

Rabbinic Eschatology: Complexity, Ambiguity, and Radical Self-Reflection

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FEW SCHOLARS HAVE FOCUSED RESEARCH on the question of rabbinic eschatology. In one of the few articles about rabbinic eschatology as such, David Novak wrote that “eschatology deals with the hope of those in this world for a world beyond their own making or even their own imagining . . . It is the ultimate human intention. As such, to a large extent, eschatology is best conceived in a phenomenology of human hope.”¹ This approach certainly helps explain and contextualize many eschatological texts and yearnings expressed in rabbinic writings, but it leaves much to be desired in the interpretation of a number of rabbinic passages.

Rabbinic literature does not include any intentional, designated set of writings organized around the topic of eschatology. The section that deals most intentionally with eschatological issues—where eschatology is built into the main structure of the text rather than arising as a tangent—is in the tenth chapter of *mSanhedrin*. The rabbis elaborate on this chapter’s points in the Gemara, but in characteristically haphazard ways, often emphasizing not the eschatological doctrines themselves but the biblical exegeses that support them.

Throughout the rest of the classical rabbinic corpus, eschatological statements, discussions, and narratives appear in a wide array of contexts,

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sometimes apparently apropos of nothing, and often in the context of rewards that one deserves but does not see in this world. We find discussions about the eschaton, for instance, concerning where and what the righteous will be resurrected wearing (bKet 11b); the angel Gabriel's slaying of Leviathan (bBB 74b–75a); about the unified song to God that will be sung in the eschaton by the prophets (bSan 91b); and about the righteous dancing around God (bTan 31a). There are mythological visions, utopian visions, nationalistic and universalistic visions, and miraculous visions. There is little if any unity to eschatological ideas or depictions among the rabbis, just as there is little unity of opinion in rabbinic literature in any realm—legal, exegetical, or theological.

Eschatology is a discourse that carries with it certain possibilities beyond the delineation of doctrine. Authors can use eschatology for purposes other than the communication of eschatology per se. That is, it can serve as a rhetorical device. This was argued in the context of Paul by Ernst Synofzik in 1977,² and David Aune has used this general approach in his analysis of passages from Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians,³ as has Robert Webb in his analysis of the Epistle of Jude.⁴ In the context of rabbinic literature, one of the possibilities that eschatology carries is the assertion of challenges to standard rabbinic ideas about themselves and others.

Rabbinic eschatological *narratives*—imaginative stories set in the eschaton—are deeply different from eschatological statements. While statements may be creative and figurative and full of allusion and depth, one often cannot escape their form, which is connected to their function: to inform the audience of when or how something will happen and its meaning. Eschatological narratives can do more; they often grapple with the *problems* inherent in those statements and sometimes offer subtle, alternative conceptions of the end. This rhetorical distinction is one familiar to that which prevails between legal statements and legal narratives, as has been explored by scholars of rabbinics building on the work of Robert Cover.⁵ Likewise, eschatological narratives contain a great deal of com-

2. *Die Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen bei Paulus* (Göttingen, 1977).

3. David Aune, "The Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10)," in *Pauline Conversations in Context: Essays in Honor of Calvin J. Roetzel*, ed. J. C. Anderson, P. Sellew, and C. Setzer (Sheffield, 2002), 68–86.

4. Robert Webb, "The Eschatology of the Epistle of Jude and Its Rhetorical and Social Functions," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 139–51.

5. Robert Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term—Forward: Nomos and Narrative" (1983), *Faculty Scholarship Series*, Paper 2705. See in particular Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia,

plexity that would be lost if we focused strictly on doctrinal statements. This essay explores eschatological narratives that demonstrate how eschatology can serve as a rhetorical repository for complexity, ambiguity, and radical self-reflection. Each text highlights ways in which eschatology is specifically useful for this sort of rabbinic self-expression.

I. ANCESTORS AND ANCESTRAL MERIT

A. bShabat 89b

The following passage is framed as an interpretation of a verse from Isaiah, but the heart of the passage is an eschatological narrative. This narrative seems to take place at the time of, or just before, the final judgment that Israel will face at the end of this world, when Israel is to be rebuked for all its sins. God tells Israel to go and receive that rebuke from the biblical patriarchs, as it will be to Israel's advantage to receive the rebuke from them—Israel's allies and defenders—rather than directly from God.

Rava expounded: What is the meaning of that which is written [Is 1.18] "Go now and let us discuss your reproof, the Lord will say"?⁶—*"Go now"?! He should have said, Come now! "The Lord will say"?! He should have said, the Lord says!*

[No, the text is correct, and its message is]

In the future, the Holy One, blessed be he, will say to Israel: Go to your ancestors and they shall reprove you.

They say to him, "Master of the world. To whom shall we go? Shall we go to Abraham, to whom you said, [Gen 15.13] "Know that your seed will be strangers in a land not their own," and he did not ask for mercy for us?

Shall we go to Isaac who blessed Esau, as it is said, [Gen 27.40] "But

2011), esp. 24–30. See also Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (New York, 2012), and Jane Kanarek, *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law* (Cambridge, 2014).

6. The NJPS translates, "Come let us reach an understanding," with a note that the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain. Most other translations render the second verb "let us reason together." BDB translates it "reason" in its appearance here and in Job 33.19. As for my translation of *lekbu* as "go" rather than "come," while in biblical Hebrew the two appear often to be interchangeable, the rabbis often distinguish the two, as indeed in their exegesis of this verse. Finally, while the biblical Hebrew phrase *ye'omar YHWH* is present tense, since in rabbinic Hebrew this would be future tense, I have translated it this way in order to clarify the exegesis.

when you break loose, you shall remove his [your brother Jacob's] yoke from upon your neck"?

Shall we go to Jacob, to whom you said, [Gen 46.3–4] "[Do not fear going down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.] I will go with you to Egypt," and he did not ask for mercy for us?

To whom shall we go?

"The Lord will say" — The Holy One, blessed be he, says to them: Since you relied only upon me, [Isaiah 1.18 continued] "If your sins are like crimson they shall turn white as snow."⁷

Israel's response to God's suggestion that it will be to their benefit to receive their rebuke from the patriarchs is to assert that the patriarchs are in fact *not* on their side.

