

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, New York University

Context and Genre: Elements of a Literary Approach to the Rabbinic Narrative

That the study of rabbinic literature entails a "literary approach" is almost a tautology. Even the most legally oriented rabbinic traditions have been transmitted to us as literary texts that require readers to interpret their literary forms. The same obviously holds true for aggadic midrashim and narratives, which are more routinely apprehended as "literature." To a certain extent therefore the interpretation of rabbinic texts will involve the same general problems and difficulties as the interpretation of all other literature. But because rabbinic literature exhibits some distinctive features, its interpretation will involve particular challenges and issues, and even those general problems will be governed by specific considerations. Here I would like to discuss context and genre as two components of a literary approach to the interpretation of sage-narratives, with a constant eye towards the issue of the redaction of the text. I will focus on the Bavli, though much of my discussion applies to the other rabbinic documents once the different processes of their redaction are factored in. Context and genre are considerations that apply to all literature; redaction is less universal a concern, and the specific process of redaction of the Bavli unique to it.

Context

All texts exist in multiple contexts: historical, social, political, literary, cultural, institutional, situational, biographical, and so forth.¹ Few scholars, I assume, would

argue that a text could be correctly interpreted outside of its general historical and cultural context. We would never interpret a Talmudic story in terms of the social or political climate of the Renaissance for obvious reasons. The degree to which other contexts are relevant or necessary for interpretation is more open to debate. At all events, in many cases of ancient literature, including that of the Bavli, most of these contexts cannot be recovered. Bavli stories (and other traditions) appear in texts redacted many years after their original expression, the contexts of which are, for the most part, unknown. The main context—or contexts—to which we have access are the literary contexts. I say “contexts” because the parameters of the literary context can be defined in various ways. Do we mean the immediate literary context, the texts directly preceding and following the story? A slightly more extended literary context, say the *sugya* in which the story is found? The series of *sugyot* in the section of Talmud commenting on the proximate Mishna paragraph? The entire chapter or Tractate of Talmud? The entire Talmud, including all relevant intertexts?

A concrete example will illustrate the degree to which the identification of the boundaries of the literary context impacts interpretation. Yonah Fraenkel, as is well known, is a minimalist when it comes to relating the immediate literary context to his interpretation. In the manner of the New Critics, Fraenkel isolates a story and analyzes it on the basis of its structure, content and poetics. A striking, if characteristic, illustration of his technique is his analysis of the following story of Elisha b. Abuya or Aher (bHag 15a):

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 and learning Torah from his mouth. When they reached the Sabbath limit, he said, “Meir, return (*hazor*) back since I measured by the footsteps of my horse that the Sabbath boundary is until

here.” He said to him, “Then you too repent (*hazor*).” He said to him, “I have already heard from behind the curtain, *Return, rebellious children (Jer 3:22)*—except Aher.”

Fraenkel opens his interpretation by commenting: “Riding a horse on the Sabbath constitutes the profanation of the Sabbath in a public domain, and is intended to provoke or ridicule, and therefore it is no wonder at all that there can be no atonement or repentance for this prohibition. This implies that we have here the closed ‘circle’ which in and of itself tells us that Aher certainly is not riding the horse on the Sabbath for the first time, and therefore he knows that he cannot repent.”² Even granting Fraenkel’s interpretive assumptions (i.e. ignoring the larger literary context), this analysis seems extremely problematic to me. There is no internal evidence that riding a horse on the Sabbath is intended “to provoke and ridicule.” Fraenkel argues, in a footnote, that although riding a horse technically does not amount to a serious violation of the Sabbath (it falls in the category of *shevut*), it is nonetheless perceived as a serious offense: in a story found at bYev 90a the court stoned someone who rode on the Sabbath “because the [exigencies of the] times required it.” Whether this intertext is relevant I will consider below; but even granting its relevance it still falls short of demonstrating the intentions of the rider as provocation or insult. The source does not explain what circumstances of the time required such strong action; the court may have stoned the rider for any number of reasons. Moreover, there is no compelling reason to assume that Meir and Elisha are in public. Though technically in a “public domain” where they approach the Sabbath limit, they may well be traveling in isolated areas or on the outskirts of town where no others are present. Fraenkel has read in the public nature of the act to make it seem more provocative. A more straightforward explanation is that Aher is simply not concerned

about violating the Sabbath; he rides because it is easier and more comfortable than walking, just as nonobservant Jews today drive on the Sabbath because it is faster and easier and less tiring.

Fraenkel's interpretation depends in part on his assumption of "closure," that the end of the story must relate to the beginning, sealing the story in a circle of its own. Why should riding on the Sabbath (the beginning) precipitate such a harsh punishment as precluding repentance (the end)? It must have been habitual, hardened behavior, which in turn indicates an attitude of provocation and ridicule (the beginning). Yet here too the beginning and end seem to me to be related in a more straightforward way. From his disclosure that he cannot repent due to the voice "from behind the curtain" he has no possibility of reward in the next world, hence no motivation to observe the Sabbath or other commandments, consequently no reason not to ride. He rides out of convenience, not contempt.

Fraenkel notes that the middle of the story, the fact that Aher counts the paces measuring the distance to the Sabbath limit, calls for explanation. After discerning a chiasmic structure, he suggests that Aher counts because he is eager to sin and wants to know precisely when he will attain his goal of exiting the limit: "Leaving the boundary is a complete abandonment, a distancing for which there is no return, and this is the intention of 'Aher' (the Other)." R. Meir, on the other hand, misunderstands Aher's reason for counting. He interprets Aher's warning to him to go no further as a sign of Aher's concern for the law, hence indicating his potential to repent, in turn prompting the exhortation to do so. Indeed, this was Meir's true purpose in following Aher. Although the story tells us that he was "walking after him and learning [*velomed*] Torah from his

mouth” (and in the printings and in other manuscripts: “in order to learn Torah” [*lilmod*]³), he was in truth hoping for an opportunity to move Aher to repentance. After all, “Does R. Meir not have a superior and more accessible source to learn Torah than from the mouth of one who violates the Sabbath in public?”⁴ The story, alas, is tragic and dramatic, for the true reality, as Aher knows, is that there can be no repentance.

Here too there is much that can be criticized on its own terms, including the attribution of purposes and motives to each character that are nowhere disclosed in the text, and especially the privileging, in the case of R. Meir, this putative motivation over the explicit reason, that he follows Aher to learn Torah. That Aher would be so eager to commit the sin of leaving the Sabbath boundary makes little sense if he has been a habitual violator of the Sabbath, as Fraenkel claims. What is so special about this sin now, even granting the symbolic value of going beyond the boundary? Moreover, if Aher is such a dedicated sinner, why bother warning Meir not to sin? But my real purpose is to show how much must be “read in” and simply conjectured when the larger literary context is ignored. Fraenkel has no choice but to try to fill the enormous gaps in the narrative through speculation and clever inferences. And if that larger context is taken into account, Fraenkel’s interpretation appears not merely implausible or speculative but flat out wrong.

