Elisha ben Abuya: Torah and the Sinful Sage

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The figure of Elisha ben Abuya or "Aher," the Other, has long fascinated the Jewish imagination. Elisha is variously considered an arch-heretic, atheist, gnostic or apostate, but always a sage whose abandonment of Torah so affected his rabbinic colleagues that they could no longer bear to mention his name. This unfavorable picture of Elisha is a composite produced from interpretations of the tradition of the "Four who entered the pardu" (found in the Tosefta), the curious epithet "Aher," later traditions of Elisha from the two Talmuds and midrashic collections, and the tendency of the folk imagination (and scholarly imagination as well) to create stereotypical villains. If the sources are considered independently,

1 I would like to thank Elliot Wolfson, Michael Satlow, Lawrence Schiffman, Baruch Levine and David Greenstein for their comments and bibliographical references.
2 Already B. Gurion, "Erekh 'Aher," Ha-Gorex 7 (1912), 81, realized that the rabbinic traditions are "an attempt to create a figure of religious opposition" and a "symbol" of heresy, apostasy and rejection. For the (re-)constructions of scholars see H. Graetz, Gnostizismus und Judentum (Krotochil: B.L. Monasch, 1846), 52-71 and Geschichte der judentum, ed. F. Rosenthal (Leipzig: Oskar Leiner, 1893), 4:93-94, 158-161; Milton Steinberg, As a Driven Leaf (New York: Berman House, 1959); L. Finkelstein, Akiiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1962), 163-164, 253-256. And see the interesting composite picture constructed by Aharon Hyman, Toledo Tannaim ve-Amenaim (Jerusalem: Qiryu Ne'amana, 1916), 155-157. For other references see the bibliography at the end of Ginzeberg's article and the survey of Gurion, pp. 82-83, which reveals a tendency among mekhilim to rehabilitate Elisha. For criticism of the distorted reconstructions of early scholars see already P. Smolenskin, "'Am 'Olam," Ha-Shakhar 3 (1876), 644-47, who recognized
however, different views emerge. Each Talmud contains an extended narrative of Elisha that presents a complex picture of the sage, a picture not as unambiguously negative as the popular image. Unfortunately, these talmudic narratives have received little scholarly attention to this point, for scholars have focused on the cryptic Toseftan tradition as the key to understanding Elisha's sin in particular and the nature of rabbinic esoteric activity in general. This study is devoted to the talmudic narratives of Elisha found in yHag 2:1, 77b–c and bHag 15a–b. It makes no contribution to the ongoing debate over the meaning of the Toseftan story except insofar as it sheds light on how each Talmud interpreted the passage. Nor does it make any claims regarding the "historical" Elisha ben Abuya, but only Elisha ben Abuya as represented by the talmudic texts. The goal is to understand each story of Elisha on its own terms and to assess its meaning for the rabbis who preserved and retold it.

While the stories of the Palestinian Talmud (PT) and Babylonian Talmud (BT) share many episodes in common, they are sufficiently different to require separate analysis. Sections I and II begin with the PT account and present an analysis of its structure, sources and literary features followed by a close reading of the story. Section III provides the structure and literary features of the BT narrative, and Section IV a close reading. Section V presents a synoptic chart of the stories and some comparisons and contrasts that emerge from the previous analyses. Section VI discusses the relationship of the two stories to their talmudic contexts. Section VII offers some concluding reflections regarding the use of these sources for the study of Jewish mysticism.

I. Elisha in the Palestinian Talmud: Structure, Sources and Literary Devices

The talmudic accounts presuppose the story of the "Four who entered the para’des," tHag 2:3–4.

Four entered the orchard (para’des). One gazed and perished, one gazed and was smitten, one gazed and cut the shoots, and one went up whole and came down whole.

Ben Azzai gazed and perished. Concerning him scripture says, "The death of his faithful ones is grievous in the Lord’s sight" (Ps 116:15).

The only substantive prior discussion of the talmudic stories is that of Yehuda Liebes, Hes’ Shel Elisha (2nd edition; Jerusalem: Academon, 1990). While Liebes’s study is full of valuable insights, both his method and overall interpretation are flawed. Because my conclusions differ in many significant ways, it is necessary to explain what method and assumptions generate Liebes’s reading and why mine is to be preferred. A detailed response to Liebes can be found in appendix 1. [After this article was submitted for publication, I learned that Alon Goshen-Gottstein had written a book on the Elisha traditions and was soliciting a publisher. He generously shared a preliminary copy with me, and we were both struck by the similarity in our methods, interpretations and conclusions. Our common findings should inspire confidence in the literary analysis of rabbinic narratives: there is something "objective" or replicable about a close reading, at least by academic conventions. Goshen-Gottstein also provides comprehensive treatment of secondary literature and textual variants, which I have dealt with briefly. Interested readers will benefit from Goshen-Gottstein’s forthcoming book and by comparing our many points of agreement, as well as occasional disagreements.]

Translation from Goshen-Gottstein, “Four Entered Paradise Revisited,” 76–77, although I have altered the translations of the biblical verses. I have also substituted "Aber" for "Elisha," following the Erfurt manuscript, since this was the version before the PT editors. (See the following note.) For textual variants and notes see David J. Halperin, The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1980), 66–67.
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Ben Zoma gazed and was smitten. Concerning him scripture says, "If you find honey, eat only what you need, lest, surfeiting yourself, you throw it up" (Prov 25:16).

Aher gazed and cut the shoots. Concerning him scripture says, "Let not your mouth lead you into sin..." (Qoh 5:3).

R. Akiba went up whole and came down whole. Concerning him scripture says, "Draw me up after you, let us run! [The king has brought me to his chambers]" (Song 1:4).

The PT story of Elisha appears in yHag 2:1, 77b-c. In this translation I underline repeated words or phrases that contribute to the structure and transiterate words that feature in wordplays or are otherwise significant.

[A]

Aher gazed and cut the shoots (=tHag 2:3)

(1) Who is Aher? Elisha ben Abuya, who would kill the young students of Torah. They said: He would kill every student whom he saw distinguish himself in Torah.

(2) Not only that, but he would go to the meeting-place and see children in front of their teacher, and he would say, "What are these sitting and doing here? This one’s profession is a builder. That one’s profession is a carpenter. This one’s profession is a hunter. That one’s profession is a tailor." When they heard this they would leave him and go away.

About him Scripture says, "Let not your mouth lead you into sin, [and do not say before the messenger that it was an error, else God may be angered by your talk and destroy the work of your hands (ma’aseh yadekha)] (Qoh 5:3)." (=tHag 2:3) For he destroyed the works (ma’aseh yadev) of that man (i.e. himself).

(3) Also, when there was a persecution, they made them (Jews) carry burdens, but they (Jews) arranged to have two carry one burden, on account of [the rule that] two who perform one labor [on the Sabbath are not culpable]. He (Elisha) said, "Make them carry individually." They went and made them carry individually, but they arranged to set [the burdens] down in a karmelit in

order that they not carry out from a private domain to a public domain. He said, "Make them carry flasks." They went and carried flasks.

R. Akiba entered in peace and went out in peace. About him Scripture says, "Draw me up after you..." (=tHag 2:4)

[B]

R. Meir was sitting and expounding in the House of Study in Tiberias. His master Elisha passed by (s’avar) riding on a horse on the Sabbath. They came and said to R. Meir, "Behold your master is outside." He ceased his homily and went out to him.

(1) He (Elisha) said to him, "What were you expounding today?" He said, "The Lord blessed the latter days of Job’s life more than the beginning." (Job 42:12). He said to him, "And how did you begin it?" He said to him, "The Lord gave Job twice what he had before (Job 42:10) – that he doubled his money." He said, "Alas for things lost and not found. Akiba your master did not expound it like that. Rather, ‘The Lord blessed the latter days of Job’s life more than the beginning’ (Job 42:12) – on account of all the mishpat and good deeds that he had done from the beginning."

(2) He said to him, "What else were you expounding?" He said to him, "The end of a thing is better than its beginning." (Qoh 7:8). He said to him, "And how did you begin it?"

(a) He said to him, "[By comparing it] to a man who had children in his youth who died, and in his old age who lived. Behold, ‘The end of a thing is better than its beginning.’"

(b) "[By comparing it] to a man who did business in his youth and lost money, and in his old age and earned. Behold, ‘The end of a thing is better than its beginning.’"

(c) "[By comparing it] to a man who learned Torah in his youth and forgot it, and in his old age and fulfilled it. Behold, ‘The end of a thing is better than its beginning.’"

7 So ms Erfurt, ms Vienna reads “Elisha.”

8 They could not set flasks down, for they would break.
He said, “Alas for things lost and not found. Akiba your master did not expound it like that. Rather, ‘The end of a thing is better than its beginning’ – when it is good from its beginning. And this matter happened to me. Abuya my father was one of the notables of Jerusalem. On the day he was to circumcise me he invited all the notables of Jerusalem and seated them in one house. [He invited] R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua [and seated them] in a separate house. When they were eating and drinking and singing and clapping and dancing, R. Eliezer said to R. Yehoshua, ‘As long as they are busying themselves with their own [business], let us busy ourselves with ours.’ They sat and busied themselves with words of Torah. From the Torah to the Prophets and from the Prophets to the Writings, and fire came down from the heavens and encircled them. Abuya said to them, ‘My masters! Have you come to burn down my house upon me?’ They said to him, ‘God forbid. But we were sitting and turning (hezrin) words of Torah. From the Torah to the Prophets and from the Prophets to the Writings. And the words rejoiced as when they were given at Sinai, and fire enveloped them as the fire enveloped them at Sinai. At Sinai they were given primarily in fire, ‘And the mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies (Deut 4:11).’ Abuya my father said to them, ‘My masters: If that is the power of Torah, if this son of mine prospers (nitqayyen), I will dedicate him to Torah.’ Since his intention was not for the sake of heaven, therefore it did not prosper (lo’ nitqayyen) for that man (= for me).”

(3) He said to him, “What else were you expounding?” He said to him, “Gold or glass cannot match its value,” (Job 28:17).” He said to him, “And how did you begin it?” He said, “The words of Torah are as difficult to acquire as vessels of gold and as easy to lose as vessels of glass. But just as vessels of gold and vessels of glass are broken one can return (labazor) and make them vessels as they were, so a sage who forgets his Torah can return (labazor) and learn it as at the beginning.”

He said to him, “Enough, Meir, the Sabbath limit is up to this point.” He said to him, “How do you know this?” He said to him, “From the steps of my horse which I have been counting. And he has walked 2000 cubits.” He said to him, “You have all this wisdom yet you will not repent (hezor)?” He said to him, “I cannot.”

He said to him, “Why?” He said to him, “Once I was passing by the Holy of Holies, riding my horse on Yom Kippur that fell on a Sabbath. I heard a heavenly voice come out of the Holy of Holies and say, ‘Return, rebellious children’ (Jer 3:22) – except Elisha ben Abuya, for he knew my power and rebelled against me.’”

[3]
And why did all this happen to him?

(1) Once he was sitting and learning in the plain of Genesaret and he saw a man ascend to the top of a palm and take the mother bird together with her young and descend safely from there. The next day he saw a man ascend to the top of the palm and take the young after shooing away the mother. He descended from there, and a snake bit him and he died. He said, “It is written [Do not take the mother together with her young.] Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may live well and have a long life” (Deut 22:6). Where is the welfare of this man? Where is the long life of this man?

He did not know that R. Yaakov had previously expounded it: “In order that you may live well,” — in the world to come that is all good. “And have a long life” — in the future that is all long.

(2) Some say [it happened to him] because he saw the tongue of R. Yehuda the Baker dripping blood in the mouth of a dog. He said, “This is Torah and this is its reward? This is the tongue that used to bring forth fitting words of Torah? This is the tongue that labored in Torah all its days? It seems that there is no giving of reward and there is no resurrection of the dead.”

(3) And some say that when his mother was pregnant with him she would pass by houses of idol worship and smell that stuff. The aroma seeped into his body like the venom of a snake.

[D]

(1) Years later Elisha became sick. They came and said to R. Meir, “Behold your master is sick.” He went desiring to visit him and found him sick. He said to him, “Will you not repent?”
The PT tradition can be divided into five sections, each characterized by a tripartite structure. Section A provides three descriptions of Elisha’s sin. B depicts Meir and Elisha discussing three biblical passages (Job 42:10–12, Qoh 7:8, and Job 28:17), and Meir expalcaates the second with three parables. C furnishes three causes of Elisha’s sin. In D anonymous rabbis thrice say something to Meir, and each statement initiates the subject of the scene. E describes three actions of Rabbi [Yehuda ha-Nasi] with verbs in the third person perfect: Rabbi decreed (gzn), cried (kkh) and said (mr).

Despite this consistent structural pattern, the composition is not all of one cloth. B, D, and E form a unified and continuous narrative. A and C were originally independent traditions.

Section A comments on that 2:3–4 and is structurally independent of the following. At the end of this section the PT cites the final portion of the Tosefta, the tradition of R. Akiba, which has nothing to do with the story of Aber. This break demonstrates that A comprises an independent source. In addition, the content is difficult to harmonize with the rest of the composition, as we shall see below.

B is a freestanding narrative and not presented as exegesis or exemplification of any tannaitic or biblical source — in other words, a self-contained story. This section is tightly structured. The three discussions of biblical verses are introduced with parallel language: Elisha asks Meir what verse he expounded and then how he began his discourse.

In the first two interchanges Elisha responds with

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9 The first two scenes are introduced by “they came and said to Meir” (ltn ve-’amom) and the third simply “they said to Meir” (’amom). In this third case they ask Meir a question, so we might expect “they asked.” It seems that “they said” was chosen to create the triplet.

10 I am less certain about the tripartite division of E, since this stylistic marker is weak. The first two descriptions of Rabbi’s actions read gzn rbbk and rbbk rbbk whereas the third has just ’amom, not ’amom rbbk. The tripartite structures of the first four sections are more evident.

11 See too n. 61.

12 Technically the beginning of the discourse, the “opening” (petiha) starts with a different verse and proceeds to the base verse. However, only in the first interchange does Meir cite a different verse. In the second and third he tells Elisha his interpretation of the base verse, i.e., the content of his homily. So it appears that the term “opening” here is not used in its technical sense.
a lament and offers a different interpretation. In the second interchange Elisha then adds the story of his origin, which exemplifies Akiba’s interpretation. The third interchange replaces Elisha’s response with his warning about the Sabbath boundary, which stimulates the subsequent dialogue. Thus the narrator combines repetition with variation. While each interchange begins in parallel form, the second and third depart from the structure in different ways so as to advance the plot.

Repetition of key words gives this section additional unity. The verses discussed in B1 and B2 end with the same word, “from-its-beginning” (me-reshita), and both times Elisha provides a novel interpretation of the comparative mem. Meir’s interpretations in B2 and B3 contain the common theme of forgetting Torah and learning it anew, which recalls Elisha’s lament for “things lost (= forgotten) and not found” in B1 and B2. The word bozrin also links the discussions of the second and third verses. In B2 Elisha recounts that the rabbis explained to Abuya that they were “sitting and turning” (bozrin, or “repeating”) matters of Torah,” an unusual locution. In B3 bozrin appears in Meir’s exegesis of Job 28:17 (a sage who forgets his Torah can return [阿拉伯] and learn it) and in his question why Elisha does not “return” (= repent; bazar bakh). The importance of the repeated words – beginnings, learning Torah and repentance – will be seen below.

The final image of this section, Elisha’s report of riding his horse on the Sabbath (and Day of Atonement) and passing by the sanctuary, parallels the opening scene, Elisha riding his horse on the Sabbath and passing by the academy. So this section has been crafted skillfully with a bracketing frame of horseriding episodes, a tripartite structure with an additional triplet in the second scene, and several repetitions of key words.

C interrupts the narrative flow with a question and provides three different explanations of the cause of Elisha’s sin – two related to theodicy and the third based on his mother’s inhalation of idolatry. The form, an anonymous Aramaic question, and the content, explanations for the sin that conflict with that given in B, suggest that C (like A) was originally independent. At best one can explain that B recounts Elisha’s father’s sin, which explains why Elisha eventually would go astray, and then C informs us why Elisha himself lost faith and sinned. But this analysis is difficult because C3 offers the tradition of Elisha’s mother smelling idolatrous substances, which competes with the explanation of the father as the cause for Elisha’s sin in B. Second, the theodicy explanation stands by itself. Nothing suggests that this sin was previously determined by the father’s sin. Third, Meir appears in B and D, but not in C.

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13 The theme of one’s beginning also appears in Meir’s exegesis of the third verse, that “a sage who forgets his Torah can return and learn it as at the beginning.” But here the word tehila is used.

14 I find only one example of bozrin used in this sense in all of the PT, BT and midrashim: they (the House of Hillel) would examine the words of the House of Shamai and repeat them (bozrin ba-bein), y Suk 2:8, 3b. Note that Eicie says to Yehoshua that they should busy themselves (na’ameq) with Torah and the narrator (Elisha) uses the same word in the next line. So the choice of bozrin appears to be deliberate.

15 The BT parallel to the problem of theodicy (C1–C2) appears elsewhere, bQid 39b (=bHul 142a), not in the corresponding story in Tractate Hagiga; see below, section V(1). This is not completely probative, but it suggests that the BT redactors either did not have this section in the main narrative when the borrowing took place, or that they realized that the episode disturbed the narrative flow and omitted it. C1 actually derives from tHul 10:16, where R. Yaakov proposes the scenario hypothetically (what if this happens...), asks the question (where is the welfare of that man?) and provides his answer. So the PT has reformulated its source by attributing R. Yaakov’s question to Elisha. (bQid 39b still has the hypothetical formulation before asserting that Elisha actually saw such an event.) In fact, neither the name “Elisha” nor “Abar” appears anywhere in C. The narrative makes Elisha the subject of the story with the question “why did all this happen to him?” The rest of the section simply has verbs in the perfect: “he saw,” “he said,” etc. So all of C originally may have been about someone else. See too n. 40.

16 That the idolatry explanation follows the theodicy account with the phrase “some say” suggests that the two explanations answer the same question, namely the ultimate cause of Elisha’s sin, not only the proximate cause.

17 See too Fischel’s Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy, 35–50, on the forms and origin of Elisha’s statements in C. Despite these tensions between C and the other sections, there is one point of connection to D2. The phrase the “world to come that is all good,” which appears in R. Yaakov’s exegesis, echoes the phrase the “world to come that is all morning,” which appears in Meir’s prayer on Elisha’s grave.
D resumes B’s story of Meir and Elisha. In the first of the three scenes Meir visits Elisha while he is alive, in the second Meir visits Elisha’s grave, in the third Meir tells his students he will visit Elisha in the world to come. As in B, repeated phrases link the scenes closely. In D1 anonymous agents “came and said to Meir” that Elisha was sick, in D2 they “came and said to Meir” that Elisha’s grave was burning, in D3 they “said to Meir” the question of whom he would visit. D1 relates that Meir “went seeking to visit him and found him” sick, D2 that Meir “went out seeking to visit it and found it” burning, and in D3 they ask Meir whom he “will seek to visit” in the world to come.

This section also plays with the letters of the root of “visit,” bqr, which also figure in the words for burial (qbrnyh), grave (qbrnyh), morning (bqr) and approach (mqrbyr). In D1 the dialogue between Meir and Elisha commences with three questions. And in both D1 and D3 Meir introduces a prototext in the form of a question.

E recounts the treatment of Elisha’s daughters after his death with the brief tripartite structure noted above. The concluding mention of Elisha’s study of Torah “not for the sake of heaven” recalls Abuja’s motives “not for the sake of heaven” in B.

B, D and E are connected by common themes and verbal echoes. Most important, Elisha and Meir appear in B and D, and Elisha’s daughters and Meir’s student in E. Sections B and D begin in parallel form: a sentence setting the stage followed by the phrase “they came and said to R. Meir, ‘Behold your master is outside/sick.’” In both B and D Meir asks Elisha, “will you not return?” In B fire down from heaven and encircles the rabbi studying Torah while in D fire burns Elisha’s grave. In B

Elisha violates the Sabbath while in D Meir proves that Elisha will be saved by citing a Mishna permitting Sabbath violations. Sections D and E both begin with the phrase “years later (le-’ahar yamim)” D recounts “At that point Elisha wept” and E relates “At that point Rabbi wept.” As we noted, the theme of Torah “not for the sake of heaven” appears in B and E.

This analysis suggests that the redactors of the PT supplemented a story of Elisha and Meir (and their “progeny”), B + D + E, with two other sources, A and C (which deal with Elisha alone). Assessment of the BT parallels will support this analysis (see Section V). Nonetheless, I will treat the PT composition in its entirety, for that is the form bequeathed to us by the final editors, and it has been unified to a certain extent by the tripartite structures.21 Yet this understanding of the sources is indispensable for a coherent analysis of the story, and raises interesting issues to be considered below. The five sections reveal an impressive density of literary devices and demonstrate the highly developed narrative art of the PT storytellers.

II. The PT Story of Elisha: Close Reading

The point of departure of the PT story is the Toseftan account of the “Four who entered the pardah.” That account provides two statements about Aher: (1) “Aher gazed and cut the shoots,” and (2) “Concerning him Scripture says, ‘Let not your mouth lead you into sin… (Qoh 5:5).” Between the two statements the PT interposes the beginning of Section A. This section portrays Aher as an arch-sinner and construct his sins through interpretations of the two statements. Thus A is essentially an exegesis of the Tosefta in narrative form.

18 Meir does not appear in E, since this scene takes place a generation later. It continues the story of the relationship of Elisha and Meir by narrating the interaction between Elisha’s descendants and Meir’s student (= spiritual descendant), Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. See below.

19 In addition, the phrase “they came and said to R. Meir” opens D2 and “they said to R. Meir” opens D3.

20 On fire surrounding rabbis during discussions of Torah see yHag 2:1, 77a (corresponding to tHag 2:1) and bHul 137b. See too yDem 1:3, 22a (= yTa 3:1, 66b); bMQ 25a.

21 Although this pattern need not be the work of the redactors. Each source independently may have had a tripartite structure, as is typical of rabbinic literature. On the other hand, it is possible that the same redactors may have composed all three sources. But they appear to have composed them independently and only later integrated them into the current composition.
Aher is first identified as “Elisha ben Abuya who would kill the young students (ráve) of Torah.” The word ráve, from the root rhab, “to grow, increase,” means “growing boys” or “young children,” and comprises an exegesis of râtâ‘, “shoots,” or “new growths,” “young plantings.” 22 Thus the PT interprets the Toseftan parable “cut the shoots” as “killed the young students of Torah” to derive the initial description of Elisha’s sin. Note that the PT continues with an apparently redundant restatement of this sin: “They said: He would kill every student whom he saw distinguish himself in Torah.” But this line adds that Elisha saw the student distinguish himself, which interprets the Toseftan datum “gazed.” A2 then charges him with another outrage (“in addition…”), that Elisha caused students to abandon Torah and devote themselves to various trades. This is a second interpretation of the Toseftan metaphor: “cut the shoots” = cut off the young children from Torah. Again the PT specifies that Elisha would go and see the children to account for the term “gazed.” 23

The second description simultaneously interprets Qoh 5:5 (statement 2), which the PT now cites. The verse reads “Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the malakb that it was an error, else God may be angered by your talk and destroy the work of your hands (ma’asheh yadeich).” First, this verse informs that Elisha sinned and requires that the phrase “cut the shoots” be interpreted as a type of sin. Without the verse the obscure parable could have any number of meanings. 24 Second, the phrase “let not your mouth lead you into sin” is the basis for the description of Elisha’s sin: Elisha’s mouth led him to sin in that he told the children to desert the Torah. Note that the first description of his sin, that Elisha actually killed the children, interprets the Toseftan phrase “cut the shoots” better, in that killing is close to cutting or “felling” (qâ‘it). This interpretation, however, makes less of an effort to satisfy the verse, which mentions a sin caused by the mouth. A2, in attempting to satisfy the verse by making Elisha’s mouth the cause of sin, offers a strained understanding of “cut” as “cut off from.” Third, the final clause of the verse, “and destroy the work of your hands (ma’asheh yadeich) generates the motif of killing the children and deserting the Torah. The phrase “work of your hands” refers to children in a well-known rabbinic homily, so to “destroy the work of your hands” explains the motif of killing (your) children. 25 Yet “work of your hands” or “works” (ma’asim) can refer to good deeds, to merit (the “work” or “fruit” of meritorious deeds and commandments) and to the merit of Torah. 26 This produces a double

22 See Liebes, Elisha, 15. On râtâ‘ referring to children in other sources see Fishel, Rabbinic Literature and Graeco-Roman Philosophy, 19.

23 Or it may be a metaphorical interpretation of the first explanation that Elisha “killed the young students of the Torah.” Elisha did not kill them literally, but metaphorically: he “killed” them from Torah, or “cut them off from Torah.” These two explanations on the surface appear to be two versions or two conflicting traditions of how Elisha prevented the study of Torah. But the PT presents them not as alternatives introduced by “some say…” but as cumulative, connected by “in addition.” That the PT interprets the Tosefta along these lines was noted in part by Peter Schäfer, “New Testament and Hebraic Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavaah Mysticism,” JJS 35 (1984), 28; Gerd A. Wewers, Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung im rabbinischen Judentum (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 186, and Goshen-Gottstein, “Four Entered Parades Revisited,” 127.

24 TbQ 3:1 uses “cut his shoots” as a typical example of damage: “If one killed [another’s] ox, or tore his clothes, or cut his shoots, he [the victim] cannot say ‘take the carcass and give me a [live] cow’, ‘take the scraps and give me a garment’, ‘take the cuttings and give me [other] shoots’…” This implies that the expression refers to some sort of damage or destructive act, but does not clarify exactly what the destruction is. So the verse indirectly influences the interpretation proposed in A1 as well, which also takes “cut the shoots” as a sin.

25 This was noted by Ginzberg, “Elisha ben Abuya,” 138–139. This derashah is also based on Qoh 5:5 and appears in a baraita cited in bKet 72a and bShab 32b: “For the sin of [not fulfilling] vows children die, as it says, ‘Let not your mouth lead you into sin...destroy the work of your hands (Qoh 5:5).’ What are the ‘work of the hands’ of a human being? His sons and daughters.” See too Numbers Rabbah 10:2; Tanhumah, Menora §2, ed. S. Buber (Vienna, 1885), 2:22b. Although the baraita is found only in the BT and later midrashim, it was presumably of tannaitic provenance and known in Palestine. In any case the PT story itself is evidence enough that the phrase “work of your hands” was interpreted in terms of children. “Work of Your hands” also refers to human beings (or angels), the creations of God. See Job 14:15, 34:19, bMeg 10b (= bSanh 39b); bSanh 90a, 98b; Levitius Rabbah 31:3, ed. M. Margoliot (Jerusalem, 1953–60), 717.

