: "And the Lord said to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind?'" (Ex. 4:11). Let them be ~~crushed~~, as you say: "Behold we were binding sheaves" (Gen. 37:7). Let them be silenced, according to the literal meaning: "Which speak arrogantly against the righteous" (Ps. 31:19), who speak concerning the Righteous One of the World words that He has withheld from His creatures. "In pride and contempt" (Ps. 31:19) - this refers to the one who boasts, saying, "I will expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit*," thinking that he is like one who exalts [his Creator], while in reality he is only like one who despises Him.⁹⁸

The Rabbis are unreserved in their use of hyperbole to emphasize their scorn for one who dishonors God by revealing His secrets. According to the Rabbis, it is better if he had not come into the world; he thinks he is like one who honors God, but really he is like one who despises Him. These are strong words, for the Rabbis regard this as a serious offense. According to the Sages, the matter is so grave because the honor of God is at stake. In section C, they explain that this is the reason for the restrictions on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. I hope to demonstrate in Chapter Five that there are other reasons as well.

V. Conclusion

Many modern scholars have found contradiction in the interdictions of sections A and B.⁹⁹ It seems that section A allows the exposition of certain topics to select individuals, but then section B forbids their investigation outright. However, this is only a contradiction if the subjects of section A are the same as those in section B. Assuming that the four matters are to be understood temporally and cosmogonically, this is a contradiction only if the *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of section A equals the four forbidden matters

⁹⁸ Translation by Neusner.

⁹⁹ See Urbach, p. 193; Gottstein p. 186.

of section B. As is apparent in my discussion in this chapter, I assert that they are not the same. In fact, I maintain that there are actually three types of cosmogonic inquiry. There are some aspects, as articulated in section B, that are forbidden to all. This divides the field of cosmogonic study into two realms: that which is absolutely forbidden and that which is permissible. Now, the realm that is permissible is further divided into two parts: that which may be discussed by the elite few and that which may be discussed publicly by all. If we view *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as a heterogeneous discipline divided into three categories, then the apparent contradiction between sections A and B is actually not a contradiction at all.

In this chapter, we have discussed each of these three categories of cosmogonic inquiry and their corresponding *halachot* and *midrashim*. Without conclusive evidence, we speculated that the Rabbis probably condoned an innocuous form of Genesis exegesis and cosmogonic study that accompanied the regular public readings of the Genesis creation narrative. Furthermore, if we view translations as interpretations, then the permission granted in Tosefta Meg. 3:31 shows a certain public exposition of the creation narrative did indeed occur in the tannaitic period.

With stronger evidence, we saw from section B of the *mishnah* and its commentaries that the Rabbis restricted certain cosmogonic exposition to a select few. JT records a tannaitic controversy between R. Akiba and R. Ishmael, but that the view of R. Akiba in support of section B was the more authoritative among the Tannaim. In amoraic times, the sources alternatively support and reject the restriction of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to a chosen few. This heterodoxy reflects a gradual amoraic development in which the majority of Rabbis began to favor the view of R. Ishmael over that of R. Akiba.

Finally, we discussed the realm of cosmogonic inquiry that was forbidden to all. First, we analyzed section B and its implications if interpreted spatially or temporally. Next, we explored the many traditions that parallel and support section B's prohibition of certain topics of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Lastly, we saw how the amoraic sources preserved

elements of these prohibitions, but nonetheless rejected the outright prohibition of any realm of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

Throughout the course of this discussion, we distinguished clearly between regulations that restrict the individuals who engage in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and those which restrict the subject matter of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. This distinction is suitable for an academic, systematic discussion of these regulations. It is also appropriate for a discussion of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 for it, too, makes such a distinction between sections A and B. However, in the amoraic texts, the Rabbis do not maintain this distinction. The amoraic redactors alternate discussions of both types of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* regulation as if they were one, and individual passages discuss both simultaneously. We saw above how an Amora transformed R. Ishmael's position on section A into an interpretation of section B. Since the Amoraim do not distinguish between regulations that restrict individuals and those that restrict subject matter, we must recognize that it is an inherent weakness of this chapter's analysis in that it artificially imposes such a distinction in its evaluation of the amoraic materials.

In conclusion, let us briefly summarize the findings of this chapter. In the tannaitic period, two leading Rabbis disputed the restriction of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to certain individuals, though the majority favored R. Akiba in favor of regulation. Regarding the four matters, there was no controversy; they were universally forbidden. The Tannaim probably approved of certain innocuous forms of public exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, including translations of the Genesis narrative. In the amoraic period, the sources contain certain articulations of support for these interdictions, but the simultaneous presence of numerous midrashim on forbidden cosmogony bespeaks a growing rejection of these *halachot*. The majority of the Amoraim condoned and even celebrated a general freedom of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, though they continued to restrict *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. This freedom to engage in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, as we shall see in the following chapters, bore a fruitful corpus of cosmogonic literature.

Chapter Three

Ma'aseh Bereshit as a Corpus of Cosmogonic Inquiry

The growing disregard of the prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in the amoraic period allowed for the publication of the once private tannaitic study of creation. In the amoraic texts we find for the first time the kind of cosmogonic study to which the term *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in Mishnah Hag. 2.1 refers. In Chapters One and Two, we found several hints that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* referred to a distinct corpus of study on the mysteries of creation. The first suggestion was based indirectly on a talmudic list of scholarly fields that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai had mastered

They said of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture, Mishnah, *gemara*, *halachah*, *aggadah*, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, inferences *a minori ad majus*, analogies, calendrical computations, *gematria*, the speech of the ministering angels, the speech of the spirits, the speech of palm trees, fullers' parables, and fox fables, great matters or small matters. "Great matters" mean *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, "small matters" the discussions of Abaye and Raba.¹⁰⁰

We deduced from this list that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was indeed a discipline of study containing a corpus of work, as was the case with Scripture, Mishnah, *gemara*, *halachah*, *aggadah* and others. We deduced further from the story of Pumbedita that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was likewise a discipline of study with a body of work that could be taught by one person to another. In Chapter Two, we discussed a text with a more direct statement on the nature of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, though this text was disquietingly ambiguous.

¹⁰⁰ Soncino translation of BT Sukkah 28a. See also BT Bava Batra 134a.

R. Yose b. Judah says: R. Joshua lectured [*hirtzah*] before Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai. R. Akiba lectured before R. Joshua. Hananiah b. Kinai lectured before R. Akiba.¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, we do not know from this excerpt or its context whether the subject of these lectures was *Ma'aseh Merkavah* or *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Nonetheless, while we do not know the specific subject, we must assume that there was in fact a content to these lectures. This *midrash* records the transmission of a corpus of knowledge through generations of Rabbis. Whether the subject of this corpus was *Ma'aseh Merkavah* or *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is immaterial to our discussion here, for, as twin disciplines, what is true for one is true for the other in this regard.¹⁰² The account of the three lectures is therefore further, albeit not definitive, proof for the existence of a corpus of cosmogonic teachings in the tannaitic period, known as *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

From the tannaitic period, we find only such indirect references to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. No tannaitic text directly defines *Ma'aseh Bereshit* or reveals the content of such cosmogonic study,¹⁰³ as such publication of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* would directly violate section A of the *mishnah*. Whether or not its numbers were understood literally or rhetorically, section A restricted cosmogonic inquiry to a chosen few. Though this topic was studied, discussed and transmitted privately, the prohibition of section A prevented its publication. However, in the amoraic period, the Rabbis openly disregarded the

¹⁰¹ My own translation of Tosefta Hag. 2:2. See also BT Hag. 14b; and JT Hag. 77b.

¹⁰² See my discussion at the end of Chapter One on the equivalency, if not equality, of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

¹⁰³ I do not count the story of Ben Zoma because it is so veiled in ambiguity and fragmentation. Though it is doubtfully tannaitic, we should consider Avot de Rabbi Natan. Chapter 4 contains the lines, "Rabbi Judah says: By three things the world is supported: by envy, lust and mercy. And also, by means of three things was the world created: voice, disposition, and appearance" (Saldarini translation). In context, I do not believe that this passage actually addresses cosmogony, but that it uses cosmogonic terminology rhetorically. Saldarini suggests that the subject of this statement is human beings, and not the creation of the world. See Saldarini, p. 53, n. 15.

It is important to note that the tannaitic texts are equally silent regarding the nature and content of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. We will discuss this further in Chapter Six.

prohibition of section A. In the amoraic texts, we find the publication of a tangible corpus of cosmogonic inquiry. Here, for the first time, we find a tangible definition and description of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

I. The Tannaitic Cosmogonic Inquiry Recorded in Amoraic Texts

The amoraic texts record the cosmogonic discussions of the Tannaim and earlier Sages¹⁰⁴ that are purposefully omitted from the tannaitic texts. One of the earliest attributions regards a dispute between the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai over the relative order of the creation of heaven and earth.

"The heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Beit Shammai maintain: The heaven was first created, while Beit Hillel hold: The earth was first created. In the view of Beit Shammai this is parallel to the case of a king who first made his throne and then his footstool, for it is written, "The heaven is My Throne, and the earth is My footstool" (Isa. 66:1). On the view of Beit Hillel this is to be compared to a king who builds a palace; after building the nether portion he builds the upper, for it is written, "In the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4).¹⁰⁵

We cannot be certain of the dating of this cosmogonical dispute. First of all, *midrashic* attributions are always dubious. Secondly, attribution to entire schools instead of individual men increases the window of possibility, as the schools of Hillel and Shammai existed longer than the lifetime of any individual. If we assume that the attributions are

¹⁰⁴ By earlier Sages I refer to the Rabbis in the late Second Temple period. While we do possess the extensive cosmogonic writings of Philo, his particular views are not expressed in the later *midrash*. Though Philo engaged in cosmogonic inquiry at a relevant period, his location in Alexandria placed him outside the circle of the Palestinian sages. Accordingly, we cannot consider his inquiry to be *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The mishnaic term *Ma'aseh Bereshit* cannot refer to Philo's cosmogony if the Palestinian Rabbis were unaware of Philo. As this thesis is a discussion of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, which is a specifically rabbinic cosmogony, Philo will remain mostly outside the scope of this work.

¹⁰⁵ Soncino translation of Genesis Rabbah (BR) 1:15. See also BT Hag. 12a; JT Hag. 77c-d; and Tanhuma Buber, Bereshit 1:19.

accurate, we know that the original debate occurred prior to the time of the tannaitic Sages who comment upon it in the continuation of the *midrash*.¹⁰⁶

We have reason to trust the attribution of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai in this case as it is corroborated by a story from the Babylonian Talmud. In this story, Alexander the Great asks a series of questions directed to the Sages of the south, including:

Were the heavens created first or the earth? [The elders of the south country] replied: The heavens were created first, as it says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). [Alexander] said to them: Was light created first, or darkness? They replied: This question cannot be solved. Why did they not reply that darkness was created first, since it is written, "Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness" (1:2), and after that, "And God said, Let there be light, and there was light" (1:3)? - They thought to themselves: Perhaps he will go on to ask what is above and what is below, what before and what after.¹⁰⁷

The significant clue here is that the Sages of the south, in accordance with Beit Shammai, hold that God created heaven first. We know from other texts that the Edomites, southerners, were disciples of the School of Shammai.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the story of Alexander in BT Tamid 32a corroborates the attributions of the previous *midrash* by affirming that the School of Shammai held that heaven was created prior to the earth's creation. In these two amoraic *midrashim*, we find the record of pre-tannaitic Sages engaging in cosmogonic debate.¹⁰⁹

Several amoraic texts record the similar cosmogonic discussions of the Tannaim. Genesis Rabbah 1:9 records R. Gamaliel's excursus against pre-existent matter:

¹⁰⁶ Including R. Judah b. R. Ilai, R. Simeon b. Yochai, and R. Eleazar b. Simeon.

¹⁰⁷ Soncino translation of BT Tamid 32a. The response of the Sages to the question of the order of light and darkness deserves some discussion. Though they avoid answering the question and proclaim it to be unsolvable, the continuation of the text explains that this was only to prevent Alexander from delving into forbidden matters. The question of light and dark is not itself a forbidden matter, but a step toward forbidden matters. The unattributed explanation that darkness preceded light may be an amoraic insertion. However, we do find an explicitly tannaitic discussion of this issue in BR 3:1.

¹⁰⁸ Urbach, p. 188, n. 14.

¹⁰⁹ For another example, see BR 11:14.

A certain philosopher asked R. Gamaliel, saying to him: "Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him." "What are they?" said he to him. "*Tohu, bohu*,¹¹⁰ darkness, water, *ruah* (spirit or wind), and the deep," replied he. "Woe to that man," he exclaimed. "The term 'creation' is used by Scripture in connection with all of them." *Tohu* and *bohu*: "I make peace and create evil" (Isa. 45:7); darkness: "I form the light, and create darkness" (ibid.); water: "Praise Him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that are above the heavens" (Ps. 148:4) - wherefore? "For He commanded, and they were created" (ibid. 5); *ruah*: "For, lo, He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind" (Amos 4:13), the depths: "When there were no depths, I was brought forth" (Prov. 8:24).¹¹¹

Genesis Rabbah 1:14 records a cosmogonic interchange between R. Akiba and R. Ishmael:

"*Et*¹¹² the heavens and *et* the earth" (Gen. 1:1) R. Ishmael asked R. Akiba: Since you have studied twenty-two years under Nahum of Gimzo that *ach* (save that) and *rak* (except) are limitations, while *et* and *gam* (also) are extensions, [tell me], what of the *et* written here? Said he to him: If it stated, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," we might have maintained that heaven and earth too are divine powers.¹¹³

Finally, Genesis Rabbah 4:6 records the cosmogonic exposition of Ben Zoma. While the *midrash* recognizes that Ben Zoma's exposition here is controversial, neither he nor his exposition is censured as before:

"And God made the firmament" (Gen. 1:7). This is one of the verses over which Ben Zoma raised a commotion: He made - how remarkable! Surely it [came into existence] at [God's] word, [as it is written,] "By the word of

¹¹⁰ *Tohu* and *bohu*, though often translated adjectivally as "unformed and void," here are considered to be entities unto themselves. See Chapter Four.

¹¹¹ Soncino translation. See Chapter Four for a discussion of creation *ex nihilo*.

¹¹² *Et* is the sign of the accusative (Soncino).

¹¹³ Soncino translation. "Without the sign of the accusative they might be regarded as nominatives and additional subjects of 'created,' or (E.J.) as in apposition to 'God'" (Soncino). See Chapter Four for a discussion of the creation of the world by God alone. See also Tanhuma Buber, Bereshit 1:8. A variant of this *midrash* can be found in BT Hag. 12a.

the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth" (Ps. 33:6)¹¹⁴

In these three excerpts from Genesis Rabbah, we find tannaitic discussions of creation recorded in an amoraic text.¹¹⁵ Assuming that we can trust these attributions, we have here abundant evidence that the Tannaim engaged in cosmogonic inquiry. It is important to note that in the three texts above, the Tannaim do not comment upon *materia prima*. In fact, nothing that is stated in the name of the Tannaim violates section B of Mishnah Hag. 2:1.¹¹⁶ In Chapter Two we saw how the tannaitic texts affirmed the authority of the *mishnah's* prohibitions. Now we see that the Tannaim themselves recognized their authority. The Tannaim engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, but not publicly, in accordance with section A of the *mishnah*. Likewise, in accordance with section B, they did not discuss what was above, what was below, what before and what after.

The crucial question remains: Is this tannaitic cosmogonic inquiry what the Tannaim called *Ma'aseh Bereshit*? The strange and confounding story of Ben Zoma is exceptional in that it contains an account of cosmogonic inquiry that is labeled *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. No other text makes this connection. All other tannaitic and amoraic texts that speak of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* do so indirectly, without defining or demonstrating *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Meanwhile, all the other amoraic texts that preserve tannaitic and amoraic cosmogonic inquiry do not label it as *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Can we now assert a connective link that the texts do not assert themselves? Can we equate the cosmogonic inquiry of the amoraic texts with the *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of the tannaitic texts?

The answer, with some degree of uncertainty, is yes. We have three reasons to draw this connection. First of all, the story of Ben Zoma equates the two. True, this

¹¹⁴ Soncino translation. We will recall this text below in a discussion of God's deliberation when creating the world.

¹¹⁵ For a further example, see Saldarini, pp.306-10. The author analyzes a common *midrashic* motif of ten things that were created at the end of the sixth day. Many of these texts cite tannaitic sources.

¹¹⁶ Urbach, p. 193.

bizarre story is frustratingly cryptic. We do not understand the strange dialogue that begins the encounter between the two Sages. We cannot claim to know with any certainty the nature of Ben Zoma's error and the reason for R. Judah's rebuke. Nonetheless, some elements of the story are clear. Without doubt, Ben Zoma is engaging in cosmogonic inquiry as he comments upon the thickness of the heavens through the exegesis of Gen. 1:2. Equally without doubt, Ben Zoma labels this activity as "looking at *Ma'aseh Bereshit*."¹¹⁷ This is an unavoidable and undeniable connection between tannaitic cosmogonic inquiry and the term *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The second reason to assert this equation comes from our analysis of the tannaitic and pre-tannaitic cosmogony in the amoraic texts. It is striking that these accounts precisely follow the Mishnah Hag. 1:2 rulings on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The Tannaim did not publicly record these expositions in accordance with section A, and they did not discuss *materia prima* in accordance with section B. The fact that this tannaitic cosmogonic inquiry conforms to mishnaic regulation on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is further evidence that it was indeed *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The final reason to assert this link derives from an amusing dialogue from Genesis Rabbah 3:4:

"And God said: Let there be light, etc." (Gen. 1:3). R. Simeon b. R. Yehotzadak asked R. Samuel b. Nahman: "As I have heard that you are a master of aggadah, tell me whence the light was created?" He replied: "The Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself therein as in a robe and irradiated with the luster of His majesty the whole world from one end to the other." Now he had answered him in a whisper, whereupon he observed, "There is a verse which states it explicitly: 'Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment' (Ps. 104:2), yet you say it in a whisper!" "Just as I heard it in a whisper, so have I told it to you in a whisper," he rejoined. R. Berekiah remarked: "Had not R. Isaac taught it, could we have said it!" Before this, what did they say [on the matter]? R. Berekiah said in R. Isaac's name: "The light was created from the place of the Temple, as it is said, 'And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the east; and

¹¹⁷ In Tosefta, JT and BR. The BT version does not mention *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth did shine with His glory' (Ezek. 43:2). Now, 'His glory' is nought else but the Temple, as you read: 'Thou throne of glory, on high from the beginning, Thou place of our sanctuary' (Jer. 17:12)."¹¹⁸

The notable aspect of this *midrash*, for the sake of our discussion, is R. Samuel's use of the whisper and R. Simeon's objection to it. The whisper is a residual trait passed down from a previous period when such cosmogonic exegesis was esoteric. R. Samuel has heard this exposition of light told in a whisper, and so he maintains the tradition. R. Simeon's subsequent ire is due to the incongruity of this practice with the contemporary freedom of cosmogonic exegesis. He finds it absurd to maintain this secretive practice in a time when *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is no longer restricted to two individuals. This *midrash* demonstrates to us the connective link between tannaitic and amoraic cosmogonic inquiry. We see from this account that a single teaching was esoteric to the Tannaim but exoteric to the Amoraim. We deduce from this that the esoteric *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to which the Mishnah refers may include the same teachings explicitly and publicly described in the amoraic texts. R. Samuel's whisper demonstrates that such cosmogonic teaching existed previously, but that the Tannaim considered it esoteric and did not publicize it themselves. The Amoraim received these cosmogonic teachings, considered them to be exoteric, and then published them openly in works such as *Genesis Rabbah*. R. Samuel's whisper further proves the connection between tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and the cosmogonic teachings of the amoraic texts.

So, in response to the question of whether or not we can equate the cosmogonic inquiry of the amoraic texts with the *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of the tannaitic texts, we boldly answer Yes. Nonetheless, we must recognize the degree of doubt in this answer.

