

Astrology in the Talmud

An Analysis of Bavli Shabbat 156

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I. Introduction¹

The role of astrology in Jewish society in Late Antiquity has been a topic of great interest to scholars over the last century.² Research was sparked by the discovery of a handful of synagogue mosaic floors that feature the signs of the zodiac side-by-side with representations of the menorah, Abraham and other images associated with the Hebrew Bible – an unexpected juxtaposition of pagan and Jewish motifs. To better understand the meanings and motivations underlying these mosaics, researchers have turned to comparative archaeological evidence, Cairo Geniza fragments and, most notably, Rabbinic literature.³

¹ I would like to thank a number of scholars for their comments and suggestions on this paper: Adam Becker, Adam Gregerman, Martha Himmelfarb, Kevin Osterloh, Peter Schäfer, David Stern, Katja Vehlow, Holger Zellentin, and the participants of the *Making Selves and Marking Others: Heresy and Self-definition in Late Antiquity* workshop and colloquium. I alone am responsible for any remaining errors. This paper is dedicated with love to my parents.

² We use the term *astrology* to denote the field that interprets the influence of heavenly bodies on human affairs.

³ Scholars often employ two or even all three types of sources in their work; amongst others, see: Joseph M. Baumgarten, "Art in the Synagogue: Some Talmudic Views," in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman Period* (ed. Steven Fine; London: Routledge, 1999), 76–78 (= *Judaism* 19 [1970]: 196–206); James H. Charlesworth, "Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Early Palestinian Synagogues," *HTR* 70 (1977): 183–200, rev. version: "Jewish Interest in Astrology During the Hellenistic and Roman Period," *ANRW* 20.2 (1987): 926–50; Iris Fishof, ed., *Written in the Stars: Art and Symbolism of the Zodiac* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2001); Solomon Gandz, "Benediction over the Luminaries," *JQR* 44:4 (1954): 305–25; Solomon Gandz, "The Origin of the Planetary Week or The Planetary Week in Hebrew Literature," *American Academy of Research: Proceedings, Vol. XVIII* (1948–49): 213–55; Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 12 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953–68), esp. 8:167–232, 12:40–49, 12:152–98; J.C. Greenfield and M. Sokoloff, "Astrological and Related Omen Texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic," *JNES*

Nevertheless, the most prominent Rabbinic text on astrology has heretofore not received full treatment. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 156a–b (henceforth "*b. Shab. 156*" or "our sugya")⁴ represents the Talmud's *locus classicus* on astrology, and is the subject of our study. Our objective is to understand *b. Shab. 156* as such, without attempting to harmonize it with archaeological finds. Indeed, a thorough understanding of the text on its own terms is a necessary, but often neglected, first step towards gaining a wider appreciation of attitudes towards astrology amongst late antique Jews.⁵

Our examination of *b. Shab. 156* reveals a highly sophisticated, composite text that the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud ("Bavli") shaped into a single literary unit.⁶ Our sugya consists of a discussion of

48 (1989): 201–14; Rachel Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance," *BASOR* 228 (1977): 61–77, rev. version: "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Synagogal Art: A Review," *JSQ* 9 (2002): 219–58; Reimund Leicht, *Astrologumena Judaica* (Ph.D. diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2003); Jodi Magness, "Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palestine* (ed. W.G. Dever and S. Gitin, Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 363–89; Stuart S. Miller, "'Epigraphical' Rabbis, Helios, and Psalm 19," *JQR* 94, 1 (2004): 27–76; Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 243–63; Eleazar L. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha: An Account of the Excavations Conducted on Behalf of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: The University Press; London: OUP, 1932); Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," *IEJ* 9 (1959): 149–65, 229–45; Ze'ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris*, 2d ed. (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1998); Ze'ev Weiss, "The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic and the Role of Talmudic Literature in Its Iconographic Study," in *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity*, *JRASup.* 40 (ed. L.I. Levine and Z. Weiss; Portsmouth, R.I.: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 2000), 15–30; Ze'ev Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message Through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2005).

⁴ A *sugya* (lit. walk, course, practice) is a Talmudic discussion of a given theme.

⁵ A comparison of *b. Shab. 156* with synagogue zodiac mosaics would entail a number of methodological difficulties, most notably the question of the Bavli redactors' knowledge of Galilean Jewish affairs. To be sure, there are a number of interesting parallels between the issues explored by the redactors of the Bavli in *b. Shab. 156* and those reflected in the zodiac mosaics, especially those of the Beth Alpha and Sepphoris synagogues: the association of astrology with some Galilean Jews (*b. Shab. 156* §§A–B), the figure of Abraham (§D), and the general chronological framework of the fifth–seventh centuries, during which the Babylonian Talmud was redacted and the synagogues with zodiac mosaics floors were constructed. For the synagogue mosaics, see the sources cited in note 3 above.

⁶ Our sugya is thematically unrelated to the Gemara immediately preceding it, as well as its mishnah (*b. Shab. 155b* = *m. Shab. 24:3*), which concern feeding animals. This

Israel's relationship to astrology and claims that Israel is immune from the power of the stars – *there is no constellation for Israel* is the repeated refrain. Rather, the Bavli posits that Israel should busy itself with fulfilling God's commandments.

II. Methodology

Our examination of *b. Shab. 156* consists of both literary analyses and source criticism. *Literary analysis* focuses on how wordplay, syntax, dialogue, repetition, biblical citations, structural parallels, and other creative uses of language are employed to create meaning.⁷ We assume that the text as it stands reflects the editorial polish, culture and concerns of the Stammaim, the anonymous sages who redacted the Babylonian Talmud from the mid-fifth to the mid-seventh centuries of the Common Era.⁸ We can uncover additional meaning and nuance in *b. Shab. 156* by considering the images and characteristics of the Rabbis mentioned in the text. We assume that the Stammaim intentionally chose to include these particular Rabbis – Joshua b. Levi, Ḥanina, Yoḥanan, etc. – on account of the sayings that are associated with them in earlier Rabbinic works.⁹

We employ *source criticism* when parallel versions of sections of our sugya have also been preserved elsewhere.¹⁰ While we do not propose that the traditions drawn upon by the Bavli are *identical* to the versions passed down to us today in the Rabbinic writings of the Land of (*Eretz*) Israel such as the Mishnah, Tosefta, Yerushalmi, Genesis Rabbah, etc., we work under the assumption that versions *close* to those preserved in earlier sources were known to the Stammaim.¹¹ The differences between the

strongly suggests that our sugya should be read as a distinct literary unit. It is incorporated into *b. Shab.* chapter twenty-four on account of the formulation of its opening line, which repeats the phraseology found in the preceding section of Gemara: *It is written in the notebook of Zeiri* (line 17 of the Vilna edition); *It is written in the notebook of Levi* (line 20); then our sugya begins on line 23: *It is written in the notebook of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi*.

⁷ Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 27.

⁸ Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1.

⁹ We make no assertions regarding the historical value of these attributions, i.e. whether or not these sages 'actually' uttered the words associated with them in *b. Shab. 156*.

¹⁰ Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 25.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 26; *idem*, *Culture*, 5.

earlier sources and *b. Shab. 156* illuminate the culture, concerns and worldview of the Stammaim in fifth–seventh centuries Babylonia.¹²

III. Text¹³

We divide our sugya into seven sections (§A–G) to facilitate analysis.

§A. It is written in the notebook of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi:

Behold, one who [is born] on the first [day] of the week, will be a man without one (*hd'*) [thing] in him. What is "without one thing in him"?¹⁴ [What] if one would say "without one virtue"?

But Rav Ashi said: I was [born] on [the] first [day] of the week! Rather, [the text should read] "but without one evil [thing in him]."¹⁵

But Rav Ashi said: I and Dimi (*dmy*) bar Kakuzta (*qqwz'*)¹⁶ were [both born] on the first [day] of the week. I am a king, [yet] he is the head of thieves! Rather [it means that he will be] entirely positive or entirely negative.

One who [is born] on the second day of the week will be a quarrelsome man. What is the reason? Because the waters were divided on it [the second day].

One who [is born] on the third day of the week will be a rich man; he will [also] be a fornicating [man]. What is the reason? Because the plants were created on it [the third day].

One who [is born] on the fourth day of the week will be a wise and intelligent (*nhyr*) man. What is the reason? Because the heavenly lights were suspended on it [the fourth day].

One who [is born] on the fifth day of the week will perform charitable acts. What is the reason? Because the fish and birds were created on it [the fifth day].

One who [is born] on the eve of Sabbath will be a busy man. Said Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak:¹⁷ Busy [fulfilling] commandments.

