DOING TOHU:

BEN ZOMA'S FORBIDDEN GLIMPSE OF CREATION

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SUMMARY

This thesis was written with the intent of turning it into a journal article for publication. It does not contain any chapters *per se* but is itself a development of a chapter from my doctoral dissertation.

The discussion offered here makes an important contribution to the understanding of one aspect of rabbinic mysticism: the rabbis' reflections on the works of creation. In it, I discuss the prohibitions placed on the investigation of creation and show that the literature is consistent throughout: One may investigate the "works" of creation, *Ma'aseh Bereshit* (albeit under severe restrictions); but one may never seek a vision of what came *before* the days creation. This is meant both in the cosmological sense (physical inquiry) as well as exegetically (expounding upon the first chapter of Genesis).

To make my case, I follow the story of the sage Ben Zoma from his journey into the *Pardes* (*b. Ḥag.* 14b) to his encounter with his teacher Rabbi Joshua at the very end of his life (*Ber. Rab.* 2:4). Utilizing a serious study of the Mishnah *Ḥag.* 2:1, I show that Ben Zoma becomes the rabbinic poster child of incorrect behavior when it comes to the study of creation. In an epilogue, I contrast his exegetical missteps to that of Rabban Gamliel when the latter encounters a philosopher in *Gen. Rab.* 1:9.

The article is divided into five main sections. The first describes Ben Zoma's life and reputation as it has come down to us in rabbinic legend. The second, considers questions surrounding the *Pardes* episode, particularly as these apply to Ben Zoma. The third provides the necessary information on the prohibition limiting the investigation of creation. The fourth analyses Rabbi Joshua's encounter with a lost Ben Zoma. Finally, the fifth section follows Rabban Gamliel's debate with the philosopher and considers the tool of rabbinic preemptive exegesis.

I. Ben Zoma

Simon ben Zoma, one of the most distinguished sages of the early second century, was not rich, nor was he the scion of a distinguished family.[1] He remained a bachelor, apparently devoting his life to the study and exegesis of Torah.[2] He was a disciple of Rabbi Joshua ben Ḥananiah,[3] and he apparently had a prominent place in Rabbi Akiba's more mystically inclined circle. He was known to be a brilliant *darshan* (exegete); indeed, in *m. Sotah* 9:15 he is called the last, and perhaps the best of the expounders of Torah.[4] He was also something of an halachic scholar. In *b. Ber.* 57b, it says that whoever sees Ben Zoma in a dream is "assured of scholarship"; and in *b. San.* 17b, Ben Zoma is listed among those qualified to argue before the Sanhedrin. Several beautiful sayings are also attributed to him,[5] and he may have been influenced by Greek ethical teachings.[6]

Many stories accrue[7] to Ben Zoma. There is even a dispute within the tradition concerning what ultimately came of him.[8] The stories describe a death as a result of questionable

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*I would like to thank Rabbi Norman Cohen for guiding this project and for the many helpful contributions which he made to it: מִכָּל־מְלַמְּדַי הִשְׂכַּלְתִּי כִּי עֵדְוֹתֶיךָ שִׂיחָה לִי (Psalm 119:99).

1. Louis Finkelstein, "Ben Zoma's Paradoxes," *Judaism* 40, no. 4 (1991): 453.

2. Much of what I report about of Ben Zoma's life is drawn from Samson H. Levey, "The Best Kept Secret of Rabbinic Tradition," *Judaism* 21 (1972): 454–55.

3. His final encounter with his rabbi, or better, his rabbi's final encounter with him, figures largely in this paper. See below, p. 29.

4. *m. Ber.* 1:5 preserves a famous exegesis of Ben Zoma's which found its way into the Passover Haggadah.

5. See, for example, *m. Avot* 4:1.

6. Cf. Finkelstein, "Ben Zoma," 452, n. 1.

7. Goshen Gottstein proposes that all stories attached to Ben Zoma's name are "local legends." Alon Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 1 (1995): 125.

8. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 106, n. 87.

mystical activities and issues of mental health. It is also more than possible that he lived to "ripe old age," dying around 132-133 CE.[9] What seems clear is that Ben Zoma never attained the title "Rabbi." The Talmud (*b. Ber.* 57b) ascribes to him—as well as to Ben Azzai, and Elisha ben Abuya—the slightly lesser title of *Talmid Hacham*, "pupil."

Why this is so remains a mystery. Since tradition had it that the principle subject of Ben Zoma's substantial exegetical skills was the first chapter of Genesis,[10] his rabbinic status may have come into doubt owing to the fact that he "was involved in esoteric matters and [was] suspected of unorthodox beliefs about the creation."[11] If he did, as suggested, live to a natural death, those legends which say otherwise must have been crafted as a warning to those who might be tempted to follow his intellectual speculations.

It is just this legend of Ben Zoma's involvement with the esoterica of creation which is the investigation of this paper. If we hope to discover the nature of the change in his thinking which led to an ambivalent overall assessment of his reputation, we will need to examine two specific stories. The first reports the warning issued to Ben Zoma and his fellow *Talmidei Ḥachamim*; the second, describes his ultimate demise for not following it.

The first story (immediately following) has to do with a mysterious journey that the three *Talmidei Ḥachamim* took with Rabbi Akiba into the *Pardes*. The second relates the encounter of Ben Zoma's teacher, Rabbi Joshua, with Ben Zoma when Ben Zoma is in an utterly bewildered state. Ben Zoma admits there to having a vision of the works of

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9. Levey, "Secret," 454.

10. Marcus Jastrow and Wilhelm Bacher, *Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v.* Ben Zoma.

11. C.R.A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1–12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate, Part 1: The Jewish Sources," *HTR* 86 (1993): 194.

creation.[12]

Each story is found in several versions.[13] Each version has its interesting distinguishing features, some of which I shall comment upon if they are relevant to my main goal of unraveling the mystery of Ben Zoma's fate. I have chosen to work with one version of each story: In the case of the *Pardes* episode, I shall focus on the tradition as reproduced in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ḥag.* 14b); in the case of Ben Zoma's demise, I shall utilize the Genesis Rabbah version (2:4). For the most part, these choices have been made on linguistic grounds. For example, all of the other versions of the *Pardes* journey lack the water motif which figures so prominently in Ben Zoma's later reflections in the story of his demise (and, I might add, in the imagination of the later traditions). I have chosen the Genesis Rabbah version of the story of Ben Zoma's demise on several accounts: First, the story itself is a midrash on the second verse of Genesis and therefore contains certain additional features which highlight Ben Zoma's cosmological (and cosmogonic) speculations. These features, which are largely linguistic, help to link Ben Zoma's ultimate demise not only to the water warning in *b. Ḥag.* 14b but also directly back to that Mishnah[14] which, to some extent at least, prohibits the investigation of creation.

With these limits, let us move on to our consideration of the story of Ben Zoma.

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12. I shall henceforth refer to this incident as Ben Zoma's "demise."

13. The *Pardes* story: *b. Ḥag.* 14b, *j. Ḥag.* 2:1 (77c), *t. Ḥag.* 1:2, *Song Rab.* 1:1. The Demise Story: *Gen. Rab.* 2:4, *j. Ḥag.* 76:4, *t. Ḥag.* 2:6, *b. Ḥag.* 15a.

14. *m. Ḥag.* 2:1. See below, p. 16 ff.

II. The Four who entered the Pardes

In the Babylonian Talmud, we encounter the following famous story:

> Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the 'Garden,'[15] namely, Ben 'Azzai and Ben Zoma,[16] Aḥer, and R. Akiba. R. Akiba said to them: When you arrive at the stones of pure marble (אבני שיש טהור), say not, water, water (מים מים)! For it is said: *He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes* (Ps 101:7). Ben 'Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints* (ibid. 116:15). Ben Zoma looked and became demented (הציץ ונפגע). Of him Scripture says: *Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it* (Prov 25:16). Aḥer mutilated the shoots. R. Akiba departed unhurt (יצא בשלום).[17]

This text has deservedly received as much scholarly attention as any in rabbinic literature. On the one hand, it opens a window through which we can glance into the hidden territory of tannaitic mysticism. On the other hand, this glance must remain an enigma to us; for, it is not at all clear what precisely is going in this story, nor what lesson the rabbis wish us to draw from it.[18] Are the four sages depicted here on an actual (historical) journey together? Are they sharing a mystical experience? Do they together ascend to an actual vision of heaven?[19] And, given the fate of three of the journeymen,

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15. *Pardes.*

16. In the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Psalms versions of the story, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, are inverted. This paper will operate along the line of tradition which states that Ben Azzai died and Ben Zoma became demented. The reasons for this will become clear in the sequel; indeed, it may be the case that the reader will conclude that this the more "correct" tradition.

17. *b. Ḥag.* 14b. Unless, otherwise noted, translations are adaptations of the Soncino translations.

18. Liebes underlines the importance of the tale, but also acknowledges that we cannot find one satisfactory interpretation of its language. Yehuda Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע: ארבעה שנכנסו לפרדס וטבעה של המיסטיקה התלמודית* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1986), 4. Alon Goshen Gottstein calls this story "the *crux interpretum* of the study of ancient Jewish mysticism." Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 69.

19. In the *Tosefta* version of the story, Rabbi Akiba is said to have "ascended and descended" in safety (ר' עקיבא...עלה בשלום וירד בשלום). This stands in contradistinction to the other versions whicch speak of him going out, or exiting, safely (יצא בשלום).

does this story contain some kind of warning to those of us who might think to enter the "Garden" ourselves? One thing that is clear here is that the four rabbinic personalities all take some kind of trip —whether this is meant spatially or experientially—with Rabbi Akiba as their leader. It is he who seems to know the territory ahead of them, who issues the warning and returns whole.[20]

Even if the Babylonian Talmud does seem to present the story as an historical event,[21] we must be wary of understanding this "trip" too literally. It could equally well be viewed as a parable which reflects varying experiences of different tannaitic personalities in their mystical quest.[22] In fact, it is possible that they do not "enter" together at all (whether in terms of time or space). Rather, they might each be undertaking a different kind of activity, an activity which reflects each figure's area of mystical specialization or concern.[23] Their grouping in this tale might reflect then more of a shared field of activity than any actual shared vision of the same event.

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20. Some scholars have attributed Rabbi Akiba's safe return to the fact that he, unlike the others, "was established as a legitimate link in a chain of relations between teachers and students." Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 83. Cf. Liebes who advances this thesis throughout his book: Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*.

21. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 88.

22. Goshen Gottstein argues that, if the *Pardes* journey did reflect an historical occurence, it should open with the characteristic term *ma'aseh*. On the other hand, if as Urbach argues, the story is meant as a parable (Urbach), Goshen Gottstein says that the moral (the נמשל) of the story is lacking here. See "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 88–89. I hope to show that this story does have a moral, perhaps several, which are to be found elsewhere in the rabbinic corpus. In the case of Ben Zoma, the moral is contained in his encounter with Rabbi Joshua. See below, p. 29 ff.

23. Goshen Gottstein points out that it is possible to read the story as a kind of typological list, wherein each figure would "express a particular ideology and conform to a given literary type." He presents Rabbi Akiba and Elisha ben Abuya as standing for extreme modes of behavior, with Ben Zoma and Ben 'Azzai somewhere in between. "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 90–92.