26 For “work of the hands” meaning commandments (or their merit), see Levitius Rabbah 16:5 (358); Qohelet Rabbah 5:2; bKet 5a; Tanhumah, ve-Yadolah
entendre, for Elisha kills not simply children (the work of your hands) but children learning Torah (the work/fruit of [your] hands). In the second description of his sin (A2) "to destroy the work of your hands" becomes the destruction of the Torah which the children have learned, since they abandon their studies.

The third description of Elisha’s sin has him collaborate with persecutors by advising them how to force the Jews to desecrate the Sabbath despite the victims’ efforts to avoid the most serious types of violations. This unusual scenario devolves exclusively from Qoh 5:5, as can be seen from the Talmud’s paraphrase of the final clause of the verse. Elisha destroyed the “work of [his own] hands,” namely the merits earned by former acts of piety, by collaborating in this heinous manner. There is additional wordplay: Elisha “destroys the work of your hands,” that is, the commandments that the Jews attempt to observe. Furthermore, the Jews are being forced to work with their hands by carrying loads. And Elisha insists on flasks since these will break (be destroyed) if they are set down. The “work of your hands” thus refers to Elisha’s merits, the commandments and the carrying. The “destruction” is the loss of Elisha’s merits, the violation of the commandments and the potential breaking of the flasks. In this case too Elisha’s mouth leads him to sin by telling the oppressors how to force the Jews to violate the Sabbath. Every detail of this narrative is the product of intricately crafted exegesis that interprets the verse.

§8 (Berlin, 1927), 56a. For Torah see Leviticus Rabbah 16:3 (398); Qohelet Rabbah 5:2 and cf. bTa 5b.

27 The verse has God destroy the work of your hands. But this, like the references to the messenger and the error, is ignored. The PT interprets select parts of the verse, not its whole. See the comparative chart, below Section IV.

28 The Jews are being forced to carry burdens on the Sabbath. They arrange to have two carry each burden, since two who perform forbidden labors in tandem are exempt (or at least do not violate the Sabbath according to the Torah [de’oraita]). When they are forced, on Elisha’s advice, to carry the burdens individually, they attempt to set them down in a karmelit, a domain that is neither public nor private, since the prohibition against carrying on the Sabbath technically forbids carrying from private to public domains (or vice versa) or carrying four cubits in the public domain. Elisha compels them to carry flasks, for flasks cannot be set down without breaking.

29 See n. 26.

Thus the first scenario, A1, interprets the Toseftan phrase “Aher gazed and cut the sheets” but only the final phrase of the verse; A2 interprets both the Toseftan phrase and the verse; and A3 is based exclusively on the verse.

Section B commences the main narrative, an extended story of Elisha’s relationship with his student R. Meir. The exposition opens in surprising fashion: R. Meir preaches while “Elisha, his master, passed by riding a horse on the Sabbath.” The delay of the crucial datum of violating the Sabbath to the end of the sentence after designating Elisha a “master” (rav) jolts the audience. One does not expect to hear this conclusion to a sentence that begins with a master riding a horse. The sense of surprise is enhanced by a subtle wordplay, for “rav” means “sinned” as well as “passed by.” The opening sentence may be understood as “Elisha, his master sinned, riding a horse on the Sabbath,” which removes all doubt about how the riding should be construed. The surprise increases when the students echo the narrator by reporting to Meir that his “master” is outside, and when Meir immediately breaks off his homily and goes out to greet him, showing honor to the Sabbath-breaker. If B is read together with A the surprise operates in a slightly different fashion. Now the surprise is not that Elisha desecrates the Sabbath — he has committed horrendous crimes in A — but that he is designated a “master” and that Meir should have anything to do with him. In either case this opening focuses on the subject of the story: the figure of the sinning sage, the master of Torah who violates the law.

The discussions of derabbot substantiate Elisha’s appellation as “master” by establishing his superiority to Meir in knowledge of Torah. Meir’s first homily expounds Job 42:12 (“The Lord blessed the latter days of Job’s life more than the beginning”) in light of the proximate verse, Job 42:10 (“The Lord gave Job twice what

30 So the PT cannot be taken as evidence for what the “historical” Elisha really did, nor is it even claiming such knowledge. It offers exegesis of the Tosefta and the cited verse.

he had before.”) Meir comments that “God doubled Job’s wealth” — exactly what the verse says.  This banal comment is no more than a paraphrase of the simple meaning of the text. Elisha, in contrast, offers a tradition of Akiba that takes the Hebrew morpheme mem as the preposition “from” (from the beginning = on account of the beginning), not as the comparative “than” (more than the beginning). Unlike Meir’s paraphrase, this homily departs from the simple sense of the verse and offers a novel interpretation. Meir comes off little better in his second effort based on Qoh 7:8. Chastened by Elisha’s reaction to his previous homily, Meir interprets the verse with three parables — certainly an improvement, but hardly a sophisticated or innovative interpretation. Each parable is a straightforward and unexciting application of the proverb. Meir merely illustrates the simple meaning of the verse rather than create a midrashic novelty. Elisha once more supplies Meir with Akiba’s exposition, which again understands the Hebrew particle mem not as a comparative but as a preposition. This exegesis offers a fresh understanding of the verse, not simply a parabolic illustration of its simple meaning. In this way the storyteller depicts Elisha as the true “master” of Torah. Elisha provides the superior exposition and he remembers the traditions of Akiba that Meir, the homilist of a distinguished academy, had forgotten.

The third discussion varies this pattern in that Meir seems to make the grade. His exposition of Job 28:17 is fresh and deep, and provokes no lament from Elisha. But the storyteller abruptly crushes any possibility of our thinking highly of Meir’s

32 Saul Lieberman, “Tanna heikha qay,” Studies in Memory of Moses Schorr, ed. L. Grinzberg and A. Weiss (New York: Shalsinger, 1944), 185–86, observes that Meir’s interpretation adds nothing to scripture. Lieberman is so troubled by this fact that he reconstructs a novel interpretation based on traditions attributed to Meir in other sources. In the context of the story, however, the banality of Meir’s interpretation is precisely the point.

33 There is also a nice phonetic and thematic echo in Meir’s third parable of a man who studied Torah in his youth and forgot it (shakkebub). Elisha then laments matters of Torah that are lost (= forgotten) and not found (meshekehbin). Meir has forgotten Akiba’s interpretation.

34 On the mechanics of the exegesis, see Frenkel, Darkha, 406.

Torah. Elisha has no time to criticize Meir’s interpretation because he must interrupt the discussion in order to caution Meir that they approach the Sabbath limit. Meir’s carelessness would have violated the Sabbath were it not for the awareness of his master. Thus Elisha is Meir’s superior in attention to piety, not only in knowledge of Torah and memory of Akiba’s traditions. And Elisha realized that they approached the Sabbath limit not by any obvious means such as a sign, but by counting the paces of his horse, which required forethought and constant vigilance. Indeed, this brilliance astonishes Meir such that he now broaches the critical question: “You have all this wisdom yet you will not repent?” How can a sage, so knowledgeable and so meticulous, persist in such sin? Yet there is much more to the three discussions than to establish Meir as student and Elisha as master. Each discussion relates to the plot in a substantive way. Elisha’s interpretation of the first verse is self-referential. Like Job, Elisha earned merit in his “beginning,” for he studied sufficient Torah to become a leading sage. Yet he now sins, and, as we soon learn, has lost the possibility of repentance. What then of a reward for “the mispat and good deeds that he had done from the beginning”? Elisha’s life seems to conflict with his (or Akiba’s) exegesis of Job 42:10. Or is sin an exception? Does Elisha differ from Job in that his sin annulled the merit of his youth? These questions — whether Torah has intrinsic or contingent merit and the status of the sinful sage — are fundamental to the composition. Elisha’s exegesis broaches these questions early on and anticipates the ultimate answer of the story when he enters the world to come.

Elisha’s interpretation of the second verse (Qoh 7:8) is explicitly self-referential and precipitates the long account of his birth and his father’s error. Here Elisha’s life exemplifies the exegesis: Abuya’s motive was not good “from its beginning,” hence the product, his son Elisha, turned out bad in the end. The storyteller uses the derashah as the first salvo of what will be a sustained
interest: explaining how the figure of a sinful sage could come to be. At the same time, the self-referential aspect of the interpretation constitutes another demonstration of Elisha’s superiority to Meir. While Meir offers some hypothetical parables (meshalim) to illustrate his understanding of the verse, Elisha’s interpretation is exemplified by his experience. He is a type of nimbal, the real-life application of the verse, thus irrefutable proof of the validity and relevance of his interpretation. In this way, moreover, the tension between the interpretations of Meir and Elisha parallels what will be their fundamental conflict throughout the story: the possibility of “return.” Meir’s three parables are optimistic visions of eternal hope. Death, financial ruin, forgetting Torah and presumably all other losses can be remedied. Elisha’s interpretation and self-exemplification amount to a pessimistic fatalism: what was bad from the beginning turns out bad in the end. So there is no “return” for him, no way to remedy the loss of faith, of merit and of opportunity to repent.

The mirroring of exegesis and plot comes to the fore in the third discussion based on Job 28:17, of which we have only Meir’s interpretation. Again Meir’s illustration deals with forgetting and reclaiming Torah, but this time he refers specifically to a sage and explicitly to “return” (ta’amor), which comes closer to Elisha’s situation. While the homily concerns a sage who forgot his Torah, unlike Elisha who recalls his Torah but has chosen to sin, it raises the issue of “return” to the pristine state. When Elisha warns Meir to stop before he violates the Sabbath, Meir translates the common ground of his interpretations into a direct question: why does Elisha, the sage, not “return” (= repent)? The wordplay on baisrin (studying Torah [in B2], re-learn Torah, repent), facilitates the transition from the implicit significance of Meir’s interpretations to explicit articulation. This anatasis (the repetition of a word with a different meaning each time) brings the question of repentance to an almost conscious level before Meir broaches it directly. Interpretation, plot and wordplay converge as we move from Meir’s exegesis of Qohelet 7:8 (losses are remediable), to his exegesis of Job 28:17 (a sage can return), through Elisha’s warning to Meir (return from the boundary), to Meir’s explicit question (why, you do not return).

The two flashbacks recounted by Elisha, the stories of Abuya and the heavenly voice, explain why Elisha became a sinner and why he cannot repent. Both questions are extremely difficult: how could a great master of Torah, the superior even of Meir, sin so flagrantly? And having fallen into sin, for whatever reason, why not repent? Both are also crucial to the construction of the fundamental conflict, as will be seen in due course. The narrative addresses the first issue by a dual strategy, pinning the blame on Elisha’s father and introducing the measure-for-measure principle. Attributing Elisha’s sin to Abuya’s crooked intention renders it a predestined occurrence. Consequently Elisha’s mastery of Torah becomes incidental: whatever the extent of his knowledge he had no choice but to go astray. It is particularly unfortunate – or interesting, or tragic, or ironic – that Elisha blossomed into such a scholar, but fundamentally beside-the-point, because responsibility lies elsewhere. The measure-for-measure principle, the basic tenet of rabbinic justice, then prevents the audience from feeling such a fate to be unjust. Abuya’s motive “not for the sake of heaven” becomes embodied in Elisha, who violated the commandments despite his knowledge – the ultimate expression of Torah “not for the sake of heaven.” Two further measure-for-measure intimations in the scene reinforce this point. While Abuya promises that if his son prosper (nitqayyenu) he will dedicate the son to Torah, Elisha reports that Abuya’s plan did not prosper (lo’ nitqayyenu). While Abuya was impressed with the fire kindled by the rabbis hazor ("turning") in Torah, his son will be denied the opportunity to hazor ("repent"), and fire will consume the son’s grave. The consequences, we feel, basically fit the crime.

The question of why Elisha does not repent is solved by the decree of the heavenly voice.37 This solution is as neat as it is harsh: the cited verse, Jer 3:22, invites “rebellious children” to repent and excludes Elisha alone. Yet here too the storyteller takes pains to assure that the rejection of Elisha is just. First, Elisha’s

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37 see Gal. The motif of a voice making pronouncements in the Holy of Holies appears several times in rabbinic literature. See TaNa 13:5–6 (cf. the version cited in ySh 9:14, 24b; bShab 33a). For other “reactions” from the Holy of Holies see bShab 52a and bGit 56b.
rebellion – riding his horse on the Sabbath and Day of Atonement specifically near the holy of holies – is a particularly outrageous act. While all intentional sins constitute rebellion (peshat), violating the Sabbath is the extreme form in that it denies God as creator and master of the universe. Violating the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, beside the Holy of Holies, God’s very domain, reaches the ultimate level. The Day of Atonement, as the name suggests, is the time specifically set aside for repentance, while the Holy of Holies, where the High Priest makes confession for the people, is the specific place of atonement. Having rejected and denied God so purposefully, it is fitting that God respond in kind by rejecting Elisha and denying him repentance – the measure-for-measure theme again. Second, the voice states that Elisha is an exception because he knew God’s power, that is, he was a master of Torah. This “power” echoes the “power of Torah” which Abuya sought for his son, and, ironically, becomes the cause of his downfall: had Elisha not known this power he could still repent. So the narrator turns what in one respect appears unjustly harsh into the justifying principle. Elisha’s Torah does not earn him merit against which his admittedly egregious sins might be balanced. Like Moses he is judged at a higher standard, and his greatness in Torah proves the root of his undoing. Why exactly Elisha rebelled is still unclear, but will be answered in the next section.

The closing scene – Elisha and Meir conversing at the Sabbath boundary – artfully comprehends the oppositions noted above in one concentrated moment: past and present, sin and virtue, the divine and human perspectives. Elisha riding the horse on the Sabbath simultaneously re-enacts and reports his riding on the Sabbath/Day of Atonement when he heard the voice. While Elisha exhorts Meir to return so as to avoid sin, Meir entreats Elisha to repent for his sins. The footsteps of the horse simultaneously preserve Meir’s virtue, by measuring distance, and constitute Elisha’s sin, both by every pace of riding and by taking him outside the limit. God rejects the possibility of repentance when Elisha rode beside the holy of holies, whereas Meir follows and urges repentance when Elisha rides beside the academy. This tension between God’s and Meir’s relationships with Elisha reaches its climax in D.

Section C, we suggested above, was originally independent of B, and stands in some tension with it. In the larger composition C nevertheless serves an important function by answering the question with which it begins: “Why did all this happen to him?” B detailed the ultimate cause of his sin, Abuya’s ignoble motives, and the sin itself, riding the horse on Yom Kippur, but does not explain the direct cause of Elisha’s sin, what pushed him over the edge. C’s first two explanations pertain to theodicy. The first points specifically to Elisha not knowing R. Yaakov’s interpretation that the promise of reward comes in the next world. This depiction of Elisha as ignorant of tradition, in my opinion, again clashes with the image of Elisha in B, where he is the consummate master of tradition who recalls Akiba’s interpretations that even Meir forgot. To the extent that we read as a unity this failing magnifies the tragedy: Meir forgetting (or never learning) assorted Akiban traditions diminishes his knowledge but not his virtue. Yet Elisha, who knew all those Akiban traditions, lost his faith because he lacked one explanation of R. Yaakov – and a pretty basic explanation of a well-known verse at that!

C2’s variation of the theodicy trope has Elisha despair not that the Torah’s promise of reward for a specific commandment is disproved by example, but at the suffering and martyrdom of a rabbi. How Elisha’s second conclusion, that there is no resurrection of the dead, follows from the martyrdom is less evident. Either the loss of faith in resurrection is a repercussion of his general loss of faith in reward and punishment or the vision of the tongue consumed by a dog convinces him that the body will not be resurrected. In any case, several aspects of this explanation

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39 At least C1 and C2 answer this question.
40 If Elisha’s exclamations “this is Torah and this is its reward,” (to torah/zakakhared) etc., are chria, as Fischel claims, we might expect that they will not fit the narrative perfectly. They are catchy slogans appropriated by the storyteller and given a narrative context, but antedate the narrative. bBer 61b
intersect with elements of the story. First, the words “This is Torah and this is its reward? This is the tongue that used to bring forth fitting words of Torah?” could be said of Elisha, who has been denied repentance and upon death has his grave burned, a sign of perdition. Not so the Baker, who, as we know from R. Yaakov’s explanation, receives his reward in the next world. But Elisha does not know this, and so he brings upon himself a similar fate (no reward for Torah) to that which he mistakenly deduces from Yehuda’s wretched end. Thus the irony is deep: not only do Elisha’s words (“This is the Torah…”) apply more to himself than to Yehuda, but they come to apply to him by his mistaken belief that they apply to Yehuda. In other words, for Elisha the problem of theodicy inheres in Yehuda, but it is only apparent (because we know R. Yaakov’s exegesis); for the audience (and for Meir) the problem of theodicy inheres in Elisha — and it is a basic question of the narrative. The ironic gap renders Elisha’s statement covertly self-referential, as were the derabot in the dialogue between Meir and Elisha. Second, Elisha loses faith in reward for Torah and in the afterlife (resurrection). His punishment is in kind: the burning grave indicates he has no share in an afterlife and consequently no reward for his Torah. Again the measure-measure principle attempts to portray his fate as deserved.

The third explanation attributes Elisha’s corruption to his mother smelling idolatrous substances while he was in utero. As we noted, this account competes with the explanation in B that the father’s impure motives led to his corruption. The redundancy or contradiction reflects again the interest in, and difficulty of, explaining the sin of a great sage. At the same time, these references to the mother and father touch on another significant interest of the narrative — progeny, both physical and spiritual. Note that in C1 the commandment pertains to a mother bird and her relationship to her young.41 I shall return to this theme below.

Within the structure of the narrative C has an additional function. This digression from the main plot before the continuation of the story of Meir and Elisha in D gives the feeling that some time has passed. While D’s introductory clause “years later” states this explicitly, the inclusion of a section that disrupts the flow of narrative time produces an effect that matches the transparent indicator. In other words, the break in narrating time (the time necessary to tell, read or hear the story) matches the break in the narrated time (the time frame of the story).42

When the story of the relationship between Meir and Elisha resumes “years later” in D the roles have changed significantly and reversed in certain respects. Elisha appears as a sick and dying man who considers repentance while Meir has become a master of Torah in his own right. This picture of Elisha complements and clarifies his image in B. That Elisha prevents Meir from violating the Sabbath creates a favorable impression. So too, perhaps, is his explanation to Meir that he cannot repent, not that he does not want to or hope to. Still, the fact that he rebels and sins is cause to hesitate before wholesale sympathy. The story takes a decided turn for a compassionate view of Elisha when Meir again asks “will you not repent,” the very question he asked in B3, the scene prior to the interlude of Section C. Now Elisha responds not with a summary explanation of why he cannot do so but with his own question about repentance (“if one repents is it accepted?”) and with tears. The question and tears can be interpreted two ways, both of which arouse sympathy. First, Elisha may be asking whether it is possible for him to repent in his condition, i.e. near death, and the

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weeping expresses repentance.⁴³ Meir’s happiness, however, is misjudged because the heavenly voice precluded repentance. Despite Elisha’s repentance, his grave burns. The second possibility, supported by the impersonal phrasing of the question, is that Elisha asks about repentance in general: is repentance in principle accepted even on the deathbed?⁴⁴ In this case Elisha weeps at the bitterness of his fate, and Meir misinterprets the weeping as repentance. Elisha’s fate is bitter because he would like to repent, but cannot. Yet all others, as Meir tells him, can repent until their dying day.⁴⁵ The second half of the verse Meir cites bolsters this reading. Ps 90:3 concludes “You decreed, ‘Return you mortals (sh’nu bene ‘adam’)’ which echoes the heavenly voice’s verse, “Return rebellious children (sh’nu ba’im sho’avim; Jer 3:22).” Elisha knows that God excluded him from Jeremiah’s blanket exhortation to repent, and Meir’s citation of a similar verse cannot override this fact.⁴⁶ Whether the tears express repentance or self-pity the portrayal of Elisha invites compassion. The narrator could have depicted Elisha persisting in sin and fulminating about theology (“there is no judge and no justice”) until his dying breath. Instead, he leaves us an image of a sick and dying man who asks a pleading question about repentance and weeps at the response.

The portrayal of Meir as Elisha’s disciple and inferior in Torah reverses when he provides the exegesis and teaching that Elisha seems not to know. While the two discuss Torah as they did in B, Meir now has the upper hand. His knowledge of Torah has blossomed in the intervening years such that he has become a true master. The reversal continues in D2 as Meir comes to the burning grave and sets out to redeem Elisha by a simultaneous exegesis and re-enactment of Ruth 3:13. In B3 Elisha prevented Meir from sin by warning him of the boundary, while here Meir saves Elisha from his sins. And in contrast to Meir’s anemic exegeses proffered in B, his interpretation of Ruth 3:13 is both brilliant and bold. It involves allegory (night and morning correspond to this world and the world to come), intertextuality (the use of “good” in Ps 145:9), syntactic play (understanding “good” as an appositive of “he”), and contains in the second half of the intertext an expression of the very divine characteristic which Meir solicits – God’s mercy for all his creatures.⁴⁷ All this is combined with a daring self-application which turns Boaz’s promise into a challenge bordering on insubordination.⁴⁸ Boaz vowed to act if his kinsman “Mr. Anonymous” (poni almoni) failed to take responsibility. Meir, in contrast, threatens to take action even if the Master of the Universe decides to punish Elisha. That Meir simultaneously re-enacts Boaz’s gesture by spreading his cloak upon Elisha’s grave, as Boaz did to Ruth, makes it clear that he means business. How Meir intends to redeem Elisha if God refuses is uncertain, but his strong-armed tactics work and the flame ceases. In any case, the brilliance and courage of Elisha’s disciple cannot be doubted.

D3 follows this climax of the action with a dialogue that explicitly sets forth the reasons for all that has transpired. Meir answers two queries from anonymous interlocutors (presumably his students) that respectively address two larger questions: Why is Meir so committed to saving Elisha? Why does God acquiesce?

⁴³ The force of the question becomes clear from the answer. Meir interprets Ps 90:3, “You return man to dust” (dokia’) as “a man may return even when his life is crushed (dibbuk),” i.e., about to die.
⁴⁴ The question may be phrased in the impersonal because the verse Meir cites is formulated impersonally. This would satisfy the first interpretation of the question.
⁴⁵ This seems to be Urbach’s understanding. See E. Urbach, Horad – Piras ‘Emunot re-Deot (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971), 411.
⁴⁶ Perhaps Meir hopes that the universal appeal to “mortals” offers a blanket invitation to repent; all mortals, even sinners like Elisha.

⁴⁷ Meir’s exegesis recalls R. Yaakov’s interpretation of Deut 22:6 by distinguishing this world from the world to come. Ironically, Elisha is saved by an exegesis and theological argument based on the very distinction that he did not know, which caused his loss of faith and damnation. Meir essentially argues that if one’s frame of reference includes the next world (as Elisha’s did not), then even Elisha should receive reward there for his merits. This becomes more explicit in D3. The play on “good” (tov) in the exegesis also recalls the discussion in B2, for Qoh 7:8 begins with this word: “Better (tov) is the end of a thing than its beginning.” (The redactors of Ruth Rabbah noticed this connection as well. See Ruth Rabbah 6:7, ed. M. Lerner [Dissertation: Hebrew University, 1971], 2:163.)
⁴⁸ The clause in Ruth 3:13 reads “If he (= the kinsman) will redeem you, good. But if He does not want to redeem you, I will redeem you myself, as God lives!” Meir reads the word “good” as an appositive of “he”: “If he (= Good, the Good One) will redeem you,” and interprets it as a reference to God, based on Ps 145:9.
The first query contrasting Elisha with Meir’s father (yet another parental reference) emphasizes that Elisha remains Meir’s master despite his sin.49 Rabbinic literature often compares the honor due to the teacher and the father. The Mishna rules that honor of the teacher takes precedence “because his father brought him into this world but his teacher, who teaches him wisdom, brings him into the world to come.”50 All along others have referred to Elisha as Meir’s master, and Meir has treated him as such. By proclaiming that he will honor Elisha before his father in the next world Meir demonstrates this commitment in its ultimate form. Elisha has taught Meir Torah, and so retains his status as master and the duties that accompany it.

The second query shifts to the divine perspective. The students ask Meir “Will they listen to you?” The identity of this “they” is not completely clear, but must refer to those in charge of the world to come, presumably some sort of angelic council. So the question is “will the divine agents agree that you continue to treat Elisha as master?” i.e., will Elisha actually have the status as sage – and the appropriate rewards – for which Meir hopes.51 While in B3 the divine point-of-view was revealed by the heavenly voice, here it is revealed by Meir’s pronouncement of what will happen in the world to come: “They will save Elisha Aher for the merit of his Torah.”52 This succinct statement elegantly summarizes the main theme of the story. Just as sin does not compromise one’s status as a master of Torah in this world, so it does not obliterate the merit earned for the study of Torah in the next. Indeed, these two considerations – and the two perspectives – are interdependent. For we see in Meir the product of Elisha’s Torah. Herein lies the importance of the reversal sketched above and the portrayal of Meir as a master: Meir’s brilliant exegesis on the grave and his interpretation of mShab 16:1 demonstrate that Elisha’s Torah yielded pious disciples who studied “for the sake of heaven.” Meir, in other words, is both the means of, and justification for, Elisha’s salvation. When Meir sets himself on the grave, embodying Elisha’s Torah and simultaneously displaying it in his exegesis, God recognizes the merit and saves Elisha.