¹² Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 2; *idem*, *Culture*, 6–9.

¹³ The text is based on the standard Vilna edition; I have noted significant textual variants. For my translation, I have consulted the following sources: I. Epstein (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud Translated into English with Notes, Glossary, and Indices* (London: Soncino Press, 1935–48); Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1903; repr. Jerusalem: Horev Press); Ludwig Koehler et. al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*; *idem*, *Culture*; Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ MS Munich 95, MS Oxford 366, MS Vatican 108.

¹⁵ MS Vatican 108.

¹⁶ MS Vatican 108; *hqwz'*.

One who [is born] on the Sabbath will die on the Sabbath. Because on his account the great day (*ywm'rb'*) of Sabbath was desecrated. Raba (*rb'*) bar Rav Shila¹⁸ said: He will be called a great holy [man] (*qdysht'rb'*).

§B. Rabbi Hanina said to them: Go out [and] tell Bar Levi [i.e. Joshua b. Levi], "The constellation (*mzl*)¹⁹ of the day is not [the] cause, rather the constellation of the hour is the cause."

One who [is born under] the sun will be a proud man. He will eat from what belongs to him and drink from what belongs to him; and his secrets will be revealed. If he steals, he will not succeed.

One who [is born under] Venus (*kwkv nwgh*) will be a rich man and will be a fornicating [man]. What is the reason? Because fire²⁰ was created in him.

One who [is born under] Mercury (*kwkv*)²¹ will be a bright and wise man, because it is the scribe of the sun.

One who [is born under] the moon will be a man [who] suffers illnesses, building and demolishing, demolishing and building; eating from that which is not his, and drinking from that which is not his; and his secrets [are] concealed. If he steals, he succeeds.

One who [is born under] Saturn will be a man whose plans are foiled. There are those who say: All plots against him are foiled.

One who [is born under] Jupiter (*sdq*) will be a righteous man (*sdqn*). Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak said: Righteous in [fulfilling] commandments.

One who [is born under] Mars will be a shedder of blood. Rabbi Ashi said: Either [he is] a bloodletter, or a thief, or a butcher, or a circumciser. Rabbah²² said: I was [born] under Mars [and I am not any of those things]! Abaye said: The master [i.e. Rabbah] punishes and kills too.

§C. It was said [that] Rabbi Hanina [had] said: A constellation makes [one] wise, a constellation makes [one] wealthy, and there is a constellation for Israel.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: There is no constellation for Israel (*yn mzl lysr'l*).²³ And Rabbi Yoḥanan's approach is consistent [with his view], as Rabbi Yoḥanan said: From where [do we derive] that there is no constellation for Israel? Because it is said Thus says the Lord: Do not learn the way of the nations, or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens;

¹⁷ MS Vatican 108: Rav Nahman.

¹⁸ MS Munich 95: *rbh br rv*; MS Oxford 366: *rbh br rv shyl*; MS Vatican 108: *rb*.

¹⁹ Translations of *mzl* vary: "constellation of the zodiac, planet" (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 755); "constellations of the zodiac" (Koehler, *Lexicon*, 565); Sokoloff translates *mzl* as "zodiacal stations, planet, fortune, guardian angel" (*Babylonian Aramaic*, 653–54).

²⁰ MS Oxford 366: heavenly lights.

²¹ MS Oxford 366: sun.

²² MS Oxford 366, MS Vatican 108: *rv*; MS Munich 95: *rv*.

²³ Translations of this phrase vary: "Israel is not dependent upon planetary nativity" (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 755); "There is no planet for Israel" i.e. Israel is not dependent on the planets" (Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1942; repr. 1994], 99); "Israel is immune from planetary influence" (Epstein, *Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat*, folio 156).

[for the nations are dismayed at them] (Jer. 10:2). They [i.e. the nations] are dismayed, but not Israel.

§D. And Rab also believes that there is no constellation for Israel, as Rav Yehudah said [that] Rab said: From where [do we derive] that there is no constellation for Israel?

As it is said: He [God] brought him [Abraham] outside [and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be"] (Gen. 15:5).

Abraham said before the holy one, blessed be he: Master of the universe! [You have given me no offspring], and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir (Gen. 15:3).

He [God] said: Not so. [This man shall not be your heir;] no one but your very own issue [shall be your heir] (Gen. 15:4).

He [Abraham] said before him: Master of the universe! I looked at my constellation (*b'stgnynwt*), and I am not fated to have a child.

He [God] said to him: Abandon your astrological speculation! For there is no constellation for Israel! What is your disposition? Because Jupiter (*sdq*) is in the west (*bm'rv*)?²⁴ I will turn it back and I will place it in the east.²⁵ And it is written: Who has roused a victor (*sdq*) from the east, summoned him to his service? [He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow] (Isa. 41:2).

§E. And from Shmuel also [we learn that] there is no constellation for Israel.

Shmuel and Avlat were sitting, and certain people were going to the lake.

Avlat said to Shmuel: That man is going but will not come [back]. A snake will bite him and he will die.

Shmuel said to him: If he is an Israelite, he will go and come [back].

While they were sitting, he [the Israelite] went and came [back]. Avlat got up, threw [open] his [the Israelite's] bag, [and] found a snake in it that was cut and strewn into two pieces.

Shmuel said to him [the Israelite]: What did you do?

He [the Israelite] said to him: Everyday we used to pool our bread together and eat. But once there was one of us who did not have bread, [and] he was ashamed. I said to them: I am going to collect [the bread]. When I reached him, I pretended to take [bread] from him, in order that he will not be ashamed.

He [Shmuel] said to him: You have fulfilled a commandment. Shmuel derived from this and expounded: [Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit,] but righteousness (*sdqh*) delivers from death (Prov. 10:2). And not [only] from an unnatural death, rather from death itself [i.e. from all kinds of death].

§F. And from Rabbi Akiva [we] also [learn that] there is no constellation for Israel.

²⁴ MS Oxford 366: east.

²⁵ MS Oxford 366: west.

Rabbi Akiva had a daughter. Chaldeans [i.e. astrologers] said to him: On the day that she enters the bridal chamber, a snake will bite her and she will die.

He [Akiva] was very worried about these words. On that day she took a brooch and stuck it in the wall.²⁶ It happened [that it] sank into the eye of the snake. In the morning, when she took it [i.e. the brooch] the snake came out trailing after it [the brooch].

Her father said to her: What did you do?

She said to him: A poor man came in the evening [and] called at the gate. But everyone was busy at the meal and there were none to heed him. I got up, took out a portion that was given to me, [and] gave it to him.

He [Akiva] said to her: You have fulfilled a commandment. Rabbi Akiva derived from this and expounded: [Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit,] but righteousness (*sdqh*) delivers from death (Prov. 10:2). And not [only] from an unnatural death, rather from death itself [i.e. from all kinds of death].

§G. And also from Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak [we learn that] there is no constellation for Israel.

Chaldeans [i.e. astrologers] told Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak's mother: Your son will be a thief.

She did not allow him to uncover his head, saying to him: Cover your head, in order that the fear of heaven will be upon you, and ask for mercy.

He did not know why she said [that] to him.

One day he was sitting and studying under a palm tree. The covering fell from his head [when] he lifted his eyes to see the palm tree. An evil inclination overcame him: he climbed up [the palm tree] and cut off a cluster [of dates that did not belong to him] with his teeth."

IV. Analysis

§A: Literary Analysis

Consulting his notebook, Joshua b. Levi emphasizes *hd'* (one) for the first day – Sunday's child will lack *one* trait.²⁷ Joshua b. Levi's views on astrology can determine only *one* characteristic of a man. The "science" of astrology is reduced, perhaps mockingly, to a play on words: he who is born on the *hd* (i.e. first) day of the week will be characterized by his lack of *hd'* thing. The Stammaim and Rav Ashi demonstrate the ambiguity in Joshua b. Levi's astrology, noting how *one thing* could be an all-encompassing personality trait like virtue or wickedness – leaving

²⁶ MS Oxford 366, MS Vatican 108: crack.

²⁷ We need not hold, as Gandz does, that the actual, historical Joshua b. Levi necessarily authored the astrological traditions attributed to him in the Bavli; cf. Gandz, "Benediction," 321–22.