A. Two Approaches to the Story

Liebes distinguishes two basic tendencies among interpreters of this tale.[24] One viewpoint contextualizes the *Pardes* episode as part and parcel of an overall current of Jewish (and non-Jewish) mysticism which, according to this view, stretches back to deep antiquity and perhaps antedates the talmudic version. The other, which he calls the "merely intellectual" approach, does not look outside the rabbinic corpus, preferring to read the story as part of a purely inter-talmudic discussion which is independent of the (later) mystical developments and variations of the story.[25]

1. The Mystical Approach

The mystical approach to the *Pardes* story understands it as a reflection of the kinds of heavenly ascents found in the Hekhalot literature and/or in the Gnostic collections. Gershom Scholem, for example, reads the rabbinic telling of the story in terms of the Hekhalot version of the story; he writes that "it is clear from the context that this orchard is a heavenly abode."[26] He belittles those who hold that the passages refer to primary matter,[27] i.e., to a preexistent substance out of which God would have created the world; he calls this "an explanation which lacks all plausibility and finds no support in the context or the subject matter itself." He then goes on to argue that the *Merkavah* mystics had the correct understanding of this passage, and that there is therefore no

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24. Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 4 ff.

25. I generally prefer this latter approach. See below, p. 14 ff.

26. Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: JTSA, 1960), 16–17 See also Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited," 193, for a discussion of the term 'garden.'

27. He cites Joel, Graetz and others. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941), 361, n. 46. NB: If the *Pardes* story—and others like it—do refer to primary matter, this would in no way remove them from the realm of the mystical!

reason to see the Hekhalot rendition as a "*post festum* interpretation of the Talmudic passage."[28] In contrast, Goshen Gottstein argues—correctly I think—that it is obvious that the "*pardes* motif is not indigenous to the Hekhalot texts, but rather was imported from talmudic materials."[29] Finally, Liebes himself offers the possibility that the story reflects certain kinds of magical practices which used (divine) names to achieve a mystical ascent.[30]

2. The Intra-Talmudic Approach

As just mentioned, it is also possible to attempt to understand the *Pardes* episode—and much of the "mysticism" of the rabbis—purely in terms of the rabbinic literature itself. Thus, I tend to agree with Goshen Gottstein that the material in the Hekhalot renditions of the story have been imported from prior rabbinic material. Indeed, I shall follow, for the most part, Liebes' merely "intellectual" approach: I agree with those who read the *Pardes* text (and the other rabbinic mystical material) intra-talmudically. In so doing, I will treat this corpus, with slight variations, as the kind of "mystical collection" described by Morray-Jones and developed by Goshen Gottstein. Rather than overly concerning myself with the dating of texts and the determination of which strands of the tradition influenced which others, I shall assume the existence of a kind of "Ḥagigah corpus"[31] which was largely internally reflective upon itself. In other words, I

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28. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 52–53. Urbach adds that the story is not about Gan Eden, as some would have it, but is clearly about the *Merkavah*. Ephraim E. Urbach, "המסורות על תורת הסוד בתקופת התנאים," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 12–13.

29. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 131.

30. Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 7–8 This would correspond to Rashi's commentary to the Babylonian Talmud (ad loc.). Rashi says that the four ascended to heaven by means of [the Divine] Name: נכנסו לפרדס – עלו לרקיע על ידי שם.

31. I take this term from Prof. Norman Cohen in discussion.

will assume that these ideas were, so to speak, in the air of the rabbinic intellectual climate. Thus, ideas which only show up in a later compilation may nevertheless have been available much earlier. [32] I shall cautiously treat the various rabbinic materials, then, as one ongoing, inter-textual discussion which was taking place concerning the "nature and path of valid and desirable mystical experience."[33]

To repeat, I here state my methodological premises:

(1) Most of my attempts to shed light on the rabbinic material will be drawn from within the talmudic material itself.

(2) I will center my efforts around the figure of Ben Zoma, and I will try to determine, first and foremost, what happened to him.

(3) Anticipating my results, I will treat the story of the Pardes as a parable, even if its moral (the נמשל) appears to be directly lacking. In fact, by treating the literature as one text, I hope to argue that we can find the moral of the story elsewhere within the Ḥagigah corpus. At least in the case of Ben Zoma, this will become abundantly clear.

(4) Finally, I shall offer an interpretation of the water warning found in the Babylonian Talmud's version of the *Pardes* journey which is intimately linked to Ben Zoma's demise. This interpretation will not necessarily contradict all other understandings of the water warning, as detailed below. Indeed my interpretation—which, to anticipate, securely places the water warning in the context of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*—may well find support from these other interpretations.

Let us turn then to a consideration of the various explanations of what Rabbi Akiba meant when he said: *When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, water, water.*

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32. After a fashion, I will apply the rabbinic notion of אין מוקדם ואין מאוחר in the Torah to rabbinic literature as well. Such an approach matches the rabbis' self-understanding of the oral law: since it was all given at Sinai, it is all in conversation with itself.

B. The Water Warning

1. Water as Primary Matter

The first common interpretation says that this water represents some kind of primary matter (as a hylic substance)—perhaps linked to the thought of Thales.[34] Indeed, one scholar goes so far as to offer the somewhat strained theory that what the journeying sages encounter are the frozen waters of chaos.[35] And Johann Maier reminds us of the idea of water as the dangerous element in the chaos battle myth of the Old Orient,[36] an idea developed so well by Jon Levinson.[37] This suggestion of the (illusionary) water as a primary element, if not as primary matter itself, is an idea to which we will return in a significant way further on.

2. The Gnostic Angle

One prominent concern behind Rabbi Akiba's water warning is that his disciples, as a result of investigating mystical matters, might find themselves led astray into

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33. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 132.

34. Cf. H. Graetz, *Gnostizismus und Judenthum* (Krotoschin: Manasch, 1846), 77–83, D. Neumark, *תולדות הפילוסופיה בישראל* (Jerusalem: הוצאת מקור, 1971), 72–74, and I. Efros, *Ancient Jewish Philosophy: A Study in Metaphysics and Ethics* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964), 58, et al. (All cited in Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 125, n. 1.) For a good review of water as one of the primal elements in the ancient world, see Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Vol. 6, Bollingen Series (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 43.

35. David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision*, vol. 16 of *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1988), 235.

36. Johann Maier, "Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der Jüdischen Apokalyptik und 'Gnosis'," *Kairos* 5, no. 1 (1963): 33.

37. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), *passim*.

Gnosticism. At one time, it was quite fashionable to attribute much of the esoteric ruminations of the rabbis either to the influence of Gnosticism or as an attempt to refute it. The whole subject is very amorphous.[38] However, Gedaliahu Stroumsa suggests that we might draw evidence from Justin's Book of *Baruch*. In it, the Gnostic refers to how the waters above correspond to the waters below.[39] The implication is that this is dangerous because it there could be two powers in heaven.[40] Strousa also points to other Gnostic treatises, such as the Sethian works *Melchizedek* (CG IX 8:1) and the *Zostrianos* (CG VIII 18:5-9) which mention water as the culmination of a trip. The fact that waters figure so prominently in the visionary activity of the Gnostics as well as in the Babylonian Talmud's version of the *Pardes* episode leads Stroumsa to conclude that "it is a most interesting possibility that when R. 'Aqiba warns his colleagues, he warns them against behavior similar to that of the Gnostics."[41]

Stroumsa's main conern is to defend his proposition that Elisha ben Abuya was a Gnostic. It could well be that Ben Zoma, too, had strayed into Gnostic waters. If he did so, his speculations would have been influenced by (Jewish) Gnostic speculations on the nature of creation and the created order.

3. Water at the Sixth Gate

Another approach to the water encounter lies in the attempt to understand the *Pardes* episode in terms of the testimony of the Hekhalot literature. According to such a

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38. See my remarks below in n. 101 on page 33.

39. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.26 and 5.27.3. Cited in Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Aher: A Gnostic," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Volume Two: Sethian Gnosticism (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 817, n. 46.

40. See A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism*, SJLA (Leiden: Brill, 1975), *passim*.

41. Stroumsa, "Aher," 817.

reading, the encounter is viewed as a necessary stage on the way of ascent of the *yored merkavah* through the levels of heaven. The first one to draw a direct link between the talmudic passage and the Hekhalot literature was Hai Gaon. Both the Greater and Lesser Hekhalot documents (and their variant manuscripts) offer their own depiction of our four sages and what they encounter when they reach the gate of the sixth palace. As an example, I offer here the one text from the Lesser Hekhalot reproduced by Scholem:

> Ben 'Azzai beheld the sixth palace and saw the ethereal splendor of the marble plates with which the palace was tesselated and his body could not bear it. He opened is mouth and asked them [apparently the angels were standing there]: "What kind of waters are these?" Whereupon he died.[42] Of him it is said: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Ben Zoma beheld the splendor of the marble plates and he took them for water and his body could bear it not to ask them, but his mind could not bear it and he went out of his mind...R. Akiba ascended in peace and descended in peace.[43]

According to Scholem, the common denominator in all of the Hekhalot version of our story is that there was a "commonly accepted cosmological view in Late Antiquity...that the heavenly traveler will encounter a body of water which, according to some traditions, must be overcome by the individual in order to successfully complete his ascent."[44] For our purposes, what is remarkable is the explanation which the passage gives to account for the significantly different fates of Ben 'Azzai and Ben Zoma. Both beheld the sixth palace and the "ethereal splendor of the marble plates" (וראה זיו אויר אבני שיש), but their

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42. In other words, he said, "water, water!"

43. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, 15, based on MS J. Th. Sem. 828, fol. 16b. Cf. the other example given by Scholem on the same page: "Ben 'Azzai was deemed worthy and stood at the gate of the sixth palace and saw the ethereal splendor of the pure marble plates. He opened his mouth and said twice, "Water! Water!" In the twinkling of an eye they decapitated him and threw eleven thousand iron bars at him. This shall be a sign for all generations that no one should err at the gate of the sixth palace." In this translation, Scholem makes use of some variant readings in MS Oxford 1531.