This story actually appears as a scene in the middle of a lengthy biographical narrative of Elisha b. Abuya. The exposition relates that Elisha saw the angel Metatron sitting down and wondered whether there were “two powers in heaven.” Metatron is then punished with sixty lashes of fire, apparently to demonstrate to Elisha that he is in fact not a deity, and subsequently receives permission to burn out the merits of Elisha,

presumably revenge for his suffering. At this point Elisha hears the voice from behind the temple precluding his repentance. He understandably reasons, “Since that man (= I) has been banished from that world (= the next world), I will go and enjoy myself in this world.” Because he has lost his merits and can never repent, he cannot atone for sin and has no chance of entry to the world to come. So why worry about observing the commandments? He therefore propositions a prostitute, violating the Sabbath to prove that he is not the famous sage she believes him to be.

Given this context, it is abundantly clear that the reason Aher cannot repent has to do with the Metatron incident, not because he habitually rode his horse on the Sabbath. Indeed, the phrase “I have *already* heard from behind the curtain” refers directly to the Metatron scene. Riding on the Sabbath is not the *cause* of the voice, as Fraenkel would have it, but the consequence. Second, Aher rides not to “provoke and ridicule,” but rather, as he explicitly explains, because he might as well enjoy himself in this world. Riding, as noted above, is more comfortable and “enjoyable” than walking. Third, Aher does not count the horse’s paces out of his zeal to sin.⁵ Pleasure or comfort, not sin, is his goal. Sin is simply incidental and irrelevant to him.

After consorting with the prostitute the narrative continues with two scenes in which Aher asks R. Meir the meaning of biblical verses. In both, R. Meir offers rather straightforward explanations which Aher rejects, supplying Meir with Akiba's midrashic interpretations. These scenes establish Aher as the superior master of Torah, essentially as R. Meir’s teacher. He knows Akiba’s traditions, which Meir apparently does not, and teaches them to Meir. At this point the story that Fraenkel analyzes appears. This context belies Fraenkel’s claim that R. Meir’s real motivation in following after Elisha is

to invite him to repent and not to learn Torah. As the two preceding scenes make clear, Elisha has a great deal of Torah to teach R. Meir. So we should take the text at face value: R. Meir follows Aher in order to learn Torah, though he surely would like his master to repent too. At all events, Fraenkel's rhetorical question, "Does R. Meir not have a superior and more accessible source to learn Torah than from the mouth of one who violates the Sabbath in public?" is greatly weakened. R. Meir may very well not have a superior source of Torah, and he has much to learn from Aher. That Elisha has counted the paces of the horse and knows exactly where the border lies fits well with this reading. Not only is he Meir's master in Torah, but his knowledge and awareness are so profound that he is able to calculate such a distance while in the midst of a discussion.

What then is Fraenkel's justification for reading the scene as a self-contained story independent of its wider literary context? No doubt Fraenkel would argue that the scene is introduced by the term "*tanu rabannan*" ("Our sages taught"), indicating a *baraita*, and it appears in a Tannaitic Hebrew that contrasts with the Aramaic of the preceding and following scenes.⁶ He would claim that the Bavli redactors have recontextualized this *baraita* in a narrative of their own making, but the *baraita* should be read on its own terms as the independent story it originally was. And he presumably would claim that the redactors transmitted their sources faithfully without reworking them, else there is no guarantee that the source as currently found in the Bavli is the same as the (putative) original tradition that Fraenkel means to analyze.

To this we can respond, first, that this may well be a pseudo-*baraita*: It does not appear in any Tannaitic document. Moreover, it bears an uncanny resemblance to a scene in the Yerushalmi's version of this story that appears in Aramaic. Such recasting of an

Aramaic—presumably Amoraic—narrative of the Yerushalmi into a (pseudo-)Tannaitic Hebrew version in the Bavli is attested in other cases.⁷ So there is in fact no solid evidence that this scene ever circulated independently. And the differences from the Yerushalmi version suggest that even if the tradition circulated independently at one point, that tradition was reworked before its inclusion in the respective Talmuds.

These arguments, of course, are not absolutely conclusive. It is still possible that the source is an authentic *baraita*, and this would lend more justification to a detached reading *a la* Fraenkel. The main justification for reading the story as one scene of a more lengthy narrative is that such is the context provided by the Bavli. The boundaries of the narrative can be determined based on plausible and well-defined criteria, so we have an empirical—albeit limited—literary context.⁸ The Bavli redactors have either created this narrative or transmitted a narrative created by earlier authorities, perhaps by combining antecedent sources (which may have included the scene [=putative *baraita*] analyzed by Fraenkel). The important point here is that the question of literary context, at least for the Bavli, cannot be approached without addressing source-critical issues and without a theory of redaction. The more we see the redactors as authors as opposed to transmitters, the more active a redactional process, the more weight should be placed on the wider literary context.

Even if we grant the scene the status of a *baraita* it is crucial to understand that Fraenkel's reading is not really as independent of context as one might assume at first glance. In place of the wider literary context Fraenkel has supplied his own context, or contexts, based on other rabbinic traditions—what we might call a cultural context. Thus Fraenkel “knows” that according to rabbinic theology and law one isolated instance of

riding a horse on the Sabbath would not be punished with a heavenly voice precluding repentance, hence Aher must have been a hardened, continual sinner bent on provocation (*lehakhis*). The source he footnotes in bYev 90b supports the claim that horse-riding can be seriously punished in certain situations (though I have observed above that it need not be analogous.) He “knows” that Torah scholars do not seek out sinners from whom to learn tradition, hence Meir must be following Aher not to learn, but to persuade him to repent. And so forth. The main difficulty is that the story is so brief, the narrative so gapped, that a great deal of information must be supplied from this general cultural context. But there is no way to know what data from the vast rabbinic tradition is most relevant, nor how those gaps should be filled. That is why Fraenkel’s reading, or really any such reading, will be subject to criticisms such as those I provide above. There is no need to rehearse all the objections against the New Criticism to make this argument. From this point of view, the advantage of taking into account the wider literary context is that it provides general information relevant to the interpretation of the source, which results in fewer and smaller narrative gaps. Thus we know why Aher cannot repent (because of Metatron), and need not attempt to guess, based on our familiarity with other rabbinic traditions, into what category of “those who cannot repent” he falls.⁹