Although the Ben Zoma story explicitly links such cosmogonic inquiry with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, it is perplexing that no other *midrash* does so. Why did the Amoraim refrain

¹¹⁸ Soncino translation. See also Tanhuma Buber, *Bereshit* 1.10; *Exodus Rabbah* 1:1; and *Leviticus Rabbah* 31:7.

from calling the tannaitic or their own amoraic cosmogonic teachings by the name *Ma'aseh Bereshit*? I suspect that the reason for this is that they did not want to be in blatant violation of the Mishnah. Although they no longer regarded Mishnah Hag. 2:1 as authoritative, they still respected the Mishnah. Perhaps they recognized the need to violate the antiquated *mishnah*, but they chose to do so in a way that would not dishonor it. By not referring to their published teachings as *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, they did not explicitly violate the letter of the law. Still, this explanation is pure speculation and is, perhaps, apologetic. The sources' dearth of stated connections between the term *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and the amoraic cosmogonic texts, however explainable and understandable, still leaves us with a measure of uncertainty. This uncertainty is augmented by the fact that our above analysis relies upon rabbinic attributions and narratives that may be entirely invented. Nonetheless, we should not let this unavoidable uncertainty nullify our analysis. It is still probable that the tannaitic excursions into cosmogony as preserved in the amoraic texts are indeed the very *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of the Mishnah. We can still draw this conclusion. We simply cannot make such a judgment beyond a reasonable doubt.

II. The New Freedom of Amoraic Cosmogonic Inquiry

As a result of the amoraic rejection of section A of Mishnah Hag. 2:1, we find for the first time the public documentation of pre-tannaitic, tannaitic and amoraic cosmogonic teachings. In addition, the simultaneous rejection of section B of the *mishnah* engendered an entirely new speculation into matters that were previously forbidden. Actually, these matters were consistently forbidden by section B of the *mishnah*, but the Amoraim simply chose to defy it. In their discourses on creation, the Amoraim freely commented on what is above, what is below, what came before and what will be after. They transformed what was the most esoteric aspect of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* into an exoteric discipline of public exegesis.

The most striking example of this transformation can be seen in reference to the story of Ben Zoma. We recall that Ben Zoma's transgression was likely his use of Gen. 1:2, and his discovery that "there is not between the upper waters and lower waters even a handbreadth." As a result, Ben Zoma is castigated by his peer and dies soon thereafter. In contrast to Ben Zoma's experience, the Amoraim unabashedly engage in the very practices of Ben Zoma without any sign of censure. For example, the Amoraim repeatedly expound upon verse 1:2 of Genesis. Indeed, their expositions focus mainly on the most sensitive part of the verse, the beginning half about *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness. In these expositions on pre-existent matter, the subject of inquiry is distinctly and explicitly "what came before."¹¹⁹

In addition to expounding upon "what came before," the Amoraim openly speculate upon the distance between the upper waters and the lower waters. In fact, they even reach conclusions similar to Ben Zoma's, but no one plays the role of R. Judah to castigate them. For a first example, we see Genesis Rabbah 4:3:

R. Pinhas said in R. Oshaya's name: As there is a void between the earth and the firmament, so is there a void between the firmament and the upper waters, as it is written, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters" (Gen. 1:6), meaning, midway between them. R. Tanhuma said: I will state the proof. If it said, "And God made the firmament, and He divided between the waters . . . which are upon the firmament," I would say that the water lies directly upon the firmament itself. Since, however, it is stated, "And between the waters which are above the firmament," it follows that the upper waters are suspended by the word [of God]. R. Aha said: It is like [the flame of] a lamp, and their fruits are the rain.¹²⁰

A second example comes from Genesis Rabbah 4:5:

¹¹⁹ We will see examples of such expositions of Gen. 1:2 in Chapter Four's discussion of creation *ex nihilo*.

¹²⁰ Soncino translation.

The thickness of the firmament equals that of the earth: Compare, "It is He that sitteth above the circle (*hug*) of the earth" (Isa. 40:22) with, "And He walketh in the circuit (*hug*) of the heaven" (Job 22:14). The use of *hug* in both verses teaches that they are alike. R. Aha said in R. Hanina's name: [It is but as] thick as a metal plate. R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah said: It is about two fingers in thickness.¹²¹

These two passages concern the same subject as Ben Zoma's inquiry, but they come to different conclusions. We deduce from Genesis Rabbah 4.3 that the distance between the upper and lower waters is twice the distance between earth and the heavenly firmament. This is a great distance. The unattributed opinion of 4.5 concurs, stating that the firmament dividing the upper and lower waters is as thick as the earth, which is presumably very thick. However, we find in the final passage minority opinions supporting the opposite view in accordance with Ben Zoma's discovery. R. Aha says that it is as thick as a metal plate, which is, in the terminology of Ben Zoma, less than a handbreadth. Even more astounding, we find R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah using terminology strikingly similar to Ben Zoma's when he asserts that "It is about two fingers in thickness."

What is the difference between R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah's assertion and that of Ben Zoma? What is the difference between the Amoraim's exposition of Gen. 1.2 and the interpretation of Ben Zoma? The only difference is the response. Ben Zoma is castigated and shamed for his exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The Amoraim, on the other hand, are honored and immortalized in *midrashic* collections such as Genesis Rabbah.

Notwithstanding this freedom for Amoraim to engage in "what came before," there was still some sense of limits to cosmogonic speculation. We find such a case in Genesis Rabbah 6.8:

R. Simeon b. Yohai said: We do not know whether [the orbs of the sun and moon] fly through the air [freely without a spherical track], glide in the

¹²¹ Ibid.

heaven, or travel in their usual manner [with great effort]. It is an exceedingly difficult matter, and no person can fathom it.¹²²

This statement of R. Simeon resonates with the wisdom of Ben Sira, "About what is too great for thee inquire not; what is too hard for thee investigate not, about what is too wonderful for thee know not." R. Simeon seems to feel that the mysteries of the travel of the sun and moon are simply too wonderful to know. There is a distinction, however, between the articulation of his sentiments and those of Ben Sira. Ben Sira's wisdom is voiced as a command, and as a result we may not know such mysteries. R. Simeon's statement is more factual, resigning to the fact that we cannot know such mysteries. According to R. Simeon, there is no restriction of our freedom to inquire, but only a limitation of our ability to know.

Despite this distinction, the amoraic texts continue to preserve and restate the words of Ben Sira. In fact, much of the tannaitic regulation of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, including and especially Mishnah Hag. 2:1, is likewise preserved and restated in the amoraic literature. What is more, we find in the amoraic literature new expressions of restriction upon *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, such as the letter *bet* tradition and the Deut. 4:32 tradition. The existence of these *midrashim*, in the midst of a corpus of free cosmogonic inquiry, produces an amoraic literary tradition that is truly schizophrenic. We can find such paradoxical statements even within individual *midrashic* segments, such as Genesis Rabbah 8:2:

R. Hama b. R. Hanina commenced: "Knowest thou this of old time, since man was placed upon earth" (Job 20:4). Said R. Hama b. R. Hanina: This may be compared to a country which received its supplies from ass-drivers, who used to ask each other, "What was the market price today?" Thus those who supplied on the sixth day would ask of those who supplied on the fifth day, the fifth of the fourth, the fourth of the third, the third of the second, the second of the first, but of whom was the first day supplier to ask? Surely of the citizens who were engaged in the public affairs of the

¹²² Ibid., with bracketed insertions according to notes from Theodor.

country! Thus the works of each day asked one another, "Which creatures did the Holy One, blessed be He, create among you today?" The sixth asked of the fifth, the fifth of the fourth, the fourth of the third, the third of the second, and the second of the first. Of what was the first to ask? Surely of the Torah, which preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years, as it is written, "Then I [the Torah] was by Him, as a nursling, and I was His delight day after day" (Prov. 8:30); now the day of the Lord is a thousand years, as it is said, "For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past" (Ps. 90:4). That is the meaning of "Knowest thou this of old time?" The Torah knows what was before the creation of the world, but you have no business to inquire about aught save "Since man was placed upon earth." R. Leazar said in Bar Sira's name: About what is too great for thee inquire not; what is too hard for thee investigate not, about what is too wonderful for thee know not; of what is hidden from thee ask not; study what was permitted thee: thou hast no business with hidden things.¹²³

The inherent contradictions within this one pericope are ludicrous. On one hand, it instructs us not to inquire about what came before the creation of man on the sixth day. On the other hand, it begins with a lengthy illustration on the means of transmitting and obtaining information before the existence of man. To further exacerbate the paradox, it coolly makes the extraordinary assertion that the Torah preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years.¹²⁴ Finally, in its conclusion, it restates Ben Sira's warning against engaging in such exposition of mysteries.

How can we explain such paradoxes both in this particular *midrash*, and in the greater corpus of amoraic literature? Why does the amoraic literature simultaneously maintain and reject the prohibitions and restrictions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*? The reason is that the amoraic literature records the gradual transition from the strict tannaitic perception of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to the loose amoraic view. The transformation of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* from an esoteric to exoteric discipline did not occur in an instant. As we saw with the story of Pumbedita, in the early amoraic period certain elders considered

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Ma'aseh Bereshit to be esoteric on a par with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. R. Joseph's view that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was exoteric would eventually become dominant in the course of the amoraic period. The schizophrenic amoraic literature records this transition, as well as the dispute between parties on both sides of the issue. Just as the Talmuds record the minority opinions that did not become *halachah*, so, too, did the Rabbis record minority or antiquated positions in the *midrash aggadah*. By the time the great amoraic works were redacted, such as the Jerusalem Talmud, Genesis Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud in the mid-fourth through sixth centuries, the opinion of the Rabbis was overwhelmingly in favor of free cosmogonic inquiry. As a result, these works contain numerous *midrashim* on creation that publicly expound upon what came before. Nonetheless, the redactors respected previous opinions and minority opinions, and they recorded them as well.

III Conclusion

In this chapter, we have demonstrated in several stages that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was a corpus of cosmogonic inquiry. The *midrash* of Ben Zakkai's accomplishments and the *midrash* of the three lectures suggested that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was a scholarly discipline with a content of teaching, equivalent to *halachah* or *aggadah*. However, with the exception of the story of Ben Zoma, no tannaitic or amoraic text gives a definition or example of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The preponderance of texts refer to it only indirectly.

With the amoraic rejection of section A of Mishnah Hag. 2:1, we find published for the first time the cosmogonic teachings of the pre-tannaitic and tannaitic Sages. The amoraic texts record the cosmogonic discussions of the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai, R. Gamaliel, R. Akiba and R. Ishmael, and Ben Zoma, among others. This raises the crucial question of this chapter, namely: Is this tannaitic cosmogonic inquiry what the Tannaim called *Ma'aseh Bereshit*? Our answer, with some degree of uncertainty, is Yes, for three reasons. One, the story of Ben Zoma, though confounding in some

regards, clearly establishes a link between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and the kind of cosmogonic inquiry and Genesis exegesis that we find in the amoraic texts. Two, the tannaitic cosmogonic inquiries, as recorded in the amoraic texts, conspicuously accord with the prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in Mishnah Hag. 2:1. Three, the whispering of R. Samuel draws the final connective link between tannaitic and amoraic cosmogonic teaching, demonstrating that the exoteric cosmogonic inquiry found in the amoraic texts was previously considered esoteric, presumably due to the *mishnah's* ruling on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. These three reasons allow us to state confidently that the cosmogonic inquiry found in the amoraic text is indeed the *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to which the tannaitic texts refer, though, of course, we cannot be absolutely sure.

The additional amoraic rejection of section B of the *mishnah* gave rise to a new tradition of cosmogonic inquiry that unabashedly expounded on "what came before." To illustrate this new freedom, we viewed several texts in which Rabbis engage in the same form of cosmogonic activity as Ben Zoma, only this time they are not condemned to shame or death. The preponderance of public cosmogonic inquiry into all matters of creation demonstrates the Amoraim's complete rejection of section A and B of the *mishnah*. Nonetheless, the amoraic redactors recorded many previous and minority opinions, producing *midrashic* collections that are laden with contradictions.

In summary, we find in the amoraic texts a continuous and developing pre-tannaitic, tannaitic, and amoraic cosmogonic tradition and corpus of teachings. This corpus of cosmogonic exposition is the *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of the Mishnah.

Chapter Four

Some Major Themes of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

Now that we have demonstrated the existence of a real, tangible body of work which is *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, let us examine what it contains. In this chapter, we will present a sampling of the major themes of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The scope of this chapter will not allow a comprehensive collection of cosmogonic *midrashim* and an analysis thereof. Instead, we will view and analyze some of the most important themes of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in order to get a sense of the essence of rabbinic cosmogony. This basic understanding of essential themes will allow us, in Chapter Five, to discuss the significance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The pertinent themes included in this chapter are:

- I. The Creation of the World by God Alone
- II. God's Deliberate but Effortless Creation
- III. The Goodness of the World
- IV. The Goodness of God
- V. Creation *Ex Nihilo*
- VI. The Order of Creation
- VII. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as Prophecy

Though we will discuss each of these subjects separately, one should note that the first four subjects are closely related in a sequence of argument. If God created the world alone, and if God created the world deliberately according to God's will, and if the world is good, then God is therefore good. Actually, this sequence is circular, as any three of its

points can demonstrate the fourth. For instance, if God is good, and if God created the world alone and deliberately, then the world is therefore good.

The interrelation of these four points, and their relation in turn with the section on creation *ex nihilo*, can be seen clearly in reference to the problem of *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness.¹²⁵ The problem with these three entities is twofold: (A) their creation is not stated in the Genesis account, and (B) they have a negative connotation. Since their creation is not accounted for in the biblical narrative, certain heretics apparently maintained that these three entities were pre-existent matter or partners in creation. If they were pre-existent matter, then God is a fashioner and not a creator. Worse yet, if they are primal materials and they are evil, then the world is consequently evil. If they were partners in creation, then God is not sole creator and owner of the world. Worse yet, if these are partners in creation and they are evil, then the world is consequently evil. Obviously, *tohu*, *bohu*, and darkness presented a serious challenge to the Rabbis. The severity and complexity of this challenge is reflected in the fact that it will be addressed in the first five subjects presented in this chapter. The final two subjects, we shall see, are more independent.

I. The Creation of the World by God Alone

The most significant challenge to the rabbinic monotheistic cosmogony comes not from an external source, but from the Rabbis' very own Hebrew Bible. The Genesis narrative contains two significant peculiarities preserved from a time when the biblical authors were not as monotheistic as the Rabbis. The first problem arises from the plurality of the God-name *Elohim*. The term *elohim* is most literally translated as "gods," and in many cases the Bible intends that meaning. However, the Bible also uses the term as a

¹²⁵ Though the words *tohu* and *bohu* are customarily translated with the adjectives "unformed and void," the Rabbis treat them as distinct, tangible entities, apparently in response to the heretics.

proper name for God. The Genesis creation narrative alternates between using this proper name and the Tetragrammaton.¹²⁶ The other difficulty arises from the troubling plurality of Gen. 1:26, in which God says "*na'aseh adam* (Let us make man)." The Rabbis felt compelled to respond to the obvious questions: To whom did God speak? Who assisted God in the creation of man? Thus the plurality of *Elohim* and the statement *na'aseh adam* in the biblical creation narrative presented internal challenges to rabbinic monotheistic cosmogony. Augmenting this difficulty were the external challenges of the pagans, Gnostics, and Christians. In response to these challenges, the Rabbis vehemently argued from scriptural exegesis that God created the world alone.

a. The denial of the textual plurality.

The Rabbis' most immediate defense was to deny the plurality of the text by demonstrating the singularity of corresponding verbs or adjacent phrases. This tactic is clearly articulated in Genesis Rabbah 8:9:

The heretics asked R. Simlai: How many deities created the world? He replied: I and you must inquire of the first day, as it is written, "For ask now of the first days" (Deut. 4:32). Not, "since the day gods created (*baru*) man" is written here, but "God created (*bara*)" (ibid.). Then they asked him a second time: Why is it written, "In the beginning *Elohim* [plural] created?" (Gen. 1:1) He answered, "In the beginning gods created (*baru Elohim*)" is not written here, but "God created (*bara Elohim*) the heaven and the earth."

R. Simlai said: Wherever you find a point [apparently] supporting the heretics, you find the refutation at its side. They asked him again: What is meant by, "And God said: Let us make man" (Gen. 1:26)? He replied: Read what follows, "And gods created (*vayibre'u*) man" is not written here, but "And God created (*vayibra*)" (1:27). When [the heretics] went out, his disciples said to him: Them you have dismissed with a mere makeshift, but how will you answer us? Said he to them: In the past

¹²⁶ The Tetragrammaton is the ineffable proper name of the particular God of Israel, spelled with the letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, and commonly called *Adonai*. Though the etymology of this name for God is disputable, it seems to be in the singular and thus does not, in itself, present a challenge to monotheism.

Adam was created from dust and Eve was created from Adam; but henceforth it shall be "In our image, after our likeness" (1:26); neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Divine Spirit.¹²⁷

In this passage, as in many others, the Rabbis deny the plurality of *Elohim* by demonstrating that the word takes the singular verb *bara* (He created). Similarly, they refute the suggested plurality of creators in *na'aseh adam* by citing the following verse which states in the singular "And God created."¹²⁸ The Rabbis confront these two problematic passages, and they find strong textual proofs to counter the challenges of scriptural plurality.¹²⁹

Despite their clever and confident refutation of the implied plurality of creators in Scriptures, the Rabbis are still troubled by the Scriptures' suggestion of polytheism. They indirectly express their dismay in the beginning of Genesis Rabbah 8:8:

R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonathan's name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, "And God said: Let us make man, etc.," he said: "Sovereign of the Universe! Why dost Thou furnish an excuse for the heretics?" God replied: "Write, whoever wishes to err may err."¹³⁰

Here, the Rabbis express their bewilderment and frustration through the mouthpiece of Moses. They, like Moses, cannot comprehend why God would give such a foothold for the heretics. Though God's response in the *midrash* is soothing, we sense that Moses' question speaks to the deeper sentiment of the Rabbis.

¹²⁷ Soncino translation. See also Deut. Rabbah 2:13; and BR 1:7.

¹²⁸ What is unique to this *midrash* is its subsequent explanation of *na'aseh adam* to account for the plural. According to R. Simlai, God is speaking to all the future generations of mankind, enlisting our partnership in the continuous creation of human beings through sexual reproduction.

¹²⁹ In BR 5:8, an interesting though perhaps unrelated *midrash*, the Rabbis comment on the use of the plural "seas" in Gen. 1:10. They find it peculiar that the Torah would say "seas" when there is really only one sea, assuming that all the bodies of water in the world are connected. There may be a general implication here that some singular things are written in the Torah as plural, and this would support the singularity of *Elohim*. Still, since this *midrash* makes no direct reference to *Elohim*, this may be unlikely.

¹³⁰ Soncino translation. The rest of the *midrash* will be quoted below.

In fact, it seems as if the Rabbis would have preferred that the Bible not contain such references to God in the plural.¹³¹ When the Sages translated these passages into other languages for the general populace to understand, they deliberately removed the troubling plural language from Gen. 1:1 and 1:26. The Septuagint translation into Greek renders these verses, "God created in the beginning . . ." ¹³² and "I shall make man in image and likeness." Onkelos, in his translation of Gen. 1:1 into Aramaic, conspicuously replaces the troublesome name *Elohim* with the unquestionably singular Tetragrammaton.¹³³ In the *midrash*, the Rabbis herald such textual emendations as the will of God.

It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, "Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master." God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him, "God created in the beginning," "I shall make man in image and likeness," . . . [and other emendations are listed after these].¹³⁴

The miraculous nature of the above story demonstrates God's sanctions of these emendations. In fact, the emendations of verses 1:1 and 1:26 are particularly mentioned for special notice. Though the authors of this *midrash* did not personally make these

¹³¹ Feldstein, p. 42.

¹³² Though the plurality of the name *Elohim* is maintained here, the reversal of the order of the initial phrase prevents one from interpreting falsely that God co-created the heaven and the earth with an entity called *bereshit*.

¹³³ Aberbach-Grossfeld, pp. 24-5. However, Onkelos does maintain the plurality of Gen. 1:26. In their notes, Aberbach and Grossfeld suggest two explanations for this. One is that by the time of the Onkelos translation there was no longer any doubt in the monotheistic faith. The second explanation is that angelology had become so popular by that time that it seemed only fitting that God would consult with the heavenly retinue. The first suggestion that monotheism was no longer doubted is controverted by the numerous amoraic *midrashim*, some mentioned in this chapter, that feverishly argue for a monotheistic interpretation of the texts. If no one doubted, there would be no need for such assertions. The second suggestion, regarding angelology, is more persuasive and better supported by the *midrashim*, as we shall see below.