44. Nathaniel Deutsch, "Dangerous Ascents: Rabbi Akiba's Water Warning and Late Antique Cosmological Traditions," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1998): 2. Deutsch presents a helpful list of the various viewpoints on the relationship between the Talmudic texts and the Hekhalot versions in n. 4 on the same page.

degree of self-control (in the face of Rabbi Akiba's warning?) differed. Ben Azzai, on the one hand, could not bear the vision; he could not keep it to himself, so he verbalized the illusion before him. This resulted in his death. Ben Zoma, on the other hand, also took the marble for water, but his body was able to bear the vision—in other words, following the implications of the text, he was able to refrain from speaking. His mind, however, could not bear the vision, so went crazy.[45]

As Scholem points out, there are many similarities between the Hekhalot versions of the story and that found in the Babylonian Talmud. The key difference is that the former provide a context and explanation lacking in the latter: The waters, which are so enigmatic in the Talmud, are the very ones which the *Merkavah* mystics encounter at the penultimate stage of their ascent. There are two levels of response which one can have after one has beheld them. One can see them and have the discipline to withold verbal comment; or one can see them and comment upon what one has seen. If one follows the latter path and cannot refrain from exclamation, one dies. If one shows a modicum of discipline and refrains from describing that which one sees, one's health will indeed suffer; but, death will not ensue—or, at least death will be delayed, as in Ben Zoma's case. Perhaps the best thing would be not to look in the first place. But, following this reading, Rabbi Akiba in his warning accounts for the fact that they *will* look; so the least he can do is warn his disciples not to say anything. And if they do look, they should not "feast their eyes," i.e., look too much or for too long.[46] It is one thing to have a vision of

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45. What is lacking from the translation which Scholem gives is the prooftext referring to Ben Zoma which follows, the same prooftext from Proverbs 25:16 found in the rabbinic telling: *Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it.*

46. Urbach takes up this theme of "feasting the eyes" (הזין את העיניים) in his discussion. He points out that the Tosefta follows its version of the *Pardes* story with the following parable of a King's garden: משל למה הדבר דומה לפרדס של מלך ועלייה בנויה על בגיו, מה עליו על אדם להציץ ובלבד שלא יזון את עיניו ממנו. We find in this parable of a mortal king many of the elements of the *Pardes* story. It seems that it is acceptable to look, but one

the divine; it is another to dwell on it. This is already the case when what one sees of the (divine) truth is beautiful and awe-inspiring. How much more should one not dwell on a vision, much less speak of it, when what one sees is chaotic or ugly![47]

4. A Mandean Possibility

Nathaniel Deutsch offers a very interesting theory which would link Rabbi Akiba's water warning to Mandeaism. He informs us that in Mandaean cosmology, "the world of light is separated from the physical cosmos by a body of water called the *hafiqia mia* or 'water brooks.'"[48] He shows how the origin of this *hafiqia mia* has been traced to Persian sources. Deutsch then makes a radical proposal. He suggests two biblical passages as the original source for the Persian concept—Second Samuel 22:5-9 and Psalms 18:4-9.[49] Both of these passages refer to "cosmic waters which must be defeated by God in order to save the righteous individual." In Second Samuel, the expression used is *afiqe yam* (v. 16); and in the Psalms, *afiqe mayim* (v. 16).[50] That something which originated in the Bible might come back and confront Rabbinic Judaism as a heresy is an interesting notion. In any case, Deutsch is led to suggest that the water warning in our passage "may have been at least partially directed" against Mandaeism.[51]

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should glance quickly. Indeed, the suggestion has been made that Rabbi Akiba did know better than to even look in the first place. See Urbach, "תורת הסוד," 13.

47. See below, p. 26 ff., when we discuss the King's palace in *Gen. Rab.* 1:5. Anticipating the Mishnah *Ḥag.* 2:1, the real crime here may be exegetical in nature. It is one thing to have a vision (הסתכלות); it is another to seek it out (הזין את העיניים); it is yet another to expound upon it at length—especially in public, before the uninitiate. See the discussion below, p. 43 ff.

48. Deutsch, "Dangerous Ascents," 6.

49. Deutsch argues that the Mandeans were at least as aware of the Hebrew Bible as were the Gnostics. Deutsch, "Dangerous Ascents," 11.

50. Deutsch, "Dangerous Ascents," 8–9.

51. *Ibid.*, 12.

C. Towards an Intra-Talmudic Reading

We have seen that it is difficult to make out what the meaning of Rabbi Akiba's enigmantic warning to the four others means: *When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, water, water!* Indeed, we just considered some of the explanations which scholars have offered which were based on bringing external influences to bear on the rabbinic telling of the *Pardes* episode. All of these explanations have facets which are helpful, but none of them is completely compelling. For, what remains unclear is exactly what is the context of Ben Zoma's activity? Does his participation in the *Pardes* trip mean that he is a *yored Merkavah*? Or could the field of his activity lie somewhere else, e.g., in the area of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*?

To come to answer these questions, I suggest we take the intra-rabbinic approach and turn to the talmudic literature itself—to an analysis of the Babylonian Talmud's *Pardes* story in terms of the Ḥagigah Corpus.

Based on the text's own testimony, there are only two things which we can say for certain. First, there is some solid substance, defined by Rashi as clear or transparent,[52] which can easily be confused for water; and, secondly, whoever acknowledges this—whoever says "water, water!"—*speaks lies* (דובר שקרים).[53] Second, when we consider Ben Zoma's plight in particular, we learn that he had a bad trip: He returns crazed and never the same.[54] Third, in accordance with his prooftext (Prov 25:16) and *his*

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52. Rashi on *b. Ḥag.* 14b: שיש טהור - מבהיק כמים צלולין.

53. We will have occasion to question whether this is true, or whether it merely reflects an attempt on the part of the rabbis to deflect our attention. In other words, it may be that one who says, "water, water" *is* telling the truth, but it is just a truth which is not to be spoken! See below, p. 41.

54. I would argue that the implications of the word נפגע is that Ben Zoma was *permanently* damaged. This is borne out first by what follows immediately after the *Pardes* story in the Talmud (*b. Ḥag.* 14b–15a). A group of students confront Ben Zoma, the (erstwhile?) renowned halachacist (see above, p. 1), with a request for a series of

encounter with the waters, we discover that what Ben Zoma was doing was not, in principle, wrong. Rather, it, like honey was good and sweet; the problem was that he did too much of it: he ate more than his fill.[55]

So Ben Zoma went too far. He overdid it with a good thing. But in order to account for this, we need to come to an understanding as to just which rules he broke and—to which realm of activity these rules applied. Since in the story which describes his ultimate demise,[56] he himself confesses to an investigation of creation, we need to understand the rules that delimit such an investigation. In other words, we need to understand the degree to which there are prohibitions associated with the study of creation.

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legal rulings. the questions posed by them seem intended to test Ben Zoma and ascertain the extent to which he (as a result of seeing the "waters"?) is "gone" or "outside" (below, p. 33). Some of these questions—especially the one about a High Priest marrying a virgin who has given birth—led Levey astray and to the conclusion that Ben Zoma had become a Christian. Levey, "Secret," 462 ff.

55. Liebes argues that even when you undertake something good and sweet, like eating honey, you can go too far. Maimonides, he points out, also argues similarly: While it is good and even required for us to pursue activities of the mind and the study of Torah as well, there comes a point when we go *ba-hutz*, i.e. beyond the pale. Study is good as long as it does not lead to the forbidden. Cf. *Guide of the Perplexed*, Book I, chapter 32. Discussed by Liebes, חטאו של אלישע, 141. Also cf. the discussion of "feasting one's eyes." Above, note 46

56. *Gen. Rab.* 2:4 and parallels.

III. אין דורשין: The Prohibition against Investigating Creation

A. M. Ḥagigah 2:1

The "Prohibition" against investigating (the esoteric aspects of) creation is contained in the famous passage in *M. Ḥag.* 2.1:

> (1) The [subject of] forbidden relations (עריות) may not be expounded in the presence of three, nor the work of creation (מעשה בראשית) in the presence of two, nor [the work of][57] the chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge. (2) Whosoever speculates upon four things, a pity on him! He is as though he had not come into the world, [to wit], what is above, what is beneath, what before (מה לפנים), what after. (3) And whosoever takes no thought for the honour of his maker, it would be a mercry [for him] had he not come into the world.

This Mishnah breaks down into three distinct statements as enumerated. The first (1) explains when and in what setting (with how many others) it is acceptable to discourse on each of three esoteric matters. The second (2) seems absolutely to forbid any discussion whatsoever of four things, some of which are apparently permissible in statement (1). The third (3) places respect for God, the Creator before all else. Two and three together seem to constitute a distinct unit (the *sefa*), whereas the first statement the (*resha*) may be added on from a different source. Infact, the Jerusalem Talmud attributes the *sefa* to R. Akiba, whereas the *resha* is thought to emerge from a later source.[58]

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57. Soncino adds this phrase in his translation. However, the addition in brackets is incorrect for the following reasons: Given the thesis which I am about to propose—wherein I argue that the rabbis distinguish sharply between מעשה בראשית and מה לפנים, it could indeed be significant that the text does *not* say מרכבה "מעשה," but rather just "במרכבה." In other words, since, as I hold, the *works* of creation are different from the question of prior status (= "what came before"), in this passage there really are no "works" of the chariot, but rather just the nature of the chariot itself. Of course, the category of מעשה מרכבה does become prominent in later rabbinic, philosophical and mystical thinking, so further investigation of the beginnings of its usage is called for. Still, in this passage, it is possible that the parallelism which the Soncino assumes—based on later usage—is mistaken.

58. *Y. Ḥag.* 2.1: דרבי עקיבה היא, ברם כרבי ישמעאל דורשין. Thus the Yerushalmi attributes the absolute prohibition to R. Akiba, whereas purportedly R. Yishmael ben

If, as Urbach argues, elements in both the *resha* and the *sefa* refer to creation, the Mishnah seems less than perfectly coherent, since parts of it seem to contradict other parts.[59] A solution is found in his suggesting that initially (perhaps in Tannaitic times) there would have been a strict prohibition against investigating these matters in any form whatsoever, (= the *sefa*), whereas later—perhaps owing to exegetical needs present in Amoraic times[60]—the strict prohibition was qualified in such a manner that it became permissible to discuss the "Works of Creation" (מעשה בראשית), albeit under severe limitations, i.e., with one or, at most, two students (the *resha*).[61] In other words, the

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Elisha permits some degree of investigation into the creation of the world. See Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie des hellenistischen und palästinischen Judentums*, Texte und Untersuchungen Zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), 81.

59. Goshen Gottstein lessens the contradiction by disagreeing that both parts of the Mishnah have to do with creation. He argues that the four things absolutely prohibited have to do with the vision of the chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*), whereas those things which may be expounded upon in small groups reflect matters of creation and nakedness (the right to expound matters of the chariot is reduced to none given the numbers involved). He argues that all elements of the phrase "what is above, what is beneath, what before, what after," should be taken spatially (פנים ואחור may indicate the front and back of God) or iconographically (לפנים and לאחור) but none of them should be understood temporally. Thus, while the entire phrase מה למעלה, מה למטה, מה לפנים, ומה לאחור would originally have applied to מעשה מרכבה and not to מעשה בראשית, "before" and "after" ultimately get transfigured into what was and what will be and becomes tied to מעשה בראשית: "From now on our formula was understood in the context of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, rather than in the original context of *Ma'aseh Merkabah*. Alon Goshen Gottstein, "Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" *The Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1995): 192–93. See also his discussion in "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 75. In the sequel, it will become clear that I disagree with Goshen Gottstein in this regard; I attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction by distinguishing sharply between the "works of creation" and "what was before" (temporally understood).

60. As a result of more interaction with Greek thought about the origins of the world and primary matter, which resulted in a need to offer an exegesis in accord with the rabbis' theology. See, for example, R. Gamliel's interaction with "the philosopher" in the epilogue below, p. 42 ff.