Let me now shift to another reading of this story, that of Yehudah Liebes, to assess these issues from another direction. Liebes takes an approach almost completely opposed to that of Fraenkel. In the manner of the Tosafists, Liebes reads all Bavli traditions about Elisha b. Abuya—really all rabbinic traditions—in light of each other in order to produce a general, synthetic reading.¹⁰ In particular the tradition of Elisha b. Abuya found in bQid 39b plays a significant role in his interpretation. There Elisha's turn

to sin is attributed to a crisis of faith caused by the problem of theodicy. He saw either (1) a son fall from a ladder and die despite climbing up at the behest of his father, and despite shooing the mother bird away before taking the eggs—two commandments for which the Torah promises long life, or (2), he saw the tongue of a great man dragged along by a swine, apparently following his martyrdom at the hands of the Romans.¹¹

Liebes assumes that all this happened before Elisha even encountered Metatron, so that the sage was incensed before seeing the angel. Moreover, Elisha held Metatron responsible for the martyr's death (and the death of other martyrs), because Metatron is in fact responsible for recording the sins of Israel. When the text in bHag 15a says that Elisha saw Metatron to whom "was given permission to write the merits of Israel," it means "the sins of Israel." Based on a doubtful reading of a single attestation elsewhere in the Bavli, Liebes claims "merits" can be a euphemism for "sins." So Metatron is partially to blame for causing the suffering of Jewish martyrs in that he recorded their (minor) sins for which they were cruelly punished.¹² This is all part of the theme of rivalry between humans and angels culled from other passages, which Liebes claims is at work here too. Is not God nevertheless responsible for the punishment of the martyrs? Sure, but Elisha's hubris causes him to get angry at the functionary, not the authority (he blames the messenger, as the saying goes).

Ironically, Liebes's approach leads to a reading of the scene of Meir and the horse that bears some affinities to Fraenkel's. He claims that riding a horse on the Sabbath is "the ultimate heresy and rebellion." This is based on the assertion that riding a horse is an unusual activity for a sage and therefore constitutes a "gesture of rebellion, pride and provocation." So for both Liebes, the maximalist, and Fraenkel, the minimalist, Elisha is

a rebel and arch-sinner. They differ, however, in their assessment of the emotional bond between Meir and Elisha. In contrast to Fraenkel, Liebes sees no bond of warmth between the two sages, hence no tragic aspect in the scene. Indeed, he claims that Aher's exchange with Meir expresses "contempt for the commandments, contempt for Torah itself and contempt for the sages." I must confess that this reading seems particularly forced to me (and in this respect I side more with Fraenkel). Rather than contempt Aher's warning that Meir not violate the boundary seems to express respect and concern. Here Liebes has been influenced by the personality of Elisha that he constructs based on other sources, a pitfall clearly avoided by Fraenkel's method.

The weaknesses of Liebes's readings are straightforward and need not detain us here.¹³ What interests me is the theory of redaction and source-criticism that underpins the reading. It seems to me that Liebes must be assuming one of two things. First, he could claim that all the sources are historically true, that all these events really happened; hence they must amount to a coherent, synthetic picture, whatever they seem to say. Second, he could claim that the same tradents or redactors transmitted the different sources and would not have contradicted themselves. His thinking seems to combine both possibilities. Although he denies that all traditions are historically accurate, he nevertheless understands his research as pursuit of the "true sin" of Elisha, and sees the Bavli as the earliest and most authentic interpretation of the Toseftan source of the "Four who entered the *pardes*." So he is delineating the rabbinic portrait of Elisha, which is anchored in historical fact. Essentially Liebes privileges bHag 15a-15b as the most reliable "historical kernel" but then harmonizes it with other traditions and other traditions with it.

In this way Liebes's reading rests on a theory of genre (that the stories are history, not fiction) and redaction (that Bavli redactors transmitted sources faithfully and would not consciously include contradictory sources). His approach therefore entails a maximal literary context, essentially extending through the entire Bavli (if not all of rabbinic literature).

I will deal with the issue of genre in more detail below, though it should be noted that, whatever the genre of rabbinic narratives, they are not best approached as history. The Tosafistic approach to context is no more plausible, as there are countless instances where the Bavli contradicts itself in both halakhic and aggadic materials. The redactors either could not or chose not to harmonize all the sources that they included in the Bavli. I would make the case that a more satisfactory context is the *sugya* or literary unit, which seems to be the basic building-block of Bavli text (granted the problem of how to define the *sugya*). The commentaries to various chapters of the Bavli published by Shamma Friedman and his students demonstrate the utility of dividing the text into *sugyot* as the basis for analysis.¹⁴ That approach has proven itself able to explicate a great many issues and resolve numerous problems in a consistent manner. If we apply this standard academic theory to our case, we would include the entire narrative in our purview, granting that it comprises different scenes and possibly incorporates earlier sources (contra Fraenkel). But we would not include the entire Talmud or other narratives found in different *sugyot*, as nothing indicates the redactors relentlessly harmonized everything (contra Liebes). The important point again is that the choice of literary context is related to theories of redaction, source-criticism and genre.

But the issue is in fact far more complicated. Immediately following the narrative appears the following passage.

Shmuel came upon Rav Yehudah leaning his hands and standing against the door-bolt and weeping. He said to him, “Keen scholar—why are you weeping?” He replied, “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 weighed 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 Ahitofel asked four hundred questions 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, Ahitofel, and Gehazi (mSanh 10:2)]*. As for us—what will become of us?” He [Shmuel] said to him, “Keen scholar—there was filth in their hearts.”

What about Aher (*aher mai*; or 'What is Aher')?— He said to him, “Greek song never ceased from his house.” They said about Aher: “When he would stand up in the schoolhouse, many books of the heretics fell from his lap.”

The discussion between Samuel and Rav Yehudah is thematically related to the story in that it deals with a similar question: how is it that great sages go astray, sin and lose their share in the world to come, as did Doeg and Ahitofel, who were masters of Torah in the rabbinic imagination. The answer: they had “filth in their hearts.” But now the discussion turns back to Aher. The question can be read as “What is Aher,” i.e., what is the meaning of the name “The Other.” The answer is that his alterity is due to his immersion in the culture of the other and alien beliefs.¹⁵ But the question can be understood in relation to the discussion of Doeg and Ahitofel—why did Aher sin (since he apparently did not have filth in his heart)? And here we have a rather different answer, attributing his fall not to the Metatron incident but to Hellenistic influence and heresy.

