

ABSTRACT

There is a great body of Christian literature that is focused on the miracles of Jesus and many accounts of miracles appear in the Christian Bible. However, miracles are deeply present in concurrent Jewish literature and yet relatively unexplored. “Wonder of Wonders, Miracle of Miracles: The Shift in the Meaning of Miracles from the Hebrew Bible to Early Rabbinic Literature” analyzes primary and secondary sources and expands current understanding of miracles in early rabbinic literature and its relationship to the biblical understanding of miracles.

This thesis explores the shift in the view of “miracle” from the Hebrew Bible to early rabbinic literature in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the subject matter, guiding questions, scope, and methodology of the thesis. The first major content chapter, Chapter 2, focuses on “Miracle in the Hebrew Bible,” concentrating the examination on the “Splitting of the Sea” miracle in Exodus 14:10-31, the “Brass Serpent” miracle in Numbers 21:4-9, and the fire from heaven miracle in the story of “Elijah and the Prophets of Baal” in I Kings 18:20-40. Chapter 3 examines those same three miracles in the context of rabbinic literature. This chapter considers particular examples in order to investigate how these miracles are understood by the early rabbis and how they function in their context in rabbinic literature. *Rosh HaShanah* 3:8 is drawn from the *Mishnah* (codified circa 200 CE¹), b. Sanhedrin 39b is drawn from the Babylonian Talmud (codified between 500-700 CE²), and Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:17 is drawn from *Midrash Rabbah*, specifically Deuteronomy *Rabbah* (codified circa 9th century CE³). These texts span early rabbinic literature. The particular texts examined trace the path from the God-centered view of “miracle” in the biblical text to the more human focus of the rabbis. After this specific analysis, Chapter 4 turns to look at the overall shift in the view of miracle from the Bible to the early rabbis. Chapter 4 surveys key figures in each period from the late Biblical period (Elijah, Elisha) around the 5th century BCE to the Pharisaic, pre-rabbinic period (Jesus, Hanina ben Dosa) to the Mishnaic and Talmudic period, of *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* (Nahum Ish Gam Zo), and into the 800s CE just after the Talmud was closed and codified (Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 10:3). Chapter 5 draws conclusions about the theological implications of such a shift, as well as the ongoing significance of this area of study. An appendix, which follows Chapter 5, proposes areas for further study and exploration based on this thesis and encourages continued Jewish scholarship in this subject area.

¹ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Mishnah,” by Stephen G. Wald.

² Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Talmud, Babylonian,” by Stephen G. Wald.

³ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Deuteronomy Rabbah,” by Moshe David Herr.

**WONDER OF WONDERS, MIRACLE OF MIRACLES:
THE SHIFT IN THE MEANING OF MIRACLES
FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE TO EARLY RABBINIC LITERATURE**

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⁴ the *Yerushalmi*: ultimately, based on quality of content, I elected for this thesis to focus on the *Bavli*

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⁵ *pointing me toward b. Shab. 32a as an important text in any discussion of the early Rabbinic understanding of miracles*: See Chapter 5: Miracles: A Conclusion

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⁶ *always been available for a consultation about the acidity of vinegar*: My father-in-law is a retired chemist, who spent over 25 years of his career working in food safety for the Giant Food Inc. chain of grocery stores, in particular. See Chapter 4, pages 67-68 about vinegar.

CHAPTER 1: MIRACLES: AN INTRODUCTION

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle.

The other is as though everything is a miracle.” – Dr. Albert Einstein⁷

“Miracle” is a word that is used commonly in our contemporary times. “Miracle” is used in the American lexicon, just as the word “awesome” has come to mean “great,” without meaning “awe inspiring” and implying within the word both a sense of wonder and fear, as it once did. With its usage, the meaning of the word “miracle” has become vague and has lost meaning.

Each year as the holiday of חנוכה *Hanukah*, the Jewish Festival of Lights, approaches, rabbis around the world begin to describe those wintery days as the “Season of Miracles.” But what does this mean? For most Jews, those miracles at *Hanukah* are miracles enshrined in history. Jews recite הלל *Hallel* (Ps. 113-118) to commemorate those wondrous deeds from times gone by. When lighting *Hanukah* candles, Jews recite the blessing שְׁעֶשְׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ, to bless God for the “miracles that [God] made for our ancestors.”

For generations, since the morning prayers were set down in prayer books, starting with seminal works like *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (9th century CE)⁸ and *Makhzor Vitry* (12th century CE),⁹ Jews have been reciting variations of the morning blessings from b. Ber. 60b. These blessings describe morning experiences, such as waking up, opening one’s eyes, sitting up, getting out of bed, and getting dressed. They were incorporated into the very first part of morning worship called ברכות השחר or “Morning Blessings.” As early as the first

⁷ Albert Einstein, with editors Alice Calaprice and Freeman Dyson, *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 483.

⁸ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Prayer Books,” by Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt and Eric Lewis Friedland.

⁹ Ibid.

printing of *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book* in 1975, Reform Jewish prayer books have given this set of blessings from b. Ber. 60b, within the rubric of ברכות השחר or Morning Blessings, their own name: נסים בכל יום or “Daily Miracles.”

Undeniably, waking up, opening one’s eyes and recognizing that one is not blind, sitting up straight and recognizing that one’s back is not crooked, getting out of bed and standing on the floor recognizing that the earth beneath one’s foot is firm, and clothing oneself recognizing that one does not have to go about naked are blessings in the life of any person who experiences them. It is beautiful that the Jewish tradition has enshrined these experiences as so meaningful in the relationship between God and human beings that people should bless God for opening the eyes of the blind and clothing the naked. However, are these נסים “miracles”?

The Babylonian Talmud (codified between 500-700 CE¹⁰) in tractate *Berachot*, or Blessings, 20a records the following conversation about miracles between a student and his teacher:

b. Berachot 20a

R. Papa said to Abaye, “How is it that in early generations (lit. the time/year of the first generations) miracles happened for them, and why in our time (lit. year) miracles do not happen for us?”

Is it because of study? In the years of Rav Yehudah¹¹ all studies were in גזיקין (a single order of the *Mishnah*), but we study six orders (meaning the whole *Mishnah*).

מסכת ברכות דף כ.א.

אמר ליה רב פפא לאביי: מאי שנא ראשונים דאתרחיש להו ניסא, ומאי שנא אנן דלא מתרחיש לן ניסא?

אי משום תנויי - בשני דרב יהודה כולי תנויי בניקין הוה, ואנן קא מתנינן שיתא סדרי

¹⁰ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Talmud, Babylonian," by Stephen G. Wald.

¹¹ Probably, רב יהודה בר יחזקאל R. Judah b. Ezekiel, a second generation *Amora* and head of the Academy of Pumbedita, two generations before Abaye held the same position. – see Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Amoraim," by Alyssa M. Gray.

And when Rav Yehudah arrived at [tractate] עוקצין (the last tractate of the last order of the *Mishnah*) [at the law] “If a woman pickles vegetables in a pot...” And others say, “Olives pickled with their leaves are ritually clean...”¹² He said, “I see here all of the debates of Rav¹³ and Samuel.”^{14,15} But we study עוקצין in 13 sittings/academies¹⁶.

And in the case of Rav Yehudah, when he would pull off one his shoes¹⁷ [during a drought] rain would come, but as for us, we afflict our souls and cry out loud – yet no one takes notice of us!”

He (Abaye) said to him, “The former [generations] would give their lives for the sanctity of [God's] name; we do not give our lives for the sanctity of [God's] name.

וכי הוה מטי רב יהודה בעוקצין האשה שוכבשת ירק בקדרה ואמרי לה זיתים שכבשן בטרפיהן טהורים אמר: היות דרב ושמואל קא חזינא הכא, ואנן קא מתנינן בעוקצין תליסר מתיבתא

ואילו רב יהודה, כי הוה שליף חד מסאניה - אתי מטרא, ואנן קא מצערינן נפשין ומצוח קא צוחינן - ולית דמשגח בן -

אמר ליה: קמאי הוו קא מסרי נפשיהו אקדושת השם, אנן לא מסרינן נפשין אקדושת השם.

Abaye was a 4th generation *Amora* and head of the academy at *Pumbedita*.¹⁸ Rav Papa was a 5th generation *Amora*, student of Abaye, and founder and head of the Academy at *Naresh*.¹⁹

The Rav Judah they discuss is probably ר' יהודה בר יחזקאל R. Judah b. Ezekiel, a second generation *Amora* and head of the Academy of *Pumbedita*, two generations before Abaye held the same position. Rav Papa believes that miracles were still happening for people, as

¹² “If a woman pickles vegetables in a pot...” And others say, “Olives pickled with their leaves are ritually clean...” This is a difference in manuscripts and traditions about how m. Ukz. 2:1 should read.

¹³ Rav (רבי אבא בר איבו) or Rabbi Abba b. Aivu): founder and head of the Academy of Sura – see Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Amoraim,” by Alyssa M. Gray.

¹⁴ Samuel (שמואל בראבא Samuel of Nehardea or Samuel b. Aba): head of the Academy of Nehardea – see Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Amoraim,” by Alyssa M. Gray.

¹⁵ *all of the debates of Rav and Samuel*: The significance of this statement is that the main body of the text in the Babylonian Talmud is made up of the legal and ritual opinions recorded in Rav's name and his debates with Samuel. It is like Rav Yehudah is saying that this one verse from the *Mishnah* is as challenging for him as the whole of rabbinic debates

¹⁶ *13 sittings/academies*: In one reading this statement could be understood to mean that Rav Papa and his contemporaries have 13 different versions of this text from the *Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, *Baraitot*, and other similar sources. In a different reading, this statement could be understood to mean that there are 13 different academies learning this idea and adding even more than Rav and Samuel.

¹⁷ *Rav Yehudah would pull off one his shoes*: Presumably in preparation for fasting

¹⁸ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Amoraim,” by Alyssa M. Gray.

¹⁹ Ibid.

recently as two or three generations before his time. The theology of this text is that it was not the merit that the former generations gathered through their learning of Torah that made miracles for them. Rather, Abaye asserts that it was because former generations would willingly give their lives to sanctify God's name in the world; they were willing to be martyrs.

What does this text and theology say about miracles? Is this dialogue representative of an early rabbinic understanding of the concept of miracles? If the Babylonian Talmud is the record of discussions, stories, and learning around the ideas in the *Mishnah*, and the *Mishnah* is understood to be Oral Torah which is a companion and commentary on the Torah, what is the relationship of this early rabbinic understanding of miracles to the way the Torah and the Hebrew Bible, writ large, understands miracles? These questions will be explored in the chapters to come.

In the Chapters to Come

Chapter two seeks to characterize the terminology of biblical miracles. It works to separate magic from miracles, to focus more clearly on what "miracle" means in the Hebrew Bible. Then, the chapter explores three particular miracles that exemplify different categories of biblical miracles. Each miracle is translated and analyzed within its genre and setting to expose its local meaning within the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter three takes these three miracles into early rabbinic literature. One is examined in a mishnaic text, one is viewed in its context in the Babylonian Talmud, and one is analyzed in its later midrashic context. Each rabbinic interpretation of a miracle is translated and commented upon in its own context, and in contrast with the biblical meaning of the miracle. In the multivocal rabbinic tradition, there are many ways these biblical texts

are used and viewed. Light treatment is given to other usages, but the focus of chapter three is to lead to the main argument of this thesis, the shift in meaning from the Bible to the early rabbis as seen in chapter 4.

Chapter four examines the overall shift from the view of “miracle” in the Bible to the view of “miracle” in early rabbinic literature. The shift is viewed through periods of time: late biblical, pre-rabbinic/Pharisaic, and early rabbinic through the latest point in early rabbinic literature represented by *Midrash Rabbah*, specifically דברים רבה or Deuteronomy *Rabbah* (codified circa 9th century CE²⁰). The figures representative of each time period are: Elijah and Elisha in the late biblical period; Elijah and Elisha in contrast with Jesus in the pre-rabbinic period; (Rabbi) Hanina ben Dosa in contrast with Jesus in the pre-rabbinic period; Rabbi Nahum Ish Gam Zo in the early rabbinic period; and a *midrash* from דברים רבה, which summarizes the shift from the biblical to rabbinic period.

Chapter five draws conclusions from the material presented in this thesis. The chapter also expresses the ongoing significance of Reform Jews, in particular, studying miracles. Finally, the appendix, which appears after chapter five proposes further areas for study, based on this thesis, and encourages continued Jewish scholarship in this subject area.

²⁰ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Deuteronomy Rabbah," by Moshe David Herr.

CHAPTER 2: MIRACLE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Terminology

There is a joke about Modern Hebrew and the modern State of Israel. The joke centers around the term *nes* נֶס meaning “miracle” in Rabbinic and Modern Hebrew and Nescafé, the common brand of instant coffee made by Nestlé, often referred to as “Nes.” The joke goes that there is something wrong with any culture for whom instant coffee is called a miracle.

נֶס in the Bible is not clearly a miracle. In Num. 21:8-9, נֶס seems to be a pole to set an object on so it will be elevated. Similarly, in Isa. 30:17, in the structure of the poetry of the verse (עַל-רֹאשׁ הַהָר, וְכִנֹּס, עַל-הַגִּבְעָה כְּתֹרֶן), נֶס is paralleled with תֹּרֶן “a beacon.” Like with the pole, נֶס is meant as part of an elevated symbol to the people. Later in Isaiah, in a metaphor about a ship, נֶס is used to indicate the sail of that ship (Isa. 33:23). It is used this same way in Ezek. 27:7, in the midst of verses describing ships. However, there are two verses that indicate נֶס is a sign. Most clearly, Num. 26:10, a verse describing the punishment of Datan, Abiram, and Korah, and the fire that consumed 250 more, such that יִהְיוּ לְנֶס “they became a sign.” This verse gives us a hint to the meaning of the phrase יִהְיוּ לְנֶס.

נֶסִי in Ex. 17:15. That verse states: וַיִּבֶן מֹשֶׁה מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יְהוָה | נֶסִי “Moses built an altar and named it “*Adonai-nissi*” or “sign of God.”

There are other words used to term miracles in such as: גְּדֻלוֹת, פְּלֵא/נִפְלְאוֹת, אֲתוֹת/אוֹת, and מוֹפְתִים/מוֹפְת. גְּדֻלוֹת or great deeds, a term which always appears in the plural, are those deeds beyond human ability which are typically done by God (e.g., Deut. 10:21; Jer. 45:5; Ps. 71:19; 106:21-22; 131:1; Job 5:9; 9:10; 37:5) and only once in the Bible by a person,

namely Elisha (see: II Kgs. 8:4-5). “An examination of the term *gedolot* thus indicates that it refers to the totality of areas of God’s power and rule: creation, its rules, exceptions to these rules, and the deliverance of Israel and individuals from the evil caused them. In this regard, miracles are but on expression (and not necessarily a unique one) of God’s rule over the universe and man.”²¹

The term נִפְלְאוֹת, which also always appears in the plural form, sometimes appears in the same verse with גְּדֻלוֹת (Job 5:9; 9:10; 37:5). נִפְלְאוֹת encompass miracles and more, like גְּדֻלוֹת, they describe the “totality of God’s deeds”²² (e.g., Ex. 3:20; 34:10; Josh. 3:5; Jud. 6:13; Mich. 7:15; Ps. 9:2; 75:2; 78:4, 11, 32; 96:3; 106:7, 22; 107:8, 15, 21, 24, 31; 136:4). The noun פְּלָא shares the same root of נִפְלְאוֹת. It is “found only in biblical poetry.... [and] generally appears as the object of the verb root *ayin, sin, heh* – ‘to make or do,’ and indicates God’s deliverance”²³ (e.g., Ex. 15:11; Isa. 25:1; Ps. 78:12; 88:11, 13; 89:6).

The term אֶתְאוֹת, singular, or אֶתְאוֹת, plural, has the general meaning of sign(s) in the Bible. Both are used frequently. The particular occurrences of interest are those that refer to signs from God, of, or for God. אֶתְאוֹת appears throughout the Bible (e.g., Gen. 4:15; 9:12, 13, 17; 17:11; Ex. 3:12; 4:8 (2 times); 8:19; 12:13; 31:13, 17; Num. 17:25; Deut. 13:2, 3; Josh. 4:6, I Sam. 2:34; II Kgs. 19:29; 20:8, 9; Is. 7:11, 14; 20:3; 37:30; 38:7, 22; 55:13; 66:19; Jer. 44:29; Ezek. 4:3; 14:8; 20:12, 20; Ps. 86:17). In its plural form, אֶתְאוֹת, also appears broadly (e.g., Ex. 4:9, 17, 28, 30; 7:3; 10:1, 2; Num. 14:11, 22; Deut. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:3 (with the word מַעֲשֵׂיו or “works”); 26:8; 29:2; Josh. 24:17; I Sam. 10:7, 9;

²¹ Yair Zakovich, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Mod Books, 1991), 13-14.

²² Ibid. 14.

²³ Ibid. 15.

Is. 8:18; Jer. 32:20, 21; Ps. 74:9; 78:43; 135:9; Neh. 9:10). אֹת or אֹתוֹת are frequently used in the Bible to reference the wonders God did in Egypt. However, these terms are also used to reference covenants of God, like after the flood with the rainbow (e.g., Gen. 9:12, 13, 17) or the covenant of circumcision (e.g., Gen. 17:11), even Shabbat seems to carry this kind of weight as a sign (e.g., Ex. 31:13, 17; Ezek. 20:12, 20). Prophets are given signs and also deliver signs to kings and the whole community, alike. Even false prophets use an אֹת when they tempt Israelites to turn and worship other gods (Deut. 13:2, 3).

These terms אֹת or אֹתוֹת also appear coupled with מוֹפֵת or מוֹפְתִים\מוֹפְתִים. This phrase, “sign(s) and wonder(s)” appears in many places, frequently referencing the miracles God performed in Egypt (e.g., Ex. 7:3; Deut. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 13:2, 3; 26:8; 29:2; Is. 8:18; 20:3; Jer. 32:20, 21; Ps. 78:43; 135:9; Neh. 9:10). However, the terms מוֹפֵת or מוֹפְתִים\מוֹפְתִים meaning wonder(s) or a sign (I Kgs. 13:3, 5; Ezek. 12:6, 11; 24:24, 27; Zech. 3:8; II Chr. 32:24) also appear without אֹת or אֹתוֹת (e.g., Ex. 4:21; 7:9; 11:9, 10; I Kgs. 13:3, 5; Ezek. 12:6, 11; 24:24, 27; Zech. 3:8; I Chr. 16:12 appears with נִפְלְאוֹת; II Chr. 32:24, 31; Ps. 105:5 appears with נִפְלְאוֹת).

For all of the power this variety of terms carries, each on its own and in combination, none of them have the direct resonance of the word נִס in Rabbinic Hebrew. Yet, there is no question that the Bible is filled with miraculous events. These terms point to events in the Bible that are miraculous, that describe God’s acts in our world.

Miracles vs. Magic

There are other events in the Bible that might seem to be miracles, but instead should be label as magic or, even, sympathetic magic. For instance, in Genesis 30, after the birth of

Joseph, Jacob is ready to move his family out of his father-in-law's house and would like to leave with a fair wage after all of his years of work. Lavan, Jacob's father-in-law, agrees to his plan: to remove every spotted or speckled goat or sheep and every brown sheep for himself, leaving the unmarked animals for Lavan (Gen. 30:32-34). Nahum Sarna points out that Lavan would likely be open to this deal, because "in the Near East, sheep are generally white and goats are dark brown or black. A minority of sheep may have dark patches and goats white markings."²⁴

With the flocks still in Jacob's care, he sets to work. Knowing that the animals mate and conceive at the watering trough, Jacob takes sticks and peels streaks in them and places them at the watering trough (vv. 37-38). In the next verse, we see Jacob's idea working. Animals who conceived looking at the streaked sticks bore streaked, spotted and speckled young (vv. 39). Moreover, he places the sticks in the sight of the stronger animals (vv. 41), but not before the weaker ones (vv. 42). Thus, his streaked flock is stronger and healthier than the one he leaves for his father-in-law.

God is not mentioned in this passage. Jacob seems to have this folk wisdom for breeding flocks. He knows where and when they will conceive and how to influence the outcome. Parents looking at striped sticks produce striped younglings. Simply put, it is sympathetic magic²⁵. God is only mentioned in the following chapter, after an accusation of theft from Lavan's sons. Jacob explains to Rachel and Leah how God protected him (Gen. 31:7) and even give him a dream to see that this plan had worked (vv. 11-12). The angel of God asks Jacob, in his dream, to return to the land of his birth (vv. 13). God never

²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation/Commentary by Nahum Sarna* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 212.

²⁵ Merriam-Webster defines sympathetic magic as "magic based on the assumption that a person or thing can be supernaturally affected through its name or an object representing it." – "Sympathetic Magic," Merriam-Webster, accessed 9 Feb. 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sympathetic%20magic>

commands Jacob's actions. Jacob never prays to God for this knowledge. None of the Bible's miracle terms are used it. It is entirely other than God's work.

Here, we can define the difference between this act of magic and miracles inherent in religion. Jacob Neusner complicates the differentiation: "If magic refers to the use of means, such as charms, spells, incantations, or other occult acts, to exert supernatural power over natural forces, then one is forced to make theological judgments about what is a charm and what is a "genuine" prayer."²⁶ Looking for an answer, he examines Erwin Goodenough's distinction:

...it is held that magic, in contrast to religion, first, looks to physical ends, such as cure of the sick, avoidance of illness, escape from accident or financial failure, or success in love. Secondly, to do this it uses material means, such as fetishistic objects or rituals, or verbal charms written or spoken. Thirdly, these work by compulsion rather than by petition.²⁷

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, in his 1948 book, *Magic, Science and Religion* took on the ideas of Tylor, Frazer, Marett and Durkheim in distinguishing and linking these three concepts. When Catherine Bell writes about "Magic, Religion, and Science," in her book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, she distills the core of Malinowski's argument:

Religious rituals, for example, are concerned with common traditions of communion with spirits, ancestors, or gods and tend to address emotional or psychological needs. By contrast, magic, for Malinowski, is essentially manipulative and thus contrasts with religion, which aspires to a more authentic relationship with divine beings. In

²⁶ Jacob Neusner, *The Wonder-Working Lawyers of Talmudic Babylonia: The Theory and Practice of Judaism in its Formative Age* (Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 59-60.

²⁷ Erwin Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 155.

his view, magic commands, while religion seeks. In magic, techniques are a means to an end; in religion, worship is an end in itself.²⁸

These voices distinguishing magic from religion suggest to us that miracles are not manipulated, but granted based on relationship with God or performed through the pure will of God.

Biblical scholar and Professor Yair Zakovich, of Hebrew University, argues that distinguishing the miracles of the Bible from other kind of events “depends on how the event is depicted in the Bible....on the degree of magnificence of the event and on the reactions of the heroes or of the narrator.”²⁹ He provides a literary definition for the Bible’s miracles: “a miracle is divine intervention (overt or concealed) in the rules of creation, either by a break in the order or by means of a ‘fortuitous occurrence’ provided that it leaves a strong impression in the literary text.”³⁰

The “Splitting of the Sea” in Exodus 14:10-31, the “Brass Serpent” in Numbers 21:4-9, and the fire from heaven in the story of “Elijah and the Prophets of Baal” in I Kgs. 18:20-40 are just such miraculous events; they leave strong impressions in the biblical text. They are stories marked with divine intervention against the rules of nature. The people react in these texts as though they have witnessed a miracle.

Each of these narratives represents a different aspect of biblical miracles, a different significant part of the biblical conception of miracle. The Splitting of the Sea includes both paradox (crossing the sea on dry ground)³¹ and demarcation (between peoples: it happens for

²⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997), 48.

²⁹ Yair Zakovich, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Mod Books, 1991), 42.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 50-52.

the Israelites but not for the Egyptians; between space: sea and dry land).³² The Brass Serpent is the narrative of miracle coming after prayer.³³ The story of Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al* includes both the concepts of demarcation (fire comes down for him and not for the prophets of *Ba'al*) and the miracle within the miracle.³⁴ Each of these narratives centers on God and the divine miracle, however, there is a concept of the human miracle to which we will turn in chapter four.