61. In the Talmud, the Gemara initially plays a numbers game in order to clear up a problem generated by the Mishnah: namely, when the latter says, e.g., "in the presence of (or *among*) two" (בשנים), does this mean two people total or a teacher speaking to two

prevailing opinion, according to Urbach, is that we are faced with an initial absolute prohibition, akin to that found in Sirach,[62] which later is qualified out of polemical needs.[63]

In terms of creation, Urbach's way of reading the Mishnah—as containing a contradiction which reflects the needs of two different periods—hinges upon the equation of "*Ma'aseh Bereshit*" in the *resha* with "what was before" (מה לפנים) in the *sefa*. According to this assumption, **all** discussion of creation can be summed up as "what is before" — the investigation of which is forbidden in an unqualified fashion in the (Tannaitic) *sefa*. But this equation of the two (and the conclusions leading from it) miss the sense of the Mishnah altogether. There is little doubt that מה לפנים and מה לאחור came to mean "what was before" and "what will be" respectively, i.e., they are (or become) temporal designations.[64] However, what is not at all obvious, nor easy to determine from the Mishnah, is whether "works" of creation (understood as the actual process of creation) and that which "was before" are absolutely one and the same thing. Rather, I would argue—*pace* Urbach—that the two expressions designate two different, if sometimes overlapping topics: *Ma'aseh Bereshit* has to do with the workings and the mechanism of the activity of creating, whereas "what was before" would have to do with

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students (לשנים). What is important for us is that secret aspects of creation may only be discussed in extremely small groups, if at all.

62. *The Wisdom of Ben Sirach*, 3:21-22: Seek not what is too difficult for you, nor investigate what is beyond your power. Reflect upon what has been assigned to you, for you do not need what is hidden. (χαλεπώτερά σου μὴ ζήτει καὶ ἰσχυρότερά σου μὴ ἐξέταζε ἃ προσετάγη σοι ταῦτα διανοοῦ οὐ γάρ ἐστίν σοι χρεία τῶν κρυπτῶν.)

63. Ephraim E. Urbach, *חז"ל: פרקי אמונות ודעות*, reprint, 1969 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 169.

64. Cf. Midrash Esfa, cited in Yalkut Shimoni, I, *remez* 739, to Numbers 12:7 has: מה לפנים מה לאחור, מה היה ומה עתיד להיות. Goshen Gottstein, "Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" 192, fn. 36. See note 59 above.

what was "really" before, i.e., that which preexisted the initiation of the process of Bereshit.

The recognition of such a distinction leads to a very different reading of the Mishnah. Instead of understanding one part as modifying (much less contradicting) the other, all three segments in the Mishnah stand independently and yet complement one another. Accordingly, each statement of Mishnah progressively defines the statement which came before it. Thus, the first statement defines the size of the groups in which one can discuss the "Works of Creation." The second statement, however, limits the permissible content of that discussion: even when talking about *Ma'aseh Bereshit* in elite groupings, all topics are not open —one may not ever discuss what was the state of things *before*. This "before" is nothing other than the state of affairs (or condition) depicted in Genesis 1:2: *the earth being unformed and void (Tohu va-Vohu), with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water.*[65] This problematic verse lends itself to an interpretation whereby certain primary elements—darkness, water (the deep) and the ever elusive *Tohu va-Vohu*[66]—preexist creation. It is just such a discussion of this, so to speak, primary matter (=the Before) which the Mishnah, consistently and coherently, insists that we avoid.

Finally, the third part of the Mishnah comes to qualify and explain the main point of the previous two statements. Not speculating upon "what is above, etc...." is done out of consideration for the honor of the Creator (הקונה). To speculate, and especially to expound upon what one has seen,[67] to go over that line then becomes the gravest of misdeeds, namely a dishonoring of God.

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65. וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם. JPS translation.
66. Henceforth, "*Tohu*."
67. Cf. the Hekhalot discussion above, page 11.

That said, perhaps we can find a contradiction in how this absolute prohibtion plays out, albeit a different contradiction than we have had in mind up to this point. The last part of the Mishnah—which places the protection of God's honor above everything else—presents a slight opening of which the rabbis begrudgingly take advantage: If it becomes necessary—under the most extreme circumstances—to go into these four absolutely forbidden topics *in order* to *defend* the honor of God, it becomes permissable and even obligatory to do so. So, while it is possible to discuss "*Ma'aseh Bereshit*" (which the Gemara goes on to define)[68] internally, among select groups of students, public consideration of what was before the "*Ma'aseh Bereshit*" should never take place *except* in the face of the gravest of external threats. The rabbis, with few aberrations,[69] communicate more about the most esoteric aspects of cosmogony in texts which reflect debates with heretics (whether Jewish or not) than in discussions with their own students.[70] Thus, when the rabbis do offer views on the subject of creation, this is done more out of a need for what Philip Alexander calls "pre-emptive exegesis:"[71] Only when the rabbis find themselves in a situation wherein (external) heretical views are making such headway within their own ranks or among the people would they even consider breaking the rule and go on to discuss the Before. The goal then is to offer an alternative

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68. See directly below.

69. Ben Zoma being one.

70. Cf. J.B. Schaller, *Gen 1:2 im antiken Judentum*, dissertation Göttingen (1961), 118. Schaller goes on to assert that the rabbis had two modes of interpretation, one for the public and one for the inner circle (p. 119). The only reason *anyone* had to become informed on these matters (including the teachers themselves—since it is no great honor to be "one who discourses on creation", a דורש במעשה בראשית, cf. *Gen. Rab.* 1.5) is for the purposes of arming oneself against heretical views. So Urbach: דרשה מעין זו הייתה עניין ליחידים, שעמדו בווכוח עם מינים וידעו את דעותיהם. לא היה מקום לדרוש אותה ברבים. Urbach, *חז"ל: פרקי אמונות ודעות*, 161. (The Midrash to which he refers here is *Gen. Rab.* 1:14 on why the particle את is necessary in verse one of Genesis.)

71. Philip S. Alexander, "Pre-Exemptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation," *JJS* 43, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 230–45 See our discussion below, p. 41 ff.

to the reading offered by their opponents. Again, this is done reluctantly and only to defend the honor of the very God who stands to be embarrassed by the content of their polemic.

B. The Temporal Limitations Placed on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*

We have distinguished between two distinct (or, at best, slightly overlapping) aspects of creation in Mishnah Ḥagigah: "that which is before" (מה לפנים) and the actual process of creation (=מעשה בראשית) as detailed in Genesis 1.[72] For now we will set aside the question as to how much the rabbis discuss "The Before" at all or, again, in which contexts. What is clear is that they do expound upon the six days of creation. However, they do even this quite reluctantly. Indeed, their concern is that once one is willing to "go back" even a little, great danger lurks that one will go too far back: one will slip beyond *Ma'aseh Bereshit* to מה לפנים—a move with dire consequences. Thus, in the Gemara to our Mishnah, one of the Talmud's first concerns is to establish just how far back the "Works of Creation" go before they hit "What was Before:"[73]

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72. Schaller points out that in some strands of rabbinic tradition, the Mishnah's prohibition is generally understood to encompass all of Genesis 1:1-31 as that which is forbidden. Whatever permission the Mishnah allows to investigate matters of creation applies, for him, then only to Genesis 2:1ff. He further argues that we do not find midrashic traditions wherein *both* of the creation stories are treated. Schaller, *Gen 1:2 im antiken Judentum*, 118–19. See in this regard *j. Ḥag.* 2 (77c, 41): R. Levi (~300); Gen. Rab. 9.1: R. Levi in the name of R. Ḥama b. Ḥanina.

73. I would argue that the ultimate purpose of this process of argumentation is to delineate the line between the permissiveness of the רישא and the absolute *Verbot* in the סיפא. Cf. Alexander's comments: "Genesis Rabba's reading is implicitly polemical and is intended to elbow out certain unacceptable readings. What were these unacceptable readings? We receive, *en passant*, some hints. They appear to have been of two kinds: those that were *absolutely* unacceptable, and those which were *unacceptable in public*." Alexander, "Pre-Exemptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation," 243. I understand by "in public" even those readings which occured among two or three "qualified" sages, whereas those which were absolutely unacceptable could not be discussed at all, even if one found oneself, like Ben Zoma, contemplating them privately.

> NOR THE WORK OF CREATION IN THE PRESENCE OF TWO.[74] Whence [do we infer] this? — For the Rabbis taught: *For ask thou now of the days past*;[75] one may inquire, but two may not inquire.[76] 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*. 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*. 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*. [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.[77]

One notices in this passage the increasing scope of just how far back (and therefore *what*) one may investigate within the creation story itself. The first immediate danger in asking about "the days past," literally the "first days," is that one might think that it is permissible to ponder the pre-creation period, קודם שנברא העולם, which is tantamount to the מה לפנים which the Mishnah absolutely forbids. As a first corrective, the Gemara swings the pendulum to the other end of the creation account (away from the first two verses of the Bible), to the creation of human beings. Its first argument thus asserts that one may only pursue knowledge of what transpires from the sixth day and onward. The upshot of this is that we may only concern ourselves with *our* time on the earth, i.e., with human history. The Gemara finds such a view too strict – even if its intention is to build a fence far around what came "before." The continuing back-and-forth refutes this opening position, then, by following the prooftext to its next phrase: "the *days* past which were before thee" (my italics). This, in effect, renders it permissible to investigate all of the works which resulted as part of the *process* of creation. The first five days then include not only human history, but also the history of the nature. This still in no way includes the

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74. Our Mishnah in *Ḥagigah* 2:1.

75. Deut 4:32: כי שאל נא לימים ראשנים. The *Beraita* will go on and separately explain the remaining phrases of the verse: first, למן היום אשר ברא אלהים אדם על הארץ; then, לימים ראשנים אשר היו לפניך; and finally, ולמקצה השמים ועד קצה השמים.

76. The play here is on the fact that the Bible says *thou* and not *you* (plural).

77. *B. Ḥag.* 11b.

"period" *before* the actual six days of creation —which is described in verse 2 of Genesis, namely, Tohu and its retinue. In order to reiterate that the Gemara limits our inquiries to these "*Ma'aseh Bereshit*" (thus defined) and not to the true "Before," the Talmud makes it clear that the prohibition of the *sefa* holds: "One end of the earth to the other" includes that which is in our purview; it includes all of human and scientific history. It does not include anything beyond the realm of our senses and experience.[78]

Another famous passage in Genesis Rabbah reinforces the view that one may not investigate the pre-creation period:

> IN THE BEGINNING (*Be-Reshit*) 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 and what is below, what is before and what is behind. Bar Kappara quoted: *For ask not of the days past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth* (Deut 4:32): you may speculate from the day that days were created, but you may not speculate on what was before that. *And from one end of heaven unto the other* (ibid.) you may investigate, but you may not investigate what was before this. R. Judah b. Pazzi lectured on the Creation story, in accordance with this interpretation of Bar Kappara....[79]

This fascinating, playful moment in midrash reinforces and adds to what we have learned from the passage in *b. Ḥag.* 11b. R. Levi reiterates the absolute prohibition. Citing Deut. 4:32 (the same prooftext used above), Bar Kappara clarifies—in a slightly different manner than does the Talmud—what the limitations of the "Before" are: We may investigate from "the day that days were created" ([ימים] למן היום שנבראו), but not the "Before" which is before that. Similarly, the field of our science must limit itself to this world and its development; one may not ask what lies beyond it in any sense of the word.