Now I would argue that we have here some independent, in fact, contradictory traditions about Aher that were added because of the associative connection.¹⁶ The redactors juxtaposed other traditions about Aher after the lengthy narrative that features him. We know from other passages such as the traditions at bQid 39b that there was a great deal of speculation as to the cause of Aher's sin reported in the cryptic Toseftan passage. The discussion of Doeg and Ahitofel begins a separate *sugya*; these characters are not mentioned previously. Based on this theory of redaction—that redactors juxtapose related, though contradictory traditions based on associative links—I would defend my limitation of the literary context to the boundaries of the narrative.¹⁷ But I think the potential weaknesses of this claim are apparent. In some ways I am opening myself to the same criticism that I raised against Fraenkel. I choose a limited literary context rather than a wider literary context, ignoring material that immediately follows the narrative. And while the traditions appear to conflict with the narrative in identifying the cause of Aher's sin, they can be reconciled with enough ingenuity. We could explain that Aher mistakenly believed Metatron to be a God because he read too many Greek (pagan?) poems and read too many heretical books. This would move us toward a more synthetic reading such as that of Liebes, though more defensible in this case because we draw upon traditions in the proximate Talmudic discussion and not from a different Tractate.¹⁸

I am therefore positing two levels (or two processes) of redaction. One set of redactors composed independent, self-contained *sugyot* out of Amoraic traditions; a second set juxtaposed other traditions, often from distant *sugyot*, and either added to the original *sugyot* or reworked them in complex ways. In defining the context as the entire

narrative about Aher, but not the appended traditions, I am interpreting the text from the point of view of the authors, those initial redactors. There is some evidence attesting to these two types of redaction.¹⁹ But obviously the theory of redaction becomes somewhat cumbersome at this point. One has to question whether my contextual boundaries are more justified than others, either narrower or broader.

Another way of broaching this question of the proper boundaries of the literary context is to focus on reception rather than composition, on the intended or actual audience of the story. How was the narrative of Elisha studied or recited or "performed" in the Talmudic academy? Was it studied as a self-contained narrative, albeit predicated on the Toseftan *baraita*? Or was it studied in connection with the following traditions? Is the answer different if we focus on the Geonic academy when the text of the Talmud was more-or-less fixed? I do not know exactly how to answer these questions, but they are potentially relevant to the definition of the context, and hence to interpretation.

Before concluding this section let me touch on the Yerushalmi version of the story, found in the corresponding location in the Talmud, yHag 2:1, 77b-c. Here we have two completely independent sources juxtaposed with one another. The first is a type of midrashic exegesis of tHag 2:3-4 which offers three interpretations of Elisha's sin based on the information supplied by the Tosefta. Thus Elisha "cutting the shoots" is interpreted first as killing young students of Torah, then as drawing them away from Torah to other professions.²⁰ These interpretations portray Elisha as an arch-sinner, a murderer, collaborator and informer. There follows a lengthy narrative, roughly parallel to the Bavli narrative, which portrays Elisha more sympathetically. The main sin recounted here is riding a horse on the Sabbath / Yom Kippur; there is no violence or

antagonism to others. Moreover, Elisha's ultimate fall is attributed in part to factors beyond his control (see below). After Elisha's death R. Meir (who does not appear in the first source, but is a central character in the second) persuades God to rehabilitate or forgive Elisha, and explains to his students that Elisha is ultimately saved "for the merit of his Torah." One is very hard pressed to believe that R. Meir (or God) would rehabilitate a murderer and collaborator, which would be the case if the two sources are read together.

So it seems reasonable to read each source independently, despite the fact that they follow one another in the current text.²¹ Limiting the context in this way entails the assumption that the Yerushalmi redactors juxtaposed the traditions based on mere association. They did not hesitate to place two distinct, even contradictory, traditions about Elisha one after the other. I believe that this is a reasonable theory regarding the nature of the redaction of the Yerushalmi. But optimally it is a theory that should be articulated and defended before venturing to interpret the narratives.

Genre

Identification of the genre of any text is crucial to its interpretation. If satire is not recognized as satire, parody as parody, fiction as fiction, then the interpreter cannot even begin to interpret a text correctly. Indeed, it was a basic question about the genre of the sage-narrative that led Fraenkel to his "Kuhnian paradigm shift" in the study of these texts.²² Fraenkel argued, "Every text must be understood according to its genre (*sugo*), and with respect to most aggadic stories, we must ask whether they should be understood as historical texts or literary texts."²³ Having argued compellingly for the latter, Fraenkel further specified the genre as "dramatic" (as opposed to epic or lyric).²⁴ To read rabbinic

narratives as historical sources upon which to construct the history of the rabbis in late antiquity, as had generations of scholars since the early days of *Wissenschaft*, was a mistake.

Fraenkel's classification of rabbinic narratives as "literature" or even "drama" is rather crude. Recent scholarship, especially that of folklorists, has provided more complex and sophisticated discussions of genre with salutary results, as I will discuss below. Yet the interest in genre, I will argue, sometimes comes at the expense of an interest in context. While these interests need not be mutually exclusive, the focus on one has often led to less focus on the other. Before turning to the folklorists, I will discuss some of the work of Henry Fischel, who actually anticipated Fraenkel in questioning the genre of the rabbinic narrative and rejecting much of its historicity.

Fischel brought to the study of rabbinics a comprehensive knowledge of the classical tradition. He classified sage-narratives within the general category of "rhetoric" and saw the storytellers as "rhetoricians" who constructed stories with many of the same techniques and methods as did Hellenistic authors. This raised the question of the genre of the material and problematized its usage for historical purposes: "Before any effort is made to utilize materials of rhetorical coloration, whether Greco-Roman or Near Eastern, for historiography or biography, the question of the literary genre of the material must be clarified."²⁵ In the process of clarifying the question, Fischel considered an impressive array of genres and literary forms: anecdote, *chria*, parody, diatribic-rhetorical tract, letter, gnomology, doxography, popular *bioi* or *vita*,²⁶ satire, comedy, mime, epigram,²⁷ *sententiae*, stoic *paradoxa*,²⁸ oration, symposium, epistle.²⁹ While Fischel does not state matters as strongly as Fraenkel, he clearly rejects using the sources for historical purposes

in any straightforward manner. He implies, for example, that the stories of the patient Hillel and intolerant Shammai have about as much historical worth as Hellenistic fables of good and bad animals.³⁰ In a footnote he observes that the Yerushalmi's portrayal of Elisha b. Abuya as an arch-sinner collaborating with the persecutors "has strong legendary features: the anonymity of the event, the ingenious evasions and betrayals, the artificiality of the plot."³¹

Yet for all of Fischel's erudition and his presentation of stunning parallels between Rabbinic and Greco-Roman material, there remains something unsatisfying about his conclusions. Take, for example, the analysis of the *baraita* of the four who enter the *pardes*.³² Fischel claims that the tradition was originally an anti-Epicurean polemic. Later Tannaim and Amoraim no longer understood the philosophical background or the rhetorical form, so they reinterpreted the tradition in terms of mystical praxis and added prooftexts or *testimonia*. But originally the "literary form" consisted of "two popular typologies: the first referring to four types of Epicureans and the second to four types of fate destined for Epicureans. The typologies are separated from each other by a parody of Epicurean pseudapocalypses uttered in the form of an admonition (*paraenesis*)."³³ (This "admonition" is the cryptic warning of R. Akiba, "when you reach the stones of pure marble do not say 'water, water.'")