Sunday's child either entirely virtuous or entirely wicked. Ashi's proof is that both he and Dimi bar Kakuzta were born on Sunday, yet these twins are completely opposite in nature:²⁸ Ashi is a king, that is, the virtuous head of the Rabbinic academy of Sura.²⁹ However, his twin, Dimi bar Kakuzta, is a leader of thieves, where the obscure *qqwzt'* may reference Cyzicus, an island city whose inhabitants had a reputation for disloyalty.³⁰ The Stammaim's questions and Ashi's responses lead to a re-formulation of the astrological prediction from *without one thing to entirely positive or entirely negative*.

For Monday, and throughout the rest of §A, the Stammaim add creation-based explanations for supposedly constellation-controlled horoscopes. Just as the nativity's quarrelsome man *opposes* another, so too the sky and sea face *opposite* each other on the second day of creation (*Gen. 1:6–8*). Here, the Stammaim argue that the position of the celestial bodies does not affect one's nature; rather, the character of Monday's child is contingent upon the order of the creation of the world³¹ – as determined by God and set forth in the Torah. Likewise, for Tuesday monetary and reproductive wealth is associated with the vegetation created on the third day (*Gen. 1:11*).³² For Wednesday, the Stammaim play on the two meanings of *nhyr* – both "clear, intelligent" and "to be bright, light, give shine."³³ The latter definition is linked to the lights created on the fourth day in *Gen. 1:14–16*. The reference to this biblical passage may also be a subtle statement regarding astrology's inadequacies, as even the *lesser light* rules over the stars in *Gen. 1:16*. For Thursday, the connection

²⁸ That two people who were born on the same day have different fates was a criticism of astrology that was made frequently in the late antique world (Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* [London: Routledge, 1994], 53–54, 76). Rashi notes the similarities between the two men: they are both leaders or heads (*r'sh*), just as Sunday was the first day of creation.

²⁹ Mordecai Margalijot, *Encyclopedia of Sages of the Talmud and the Geonim*, 2 vols. [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1998), 2:185; in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, *mlkh* often denotes the head of an academy (Sokoloff, *Babylonian Aramaic*, 680). For the great esteem in which the Stammaim held the heads of academies, see Rubenstein, *Culture*, 16–31.

³⁰ Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. rev. (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 424.

³¹ I thank David Stern for this observation.

³² We suggest that *'tyr wzn'y* was connected to *'shym* because agriculture was a symbol of productivity and wealth in Late Antiquity. Similarly, Rashi suggests that plants grow quickly like promiscuity and wealth, and that they freely intermingle with other species of plants in the same way that fornicating men and women intermingle.

³³ Sokoloff, *Babylonian Aramaic*, 733.

between Joshua b. Levi's prediction and the biblical verse is difficult to determine.³⁴

For Friday, the Stammaim's explanation is replaced by Naḥman b. Yitzḥak's dictum. The fourth-century Babylonian Amora's preoccupation with mitzvoth is consistent with the depiction of his character elsewhere in Rabbinic literature.³⁵ The horoscope for the sixth day of the week may also be an implicit reference to the creation of man on the sixth day in *Gen. 1:26–31* – perhaps conveying the message that man was created in order to fulfill God's commandments – and thereby continuing the theme of creation from the previous days. The treatment for Saturday is contingent upon the word *d'hylw* (desecrated), which would portray Sabbath's child in a negative light, but makes little sense. However, *d'hylw* may very well play on the homonym *wykhl* from *Gen. 2:2*, where God *finishes* (*wykhl*) his work on the seventh day.³⁶ That is, Saturday's child will be *finished*, or perhaps *ceased*,³⁷ thereby explaining why one who is born on the Sabbath will die on the Sabbath. Here, the Stammaim's masterful control of literary techniques and scripture are on display as they simultaneously reject a possible reading of *d'hylw* as *desecrated* by proclaiming Saturday's child to be a *qdysh' rb'* (*great holy [man]*), offer an exegesis on *wyqdsh* in *Gen. 2:3* (*So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed [wyqdsh] it...*),³⁸ maintain the theme of creation running throughout §A, and play on the word *rb'* as both *Raba* (*b. Shila*) and *great*.

The form and language of §A is generally repetitive and attests to the section's literary unity: a nativity from Joshua b. Levi's notebook, followed by *What is the reason?* and the Stammaim's Genesis-based explanation for the nativity. The Bavli redactors continually and consistently demonstrate that man's nature is not contingent upon astrology and the stars. Rather, one's character is a function of the order of creation, as determined by God and set forth in the Torah.³⁹

³⁴ Rashi suggests that fish and birds do not make a great effort to acquire food, but rather are given food by the grace of God. We suggest that loving kindness (*gwml ḥsdym*) is equated with God's blessing for all animals in *Gen. 1:22*. See also Kocku von Stuckrad, "Jewish and Christian Astrology – A New Approach," *Numen* 47 (2000): 27.

³⁵ Margaliyot, *Encyclopedia*, 2:271. We make no assertions on the beliefs of the actual, historical Naḥman b. Yitzḥak. Rather, we are only concerned with how he is portrayed in Rabbinic literature.

³⁶ I thank David Stern for this observation.

³⁷ Koehler, *Lexicon*, 477.

³⁸ Likewise, Rashi suggests that it is an exegesis of *Exod. 20*.

³⁹ The domestication of astrology is paralleled in late antique Christian society (Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, 71).

§B: Literary Analysis

Ḥanina was a prominent first-generation (third century) Amora of Eretz Israel. He replaces Joshua b. Levi's day-based nativities with horary horoscopes, where each hour of the day is governed by a particular planet.⁴⁰ The horoscopes in §B are followed by Stammaitic explanations that undermine the discipline of astrology with perhaps mocking wordplay, much like in §A. Venus's name (*nwgh*) is a homonym for "splendor, light,"⁴¹ which is played by the Stammaim as a pun on *fire* (*nwr*). Mercury's proximity to the source of light is played with the Aramaic word *nhyr*, meaning both "light" and "intelligence."⁴² Saturn's (*shbt*) root (*shvt*) carries the meaning "to be annulled,"⁴³ a synonym for *btyl*, which is employed in the Stammaim's explanation.⁴⁴ Jupiter's name (*sdq*) is played by Naḥman b. Yitzḥak as *sdqn* to emphasize the importance of fulfilling commandments, the same message he gave for Friday in §A. For Mars, Ashi points out the ambiguity of the horoscope by demonstrating how it can be interpreted in diametrically opposite ways (evil thief, yet righteous circumciser), just as was done for Sunday in §A (head of thieves, yet king; entirely positive, yet entirely negative). The third generation Babylonian Amora Rabbah notes that the horoscope was powerless over him, which is answered by Abaye's humorous jab.

The natal predictions for those born under the sun and moon lack explanations. However, it is clear that the sun and moon are assigned characteristics that are polar opposites, demonstrating Ḥanina's stance that the hour (not the day) determines one's character. The sun illuminates, enabling man's secrets and devious deeds to be seen by all.⁴⁵ The moon, however, emerges at night, allowing man to successfully conceal his secrets and theft under the cover of darkness.⁴⁶

Literary themes and motifs are also used to bind §B together with §A. Both sections exhibit repetitive form (description of 'scientific' content⁴⁷) and language (*One who [is born]...; will be a rich man; What is the reason?*). The protagonists are linked, as earlier traditions suggest that

⁴⁰ A similar move is made in *b. Shab. 129*; see Leicht, *Astrologumena*, 94.

⁴¹ Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 883.

⁴² Sokoloff, *Babylonian Aramaic*, 733.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 1107.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁵ Also noted by Rashi.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 52.

Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina were known to be close associates.⁴⁸ Ashi and Naḥman b. Yitzḥak appear in both sections, playing the same role each time. There is also a general parallelism between the daily and horary horoscopes in §§A–B: Venus and Tuesday both contain the phrase: *[he] will be a rich man; he will [also] be a fornicating [man]*; Mercury and Wednesday: *[he] will be a wise and intelligent man*; Jupiter and Friday: Naḥman b. Yitzḥak on fulfilling commandments; Mars and Saturday: themes of killing and death.⁴⁹ These common themes, motifs and parallelisms further demonstrate the Stammaim's effort to knit together disparate traditions into a literary whole, a technique that will be further explicated below.