Splitting the Sea: Text and Outline

Exodus 14:10-31

10 And [when] Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians were riding after them; and they were very afraid; and the children of Israel cried out to יהוה.

11 And they said to Moses: “Were there not graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, to bring us out of Egypt?”

12 Is not this the thing that we said to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it is better for us to serve the Egyptians, than for us to die in the wilderness!”

13 And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand and see the salvation of יהוה, which God will make for you today; for though you have seen the Egyptians today, you shall not see them again ever.

14 יהוה will fight for you, and you shall be silent.”

15 And יהוה said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they journey [onward].

16 And lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it; and the children of Israel shall go into the middle of the sea on dry ground.

ספר שמות, פרק יד: י-לא

י וּפָרַעְהַ הֶקְרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנִה מִצְרַיִם | נֹסַע אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה:

יב וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַמִּבְלִי אִי־קָבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר מִהַ־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

יג הֲלֹא־זֶה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר הַחַל מִמֶּנּוּ וְנַעֲבֹדָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבֹד אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מִמָּוְתוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר:

יד וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אֶל־תִּירְאוּ הַתִּיצְבוּ וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת־יְשׁוּעַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם אֶת־מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תִסְפוּ לִרְאֹתָם עוֹד עַד־עוֹלָם:

טו יְהוָה יִלָּחֶם לָכֶם וְאַתֶּם תִּחַרְשׁוּ:

טז וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִהַ־תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דִּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסָּעוּ:

טז וַאֲתָה הָרָם אֶת־מִטְוֶה וְנָטָה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּבָּעֶהוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבָּשָׁה:

³² Ibid. 55-58.

³³ Ibid. 49.

³⁴ Ibid 53-55.

17 And I, behold, I will harden the heart of the Egyptians, and they shall go after them; and I will be honored/gain glory through Pharaoh, and through his whole army, through his chariot, and through his horsemen.

18 And the Egyptians shall know that I am יהוה, through My gaining honor/glory through Pharaoh, through his chariot, and through his horsemen.”

19 And the angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, journeyed and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud journeyed from before them, and stood behind them;

20 and it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud and the darkness, and it shined at night; and one did not approach the other all night.

21 And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and יהוה caused the sea to go by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were split.

22 And the children of Israel went into the middle of the sea on the dry ground; and the waters [were] a wall to them on their right, and on their left.

23 And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariot, and his horsemen, into the middle of the sea.

24 And it came to pass, in the morning watch, that יהוה looked to the camp of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of cloud, and God roared in/confused/troubled the camp of the Egyptians.

25 And God turned aside his chariots' wheels, and made them drive heavily; and the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the face of Israel because יהוה is fighting for them against the Egyptians.”

26 And יהוה said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, the waters will return on Egypt, on his chariot, and on his horsemen.”

27 And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned shortly before sunrise to its place; and the Egyptians fled from it; and יהוה shook off the Egyptians in the middle of the sea.

יִזְוֹאֲנִי הַנְּגִי מִחֻזְל אֶת־לֵב מִצְרַיִם וַיָּבֹאוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם וְאֶכְבְּדָה בַּפָּרְעָה וּבְכָל־חֵילוֹ בָּרַכְבוֹ וּבַפָּרָשָׁיו:

יִחַ וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה בְּהַכְבְּדִי בַּפָּרְעָה בָּרַכְבוֹ וּבַפָּרָשָׁיו:

יט וַיֵּטֶע מֶלֶאכָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַהֲלֹף לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֶה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיֵּטֶע עֲמֹד הָעֲנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם:

כ וַיָּבֹא בֵּין ׀ מַחֲנֶה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֶה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הָעֲנָן וְהַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֹּאֲרֶה אֶת־הַלֵּילָה וְלֹא־קָרַב זֶה אֶל־זֶה כָּל־הַלֵּילָה:

כא וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ יְהוָה ׀ אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֲזָה כָּל־הַלֵּילָה וַיִּשָּׁם אֶת־הַיָּם לַחֲרָבָה וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:

כב וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בֵּיבֻשָׁה וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חוֹמָה מִיְּמִינָם וּמִשְׁמָאלָם:

כג וַיִּרְדְּפוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיָּבֹאוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם כָּל סוּס וּפָרְעָה רֶכֶב וּפָרָשָׁיו אֶל־תּוֹךְ הַיָּם:

כד וַיְהִי בְּאַשְׁמֶרֶת הַבֹּקֶר וַיִּשְׁקֹף יְהוָה אֶל־מַחֲנֶה מִצְרַיִם בַּעֲמֹד אֵשׁ וָעָנָן וַיִּהְיֶה אֶת מַחֲנֶה מִצְרַיִם:

כה וַיִּסַּר אֶת אַפּוֹ מִרְפַּבְתָּיו וַיִּגְהַגְהוּ בִּכְבֹּדָת וַיֹּאמֶר מִצְרַיִם אֲנוֹסָה מִפְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי יְהוָה נִלְחָם לָהֶם בַּמִּצְרַיִם:

כו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָטָה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הֶם וַיָּשֻׁבוּ הַמַּיִם עַל־מִצְרַיִם עַל־רֶכֶבוֹ וְעַל־פָּרָשָׁיו:

כז וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הֶם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנוֹת בֹּקֶר לְאֵיתָנוּ וּמִצְרַיִם נָסִים לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיִּגְעַר יְהוָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם:

28 And the waters returned, and covered the chariot and the horsemen, to all the army of Pharaoh that went in after them into the sea; not one remained from them.

29 And the children of Israel walked on dry land in the middle of the sea; and the waters [were] a wall to them on their right, and on their left.

30 And יהוה saved Israel on that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the sea-shore.

31 And Israel saw the great hand [with] which יהוה worked on the Egyptians, and the people feared יהוה; and they believed in יהוה, and in God's servant Moses.

כח וישבו המים ויכסו את־הרכב ואת־הפרשים לכל חיל פרעה הבאים אחריהם בים לא־נשארו בהם עד־אחד:

כט ובני ישראל הלכו ביבשה בתוך הים והמים להם חמה מימנם ומשמאלם:

ל וישע יהוה ביום ההוא את־ישראל מיד מצרים וירא ישראל את־מצרים מת על־שפת הים:

לא וירא ישראל את־היד הגדלה אשר עשה יהוה במצרים וייראו העם את־יהוה ויאמינו ביהוה ובמשה עבדו:

These verses can be outlined in many ways, but for the purposes of this exegesis, it is outlined as follows:

I. Crossing the Sea (14:10-31)

1. Preparing to Cross (vv. 10-20)
 - a. The people's reaction (vv. 10-12)
 - b. Moses' response (vv. 13-14)
 - c. God's response to Moses (vv. 15-18)
 - d. Actions of the angel of God (vv. 19-20)
2. Splitting of the sea (vv. 21-30)
 - a. Sea splits (vv. 21)
 - b. Israelites cross safely (vv. 22, 29)
 - c. Egyptian pursuit and demise (vv. 23-28, 30b)
 - d. God saved Israel (vv. 30a)
3. People's response: fear and faith (vv. 31)

Splitting the Sea: Paradox

The genre of the paradoxical miracle, like the crossing of the sea on dry ground, runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Gen. 17, when God tells Abraham that he will have a son by Sarah (vv. 16), he reacts to the absurdity and paradox of this miracle in verse 17, laughing and saying to himself הֲלָבֹן מֵאָה־שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם־שָׂרָה הִבְתַּתְּשָׁעִים שָׂנָה תֵּלֵד “Will a child be born to a 100 years-old, and will Sarah, a 90 year-old, give birth?” Again, in chapter 18, after the visiting men tell Abraham that Sarah will give birth to a son, the narrator tells us

that not only are Abraham and Sarah old, but – *קָדַלְתָּ לְהֵיוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֵרֶחַ כְּנָשִׁים* Sarah is post-menopausal (vv. 11). It is no wonder that Sarah reacts in the same way as Abraham in the previous chapter, laughing and reflecting on their age (vv. 12). And yet, through God's miracle, the elderly couple has a son, named for their laughter, named for the very paradoxical nature of his miracle birth.

Exodus presents the miracle of a bush that burns, but is not consumed (Ex. 3:2-3)—a paradox against nature that gets Moses' attention. This paradox is unexpected. In other places, the narrator remarks on the unlikelihood of the event to highlight the paradox. In the Book of Joshua, before the splitting of the Jordan, the narrator notes how full the Jordan was at that time: *וְהַיַּרְדֵּן מָלֵא עַל-כָּל-גְּדוֹתָיו כָּל יְמֵי קָצִיר* (Josh. 3:15). Similarly, in I Sam. 12, Samuel reminds the people that it is the wheat harvest, after Passover, the time when rain does not fall in the land of Israel and liturgically when Jews cease to pray for rain (vv. 17). Paradoxically, Samuel calls on God to go against nature, as a sign to the people that asking for a human king was against God's will. God causes rain and *וַיִּירָא כָל-הָעָם מֵאֵד אֶת-יְהוָה* the people react with fear (vv. 18), seeing God's miracle and ask Samuel to pray for them with renewed faith in God (vv. 19).

Elisha remarks on a different water paradox in II Kgs. 3. There, in verse 17, God states that water will appear and fill the valley, without the expected wind and rain. It comes to pass, just as God said, a valley full of water without rain (vv. 20). Later in II Kgs. 20, King Hezekiah is very sick and the prophet Isaiah gives him the choice of signs to show that God will heal him (vv. 9). He selects the paradoxical sign, a shadow that will move backward (vv. 10). The prophet cries out to God and *וַיָּשָׁב אֶת-הַצֵּל בַּמַּעֲלוֹת אֲשֶׁר יָרָה*

בְּמַעֲלֹת אֶתְּוֹ אַחֲרֵי עֶשֶׂר מַעֲלֹת God brings the shadow backwards, the paradox occurs (vv. 11).

Perhaps, one of the most well-known paradoxical miracles is from the Book of Daniel. The Babylonian king Nevukhadnešar is interrogating the faithful and non-idol worshiping Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Aved-Nego. Even under threats, the three stay faithful to their God (Dan. 3:12-18). When tossed into the fiery furnace, heated seven times, the king sees them inside, walking around, unconsumed (vv. 25). They emerge completely intact from the hairs on their heads to their clothes (vv. 27). Nevukhadnešar responds with faith, blessing their God and insisting that they need not worship anyone but their own God (vv. 28).

The paradoxical miracle is an important category of biblical miracle, exemplified by the Splitting of the Sea in Exodus 14.

Splitting the Sea: Demarcation

Like the paradoxical miracle, the genre of demarcation runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. Demarcation is a pronounced element of the plagues in Egypt. The third plague, כְּנִים or lice, which would seem to fly everywhere, do not enter the land of Goshen where the Israelites dwell (Ex. 8:18). Similarly, in the fifth plague, דִּבְרַר or pestilence, none of the Israelite livestock are afflicted, because God makes a division between the two groups (Ex. 9:4,6). When hail rains down upon the Egyptian in the seventh plague, in Goshen, among the Israelites, לֹא הָיָה בָרָד “there was no hail” (Ex. 9:26). During the three day period of darkness in Egypt (Ex. 10:22), the ninth plague, the Israelites had light (vv. 23). The tenth plague is set up to be the biggest demarcation of all: לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יַפְלֶה יְהוָה בֵּין מִצְרַיִם “Therefore, you will know that יְהוָה separated between Egypt and Israel.” This

separation requires a ritual from the Israelites (Ex. 12:21-23). With the spreading of the blood of the פסח (Passover sacrifice), the Israelites signal their difference and in a sympathetic magical fashion,³⁵ God passes over their houses: וַפָּסַח יְהוָה עַל-הַבָּתִּים וְלֹא יָתַן. In a similar tale of destruction and salvation, in the story of the furnace in Daniel, the men who built the fires for Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Aved-Nego to burn in, are themselves burnt to death while the three faithful men go free unharmed (Dan. 3:22).

In the case of manna in Exodus 16, demarcation occurs in time, between Shabbat and the rest of the week. During the week, Moses tells the people not to keep any manna overnight (Ex. 16:19). Those people who go against Moses and keep leftovers find it inedible in the morning (vv. 20). However, in preparation for Shabbat, the people are asked to gather a double portion on Friday and hold it overnight (vv. 23). On Shabbat morning, when they awaken, the manna is good to eat (vv. 24) and there is none in the field to collect (vv. 25, 27).

Splitting the Sea: Paradox and Demarcation

The sea splitting in Exodus 14 is not the only body of water that splits for the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible. The paradox of crossing a body of water on dry ground can be seen later in the Bible in the Book of Joshua when the Israelites are able to cross the Jordan on dry ground (Josh. 3). God, in fact, connects the two events by declaring that God will use the splitting of the Jordan to magnify Joshua in the sight of the people אֲשֶׁר יֵדְעוּן כִּי כַּאֲשֶׁר הָיִיתִי עִם־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ “that they will know that as I was with Moses, I am with

³⁵ The Israelites signal to God to spare their homes bloodshed by placing blood on the lintel and doorposts of their homes.

you.” However, this miracle also creates a demarcation between the water and dry land, as with the miracle in the exodus from Egypt. The priests enter the water with the ark and stand וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָבְרִים, בְּחַרְבָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַיַּרְדֵּן “on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan” and so too, בְּחַרְבָּה “all Israel passed over on dry ground” (Josh. 3:17). In this narrative, the Ark represents God traveling with the people. The miracle performed for the sake of the Ark is done through God’s miraculous power.

The demarcation is magnified in the Exodus narrative. Not only is there a demarcation between dry land and sea, but there is a demarcation between peoples. The sea is splits for the Israelites, but not for the Egyptians.

Historical Setting of Splitting the Sea: Documentary Hypothesis

With these two genres interwoven, can the sources of this narrative help to separate out what is happening in this complex account? In his book, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, Richard Elliot Friedman identifies threads of the J, E, and P sources in Ex. 14:10-31. He shows how the J and P sources can be separated into two complete narratives of the events at the sea. He argues that the J verses in this section are 10b, 13-14, 19b, 20b, 21b, 24, 27b, 30-31 and the P verses are 10a, 10c, 15-18, 21a, 21c, 22-23, 26-27a, 28-29.³⁶ He writes:

“The J and P accounts picture two different scenarios of the event at the sea. In J, while the Egyptians pursue the Israelites, God pushes back the sea with a wind. Then God throws the Egyptian camp into the tumult, and when the Egyptians try to flee then run right into the dried seabed as God released the seawaters, which return to swallow the fleeing Egyptians. In P, meanwhile, the sea splits, with a path of dry

³⁶ Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 29.

ground between walls of water, and the Israelites cross through this path. The Egyptians try to cross through this path as well, but the water closes up over them. ...

The P story repeats details of locations and of the Egyptian forces.”³⁷

In terms of the genre of miracles, the J source seems to emphasize the paradoxical nature of what happened at the sea. Even when the Egyptians relent and attempt to escape, God sees to their destruction. By contrast, the P source seems to emphasize the demarcation: both geographically, between dry land and sea, and between the peoples, with the Israelites crossing safely and the Egyptians suffering from it. Examining the sources reveals the weaving together of two narratives rooted in two different genres.

Meaning of the Miracle in Exodus 14:10-31

The focus of the Biblical account seems to rest on God’s wondrous act. This miracle contains echoes of previous paradoxical wonders, of the demarcating plagues in Egypt, and later Biblical miracles. Each example points to God’s marvelous acts that are beyond human ability. Such miracles defy our understanding of how the world works, because, in the biblical description, God goes above and beyond the expected order of the world. Ultimately, “by performing miracles which tear asunder the constant order of the creation, God proves His control over all creation and all creatures.”³⁸

The Brass Serpent: Text and Outline

Numbers 21:4-9

4 And they journeyed from Mount Hor the way of the Sea of Reeds, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became impatient/short tempered because of the way.

ספר במדבר, פרק כא: ד-ט

ד וַיֵּסְעוּ מִהָר הָהָר דֶּרֶךְ יַם-סוּף לְסָבֵב
אֶת-אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם וַתִּקְצַר נַפְש־הָעָם בַּדֶּרֶךְ:

³⁷ Ibid. 142

³⁸ Yair Zakovich, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Mod Books, 1991), 24.

5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, and there is no water; and our souls are sick of this light bread!”

6 And יהוה sent burning serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people from Israel died.

7 And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against יהוה and against you; pray to יהוה, that God turn aside the serpents from us.” And Moses prayed for the people.

8 And יהוה said to Moses, “Make for yourself a burning serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten and sees it, shall live.”

9 And Moses made a brass serpent, and set it on the pole; and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten a man, and he looked to the brass serpent, he lived.

ה וַיִּדְבֹּר הָעָם בְּאֱלֹהִים וּבַמֹּשֶׁה לֵאמֹר
הֲעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי אֵין
לֶחֶם וְאֵין מַיִם וְנַפְשֵׁנוּ קָצָה בַלֶּחֶם הַקָּלֶקֶל:

ו וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה בָּעָם אֶת הַנָּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרְפִים
וַיִּנְשָׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיָּמָת עַם־רַב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:

ז וַיָּבֹא הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חֲטֵאנוּ
כִּי־דִבַּרְנוּ בַּיהוָה וּבָךְ הַתַּפִּלָּל אֶל־יְהוָה
וְיִסַּר מֵעַלֵּינוּ אֶת־הַנָּחָשׁ וַיִּתְּפֹלֵל מֹשֶׁה בָּעֵד
הָעָם:

ח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף
וְשִׂים אוֹתוֹ עַל־גֹּסֶס וְהָיָה כָּל־הַנִּשְׁוָף וְרָאָה
אוֹתוֹ וְחָיָה:

ט וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל־הַגֹּסֶס
וְהָיָה אִם־נִשְׁוָף הַנָּחָשׁ אֶת־אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט
אֶל־נְחֹשֶׁת הַנָּחָשׁ וְחָיָה:

These verses can be outlined in many ways, but for the purposes of this exegesis, it is outlined as follows:

I. Brass Serpent (Num. 21:4-9)

1. Israelites become short tempered (vv. 4)
2. Israelites complain (vv. 5)
3. God responds with flaming serpents; people die (vv. 6)
4. People appeal to Moses; Moses prays (vv. 7)
5. God responds with miracle solution (vv. 8)
6. Moses follows God's instruction; people are healed miraculously (vv. 9)

The Brass Serpent: Miracle after Prayer

In narratives in the miracles after prayer genre, there seem to be two subcategories, either: 1) God sends a punishment, prayer then secures a solution from God or 2) the situation was not caused by God as a punishment, but prayer will curry God's favor and bring about a solution.

In the first subcategory, we find the account of Sarah in Avimelekh's house (Gen. 20). Abraham has told the Philistines that Sarah is his sister. However, as a punishment for taking another man's wife, God has made Avimelekh's entire household barren (Gen. 20:18). After Sarah is returned and Avimelekh showers Abraham and Sarah with livestock, slaves, and silver, Abraham prays and *וַיִּלְדוּ וְאִמְהָתָיו וְאֶת־אֲשֵׁתוֹ וְאֶת־אֲבִימֶלֶךְ* “and God heals Avimelekh and his wife and their female servants and they give birth” (vv. 17).

In an unusual turn of events, Pharaoh is suffering from a punishment from God and Moses prays for him. It is during the plague of the locusts, the eighth plague upon Egypt, that Pharaoh asks Moses to petition God for him (Ex. 10:17). When Moses does (vv. 18), God sends a wind that takes all of the locusts out of Egypt (vv. 19).

I Kgs. 13 tells of a man of God, from Judah, who delivers a prophecy that is particularly damaging for King Jeroboam. In verse 4, Jeroboam reaches across the altar to grab hold of the man of God, presumably to harm him. When he reaches out, something miraculous happens: his hand dries up and he cannot grab the man, nor harm him, nor even retract his own hand (I Kgs. 13:4). The *מוֹפֵת* or sign of the man of God having become reality in verse 5, the king requests the prophet pray for him to be healed (vv. 6). With his prayer, the king's hand is restored to its normal state (vv. 6).

In the second subcategory, we find three stories of water miracles. Soon after the Israelites cross the sea on dry ground and celebrate the experience with the Song of the Sea and Miriam and the women dancing and singing, the Israelites begin to move. After three days of no water (Ex. 15:22), the people begin to complain about/against Moses (vv. 24). Moses cries out to God and God gives the solution of a tree that will sweeten the bitter waters of *מָרָה* (lit. Bitter).

Again in Exodus 17, the people are without water. Again, the people complain about/against Moses, but this time, they add an accusation that they were brought from Egypt to die of thirst (vv. 3). Again, Moses cries out to God (vv. 4) and gives a solution (vv. 5-6) to provide water from the rock at *מַסָּה וּמֵרִיבָה* *Massah and Merivah* (מֵרִיבָה, lit. argument).

After slaying 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey (Jud.15:15), Samson is mightily thirsty; but like his Israelite ancestors before him, there is nothing to drink (vv. 18). He calls out to God asking if now that he has defeated so many, he would die of thirst (vv. 18). God responds by splitting the *מַכְתֵּיץ*, a particular geological formation like a crater, and water comes gushing out for him (vv. 19). Following drinking from that water, *וַיָּשֻׁב רוּחוֹ*, his spirit returns to him and he is revived.

After examining miracles that fit in each subcategory, it seems clear that the Brass Serpent narrative fits squarely in the first subcategory. The people are being punished. Moses' prayer is able to prompt God for a solution to the people's suffering.

Rebellion in the Book of Numbers

Literary setting seems to be a particularly potent means for determining meaning in the narratives of the Book of Numbers. The Bronze Serpent miracle occurs after a rebellion. People complaining to and against or about Moses is frequent in the Book of Numbers. These six verses are hardly the first instance. In Numbers 11:1-3, we see a similar sequence:

I. Brass Serpent (Num. 21:4-9)	I. <i>Taverah</i> Complaint (Num. 11:1-3)
1. Israelites become short tempered (vv. 4)	
2. Israelites complain (vv. 5)	1. Israelites complain (vv. 1a)
3. God responds; people die of snake bites (vv. 6)	2. God responds with fire; no deaths mentioned (vv. 1b)
4. People appeal to Moses; Moses prays (vv. 7)	3. People appeal to Moses; Moses prays (vv. 2a-b)
5. God responds with miracle solution (vv. 8)	4. Fire dies down (vv. 2c)
6. Moses follows God's instruction; people are healed miraculously (vv. 9)	
	5. Place is named after the incident (vv. 3)

The *Taverah* incident is distinct from the Brass Serpent in a few ways. First, unlike the Brass Serpent story, there are no deaths or physical injuries mentioned in the *Taverah* incident. In the Brass Serpent narrative, God explicitly sends a cure to the people. It is the heart of the miracle. In the *Taverah* Complaint narrative, God is not explicitly depicted as the One who caused the fire to die down. Moses prays to God and the fire dies down. Perhaps, most distinctively, the *Taverah* Complaint immediately makes an impression on the physical surroundings, as the geographic location of the incident is named תַּבְּעָרָה פִּי־בַעֲרָה “*Taverah* (lit. burning), because God’s fire burned among them [in that place]” (Num. 11:3).

From this point on in the chapter, the verbal rebellion continues. The people begin to long for Egypt from not only in their minds but from their very stomachs, craving the food they ate in Egypt. Immediately after overcoming one rebellion against God, they turn and rebel again. However, by contrast, this time God does not respond with flaming punishment. Moses is beside himself, unable to please the people, and even asks God to kill him (11:15). God presents him with a solution: God will transfer some of the “spirit” that is on Moses and distribute it over 70 elders of Moses’ choosing, so that they will help Moses bear the burden of the people who are constantly rebelling. In addition, God promises to give the people the

meat for which they have mutinied. Again, through prayer to and conversation with God, Moses is able to bring relief to the people.