To substantiate this claim Fischel marshals parallels between Epicurean traditions and the depictions and dicta of the four sages mentioned in rabbinic sources, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and R. Akiba. Thus rabbinic traditions portray Ben Azzai as celibate or refusing to marry, an anomaly in rabbinic culture, but paralleled by traditions about Epicurus, who disdained marriage and procreation. The celibate Epicurean therefore

became a "stereotype in rhetorical culture" and apparently the model for depictions of Ben Azzai.³⁴ Fischel draws attention to a great deal of "chriic-rhetorical and biographic anti-Epicurean items" in the Aher traditions, especially in Aher's reputed denial of divine retribution. That the esteemed R. Akiba should be the subject of an anti-Epicurean polemic Fischel concedes is surprising. Nevertheless, he suggests that the traditions concerning Akiba's early years as an *am-haarets* or ignoramus is paralleled by unflattering epithets such as "vulgaris" and "indoctus" directed at Epicureans. Hence "the classification of Akiba as an Epicurean must have been on the basis of his ignorance."³⁵ The *pardes*, Fischel notes, parallels the "Garden," a sobriquet for the Epicurean philosophical school.³⁶ Fischel's conclusion is that the passage should be understood as follows: The statement "Four entered the *pardes*" means "Four entered into undue trafficking with the Epicureans."³⁷ The first typology (the names of the four sages) boils down to: "There are four types of Epicureans: the celibate, the wild speculator, the denier of divine retribution, and the intentional ignoramus." And the second typology, the statement of the fates of the four sages / Epicureans, amounts to "death – insanity – nihilism – conversion."

The brief summary above cannot do justice to Fischel's discussion, which can only be appreciated by the full presentation of the striking classical parallels. The depth of knowledge, breadth of scholarship and complete mastery of both rabbinic and classical sources can be discerned in each and every paragraph. Classical literary genres—chria, typologies, rhetorical stereotypes, pseudapocalypses, admonitions, *testimony*, parodies—are all brought into impressive comparisons with rabbinic sources. The generic considerations successfully shed light on a great many puzzling and obscure elements of

the *pardes* and related traditions. Personally I am not persuaded by his final interpretation of the passage, which strikes me as being rather reductionistic. But the connections he draws between rabbinic traditions and many of the classical genres and forms are convincing.

What is most important for my purposes here is how the generic considerations serve to remove the passage from its literary context. The genres which Fischel discerns emerge from a specific social and institutional setting, the competing philosophical academies of the classical world, in which intellectuals satirized their rivals. This is apparently not the case of Talmudic Babylonia, so Fischel focuses on an earlier period, that of the tradition's genesis, rather than its reception or integration in the Talmud. The literary context within the Bavli (or Tosefta) is therefore irrelevant. Second, Fischel explicitly states that the received version of the tradition has been changed from its original form. Because the reconstructed, original tradition (from the early Tannaitic period) differed from the version available to the Amoraim or Talmud redactors, there is little value in considering their interpretations, another reason the literary context can be ignored. In place of the literary context he postulates a type of social context analogous to the academic rivalries of the classical world: contending rabbinic schools of the early Tannaitic period, in which sages satirized their opponents. The question then becomes whether this social context is plausible, and whether the reconstruction is accurate. By no means am I rejecting this type of scholarship that seeks to reconstruct the original form of traditions preserved in later sources and to understand them on their own terms, or to derive information about earlier historical periods. But I wish to underline how the emphasis on genre functions in this case to isolate the source from its literary context. In

this respect one should note the similarity to Fraenkel's method, also heavily based on considerations of genre (that the rabbinic story is not history but literature/dramatic fiction), that decontextualizes stories from their literary contexts. Where Fraenkel postulates an amorphous, atemporal rabbinic school (*bet midrash*) as his social context, Fischel assumes early, competing rabbinic schools.

A similar tendency can be seen in some folkloristic approaches to rabbinic stories. In recent years scholars of folklore have made some of the most significant contributions to the understanding of the genre of rabbinic stories and consequently to their interpretation. Eli Yassif, for example, in his magnum opus, *The Hebrew Folktale*, devotes his longest chapter to the rabbinic period (pp. 70-244). His primary generic classifications include: narrative traditions from the second temple period, the biographical legend, the exemplum, the historical legend, tales of magic and demonology, the comic tale, parables and fables, and the story cycle, though his discussion ranges over many other genres and sub-categories of these primary genres. This taxonomy includes both genres attested in other cultures (e.g. the exemplum) and genres defined by a sort of induction on the basis of the rabbinic sources themselves (e.g. narrative traditions from the second temple period, the story cycle).

In his discussion of Elisha b. Abuya's sin, Yassif comments on the strong folkloristic elements in the explanations for his fall. From the Yerushalmi's account Yassif quotes Elisha's explanation to R. Akiba that his father, Avuyah, dedicated Elisha to Torah after witnessing the great power of Torah when R. Eliezer and R. Joshua studied together at Elisha's circumcision celebration. Because Avuyah's original intention "was not for the sake of heaven," he did not achieve his goal, that Elisha become a Torah

scholar, and Elisha ended up a sinner. Yassif also quotes “another version of his birth” from *Qohelet Rabbah* 7:8: when Elisha’s mother was pregnant she passed by idolatrous temples and smelled the offerings. She even ate from them “and it burned in her stomach like the venom of a serpent [and infected him].”³⁸ Yassif then comments:

In these legends, as in other birth legends, the biography begins with events in the lives of the hero’s parents, which set the tone for the hero’s destiny and deeds. But while in all other birth legends, the parents perform exceptional deeds, such as withstanding temptation or giving charity, Elisha ben Avuyah’s parents sin against society’s norms (in this case, those of the sages), and this sin is an omen (or cause) of the birth of the anti-saint. Here too, a “learned” legend made brilliant use of structures and motifs of the biographical folk legend in order to create an anti-legend. Its power indeed stems from the traditional associations of the tale—folk motifs familiar to the audience of listeners from other traditions, but its moral significance and psychological effect are based on the breaking of these traditional narrative norms. These legends were intended to set Elisha ben Avuyah apart from other holy men and present him in all his negativity by means of reverse signs of the same narrative-traditional structures particular to the “true” saints.³⁹

This analysis, in my opinion, is very illuminating. The characterization of Elisha as an “anti-saint” or anti-hero is apt, and the inversion of the common signs typically related of the hero’s parents fits nicely. The attribution of his fall to his parents’ actions or sins, though not unprecedented, stands in some tension with rabbinic theology, which tends to emphasize free will and individual responsibility. Understanding this anomaly as a reflex of typical folkloristic motifs supplies a useful explanation.