Meir’s parabolic interpretation of the Mishna can be decoded two ways corresponding to these interdependent divine and human perspectives regarding Elisha. The Mishna concerns what objects one may save from a fire that breaks out on the Sabbath despite violating the prohibition against carrying.53 Now the scrolls/ phylacteries correspond to Elisha’s Torah, the casings to Elisha and the fire on the Sabbath to the fire on the grave. According to one application (nimshal) the person who saves the object corresponds to God (or the divine agents). God saves Elisha from the fires of perdition because of his Torah just as one saves the casings from the fires on the Sabbath because of the sancta inside. This understanding expresses the divine point of view, God’s reason for saving Elisha. However, Meir may also be considered Elisha’s savior by virtue of his daring confrontation on the grave.54 According to this application, the person who saves the object on the Sabbath corresponds to Meir, and the violation of the divine law against carrying on the Sabbath corresponds to Meir violating (or at least

49 The question is whom Meir will visit (migarn), but he answers that he will first approach (migarn), his master. This maybe a scribal error. It is tempting to transliterate lamiqar as “bring near, save, redeem,” in which case the following question, “will they listen to you” flows better. See n. 51. However, this usage of grv is rare. For one example see Genesis Rabba 35:2, eds. J. Theodor and H. Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 329 and parallels. But this lacks the preposition le-following the verb as in our case.

50 mBM 2:11, in reference to returning the lost object of the teacher before that of the father. See too (Hor 2:5).

51 Alternatively, one can understand this question as asking if they will listen to Meir and save Elisha. This is slightly difficult, for the initial question, “Whom will you visit first?” seems to assume that both Elisha and Meir’s father will be there. However, the question may be theoretical (whom will you wish to visit), while the answer is definite (I will approach), and this certainty provokes the following question. In any case, the real point is Meir’s answer.

52 Note that Meir here refers to his master as Elisha-Aher. The restoration of the personal name Elisha suggests that he is no longer completely rejected as the Other.

53 Both Talmuds discuss what type of carrying (or removing from a private to a public or semi-public domain) is at issue.

54 In this reading the phrase “they save Elisha-Aher” is understood impersonally. “They save” means “one saves” or “it is right that one save...” According to the first reading “they save” refers to the “they” of the previous statements, apparently the heavenly host in the world to come. This reading is more satisfying in that it does not require a change of subject. But since the identity of that “they” itself is not clear, the passage is sufficiently vague to admit both readings.
challenging) the divine decree that Elisha suffer. In this case the parable provides both the reason for saving Elisha and the model for Meir's action. Recall, moreover, that Elisha's sins in B, both present and past, involved Sabbath violations. Here Meir interprets a law permitting Sabbath violations to justify the salvation of a Sabbath violator. Preserving scrolls of Torah takes precedence over the sin of carrying on the Sabbath in the same way as the merit of Elisha's Torah takes precedence over his sins of riding on the Sabbath.

Meir's application of this mishna to Elisha becomes more significant in light of a law found in the relevant section of Tosefta and cited in both Talmuds. Tosefta Shabbat 13:5 rules, "One does not save the Gospels and the books of the heretics from a fire [on the Sabbath], rather they burn in their places, both them and their divine names." The Tosefta then mandates that one actively burn such books (on weekdays). If analogies are to be drawn, we might expect that Elisha and his Torah would be compared to the books of the heretics. Just as the books of heretics are not saved on the Sabbath and are even purposefully burned, so the heretical and sinful Elisha should not be saved from perdition but deserves his punishment. Or again: just as heretical books and their divine names are burned, because such divine names have no true sanctity, so Elisha and his Torah should burn, because the Torah of a sinner has no substance or sanctity. This seems to be God's initial logic in burning Elisha despite his Torah. Meir's analogy emphatically expresses the opposite perspective—that neither the deeds nor heresies of a sinner pervert his Torah, which remains a pure source of wisdom and merit.

E continues the story in the following generation by describing the encounter of Elisha's daughters and Meir's student, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. The brief episode rehearse the tension between sin and Torah set forth in the previous sections as well as the resolution. Rabbi initially identifies Elisha as the "wicked man" of Psalm 109 on account of his sinful deeds. Just as God cut off Elisha because of his sins, so Rabbi cuts off Elisha's daughters. But just as Meir valued Elisha's knowledge of Torah, so the daughters beseech Rabbi to value his Torah. And just as God changed his mind and rehabilitated Elisha, so Rabbi changes his mind and supports the daughters. Meir's statement "they save Elisha Aher for the merit of his Torah" rings true again. The merit of Elisha's Torah saves his daughters in this world even as it saves his soul in the world to come. So this scene offers a different (or additional) accounting of the merit that must accrue for Elisha's Torah. Torah confers merit in this world to the descendants of the sinning sage himself, an idea consistent with the notion of zekhut avot ("the merit of the forefathers") and biblical conceptions of reward and punishment. The tension between sin and Torah again is resolved by giving primacy to his Torah.

Mention of Elisha's daughters and Meir's student also continues the story's interest in parents and children. In rabbinic culture a student is essentially a "spiritual descendant" or son. D2 almost spells this out explicitly when Meir puts Elisha before his

Traditions in both Talmuds claim that Rabbi formulated the Mishna based on the mishna collection of R. Meir (bSanh 86a; yYev 4:11, 6b). So I think we can assume that the storytellers considered Rabbi to be Meir's disciple and prime transmitter of his traditions. See too H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, trans. M. Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140-41, 147.

57 In the biblical conception of reward and punishment (and in some rabbinic views) the results may materialize in succeeding generations.

58 A second (or additional) possibility is that Rabbi represents patriarchal authority and therefore "official" rabbinic institutional policy. Not only does Meir remain loyal to his master, which we might take as an unavoidable reflex of the disciple-teacher relationship, but even the highest rabbinic authorities eventually respect and reward Elisha (through his progeny). The scene with Rabbi therefore signals Elisha's complete rehabilitation within the general rabbinic community. The interpretation of this scene is difficult because we do not know exactly what Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi represented to the storytellers and the audience.

59 See Sifre Deut §34, ed. L. Finkelstein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1983), p. 61 ("Teach them to your sons" [Deut 6:7]—these are your students); bSanh 10:2, 28b; bSanh 19b ("whoever teaches the son of his fellow Torah, Scripture considers it as if he gave birth to him"); bSanh 99b, etc.
father, his “spiritual father” before his biological father. So too Rabbi can be considered Meir’s “spiritual” son and hence Elisha’s “spiritual” (grand) son. The daughters and Rabbi therefore represent Elisha’s biological progeny and spiritual progeny. His biological progeny is that which we expect of a sinner: female, orphaned and destitute. His spiritual progeny is that which we expect of a master of Torah: male and learned. The conflict of female and male progeny recapitulates the conflict within Elisha between sin and Torah. It is resolved by means of Torah (the daughters respect Torah) and by virtue of Torah (Elisha’s Torah). In addition, Rabbi’s reference to Elisha’s Torah “not for the sake of heaven” recalls Elisha’s father and his base motive. Abuya dedicated Elisha to Torah “not for the sake of heaven” and Elisha studied “not for the sake of heaven.” Yet his daughters honor the Torah, his spiritual son becomes a sage and his spiritual grandson the patriarch. The intrinsic worth of Torah ultimately prevails. So too must its merit.

At this point we may evaluate the story as a whole. It is extremely difficult to relate section A to the rest of the story in any substantive fashion. The picture of Elisha as archenemy of the Torah and murderer contradicts his benevolent relationship with Meir and his efforts to prevent his former student from violating the law. Because the entire section is formally separated from B–E by the conclusion of the Tosefta, we are justified in considering it an independent tradition. It is easy to account for the juxtaposition of the two sections (A vs. B–E). The redactors cited A in this section of Talmud (yHag 2:1, 77b–c) because it interprets tHag 2:3, which in turn complements mHag 2:1. The redactors then included B–E, a different story of Elisha, by association. For B–E lacks any connection to a Mishna or horaita, and so has no natural place in the Talmud. The redactors found an appropriate location for it following an autonomous Elisha story. Whether we should read the two stories independently or as a unity depends on whether our interest is the meaning of the original sources to those who told them or of the redactional composition to those who redacted and studied it. In any case, reading A together with B–E makes the overall point of the story much stronger. Despite such heinous crimes, Meir nevertheless continued to treat Elisha as a master, and the merit of Elisha’s Torah nevertheless prevailed.

Section C, while originally independent, or at least constructed from discrete traditions, has been integrated to some extent with the rest of the material. This section evinces the difficulty in plausibly accounting for Elisha’s rebellion.

The story’s primary question is whether the merit of Torah is intrinsic or contingent on observance. Does the Torah that one has mastered earn him enduring merit? Or can that merit be neutralized by his sins? The story considers this question by examining the figure of the sinning sage, the master of Torah who does not observe the law.

Before the story can consider such a figure it must construct one. This is no easy task. For the figure itself is almost self-contradictory: how can Torah and sin coexist? Surely the more

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60 There may also be an allusion to the biblical “Daughters of Zelophehad” (Num 36:1–12) in Elisha’s daughters. They approach Moses and ask not to be cut off from the land on account of the sin of their father.

61 It should also be noted that the parallels in Rabb Rabbah 6:7, ed. Lerner, 2:162–174 and Qohelet Rabbah 7:8 contain B–D but omit A. Either the redactors of these compilations lacked A in their tradition or they realized that it was a separate story and omitted it.

62 It also depends on assumptions concerning the way the PT was redacted and studied, what Robert Hodge calls the “domain” or “reception regime.” (Robert Hodge, Literature as Discourse: Textual Strategies in English and History [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press], 23–37). If individual units of the PT were studied independent of their proximate literary contexts (but were placed in that context for associative or mnemonic reasons), then the PT redactors and editors themselves would have treated the stories as distinct. If the PT was redacted over a lengthy period of time and studied sequentially, then the two stories may have been read, interpreted and perhaps edited as a unity well before the final redaction (even if they were originally independent).

63 The composition focuses less on heresy than on rebellion, as evident in the charge of the heavenly voice. Elisha is portrayed as one who has lost his faith rather than a heretic trumpeting nonconformist beliefs. His “heresy,” the rejection of reward and punishment, leads to the main offense, his rebellion against God by not observing the law. Rebellion, part of the Hebrew concept of sin (peha), of course always entails “heresy” (in the sense of loss of faith) or there would be no motive to sin. (Section C, independent of the rest; makes more of heresy, for the rejection of reward and punishment can be considered the sin itself. But B, D and E ignore heresy, and without C, heresy would not figure in the story at all.)
Torah one knows, the greater his piety and the more he worships God. And would not the merit of Torah protect him from error? The sustained interest in the provenance of Elisha's sin and the multiple explanations provided (Section C) are attempts to account for such a figure. The focus on the father (and/or mother) as source of Elisha's unfortunate fate is an effective strategy. Attributing the cause of Elisha's sin to circumstances prior to his birth and out of his control makes it easier to accept that a sage could go astray. His sin was not only fated, but the Torah he learned was tainted ab initio and could not protect him from error. Combine these factors with the eternally difficult question of theodicy and one has a plausible account of the making of a sinning sage. The heavenly voice is crucial, for the voice rules out the obvious solution to the problem: that the sinning sage repent.\textsuperscript{64} Because repentance is not an option, Torah and sin coexist until death, when rewards and punishments materialize. The measure-for-measure theme is another important element that makes Elisha's fate appear just. Through these maneuvers the story constructs a figure that allows us to ponder the question of the intrinsic merit of Torah.

The solution to the question emerges if we consider the relationships between Meir and Elisha, on the one hand, and God and Elisha, on the other. Meir continues to regard Elisha as his master, as illustrated by the numerous times he is told "behold your master is outside/sick" and emphasized by his placing Elisha before his real father in the world to come. He does so because he has learned Torah from Elisha in the past and continues to learn even after Elisha's fall (B1–B3). And for good reason: Elisha knows more and informs Meir of valuable traditions. As a disciple, Meir is obligated to seek his master's best interests, both in this world and the world to come. The story nowhere questions the propriety of all this. It does not suggest that the sinning sage would lead disciples astray or teach them corrupt Torah.\textsuperscript{65} Torah is so precious that it must be sought even from a sinning sage ("Alas for the things lost and not found.") The quality of Elisha's Torah is not affected by his behavior. From Meir's point of view, Elisha's Torah retains its merit.

God, however, rejects Elisha because of his sins. Unlike Meir, God does not require Elisha's Torah. God requires something different—that Torah be observed, not only studied.\textsuperscript{66} From God's perspective, Torah has no worth if its possessor rebels. The rebellion is greater when a sage sins, because he knows so much Torah, hence he knows God's power and wisdom. So God spurns Elisha, rules out repentance and punishes him in the world to come.

Meir cannot reconcile Elisha to God because of the heavenly voice (although he tries to do so in B3 and D1), so he must reconcile God to Elisha. This leads Meir to confront God in the dramatic scene on the grave. He engages God by interpreting a verse of Torah, thereby demonstrating that Elisha's Torah lives on in his student. Elisha's sins may have destroyed the immediate merit of his Torah, but the Torah he bequeathed to his disciple is unaffected, and must earn him merit. As Meir explains to his students, "they save Elisha by the merit of his Torah." Once the story accepts that Torah is not corrupted by sin (even if its bearer is), it must recognize the merit of that Torah. A sage who sins in the worst way cannot lose the merit for the Torah he studied and taught.

The final scene reiterates this point. Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, like God, initially rejects Elisha's daughters because of Elisha's sins. He subsequently focuses on Elisha's Torah and supports the daughters. Just as Elisha produced a pious disciple, so he produced daughters who respect Torah. Neither Elisha's Torah nor his progeny (both natural and spiritual) were corrupted by his deeds. The intrinsic merit of Torah prevails in the end.

The story's main message is thus the inviolability and intrinsic merit of Torah. The contradiction of the sinning sage is resolved by giving precedence to Torah. Despite his sin and rebellion, despite God rejecting him, his Torah retains its merit and power to save.

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\textsuperscript{64} Without the voice Torah and sin should not coexist because the sage should either repent or reject his Torah. In Elisha's case Torah and sin stably coexist because he cannot repent.

\textsuperscript{65} This is one of the main differences between the PT and BT; see below.

\textsuperscript{66} The talmudic discussion of what takes priority, Torah or deeds, is not germane. Here the issue is whether Torah without deeds retains its value. See bYev 109b.
III. Elisha in the Babylonian Talmud: Structure and Literary Devices

This translation is based on ms London (Harley 5508) with variants from mss Göttingen 3, Munich 95, Munich 6, Vatican 134 and Vatican 171. This is not a comprehensive critical edition, and I have cited only the major variants.67

[I] Aber (gazed and)68 cut the shoot. About him Scripture says, "Let not your mouth lead you into sin, [and do not say before the malak (angel/messenger) that it was an error, else God may be angered by your talk and destroy the work of your hands (ma'asib yadekhah)] (Qoh 5:5)." (= tHag 2:3)

What did he see? He saw Metatron, to whom was given permission one hour each day to sit and write the merits of Israel. He said, "It is taught that 'On high there is no standing'69 and no sitting and no jealousy and no rivalry and no back and no weariness. Perhaps — heaven forbid — there are two divine powers!" Immediately they brought out Metatron and struck him with sixty lashes of fire.70 He was given permission to burn71 the merits of Aber. A heavenly voice went out72 and said to him, "Return, rebellious children" (Jer 3:22) — except Aber.

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67 On the supplementary material that follows the story, see Appendix 2.
68 The words "gazed and" do not occur in any of the BT manuscripts I have consulted. But they are in the PT and in tHag 2:3, ed. S. Lieberman (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1935–88), 2:381. The authors of the BT story had them for the composition begins "what did he see?" (In printed texts the question has been changed to "What is this?" [mi bi]. The manuscripts are consistent.)
69 So Munich 6 and 95, and Göttingen. London and Vatican 171 and 134 omit the term (cf. Rashi), because the story assumes angels stand. This list varies slightly in the mss.
70 Printed texts and Vatican 171 add, "They said to him, "Why did you not stand up in front of him?" All other mss lack this question. The line seems to be a gloss.
71 So too Munich 6, Göttingen and Vatican 171. Munich 95 and Vatican 134 read "uproot."
72 Munich 95 and Vatican 134 add "from behind the curtain (pargad)."

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[II] He said, "Since 'that man' (= since I) has been banished from that world,73 I will go and enjoy myself in this world." Aber went out to evil ways (literally, 'evil growth'). He found a certain prostitute. He propositioned her. She said to him, "Are you not Elisha ben Abuya, whose name went out throughout the world?" He uprooted a radish on the Sabbath and gave it to her.74 She said, "It is another (aber)."75

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[III]

(A) After he went out into evil ways Aber asked R. Meir, "What is written, 'The one no less than the other is God's doing' (Qoh 7:14)?" He said, "Everything that God made, He made its counterpart. He made mountains, he made hills. He made oceans, he made rivers." He said to him, "Akiba, your master, did not say this. [Rather], He made righteous, he made wicked. He made the Garden of Eden, he made Gehemnom. Each and every person has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehemnom. The righteous man, having earned merit, takes his portion and the portion of his fellow in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, having been found guilty, takes his portion and the portion of his fellow in Gehemnom. (Rav Mashiachia said, "What is the verse? About the righteous it is written, 'They shall have a double share in their land' [Isa 61:7]. About the wicked it is written, 'Shatter them with double destruction' [Jer 17:18].")76

(B) After he went out into evil ways Aber asked R. Meir, "What is written, 'Gold or glass cannot match its value, nor vessels of fine gold be exchanged for it' (Job 28:17)?" He said, "This refers to matters of Torah which are difficult to acquire like vessels of gold and vessels of fine gold and easy to lose like vessels of stone and vessels of fine stone."77

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73 The world to come.
74 Munich 95 omits "on the Sabbath." This appears to be an error. See the comment of C.F. Rabinovitch, Die Propheten Saferim (n.p., Brooklyn and Jerusalem, 1939/60), ad loc.
75 A play on the name Aber, which means "other, another."
76 So Munich 95 and Vatican 171. London, Munich 6, Göttingen and Vatican 134 add, "Rav Mashiachia said, 'What is the verse? They shall have a double share in their land' (Isa 61:7). And it is written, 'Shatter them with double destruction' (Jer 17:18)." The statement is a gloss.
of glass." He (Aher) said to him, "By God! Are they even like clay vessels?" He (Aher) said to him, "Akiba your master, did not say thus. Rather, just as vessels of gold and vessels of glass, even if they are broken, they can be restored, so sages who sin can be restored." He said to him, "Then you too should repent." He said to him, "No. For I have already heard from behind the curtain, 'Return, rebellious children' (Jer 3: 22) – except Aher."

(C) Our sages taught: It once happened that Aher was riding his horse on the Sabbath [going on his way] and R. Meir was walking after him to learn Torah from his mouth. He said to him, "Meir, return (hazor) back, since I have already measured by the footsteps of my horse that the Sabbath boundary is here. He said to him, "Then you too should repent (hazor)." He said to him, "No, I have already heard from behind the curtain, 'Return, rebellious children' (Jer 3: 22) – except Aher."

[IV] He (Meir) took hold of him (Aher) and
(A) He brought him to the House of Study. He said to a child, "Tell me your study verse." He said to him, "There is no peace – said the Lord – for the wicked" (Isa 48: 22).
(B) He brought him to another House of Study. He (the child) said to him, "Though you wash with natron and use much lye, [your guilt is ingrained before me – declares the Lord God]" (Jer 2: 22).
(C) He brought him to another House of Study. He (the child) said to him, "And you, who are doomed to ruin" (Jer 4: 30).
(D) He brought him to thirteen Houses of Study. They recited for him in similar ways. The child in the thirteenth House of Study said, "And to the wicked (u-le-rash'ma) God said: Who are you to recite my laws [and mouth the terms of my covenant, seeing that you spurn my discipline, and brush my words aside?]" (Ps 50: 16)." That child stuttered so it sounded as if he said, "And to Elisha (u-le-'Elish'a) God said..." Some say he (Aher) took a knife and cut him up and sent him to thirteen Houses of Study. And some say, he (Aher) said to him, "If I had a knife with me I would cut you up." [V]

(A) When Aher died, they [the angels?] said, "Let him not be punished and let him not enter the world to come. Let him not be punished since he studied Torah regularly. Let him not enter the world to come, since he sinned."
(B) R. Meir said, "When I die I shall cause smoke to rise from his grave." When R. Meir died, smoke rose up from Aher's grave.
(C) R. Yohanan said, "[What a] mighty deed to burn his master with fire! One was among us, and yet we cannot save him? If I were to take him by the hand, who would tear him away from me? When I die I will extinguish the smoke from his grave." When R. Yohanan died, the smoke ceased from the grave of Aher. (The eulogizer said of him [Yohanan], "Even the guard of the gate [of Geonom] could not stand before you, our master."

[IV]

The daughter of Aher came before Rabbi [Yehuda ha-Nasi]. She said to him, "My master, support me." He said to her,

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81 London reads melaglem, perhaps a corruption of melagel, stammer.
82 Vatican 134 reads fig. Other ms read megangem, stutter.
83 Munich 95 reads simply, "He cut him up and sent him to thirteen Houses of Study." Göttingen 3 reads, "He took a knife and cut him up and sent him to thirteen Houses of Study. And some say he said to him, 'If I had a knife in my hand I would cut him up.'" (So Munich 6 and Vatican 134).
84 Literally, "judged." However, the term "judged" also means punishment. See S. Lieberman, "On Sins and their Punishment," Texts and Studies (New York: Ktav, 1974), 32–33 and n. 31. See too msSanh 10: 3 and bSanh 108a.
85 A sign that he is punished. I have deleted "it is possible that he be punished. When I die..." since this is found only in London and omitted by the other ms. Printed versions add "R. Meir said, 'It is better that he be punished and enter the world to come.'"
86 London adds "Our sages taught: It once happened that the daughter...", a parallel opening to IIIC, which also comes from the PT. But all other ms lack this opening.
D resumes B's story of Meir and Elisha. In the first of the three scenes Meir visits Elisha while he is alive, in the second Meir visits Elisha's grave, in the third Meir tells his students he will visit Elisha in the world to come. As in B, repeated phrases link the scenes closely. In D1 anonymous agents "came and said to Meir" that Elisha was sick, in D2 they "came and said to Meir" that Elisha's grave was burning, in D3 they "said to Meir" the question of whom he would visit. D1 relates that Meir "went seeking to visit him and found him" sick, D2 that Meir "went out seeking to visit it and found it" burning, and in D3 they ask Meir whom he "will seek to visit" in the world to come.

This section also plays with the letters of the root of "visit," br, which also figure in the words for burial (qfr), grave (qfr), morning (br) and approach (mfr). In D1 the dialogue between Meir and Elisha commences with three questions. And in both D1 and D3 Meir introduces a protext in the form of a question.

E recounts the treatment of Elisha's daughters after his death with the brief tripartite structure noted above. The concluding mention of Elisha's study of Torah "not for the sake of heaven" recalls Abuya's motives "not for the sake of heaven" in B.

B, D and E are connected by common themes and verbal echoes. Most important, Elisha and Meir appear in B and D, and Elisha's daughters and Meir's student in E. Sections B and D begin in parallel form: a sentence setting the stage followed by the phrase "they came and said to R. Meir, Behold your master is outside/sick." In both B and D Meir asks Elisha, "will you not return?" In B fire comes down from heaven and encircles the rabbi studying Torah while in D fire burns Elisha's grave. In B Elisha violates the Sabbath while in D Meir proves that Elisha will be saved by citing a Mishna permitting Sabbath violations. Sections D and E both begin with the phrase "years later (le-ahar yamim)." D recounts "At that point Elisha wept" and E relates "At that point Rabbi wept." As we noted, the theme of Torah "not for the sake of heaven" appears in B and E.

This analysis suggests that the redactors of the PT supplemented a story of Elisha and Meir (and their "progeny"), B + D + E, with two other sources, A and C (which deal with Elisha alone). Assessment of the BT parallels will support this analysis (see Section V). Nonetheless, I will treat the PT composition in its entirety, for that is the form bequeathed to us by the final editors, and it has been unified to a certain extent by the tripartite structures. Yet this understanding of the sources is indispensable for a coherent analysis of the story, and raises interesting issues to be considered below. The five sections reveal an impressive density of literary devices and demonstrate the highly developed narrative art of the PT storytellers.

II. The PT Story of Elisha: Close Reading

The point of departure of the PT story is the Toseftan account of the "Four who entered the parkes." That account provides two statements about Aher: (1) "Aher gazed and cut the shoots;" and (2) "Concerning him Scripture says, 'Let not your mouth lead you into sin... (Qoh 5:5)." Between the two statements the PT interposes the beginning of Section A. This section portrays Aher as an arch-sinner and construct his sins through interpretations of the two statements. Thus A is essentially an exegesis of the Tosefta in narrative form.

18 Meir does not appear in E, since this scene takes place a generation later. It continues the story of the relationship of Elisha and Meir by narrating the interaction between Elisha's descendents and Meir's student (= spiritual descendents), Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. See below.

19 In addition, the phrase "they came and said to R. Meir" opens D2 and "they said to R. Meir" opens D3.

20 On fire surrounding rabbis during discussions of Torah see yHag 2:1, 77a (corresponding to tHag 2:1) and bHul 137b. See too yDem 1:3, 22a (= yTa 3:1, 66b); bMQ 25a.

21 Although this pattern need not be the work of the redactors. Each source independently may have had a tripartite structure, as is typical of rabbinic literature. On the other hand, it is possible that the same redactors may have composed all three sources. But they appear to have composed them independently and only later integrated them into the current composition.
Aber is first identified as "Elisha ben Abuya who would kill the young students (reem of Torah." The word reem, from the root reb, "to grow, increase," means "growing boys" or "young children," and comprises an exegesis of neti'ot, "shoots," or "new growths," "young plantings." Thus the PT interprets the Toseftan parable "cut the shoots" as "killed the young students of Torah" to derive the initial description of Elisha's sin. Note that the PT continues with an apparently redundant restatement of this sin: "They said: He would kill every student whom he saw distinguish himself in Torah." But this line adds that Elisha "saw" the student distinguish himself, which interprets the Toseftan datum "gazed." A2 then charges him with another outrage ("in addition...), that Elisha caused students to abandon Torah and devote themselves to various trades. This is a second interpretation of the Toseftan metaphor: "cut the shoots" = cut off the young children from Torah. Again the PT specifies that Elisha "would go and see" the children to account for the term "gazed."