¹³⁴ Soncino translation of BT Megillah 9a. See abridged versions in JT Meg. 71d; and Mechilta, Pisha 14.

textual emendations in the Septuagint and the Targum, they nonetheless show strong support for this practice. They are capable of explaining away the troubling suggestions of a plurality of creators, but they seem to prefer hiding them from those who do not understand the original Hebrew.

b. The acceptance of plurality in Gen. 1:26

Though many *midrashim* deny the plurality of *Elohim* and *na'aseh adam*, there is a *midrashic* tradition that does accept the plurality of *na'aseh adam* in verse 1:26. Some Rabbis maintained that, while God alone created the world, He did seek the counsel of the ministering angels in His retinue. The continuation of Genesis Rabbah 8:8, quoted above, explains:

Said the Lord: Moses, this man [Adam] that I have created - do I not cause men both great and small to spring from him? Now if a great man comes to obtain permission [for a proposed action] from one that is less than he, he may say, "Why should I ask permission from my inferior!" They will answer him, "Learn from thy Creator, who created all that is above and below, yet when He came to create man He took counsel with the ministering angels."¹³⁵

According to the *midrash* above, not only did God consult with angels, but it was good that He did, for this consultation provides a positive lesson for mankind. Other texts affirmed that God took counsel, but offer different sources of that counsel. In various *midrashim*, we find God taking counsel with the Torah,¹³⁶ the souls of the unformed righteous,¹³⁷ the heaven and earth,¹³⁸ the works of each day,¹³⁹ and His own heart.¹⁴⁰ The

¹³⁵ Soncino translation. See also BR 17:4; and Lev. Rabbah 29:1. In BR 12:1, God and His court take a vote before deciding upon creating each of man's limbs and parts.

¹³⁶ Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 11.

¹³⁷ BR 8:7; and Ruth Rabbah 2:3.

¹³⁸ BR 8:3.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. This interpretation allows for God to be alone, but still explains the plurality of "Let us make man." God was speaking to His own heart, not to any other being.

perplexity of "Let us make man" is thereby resolved in that God sought the counsel of others in preparation of the final act of creation. In each of these *midrashim*, careful attention is paid to make sure that counselors only counseled, and that God alone performed the actual deeds of creation.

The idea that God took counsel raises several new problems. Perhaps God is not omnipotent if He needed the assistance of others to create man. Worse, perhaps God is not the sole creator of the world. Still worse, perhaps God's counselors did not share God's perfection and goodness, and the created world is therefore flawed or evil. Because of these concerns, many Rabbis, who were willing to accept that God sought counsel in the creation of man, insisted that God did not seek counsel in the creation of the world. For the most crucial cosmogonic act of the initial creation of the world, most *midrashim* adamantly insist that God was alone and acted alone. This can be seen in the discussions of when the ministering angels were created in *midrashim* such as Genesis Rabbah 1:3:

When were the angels created? R. Yohanan said: They were created on the second day, as it is written, "Who layest the beams of Thine upper chambers in the waters" (Ps. 104:3), followed by, "Who makest the spirits Thine angels" (ibid. 4).¹⁴¹ R. Hanina said: They were created on the fifth day, for it is written, "And let fowl fly above the earth" (Gen. 1:20), and it is written, "And with twain he did fly" (Isa. 6:2).¹⁴² R. Luliani b. Tabri said in R. Isaac's name: Whether we accept the view of R. Hanina or that of R. Yohanan, all agree that none were created on the first day, lest you should say, Michael stretched [the world] in the south and Gabriel in the north, while the Holy One, blessed be He, measured it in the middle; but "I am the Lord, that maketh all things; that stretched forth the heavens alone; that spread abroad the earth by Myself (*me'itti*)" (Isa. 44:24): *mi itti* (who was with Me?) is written¹⁴³: who was associated with Me in the creation of the world? Ordinarily, a mortal king is honored in his realm and the great men of the realm are honored with him. Wherefore? Because they bear the

¹⁴¹ This verse is often associated with the creation of the heavens on the second day. Here, R. Yohanan associates the angels with this creation of the heavens of the second day.

¹⁴² R. Hanina draws a *gezerah shavah* between the use of the word fly (*yafaf*) in both verses, thus associating the angel from Isaiah with the formation of flying things on the sixth day.

¹⁴³ Here the Rabbis divide the single word *me'itti* (Myself) into two words *mi itti* (who was with Me?) to further dramatize their point.

burden [of state] with him. The Holy One, blessed be He, however, is not so, but He alone created His world, He alone is glorified in His universe. R. Tanhuma quoted: "For Thou art great and doest wondrous things" (Ps. 86:10). Wherefore? Because "Thou God art alone" (ibid.): Thou alone did create the world. Hence, "In the beginning God created (*bara*)."¹⁴⁴

Though this *midrash* allows for the presence of ministering angels at the time of the creation of man, it explicitly states that no angels existed at the time of the creation of the world to assist God in that task. The statements of R. Luliani and R. Tanhuma are representative of the vast majority of *midrashim*. Throughout rabbinic literature, there are but few isolated *midrashim*, or manuscripts thereof, that recognize the existence of angels at the beginning of creation or prior.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, as seen above, there is a significant tradition of *midrashim* that does allow for the presence of angels giving counsel to God regarding the formation of man on the sixth day.

Asserting that angels counseled God resolves the plurality of "Let us make man," but, as mentioned above, it raises a whole new set of concerns about God's omnipotence and the goodness of God's creation. To counter these troublesome implications, many *midrashim* fervently minimize the role of these angels. They assert God's omnipotence in the creation of man and negate the influence of the angels upon that act of God. The most dramatic of these *midrashim* can be found in BT Sanhedrin 38b.

Rav Judah said in Rav's name: When the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to create man, He [first] created a company of ministering angels and said to them: Is it your desire that we make a man in our image? They answered: Sovereign of the Universe, what will be his deeds? - Such and such will be his deeds, He replied. Thereupon they exclaimed: Sovereign of the Universe, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou thinkest of him?" (Ps. 8:5). Thereupon He stretched out His little finger among them and consumed them with fire. The same thing happened with a second company. The third company said to Him: Sovereign of the Universe, what did it avail the former [angels] that they

¹⁴⁴ Soncino translation. See also BR 3:8; Tanhuma Buber. Bereshit 1:1 and 1:12.

¹⁴⁵ For a listing and discussion of these few sources, see Urbach, p. 204, especially n. 92. To his list I add Eliyahu Rabbah 1, which states that the cherubim preceded creation.

spoke to Thee [as they did]? The whole world is Thine, and whatsoever that Thou wishest to do therein, do it.¹⁴⁶

In this midrash, God's omnipotence is illustrated through His wrath and power over the angels. The role of the angels, as the third party comes to realize, is merely to affirm God's will. A similar conclusion is drawn in Genesis Rabbah 8:6. Here, the angels are slow to comprehend the mysteries of God's plan, but in the end they likewise affirm God's will to do as He pleases. In other *midrashim*, God's request for advice is merely a ceremonial ruse. In Genesis Rabbah 8:4, God withholds vital information from the angels regarding the nature of man:

[God] revealed to them that the righteous would arise from him, but He did not reveal to them that the wicked would spring from him, for had He revealed to them that the wicked would spring from him, the quality of Justice would not have permitted him to be created.¹⁴⁷

Since God does not reveal to the angels the significant fact that wicked people would come from Adam, their advice is rendered meaningless. God made sure that His plan for creating man would be carried out. In another *midrash* from Genesis Rabbah 8:5, God thoroughly ignores the advice of the angels and acts contrary to it:

R. Huna the Elder of Sepphoris said: While the ministering angels were arguing with each other and disputing with each other, the Holy One, blessed be He, created [Adam]. Said He to them: What can ye avail? Man has already been made (*ne'esah*)!¹⁴⁸

As we see here, according to R. Huna, God acts despite the advice of the angels. In of all the above *midrashim*, whether God smites the angels, withholds information from the

¹⁴⁶ Soncino translation. See also the beginning of BR 8:5.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. R. Huna revocalizes *na'aseh adam* to read *ne'esah adam*, "man has been made." Similarly, in BR 8:8, R. Hila compares God's counsel to that of a king who listens to the advice of counselors but then acts differently, according to his own will, and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

angels, or completely ignores the angels, the result is the same. The advice of the angels is rendered irrelevant as God's supremacy is affirmed. The creation of man, despite the ruse of advice from angels, is according to the sole will of God.

c. The affirmation of one God irrespective of the textual difficulties.

In the above *midrashim*, we saw how various Rabbis responded to the difficulties of verses 1:1 and 1:26. There are other *midrashim* that affirm the singularity of the Creator without regard for these troubling passages. One *midrashic* tradition focuses again on the first letter of the biblical creation account, the letter *bet*.

What is the characteristic of the letter *bet*? It has a stroke which projects above and a stroke which extends back from its base. When the *bet* is asked: "Who created thee?" it points to the stroke above, "He who is above created me." "And what is his name?" With the extension of its base it points back [to the preceding letter in the alphabet, *alef*], "The Lord is His name."¹⁴⁹

Here, the particular shape of the letter *bet* is again the subject of exposition. This time its shape identifies the Creator as *Adonai*, the One. The allusion to the letter *alef* attests to the singularity of this Creator.

In another interesting tradition of *midrashim*, the Rabbis refute the participation of certain mythic gods in the process of creation. Apparently, such ancient pagan heroes were still popular among Jews in Palestine and Babylon in late antiquity.¹⁵⁰ Surprisingly, the Rabbis do not deny the existence of these mythic figures. Instead, they absorb them and transform them to suit their own polemical needs, as we see in the following two *midrashim*:

¹⁴⁹ Braude translation of *Pesikta Rabbati*, Piska 21/21. See also BR 1:10. The letter *alef* can mean "one" or "the first," and therefore it refers to God. It is also the first letter of *Adonai*, the common pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton.

¹⁵⁰ See Urbach, p. 194.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world He said to the Prince of the Sea: "Open your mouth and swallow all the waters of creation." Said the Prince to Him: "Sovereign of the Universe! It is sufficient for me to retain what I already have," and he began to weep. The Holy One, blessed be He, kicked him and killed him; as may be inferred from the text, "He stirreth up the sea with His power and by His understanding He smiteth through Rahab" (Job 26:12); you find that the Prince of the Sea is named Rahab.¹⁵¹

Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, create His world in [the month of] Nisan and not create it in Iyar? Because at the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to create His world He said to the Prince of Darkness: "Get thee hence from Me, for I desire the world's creation to begin with light," the Prince of Darkness being as black as a bull. At once the Prince of Darkness replied to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the universes, why dost Thou wish to put something ahead of me in the creation?" The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Prince of Darkness: "Get thee hence from Me. If thou wilt not get thee hence from Me, I will rebuke thee - I desire to begin creating the world with light." "And after the light, what wilt Thou create?" God replied: "Darkness."¹⁵²

In the above *midrashim*, the Rabbis claim the mythic lore to assert their cosmogonical polemics. They insert the God of Israel into this epic tradition, describing Him as an epic hero as he kicks and kills one rival, and intimidates and expels another. In both tales, God removes the rival prince before the act of creation, ensuring that God alone creates the world. Urbach notes that in the first *midrash*, God kills the Prince of the Sea, but in the second, God merely casts aside the Prince of Darkness. Nonetheless, Urbach observes, the creation of darkness is specifically attributed to God, lest one think that the Prince of Darkness participated in the creation of darkness.¹⁵³ The polemical result is therefore achieved; God alone created the world.

¹⁵¹ Soncino translation of an excerpt from Numbers Rabbah 18:22. See also BT Bava Batra 74b.

¹⁵² Excerpt from Braude translation of Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 20:2.

¹⁵³ Urbach, p. 194.

d. Summary

It was the difficult task of the Rabbis perpetually to refute challenges to their strict monotheistic cosmogony from Gnostics, Christians, pagans and others. These challenges were augmented by several textual peculiarities in the Rabbis' own Scriptures that suggested a plurality of creators. The Rabbis responded to these challenges in a myriad of ways. They denied the plurality of the texts, and altered their translations accordingly. Some recognized the plurality of "Let us make man," allowing that God sought counsel from the ministering angels. Nonetheless, many *midrashim* insisted that this was not real counsel, affirming that the Omnipotent God created alone according to His will. In the rare cases in which the Rabbis recognized the existence of rival princes, they were sure to demonstrate God's supremacy over them and God's solitude when creating the world. In these myriad of polemics, the Rabbis affirmed one central assertion: God alone created the world.

II. God's Deliberate but Effortless Creation

A necessary link between the goodness of God and the goodness of the world is that God created the world deliberately. Had aspects of the creation been left to chance, then the goodness of the Creator would not guarantee a good world, nor would the goodness of the world necessarily be proof of the goodness of the Creator. Therefore, in various *midrashim*, the Rabbis demonstrated that God created the world with special care and deliberation.

a. God's deliberation

The first proof of God's deliberation was that the act of creation was premeditated; God did not create the world on a whim. Rather, God began planning early on, as we see in chapter 3 of Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer:

Before the world was created, the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Name alone existed, and the thought arose in Him to create the world. He began to trace [the foundations of] the world before Himself, but it would not stand. They told a parable: To what is the matter like? To a king who wishes to build a palace for himself. If he had not traced in the earth its foundations, its exits and its entrances, he does not begin to build. Likewise the Holy One, blessed be He, was tracing [the plans of] the world before Himself, but it did not remain standing until He created repentance.¹⁵⁴

In this passage, we see yet another assertion of God's singularity in creating the world. In addition, we find a description of God's devising plans immediately after deciding to create the world. To illustrate, the Rabbis compare God to a king who composes architectural blueprints before creating his palace.

From elsewhere we learn that God's blueprint was the Torah, whose existence preceded creation by two thousand years.¹⁵⁵ A common *midrash*, with parallels in several sources, demonstrates God's careful deliberation as He created the world according to His toraitic plans:

The Torah declares: "I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He." In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, "In the beginning (*bereshit*) God created" (Gen. 1:1), *bereshit* (with *reshit*) referring to the Torah, as in the verse, "The Lord made me [the Torah] as the beginning (*reshit*) of His way" (Prov. 8:22).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Translated by Friedlander.

¹⁵⁵ According to BR 5:11; and Song of Songs Rabbah 5:1. BT Shabbat 80b says 1000 years. Other *midrashim* assert the precedence of the Torah without quantifying it. See BR 1:8; and Eliyahu Zuta 21.

¹⁵⁶ Soncino translation of excerpt from BR 1:1. For parallels, see Tanhuma Warsaw, Bereshit; Tanhuma Buber, Bereshit 1:5; and Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 3. Mishnah Avot 3:14 refers to this tradition. For a discussion of this *midrashic* motif in relation to Plato's World of Ideas, see Urbach p. 199.

This *midrash* draws a *gezerah shavah* between the use of *reshit* in the Proverbs passage and *bereshit* in Gen. 1:1, rendering verse 1:1 to read "with Torah God created the heaven and the earth." Though it is not clear exactly how the Torah, a document of words, served as a blueprint for the world, the entire practice of rabbinic cosmogonic exegesis is an attempt to understand this. This *midrash* helps explain why the Rabbis, when studying the mysteries of creation, turned first to the Torah. Others may choose the paths of astronomy, geology, or biology to gain understanding about the formation of the world and all that fills it. While the Rabbis themselves engaged in such scientific disciplines and derived some of their knowledge from these sources, they believed that they had unique access to the most direct source of cosmogonic information: the Torah. This was true for two paradoxical reasons. One, as the blueprint of creation, preceding and determining creation, the Torah contains essential cosmogonic mysteries. Two, as perfect revelation, following and recording creation, it contains essential cosmogonic mysteries. Though these two reasons are paradoxical chronologically, they are consistent in their singular result. The Torah is the chief rabbinic source of cosmogonic understanding.

Having established that God's creation was premeditated and planned with the Torah as a blueprint, the Rabbis also demonstrated God's deliberation in performing the actual act of creation. The Rabbis were insistent that God did not act hurriedly, and therefore they emphasized the length of the process. Though Omnipotent, God took six whole days to create the world. This patient deliberation is illustrated in the following *midrash*:

By ten utterances was the world created. And what does this teach? Surely it could have been created by one utterance! But this was so that the wicked be punished, for they destroy the world.¹⁵⁷ By ten utterances was the world created, and they are: "And God said: Let there be light" (Gen. 1:2). "And God said: Let there be a firmament" (1:6). "And God

¹⁵⁷ God took special care to create the world by ten utterances instead of just one. This shows that the world is especially valuable. Therefore, the wicked who destroy the world are especially punished.

said: Let the waters be gathered together" (1:9). "And God said: Let the earth put forth vegetation" (1:11). "And God said: Let there be lights" (1:14). "And God said: Let the waters swarm" (1:20). "And God said: Let the earth bring forth" (1:24). "And God said: Behold I have given" (1:29). "And God said: Let us make man" (1:26). "And God said: It is not good that the man should be alone" (2:18).¹⁵⁸

The significance of the ten utterances is that they are unnecessary. As the *midrash* explicitly notes, the all-powerful God surely could have created the world with a single utterance. Instead, God took special care and patiently articulated ten separate utterances, thus creating the world in discrete stages. The ten utterances show that in deed as in plan, God acted deliberately.

The final demonstration of God's intentional creation of the world is the refutation of external influence. Since the Rabbis have already ruled out any external being's significant involvement in creation, all that is left is chance. In several *midrashim*, they show how God did not allow room for chance in His carefully monitored creation of the world.

R. Levi said: Some interpreters, such as Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, interpret: The voice of the Lord became a guide to the waters, as it is written, "The voice of the Lord is over the waters" (Ps. 29:3).¹⁵⁹

To illustrate this point, the Rabbis describe the specific movement of the waters:

R. Levi said: The waters said to each other: Let us go and obey the fiat of the Holy One, blessed be He; thus it is written, "The floods have lifted up their voice, etc." (Ps. 93:3). They asked: But whither shall we go? He replied: Let the floods take up *dokyam*.¹⁶⁰ R. Levi said: [*Dokyam*] means *derek yam* (the way to the sea). R. Abba b. Kahana interpreted it: To such and such a place (*dok*), to such and such a corner. R. Huna explained: To

¹⁵⁸ Translation of Avot d'Rabbi Natan 36 by Saldarini. Parallels and references to this *midrash* abound. See Mishnah Avot 5:1; BT Rosh Hashanah 32a; BR 17:1; Mechilta, Shira 10; and Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 3.

¹⁵⁹ Excerpt of Soncino translation of BR 5:4. See also BR 5:1.

¹⁶⁰ In context, *dokyam* means "their roaring," but the Rabbis will suggest other meanings.

this sea (*ha-dak yama*). R. Joshua b. Hananiah said: To the receptacle (*diksa*) of the sea. R. Eliezer said: The sea absorbed them, as you read, "Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea" (Job 38: 16)? Which means, into the waters absorbed by the sea. Our Rabbis interpreted it: We are crushed (*dakkim*): receive us; we are broken: receive us. R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah said: The waters ascended mountains and descended into the depths, until they came to the Ocean [Mediterranean], as it is written, "They ascended the mountains, they descended into valleys unto the place which Thou hast founded for them" (Ps. 104:8): which place hast Thou founded for them? The Ocean.¹⁶¹

The Rabbis seem to spend an exorbitant amount of energy discussing the movement of the waters when the waters divided to allow dry land to appear. The reason for this excess is that the gathering of the waters described in Scriptures seems chaotic. The Rabbis therefore carefully demonstrate that the waters moved with precision according to God's command. They did not simply flow as they pleased or according to the random pull of gravity. Rather, the waters fled to the area specified by God, even despite gravity. The waters flowed over mountains and through depths to reach their oceanic destination. Thus, the Rabbis prove that the gathering of the waters, a most chaotic episode of the creation saga, occurred not by chance. Instead, it occurred precisely according to the will of God.

b. Effortless creation

Though the Rabbis go to great lengths to show God's painstaking care in creating the world, they simultaneously assert that the creation was achieved without effort. The problem is that God's meticulous deliberation in creating the world is unbecoming for an Omnipotent Being. However, the argument for deliberation is such an important element in rabbinic cosmogony that the Rabbis are unwilling to denounce it. Instead, they maintain the paradox that despite His deliberation, God created the world without effort. In numerous *midrashim*, they exemplify God's ease of creation. Commenting on Gen. 2:2

¹⁶¹ Soncino translation of BR 5:3.

"And on the seventh day God finished His work," an anonymous author in Genesis Rabbah 10:9 retorts:

His work! Did not R. Berekiah say thus in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: Neither with labor nor with toil did the Holy One, blessed be He, create the world, yet you say "from all His work?"¹⁶²

The Rabbis insist that God did not toil, but rather created the world by merely speaking. Subsequently, numerous *midrashim* draw upon Psalm 33:6, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, by the breath of His mouth, all their host."¹⁶³ These *midrashim* assert God's effortless creation of the world, and thus they maintain the dignity of the Supreme Being.

c. Summary.