Rebellion in Numbers 12

In chapter 12, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses. The first conflict in this text, portrayed in verses 1 and 2, seems to be between Miriam and Aaron on one side and Moses on the other. However, this conflict is one-sided. “Miriam spoke, and Aaron” and Moses says nothing; it is not even clear that he is with them, since they speak about him in the third person. This literary style seems common among the stories. The people who complain, whether the whole community or named figures, speak and it is unclear if Moses is present, until they ask him for healing or repair. In Num. 12:3, unlike any of the other scenes, there is a narrative statement that does not come from any of the characters, about Moses’ humility. Here, it functions an introduction to the second part of the conflict, which appears in verses 4 through 9.

God calls to all three (vv. 4), but then only addresses Miriam and Aaron (vv. 5). God defends Moses and explains the special relationship that the two of them share. The reprimand, in verses 6, 7, and 8, is widely identified by biblical scholars as poetry. “The first half describes God’s communication with other prophets..., the second half, His unique transmission to Moses.”³⁹ In no other narrative, does God address the complainers/rebels; God simply punishes them. In no other narrative does God seem to be physically with them, descending (vv. 5) and ascending (vv. 10) בְּעֶמֶד עָנָן.⁴⁰ God leaves them, still angry and when God is gone, the second part of the reprimand is apparent. Following the verbal

³⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar]: the Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 95.

⁴⁰ עָנָן Samaritan medieval manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible read הָעָנָן, presumably implying that it was the same pillar of cloud that was with the people since the exodus from Egypt. See: Elliger, K. & Rudolph, W., ed. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977.

reprimand, Miriam alone suffers a physical punishment. Suddenly, “Miriam was with ⁴¹צִרְעָתָהּ like snow” (vv.10).

With the punishment meted out, Aaron implores Moses to urge God to heal her in verses 11 and 12, making an allusion to Miriam’s death. This insinuation is particularly interesting because it makes the punishment sound like Miriam is alive and dead at the same time, a bizarre and liminal punishment. However, in context of the deaths in chapter 21, this reference seems to make more sense.

Moses does shout to God on her behalf, using only four words, in verse 13. Unlike the Brass Snake and *Taverah* incidents, God seems unready to forgive so soon and resists, requiring Miriam’s punishment to last for seven days. After that, the narrator notes that she was punished for seven days and the community waited for her to heal.

Rebellion in Numbers 14

After hearing the report of the 12 spies in Num. 13, the people rebel in chapter 14 using language similar to Num. 21:5 and Ex. 14:11-12. Now that the people believe they will die fighting in the land of Israel, they cry all night (vv. 1), wish for death in Egypt or in the wilderness, and wish for a return to Egypt (vv. 2-3). They start to plan for their return (vv. 4) and their leaders mourn and try to convince them of the goodness of God’s plan (vv. 5-9). As the people ready themselves to stone Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb, or כְּבוֹד יְהוָה “the glory of” appears, similar to God’s appearance in 12:5. God, using similar restraint to the lecture in 12:6-8, speaks with Moses about God’s plans for destroying the people instead of directly sending destruction (vv. 11-12). Moses does his best to talk God out of the plan (vv. 13-16) and prays for pardon, appealing to God’s loving and forgiving nature

⁴¹ An often white, flaky skin disease, regularly mistranslated as “leprosy.”

(vv. 17-19). God grants pardon (vv. 20), but condemns most of the generation of the Exodus to die in the wilderness and never see the land God “swore to their fathers” (vv. 21-23). Caleb is an exception (vv. 24). Then, God redirects their wandering path away from entering the land, as promised (vv. 25).

The proclamation against the generation continues in a more detailed and specific way from verses 26-35. It becomes very clear that those over 20 years old are being held accountable, except for Caleb and Joshua (vv. 29-30) and minor children (vv. 31). The 40 year punishment is *מִידָּה כְּנִגְדַּ מִידָּה* or “measure for measure” – for the 40 days of spying, there will be 40 years of wandering (vv. 34). Moreover, the 10 remaining spies die in a plague before God (vv. 37). Unlike the immediate deaths in Num. 21, a majority of the deaths in Num. 14 will be slow and natural. There are the 40 years of wandering to come, waiting for the death of a generation of rebels (vv. 34). However, the specific rebellious spies are killed immediately *בַּמִּגֶּפֶה לְפָנֵי יְהוָה* “in a plague before God” (vv. 37).

Moses delivers the news to the people (vv. 39) and they resolve to enter the land (vv. 40). Moses warns them against this plan (vv. 41-43), because God would not be with them. They go out to battle without the ark (vv. 44) and are defeated by the ‘Amaleqites and Canaanites (vv. 45). The text seems to allude to more deaths, (see Num. 21:6).

Numbers 21 and II Kings 18

The Brass Serpent is a tale of rebellion, punishment and prayer, answered with a miracle. It shares many similarities with other rebellion narratives in the Book of Numbers, but it is distinctive in that God directs Moses to create a vessel through which God’s miracle will flow. Perhaps, this element is problematic in its uniqueness. Already a simple reading of the text might reveal an element of sympathetic magic in this miracle. A snake bite healed

by looking at the image of a snake seems like the medieval practice of placing a poultice of the hair of the dog that bit you on the wound sustained from that dog in order to heal it.⁴²

The Bible seems aware of this possibility. Though the Brass Serpent is a brief narrative in the Torah, it leaves a strong impression in the biblical text. We see in II Kgs. 18:4 the following episode about King Hezekiah:

4 He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the *Asherah*; and he broke in pieces the brass serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel would offer incense to it; and it was called *Nehushtan*.

דָּהוּא | הִסִּיר אֶת־הַבָּמוֹת וְשָׁבַר אֶת־הַמִּצֵּבֹת
וְכָרַת אֶת־הָאֲשֵׁרָה וּכְפַתָּה נָחָשׁ הַנְּחָשֶׁת
אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה כִּי עַד־הַיָּמִים הַהֵמָּה הָיוּ
בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִקְטְרִים לוֹ וַיִּקְרָא־לוֹ נְחֻשְׁתָּן:

This verse records the first actions of Hezekiah as a king. It follows from the verse which states that *וַיַּעַשׂ הַיֵּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה* “he did what is right in the eyes of יהוה” (vv. 3). Thus, these acts against the worshiping of other gods and idols follow as the righteous acts of the new king.

However, this verse points directly to the story from Numbers 21 and shows how the same brass serpent—which God had imbued with powers to heal during the wandering in the wilderness—has become an idol many generations later in the land of Israel. Is this a side effect of a folk understanding of sympathetic magic and the power of symbols in biblical times?

Historical Context: The Documentary Hypothesis

Richard Elliot Friedman suggests the hypothesis that the rebellions of Num. 11, 12, and 21 are E texts,⁴³ though he states that the text of Num. 11:1-3 is too brief to identify with

⁴² This practice is the origin of the phrase used in common English today to refer to cures for a hangover. NBC and CBS Reporter Carol Pozefsky writes that the “first mention of the phrase in reference to hangovers is in John Heywood's Proverbs (1546): "I pray thee leat me and my fellow have a heare of the dog that bote us last night and bitten were we both to the braine aright."” – available online at <http://en.allexperts.com/q/Etymology-Meaning-Words-1474/Phrase-origin.htm>. Until that time, the phrase “the hair of the dog” referred exclusively to this cure.

certainty.⁴⁴ With its long form and repetitive structure, with God deciding the fate of the Israelites twice, the narrative from Num. 14 appears to be a combination of J (vv. 4, 11-25, 39-45) and P (vv. 1-3, 5-10, 26-38) sources.⁴⁵ II Kgs. is considered to be part of the Deuteronomic History that stretches from most of Deuteronomy through Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel and I and II Kings. Therefore, it is no surprise that the formulation of the text is extremely different, focusing on a leader enforcing the law of Deuteronomy, to worship only the one God, and only in the place that God causes God's name to dwell (i.e., Jerusalem).

Meaning of the Miracle in Numbers 21:4-9

Based on the literary and historical context, the Brass Serpent of Num. 21:4-9 is a narrative of rebellion: the children of Israel against God and their human leader, Moses. Looking at the genre of miracle, God punishes the people for their rebellion. When the people have a change of heart and recognize their sin, having suffered from God's punishment, they entreat Moses to pray for their relief. God delivers the miracle solution in response to Moses' prayer.

This miracle focuses attention on the power of God to heal. Here, while God does not change the hearts and minds of the people, as they continue to rebel, God's miracle physically heals their bodies.

At the same time, the miracle focuses attention on the power of prayer. It is not clear in this short text why only Moses' prayer will be efficacious. Why are the people's cries no longer enough, as they were in Exodus (Ex. 3:7, 9)? Perhaps, we have a hint from Num. 12

⁴³Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 258, 261, 277-278.

⁴⁴Ibid. 258.

⁴⁵Ibid. 263-266.

when God describes God's relationship with Moses (Num. 12:7-8). Is the prayer powerful because of the person from whom it comes? The Bible does not directly suggest answers to these questions. For theological understandings, we look beyond the Bible to rabbinic literature.

Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*: Text and Outline

I Kings 18:20-40

20 And Ahab sent among all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets to Mount Carmel.

21 And Elijah came near to all the people, and said, "How long [will you] skip between two thoughts/opinions? If יהוה is The [One] God, follow Him; but if *Ba'al*, follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word.

22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I remain a prophet of יהוה by myself; but the prophets of *Ba'al* are four hundred and fifty men.

23 Let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and place it on the wood, and do not put fire [on it]; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and I will not put fire [on it].

24 And you shall call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of יהוה; and the god that answers by fire, let him be God.' And all the people answered and said, "The word [is] good."

25 And Elijah said to the prophets of *Ba'al*, "Choose one bull for yourselves, and prepare it first; for you are many; and call on the name of your god, and do not put fire [on it]."

26 And they took the bull that was given to them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of *Ba'al* from morning even until noon, saying, "*Ba'al*, answer us." And there was no voice and there was no answer, and they skipped on the altar that was made.

27 And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, "Call out with a great voice for your god, either he is talking, or he is busy, or he is on a journey or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

ספר מלכים א, פרק יח: כ-מ

כ וישלח אחאב בכל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־הַנְּבִיאִים אֶל־הָרֹם הַכַּרְמֶל:

כא וַיָּגֶשׁ אֵלָיוּ אֵלֶיהוּ אֶל־כָּל־הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר עַד־מָתַי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל־שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִים אִם־יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים לְכוּ אַחֲרָיו וְאִם־הַבַּעַל לְכוּ אַחֲרָיו וְלֹא־עָנוּ הָעָם אֹתוֹ דְּבָר:

כב וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיוּ אֶל־הָעָם אֲנִי נֹתַרְתִּי נְבִיא לַיהוָה לְבַדִּי וְנְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל אַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים אִישׁ:

כג וַיִּתְּנוּ־לָנוּ שְׁנַיִם פָּרִים וַיַּבְחֲרוּ לָהֶם הַפֹּר הָאֶחָד וַיִּנְתְּחוּהוּ וַיְשִׁימוּ עַל־הָעֵצִים וְאֵשׁ לֹא יִשְׁימוּ וְאֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה | אֶת־הַפֹּר הָאֶחָד וַנִּתְּתִי עַל־הָעֵצִים וְאֵשׁ לֹא אֲשִׁים:

כד וַקְרָאֲתָם בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְאֲנִי אֶקְרָא בְּשֵׁם־יְהוָה וְהָיָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲנֶנָּה בָּאֵשׁ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַן כָּל־הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ טוֹב הַדָּבָר:

כה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיוּ לְנְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל בַּחֲרוּ לָכֶם הַפֹּר הָאֶחָד וַעֲשׂוּ רֹאשֻׁנָּה כִּי אַתֶּם הָרַבִּים וַקְרָאוּ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְאֵשׁ לֹא תִשְׁימוּ:

כו וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־הַפֹּר אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן לָהֶם וַיַּעֲשׂוּ וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּשֵׁם־הַבַּעַל מִהַבֹּקֶר וְעַד־הָאַחֲרִים לֵאמֹר הַבַּעַל עֲנֵנוּ וְאִין קוֹל וְאִין עֲנָה וַיִּפְסְחוּ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה:

כז וַיְהִי בְּאַחֲרֵי־יְמֵי וַיִּתְּחַל בָּהֶם אֵלָיוּ וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָאוּ בְּקוֹל־גָּדוֹל כִּי־אֱלֹהִים הוּא כִּי־שִׁית וְכִי־שָׁגִי לוֹ וְכִי־דַרְדַּר לוֹ אוֹלִי יִשָּׁן הוּא וַיִּקְרָא:

28 And they called out with a great voice and they cut themselves, as their law, with swords and spears, until the blood spilled out on them.

29 And it was when noon was past, that they prophesied until the time of the offering of the *מִנְחָה* offering; but there was no voice and there was no answer and there was no attention.

30 And Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of *יְהוָה* that was destroyed.

31 And Elijah took twelve stones, as the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the *יְהוָה* was, saying, "Israel shall be your name."

32 And with the stones he built an altar in the name of *יְהוָה*; and he made a trench around the altar, as would house two measures (lit. *seahs*) of seed.

33 And he arranged the wood, and cut the bull in pieces, and placed [it] on the wood.

34 And he said, "Fill four jugs with water, and pour it on the burnt-offering, and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time.

35 And the water ran around the altar; and the trench was filled with water also.

36 And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the *מִנְחָה* offering, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "*יְהוָה*, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known today that You are God in Israel, and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word.

37 Hear me, *יְהוָה*, hear me and this people shall know that You, *יְהוָה*, are The [One] God, for You have turned their hearts backward.'

38 Then the fire of *יְהוָה* fell, and consumed the burnt-offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 And all the people saw it, and they fell on their faces; and they said, "*יְהוָה*, He is The [One] God; *יְהוָה*, He is The [One] God.'

כח וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל וַיִּתְּגַדְּדוּ כַּמִּשְׁפָּטִים בַּחֲרָבוֹת וּבִרְמָחִים עַד־שִׁפְף־דָּם עָלֵיהֶם:

כט וַיְהִי בַעֲבֹר הַצֹּהֲרִים וַיִּתְּנִבְּאוּ עַד לַעֲלוֹת הַמִּנְחָה וְאִין־קוֹל וְאִין־עֲנָה וְאִין־קִשְׁב:

ל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם לְכֹל־הָעָם גִּשּׁוּ אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ כָל־הָעָם אֵלָיו וַיִּרְפָּא אֶת־מִזְבַּח יְהוָה הַהָרוּס:

לא וַיִּקַּח אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁתֵּים עָשָׂר אֲבָנִים כַּמִּסְפָּר שְׁבָטֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָיָה דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהִיָּה שְׁמָה:

לב וַיִּבְנֶה אֶת־הָאֲבָנִים מִזְבֵּחַ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה וַיַּעַשׂ תְּעֹלָה כְּבִית סֻאתִים זָרַע סָבִיב לַמִּזְבֵּחַ:

לג וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת־הָעֵצִים וַיִּנְתַּח אֶת־הַפָּר וַיִּשֶׂם עַל־הָעֵצִים:

לד וַיֹּאמֶר מָלְאוּ אַרְבַּעָה כְּדִים מַיִם וַיִּזְקֹקוּ עַל־הָעֹלָה וְעַל־הָעֵצִים וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁנוּ וַיִּשְׁנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלֹשׁוּ וַיִּשְׁלֹשׁוּ:

לה וַיִּלְכוּ הַמַּיִם סָבִיב לַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְגַם אֶת־הַתְּעֹלָה מִלֵּא־מַיִם:

לו וַיְהִי | בַּעֲלוֹת הַמִּנְחָה וַיֵּאָשׁ אֲלֵיהֶם הַנָּבִיא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם יוֹדַע כִּי־אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ וּבְדַבְּרֶיךָ [וּבְדַבְּרֶךָ] עָשִׂיתִי אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:

לז עֲנֵנִי יְהוָה עֲנֵנִי וַיַּדְעוּ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַתָּה הַסֹּכֵת אֶת־לִבָּם אַחֲרָיִת:

לח וַתִּפֹּל אֵשׁ־יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אֶת־הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־הָעֵצִים וְאֶת־הָאֲבָנִים וְאֶת־הָעֹפָר וְאֶת־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר־בַּתְּעֹלָה לַחֲכָה:

לט וַיֵּרָא כָל־הָעָם וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים:

40 And Elijah said to them, “Catch the prophets of *Ba'al*; let not a man from them escape.” And they caught them; and Elijah brought them down to the Kishon stream, and slaughtered them there.

מִיָּאמְרוֹ אֵלֵיהֶם לָחֶם תִּפְשׁוּ | אֶת־נְבִיאֵי
הַפִּעַל אִישׁ אֶל־יָמְלֵט מֵהֶם וַיִּתְּפְשׂוּם
וַיּוֹרְדֵם אֵלֵיהֶם אֶל־גִּיחֹל קִישׁוֹן וַיִּשְׁחָטֵם
שָׁם:

These verses can be outlined in many ways, but for the purposes of this exegesis, it is outlined as follows:

I. Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*: Contest on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:20-40)

1. Contest is established (vv. 20-24)
 - a. Israelites gather (vv. 20)
 - b. Elijah challenges the Israelites to choose a god (vv. 21)
 - c. Elijah establishes the rules for the contest (vv. 22-24)
2. The Prophets of *Ba'al* Take the First Turn (vv. 25-29)
 - a. Elijah directs the prophets of *Ba'al* (vv. 25)
 - b. They call to *Ba'al*, no response (vv. 26)
 - c. Elijah mocks them at noon (vv. 27)
 - d. More shouting and blood (vv. 28)
 - e. At *mincha* time, still no response (vv. 29)
3. Elijah's Turn (vv. 30-39)
 - a. Elijah repairs the altar in sight of the people (vv. 30-32)
 - (1) Using 12 symbolic stones (vv. 31)
 - (2) Making a trench around the altar (vv. 32)
 - b. Elijah lays out the wood, butchers the bull, and lays the meat on the wood (vv. 33)
 - c. Elijah drenches the altar 3x, filling the trench (vv. 34-35)
 - d. Elijah addresses God (vv. 36-37)
 - e. God's fire descends and consumes everything (vv. 38)
 - f. The people see and react with fear and faith (vv. 39)
4. Elijah and the People Kill the Prophets of *Ba'al* (vv. 40)

Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*: Genre

The story of Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al* includes both the concepts of demarcation and the miracle within the miracle. Demarcation, as explained above, appears in the Bible in many different forms: between groups of people, in time, and geographically. The demarcation in this miracle is clearly between groups of people. Simply put, fire comes down from God for Elijah and nothing happens for the prophets of *Ba'al*, no matter how loud they call out or how much they cut themselves.

The miracle within the miracle “bears a resemblance to the paradox: In order to prevent any heretical thoughts about its miraculous nature, the miracle takes place by means which prove its absurdity, by making the completion of the miracle even more difficult that it would be otherwise.”⁴⁶

When the Philistines have captured the ark from the Israelites in I Sam. 5, it begins to wreak havoc in their land. By chapter 6, they are ready to get it far away from them. They set up the ark to travel, being pulled on a cart by two milking cows (vv. 7, 10). Milking cows do not normally leave their young. In this scene, their young are purposefully removed from them (vv. 7, 10) and still the mother cows transport the ark straight to *Beit Shemesh*, back toward Judah, וְלֹא־סָרוּ יָמִין וּשְׂמָאוֹל, “and they did not turn to the right or the left” (vv. 12). The Philistines establish this means of travel for the ark as a test (vv. 9). If the ark goes straight to *Beit Shemesh* on its own, then it is the God of Israel who has been wreaking this havoc. If not, then it was all by chance (vv. 9). Thus, “the cows, by behaving against their own nature, prove conclusively that God’s hand is involved.”⁴⁷

In II Kgs. 2:19, the people of Jericho complain to Elisha about the problem of the city: the water has gone bad. Elisha sets about to fix this problem by doing the opposite of what should work. He seeks out salt to add to the water. In the desert, who wants to drink salt water? Yet, when he tosses the salt in at the source, he reports that God says רָפָאתִי לַמַּיִם “I have healed these waters and from there will be no more death or miscarriage/barren land” (vv. 21). And, indeed, the waters were healed (vv. 22).

⁴⁶ Yair Zakovich, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Mod Books, 1991), 53.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 55.

The scene of Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al* is a miracle within a miracle because calling down fire from the heavens is hard enough. The prophets of *Ba'al* are at it all day. Even when they employ the sympathetic magic of their red drops of blood falling like the fire they want from the sky, nothing happens for them. Elijah, on a mission to deepen the wonder of God's miracle and blot out the cult of *Ba'al* in one day, creates the conditions for a miracle within a miracle. He waits for the end of the day to get started, calmly watching the prophets of *Ba'al* struggle and mocking them. When Elijah final gets started, he drenches his altar completely, soaking the ground so thoroughly that there is standing water in the trench around his altar. Only then does he call down God's fire, which consumes everything from the bull to the wood to the standing water. The power of the miracle is palpable in the text. The onlookers fall to the ground. This unbelievable thing has just occurred and they can say nothing but – יהוה יהוה? הנה הוא האלהים – "is THE God," as in the only God, as in *Ba'al* has no power here.

Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*: Literary Setting

The narrative of the Contest on Mount Carmel (I Kgs. 18:20-40) is set within a larger storyline with socio-political forces at play. In I Kgs. 16:29, King Ahab rises to power over the northern kingdom of Israel. He marries Jezebel, the daughter of King Etba'al of Sidon, and begins to worship and serve *Ba'al* (vv. 31). Moreover, he builds a temple with an altar for *Ba'al* in Samaria (vv. 32) and erects an *asherah* for *Ba'al*'s goddess-wife *Asherah* (vv. 33). The text does not mince words: Ahab does more to anger the God of Israel מֶלֶךְ מְלָכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לִפְנָיו "than all of the kings before him" (vv. 33).

In the first verse of chapter 17, Elijah prophesies to Ahab that God is going to withhold dew and rain. This prophecy is significant because "in Ugaritic mythology, 'zebul'

[as in Je-zebel's name] is a title of Baal, god of rain and sweet water."⁴⁸ Essentially, if you, King Ahab, think that *Ba'al* is going to help you with rain, think again. Only the God of Israel controls the world.

The socio-political storyline picks up again at the beginning of chapter 18. Now, the drought has been going on for three years. Elijah is directed by God to go before Ahab, which will end the drought (I Kgs. 18:1). The narrator shares that Jezebel had been killing off the prophets of God, but Obadiah, the steward of the palace, had saved 100 of them (vv. 4). Ahab sends Obadiah out to look for water (vv. 5-6), when Elijah finds him (vv. 7). Elijah wants to speak with Ahab, but Obadiah is afraid (vv. 9) and shares the news that Ahab has been hunting for Elijah (vv. 10). Ahab meets with Elijah (vv. 17-19) and the two argue heatedly. Ahab accuses Elijah of causing trouble for Israel (vv. 17) and Elijah retorts that it is Ahab's idolatry that is the root cause of Israel's troubles (vv. 18). Elijah then levels the challenge to the 450 prophets of *Ba'al* and the 400 prophets of *Asherah*; the challenge which results in the miracle within the miracle and the slaughter of the prophets of *Ba'al* (vv. 40). After verses 20-40, rain clouds return to the land and rain falls, finally ending the drought (vv. 45).

The socio-political drama continues in chapter 19, with Jezebel threatening Elijah's life (vv. 2). Jezebel never repents and dies a horrible death (II Kgs. 9:30-37). However, in I Kgs. 21:27 her husband, Ahab, sincerely repents his idolatry. God responds compassionately, that because of the way Ahab humbled himself, God will delay the coming disaster on Ahab's house by a generation (vv. 29). Ahab is wounded in battle in the next

⁴⁸ *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Z. Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 711.

chapter (I Kgs. 22:34) and dies (vv. 35). In verse 38, God's prophecy is fulfilled with dogs lapping up his blood and prostitutes bathing in it.

With this larger setting in mind, we see how Elijah's religious challenge to the prophets of *Ba'al* is imbedded within the larger events during the reign of King Ahab. Elijah is waging war not only against false prophets, but he is making a play for the souls of the citizens of Israel and its king. The entire political country of Israel and physical land of Samaria has been suffering from the drought, which can only be resolved when the prophet and the king come together. This solution of prophet and king coming together in order for rain to return to the kingdom appears to be a metaphor for the rejoining of the kingship with the proper, monotheistic path. God's approval comes in the form of rain. As for Queen Jezebel, it is reasonable to presume that her fate was sealed from the time she slaughtered the prophets of God.

Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*: Historical Setting

The Deuteronomic History includes the books of I and II Kings. With this knowledge, the content of these chapters are not surprising. The northern kingdom of Israel and its king have become idolatrous, and God's prophet is employed to return them to the right path, by whatever means necessary. In this case, removal of the prophets of *Ba'al* and the political system that supported them by a prophet of the one, true God of Israel.

Meaning of the Miracle in I Kings 18:20-40

With a review of the genre, literary and historical setting, the meaning of this miracle seems clear: God's dominance over all other gods. Only the God of Israel is the true God and God's prophet, Elijah, will go to extremes to encourage God's people back from idolatry to monotheism.

With the larger context in mind, we can see deeper lessons, like only the repentant will be spared worse punishments. There is a message embedded in this miracle about repentance. The prophets of *Ba'al* are all slaughtered immediately after their defeat and the defeat of their god. The people witnessing the contest are repentant and come away unscathed. God decides your fate, God's prophet delivers it.

CHAPTER 3: THESE THREE MIRACLES IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

Introduction

Having examined these three miracles of the Bible closely, in their own context, the rabbinic interpretations of these miracles is the next focus of this investigation. This study examines particular examples in order to investigate how these miracles are understood by the early rabbis and how they function in their context in rabbinic literature. One text is drawn from the *Mishnah* (codified circa 200 CE⁴⁹), one text is drawn from the Babylonian Talmud (codified between 500-700 CE⁵⁰), and one text is drawn from *Midrash Rabbah*, specifically *דברים רבה* or Deuteronomy *Rabbah* (codified circa 9th century CE⁵¹). These texts span early rabbinic literature. The particular texts examined here trace the path from the God-centered view of “miracle” in the biblical text to the more human focus of the rabbis. After this specific examination, Chapter 4 will turn to look at the overall shift in the view of miracle from the Bible to the early rabbis.

Splitting the Sea

The miracle of Splitting the Sea appears at a key moment in the biblical narrative. The Israelite nation exits Egypt, *מִצְרַיִם* (from the root *מִצַּר* or narrow place), and travels through the watery passage into the openness of the wilderness. Metaphorically, this miracle can be seen as the moment a nation is born, like a baby. The people come through hardship to a place of liberation. The shared experience bonds them together as a nation, even

⁴⁹ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Mishnah," by Stephen G. Wald.

⁵⁰ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Talmud, Babylonian," by Stephen G. Wald.

⁵¹ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Deuteronomy Rabbah," by Moshe David Herr.

stronger than their earlier family ties.⁵² Whether historical, fictional or some blend of the two, any way this miracle is viewed, it is extremely important to the Israelite, and ultimately, Jewish, narrative. It is unsurprising then that the rabbis drew, and continue to draw, many different interpretations from this passage.

In the Babylonian Talmud (codified between 500-700 CE), this miracle passage from Ex. 14 is used broadly to discuss everything from Egyptian punishment (e.g., Sot. 11a, San. 94a-b) to the blessings recited at a place where a miracle occurred (e.g., Ber. 54a-b). Since the biblical interpretation focuses so intensely on God, this examination will turn to a commonly cited *midrash* about God at the time of the miracle.

This *midrash* appears in the Babylonian Talmud both in *Megillah* 10b and *Sanhedrin* 39b. First we will look at the text and its meaning:

b. Sanhedrin 39b

[Quotation from m. San. 4:5] “Therefore every single person...[is obliged to say: the world was created for my sake].” (I Kgs. 22:36, the verse at the death of King Ahab)

“And there went a cry/song (הרנה) throughout the camp [about the going down of the sun, saying: ‘Every man to his city, and every man to his country.’”]

R. Aha b. Hanina said: [This is הרנה referred to in the verse:] (Prov. 11:10) [“When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices;] and when the wicked perish, there is joy/song (רנה).” [Thus] when Ahab b. Omri perished there was joy/song (הרנה). But does the Holy One, blessed be God, rejoice (חדי) in the downfall of the wicked?

מסכת סנהדרין דף לט.ב

לפיכך כל אחד ואחד כו'. (מלכים א' כ"ב) ויעבר הרנה במחנה

אמר רבי אחא בר חנינא: (משלי י"א) באבד רשעים רנה - באבוד אחאב בן עמרי רנה. ומי חדי קודשא בריך הוא במפלתן של רשעים?

⁵² On this literary point, consider the animosity between the Israelites exiting Egypt and ‘Amaleq. ‘Amaleq is the grandson of Esau, brother of Jacob/Israel. The two peoples are related by blood and yet, ‘Amaleq does not go down into the slavery of Egypt, nor does ‘Amaleq experience God’s power of salvation.

Is it not written, (II Chr. 20:21, a verse about King Jehoshaphat of Judah, when he went to engage in war with the Ammonites and Moabites) [“And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed singers to הִלְלוּ and those giving praise to the splendor of holiness,] as they went out before the army, and saying: ‘Give thanks to הִלְלוּ, for God’s loving-kindness endures forever.’”? R. Jonathan asked (concerning this):

“Why is it not said in this expression of thanks כי טוב ‘For God is good’ (as in Ps. 118:1, where the two expressions appear together)?” Because the Holy One, blessed be God, does not rejoice (שמח) in the downfall of the wicked.

For R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonathan’s name: What is meant by, (Ex. 14:20, the verse about the pillar of cloud going between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, making it dark in the Egyptian camp and light in the Israelite camp) “And one did not approach the other all night”?

At that same time, the ministering angels wished to utter a song (שירה) before the Holy One, blessed be God, but God said to them “The work of my hands (i.e., the Egyptians) is drowning in the sea; you would utter song before me?”⁵³

R. Yosi b. Hanina said: “God does not rejoice (שש), but others rejoice (משיש). Scripture supports this too, for it is written, (Deut. 28:63) [“And it shall come to pass, that as הִלְלוּrejoiced (שש) over you to do good and to multiply you; so הִלְלוּ] will cause rejoicing (ישיש) [over you to cause you to perish, and to destroy you...”] and not ישיש [so הִלְלוּwill rejoice etc.] This proves it.⁵⁴

הכתיב (דברי הימים ב' כ') בצאת לפני החלוצ ואמרים הודו לה' כי לעולם חסדו, ואמר רבי יונתן:

מפני מה לא נאמר בהודאה זו כי טוב - לפי שאין הקדוש ברוך הוא שמח במפלתן של רשעים,

דאמר רבי שמואל בר נחמן אמר רבי יונתן: מאי דכתיב (שמות י"ד) ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה,

באותה שעה בקשו מלאכי השרת לומר שירה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, אמר להן הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעשה ידי טובעין בים ואתם אומרים שירה לפני?

אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא: הוא אינו שש אבל אחרים משיש. דיקא נמי, דכתיב ישיש ולא כתיב ישוב שמע מינה.

Meaning of b. Sanhedrin 39b in Context; Contrasting with the Biblical Interpretation

In reading this text, the *midrash* seems to be focused on God. However, unlike the biblical text in which God goes above and beyond the expected order of the world in mighty acts, here God is surprisingly restrained. This text adds an ethical layer on top of God’s

⁵³ Here, the *midrash* re-reads the context of “And one did not approach the other all night” – reading that angels did not approach each other, rather than the human camps no approaching each other, as in Exodus.

⁵⁴ Here, the text from Deuteronomy is used to reinforce the concept that God does not rejoice over the downfall of human beings, but God does cause rejoicing over that same situation.

power. As God performs miracles which prove God's "control over all creation and all creatures", ⁵⁵ God does not relish in that power. God is mournful. Humanity may celebrate, but God will be solemn.

Aryeh Cohen, in his book *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law and the Poetics of Sugyot*, argues that in the Talmud "meaning is a function of context."⁵⁶ Specifically, "any unit of meaning – word, sentence, story, etc. – 'means' only within a certain frame... within a different frame, that very same unit 'means' something else."⁵⁷ Thus, a *sugya* has meaning based on its "literary and cultural universe." Essentially, to understand the meaning of this text we must look back to the frame in which this text appears here, as opposed to where it appears in b. Meg. 10b. Here, the framing ideas come from m. San. 4:5.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 discusses how to instruct witnesses in capital cases, so that they take their role as witnesses seriously and only come forward to accuse someone with true testimony. This *mishnah* equates the value of a human life with the life of a whole world saying:

<p>Therefore man was created alone, to teach you, that everyone who destroys the life of one Israelite, Scripture charges him as if he had destroyed a whole world.</p> <p>And everyone who saves the life of one Israelite, Scripture credits him as if he had saved a whole world.</p>	<p>לְפִיכָּהּ נִבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי, לְלַמְדָּךְ, שְׁכָּל הַמֵּאַיִד נָפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַפְּתוּב כְּאִלּוּ אֵיבַד עוֹלָם מָלֵא.</p> <p>וְכָל הַמְּקַיִם נָפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַפְּתוּב כְּאִלּוּ קִיַּם עוֹלָם מָלֵא.</p>
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Now that the text has demonstrated the profound value of each life, the *mishnah* continues to explain about human individuality:

⁵⁵ Yair Zakovich, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Mod Books, 1991), 24.

⁵⁶ Aryeh Cohen, *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law and the Poetics of Sugyot* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 132.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

And to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One,
Blessed be God: When a man mints many coins
from one seal – they are all like one another,

וְלַהֲגִיד גְּדֻלָּתוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שְׂאֵדָם
טוֹבֵעַ כְּמָה מִטְּבָעוֹת בְּחוֹתָם אֶחָד וְכֵלֶן דּוֹמִין
זֶה לָזֶה,

But [when] the King of Kings of Kings, the Holy
One, Blessed be God mints each person from the
seal [with which God made] the First Person,
not one of them is like anyone else. Therefore,
each person is obligated to say: “The world was
created for my sake.”

וּמֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא טִבֵּעַ
כָּל אָדָם בְּחוֹתָמוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן
וְאִין אֶחָד מֵהֶן דּוֹמָה לַחֲבֵרוֹ. לְפִיכָךְ כָּל אֶחָד
וְאֶחָד חַיֵּב לוֹמַר, בְּשִׁבְלִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם.

It is in this context, “Therefore, each person is obligated to say: ‘The world was created for my sake,’” that the Talmudic discussion launches into an interpretation of the miracle of splitting of the sea for the Israelites and the drowning of the Egyptians. The *midrash* from b. San. 39b is presented as part of a response to the *midrash* from m. San. 4:5 about the sanctity of all life, which directly contradicts the idea from Prov. 11:10, which suggests that there is joy when the wicked die.

10 When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices;
and when the wicked perish, there is joy.

י בְּטוֹב צְדִיקִים, תִּשְׂעֹלֶץ קִרְיָה;
וּבְאַבְדֹת רְשָׁעִים רִנָּה.

The verse from Proverbs describes distinctly human joy. The city seems to celebrate both in the successes of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked. How can this gleeful celebration of the destruction of human life, which is much older than the *mishnah* text, because it comes from the Bible be reconciled? That is the work of the text from b. San. 39b.

Humans may celebrate the downfall of the wicked, but God always maintains the infinite value of human life. Read the *gemara*’s *midrash* without its accompanying *mishnah* and it seems to suggest a focus on God. When read in context with the *mishnah*, that starts the *gemara*’s discussion, the text seems to be focusing on humanity: human action, human behavior. The text strikes a significant difference between God and people. People need to be reminded of the value of human life. God remembers people as the work of God’s own hands. Even angels can forget these truths and identify with the Israelites’ joy. People may

revel in the destruction of their enemies; the Host of Heaven may do no such thing. God suffers with the suffering, no matter who they are.

Where the Bible emphasizes God's power, the Talmud provides an ethical interpretation of the Splitting the Sea miracle. It may have been a profound expression of God's power, but the enduring meaning of the miracle was the destruction of Egyptian lives. The rabbinic interpretation refocuses the miracle on the human experience: human celebration, human destruction. This *midrash* embraces and reflects the ambivalence of the miracle: joy in freedom, horror over the drowning victims. The *midrash* allows Rabbinic Judaism to embrace both sides of the moment: a cup full of wine and drops spilled out,⁵⁸ the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15) and God's pain with God's own creations.

The Brass Serpent

The Brass Serpent miracle is problematic for the rabbis in a number of ways. For instance, the later mention of the same serpent image in the Bible implies the idolatry of the Israelites. As previously discussed in chapter 2,⁵⁹ in II Kgs. 18:4 it says:

4 He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the *Asherah*; and he broke in pieces the brass serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel would offer incense to it; and it was called *Nehushtan*.

זְהוּא הִסִּיר אֶת־הַבָּמוֹת וְשִׁבַּר אֶת־הַמִּצֵּבֹת
וַכָּרַת אֶת־הָאֲשֵׁרָה וּפָתַתְנָהּ גִּחְשׁ הַנְּחָשֶׁת
אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה בְּיַד־הַיְיָ הַלֵּמָּה הָיָה
בְּיַד־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִקִּטְרִים לוֹ וַיִּקְרָא־לוֹ נְחֹשֶׁתָן:

The rabbis of the Talmud are clearly aware of this incident and its troubling implications. It is cited in a discussion in b. *Avodah Zarah* 44a about idols, idol worship, and whether or not King Hezekiah had a right to destroy the נְחֹשֶׁתָן, since it would have been the private property of Moses' heirs.

⁵⁸ At the Passover *seder*, each person is asked to remove 10 drops of wine (symbol of joy) from his cup to commemorate each of the 10 plagues of Egypt, during which the Egyptian people suffered greatly, as the Israelites were gaining their freedom.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 2, page 26-27.

Equally, if not more problematic to the early rabbis, than idol worshiping ancestors, would have been the parting of the ways with early Christians. Thus, the Christian adoption of the image from Numbers 21 in the Gospel of John (dated circa 90 CE) would have been an issue in the mind of the rabbis. In this text from John 3:14, Jesus compares the “Son of Man,” often understood as Jesus himself, to the serpent that Moses made and lifted. Later interpreters have understood this reference to mean Jesus crucified and elevated on the cross.⁶⁰ This Christian text precedes perhaps the most quoted text of the Gospels in our day.

Each verse is below:

John 3:14-17⁶¹

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

LXX John 3:14-17⁶²

καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὕψωσεν τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου

ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον

οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόλῃται ἀλλ’ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον

οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνῃ τὸν κόσμον ἀλλ’ ἵνα σωθῇ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ

Thus, it is intriguing to find the following text in m. Rosh HaShanah 3:8 (codified circa 200 CE):

⁶⁰ In an 1857 sermon, Rev. Charles H. Spurgeon, an influential British Baptist Preacher interpreted this passage:

Allow me, then, dear friends, to describe first, *the people in the wilderness*—the representatives of men who are sinners. Let me describe next, *the brazen serpent*—the type of Jesus Christ crucified. Let me then note what was to be *done with the brazen serpent*—it was to be lifted up; and so was Christ to be lifted up. And then let us notice what was to be *done by the people who were bitten*—they were to look at the serpent; and so sinners must believe in Christ.

“The Mysteries of the Brazen Serpent: A Sermon,” The Spurgeon Archive, accessed January 29, 2012, <<http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0153.htm>>

⁶¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1886.

⁶² Blue Letter Bible. “Gospel of John 3 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament).” Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Jhn&c=3&t=MGNT>>

Rosh HaShanah 3:8

(Ex. 17:11) And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed [and when he let down his hand, ‘Amaleq prevailed]. Now, do the hands of Moses wage war or stop (lit. break) war?

Rather, [the text] says to you that so long as Israel looks toward Heaven and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven they would prevail. And if not, they would fall.

Similarly, you can say, (Num. 21:8) [וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה] “Make for yourself a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole, and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

Now, did the serpent [on the pole] kill or did the serpent revive? Rather, when Israel looks toward Heaven and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed, but otherwise they wasted away.⁶³

A deaf-mute, a simpleton and a minor do not fulfill the obligation of the community. This is the general principle: one who is not obligated to do something, cannot fulfill the obligation of the community.

מסכת ראש השנה פרק ג משנה ח

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וַיִּגְבֵּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו' (שמות יז), וְכִי יִדְּיוֹ שָׁל מֹשֶׁה עוֹשׂוֹת מִלְחָמָה אוֹ שׁוֹבְרוֹת מִלְחָמָה.

אֵלֹא לֹאמַר לָהּ, כָּל זְמַן שֶׁהָיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִסְתַּכְּלִים כָּל־פִּי מַעֲלָה וּמַשְׁעֲבָדִין אֶת לִבָּם לְאַבְיָהֶם שְׂבִשְׁמִים הָיוּ מִתְגַּבְּרִים. וְאִם לֹא, הָיוּ נוֹפְלִין.

כִּי־צֵא בַדָּבָר אֶתָּה אוֹמֵר, (במדבר כא) עֲשֵׂה לָּהּ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אוֹתוֹ עַל גֹּסֶס, וְהָיָה כָּל הַנִּשּׁוּף וְרָאָה אוֹתוֹ וְחָיָה.

וְכִי נִחַשׁ מִמִּית, אוֹ נִחַשׁ מִחַיָּה. אֵלֹא, בְּזִמְנֵי שִׂישְׁרָאֵל מִסְתַּכְּלִין כָּל־פִּי מַעֲלָה וּמַשְׁעֲבָדִין אֶת לִבָּם לְאַבְיָהֶן שְׂבִשְׁמִים, הָיוּ מִתְרַפְּאִים, וְאִם לֹא, הָיוּ נִמְוָקִים.

חֲרַשׁ, שׁוֹטָה, וְקָטָן, אֵין מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָרָבִים יְדֵי חוֹבָתָן. זֶה הַכָּלָל, כָּל שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְחַיֵּב בַּדָּבָר, אֵינוֹ מוֹצִיא אֶת הָרָבִים יְדֵי חוֹבָתָן.

Meaning of *Rosh HaShanah* 3:8 in Context; Contrasting with the Biblical**Interpretation**

This mishnaic text begins by introducing a narrative from the Torah where the Israelites are going out to war with the ‘Amaleqites. Moses tells Joshua that he will stand on a hill during the battle וַיִּמָּטֶה הָאֱלֹהִים בְּיָדִי “with the rod of God in my hand” (Ex. 17:9). In the original context, it seems clear that Moses’ hands are doing all of the heavy lifting in the war. Perhaps the power is in the “rod of God” or perhaps it is in Moses’ hands, but Aaron and Chur have to help Moses keep them raised at the end of the day (vv. 12). As long as Moses’ hands were raised, the Israelites were successful.

⁶³ This statement directly turns the attention from the brass serpent Moses made by God’s command to the Israelites themselves. As soon as the question is asked about the power of the brass serpent, it is rebuffed as having nothing to do with the real miracle of healing.

The *mishnah* turns this biblical narrative on its head, focusing not on the power in Moses' hands or God's power, but the actions of the Israelites. When they had כַּיְיָנָה, or intention, and focused on God in Heaven, it went well for them. Any setbacks in the war are attributed to the Israelites not focusing their hearts on God.

This same reversal is applied to the Brass Serpent miracle: rather than the focus being on the Brass Serpent as the object performing miracles, the focus is on the Israelites and their hearts. In fact, the Serpent's role is deemphasized. Perhaps, this minimizing of the biblical object of healing is a rabbinic response to the concern over the possibility to interpret the miracle as idolatry/sympathetic magic instead. This choice to reduce the role of the Brass Serpent could also reflect a rabbinic polemic against the New Testament interpretation of Jesus on the cross. Even the question of whether the Serpent killed or revived the snake bite victims goes unanswered in the text. Rather, this *mishnah* empowers the Israelites themselves as the source of their cure or demise. Only when they focused on God in Heaven were they healed. The focus shifts from God and the Brass Serpent to the choices of individual Israelites.

The strange, seemingly out of place sentences at the end of the *mishnah* further this conclusion. The person is the focus. A person who is commanded to hear the *shofar* blown may blow the *shofar* for the community to hear and fulfill that commandment. The individual matters most in the relationship with holiness. Is that person a fit actor? Does he direct his heart properly? Or, in the case of the deaf-mute, simpleton, and minor, are they capable to do so?

The previous *mishnah* further clarifies this message. In this text, below, it states that כַּיְיָנָה, or intention, is the most important element in fulfilling the commandment:

Rosh HaShanah 3:7

One who sounds the *shofar* in the middle of a pit or the middle of a cistern or in the middle of a large jar/barrel, if he heard the sound of the *shofar*, he has fulfilled his obligation. But if he heard the echo, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

And so too, one who was passing behind the synagogue or one whose house was adjoining the synagogue, and he heard the sound of the *shofar* or the *megillah* reading, if he listened with intention [lit. directed his heart], he has fulfilled his obligation.

And if not, he has not fulfilled his obligation. Even if this one heard and that one heard, this one listened with intention [lit. directed his heart] (and thus fulfilled his obligation) and that one did not listen with intention [lit. did not direct his heart] (and thus did not fulfill his obligation).

Essentially, if a person hears the *shofar* and is thinking, “I wish to fulfill my obligation to hear the *shofar*,” then, his obligation is fulfilled. If he is walking by the synagogue on his way to the market or simply living next door and the sound of the *shofar* comes to him like background noise during his chores, he has not fulfilled the commandment. The human intention in harmony with the human action is the key.⁶⁴

For the rabbis of the *Mishnah*, God does not decide if you will fulfill a commandment. You, the human actor, decide. The focus of this biblical miracle shifts from God’s divine action to human action. A person has to choose to look to God for healing in order to be healed. Staring at the sky or the Brass Serpent is not enough. God will not initiate healing for you; you must initiate your own healing. In the reading of the *mishnah*, this miracle is not in God’s hands, it is in human hands.

מסכת ראש השנה פרק ג משנה ז

הַתּוֹקֵעַ לְתוֹךְ הַבּוֹר אוֹ לְתוֹךְ הַדֵּיאוֹת
אוֹ לְתוֹךְ הַפֶּטֶס, אִם קוֹל שׁוֹפָר
שָׁמַע, יֵצֵא. וְאִם קוֹל הֶבְרָה שָׁמַע,
לֹא יֵצֵא.

וְכֵן מִי שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר אַחֲרֵי בֵּית
הַכְּנֶסֶת, אוֹ שֶׁהָיָה בֵּיתוֹ סְמוּךְ לְבֵּית
הַכְּנֶסֶת, וְשָׁמַע קוֹל שׁוֹפָר אוֹ קוֹל
מְגִלָּה, אִם כּוֹנֵן לְבוֹ, יֵצֵא.

וְאִם לֹא, לֹא יֵצֵא. אִךְ עַל פִּי שְׁזָה
שָׁמַע וְזֶה שָׁמַע, זֶה כּוֹנֵן לְבוֹ וְזֶה לֹא
כּוֹנֵן לְבוֹ:

⁶⁴ The *gemara* then picks up (RH 29a) and expands on this idea of obligation and mitzvah fulfillment.

Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*

Elijah, the prophet, makes a powerful impression on the Bible and an even deeper impression on the rabbis of the Talmud and later Jewish folklore and tradition. Dr. Kristen H. Lindbeck writes in her book, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology*, about Elijah's many roles in rabbinic literature and beyond:

Rabbinic Judaism knows Elijah as herald of the last days, as legal authority, teacher of the wise, and helper of those in crisis. During the medieval period "Elijah's cup" became part of the Passover Seder. At the Seder, throughout the world, families still open the door for Elijah as herald of the Messiah, and children look eagerly at Elijah's cup to see if he has sipped any wine. Elijah plays an esoteric role in kabbalah, and a better-known and more homely one as the hero of Jewish folk tales. In these stories Elijah often comes in the guise of a poor stranger, and if he is welcomed he brings benefits and blessings.⁶⁵

When examining rabbinic interpretations of the miracle between Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*, many interpretations can be found. A major focus of the rabbinic sources is the way Elijah talks to God: what words he uses (b. Ber. 6b; c.f. 9b; b. Shab. 55a, c.f. *Vayikra* Rabbah 36:6), with what tone he addressed God (b. Ber. 31b-32a; b. Tan. 17a), and as a proof text that God answers prayer (b. Tan. 17a citing m. Tan. 2:4; Deut. Rab. 2:17). Each of these examples could support the idea that the rabbis use this biblical miracle to refocus attention on human beings. The late text from *Midrash Rabbah*, called **דברים רבה** or Deuteronomy

⁶⁵ Kristen H. Lindbeck, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), ix.