The second description simultaneously interprets Qoh 5:5 (statement 2), which the PT now cites. The verse reads "Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the malakh that it was an error, else God may be angered by your talk and destroy the work of your hands (ma'aseh yadekeha)." First, this verse informs that Elisha sinned and requires that the phrase "cut the shoots" be interpreted as a type of sin. Without the verse the obscure parable could have any number of meanings. Second, the phrase "let not your mouth lead you into sin" is the basis for the description of Elisha's sin: Elisha's mouth led him to sin in that he told the children to desert the Torah. Note that the first description of his sin, that Elisha actually killed the children, interprets the Toseftan phrase "cut the shoots" better, in that killing is close to cutting or "felling" (qiset). This interpretation, however, makes less of an effort to satisfy the verse, which mentions a sin caused by the mouth. A2, in attempting to satisfy the verse by making Elisha's mouth the cause of sin, offers a strained understanding of "cut" as "cut off from." Third, the final clause of the verse, "and destroy the work of your hands (ma'aseh yadekeha)" generates the motifs of killing the children and deserting the Torah. The phrase "work of your hands" refers to children in a well-known rabbinic homily, so to "destroy the work of your hands" explains the motif of killing (your) children. Yet "work of your hands" or "works" (ma'asim) can refer to good deeds, to merit (the "work" or "fruit" of meritorious deeds and commandments) and to the merit of Torah. This produces a double

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22 See Liebes, Elisha, 15. On neti'ot referring to children in other sources see Fischel, Rabbinic Literature and Graeco-Roman Philosophy, 19.

23 Or it may be a metaphorical interpretation of the first explanation that Elisha "killed the young students of the Torah." Elisha did not kill them literally, but metaphorically: he "killed" them from Torah, or "cut them off from Torah." These two explanations on the surface appear to be two versions or two conflicting traditions of how Elisha prevented the study of Torah. But the PT presents them not as alternatives introduced by "some say," but as cumulative, connected by "in addition." That the PT interprets the Tosefta along these lines was noted in part by Peter Schafer, "New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism," JJS 35 (1984), 28; Gerd A. Wenzes, Gebnisim und Gebenmonke in rabbinimden Judenlim (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 186, and Gochen-Gottstein, "Pour Entend Pardes Revisited," 127.

24 TQ 3:1 uses "cut his shoots" as a typical example of damage: "If one killed [another's] ox, or tore his clothes, or cut his shoots, he [the victim] cannot say 'take the carcass and give me a [live] cow', 'take the scraps and give me a garment', 'take the cuttings and give me [other] shoots...' This implies that the expression refers to some sort of damage or destructive act, but does not clarify exactly what the destruction is. So the verse indirectly influences the interpretation proposed in A1 as well, which also takes "cut the shoots" as a sin.

25 This was noted by Ginzberg, "Elisha ben Abuya," 128–139. This darashah is also based on Qoh 5:5 and appears in a baraita cited in bKet 72a and bShab 32b: "For the sin of [not fulfilling] vows children die, as it says, 'Let not your mouth lead you into sin... destroy the work of your hands (Qoh 5:5).' What are the 'work of the hands' of a human being? His sons and daughters." See also Numbers Rabba 10:2, Ta'anitba, Matora 35, ed. S. Buber (Vilna, 1882), 2:22b. Although the baraita is found only in the BT and later midrashim, it was presumably of tannaitic provenance and known in Palestine. In any case the PT story itself is evidence enough that the phrase "work of your hands" was interpreted in terms of children. "Work of Your Hands" also refers to human beings (or angels), the creations of God. See Job 14:15, 34:19, bMeg 10b (=bSanh 39b); bSanh 90a, 98b; Lesevishn Rabbiha 31:3, ed. M. Margoliot (Jerusalem, 1953–69), 717.

26 For "work of the hands" meaning commandments (or their merit), see Levitica 16:5 (398); Qohelet Rabbah 5:2; bKet 5a; Ta'anitba, va-Yishlahb
entendre, for Elisha kills not simply children (the work of your hands) but children learning Torah (the work/fruit of [your] hands).\(^{27}\) In the second description of his sin (A2) "to destroy the work of your hands" becomes the destruction of the Torah which the children have learned, since they abandon their studies.

The third description of Elisha’s sin has him collaborate with persecutors by advising them how to force the Jews to desecrate the Sabbath despite the victims’ efforts to avoid the most serious types of violations.\(^{28}\) This unusual scenario devolves exclusively from Qoh 5:5, as can be seen from the Talmud’s paraphrase of the final clause of the verse. Elisha destroyed the “work of [his own] hands,” namely the merits earned by former acts of piety, by collaborating in this heinous manner. There is additional wordplay: Elisha “destroys the work of your hands,” that is, the commandments that the Jews attempt to observe.\(^{29}\) Furthermore, the Jews are being forced to work with their hands by carrying loads. And Elisha insists on flasks since these will break (be destroyed) if they are set down. The “work of your hands” thus refers to Elisha’s merits, the commandments and the carrying. The “destruction” is the loss of Elisha’s merits, the violation of the commandments and the potential breaking of the flasks. In this case too Elisha’s mouth leads him to sin by telling the oppressors how to force the Jews to violate the Sabbath. Every detail of this narrative is the product of intricately crafted exegesis that interprets the verse.

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\(^{27}\) The verse has God destroy the work of your hands. But this, like the references to the messenger and the error, is ignored. The PT interprets select parts of the verse, not its whole. See the comparative chart, below Section IV.

\(^{28}\) The Jews are being forced to carry burdens on the Sabbath. They arrange to have two carry each burden, since two who perform forbidden labors in tandem are exempt (or at least do not violate the Sabbath according to the Torah [ḥe’er!] ). When they are forced, on Elisha’s advice, to carry the burdens individually, they attempt to set them down in a karmelit, a domain that is neither public nor private, since the prohibition against carrying on the Sabbath technically forbids carrying from private to public domains (or vice versa) or carrying four cubits in the public domain. Elisha compels them to carry flasks, for flasks cannot be set down without breaking.

\(^{29}\) See n. 26.

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Thus the first scenario, A1, interprets the Toseftan phrase "Aher gazed and cut the shoots" but only the final phrase of the verse; A2 interprets both the Toseftan phrase and the verse; and A3 is based exclusively on the verse.\(^{30}\)

Section B commences the main narrative, an extended story of Elisha’s relationship with his student R. Meir. The exposition opens in surprising fashion: R. Meir preaches while “Elisha, his master, passed by riding a horse on the Sabbath.” The delay of the crucial datum of violating the Sabbath to the end of the sentence after designating Elisha a "master" (rav) jolts the audience. One does not expect to hear this conclusion to a sentence that begins with a master riding a horse.\(^{31}\) The sense of surprise is enhanced by a subtle wordplay, for evar means “sinned” as well as “passed by.” The opening sentence may be understood as “Elisha, his master sinned, riding a horse on the Sabbath,” which removes all doubt about how the riding should be construed. The surprise increases when the students echo the narrator by reporting to Meir that his “master” is outside, and when Meir immediately breaks off his homily and goes out to greet him, showing honor to the Sabbath-breaker. If B is read together with A the surprise operates in a slightly different fashion. Now the surprise is not that Elisha desecrates the Sabbath—he has committed horrendous crimes in A—but that he is designated a “master” and that Meir should have anything to do with him. In either case this opening focuses on the subject of the story: the figure of the sinning sage, the master of Torah who violates the law.

The discussions of derashot substantiate Elisha’s appellation as “master” by establishing his superiority to Meir in knowledge of Torah. Meir’s first homily expounds Job 42:12 (“The Lord blessed the latter days of Job’s life more than the beginning”) in light of the proximate verse, Job 42:10 (“The Lord gave Job twice what
he had before.") Meir comments that “God doubled Job’s wealth” — exactly what the verse says. This banal comment is no more than a paraphrase of the simple meaning of the text. Elisha, in contrast, offers a tradition of Akiba that takes the Hebrew morpheme mev as the preposition “from” (from the beginning = on account of the beginning), not as the comparative “than” (more than the beginning). Unlike Meir’s paraphrase, this homily departs from the simple sense of the verse and offers a novel interpretation. Meir comes off little better in his second effort based on Qoh 7:8. Chastened by Elisha’s reaction to his previous homily, Meir interprets the verse with three parables — certainly an improvement, but hardly a sophisticated or innovative interpretation. Each parable is a straightforward and unexciting application of the proverb. Meir merely illustrates the simple meaning of the verse rather than create a midrashic novelty. Elisha once more supplies Meir with Akiba’s exposition, which again understands the Hebrew particle mev not as a comparative but as a preposition. This exegesis offers a fresh understanding of the verse, not simply a parabolic illustration of its simple meaning. In this way the storyteller depicts Elisha as the true “master” of Torah. Elisha provides the superior exposition and he remembers the traditions of Akiba that Meir, the homilist of a distinguished academy, had forgotten.

The third discussion varies this pattern in that Meir seems to make the grade. His exposition of Job 28:17 is fresh and deep, and provokes no lament from Elisha. But the storyteller abruptly crushes any possibility of our thinking highly of Meir’s Torah. Elisha has no time to criticize Meir’s interpretation because he must interrupt the discussion in order to caution Meir that they approach the Sabbath limit. Meir’s carelessness would have violated the Sabbath were it not for the awareness of his master.

Thus Elisha is Meir’s superior in attention to piety, not only in knowledge of Torah and memory of Akiba’s traditions. And Elisha realized that they approached the Sabbath limit not by any obvious means such as a sign, but by counting the paces of his horse, which required forethought and constant vigilance. Indeed, this brilliance astonishes Meir such that he now broaches the critical question: “You have all this wisdom yet you will not repent?” How can a sage, so knowledgeable and so meticulous, persist in such sin?

Yet there is much more to the three discussions than to establish Meir as student and Elisha as master. Each discussion relates to the plot in a substantive way. Elisha’s interpretation of the first verse is self-referential. Like Job, Elisha earned merit in his “beginning,” for he studied sufficient Torah to become a leading sage. Yet he now sins, and, as we soon learn, has lost the possibility of repentance. What then of a reward for “the mishpat and good deeds that he had done from the beginning”? Elisha’s life seems to conflict with his (or Akiba’s) exegesis of Job 42:10. Or is sin an exception? Does Elisha differ from Job in that his sin annulled the merit of his youth? These questions — whether Torah has intrinsic or contingent merit and the status of the sinful sage — are fundamental to the composition. Elisha’s exegesis broaches these questions early on and anticipates the ultimate answer of the story when he enters the world to come.

Elisha’s interpretation of the second verse (Qoh 7:8) is explicitly self-referential and precipitates the long account of his birth and his father’s error. Here Elisha’s life exemplifies the exegesis: Abuya’s motive was not good “from its beginning,” hence the product, his son Elisha, turned out bad in the end. The storyteller uses the derashah as the first salvo of what will be a sustained

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32 Saul Lieberman, "Tanna heikha qay," Studies in Memory of Moses Schorr, ed. L. Ginzberg and A. Weiss (New York: Shalsinger, 1944), 183–86, observes that Meir’s interpretation adds nothing to scripture. Lieberman is so troubled by this fact that he reconstructs a novel interpretation based on traditions attributed to Meir in other sources. In the context of the story, however, the banality of Meir’s interpretation is precisely the point.

33 There is also a nice phonetic and thematic echo in Meir’s third parable of a man who studied Torah in his youth and forgot it (shekhekhub), Elisha then laments matters of Torah that are lost (= forgotten) and not found (meshekhekhun), Meir has forgotten Akiba’s interpretation.

34 On the mechanics of the exegesis, see Fraenkel, Darkhe, 406.

35 Elisha’s concern for Meir is difficult to harmonize with his actions in Section A, a point to which I will return.

36 Perhaps Elisha’s lament is self-referential as well. He laments that which “has been lost and cannot be found” — his opportunity to repent.
interest: explaining how the figure of a sinful sage could come to be. At the same time, the self-referential aspect of the interpretation constitutes another demonstration of Elisha's superiority to Meir. While Meir offers some hypothetical parables (mesbalim) to illustrate his understanding of the verse, Elisha's interpretation is exemplified by his experience. He is a type of simbal, the real-life application of the verse, thus irrefutable proof of the validity and relevance of his interpretation. In this way, moreover, the tension between the interpretations of Meir and Elisha parallels what will be their fundamental conflict throughout the story: the possibility of "return." Meir's three parables are optimistic visions of eternal hope. Death, financial ruin, forgetting Torah and presumably all other losses can be remedied. Elisha's interpretation and self-exemplification amount to a pessimistic fatalism: what was bad from the beginning turns out bad in the end. So there is no "return" for him, no way to remedy the loss of faith, of merit and of opportunity to repent.

The mirroring of exegesis and plot comes to the fore in the third discussion based on Job 28:17, of which we have only Meir's interpretation. Again Meir's illustration deals with forgetting and reclaiming Torah, but this time he refers specifically to a sage and explicitly to "return" (loshar), which comes closer to Elisha's situation. While the homily concerns a sage who forgot his Torah, unlike Elisha who recalls his Torah but has chosen to sin, it raises the issue of "return" to the pristine state. When Elisha warns Meir to stop before he violates the Sabbath, Meir translates the common ground of his interpretations into a direct question: why does Elisha, the sage, not "return" (= repent)? The wordplay on shirin (studying Torah [in B2], re-learn Torah, repent), facilitates the transition from the implicit significance of Meir's interpretations to explicit articulation. This antanasis (the repetition of a word with a different meaning each time) brings the question of repentance to an almost conscious level before Meir broaches it directly. Interpretation, plot and wordplay converge as we move from Meir's exegesis of Qoh 7:8 (losses are remediable), to his exegesis of Job 28:17 (a sage can return), through Elisha's warning to Meir (return from the boundary), to Meir's explicit question (why you do not return).

The two flashbacks recounted by Elisha, the stories of Abuya and the heavenly voice, explain why Elisha became a sinner and why he cannot repent. Both questions are extremely difficult: how could a great master of Torah, the superior even of Meir, sin so flagrantly? And having fallen into sin, for whatever reason, why not repent? Both are also crucial to the construction of the fundamental conflict, as will be seen in due course. The narrative addresses the first issue by a dual strategy, pinning the blame on Elisha's father and introducing the measure-for-measure principle. Attributing Elisha's sin to Abuya's crooked intention renders it a predetermined occurrence. Consequently Elisha's mastery of Torah becomes incidental: whatever the extent of his knowledge he had no choice but to go astray. It is particularly unfortunate — or interesting, or tragic, or ironic — that Elisha blossomed into such a scholar, but fundamentally beside-the-point, because responsibility lies elsewhere. The measure-for-measure principle, the basic tenet of rabbinic justice, then prevents the audience from feeling such a fate to be unjust. Abuya's motive "not for the sake of heaven" becomes embodied in Elisha, who violated the commandments despite his knowledge — the ultimate expression of Torah "not for the sake of heaven." Two further measure-for-measure intimations in the scene reinforce this point. While Abuya promises that if his son prosper (nitzqayem) he will dedicate the son to Torah, Elisha reports that Abuya's plan did not prosper (la' nitzqayem). While Abuya was impressed with the fire kindled by the rabbis shirin ("turning") in Torah, his son will be denied the opportunity to shir ("repent"), and fire will consume the son's grave. The consequences, we feel, basically fit the crime.

The question of why Elisha does not repent is solved by the decree of the heavenly voice. This solution is as neat as it is harsh: the cited verse, Jer 3:22, invites "rebellious children" to repent and excludes Elisha alone. Yet here too the storyteller takes pains to assure that the rejection of Elisha is just. First, Elisha's...
rebellion — riding his horse on the Sabbath and Day of Atonement specifically near the holy of holies — is a particularly outrageous act. 38 While all intentional sins constitute rebellion (pusba'), violating the Sabbath is the extreme form in that it denies God as creator and master of the universe. Violating the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, beside the Holy of Holies, God's very domain, reaches the ultimate level. The Day of Atonement, as the name suggests, is the time specifically set aside for repentance, while the Holy of Holies, where the High Priest makes confession for the people, is the specific place of atonement. Having rejected and denied God so purposefully, it is fitting that God resound in kind by rejecting Elisha and denying him repentance — the measure-for-measure theme again. Second, the voice states that Elisha is an exception because he knew God's power, that is, he was a master of Torah. This "power" echoes the "power of Torah" which Abuya sought for his son, and, ironically, becomes the cause of his downfall: had Elisha not known this power he could still repent. So the narrator turns what in one respect appears unjustly harsh into the justifying principle. Elisha's Torah does not earn him merit against which his admittedly egregious sins might be balanced. Like Moses he is judged at a higher standard, and his greatness in Torah proves the root of his undoing. Why exactly Elisha rebelled is still unclear, but will be answered in the next section.

The closing scene — Elisha and Meir conversing at the Sabbath boundary — artfully comprehends the oppositions noted above in one concentrated moment: past and present, sin and virtue, the divine and human perspectives. Elisha riding the horse on the Sabbath simultaneously re-enacts and reports his riding on the Sabbath/Day of Atonement when he heard the voice. While Elisha exhorts Meir to return so as to avoid sin, Meir entreats Elisha to repent for his sins. The footsteps of the horse simultaneously preserve Meir's virtue, by measuring distance, and constitute Elisha's sin, both by every pace of riding and by taking him outside the limit. God rejects the possibility of repentance when

Elisha rode beside the holy of holies, whereas Meir follows and urges repentance when Elisha rides beside the acadeny. This tension between God's and Meir's relationships with Elisha reaches its climax in D.

Section C, we suggested above, was originally independent of B, and stands in some tension with it. In the larger composition C nevertheless serves an important function by answering the question with which it begins: "Why did all this happen to him?" 39 B detailed the ultimate cause of his sin, Abuya's ignoble motives, and the sin itself, riding the horse on Yom Kippur, but does not explain the direct cause of Elisha's sin, what pushed him over the edge. C's first two explanations pertain to theodicy. The first points specifically to Elisha not knowing R. Yaakov's interpretation that the promise of reward comes in the next world. This depiction of Elisha as ignorant of tradition, in my opinion, again clashes with the image of Elisha in B, where he is the consummate master of tradition who recalls Akiba's interpretations that even Meir forgot. To the extent that we read as a unity this failing magnifies the tragedy: Meir forgetting (or never learning) assorted Akiban traditions diminishes his knowledge but not his virtue. Yet Elisha, who knew all those Akiban traditions, lost his faith because he lacked one explanation of R. Yaakov — and a pretty basic explanation of a well-known verse at that!

C2's variation of the theodicy trope has Elisha despair not that the Torah's promise of reward for a specific commandment is disproved by example, but at the suffering and martyrdom of a rabbi. How Elisha's second conclusion, that there is no resurrection of the dead, follows from the martyrdom is less evident. Either the loss of faith in resurrection is a repercussion of his general loss of faith in reward and punishment or the vision of the tongue consumed by a dog convinces him that the body will not be resurrected. 40 In any case, several aspects of this explanation

38 As are the crimes recounted in A, assuming that section is an integral part of the composition.

39 At least C1 and C2 answer this question.

40 If Elisha's exclamations "this is Torah and this is its reward," (so torah/so sehabah) etc., are chria, as Fischel claims, we might expect that they will not fit the narrative perfectly. They are catchy slogans appropriated by the storyteller and given a narrative context, but antedate the narrative. bBer 61b
intersect with elements of the story. First, the words “This is Torah and this is its reward? This is the tongue that used to bring forth fitting words of Torah?” could be said of Elisha, who has been denied repentance and upon death has his grave burned, a sign of perdition. Not so the Baker, who, as we know from R. Yaakov’s explanation, receives his reward in the next world. But Elisha does not know this, and so he brings upon himself a similar fate (no reward for Torah) to that which he mistakenly deduces from Yehuda’s wretched end. Thus the irony is deep: not only do Elisha’s words (“This is the Torah...”) apply more to himself than to Yehuda, but they come to apply to him by his mistaken belief that they apply to Yehuda. In other words, for Elisha the problem of theodicy inheres in Yehuda, but it is only apparent (because we know R. Yaakov’s exegesis); for the audience (and for Meir) the problem of theodicy inheres in Elisha — and it is a basic question of the narrative. The ironic gap renders Elisha’s statement covertly self-referential, as were the derehbot in the dialogue between Meir and Elisha. Second, Elisha loses faith in reward for Torah and in the afterlife (resurrection). His punishment is in kind: the burning grave indicates he has no share in an afterlife and consequently no reward for his Torah. Again the measure-for-measure principle attempts to portray his fate as deserved.

The third explanation attributes Elisha’s corruption to his mother smelling idolatrous substances while he was in utero. As we noted, this account competes with the explanation in B that the father’s impure motives led to his corruption. The redundancy or contradiction reflects again the interest in, and difficulty of, explaining the sin of a great sage. At the same time, these references to the mother and father touch on another significant interest of the narrative — progeny, both physical and spiritual. Note that in C1 the commandment pertains to a mother bird and her relationship to her young. I shall return to this theme below.

Within the structure of the narrative C has an additional function. This digression from the main plot before the continuation of the story of Meir and Elisha in D gives the feeling that some time has passed. While D’s introductory clause “years later” states this explicitly, the inclusion of a section that disrupts the flow of narrative time produces an effect that matches the transparent indicator. In other words, the break in narrating time (the time necessary to tell, read or hear the story) matches the break in the narrated time (the time frame of the story).42

When the story of the relationship between Meir and Elisha resumes “years later” in D the roles have changed significantly and reversed in certain respects. Elisha appears as a sick and dying man who considers repentance while Meir has become a master of Torah in his own right. This picture of Elisha complements and clarifies his image in B. That Elisha prevents Meir from violating the Sabbath creates a favorable impression. So too, perhaps, is his explanation to Meir that he cannot repent, not that he does not want to or hope to. Still, the fact that he rebels and sins is cause to hesitate before wholesale sympathy. The story takes a decided turn for a compassionate view of Elisha when Meir again asks “will you not repent,” the very question he asked in B3, the scene prior to the interlude of Section C. Now Elisha responds not with a summary explanation of why he cannot do so but with his own question about repentance (“if one repents is it accepted?”) and with tears. The question and tears can be interpreted two ways, both of which arouse sympathy. First, Elisha may be asking whether it is possible for him to repent in his condition, i.e. near death, and the

weeping expresses repentance. Meir's happiness, however, is misjudged because the heavenly voice precluded repentance. Despite Elisha's repentance, his grave burns. The second possibility, supported by the impersonal phrasing of the question, is that Elisha asks about repentance in general: is repentance in principle accepted even on the deathbed? In this case Elisha weeps at the bitterness of his fate, and Meir misinterprets the weeping as repentance. Elisha's fate is bitter because he would like to repent, but cannot. Yet all others, as Meir tells him, can repent until their dying day. The second half of the verse Meir cites bolsters this reading. Ps 90:3 concludes "You decreed, 'Return you mortals (shnon bene 'adam)' which echoes the heavenly voice's verse, "Return rebellious children (shnon banim shovavin; Jer 3:22)." Elisha knows that God excluded him from Jeremiah's blanket exhortation to repent, and Meir's citation of a similar verse cannot override this fact.

Whether the tears express repentance or self-pity, the portrayal of Elisha invites compassion. The narrator could have depicted Elisha persisting in sin and fulminating about theodicy ("there is no judge and no justice") until his dying breath. Instead, he leaves us an image of a sick and dying man who asks a pleading question about repentance and weeps at the response.

The portrayal of Meir as Elisha's disciple and inferior in Torah reverses when he provides the exegesis and teaching that Elisha seems not to know. While the two discuss Torah as they did in B, Meir now has the upper hand. His knowledge of Torah has blossomed in the intervening years such that he has become a true master. The reversal continues in D2 as Meir comes to the burning grave and sets out to redeem Elisha by a simultaneous exegesis and re-enactment of Ruth 3:13. In B3 Elisha prevented Meir from sin by warning him of the boundary, while here Meir saves Elisha from his sins. And in contrast to Meir's anemic exegeses proffered in B, his interpretation of Ruth 3:13 is both brilliant and bold. It involves allegory (night and morning correspond to this world and the world to come), intertextuality (the use of 'good' in Ps 145:9), syntactic play (understanding "good" as an appositive of "he"), and contains in the second half of the intertext an expression of the very divine characteristic which Meir solicits — God's mercy for all his creatures. All this is combined with a daring self-application which turns Boaz's promise into a challenge bordering on insubordination. Boaz vowed to act if his kinsman "Mr. Anonymous" (phan almoni) failed to take responsibility. Meir, in contrast, threatens to take action even if the Master of the Universe decides to punish Elisha. That Meir simultaneously re-enacts Boaz's gesture by spreading his cloak upon Elisha's grave, as Boaz did to Ruth, makes it clear that he means business. How Meir intends to redeem Elisha if God refuses is uncertain, but his strong-armed tactics work and the flame ceases. In any case, the brilliance and courage of Elisha's disciple cannot be doubted.

D3 follows this climax of the action with a dialogue that explicitly sets forth the reasons for all that has transpired. Meir answers two queries from anonymous interlocutors (presumably his students) that respectively address two larger questions: Why is Meir so committed to saving Elisha? Why does God acquiesce?

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43 The force of the question becomes clear from the answer. Meir interprets Ps 90:3, "You return man to dust (dokba) as "a man may return even when his life is crushed (dokhabbb)," i.e., about to die.

44 The question may be phrased in the impersonal because the verse Meir cites is formulated impersonally. This would satisfy the first interpretation of the question.

45 This seems to be Uerbach's understanding. See E. Uerbach, Heracl. — Pirke E'mmam re-De'ei (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971), 411.

46 Perhaps Meir hopes that the universal appeal to "mortals" offers a blanket invitation to repent: all mortals, even sinners like Elisha.
The first query contrasting Elisha with Meir’s father (yet another parental reference) emphasizes that Elisha remains Meir’s master despite his sin. Rabbinic literature often compares the honor due to the teacher and the father. The Mishna rules that honor of the teacher takes precedence “because his father brought him into this world but his teacher, who teaches him wisdom, brings him into the world to come.” All along others have referred to Elisha as Meir’s master, and Meir has treated him as such. By proclaiming that he will honor Elisha before his father in the next world Meir demonstrates this commitment in its ultimate form. Elisha has taught Meir Torah, and so retains his status as master and the duties that accompany it.