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78. השכל האנושי עשוי כך, שהוא שופט, מכיר ויודע רק בעזרת החושים, הממציאים לו חומר בצורת רשמים. משום כך בשטח העולם *שנברא*, שהוא עולם *מוחשי*, היינו עולם שניתן להתפס על ידי החושים, בעזרת הרשמים, שהחושים ממציאים לו. אבל למה *שקדם* לבריאה אין לחושים גישה, וממילא אין לשכל האנושי כל סכוי להגיע לידיעה של ממש. Avraham Arzi, "בריאת העולם באגדת חז"ל," *Maḥanayim* 74 (1964): 36. His reading of the rabbis on creation, it seems to me, depends heavily upon Maimonides.

79. *Gen. Rab.* 1:10. Weiss argues that that which in the Hebrew Bible was originally meant non-speculatively, when it hit the Hellenistic wave, became a matter of 'whence'

C. Building a Fence around the Inquiry

Now that we have determined the frame of the permitted, let us ourselves turn toward the forbidden and attempt to determine what its content might have been. In other words, we can inquire after just what it was we might discover in a public exegesis of the second verse of the Bible. Whatever it was, they put a fence before philosophers, as is borne out in *b. Tamid* 32a. This story portrays Alexander of Macedonia as posing ten questions to the "Elders of the Negev." Alexander's inquiries, which are cosmological in nature, start off innocuously enough. First, he asks whether it is further from East to West or from heaven[80] to earth—a question concerning the earth. Then, getting a little closer to the nerve of the prohibition, he asks whether the heavens were created first or the earth. Since there is a ready biblical text which explains this, it is not an exegetical *aporia*; so the Elders read Gen 1:1 closely and present the heavens as coming first.[81] Alexander finally gets just too close. He asks a question which touches the border of the forbidden: Was the darkness or the light created first? The elders answer that this question cannot be solved. Caught unawares at first (they do not initially realize Alexander's agenda), they now fear that he will go even further and inquire into "what was above and what was below and what was before and what was after."[82] So even though they have a ready

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and 'whither' (cf. those versions of the the Ben Zoma and Rabbi Joshua story which ask מאין לאין!). In this case בראשית became a question of what was *behind* this "In the beginning." Weiss, *Untersuchungen Zur Kosmologie*, 84.

80. What is meant is presumably the visible vault of heaven.

81. Cf. the debate between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai on whether the heavens or the earth were created first: *b. Ḥag.* 12a (developed by R. Ḥanin in *Gen. Rab.* 1:15; and continued by R. Eliezar and R. Joshua in *Gen. Rab.* 12:11). Cf. *Mek. d'Rabbi Yishmael, Mas. d'Pisha, Bo*, parsha 1.

82. אקראי בעלמא הוא דקא שייל, כיון דחזו דקהדר שאיל, סברי - לא נימא ליה, דילמא אתי לשיולי מה למעלה מה למטה, מה לפנים ומה לאחור.

prooftext in hand which establishes that the darkness came first,[83] they refuse to answer and stop Alexander in his tracks.

One of the things which we learn from this story is that, for the rabbis, there is a major difference between *knowing* something to be true and expounding upon it publically. For example, based on their own text (not Alexander's!), they can trust that the correct exegesis would tell us that darkness came first. To say so, might lead one—especially the uninitiated—to go further and get a glimpse of something which one should not see, or—know at all. As we have seen, one of the lessons our Mishnah comes to teach is that, while exegetical activity is not completely discouraged, it is severely limited, lest it lead on to a visionary activity which is complete prohibited.[84] What we can draw here, then, is a distinction between exegetical activity (אין דורשין) and visionary activity (הסתכלות). While they may be technically permitted, certain kinds of exegetical activities (*derash*) are dangerous because they might *lead* to visionary activities.[85] The peril involved in *drashing* certain biblical verses, especially verses which are extraordinarily ambiguous (such as Genesis 1:2), is that one might turn around a corner and come across something one should not see. A glimpse is bad enough. It is even worse to dwell there and feast the eyes.

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83. I.e., Gen 1:2. There may be more to this than meets the eye. It may be that the real reason the Elders did not respond is that they did not want to be forced to acknowledge that darkness was "created" first, i.e., that it existed (in any fashion) before light. It is a repeating theme that the rabbis are often not willing to go into esoteric topics precisely because they are afraid of what they might find there!

84. Cf. Goshen Gottstein who refers to the Tosefta *Ḥagigah* in this context, the text upon which he bases his study. He writes that the first sections, positive in nature, display correct exegetical activity, whereas in the later sections, when things go awry, the various characters are delving into absolutely forbidden visionary activities. He then adds that "the story of the *pardes* ought to be viewed in this context—as the opening of this second and negative part of the Tosefta's commentary on the Mishnah." "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 80–81. Of course contained in this "second and negative" section is the Tosefta's version of the Ben Zoma story to be discussed below.

85. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 82 See also, p. 75 where he

D. What are They Afraid We Might See?

A warning from Genesis Rabbah helps us understand what the rabbis are afraid Alexander might discover were they to pursue their exegesis too far:

> R. Huna quoted in Bar Kappara's name: *Let the lying lips be dumb* (Ps. 31:19): this means, Let them be bound, made dumb, and silenced....Which speak (E.V. 'arrogantly') against the righteous (Ps loc. cit.), meaning, [which speak] against [the will of] the Righteous One, who is the Life of all worlds, on matters which He has withheld from His creatures. *With pride* (ibid.)! in order to boast and say, ' I discourse on the Creation narrative!' (אני דורש במעשה בראשית). *And contempt* (ibid.): to think that he condemns 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 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* (ibid. 20). Said Rab: 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]! R. Huna said in Bar Kappara's name: If the matter were not written, it would be impossible to say it, viz., *God created heaven and earth*; out of what? Out of *now the earth was tohu and bohu* (1:2).[86]

In this passage, itself an exegesis of Psalm 31:19-20, Bar Kappara's concern is to silence those who pridefully discourse on creation, especially its forbidden aspects. For they speak against the "Righteous one" (על צדיק חי העולמים) on matters which are hidden. In other words, as R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina emphasizes, they dishonor God . But Rav's statement goes to the crux of the issue. Presented almost as an afterthought, his *Königsgleichnis*, his parable of an earthly king, shows where the real problem lies: it is not just with those who dishonor God and boast of their discourse on creation (אני דורש במעשה בראשית). Rather, it is with the *biblical text* itself. Were "*tohu va-vohu*" not written, one would not be forced to avert one's eyes and purposefully ignore the fact that the

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breaks down the Mishnah in accordance with these two kinds of activity.

86. *Gen. Rab.* 1:5.

palace of creation (the world) is built on a dunghill.[87]

There is no missing the expletive in describing *Tohu* as *dung*. Not only is this mixture of stuff, of sewers, dunghill and garbage, the *Urstoff* out of which the world was initially created; it remains the unspoken foundation of the *present* world. It is "the mud beneath the pavement" which we should try hard not to see.[88] It comprises a "huge reservoir of negative forces" which threaten to re-emerge and imperil the present. For, all of creation—to this day—is hung perilously over an abyss.[89] The rabbis, loathe to acknowledge this, nevertheless consistently warn us that God might unearth this foundation and return earthly existence to a state of *Tohu va-Vohu* if we do not do what God demands.[90]

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87. Weiss argues that one can draw two conclusions from this midrash: that *tohu va-vohu* is the matter out of which *and* upon which the world is created, and that speculation concerning this primary matter is viewed as an affront to the honor of God. Weiss, *Untersuchungen Zur Kosmologie*, 93.

88. So Lawrence Troster, "Asymmetry, Negative Entropy and the Problem of Evil," *Judaism* 34 (1985): 454. He thinks that the danger (for the rabbis) here is that we might fall into the "Gnostic trap" and view all of this creation as evil, instead of seeing the world as a necessary combination of good and evil, of symmetry and asymmetry.

89. Cf. Job 26:7, and the "reversal of creation" (Fishbane) in Job 3. From the book of Job (and from Jeremiah) we learn that creation is ever under threat, that the struggle with the forces of chaos goes on. See Leo G. Perdue, "Job's Assault on Creation," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1987): 295–315, and Michael Fishbane, "Jeremiah IV 23–26 and Job III 3–13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 151–67.

90. The rabbis give *Tohu* a prominent role in history. *b. San.* 97a divides history's total of six thousand years into three great periods: The first 2,000 years was the era of *Tohu*; the second 2,000 years, the era of (the giving of) Torah; and, finally, the third 2,000 years was to have been the era of the Messiah. (This last period has not came to pass yet due to our unworthiness.) *Tohu* is a symbol of destruction for the rabbis (cf. *Lev. Rab.* 33:6), and it is possible, even though we live in the (now ongoing) era of Torah, that God could choose to return the world to chaos (להחזיר את העולם לתהו ובהו). For example, had Abraham not circumcized Isaac, God would have returned the world to *Tohu va-Vohu* (*Midr. Tanḥ Lech Lecha*, section 19); and a similar fate would have befallen Israel (and the world) had Israel not accepted the Torah at Sinai (*b. Šabb.* 88a; cf. *Ruth Rab.* Petiḥta 1). The implication, of course, is that God might return the world to *Tohu* in the future.

The intent of this passage is not, as some would argue, to refute the view of a creation out of primordial matter. On the contrary, what we have here is a tacit acknowledgment of *Tohu*'s preexistence. What the Rabbis advocate here is that at best we remain purposefully agnostic, or at worst—as the Gemara in *b. Ḥag.* 16a shows—that we willingly act in denial:

> WHOSOEVER SPECULATES UPON FOUR THINGS, IT WOULD BE A MERCY (FOR HIM) HAD HE NOT COME INTO THE WORLD. Granted as regards to what is above, what is beneath, what [will be] after, that is well. But as regards to what was before — what happened, happened! (מה דהוה הוה) — Both R. Johanan and Resh Lakish say: It is like a human king who said to his servants: Build for me a great palace upon the dunghill (על האשפה). They went and built it for him. It is not the king's wish [thenceforth] to have the name of the dunghill mentioned (אין רצונו של מלך להזכיר שם אשפה).

This passage goes on to add the now familiar justification for all of this: "Whosoever takes not thought for the honor of his maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world," etc. In other words, if it will protect the honor of God, we will stubbornly look the other way. One can well imagine that the rabbis wish that Gen 1:2 did not exist as a text; but, since it does, the best we can do is ignore it. And if we do not, well, the fate of Ben Zoma provides a serious warning to those who would tread into the forbidden.

For the rabbis, this is certainly what God has in store for Rome (cf. *Midr. Tanḥ Bo*, section 4).