§A–B: Source Criticism

While it is possible that §§A–B may preserve actual traditions of third century sages from Eretz Israel, we find it unlikely for two reasons. First, the horoscope in §B has striking parallels to non-Rabbinic texts from the Near East which date well into Late Antiquity, if not the Middle Ages. General parallels for the form and content of §A are found in Cairo Geniza fragments.⁵⁰ The nativities in *b. Shab. 156* resemble those in *The Syriac Book of Medicines*, as well as a Mandaic text⁵¹ – there may even be a common source behind all three texts.⁵² Indeed, that Near Eastern astrological texts such as these may have been known to the Bavli is further suggested by the repetition of 'yn ('yn mzl lysr'l) in *b. Shab. 156*, which is also found at the beginning of Syriac omen texts (where it means "if").⁵³ These parallels suggest that §§A–B constitute a received tradition, dating to the days of the Stammaim at the earliest.⁵⁴ Second, the type of astrology found in §§A–B is without precedent in earlier Rabbinic

⁴⁸ *Gen. Rab. 78:5; y. Ber. 5:1; y. Shab. 14:4; y. Ta'an. 3:4*; Margaliyot, *Encyclopedia*, 1:133.

⁴⁹ However, we note that the parallelism is incomplete, due to the lack of correspondence between Thursday and Saturn.

⁵⁰ Ithamar Gruenwald, "Further Jewish Physiognomic and Chiromantic Fragments," [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 40 (1971): 308–11, where the astrological nativities alternate with physiognomic and chiromantic material; Greenfield and Sokoloff, "Astrological," 210–11.

⁵¹ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Syriac Book of Medicines: Syrian Anatomy, Pathology and Therapeutics in the Early Middle Ages*, vol. I (London: Philo Press, 1913, repr. 1976), 515 (= vol. II, 615–17); E.S. Dower, *The Book of the Zodiac* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1949), 97–98. See also Greenfield and Sokoloff, "Astrological," 212.

⁵² Greenfield and Sokoloff, "Astrological," 213.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 203 n15.

⁵⁴ *The Syriac Book of Medicines* may be as late as the twelfth century; see Adam H. Becker, "Doctoring the Past in the Present: E. A. Wallis Budge, the Discourse on Magic, and the Colonization of Iraq," *IJR* 44 (2005): 183.

literature. That is, the Rabbinic sources that are chronologically closer to the era of Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina (third century) treat a very different type of astrology than that which is found in *b. Shab. 156*.⁵⁵ Therefore, the horoscopes in §§A–B reflect the astrological norms of the times of the Stammaim, centuries after the lives of Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina.

The Rabbis in §§A–B were purposefully chosen by the Bavli redactors due to their interaction with pagans, association with each other, and lofty standing in the Galilean Rabbinic community. Joshua b. Levi figures prominently in Bavli aggadah and is portrayed in Rabbinic literature as trying understand and serve God, possibly by means of pagan customs.⁵⁶ The traditions of Ḥanina's interactions with Gentiles,⁵⁷ Babylonian roots,⁵⁸ beliefs in determinism,⁵⁹ and close association with Joshua b. Levi,⁶⁰ shed light on the Stammaim's decision to include him in this text.

§§A–B: Conclusions

The editorial skill of the Stammaim is on full display in §§A–B. Using disparate, received traditions, they weave common themes and motifs throughout §§A–B in order to form coherent, related literary units. The objective is to demonstrate God's dominance over the power of the stars. In §A, this is done by positing creation-based explanations for the horoscopes. That is, the nature of a day, and the person born on that day, is dependent upon the order of the creation of the world, as determined by God and set forth in the Torah. It is not determined by the stars. In §B, the Bavli redactors explain the horoscopes with wordplay, further undermining the power of the stars. For the Stammaim, the stars and astrology are mere window dressing, and should be ignored by Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina.

Evidence from external sources strongly suggests that the Stammaim utilized horoscope traditions that were circulating in their own days, rather than in the days of Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina. The Bavli redactors added

⁵⁵ See discussion on §C below.

⁵⁶ *Gen. Rab. 78:5; y. Ber. 5:1; b. Ber. 7a; b. Abod. Zar. 4b*. Jacob Neusner, ed., *Dictionary of Ancient Rabbis: Selections from The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 265. Joshua b. Levi may be associated with astrology in one other text, *b. Ber. 59*; see Solomon Gandz, "Benediction," 322. We agree with Fraenkel that there is not a singular image of Joshua b. Levi that pervades the entire Bavli, and surely not all of Rabbinic literature; see Jonah Fraenkel, *The Aggadic Narrative Harmony of Form and Content* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 273–94.

⁵⁷ *y. Ber. 5:1; y. Erub. 6:4*.

⁵⁸ Margaliyot, *Encyclopedia*, 1:133.

⁵⁹ *b. Hul. 7b*.

⁶⁰ *Gen. Rab. 78:5; y. Ber. 5:1; y. Shab. 14:4; y. Ta'an. 3:4*; Margaliyot, *Encyclopedia*, 1:133.

their own explanations to these horoscopes to undermine the power of the stars and promote Torah and God.

§C: *Literary Analysis*

Section C serves as the midpoint of the sugya, situated between the proponents (Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina in §§A–B) and opponents (Shmuel, Akiva, and Naḥman b. Yitzḥak in §§D–G) of astrology. Section C is linked to §B by the presence of Ḥanina and the themes of wealth and wisdom. This section also introduces the phrase *there is no constellation for Israel*, which appears in each of the following sections (§§D–G). That is, the Bavli redactors have integrated §C, which is largely based on a received tradition,⁶¹ into our sugya by means of themes and language that are characteristic of *b. Shab. 156* as a whole.

Ḥanina and Yoḥanan, who have a tradition of disputes in earlier Rabbinic literature,⁶² face-off in §C, where the consequences of Ḥanina's and Joshua b. Levi's astrology are brought to the fore. The Babylonian-born Ḥanina declares that *mzl* makes one wise and wealthy. This has two important implications. First, merit and acts of righteousness have no effect on man's wealth or wisdom.⁶³ Second, astrology is the force that governs man's fate – not the order of creation or any other agent, including God. To emphasize this point, Ḥanina declares that *there is a constellation for Israel* – i.e. astral powers indeed hold sway over Israel's fate.

Yoḥanan counters that *there is no constellation for Israel* – the stars exercise no influence over Israel. Note that he does not undermine the efficacy of astrology over the Gentiles. Rather, Israel is unique in its immunity from planetary influence. Moreover, Yoḥanan's statement that *there is no constellation for Israel* is made more powerful in light of the earlier Rabbinic traditions that depict him as lenient towards idolatry;⁶⁴ that is, he knows to draw the line at astrology. The implication of Yoḥanan's words is that one's nature is actually determined by adherence to Torah and God. Yoḥanan bolsters his position by citing Scripture, which provides decisive proof – as there is no further argument from Ḥanina. Moreover, Yoḥanan establishes a boundary marker: Israel is not subject to astral influences, while those outside of Israel are ruled by the power of the stars.

⁶¹ See §C: Source Criticism below.

⁶² *y. Beṣah. 60a; y. Sheb. 38c; Margaliyot, Encyclopedia, 2:192.*

⁶³ Also noted by Rashi.

⁶⁴ See the sources cited in Baumgarten, "Art in the Synagogue," 76–78.

§C: *Source Criticism*

Section C has close parallels in earlier Rabbinic writings, indicating that it is indeed a received tradition. By focusing on the differences between these parallel texts, we can better understand the Bavli's unique disposition. The received tradition centers on the use of *Jer. 10:2* as an anti-astrological proof-text. The earliest example is *Mekhilta Pisha 2:3* (Bo I), which interprets solar and lunar eclipses as good or bad signs (*symn*) for all of Israel or the Gentiles:

R. Yosiah says: When the constellations (*mzlwt*) are eclipsed in the east, it is a bad sign (*symn*) for the inhabitants of the east; in the west, it is a bad sign for the inhabitants of the west. R. Yonatan says: Both these and those [signs] are assigned to the Gentiles, as it is said: *Thus said the Lord: Do not learn the ways of the nations, and do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; [let the nations be dismayed by them!]* (*Jer. 10:2*).⁶⁵

This tradition is also incorporated into *Tosefta Sukkah 2:6*, which adds:

When Israel is occupied with Torah, they do not worry about all of these [signs], as it is said: *Thus said the Lord: Do not learn the ways of the nations, and do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; [let the nations be dismayed by them!]* (*Jer. 10:2*).⁶⁶

The passage in *t. Sukk. 2:6* indicates that the redactors of the *Tosefta* understood augury and Torah to be mutually exclusive; one cannot have both. Reliance on signs in the sky necessitates neglect of Torah and vice versa. The idea that Torah and astrology are irreconcilable forces is drawn upon later in our sugya (§G).