The second query shifts to the divine perspective. The students ask Meir “Will they listen to you?” The identity of this “they” is not completely clear, but must refer to those in charge of the world to come, presumably some sort of angelic council. So the question is “will the divine agents agree that you continue to treat Elisha as master?” i.e., will Elisha actually have the status as sage – and the appropriate rewards – for which Meir hopes. While in B3 the divine point-of-view was revealed by the heavenly voice, here it is revealed by Meir’s pronouncement of what will happen in the world to come: “They will save Elisha Ahor for the merit of his Torah.” This succinct statement elegantly summarizes the main theme of the story. Just as sin does not compromise one’s status as a master of Torah in this world, so it does not obliterate the merit earned for the study of Torah in the next. Indeed, these two considerations – and the two perspectives – are interdependent. For we see in Meir the product of Elisha’s Torah. Herein lies the importance of the reversal sketched above and the portrayal of Meir as a master: Meir’s brilliant exegesis on the grave and his interpretation of mShab 16:1 demonstrate that Elisha’s Torah yielded pious disciples who studied “for the sake of heaven.” Meir, in other words, is both the means of, and justification for, Elisha’s salvation. When Meir sets himself on the grave, embodying Elisha’s Torah and simultaneously displaying it in his exegesis, God recognizes the merit and saves Elisha.

Meir’s parabolic interpretation of the Mishna can be decoded two ways corresponding to these interdependent divine and human perspectives regarding Elisha. The Mishna concerns what objects one may save from a fire that breaks out on the Sabbath despite violating the prohibition against carrying. Now the scrolls/ phylacteries correspond to Elisha’s Torah, the casings to Elisha and the fire on the Sabbath to the fire on the grave. According to one application (nimshal) the person who saves the object corresponds to God (or the divine agents). God saves Elisha from the fires of perdition because of his Torah just as one saves the casings from the fires on the Sabbath because of the sancta inside. This understanding expresses the divine point of view, God’s reason for saving Elisha. However, Meir may also be considered Elisha’s savior by virtue of his daring confrontation on the grave. According to this application, the person who saves the object on the Sabbath corresponds to Meir, and the violation of the divine law against carrying on the Sabbath corresponds to Meir violating (or at least

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49 The question is whom Meir will visit (miyign), but he answers that he will first approach (miyign), his master. This maybe a scribal error. It is tempting to translate lentiqer as “bring near, save, redeem,” in which case the following question, “will they listen to you” flows better. See n. 51. However, this usage of qrv is rare. For example see Genesis Rabbah 35:2, ed. J. Theodor and H. Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 329 and parallels. But this lacks the preposition le-following the verb as in our case.

50 mBM 2:11, in reference to returning the lost object of the teacher before that of the father. See too tHor 2:5.

51 Alternatively, one can understand this question as asking if they will listen to Meir and save Elisha. This is slightly difficult, for the initial question, “Whom will you visit first?” seems to assume that both Elisha and Meir’s father will be there. However, the question may be theoretical (whom will you wish to visit), while the answer is definite (I will approach), and this certainty provokes the following question. In any case, the real point is Meir’s answer.

52 Note that Meir here refers to his master as Elisha-Ahor. The restoration of the personal name Elisha suggests that he is no longer completely rejected as the Other.

53 Both Talmuds discuss what type of carrying (or removing from a private to a public or semi-public domain) is at issue.

54 In this reading the phrase “they save Elisha-Ahor” is understood impersonally. “They save” means “one saves” or “it is right that one save.” According to the first reading “they save” refers to the “they” of the previous statements, apparently the heavenly host in the world to come. This reading is more satisfying in that it does not require a change of subject. But since the identity of that “they” itself is not clear, the passage is sufficiently vague to admit both readings.
challenging) the divine decree that Elisha suffer. In this case the parable provides both the reason for saving Elisha and the model for Meir’s action. Recall, moreover, that Elisha’s sins in B, both present and past, involved Sabbath violations. Here Meir interprets a law permitting Sabbath violations to justify the salvation of a Sabbath violator. Preserving scrolls of Torah takes precedence over the sin of carrying on the Sabbath in the same way as the merit of Elisha’s Torah takes precedence over his sins of riding on the Sabbath.

Meir’s application of this mishna to Elisha becomes more significant in light of a law found in the relevant section of Tosefta and cited in both Talmuds. Tosefta Shabbat 13:5 rules, “One does not save the Gospels and the books of the heretics from a fire [on the Sabbath], rather they burn in their places, both them and their divine names.” The Tosefta then mandates that one actively burn such books (on weekdays). If analogies are to be drawn, we might expect that Elisha and his Torah would be compared to the books of the heretics. Just as the books of heretics are not saved on the Sabbath and are even purposefully burned, so the heretical and sinful Elisha should not be saved from perdition but deserves his punishment. Or again: just as heretical books and their divine names are burned, because such divine names have no true sanctity, so Elisha and his Torah should burn, because the Torah of a sinner has no substance or sanctity. This seems to be God’s initial logic in burning Elisha despite his Torah. Meir’s analogy emphatically expresses the opposite perspective — that neither the deeds nor heresies of a sinner pervert his Torah, which remains a pure source of wisdom and merit.

E continues the story in the following generation by describing the encounter of Elisha’s daughters and Meir’s student, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. The brief episode rehearse the tension between sin and Torah set forth in the previous sections as well as the resolution. Rabbi initially identifies Elisha as the “wicked man” of Psalm 109 on account of his sinful deeds. Just as God cut off Elisha because of his sins, so Rabbi cuts off Elisha’s daughters. But just as Meir valued Elisha’s knowledge of Torah, so the daughters beseech Rabbi to value his Torah. And just as God changed his mind and rehabilitated Elisha, so Rabbi changes his mind and supports the daughters. Meir’s statement “they save Elisha Abner for the merit of his Torah” rings true again. The merit of Elisha’s Torah saves his daughters in this world even as it saves his soul in the world to come. So this scene offers a different (or additional) accounting of the merit that must accrue for Elisha’s Torah. Torah confers merit in this world to the descendants of the sinning sage himself, an idea consistent with the notion of zekhut ’avot (“the merit of the forefathers”) and biblical conceptions of reward and punishment.

The tension between sin and Torah again is resolved by giving primacy to his Torah.

Mention of Elisha’s daughters and Meir’s student also continues the story’s interest in parents and children. In rabbinic culture a student is essentially a “spiritual descendant” or son. D2 almost spells this out explicitly when Meir puts Elisha before his

55 TShab 13:5; yShn 16:1, 15c; bShab 115b.
56 That Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi was Rabbi Meir’s student is not stated explicitly. According to yBek 5:2, 63a Rabbi once said: “I have merited Torah only because I saw the neck of R. Meir from the back.” In the version of this tradition found in bErav 13b, Rabbi attributes his superiority to his colleagues to the fact that he “saw the back of R. Meir,” which Rashi s.v. de-besote takes to mean that Rabbi sat in a row of Meir’s academy that had a rear view of Meir.

Traditions in both Talmuds claim that Rabbi formulated the Mishna based on the mishna collection of R. Meir (bSanh 86a; yYev 4:11, 6b). So I think we can assume that the storytellers considered Rabbi to be Meir’s disciple and prime transmitter of his traditions. See too H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, trans. M. Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140-41, 147.
57 In the biblical conception of reward and punishment (and in some rabbinic views) the results may materialize in succeeding generations.
58 A second (or additional) possibility is that Rabbi represents patriarchal authority and therefore “official” rabbinic institutional policy. Not only does Meir remain loyal to his master, which we might take as an unavoidable reflex of the disciple-teacher relationship, but even the highest rabbinic authorities eventually respect and reward Elisha (through his progeny). The scene with Rabbi therefore signals Elisha’s complete rehabilitation within the general rabbinic community. The interpretation of this scene is difficult because we do not know exactly what Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi represented to the storytellers and the audience.
59 See Sifte Deot 534, ed. L. Finkelstein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1983), p. 61 (“Teach them to your sons” [Deut 6:7] — these are your students); ySanh 10:2, 28b; bSanh 19b (“whoever teaches the son of his fellow Torah, Scripture considers it as if he gave birth to him”); bSanh 99b, etc.
father, his “spiritual father” before his biological father. So too Rabbi can be considered Meir’s “spiritual” son and hence Elisha’s “spiritual” (grand) son. The daughters and Rabbi therefore represent Elisha’s biological progeny and spiritual progeny. His biological progeny is that which we expect of a sinner: female, orphaned and destitute. His spiritual progeny is that which we expect of a master of Torah: male and learned. The conflict of female and male progeny recapitulates the conflict within Elisha between sin and Torah. It is resolved by means of Torah (the daughters respect Torah) and by virtue of Torah (Elisha’s Torah). In addition, Rabbi’s reference to Elisha’s Torah “not for the sake of heaven” recalls Elisha’s father and his base motive. Abuya dedicated Elisha to Torah “not for the sake of heaven” and Elisha studied “not for the sake of heaven.” Yet his daughters honor the Torah, his spiritual son becomes a sage and his spiritual grandson the patriarch. The intrinsic worth of Torah ultimately prevails. So too must its merit.

At this point we may evaluate the story as a whole. It is extremely difficult to relate section A to the rest of the story in any substantive fashion. The picture of Elisha as archenemy of the Torah and murderer contradicts his benevolent relationship with Meir and his efforts to prevent his former student from violating the law. Because the entire section is formally separated from B–E by the conclusion of the Tosefta, we are justified in considering it an independent tradition. It is easy to account for the juxtaposition of the two sections (A vs. B–E). The redactors cited A in this section of Talmud (yHag 2:1, 77b–c) because it interprets tHag 2:3, which in turn complements mHag 2:1. The redactors then included B–E, a different story of Elisha, by association. For B–E lacks any connection to a Mishna or baraita, and so has no natural place in the Talmud. The redactors found an appropriate location for it following an autonomous Elisha story. Whether we should read the two stories independently or as a unity depends on whether our interest is the meaning of the original sources to those who told them or of the redactional composition to those who redacted and studied it. In any case, reading A together with B–E makes the overall point of the story much stronger. Despite such heinous crimes, Meir nevertheless continued to treat Elisha as a master, and the merit of Elisha’s Torah nevertheless prevailed.

Section C, while originally independent, or at least constructed from discrete traditions, has been integrated to some extent with the rest of the material. This section evinces the difficulty in plausibly accounting for Elisha’s rebellion.

The story’s primary question is whether the merit of Torah is intrinsic or contingent on observance. Does the Torah that one has mastered earn him enduring merit? Or can that merit be neutralized by his sins? The story considers this question by examining the figure of the sinning sage, the master of Torah who does not observe the law.

Before the story can consider such a figure it must construct one. This is no easy task. For the figure itself is almost self-contradictory: how can Torah and sin coexist? Surely the more

62 It also depends on assumptions concerning the way the PT was redacted and studied, what Robert Hodge calls the “domain” or “exception regime.” (Robert Hodge, Literature as Discourse: Textual Strategies in English and History [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press], 23–37). If individual units of the PT were studied independent of their proximate literary contexts (but were placed in that context for associative or mnemonic reasons), then the PT redactors and editors themselves would have treated the stories as distinct. If the PT was redacted over a lengthy period of time and studied sequentially, then two stories may have been read, interpreted and perhaps edited as a unity well before the final redaction (even if they were originally independent).

63 The composition focuses less on heresy than on rebellion, as evident in the charge of the heavenly voice. Elisha is portrayed as one who has lost his faith rather than a heretic trumpeting nonconformist beliefs. His “heresy,” the rejection of reward and punishment, leads to the main offense, his rebellion against God by not observing the law. Rebellion, part of the Hebrew concept of sin (peshua), of course always entails “heresy” (in the sense of loss of faith) or there would be no motive to sin. (Section C, independent of the rest; makes more of heresy, for the rejection of reward and punishment can be considered the sin itself. But B, D and E ignore heresy, and without C, heresy would not figure in the story at all.)
Torah one knows, the greater his piety and the more he worships God. And would not the merit of Torah protect him from error? The sustained interest in the provenance of Elisha’s sin and the multiple explanations provided (Section C) are attempts to account for such a figure. The focus on the father (and/or mother) as source of Elisha’s unfortunate fate is an effective strategy. Attributing the cause of Elisha’s sin to circumstances prior to his birth and out of his control makes it easier to accept that a sage could go astray. His sin was not only fated, but the Torah he learned was tainted ab initio and could not protect him from error. Combine these factors with the eternally difficult question of theodicy and one has a plausible account of the making of a sinning sage. The heavenly voice is crucial, for the voice rules out the obvious solution to the problem: that the sinning sage repent. Because repentance is not an option, Torah and sin coexist until death, when rewards and punishments materialize. The measure-for-measure theme is another important element that makes Elisha’s fate appear just. Through these maneuvers the story constructs a figure that allows us to ponder the question of the intrinsic merit of Torah.

The solution to the question emerges when we consider the relationships between Meir and Elisha, on the one hand, and God and Elisha, on the other. Meir continues to regard Elisha as his master, as illustrated by the numerous times he is told “behold your master is outside/sick” and emphasized by his placing Elisha before his real father in the world to come. He does so because he has learned Torah from Elisha in the past and continues to learn even after Elisha’s fall (B1–B3). And for good reason: Elisha knows more and informs Meir of valuable traditions. As a disciple, Meir is obligated to seek his master’s best interests, both in this world and the world to come. The story nowhere questions the propriety of all this. It does not suggest that the sinning sage would lead disciples astray or teach them corrupted Torah. Torah is so precious that it must be sought even from a sinning sage (“Alas for the things lost and not found.”) The quality of Elisha’s Torah is not affected by his behavior. From Meir’s point of view, Elisha’s Torah retains its merit.

God, however, rejects Elisha because of his sins. Unlike Meir, God does not require Elisha’s Torah. God requires something different— that Torah be observed, not only studied. From God’s perspective, Torah has no worth if its possessor rebels. The rebellion is greater when a sage sins, because he knows so much Torah, hence he knows God’s power and wisdom. So God spurns Elisha, rules out repentance and punishes him in the world to come.

Meir cannot reconcile Elisha to God because of the heavenly voice (although he tries to do so in B3 and D1), so he must reconcile God to Elisha. This leads Meir to confront God in the dramatic scene on the grave. He engages God by interpreting a verse of Torah, thereby demonstrating that Elisha’s Torah lives on in his student. Elisha’s sins may have destroyed the immediate merit of his Torah, but the Torah he bequeathed to his disciple is unaffected, and must earn him merit. As Meir explains to his students, “they save Elisha by the merit of his Torah.” Once the story accepts that Torah is not corrupted by sin (even if its bearer is), it must recognize the merit of that Torah. A sage who sins in the worst way cannot lose the merit for the Torah he studied and taught.

The final scene reiterates this point. Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, like God, initially rejects Elisha’s daughters because of Elisha’s sins. He subsequently focuses on Elisha’s Torah and supports the daughters. Just as Elisha produced a pious disciple, so he produced daughters who respect Torah. Neither Elisha’s Torah nor his progeny (both natural and spiritual) were corrupted by his deeds. The intrinsic merit of Torah prevails in the end.

The story’s main message is thus the inviolability and intrinsic merit of Torah. The contradiction of the sinning sage is resolved by giving precedence to Torah. Despite his sin and rebellion, despite God rejecting him, his Torah retains its merit and power to save.

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64 Without the voice Torah and sin should not coexist because the sage should either repent or reject his Torah. In Elisha’s case Torah and sin stably coexist because he cannot repent.

65 This is one of the main differences between the PT and BT; see below.

66 The talmudic discussion of what takes priority, Torah or deeds, is not germane. Here the issue is whether Torah without deeds retains its value. See bYev 109b.
III. Elisha in the Babylonian Talmud: Structure and Literary Devices

This translation is based on ms London (Harley 5508) with variants from mss Göttingen 3, Munich 95, Munich 6, Vatican 134 and Vatican 171. This is not a comprehensive critical edition, and I have cited only the major variants.67

[1] Aber (gazed and) cut the shoots. About him Scripture says, "Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the malakh (angel/messenger) that it was an error, else God may be angered by your talk and destroy the work of your hands (ma'aseh yadekha)" (Qoh 5:5). (= tHag 2:3)

What did he see? He saw Metatron, to whom was given permission one hour each day to sit and write the merits of Israel. He said, "It is taught that 'On high there is no standing' and no sitting and no jealousy and no rivalry and no back and no weariness.' Perhaps – heaven forbid – there are two divine powers?

Immediately they brought out Metatron and struck him with sixty lashes of fire. He was given permission to burn the merits of Aber. A heavenly voice went out and said to him, "'Return, rebellious children' (Jer 3:22) – except Aber."70

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67 On the supplementary material that follows the story, see Appendix 2.
68 The words "gazed and" do not occur in any of the BT manuscripts I have consulted. But they are in the PT and in tHag 2:3, ed. S. Lieberman (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–88), 2:381. The authors of the BT story had them for the composition begins "what did he see?" (In printed texts the question has been changed to "What is this? [ma'ati]. The manuscripts are consistent.)
69 So Munich 6 and 95, and Göttingen. London and Vatican 171 and 134 omit the term (cf. Rashi), because the story assumes angels stand. This list varies slightly in the ms.
70 Printed texts and Vatican 171 add, "They said to him, 'Why did you not stand up in front of him?'" All other ms lack this question. The line seems to be a gloss.
71 So too Munich 6, Göttingen and Vatican 171. Munich 95 and Vatican 134 read "uprooted."
72 Munich 95 and Vatican 134 add "from behind the curtain (purjed)."

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[II] He said, "Since 'that man' (= since I) has been banished from that world,73 I will go and enjoy myself in this world." Aber went out to evil ways (literally, 'evil growth'). He found a certain prostitute. He propositioned her. She said to him, "Are you not Elisha ben Abuya, whose name went out throughout the world?" He uprooted a radish on the Sabbath and gave it to her.74 She said, "It is another (aber)."75

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[III]

(A) After he went out into evil ways Aber asked R. Meir, "What is written, 'The one no less than the other is God's doing' (Qoh 7:14)? He said, "Everything that God made, He made its counterpart. He made mountains, he made hills. He made oceans, he made rivers." He said to him, "Akiba, your master, did not say this. [Rather], He made righteous, he made wicked. He made the Garden of Eden, he made Gehem. Each and every person has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehem. The righteous man, having earned merit, takes his portion and the portion of his fellow in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, having been found guilty, takes his portion and the portion of his fellow in Gehem. (Rav Mesharshia said, "What is the verse? About the righteous it is written, 'They shall have a double share in their land' [Isa 61:7]. About the wicked it is written, 'Shatter them with double destruction' [Jer 17:18].’)"76

(B) After he went out into evil ways Aber asked R. Meir, "What is written, 'Gold or glass cannot match its value, nor vessels of fine gold be exchanged for it' (Job 28:17)?" He said, "This refers to matters of Torah which are difficult to acquire like vessels of gold and vessels of fine gold and easy to lose like vessels..."

73 The world to come.
74 Munich 95 omits "on the Sabbath." This appears to be an error. See the comment of C.F. Rabinovich, Disqute Sofrin (rpt., Brooklyn and Jerusalem, 1939/60), ad loc.
75 A play on the name Aber, which means "other, another."
76 So Munich 95 and Vatican 171. London, Munich 6, Göttingen and Vatican 134 add, "Rav Mesharshia said, 'What is the verse? 'They shall have a double share in their land' (Isa 61:7). And it is written, 'Shatter them with double destruction' (Jer 17:18)." The statement is a gloss.
of glass." He (Aher) said to him, "By God! Are they even like clay vessels?" He (Aher) said to him, "Aki"ba your master, did not say thus. Rather, just as vessels of gold and vessels of glass, even if they are broken, they can be restored, so sages who sin can be restored." He said to him, "Then you too should repent." He said to him, "No, for I have already heard from behind the curtain, 'Return, rebellious children' (Jer 3:22) — except Aher."

(C) Our sages taught: It once happened that Aher was riding his horse on the Sabbath [going on his way] and R. Meir was walking after him to learn Torah from his mouth. He said to him, "Meir, return (hazor) back, since I have already measured by the footsteps of my horse that the Sabbath boundary is here. He said to him, "Then you too should repent (hazor)." He said to him, "No, I have already heard from behind the curtain, 'Return, rebellious children' (Jer 3:22) — except Aher."

[IV] He (Meir) took hold of him (Aher) and

(A) He brought him to the House of Study. He said to a child, "Tell me your study verse." He said to him, "There is no peace — said the Lord — for the wicked' (Isa 48:22)."

(B) He brought him to another House of Study. He (the child) said to him, "Though you wash with natron and use much lye, [your guilt is ingrained before me — declares the Lord God'] (Jer 2:22)."

(C) He brought him to another House of Study. He (the child) said to him, "And you, who are doomed to ruin' (Jer 4:30)."

(D) He brought him to thirteen Houses of Study. They recited for him in similar ways. The child in the thirteenth House of Study said, "And to the wicked (a-le-rasb'a) God said: Who are you to recite my laws [and mouth the terms of my covenant, seeing that you spurn my discipline, and brush my words aside?]' (Ps 50:16)." That child stuttered so it sounded as if he said, "And to Elisha (u-le-'Elis'h'a) God said..." Some say he (Aher) took a knife and cut him up and sent him to thirteen Houses of Study. And some say, he (Aher) said to him, "If I had a knife with me I would cut you up." [V]33

(A) When Aher died, they [the angels?] said, "Let him not be punished and let him not enter the world to come. Let him not be punished since he studied Torah regularly. Let him not enter the world to come, since he sinned."

(B) R. Meir said, "When I die I shall cause smoke to rise from his grave." When R. Meir died, smoke rose up from Aher's grave.

(C) R. Yohanan said, "[What a] mighty deed to burn his master with fire! One was among us, and yet we cannot save him? If I were to take him by the hand, who would tear him away from me? When I die I will extinguish the smoke from his grave." When R. Yohanan died, the smoke ceased from the grave of Aher. (The eulogizer said of him [Yohanan], "Even the guard of the gate [of Gebonim] could not stand before you, our master.")

[IV]36 The daughter of Aher came before Rabbi [Yehuda ha-Nasi]. She said to him, "My master, support me." He said to her,

81 London reads melaglem, perhaps a corruption of melaglog, stammerer. Vatican 134 reads lig. Other mss read megonem, stutterer.
82 Munich 95 reads simply, "He cut him up and sent him to thirteen Houses of Study." Göttingen 3 reads, "He took a knife and cut him up and sent him to thirteen Houses of Study. And some say he said to him, 'If I had a knife in my hand I would cut him up.'" (So Munich 6 and Vatican 134).
83 London, Göttingen 3 and Munich 6 repeat section [IL almost verbatim. This appears to be an error. Perhaps this section originated as a gloss that entered the manuscripts in different places.
84 Literally, "judged." However, the term "judged" also means punishment. See S. Lieberman, "On Sins and their Punishment," Texts and Studies (New York: Ktav, 1974), 32–33 and n. 31. See also mSanh 10:3 and bSanh 108a.
85 A sign that he is punished. I have deleted "It is possible that he be punished. When I die..." since this is found only in London and omitted by the other mss. Printed versions add "R. Meir said, 'It is better that he be punished and enter the world to come.'"
86 London adds "Our sages taught: It once happened that the daughter...", a parallel opening to IIIC, which also comes from the PT. But all other mss lack this opening.

77 Munich 95 and Vatican 171 add "clay vessels that have no value" (or "have no substance"); 'ayn ba-lam mamash, ayya.
78 literally, "they have a remedy" (taggane).
79 So London. Other mss omit.
80 Vatican 134 and Munich read "walking after him and learning torah from him."
“My daughter, whose daughter are you?” She said to him, “The daughter of Aher.” He said, “Is there still his seed in the world? ‘He has no seed or breed among his people, no survivor where he once lived’ (Job 18:19).” She said to him, “My master. Remember his Torah and do not remember his deeds.” Fire came down from heaven and tried to burn Rabbi. Rabbi wept and said, “If this [happens] for those who dishonor her [Torah], how much the more so for those who respect her?”

[III] How did R. Meir learn Torah from Aher? Did not Rabbah bar bar Hanna say that R. Yohanan said, “What is the meaning of ‘For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is a malakh [messenger/angel] of the Lord of hosts’ (Mal 2:7)? If the master is similar to the ‘malakh of the Lord of hosts,’ then they should seek Torah from his mouth, and if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth.”

(A) Resh Laqish said, “R. Meir found a verse and expounded it: ‘Incline your ear and listen to the words of the sages; pay attention to my wisdom’ (Prov 22:17). It does not say ‘to their wisdom’ but ‘to my wisdom.’”

(B) R. Hanina said, “From here: ‘Take heed, daughter, and note, incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house’ (Ps 45:11).” (The verses contradict each other; There is no difficulty. One is about an adult, one a child.)

(C) When Rav Dimi came up [from Israel] he said, “They say in the West (Israel): Eat the date and throw away the peel.”

[II’] Rava expounded: “What is written, ‘I went down to the nut grove to see the budding of the vale’ (Song 6:11)? Why are words of Torah compared to a nut? To tell you that just as a nut, even though it is dird with mud and filth, its inside is not soiled, so too a sage, even though he sins, his Torah is not soiled.”

[I’] Rabba bar Rav Sheila came upon Elijah. He said to him, “What is the Holy One, Blessed be he, doing?” He said to him, “He recites traditions from the mouths of all the rabbis, but he does not recite from the mouth of R. Meir.” He said to him, “Why?” He said to him, “Because he learned traditions from the mouth of Aher.” He said to him, “So what? R. Meir found a pomegranate. He ate the inside and threw away the peel.” He said to him, “Now He (God) says: ‘Meir my son says: When a human being suffers, the Shekhina—what expression does it say? I am light (=pained) in my head. I am light in my hand. If I am saddened so on account of the blood of the wicked who are killed, how much the more so for the blood of the righteous that is spilled?’”

The BT’s story of Elisha has the following chiastic structure.

[I] Aher rejected by God and God’s servant (Metatron)

[II] Sins of Aher

[III] Meir learns Torah from Aher

(A), (B), (C)

[IV] God again rejects Aher; Aher brings death to child

[V] Death, Punishment and Redemption of Aher

(A), (B), (C)

[IV’] God accepts Torah of Aher; Aher’s Torah brings life to child

[III’] Defense of Meir learning Torah from Aher

(A), (B), (C)

[II’] Defense of Torah of Aher

[I’] Torah of Meir who learned Torah from Aher accepted by God and his servant (Elijah)

93 sarah, literally, “decompose, decay, stink.”

92 = mSanh 6:3. Thus God cites a mishna that contains a tradition of R. Meir.