IV. Ben Zoma's Glimpse

If the texts to this point indicate that one should completely avoid Genesis 1:2 (and by extension, the issue of *creatio ex nihilo*) as much as possible, what are the ramifications when someone does consider "what came" before and openly reaches the conclusion that this world is created from preexistent dung? The mortal outcome is illustrated by the famous story in *Gen. Rab.* 2:4 where Ben Zoma was caught doing just that.[91]

> It once happened that Simeon b. Zoma was standing wrapped in speculation, when R. Joshua passed and greeted him once and a second time, without his answering him. At the third time he answered him in confusion. 'What does this mean this, Ben Zoma!' exclaimed he: 'Whence are the feet' (מאין הרגלים)? 'From nowhere, Rabbi,' replied he. ' I call heaven and earth to witness that I will not stir hence until you inform me whence are the feet,' he urged. 'I was contemplating the Creation (מסתכל הייתי במעשה בראשית) [and have come to the conclusion] that between the upper and the nether waters there is but two or three fingerbreadths,' he answered. ' For it is not written here, *And the spirit of God* blew, but [rather] *hovered*, like a bird flying and flapping with its wings, its wings barely touching [the nest over which it hovers].' Thereupon, R. Joshua turned to his disciples and remarked to them, 'The son of Zoma has gone'. But a few days elapsed and the son of Zoma was in his [eternal] home (ולא שהו ימים מועטים ובן זומא בעולם).[92]

Several questions present themselves. First, is this in fact the actual "trip" described in the *Pardes* episode? In other words, are we encountering here the original vision which caused Ben Zoma to become demented? Such an interpretation is not completely impossible, since, as I hinted above (p. 5), it is possible that the *Pardes* story serves as an parable which conflates four personal mystical experiences into one retelling. The activities of all four mystical journeymen could have been separate in time and space, but linked because of the similarity of their mystical enterprise. Or, second and what is more likely the case, do we discover in this story the *aftermath* of the *Pardes* trip: do we gain

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91. Ben Zoma means to explain the meaning of the waters and the phrase in Gen 1:2, רוח אלהים מרחפת, but his exegesis essentially takes up the entirety of the second verse of Genesis 1. I will establish this on the basis of further linguistic evidence below, p. 36 ff.

92. *Gen. Rab.* 2:4. Other versions: *y. Ḥag.* 76:4; *t. Ḥag.* 2:6; *b. Ḥag.* 15a.

understanding from this story as to what the exact nature and character of Ben Zoma's dementia was?

To answer questions such as these, we need to analyze the text more closely. Unfortunately, several expressions are unclear. This makes it not only difficult to determine exactly what Ben Zoma was doing; it also makes it difficult to understand what is bothering Rabbi Joshua as well.

A. Ben Zoma's Behavior toward His Master

We begin with Ben Zoma "standing wrapped in speculation;"[93] in other words, he is caught up in thought or ecstatic revelation. Rabbi Joshua passes Ben Zoma and greets him. It is very strange that a student would not respond to his teacher, not just once but twice, so Joshua clearly becomes nonplused. Indeed, the oddity of Ben Zoma's apparent disrespect has led Yehudah Liebes to put forth the interesting, if incomplete, thesis that it is precisely this dishonoring of his master which leads to Ben Zoma's punishment. For Liebes, Ben Zoma's behavior not only lacks respect, it even carries with it a tinge of ridicule. In not returning Joshua's greeting, Ben Zoma breaks a fundamental of the master-disciple credo: he not only does not respect his teacher; by extension, he dishonors heaven as well. The result: Ben Zoma has undermined the main point of our Mishnah: by disregarding the established ethos, he has not guarded the honor of his maker.[94]

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93. Some would say, "lost in thought" (Jastrow and Bacher, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, *s.v.* Ben Zoma). Both of these are problematic translations of עומד ותוהא. The phrase occurs only in the *Genesis Rabbah* version which we are discussing here. (Indeed, as I said at the outset, it is thanks to this language that we chose to emphasize this version.) In the *Yerushalmi*, it says that Rabbi Joshua was going along the way (שה' מהלך בדרך) and that Ben Zoma comes upon him. In the *Tosefta* version, Rabbi Joshua was also walking along a paved road (מהלך באסתרטא) and Ben Zoma again comes upon him. Finally, in the Babylonian Talmud, the scene takes place at the Temple Mount, which is problematic from an historical point of view. The *Yerushalmi* and *Tosefta* versions are both introduced by the term מעשה, where as in the Babylonian Talmud, is introduced by the phrase תנו רבנן followed by מעשה. Our story offers a peculiar entrée: כבר היה. For my ultimate contextualization of the phrase עומד ותוהא see below, p. 36.

B. Ben Zoma's Visionary Activity

However, interesting and insightful Liebes' argument is, it is not fully compelling. On the one hand, we can agree with Liebes to a point. Rabbi Joshua is indeed stunned that Ben Zoma has ignored him (in all the versions of the story); he does wonder what could possibly make Ben Zoma forget all proper respect and decorum. But, on the other hand, and *pace* Liebes, it is precisely the *activity* which has caused this to happen which interests Rabbi Joshua.[95] When he hears what that content is —whatever it is—it is then, and only then, that he knows that Ben Zoma is gone. It is the visionary activity itself which leads to the ignoring of social norms; it is his activity which drives Ben Zoma mad. Therein lies the warning of the tale.[96] However difficult the language, the bottom line is that Rabbi Joshua, in his questioning, wants to know what activity so involves Ben Zoma that he is utterly cut off from earthly existence and all halachic and societal norms — to such an extent that he does not even fulfill his obligations toward his master.[97]

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94. Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 130 ff.

95. David Neumark, according to Levey, thinks that R. Joshua "was a devotee of *Merkavah* mysticism while Ben Zoma veered towards speculative cosmogony." Levey, "Secret," 459.

96. Drawing on Ben Zoma's sayings (see above, n. 5, p. 1), Liebes makes the interesting point that, at least by the end of his life (and after the Trip), Ben Zoma neglects some other principles, namely his o*wn* principles of behavior: He does not seem to learn from every person; he does not master his *yetzer* (evil instinct); and he is not happy in his lot (he tasted of honey but wanted too much); and he does not honor others—in the form of his master or even his creator. Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 139. Cf. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 113. As to Ben Zoma's "sayings," Mordecai Roshwald argues that a coherent "way of life," based on Greek ethics lies behind them. "The Teaching of Ben Zoma," *Judaism* 42, no. 1 (1993): 14–28. Cf. Finkelstein, who thinks that the meaning of Ben Zoma's entry into the *Pardes* is that he "studied metaphysics and philosophy" and that his paradoxes reflect socratic influence. Finkelstein, "Ben Zoma," 452, n. 1.

97. Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 133 Is it possible that the word מהלך found in some of the versions (cf. n. 93 above) is a clandestine reference (keyword) to the disregard of

1. Whence the Feet

The question which Rabbi Joshua poses surely reflects the confusion which he experiences as a result of Ben Zoma's rudeness. The phrase 'whence are the feet' is bizarre by any measure and difficult to decipher. It might be translated to mean "with what are you preoccupied?" Urbach (in agreement with Lieberman) thinks that R. Joshua finds Ben Zoma deep in thought on the questions of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* (as Ben Zoma immediately confesses) and that, when startled out of his day dream, Ben Zoma assumes that R. Joshua is asking "whence was the world created?" If this is the case, Ben Zoma might be extending a Gnostic manner of greeting—which asked, "whence do you come, whither are you going?"[98]—to the question of the origin of the whole world. Lieberman thinks that Ben Zoma is so influenced by the kinds of Gnostic heresies which rabbinic Judaism was resisting at the time that when he answers "from nowhere, Rabbi,"[99] Ben Zoma means to offer a Hebraized equivalent of "nothing comes from nothing."[100] In other words, Ben Zoma has concluded that God created the world out of preexistent matter.

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halacha? This would stand in parallel to my use of the phrase עומד ותוהא just below.

98. This reading finds support in all three of the other versions of this story which instead of מאין הרגלים ("whence the feet"), have מאין לאין ("whence to whither?"). The common formulaic response to this Gnostic question ran something like, "I come from the darkness and head to the light." Cf. Socrates' question at the beginning of Plato's *Phaedrus*: "My dear Phaedrus, whence come you, and whither are you going?" (Ὦ φίλε Φαῖδρε, ποῖ δὴ καὶ πόθεν;)

99. Theodor points out that it is possible that the 'ר translated as "Rabbi" could be an abbreviation for רגליים (feet). Then the answer would be "the *feet* come from nowhere."

100. "'את תשובת בן זומא 'לא מאין' מפרש ליברמן במובן 'לא' — לא כלום — הבא מן האין'." Urbach, *חז"ל: פרקי אמונות ודעות*, 165. Urbach goes on to say that Ben Zoma is representing some kind of Gnostic position, but not that of any particular system: קשה לזהות את תיאורו של בן זומא עם אחת התורות הקוסמולוגיות הנפוצות במאה השנייה, וספק רב, אם באמת התכוון בן זומא לשיטה גנוסטית מסוימת. מה שניתן לומר לכל היותר הוא, שדבריו כוללים סממנים של מיתוס דואליסטי, המניח את קיומו של חומר קדמון. Urbach, *חז"ל: פרקי אמונות ודעות*, 166.

Even if Ben Zoma is not a Gnostic,[101] many have recognized that his demise has to do with some "theological flaw" which developed in his thinking.[102] It is not enough to say that he went out of his mind (that he was נפגע). Rather, readers have long intuited "that the sage was involved in some matter of a religious nature in which his interpretation or position went beyond the permissible limits of Judaism and contained elements which were not acceptable within the normative bounds of the Jewish faith."[103] This, then, is what it means to say that Ben Zoma "is gone" (הלך לו) or that that he "is on the outside."[104] This activity is also what causes his demise and is the object of Rabbi Joshua's concern.

2. Contemplating Creation

Eventually—after calling all of creation itself as witness—Rabbi Joshua gets Ben Zoma to answer his question, to give an account of what he is doing. The answer he gets is equally perplexing. First, Ben Zoma admits that he was doing the forbidden: that he

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101. The question of the relationship of early Judaism to Gnosticism is a difficult one. Earlier scholars—especially those who wrote before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library—tended to read much more influence (and resistance) into the thought of the Rabbis than was probably actually there. Many scholars today, however, reject the notion, purveyed by some, that Gnosticism began in Judaism. That said, there probably was a later Jewish *gnosis*, i.e., Jews who leaned in Gnostic directions, but the fact is that Gnostics knew a lot more about Judaism than Jews did about Gnosticism. See Ithamar Gruenwald, "The Problem of the Anti-Gnostic Polemic in Rabbinic Literature," eds R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenic Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 171–89. Even if Ben Zoma does not actually reflect Gnostic tendencies in this text, he could be taking up a glove thrown down by philosophy vis-à-vis preexistent matter, and he is definitely treading on the forbidden turf of "the Before." Hence, his ultimate fate.

102. Levey, "Secret," 462.

103. *Ibid.*, 455.

104. In the three other versions of the story, Rabbi Joshua tells his students that Ben Zoma is מבחוץ, that he is on the outside. The result is the same in all but one of them: he passes away in short order.

was contemplating the Works of Creation, i.e., that he was having a visionary experience of the created order. In so admitting, Ben Zoma makes use of the verb associated with the four absolutely forbidden investigations from our Mishnah—he says that he was contemplating—or better: having a visionary experience (*mistakel hayiti*) of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. In terms of the topic of creation, this should translate to mean that Ben Zoma was investigating "what came before." But here he says that he was contemplating the "Works of creation," not מה לפנים, not what came before. This may or may not be significant. It is possible that we have to allow for a little looseness in the language here. What Ben Zoma may mean—or what the critical narrator means to show—is that he *started off* considering the works of creation, i.e., the semi-permissible period of the six days; but what Rabbi Joshua discovers is one who has slipped back from the merely dangerous to the absolutely forbidden. We can only get closer to determining what exactly is going on here after we consider the content of what Ben Zoma says.