It is not ordinarily conceived of as the task of the biblical patriarchs to serve as God's intermediaries for rebuking Israel, but they do frequently serve as intermediaries between God and Israel in rabbinic literature, praying for Israel, asserting their own merit on behalf of Israel, or reminding God of the promises he made to them which God would be breaking if he destroyed Israel.⁸ Here, the intermediary role of the patriarchs is to rebuke Israel, but the intention is clearly for the patriarchs to offer a softer, more compassionate rebuke than God would have, ultimately benefiting Israel in the eschaton.

That suggestion is then flatly rejected. Israel asserts that the patriarchs are unsuited to serve as intermediaries. This flies in the face of established rabbinic ideas about the reliable efficacy of the patriarchs as intermediaries. The rabbis portray Israel as scoffing at the idea that the patriarchs would be good intermediaries for Israel. Its eschatological context makes this both extraordinarily significant—because this realization on the part of Israel affects the entirety of the community and their ultimate salvation—and also somewhat *insignificant*, because of its uniqueness. This duality makes eschatology discourse ideal for free-play with issues like this in rabbinic literature. The eschaton, for the rabbis, seems to be at once the most important and least important setting.

B. bPesahim 119b

The next passage similarly includes critiques of the patriarchs' suitability to represent Israel, this time in a different way.

7. Translation based on MS Oxford Opp. Add. Fol. 23. See appendix.

8. See Uri Erlich, "Ben zekhut avot le-'ahrayut avot: Perek be-mahshevet ha-tefilah bi-tekufat hazal," in *Al pi ha-be'er: Jubilee Volume for Professor J. G. Blidstein*, ed. Erlich et al. (Hebrew; Beer Sheva, 2008), 13–23. See also Ze'ev Falk, "Zekhut avot bi-nevu'at Yehezkel," *Bet Mikra* 17 (1972): 393–97.

Rav Ezra expounded. Sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Ami, and sometimes in the name of Rabbi Assi: What is the meaning of the verse [Gen 21.8] “And the boy [Isaac] grew and was weaned [g-m-l], and Abraham made a great feast on the day of Isaac’s weaning [g-m-l]”?

In the future, the Holy One blessed be he will make a feast for the righteous, on the day that he will grant [g-m-l] kindness to the seed of Isaac.

After they eat and drink, they give a cup to Abraham [with which to recite the blessing after the meal]. He says to them: I shall not bless, for Ishmael came forth from me.

They give the cup to Isaac; he says to them: I shall not bless, for Esau came forth from me.

They give the cup to Jacob to bless; he says to them: I shall not bless, for I married two sisters and then the Torah came and forbade that.

They give the cup to Moses to bless; he says to them: I shall not bless, for I did not merit to enter the Land of Israel.

They give the cup to Joshua to bless; he says to them: I shall not bless, for I did not merit to have a son.

They give the cup to David to bless; he says to them: I will bless, and it is appropriate for me to bless, as it is said [Ps 116.13] “I shall raise the cup of redemption and call out in the name of the Lord.”⁹

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua are each portrayed as ultimately unworthy to perform the simple ritual of leading others in the blessings after a meal. But their reasons for invalidating themselves are bizarre and have no relationship to Jewish law or other traditions about blessings and who is qualified to recite them. Still, until we arrive at the dramatic conclusion with David, of all people, asserting his own worthiness, we encounter an eschatological feast paralyzed by ancestors who feel themselves to be completely unworthy even of performing a simple ritual.

And then we reach the conclusion. David shines in this scene. The irony of course is that David is the *most* sinful and complex character on this list, both in the Bible and in rabbinic literature, yet he is the most confident. It does not seem likely that the rabbis are simply poking fun at David, though there is some humor in this text. There is a serious message here that resonates with the other eschatological texts this essay examines. The message is not that David is superior to the other ances-

9. Translation based on MS NY–Columbia X 893 T141. See appendix.

tors. The message is that the eschatological David, not unlike the biblical character, is the only one who takes sinfulness and imperfection for granted, and that is precisely what qualifies him to lead the blessing in the eschaton.¹⁰

It is often assumed that the role of the end time will be to *resolve* problems. There are various ancient and medieval rabbinic expressions of that assumption, and some rabbinic eschatology indeed reflects that.¹¹ But in the two passages just analyzed, we find the exact opposite. The eschatological scenario is the one that makes matters problematic. Another way to conceive of this is that these texts reflect a different sort of resolution from the one usually imagined. It is a resolution that welcomes and sits comfortably with difficulty and complexity, perhaps even sinfulness, rather than seeking to smooth it out.

II. THE FATE OF THE NATIONS

In the three rabbinic texts that will occupy the rest of this essay, the rabbis choose to give voice to what they imagine to be the perspectives of the other nations of the world as they are being judged by God at the end of days. Whereas the commonplace view of eschatology and its cultural function would lead us to expect that judgment scenes against the other nations would unequivocally condemn the nations and elevate Israel, these texts in fact contend with substantive claims of unfairness to the nations.

It would have been especially easy for the rabbis to have excluded any kind of complex considerations in their eschatological narratives about non-Jews. Descriptions of the eschaton do not, strictly speaking, reflect or impact upon the rabbis' own lived experiences and need not capture the inevitable complexity of actual life. There are neither legal ramifications nor practical challenges addressed or resolved in eschatological scenarios.¹² Yet the rabbis did not, at least not always, take this opportunity

10. I am indebted to Yoni Pomeranz for this insight.

11. Elijah's ultimate arrival is often the occasion for clarity and answers. See, for instance, the Parma Scholion to Megilat Ta'anit for 23 *Marpeševan* (Vered Noam, *Megilat Ta'anit: Versions, Interpretation, History* [Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2003], 239) and mBM 1.8, 3.4–5. Karin Hedner-Zetterholm, "Elijah's Different Roles: A Reflection of the Rabbinic Struggle for Authority," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16.2 (2009): 163–82.