In Section I a sage (Aher) sins (or err). God’s servant, the angel Metatron, destroys his merits and God, through the heavenly voice, rejects him. In Section I God’s servant Elijah relates how a sage (Meir) has erred in matters of Torah (by learning from Aher) and so his Torah has been rejected by God (who does not cite traditions in his name). God subsequently accepts the Torah of the sage and cites a tradition in his name, the reverse of the heavenly voice. Both scenes portray the situation in the heavenly realm.

Section II relates that the sage (Aher) engaged in evil ways and recounts his sinful deeds. II' defends the Torah of a sinful sage by proving that it is not corrupted by sin.

Section III provides three accounts of Meir learning Torah from Aher. In the first two Meir interprets a verse and then Aher informs Meir of Akiba’s exegesis. The third notes that Meir followed Aher “to learn Torah from his mouth.” III’ asks how Meir could learn Torah from Aher and presents three defenses. The first two involve exegeses of verses while the third offers a parable. Thus the chiastic parallel extends even to the tripartite structure and its internal variation.

In Section IV God’s rejection of Aher is expressed through the “prophetic” verses cited by children. Aher kills or says that he would have killed the child, so the sinful sage is associated with death. In IV’ Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi rejects the child (daughter) of the sinful sage, but God accepts and protects her when she invokes the Torah of her father. The Torah of the sage therefore brings life to that child.

Section V, also bearing a tripartite structure, is the center of the chiasm. It recounts the death, punishment and ultimate redemption of the sinning sage. His disciple Meir and subsequently Rabbi Yohanan struggle on his behalf and prevail.

The structure is almost perfectly symmetrical with the tripartite divisions of III, V and III’ contributing to the chiasm. I say “almost” because the quadruple repetition in II is unparalleled in II’ and because supplementary material has been appended (see Appendix 2).

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It should be noted that the first two sections are based on the Tosefta. The scenario constructed in I comprises an exegesis of Qoh 5:5, which the Tosefta applies to Aher (see below). The episode in II provides an etiology of the name Aher as well as an interpretation of the phrase “cut the shoots” of Ef Haq 2:3. Yet both sections have been integrated with the rest of the narrative, unlike Section A of the PT, which interprets the Tosefta but has no connection to the subsequent story. Section I is fundamental to what follows, since it constructs the sinning sage and explains why he cannot repent. II is not absolutely indispensable, but it illustrates the sins which Aher commits and explains his motivation. Repetition of motifs and phrases also demonstrate the efforts at integration. The heavenly voice’s rejection of Aher in I is repeated in IIIB and IIIC. The opening to II, that Aher “went out into evil ways,” is repeated in IIIA and IIIB. Thus the sections that interpret the Tosefta cannot be separated from the remainder of the story.

The narrative contains several literary devices worthy of note. Sections I and II are linked by the repetition of the verb “went out” (yasa or nafaq). After the heavenly voice “went out,” we learn that Aher “went out” to evil ways, and the prostitute tells him that his name “went out” throughout the world. In addition, the description of Metatron “brought out” uses the same verb.

Of the three scenes in III, the first two begin with the same phrase and discuss biblical verses, while the second two end with the same dialogue. IIIIC contains a play on haqer: Elisha tells Meir to return for he has journeyed too far, and then Meir asks why Elisha does not return (= repent). The phrase “Torah from the mouth of Aher” appears in III’, the corresponding part of the chiasm, and in I’ as well. III’ contains an exegesis of the term melakh (angel) in Mal 2:7. The same word appears in the exegesis of Qoh 5:5 that generates the scene in I.

Numerous vegetable motifs and parables appear, including cutting the shoots (I), uprooting the radish (II), evil growth (II, III), the date/peel (II’C), nut (III’), and pomegranate (I’). While the first three express sin, the final three express the ability to separate the pure from the sinful. Another repeated motif is fire and burning: Metatron is struck with fiery lashes and then burns out Aher’s merits (I), Meir burns his master with fire (V) and fire
from heaven almost burns Rabbi (IV'). These literary devices and verbal connections complement the chiastic structure and give the narrative coherence.

IV. The BT Story of Elisha: Close Reading

Sections I and II are based on the Toseftan tradition of the four who entered pardees (tHag 2:3–4), cited on bHag 14b, and specifically the reference to Aber, cited on bHag 15a. Recall that the Tosefta provides two comments, that Aber "gazed" and cut the shoots" and that Qoh 5:5 applies to him. The BT begins with an exegesis of this data in narrative form. The opening question, "what did he see," understands Elisha's gaze as the cause of his downfall. The content of the vision emerges from Qoh 5:5. Elisha's mouth leads him to sin in that he stated his tradition of the situation on high and wondered whether there were two divine powers. The sin arises from an error: either Elisha's tradition is erroneous or he has understood it erroneously. In any case, his possible identification of Metatron as a divinity is an error. The malakh of the verse is the angel Metatron. He is probably named because the verse uses the definite article, the angel, and rabbinic

midrash always identifies the anonymous figures of biblical verses referenced by the definite article. God's anger at Elisha's "talk" is the punishment of Metatron. The destruction of Elisha's ma'asim, the "work" of his hands, is the burning out of his meritorious deeds. Elisha cannot "say that it was an error" because his merits have been wiped out. As the heavenly voice says, he cannot "return" or admit that he was at fault. Thus section I is purely an exegesis of the "gaze" and the verse cited by the Tosefta – and an intricate one at that. Almost every motif devolves from the exegesis of the source:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tosefta + verse</th>
<th>BT</th>
<th>PT (Section A)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elisha gazed</td>
<td>vision of Metatron</td>
<td>saw the students learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and cut the</td>
<td>uprooted radish</td>
<td>killed students or cut them off from Torah</td>
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<tr>
<td>shoots</td>
<td>(Section II)</td>
<td>tells students to abandon Torah; tells persecutors how to compel sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let not your</td>
<td>says &quot;Perhaps...two powers&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>mouth lead</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>you into sin</td>
<td>and do not say</td>
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<td></td>
<td>heavenly voice:</td>
<td>do not repent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>before the</td>
<td>Metatron</td>
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</table>

99 See n. 64.
100 bHag 14b mentions only that "Aber cut the shoots." The pisqah on 15a adds the verse.
101 The form of Elisha's tradition may be modeled on a statement of Rav, bBer 17a: "In the next world there is no eating and no drinking and no procreation and no commerce and no jealousy and no envy and no rivalry (kavrusa), but the righteous sit..." Both Rav and Elisha mention "rivalry" and "jealousy."
102 The confusion of the angel and God may devolve from the strange shift in the verse from "do not say before the malakh" to "else God may be angered." One would expect the subject to remain the same: "do not say before the angel... else he (or the angel) be angered" or "do not say before God... else God be angered." The Septuagint and Peshitta indeed read "God" here instead of malakh. The identity of the malakh as God or a God is therefore a plausible interpretation of the verse itself. This interpretive possibility perhaps provides additional background for the dualistic vision, which the BT then develops in more elaborate fashion.

99 See e.g. Gen 37:15–18. "The man" whom Joseph encounters is identified by the rabbis as the angel Gavriel. (Here Gavriel is chosen, rather than another angel, because of the gever [= "man"] of Gavriel's name.) And see the previous note.
100 The punishment of Metatron by lashes may also derive from the clause "lead you into sin" (lehabat et besarekeha), which can be translated "bring punishment upon your body" (so Robert Gordis, Kedeth – The Man and His World [New York: Schoken Books, 1978], 164). Elisha's mouth brought punishment upon Metatron's body. However, this requires that "your" be ignored, since Elisha does not bring punishment on his own body.
101 See Goshen-Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," 127. For another example of a complex narrative constructed completely through exegesis of a verse, see bSanh 95b–96a.
that it was an error on high leading to identification of Metatron as God

else God may be angered Metatron punished

by your talk (as above: says "Perhaps...two powers") (as above: tells students to abandon Torah)

and destroy Metatron burns killing of children; the work of Elisha’s deserting Torah; yours hands merits breaking vessels

This section also contains a measure-for-measure (midda ke-naged mida) motif which helps justify Elisha’s punishment. One could object that Elisha hardly deserves his fate. True, he “sinned” in that he said the wrong thing. But it was an error, an inadvertent sin (shogeg), not a rebellion (pesha’). Elisha made a mistake, a peccadillo, saying the wrong thing at the wrong place at the wrong time. Note the tentative form of Elisha’s statement, “Perhaps—heaven forbid—there are two powers?” This is no proclamation of heresy but rather an expression of shock and amazement. Does he deserve rejection by God and disqualification from repentance? Nevertheless, Elisha’s error caused Metatron to be punished, so Metatron punishes Elisha. Metatron was struck with fiery lashes, so he burns out Elisha’s merits. Metatron was “given permission” to record the merits of Israel, then he is “given permission” to burn out Elisha’s merit. Elisha’s fate, although on one level exceedingly harsh and perhaps even unjust, on another level is fitting according to the measure-for-measure principle. Note that only after Metatron’s revenge does the heavenly voice preclude Elisha repenting. Whatever God’s opinion about the severity of Elisha’s sin, God must allow Metatron his measure-for-measure revenge, and so Elisha loses all merit.

In this way the BT negotiates the tricky path and constructs a sinning sage who cannot repent. On the one hand, Elisha’s punishment is just and his inability to repent understandable. On the other hand, his original intention was not to sin or rebel, so it is plausible that he knows Torah and that Meir desires to learn from him. Torah and sin coexist in Elisha because he has neither rebelled against God nor rejected Torah and the commandments. The PT constructed the sinning sage independently of the Tosefta by casting the blame on Elisha’s father and focusing on the problem of theodicy. In this scene the BT authors simultaneously account for the sinning sage and interpret the Tosefta data. They have also satisfied the general Mishnaic context, as we shall see below (Section VI).

It is crucial to note that Elisha sins deliberately only in II, after his merits have been erased and repentance precluded. As he quite logically reasons, “since that man (=I) has been banished from that world, I will go and enjoy myself in this world.” Elisha has nothing to lose, no possible share in the world to come (since no merits), so why not enjoy this world? His sin is a result of being excluded from repentance, not the cause of it. Nor is his initial sin an outright rebellion against God such as cursing God’s name, forcing others to violate the law, or, as in the PT, riding his horse on the Sabbath/Day of Atonement near the Holy of Holies. Elisha seeks his own pleasure, as anyone not constrained by law, whether divine or human, might do.

Elisha commits the more severe sin of violating the Sabbath by uprooting a radish. Yet the purpose of this act is not to rebel against God but to convince the prostitute that he is not the famous master of Torah. Pleasure is the goal and violating the Sabbath means to the end, not an act of rebellion. In any case,

102 Cf. Alan Segal, Two Powers in Heaven (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 61: “Nor does Abi present his observation as a challenge to the rabbis. He is horrified by it. ‘Heaven Forbid’ that there are two powers,’ he exclaims.”

103 Printed texts read that Metatron “erases” the merits of Abi, the opposite of “writing” the merits of Israel.

104 The form of Metatron’s revenge may be a function of his activity. He appears to be limited to writing down—or removing—merit, and thus takes his revenge in this way.

105 The opposite of the PT. This was noted by Liebes, Elisha, 67.

106 See n. 74.
his action of uprooting the radish is determined by two factors. First, it explains the phrase of the Tosefta “cut the shoots,” which Section I neglected.\(^{107}\) Second, the sin provides an etiology of the name “Aber,” which is also mentioned in the Tosefta.\(^{108}\) The prostitute remarks that Elisha is “(an)other” when she sees him violate the Sabbath.\(^{109}\) I do not mean to whitewash Elisha, but simply to emphasize that his sins could be much worse. Finally, we should note that the vegetable metaphor in the description of Aber going out “to evil ways,” literally “evil growth” (tarbit), an unusual location, also picks up on the Toseftan phrase of cutting the shoots. Elisha replaced the shoots he cut with “evil growth.”

Section III introduces Meir and reports his discussions of Torah with Aber. The opening stresses that their encounter took place after the incidents related in I–II. Nonetheless, Meir feels no compunction about engaging Aber in discussions of Torah, an issue that the composition will address later. The three scenes portray Aber in sympathetic fashion while emphasizing his proficiency in Torah and the fact that he cannot repent.

In the first scene Meir offers a banal interpretation of Qoh 7:14. He interprets the undefined “one” and “other” in terms of complementary geographic phenomena – mountains and hills, oceans and rivers. In contrast to this trivial explanation Elisha cites Akiba’s exegesis, which Meir apparently did not know. The “one” and “other” refer to opposite moral phenomena, good and evil, the Garden of Eden and Gehennom, and all derive from God. The irony of this comment is striking. In I Elisha mistakenly wondered about a heavenly dualism and was punished. Here the tradition which he teaches to Meir completely rejects dualism. It seems that the authors covertly protest the injustice of Aber’s punishment by stressing that he never actually subscribed to dualistic beliefs or at least emphasizing that his statement in I was an error, not a profession of heresy.\(^{110}\) As in the PT, the discussion is self-referential.

The second scene continues to establish Elisha’s command of Torah.\(^ {111}\) Elisha’s objection to Meir’s analogical interpretation of Job 28:17 seems to be that if Torah can be compared to the prime characteristic of various vessels – difficult to acquire like gold and easy to lose like glass – then Torah must also be ordinary or worthless like clay vessels.\(^ {112}\) Citing Akiba, Elisha modifies the analogy slightly by comparing the master of Torah, not Torah itself, to vessels, and concludes that a sage who sins can be restored. This time Meir realizes that the teaching is self-referential and asks Aber why he does not repent. Now Meir hears (and the audience hears again) of his unfortunate fate. Again the juxtaposition invites sympathy. Despite the Torah’s (in Akiba’s exegesis) policy that a sage has a taqqana (remedy), Elisha has none.

The third scene underscores Aber’s mastery of Torah by picturing Meir following him in order to learn Torah even as Aber violates the Sabbath. Proximity to sin proves no deterrent when Torah is to be had. Moreover, as we saw in the PT, Elisha emerges as Meir’s superior in piety as well as Torah, for he measures the Sabbath boundary with the footsteps of his horse. His instruction to Meir to “return” invites the wordplay in Meir’s response that Aber should “return” (repent), and the repetition of Aber’s fate. Once more Aber is portrayed in sympathetic light. He teaches Meir Torah, prevents him from sin and remains so attuned to the law as to measure meticulously the Sabbath boundary in a very difficult way.\(^ {113}\)

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\(^{107}\) In some manuscripts Metatron “uproots” the merits of Aber, which creates a nice verbal resonance. The verb “proposition” (tan’ut) is the standard Talmudic phrase for soliciting a prostitute (or a woman for illicit sex). See bBeTa 22a, bBeTa 10a, bBeTa 11b and bQid 81b, which, interestingly enough, has the sage present the “prostitute” (who turns out to be his wife) with a fruit.

\(^{108}\) At least in some versions.

\(^{109}\) For interpretations (and geonic traditions) of the name “Aber” other than “Other” see H. Yalon, “Midrashot u-migra’ot,” Lebionn 29 (1965), 215.

\(^{110}\) A gloss attributed to Rav Meshashia finds prooftexts for Elisha’s (or Akiba’s) exegesis. This again emphasizes the orthodoxy of Elisha’s interpretation.

\(^{111}\) The scene with the prostitute alludes to Elisha’s fame as a master of Torah. She is astonished at the proposition from a great sage whose “name went out throughout the world.”

\(^{112}\) Munich 95 makes this more clear by adding “clay vessels that have no substance” (en ko-beh manamah).

\(^{113}\) Fraenkel analyses this scene in Dakhia, 263–266. In my opinion he misinterprets it because of his methodological principle of ignoring the literary context. Fraenkel considers this scene an independent and self-contained story with no connection to the preceding and following scenes. If the scene is taken out of context in this way, then Fraenkel’s reading is possible. But if it is read as part of
welfare by encouraging Meir to “return,” his own “return” has been blocked.

Section IV continues to explore the two prime axes of the plot: Meir’s relationship with Elisha and the preclusion of repentance.

the story in which it is found, then his reading is problematic. First, Fraenkel suggests that Aber’s riding is a “decoration of the Sabbath in public, which comes to provoke or insult, and therefore it is no wonder that there can be no atonement or even repentance for this violation.” Fraenkel then suggests that Aber habitually rode on the Sabbath, and for this reason he knows that he cannot repent. However, as Fraenkel himself realizes in a note (p. 629 n. 29), riding on the Sabbath from a “formal point of view” is not a serious violation. Nor does Fraenkel provide compelling evidence that riding on the Sabbath is particularly associated with provocation or insult. Rather, as we know from the larger context, Aber rides for the same reason that he visits the prostitute: he has no reason to obey the law because of the heavenly voice, and it is easier and less tiring to ride than walk. (Nor is there evidence that the scene takes place in public.) In any case, the reason Aber knows he cannot repent is that he heard the heavenly voice after the Metatron business in Section I. Riding on the Sabbath was not the cause of the voice, as Fraenkel would have it, but the consequence of it. Second, Fraenkel claims that Meir follows Aber in order to encourage him to repent. Indeed, learning Torah was a pretense to create a situation such that he could raise the issue of repentance. After all, “Doesn’t Meir have a better source and opportunity than to learn from a Sabbath violator in public?” It seems to me that Meir’s primary purpose is in fact to learn Torah and encouraging repentance is secondary. This is clear in the textual tradition I have cited which reads “Meir was walking after him to learn Torah from his mouth” (Gilad torah mi-ni-bay). Fraenkel, however, prefers the version “walking after him and learning Torah from him” found in Munich 95 and Vatican 134. Even so, that Meir’s purpose is to learn Torah is clear from the previous two scenes (IIIA–B).

In both Meir learns from Elisha and, at least in IIIA, Meir does not bring up repentance. Those scenes demonstrate that Meir has much to learn from Aber, which is precisely why Meir follows him. Third, Fraenkel claims that the reason Aber counts the two thousand paces is to know precisely when he will violate the Sabbath boundary, because he is eager to do so, and because this was his true purpose in riding the horse: “Leaving the boundary is a complete abandonment, a distancing for which there is no return, and this is Aber’s intention.” Yet the text explicitly states that Aber told Meir to return so that Meir not violate the Sabbath. There is not one shred of evidence to substantiate Fraenkel’s understanding of Aber’s hidden intention or purpose. Rather, his intention should be judged by his action – to prevent Meir from violating the Sabbath. If Fraenkel’s reading were correct we would expect Aber to say so explicitly (“I don’t want to repent, I am eager to violate the boundary etc.”) rather than explaining that he cannot repent (although he may have wanted to). While leaving the boundary may symbolize abandonment at some level, it is not Aber that abandons God, but God who rejects Aber at the beginning. Despite these shortcomings, Fraenkel astutely recognizes the love between Meir and Aber and the tragic element of their relationship.

While Elisha knows that he cannot repent (since he heard the heavenly voice) and the audience knows this to be true (since it is privy to the narrator’s omniscient point-of-view in I), Meir has no such firsthand knowledge. He knows only what Elisha has told him. Undaunted or unconvincing or hoping that Elisha was mistaken, Meir requires confirmation for himself. To seek an oracle through the study-verse of a child is a standard technique of talmudic stories,114 which functions in the same manner as heavenly voices, dream-visions and messages from Elijah. These methods provide types of divine revelation in the post-biblical world after the cessation of prophecy. So the study-verses are for Meir what the heavenly voice was for Elisha and the audience. They confirm for Meir, and re-confirm for Elisha and the audience, that God wants no part of Elisha’s repentance. Meir’s relentless efforts of dragging Elisha to “thirteen” houses of study simultaneously establishes the depth of his commitment to Elisha and the depth of God’s rejection.115 As a disciple who has learned Torah from Elisha, who loves and owes his master, Meir continues to hope for some sign that repentance is possible, for some chance to save his master’s soul. Unfortunately, the last study-verse makes matters worse. Not only does the stuttering child mention Elisha by name, but the verse — “Who are you to recite my laws and mouth the terms of my covenant (Ps 50:16)” — signals God’s offense at Elisha’s “reciting” and “mouthing” Torah as well. The previous verses implied only that Elisha could not repent or was doomed to ruin, but said nothing about his Torah. This development eventually has deleterious consequences for Meir, and is addressed in the final sections of the narrative.


Elisha’s brutal reaction to the final study-verse, which draws on Jgs 19:29–30, is the one heinous crime attributed to him in the BT. This atrocity seems out of character, and it is strange to be presented with an alternative tradition that involves no bloodshed at all: either Aher was a cruel murderer or he simply made an angry threat. Because the image of Elisha as killer is difficult to reconcile with the previous sections, I am inclined to see the comment as a later addition based on the PT. Recall that in the first section of the PT account Elisha kills children studying Torah and appears as archenemy and traitor. A reflex of the motif seems to have entered the BT and glossed Aher’s rather different encounter with children. Later editors may have attempted to tone down its severity by entertaining the possibility that Elisha did not commit the outrage at all but only said that he would have done it. Be that as it may, in its present context the murder/potential murder warns that dire consequences result from attempts to reconcile God and Elisha. God’s rejection of Elisha, at least in this world, is final.

As the central hinge of the chiasm (V), Aher’s death and redemption emerge as the principal concern of the composition. Some anonymous figures—perhaps angels or the heavenly retinue—unambiguously articulate the cultural problem represented by Aher, namely the conflict that arises from the coexistence of sin and Torah. Sin must be punished but Torah must be rewarded. They reconcile the opposing pressures by proposing a standoff, that Aher neither suffer for his sins nor enjoy the reward of his Torah. Note that this view presupposes that Torah has intrinsic merit. Aher’s Torah was not rendered worthless by his sin and remains a source of merit, yet his sin remains equally potent.

Aher’s disciple Meir, however, prefers a different resolution, that the sinning sage be punished for his sins and then be rewarded for his Torah. His promise to “cause smoke to rise” from his master’s grave is to bring about punishment so that the reward may follow. (Printed texts add, “R. Meir said, ‘It is better that he be punished and enter the world to come’” to clarify his motive.) While Meir succeeds in effecting the punishment—and presumably the reward will eventually follow—he also causes great pain to his master. Thus Yohanan reacts with both admiration and dismay. He recognizes that Meir has done a gutsy, “mighty deed” but is appalled that one “among us,” a master of Torah, must suffer.

Yohanan proposes a third resolution, that a rabbi (himself) save Aher. Exactly how he accomplishes this is not spelled out. The allusion to his eulogy suggests Yohanan personally escorted Aher out of Gehemom and none dared stand in his way because of his stature. In any case, Aher’s Torah ultimately earns him merit and a share in the world to come. Like the PT, the story emphasizes the role of disciples and the rabbinic community. Yohanan stresses that Aher “was among us,” a sage and member of the rabbinic community. The merit of Torah does not save him directly, but through disciples and colleagues struggling on his behalf.

The three scenes can be seen as three possible perspectives on the contradictory figure of the sinful sage and the status of his Torah. The first considers him a neutral figure, his merits neutralizing his demerits into a moral stalemate. The second considers him in somewhat better light. Ultimately the merit of Torah bestows its reward, but the sins likewise require punishment. The third considers him as fundamentally deserving of reward, if not because of his own Torah then for the merit of the Torah he has taught to his disciples and bequeathed to his colleagues. Placing the scenes in a serial relationship gives primacy to the final perspective. And this coheres with the fundamentally sympathetic picture of Aher: the sinful sage deserves compassion and loyalty rather than revulsion and contempt.

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117 The text may have been softened. See the textual variants, n. 82. It is possible that the shorter reading is original, and attempts were made later to tone down the horrible act. Then again, it is possible that the BT originally had Elisha threaten to kill the children, and a marginal gloss based on the PT later entered the text.
118 This stands in some tension with section I and the claim of the heavenly voice. The angels seem to assume that Elisha still has merit.
119 Yohanan’s reaction also can be read sarcastically.
120 That Elisha deserves sympathy was already recognized by Abraham Zacuto (b. 1304), Sefer Yehasin ha-Shalom, ed. H. Filipowski (London, 1857),
The merit of Torah emerges powerfully in IV, which shifts to Aher's daughter and Meir's disciple, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. Because Rabbi focuses on Aher's deeds, he cannot believe that Aher's progeny lives, for Job 18:19 states that wicked men leave no survivors. The daughter again articulates the crux, "remember his Torah and do not remember his deeds," i.e., his sins. The celestial fire that almost burns Rabbi, a warning that he better not reject the daughter's plea, unambiguously communicates the sympathies of the authors and creates an interesting reversal. While Aher's merits and grave were burned as punishment, Rabbi is almost burned for not rewarding Aher's daughter. Again the merit of Aher's Torah remains intact. Indeed, Rabbi is overcome by the realization of the greatness of Torah which prompts divine intervention even on behalf of a sinner. His exclamation could well summarize the main theme of the composition: even the Torah of a sinner retains its merit and power.

This section corresponds on several levels to IV and God's emphatic rejection of Aher. There the children of the academy cite verses of Torah that spurn Aher, while here the patriarch, the leader of the House of Study, cites a verse of Torah that spurns his daughter. The sinful sage kills or threatens to kill children, but mention of the Torah of the sinful sage brings life to his child. Once the sin has been removed – in V by punishment and rabbinic intervention, in IV through the innocence and piety of the child – the intrinsic merit of Torah endures. Thus God, at least through the heavenly fire, signals his acceptance of Aher's daughter.

The subsequent sections continue to wrestle with the contradictory coexistence of sin and Torah by focusing on the disciple. Should a disciple learn Torah from a sinful sage or is that Torah tainted? Will the disciple become corrupted by his interactions with a sinful master? Even if he will not be corrupted, does not the association amount to complicity in sin? While I explores the issue in narrative form, III and II address the issue with exegetical traditions and argumentation. In I God disdains Meir's traditions because he learned them from an untrustworthy source. That is, a disciple should not seek Torah from a sinning master, as Rabbah bar bar Hanna/Yohanan state in III. Both the narrative and the non-narrative sections defend the disciple learning from the sinning sage, although both express some ambivalence.

The story of Meir's posthumous fate (I) recapitulates the movement in I–V. God's rejection of Aher continues in his rejection of the Torah of Aher's disciple Meir. In place of God rejecting the sage by precluding repentance, God repudiates the Torah of a sage by not citing traditions in his name. In place of other sages redeeming the rejected sage by supernatural force, a sage (Rabbah bar Rav Sheila) redeems Meir's name and Torah by argumentation. For the rabbi, the citation of traditions in one's name represents a type of immortality, the attainment of life-after-death through ongoing presence in rabbinic memory.
By rejecting Meir's traditions God destroys his name and potentially the merit for his Torah, a fate similar to that of his master. It may be worse: Elisha becomes known as "the Other," which erases his name while simultaneously preserving his Torah (Aher said ...). Yet God initially effaces Meir's name and Torah completely.