In order to maintain the connection between the goodness of God and the goodness of creation, the Rabbis repeatedly insisted that God created the world deliberately, without the possibility of whimsy or chance. Using the Torah as a blueprint, God premeditated and meticulously planned His creation. Through the lavish use of ten utterances, God carefully executed the act of creation in stages. By guiding the waters to their pre-ordained destination, God ensured that the creation would occur precisely according to His will. Such deliberation allowed the Rabbis to equate the characteristics of the Creator with the characteristics of the created. However, such deliberation might imply that God is not all-powerful. To counter such implications, the Rabbis offered numerous *midrashim* that demonstrate that God did not work while creating the world. Though they never resolved the paradox of God's deliberate but effortless creation, the Rabbis passionately maintained these two principles of faith.

¹⁶² Ibid., 10:9. See also BR 12:2.

¹⁶³ JPS translation. See Pesikta Rabbati 23:5; and BR 3:2, 3:3, and 12:10.

III. The Goodness of the World

One of the challenges of *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness is the negative connotation of their ambiguous meaning. Since their creation is not accounted for in the Genesis narrative, the *midrash* records many instances where heretics claim that they are the pre-existent matter with which God shaped the world. The implication of these challenges is that the world, if formed from negative matter, is evil. The goodness of the world is a fundamental tenet of rabbinic theology, both for its own sake and because the nature of the world bespeaks the nature of the Creator. Therefore, the Rabbis felt compelled to address these challenges to the nature of the world and God. To counter the claims of the heretics, the Rabbis refuted the negative implication of *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness, and they made many outright declarations of the goodness of the world.

a. Direct responses to *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness.

The Rabbis employed several distinct strategies in their refutation of those who claim that God formed the world out of inferior materials. The first defense is to curse such heretics, as can be seen in this excerpt from Genesis Rabbah 1:5:

For R. Hanina said: Whoever elevates himself at the cost of his fellow man's degradation has no share in the World to Come. How much the more then [when it is done at the expense of] the glory of God! And what is written after it? "Oh how abundant is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee" (Ps. 31:20). Said Rav: Let him have nought of Thine abundant goodness. In human practice, when an earthly monarch builds a palace on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage, if one says, "This palace is built on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage," does he not discredit it? Thus, whoever comes to say that this world was created out of *tohu* and *bohu* and darkness, does he not indeed impair [God's glory]?¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Soncino translation. See also JT Hag. 77c.

Cursing such heretics for their insult to God probably achieved some satisfaction for the Rabbis, but it did not effectively refute the heretical challenge. In fact, this curse conspicuously does not deny that the world was derived from negative matter; it states only that such a view is an offense that should be punished. Elsewhere, the Rabbis will employ a second defense and specifically refute the pre-existence of these materials.¹⁶⁵ With a third tactic, the Rabbis cleverly deny the negative connotations of the ambiguous words *tohu* and *bohu* by giving them new meaning. This strategy can be seen in Genesis Rabbah 2:2, in which the Rabbis give several proofs for why *tohu* and *bohu* should be read as "bewildered and confused."¹⁶⁶ By removing the negative connotation of these words, the Rabbis simultaneously remove the negative implications upon the nature of the world. In summation, with these three strategies, the Rabbis responded to the heretical challenges of *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness.

b. The goodness of the world based on mythic lore

In several *midrashim*, the Rabbis make outright declarations of the goodness of the world based on cosmogonic mythology. One proof for the goodness of the world is demonstrated by God's taking counsel from good sources. As we saw above, many Rabbis posited that God sought counsel before creating man. What is relevant here is from whom God sought counsel. God sought counsel from such notable sources as the Torah and the souls of the righteous. This good counsel suggests that the subsequent world is likewise good.

Another mythological motif demonstrating the goodness of the world is found in Genesis Rabbah 3:7:

¹⁶⁵ See section V below on creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁶⁶ According to Soncino translation.

"And there was evening, etc." (Gen. 1:5). R. Judah b. R. Simon said: "Let there be evening" is not written here, but "And there was evening." Hence we know that a time-order existed before this.¹⁶⁷ R. Abbahu said: This proves that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created this one and declared, "This one pleases Me; those did not please Me."¹⁶⁸ R. Pinhas said: This is R. Abbahu's reason: "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold,¹⁶⁹ it was very good" (1:31): this pleases Me, but those did not please Me.¹⁷⁰

God's creation and destruction of previous worlds further demonstrate God's careful deliberation, as discussed in the previous section. Additionally, it demonstrates the goodness of this world. First of all, God proclaims it to be good. Second, it is distinguished from all other worlds by this goodness. God's proclamation of the goodness of this world is especially noteworthy because God did not regard the other worlds as such. The continued existence of this world is proof of its goodness.

c. The goodness of the world based on the text

The Rabbis find in the text of the Genesis narrative further proofs for the goodness of the world. Beginning with the first letter of the text, they find proclamations of goodness:

Another interpretation: Why [was the world created] with a *bet*? Because it connotes blessing (*berachah*). And why not with an *alef*? Because it connotes cursing (*arur*). Another interpretation: Why not with an *alef*? In order not to provide a justification for heretics to plead, "How can the world endure, seeing that it was created with language of cursing? Hence

¹⁶⁷ Since evening was not specifically created here, it must have existed already. Therefore, time-order existed prior to creation.

¹⁶⁸ R. Abbahu derives from the pre-existence of time-order that there must have existed prior worlds in which time was measured.

¹⁶⁹ R. Pinhas derives from the exclamation "behold" that God was pleased with this particular creation. Therefore, there must have been previous creations that did not please God.

¹⁷⁰ Soncino translation. See also BR 9:2; Exodus Rabbah 30:3; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2; and Midrash Tehillim 34:245. According to Urbach, p. 211, Philo attributes the tradition of God creating and destroying previous worlds to the Stoics, and he refutes them on the grounds that it contradicts the perfection of God. The Rabbis do not recognize or acknowledge Philo's difficulty with this mythological tradition, and thus they make no attempts to resolve it.

the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Lo, I will create it with the language of blessing, and would that it may stand!"¹⁷¹

Further proof of the world's goodness is derived from numerous expositions on Gen. 1:13, "And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." Various Sages focused on the all-inclusive scope of "every thing" and speculated upon what that would include. In a pericope of *midrashim* found in Genesis Rabbah 9:3 through 9:13, they list a large variety of things in this world that, though normally considered bad, are actually good. This includes death, sleep, the evil inclination, suffering, *Gehenna*, the Angel of Death, punishment, man, and the earthly kingdom (Rome). The Rabbis anticipated any objections to the goodness of the world by specifically addressing these elements which seemed to controvert their argument. In the Genesis Rabbah chapter 9 pericope the Rabbis face the difficulties head on, as they demonstrate how even the apparently evil aspects of the world are indeed good. In all of these texts and more, the Rabbis elevate God's enthusiasm for the goodness of the world that He expressed in Gen. 1:13.

d. The goodness of the world based on observation.

The Rabbis assert additional proofs for the goodness of the world independent of the Genesis narrative, basing their arguments instead on simple observation. The Sages looked at the world around them and saw miracle and wonder. In their liturgy, they exclaimed "In Your goodness You renew each day the works of creation. How wondrous are Thy works, O Lord!"¹⁷² In God's created works of nature they found demonstration of God's goodness and the goodness of the world, and thus they command in Mishnah Berachot 9:2:

¹⁷¹ Ibid., excerpted from BR 1:10.

¹⁷² From the morning blessing *Yotzer*.

[Upon seeing] a mountain, a hill, a sea, a river, or a wilderness, one should recite [the formulaic blessing]: Blessed is the One who performs *ma'aseh bereshit* (the wonders of creation).

In the *midrash*, the Rabbis offer further testimony that the world is good based on common sense. For an example, let us turn to the amusing and mocking words of R. Simeon b. Yochai in Genesis Rabbah 12:1:

This may be compared to a mortal king who built a palace. People entered it and criticized: "If the columns were taller it would be beautiful; if the walls were higher it would be beautiful; if the ceiling were loftier it would be beautiful." But will any man come and say, "Oh that I had three eyes or three feet!" Surely not.

This kind of base reasoning is incontrovertible and applicable to all. Even one who is unaware of Scriptures can understand. Unfortunately, this reasoning based on observation is not necessarily persuasive, since it is a matter of perception. Two people can look at the same world, and one may deem it good and the other may deem it bad. Though the Rabbis were aware of the bad in our world, they chose to find good in it. They chose to assert that the world is good.

e. Summary.

In response to the heretical challenge that God sculpted the world out of inferior material, the Rabbis argued that the world is good. In direct response to the heretical challenge of *tohu*, *bohu* and darkness, they cursed the heretics, denied the pre-existence of matter, and denied the negative connotation of these ambiguous words. Furthermore, the Rabbis made outright declarations of the goodness of the world based on mythic lore, the Genesis text, and observation of the world. From all of this, we learn that the goodness of the world is a central and consistent polemic and tenet in rabbinic theology.

IV. The Goodness of God

Of course, the rabbinic literature is filled with general proclamations of the goodness of God. However, what concerns us in this thesis are those proclamations that refer specifically to God as the Creator. The goodness of the Creator is demonstrated primarily through the summation of the arguments in the above sections. Since God alone created the world, and the world was created precisely according to God's will, and the created world is good, then the Creator is therefore good.¹⁷³ In addition to this deductive reasoning, the Sages also made certain proclamations about the goodness of the Creator independent of the goodness of His world. In fact, some *midrashim* demonstrate God's goodness despite the existence of certain things in His world which are perceived to be bad.

"And God called the light, Day, etc." (1:5). R. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, does not link His name with evil, but only with good. Thus it is not written here, "And God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night," but "And the darkness called He Night."¹⁷⁴

In this passage, the Rabbis notice that the text specifically mentions God's name regarding the naming of the light, but the text uses the pronoun "He" regarding the naming of darkness. They determine from this that God, the presumed Author of the text, chooses to associate His name only with the good and not with the bad.¹⁷⁵ God is good, therefore, irrespective of the goodness of the world and all that fills it.

¹⁷³ One might note that the last two arguments in this formula are circular. Though the goodness of God is dependent upon the goodness of the world, much of the rabbinic proof of the goodness of the world is based on God's repeated proclamation that the world is good. Nonetheless, though circular arguments are false, they can often be persuasive.

¹⁷⁴ BR 3:6, Soncino translation. See also BR 4:6.

¹⁷⁵ Of course, we know from elsewhere that the darkness is also good, as everything in the world is good. This either represents a different tradition or the belief that God would not associate His name with anything that was perceived by some to be bad.

V. Creation *Ex Nihilo*

In both the tannaitic and amoraic periods, the Rabbis disagreed on the issue of pre-existent matter. However, we find that the majority opinion during both periods supported the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. This doctrine was a rejection of the Gnostic and Platonic positions that the world was formed out of eternal matter. The difficulty in maintaining this doctrine stems from the biblical text itself, which does not account for the creation of several substances. In a *midrash* we saw earlier, R. Gamaliel, representing the view of the majority, explains to a philosopher how each of these substances was actually created by God.

A certain philosopher asked R. Gamaliel, saying to him: "Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him." "What are they?" said he to him. "*Tohu, bohu*, darkness, water, *ruah* (spirit or wind), and the deep," replied he. "Woe to that man," he exclaimed. "The term 'creation' is used by Scripture in connection with all of them."

Tohu and *bohu*: "I make peace and create evil" (Isa. 45:7); darkness: "I form the light, and create darkness" (ibid.); water: "Praise Him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that are above the heavens" (Ps. 148:4) - wherefore? "For He commanded, and they were created" (ibid. 5); *ruah*: "For, lo, He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind" (Amos 4:13); the depths: "When there were no depths, I was brought forth" (Prov. 8:24)¹⁷⁶

R. Gamaliel uses biblical prooftexts to show how God created each of the substances that the philosopher held served as building material for creation. The Tanna makes a strong statement against the existence of *materia prima*. However, in Genesis Rabbah 1:5, we find attributed to another Tanna that God created the heaven and the earth out of *tohu* and *bohu*.

¹⁷⁶ Soncino translation of BR 1:9.

R. Huna said in Bar Kappara's name: If the matter were not written [in Scriptures], it would be impossible to say it, viz., "God created the heaven and the earth;" (Gen. 1:1) out of what? Out of "~~now~~ the earth was *tohu* and *bohu*" (1:2).

Though we find here an opposing view to that of R. Gamaliel, it is clear that this *midrash* represents a minority opinion. Had this been a mainstream view, then there would be no need for Bar Kappara to justify his ability to speak it, citing "If the matter were not written, it would be impossible to say it." The Rabbis use this precautionary phrase only when they make a statement that does not accord with mainstream rabbinic theology. If the belief that *tohu* and *bohu* formed the heaven and earth was generally accepted by the Tannaim, then Bar Kappara would not have to couch it such terms.

In the amoraic period, the great Sage Rav agrees with the position of Gamaliel, but he tries to incorporate the opinion of Bar Kappara as well. In the BT Hag. 21a, Rav presents a list of ten things that were created on the first day, including all of the substances addressed by R. Gamaliel, except "deep." The significant difference with Rav's version is that he adds:¹⁷⁷

Tohu is a green line that encompasses the whole world, out of which darkness proceeds, for it is said: "He made darkness His hiding-place round about Him" (Ps. 18:12). *Bohu*, this means slimy stones that are sunk in the deep, out of which the waters proceed, for it is said: "And He shall stretch over it the line of confusion [*tohu*] and the plummet of emptiness [*bohu*]" (Isa. 34:11).¹⁷⁸

While the overall meaning and source of this mysterious statement is uncertain, it is clear that Rav teaches that darkness and water are derived from *tohu* and *bohu*. Now, to understand how this relates to heaven and earth, we must look to Genesis Rabbah 4:7:

¹⁷⁷ Our text does not state explicitly that Rav teaches this; some manuscripts do. Urbach states that the correct attribution is Rav on p. 195, n.46.

¹⁷⁸ Soncino translation.

"And God called the firmament *shemayim* (heaven)" (Gen. 1:8). Rav said: *Shemayim* is [a compound of] *esh* (fire) and *mayim* (water). R. Abba b. Kahana said in Rav's name: The Holy One, blessed be He took fire and water and beat them up together, and from them the heaven was made.¹⁷⁹

From these two texts we learn from Rav that water came from *tohu* and *bohu*, and that the heavens are partly derived from water. Further, we know from the Genesis narrative that the earth was formed from the separation of the waters. Therefore, according to Rav's teaching, *tohu* and *bohu* produced water which in turn partly produced heaven and earth. This justifies the view of Bar Kappara that heaven and earth were formed from *tohu* and *bohu*, but it maintains the position of Gamaliel that *tohu* and *bohu* were created by God. Thus, Rav is able to affirm the majority view of Gamaliel while incorporating the minority view of Bar Kappara. As a result, Rav, one of the most respected Amoraim, presents the standard amoraic opinion in favor of creation *ex nihilo*. Nonetheless, we still find amoraic expressions of pre-existent matter:

Three things preceded the creation of the world: water, wind and fire.¹⁸⁰

So we see, in the amoraic period as in the tannaitic period, the standard rabbinic position was for creation *ex nihilo*, but statements supporting the existence of pre-existent matter are nonetheless present in the rabbinic literature.

VI. The Order of Creation

One of the major cosmogonic concerns of the Sages was to establish the order of creation. As we saw in Chapter Three, the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel debated over whether the heaven or the earth was created first. This controversy

¹⁷⁹ Soncino translation.

¹⁸⁰ Exodus Rabbah 15:22, Soncino translation.

continued through the tannaitic and amoraic periods.¹⁸¹ Similar debate occurred over other aspects of creation as well. In the dialogue between Alexander and the Sages of the south, we find a discussion of the precedence of light or darkness:

[Alexander] said to them: Was light created first, or darkness? They replied: This question cannot be solved. Why did they not reply that darkness was created first, since it is written, "Now the earth was unformed and void and darkness" (Gen. 1:2) and after that, "And God said: Let there be light, and there was light" (1:3)? - They thought to themselves: Perhaps he will go on to ask what is above and what is below, what came before and what will be after.¹⁸²

We find a similar expression of darkness preceding light in Genesis Rabbah 3:1:

R. Judah and R. Nehemiah disagree. R. Judah maintains: The light was created first, this being comparable to a king who wished to build a palace, but the site was a dark one. What did he do? He lit lamps and lanterns, to know where to lay the foundations; in like manner was the light created first. R. Nehemiah said: The world was created first, this being similar to the king who built a palace and then adorned it with lights.¹⁸³

The assumption for both of the Rabbis in this passage is that darkness preceded light. Nonetheless, they disagree on another aspect of the order of creation: the precedence of light and the world. Actually, the true subject of this debate is the relationship between creation and the Genesis narrative. Since the first act of creation in the Genesis narrative is the creation of light, R. Judah implicitly argues that the biblical text records the entirety of creation. On the other hand, R. Nehemiah's position that the world was created first implies that some acts of creation occurred before the beginning of the biblical narrative. The relative order of the creation of light and the world thus has significant implications.

¹⁸¹ See BR 1:15.

¹⁸² Tamid 32a, Soncino translation.

¹⁸³ Soncino translation. See Urbach, p. 192, n. 30 and 31; and Ginzberg, Vol. V, p. 7, n. 17.

Another important subject of conjecture was the appearance of man in the order of creation. Though the Genesis narrative seems incontrovertible on this topic, the timing of man's creation was nonetheless a source of significant rabbinic debate. Many Rabbis maintained what would seem to be the literal biblical interpretation that man was the last entity created at the end of the sixth day. However, other Rabbis held that man's soul was created at the beginning of the sixth day, before the creation of the land animals, and only man's body was created at the end of the day. Still others argued that man's soul was the first of all things created in the beginning on the first day. We find all three of these views expressed in Genesis Rabbah 8:1:

["Thou hast formed me *ahor* and *kedem*" (Ps. 139:5)¹⁸⁴] R. Leazar interpreted it. He was the latest (*ahor*) in the work of the last day, and the earliest (*kedem*) in the work of the last day. That is R. Leazar's view, for he said: "Let the earth bring forth the soul of a living creature" (Gen. 1:24) refers to the soul of Adam. R. Simeon b. Lakish maintained: He was the latest in the work of the last day and the earliest of the work of the first day. That is consistent with the view of R. Simeon b. Lakish, for he said: "And the spirit of God hovered" (1:2) refers to the soul of Adam, as you read, "And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him" (Isa. 11:2). R. Nahman said: Last in creation and first in punishment. R. Samuel b. R. Tanhum said: His praise [of God], too, comes only at the last, as it is written, "Hallelujah. Praise ye the Lord from the heavens," the passage continuing until, "He hath made a decree which shall not be transgressed." This is followed by, "Praise ye the Lord from the earth, etc." and only after all that, "Kings of the earth and all peoples" (Ps. 148:1-11). R. Simlai said: Just as his praise comes after that of cattle, beasts, and fowls, so does his creation come after that of cattle, beasts, and fowl. First we have "And God said: Let the waters swarm" (Gen. 1:20), and after them all, "Let us make man" (1:26).¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Though JPS translates this as "You hedge me before and behind," the Rabbis understand *tzartani* to be derived from the root *yod-tzadi-resh* (formed). As we saw with *lifanim* and *la'ahor* in section B of Mishnah Hag. 2:1, *ahor* and *kedem* can have both spatial and temporal meanings. The Rabbis choose to interpret them temporally here, as "before" and "after."

¹⁸⁵ Soncino translation.

R. Leazar holds that man's soul was created at the beginning of the sixth day. R. Simeon b. Lakish demonstrates that man's soul hovered over the waters, being the first of God's creation. Finally, R. Simlai asserts, according to the order of the Genesis narrative, that man was specifically created last because in Psalm 148 man was the last of God's creations to praise God. Similar to the debates over the precedence of heaven or earth, light or darkness, and light or world, the Rabbis do not agree exactly when the creation of man occurred. Nonetheless, though there is no accord, the subject of the order of creation is a significant and fruitful aspect of rabbinic cosmogony.¹⁸⁶

VII. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as Prophecy

The scope of the Genesis narrative and rabbinic cosmogony is not limited to the study of past events alone. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is likewise a study of the future. The mysteries of the future are found in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* because God, the Author of creation and the toraitic narrative, could see into the future. God planned for the end in the beginning, so God designed His world and His account of its creation to anticipate future events. By studying the mysteries of creation and God's account of it, the Rabbis could unlock the secrets of God's anticipated future. In this way, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is prophecy; those who engage in it are prophets.

a. Proven prophecy of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

We find proof for this assertion in certain prophecies of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* that have already come to pass. For example, the Sages found in the formation of the seas prophetic revelations of the punishment of the generation of Noah and of the sins of Moses. We see in Genesis Rabbah 5:1

¹⁸⁶ We will postpone a discussion of why it is so significant and fruitful until Chapter Five.