3. Between the Upper and Lower Waters

After describing the overall field of his activity, *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, Ben Zoma immediately informs Rabbi Joshua of his conclusion. He has seen (had a vision) that "between the upper and lower waters there are but one or two fingerbreadths."[105] This idea that the waters are (already) separated has led commentators from early on to suggest that what Ben Zoma was doing here was explicating a mystery concerning the status of things in the seventh verse of Genesis. Indeed, later in Genesis Rabbah itself, we find the statement that Genesis 1:7—*God made the expanse and separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse*[106]—was one of the

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105. כב' וג' אצבעות. Jerusalem Talmud and the Tosefta: a handbreadth (טפח); Babylonian Talmud: only three fingers: שלש אצבעות.

106. JPS.

verses by which "Ben Zoma shook the world."[107] If this is the case, then what Ben Zoma was doing may not have been so bad at all; for, his considerations remained well within the period of the six days of creation, inasmuch as he considers matters which occurred on the second day of the process of creation.

The weight of the evidence, however, points in another direction: back beyond even the first day, that is, back to the "period" before creation. First of all, there is the prooftext. Ben Zoma, at least in the text before us, does not refer to verse seven of Genesis. Instead, he cites the last part of verse two: "For it is not written here (Gen 1:2), *and the spirit of God* blew, but *hovered*, like a bird flying and flapping its wings, its wings barely touching." Considering this, we see, secondly, that the space between the waters which Ben Zoma describes here seems too small to contain our world, i.e., to reflect the space created by the separation of the second day. In fact, this is just the line of reasoning which the Gemara takes up in commenting on its version of the Ben Zoma story. The Talmud attempts to account for Ben Zoma's saying that there are only three fingers between the upper and the lower waters by asserting that he was, in his investigation, looking at the state of the waters on the "first day." After the separation (the *havdalah*) of the second day, we should find a much larger gap which would correspond with our experience of the breadth of the world we live in.[108] The gap which Ben Zoma

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107. *Gen. Rab.* 4:6 – ויעש אלהים את הרקיע – זה אחד המקראות שהרעיש בן זומא את העולם. As a matter of fact, Ben Zoma's comment here has led many to learn that "Gen. 1, 7 played its part in the early rabbinic meditation on creation." Christopher Rowland, "The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 10, no. 2 (1979): 148. There are several other texts where "Ben Zoma set the world in commotion." Even in the present text, according to Urbach, the very fact that Ben Zoma describes the 'Spirit of God' as touching yet not touching corresponds to two other Ben Zoma traditions in which he limits the divine role in creation and seeks to preserve the distance between God and matter: התיאור של רוח אלהים כנוגעת ואינה נוגעת תואם שני מאמרים אחרים של בן זומא, שבהם הוא מצמצם את העשייה באקט הבריאה ושומר על המרחק שבין האל לבין החומר. Urbach, *חז"ל: פרקי אמונות ודעות*, 166–67.

108. Compare the first question posed by Alexander to the Elders of the Negev, above p. 24.

describes is just too thin.[109]

I agree with the Gemara to a certain degree. However, I think its argument may also be purposefully deceptive. First, as Goshen Gottstein confirms, it seems that Ben Zoma is *not* occupied with the *first* day of creation; rather, he is taking a direct look at what was *before* day one. As we have asserted many times, this is the forbidden activity when it comes to the study of creation.[110] As a matter of fact, it appears that the Gemara, by saying that Ben Zoma is fixed on the *first* day, is indeed trying to distract us from the nature of his true investigation! In any case, given the prooftext and the dimensions involved, there can be little doubt that what we are concerned with here is not the second day of creation.[111]

4. Doing *Tohu*

If we need more evidence that he is studying matters "which are before," we need

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109. In point of fact, the Gemara in its discussion presents several positions on just how large the space between the waters is, and all of them are small: One sage even goes so far as to say that the distance is a hair's breadth (*smaller* than Ben Zoma's calculation)! *b. Ḥag.* 15a.

110. Other areas of study, e.g. the *Merkavah*, have their own limitations placed upon them. Goshen Gottstein argues that "the content of the four things [from the Mishnah] is reflected in [Ben Zoma's] speculation. Ben Zoma looks at the waters above and below—that is, what is above and what is below. He also seems to be looking at what was at the beginning of the world—thus, what was before." "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 79, n. 24.

111. Just to play devil's advocate, if he was commenting on the text which describes the creation of the heavens (on the second day), we could speculate that the vision which Ben Zoma had is correct. (Let us remember that nowhere does any text argue that what he sees is wrong about anything!—merely that he either shouldn't be seeing it (הסתכל) or, at least, discussing (דורש) it further.) It may well be that compared to the grand scheme of things, our world, in its entirety, occupies a space which seems but three finger-breadths. In other words, this world is nothing compared to the majesty of God. One is tempted here to think of the *Shi'ur Koma* literature, and the (much) later concept of *Tzimtzum* in Lurianic Kabbalah.

look no further than how Ben Zoma is described at the outset of the story. The phrase which in the translation reads "standing wrapped in speculation" is עומד ותוהא. In fact, this is why the *Genesis Rabbah* version of the Rabbi Joshua's encounter with Ben Zoma—itself a commentary on the second verse of the Bible—is key. For, the phrase עומד ותוהא contains a root which, if not directly related to the word *Tohu*,[112] could well remind the reader of it.[113] A colloquial translation might be better rendered as "he was standing in astonishment";[114] but, to my mind, the most exact translation—especially given the

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112. Gen 1:2 – and the earth was *tohu va-vohu*. (Some: formless and void.)

113. Even were the word תוהא not actually related to תהו, this is no matter. The playful rabbinic forms of exegesis—which we can rightfully utilize here to understand their thinking—would certainly seize upon the phonic similarity between the words. Plus, again we have the evidence of this being a comment on Gen 1:2.

114. Another way of reading it would be to say that Ben Zoma was "Tohu*ed*," i.e., was confused. On this meaning of the root תהי, תהה, תהא in the verbal form, see Jastrow, *Dictionary, s v.* Many rabbinic midrashim play on the root *Tohu* (and *Bohu*) with respect to the status of the earth at the beginning of creation. Again and again, the earth is said to be astonished at its lowly and unfair state. See *Gen. Rab.* 2:2 where, following Soncino, תהו ובהו, as applied to the earth, is rendered variously as "bewildered and astonished" or "desolate and anxious." Three similes are offered there. In the first two, the earth bemoans what she finds to be her unfair status in comparison to the heavens. In one case, she must work; in the other, she is banished. In the third simile, the earth is *toha* and *boha* because she knows that it is she who has brought forth human beings, and yet it is *she* who will be punished and suffer for their misstep (Gen 3:17). This amazing reading of (or play upon) the phrase *tohu va-vohu* was taken up in the writings of the Church fathers by Origen who had ample contact with rabbinic scholars. As van Winden discusses in his article, Origen originally understood the earth which is *invisibilis et incomposita* as being nothing other than "unformed matter" (*informem materiam*) for Moses (De princ. IV, 4,6). Calcidius said that Origen, however, was persuaded "by Hebrews" that the correct translation was "but the earth was dumbstruck by a kind of astonishment": *Terra autem stupida quadem admiratione* (Calcidius' Commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*). Origen took this to mean that the earth was struck dumb, captivated by the majesty of its maker (*et auctoris sui maiestate capta stuperet*), which van Winden explains means that the earth, "standing for matter, [lay] in admiration being perplexed because of the majesty of its creator (p. 461). Van Winden's article goes on to discuss how Tertullian showed that such a reading was in the hands of the Gnostics for whom the pathos of Sophia (who is intimately associated with matter) "originates in a ἔπληκτον θαῦμα, which is, without doubt, the exact equivalent of '*stupida admiratio*'" (p. 463). "The terms *Tohu* and *Bohu* indicate a state of wilderness and disorder. Normally these words are taken in a 'physical'

context—would be that Ben Zoma was **doing *Tohu***, i.e., he had gone back to beyond the six days of creation and was "preoccupied" with "what was before." His conclusion was, it seems, that *Tohu* (and the waters) preexist creation. His error, then, consists in "his very engagement with Genesis 1:2." If this is the case, Ben Zoma's statement probably constitutes the only Tannaitic commentary on the verse. The lesson: "Any study of Gen 1.2 becomes a consideration of *tohu va-vohu*,"[115] a *doing* of Tohu. And for undertaking this kind of forbidden speculation at all, Ben Zoma, in the minds of the Rabbis, got his rightful desserts.

We now may be in a position to shed some different light on what is the meaning of the water warning in the *Pardes* story with which I opened this paper. For in doing *Tohu*, i.e., by going back to that which was before, Ben Zoma encounters two waters. In other words, in the vision which led to his ultimate demise, a vision based on the creation

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sense. The Hebrew under discussion, and Origen after them, did nothing else than give those terms a 'psychical' meaning. According to them, the two words indicated a state of 'mental disorder.' The earth was 'bewildered,' 'perplexed,' hence "*stupida admiratione*." And in the allegorical context, in which earth stood for matter, matter was affected by that feeling. In other words, allegory was coupled with personification here." J. C. M. van Winden, "*Terra autem stupidi quaddam erat admiratione*: Reflections on a Remarkable Translation of Genesis 1:2," eds R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenic Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 460. I am indebted to Moshe Idel for directing me to van Winden's article.

115. Goshen Gottstein, "Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" 199. Goshen Gottstein goes on to argue, in accordance with *m. Ḥag*, that Ben Zoma's real mistake consists in offending the honor of God: "God's honor is the common denominator of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkabah*. Beyond that, there is no connection among the interdictions" (200). While I agree with Goshen Gottstein on these matters, I disagree with him (and with the vast majority of the scholarship) that something in Judaism's situation changed such that, in the Amoraic period, it became permissible to discuss *tohu va-vohu* and related topics. I have tried to distinguish between investigations of *Maaseh Bereshit* and deeper inquiries into "what came before." In all cases and at all times, treatment of the latter remains forbidden and occurs only under the greatest duress. Even then, one alludes to *tohu va-vohu* as obliquely as possible. Ben Zoma was breaking the rule. I do agree that כבוד ה', the honor of God, is the common denominator which holds our Mishnah together.

story, Ben Zoma is saying nothing if he is not saying, "water, water!" Indeed, to take it one step further, Ben Zoma seems to be admitting that a kind of chaos preexisted creation (in other words, that God did not create the world out of absolute nothing)[116] such that, in the beginning, the world was "water within water."[117]

C. The Break with Rabbi Akiba: Dishonoring the Creator

By interpreting Genesis 1:2 in the manner in which he does, and by explicating it in front of his teacher as he does,[118] Ben Zoma breaks with Rabbi Akiba: he does precisely that which his mystical master said the four journeymen should not do.[119]

I would argue again that, in the last analysis, we learn that the story of the four who entered the *Pardes* should not be read historically, that is, as an actual single event in which the four scholars participated together. Instead, we should read the text prismatically and understand that each of the four figures represent types—in this case, types of activities—such that the fate which awaits each of them contains a different

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116. See the Epilogue below, p. 41.