The tradition of Meir's that God finally cites is significant. Borrowed from mSanh 6:5, the tradition depicts God's reaction at the execution of a criminal. Although the culprit sinned grievously, although it is "the blood of the wicked," God feels pain at the death. Earlier God (through the child's study-verse) called Elisha "wicked" and countenanced his punishment, but in the end God's compassion emerges. God's tender reference to Meir as "my son" and his decision to cite the tradition in his name express God's reconciliation with the disciple. And by the content of that tradition God simultaneously signals his own sadness at the suffering of Elisha, the "wicked man," and presumably his satisfaction with Elisha's salvation.

Sections III' and II' shift to a level of discourse outside of the story's framework, a common feature of BT narratives. These sections do not represent further developments of the plot but debate or comment upon aspects of the story. They indicate that the story's treatment of the propriety of Meir's learning, Rabbi bar Rav She'ila's terse parable "Meir ate the inside and threw the peel away," does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. Whether a disciple should learn Torah from a sinning sage is a problematic matter requiring analysis beyond that which can be accomplished in the confines of the story. The shift in genre thus illuminates the main interests of the authors with explicit questions and explanations as to why Meir's Torah should or should not be rejected.

III' objects to Meir learning Torah from Aher, the theme of III, by citing a tradition that forbids learning from a master who is not a malakb (messenger/angel). Torah, the revelation of God, should be sought from God's agents, not his rebels and opponents. The formula "Torah from his mouth" echoes Meir following Aher "to learn Torah from his mouth" (in III) and amplifies the indictment. The first response answers this objection by distinguishing God's wisdom (=Torah) from the "wisdom" of the sages (=their heresies). In other words, a disciple can "pay attention" to the Torah he learns without adopting the heterodox ideas or ways of his master. The second and third responses suggest that one can learn Torah ("incline your ear") and yet shun the evil ways of the master ("forget your father's house"). Torah and deeds are independent, so acquisition of Torah from a sinner need not cause involvement in sin. II' states explicitly that Torah cannot be corrupted by the sin of its bearer. Although Aher sinned, his Torah remained pure, so Meir risked no danger in learning from him.

These sections defend Meir and encourage disciples to acquire Torah wherever they can. But we should not miss the opposing point of view expressed by the initial question of III', by the editorial gloss following III'B instructing that children not learn from teachers who sin, and by God's initial rejection of Meir in the story. The attributions to Babylonian amora'im demonstrate that learning Torah from a sinful sage remained an ongoing source of tension and anxiety in the culture of the BT.

In sum, the BT narrative is an extended meditation on the power of Torah and its relationship to sin. The composition constructs a sinning sage, a figure who combines mastery of Torah with sins for which he cannot repent. As in the PT, the story questions whether Torah has intrinsic merit or whether its merit can be neutralized. As in the PT, there is a conflict between God and humans and a difference in their relationships to the sinning sage.

125 The tradition of Rabbi bar bar Hannah was borrowed from bMQ 17a. There Rabbi bar bar Hannah is a character in a story and cites the tradition of R. Yohanan in response to a query.

126 The problem of the coexistence of Torah and sin appears several times in the BT. See e.g. the extended discussion in bSota 21a. Rav Yosef states that merit for the study of Torah "saves" from suffering and "protects" from the evil inclination inducing one to sin. Rava objects that if this is the case, then it should not have been possible for Doeg and Ahitofel to sin (since they were great sages). This objection recalls the supplementary material of our sugya. See too bMak 10a, bBiq 39b and bBer 29a.
Eventually the intrinsic merit of Torah prevails over sin and supersedes even God’s preclusion of repentance. The sage is saved, thanks in part to his disciples, and his daughter is likewise saved by virtue of his Torah.

The narrative proceeds to consider two related questions which are not raised directly in the PT. First, can Torah itself be tainted by sin? Second, may disciples learn Torah from the sinning sage or will they be corrupted by, or an accomplice to, sin? The answer to these questions, it seems to me, follows from the primary question. Because the merit of Torah is intrinsic and cannot be destroyed by sin, then its essence too is incorruptible. Therefore disciples may learn Torah from a sinning sage provided that they separate the pure Torah from the sins and blasphemies of its bearer.

These resolutions should not obscure the fundamental tensions that pervade the story. The authors recognize the reality of sin and the danger of the sinner, even if he possesses Torah. Indeed, if he possesses Torah then he is more of a danger in that disciples seeking to learn from him risk going astray. These tensions are expressed in God’s rejection of Meir’s Torah, the struggle to rehabilitate Meir and the discursive amoral traditions. The PT contains neither criticism of Meir nor the slightest question about the propriety of his learning from or associating with Elisha. The BT eventually defends his discipleship and Torah, but recognizes the problematic nature of such endeavors.

V. The BT and PT Compared

PT

[A] Aber gazed and cut the shoots (=tHag 2:3)

(1) Killed the young students of Torah
(2) Send children away from Torah.

About him Scripture says... (Qob 5:5)

(see IV-D?)

BT

[I] Aber (gazed and) cut the shoots. About him Scripture says... (Qob 5:5)

(see IV-D?)

(3) Collaborate in persecution

He saw Metatron...
Heavenly voice,
Jer 3:22 (=B3)

[B] Elisha passes by on horse, Meir goes out to him
I Job 42:12, “Akiba your master…”

Abuya story and fire from heaven

(1) Job 28:17; “a sage who forgets his Torah can return”

Sabbath limit and warning

“will you not repent” heavenly voice from temple, Jer 3:22

(C) Why did this happen to him?
(1) Theodicy 1: long life
(2) Theodicy 2: suffering of R. Yehuda
(3) Mother and idolatry

(= bQid 39b/Hul 142a)
(= bQid 39b/Hul 142a)

(see Appendix 2?)

[IV] He brought him to the house of study... (=D1?)
Years later Elisha became sick
(1) Meir visits, "will you repent?"

(2) Aher dies, grave burning
Meir, cloak; Ruth 3:13
Fire extinguished
(3) Meir will approach Elisha first; "Will they listen to you?"
They will save Elisha Aher for the merit of Torah, mShab 16:1

Daughters approach Rabbi
(1) Rabbi decreed no support, Ps 109:12
(2) Rabbi wept
(3) Rabbi said, "If for this one who learned not for the sake of heaven ... how much the more so?"

A number of points emerge from the synoptic presentations:

(1) The most extensive parallels occur in Sections B, D and E of the PT, corresponding to III, V and IV of the BT. On the basis of internal criteria we determined these to comprise the primary PT tradition to which A and C were added. The synoptic view confirms that analysis. Moreover, the BT contains parallels to C1 and C2 in bQid 39b=bHul 142a. This again suggests that these portions were not part of the primary tradition. The final sections of the BT are unparalleled in the PT and represent a unique BT development.

(2) Both A in the PT and I–II in the BT are interpretations of rHag 2:3. In the PT this section has no connection to the rest of the narrative. In the BT this section is integrated with the narrative by plot, theme and style. In terms of plot, Elisha’s rejection by the heavenly voice creates the figure of the sinning sage. The theme of the heavenly voice appears again in IIIA and IIIB. As to style, the mention of “evil ways” at the opening of II and III links the sections. In addition, as we will see below, in the BT these sections relate to the larger halakhic context of rHag 2:1, with which the PT again has no connection. If the BT knew A, it had good reason to eschew it in favor of I–II.

(3) The most significant differences between the stories are the constructions of the sinning sage in general and the roles of the heavenly voice in particular. The PT constructs the sinning sage through the sins of the parents (B2, C3) and the problem of theodicy (C1–C2) – sections without BT parallels. The BT constructs the sinning sage through the Metatron affair (I) – a section almost without PT parallel. “Almost” because the heavenly voice that precludes repentance does appear in the PT (B3). However, the voice functions very differently in the two stories. In the BT the heavenly voice is a consequence of the Metatron affair. It comes at the outset of the narrative and explains why Elisha subsequently decided on evil ways. His sins in II (and perhaps IV) were a response to his condition of not being able to repent – an understandable
reaction and thus a plausible construction of a sinning sage. Accordingly, the BT does not have the voice say "who knew my power and rebelled against me"—since Elisha did not really rebel. And the BT moves the voice to the heavenly temple which Elisha experiences in his vision.\(^{127}\) In the PT the voice rejects Elisha from the earthly temple and after his rebellious sins, which were motivated by those other factors (parents, theology). Unlike the PT, the BT need not focus attention as to why a great sage abandoned his Torah and rejected God. Elisha made a mistake and so God rejected him.\(^{128}\)

(4) As in all studies of parallel sources, it is impossible to prove absolutely whether one borrowed from the other or vice versa, or whether both drew from a common source. The respective dates of editing of the PT (c. 400 C.E.) and BT (c. 500–700 C.E.) suggest that the BT versions of stories postdate those of the PT, if borrowing occurred, it went in one direction. So too do studies by Shamma Friedman and others of parallel versions of stories.\(^{129}\)

\(^{127}\) As noted by the Tosafot, b.Hag 15a, s.v. shaven and Halperin, Menorah, 169.

\(^{128}\) This issue can be seen in terms of some interpretations of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. As is well known, some interpret Aristotle to have stated that the best tragedy requires a heroic protagonist who has a fatal flaw (hamartia). If the hero has no flaw, then we are outraged at his fate. If he has too many flaws, then he deserves his fate. The drama is tragic only when the flaw brings about his demise in such a way that we still feel pity. The sinning sage who cannot repent is heroic (a sage), but has a fatal flaw (sin). If the sin is too rebellious and offensive, we feel that he should be punished despite Torah, that he deserves condemnation. If his sin is trivial, we are offended at his punishment. The PT negotiates this narrow strait by presenting serious sin but attributing it to various causes beyond his control (father and mother) or to loss of faith at theology, a perennially difficult issue. But this directs attention away from the main subject of the narrative. In the BT the Metatron encounter neatly solves this problem. The hero Elisha was justifiably rejected by the heavenly voice (measure-for-measure), and then understandably went out to sin. So we are neither outraged at his fate nor do we feel he deserves it (although we understand why it happened).


\(^{130}\) See Friedman, "La-'Aggada ha-Historia," 129 n. 38, 144–145, with further references. Another example is the story of Shelomoh Bar Yohai in the cave, b.Shab 34a–b/PT Shev 9:1, 38d. The BT has two sojourns in the cave, two appearances of a heavenly voice and two dereshot based on Gen 33:18 vs. one of each in the PT.
Moreover, the presence of Yohanan disrupts the temporal order of the narrative since Yohanan lived after Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, who appears in the next section. The BT here has inserted the Yohanan episode without altering the basic sequence of its source, which (like the PT) had the scene with Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi follow Meir’s redemption of Elisha.

There are also indications that the BT editors knew portions of the PT not explicitly paralleled. There is a reflex of A1, the killing of the children studying Torah, in IV-D, the killing or threatened killing of the child reciting Torah. The fire descending from heaven in Abuya’s house (B2) seems to have been transferred to IV' and Rabbi’s house. Meir’s vague promise, “they will save Elisha Aber for the merit of his Torah” (D3), is fleshed out in IV' and “they” identified as Yohanan. Each of these three cases is better explained in terms of the BT adding and rearranging data from the PT than the reverse. The killing of the children is part of the PT’s exegesis of the Tosefta and cannot be omitted. In the BT it presents interpretive difficulties by conflicting with the benign description of Elisha. The BT scene would read just as well without it. The fire from heaven is integral to the Abuya story, for it explains his sudden respect for Torah and twisted motive. It could not have been borrowed from the BT to embellish the scene. In the BT the fire that threatens to burn Rabbi helps explain his powerful reaction to Elisha’s daughter. It is not absolutely necessary (the PT scene lacks it after all), but is certainly helpful. If the PT borrowed from the BT, it would have no reason to remove the fire from this scene. But having eliminated the Abuya scene by explaining the origin of Elisha’s sin differently, the BT found a place for the fire. Note that the BT manuscript traditions of these two passages exhibit major discrepancies, which often indicates later additions. As for Yohanan, it is easier to explain that the BT identified the vague “they” of the PT as Yohanan than the PT eliminated Yohanan’s name.

Finally, the development represented by Sections III', II' and I', including the story of Meir’s posthumous fate, is clearly a later addition and embellishment. The attributions to relatively late Babylonian Amoraim (e.g. Rava, Rabbah bar Rav Sheila) and the fact that material was transferred from other BT passages point to a late provenance. All these changes suggest that the BT editors freely adapted, transferred and reconfigured motifs of their sources to heighten the drama and enhance the plot. If I have belabored an obvious point it is because the major scholarly treatment of this narrative argues that the BT is the original, and this claim deserves a response (see Appendix 1).

(5) Despite the stunning parallels such as the heavenly voice citing Jer 3:22, the discussion of Job 28:17, the exclamation “Akiba, your master...,” the episode of the Sabbath limit, the burning grave and the daughter(s) petitioning Rabbi – which can only be explained if one version knew the other directly or both drew on a common source – each document has shaped the material for its own purposes. This is most clearly seen in the discussions of Meir and Elisha in B1-2 and IIIA. In both Elisha solicits Meir’s interpretation of a verse, then rejects Meir’s explanation with the lament “Akiba, your master...” and provides his own exegesis. However, in the PT the verses are Job 42:12 and Qoh 7:8, and the exegesis concerns one’s “beginning” and whether one’s good deeds and origins impact one’s end. This is a major interest of the PT, especially whether Elisha’s beginning doomed him because of the sins of his father or mother. In the BT the verse is Qoh 7:14 and Elisha’s exegesis rejects dualism, his apparent error in 1. Thus the editors have tailored the discussion to the specific interests of the stories. Similarly, in the PT Rabbi Yehuda

133 See n. 125. Rava and Rabbah bar Rav Sheila are fourth generation Babylonian Amoraim. Frenkel has noted that the figure of Elijah seems to have been added to some stories in later stages of redaction and even in the post-talmudic period. See “The Story of R. Sheila,” 36 n. 7.

134 For a similar example of BT additions to Palestinian sources compare the versions of the famous story of the “Oven of Akhnai,” yMQ 2:1, 81c-d vs. bBM 59a-b. The BT adds a scene in which R. Natan asks Elijah about God’s reaction (cf. Rabbah bar Rav Sheila in the final scene of the BT here) as well as a lemma attributed to R. Yehuda in the name of Samuel.
ha-Nasi exclaims, “If this one, who labored in Torah not for the sake of heaven...” which recapitulates Abuya’s intention “not for the sake of heaven.” The BT lacks the Abuya portion and so has Rabbi say, “If this [happens] for those who dishonor her [Torah]...” These observations support the insistence of Jacob Neusner and Jonah Fraenkel that “parallel” versions should not be harmonized but must be analyzed on their own terms.135

(6) An interesting point of comparison is the temporal structure of the two narratives. The temporal structure of the PT is among the most artful and complex of all rabbinic stories. The primary narrative time of B includes flashbacks to Elisha’s origins in B2 and to the heavenly voice in B3. C1 and C2 are additional flashbacks to some time between these two flashbacks, for Elisha’s loss of faith preceded his rebellion. C3 shifts again to the prenatal time of B2. D1 and D2 continue the primary narrative time of B, but D3 offers a flashforward (or “prolepsis”) by focusing the discussion on the future. E continues the narrative time of B and D but catapults us to the next generation. If we include Section A then additional questions arise, for A lacks chronological indicators. The events may precede B, as suggested by a sequential reading, but may follow B as well. This temporal structure arouses the reader’s curiosity in much the same manner as a mystery or detective novel, which first presents the crime and then has the detective, along with the reader, investigate the background, the suspects and their situations, the network of relevant relationships and other clues in order to reconstruct what happened. Similarly, our storyteller presents the figure of the sinning sage (the master of Torah riding on the Sabbath) and slowly reveals the information that explains such a paradox: the father’s intention, the voice precluding repentance, the incidents that caused his loss of faith.136

The temporal structure of the BT differs considerably. First, the BT begins with the scene of the heavenly voice, so when Elisha apprises Meir of the voice in IIIB–C, the flashback returns to an event within the chronological time of the story. According to the terminology developed by Gérard Genette, this flashback in the BT is an “internal analepsis” in that it does not exceed the starting point of the story.137 The flashback to the voice in the PT (as well as the flashback to Abuya) is an “external analepsis” which narrates events that precede the beginning of the narrative time (Elisha passing by the academy). Furthermore, the flashback in the BT is a “repeating analepsis” in that it repeats events previously narrated. The analepsis in the PT is not repeating, for we have not been informed of the voice independently. The BT therefore loses the “detective novel” quality of the PT but opens an ironic gap in its place: the audience knows about the heavenly voice before and independently of Meir.

Second, the BT has the salvation of Aher begin after Meir’s death and fully materialize after Yohanan’s death. Yet these events are narrated within the primary narrative time, which simply leaps forward to the times of these events: there is no prolepsis but rather a considerable ellipsis. However, in IV’ the BT recounts an event in the age of Meir’s daughter and R. Yehuda ha-Nasi, who lived before Rabbi Yohanan.138 So the BT is chronologically out of order. In the PT Meir redeems Elisha while Meir lives and prophetically informs his students about what will occur when he goes to the world to come. The primary narrative time remains within the span of Meir’s life, and the next scene appears in its proper temporal sequence.139 To phrase this point in other words: in the PT the discourse or sujet (what happens in the order of presentation encountered by the reader) differs substantially from the story or


136 The inclusion of Section A magnifies the sin and therefore enhances this dynamic.


138 At least before the historical Rabbi Yohanan, a second generation Palestinian Amora. If the narrators intended a different Rabbi Yohanan, or a completely fictional Rabbi Yohanan, this problem disappears.

139 The final sections of the BT continue the primary narrative time by settling Meir’s ultimate fate several generations after his death in the time of Rablah bar Rav Sheila. So this scene is in its proper temporal sequence following the time of Elisha’s daughter.
fabula (the rearranged, sequential order of occurrence). In the BT the discourse/sujet and story/fabula almost coincide, the only exception being the presentation of R. Yohanan before Abi's daughter. The BT contains significantly more supernatural or mythic elements than the PT. In the PT we find: (a) the heavenly fire that surrounds the rabbi learning Torah, (b) the voice from the holy of holies, (c) the fire burning the grave and (d) Meir's assertion of what he and "they" (the angels?) will do in the world to come. All these elements appear in the BT in some form (the fire almost burns Rabbi in the encounter with the daughter; "they" are quoted directly in VA). However, the BT adds the spectacularly supernatural scene with Metatron. It also adds the final account of Elisha informing about God's repertoire of traditions and the rehabilitation of Meir. The oracular study-verses of the children only appear in the BT. And while the PT depicts Meir extinguishing the fire while perched on the grave in this world, the BT has Meir and Yohanan accomplish the task after their deaths, which implies that they took action in the world to come. In general, supernatural elements appear more frequently in BT than PT stories. Here the higher density may also devolve from the talmudic context, as we will now see.

VI. The Stories and their Contexts

One of the larger questions concerning the rabbinic story is the relationship of the story to its literary context. Were stories consciously placed by redactors or editors into their extant literary contexts for specific purposes? Were they changed or tailored to fit those contexts? Or were they placed in their current contexts for mnemonic or formal reasons, unadulterated and unaffected by the redactional process? This question is complicated by the consensus of (most) modern literary theory that interpretation is always influenced by context, especially the literary context. While I cannot treat this topic fully here, I would like to make some observations about the relationship of the two stories to their talmudic contexts.

In both Talmuds the story of Elisha appears in the section of Talmud that comments on mHag 2:1. This mishna warns against various types of esoteric activity, such as expounding the "works of creation" and the "works of the chariot," and inquiring as to "what is on high and what is below." In both Talmuds the passages preceding the story address these and other esoteric subjects with long discussions about the creation of the world, the structure of the cosmos, rabbis who expounded the "works of the chariot" and the meaning of obscure biblical verses. The baraita about the parades, tHag 2:3, which probably relates to esoteric activity of some sort, is naturally cited in the course of these discussions in both Talmuds.

The PT story of Elisha, as far as I can see, has no relation to this context. The story, as we noted above, occurs here because section A interprets tHag 2:3 — albeit in a way that has nothing to do with esoteric activity — and the subsequent story (B–E) follows by association.

The BT story, on the other hand, especially the description of Metatron inscribing merits and being lashed, fits with the context of esotericism. While the BT does not explore the exact nature of

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141 The eulogizer's gloss about the "guard of the gate" contributes to this point. The PT is more restrained by having Meir speak of what he will do in the world to come.

143 Above, p. 170. On the lack of integration of the PT stories with the body of the sugya see A. Karlin, Dibur Sifer (Tel Aviv, 1952), 7–8 and discussions of the PT's term dlma in the standard dictionaries.
Elisha’s praxis or experience, the vivid description of the heavenly realm is clearly meant to be esoteric. Besides the general esoteric tone, there is a direct connection between Elisha’s mistaken tradition and mHag 2:1. This tradition concerns what is “on high,” and the mishna forbids contemplating what is “on high.” The mishna in fact reads: “all who look to (mistabbel) four things, it is better as if he did not enter the world: what is on high and what is below, what is before and what is after.” Since Elisha both “looked to” (= contemplated) by possessing a tradition, and actually looked at what was on high (he saw Metatron), the description is a perfect exemplification of the mishna as well as an exegesis of the term “gaze” in tHag 2:3. Elisha violated the halakhic prohibition of the mishna, and his fate in the subsequent story, that he is neither punished nor enters the world to come but just dies, essentially amounts to “not entering the world.” He leaves the world with nothing to show for it and ceases his existence. The Mishnaic and literary contexts help explain why the authors interpreted the Toseftan tradition and Qoh 5:5 in terms of the vision of Metatron and eschewed section A of the PT (if they knew it). This method contrasts sharply with the PT where the interpretation of tHag 2:3 and the subsequent story have no substantive relationship to the literary or Mishnaic context. Whether our case is idiosyncratic or typical of both Talmuds is a question that deserves more study.\footnote{On the significance of mistabbel in the Mishna and its relationship to the Tosefta, see Goshen-Gottstein, “Four Entered Paradise Revisited,” 75–76. See the work of Ofra Meir, n. 142. Other stories that have a substantive connection to their Mishnaic contexts include: (1) “The Oven of Akhnai,” bBM 94a–b. The story is about the consequences of slaming R. Eleazar, and both the preceding talmudic passage and the proximate mishna deal with shame. (2) The conspiracy against Rabban Shimon ben Gamalel, bHor 13b–14a. The story concerns the tension between lineage and knowledge as the basis for rabbinic leadership and status, which is related to the subject of mHor 3:8. (3) Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and the escape from Jerusalem, bGit 55b–56a. See my forthcoming article in Hebrew Studies.}

Appreciation of this relationship between the BT story and its halakhic and literary contexts may add a second level to our analysis. Perhaps we should see the story as an attempt to work out the contradictions inherent in mHag 2:1. That mishna, as we noted, restricts certain exegetical and contemplative activity. But the restriction on exegesis—on study of Torah—conflicts with the general rabbinic drive to acquire as much Torah as possible. So too does a restriction on mastering traditions relating to esoteric subjects considering that such traditions themselves are part of the oral Torah. How can a sage not learn aspects of Torah when the core rabbinic value mandates that he do everything in his power to learn? Despite the danger, is not the potential acquisition of Torah worth the risk? And should Torah not be rewarded in any case? Elisha embodies this tension, for it is his tradition about the situation “on high” that leads to his downfall, but that knowledge of tradition is Torah and should bring him merit. Meir too takes a risk to learn Torah: he learns from a dangerous source, rather than learning dangerous subjects, as did Elisha. That his actions are defended and his Torah redeemed points to the BT’s resolution of the cultural tension. There are certainly risks, but Torah must be acquired despite the dangers. In a way then, the BT contests the mishna’s restriction of the study of aspects of Torah. Indeed, the redeeming and rehabilitation of Aher reflects the authors’ sympathy for rabbis who seek esoteric knowledge. In the final reckoning they are sages seeking Torah, the noblest of pursuits.

VII. Postscript:

On Ancient Jewish Mysticism

The stories of Elisha in both the BT and PT address a problem of rabbinic culture: the relationship between Torah and sin. Their...
reliability as accurate historical sources is questionable. This is particularly true of the first sections in both Talmuds, the portrayals of Elisha as either apostate and collaborator (PT) or visionary (BT) since these passages are simply interpretations of the cryptic Tosefta tradition. Ironically, scholars in the past have relied on just these passages to reconstruct the historical Elisha. A related question is whether the first section of the BT tells us anything about Jewish mysticism in talmudic times. Can we conclude that this section proves that Babylonian amoraim were acquainted with visionary ascent and its dangers, sophisticated angelology, dualistic tendencies and Metatron speculation of the type that we encounter in later Hekhalot texts, even if they polemicize against these ideas? Several scholars have made claims along these lines. In my opinion, such a conclusion is unwarranted. First, the interest of the BT is Torah and sin, not mysticism of any type. The passage simply states in a matter-of-fact fashion that Elisha "saw" Metatron. While this has an esoteric sense, it does not mention ascent, meditation or mystical praxis. Second, almost every detail of the passage functions as an interpretation of an element of the Tosefta or as a means plausibly to construct a sinning sage who cannot repent. These factors, combined with a general aim to include an esoteric flavor so as to fit the context, provide sufficient explanation for the content of the passage, and therefore no other explanation (e.g. acquaintance with mystical traditions) is necessary.

heavens, which may relate to what is "on high." Paradoxically, the prohibition of the misha did not impede the amoraim from seeking and bequeathing traditions to their disciples. This is the very tension the story addresses. See e.g. Halperin, Merkabah, 176: "On the other hand, we might argue that these two passages [M Hag 14b–15b and BMeg 24b – J.R.] share a common element – their perceiving allusions to mystical experience in texts that seem not to have intended any such thing – and that it is reasonable to derive both 'sages/ces' from a single conception of mysticism. This conception would be akin to that which we find in the Hekhalot texts: a danger-laden ascent through the heavenly realms, whose climax is the 'vision of the merkabah.' Elisha, Eliesh, assumes the BT story is essentially a Hekhalot text. Gershon Scholem, "Metatron," in Kabbalah (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 377 connects the passage to "polemics conducted against heretics." Segal, "Two Powers in Heaven," 62, claims it "explains how certain people, who had special Metatron traditions, risk the heretical designation of 'two powers in heaven.'" After functions as the heretic, for excellence, as Simon Magus does in Christian anti-heresiological tracts."