While this is not the place to delve into a history of astrology in all of Rabbinic literature, it is important to note that the type of star-gazing found in the *Mekhilta* and *Tosefta* is of a very different sort than that found in *b. Shab. 156*. The earlier writings are concerned with augury, the practice of divination from omens or signs. Consequently, the *Mekhilta* and *Tosefta* texts are primarily interested in eclipses. In contrast, *b. Shab. 156* is concerned with horoscopy and nativities, which use diagrams of the heavens to show the relative position of planets at the moment of one's birth, thereby determining one's character. Consequently, *b. Shab. 156* is

⁶⁵ H. S. Horovitz, and I. A. Rabin, eds., *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ismael* (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1960), 7, lines 18–20. Translation based on Jacob Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933–35), 1:19, and Jacob Neusner, *Mekhilta According to Rabbi Ishmael: An Analytical Translation*, 2 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 1:15.

⁶⁶ Ed. Saul Lieberman, *The Tosefta: According to Codex Vienna, with Variants from Codices Erfurt, London, Genizah MSS. and Editio Princeps (Venice 1521): The Order of Mo'ed* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962; repr., 2002), 262. Translation based on Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Translated from Hebrew with a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 572.

concerned with a number of heavenly features, namely all the known planets and their associated days of the week. This seems to be a far more elaborate type of astrology than that found in the Mekhilta and Tosefta, which is little more than eclipse-watching.

A second important distinction between earlier and later Rabbinic discussions of astrology concerns those subject to the predictions. In the Mekhilta and Tosefta texts, celestial features govern the fate of large groups: inhabitants of the east, inhabitants of the west, and the whole world. However, *b. Shab. 156* is concerned with personal, individual uses of astrology. The signs in the sky are used to predict the nature of the individual born under that sign. The power of horoscopy in *b. Shab. 156* is far more nuanced, as an array of character traits are predicted. This is much more complex than the astrology that appears in the Mekhilta and Tosefta passages, where omens in the sky are deemed simply "good" or "bad."

The exegetical traditions based on *Jer. 10:2* continued to be incorporated into discussions on astrology in the Amoraic period, as in the fifth-century work Genesis Rabbah 44:12:

In the days of Jeremiah, the Israelites wished to take up this principle [of astrology], but the Holy One, blessed be he, did not permit them. Thus it is written: *Thus said the Lord: Do not learn the ways of the nations, and do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; [let the nations be dismayed by them!]* (*Jer. 10:2*).⁶⁷

It is notable that *the Israelites wished to take up this principle [of astrology]* is a statement that is included in *Gen. Rab. 44:12*, but is absent from parallel passages in the earlier, Tannaitic texts *Mek. Pisha 2:3 (Bo 1)* and *t. Sukk. 2:6*. This suggests a heightened concern amongst the editors of Genesis Rabbah over a perception that Jews wished to practice astrology. The statement is cleverly retrojected into the biblical period in the days of Jeremiah, which adds weight to the discussion and establishes a precedent for the redactors' anti-astrological position.

The prohibition against astrology can be easily derived from the citation of *Jer. 10:2* (*Thus said the Lord: Do not learn the ways of the nations, and do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; let the nations be dismayed by them!*) in *Mek. Pisha 2:3 (Bo 1)*, *t. Sukk. 2:6*, and *Gen. Rab. 44:12*. However, it is significant that the redactors of Genesis Rabbah felt the need to clearly explicate the implications of *Jer. 10:2*: *but the Holy One, blessed be he, did not permit them*. This unequivocal statement on the

⁶⁷ Ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Raba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965), 433. Translation based on H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 3d ed.; 2 vols. (London: Soncino, 1983), 367–68; and Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation*, 3 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 2:133–34.

prohibition of astrological practices is unique to *Gen. Rab. 44:12* and adds vigor and urgency to its stance against astrology. This statement, together with *the Israelites wished to take up this principle [of astrology]*, indicates a greater preoccupation with astrology amongst the redactors of Genesis Rabbah than amongst the editors of the Mekhilta and Tosefta.

Like *Gen. Rab. 44:12*, *b. Shab. 156* also stakes out a position against astrology, though there is a subtle difference between the two: whereas Genesis Rabbah holds that astrological practices are prohibited; the Bavli is more concerned with demonstrating that astrology is powerless over Israel. The Bavli's position is evident in two passages in §C. The first is Yoḥanan's statement that *there is no constellation for Israel*. Israel has no sign of the zodiac and therefore its fate is not controlled by any of the stars or planets in the sky. That the Stammaim considered this idea to be of great importance is suggested by the fact that *there is no constellation for Israel* is repeated throughout the remainder of our sugya. Following the citation of *Jer. 10:2*, the Bavli adds that *the nations are dismayed, but not Israel*. The explications of *Jer. 10:2* in *b. Shab. 156* and *Gen. Rab. 44:12* highlight their different approaches: while Genesis Rabbah seeks to ban astrology (*...the Israelites wished to take up this principle [of astrology], but the Holy One, blessed be he, did not permit them*), the Bavli argues that the stars are simply powerless over Israel (*the nations are dismayed, but not Israel*).

§C: Conclusions

In §C the Stammaim integrate a received exegetical tradition on *Jer. 10:2* into their discussion on astrology. This tradition is also preserved in earlier Rabbinic sources, the Mekhilta, the Tosefta, and Genesis Rabbah. *Mek. Pisha 2:3 (Bo 1)* holds that the stars rule the fate of the Gentiles,⁶⁸ a position that is paralleled in, if not drawn upon by, *b. Shab. 156*. Moreover, the Tosefta's position that Torah study can overcome the power of heavenly bodies is echoed later in our sugya (§G). Our sugya's message is cast in high relief upon comparison with Genesis Rabbah. Whereas *Gen. Rab. 44:12* merely prohibits the practice of astrology, *b. Shab. 156* holds that the stars are powerless over Israel. The Bavli's slogan *there is no constellation for Israel* is used in §C for the first time and is prevalent in the following sections of *b. Shab. 156*; as such, it serves to establish a boundary marker between Israel and the nations.

⁶⁸ Lieberman, *Greek*, 99.

§D: Literary Analysis

Section D continues the theme established in §C, that Israel is immune from the power of the stars. Rab, as cited by his student Rav Yehudah, supports Yoḥanan's position that Israel is not subject to planetary influence, repeating the slogan *there is no constellation for Israel*.⁶⁹ It is fitting that both Rab and Yoḥanan were active in the third century, the same time period as Joshua b. Levi and Ḥanina.⁷⁰

The prooftexts for Rab's position center on Abraham, whose dual image as both patriarch and astrologer in Jewish literature makes the selected textual traditions an ideal fit for a sugya on astral influence. The sequence of events as they are presented in the Bavli is crucial. In the biblical account, Abram⁷¹ laments his lack of an heir and God reaffirms his promise to give the patriarch an heir (*Gen. 15:3–4*); after the lament, God brings Abram outside to count the stars (*Gen. 15:5*). In *b. Shab. 156*, it is significant that verse *Gen. 15:5* is cited before *Gen. 15:3–4*. That is, in the Bavli, Abram first goes outside to look at the stars, and through their consultation determines that he will not have any heirs. In the Bavli, looking at the stars promotes the patriarch's lament in *Gen. 15:3*. That astrology lies behind his grievance is made explicit by inserting an extra-biblical tradition: *He [Abraham] said before him: Master of the universe! I looked at my constellation, and I am not fated to have a child*.⁷² However, in the biblical account, Abram's disbelief in God's promise causes him to lament, and God takes Abram outside to look at the stars only after the promise is reaffirmed in *Gen. 15:4*. By placing verse five before verses three-four, and inserting extra-biblical traditions, the Bavli redactors have projected the theme of astrology onto the biblical narrative. That is, the Stammaim have craftily re-arranged the order of *Gen. 15:3–5* and interpolated extra-biblical traditions in order to contextualize the verses within a discussion on astrology between the patriarch and God. Abraham is then told to abandon his astrological practices as *there is no constellation for Israel* – i.e. the stars do not hold sway over Israel, making astrological speculation a fruitless exercise.

God then offers to move Jupiter in order to demonstrate his power over celestial bodies. The choice of Jupiter is due to its Hebrew root, *sdq*, which also appears in §§B, F–G, serving as another linguistic thread that is

⁶⁹ In the Bavli, repetitive language frequently serves to bind together smaller sections of a text into a single literary unit (Louis Jacobs, "The Talmudic *Sugya* as a Literary Unit," *JJS* 24 (1974): 119–26; Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 251–53).

⁷⁰ Margaliyot, *Encyclopedia*, 1:133, 2:185, 192, 302.