117. In *y. Ḥag.* 2:1 (77c) we find a story which parallels the midrash from *Gen. Rab.* 1:5 which we discussed above (p. 26 ff.). Here, too, a simile is offered to a mortal king who builds his palace on a "place of sewers, trash and stench" (למלך שבנה פלטין ביבים במקום אשפות במקום סריות). The text proceeds to rail against anyone who would say "In the beginning the world was water within water" (מים במים) [since this person] causes great damage (פוגם). Cf. *Exod. Rab.* 15:7.

118. Lieberman argues that the Ben Zoma's true "sin" has to do with his speculation on the space between the waters, an activity which he associates with a Gnostic preoccupation. *Tosefta Kifshuto, Ḥagigah*, p. 1294. If true, this would serve as yet another link between this text and the *Pardes* story, since, as we discussed, many scholars see a Gnostic influence in the Babylonian Talmud's version of the episode. See above, p. 9.

119. Liebes also offers this possibility that Rabbi Akiba's warning against saying "water, water" should be linked to Ben Zoma's *derash* concerning the upper and lower waters. But he goes on to argue that the warning has to do with the context of Ben Zoma's words, i.e., disrespect for the master, and not so much the subject matter *per se*; Ben Zoma (and Ben Azzai and Elisha ben Abuya) didn't know the limits of their quest and delved into it as one would into deep waters. Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע*, 143–44.

lesson. In other words, the story *is* a parable, perhaps four parables corresponding to the nature of each's mystical activity; what is different here (and difficult) is that we must search elsewhere in the grand "text" which is the mystical collection in order to find the moral to the story.[120]

In sum, the common denominator among all of the four journeymen, with the exception of Rabbi Akiba, is that they dishonor the creator.[121] They do this by delving into different areas of the forbidden. Ben Zoma's particular activity, as opposed perhaps to that of the others, has to do with an investigation into the Works of Creation. He, as far as we can tell, does not gain a vision of the *Merkavah*.[122] Instead, he *does Tohu*. And what conclusion does he reach? What does he end up saying?: Water, water!

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120. It seems to me that Maimonides, in his *Guide*, when he alerts us to the fact that we will have to search around and cut and paste to understand what he is getting at, utilizes just such an obfuscating method! He says that difficulties with the *Guide*—which deals largely with "the mysteries of the Torah"—have to do with the fifth and seventh causes which account for contradictory or contrary statements. See the Introduction, Moses b. Maimon, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), Vol. I, p. 17 ff.

121. As Goshen Gottstein sums it up nicely: "Ben Zoma's death makes tangible the statement: 'He should never have come into the world.'" Goshen Gottstein, "Is *Ma'aseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" 198.

122. This is a very difficult statement to make. It could well be that the two subjects were not so clearly delineated in the mind of the rabbis.

V. Epilogue: On Correct and Incorrect Exegesis: Preemptive Exegesis

A city is built up by the blessing of the upright,
But it is torn down by the speech of the wicked.[123]

Because it was so dangerous, the Elders of the Negev[124] sought to build a fence around just the sort of reading of Genesis 1:2 which Ben Zoma offers. As I have hinted above, to say that Ben Zoma's explication was problematic is not, however, to say that it was untrue. When the rabbis use such phrases as "let the lying lips be still," or when the *Pardes* episode refers to those "speak falsehood," these claims could well fall under the category of protesting too much. In other words, it may be precisely because those who say "water, water" and "this world is built on a dunghill" (i.e., on *Tohu*) are telling the truth that they become so dangerous. The problem is not that they are lying; the problem is that they are *speaking* at all. In fact, the rabbis seem to have known well that such ascriptions as "speaking falsehoods" and "lying lips" were themselves the untruth: they were euphemisms (or "malphemisms" really) meant to protect the real truth from coming to the light of day.

A. Preemptive Exegesis

As we learn in politics, suppressed truths cannot remain hidden forever. So what happens when the rabbis are forced to present their own exegesis—say, on the implications of Genesis 1:2—precisely because others are doing so? In other words, what happens when the rabbis find themselves forced to offer an interpretation of Genesis 1:2, because, if they do not, one less palatable to them will win the day? Such a "pre-emptive

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123. Prov 11:11. JPS.
124. See above, p. 24.

exegesis" of Genesis 1:2—a verse the Elders of the Negev hoped to avoid altogether—is what we find in the famous story of Rabban Gamliel and the philosopher:

> 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, wind (ruah), and the deep,' replied he. 'Woe to that man,' he exclaimed. 'The term '"creation" is used by Scripture in connection with all of them.' (כולהון כתיב בהן בריאה) *Tohu* and *bohu*: *I make peace*[125] *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); wind: *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).[126]

What is interesting from the outset is that the philosopher accepts the playing field upon which a rabbinic debate much take place. Recognizing that he must use Scripture to make his argument, he confronts Rabban Gamliel with the Bible's own inclusion of "elements" in Genesis 1:2. By all rights, it seems to him that it is the Torah itself which allows him to conclude that *Tohu* and *Bohu* and their cohorts preexisted the creation, serving an artisan, God (a demiurge?),[127] as the paints with which the divine canvas is painted. What is even more disturbing to Rabban Gamliel is that these materials are not merely passive; they are described as *helping* God (סממנים טובים שסייעו אותו). In other words, "if the philosopher were correct, then God is not omnipotent and a kind of dualism exists."[128] Not only does God create out of *something*, but this something plays a role in creation. Such a

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125. Instead of seeing *Tohu* and *Bohu* as a conglomerate for evil, Altmann separates them and takes peace to equal *Bohu*; evil to equal *Tohu*. Alexander Altmann, "Gnostic Themes in Rabbinic Cosmology," in *Essays in Honour of the Very Rev. Dr. J.H. Hertz* (London: E. Goldston, 1942), 19–32. Contrast this with Troster who does exactly the opposite and sees *Tohu* as the Peace and Bohu as the evil! Troster, "Asymmetry, Negative Entropy and the Problem of Evil," 454. Altmann seems to me to be wrong. Rather, the text comes to teach that *Tohu* and *Bohu* are corporately evil. It is true, however, that the "philosopher" does name each of them as separate materials.

126. *Gen. Rab.* 1:9.

127. We could argue that this text points to the threat of the Gnostic heresy.

128. Troster, "Asymmetry, Negative Entropy and the Problem of Evil," 453.

view—based on a viable reading of Scripture!—threatens the one constant which runs not only through rabbinic thought, but also holds true throughout the more daring textual adventures of Jewish mysticism: the Aloneness and Unity of God.[129] Rabban Gamliel's main task then is firmly to establish two things: that God created all of the elements in Gen 1:2 and that, therefore, they did not help God in any way. Taking prooftexts from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, he shows that the uniquely divine term for creating—*bara*—is used with respect to all of the elements. The result is a clear rejection of the world being created out of any matter which was not—at least—itself first created.[130]

B. Ben Zoma vs. Rabban Gamliel

We are now in a position to reflect upon the differences between the exegetical activity of Ben Zoma and that of Rabban Gamliel. First, using the example of the Elders of the Negev, we can infer that Rabban Gamliel does not want to broach the topic of Genesis 1:2; he would not do so, were he not forced to. Ben Zoma, on the other hand, even if forced to do so by mental illness, seems to take up this activity on his own and

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129. Cf. Weiss, *Untersuchungen Zur Kosmologie*, 79. It is not necessarily the case that preexistent matter would threaten God's unity; but this seems to be a concern here.

130. Weiss, who does not believe that the Rabbis display any explicit concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, sees the main point here to be that God does not need any help. He does acknowledge, however, that this passage verges on a kind of proto-*creatio ex nihilo*. The endeavor to establish such an incipient doctrine is caused completely by pressure from the outside. Weiss, *Untersuchungen Zur Kosmologie*, 86–91. Vajda takes a middle position between Urbach and Weiss. He thinks that this passage acknowledges the existence of "ontological intermediaries," but that these are portrayed as created. I myself tend to side with Urbach and read a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* into this story. This is the position of Cohen-Yashar, who bases his entire theory of an early Jewish view of *creatio ex nihilo* on the use of the word ברא here. Yochanon Cohen-Yashar, "על בעיות הבריאה יש מאין בכתבי פילון," in *Annual of Bar Ilan University*, Decennial Volume 1955–1965 (Ramat Gan, 1967), 60–66.

willingly. With the same kind of "spiritual gluttony"[131] found among those who seek a vision of *Merkavah*, he pursues precisely that which is forbidden by the Mishnah: he contemplates what came before. Second, even if Rabban Gamliel thinks that the philosopher is correct, he certainly does not say so. He prevents the message of those very lying lips which would dare tell the truth from making headway—that is, the lying lips of one who would take too much honey.[132] Third, Rabban Gamliel limits himself to the explication, to the *derash*—the right *derash*. He uses what the Hebrew Bible has to offer to his advantage, and once he has accomplished his (defensive) mission, he speculates no further.[133]

If we combine the story of Rabban Gamliel with that of the Elders of the Negev, and contrast both with Ben Zoma's infraction, we come to understand the difficult dilemma which confronted the rabbis. Were *Tohu va-Vohu* only *not* written! — But since it is, the best strategy is to evade it (as the Elders successfully did); and, if you cannot

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131. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 105.

132. In the story of Ben Zoma's demise (see above page 29 ff.), it is interesting to reflect upon what exactly Rabbi Joshua might have said to his other disciples when he went back to them. Did he just tell them that Ben Zoma was not long for this world; or did he also inform them of the content and thrust of Ben Zoma's vision? If he did the latter, then Ben Zoma's death would serve as a deterrent to those of his students who might consider taking up the same theme on their own.

133. We can compare Rabban Gamliel's (proper) behavior to that of Rabbi Akiba. For, according to Goshen Gottstein, "Rabbi Akiba did attain great mystical heights and ascension. He did not, however, follow the questionable path of self-initiated visionary activities." In other words, Rabbi Akiba did not feast his eyes. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 105. Rabban Gamliel, in his defense of the Creator, offers a doctrine not without problems of its own. For if God is the creator of evil (and not merely its Maker, as God is of the good), this renders God responsible for evil in the world. This is the same radical conclusion to which Second Isaiah is led. The prophet, confronted by the same problem and verses with which the philosopher confronts Rabban Gamliel, is forced to defend God to the extreme, even at the expense of a simple theodicy. It is no wonder, then, that Rabban Gamliel uses Isaiah for the source of his prooftexts! See the seminal article by Moshe Weinfeld, "האל הבורא בבראשית א ובנבואת ישעיהו השני," *Tarbiz* 37 (1968): 105–32.

avoid the topic, offer a *derasha* which does the least harm, refer to the matter obscurely, and with the *sole* purpose of upholding the honor and uniqueness of God. Ultimately (and ironically), the rabbis find themselves in the awkward position of having to defend God against the implications of God's own text.

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