12. In contrast, for example, the rabbis' consideration of the prohibition against idolatry and the command to destroy idolaters raises practical and legal matters. See Moshe Halbertal, "Jews and Pagans in the Mishnah," in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. G. N. Stanton and G. G. Stroumsa (Cambridge, 2008), 159–72.

to simply bury the nations in Jewish resentment and fury. Surprisingly, some of the most generous and complex perspectives on non-Jews are expressed in this realm.

A. The Nations Meet the Messiah: bPesahim 118b

The following passage is presented by Rav Kahana as a teaching of R. Ishmael son of R. Yosi, in the name of the latter's father, based on Psalm 68:

In the future, Egypt will bring a gift¹³ for the King Messiah. It thinks, "He will not accept [it] from me."¹⁴ The Holy One, blessed be he, said¹⁵ to the Messiah: "Accept it from them; they gave lodging to my children [in]¹⁶ Egypt." Immediately: [Ps 68.32] "Nobles shall come forth from Egypt."

Ethiopia reasoned *a fortiori* regarding itself: "If so with them [Egypt], who enslaved them [Israel], we who did not enslave them, how much the more so?" Immediately: [Ps 68.32] "Ethiopia shall hasten its hands to God."¹⁷

The evil kingdom [Rome] reasoned *a fortiori* regarding itself: "If so with them [Egypt and Ethiopia], who are not their brothers, we, who are their brothers, how much the more so?" The Holy One, blessed be he, said to Gabriel: [Ps 68.31] "Blast the beasts of the reed-marsh."

[Aramaic] What is the meaning of "Blast the beasts of the reed-

13. The word for gift is *doron*, transliterated from the Greek, which can mean simply gifts or tribute but also means bribes.

14. Several manuscripts (MS New York–JTS Rab. 1608 [ENA 850]; MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23; MSS Vatican 109 and 134) and the printed editions read instead some version of: "He thought, I will not accept from it." All the text witnesses agree that the receipt of the gift is in question and that God has to instruct the messiah what to do, but the witnesses on which this translation is based are the only two witnesses that indicate a sense of insecurity on the part of Egypt.

15. Despite the setting of this narrative in the future, the verbs are all past-tense verbs, as in most rabbinic narratives.

16. While the two best witnesses lack this preposition, the text is not coherent without it. Other MSS either include the preposition (Oxford Opp. Add. Fol. 23, Vatican 109, Vatican 134) or leave out the word "Egypt" (JTS Rab. 1608 [ENA 850]).

17. On the Hebrew *kush* as Ethiopia, see David M. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 17–25, and on this particular verse, see p. 21.

marsh"? He said to him: Blast the beast [Rome] and take possession of the congregation [*edab*, Israel].

Another interpretation: "Blast the beasts of the reed-marsh" — Blast the beast that lives among the reeds, as it is said, [Ps 80.14] "The boar from the forest ravages it."

Rabbi Ḥiy'a bar Abb'a: said Rabbi Yoḥanan: he said to him, "Blast the beast" — all of whose actions are written with one reed-pen.¹⁸

[Ps 68.31] "The herd of bulls among the calves of nations" — who slaughtered my princes like calves who have no owners.

[Ps 68.31] "Trampling pieces of silver" — who outstretch their arms to receive money without fulfilling the will of their owner.

[Ps 68.31] "Scatter the nations who desire battles" — who caused Israel to be dispersed among the nations? The battles that they desired.¹⁹

The two initial characters in this passage, other than the nations, are God and the messiah, the latter of undefined status and identity; later the angel Gabriel is introduced. God corrects the instinct of the messiah not to accept a gift from Egypt. Rather than punishing Egypt as the slave-masters of Israel (as in Exodus), they are rewarded for having given Israel a place to live (presumably a reference to Gen 47). Building dramatically on Deut 23.8, "Do not hate the Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land,"²⁰ the rabbinic authors here refuse to reduce the Egyptians to slave-masters.²¹ The eschatological setting indicates that Egypt's identity is not merely an intellectual exercise or a passing consideration; rather, God's emphasis on this particular aspect of Egypt's iden-

18. This appears to mean that there is no variety in their actions; they are all completely evil. See Rashbam, ad loc.

19. According to the database of the Academy of Hebrew Language's Historical Dictionary (*Ma'agarim*), the best witnesses for this text are MS JTS Rab. 1623 (EMC 271) and MS New York–Columbia X 893 T 14. Their texts are very similar to each other, but each one has a few clear errors that the other lacks, so my translation is based on a consideration of both of these witnesses.

20. Elsewhere in the Bavli (bBer 63b), the period in which Egypt played host to Israel is taken to be that of Gen 47, when Pharaoh invites Joseph to settle his family in Egypt. But, as Seth Schwartz points out (*Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* [Princeton, N.J., 2010], 8, n. 9), "Given that the Egyptians had enslaved and oppressed the Israelites, according to the biblical narrative, the law's goodwill is rather mysterious."

21. On Egypt and rabbinic literature more broadly, see Rivka Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Miḏrash* (Berlin, 2009).

tity plays a decisive role in the ultimate fate of the Egyptians at the end of time. Again, rather than using the eschaton for cathartic condemnation, God himself is used to inject complexity by underscoring Egypt's hospitality and declaring that Egypt's gift should be accepted.

In comparison to Egypt, the next nation, Ethiopia, has a less developed national character in Jewish texts, history, and liturgy²² but serves here as a usefully neutral nation (mentioned in Ps 68 alongside Egypt as gift-bearers), who nonetheless are not God's chosen. Despite being a nation other than Israel, Ethiopia suggests that it has a positive attribute even from Israel's perspective, in that they never oppressed the Israelites. And their gift is accepted.

The next part of the passage is the most fraught, as it deals with a nation whose interaction with Israel and significance for Israel relates both to the mythic past and to the ever present reality of the Roman Empire. Here we should pause to look at the central Psalms passage in full. Ps 68.29–32, at the core of this passage, is particularly difficult to translate. The translation of Hossfeld and Zenger in the *Hermeneia* series is as follows:

- (29) . . . show yourself mighty, O God, as you did for us,
 (30) from your Temple above Jerusalem,
 where kings bring you gifts.
 (31) Rebuke the wild beast of the reeds,
 the herd of bulls among the calves of the people.
 Treading down those who take delight in silver,
 scatter the peoples who love battles.
 (32) So precious goods will come out of Egypt,
 Cush will hasten (to lift up) its hands to God.²³

The intent of the passage seems to be that if the “wild beast of the reeds” (v. 31) is rebuked, the nations or their kings (specifically Egypt and Cush) will finally come bearing gifts and showing loyalty to God and Jerusalem (vv. 30b and 32). The rabbinic passage uses these verses out of order, beginning with verse 32 about Egypt and Ethiopia (Cush), and only then turning to “the wild beast of the reeds” in verse 31, which they take to mean Rome. The author or editor of this passage then appended

22. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*.

23. Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, ed. K. Baltzer, trans. L. M. Maloney (Minneapolis, Minn., 2005), 159.

to it a running commentary on the four clauses of verse 31 that they take to be descriptions of Rome.²⁴

In the rabbinic passage's section about Rome, the narrative is interrupted by God's comment to Gabriel—not to the messiah—and the scene is never actually resolved. We are left to wonder what the messiah does or should do. Given the fact that both Egypt's and Ethiopia's gifts are accepted, it would stand to reason that the messiah *would* accept Rome's as well, at least after Gabriel metes out vengeance to them. Alternatively, perhaps the intention is that Rome's gift is rejected, and God's positive attitude to Egypt is a foil to show just how vile God considers Rome to be.

But it is important to notice that the narrative ends on a cliffhanger. Rome's gift is neither accepted nor rejected. The narrative explicitly told us what happens to both Egypt (Immediately: [Ps 68.32] "Nobles shall come forth from Egypt") and Ethiopia (Immediately: [Ps 68.32] "Ethiopia shall hasten its hands to God") after they approach. But we have no such indication for Rome, only a slew of angry exegeses. The rabbinic authors leave the matter open. Another indication that Rome's condemnation is not a simple matter is that God does not address the messiah when it comes to Rome, but the angel Gabriel.²⁵ Rome hadn't addressed Gabriel, and his role in this scene is ambiguous. The emotional tone of the conclusion is clear, but its practical significance for eschatological judgment is not at all clear.

24. According to the translation above, the third clause about "the wild beast" in v. 31 is a reiteration of the call for God to rebuke this wild beast; it is a call for God to come "treading down those who take delight in silver." This corresponds with the rabbinic portrayal of Rome as people who love money in the rabbinic passage's exegetical appendix. The NJPS translation, in contrast, considers this clause not a parallel call to come and take vengeance upon the wild beast but a description of *how* God should rebuke them: "till they come cringing with pieces of silver." This corresponds with the rabbinic portrayal of Rome ultimately bringing a gift as well, in the body of our rabbinic passage. Grammatically, neither is a perfect fit with the Hebrew. Brown, Driver, and Briggs's lexicon (BDB) indicates that the Hebrew word for "treading down" (Hossfeld and Zenger) or "till they come cringing" (NJPS)—*mitrapes*—is probably corrupt; they suggest, with a question mark, "stamping, trampling down pieces of silver" (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford, 1951], 952, s.v. מִטְרָפֶס).

25. See bShab 55a, in which God instructs Gabriel to mark the righteous to be saved and the evil to be destroyed. There, the attribute of justice intercedes and convinces God that the righteous and the evil are not actually polar opposites. To Gabriel, God had expressed the same sort of vengeful anger he expresses in the present text. Gabriel is the destroyer, but he is actually foreign to this scene.

Rome's claim, like that of Egypt, is unique to its particular identity. Rome is commonly personified as Esau in rabbinic literature, the twin brother of Jacob, who represents Israel as a nation.²⁶ This relationship is often invoked to imply a contrast and to distance the two nations; they are opposites and rivals, but other rabbinic texts express a more nuanced relationship between Jacob and Esau.²⁷ Here in *bPesahim*, the rabbis' hostility toward Rome is expressed right alongside the positive sentiment of their kinship.²⁸ From a logical perspective, it seems reasonable. If Egypt's hospitality, as it were, can offset the enslavement of the Israelites, surely Rome's close familial relationship with Israel can offset their political subjugation of Israel and perhaps even their destruction of the Temple. This perspective is, to quote sociologists from another context, "a multi-dimensional one, which is characterized by the simultaneous holding of different points of view in relation to self and 'others.'"²⁹ We should keep in mind that the rabbis express this view of Rome specifically in an eschatological context—a context that we would ordinarily assume would be an opportunity to eschew complexity in favor of catharsis.

26. See Carol Bakhos, "Figuring (Out) Esau: The Rabbis and Their Others," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58.2 (2007): 250–62.

27. For a recent consideration of this issue including numerous rabbinic texts (though some of them are later than the classical rabbinic period), see Gerhard Langer, "'Brother Esau?': Esau in Rabbinic Midrash," in *Encounters of the Children of Abraham from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. A. Laato and P. Lindqvist (Leiden, 2010), 75–94. For a more general discussion of the biblical background and rabbinic use of it, see Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), 3–12.

28. Similarly, see the passage appearing in bRH 19a and bTan 18a as a citation from Megilat Ta'anit, where it indeed appears in the Parma manuscript's scholion, invoking the sibling relationship among Israel and the nations in general (see Noam, *Megilat Ta'anit*, 312–15). Yehudah ben Shamu'a and his colleagues demonstrate (successfully) against certain Roman decrees against the practice of Jewish religion, by shouting: "By Heaven! Are we not your brothers, and are we not children of one father, and are we not children of one mother? How are we different from every nation and language such that you decree upon us harsh decrees?" This text is not historical, and the author's aims are not obvious. Ideas of human equality deriving from the single father and mother that God created have precedent in rabbinic thought (see mSan 4.5 and tSan 8.4), but here, whether heartfelt or utilitarian, the rabbis invoke the idea of the sibling relationship between all peoples despite the fact that one particular nation, Rome, is oppressing Israel. In other words, neither their own suffering nor the behavior of the Romans clouds their ability to articulate the familial, equal relationship between Israel and the other nations, including, and perhaps especially, Rome.

29. Tal Litvak-Hirsch, Dan Bar-On, and Julia Chaitin, "Constructing Self, Constructing Others: Jewish Israeli Perceptions of Palestinians and Germans," *Israel Studies Forum* 22.2 (2007): 4.