"Let the waters be gathered together unto one place" (Gen. 1:9). . . . R. Abba b. Kahana explained it in R. Levi's name thus: Let the waters be gathered together for My purpose, [so as to perform] what I will one day do by means of them.

The *midrash* continues to explain that God's purpose of gathering the waters in one place was to store them until the generation of Noah, so that they could be used to flood and destroy the inhabitants of the earth. God anticipated this future use of the waters when he gathered them together on the second day. Genesis Rabbah 4:6 corroborates this prophecy, and reveals another one as well, in its discussion of why God does not declare the creation of the second day to be good.

R. Levi said in the name of R. Tanhum b. Hanilai: It is written, "Declaring the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10): from the very beginning of the world's creation God foresaw [the existence of] Moses who was called, "for it was good" and that he was destined to be punished through them [the waters],¹⁸⁷ therefore "for it was good" is not written in connection therewith.

R. Simon said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: This is similar to the king who had a very stern legion, and said, Since this legion is so stern, let it not bear my name. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Since the generation of Enosh, the generation of the Flood, and the generation of the separation of races were punished through them [the waters], let 'for it was good' not be written in connection therewith."¹⁸⁸

In this *midrash*, the creation of the waters is not called "good" because the waters will play negative roles in the future. Thus, we see that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* can be prophetic, because it speaks of the punishment of the wicked generations and the sins of Moses. The proof of the prophecy comes from later on in the biblical narrative, when these events actually occur as anticipated in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

¹⁸⁷ Because of his sin at the waters of Meribah.

¹⁸⁸ Soncino translation. This is also further proof of the goodness of God.

b. The eschatological prophecy of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The single most important prophetic element of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is its foretelling of the messianic end of days. Numerous cosmogonic *midrashim* preview the eschatological future. Such eschatology became increasingly important as contemporary conditions worsened. The generations of the Tannaim and Amoraim saw the destruction of the Temple, the loss of their sovereignty, the brutal death of a third of their people in the failed Bar Kochba revolt, and the expulsion from their native land of Judea. These dire times bore elaborate dreams of redemption. After two crushing defeats at the hands of the mighty Roman Empire, the Jews postponed their hopes of achieving this redemption until the eschatological future. Their eschatological hopes included six discrete elements: (1) the arrival of a Davidic Messiah, (2) vindication and revenge for Jewish suffering, (3) the restoration of the Temple, (4) the miraculous gathering of the exiles from every generation, (5) judgment and retributive justice, and (6) the reward of eternal bliss. The Rabbis encouraged this messianic hope to comfort and renew the Jewish people in their time of grave distress.

The Sages viewed the history of the world in three periods: creation, revelation and redemption. They saw themselves, as we do now, living at the final stages of the period of revelation, on the cusp of redemption. Desperate to learn about this coming period of redemption, the Rabbis sought insight in the study of creation. Creation and redemption are paired at opposite ends of this time continuum, as both are periods of cataclysmic and cosmic change. It was thus only natural that the Rabbis would look to the known period to find out about the other, unknown period. In *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the Rabbis found prophecy regarding each of the six eschatological hopes listed above.

The arrival of the Messiah and the vindication of Israel was prophesied in a brilliant metaphoric reading of the initial Genesis narrative. In this account from Genesis

Rabbah 2:4, R. Simeon b. Lakish interprets each stage of creation as a symbol for each succeeding enemy of Israel, culminating in the triumphant arrival of the Messiah.

R. Simeon b. Lakish applied the passage to the [foreign] powers. "Now the earth was *tohu*" symbolizes Babylonia: "I beheld the earth, and lo, it was *tohu*" (Jer. 4:23);¹⁸⁹ "and *bohu*" symbolizes Media: "They hastened (*vayabhillu*) to bring Haman" (Est. 6:14).¹⁹⁰ "And darkness" symbolizes Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees, ordering Israel, "Write on the horn of an ox that ye have no portion in the God of Israel." "Upon the face of the deep" - this wicked state [Rome]: just as the great deep cannot be plumbed, so one cannot plumb this wicked state. "And the spirit of God hovered:" this alludes to the spirit of Messiah, as you read, "And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him" (Isa. 11:2).¹⁹¹

Like the Passover tale *had gadya*, this is a metaphoric and cryptic account of how foreign powers successively conquer Israel, only to be conquered by the next power. Ultimately, however, the spirit of the Messiah will succeed them all and rule in the end. In this eschatological future, Israel will be vindicated by the destruction of her brutal enemies.¹⁹² This is revealed by God, in preview, with the creation of the world.

The restoration of the Temple is foretold in Genesis Rabbah 2:5:

R. Hiyya Rabbah said: From the very beginning of the world's creation the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw the Temple built, destroyed, and rebuilt. "In the beginning God created" [symbolizes the Temple] built, as you read, "That I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion: Thou art My people" (Isa. 51:16). "Now the earth was *tohu*" alludes to [the Temple] destroyed, as you read, "I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was *tohu*" (Jer. 4:23). "And God said: Let there be light," i.e. rebuilt and firmly established in the Messianic era, as you read, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee, etc." (Isa. 60:1).¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Jeremiah's description is of the land after the Babylonian conquest.

¹⁹⁰ R. Simon seems to draw a linguistic connection between *bohu* and *vayabhillu*.

¹⁹¹ Soncino translation.

¹⁹² See also BR 6:3 in which the moon, symbolizing Israel, will outlast and outshine the brighter sun, symbolizing Rome.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

After the destruction of the Temple and the repeated military failures of the Jews against Rome, it must have seemed impossible that the Temple could ever be rebuilt again from the pile of rubble and weeds. The story of creation implicitly demonstrates the possibility of this miracle. If God can create the entire world from nothing, surely God can rebuild the Temple from ruins. The *midrash* above further demonstrates that not only can God rebuild the Temple, but God will rebuild it. The restoration of the Temple is prophetically proclaimed in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The ingathering of the exiles is likewise foretold. According to Jewish eschatological belief, the righteous of Israel and every nation will be gathered together at God's Holy Mountain in Jerusalem at the end of days. Joining them will be the righteous of every past generation, resurrected from the dead. One of the difficulties of this doctrine is the matter of space. How can all of those people fit into one city, a city already filled with people? A resolution of this difficulty is provided in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, as we see in Genesis Rabbah 5:7:

In human practice, a man empties a full vessel into an empty one; does he ever empty a full vessel into a full vessel? Now the world was full of water everywhere, yet you say, "[Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together] unto one place" (Gen. 1:9)! In truth, from this we learn that little held much.

[Other examples are given where little held much, before the *midrash* concludes:]

R. Yohanan went up to inquire after the wellbeing of R. Hanina, and he found him sitting and lecturing on this verse: "At that time they shall call Jerusalem 'the throne of the Lord,' and all the nations shall be gathered unto it" (Jer. 3:17). Said he to him: Can it then hold [them all]? It is amazing! - The Holy One, blessed be He, will order it: "Lengthen, enlarge, and receive thy hosts," as it is said, "Enlarge the place of thy tent" (Isa. 54:2).¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

The gathering of all the waters into one place, a place already filled with water, comes to demonstrate the possibility that all the righteous of the world can gather into the city of Jerusalem, a city already filled with people. Thus *Ma'aseh Bereshit* resolves one of the great eschatological difficulties, as it further supports the Jewish hope for ingathering of the exiles.

The Genesis creation narrative also prophesies the eschatological Day of Judgment in which all of the righteous and wicked of the world will be tried before God's heavenly court. In Genesis Rabbah 3:8, R. Yannai notices a peculiarity in the description of the first day.¹⁹⁵ The other days are called *yom sheni* (the second day), *yom shelishi* (the third day), etc. However, the first day is called *yom ehad* (one day). Through a metaphoric reading of the narrative, he explains the significance of this peculiarity:

R. Yannai said: From the very beginning of the world's creation the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw the deeds of the righteous and the deeds of the wicked. "And the earth was desolate" alludes to the deeds of the wicked; "And God said: Let there be light," to those of the righteous; "And God saw the light, that it was good," to the deeds of the righteous; "And God made a division between the light and the darkness," between the deeds of the righteous and those of the wicked; "And God called the light day" alludes to the deeds of the righteous, "And the darkness called He night," to those of the wicked; "And there was evening," to the deeds of the wicked, "And there was morning," to those of the righteous; "One day:" the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them one day, and which is that? It is the Day of Judgment.¹⁹⁶

Given the success of Rome and the continued humiliation of Israel, the Jews surely had cause to doubt God's justice. Though justice was not to be found in this world, the Jews anticipated a future time when the guilty would be held accountable for their sins and the righteous would be rewarded for their righteousness. They yearned for an eschatological Day of Judgment that would right the wrongs of this world and bring about God's long-

¹⁹⁵ Though this is not stated specifically here, it is in BR: 3:9.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

overdue justice. Through R. Yannai's metaphoric reading above, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* brings prophetic reassurance that the Day of Judgment will come.

Finally, the eternal reward of the righteous is foretold in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Faith in the World to Come is essential for the Sages, for it is the underpinning of God's justice. Reward and punishment in the World to Come counters the apparent injustices observable in this world. Without this faith in God's perfect justice, the covenant with God would be finished. Therefore, the Rabbis repeatedly insisted upon the existence of the World to Come, and they found confirmation in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In yet another interpretation of the letter *bet*, they find evidence of the World to Come:

Why was [the world] created with a *bet*? To teach you that there are two worlds.¹⁹⁷

This interpretation is based on the understanding that the letter *bet*, as the second letter in the alphabet, has a numeric value of two. Thus, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* shows that God created two worlds in the beginning, this world and the next. That the World to Come will correct the injustices of this world and vindicate Israel is demonstrated in a *midrash* from Genesis Rabbah 6:3:

["God made the two great lights, the great light to rule the day and the small light to rule the night" (Gen. 1:16)]. R. Levi said in the name of R. Jose b. Lai: It is but natural that the great should count by the great, and the small by the small. Esau counts [time] by the sun, which is large, and Jacob by the moon, which is small. Said R. Nahman: That is a happy augury. Esau¹⁹⁸ counts by the sun, which is large: just as the sun rules by day and but not by night, so does Esau enjoy this world, but has nought in the World to Come. Jacob counts by the moon, which is small: just as the moon rules by day and by night, so has Jacob a portion in this world and in the World to Come.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., BR 1:10.

¹⁹⁸ Esau represents Rome, which marks time through a solar calendar. Jacob represents the descendants of Jacob who mark time through a lunar calendar.

¹⁹⁹ Soncino translation.

This *midrash* explicates an important quality of the World to Come, that it is exclusively limited to the righteous. The reward of Israel through eternal bliss, and the exclusion of the wicked Rome from this eternal bliss, guarantees justice, restores faith in God, and renews a shaken covenant.

c. Summary of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as prophecy.

As Author of the world and the Genesis narrative describing it, God knew the future and designed creation accordingly. Therefore, one can find in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* certain revelations of the future. The Rabbis saw this in the gathering of the waters for the purpose of flooding the earth at a later time. More importantly, the Rabbis found in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* certain revelations about the future period of redemption. In fact, they discovered prophecy and corroboration of the six most important elements of their messianic faith. In this way, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* restored hope and faith in God for generations living in misery, destitution, and shame.

VIII. Summary of Chapter Four

Having determined in Chapter Three that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is a tangible corpus of rabbinic cosmogony, we set out in this chapter to examine some of its content. Though the scope of this chapter did not allow for a comprehensive study of this literature, we did address some of the most important themes.²⁰⁰ Many of these themes sought to refute heretical interpretations of *tohu* and *bohu*. In response to such challenges, the Rabbis repeatedly and firmly asserted that God alone created the world, that the world was

²⁰⁰ Some important cosmogonic issues from the *midrash* but not addressed in this chapter include: the method of creation, Incorporeal Ideals, the gender of God, the nature of man, the greatness of man, and moral lessons derived from creation. Of course, this list is itself not complete, as the Rabbis found in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* virtually unlimited inspiration and meaning.

created according to God's will, that the world is good, that God is good, and that the world was created *ex nihilo*. In addition to these polemically charged themes, the Rabbis considered other cosmogonic issues as well. In numerous *midrashim*, they disputed over the precise order of creation. Furthermore, they found in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* prophetic messages of the eschatological redemption. All of these themes, and still others not mentioned here, collectively comprise a rich corpus of rabbinic cosmogonic inquiry. In the following chapter, we shall look to these themes to help explain the significance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

Chapter Five

Why Prohibit and Why Engage

Up to now, we have seen how the Rabbis restricted and prohibited *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, only to engage in it themselves. The questions remain. Why did the Rabbis prohibit such cosmogonic inquiry? Why did they violate these prohibitions? What is so important about *Ma'aseh Bereshit* that it should merit such attention? What is truly at stake here? There are many related but distinct answers to these questions. In fact, there are five separate reasons for the importance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and they are. (I) the honor of God, (II) political status, (III) polemical advantage, (IV) prophecy, and (V) the power of knowledge. Each of these five reasons, on its own, explains why the Rabbis both restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Together, the explanations augment each other to demonstrate the crucial significance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to the Rabbis. We shall address each one in turn.

I. The Honor of God

The reason given by the Rabbis for the restrictions on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is the protection of the honor of God. This is articulated most clearly in section C of Mishnah Hag. 2:1, which acts as a summation and exhortation for the *mishnah's* previous prohibitions. It states, "Anyone who does not [thus] respect the honor of his Maker, it is better if he had not come into the world." Similarly, we find in Genesis Rabbah 1:5:

[regarding "Let lying lips be dumb which speak arrogantly against the righteous with pride and contempt" (Ps. 31:19)] "With pride!" in order to boast and say, "I discourse on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*!" "And contempt:" to

think that he contemns My Glory! For R. Jose b. R. Hanina said: Whoever elevates himself at the cost of his fellow man's degradation has no share in the World to Come. How much more then [when it is done at the expense of] the glory of God!²⁰¹

In both of these cases the Rabbis clearly state that the reason one should not expound upon the mysteries of creation is because such an act is disrespectful of God. In doing so, the Rabbis illustrate an important aspect at the heart of cosmogonic inquiry. They realize that any study of creation is ultimately a study of God Himself, for to know creation is to know the Creator. Therefore, the Rabbis restricted cosmogonic study in order to prevent inappropriate investigation of God.

There is no reason to doubt this assertion of the Rabbis regarding their cause to restrict *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Though there are several other reasons why they did thus, these reasons do not negate or disprove in any way the stated reason of the Sages: to protect the honor of God. The Sages were deeply religious and pious men who dedicated their lives to the service of God and God's people. It only stands to reason that men who would suffer martyrdom rather than dishonor God and deny God's laws would likewise go to such lengths to protect God from dishonorable inquiry. Therefore, we have cause to trust the assertions made in the sources that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* threatened the honor of God, and was therefore restricted and prohibited.

Ironically, this very reason the Rabbis restricted *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was also reason to violate such restriction. For the Sages, one of the most appropriate ways of honoring God was to seek knowledge of God. Accordingly, the rabbinic literature is filled with discussions of the nature of God and God's attributes. In pious consideration, the Rabbis frequently debated such topics as God's nearness and transcendence, or His attributes of mercy and justice. The Rabbis gained this understanding of God primarily by means of two sources: revelation and the study of God's historical deeds. These particular methods

²⁰¹ Soncino translation.

of insight avoid direct speculation upon the nature of God. Rather, the Rabbis primarily studied God through God's own descriptions by means of the Prophets, or through the specific role God has played in history. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is an example of these forms of inquiry. Through *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the Rabbis gain indirect knowledge of God through the study of His creative act. They derive knowledge of this creative act from the scriptural narrative and from their own observations of the created world. Therefore, since cosmogonic inquiry was an indirect study of God through revelation and historical action, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* fits into mainstream rabbinic exegesis and inquiry. It was a normative, pious act demonstrating the glory of God through His wondrous creation. As such, the Amoraim came to regard it as an acceptable and exoteric practice. Notably, its sister discipline *Ma'aseh Merkavah* remained esoteric as its direct study of the nature and status of God in the present did not fit the standard mold of rabbinic inquiry.

We find in the *midrash* numerous articulations of how *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was not only permissible, but that it positively enhanced the honor of God. The Rabbis argued for the permissibility of cosmogonic inquiry by demonstrating that it was according to God's will. Genesis Rabbah 1:6 illustrates how God assists man in this endeavor by providing cosmogonic revelations in the Prophets and Holy Writings that explain the cryptic mysteries of the Genesis narrative:

R. Judah b. R. Simon said: From the commencement of the world's creation "He revealeth the deep things, etc." (Dan. 2:22), for it is written, "In the beginning God created heaven" (Gen. 1:1), but it is not explained how. Where then is it explained? Elsewhere: "That stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain" (Isa. 40:22); "And the earth" (Gen. 1:1), which is likewise not explained. Where is that explained? Elsewhere: "For He saith to the snow: Fall thou on the earth, etc." (Job 37:6). "And God said: Let there be light" (1:3), and the manner of this, too, is not explained. Where is it explained? Elsewhere: "Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment" (Ps. 104:2).²⁰²

²⁰² Soncino translation.

According to this *midrash*, God openly and purposefully reveals the secrets of creation in the texts of the Prophets and Holy Writings. Therefore, we learn that God sanctions the practice of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Further, we find in other sources that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not just a practice condoned, but that it is a practice encouraged. Regarding cosmogonic inquiry after the first day, R. Levi cites Prov. 25:2 in the JT Hag 77c:

"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing." It is the glory of God to conceal a thing before the world was created. "It is the glory of kings to search a thing out," after the world was created.²⁰³

Though R. Levi restricts the parameters of cosmogonic inquiry, he nonetheless describes it as glorious. More importantly, through scriptural citation, he shows how God and tradition consider it to be glorious. A similar but more explicitly positive description of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* can be found in a text we viewed earlier from Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer:

Rabbi Eleazar Ben Hyrkanos began his discourse: "Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord, or make all His praise to be heard?" (Ps. 106:2). Is there anyone who can "express the mighty acts" of the Holy One, blessed be He, or "make all His praise be heard?" The ministering angels cannot even tell of the details of His mighty acts. [And yet it is permitted] for us to expound upon what He did, and what He will do in the future for the sake of His creations exalting the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He created from one end of the world until the other as it is said, "One generation shall laud Thy works to another, and shall declare Thy mighty acts" (Ps. 145:4).²⁰⁴

Here, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is not only the special privilege of the human race, but it is elevated to the near status of commandment through the citation from Ps. 145:4. The Rabbis take this verse, which is not necessarily about creation, and infuse it with cosmogonic meaning. In this context, the Psalmist implores us to laud God's mighty

²⁰³ Translation by Neusner.

²⁰⁴ Translated by Friedlander, p. 9.

works of creation, one generation to another. This exhortation is fulfilled through the study of creation and the publication of those findings in the amoraic texts. We honor God by actively engaging in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The very reason the Rabbis give for prohibiting *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, is now reason to encourage and openly partake of its mysteries.

II. Political Status

Another related but distinct reason that the Sages restricted *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was because it was a source of political status. As we saw in the excerpt from Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, the ability to engage in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was one of the distinguishing characteristics that demonstrated the superiority of mankind over the angels. Similarly, the text from Genesis Rabbah 1:5 explains that cosmogonic inquiry was the subject of arrogant boasting by people who elevated themselves through the degradation of God. Thus we find that the Rabbis were sensitive to the power of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as a source of status among its practitioners. They therefore limited its practice to a select group of Sages who were deserving of such an honor.

Nonetheless, as before, we find that the very reason for restricting *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is also a reason to engage in it. The Rabbis expounded upon *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in order to reap the very political advantage they denied to others. We learn from historians that the Rabbis encountered opposition in their efforts to secure political and judicial control of the autonomous Jews of Palestine living under Roman sovereignty. In fact, contrary to the testimony of the rabbinic literature, it seems likely that the Rabbis did not enjoy as much power as the ruling Jewish Patriarchs. In addition, the privilege and status of the Rabbis were challenged by their subjects. Unlike that of the priests and Levites from the Second Temple period, the authority of the Rabbis did not rest upon the solid foundations of birthright. Instead, the Rabbis rose from the midst of the common people,

distinguishing themselves only through their scholarship. To maintain this distinction, the Rabbis had to assert their unique ability to understand the texts, traditions and laws.