Note, however, how Yassif’s analysis ignores the rest of the Yerushalmi’s narrative. True, his goal is to identify folk motifs in rabbinic narratives, not to provide comprehensive analysis of an entire narrative, and perhaps one should not criticize him for what he is not trying to do. Nevertheless, one can see how the focus on the folkloristic genre leads him away from analyzing these scenes within their literary context within the extended narrative. First, it should be noted that the Yerushalmi’s

narrative actually includes a close parallel to the tradition Yassif cites from *Qohelet Rabbah* about Elisha's mother. The Yerushalmi's version is slightly less detailed, noting that she "would pass by houses of idol worship and the aroma seeped into his body like the venom of a snake." I assume Yassif quotes *Qohelet Rabbah* because it mentions that she actually ate the sacrifices, which is not only a more substantive manner of ingestion than smell, but indicates the intention to sin. That "she would pass by" the idolatrous temples, as the Yerushalmi puts it, renders her intentions more ambiguous. Still, that the Yerushalmi mentions both the sins or contributing actions of Elisha's mother and father is significant. Do these stand in tension within the Yerushalmi's narrative, one tradition blaming the father, the other blaming the mother? Are they complementary? Why mention both?

More importantly, Yassif neglects the actual setting of the recounting of Avuya's sin within the narrative discourse. The narrator does not relate this event, but rather Elisha tells it to Meir as a flashback in the course of their dialogue. Moreover, Elisha uses the account of his father to illustrate the meaning of a verse: "The end of a thing is better than its beginning" (Qoh 7:8). When Meir offers several parables that present unexceptional, straightforward applications of this verse (e.g. "[By comparing it] to a man who had children in his youth who died, and in his old age who lived."), Elisha tells him that Akiba gave a different interpretation, "when it is good from its beginning." This midrash renders *meireishito* (מראשיתו) not as "than its beginning" but "from its beginning" by reading the *מ*- against its contextual meaning. Elisha then presents the account of Avuya as a real-life example of the verse: his father's intention was not good "from its beginning" hence Elisha ultimately sinned. Thus Elisha (1) knows the

interpretation of Akiba which Meir has forgotten or never learned, (2) offers a complex midrash rather than a straightforward paraphrase, and (3) presents a true manifestation of the verse rather than hypothetical parables. All this serves to establish that Elisha's knowledge of Torah is far superior to Meir's. This is crucial to the narrative dynamic and its meaning, as I have argued at length elsewhere.⁴⁰ Yassif not only ignores this entire point, but effaces it completely: his quotation of the passage eliminates the words that create the setting: "[Elisha] said . . . 'The end of a thing is better than its beginning' so long as it is good from its beginning. And so it happened to me." The ellipsis skips over Meir's interpretation and Elisha mentioning Akiba's midrashic interpretation.

The function of the Avuya episode and the report of the mother's inhalation of idolatrous substances within the larger narrative context is also important. The narrative essentially poses the question of whether the merit accrued by Torah study is inviolable or can be negated by sin. To answer the question the narrative presents the figure of a sinning sage, a master of Torah who goes astray, and depicts his fate, which culminates in salvation in the next world. But it is no easy task to construct the figure of a sinning sage: how can sin and knowledge of Torah stably coexist? Either the power of Torah should influence the sage to repent and cease sinning (and perhaps protect him from error in the first place), or the love of sin should predominate to cause the neglect and loss of Torah. The narrative solves the problem by several strategies. It attributes Elisha's sin to multiple factors including the problem of theodicy (a notoriously difficult issue) and the actions of his father and mother, which were clearly beyond his control: despite his Torah he was predestined to come out bad. The voice from the temple is critical, as it precludes Elisha from repenting, thereby excluding the obvious solution to the problem (which

Meir indeed mentions several times). Elisha may *wish* to repent, but cannot. Hence sin and Torah coexist until death when rewards and punishments materialize, and the answer to the question is given. As Meir says, “They save Elisha-Aher for the merit of his Torah.”⁴¹ The (inverted) folkloristic motifs thus serve a specific and critical function within the larger narrative, contributing to the plausible construction of an anti-hero, namely a sinning sage. These traditions may have originated independently of the Yerushalmi’s narrative, as Yassif assumes, and they can be appreciated on their own terms. (Here again we encounter the issue of the nature of the redaction of the Yerushalmi, and some sort of theory of redaction should be articulated). But a great deal is lost by neglecting to assess their function within their larger literary context. Focus on the generic context can lead to the analysis of the passage in terms of the typical characteristics of the genre rather than the function in the extended narrative.

Let me conclude with one final example. A significant contribution of folklorists has been to offer new perspectives on some of the most unusual Talmudic stories such as the exaggerated travel tales of Rabbah bar bar Hama in bBB 73b-74a.⁴² These tales of humongous birds and eggs, giant fish and frogs, and other such wonders, were an embarrassment to the Geonim and medieval exegetes, who were troubled that the sages would make such “flagrant lies” by claiming to have witnessed impossibilities. They either allegorized the stories or explained them as dreams and visions. Dan Ben-Amos argued that these stories belong to the genre of “Tall Tales,” found in many cultures, including the tales of Paul Bunyan in 19th century America. He refers to the account of R. Joshua b. Hanina and the wise men of Athens, which mentions *milei debdiei* (“words of lying”; bBekh 8b), attesting to the genre. According to Ben-Amos: “The Talmudic

rabbis themselves understood these narratives for what they were: tall tales. They constituted a distinct genre within the oral tradition of Talmudic society, marked by distinctive features and their rhetorical significance.”⁴³ He provides an erudite discussion delineating the characteristics of the tales, their function, themes and social context. In my opinion, this understanding of the genre goes a long way to explaining why they are in the Talmud and how they should be understood.

Yet here too the generic focus can lead away from important considerations of the wider literary context. Yassif, for example, takes up Ben-Amos’s characterization of these stories as tall tales. He classifies tall tales as a subgenre of “comic tales” and identifies the mechanisms that create the humor, especially the incongruity between realistic and fantastic elements.⁴⁴ He also notes that rabbinic tall tales include distinctive features beyond those found in international tall tales, including references to “Jewish National Mythology,” such as Leviathan, the desert dead and the fertility of the Land of Israel. This folk genre “was recruited to substantiate and fortify the national and religious consciousness of the period.”⁴⁵ Yassif then proceeds to discuss a distinct type of tall tale, the “agricultural tall tale,” comprised of accounts of the “amazing fertility of the Land of Israel.” He observes that agricultural societies, like that of Palestine, naturally told tall tales of an agricultural nature. This type of tale:

displays the two principal elements of the tall tale in general: the first is the comic-entertainment aspect. Experienced farmers can only laugh upon hearing fantastic tales of giant produce. But there is a secret desire for great success which, in the case of farmers whose agricultural output is their livelihood, would be fruits of extraordinary size. As the tall tale of travelers to distant parts oversteps the boundaries of imagination to vistas beyond the reality familiar to the audience of listeners, so the agricultural tall tales involve a leap of the imagination, in this case inward, into familiar, day-to-day reality of the narrating society. The tales are at once a bit of comic relief in a life filled with hard work, and a faint hope that even some small part of the fantasy could come true.