Rabbah (codified circa 9th century CE⁶⁶), we see a series of biblical proofs utilized to support the efficacy of prayer:

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:17

What is the meaning of, (Deut. 4:7) “[For what great nation is there, that has God so near to them, as יהוה our God is] whenever we call upon God?” The Rabbis said: A prayer can be answered after forty days. From whom can you learn [this fact]? From Moses, as it is written, (Deut. 9:18) “And I threw myself down before יהוה, [as at the first,] forty days [and forty nights; I did not eat bread nor drink water; because of all your sin which you sinned, by doing what is evil in the sight of יהוה, to make God angry].

And a prayer can be answered after twenty days. From whom can you learn [this fact]? From Daniel, as it is written, (Dan. 10:3) I ate no pleasant bread [and flesh and wine have not come into my mouth, and I have not anointed myself at all,] until three whole weeks were fulfilled.” And after this he said, (Dan. 9:19) “O Lord, hear, O Lord, forgive, [O Lord, attend and do; do not delay, for Your own sake, O my God, because Your name is called on Your city and Your people].”

And a prayer can be answered after three days. From whom can you learn [this fact]? From Jonah, as it is written, (Jonah 2:1) “[And יהוה prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah;] and Jonah was in the belly of the fish [three days and three nights].” And after that, (Jonah 2:2) “Then Jonah prayed to יהוה his God from the fish's belly.”

דברים רבה (וילנא) פרשה ב פרק יז

מהו בכל קראנו אליו

אמרו רבנן יש תפלה שנענית לארבעים יום ממי את למד ממשה דכתיב ואתנפל לפני ה' מ' יום וגו'

ויש תפלה שנעשית לכ' יום ממי את למד מדניאל דכתיב (דניאל י) לחם חמודות לא אכלתי עד מלאת שלשה שבועים ימים ואח"כ אמר ה' שמעה ה' סלחה וגו'

ויש תפלה שנענית לשלשה ימים ממי את למד מיונה דכתיב (יונה ב) ויהי יונה במעי הדגה וגו' ואח"כ ויתפלל יונה אל ה' אלהיו ממעי הדגה

⁶⁶ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Deuteronomy Rabbah," by Moshe David Herr.

And a prayer can be answered after one day. From whom can you learn [this fact]? From Elijah, as it is written, (I Kgs. 18:36) “[And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening offering,] that Elijah the prophet came near, and said: [‘O יְהוָה, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel, and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word’].”

ויש תפלה שנענית ליום אחד ממי את
למד מאליהו דכתיב (מ"א = מלכים א'
(יח) ויגש אליהו הנביא ויאמר וגו'

And a prayer can be answered at the time [it is uttered] (lit. in its season). From whom can you learn [this fact]? From David, as it is written, (Ps. 69:14) “But as for me, let my prayer be to You, O יְהוָה, in an acceptable time; [O God, in the abundance of Your loving-kindness, answer me with the truth of Your salvation].”

ויש תפלה שנענית לעונה ממי את למד
מדוד דכתיב (תהלים סט) ואני תפילתי
לך ה' עת רצון

And a prayer [can be answered] even though it is not prayed from his mouth, the Holy One Blessed be God will answer [it], as it is said, (Is. 65:24) “And it shall come to pass that, before they will call, I will answer, [and before they are speaking, I will hear.]”

ויש תפלה שעד שלא יתפלל אותה
מפיו הקב"ה יענה שנאמר (ישעיה סה)
והיה טרם יקראו ואני אענה

Meaning of Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:17; Contrasting with the Biblical Interpretation

This *midrash* rereads biblical moments of wonder into a human framework. Rather than focusing on God who answers the prayers of these people, as in the final verse quoted from Isaiah, the majority of the text looks to the human biblical figures. Unlike most rabbinic texts, which ask **איך מציין דאמר והמד"א** how is this [idea] supported in Scripture” or “Where does it say,” this text says **למד ממי את** From whom can you learn [this fact]?” The emphasis on this text is on the “whom,” on the person. And each person is listed by name with part of a verse.

Moses throws himself down before God and 40 days later, his prayer is answered. Daniel fasts for three weeks and 20 days later, his prayer—from the previous biblical chapter—is answered. The parts of Daniel’s first verse that are quoted do not mention God.

God is only mentioned in the second verse in the context of the prayer from Daniel's mouth. The emphasis is on Daniel's actions. Jonah's three day prayer response time follows a similar pattern to the Daniel verses. The focus of the first verse is only on Jonah, as the parts about God are not quoted in the Hebrew text. The second verse only names God within Jonah's prayer. The Elijah section does not quote Elijah's prayer at all, only that it had reached the time for the evening offering when Elijah began to pray. David's verse is humble, expressing the human wish that the time we chose to pray to God be a favorable time. Yet, here again, the focus is on the human action and the human decision to pray, not God's response. The part of David's verse that talks about God's response is omitted from the text. The final text, supporting the idea that God anticipates human needs, comes from third Isaiah. The verse is spoken by God through the prophet, speaking directly with a human voice to the human audience, "before they will call, I will answer" (Is. 65:24).

The *midrash* goes to into painstaking detail to identify each human actor, all of them prophets except King David, and locate each person within the verse. The *midrash* is not focusing on including God's name and centering the prayers on God and God's power. Rather, the center of this *midrash* is the human choice to call out to God. Presumably, between these different occasions, prayers answered in 40 days or before the prayer is uttered, God has not changed. What elements do change are the people and the manner in which they pray. The miracles, like the miracle of Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al*, are not the main subject. The focus is human prayer.

This *midrash* focuses on the people and what they said, not on God's response. In no case does the verse quoted identify the answer the person received. This *midrash* leaves

Jonah in the belly of the fish praying. The focus is on the person praying, not the solution nor the situation that caused the man to call out to God.

In the Bible, the narrative of Elijah and the Prophets of *Ba'al* focuses on God's dominance over all other gods. This *midrash* takes for granted that people might pray to any other deity. No concern about repentance is expressed in this midrashic text, though Jonah is repentant in the fish's belly, willing now to follow God's plan for him. This text does not show God delivering your fate directly through a prophet. Here, we see prophets and a king in direct relationship with God praying, with no mention of results other than time of delivery. There is no implication what answer will come in this text, it is for the reader to learn the story of each man to know the nature of his prayer and relationship with God.

As with the previous two texts, the rabbinic interpretation refocuses the miracle on the human experience: human choices, human prayers. In the reading of this *midrash*, miracles are not in God's hands, but in the hands of a praying prophet or king.

CHAPTER 4: OVERALL SHIFT IN THE VIEW OF MIRACLE FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE TO EARLY RABBINIC LITERATURE

The three miracles examined so far in this thesis point to a larger thematic shift in the understanding of miracles from the Bible to rabbinic literature. The Bible places its overall focus on divine intervention in the human experience of the world. With two exemplary figures, the prophet Elijah and his prophetic disciple Elisha, the Bible begins to shift from the focus on God to the focus on people and especially the wonderworking power of prophets. This chapter will argue that the shift from focusing on a wonderworking God to the divine power in humans continues from those narratives through the time of Jesus and into the early rabbinic period. Faith in God is not diminished in this period, as the Talmud still proclaims God's ultimate power to perform miracles,⁶⁷ rather the people writing this literature focus not on the ultimately unknowable power of God, but on their human world.

Dating of Elijah and Elisha Narratives

The prophets Elijah and Elisha from the Books of Kings are two strong biblical figures during the post-Davidic period of kings in Israelite society, before the destruction of the first Temple and exile to Babylon. Scholars debate the dating of their narratives. Susanne Otto, in her article "The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History," citing E. Zenger and Albertz, explains that "there is no evidence for the assumption that the Deuteronomistic History was composed before the last date

⁶⁷ Responding to a *mishna* on b. Ber. 49b discussing the invitation to recite the grace after meals, or *ẓmōn*, b. Ber. 50a states:

R. Aha the son of Raba said to R. Ashi, "But [at the Passover *seder* before reciting *Hallel*] we say, '[Therefore it is our duty to thank and praise, pay tribute and glorify, exalt and honor, bless and acclaim] the one who performed, for our ancestors and for us, all these miracles.'"

He (R. Ashi) said, "There it is proven with a word, [for] who performs miracles? The Holy One, Blessed be God."

אמר ליה רב אחא בריה דרבה לרב אשי: והא אמרינן למי שעשה לאבותינו ולנו את כל הנסים האלו - אמר ליה: התם מוכחא מילתא, מאן עביד ניסי - קודשא בריך הוא.

mentioned in it, the rehabilitation of Jehoiachin (562 BCE).”⁶⁸ John Gray, author of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* entry on the Book of Kings, agrees that “The extant Books of Kings must postdate the accession of Evil-Merodach to the throne of Babylon in 561 B.C.E. (II Kgs. 25:27–30).”⁶⁹ Otto further argues, in her article and her doctoral dissertation,⁷⁰ that:

By means of the epoch from Ahab to Jehu the Deuteronomists demonstrated the reliability of the word of God throughout history. Further, they embodied the theme ‘Baal worship—cultic reform’ in the history of the Northern Kingdom. Second, shortly after the narratives about the Omride wars were added and a new theme introduced: the attitude of the king towards the word of the prophets determines the fate of Israel. Third, in early post-exilic times, 1 Kings 17-18 was added to demonstrate the possibility of a new life in community with God after the time of judgment. Fourth, in the fifth century, 1 Kgs. 19.1-18 and the remaining Elisha stories were inserted to give prophecy a legitimate [theological] foundation in the history of Israel.⁷¹

Working with this hypothesis, Elijah and Elisha continue to appear as key figures and their narratives appear as late, 5th century BCE insertions in the composition of the Deuteronomistic history. As models of wonderworking biblical figures, they appear toward the end of the biblical period represented in the Hebrew Bible.

⁶⁸ Susanne Otto, “The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 4 (June 1, 2003): 491.

⁶⁹ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Kings, Book of,” by John Gray.

⁷⁰ Susanne Otto, *Jehu, Elia und Elisa. Die Erzählung von der Jehu-Revolution und die Komposition der Elia-Elisa-Erzählungen* (BWANT, 152; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2001).

⁷¹ Susanne Otto, “The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 4 (June 1, 2003): 487.

Comparing Elijah and Elisha: Wonders with Food

Both the prophets Elijah and Elisha work wonders with food for a poor woman and her children. Elijah is sent by God to the widow of Šarfatah (I Kgs. 17:8-16). God instructs Elijah to:

9 “Get up and go to Šarfatah, which belongs to
Šidon, and dwell there; behold, I have commanded
a widow there to feed you.’

ט קום לך צרפתה אשר לצידון וישבת
שם הנה צויתי עם אשה אלמנה
לכלכלך:

When Elijah meets this woman, she seems to have no knowledge of God’s command. Moreover, she is gathering wood to prepare the last meal she and her son will ever eat, as they are impoverished and nearly out of food (vv. 12). Elijah asks her to make food for him and then for herself and her son (vv. 13), because:

14 For thus says יהוה, God of Israel: The jar of flour
shall not be finished, nor shall the cruise of oil lack,
until the day that יהוה sends rain on face of the
earth.’

יד כי כה אמר יהוה אלהי ישראל בד
הקמח לא תכלה וצפתת השמן לא
תחסר עד יום תתן [תת] יהוה גשם
על-פני האדמה:

15 And she went and did according to the word of
Elijah; and she, and he, and her house, ate [for] days.

טו ותלך ותעשה כדבר אליהו ותאכל
הוא [היא] ויהיא [והוא] וביתה ימים:

16 The jar of flour was not finished, nor did the
cruise of oil lack, according to the word of the
that He spoke through Elijah.

טז בד הקמח לא כלתה וצפתת השמן
יהוה לא חסר כדבר יהוה אשר דבר ביד
אליהו:

Elijah works directly through the instructions of God and God is a clear actor in this narrative. The miracle of the unending flour and oil is attributed directly to God ביד אליהו through Elijah.

Elisha’s narrative (II Kgs. 4:1-7) functions differently. In II Kgs. 4:1, instead of God calling to the prophet, as in I Kgs. 17:8-9, a woman whose deceased husband was of בני-

הנביאים the children/sons of the prophets cries out (צעקה) to Elisha. Already, in the first verse of the Elisha narrative, a human has replaced God’s role from the Elijah text.

In the woman's poverty, she has been unable to pay her debts וְהַנִּשְׁעָה, "and the creditor," will soon come to enslave her children, her last property of value (vv. 1). Elisha, looking for a solution to her poverty, asks the woman, מֶה־יֵשׁ־לְךָ [לָךְ] בַּבַּיִת "What do you have in the house?" (vv. 2). She answers him, אֵין לִשְׂפָחוֹתַי כֹּל בַּבַּיִת כִּי אִם־אֶסֹּוד שָׁמָּן "Your servant has nothing in the whole house except for a container of oil" (ibid). That being the item on hand, the prophet instructs her to borrow as many containers as she can from her neighbors (vv. 3) and pour the oil from her container into the empty containers (vv. 4). She follows his instructions (vv. 5) and when she had filled them all, the oil stopped flowing (vv. 6).

7 Then she came and told the man of God. And he said: "Go, sell the oil, and pay your debt, and you and your sons live from the rest." ז וַתָּבֹא וַתַּגִּד לְאִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָכִי מְכֹרִי אֶת־הַשָּׁמֶן וְשַׁלְמִי אֶת־נִשְׁיָכִי [וְנִשְׁיָךְ] וְאַתָּה בְּנִי־ךְ [וּבְנֵי־ךְ] תַּחֲיוּ בְנוֹתָר:

This remarkable story contains no prayer to God and no command of God. God is not even given credit for inspiring Elisha's good idea. Rather, God is only mentioned in Elisha's title as a man of God, אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים. The focus is on human action and centered on Elisha as a wonderworker. Elisha envisions the solution and sees it to fruition.

Comparing Elijah and Elisha: Reviving the Dead

The prophets Elijah and Elisha each revive a boy. Neither the son of the widow of Sargatah (I Kgs. 17:17-24) nor the son of the Shunammite woman (II Kgs. 4:8-37) are being punished by God; rather, the first boy dies of an illness and the second boy is injured out in the field with the reapers. Elijah calls out to God and Elisha prays to God, and in each case, the prophet is able to revive the boy. In the Elijah story, God does the work:

22 And יְהוָה listened to the voice of Elijah; and the כב וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה בְּקוֹל אֱלִיָּהוּ וַתָּשָׁב נַפְשׁ־הַיֶּלֶד עַל־קִרְבּוֹ וַיָּחִי: soul of the child returned to him, and he revived.

In the Elisha story, the prophet seems to work alone after praying:

33 He went in, and closed the door on the two of them, and prayed to יהוה.
לֵג וַיָּבֹא וַיִּסְגֹּר הַדֶּלֶת בְּעַד שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה:

34 And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth on his mouth, and his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands; and he prostrated himself upon him; and the flesh of the child became warm.
לָד וַיַּעַל וַיִּשְׁכַּב עַל־הַיֶּלֶד וַיָּשֶׂם פִּיו עַל־פִּיו וְעֵינָיו עַל־עֵינָיו וְכַפָּיו עַל־כַּפָּו [כַּפָּיו] וַיִּגָּהֶר עָלָיו וַיָּחֶם בְּשָׁר הַיֶּלֶד:

35 Then he returned, and walked in the house once this way and once that way; and went up, and prostrated himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.
לָה וַיָּשָׁב וַיֵּלֶךְ בִּבְיֹת אַחַת הַנֶּה וְאַחַת הַנֶּה וַיַּעַל וַיִּגָּהֶר עָלָיו וַיִּזְוֹרֶר הַנֶּעֱרָ עַד־שִׁבְעַ פְּעָמִים וַיִּפְקַח הַנֶּעֱרָ אֶת־עֵינָיו:

God is not said to have answered Elisha's prayer, as in the Elisha story. Elisha seems to endeavor to revive the child on his own, through bodily contact, and is successful. This comparison suggests, again, the shift from dependence on God for miracles to the human ability to work wonders, as seen through the power and acts of select individuals.

In another outstanding case of Elisha reviving the dead, Elijah's narrative presents no parallel. II Kgs. 13:20-21 gives a crowning example of Elisha as a wonderworker, doing wonders even after death:

20 And Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to come into (invade, raid) the land at the start of the year.
כ וַיָּמָת אֱלִישָׁע וַיִּקְבְּרוּהוּ וַיְגִדּוּ מוֹאָב יָבֹאוּ בְּאַרְצָא בִּיא שָׁנָה:

21 And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that behold, they saw a band; and they threw the [dead] man into the tomb/burial cave of Elisha and left; and [when] the [dead] man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood on his feet.
כא וַיְהִי הֵם קִבְּרִים אִישׁ וְהֵנָּה רָאוּ אֶת־הַגִּדּוֹד וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אֶת־הָאִישׁ בְּקִבְרֵי אֱלִישָׁע וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּגַּע הָאִישׁ בְּעַצְמוֹת אֱלִישָׁע וַיָּחִי וַיָּקָם עַל־רַגְלָיו:

Even Elisha's bones are powerful enough to revive the dead. As with Elisha and the oil miracle, there is no prayer to God and no mention of God in these verses. This moment from the Hebrew Bible signals the shift in the focus of miracles to come, the shift to focusing on the human and his divine power. In verse 21, Elisha exhibits power over the life and death of

another human being, even though he is dead. His power is inherent in his bones, the core structure of his human body.

The Relationship between Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus

The powerful biblical figures of Elijah and Elisha made deep impressions on the text of the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish tradition, and on early Christianity, as reflected in the Gospels. “Scholars generally agree that the Gospels were written forty to sixty years after the death of Jesus,”⁷² indicating that were written approximately 500 years after the latest Elisha stories were inserted in the biblical text, according to Otto. Yet, these powerful figures influence the figures of John the Baptist and Jesus in the Gospels.

Dr. Magnus Zetterholm, Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Lund University, writes in his article, “The Books of Kings in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers”:

Apart from the traditions about Elijah and Elisha, the Books of Kings have left few traces in the New Testament. The most important and most interesting use of these traditions is found in the gospels, but even outside them, Elijah and Elisha are those figures from the Books of Kings who seem to have influenced the authors of the New Testament the most.⁷³

Moreover, Zetterholm states that “John the Baptist...is explicitly identified with Elijah in Matthew [14:1-2, 16:14], and implicitly in Mark [6:14-16; 8:28] and Luke [9:7-9, 19].”⁷⁴ In

⁷² The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1744.

⁷³ Magnus Zetterholm, “The Books of Kings in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers,” in *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception*, ed. André Lemaire et al. (Boston: Brill, 2010), 561.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 575.

fact, as a part of the annunciation narrative of John the Baptist in Luke 1:16-17, the text states:

Luke 1:16-17⁷⁵

16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him⁷⁷, to turn the hearts of parents to their children⁷⁸ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the lord.

MGNT Luke 1:16-17⁷⁶

καὶ πολλοὺς τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ ἐπιστρέψει ἐπὶ κύριον τὸν θεὸν αὐτῶν

καὶ αὐτὸς προελεύσεται ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δυνάμει Ἑλίου ἐπιστρέψαι καρδίας πατέρων ἐπὶ τέκνα καὶ ἀπειθεῖς ἐν φρονήσει δικαίων ἐτοιμάσαι κυρίῳ λαὸν κατεσκευασμένον

This text clearly proclaims the strong relationship assumed in Luke between John the Baptist and Elijah. It declares that John the Baptist will function in the world with the “spirit and power of Elijah.” This relationship is a powerful bridge between the late Elijah-Elisha narratives of Hebrew Bible and narratives about John the Baptist and his disciple, Jesus, centuries later. Jesus appears in the gospels as a disciple of John the Baptist paralleling Elisha, as the disciple of Elijah. Zetterholm states outright that “It is, in fact, hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus, to some extent, is modeled after the prophets Elijah/Elisha.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1830.

⁷⁶ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of Luke 1 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Luk&c=1&t=MGNT>

⁷⁷ *he will go before him*: before the messiah. This statement relates John the Baptist to Elijah, as Elijah in Judaism is the prophet designated to “go before” the messiah and announce his arrival. This idea probably arises from Mal. 3:23:

23 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and terrible day of **יְהוָה** comes. כִּגְהֵנָה אֶנְכִּי שְׁלַח לְכֶם אֶת אֵלֶיָּה הַנָּבִיא לִפְנֵי בֹא יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

The assumption then is that the messiah will arrive on the “great and terrible day of **יְהוָה**.” This idea is picked up and expanded greatly in rabbinic literature and beyond.

⁷⁸ *to turn the hearts of parents to their children*: This statement is a direct reference to Mal. 3:24. In Mal. 3:23, God describes sending Elijah back. Verse 24 explains that Elijah’s mission upon returning to Earth will be to

וְהָשִׁיב לִב־אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְלִב בָּנִים עַל־אֲבֹתָם “turn the hearts of the parents to [their] children, and the hearts of children to their parents.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

In his book, *Workers of Wonders*, Rabbi Dr. Byron Sherwin, former Dean and current Distinguished Service Professor and Director of Doctoral Programs at the Spertus Institute, observes that:

...it should be stressed that the Gospels are not meant to be objective historical chronicles of Jesus' life and times. Rather, they are religious documents aimed at depicting Jesus' life, ministry, and message. Consequently, a major subject of this [Sherwin's] inquiry is not the historical Jesus as the founder of Christianity, but Jesus as he was portrayed as a Jewish religious leader and holy man of the first century in the Land of Israel by the authors of the Gospels. ... Jesus fit the paradigm of the wonder-working biblical prophet who also conveyed a moral message.⁸⁰

In this regard, setting aside any Gospel agenda to ultimately assert that Jesus is God, Jesus, the human being in the Gospels, fits with the theme established most soundly by Elisha. Jesus works wonders without prayer to God or reliance on God in some other way. The power to do these miracles and work these wonders seems to emanate from Jesus himself.

Sherwin goes further than Zetterholm stating that:

Certain types of Jesus' wonder-working activities seem to be deliberately modeled after the wonders of the greatest wonder-working prophets of Hebrew scripture, that is, Elijah and his disciple and successor Elisha. As has been noted, Jesus was compared in the Gospels to Elijah. As the inheritor of the mantle of John the Baptist, according to some, it was all but inevitable that Jesus also would be compared to Elijah's disciple, Elisha.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Byron L. Sherwin, *Workers of Wonders: A Model for Effective Religious Leadership from Scripture to Today* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 45.

⁸¹ Ibid. 49.