One demonstration of this unique ability was the exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. By restricting the study of creation to their own inner circle, the Rabbis reserved for themselves the privilege and honor of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. However, the hidden and secret exposition of creation, characteristic of tannaitic practice, did not necessarily achieve political advantage. Only if the public is aware of this cosmogonic inquiry could the Rabbis benefit from its prestige. Therefore, the public expositions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, characteristic of amoraic practice, displayed to the community that the rabbinic elite was engaged in a venerable study of creation. Through clever *midrashim*, the Rabbis could impress their followers with their unique expertise in the complex and mystifying secrets of creation. In such a way, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* affirmed the status of the Rabbis as an elite class of scholars.

We find evidence and articulation of this political motivation in the rabbinic literature. We saw previously how the Septuagint and Targum Onkelos delineate between classes of people regarding the issue of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The Rabbis, grounded in their scholarship and theological conviction, are capable of reading the original Hebrew text with its troubling signs of plurality. However, the translations remove these complexities for the non-Hebrew-speaking general public who might be led astray by such complexities. Similarly, in Genesis Rabbah 12:1, R. Huna distinguishes between classes of people according to their ability to understand an aspect of God's creation.

"But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can understand?" (Job 26:14).
R. Huna said: When thunder goes forth in its full force, no creature can understand it. It is not written, none understands, but "who can understand?" The intelligent know His hints and His thoughts.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Soncino translation.

The intelligent understand God's hints and know his thoughts, and, implicitly, the rest of the community does not. In a fantastic *midrash* from Genesis Rabbah 7:2, the Rabbis demonstrate the absurd folly of an unqualified person engaging in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

"Let the waters swarm, etc." (Gen. 1:20). Jacob of Kefar Nibburaya gave a ruling in Tyre that fish must be ritually slaughtered. When R. Haggai heard thereof he ordered, "Come and be flagellated." "What!" exclaimed he, "when a man gives a scriptural ruling he is to be flagellated!" "How do you know that this is scriptural?" inquired he. "Because it is written, 'Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let fowl fly, etc.,'" replied he: "Just as a bird must be ritually killed, so must a fish be ritually killed." "You have not ruled well," said he to him. "And whence can you prove this to me?" he asked. "Lie down [to be lashed] and I will prove it to you." Said [R. Haggai] to him: "It is written, 'If flocks and herds be slain for them, will they suffice them? or if all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, will they suffice them?' (Num. 11:22); 'shall be slain' is not written here but 'be gathered together.'" "Lay on me," exclaimed [Jacob], "for thine exposition is good."²⁰⁶

In this quaint account, Jacob of Kefar Nibburaya derives from *Ma'aseh Bereshit* the ridiculous ruling that fish should be ritually slaughtered like fowl, since both were created together on the same day. R. Haggai whips him because of the serious consequences of his foolish deeds. Jacob is the sorcerer's apprentice who has a vague notion of the meaning of creation but whose bumbling attempts prove disastrous. An unqualified person should not meddle in such matters since they can determine *halachah* and Jewish practice. This *midrash* affirms for the Rabbis their unique role as interpreters of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and arbiters of *halachah*. All of these *midrashim* together demonstrate the Rabbis' conscious delineation of individuals on the basis of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

So we see, the Rabbis restricted *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to prevent rivals from boasting of their knowledge of creation's mysteries. Meanwhile, they privately engaged in such matters as a means of bolstering their own authority and position in society. This strategy

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

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required the Rabbis to expound *Ma'aseh Bereshit* openly and publicly in order to demonstrate to the community their unique and superior scholarship. Eventually, this exposition became so public, so exoteric and so mundane that it no longer fully served this function. As we saw with the account of R. Joseph and the elders of Pumbedita, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* began to lose some of its cache[†] as it was publicly expounded by the Amoraim. R. Joseph thus relied upon his unique knowledge of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, which was still exclusive, to assert his dominance and authority as the head of the academy in Pumbedita.

III. Polemical Advantage

Perhaps the most important reason that the Rabbis restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is because it yielded polemical advantage. It was not the general practice of the Rabbis to argue in the form of essays, making systematic, logical arguments in the fashion that we do today. Rather, they preferred the biblical custom of asserting polemics through narratives and illustrations. For instance, the Bible does not demonstrate the power of God through a complex system of proofs and deductions, but through the narration of God's splitting apart the seas, or causing mountains to shake. Similarly, the Rabbis demonstrated their assertions through narrative illustrations, such as stories of kings or animals. In this process, the Rabbis routinely relied on the authority of scriptural texts to legitimize their arguments. As we have seen in many of the *midrashim* excerpted so far, the Rabbis grounded their arguments with scriptural proofs and quotations. It is important to recognize that the Rabbis often quoted scriptural texts out of context, altered the lettering in their reading of the texts, or interpreted the texts far beyond their literal intent. Through these and other hermeneutical techniques, the Rabbis manipulated the scriptural narrative to suit their own theological or polemical needs.

Herein lies one of the great powers of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The Genesis creation narrative is one of the most important sections of the entire Bible because it speaks

dramatically of both the nature of the created world and the nature of the Creator. Access to this crucial narrative allows one to manipulate and control it. Through its interpretation, one can co-opt the authority of the text and make wholesale assertions about the world and about God. For this reason, the Rabbis restricted the exposition of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, so that this powerful tool did not fall into the wrong hands. Nonetheless, this very reason for restriction was also a strong motive for the Rabbis to engage in such exposition. The potential polemical power of the creation narrative particularly attracted the attentions of the Rabbis, and they responded with fruitful cosmogonic polemic.

a. The order of creation.

One important source of polemics was the order of creation. As we saw in section VI of Chapter Four, the Sages fiercely debated the order of the creation of heaven and earth, light and darkness, man and the other creatures, etc. The reason for this debate was that the Sages subscribed to the popular notion that what preceded in creation preceded in importance. According to this doctrine, God created what was most important first, and then created items of successive importance. Therefore, a discussion of the order of creation is really a discussion of the relative importance of created entities. Consequently, in their manipulation of the creation narrative, the Rabbis could assert the importance of an object by establishing its creation in the early stages of the cosmogonic process.

Examples of such polemical ordering are numerous. A popular *midrashic* motif establishes the primary importance of several entities by asserting that they preceded all others in the order of creation. An example of this motif can be found in Midrash Tanhuma Buber, Naso 19:

Thus our Rabbis taught: Seven things preceded the world [in the order of creation], and these are they: the Holy Throne, the Torah, the Temple, the fathers of the world, Israel, the name of the Messiah, and repentance. And

there are some who say the Garden of Eden and Gehenna as well.
[Following this the Rabbis give scriptural proof for each item on the list.]²⁰⁷

Genesis Rabbah 1:4 specifies that only the first two items on this list were actually created, while the others were only contemplated prior to the creation of the world. Either way, their precedence establishes their importance. This argument from narrative is powerfully effective. Rational arguments with proofs and logical deductions may persuade someone that these seven things were important, but to say that they are so important that they preceded the creation of the world: that is truly impressive.

Another example of the polemical nature of creation's order can be found regarding the creation of man. Man's creation at the end of the sixth day presented a difficult paradox for the Rabbis. On the one hand, this is a position of prestige since all the world was created in preparation for man's arrival. On the other hand, man's position at very end of creation means that every single created entity preceded man in the order of creation, implying that everything else in the world is more important than man. The Rabbis, eager to demonstrate the importance and primacy of man, worked from both sides of this paradox. In numerous *midrashim*, they glorified man's position at the end of creation, citing that all the world was God's banquet and man was God's intended guest. In other *midrashim*, the Rabbis denied man's place at the end of creation. As we saw in Chapter Four, they specified that man's soul was created at the beginning of the sixth day, or even at the beginning of the first day before the creation of the world. Though the Rabbis were not consistent in their strategy, they were consistent in their intent to illustrate the primacy of man through the order of creation. Occasionally, however, we find disparate intent expressed in a single *midrash*, such as one we saw from Leviticus Rabbah 14:1:

²⁰⁷ My own translation. See also Midrash Tanhuma Warsaw, Naso 11, for an identical list. For similar lists, see BR 1:4; BT Pesahim 54a; and Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 3.

If a man acts meritoriously, they say to him: "You preceded all *ma'aseh bereshit* [in the order of creation];" but if not, they say to him: "A gnat preceded you, a snail preceded you."²⁰⁸

Whether man is to be exalted or denigrated, the Rabbis utilized the order of creation to determine man's status. Such is the power of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

A final example of the polemical character of creation's order can be found in the famous debate over the relative precedence of heaven and earth. Here we find the most explicit rabbinic statement that the timing of a thing's creation determines its importance. Commenting on the fact that sometimes heaven precedes earth in scriptural passages and sometimes earth precedes heaven, R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon states in *Genesis Rabbah* 1:15:

If my father's view is right, why is the earth sometimes given precedence over the heaven, and sometimes heaven over earth? In fact it teaches that they are equal to each other.²⁰⁹

They are equal to each other in value because neither precedes the other in the order of creation. The cosmogonic debate about order, while it addresses issues of the distant past, is in reality a debate over the present value of created entities. The relative value of heaven and earth is a loaded issue. The hidden subtext of this debate is actually the extent to which the Rabbis may interpret biblical law. The School of Shammai argued for a strict interpretation of biblical law, citing that the Torah is from heaven and should not be altered. The School of Hillel, on the other hand, argued for a lenient interpretation of biblical law, citing that the Torah is intended for the earthly humans and may be interpreted by us as we see fit. Accordingly, the School of Shammai asserted that heaven (symbolizing divine prerogative) was of primary importance, while the School of Hillel asserted that the earth (symbolizing human prerogative) was of primary importance. To

²⁰⁸ Soncino translation. See also T. Sanhedrin 8:8; and BT Sanhedrin 38a.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

prove these assertions, both schools turned to *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to show that heaven or earth was created first.²¹⁰ They used ancient cosmogony in their debate over the heated contemporary issue regarding the nature of biblical law and its interpretation. In this distinctively non-cosmogonic debate, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was a powerful polemic.

b. The Creator owns the world.

Another polemical reason for *Ma'aseh Bereshit* explicitly articulated in the *midrash* comes from Genesis Rabbah 1:2, which reads:

R. Joshua of Siknin quoted in R. Levi's name: "He hath declared to His people the power of His works, in giving the heritage of the nations" (Ps. 111:6). Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal to Israel what was created on the first day and on the second day, etc.? So that the nations of the world might not taunt Israel and say to them: "Surely ye are a nation of robbers: think of that!" But Israel can retort: "And do ye not hold yours as spoil, for surely 'The Caphtorim, that came forth from out of Caphtor, destroyed them, and dwelt in their stead' (Deut. 2:23)! The world and all the fullness thereof belong to God. When He wished, He gave it to you; and when He wished, He took it from you and gave it to us." Hence it is written, "In giving them the heritage of the nations, He hath declared to His people the power of His works." He declared the beginning to them, viz., "In the beginning God created, etc."²¹¹

R. Joshua of Siknin specifically questions the reason for cosmogonic revelation, and he responds with an answer: God revealed to us His creation of the world to show that the world belongs to Him. This fact, though seemingly obvious, is crucial to Israel's claim of Canaan or Palestine, the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants. The problem is that when his descendants came to claim this land in the time of Joshua and the Judges, it was populated and claimed by others. Israel could claim it only at the expense of others. Lest Israel appear to be a nation of robbers who steal land, the Rabbis turned to

²¹⁰ Feldstein, pp.68-69.

²¹¹ Soncino translation.

Ma'aseh Bereshit to demonstrate that the land, indeed all the world, belongs to God and God may promise it to whomever He wishes. Israel did not steal it from the other nations because *Ma'aseh Bereshit* proves that it never really belonged to them. Of course, this issue of land is not limited to the historical period of Joshua and the Judges. Indeed, there has not been a time in Israel's millennial history that she did not have rivals contesting her claim to her promised land. In the time of the Rabbis, as now, Israel's chief claim to its promised land is grounded in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

c. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and the threat of heresy

We said above that polemical advantage was perhaps the most important reason that the Rabbis restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Of all the important polemical advantages gained by *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, none were as crucial as those that refuted heresy. As we discussed briefly in Chapter Four, there were a host of rival theologies and philosophies that threatened to lead the Israelites astray throughout the rabbinic period. Some of these challenges came from outside Israel, others rose from its midst. Many of these foreign and heretical groups grounded their beliefs firmly in cosmogony. In the face of these cosmogonic challenges, the Rabbis responded by restricting and prohibiting *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, as well as by engaging in it.

The motivation to avoid cosmogonic speculation and to engage in it was the same; which tactic the Rabbis chose at any given time was simply a means of strategy. In the tannaitic period, the Sages chose to respond to the heretical cosmogony by distancing themselves and their people from any form of cosmogonic inquiry. Cosmogony was so associated with heretical practice that any study of creation aroused suspicion. The Sages absolutely forbade the study of the most sensitive aspects of creation, such as what came before. They allowed the study of other aspects only to a select group of initiated. Presumably, scholars steeped in the rabbinic tradition would not be shaken by this complex study of mysteries. Since such Rabbis were firmly grounded in rabbinic theology, they

would not be tempted to stray into heresy. For the rest of the population, the Rabbis recommended that they avoid cosmogonic inquiry altogether. This was their policy, too, regarding the heretics themselves, as they warned their public in Deut. Rabbah 2:33, "Do not meddle with those who declare that there is a second god."²¹² Privately, however, the Tannaim did engage in a limited form of cosmogony as a means of refuting the cosmogonic claims of the heretics, as we saw with Gamaliel and the philosopher. Perhaps even the most initiated Rabbis needed some doubts to be dispelled. Nonetheless, such examples of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit* are rare, and they were probably not addressed to the greater community. For the most part, the Tannaim reacted to the threat of the heretics by constructing a wall separating the Jewish people from the heretics or anything that resembled heresy.

For unexplained reasons, the Amoraim chose a different strategy in response to the threat of the heretics. Unlike their tannaitic predecessors, the Amoraim chose to face the heretical challenge head on, publicly confronting the heretics on their own cosmogonical turf. Instead of treating cosmogony as taboo, they recognized it as a powerful polemical tool for refuting the heretical claims of their rivals. Where the heretics claimed that several powers created the world, the Amoraim used *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to show that God alone created the world. Where the heretics claimed that an evil creator created an evil world out of evil or inferior materials, the Amoraim used *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to show that the Creator is good, that He created a good world, and that He created it *ex nihilo*. Where the heretics grounded their assertions in their heretical cosmogony, the Amoraim responded with their own brand of cosmogony, unabashedly delving into previously forbidden matters to meet this challenge. What is more, the Amoraim did so publicly, so that they could persuade the greater community not to be led astray by the foreign cosmogonies. It is uncertain why the Amoraim chose such a different strategy in

²¹² Ibid.

confronting the heretical cosmogonies. Perhaps the threat of heresy had become so widespread by their time that they could no longer remain silent. This is, of course, pure speculation. What is more certain is simply that the Amoraim responded to heretical challenges by actively engaging in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

The nature of rabbinic cosmogony would become clearer if we were to know who it was exactly who challenged the Rabbis. Throughout the rabbinic literature, the Rabbis rarely address the object of their polemics. However, in the cosmogonic *midrashim*, the Rabbis often direct their attacks toward a named adversary: the *minim* (heretics).²¹³ Unfortunately, we do not know precisely who these *minim* were. Some modern scholars say they were Gnostics, some say they were Christians, and others say they were both of these and more. An example of this uncertainty can be seen in the polemic against the existence of two Powers. This might be an anti-dualistic polemic, and therefore directed against the Gnostics, the Iranians, or others. On the other hand, this might have nothing to do with dualism, but instead be an argument against two gods who exist in harmony. If so, then this polemic is directed against the Christians regarding Jesus or the pagan Greeks regarding Metatron.²¹⁴ There is evidence that the object of the rabbinic polemics could be any of these groups, though it is most likely the Gnostics and the Christians.

The true identity of the Gnostics is itself an enigma. The term Gnosticism generally refers to a wide variety of dualist heresy in late antiquity. We know that the Gnostics were greatly concerned with cosmogony, and they believed in a dualistic tension between the Good Most High God and the wicked Demiurge. They asserted that the Demiurge rebelled against the Good Most High God and, together with a host of malevolent angels, created an evil world out of wicked material. Whether or not the Rabbis were aware of the Gnostics cannot be fully demonstrated, but it seems likely.

²¹³ Such as BR 1:10, 8:8, 8:9; and Tanhuma Buber 1:1, 1:12. In BR 1:9 the object is a philosopher; in BR 4:3 it is a Samaritan.

²¹⁴ Gruenwald p. 248.

Gnosticism was widespread throughout the Roman empire, though our extant Gnostic texts come primarily from Egypt.²¹⁵ We know that the Gnostics were familiar with Israel as they derived much of their theology from Jewish sources, particularly the Genesis narrative and the Jewish apocalyptic literature, though they inverted the meaning of these texts. The most telling evidence suggesting that the Rabbis were aware of the Gnostics is that the rabbinic cosmogonic polemics seem to address specifically the Gnostic beliefs described above. The Rabbis explicitly refuted the existence of two Powers and that angels assisted significantly in creation, and they forcefully asserted that God is good and created a good world from nothing. The parallels are uncanny. Though this does not prove for certain that these polemics were anti-Gnostic, it seems probable.²¹⁶

The other most likely candidate for the identity of the mysterious *minim* are the Christians. As Christianity originally grew from within Judaism, it is more likely that these formerly Jewish Christians would deserve the specific title of heretics. In addition, it is hardly conceivable that the Rabbis were not aware of this popular and deviant Jewish sect, or that they could ignore their heretical theology. Furthermore, there is strong evidence in the rabbinic cosmogonic *midrashim* of certain anti-Christian polemics. The early Christians had made much of the plurality of God language in the Genesis narrative, particularly Gen. 1:26, "Let us make man." The Church Fathers interpreted this as referring to the Trinity, or to Christ, *logos*, and wisdom. As we saw in Chapter Four, the Sages devoted numerous *midrashim* to the refutation of such notions. It is therefore very

²¹⁵ Altman, p.6.

²¹⁶ Gruenwald (p. 51) argues that the Rabbis may not have been concerned with Gnosticism because it was simply too radical and too repelling to be a serious threat of heresy. Here I must disagree. Gnosticism has a foundation in Judaism and Jewish texts and speaks in a vocabulary that would be familiar to a Jewish ear, albeit distorted. More importantly, the period of Gnosticism's greatest influence was a time of dire distress, suffering, and humiliation for the Jews. Given such a situation, it seems only natural that some members of God's supposedly chosen people might view their God to be evil, or see in this world filled with good and evil suggestion of dualistic Powers. We will address this further in a discussion of Jewish heresy below.

likely that the Rabbis specifically targeted the Christian heresy in their cosmogonic polemics, but due to the ambiguity of the term *minim*, we cannot know for certain.

Whether the Rabbis were refuting Gnostic theology or Christian theology, the most important question is whether or not these *minim* were Jews or outsiders. Most of the evidence suggests the former. We have abundant evidence proving that at the time of the Second Temple's destruction Israel was a diverse and fragmented nation. The Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 29c attests, "Israel did not go into exile until it had turned into twenty-four parties of heresy."²¹⁷ Augmenting this divided reality, the particularly dire state of the Jewish people may have motivated many Jews to stray from orthodox belief in favor of a more negative theology such as Gnosticism. With the extraordinary suffering and humiliation accompanying the destruction of the Temple, the failure of the Bar Kochba Revolt, and the exile from Judea, the Jews had abundant reason to doubt the goodness of their God and the goodness of their world. There is evidence in the *midrash* that some Jews doubted the singularity of God. In Genesis Rabbah 8:9, a heretic challenges R. Simlai about the plurality of "Let us make man," and R. Simlai rebuts his challenge with a typical rabbinic response. However, R. Simlai's disciples are not satisfied, and they press him for a more satisfying answer. Now, this may simply be a literary device to allow the *midrash* to give two responses to the challenge. On the other hand, it may be evidence that some Jews, indeed some scholars, had some doubts about orthodox belief. Still, the greatest proof in midrashic sources for the existence of Jewish heresy can be found in the character of Elisha b. Abuya. This member of the elite circle of leading Sages became the archetypal heretic, suggesting the existence of two Powers and often questioning the justice of God and the world. We find further suggestion of the existence of Jewish heresy in the fact that the Gnostic, Christian, and Jewish polemics seem to address a Jewish audience. The Gnostic writers' use of the Genesis narrative in their

²¹⁷ Translation by Neusner.

cosmogonic polemics could be appreciated only by a Jew or former Jew. Regarding the Christians, we know that their original source for proselytes was the Jewish community. Finally, in the *midrashim*, we find that where the Rabbis argue with heretics they often cite biblical sources as prooftexts. Who but a Jew would appreciate this line of argument? What is more, I must agree with Gruenwald's observation that the tone of the rabbinic cosmogonic polemics sounds more like an internal diatribe than an outward disputation. All of this evidence together suggests the true identity of the *minim* to be Jews.