All this I consider very insightful, especially the attention to the distinctive Jewish or rabbinic dimension over and above the standard features common to “international” tall tales.

However, in his description of the agricultural tall tales, Yassif makes a telling error. He quotes verbatim a series of such tales from bKetubot 111b-112a, accounts of a grape vine that yielded hundreds of clusters of grapes each producing a keg of wine, of a three-square mile area filled with fig honey, and of a sixteen square mile flow of milk and honey. He then continues with a semi-quotation, semi-paraphrase of the next story as follows:

The text goes on to describe the sages’ discovery of a peach as large as a village cooking pot with a five-*seah* capacity—“One third [of the fruit] they ate, one third they declared free of all, and one third they put before their beasts.” A year later R Eleazar found himself in the same place, and saw it as well (pp. 189-90).

This is not really how the story goes. Here is the full text of the Bavli together with the parallel found in the Yerushalmi, to which I will refer below:

yPeah 7:3, 20a	bKet 112a
Once R. Abbahu, R. Yose b. Hanina and R. Shimon b. Laqish passed by a certain vineyard in Doron. The farmer brought them a peach. They and their ass-drivers ate, and there was some left over. They measured its size as equal to a pot of Kefar Hananiah that holds a seah of lentils	R. Helbo, R. Avira and R. Yose bar Hanina visited a certain place (in the Land of Israel). They brought them a peach as big as a pot of Kefar Hino. And how big is a pot of Kefar Hino? Five se’ah. They ate one-third, renounced ownership of one-third and gave one-third to their beasts.
A few days later they passed by. He brought them two or three [peaches] in the palm of his hand. They said, “We want from that same tree.” He said to them, “I brought you from that tree.” They applied the verse, <i>[God turns] fruitful land into a salty marsh because of the wickedness of</i>	The following year R. Eleazar visited there and they brought him [a peach]. He took it in one hand and said, “ <i>[God turns] fruitful land into a salty marsh because of the wickedness of its inhabitants (Ps 107:34).</i> ”

<i>its inhabitants (Ps 107:34).</i>	
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So it is not at all the case that R. Eleazar “saw it as well.” The opposite—he saw that the amazing fertility experienced by his colleagues had disappeared due to the sins of the residents of the land, as explained by the verse he quotes. In place of the mammoth peach of the preceding year he holds the puny peach in one hand. Yassif paraphrases the story, instead of quoting it in its entirety, in order to pass it off as structurally similar to the other tales which he quotes verbatim. But this is a distortion. In fact, to the extent that the story of Elisha can be called an anti-legend, this story should be designated an anti-tall tale. Or perhaps it should be seen as a parody of a tall tale. At least the second half plays off the generic expectations by shifting from the typical tall tale mode of the first half.⁴⁶ The tale suddenly loses its “fantastic” dimension and returns to realistic and sinful daily life. Yassif has been so seduced by the typical characteristics of the tall tale genre that he fails to recognize its inversion or parody.

More significant is the lack of attention to the literary context. Yassif does not consider why these stories appear towards the end of *Ketubot* in the Talmud’s commentary to mKet 13:11. But this is extremely important, and sheds considerable light on the reason for the anomalous tall tale. The *sugya* that includes these tales begins with a number Palestinian traditions that celebrate the advantages of living in the Land of Israel and detail the disadvantages of living in the diaspora. (These traditions appear here because mKet 13:11 gives certain advantages to a spouse who wants to move to the Land of Israel, which implies that living in the Land of Israel is a meritorious act, if not a full-blown *mitzvah*.) These traditions include, “He who dwells outside of the Land, it is as if he worships idols,” “He who walks four cubits in Israel is assured a place in the

world to come,” and “He who is buried in the Land of Israel, it is as if he is buried under the altar.” The agricultural tall tales illustrating the amazing fertility of the Land fit perfectly here in that they express another aspect of the superiority of the Land and benefits of living therein. At the same time, a stratum that runs throughout the *sugya* attempts to attenuate the exaggerated praise of the Land and to neutralize the traditions that denigrate diaspora life—an obvious interest of Babylonian sages living in the diaspora.⁴⁷ Here we find the famous midrash of the “three oaths” forbidding mass immigration to the Land of Israel, frequently cited by medieval rabbis, and to this day the basis for the anti-Zionism of the Satmar Hasidim. The anti-tall tale is part of this stratum. It neutralizes the traditions of the Land’s fertility by claiming that it is contingent, ephemeral and elusive. Perhaps the point is even that such fertility no longer is to be found. R. Eleazar already discovered that the fruit had returned to its typical size. At all events, the two halves of the story beautifully exemplify the two warring tendencies within the larger *sugya*. To fully appreciate the tradition it is not enough to recognize it as a tall tale (or parody of a tall tale), but to view it within this broader context.

And yet there is more. One can observe an additional peculiarity in the source. The protagonists shift from R. Helbo, R. Avira and R. Yose bar Hanina in the first half of the story to R. Eleazar in the second. This is something of a non-sequitor. How did R. Eleazar know of the place’s fertility? We would have to say that the three rabbis told him about the peach they experienced, but that datum is hardly self-evident, and should be given in the story. Note how much more smoothly the parallel in the Yerushalmi reads. The same three rabbis return and they want the same sort of giant fruit which they had eaten a little while before. There is no shift in protagonist. The Bavli must accordingly

dispense with the explicit request to eat from the “same tree” since R. Eleazar had not been there before. The citation of the verse also makes less sense. It does not explain the astonishing *decrease* in size, as in the Yerushalmi, since R. Eleazar had not seen the giant peaches previously. Rather it simply explains the small size of the fruit he receives. The Yerushalmi’s version is also an anti-tall tale or a parody of a tall tale, but it is a much better one than that of the Bavli.

I would suggest, in light of the larger context, that the Bavli redactors replaced the three rabbis in the second half of the story with R. Eleazar. (Here of course I am assuming an active, interventionist mode of redaction, a position that I have argued elsewhere.⁴⁸) They did so because several of the most pro-Israel and anti-diaspora traditions quoted earlier in the *sugya* are attributed to R. Eleazar, such as “He who dwells in the Land of Israel lives without sin” and “The dead outside of the Land will not live [again]” (bKet 111a). The change to R. Eleazar is thus very effective and ironic. The most ardent pro-Israel advocate sees with his own eyes that the yield of crops in the Land of Israel is reduced by sin, and acknowledges that truth with his own mouth, thus neutralizing his own claim that those in the land of Israel live without sin. This version of the anti-tall tale reads less neatly than that of the Yerushalmi, but makes a more powerful statement within the overall *sugya*. It contributes much more effectively to the neutralization of the anti-diasporic traditions. Only by taking into account genre, context and redactional process can this tradition be appreciated in all its complexity.