This passage includes unusually generous rabbinic views of other nations, and the ambiguous, rather than unequivocal, condemnation of Rome. In and of themselves, neither is unprecedented in rabbinic literature. But eschatology, were it meant to serve as a cathartic, comforting vision for the community that produces it, would be a surprising context for this passage's view of other nations. If, on the other hand, eschatology can serve as a challenge to its community not only by means of moral exhortation but by undermining the community's standard view of both itself and the other nations of the world, then this passage makes perfect sense.

B. Revisiting b'Avodah Zarah 2a–5b

In the long eschatological narrative spanning two and a half folios at the beginning of *b'Avodah Zarah*, God invites all those who have occupied themselves with Torah to come and claim their reward. Various nations present themselves and are in turn rejected. Unlike in the previous passage, the ultimate decisions rendered and the reality portrayed are unambiguous. However, in the various stages leading up to its conclusions this narrative includes surprisingly generous and imaginative perspectives on the nations and their claims for divine favor. Jeffrey Rubenstein, who has written extensively and masterfully on this narrative,³⁰ emphasizes its teleological thrust,³¹ and in so doing he at times overlooks the robust

30. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, Md., 1999), 212–42, and Rubenstein, “An Eschatological Drama: Bavli Avodah Zarah 2a–3b,” *AJS Review* 21.1 (1996): 1–37.

31. For instance, Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 235 describes “the point of the homily”: “When all is said and done, the nations cannot respond. There remains for them neither objection, dispute, plea, argument, nor question of God’s judgment.” Similarly, he characterizes the story as a whole as presenting the nations as “deceivers, liars, and fools” (p. 238). Rubenstein there describes the entire narrative as in line with the negative attitudes toward non-Jews conveyed in the rest of *b'AZ*. In contrast, I will show that while its conclusion may be described that way, the body of the story opens up more complex attitudes toward the nations and forces the tractate to slow down before pronouncing judgment. Rubenstein does admit that some of the Aramaic asides added to the basic narrative in the Bavli evince much more complexity than is expressed by the story as a whole. He writes, “The many voices in the comments provide ample testimony of the deep tensions in the view of gentiles within the culture of the BT” (p. 239), and later, “BT culture exhibits tensions concerning the image, virtue, and salvation of gentiles” (p. 241). My goal here is to flesh out that complexity and to show that it is apparent not merely in the additional Aramaic notes to the story, but in the body of the story itself.

complexity of the process through which it arrives at its conclusion.³² This speaks to the importance of appreciating the difference between eschatological narrative and eschatological statements or doctrinal proclamations. Focusing on the conclusion distracts from the radical ideas expressed in the body of the narrative.

The passage is framed as an expansion of Isaiah 43.9, in which God invites the nations to defend themselves, but which does not include the content of any actual self-defense. This passage fills in that gap. Joshua Levinson has shown that the very kind of gaps that the rabbis noticed and the ways in which they fill them in reflect the rabbis' own philosophical and cultural interests.³³ In the case of revising and expanding biblical allusions to the nations on trial, we discover a specific rabbinic interest in imagining the nations' perspectives on themselves, not just the Jews' or God's perspectives on them,³⁴ reflecting a rabbinic worldview in which, whatever the outcome, the nations' perspectives *matter*. As depicted here, other nations of the world are not paper tigers that will disintegrate the moment God appears on the scene to cast judgment, and in fact they are granted the dignity of due process, as it were.

In this rabbinic passage we can see the rabbis going further than and thinking independently of the biblical text while still drawing on it. They depart meaningfully from the other biblical text heavily present in the rabbinic passage, namely Psalms 2:1–4.³⁵

(1) Why do nations assemble, and peoples plot vain things; (2) Kings of the earth take their stand, and regents intrigue together against the Lord and against his anointed? (3) "Let us break the cords of their

32. Focusing on the *variety* of stances taken by Jewish authors on non-Jews, even when they share a negative valence, is important for understanding Second Temple Jewish literature. See Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel's Re-Gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts* (New York, 2006), specifically chapter 2, "The Fate of the Nations and Other Enemies," 102–96.

33. See Joshua Levinson, "From Narrative Practice to Cultural Poetics: Literary Anthropology and the Rabbinic Sense of Self," in *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters*, ed. M. R. Niehoff (Leiden, 2012), 345–67.

34. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 225–26, discusses how "the transformation of certain elements underscores the distance between biblical and rabbinic concerns," but he emphasizes the shift from a focus on the validity of the nations' gods to their worthiness of reward and the shift ("the crucial turn," p. 226) in the witnesses brought during the trial.

35. *Ibid.*, 224–25.

yokes, shake off their ropes from us!" (4) He who sits enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them.³⁶

Unlike in the passage from Isaiah, here the nations actually speak: "Let us break the cords of their yokes, shake off their ropes from us." Rubenstein writes: "The homilist takes from Psalms the notion that the nations articulate their claims and take action."³⁷ But the rabbinic homilist departs dramatically from both the content and tone of the nations' claims and actions in Psalms. In fact, the nations' outright rejection of God and God's commandments, as in Psalms, is relegated to the very *end* of the rabbinic passage and is preceded, in contrast, by patient, reasoned discourse. The rabbis refuse to simply insert the nations' statements from Psalms into their elaboration of Isaiah; there must, the narrative indicates, be a stage that gives the nations space to actually develop their argument before sealing their own fate.³⁸

We can now turn to the passage itself, made up of a Hebrew core with additional comments and expansions inserted throughout in Aramaic.³⁹ I will include only a few of these Aramaic expansions, and I will abbreviate some of the core story's text for the sake of space. There is a great deal to say about the literary quality and subtleties of the passage, for which I direct the reader to Rubenstein's essay, and which there is no need to reiterate here. The text begins:

In the world to come, the Holy One, blessed be he, brings a Torah scroll and sets it in his lap and says, "Let everyone who occupied themselves with this come and take their reward." Immediately the nations of the world assemble [. . .]