The Rabbis used *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as an internal cosmogonic polemic to prevent members of their own community from straying to Gnostic, Christian, or other heresies. Still, given the ambiguity of the term *minim*, we cannot be certain. Gruenwald argues that since we cannot absolutely prove the existence of Jewish heretical groups, we must assume that there were none. I disagree. The abundance of evidence mentioned above suggests a strong probability that Jewish heresy existed, and that it was the true subject of rabbinic cosmogonic polemic. If there was not such a threat of Jewish doubt and heresy, why would the Rabbis bother polemicizing against it?

Many modern scholars have focused on the relationship between *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and heresy. Indeed, the threat of heresy is perhaps the most important reason why the Rabbis restricted and prohibited *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, as well as why they engaged in it. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that the refutation of heresy is only one of several important polemical advantages of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Furthermore, we must be mindful that polemical advantage is only one of several important reasons why the Rabbis restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

IV. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as a Source of Prophecy

Another important reason why the Rabbis expounded upon *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was because it predicted the eschatological redemption.²¹⁸ As we saw in Chapter Four, the Rabbis found in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* prophetic revelations of six major attributes of the messianic future, including: the arrival of a Davidic Messiah, vindication and revenge for Jewish suffering, the restoration of the Temple, the miraculous gathering of the exiles from every generation, judgment and retributive justice, and the reward of eternal bliss. One cannot underestimate the importance of this prophetic message of hope in one of the darkest times of Jewish history. Through *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the Rabbis comforted their troubled people, and instilled in them the fortitude to remain faithful and loyal to their God.

V. The Power of Knowledge

Perhaps one of the most obvious and understated reasons for restricting and engaging in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is that knowledge is power. Through *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, one learns the reasoning behind the creation of the world, how it was formed, and by what plan it was determined. More importantly, however, this study of the past enlightens the present. One who uncovers creation's mysteries understands the world as it is today, how it functions, and by what laws it is governed. The expositor of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* can live according to the secrets of the world, knowing what to do and when to do it, and thereby gain wealth, health and happiness. One who does not know these secrets, and does not live according to the cosmic order, is doomed to suffer misfortune.

The Rabbis recognized the awesome power and benefits derived from wisdom. In the tradition of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ben Sira, the Rabbis heralded wisdom as a precious and sought-after prize. Wisdom instructed one when to embark on a journey,

²¹⁸ As this was discussed in detail in Chapter Four, we will only briefly recount those conclusions here.

what crops to plant in a given year, and how to have a successful marriage. Though they recognized the value of knowledge derived from any source, the Rabbis particularly lauded knowledge derived from Torah. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* fits into this category, as it was an exposition of the Genesis narrative and a study of the world created according to the principles of Torah. Because *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was such a powerful tool and guide for success, the Rabbis carefully restricted its exposition to contain and control its power. At the same time, the Rabbis grew attracted to this great tool and its potential benefits, and sought to wield it themselves.

VI. Conclusion

The peculiar and inconsistent relationship between the Sages and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* raises a host of perplexing questions. Why did the Rabbis restrict its exposition to a select few individuals, and why did they prohibit certain aspects of its study? Furthermore, why did the Sages subsequently violate their own regulations? Why did *Ma'aseh Bereshit* deserve so much attention? In the course of this chapter, we have seen the awesome importance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* through the numerous reasons for its regulation and violation thereof. I have taken special care to systematize and distinguish the many different reasons for *Ma'aseh Bereshit's* special attention. Modern scholars have tended to focus on any one of these issues, especially heresy, while ignoring the rest. We must be careful to pay attention to the many possible motives for why the Rabbis restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, lest we attribute too much significance to any one motive. Because there were so many potential reasons, we cannot be sure of any one.

As we looked at five reasons why the Rabbis restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, there were two aspects that were common to all of them. First, we found that the reasons that the Rabbis restricted and prohibited cosmogonic inquiry were the same

reasons that they engaged in it nonetheless. This great irony helps explain why the Rabbis' position on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was so volatile and paradoxical.

The second strand uniting all of the reasons was power. As we saw in each of the five sections above, the Rabbis restricted *Ma'aseh Bereshit* because they were wary of its power, and they engaged in it because they were drawn to its power. In section I regarding the honor of God, the Rabbis recognized that the study of creation is really the study of the Creator. Therefore, the study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* yields certain secret mysteries about God, and to understand secret mysteries about God is to have some power or influence over God. Similarly, in section II on political status, we saw how the Rabbis used *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to assert their collective authority over the community as an elite class of scholars. In section III regarding polemical advantage, the power of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was demonstrated by its use as a forceful and effective means of argument. Cosmogonic exegesis allowed the Rabbis and their adversaries to control the Genesis narrative and co-opt its authority. Through this polemical advantage, the expositor of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* had power over others through the power of persuasion. This could be seen in the debate over the order of creation and its decidedly non-cosmogonic ramifications regarding the interpretation of biblical law. As well, it could be seen in the rabbinic argument for Israel's claim to the promised land. Most importantly, the polemical power of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was crucial as it pertained to heresy. On the one hand, cosmogonic inquiry was powerful because it could lead an orthodox Jew into heresy. On the other hand, it was the most effective means of refuting the heretical cosmogonic claims of the rabbinic adversaries. Furthermore, in section IV we saw how *Ma'aseh Bereshit* functioned as prophecy, providing a powerful means for the Rabbis to comfort and restore hope to their beleaguered people, and thereby maintaining the covenant with God for succeeding generations. Finally, section V demonstrated how knowledge derived from *Ma'aseh Bereshit* yielded power over the world. If one was privy to the secrets that underpin the cosmos, then one could live according to those secrets and thereby prosper.

In conclusion, though there are many distinct reasons why the Rabbis both restricted and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, all of these reasons are united by a common strand. The essential nature and significance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is power. The Rabbis' paradoxical relationship with *Ma'aseh Bereshit* reflects their struggle with how to control and wield this powerful tool.

Chapter Six

The Mutual Implications of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

In Chapters One and Two of this work, we looked to *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to gain an understanding of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is addressed more frequently and more explicitly in the rabbinic sources, and modern scholars have devoted more time to its explication. Consequently, in many regards we know more about tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* than we do about tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Having demonstrated in Chapter One that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* were equivalent disciplines of esoteric study, we have gained some insight into *Ma'aseh Bereshit* from our greater knowledge of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Thus far from *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, we have learned that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was a formal discipline of study; we have learned the meaning of the ambiguous preposition *bet* in Mishnah Hag. 2:1; and we have found further proof of the esoteric nature of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In this chapter, we shall determine if there are other insights into *Ma'aseh Bereshit* that can be gained from its relationship with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. As well, given our new findings from this thesis, we shall speculate whether or not we can gain insight into *Ma'aseh Merkavah* from our understanding of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In the process, we shall explore the natures of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, seeking to understand what unites these two distinct esoteric disciplines.

I. The Uncertain Nature of Tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

a. The evidence

Among modern scholars, the most hotly debated aspect of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is whether or not this practice was magical, mystical, neither, or both. The uncertainty derives from the fact that the tannaitic and amoraic rabbinic sources do not directly define *Ma'aseh Merkavah* nor articulate a single example of its teaching or practice. The rabbinic sources speak only indirectly about *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as a discipline, and they give but the slightest hint of its possible magical or mystical nature. However, in the later Hechalot literature we find explicit definitions and exemplifications of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, including fantastic details of mysticism, magic and revelation. In many cases the Hechalot literature acts as a manual of how to engage in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. In other places it describes in detail what a *yored merkavah*, one who engages in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, experiences. In the Hechalot literature we finally find a detailed description of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, but, unfortunately, we do not know if this description is true for tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

Alas, the mysterious Hechalot literature raises as many questions as it answers, as we do not know by whom, where, or when it was written. Many scholars argue that it was written by an elite fraternity of Rabbis, while Halperin argues that it was written by a group in opposition to the rabbinic elite. There is similar controversy regarding the location of its composition, some scholars finding evidence for Palestine, others for Babylonia. As for its dating, we have only a general idea of somewhere between the years 100 and 800 of the Common Era. We know that it is later than 100 because it speaks often of Akiba who lived at that time, and we know that it is before 800 because it is mentioned in several ninth- and tenth-century Karaite and Christian sources.²¹⁹ To advance their own theories, some scholars such as Scholem argue for an early dating on that timeline, and others such as Halperin argue for a later dating. The result of all this uncertainty and controversy over authorship, place, and time, is that we cannot assume

²¹⁹ Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, pp. 359-60.

outright that the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the Hechalot is the same as the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the rabbinic literature. However, given this uncertainty, we can still speculate upon a connection between the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of rabbinic literature and the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the Hechalot by comparing the themes and characteristics of both sources.

The *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the rabbinic and Hechalot literatures share much in common. Both are a discipline of study containing a corpus of knowledge that can be passed from one person to another. As well, both are a form of exegesis of Ezekiel's vision. Finally, and perhaps most dramatically, in both the rabbinic and Hechalot literatures, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is reserved for an elite few.²²⁰ The initiated derive fantastic rewards from *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, all others receive dramatic punishment for attempting to engage in it. In the rabbinic literature, the uninitiated are punished with fire²²¹ and skin disease,²²² while the initiated are rewarded with approving fire, a chorus of trees, and blessing.²²³ Similarly, in the Hechalot literature, the uninitiated *yored merkavah* may suffer a fiery or watery death, while the successful *yored merkavah* is promised the benefits of stature, power, honor, intelligence and happiness.²²⁴ In summary, both the rabbinic and Hechalot literatures describe a *Ma'aseh Merkavah* that is an esoteric discipline involving the exposition of Ezekiel's theosophical vision.

There are some areas, however, in which the two textual traditions differ. The Hechalot explicitly describes a form of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* that is mysticism, magic, and revelation. It is mysticism, in that qualified *yordei merkavah* ascend to the upper realms

²²⁰ In the rabbinic literature, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is indisputably esoteric lore. However, in the Hechalot literature there is consistent tension between esotericism and inclusivity. On the one hand, the *yored merkavah* must know certain secret adjurations in order to pass the numerous tests and obstacles blocking his ascension. This suggests esotericism. On the other hand, the works of Hechalot literature profess to be guides enabling anyone to learn these secrets. This suggests inclusivity. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that the existence of the inclusive tendency in this paradox does not negate the exclusive, esoteric tendency. This esoteric aspect does compare to rabbinic esotericism.

²²¹ As in BT Hag. 13a.

²²² As in JT Hag. 77c.

²²³ As in the story of Eleazar b. Arach and Yohanan b. Zakkai from BT Hag. 14b. See Chapter Two.

²²⁴ See *Merkavah Rabbah*, section 705, as quoted by Schäfer, p. 115.

of heaven to view God and God's retinue upon the divine chariot. It is magic, in that the *yordei merkavah* ascend to the chariot to receive, among other things, secret names of God that can be used in powerful adjuration. Also, it is revelation, in that the *yordei merkavah* learn secret mysteries of Torah from the lips of God and the angels. Meanwhile, from the rabbinic literature, we have no definitive proof that the Tannaim engaged in similar mystical and magical acts of ascension. Of course, if they did engage in this practice, the Rabbis would not have discussed it publicly or described it in their literature due to its esoteric nature. Nonetheless, there are some enigmatic hints and allusions suggesting that the Tannaim engaged in ascensions to the divine chariot, or that they believed that they did.²²⁵ The most significant hint comes from the mysterious story of the four Rabbis who entered *pardes*:

Four men entered a garden: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, *Aher* [Elisha b. Abuya], and R. Akiba. One of them looked and died; one looked and went mad; one looked and cut the young plants, one ascended safely and descended safely.

Ben Azzai looked and died. Of him Scripture says, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15).

Ben Zoma looked and went mad. Of him Scripture says, "If you find honey, eat only your fill" (Proverbs 25:16; the biblical text concludes: "lest you become stuffed with it and vomit it").

Elisha looked and cut the young plants. Of him Scripture says, "Do not let your mouth bring your flesh into sin" (Ecclesiastes 5:5).

R. Akiba ascended safely and descended safely. Of him Scripture says, "Draw me, we will run after you" (Song 1:4).²²⁶

In most manuscripts of Tosefta²²⁷ and the Babylonian Talmud,²²⁸ the texts read that Rabbi Akiba ascended and descended safely. This cryptic story is clouded in mystery, but its use

²²⁵ We can only discuss whether or not they believed in such ascensions. Whether or not the Rabbis actually engaged in such ascensions is less a matter of scholarship than faith.

²²⁶ Translation from Tosefta Hag. 2:3-4 by Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p.31.

²²⁷ One manuscript (Erfurt) reads as the JT Hag. version, with Akiba entering and going out safely. See Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 31.

²²⁸ Hag. 14b. One manuscript (Gottingen 3) has Akiba enter and go out. See Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 31.

of these words and its context in the commentary of Mishnah Hag. 2:1 suggest that it describes a form of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* that includes ascension. Still, this suggestion is not proof of tannaitic mysticism. The rabbinic texts specifically avoid the fantastic descriptions of magic, mysticism, and revelation characteristic of the Hechalot literature. Though we can easily explain the silence of the Rabbis on this esoteric topic, we cannot argue from this silence.

Due to the lack of explicit description of a mystical *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in the rabbinic sources, the strongest argument for the existence of a tannaitic mysticism comes from the descriptions of mystical *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in the Hechalot literature. In order to link the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the Hechalot to that of rabbinic literature, one must rely upon an early dating to the themes found in the Hechalot. To demonstrate the antiquity of such themes, many scholars have turned to the apocalyptic literature, which predates and coincides with the rabbinic materials. Although the apocalyptic literature does not use the term *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, scholars find in it explicit descriptions that are characteristic of the Hechalot *Ma'aseh Merkavah* but absent from the rabbinic literature. With such explicitness, comparisons can be made with fruitful results, as the apocalyptic literature is similar to that of the Hechalot on many counts. First of all, both purport that their heroes receive revelation from God or one of God's angelic agents. Second, the apocalyptic literature contains numerous accounts of ascensions similar to those found in the Hechalot. Such journeys to the divine throne and *merkavah* can be found in the First and Second Books of Enoch, as well as in the Apocalypse of Abraham.²²⁹ Third, we find in the "Angelic Liturgy" from Cave IV of the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran a description of the heavenly retinue and divine chariot strongly resembling theosophical accounts in the Hechalot literature. In these many ways, there are significant correlations between the apocalyptic literature and that of the Hechalot. The material is suggestive and the

²²⁹ Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, pp. 65-66.

evidence is fragmentary; it is up to the modern scholar now to theorize a connection or not.

b. Scholem's theory

The current scholarly community is divided over the question: Did the Tannaim engage in a mystical and magical form of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*? Gershom Scholem represents the position that they did, and his theory is simple and clear. He links the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the three periods discussed above in a consecutive chain of transmission. The *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to which the rabbinic sources allude is the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* explicitly defined in the Hechalot. The rabbinic sources speak from the outside, the Hechalot from the inside. Scholem recognizes that the extant Hechalot texts which we have are probably later than the rabbinic sources, but holds that these texts contain material from the tannaitic period. This Hechalot *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, which was practiced by tannaitic and amoraic Rabbis, has its roots in the ancient Palestinian Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. So, in response to our question on the nature of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in tannaitic Palestine, Scholem is unequivocal and unwavering. Tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is more than just exegesis; it also includes the revelation and mystical ascensions as defined in the Hechalot and apocalyptic texts. The tannaitic Rabbis actively engaged in mystical *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and journeyed in mystical ascents, or at least believed that they did. The *pardes* story describes one such ascent, and Akiba's mysterious warnings of water in the Babylonian version refer to the infamous water test described in the Hechalot. The rabbinic texts do not record such practices because, according to Mishnah Hag. 2:1, it was forbidden to discuss them in public. The tradition was passed down orally until it was finally recorded in the Hechalot literature, which was a guide to practicing *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

This is Scholem's theory, and it is based on a continuous line of transmission from the apocalyptic texts, through the rabbinic period, until the Hechalot. It is neat and simple, and it resolves many of the perplexing mysteries surrounding these texts.

c. Halperin's theory

With the publication of his seminal volume The Faces of the Chariot, David Halperin has established himself as one of the new leaders in the field of *Merkavah* studies. He has further distinguished himself with a radical theory in direct opposition to Scholem and the general consensus of the scholarly community. Halperin asserts that there is no continuous tradition between the apocalyptic literature and that of the Hechalot. This supposed tradition is broken with the gap of Palestinian rabbinic literature. Here, Halperin finds no sign of the mystical ascents that characterize the Hechalot and apocalyptic texts. He insists that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in tannaitic times was solely exegesis of Ezekiel's vision expounded in sermons in synagogues throughout Palestine during the Shavuot cycle when the relevant chapters of Ezekiel were read as Haftarah. In these annual sermons, the Rabbis comforted their flock with consoling words about how the remote and transcendent God was concerned with Israel. According to Halperin, this exegetical practice became more like the mystical practice of the Hechalot only later in amoraic Babylonia. Here, the *pardes* story was transformed into a story of ascension as the definition of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* broadened.

The two periods are completely distinct. In tannaitic Palestine, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was solely rabbinic exegesis. Later, in amoraic Babylon and in the Hechalot, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was mysticism and magic. In fact, Halperin claims, the Hechalot is the antithesis of rabbinic accounts of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* for the Hechalot is specifically anti-rabbinic in its polemic. Halperin sees the Hechalot as a revolt against the rabbinic elite who try to quash the popular practice of ascension. Just as the *yored merkavah* must overcome the angels who try to suppress his mysticism, the authors of the Hechalot reveal

the secret methods of ascension in order to foil the suppressing machinations of the Rabbis. Thus the tannaitic rabbinic texts and those of the Hechalot were written by different authors in different periods in different places who had different definitions of the term *ma'aseh merkavah*. On account of these distinctions, one cannot draw a continuous line of transmission from the apocalyptic literature to the Hechalot. The theorized chain of mystical ascension is broken during the period of the Tannaim. Halperin attributes any similarities found in these texts to the outcroppings of certain universal themes that are bound to appear in distinct circumstances without having any formal connection. So, in response to our question on the nature of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in tannaitic Palestine, Halperin, too, is unequivocal and unwavering, except he maintains that the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the Tannaim was strictly exegesis.

d. Analysis of the theories

One encounters two difficulties in an attempt to refute Scholem's theory. First, one must overcome the strong desire for Scholem's theory to be true. The theory of continuous transmission is clear and simple. It resolves uncertainties and places many disparate pieces together in a way which we can comprehend. Scholem has solved the puzzle in a simple and neat fashion. Unfortunately, it is too simple and neat. The texts from each period reveal a complexity that resists fitting into a mold of strict linear transmission. This brings us to the second great difficulty in refuting Scholem: We do not have enough evidence to prove him wrong. On the other hand, we do not have enough evidence to prove him right either. Whether or not the Tannaim practiced a mystical or magical form of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is entirely a matter of speculation. The sources from that period are intentionally evasive on that issue. There is some suggestion that the Tannaim practiced a form of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* similar to that described in the Hechalot, but there is no conclusive proof. Scholem's flaw is that he finds certainty in evidence that is only suggestive. Scholem may indeed be right, but we cannot know for certain.

One encounters similar difficulties in refuting Halperin. He, too, may be right, but we do not have enough information from the sources to support his theory with any degree of certainty. Like Scholem, Halperin seems to find certainty in matters which are merely speculative. Except where Scholem at times confuses likelihood with certainty, Halperin seems to confuse unlikelihood with certainty, making his conclusions entirely dubious. For instance, Halperin makes much of the distinction between the *pardes* story in the Palestinian Talmud and its counterpart from the Babylonian Talmud. The Palestinian version has Akiva enter and exit safely, while the Babylonian version has him ascend and descend safely. The distinction leads Halperin to conclude that the Babylonians took a Palestinian story that was not at all about ascension and made it about ascension. Unfortunately, this theory is shaken by the account in the Tosefta, a text which is most likely of Palestinian tannaitic origin. Every extant manuscript of the Tosefta except for one has the same mystical reading as the Babylonian text. Halperin dismisses this, explaining that later medieval scribes emended the Tosefta texts in order to correspond to the more authoritative Babylonian Talmud. According to Halperin, only one text preserves the original reading. This may be true, but it is a wild and entirely unlikely hypothesis. The Faces of the Chariot is filled with similar assertions which are possible but not probable. Since we were not alive at that time, we cannot disprove Halperin for sure. Still, the foundation of Halperin's theory is so shaky that it cannot support such definitive statements found in the conclusion of his book. He may be right, but the evidence suggests that he is not.