⁷¹ It is notable that the figure is *Abraham* in the Bavli's reworking of *Gen. 15* in *b. Shab. 156* §D, though he is *Abram* in the biblical text.

⁷² This extra-biblical tradition is also found in *b. Ned. 32a*.

woven throughout our sugya.⁷³ God's dominance over the stars and planets is emphasized by the citation of *Isa. 41:2*, where *sdq* not only means "victor," but also alludes to Jupiter – which is *sdq* in §D. The message is that God demonstrates his power over *sdq* by rousing it and summoning it to service. Moreover, there is a clever, second play on *Isa. 41:2* as a reference to Abraham and his merit – *sdqh* – in *Gen. 15:6*.⁷⁴ In sum, §D holds that Israel is not influenced by astrology and that God is the true guiding force behind the world.

§D: Source Criticism

There are many traditions in Jewish writings that portray Abraham as an astrologer, dating back to the Second Temple period and prevalent throughout Rabbinic literature.⁷⁵ Some strands of this tradition treat astrology as magic performed with a special instrument,⁷⁶ while others as star-gazing.⁷⁷ In earlier traditions, Abraham abandons astrology on his own volition.⁷⁸ However, in later traditions, Abraham needs some prodding in order to give up his astral ways.⁷⁹ We presently investigate the exegetical traditions that utilize *Gen. 15:3, 15:5* to associate Abraham with astrology.

And Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring [my steward will be my heir]" (Gen. 15:3). R. Shmuel bar Yitzḥak said: [Abraham said:]⁸⁰ "My planetary fate (hmzl) oppresses me and says, 'Abram cannot beget a child.' " The Holy One, blessed be he said to him, "That is indeed as you say: Abram and Sarai ('vrm wsrj) cannot beget, but Abraham and Sarah ('vrhm wsrh) can beget."

He took him outside [and said: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (Gen. 15:5)]

R. Joshua in the name of R. Levi [said]: Did he bring him outside of the world, that it should say *He took him outside*? Rather, [it means that] he showed him the open spaces

⁷³ Rashi posits that Jupiter was Abraham's sign.

⁷⁴ Also noted by Rashi.

⁷⁵ For sources on Abraham as an astrologer in the Greco-Roman period, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist and Father of the Jews; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.154–168, and the Greco-Roman Discourse about Astronomy/Astrology," *JSJ* 35 (2002): 124–27.

⁷⁶ *T. Qidd. 5:17*.

⁷⁷ *Jubilees 12:16–18*.

⁷⁸ *Jubilees 12:16–18*; Philo, *On Abraham*, 69–71. For an analysis of the Second Temple sources of Abraham as astrologer, see Reed, "Abraham."

⁷⁹ *Gen. Rab. 44:12*; *b. Ned. 32a*; *b. Shab. 156*.

⁸⁰ "Abraham said" is suggested by Theodor-Albeck, *Midrash*, 432, and Freedman, *Genesis*, 1:367.

of heaven, in line with this verse: *When he had not yet made earth and fields [i.e. open spaces]*⁸¹ (*Prov. 8:26*).

R. Judah b. R. Simon [in the name] of R. Yoḥanan said: He raised him [i.e. Abraham] above the vault of heaven, as he says to him "Look toward heaven (*Gen. 15:5*)," where look [means] only "from above to below" [therefore he looked downward from above the vault of heaven].

Rabbis say: You are a prophet, not an astrologer. As it is said: *Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet* (*Gen. 20:7*).

In the days of Jeremiah, the Israelites wished to take up this principle [of astrology], but the Holy One, blessed be he, did not permit them. Thus it is written: *Thus said the Lord: Do not learn the ways of the nations, and do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; [let the nations be dismayed by them!]* (*Jer. 10:2*).

Your father Abraham wanted to take up this principle, but [God] did not allow him (*Genesis Rabbah 44:12*).⁸²

The link between astrology and *Gen. 15:5* is inherent in the text (*Look toward heaven and count the stars*), though *Gen. 15:3*'s link is less obvious. The two citations from *Genesis Rabbah* above represent the earliest preserved versions of traditions that link *Gen. 15:3* and *15:5* with astrology – constituting an innovation in the exegesis of these verses around the fifth century.

Genesis Rabbah's lengthy statement on astrology, *Gen. Rab. 44:12*, bears important similarities to §D of *b. Shab. 156*. First, both use *Gen. 15:5* to discuss Abraham as astrologer. Second, both champion the same general message, that God, not the stars, governs the fate of Israel.⁸³ Likewise, *Gen. Rab. 44:10* and *b. Shab. 156* bear striking similarities in that they both understand Abraham's lament in *Gen. 15:3* to be a result of his astrological practices. While it is not possible to determine if *b. Shab. 156* drew upon these traditions exactly as they are preserved in *Genesis Rabbah*, at the very least it seems likely that *Gen. Rab. 44:10* and *44:12* and *b. Shab. 156* drew upon a common tradition that links *Gen. 15:3*, *15:5* with astrology. Moreover, it is probable that *Genesis Rabbah* preserves the earlier version of this exegetical tradition.

A comparison of *Genesis Rabbah* and *b. Shab. 156* texts will highlight the differences in their aims and the methods of their redactors. First, *b. Shab. 156* has conflated the astrological exegesis of *Gen. 15:3*, *15:5* into a single narrative, whereas they are presented as separate units in *Gen. Rab. 44:10*, *44:12*. The Bavli also incorporates *Gen. 15:4*, which has no explicit link to astrology in *Genesis Rabbah*'s exegesis on that verse (*Gen. Rab.*

⁸¹ As suggested by Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 2:133.

⁸² Text based on Theodor-Albeck, *Midrash*, 432–34. I have consulted Freedman, *Genesis*; Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*; and NRSV in my translation.

⁸³ As noted by Neusner in his commentary, *Genesis Rabbah*, 2:134.

44:11). Furthermore, the Bavli redactors have interpolated extra-biblical quotations, creating a smooth dialogue between Abraham and God.⁸⁴

Next, we find that *Gen. Rab. 44:12* and *b. Shab. 156* have slightly different foci. *Gen. Rab. 44:12* claims that Abraham looked downward and thus he did not look up at the stars as astrologers do. It then cites *Gen. 20:7* to indicate that Abraham is a prophet, not an astrologer – for *Gen. Rab. 44:12*, the two are incompatible. Thus, *Gen. Rab. 44:12* centers on undermining the portrayal of Abraham as an astrologer. In contrast, the redactors of *b. Shab. 156* §D do not attempt to deny that Abraham practiced astrology. Instead, they accept the patriarch's image as astrologer and then encourage him to change his ways: *Abandon your astrological speculation!* for Israel is immune from planetary influence as God is the true motivating force behind the world.

There is another important distinction between *Gen. Rab. 44:12* and *b. Shab. 156* §D. Both texts hold that astrology rules over the Gentiles but is powerless over Israel. In *Gen. Rab. 44:12* this point is made with Scripture alone, and the line between Israelite and Gentile must be inferred from *Jer. 10:2*. In the Bavli, however, following its citation of *Jer. 10:2*, the Stammaim add *they [i.e. the nations] are dismayed, but not Israel*, an idea further underscored by *there is no constellation for Israel*. For the Bavli, the establishment of astrology as a boundary marker between Israel and the Gentiles is central to the message of *b. Shab. 156*. The Stammaim explicate this point with a clarity and forcefulness that is unparalleled in *Genesis Rabbah* or other earlier Rabbinic sources.

§D: Conclusions

Section §D craftily manipulates the *Gen. 15* narrative to demonstrate that Israel is not subject to planetary influence, as astrology serves as a boundary marker between Israel and the Gentiles – a similar message to that of §C. Section D, however, goes one step further than §C in demonstrating that God trumps the stars and serves as the true guiding force behind the universe. Section D draws upon preexisting exegetical traditions that link *Gen. 15:3*, *15:5* to astrology. These traditions are relatively recent, as the earliest preserved versions date back only to *Genesis Rabbah*. However, whereas *Gen. Rab. 44:12* denies that Abraham is an astrologer, *b. Shab. 156* §D accepts this and encourages the patriarch to change his ways because astrological practices are useless for Israelites.

⁸⁴ The extra-biblical dialogue is also found in *b. Ned. 32a*, which preserves a shorter version of the conversation between God and Abraham. The tradition in *b. Ned. 32a* lacks the citations of *Gen. 15:3–4* and *Isa. 41:2*, as well as God's offer to move Jupiter. It is situated amidst a collection of traditions about Abraham, and develops into a short discussion on augury (*nhsh*) based around *Num. 23:23*.