It is forced to claim that the fact that the authors interpreted the Tosefta in this way and not otherwise nevertheless shows their acquaintance with Hekhalot thought. When one has a sufficient explanation, anything else becomes over-interpretation. If there are stunning parallels to images in Hekhalot texts then we should conclude that the Hekhalot authors drew on the BT and not the reverse. Could one not argue that at least the name "Metatron" is significant, for the passage could have sufficed with an anonymous angel ("he saw an angel sitting and writing...") to satisfy the Tosefta? Perhaps – although as suggested above, the specific name both interprets the definite article and adds esoteric coloring that helps integrate the story with the Mishnaic context. Certainly we can conclude that the Babylonian rabbis knew of an angel named Metatron. But any further conclusions about specific functions of this angel are not justified. The BT passage must be understood on its own terms and for what it is – a story about Torah and sin – and not a polemic against mystical activity.

Appendix 1: The Sin of Elisha, by Yehuda Liebes

In The Sin of Elisha, Yehuda Liebes comprehensively analyzes the baraita of the "Four who entered pardes" and its related traditions. Liebes devotes the bulk of the work, as the title implies, to the story of Elisha and offers a detailed exposition and close reading of the BT story. Because Liebes's reading differs from mine I wish to explain why his interpretation is not persuasive. The reader may then judge between our readings. Let me emphasize at the outset that Liebes's study is an excellent work of scholarship and provides insightful interpretations of numerous talmudic, midrashic and mystical sources. He offers rich readings of various individual passages of the BT narrative from which I have benefitted. His criticism of misunderstandings of the pardes traditions by
other scholars is compelling. It is his overall interpretation—and method—that is problematic. By no means should the book be dismissed as irrelevant either to the Elisha traditions in particular or to rabbinic views of esoteric study in general.

First, a comment on methodology. The primary methodological divide between Liebes and me is that Liebes interprets the BT passage in light of numerous other sources and texts. Liebes’s focus is actually the Tosafist tradition of the “Four who entered pardes,” rather than the BT’s narrative of Elisha. He analyzes this BT passage because he believes it is the earliest and most faithful interpretation of the pardes tradition, even if not historically accurate in all its details. The account of Elisha in the BT helps to understand the “true” sin of Elisha. Because Liebes is trying to get beyond the BT to a type of original (or early) tradition, he liberally draws on other sources and tends to understand them in light of one another. But this harmonizing approach results in forced readings and misinterpretations, as I will detail below. This method pervades his analysis of the Elisha narrative and emerges in more striking fashion in his interpretation of the other sages mentioned in the Tosafists, concerning whom the BT has little to say, which forces him to look elsewhere for material. Thus Liebes describes his study:

In the following analysis we will exploit extensively all the traditions of the sages that pertain to Elisha (without ignoring the problems of different tendencies and later explanations), and especially the Babylonian Talmud, and with the aid of them all we will paint the picture of Elisha (p. 27).

And exploit them he does, drawing on the PT parallel, the “Story of the Ten Martyrs,” numerous Hekhalot texts, later midrashim.

Asoit d’Rabbi Natan, and other passages of the BT. His project is therefore something quite different than analyzing the BT passage on its own terms, as I do. Liebes’s study is not altogether different from a type of source-critical analysis. He assumes the BT is the closest to the historical “kernel” and chooses it as the base, but harmonizes other traditions to create a composite picture. I insist on the integrity of the BT independent of other characterizations of Elisha in rabbinic and questionably-rabbinic (e.g. Hekhalot) texts. For those who are interested in a possible composite picture of Elisha that emerges from synthesizing and reconciling disparate texts, or for those who believe that all these sources accurately represent the historical Elisha, Liebes’s study is first-rate. For those who wish to understand the BT on its own terms and who do not believe that these stories must correspond to an historical reality, it is problematic.

Liebes finds three primary themes in the BT narrative: first, rivalry between angels and human mystics; second, the problem of theodicy; and third, the sin of hubris. (These three are related since the hubris of human mystics angers the angels, and hubris also leads to an inability to come to terms with the problem of theodicy.) All three themes, however, derive from outside sources rather than the BT itself. The motif of rivalry between angels and mystics appears primarily in Hekhalot texts, although numerous rabbinic sources portray competition between angels and individual humans (not necessarily mystics), such as Adam and Moses. But such traditions do not appear in this passage, and are not exactly parallel to the type of rivalry Liebes invokes. The theme of theodicy appears in the PT story of Elisha, in the Story of the Twelve Martyrs, in various Hekhalot texts, and in the Elisha traditions of bQid 39b. That the BT knew the tradition but omitted it from the Haggiga passage proves that theodicy is not the concern of the BT here. The theme of hubris also derives from Hekhalot texts and perhaps from the PT story. It is not in the BT.

One final methodological note. As I mentioned, Liebes believes that the BT version is the closest to the primary rabbinic interpretation of Elisha and the pardes. He claims that the version of the PT is a revision of the BT, rather than the reverse. This is most unlikely. First, the BT is chronologically much later. If borrowing
and revision took place, it is the BT that borrowed from the PT. Second, as noted above, Shamma Friedman and others have demonstrated that the BT editors freely adapt extensive PT aggadic sagot for their own purposes, revising, adding and rearranging.\footnote{See above, V.(4).} Again presumption argues that such a process occurred here too. I know of no scholar who argues for the priority of the BT in any extensive passage of this type. Third, I have shown above that in our passage too the BT has adapted and added to PT traditions.\footnote{See Section V.(4).} Finally, Liebes’s two main reasons for privileging the BT version are that it is the superior composition based on literary considerations and that it attends to the pardes tradition in its entirety. But literary sophistication is no proof of priority or reliability. Punkt verklebt! The literary elegance and comprehensiveness of the BT suggests that it is late and has improved on earlier traditions.\footnote{If indeed the BT is superior literarily. See above V.(6).} This idiosyncratic prioritizing of the sources calls into question much of Liebes’s general analysis for those interested in the history of the Elisha traditions or a composite picture of the sage. Paradoxically, however, it turns out to be an advantage insofar as one’s interest is the BT passage itself, for Liebes is less inclined to read the BT in light of the PT! Nevertheless, in several instances this prioritizing leads to forced interpretations and confusing assertions about the history of the traditions.

Now for a close reading of Liebes’s reading, based on the paragraphs of my translation.

**Section 1:** (1) Liebes claims that Elisha ascends to heaven and immediately becomes irate at the angels for not standing up in front of him. Since Elisha is the powerful mystic Metatron should stand and show him respect. Elisha is not astonished that Metatron is sitting per se, but sitting before him when the angel should stand. This attitude displays overweening hubris and expresses Elisha’s belief that he is superior to the angels (pp. 23—25, 29—33). Liebes therefore explains that Elisha’s statement “Heaven forbid . . .” is not theological speculation, but words “of feuding and rebuke” (p. 29).

How compelling is this? Elisha’s exclamation is a simple observation with an air of astonishment and perhaps horror, not “feuding and rebuke.” Liebes concedes that on the surface Elisha’s tone is not rebuke, but argues that “it seems we only have here an elegant way of speaking since it is impolite for one to insist explicitly on one’s honor and it is better to formulate it in general terms.” So Liebes must ignore the simple meaning, which he acknowledges, and impute the opposite intention to Elisha. This is a questionable and subjective method. And if Elisha is so polite then Liebes cannot argue that Elisha displays hubris.

In any case, Elisha’s reference to “two powers” becomes unintelligible with Liebes’s reading, since the issue is Metatron standing before Elisha, not two powers in heaven. To make the reference intelligible Liebes paraphrases the statement of Elisha thus:

How dare you sit before me?! What is your name?! Is there no judge and no justice? How can you violate the order that God ordained during the six days of creation that angels should bow down to human beings? Are you rebelling against God (just like the angels who refused to bow before Adam, according to the many parallels of this motif found in ancient literature)? Or do you compare yourself to him? (pp. 32—33)

This is a great deal of mileage to get out of Elisha’s statement. For Liebes the charge of “two powers” culminates an extended and bizarre chain of thought that has absolutely no basis in our text. Of course if the BT redactors meant this to be the charge, they would have said it in similar words to Liebes and attributed to Elisha the main point (“how dare you sit before me”) instead of the ancillary ramifications. (And note the explicit use of extraneous sources.)

(2) Liebes explains that Elisha bears a grudge against Metatron from the start, and even intended to have the angel punished, because of Elisha’s distress at the problem of theodicy (pp. 36—38). The relevance of theodicy Liebes derives from the PT, the Tale of the Ten Martyrs and bQid 39b (again the problem of extraneous passages). Liebes emphasizes that Elisha specifically found the death of the ten martyrs horribly unjust (p. 38; even more extraneous). But why should Elisha be angry at Metatron? Because, Liebes
claims, Metatron is actually responsible for the sufferings and martyrdom. How so? Liebes reads the description of Elisha’s vision, “that Metatron was given permission to sit and write the merits of Israel” as a euphemism: Metatron was writing the sins of Israel (as found in the Story of the Ten Martyrs; see p. 37 and n. 18). Liebes adduces only one precedent where “merits” (zakhnut) is a euphemism for sins (bQid 39b, p. 35). But this precedent is doubtful.\(^{154}\) In our ingya nothing requires “merits” to be read as “sins.” In the next line Metatron is given permission to erase the “merits” of Elisha, and here “merits” means merits. It is extremely dangerous to reverse completely the meaning of a text in the absence of compelling evidence.\(^{155}\)

Liebes claims that Elisha’s outrage at the death of the martyrs combined with his hubris such that he became angry at the functionary, not the true power (God), who ordained their deaths. This motivated him to seek revenge upon Metatron. I submit that to sustain this reading one must read in the entire theme of theodicy, invent the attitude of hubris and reverse the way the BT describes Metatron.

(3) Liebes explains that Metatron was indeed punished because he sinned at not rising before Elisha, that is, that Elisha succeeded at exacting revenge. In this respect he rejects the standard explanation that Metatron is whipped to prove to Elisha (or to others) that there are not two powers in heaven. To this Liebes objects: (a) if this is the case they should whip Metatron in front of Elisha, and not “take him out” – apparently outside – where Elisha could not see. (b) The punishing angel tells Metatron his sin (“why did you not rise before him?”) so one cannot argue that Metatron did nothing wrong and that it was all a show for Elisha. (c) How could they whip Metatron without a trial (din)? (d) The sixty pulses of fire is the typical punishment of angels who sin, as found elsewhere (bYom 77a, bBM 85). None of these objections is compelling. As for (a), that they “took out” Metatron does not mean that they took him outside where Elisha could not see. It simply means they removed Metatron from his place. The phrase “to take out for trial” or “for punishment” is standard rabbinic idiom and does not mean spatial removal. As for (b), the charge “why did you not rise...” only occurs in one manuscript, and is probably a later addition.\(^{156}\) The demand that Metatron receive a fair trial (c) is expecting too much of a story. In any case, even in Liebes’s reading Metatron gets no fair trial. Point (d) at most proves Metatron sinned, not what the sin is. Even if we read in the disputed line the most we can conclude is that Metatron sinned by not standing and thereby provoked Elisha’s heretical thoughts. The sin was not that of refusing to stand and respect the mystic, as Liebes claims. This is not a major point, but it takes away some of the motivation for Metatron’s revenge and the extended rivalry that Liebes postulates.

(4) Liebes has great difficulty explaining why Metatron was given permission to “erase the merits of Abner.” Did Elisha not have a valid claim? After all, Metatron was punished. So Liebes explains that God takes the side of the oppressed and lowly against the strong and proud, and, more importantly, that this was not a real erasure of his merits! Rather, Metatron was given permission to make it seem as if he erased Elisha’s merits: “Elisha’s merits were not really annulled...” This was nothing but a deception (pp. 40–41). Liebes is led to this interpretation because he observes that Elisha’s merits were not actually erased, since subsequently his merit for learning Torah does him some good, and helps his daughters to boot. Here Liebes touches upon the real

\(^{154}\) The text reads “Whoever performs one commandment in addition to his merits is rewarded.” The Talmud explains that the statement refers to a person whose merits are evenly balanced with his sins, and explains the mishna to which it is appended in a similar fashion (mQid 1:10). See too Marc Hirshman, “On the Nature of Mitzva and its Reward in the Mishnah and Tosafot,” Truth World Congress of Jewish Studies, vol. 3/1 (1989), 54–60 (Hebrew).

\(^{155}\) I cannot find even one commentator who takes “merits” here as a euphemism.

\(^{156}\) Liebes argues for its authenticity on pp. 157–160. I tend to agree with Liebes that even if the line is not original, a similar explanation is required. But without this line one may explain that Metatron is whipped to teach the theological lesson, not because he did anything wrong.
tensions, complexity and interest of the story, but fails fully to appreciate their significance. In any case, the passage clearly reads that Metatron was given permission to erase the merits of Aber. If the point was that Metatron acted “as if” he erased the merits, the text would say so. Moreover, the heavenly voice makes Liebes’s interpretation difficult, since the voice unambiguously states that Elisha cannot repent. And this is God, not Metatron, issuing the voice. So Liebes explains that the heavenly voice reflects what Elisha understood, not what was actually said (p. 44). The voice just said “Turn back, rebellious children” – and Elisha himself added “except Aber.” This again is a desperate attempt to interpret away a passage that cuts against Liebes’s interpretation. The message of the voice is clear. It is not the angels conspiring, deceiving and tempting Elisha, but punishment for causing Metatron to be struck.

Why would Elisha understand the voice to refer to him when it does not (according to Liebes)? Liebes again marshals Elisha’s supposed hubris. Elisha heard the verse “Turn back, rebellious children” and interpreted it to refer only to those who are ready to turn back. He understood the word shovveim (rebellious) as derived from tehunot (repentance/return) and understood the verse as “Turn back, children who are ready to return.” Because of Elisha’s “attitude of hubris and stubbornness,” he knew that he was not “ready to return,” and believed that the call was meant to exclude him. Then Elisha forgot he had made the derarabah himself and understood his personal exclusion as the words of the voice (pp. 44–45). This, for Liebes, also explains the term aber.

Everyone can repent, but Elisha is “different” (aber). All this is pure speculation. Not one shred of evidence implies that Elisha made such a derarabah, much less that he subsequently forgot it. And why would a heavenly voice issue a general call to repentance then? The text is clear that Metatron was given permission (by God) to erase Elisha’s merits, and the heavenly voice confirms that Elisha has no possibility of repenting. The BT, moreover, explains the sobriquet “Aber” along different lines in the encounter with the prostitute. Liebes again finds rivalry between angels and mystics (the deception of pretending to erase Elisha’s merits, the deceptive voice) and hubris (Elisha’s purported derarabah and reaction) where there is no textual warrant.

This first section is admittedly difficult to understand. (Many of the difficulties result from the fact that the BT’s is mapping a narrative onto a difficult verse, not creating it without constraint.) But a reader must above all remain faithful to the text and not make it say what it does not. Liebes systematically takes each line out of context because of his desire to read in the three themes.

Section II: Liebes explains that when Elisha approaches the prostitute his two inclinations struggle within him. On the one hand his Torah, piety and doubt about the heavenly voice encourage him to repent. On the other, his hubris, pride and stubbornness encourage him to act (pp. 49–50). When the prostitute innocently calls him Aber, the designation functions as a divine sign that reinforces his hubris and resistance to repent. “But the reader, who has followed us in the course of the story to this point, knows more than the errors of Elisha allow him to know. He knows that the words of the prostitute, like the subsequent words of the children, were put in her mouth by the angel Metatron” (p. 50). Again Liebes imposes his reading of angelic rivalry and of deceptive temptation of Elisha on the text. There is not the slightest hint that Elisha’s two inclinations are at war. He reasons that he has no share in the next world so why not enjoy himself in this one? Liebes actually realizes this and must explain that Elisha’s appearance to the outside world “covers an inner confusion.” How he ascertains Elisha’s inner state I do not know. The prostitute calling Elisha Aber serves as an etiology of this nickname, which appeared in the heavenly voice’s statement and in the Tosefta. Nothing suggests her mention of “Aber”.
tilts the balance of an inner conflict. And nothing suggests Metatron put this title in her mouth.

Section III. Liebes's reading of the conversations between Elisha and Meir are not convincing since he attributes motives to the two sages that have no support in the text. He suggests that in the first conversation Elisha seeks confirmation that his merits have been erased by inducing Meir, the student of the successful mystic Akiba, to interpret a verse in this way. Meir does not want to provide the confirmation, and so gives a superficial interpretation of the verse (pp. 50–51). This again rests on the untenable assumption that the heavenly voice was a figment of Elisha's imagination and he still wonders whether repentance is possible. But Elisha needs no confirmation, for the voice was unambiguous. He simply explains to Meir why he cannot repent, as Meir wishes. Nor does the text in any way imply that Meir attempts to evade the question or deceive Elisha.

Indeed, concerning the second conversation Liebes is hard pressed to explain why Meir seems to reverse and offer an interpretation suggesting that the reward for Torah can be annulled, i.e., that Elisha's merits can be erased (pp. 52–57). He explains that in this case Meir gave Elisha the answer he wanted to hear because Meir did not want to be rebuked again, as he was in the first conversation. 159 Then Liebes claims that Meir's true motive was to induce Elisha to contradict himself by offering an interpretation that repentance is always possible, and so kindle the desire for repentance in his heart. While Meir does encourage Elisha to repent, there is no evidence that this was Meir's motive all along, nor that the answer was calculated to lure Elisha into an unwitting lowering of his hubris. Liebes sees Elisha's subsequent explanation to Meir that he cannot repent on account of the heavenly voice as a strong expression of hubris: Elisha asserts every other sage can repent (his interpretation of the verse)—but not himself. Elisha's two inclinations are still at war, and while there are sparks within him that consider repentance, the attitude of hubris prevails. Once again, Meir's motivation and Elisha's internal struggle find no support in the text. And I see no display of hubris. 160 Elisha simply reports to Meir why he cannot repent.

Liebes understands the account of Elisha riding the horse on the Sabbath as the "ultimate heresy and rebellion (ḥnippah)" (p. 61) and his interchange with Meir as "contempt (zīznāl) for the commandments, contempt for Torah itself and contempt for sages" (pp. 61–63) Liebes claims that riding a horse is an unusual activity for a sage, and is a "gesture of rebellion, pride and provocation." He offers no evidence that riding a horse is unusual or valenced negatively. Elisha rides simply because it is more comfortable and less tiring to ride than walk, and he is not concerned about violating the Sabbath, since his merits have been erased. Rather than "contempt" this scene shows Elisha's respect for Torah, the commandments and the sages. Elisha teaches Meir Torah, keeps in mind the commandment of the Sabbath-limits and expresses his concern for Meir by warning him not to violate it. How can Elisha be accused of contempt for Torah and the commandments when he, not Meir, meticulously concerns himself with the exact distance? This misreading is particularly unfortunate, for this scene poignantly expresses the true tragedy of Elisha, a sage who cannot repent.

Section IV. Liebes suggests that Elisha grabbed Meir and took him to the schools (pp. 72–73). I think it is more plausible that Meir takes Elisha to the schools, for Meir did not hear the heavenly voice and seeks an omen that Elisha should repent. Elisha, on the other hand, definitely heard the heavenly voice (as he repeatedly tells Meir) and needs no further sign. All traditional commentators that I have found understand it this way. 161 Liebes has Elisha take

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159 Liebes also claims Meir had no choice but to answer truthfully based on traditions in Avot d'Rabbi Natan, a conflict between Elisha and Akiba on certain matters, and other putative considerations—the influence of outside traditions again.

160 Liebes explains that the BT characterizes Akiba, the successful mystic, as modest and humble, as opposed to Elisha, hubristic and proud (pp. 85–87). But this too is forced. Liebes asserts that the term elder (zagon), which God calls Akiba, means "humble, meek and modest," and this is why Akiba succeeds. But an "elder" does not necessarily possess these qualities. The BT actually explains that Akiba was worthy because he could distinguish God from the angelic host, not that he was "humble." The antonym of hubris and humility is simply not in this passage. See too the forced attempt to attribute arrogance to Ben Zoma, pp. 115–118.

161 See e.g. Maharsha ad loc.
Meir because this continues the idea of an inner conflict in Elisha’s mind as to whether the voice was real and whether “the way of repentance is closed to him.” Deep down Elisha hoped for a sign that he could repent, although his hubris desired confirmation that he could not. But on this point I admit that the impersonal verb “he grabbed him…” can be read both ways.

Liebes considers this episode “another chapter in the story of the tempting of Elisha.” For it is none other than Metatron who put the verses in the mouths of the children. This continues Liebes’s reading of the rivalry and vengeance of the angels. But there is no evidence that angels do this sort of thing, here or anywhere else. The verses cited by children express God’s decree and prove, to Meir, the futility of Elisha repenting.

There is much more that could be said, but I think that this criticism offers enough to decide between our readings. Actually Liebes’s reading of several of the remaining sections converges with my own to some extent. In sum, Liebes’s study is erudite, rich and full of insightful observations, but it is not a compelling reading of the BT.

Appendix 2: The BT Story of Elisha: Supplementary Material

The text that immediately follows the BT story is as follows:

[A] Shmuel came upon Rav Yehuda standing and leaning against the door-bolt and weeping. He said to him, “Keen scholar – why are you weeping?” He said to him, “See what is written about the sages, ‘Where is one who could count? Where is one who could weigh? Where is one who could count [all these] towers?’ (Isa 33: 18). ‘Where is one who could count?’ – for they would count all the letters in the Torah. ‘Where is one who could weigh?’ – for they would weigh the light and heavy in the Torah. ‘Where is one who could count [all these] towers?’ – for they would teach three hundred laws about a tower that flies in the air. And R. Asi said, ‘Doeg and Ahithophel asked four hundred questions about a tower that flies in the air.’ Yet it is taught, ‘Three kings and four commoners have no share in the world to come […. Bilaam, Doeg, Ahithophel and Gehazi]’ (mSanh 10: 2). As for us – what will become of us?” He said to him, “Keen scholar – there was filth in their hearts.”


[C] They said about Aber: When he would stand up in the House of Study, many books of the heretics fell from his lap.

[D] Nimos the weaver asked R. Meir, “Does all wool that descends in the vat come up?” He said to him, “All that was clean by its mother comes up.”

To a certain extent this block is thematically related to the story. But it has not been integrated into the narrative and both its main concern and image of Aber differ substantially. The overall issue is how masters of Torah can go astray and sin. Section A refers to other sages who sinned and lost their share in the world to come. It explains that these particular figures had “filth in their hearts.”

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162 And I take this as support for my reading, since I see these themes as the subjects of the entire passage, not just the final sections.
163 So other mss. London reads “leaning his hands and standing.” Cf. bSuk 52a.
164 Göttingen 3, Munich 95 and Vatican 134 read “Is it a small thing that is written…”
165 qal vahomer, i.e. a minora ad maius.
166 Munich 95 reads R. Abbahu and Vatican 134 has Abaye. Göttingen, Munich 6 and Vatican 171 read R. Ami. See too bSanh 106b.
167 It is chronologically difficult that Rav Yehuda cites a tradition of R. Asi (or the other traditions in the manuscript variants). It appears that this passage is a later reworking of bSanh 106b where the tradition attributed to Asi (or Ami) is independent of the preceding. One can also read R. Asi’s statement as a gloss (also based on bSanh 106b) and understand Rav Yehuda’s original statement as applying to mSanh 10: 2. He says “sages” meaning those who went astray. In bSanh 106b this interpretation of Isa 33: 18 is attributed to R. Yizhaq.
168 London and Munich 95 adds, “He said to him.”
169 nimus hagadda. Vatican 171 reads “Avinomos.” This figure is usually identified with Onenamsa the Gadarite.
170 A cryptic tradition. The meaning seems to be: Does every scholar who studies emerge with pure beliefs? Those that were pure ab initio emerge pure.
hearts," apparently an inner character defect or evil intention. Neither the rabbis (Shmuel and Rav Yehuda) nor the characters discussed (Doeg and Ahitophel) are mentioned in the preceding story. The cryptic interchange in D— if we are to explain it in context—gives a similar type of answer. Sages remain pure provided they were pure ab initio. Otherwise they may not "come up" properly, i.e., they may become sinners. In contrast, the main story accounts for Elisha’s sinning ways in I–II: the mistaken assumption about Metatron caused him to lose his merit and he sinned because he had nothing to lose. Thus the supplementary material juxtaposes different traditions about sages who sinned and offers a different explanation for their sin.

B appears to be a gloss added by a later hand who realized that this explanation of the sin of Doeg and Ahitophel conflicts with the account of Aher’s sin. The main story did not suggest that Aher had "filth in his heart" nor that he was unclean ab initio—so why did he sin? The answer, that Aher was corrupted with “Greek song,” attributes his downfall to some sort of Hellenistic influence. C provides yet another explanation—that Aher studied heretical books. These sections draw on different traditions of Aher. Nothing in the main story implies that Aher was corrupted by Hellenistic culture or heretical reading. Indeed, these explanations conflict with the account of his sin in I–II. And the image of Aher as Hellenophile or heretic does not square well with his image as master of Torah and teacher of Meir in III–V. Of course we can harmonize the images by explaining that prior to his vision of Metatron Aher read too many heretical books and sang too many Greek songs, and this led him to make the fatal mistake. But this is clearly forced: in I he makes the error because his vision conflicts with a rabbinic tradition about the behavior of angels in heaven. He sins because he has nothing to lose, not because he desires to imitate Hellenistic ways or to apostasize.

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171 It is unclear if the answer attributes their flaw to their parents (clean by its mother) or if this simply refers to their initial state.
172 But what is the harm of Greek song? See the commentaries, who have difficulty with this question. Perhaps zemer refers to Greek poetry, drama or other literature.
173 That the BT redactors possessed disparate traditions about Aher is clear from bQid 39b = bHul 142a, the traditions relating to theodicy. See the synoptic charts in Section V. Evidently a variety of traditions about him circulated among the rabbis.