In sum, an adequate literary theory of the rabbinic narrative must address issues of context and genre while articulating a theory of redaction. These considerations are by

no means mutually exclusive: a focus on context need not lead to neglect of genre, nor *vice versa*. In practice, however, concentrating on the one has tended to lead to less emphasis on the other. In both cases a theory of redaction is crucial. Proper definition of the literary context, as well as the decision to ignore that context completely, will depend on the conception of the process of the redaction. Likewise, the redactional process may have caused distortions or modifications of typical genres. While there are clearly other elements that must be assessed, these three are necessary components of a successful literary approach to rabbinic narratives.

¹ Dan Ben-Amos, "'Context' in Context" *Western Folklore* 52 (1993), 209-26.

² Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha'aggada vehamidrash* (Masada: Yad Letalmud, 1991), 264.

³ So in manuscripts London 5508, Munich 6, Vatican 134, Goettingen 3. The reading "and learning Torah" is found in Munich 95 and Vatican 171.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁵ His reason for counting the paces, though not provided in the narrative—hence a challenging gap to fill—in my opinion is almost the opposite of Fraenkel's explanation. Before his "fall" he was a meticulous, brilliant sage (see below) who seems to have been conscious always of the distances traveled on the Sabbath so as *not* to sin. Though in his present condition, after the voice from the curtain, sin is irrelevant, he nevertheless continues to count out of habit.

⁶ Actually the immediately preceding scenes are predominantly Hebrew, though with a smattering of Aramaic.

⁷ See Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 261-62.

⁸ The narrative begins with the first mention of Aher and ends with final fate of Meir, the other main character in the narrative. But see my discussion below on the uncertainty here.

⁹ Fraenkel claims that a story provides all the information necessary for its interpretation, hence we should understand that Aher cannot repent because of the horse-riding on the Sabbath. But this principle is obviously false. The story does not even tell us that riding is forbidden on the Sabbath, does not explain what a Sabbath limit is, does not identify R. Meir and Aher, etc. All this knowledge is assumed. The problem is we do not know what knowledge about Aher's act that precipitated the voice is presupposed. See Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 254-55.

¹⁰ Yehuda Liebes, *Het' o shel elisha* (2nd ed., Jerusalem: Academon, 1990), 27: "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."

¹¹ The printed version reads "Huzpith the Meturgeman." But all mss read "a great man."

¹² Liebes, *ibid.*, 61.

¹³ See Rubenstein, "Elisha ben Abuyah: Torah and the Sinful Sage," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998), 211-25, for detailed criticisms.

¹⁴ Shamma Friedman, "Pereq ha'isha rabba babavli," *Mehqarim umeqorot*, ed. H. Dimitrovksi (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1977), 277-441; idem, *Talmud*

'arukh: Perek ha-sokher et ha-omanin (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990-96); Stephen Wald, *BT Peshaim III: Critical Edition with Comprehensive Commentary* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2000).

¹⁵ See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 78-80.

¹⁶ See Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 94-99.

¹⁷ For what it is worth, Alon Goshen-Gottstein independently came to similar conclusions about this passage in *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 78-80.

¹⁸ Ironically, in this case Liebes, *ibid.*, 11-12, takes the tradition as an independent and separate source *not* related to the main narrative.

¹⁹ See Jay Rovner, "Rhetorical Strategy and Dialectical Necessity in the Babylonian Talmud: The Case of Kiddushin 34a-35a," *HUCA* 65 (1994), 177-231; *idem*, "Pseudepigraphic invention and diachronic stratification in the Stammaitic component of the Bavli; the case of Sukka 28," *HUCA* 68 (1997) 11-62.

²⁰ See Rubenstein, "Elisha ben Abuyah: Torah and the Sinful Sage," 151-55, for detailed explanations.

²¹ Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 81-88, comes to the same conclusion.

²² See Joshua Levinson, "From Parable to Fiction: The Rise of Fiction as a Cultural Category," *Sefer hayovel leyonah fraenkel* (forthcoming).

²³ Yonah Fraenkel, "Hermeneutic Problems in the Study of the Aggadic Narrative," *Tarbiz* 47 (1978), 142 (Hebrew).

²⁴ In "Hermeneutic Problems," Fraenkel simply categorizes rabbinic stories as "literature" (*sifrut*). In *Darkhei ha'aggada vehamidrash*, 240-244, he argues that

dramatic, epic and lyric are subgenres of “literature” and that rabbinic stories are dramatic.

²⁵ Henry A. Fischel, “Story and History: Observations on Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism,” *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature*, ed. Henry A. Fischel (New York: Ktav, 1977), 449.

²⁶ Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 3-4

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70

²⁹ *Essays*, 444-45

³⁰ *Essays*, 449

³¹ *Rabbinic Literature*, 113. See too p. 10 where he considers the traditions about Aher's heresy to be of "uncertain historical value."

³² *Rabbinic Literature*, 1-24.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁸ Yassif, *Folktale*, 120.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁰ Rubenstein, “Elisha ben Abuya: Torah and the Sinful Sage,” 155-58.

⁴¹ The name “Aher” here may be a later addition. See Leib Moscovitz, “Leheqer hagufim hazarim ha’agadiim birushalmi,” *Tarbiz* 66 (1997).

⁴² Dan Ben-Amos, “Talmudic Tall Tales,” *Folklore Today: A Festschrift for Richard M. Dorson*, ed. Linda Degh, Henry Glassie, and Felix Oinas (Bloomington, 1976), 25-43; Dina Stein, “Devarim shero’im misham lo ro’im mikan: iyyun bevava batra 73a-75b,” *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999), 9-32; Yassif, *Jewish Folktale*, 182-90; Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*. Trans. Batya Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 159-60.

⁴³ Ben-Amos, “Talmudic Tall Tales,” 28.

⁴⁴ Yassif, “Hebrew Folktale,” 184.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 189

⁴⁶ For a brilliant analysis of a rabbinic tale that employs the genre of the late antique novel in an inverted way to create precisely the opposite effect, see Joshua Levinson, “The Tragedy of Romance: A Case of Literary Exile,” *HTR* 89 (1996), 227-44.

⁴⁷ See Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “Coping with the Virtues of the Land of Israel: An Analysis of Bavli Ketubot 110b-112a,” *Israel-Diapora Relations in the Second Temple and Talmudic Periods*, ed. I Gafni (Jerusalem: Shazar Institute, forthcoming) (Hebrew).

⁴⁸ *Talmudic Stories*, 255-67. And see Rubenstein, “Criteria of Stammaitic Intervention in Aggada” (forthcoming).