§E: Literary Analysis

The first-generation Babylonian Amora Shmuel (second–third centuries)⁸⁵ is associated with astrology elsewhere in the Bavli,⁸⁶ where he professes knowledge of the planetary week.⁸⁷ Section §E begins with *there is no constellation for Israel*, formally, thematically and linguistically tying it to §§C–D, F–G of *b. Shab. 156*. The genre, however, has changed from a description of “scientific” content (§§A–B) and exegesis (§§C–D) to narrative in §§E–G. The theme of shame, which is common in the Bavli, is prevalent in §E as the Israelite pretends to collect bread from the one who lacks it in order to spare him from public embarrassment.⁸⁸ The editorial hand of the Stammam is evident with the repetition of key words, as the final line of §E bears the root *šdq*, which is also found in §§B, D–F. There is a play on the word for *snake*: the Bavli uses the Aramaic *hywy*,⁸⁹ the equivalent of *nḥsh* in biblical Hebrew, which is also a homonym for *omen*.⁹⁰ Moreover, not only is the Israelite protected from the snake, but the snake itself dies – a reversal of Avlat’s prediction that the snake would kill the Israelite.

Like other sections, §E draws on the theme of astrology as a boundary marker between Jews and Gentiles. Not only is Avlat’s prediction wrong, but Shmuel is proven to be correct. Recall Shmuel’s prediction: *if he is an Israelite, he will go and come [back]*. That is, Israelites are immune from planetary influence while Gentiles are not – further emphasizing the sugya’s anti-astrological message⁹¹ and indicating why *from Shmuel also [we learn that] there is no constellation for Israel*.

Shmuel’s proclamation *you fulfilled a commandment* is paralleled elsewhere in the sugya by Nahman b. Yitzḥak (§§A–B) and Akiva (§F). The link between Israel’s immunity from astrology and fulfilling commandments becomes an increasingly important theme. Note Shmuel’s assuredness that the astrological prediction will be proven false, even before he learns of the mitzvah that was performed: *If he is an Israelite, he will go and come [back]*. Two possible interpretations arise: an Israelite’s fate is protected against an astrological prediction whether or not he fulfills commandments (i.e. Shmuel did not say: If he is an Israelite *and* performs commandments he will go and come back). Or Shmuel was confident that as an Israelite, this man would surely fulfill a commandment – that is,

⁸⁵ Margaliyot, *Encyclopedia*, 2:327.

⁸⁶ *b. Erub. 56a; b. Shab. 129b*; see Leicht, *Astrologumena*, 94–95.

⁸⁷ Gandz, “Origin,” 223.

⁸⁸ Rubenstein, *Culture*, 68–69.

⁸⁹ Sokoloff, *Babylonian Aramaic*, 450.

⁹⁰ Koehler, *Lexicon*, 1:690–91.

⁹¹ I thank David Stern for this observation.

satisfying commandments make one an Israelite, which in turn provides protection against the horoscope.

§E: Source Criticism

Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 6:9, 8d⁹²

Two students of R. Ḥanina went out to cut wood. A certain astrologer saw them. He said: These two will go out but not return.

When they went out they came upon a certain old man. He said to them: Give me alms, for it has been three days since I have tasted anything.

They had a loaf of bread. They cut it in half and gave it to him. He ate and prayed for them. He said to them: May your souls be preserved this day just as you have preserved my soul for me this day. They went out safely and came back safely.

There were some men there who had heard his [the astrologer’s] words. They said to him: Did you not say, “These two will go out but not return”?

He said: There is here a man of lies [= me], whose astrology is lies.

Even so they went and searched and found a snake, half in this one’s load and half in the other’s. They said: What good deed did you do today? They told him the deed.

He [the astrologer] said: What can I do? For the God of the Jews is appeased by half a loaf.

There are a number of differences between the versions of the story found in the Bavli and Yerushalmi. In *y. Shab. 6:9, 8d*, the astrologer’s prediction is disproved by the actions of two students of Ḥanina – a sage unsuitable for the Bavli’s version because of Ḥanina’s *promotion* of astrology earlier in its sugya (§C). Shmuel is a fitting replacement for Ḥanina, as the former is associated elsewhere with astrology and professes knowledge of a planetary week, but does not promote it as intensely as Ḥanina does in §§B–C.⁹³

The nature of the fulfilled commandment also differs between the texts. In the Yerushalmi, it is a simple act of charity: upon request, the two students give the old man half their loaf of bread. The Bavli, however, takes the mitzvah one step further: the Israelite gives the bread without having been asked. Moreover, the Bavli’s Israelite spares the hungry man from the shame of not contributing to the common pool of bread. Indeed, shame is an important theme in the Bavli.⁹⁴ The Yerushalmi version seeks to inflict (rather than avoid, as in the Bavli) shame, as it publicly

⁹² Peter Schäfer and Hans-Jürgen Becker, eds., *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi*, Band II/1–4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). Translation based on Rubenstein, *Culture*, 68–69.

⁹³ *b. Erub. 56a; b. Shab. 129b*; Gandz, “Origin,” 223.

⁹⁴ Rubenstein, *Culture*, 68–69.

embarrasses the astrologer. In the Yerushalmi, astrology is nothing but lies; in the Bavli, astrology is a real science that has real use for the Gentiles, but has no influence over Israel, which is consistent with the rest of our sugya. The inclusion of the snake in the astrologer's prediction in the Bavli adds a sense of irony that the Yerushalmi lacks: the astrologer predicts that a snake will kill the Israelite, but in the end, the snake itself is killed.⁹⁵

§E: Conclusions

Literary and source-critical analyses have highlighted the Bavli's message that Israel is not subject to planetary influence, the theme that permeates the entire sugya. Shmuel's prediction that the Israelite will return unharmed *because* he is an Israelite reinforces the theme seen elsewhere in our sugya that astrology serves as a boundary marker between Jew and Gentile. Section §E adds a strong emphasis on the fulfillment of commandments, perhaps making it a defining characteristic of an Israelite and a necessary condition for immunity from planetary influence.

§F: Literary Analysis

There is a great deal of parallelism between §E and §F as both serve as aggadic examples as to why *there is no constellation for Israel*. In each, the astrologers' predictions are nearly identical and the potential victims are unaware of the proximity of the attacking snake. Moreover, both reverse the astrologer's prediction as the snake is killed instead of the Israelite/Akiva's daughter. Both Shmuel and Akiva ask *what did you do* upon finding the dead snake. In both stories, the fulfilled commandments involve supplying a man with food. In §F, the banquet distracted others from attending to the beggar. Indeed, elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud meals often distract people from their moral responsibilities.⁹⁶ Both sections end with a sage's interpretation of *Prov. 10:2*, namely that *sdqh*, saves not only from an unnatural death, but from death in general. Indeed, the root *sdq* is used throughout the sugya, as the Bavli redactors weave a linguistic thread throughout *b. Shab. 156*. The parallelism between §E and §F demonstrates the Stammim's editorial skill to formally, thematically, and linguistically bring disparate traditions together into a single literary unit.

An important difference arises in the behavior of the sages. In §E Shmuel is confident that the astrologer's prediction will be proven wrong so long as the man is an Israelite. However, in §F Akiva *was very worried*

⁹⁵ The use of irony is common in Rabbinic literature; see Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 247–48.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 148.

about the Chaldean's prediction, even though he knows that his daughter is an Israelite. We posit that Akiva is troubled because, at this point in the story, he is unaware that his daughter had performed an act of charity. With Akiva's apprehension, the Bavli redactors raise the importance of righteousness in warding off an evil astrological prediction. Fulfilling commandments somehow defines an Israelite as such, and protects him or her from astrological powers. To sum up, §F promotes the major themes of the sugya – that Israel is immune from planetary influence and that astrology can serve as a boundary marker between Jew and Gentile. Moreover, §F places great emphasis on the fulfillment of mitzvot and acts of charity, as it is a precondition for immunity from the power of the stars.⁹⁷

§G: Literary Analysis

There are a number of motifs and themes in §G that are common to our sugya. In §§E–G, the astrologers do not make their prediction directly to the subject, but rather through an intermediary – Shmuel, Akiva, and Nahman b. Yitzhak's mother. The astrologer's prediction that Nahman b. Yitzhak would be a thief is identical to one of Ashi's four interpretations of one born under Mars in §B. Nahman b. Yitzhak's transformation from thief in his youth to sage recalls the earlier juxtaposition of the twins Ashi and Dimi, head of an academy and thieves, respectively. The motif of the worried parent appears in both §G with Nahman b. Yitzhak's mother and §F with Akiva. The term "Chaldeans" is also found in §F and *there is no constellation for Israel* is found throughout the sugya.