Halperin's theory is further refuted by accounts in *Pesikta Rabbati* and *Deuteronomy Rabbah* in which Moses storms heaven and fights off angels in order to receive Torah.²³⁰ If the stories of ascent in the face of angelic opposition are evidence that the *Hechalot* is anti-rabbinic, why do the rabbinic *midrashim* have similar accounts of

²³⁰ *Pesikta Rabbati*. Piska 20; and *Deut. Rabbah* 11:10.

ascension in the face of angelic opposition? If the angels represent the Rabbis in the Hechalot versions, then whom do they represent in the rabbinic versions? Again, Halperin's theories may be true, but with every step they become less and less likely.

Finally, the greatest opposition to Halperin's theory can be found outside the realm of philology. Many scholars have looked at the greater Hellenistic world at the time of the Tannaim for insight into their theosophical practices. We have evidence that the Gnostics engaged in ascensions similar to those described in the Hechalot. As we saw in Chapter Five, it is likely that the Rabbis were intimately familiar with Gnostic practice. Still, aside from the Gnostics, it seems that the entire Hellenistic world surrounding the Rabbis valued dreams, visions, mysticism and magic as valuable means toward obtaining knowledge. Indeed, it was the general consensus that such methods yielded the highest forms of knowledge.²³¹ It seems highly unlikely that the tannaitic Rabbis would abstain from what was apparently a universal practice at that time. It is further doubtful that the Rabbis would use vocabulary and imagery of mysticism and magic if they did not engage in those practices themselves. Halperin dismisses such external influences, doubting that Jewish writers would embrace something foreign.²³² Of course, this assertion seems to ignore the multi-millennial history of Israelites and Jews embracing foreign influences and making them their own. Again, it is possible that Halperin is right, but it is less and less probable.

In response to the question of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, Scholem and Halperin give opposing theories for which each claims certainty without demonstrating that certainty. Indeed, there is no way to avoid uncertainty in this issue. We are speculating about a practice which the only texts from that period specifically avoid. We have only indirect knowledge of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in tannaitic times. We have regulations about it and stories about those who engage in it, but we have no direct definition or description of it in the rabbinic sources. What is worse, even these indirect allusions to *Ma'aseh*

²³¹ Gruenwald, pp. i-iv.

²³² Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 454.

Merkavah cannot be taken literally. We do not know the full polemical agenda that underlies the regulations, and we do not know by whom and when the stories were written. Although names are attributed to many of the stories, we cannot trust such attributions of names. This is just one of many ways we must be careful not to confuse historical fact with literary convention, or historical fact with an author's ideal. Furthermore, with the apocalyptic, rabbinic and Hechalot texts, we cannot determine the date of each text, let alone who is the author, redactor, and editor. In addition, we can never know for certain the myriad influences that affected these texts and the practices of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. And finally, in our position centuries later, we cannot penetrate the numerous paradoxes and inconsistencies in these texts to determine with any degree of certainty what was actually practiced at that time. As a result of all of these clouding elements, we cannot presume to see with any degree of clarity into the practices of the Tannaim. Alas, when pressed to define *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in tannaitic Palestine, we must regretfully respond that we do not and cannot know with any certainty whether the Tannaim practiced any form of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* beyond exegesis. We can only say that it seems likely that they did.

II. Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Likewise Magic and Mysticism?

Assuming, without any declarations of certainty, that tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is magical and mystical as in the Hechalot, should we make similar assertions about tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit*? In Chapter One we made much of the equivalence, if not equality, of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as sister esoteric disciplines. Throughout this thesis we have drawn many conclusions about *Ma'aseh Bereshit* based upon its equivalence with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. The question is: Can we assume magical and mystical qualities in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* due to its association with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*? The answer is definitively negative.

Our proof for the likely mystical and magical quality of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is based primarily on later sources. Crucial for this assertion is that we do not possess any extant texts that define or explicate tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and we are therefore free to project our assumptions onto this period of silence. However, this is not the case with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. While we do not possess any tannaitic sources that define or explicate tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, we do have abundant amoraic sources which do so. As we demonstrated in Chapter Three, these amoraic sources preserve a significant corpus of tannaitic and pre-tannaitic cosmogony. We also proved that this cosmogony was indeed *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Therefore, we cannot project assumptions onto tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit* because we have in our possession a literary corpus of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* preserved in the amoraic texts. More specifically, we cannot deduce a magical or mystical element of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* due to its association with *Ma'aseh Merkavah* because we possess this corpus of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. As we saw in Chapter Four, this corpus shows no signs of magic, mysticism, or revelation beyond standard exegesis.

Since the amoraic texts provide us with such an explicit definition and exemplification of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, we have no need, as we do with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, to look to later materials for clues. Interestingly, the later rabbinic cosmogonic materials such as *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Baraita d'Ma'aseh Bereshit* do contain magic and mysticism. In fact, these sources closely resemble the *Hechalot* literature in their vocabulary and form. However, we cannot retroject these magical or mystical practices back to tannaitic times, as they do not concord with our corpus of rabbinic *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Nor can we assert the antiquity of these mystical and magical cosmogonic practices based on the apocalyptic literature. While the apocalyptic literature often dwells in matters of creation, its cosmogony does not reflect the mystical and magical elements of *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Baraita d'Ma'aseh Bereshit*. If anything, the apocalyptic cosmogony, especially where it comments on the Genesis narrative, more closely resembles tannaitic

Ma'aseh Bereshit. The methodology of studying tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, as described in section I of this chapter, does not apply to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

Of course, it is impossible to prove that the Tannaim did not engage in some form of cosmogonic magic and mysticism. In fact, we have some evidence that the Amoraim may have possessed the *Sefer Yetzirah* and engaged in cosmogonic magic. The Babylonian Talmud in Sanhedrin 65b relates:

Raba said: If the righteous desired it, they could [by living a life of absolute purity] be creators, for it is written, "But your iniquities have distinguished between [you and your God]" (Isa. 59:2). Raba created a man, and sent him to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him: Thou art a creature of the magicians. Return to thy dust.

R. Hanina and R. Oshaya spent every Sabbath eve studying *Sefer Yetzirah*, by means of which they created a third-grown calf and ate it.²³³

Whether or not the *Sefer Yetzirah* mentioned here is one of the two extant versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is difficult to say. Nevertheless, the Sanhedrin account does describe a magical application of cosmogony among Amoraim in an amoraic text. It is possible that the Tannaim engaged in similar practices. As we mentioned above regarding *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, mysticism and magic were likely to have been universalistic practices in the Near East in late antiquity, with strong influences from both the east and the west. It is not hard to imagine that such practices would be fused with the power of cosmogony. In fact, it may be likely that the Tannaim engaged in a magical and mystical form of cosmogony,²³⁴ but it is important to note that this form of cosmogony was not *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. As we demonstrated in Chapter Three, the term *Ma'aseh Bereshit* referred to the kind of Genesis exegesis exemplified in Chapter Four. The cosmogonic magic described in the Sanhedrin passage above is in no way related to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. It is

²³³ Soncino translation.

²³⁴ According to the principle that there is nothing new under the sun, cosmogonic magic did not begin with the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

not part of the Talmud's commentary on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, for that discussion occurs in tractate Hagigah in a commentary on Mishnah Hag. 2:1. The cosmogonic magic of the Sanhedrin passage and Sefer Yetzirah is not *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Neither does the Baraita d'*Ma'aseh Bereshit* resemble tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit*; it simply reflects the work of a later author who drew upon a revered term and infused it with new meaning. *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, as it is used in the tannaitic texts such as Mishnah Hag. 2:1, is decidedly not cosmogonic magic or mysticism. While it may be possible that the Tannaim engaged in such magical and mystical cosmogony, they did not call it *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.

III. The Connection Between *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

Given that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was probably a tannaitic form of magic and mysticism, and that *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was not, what is it that unites these distinct practices? Why are *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* paired both in the original rabbinic sources and in the numerous scholarly commentaries upon those rabbinic sources? Our first answer comes from the most significant pairing of these terms, Mishnah Hag. 2:1. Section C reads: "Anyone who does not respect the honor of his Maker, better he had not come into the world." The Mishnah restricts the inquiries of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* because they pose a potential affront to God. The threat is the same in both disciplines because both are means of obtaining knowledge of God. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* achieves this by studying the most significant and explicative act of God; knowledge of creation yields knowledge of the Creator. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* yields similar knowledge through ascensions which allow the mystic to look upon the glory and throne of God, or through adjuration and revelation in which the mystic acquires secret mysteries of God. Nevertheless, though both of these disciplines achieve similar results, the means by which they achieve these results are different. As mentioned in Chapter One, these sister disciplines are equivalent, but not equal. Both are esoteric, but *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

is more so. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* studies God indirectly, through the buffering intermediary of the act of creation. What is more, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* studies God as He was in the past, and as He will be in the future. In these two ways, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is in line with traditional rabbinic, scriptural exegesis. However, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* studies God directly, without intermediary, and it studies God as He is in the present. This significant departure from traditional Torah study earned *Ma'aseh Merkavah* the unique status as the most esoteric discipline. Still, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was not the only esoteric discipline, as *Ma'aseh Bereshit* likewise inquired of God's mysteries, only in a fashion that was less dangerous.

The reason given in section C of the *mishnah* for the restriction of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* indeed unites these two disciplines as esoteric studies of God. Nevertheless, there is yet a deeper link connecting these two forms of inquiry. They are both about power. All of the reasons outlined in Chapter Five explaining *Ma'aseh Bereshit* as a means of power apply equally to *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Like *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* seeks knowledge of God, and such knowledge yields power over God. Refuting Scholem's prejudice for mysticism, Halperin and Peter Schäfer have demonstrated that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in the Hechalot literature is more about magic than mysticism. True, ascents through the heavens play a prominent role in the Hechalot, but these ascents are primarily a means of obtaining magical names for God and incantations to be utilized for effective adjuration. The mystical element was a means toward a magical goal. These magical names for God held powerful sway over the ruling angels, and even over God Himself.²³⁵ Furthermore, as with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was a means of acquiring and affirming political status. We saw this clearly in the Babylonian Talmud when R. Joseph wielded his unique knowledge of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as a badge of distinction, using it to assert his authority over the Pumbedita academy. In further

²³⁵ See Schäfer, pp. 107-114, 142-152. See Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 384.

resemblance of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* also yielded polemical advantage. As with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the Rabbis used *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to refute the heretics in their own arena of interest. Ira Chernus has solidly demonstrated that rabbinic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was specifically anti-Gnostic.²³⁶ In addition, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, like *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, was a powerful tool for bringing comfort to a beleaguered nation. Through the ascensions of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the Rabbis demonstrated how the remote God on High was still near to Israel, still cared about Israel, and still favored Israel over the other nations. Such a powerful means and powerful message were necessary to keep Israel loyal to a God that seemed to have betrayed her. Finally, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* bears a likeness to *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in that both disciplines yield knowledge, and knowledge itself is power. The *yored merkavah* sees the cosmos, and understands the order of the world and how it functions. He can live according to the laws that govern the cosmos and according to rule of God and the ministering angels. Through this unique wisdom, the *merkavah* mystic can achieve health, wealth and power.²³⁷ *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, as we saw with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, is essentially about power.

So we see that despite certain differences, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* share much in common. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is most likely magic and mysticism, though *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is certainly not. However, uniting these two disciplines is that they are both esoteric inquiries of God, though *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is more esoteric than *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* studies God directly in the present, while *Ma'aseh Bereshit* studies God of the past and future, through the indirect means of studying God's act of creation. Still, the greatest connection between *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh*

²³⁶ See Chernus, chapter 1, esp. pp. 14-15. In his brilliant analysis, Chernus proves how the rabbinic insistence on the association of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and Sinai is an anti-Gnostic polemic. The Gnostics specifically denied the relevance of the Torah and the existence of historical time. By focusing on the revelation at Sinai, the Rabbis affirm the importance of Torah and the existence of historical time, as this event marks the beginning of the period of revelation. The Rabbis used *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, a practice closely related to *gnosis*, specifically to refute Gnostic doctrine. This recalls the similar rabbinic practice of refuting the Gnostics in their own arena of cosmogony.

²³⁷ See Schäfer p. 144, and Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 440.

Bereshit is that they are both potent tools and means toward acquiring power. For all the reasons mentioned in Chapter Five regarding *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is likewise about power. Despite their differences, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* are truly equivalent, sister disciplines of esoteric study.

IV Some Implications of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* on *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

Throughout this thesis we have relied upon *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to illumine certain aspects of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, since, in many ways, our knowledge of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* exceeds our knowledge of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The rabbinic literature contains many more references and descriptions of this more esoteric and likely more important discipline. Subsequently, modern scholars have written numerous tomes on *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and have given *Ma'aseh Bereshit* only secondary attention. At this time, there exists no comprehensive analysis of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*.²³⁸ Still, there are some aspects of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* that can shed light upon the deepest mysteries of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. While we do not possess many rabbinic descriptions or explications of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, we do possess an entire body of cosmogonic inquiry that is *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. The only equivalent to this corpus in the field of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is the Hechalot literature, and the connection between the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the Hechalot and the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* of the Tannaim is dubious.

The situation is such: we have numerous rabbinic descriptions of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, but we have only questionable examples of it. At the same time, we have few descriptions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, but we have abundant examples of it. Due to this situation, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bereshit* should be studied together, because each fills the other's lack.

²³⁸ This thesis takes a step in that direction.

Up to now, we have used *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to derive certain knowledge of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Now, at the risk of lapsing into circular argument, we shall apply some of our findings on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to the study of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Many of the conclusions reached in this thesis can provide some insight into the mystery and debate over tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. First, the multiplicitous term *ma'aseh bereshit* may influence the debate over whether the tannaitic term *ma'aseh bereshit* refers to esoteric or exoteric practice. Scholem and others argue that the term *ma'aseh merkavah* refers to esoteric mysticism and magic, while Halperin asserts that it is merely exoteric exegesis of Ezekiel's vision is a synagogue setting. Our analysis of the term *ma'aseh bereshit* in Chapter One demonstrated that this single rabbinic term can simultaneously refer to both esoterica and exoterica. This suggests that the term *ma'aseh merkavah* may likewise have esoteric and exoteric meanings. If true, this would prove Scholem and Halperin to be both right and wrong. Scholem was right to recognize an esoteric usage, and Halperin was right to recognize an exoteric usage. However, if we can apply our understanding of *ma'aseh bereshit* to *ma'aseh merkavah*, both scholars erred in assuming that the existence of one meaning negates the possibility of the other.²³⁹

Second, regarding the existence of a corpus or tradition of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* can yield further insight. Contrary to most scholars, Halperin argues that there did not exist any body of *Merkavah* interpretation or understanding that was passed down from one scholar to another.²⁴⁰ Since we do not possess any trace of such a body of work from the tannaitic or amoraic period, we cannot determine whether or not such a tradition existed. However, the real existence of an extant body of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Bereshit* preserved in amoraic texts suggests the

²³⁹ If there are indeed simultaneously esoteric and exoteric meanings of the term *ma'aseh merkavah*, it would be useful to apply our system of capitalization to this term as well, with *ma'aseh merkavah* referring to exoteric and general uses of the term, and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* referring to explicitly esoteric uses.

²⁴⁰ Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 61.

* existence of a corpus of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Of course, this association does not prove the existence of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* tradition. Regarding this enigmatic matter, we can turn to *Ma'aseh Bereshit* only for speculative hints.

Third, we should not assume that the esoteric nature of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* itself suggests that it is a mystical or magical practice. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* demonstrates that an esoteric rabbinic discipline is not necessarily magical or mystical. It may be likely that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was magical and mystical, but we cannot assert this simply because it is limited to a select group of initiated Rabbis. This distinction is ignored by a number of modern scholars who routinely refer to rabbinic mysticism and magic simply as "esotericism." This term, in its proper meaning, refers to the number and quality of individuals who engage in a certain practice; it does not refer to the nature of that practice. Esotericism does not equal mysticism or magic, and we should not use this term to refer to such specific practices.

Finally, the example of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* may finally be able to put a belabored issue to rest. In his groundbreaking study of tannaitic mysticism, Scholem emphasized the similarities between rabbinic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and Gnostic ascensions so much that he referred to *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as "Jewish Gnosticism." Since then, numerous scholars have refuted Scholem's label, asserting that though the Jews may have been influenced by Gnostic mysticism in the development of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, this Jewish practice is actually anti-Gnostic.²⁴¹ A study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* confirms these assertions. Like *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* may be rooted in Gnostic influence. The Gnostic fascination with cosmogony may have originally inspired the Rabbis to form a discipline of the study of creation's mysteries. Nonetheless, the discipline that the Rabbis formed was pointedly anti-Gnostic in its content. Since the Gnostic-influenced *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is

²⁴¹ For a fine refutation of Scholem's label, see Chernus pp. 13-14.

hardly "Jewish Gnosticism," we may further deduce that this is an equally inappropriate term for *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

V Conclusion

In both rabbinic literature and contemporary scholarly literature, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* has quietly remained in the shadow of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. However, it is time now for *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to receive greater attention from the scholarly community. Though perhaps not as significant as *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was nonetheless an important rabbinic discipline. It was, after all, a carefully guarded practice among the Tannaim before the Amoraim publicized it to enhance its effect. *Ma'aseh Bereshit* revealed mysteries of God, enhanced political status, provided polemical advantage against a wide range of heresies, brought comfort to a defeated nation, and yielded power to those who mastered it. In its own right, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* was a crucial and powerful rabbinic discipline deserving the attention of contemporary scholars of rabbinics. Nonetheless, should today's scholars remain consumed with *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, let them at least turn to *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to unlock some of the majestic gates of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

Conclusion

In the course of this thesis, we have attempted a systematic study of rabbinic cosmogony. In Chapter One, we explored the many different meanings of the rabbinic term *ma'aseh bereshit*. Chapter Two discussed the ambiguous and varied prohibitions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In Chapter Three, we demonstrated that the mysterious *Ma'aseh Bereshit* of the tannaitic texts was indeed the rabbinic cosmogony of the amoraic texts. Chapter Four illustrated some major themes of this corpus of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In Chapter Five, we speculated upon why the Rabbis both prohibited and engaged in *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Finally, in Chapter Six, we returned to the topic of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in an effort to show how our findings regarding *Ma'aseh Bereshit* can help illumine the depths of mystery surrounding *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

Throughout the progression of this study, we have drawn several new and important conclusions. One, the term *ma'aseh bereshit* supports a wide range of usage, and can have both exoteric and esoteric meanings. Two, one of these meanings, denoted by capital letters in this thesis, refers to a discipline and corpus of study restricted to a select group of individuals. In this way, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is like *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Three, though the tannaitic texts which discuss *Ma'aseh Bereshit* do not define or exemplify *Ma'aseh Bereshit* explicitly, we find definition and exemplification of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in the amoraic texts. The amoraic sources preserve pre-tannaitic and tannaitic cosmogony. This cosmogony, though not so stated explicitly, is *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Four, the essence of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is power. The utilization and protection of that power motivated the Rabbis both to engage in and restrict the study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Five, unlike *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is probably not magic or mysticism. And six,

these new insights into *Ma'aseh Bereshit* may provide further understanding of tannaitic *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. These six assertions represent the contributions of this thesis to the contemporary study of rabbinic esotericism.

Of course, these six conclusions are not free of uncertainty. The contemporary study of rabbinic esotericism is an exercise in speculation. In general, the rabbinic sources can be cryptic and unreliable. Due to their sensitive nature, rabbinic esoteric matters are further obscured in a cloud of mystery. With certainty unattainable, we are restricted in our discussions to assert only possibilities and probabilities. Therefore, despite the breadth and depth of this thesis, it does not resolve the issue of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and rabbinic cosmogony. At best, it provides but a modest few new insights into a matter that refuses resolution. *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the rabbinic study of creation's mysteries, shall itself remain a mystery.

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Maker of ma'aseh bereshit. - Mishnah

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