Immediately the kingdom of Rome enters first [. . .] The Holy One, blessed be he, says to them: "With what have you occupied yourselves?" They say to him: "Master of the Universe: We established many marketplaces; we built many bathhouses; we accumulated gold and silver. And we only did all of this for Israel, so that they could occupy themselves with Torah."

36. Translation from *ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 225.

38. Rubenstein, *ibid.*, notes that this part of the Psalms text relates to the conclusion of the trial in Isaiah, but I wish to emphasize the stark contrast between that conclusion and the body of the trial itself.

39. See Rubenstein's description of these insertions as "footnotes" and his commendable use of actual footnotes in his own text when translating the passage. *Talmudic Stories*, 213–19.

The Holy One, blessed be he, says to them: “Everything you did was for yourselves: marketplaces in order to set up prostitutes there, bath-houses to adorn yourselves. Gold and silver are mine, as it is said [Hag 2.8] ‘Silver is mine and gold is mine.’” [. . .] Immediately they depart from him dejected.

The Kingdom of Persia enters after it [. . .]. The Holy One, blessed be he, says to them: “With what have you occupied yourselves?” They say to him: “We constructed many bridges; we conquered many cities; we made many wars. And we only did all this for Israel, so that they could occupy themselves with Torah.”

The Holy One, blessed be he, says to them: “Everything you made was for your own needs: bridges to collect tolls, cities to impose forced labor. *I* made wars, as it is said, [Ex 15.3] “The Lord is a man of war.” [. . .] Immediately they depart from him dejected.

[Aramaic] And after the kingdom of Rome entered and gained nothing, why did it [Persia] approach? It reasons: “They [Rome] destroyed the Temple, but we built it.”

And so too with each and every nation . . .

[Aramaic] And after they see that the first ones gained nothing, why do they enter? They reason: “These [Rome and Persia] enslaved Israel but we never enslaved Israel.”⁴⁰

This is the first portion of the passage. Both the Romans and the Persians argue that the infrastructures and accomplishments of their empires have made it possible for the Jews to study Torah, but God retorts that all of it was in the empires’ self-interest. This exchange is reminiscent of a passage in bShab 33b, where R. Yehudah expresses his admiration for the Roman infrastructure, while R. Shimon bar Yoḥai cynically attributes it all to self-interest.⁴¹ And indeed, the rabbis find many occasions on which to admire or at least admit Roman accomplishments and even the benefits of living under Roman rule.⁴² What is different about this instance is that the Romans and Persians themselves give voice to their own accomplishments in this particular way. By the time this story is envisioned taking

40. Translation based on MS Paris 1337. See appendix.

41. The same sentiment is expressed in passing in bBer 63b.

42. See, for instance, Geza Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden, 1975), 215–24; Nahum Glatzer, “The Attitude to Rome in the Amoraic Period,” *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1975), 9–19; Louis H. Feldman, “Rabbinic Insights on the Decline and Forthcoming Fall of the Roman Empire,” *Journal of the Study of Judaism* 31.3 (2000): 275–97; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Jerusalem against Rome* (Leuven, 2006), 380–87.

place, in the eschaton, the Romans express the importance of Jews studying Torah (forced as they may be to do so, given the image of God stating explicitly at the outset that engagement with Torah will be the basis of reward in the world to come), and they argue, quite coherently, that they had a role to play in that. This is in fact a far easier argument to accept than the one God himself made on behalf of the Egyptians in bPes 118b that hospitality overrides enslavement regarding gift givers acceptable to the messiah.

Like R. Shimon bar Yoḥai in bShab 33, God plays the zealot, sticking to the conventional narrative of the Romans and Persians as self-interested, vain, and materialistic. But two factors urge us to linger for a moment and consider the complexity of the situation. First, like minority legal opinions rejected but preserved, the rabbis did not need to present the Romans' and Persians' perspectives at all. Their presence serves a function. The skeptic will retort that they serve as foils, making sure the audience never gives Rome and Persia too much credit for the undeniable benefits of their society. But if so, why give the Romans and Persians a voice to say these things themselves, especially given the fact that the rabbis do a perfectly good job of expressing these ideas themselves in bShab in an intrarabbinic debate? Furthermore, as the scene continues the nations express two additional arguments on their own behalf. If these first arguments are a foil, it's only insofar as they are the easiest claims to make, paving the way for more subtle arguments as the passage progresses.

But a second reason that we should not be too won over by God's refusal to accept Rome's and Persia's claims is found in the Aramaic addition to the Hebrew story, which again echoes our passage from bPes 118 about gifts to the messiah. According to the Talmud's gloss on its own story, at least from the perspectives of Persia and the other nations, there is reason to attribute merit to those nations who either refrained from hurting or who even helped Israel. Persia is perfectly justified in thinking that its sponsorship of the construction of the Second Temple might earn it some merit. And the other nations who had less of a relationship with Israel in the first place would seem justified in assuming that God's hostility toward them might be diminished because of that. By the end, an open-minded reader might even find God's harsh rejection of the nations to be somewhat unfair.

The passage continues:

They [the nations] say to him: "Master of the Universe: Did we ever accept it [the Torah] and then not fulfill it? [. . .] He says to them: "[Is

43:9] ‘Let them tell us former things.’ Those seven commandments that you did accept, when did you fulfill them?”

These lines include a subtle admission on the part of God that the nations have a valid claim. The nations assert that hanging their fate in the world to come on occupying themselves with Torah is unfair, since only Israel ever committed to doing so in the first place. In other words, they can’t be blamed for breaking a contract that they never entered into. Instead of actually addressing this claim, God shifts the topic to the contract that the nations apparently did enter into earlier on, namely, the seven Noahide commandments. Is this a tacit acceptance on God’s part that the rejection of the nations’ claims in the previous section is immaterial, since the basis of God’s invitation to receive reward based on occupying oneself with Torah was unfair?