Sherwin goes on to argue that Jesus of the Gospels is both modeled after Elisha and designed to surpass his wonderworking abilities:

Jesus is reported as performing many of the same wonders as Elisha. For example, Elisha (like Elijah; 1 Kgs. 17:17-24) raises a child from the dead (2 Kgs. 4:32-37); yet, Jesus raises at least three people from the dead [Matt. 9:18-19, 23-25; Mark 5:29-42; Luke 7:11-15, 8:41-42, 49-46; John 11:1-44]. Elisha miraculously causes food to multiply to feed hundreds of people [2 Kgs. 4:42-44], yet, Jesus causes food to multiply to feed thousands of people [Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; Matt. 14:15-21, 15:32-38]. Elisha, like Moses, cures one leper (2 Kgs. 5); yet, Jesus cures many lepers [Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-14; ten at one time in Luke 17:11-19; Matt. 8:2-4]. If Elisha needs angelic bodyguards (2 Kgs. 6:17), Jesus demonstrates that he can get along without them (Matt. 26:53). If Elisha and Moses can cure one leper, Jesus can cure many and quicker [Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-14, 17:11-19; Matt. 8:2-4]. In other words, the Gospels try to establish Jesus not only as a wonder worker, but as one whose abilities surpass those of Elisha, Elijah, and even of Moses. Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus ministers to individuals, to the common folk, and especially to women.⁸²

From these textual comparisons, Sherwin establishes a firm case of the relationship between Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus. Jesus is portrayed along the lines of wonderworkers from the Hebrew Bible and seems particularly modeled to exceed the work of the Hebrew Bible's prophet, Elisha. Whatever the intent of the authors of Gospels, to portray Jesus as a prophet, healer, exorcist, messiah and/or son of God, there is a clear literary connection between Jesus as a wonderworker and Elijah and Elisha as wonderworking figures. Moreover, that

⁸² Ibid. 50.

connection continues to show the shift in focus from the Bible to the rabbinic period. There is no question that Jesus was an influential figure in rabbinic Judaism, especially in terms of the rabbis reacting against him and Christianity.⁸³

Jesus and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: An Introduction⁸⁴

Contemporary with Jesus, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and the Gospels, a new class of scholar-leader was growing and developing in Palestinian Jewish society: the Rabbi. Rabbi is not a title in the Hebrew Bible; rather, it and the title, “*Rabban*,” are first mentioned in Jewish literature, in the *Mishnah* (codified c. 200 CE). While unlikely that this term was being used during Jesus’ lifetime, clearly this title was known to the writers of the Gospels, because the word ῥαββί or “Rabbi” is used in 15 verses across Matthew, Mark, and John.⁸⁵ For example, Jesus speaks out against calling the scribes and the Pharisees “Rabbi” in Matt. 23:8 and in Mark 11:21, Jesus is anachronistically referred to as ῥαββί.

The *Mishnah* records the stories of men who lived in the pre-rabbinic, i.e., Pharisaic period. Hanina ben Dosa, like Jesus, was a Galilean. He lived in ‘Arav, “about six miles north of Sepphoris and therefore about ten miles north of Nazareth.”⁸⁶ He was a

⁸³ See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) for a full treatment of this subject.

⁸⁴ This study has elected to focus on Hanina ben Dosa because of the wide variety of ways in which he and Jesus are similar: power over snakes, transmuting substances, distance healing, and power over demons. Another study could easily examine חוּנִי הַמַּעֲגֵל, Honi the Circle Maker, as another exemplary rabbi contemporary with Jesus.

⁸⁵ “Strong’s Number G4461 matches the Greek ῥαββί (*rhabbi*), which occurs 17 times in 15 verses in the Greek concordance of the KJV”: Matt. 23:7-8; 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:38, 49; 3:2, 26; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8

Blue Letter Bible. “Dictionary and Word Search for *rhabbi* (Strong’s 4461)”. Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 1 Feb 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G4461&t=NKJV>>

⁸⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Miracles: Elisha and Hanina ben Dosa,” in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, edited by John C. Cavadini, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Pr, 1999), 70.

contemporary of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabban Gamaliel,⁸⁷ so “it seems to be generally agreed that Hanina flourished before the fall of Jerusalem, therefore about a generation after Jesus, and he may have lived on into the postdisaster period.”⁸⁸ He is “known from later rabbinic sources”⁸⁹ that label him “Rabbi,” such as m. Sot. 9:15, which states:

When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa died, men of *מְשִׁמַּת רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶּן דּוּסָא, בְּטָלוּ אֲנָשֵׁי מַעֲשָׂה*.
deed came to an end.

Dr. Rabbi Baruch Bokser, ז”ל, a former professor of Talmud and rabbinical studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, understands “men of deed” to be a “type of wonder worker.”⁹⁰ He explains that “this image of Hanina accords with the fact that the *Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, and several later *midrashim* narrate his wonder-working activities but attribute to him no halakhic teachings.”⁹¹

Géza Vermés, in part one of his seminal work, “Hanina ben Dosa: A Controversial Galilean Saint from the First Century of the Christian Era,” writes about Hanina ben Dosa as a “man of deed.” He writes that:

His (good) “deeds” are described as charismatic healing and other miraculous acts, and the most suitable parallels to these are to be found, not in the Talmud, but in the contemporary New Testament. There, Jesus is depicted as “a prophet mighty in *deed*

⁸⁷ See b. Ber. 34a.

⁸⁸ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Miracles: Elisha and Hanina ben Dosa,” in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, edited by John C. Cavadini, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Pr, 1999), 70.

⁸⁹ Baruch M. Bokser, “Wonder-Working and the Rabbinic Tradition: The Case of Hanina Ben Dosa,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period*, vol. 16, no 1 (1985): 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

and word” (Lk. 24:19) [emphasis in original] and his miraculous cures are referred to simply as his “deeds” (ἔργα).⁹²

Vermés also notes other locations in the Gospels that refer to Jesus’ deeds: “Matt. 11:2.—The healing of the sick man in Jn. 5:1-9 is alluded to in J. 7:21 as ‘one deed.’”⁹³ In fact, Vermés touts Hanina ben Dosa as “the most celebrated miracle-worker in rabbinic Judaism.”⁹⁴

Jesus and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: Power over Snakes

Mishnah Berachot 5:1 describes the frame of mind for prayer. Sages took extreme care and focus before prayer, שִׁיכְנוּ אֶת לְבָבָם לַמָּקוֹם in order that they could direct their hearts to God. The *mishnah* lists various distracting situations that could occur while a person was standing in prayer. In reacting to this line from m. Ber. 5:1, וְאִפְלוּ נִחַשׁ כְּרוּךְ עַל וְאִפְלוּ נִחַשׁ כְּרוּךְ עַל “and even if a snake is wrapped around his heel, he does not stop,” the b. Ber. 33a states:

Our Rabbis taught: It happened in a certain place there was an ערוד ⁹⁵ which used to harm people. They came and told R. Hanina ben Dosa.	תנו רבנן: מעשה במקום אחד שהיה ערוד והיה מזיק את הבריות, באו והודיעו לו לרבי חנינא בן דוסא.
He said to them, “Show me its hole.” They showed him its hole. He put his heel over the hole, it came out and bit him, and the ערוד died.	אמר להם: הראו לי את חורו הראוהו את חורו, נתן עקבו על פי החור, יצא ונשכו ומת אותו ערוד.
He took it on his shoulder and brought it to the House of Study. He said to them, “See, my sons, it is not the ערוד that kills, it is sin that kills!”	נטלו על כתפו והביאו לבית המדרש. אמר להם: ראו בני, אין ערוד ממית אלא החטא ממית.

⁹² Géza Vermés, “Hanina ben Dosa: A Controversial Galilean Saint from the First Century of the Christian Era [Pt 1],” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23, no 1 Spr (1972): 39.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ ערוד according to Vermés refers to “a poisonous reptile (a cross, according to the popular zoology of b. Hul. 127a, between a snake and a lizard!).” – Ibid. 34.

At that time they said, “Woe to the man who באותה שעה אמרו: אי לו לאדם שפגע בו ערוד ואוי לו לערוד שפגע בו רבי חנינא בן ערוד ואוי לו לערוד שפגע בו רבי חנינא בן
meets an ערוד, but woe to the ערוד that meets R. Hanina ben Dosa!
וְאֵי לוֹ לַעֲרוּד שִׁפְּגַע בּוֹ רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶּן עֲרוּד.⁹⁶

On this theme of story, which occurs also in t. Ber. 3:20, y. Ber.9a and in *Yelammedenu*, Vermés writes:

The original meaning of the episode is that no evil can prevail against a holy man.

The New Testament employs the same paradigm, and expresses it more emphatically by speaking of picking up, or stepping on, snakes.⁹⁶

In meaningfully parallel Jesus episodes, facility with snakes is also a significant sign of a holy person. For example:

Mark 16:14-18⁹⁷

14 Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

15 And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

16 The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.

17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name will they cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues;

18 they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

MGNT Mark 16:14-18⁹⁸

ὕστερον δὲ ἀνακειμένοις αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἑνδεκά ἐφανερώθη καὶ ὠνειδίσεν τὴν ἀπιστίαν αὐτῶν καὶ σκληροκαρδίαν ὅτι τοῖς θεασαμένοις αὐτὸν ἐγγεγερμένον οὐκ ἐπίστευσαν

καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς πορευθέντες εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἅπαντα κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται ὁ δὲ ἀπιστήσας κατακριθήσεται

σημεῖα δὲ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ταῦτα παρακολουθήσει ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου δαιμόνια ἐκβαλοῦσιν γλώσσαις λαλήσουσιν καιναῖς

καὶ ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν ὄφεις ἄροῦσιν καὶ ἂν θανάσιμόν τι πίωσιν οὐ μὴ αὐτοὺς βλάβῃ ἐπὶ ἀρρώστους χεῖρας ἐπιθήσουσιν καὶ καλῶς ἔξουσιν

⁹⁶ Ibid. 35.

⁹⁷ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1824.

⁹⁸ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of Mark 16 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Mar&c=16&t=MGNT>>

In this passage, Jesus speaks to his remaining apostles about spreading the gospel of Jesus. He gives them a series of special signs that will accompany believers. The signs of particular interest here are signs that parallel the work of Hanina ben Dosa. In verse 18, two signs are common between the two: special facility with snakes, where snakes do not injure them and ability as a healer.

This theme is expanded upon in Luke 10:

Luke 10:19⁹⁹

19 See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

MGNT Luke 10:19¹⁰⁰

ἰδοὺ δέδωκα ὑμῖν τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ πατεῖν ἐπάνω ὄφεων καὶ σκορπίων καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ ἐχθροῦ καὶ οὐδὲν ὑμᾶς οὐ μὴ ἀδικήσῃ

In this short text, Jesus is speaking to his 70 or 72 followers. He is assuring them that he has imbued them with power over snakes. They are able to do exactly what Hanina did, walk right over these dangerous animals and go unharmed.

Acts is the fifth book of the New Testament and the first outside the four Gospels. It is aptly named for the subject here, which focuses on “men of deeds.” The New Oxford Annotated Bible explains that “modern interpreters now understand Luke-Acts as a unified literary work in two parts.”¹⁰¹ Broadly, the Book of Acts traces the establishment of the early church. “According to its opening words, Acts was written sometime after Luke’s Gospel, which scholarly consensus currently dates to 85-95 CE (though some arguments have been advanced for an early second-century date).”¹⁰² This timing places the Book of

⁹⁹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1850.

¹⁰⁰ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of Luke 10 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Luk&c=10&t=MGNT>>

¹⁰¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1919.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Acts after the lifetime of Hanina ben Dosa, but before the codification of the *Mishnah* and well before the codification of the Babylonian Talmud. In this text, Paul experiences a similar event to Hanina ben Dosa.

Acts 28:3-6¹⁰³

3 Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand.

4 When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live."

5 He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

6 They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

MGNT Acts 28:3-6¹⁰⁴

συστρέψαντος δὲ τοῦ Παύλου φρυγάνων τι πλῆθος καὶ ἐπιθέντος ἐπὶ τὴν πυρὰν ἔχιδνα ἀπὸ τῆς θερμῆς ἐξελθοῦσα καθῆψεν τῆς χειρὸς αὐτοῦ

ὥς δὲ εἶδον οἱ βάρβαροι κρεμάμενον τὸ θηρίον ἐκ τῆς χειρὸς αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἔλεγον πάντως φονεὺς ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος ὃν διασωθέντα ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης ἡ δίκη ζῆν οὐκ εἴασεν

ὁ μὲν οὖν ἀποτινάξας τὸ θηρίον εἰς τὸ πῦρ ἔπαθεν οὐδὲν κακόν

οἱ δὲ προσεδόκων αὐτὸν μέλλειν πίμπρασθαι ἢ καταπίπτειν ἄφνω νεκρὸν ἐπὶ πολὺ δὲ αὐτῶν προσδοκῶντων καὶ θεωρούντων μηδὲν ἄτοπον εἰς αὐτὸν γινόμενον μεταβαλόμενοι ἔλεγον αὐτὸν εἶναι θεόν

In this text, Paul is the charismatic figure. He is bitten and, as with Hanina ben Dosa, he survives and the snake dies. Paul does not cry out to God, Paul simply shakes the snake off and comes away from the experience unscathed. Like Hanina, he has an internal power that protects him. He is a human capable of working wonders to the extent that the people who witness the event come to believe that he is divine.

Jesus and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: Transmuting Substances

This chapter, in the section "Elijah and Elisha: Wonders with Food," has already examined Elijah and Elisha's ability with the multiplication of food. In each case, the prophet is able to perform a miracle with oil (I Kgs. 17:16; II Kgs. 4:5-6). Hanina is also

¹⁰³ Ibid. 1969-1970.

¹⁰⁴ Blue Letter Bible. "Acts of the Apostles 28 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Act&c=28&t=MGNT>

recorded to have performed an oil miracle; however his wonder comes in the category of transformation.

b. *Ta'anit* 25a

Once when the sun was going down [on a Friday] he saw that his daughter was sad. He said to her, "My daughter, why are you sad?"

She said to him, "I have exchanged/mistaken my container of vinegar for my container of oil and I kindled the Sabbath light with it (the vinegar).

He said to her, "My daughter, why are you worried about it? The One who told the oil to burn, He will tell the vinegar to burn.

It was taught: It burned and continued [to burn] the whole day, until they took light from it for the *הבדלה* [candle/light].¹⁰⁵

מסכת תענית דף כה.א

חד בי שמש חזיה לברתיה דהוות עציבא, אמר לה: בתי למאי עציבת?

אמרה ליה: כלי של חומץ נתחלף לי בכלי של שמן, והדלקתי ממנו אור לשבת.

אמר לה: בתי, מאי אכפת לך? מי שאמר לשמן וידלוק הוא יאמר לחומץ וידלוק.

תנא: היה דולק והולך כל היום כולו, עד שהביאו ממנו אור להבדלה.

In this passage, Hanina ben Dosa's daughter is preparing for Shabbat by kindling the *אור לשבת*, or Shabbat light. After the light is lit and the sun sets, no more fires may be kindled until the end of Shabbat at the ritual of *הבדלה*, or Separation, approximately 25 hours later. The Rabbis of *Mishnah* Shabbat discuss these issues at great length, including what substances are acceptable to burn for the Shabbat light, in m. Shab. 2:2:

R. Ishmael says, "They may not light with tar, because of respect for the Sabbath."¹⁰⁶

And the Sages permit all kinds of oils: sesame seed oil, nut oil, radish oil, fish oil, gourd oil, tar and kerosene. R. Tarfon says, "They may only light with olive oil."

רבי ישמעאל אומר, אין מדליקין בעטרן, מפני כבוד השבת.

וחכמים מתירין בכל השמנים, בשמן שמשמין, בשמן אגוזים, בשמן צנונות, בשמן דגים, בשמן פקועות, בעטרן ובנפט. רבי טרפון אומר, אין מדליקין אלא בשמן זית בלבד:

This text is very specific about what may be used. Thus, it is possible that Hanina ben Dosa's daughter is not only concerned that she has lit and cannot relight, but that she has used an ineligible substance. Moreover, vinegar generally does not burn, as it is mostly

¹⁰⁵ The light was still burning 25 hours later, when the family went to light their *הבדלה* candle for the ritual of Separation (*הבדלה*) which concludes Shabbat and the need for a Shabbat light.

¹⁰⁶ Tar is forbidden, presumably, because of the bad smell. Shabbat is supposed to be a pleasant time, and the smell would make it unpleasant.

water, usually about 95%, with some acetic acid, usually about 5%. 2000 years in the past, it is unlikely that vinegar could have been purified to a state that the acetic acid could ignite without the water extinguishing the flame.¹⁰⁷ That being said, Hanina's statement seems to allow the vinegar to burn and burn for the entire Shabbat until the end when the family kindles the light for **הבדלה**; presumably, because it became as the oil that was intended to have been lit. Hanina has worked a wonder, which both serves to cheer up his daughter and give respect to the Sabbath in their home.

Hanina invokes the power of God in this passage without naming God or asking God for anything. He simply states the reality of the world as he understands it: **מי שאמר לשמן** - "The One who told the oil to burn, He will tell the vinegar to burn." His prediction then becomes reality. The focus of the text remains on him and his daughter. Whether it is God or Hanina, through his faith in God, working the wonder behind the scenes, the text remains vague. The summary statement at the end of the passage only confirms that Hanina ben Dosa's statement became reality and the substance in the lamp burned for 25 hours, it does not say why.

Géza Vermés points out that while the Jewish tradition has examples of the "miraculous multiplication of oil...the transformation of vinegar into oil is an additional embellishment."¹⁰⁸ Moreover, he observes that "the only parallel one can think of without searching is the conversion of water into wine in the New Testament narrative of the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Martin Lazarus, telephone interview about the properties of vinegar with the author, 16 Feb. 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Géza Vermés, "Hanina ben Dosa: A Controversial Galilean Saint from the First Century of the Christian Era [Pt 1]," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23, no 1 Spr (1972): 42.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

John 2:1-10¹¹⁰

1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.

8 He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it.

9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom.

10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

MGNT John 2:1-10¹¹¹

καὶ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ γάμος ἐγένετο ἐν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἦν ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐκεῖ

ἐκλήθη δὲ καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν γάμον

καὶ ὑστερήσαντος οἴνου λέγει ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ πρὸς αὐτόν οἶνον οὐκ ἔχουσιν καὶ λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοὶ γύναι οὐπω ἔκει ἡ ὥρα μου

λέγει ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ τοῖς διακόνοις ὅ τι ἂν λέγῃ ὑμῖν ποιήσατε

ἦσαν δὲ ἐκεῖ λίθιναι ὑδρίαὶ ἕξ κατὰ τὸν καθαρισμόν τῶν Ἰουδαίων κείμεναι χωροῦσαι ἀνὰ μετρητὰς δύο ἢ τρεῖς λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς γεμίσατε τὰς ὑδρίας ὕδατος καὶ ἐγέμισαν αὐτὰς ἕως ἄνω

καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ἀντλήσατε νῦν καὶ φέρετε τῷ ἀρχιτρικλίνῳ οἱ δὲ ἤνεγκαν ὥς δὲ ἐγεύσατο ὁ ἀρχιτρικλίνος τὸ ὕδωρ οἶνον γεγεννημένον καὶ οὐκ ᾔδει πόθεν ἐστίν οἱ δὲ διάκονοι ᾔδεισαν οἱ ἠντληκότες τὸ ὕδωρ φωνεῖ τὸν νυμφίον ὁ ἀρχιτρικλίνος

καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος πρῶτον τὸν καλὸν οἶνον τίθησιν καὶ ὅταν μεθυσθῶσιν τὸν ἐλάσσω σὺ τετήρηκας τὸν καλὸν οἶνον ἕως ἄρτι

In this narrative, Jesus acts after being prompted by his mother, similar to Hanina after being prompted by his daughter. He seems to act both to please his mother, even though he states that it is not yet his time, and to give more joy to the wedding party. Jesus never mentions God in this narrative, as the narrative is focusing around Jesus gradually revealing his own powers. Ultimately, his miracle is verified externally, by the steward tasting the wine and telling the bridegroom about its quality. By contrast, Hanina ben Dosa's

¹¹⁰ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1885.

¹¹¹ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of John 2 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Jhn&c=2&t=MGNT>>

miracle is affirmed, without any person stating the change or making it explicit. Rather, in his narrative the change in the vinegar is implicit, as the substance in the light burns continuously throughout Shabbat.

Jesus and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: Distance Healing

Hanina ben Dosa was famously regarded as a healer in his generation. This fact is evident through stories where he is called upon to heal the children of two major figures of his time: Rabban Gamaliel and Yochanan ben Zakkai. Vermés summarizes many different narratives stating that “Hanina’s intervention was principally sought in cases of sickness.”¹¹²

An exemplary narrative of Hanina ben Dosa’s distance healing is found in b. Ber. 34b:

Our Rabbis taught, “Once the son of R. Gamaliel fell ill. He dispatched two [of his] students to the place of R. Hanina ben Dosa to pray (lit. request mercy) for him.

When he saw them he went up to the upper chamber and prayed (lit. asked mercy) for him.¹¹³ When he came down, he said to them, “Go, the fever has left him.”

They said to him, “Are you a prophet?” He said to them, “(Amos 7:14) ‘I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet,’ but so I have received/been favored.

If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that he (the sick person) is accepted [and will recover]; but if not, I know that he is rejected (lit. torn) [and will die]. They sat down and wrote, and noted (lit. directed or intended) the time.

And when they came to the place of R. Gamaliel, he said to them, “By the temple service! You have not detracted nor have you added, but so it happened: at that same time the fever left him, and he asked us for water to drink.

תנו רבנן: מעשה שחלה בנו של רבן גמליאל, שגר שני תלמידי חכמים אצל רבי חנינא בן דוסא לבקש עליו רחמים.

כיון שראה אותם עלה לעלייה ובקש עליו רחמים. בירידתו, אמר להם: לכו - שחלצתו חמה.

אמרו לו: וכי נביא אתה? אמר להן: לא נביא אנכי ולא בן נביא אנכי, אלא כך מקבלני:

אם שגורה תפלתי בפי - יודע אני שהוא מקובל, ואם לאו - יודע אני שהוא מטורף. ישבו וכתבו וכוונו אותה שעה.

וכשבאו אצל רבן גמליאל, אמר להן: העבודה לא חסרתם ולא הותרתם, אלא כך היה מעשה, באותה שעה חלצתו חמה ושאל לנו מים לשתות.

¹¹² Géza Vermés, *Jesus the Jew*, (London: Collins, 1973), 74.

¹¹³ Hanina ben Dosa is so outstanding a healer, the students sent by Rabban Gamliel do not even have to tell Hanina why they have come.

In this exceptional passage, Hanina shows his skill as a healer and reveals his talent for pre-cognition. Not only does Hanina know why the students have come without them speaking to him, but he explains how he can always tell of the person he prays for will recover or not. In this passage, Hanina's actions invoke the image of Elijah from I Kgs. 17:19: וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ אֶל-הֶעָלְיָהּ “and he took him up to the upper chamber.” When Elijah goes up, he goes up to pray and he takes the child he seeks to heal with him. When Hanina ben Dosa goes up, he goes with the intent of healing the child through prayer as well. When asked about being a prophet, based on these prophet-like abilities, Hanina answers at the beginning with the humble answer of Amos (7:14), but ends up with a statement very different from Amos. Amos finishes his sentence, כִּי-בֹקֵר אֶנֶכִּי וּבֹלֵס שְׂקָמִים “but I am a herdsman and cultivator of sycamores.” It is not glamorous work. Hanina takes the end of his sentence in a very different direction: כִּךְ מִקְבֻלִּי “but so I have received/been favored.” God is not mentioned, but the implication is that the Divine shows Hanina special favor. Perhaps Hanina believes that prophecy has ended, as is stated elsewhere in rabbinic literature,¹¹⁴ but he still knows himself to be unique. He does not seem to be exaggerating, as the rest of the passage demonstrates: the moment that Hanina says the fever is gone, it was gone. Hanina was miles away from the patient, but his healing was efficacious and instantaneous. The way the text is written with its emphasis on the human actors, even the students noting down the time, God's role is minimized, while Hanina's power is maximized.

¹¹⁴ b. San. 11a states, תנו רבנן: משמתו נביאים האחרונים חגי זכריה ומלאכי - נסתלקה רוח הקודש מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל - “The Rabbis taught: When the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, died – the holy spirit [of prophecy] was removed from Israel.” (Cf. t. Sot. 13.3; y. Sot. 9.13, 24b; b. Sot. 48b; b. Yoma 9b; S.S. Rab. 8:9 #3)

Like Hanina ben Dosa, Jesus also cures patients from a distance. These narratives can be found in Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10, and John 4:46-53. The narrative in John most closely relates to the Hanina narrative from b. Ber. 34b.

John 4:46-53¹¹⁵

46 Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum.

47 When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

48 Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

49 The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies."

50 Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.