Section G differs from §F in an important way, as Nahman b. Yitzhak's mother tells her son to cover his head, a more active stance than that taken by Akiva, who merely worries about his daughter. The reasoning, to instill *the fear of heaven* and her instructions *to ask for mercy* are unprecedented in *b. Shab. 156*. Indeed, the introduction of these elements may indicate that Nahman's mother was more worried about the astrologer's prediction than Akiva in §F, and far more concerned than Shmuel in §E. That is, as we progress through the sugya, the Bavli redactors increase the importance of adherence to God's commandments, adding more conditions in order to gain immunity from planetary influence.

In the end, Nahman b. Yitzhak's distraction from Torah study left him unprotected from the astrologer's prediction.⁹⁸ The Rabbis considered

⁹⁷ We have not found an earlier version of the traditions preserved in §F.

⁹⁸ While it is possible that the loss of his head covering caused Nahman b. Yitzhak to succumb to evil inclination, we note that nothing happened to him immediately after his head covering fell. Rather, only after he looked up at the palm tree – thereby interrupting his Torah study – was he overtaken by an evil inclination.

Torah study to be one of the greatest mitzvot,⁹⁹ and may indeed be one of the defining acts of an Israelite. Moreover, one should avoid any interruptions in Torah study, as any such break could lead to forgetfulness.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the importance of fulfilling commandments in order to gain immunity from the stars reaches its climax in §G. Whereas §§E–F hold that fulfilling commandments protects one from the stars, §G demonstrates the counterfactual: the interruption of fulfilling commandments such as Torah study leaves one vulnerable to astrological influence. There is no one better to demonstrate the importance of mitzvot than Nahman b. Yitzhak, who earlier in our text (§§A–B) stressed the fulfillment of commandments.¹⁰¹

V. Conclusion

Our analysis of *b. Shab. 156* is the first full treatment of the *locus classicus* of Talmudic discussions on astrology and constitutes a first step towards understanding the Bavli's views on the subject. Our literary and source-critical analyses have highlighted the editorial skill and methods of the Bavli redactors. The Stammaitim appropriated earlier Galilean Rabbinic traditions on astrology and often changed the focus of these texts. These once-disparate received traditions were woven together into a single literary unit by the Bavli redactors with threads of repetitive language and recurrent themes. It is significant that the text does not deny the efficacy of astrology over the Gentiles. For the Bavli's redactors, astral powers influence the nations but not Israel, and astrology functions as a boundary marker between Israel and the Gentiles. Indeed, the redactors of the Bavli have integrated this boundary marker into the message of *b. Shab. 156*: the people of Israel are immune from astral influence so long as they fulfill God's commandments. Those who do not busy themselves with God's commandments are subject to the power of the stars like the Gentiles.

⁹⁹ Rubenstein, *Culture*, 31–33.

¹⁰⁰ Lee Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Press, 1989), 45.

¹⁰¹ We have not found an earlier version of the traditions preserved in §G.

Margin of Error

Women, Law, and Christianity in *Bavli Shabbat* 116a–b

HOLGER M. ZELLENTIN

'The horse-leech has two daughters:
Give, give' (Proverbs 30.15)
What is 'Give, give'?

Rav Hisda said in the name of Mar 'Ukba:
It is the voice of two daughters who scream
from the Gehenom to this world: 'Bring, bring.'
Who are they? Heresy and the government.
— *Babylonian Talmud*, Avodah Zarah 17a

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the story of Imma Shalom and the philosopher in *Bavli Shabbat* 116a–b is a nuanced polemic against Christianity, an apology for the Jews' exile and the Christian rule of Palestine, and, at the same time, a defense of Babylonian Rabbinic jurisdiction on inheritance. A clear majority of scholars agreed upon the fact that the story somehow polemicalizes against Christianity. Moritz Guedemann, in 1876, was the first to consider *Bavli Shabbat* 116a–b as a satirical reaction to the Gospel of Matthew, an interpretation that most scholars followed, up to Burton Visotzky's 1995 article.¹ Hence, the question is not whether the story seeks

¹ Moritz Guedemann, *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien* (Leipzig: Oskar Leiner, 1876), 65–99. Other authors (in chronological order) discussing the passage include Michael Sachs, *Beiträge zur Sprach und Altertumsforschung* (Berlin: Veit und Comp., 1852); Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der Palästinensischen Amoräer* (Strasbourg: K.J. Trübner, 1892–99), II, 424n; Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus Christ in the Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, and the Liturgy of the Synagogue* (New York: Arno Press, 1893, repr., 1973), 69; Robert Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1903), 146–155; Edgar Hennecke ed., *Handbuch zu den Neutestamentlichen Apokryphen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1904), 70f; George Foot Moore, "The Definition of the Jewish Canon and the Repudiation of Jewish Scriptures," in *Essays in Modern Theology and Related Subjects* (ed. Ch. A. Briggs; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1911), 99–125; Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922), I, 241f; S. Zeitlin, "Jesus in Early Tannaitic

Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity

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Preface

The colloquium held on January 16–18 2005, “Making Selves and Marking Others: Heresy and Self-Definition in Late Antiquity,” follows in the steps of two earlier Princeton colloquia and volumes, which have gained wide academic attention. The series of colloquia was initiated by Peter Schäfer in 2000, with generous funding from the Princeton University Graduate School, and continued in the following years under his tutelage.* Each year, two graduate students in the Department of Religion at Princeton University choose a topic of interdisciplinary interest and organize a semester-long workshop on the selected theme, followed by a colloquium. During the workshop, graduate students present their papers to colleagues and faculty from a variety of fields, and rework them into a formal presentation. At the concluding colloquium, the participants discuss their revised work with recognized scholars from Princeton University and other institutions, invited by the organizers to present their views on the same topic.

We take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to our contributors, and to all who so generously supported the colloquium and this publication. As representative of all those who ensured our success, we have space to name only the most prominent ones. It is hardly possible to exaggerate Peter Schäfer's initiative and support for this project. Annette Yoshiko Reed has considerably facilitated our task by providing us with invaluable academic and editorial advice. Baru Saul and Lorraine Fuhrmann have ensured a pleasant stay at Princeton for all participants of the colloquium. At Princeton University, the Center for the Study of Religion, the Department of Religion, and the Program in Judaic Studies generously provided office space and funding for the colloquium and the publication. Finally, Henning Ziebritzki and Tanja Mix from Mohr Siebeck guided the project to its present form.

Holger Zellentin and Eduard Iricinschi

* Adam H. Becker and Annette Y. Reed, eds. *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, TSAJ 95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); and Ra'anan Boustán and Annette Y. Reed, eds., *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See now also Gregg Gardner and Kevin L. Osterloh, eds., *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming); and the colloquium organized in January 2007 by Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, “Revelation, Literature, and Community in Antiquity.”

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Making Selves and Marking Others: Identity and Late Antique Heresiologies

EDUARD IRICINSCHI & HOLGER M. ZELLENTIN

“The Other may not be very other at all.”
Kwame Anthony Appiah¹

As influential catchwords, “heresy” and “identity” have recently acquired the sense of entitlement and hazard that only a dominant academic paradigm would impart. In a famous manifesto of the 1970s, for instance, sociologist Peter Berger associates modernity with the “universalization of heresy.” According to Berger, the freedom to choose among different versions of plausibility characterizes the post-Enlightenment person. Under these new circumstances, heresy surrenders itself to the imperative of multiple worldviews and becomes the very label of modern religious life: “For premodern man, heresy is a possibility – usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity.”²

Academic success has not been easy on “identity” either. In the last three decades of shifting cultural geographies, identity has become an ever-present theoretical tool in the Humanities and Social Sciences to the point where Siniša Malešević has invoked the utopia of an identity-less world.³ A number of social scientists and historians concur that the birth of

* We would like to thank Adam Becker, Ra‘anan Boustan, Gregg Gardner, Martha Himmelfarb, Annette Yoshiko Reed, Jeffrey Stout, Philippa Townsend, and Moulie Vidas for their careful reading, insightful critiques, and helpful suggestions for improving this text.

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), 28. Closer to our disenchanted twenty-first century, Arthur Versluis identifies the origins of totalitarianism in “the emergence of historical Christianity,” more precisely, in its incipient heresiology and the unabated history of witch-hunting in Christianity; *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), ix.

³ Siniša Malešević, *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Basingstoke U.K.; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13–14.