Rubenstein comments about this section: “The nations somehow become the judge of the fairness of God’s standards, and God—at least temporarily—allows himself to be relegated to defendant. For a moment, the story permits the illusion that the nations stand on a par with God and may question him as equals.”⁴³ I agree with this characterization, with a caveat about the word “illusion.” There is no reason to doubt the straightforwardness with which the nations’ perspectives are being portrayed and considered; if this is an illusion it is a serious and familiar one. Human beings argue with God “as equals” commonly enough both in the Bible and in rabbinic literature. The fact that it is shocking to find the nations doing so is evidence of a bias—to be sure provided by elements of the rest of rabbinic literature and certainly by the conclusion of this very passage—that assumes that the nations could not possibly have a meritorious point. But, to explain the “somehow” with which Rubenstein begins his characterization, the fairness the nations demand is the fairness that can only adequately be expressed by one who is experiencing unfair treatment. The nations are in a unique position to challenge God, and the rabbis portray them doing exactly that.

The passage continues with still more audacious challenges to God:

They [the nations] say to him: “Master of the Universe: Israel, who accepted it [the Torah]—when did they fulfill it?”

He says to them: “I testify for Israel that they fulfilled the entire Torah.”

They say to him, “Master of the Universe: Is there a father who may

43. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 229.

testify for his son?!⁴⁴ As it is written, [Ex 4.22] ‘Israel is my first-born son.’”

He says to them: “Let heaven and earth come and testify for Israel that they fulfilled the entire Torah.”

They say to him, “Heaven and earth are invested in their testimony, as it is said, [Jer 33.25] ‘Were it not for my eternal covenant, I would not have made the laws of heaven and earth’”⁴⁵ [. . .]

He says to them, “Let those from among you come and testify for Israel that they fulfilled the Torah. Let Nimrod . . . Let Laban the Aramean . . . Let the wife of Potiphar . . . Let Darius . . . Let Nebuchadnezzar . . . Let Eliphaz the Temanite . . . Let Elihu ben Barachel . . . as it is said, [Is 43.9] ‘Let them give their testimony and be vindicated.’”

The rabbis’ generosity and portrayal of the nations is, of course, limited. The nations adopt an absolutely Jewish perspective: they state that Israel is God’s first-born son and that the very existence of the world—“heaven and earth”—is dependent on the covenant between God and Israel. The nations are not fully independent characters who can articulate a completely new perspective on God, Torah, and the world. On the other hand, they do articulate unfairness in the system of God’s judgment of the nations. And God, let it not be overlooked, accepts their accusations. Ultimately, God’s recourse is to non-Israelite biblical characters who were forced to see Israel’s and/or God’s greatness despite their efforts to undermine Israel and/or God.

Rubenstein cites a traditional commentary, *Ḥiduşbe ha-ge’onim* in *‘En Ya’akov*, on this section of the narrative: “These matters require explanation. How can God, who is witness and judge, debate with the nations.”

44. Rabbinic law forbids family members from testifying for each other. See mSan 3.4.

45. This translation reflects the rabbinic understanding of this verse’s significance. A more contextual translation, including the beginning of the next verse which completes the thought, reads: “(25) If I did not (establish) my covenant with day and night or establish the laws of heaven and earth, (26) then I would reject the seed of Jacob and my servant David.” In other words, just as surely as God is the creator of the world, God is committed to Israel. Cutting the verse off where this narrative does, however, allows the rabbis to read verse 25 as its own complete thought, with the first part as a reference to God’s “day and night covenant”—meaning, the eternal covenant with Israel. Thus, if God hadn’t established that covenant with Israel, he would not have established the laws of heaven and earth; the entirety of creation depends on the covenant between God and Israel. See mNed 3.11; Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael *Beshalah* 3; Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai 14.15; bShab 137b; bPes 68b; bMeg 31b; bNed 31b–32a.

Rubenstein's response to this is that it "fails to appreciate the satirical and humorous tone."⁴⁶ I prefer to read this passage straightforwardly, and I do not see clues in the text to indicate satire or humor. Rather, the fact that traditional commentators were stunned by this passage indicates just how genuinely audacious it is, and how easy it is to misread it due to our prior assumptions about rabbinic attitudes to the nations.

This part of the narrative portrays the nations shifting gears and claiming that since Israel didn't fulfill the Torah either, the premise of God's judgment of them is unfair.⁴⁷ What this shift pushes the audience to realize is that, in Rubenstein's words, "The trial is as much of the merit of Israel—of the life of Torah—as of the shortcomings of the nations."⁴⁸ Neither the nations *nor* Israel are judged in isolation. Everything would be much easier if we could draw a neat distinction between the perfectly righteous and the perfectly evil. In this passage, the nations themselves point out that we cannot do that.⁴⁹ The rabbis' worldview here is not one that envisions easily separable claims to justification and righteousness but a complex reality in which the nations sustain an extended dialogue with God about their own and Israel's merit, neither of which is fully agreed upon until the end of this section when God trots out a slew of biblical proofs.

The nations, apparently willing to accept God's conclusion, try one more approach to winning God's favor:

They say to him: "Give it to us anew, and we will do it."

He says to them, "You most foolish people!⁵⁰ One who worked on the

46. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 284, n. 32.

47. I disagree with Rubenstein's characterization of this shift as nonsensical and futile. *Ibid.*, 230: "This charge seems totally out of place, for the issue is whether the nations deserve a reward or not. From a strictly juridical point of view, that question is completely irrelevant. Moreover . . . suddenly to claim Israel never observed the Torah subverts their initial argument. What vicarious merit can they now claim? The self-contradiction exposes once again the futility of their charges . . . Another aspect of their confusion described at the initial gathering." Especially given the fact that God accepts parts of their arguments, their shift to challenging the premise of the entire judgment seems not only valid, but poignant.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Similarly, see bShab 55a, in which God instructs Gabriel to mark the righteous to be saved and the evil to be destroyed, but the attribute of justice intercedes. See also the printer's emendation of bMeg 15b in the Vilna edition.

50. The Hebrew here, *shotim she-ba-'olam*, is difficult to translate. The word *shoteb* carries a range of meanings, sometimes quite specific and other times more

eve of the Sabbath will eat on the Sabbath, but one who did not work on the eve of the Sabbath, how will he eat [on the Sabbath]? Nevertheless, I have a simple precept called "sukkah." Go and do it . . . Immediately each and every one makes a sukkah on his roof, and the Holy One, blessed be he, makes the sun blaze upon them as in the summer. Immediately each and every one kicks his sukkah and departs, as it is said, [Ps 2.3] "Let us break the cords of their yokes." [. . .] The Holy One, blessed be he, sits and laughs at them, as it says, [Ps 2.4] "He who sits in heaven laughs."