51 As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive.

52 So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, "Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him."

53 The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he believed, along with his whole household.

MGNT John 4:46-53¹¹⁶

ἦλθεν οὖν πάλιν εἰς τὴν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ὅπου ἐποίησεν τὸ ὕδωρ οἶνον καὶ ἦν τις βασιλικὸς οὗ ὁ υἱὸς ἡσθένει ἐν Καφαρναούμ

οὗτος ἀκούσας ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἦκει ἐκ τῆς Ἰουδαίας εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ ἠρώτα ἵνα καταβῇ καὶ ἰάσῃται αὐτοῦ τὸν υἱόν ἡμελλεν γὰρ ἀποθνήσκειν

εἶπεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς αὐτόν ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδῃτε οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε

λέγει πρὸς αὐτόν ὁ βασιλικὸς κύριε κατάβηθι πρὶν ἀποθανεῖν τὸ παιδίον μου

λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς πορεύου ὁ υἱός σου ζῇ ἐπίστευσεν ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῷ λόγῳ ὃν εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἐπορεύετο

ἤδη δὲ αὐτοῦ καταβαίνοντος οἱ δοῦλοι αὐτοῦ ὑπῆντησαν αὐτῷ λέγοντες ὅτι ὁ παῖς αὐτοῦ ζῇ ἐπύθετο ὅν τὴν ὥραν παρ' αὐτῶν ἐν ἧ κομψότερον ἔσχεν εἶπαν οὖν αὐτῷ ὅτι ἐχθὲς ὥραν ἐβδόμην ἀφῆκεν αὐτόν ὁ πυρετός

ἔγνω οὖν ὁ πατήρ ὅτι ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐν ἧ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ υἱός σου ζῇ καὶ ἐπίστευσεν αὐτός καὶ ἡ οἰκία αὐτοῦ ὅλη

Both narratives take place in the Galilee region. The royal official with the sick son in the John text is parallel to the powerful rabbinic figure of Rabban Gamaliel, whose son has fallen ill. However, in the John narrative, the official goes directly to Jesus, unlike Rabban Gamaliel who sends his students to Hanina ben Dosa. Unlike Hanina, Jesus does not pray,

¹¹⁵ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1889.

¹¹⁶ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of John 4 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Jhn&c=4&t=MGNT>>

but he does dismiss the man with the same “Go” as Hanina. Both Hanina and Jesus send the men away with a promise that the boy will be healed. In each narrative, the time of the healing holds great significance in showing that it was Hanina and Jesus, respectively, who healed the boys. God’s role is minimized in the Hanina narrative and God is absent from the Jesus text.

Hanina ben Dosa stands out as being able to know whether a person will recover or die, just from his experience of praying for him. Jesus only states his knowledge of a person’s recovery based on his experience of “bodily contact with the sick”¹¹⁷ and feeling that the “power had gone out from [him].”¹¹⁸

Jesus and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: Power over Demons

Each man also demonstrates power over demons. A key narrative about Hanina ben Dosa appears in b. Pes. 112b. The narrative follows and expands on a statement from Rabbi Yossi son of Rabbi Judah¹¹⁹, who commanded Rabbi: אל תצא יחידי בלילה “Do not go out alone at night.”

b. Pesachim 112b

‘Do not go out alone at night’ - It was taught: One should not go out alone at night, not on Wednesday nights and not on Saturday nights, because Igrat, the daughter of Mahalat,¹²⁰ she and one hundred eighty thousand destroying angels go out, and each has permission destroy independently.

מסכת פסחים דף קיב.ב

אל תצא יחידי בלילה - דתניא: לא יצא יחידי בלילה לא בלילי רביעיות ולא בלילי שבתות, מפני שאגרת בת מחלת, היא ושמונה עשרה רבוא של מלאכי חבלה יוצאין, וכל אחד ואחד יש לו רשות לחבל בפני עצמו.

¹¹⁷ Géza Vermés, *Jesus the Jew*, (London: Collins, 1973), 75.

¹¹⁸ Luke 8:46; Cf. Mark 5:30

¹¹⁹ One of the last *tannaim*, who lived in the late 2nd century CE, or approximately 150 years after Hanina ben Dosa. - Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Tanna, Tannaim," by Daniel Sperber.

¹²⁰ *Igrat, the daughter of Mahalat* – the Queen of Demons

Originally, they were common every day. One time, she met R. Hanina ben Dosa. She said to him, "If they had not proclaimed about you in Heaven, 'Beware of Hanina and his learning (lit. his Torah),' I would have put you in danger."

He said to her, "If I am regarded [so well] in Heaven, I decree that you shall never to pass through settled regions." She said to him, "Please, leave me a little room (lit. the space of a penny)." He left her Saturday nights and Wednesday nights.

מעיקרא הוו שכיחי כולי יומא, זמנא חדא פגעה ברבי חנינא בן דוסא. אמרה ליה: אי לאו דמכרזן עלך ברקיע הזהרו בחנינא ובתורתו - סכנתך.

אמר לה: אי חשיבנא ברקיע - גוזר אני עליך שלא תעבורי ביישוב לעולם. אמרה ליה: במטותא מינך, שבק לי רווחא פורתא. שבק לה לילי שבתות ולילי רביעיות.

In this narrative, Hanina ben Dosa holds power over the Queen of the Demons because of his regard in Heaven. The Queen of the Demons is aware of Heaven's opinion of Hanina; because of his reputation, he is able to control her. God is not explicitly mentioned in the text. God is very likely the voice *ברקיע*, in the firmament of Heaven, to which Igrat refers; the proclamation affirming Hanina ben Dosa as a significant human being. In fact, in three places in the Babylonian Talmud¹²¹, a daily voice from Heaven, or *בת קול*, calls Hanina ben Dosa "my son":

b. Ta'anit 24b

R. Judah said [in the name of] Rav: Every day a Heavenly Voice goes out and says, "The whole world is provided for because [of the merit] of Hanina my son, and Hanina my son suffices himself with a *קב*¹²² of carobs from one Friday evening to another.

מסכת תענית דף כדב

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: בכל יום ויום בת קול יוצאת ואומרת: כל העולם כולו ניזון בשביל חנינא בני וחנינא בני דיו בקב חרובים מערב שבת לערב שבת.

Hanina ben Dosa does not call upon God, in b. Pes. 112b., to decree against the demons, rather, he rallies his own strength. He, the human figure with the divine connection, is waging war against supernatural creatures and limiting their freedom simply by speaking.

There are several parallel stories of Jesus controlling demons and sending them into a herd of pigs. Based on the Four Source Hypothesis of the Synoptic Gospels, Mark 5:1-20

¹²¹ b. Taan. 24b, cf. b. Ber. 17b, b. Hul. 86a

¹²² The *קב* is the standard unit of measurement for dry goods in Rabbinic Literature (e.g., 4 *Log* = 1 *Kav* = 24 *Bezah* (eggs)). For the purpose it is used here, a *קב* is a modest amount of food for a week of sustenance.

was probably the original source text for Matthew 8:28-24 and Luke 8:26-39. The Mark text is as follows:

Mark 5:1-20¹²³

1 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.

2 And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

3 He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain;

4 for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.

5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him;

7 and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.”

8 For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!”

9 Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.”

10 He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country.

11 Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding;

12 and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.”

MGNT Mark 5:1-20¹²⁴

καὶ ἦλθον εἰς τὸ πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γερασηνῶν

καὶ ἐξελθόντος αὐτοῦ ἐκ τοῦ πλοίου εὐθὺς ὑπήντησεν αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν μνημείων ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ

ὃς τὴν κατοίκησιν εἶχεν ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν καὶ οὐδὲ ἀλύσει οὐκέτι οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο αὐτὸν δῆσαι

διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν πολλάκις πέδαις καὶ ἀλύσεσιν δεδεσθαι καὶ διεσπᾶσθαι ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ τὰς ἀλύσεις καὶ τὰς πέδας συντετριφθαι καὶ οὐδεὶς ἴσχυεν αὐτὸν δαμάσαι

καὶ διὰ παντὸς νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν ἦν κράζων καὶ κατακόπτων ἑαυτὸν λίθοις

καὶ ἰδὼν τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἔδραμεν καὶ προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ

καὶ κράξας φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγει τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοὶ Ἰησοῦ υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου ὀρκίζω σε τὸν θεόν μή με βασανίσῃς

ἔλεγεν γὰρ αὐτῷ ἔξελθε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀκάθαρτον ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου

καὶ ἐπηρώτα αὐτόν τί ὄνομά σοι καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ λεγιὼν ὄνομά μοι ὅτι πολλοὶ ἐσμεν

καὶ παρεκάλει αὐτὸ ν πο λὰ ἵνα μὴ αὐτὰ ἀποστείλῃ ἔξω τῆς χώρας

ἦν δὲ ἐκεῖ πρὸς τῷ ὄρει ἀγέλη χοίρων μεγάλη βοσκομένη

καὶ παρεκάλεσαν αὐτὸν λέγοντες πέμψον ἡμᾶς εἰς τοὺς χοίρους ἵνα εἰς αὐτοὺς εἰσέλθωμεν

¹²³ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Michael D. Coogan; assoc. eds. Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1799-1801.

¹²⁴ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of Mark 5 - (MGNT - Morphological Greek New Testament)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012. 29 Jan 2012. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Mar&c=5&t=MGNT>>

13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

14 The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened.

15 They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.

16 Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it.

17 Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him.

19 But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.”

20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

καὶ ἐπέτρεψεν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐξελθόντα τὰ πνεύματα τὰ ἀκάθαρτα εἰσῆλθον εἰς τοὺς χοίρους καὶ ὥρμησεν ἡ ἀγέλη κατὰ τοῦ κρημνοῦ εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν ὥς δισχίλιοι καὶ ἐπνίγοντο ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ

καὶ οἱ βόσκοντες αὐτοὺς ἔφυγον καὶ ἀπήγγειλαν εἰς τὴν πόλιν καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἀγροὺς καὶ ἦλθον ἰδεῖν τί ἐστὶν τὸ γεγονός

καὶ ἔρχονται πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ θεωροῦσιν τὸν δαιμονιζόμενον καθήμενον ἱματισμένον καὶ σωφρονοῦντα τὸν ἐσχηκότα τὸν λεγιῶνα καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν

καὶ διηγήσαντο αὐτοῖς οἱ ἰδόντες πῶς ἐγένετο τῷ δαιμονιζομένῳ καὶ περὶ τῶν χοίρων

καὶ ἤρξαντο παρακαλεῖν αὐτὸν ἀπελθεῖν ἀπὸ τῶν ὁρίων αὐτῶν

καὶ ἐμβαίνοντος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ πλοῖον παρεκάλει αὐτὸν ὁ δαιμονισθεὶς ἵνα μετ’ αὐτοῦ ᾗ

καὶ οὐκ ἀφῆκεν αὐτόν ἀλλὰ λέγει αὐτῷ ὕπαγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου πρὸς τοὺς σοὺς καὶ ἀπάγγειλον αὐτοῖς ὅσα ὁ κύριός σοι πεποίηκεν καὶ ἠλέησέν σε

καὶ ἀπῆλθεν καὶ ἤρξατο κηρύσσειν ἐν τῇ Δεκαπόλει ὅσα ἐποίησεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ πάντες ἐθαύμαζον

These two narratives, from the Babylonian Talmud and the Gospel of Mark, share many common elements. The first deeply significant similarity is that both figures, Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa and Jesus are called “son of God.” Hanina is called “my son” by the Heavenly Voice in b. Taan. 24b, and the demon calls Jesus, “Son of the Most High God,” in Mark 5:7. In each narrative, the demon is aware of both God/Heaven and the man’s relationship to God/Heaven. The demons ask each man for an alternative solution to pure banishment. Ultimately their demonic power is greatly limited, in the Hanina narrative, and limited, then utterly destroyed, in the Jesus narrative. Unlike Hanina ben Dosa, Jesus has witnesses immediately after his miracle, who react with fear. After the formerly possessed

man reports what Jesus did for him to the broader public, the reaction is amazement; the standard response of people witnessing a miracle. In the Talmud narrative, no person is present to react to the scene, rather the story makes a larger impact on Rabbinic Judaism and the idea of when it is safe to go out at night. This impact can be seen through the tradition preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (codified between 500-700 CE) with Rabbi Yossi ben Yehuda, a rabbi from the end of the Tannaitic generation (late 2nd century CE), quoting the tradition based on the actions of Hanina ben Dosa, one of the first *Tannaim* (early to mid-1st century CE).¹²⁵ Echoes of Hanina's power over the Queen of the Demons continue to resound throughout early rabbinic literature.

Jesus and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: A Conclusion

Each of these men establishes a pattern of the extraordinary in their generation. Their powers are compared with divine powers. Jesus is ultimately turned into a divine figure by Christianity. Hanina ben Dosa ultimately becomes a small force in Rabbinic Judaism. In his book, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Rabbi Solomon Schechter explains that "such men as... R. Chaninah b. Dosa [*sic*], whose prayers were often solicited in cases of illness [see b. Ber. 33a], left almost no mark on Jewish thought... [as he is] represented in the whole Talmud only by one or two moral sayings."¹²⁶ Géza Vermés adds to this Talmudic reality a hypothesis to explain why. He writes, "Fear of blurring the distinction between Judaism and Judea-Christianity was probably the main contributing factor, in third century Galilee, to the dissolution of the legend surrounding the figure of Hanina ben Dosa."¹²⁷ With a close

¹²⁵ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Tanna, Tannaim," by Daniel Sperber.

¹²⁶ Rabbi Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 7.

¹²⁷ Géza Vermés, "Hanina ben Dosa: A Controversial Galilean Saint from the First Century of the Christian Era [Pt 2]," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 24, no 1 Spr (1973): 64.

reading, it becomes clear that Hanina is diminished also in the writings of the early Rabbinic period, when his narratives are included. Regular comments on Hanina ben Dosa narratives in the Babylonian Talmud “attributed to a fourth-century Babylonian *Amora*, R. Aha bar Jacob”¹²⁸ minimize Hanina’s divine powers, by shifting the focus from Hanina, as an individual, back toward God and the larger Jewish Tradition. Vermés points out that while this process occurred in the early Rabbinic period, by the medieval period, the reality on the ground was different:

The first allusion, preserved by the twelfth-century historian, Abraham ibn Daud, claims that Saadiah Gaon, one of the luminaries of early medieval Jewry, descended from the tribe of Judah through Judah’s son, Shelah, and counted among his ancestors none other than R. Hanina ben Dosa.¹²⁹ It would see therefore that in the tenth century it was an honour [*sic*] to be counted among his posterity.¹³⁰

Overall Shift in the View of Miracle from the Bible to the Early Rabbis

What has been demonstrated as beginning in the end of the Biblical period and continuing through the first generation of *Tannaim*, as established through the wonderworking of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, continues on through early rabbinic literature. Human divinity and human power are elevated, especially when the human in question is a rabbi. In his book, *The Wonder-Working Lawyers of Talmudic Babylonia: The Theory and Practice of Judaism in its Formative Age*, Rabbi Jacob Neusner explains the image of the rabbi in the Babylonian Talmud:

¹²⁸ Géza Vermés, “Hanina ben Dosa: A Controversial Galilean Saint from the First Century of the Christian Era [Pt 1],” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23, no 1 Spr (1972): 31.

¹²⁹ [Vermés’ note from citation in notes 59 and 62 on this page] *Sefer ha-Qubbalah (The book of Tradition)*, ed. Gerson D. Cohen (1969), pp. 41-2, lines 96-7.

¹³⁰ Géza Vermés, “Hanina ben Dosa: A Controversial Galilean Saint from the First Century of the Christian Era [Pt 2],” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 24, no 1 Spr (1973): 64.

The rabbi both presented himself as, and was widely believed to be, a holy man, whose charisma weighed at least as heavily as his learning, and whose learning to begin with encompassed far more than a mere collection of ancient traditions of Scriptural exegesis. What was extraordinary about him was his mastery of a body of theurgical learning, the power of which rendered him exceptionally influential in heaven and earth. This learning was called "Torah," but as we shall soon see, "Torah" comprehended more than merely the Scriptures revealed at Sinai or to the prophets, along with the oral traditions that had accompanied them. If rabbinical knowledge, or gnosis, proved an effective basis for public activities, it was because the rabbis could authenticate it by a wide variety of impressive proofs. No phenomenon above or below proved too hard for their understanding.¹³¹

Moreover, these rabbis "were neither wizards nor sorcerers, but their wisdom was such that they could interpret natural phenomena and consort with heavenly beings."¹³² In their human world, they had the wisdom to reach into the divinity inherent in the human world. "They were not physicians, but possessed sound knowledge about healing."¹³³

Even having acknowledged the end of prophecy,¹³⁴ early rabbinic literature sought out and found ways for prophecy to continue, whether through the Heavenly Voice or through visits from Elijah. As Neusner points out, "these [appearances of Elijah to the rabbis] were not merely occasional, or for brief instruction." Elijah becomes a major figure in early rabbinic literature connected the rabbis and the divine, though human prophecy,

¹³¹ Jacob Neusner, *The Wonder-Working Lawyers of Talmudic Babylonia: The Theory and Practice of Judaism in its Formative Age* (Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 47-48.

¹³² Ibid. 48.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ t. Sot. 13.3; y. Sot. 9.13, 24b; b. Sot. 48b; b. Yoma 9b; S.S. Rab. 8:9 #3

power, and action.¹³⁵ Elijah, as seen above is an early model on the path from the Bible viewing miracles in the hands of God to the early rabbis envisioning miracles as in the hands of human wonderworkers.

Not only conversing with Elijah, the Babylonian Talmud presents that “the rabbis were also thought to be able to converse with ...the Angel of Death, to come back from the 'world beyond' in dreams to converse with their disciples, to argue with the angels and with God himself.”¹³⁶ As Neusner states, “what is important is that the rabbis were not ordinary men, but were widely believed to have other-worldly powers.”¹³⁷

It is in this context that men work wonders and produce miracles in Rabbinic literature. Many examples could be brought, and should be examined in a longer study than is presented here. For the purposes of this chapter, we will examine a narrative from the Babylonian Talmud about Nahum Ish Gam Zo, a 2nd generation *Tanna* and teacher of Rabbi Akiva, for whom miracles were also wrought and wonders worked, such as rain falling during a drought only for his sake.¹³⁸

Nahum Ish Gam Zo and the Ark of the Covenant

b. Ta'anit 21a records some stories from the life of Nahum Ish Gam Zo, including the story of why he is called “Nahum, the Man [who always said,] ‘this is also for the best.’”

¹³⁵ See Kristen H. Lindbeck, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), especially chapters 3 and 4.

¹³⁶ Jacob Neusner, *The Wonder-Working Lawyers of Talmudic Babylonia: The Theory and Practice of Judaism in its Formative Age* (Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 51.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ b. Taan. 25b – In this narrative, rain falls for R. Akiva when it will not for R. Eliezer:

A Heavenly Voice went out and said, “[The prayer of R. Akiva] was not answered because this one [R. Akiva] is greater than that one [R. Eliezer], rather this one [R. Akiva] is merciful/forgiving (lit. he refrains from measuring others), and that one [R. Eliezer] is not merciful/forgiving.

יצתה בת קול ואמרה: לא מפני שזה גדול מזה, אלא שזה מעביר על מידותיו, וזה אינו מעביר על מדותיו.

The narrative below presents Nahum in parallel to the Ark of the Covenant in Joshua 3, showing a direct shift from the Bible to the early rabbis:

b. Ta'anit 21a

It was said about Nahum Ish Gam Zo that his two eyes were blind, his two hands were amputated, and his two legs were amputated, and his whole body was covered with boils, and he was lying in a dilapidated house and the legs of his bed were standing in bowls of water in order that ants could not go up [and crawl] on him.

Once [his bed was standing in a dilapidated house]. His disciples asked to evacuate his bed (meaning, to evacuate him) and then evacuate the things (lit. vessels) [out of the house because it was collapsing]. He said to them, "My children, first evacuate the things [from the house] and then evacuate [me and] my bed. You can be assured that as long as I am in the house, the house will not fall down." They evacuated the things (lit. vessels) and after that they evacuated [him and] his bed, and the house [immediately] collapsed/fell down.

מסכת תענית דף כא.א

אמרו עליו על נחום איש גם זו שהיה סומא משתי עיניו, גדם משתי ידיו, קיטע משתי רגליו, וכל גופו מלא שחין, והיה מוטל בבית רעוע ורגלי מטתו מונחין בספלין של מים כדי שלא יעלו עליו נמלים.

פעם אחת [היתה מטתו מונחת בבית רעוע]. בקשו תלמידיו לפנות מטתו ואחר כך לפנות את הכלים.

אמר להם: בניי, פנו את הכלים ואחר כך פנו את מטתי. שמובטח לכם שכל זמן שאני בבית - אין הבית נופל. פינו את הכלים ואחר כך פנו את מטתו, ונפל הבית.

In this text, Nahum is incapable of taking care of himself. If he is to exit a collapsing house, others must carry him out. However, this narrative suggests that this crippled rabbi possesses extraordinary power. This crippled man, who lives in poverty, is surrounded by compassionate disciples. Moreover, he seems to have the gift of precognition to know that the house would remain standing for him alone. If the students evacuated him first, the house would collapse and the furnishings and other modest possessions would be destroyed. Rather, in taking him out last, every item within the house is saved.

This narrative echoes the biblical text of Joshua 3-4. As discussed in chapter 2,¹³⁹ the Ark splits the Jordan for the Israelites to cross on dry land:

¹³⁹ See Chapter 2, pages 15, 17-18.

Joshua 3:10-17

10 And Joshua said, “With this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will surely drive out from before you the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Hivite, and the Perizzite, and the Girgashite, and the Amorite, and the Jebusite.

11 Behold, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the Earth passes over the Jordan before you.

12 And now take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man for each tribe.

13 And it shall come to pass, when the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the Ark of the ^{יהוה}, the Lord of all the Earth, are in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from above; and they shall stand in one wall of water.”

14 And it came to pass, when the people set out from their tents, to pass over the Jordan, and the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant were before the people.

15 And when they that bore the ark were came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bore the ark were dipped in the edge of the water--and the Jordan was full to all its banks all the days of harvest--

16 and the waters of the Jordan stood from above, they rose in one wall of water, a great distance from Adam, the city that is beside *Şartan*; and those [waters] that went down toward the sea of the *Aravah*, the Salt Sea, were wholly cut off; and the people passed over opposite Jericho.

17 And the priests that bore the Ark of the Covenant of ^{יהוה} stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, and all Israel passed over on dry ground, until all the nation were completely passed over the Jordan.

The priests stand in the middle of the Jordan like that while Joshua sends the 12 men from the 12 tribes to gather stones to set up a monument to the miracle. When they have finished crossing the Jordan:

Joshua 4:15-18

15 ^{יהוה} spoke to Joshua, saying,

ספר יהושע, פרק ג

י וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָשֻׁעַ בְּזֹאת תֵּדָעוּן כִּי אֵל הוּא בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהוֹרֵשׁ יוֹרֵשׁ מִפְּנֵיכֶם אֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְאֶת־הַחִתִּי וְאֶת־הַחִיטִּי וְאֶת־הַפְּרִזִּי וְאֶת־הַגִּרְגָּשִׁי וְהָאֹמֹרִי וְהַיְבוּסִי:

י א הִנֵּה אֲרוֹן הַבְּרִית אֵדוּן כָּל־הָאָרֶץ עֵינֶךָ לִפְנֵיכֶם בִּירְדֹּן:

יב ועתה קחו לכם שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרֵי אִישׁ מִשְׁבְּטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ־אֶחָד אִישׁ־אֶחָד לָשֶׁבֶט:

יג וְהָיָה כְּנֻחַ כַּפּוֹת רַגְלֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים נִשְׁאִי אֲרוֹן יְהוָה אֵדוּן כָּל־הָאָרֶץ בְּמִי הַיַּרְדֵּן מִי הַיַּרְדֵּן יִפְרָתוֹן הַמַּיִם הַיַּרְדִּים מִלְּמַעְלָה וַיַּעֲמָדוּ גֹד אֶחָד:

יד ויהי בנסע העם מֵאֶהְלֵיהֶם לַעֲבֹר אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן וְהַכֹּהֲנִים נִשְׁאִי הָאָרוֹן הַבְּרִית לִפְנֵי הָעָם:

טו וּכְבֹּאוּ נִשְׁאִי הָאָרוֹן עַד־הַיַּרְדֵּן וּרְגְלֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים נִשְׁאִי הָאָרוֹן נִטְּבְלוּ בַּקֶּצֶה הַמַּיִם וְהַיַּרְדֵּן מָלֵא עַל־כָּל־גְּדוֹתָיו כֹּל יְמֵי קִצִּיר:

טז וַיַּעֲמָדוּ הַמַּיִם הַיַּרְדִּים מִלְּמַעְלָה קָמוּ נֹד־אֶחָד הַרְחֵק מֵאֵד בְּאֶדָם [מֵאֶדָם] הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר מֵצֵד צֶרְתֹּן וְהַיַּרְדִּים עַל יָם הָעַרְבָה יַם־הַמֶּלַח תָּמּוּ נִכְרְתוּ וְהָעָם עָבְרוּ גֹגֶד יִרְיָחוֹ:

יז וַיַּעֲמָדוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים נִשְׁאִי הָאָרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה בַּחֲרֻבָּה בְּתוֹף הַיַּרְדֵּן הִכּוּ וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָבְרִים בַּחֲרֻבָּה עַד אֲשֶׁר־תָּמּוּ כָּל־הַגּוֹי לַעֲבֹר אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן:

ספר יהושע, פרק ד

טו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לֵאמֹר:

- 16** “Command the priests bearing the Ark of the Testimony that they come up from/out of the Jordan.” מִזֶּצִוָּה אֶת־הַכֹּהֲנִים נֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת וַיַּעֲלוּ מִן־הַיַּרְדֵּן:
- 17** And Joshua commanded the priests saying, “Come from/out of the Jordan.” יִזְוֹצוּ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת־הַכֹּהֲנִים לֵאמֹר עֲלוּ מִן־הַיַּרְדֵּן:
- 18** And it came to pass, as the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant of יהוה came up from the middle of the Jordan, as the soles of the priests' feet were drawn up into the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned unto their places, and went over all its banks, as yesterday and the day before. יַחַד וַיָּהִי בַעֲלוֹת [בַּעֲלוֹת] הַכֹּהֲנִים נֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה מִתּוֹךְ הַיַּרְדֵּן נִתְקַוּ כַּפּוֹת רַגְלֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶל הַחֲרָבָה וַיָּשָׁבוּ מִיַּרְדֵּן לְמָקוֹמָם וַיָּלְכוּ כַתְּמוּל־שִׁלְשׁוּם עַל־כָּל־גְּדוֹתָיו:

In Joshua 3-4, the miracle with the Ark is meant to demonstrate God's power. As long as the Ark is in the water, the water does not fall. By contrast, in b. Taan. 21a, Nahum and his power to work wonders are placed at the center. God is never mentioned or even appealed to through prayer or any other means. The miracle performed, with the house standing as long as Nahum is inside, places Nahum parallel with the Ark; the dilapidated house with the water of the Jordan. In the text from the Hebrew Bible, the focus was on God's power, in the Talmud text the focus is on the human power of Rabbi Nahum Ish Gam Zo. These texts demonstrate the powerful shift in the view of miracles in the Bible to the view of miracles in early rabbinic literature.

Human Divinity, Human Power: A Conclusion

Even in the post-Talmudic period, the focus on human divinity and human power persists in rabbinic literature. The following *midrash*, comparing and equating the power of the righteous with the power of God, appears in דברים רבה Deuteronomy *Rabbah* (codified circa 9th century CE¹⁴⁰):

¹⁴⁰ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Deuteronomy Rabbah," by Moshe David Herr.

Deuteronomy Rabbah, Parsha HaAzinu 10:3

This is what Scripture says, (II Sam. 23:3) “The God of Israel said, ‘The Rock of Israel spoke to me, ‘A ruler over men shall be [righteous, ruling in the fear of God].’”

And what does, “righteous, ruling in the fear of God” mean?

The righteous have power over, if one may say so, that which the Holy One Blessed be God has power over.

How so? Everything that the Holy One Blessed be God does, the righteous do.¹⁴¹ How so?

The Holy One Blessed be God remembers barren women, and Elisha remembered the Shunammite woman. From where [do we learn this]? It is said, (II Kgs. 4:16) “At this season, when the time comes around, you shall embrace a son.”

The Holy One Blessed be God revives the dead, and Elisha revived the son of the Shunammite woman (II Kgs. 4:32-36).

The Holy One Blessed be God parts the seas, and Elijah and Elisha parted seas. From where [do we learn this]? It is said, (Elijah: II Kgs. 2:8 and Elisha: II Kgs. 2:14) “And he struck the waters, and they were divided hither and thither.”

The Holy One Blessed be God heals without emollients, and Elisha healed Na’aman without emollients (II Kgs. 5:9-14).

The Holy One Blessed be God sweetens the bitter waters, and Elisha sweetened the bitter waters, for so Scripture says, (II Kgs. 2:20) “And he said, ‘Bring to me a new flask,[and put salt in it] and they brought [it] to him[.]’” And it is [further] written, (II Kgs. 2:22) “And the waters were healed [until this day, according to the word of Elisha, that he spoke].”

דברים רבה (וילנא)

פרשת האזינו פרשה י פרק ג

זש"ה [זהו שאמר הכתוב] (שמואל ב כג) אמר אלהי ישראל לי דבר צור ישראל מושל באדם, וגו'.

ומהו צדיק מושל יראת אלהים?

הצדיקים מושלים כביכול שהקדוש ב"ה מושל.

כיצד? כל מה שהקב"ה עושה הצדיקים עושין. כיצד?

הקב"ה פוקד עקרות ואלישע פקד את השונמית מנין שנאמר (מלכים ב ד) למועד הזה כעת חיה את חובקת בן,

הקב"ה מחיה מתים ואלישע החיה את בנה של שונמית,

הקב"ה קורע ימים ואליהו ואלישע קרעו ימים מנין שנאמר (שם/מלכים ב' / ב) ואף הוא ויכה את המים ויחצו הנה והנה,

הקב"ה מרפא בלא רטיה ואלישע ריפא את נעמן שלא ברטיה,

הקב"ה ממתיק את המרים ואלישע המתיק את המרים שכך כתיב (שם/מלכים ב' ב' / ב) ויאמר קחו לי צלוחית חדשה וגו' וכתיב (שם/מלכים ב' ב' / ב) וירפאו המים,

¹⁴¹ Cf. Gen. Rab. 77:1:

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת וישלח פרשה עז

א ויותר יעקב לבדו ויאבק איש עמו, (דברים לג) אין כאל ישורון רוכב שמים בעוזר, ר' ברכיה בשם ר' יהודה בר' סימון אמר אין כאל ומי כאל ישורון הנאים והמשובחין שבכם, אתה מוצא כל מה שהקב"ה עתיד לעשות לעתיד לבא, הקדים ועשה ע"י הצדיקים בעולם הזה, הקב"ה מחיה המתים ואליהו מחיה את המתים, הקדוש ב"ה עוצר גשמים ואלהו עוצר גשמים, הקב"ה מברך את המועט ואליהו מברך את המועט, הקב"ה מחיה את המתים ואלישע מחיה את המתים, הקדוש ב"ה פוקד עקרות ואלישע פוקד עקרות, הקב"ה מברך את המועט ואלישע מברך את המועט, הקב"ה ממתיק את המר והמר ואלישע ממתיק את המר, הקב"ה ממתיק את המר במר, ר' ברכיה בשם ר' סימון אמר אין כאל ומי כאל ישורון ישראל סבא, מה הקב"ה כתוב בו (ישעיה ב) וגשגב ה' לבדו, אף יעקב ויותר יעקב לבדו.

The Holy One Blessed be God withholds rain, and Elijah withheld the rain, as it is said, (I Kgs. 17:1) “[And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab,] ‘As יְהוָה, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, [except according to my word’].”

The Holy One Blessed be God causes the rain to fall, and Samuel caused the rain to fall, as it is said, (I Sam. 12:17) “Is it not wheat-harvest to-day? I will call to יְהוָה, [and He will give thunder and rain; and you will know and you will see that the evil you have done is great in the eyes of יְהוָה, to ask for a king for yourselves’].”

The Holy One Blessed be God rains down fire, and Elijah caused fire to rain down, as it is said, (I Kgs. 18:38) “Then the fire of יְהוָה fell, and consumed the burnt-offering, [and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench].”

הקב"ה עוצר גשמים ואליהו עצר את הגשמים שנאמר (שם /מלכים/ א יז) חי ה' צבאות אם יהיה השנים האלה טל ומטר וגו',

הקב"ה מוריד את הגשמים ושמואל הוריד את הגשמים שנאמר (שמואל א יב) הלא קציר חטים היום אקרא אל ה' וגו',

הקב"ה מוריד האש ואליהו הוריד את האש שנאמר (מלכים א יח) ותפל אש ה' ותאכל את העולה.

On a case by case basis, this *midrash* shows how human beings have performed the same kinds of miraculous actions as God. In the language of the *midrash*,

The righteous have power over, if one may say so, that which the Holy One Blessed be God has power over. הצדיקים מושלים כביכול שהקדוש ב"ה מושל.

People can act with the same power as God. Starting humbly with כביכול “if one may say so,” the author of this *midrash* signals to the reader that he knows it is *chutzpadik* (brazen, audacious) to compare people to God. That being said, the *midrash* goes on to craft a one-to-one comparison equating the power of the righteous with the power of God.

In this *midrash*, as in the view of rabbinic literature, the people are the focus, the miracles lie in the hands of the wonderworking humans; here, represented by Samuel, Elijah, and, most profoundly, Elisha. Each man acts with the same power as God. God and righteous people stand on equal footing. People have power in the world and over the world.

CHAPTER 5: MIRACLES: A CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to identify the understanding of miracles from the Hebrew Bible to the early rabbinic period. The shift from the mainly divine miracles of the Bible to the human role within the miracles of early rabbinic literature has implications for theology. What does it mean if in the past, miracles only came from God and in later times, people were able to bring about miracles by themselves or for their own sake?

The introduction to this thesis presented a text from b. Ber. 20a.¹⁴² In this text, the teacher, Abaye, presents a rationale to his student Rav Papa for why miracles were performed for earlier generations, but not for them:

He (Abaye) said to him, “The former אמר ליה: קמאי הוו קא מסרי נפשייהו
[generations] would give their lives for the אקדושת השם, אנן לא מסרינן נפשין
sanctity of [God's] name; we do not give our אקדושת השם.
lives for the sanctity of [God's] name.

This response suggests a particular view about a quality that would make a person extraordinary. When people are willing to be martyrs, they center their lives and especially their deaths on the divine name. It is a theology that may smart in our mouths as moderns. Are we only deserving of miracles if we would sacrifice our lives for God? Is not פקוח נפש (saving a life), a great מצוה (religious obligation) that supersedes even the laws of כְּשָׁרוֹת (dietary laws) and Shabbat? As it is written in m. *Yoma* 8:6 after a sequence of events that permit transgression of the laws of כְּשָׁרוֹת and Shabbat, the *mishnah* says,

...because there was doubt about his survival (lit. lives) מִפְּנֵי יִשְׁהוּא סָפַק נַפְשׁוֹת, וְכָל
[without doing these actions] and any [time when there is] סָפַק נַפְשׁוֹת דּוֹחָה אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת
doubt about survival (lit. lives) cancels/overrides Shabbat.

Would God not function under these same expectations, that humans should preserve life to the best of their ability and not opt for martyrdom? In fact, the theology in early Rabbinic

¹⁴² See Chapter 1, pages 2-3.

Judaism would go so far as to suggest three times when martyrdom is preferable to violating the law.¹⁴³ However, the priorities in the Babylonian Talmud are generally to preserve many perspectives and opinions; it is later rabbinic authorities who focus on agreeing upon one answer to each question.¹⁴⁴ The spirit of the Babylonian Talmud is much more aligned with the ethos of m. *Eduyyot* 1:5 and 6, which present three differing opinions on why preserving dissenting opinions is important. In another tractate, another idea about miracles is presented:

b. Shabbat 32a

And when are men examined? – Resh Lakish said, “When they pass over a bridge.” A bridge and nothing else? Say, that which is similar to a bridge.¹⁴⁵

Rav would not cross a ford/crossing board where a non-Jew was sitting. He said, “Lest judgment would be visited upon him, and I would be seized with him.

Samuel would not cross unless a non-Jew was on the ford/crossing board. He said, “Satan has no power over two nations [at the same time].”

R. Yannai examined [the bridge] and [then] crossed. R. Yannai [acted] according to his taste/reason, for he said, “A man should never stand in a place of danger to say that a miracle will be made for him, lest a miracle is not made for him. And if a miracle is made for him, it is deducted from his merits.¹⁴⁶

מסכת שבת דף לב.א

וגברי היכא מבידקי? – אמר ריש לקיש: בשעה שעוברים על הגשר. גשר ותו לא? אימא: כעין גשר.

רב לא עבר במברא דיתיב ביה גוי, אמר: דילמא מיפקיד ליה דינא עליה, ומתפיסנא בהדיה.

שמואל לא עבר אלא במברא דאית ביה גוי, אמר: שטנא בתרי אומי לא שליט.

רבי ינאי בדיק ועבר. רבי ינאי לטעמיה, דאמר: לעולם אל יעמוד אדם במקום סכנה לומר שעושין לו נס – שמא אין עושין לו נס. ואם עושין לו נס – מנכין לו מזכיותיו.

¹⁴³ *three times when martyrdom is preferable to violating the law: idolatry, incest (which includes adultery) and murder, see b. San. 74a*

¹⁴⁴ *it is later rabbinic authorities who focus on agreeing upon one answer to each question: See later codes, such as the שולחן ערוך Shulchan Aruch, by Joseph Caro (cited below), which brings together three different rabbinic opinions and conclusively decides with the majority.*

יוסף קארו, שולחן ערוך: אורח חיים|יוסף קארו עם הגהות הרמ"א משה איסרליש; עורך דב איכנולד (תל אביב: משכל: ידיעות אחרונות: ספרי חמד, 2009).

¹⁴⁵ *A bridge or similar to a bridge: these are liminal times of total uncertainty and possible danger.*

¹⁴⁶ *And if a miracle is made for him, it is deducted from his merits: It is as if each person has a spiritual bank account, keeping track of his merit. If a miracle is made for him, his spiritual bank account will be depleted of credit, having been used up making the miracle.*

R. Hanin said, “Which verse of scripture [teaches this]? אמר רבי חנין: מאי קראה (Gen. 32:11) ‘I am not worthy (lit. made small)¹⁴⁷ of all (בראשית לב) - קטנתי מכל החסדים ומכל האמת.”¹⁴⁸

R. Zera would not go out among the palm trees on a day רבי זירא ביומא דשותא לא נפיק of a severe south wind.¹⁴⁹ לביני דיקלא.

In this text, miracles save a person from peril. However, this does not allow a person to rely on miracles occurring: first, because they will not always occur and second, because they will deplete a person’s spiritual merit and leave them exposed to other potential physical and spiritual dangers. R. Zera is careful not to even go out walking under palm trees when it is especially windy. This idea that miracles cannot be counted on is reinforced in another place in the Babylonian Talmud:

b. Megillah 7b

Rabbah and R. Zera made a Purim feast together. They were feeling the wine/got drunk, and Rabbah rose up and slaughtered R. Zera.¹⁵⁰ On the next day he prayed for mercy and he (Rabbah) revived him (R. Zera). In the next year he (Rabbah) said, “Will Master come and we will make the Purim feast together. He (R. Zera) said, “A miracle does not happen on every occasion.”¹⁵¹

מסכת מגילה דף ז.ב.

רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי, איבסום, קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא. למחר בעי רחמי ואחיה. לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי - אמר ליה: לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

Rabbah b. Huna was the head of the Academy of Sura¹⁵² and R. Zera was his contemporary. Both Rabbah and R. Zera were 3th generation *Amoraim*.¹⁵³ Interestingly,

¹⁴⁷ The reading of קטנתי (lit. made small) is consistent with the “spiritual bank account” idea – that Jacob is being diminished by this salvation.

¹⁴⁸ This verse, Gen. 32:11, in context is Jacob praying to God to deliver him from his brother Esau. This situation is very dangerous for Jacob, since Esau has every right to be angry and seek to kill Jacob.

¹⁴⁹ R. Zera would not go out among the palm trees on a day of a severe south wind. Palm trees will drop fruit, branches and even fall over on very windy days. R. Zera will not even take a chance with being injured by the wind.

¹⁵⁰ Rabbah rose up and slaughtered R. Zera: It is likely that the men were very drunk from the Purim feast, so Rabbah was not in his right mind.

¹⁵¹ A miracle does not happen on every occasion. Meaning: “Just because a miracle happened last time and I was revived from the dead, does not mean it will happen again.”

¹⁵² Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Amoraim,” by Alyssa M. Gray.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

rabbis lived in the same generation as Abaye, whose student Rav Papa asserted that miracles had ceased a generation before. In this unusual text, a rabbi is slaughtered and brought back to life by the same man. R. Zera, careful before in b. Shab. 32a with the palm trees, is even more hesitant playing with his life and death. His point, “a miracle does not happen on every occasion” is well taken.

Yet, this logical point that miracles do not always occur, in concert with the other texts examined in this chapter, support a theological idea reflected in the contemporary Reform Movement. There is a statement, of Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, printed in *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book* and reprinted in each Reform prayer book since 1975 that seems a fitting summation of this theological stance:

Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you. Who rise from prayer better persons, their prayer is answered.¹⁵⁴

With the shift away from God centered miracles, people remain faithful to God, but act more and more in the world, without depending on God alone for solutions to problems or protection from danger. Rabbis do not sacrifice their lives for God’s name. Rather, they work around the system of laws to preserve lives, except in the most extreme circumstances of being forced into idolatry, incest, and/or murder. Rabbinic lives are preserved for the purpose of continuing the larger Jewish project of Torah and building a world suitable for God to dwell in.

Rabbis cross bridges based on their own estimations of safety. They encourage each other not to rely on miracles, but to take care of themselves. R. Zera takes this idea so seriously, he does not reserve it for tenuous situations like crossing bridges, but he takes it to

¹⁵⁴ Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), 157.

heart in everyday life. He does not go out when it is too windy and he certainly would not return to a place where he was murdered, to the same circumstances in which he was previously slaughtered.

These rabbis long for miracles and believe in their power. They experience them in their own lives, and yet, they do not rely on them alone. Their actions reflect a human self sufficiency, an idea which flows from the shift to a human divinity and focus on human power. In an uncertain world, with an unknowable God who intervenes intermittently, it is best to keep praying, but act as if everything depended on us.

Ongoing Significance

The topic of miracles has ongoing significance in our day, especially for the Reform Movement, which began with an emphasis on the denigration of the non-rational aspects of the Jewish religious experience, and today seems on a path of the reclamation of what previous generations of Reform Jews pushed away or removed. Studying miracles could be an important way to open up the spirituality, faith, or *אמונה* of the Tradition we have inherited. This non-rational side of Jewish faith pushes our boundaries and expectations of the world and our lives as human beings. How do these stories challenge our rational attachments to Judaism? How do these stories challenge our rational attachments to science and secular, academic thought? Alternatively, what do these stories have to offer the spiritual seekers in our midst? Will the next generation of Jews view these miracles the way they are presented in this thesis, or in a totally new way? Reflection and time will reveal the answers to these questions.

APPENDIX: AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND EXPLORATION

Having examined the material presented in this thesis in depth, it is evident that there is rich ground here for further research. Tracing the shifting focus through the Bible and early rabbinic literature has many implications for further study. Certainly, there is more theological material to uncover. In the broad spectrum of our multivocal rabbinic tradition, if the case can be made for one theological stance, surely, there are more ideas and different stances to be located and substantiated by the early rabbis.

A future project could expand on this theme in the rich material of early rabbinic literature. There are many rabbis among the *tannaim* alone who could occupy whole chapters of material: Pinhas ben Yair, Honi Ha-Ma'agal, Akiva and so many others. An entire thesis could possibly be composed exclusively on the topic of rabbis, discussed in the Babylonian Talmud, who cause rain to fall.

A future project could more deeply explore the role of disciples in these narratives. Disciples often function as witnesses to miracles, but also students of the wonderworkers. For instance, Honi Ha-Ma'agal's grandsons are able to perform wonders of causing rain to fall, just like Honi.¹⁵⁵

In rabbinic stories, from a variety of sources,¹⁵⁶ people who witness miracles being performed are often described as having a sense of amazement/wonder and the Hebrew word תַּמְהוֹן, or a derivative there of, is used. It is that very astonishment around miracles which

¹⁵⁵ For Honi, see b. Taan. 23a, for Honi's son's son Hilkiah, see b. Taan. 23a-b, for Honi's daughter's son Hanan haNehba, see b. Taan. 23b.

¹⁵⁶ See: מיכה יוסף בן-גריון, ממקור ישראל: מעשיות וסיפורי-עם / אסף והעתיק (תל-אביב: דביר, 1965).

leads the characters to a greater belief or faith. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “The way to faith leads through acts of wonder and radical amazement.”¹⁵⁷

There is a Talmudic principle from b. Pes. 115a that states:

...but in the case of a Scriptural and a Rabbinical [precept], אבל דאורייתא ודרבנן - אתי
the Rabbinical [one] comes and nullifies the Scriptural [one]. דרבנן ומבטיל ליה לדאורייתא

In *Pesachim*, this idea has consequences for the Passover *seder*. What consequences does it have in the larger Talmud and early rabbinic literature? Is this legal principle at play in the idea of miracles? The Rabbis seem able to come and perform miracles in the Talmud, as if they were standing in the Bible at the shores of a parting sea, looking at a brass serpent, or calling fire down from Heaven to defeat the prophets of *Ba'al*. Does the rabbinical precept supersede the Bible in extra-legal ways, in ways related to miracles?

In an exploration that pushes beyond early rabbinic literature towards modernity, there seem to be meaningful connections between the early rabbinic shift of miracles into human hands and the idea around miracles in the early Zionist movement. Such a connection can be seen in the song אנו נושאים לפידים¹⁵⁸ “We Carry Torches” below:

We Carry Torches

Words: Aaron Zev

Melody: Mordechai Zeira

אנו נושאים לפידים

מילים: אהרון זאב

לחן: מרדכי זעירא

We carry torches
On dark nights.
Illuminating the trail beneath our feet
And who would notice him
The thirsty for light
Lift up his eyes and his heart to us
Light and come!

אנו נושאים לפידים
בְּלֵילוֹת אַפְּלִים.
זֹרְחִים הַשְּׁבִילִים מִתַּחַת רַגְלֵינוּ
וּמִי אֲשֶׁר לֵב לוֹ
הַצֵּמָא לְאוֹר -
יִשָּׂא אֶת עֵינָיו וְלִבּוֹ אֵלֵינוּ
לְאוֹר וְיָבוֹא!

¹⁵⁷ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), 47.

¹⁵⁸ “אנו נושאים לפידים,” Zemer.co.il, Accessed 13 Feb. 2012, <http://zemer.co.il/song.asp?id=357>.

A miracle has not happened -	יֵם לֹא קָרָה לָנוּ -
We found no jug of oil.	פֶּךָ שֶׁמֶן לֹא מָצָאנוּ.
To the valley we went, we went up the mountain,	לְעֵמֶק הַלְכָנוּ, הִהָרָה עָלֵינוּ,
The springs of lights	מַעְיָנוֹת הָאוֹרוֹת
The hidden, we revealed.	הַגְּנוּזִים גָּלֵינוּ.
A miracle has not happened -	יֵם לֹא קָרָה לָנוּ -
We found no jug of oil.	פֶּךָ שֶׁמֶן לֹא מָצָאנוּ.
We carved the stone until blood -	בְּסִלַּע חָצַבְנוּ עַד דָּם -
Let there be light!	וַיְהִי אוֹר!

This song emphasizes the idea that no miracle of *Hanukah* occurred, rather everything that happened to build the land of Israel, to illuminate the country, happened through the work and blood of its Zionist pioneers. The song takes an even more radical perspective than human centered miracles: no miracles, only human centered action. The area of early Zionist thought could be an interesting expansion on this study into a more recent part of the Jewish tradition.

Any of these subjects would continue the research and efforts of this thesis and constitute important articles or chapters in future works. As of the date of printing, the author of this thesis has yet to find publications that adequately cover these topics. This area of Jewish scholarship has rich potential for growth.

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