This concludes our narrative.⁵¹ The final approach the nations suggest is a do-over, and while God is clearly horrified at this request ("You foolish people!"), he acquiesces ("nevertheless . . ."). This indicates that despite the emotional intensity that this topic raises for none other than God himself (just as Rome offering a gift to the messiah had angered God), there is an element of fairness and reasonability in what the nations suggest, even if in the end their argument fails.

Rubenstein offers a great deal of insight into the significance and symbolism of the particular choice of the sukkah as the precept to demonstrate the non-Jews' exclusion from God's reward in the World to Come.⁵² I will build on the points he raises to add that the sukkah is the perfect example of a precept whose symbolism mingles monolithic and complex roles for non-Jews.⁵³ On the one hand, as Rubenstein explains, the simple sukkah is the structural and functional opposite of the elaborate building projects that Rome and Persia boast about at the beginning of the passage,⁵⁴ and various rabbinic sources use imagery from the holiday of Sukkot to represent Israel as the polar opposite of the nations.⁵⁵ But on the other hand, Sukkot is the most universalistic festival

generically negative referring either to insanity or foolishness. Rubenstein renders it "complete idiots."

51. Later additions to the story continue on for a while, but the body of the Hebrew narrative is complete.

52. For bibliography and discussion of this passage as a homily for the holiday of Sukkot or Simḥat Torah, see Rubenstein, "Eschatological Drama," 27, n. 58.

53. Again, see Litvak-Hirsch, et al., "Constructing Self, Constructing Others," 3–27.

54. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 233.

55. Rubenstein addresses this issue more extensively in the earlier version of the chapter, "Eschatological Drama," 29–34, elaborating thoroughly on his comment that "the theme of eschatological competition between Israel and the nations supports the link to Sukkot" (p. 29).

for the rabbis.⁵⁶ Even going back to the Bible, in Zach 14.16, those among the nations who remain after God has killed the enemies of Israel will come to worship God on the holiday of Sukkot every year. Thus, for Zachariah Sukkot is singled out as especially significant for the righteous among the nations. And for the rabbis, the seventy bulls the Bible commands to be sacrificed on Sukkot correspond to the proverbial seventy nations of the world.⁵⁷ Both the biblical and rabbinic meanings of Sukkot mingle these different ways of conceiving of the nations' relationship to Israel and to worshipping Israel's God. In short, I agree with Rubenstein that the rabbis choose Sukkot deliberately, but I suggest that whereas he understands the sukkah as emblematic of the binary opposition between Jews and the nations, I see it as the perfect symbol of the complexity of their relationship, which is confronted at length specifically in the eschaton.

The final element in our passage is God laughing. While on the surface it would seem that God is simply mocking and laughing at the nations,⁵⁸ as in the biblical prooftext cited and as some of the Aramaic glosses to the story indicate, it is worth considering the ambiguity of the image of God laughing. We might look for inspiration to the rabbinic story of the oven of Akhnai (bBM 59a-b), where God laughs as the sages defeat God in a contest of legal reasoning and biblical interpretation. There laughter indicates God's delight at his children's "defeat" of him. It does not seem to indicate any kind of humor, satire, or derision, but rather delight and pride. There is an element of vindication in this pride: it is a complicated matter to hand over the Torah to humanity, but the story of the oven of Akhnai reassures God that he has made the right choice and that his children are capable of accepting the gift of the Torah and using it properly.

What kind of laughter do we find in our passage? We should note that only a few moments prior God was furious at the nations. Is God really delighted or entertained that the nations reject him and his commandments? Has God so lost sight of his real objective for the world, articulated at the opening of this narrative ("Let everyone who occupied themselves with this [Torah] come and take their reward"), that it gladdens him to have the nations reject him? If so, God's laughter here should be profoundly troubling to the audience and should make them question whether rooting against the nations was the proper attitude.

56. Rubenstein, "Eschatological Drama," 33–34.

57. *Peikta de Rav Kahana* §28 (ed. B. Mandelbaum, 2:421).

58. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 234 writes: "God has good reason to laugh at their folly."

Another understanding of God's laughter, and one more in line with the oven of Akhnai story, is that here too it is intended as laughter of vindication. God feels relieved and pleased that he made the right choice by giving the Torah to Israel and by defending their righteousness. Implied in the need for vindication is a measure of doubt and maybe even anxiety that needed to be resolved. Just as God needed reassurance that his children could interpret and use the Torah properly, he apparently needed reassurance that his choice of Israel as the recipients of the Torah and the objects of his favor in the world to come were justified. God's laughter, understood this way, hardly reflects straightforward mockery.

The final perspective on this story offered by Rubenstein is its redactional context. Rubenstein argues convincingly, in part based on a comparison with the opening of tractate y'AZ which lacks this story, that it serves as an introduction to the entire tractate,⁵⁹ whose topic is the avoidance of idolatry and proper dealings with non-Jews. He lists a series of questions that the story serves to address before the tractate launches into the nitty gritty of living in a world filled with idolatry:

Are the gentiles responsible for their religious blindness? [. . .] What commandments must a gentile observe? Will the gentiles ever realize the futility of their beliefs and renounce the festivals mentioned in the Mishnah? Will they ever acknowledge the truth of Torah and God? What is their ultimate fate? Is that fate just? Conversely, what is the reward for accepting God and Torah and for rejecting idolatry?⁶⁰

The question "Is that fate just?" is a particularly apt description of this story's pursuit for these several folios. And Rubenstein is of course right that this story offers an opportunity to creatively address these questions before launching into this long and detailed tractate. But there is another way in which it serves as the introduction to this tractate all about the other nations: in this narrative, the nations are not *objects* but *subjects* who speak for themselves. Obviously, as explained above, they do not speak as fully independent characters. They adopt the language and assumptions of the rabbis; nevertheless, they are portrayed speaking for themselves and arguing with God on their own behalf. The eschatological setting that the rabbis chose for the dramatization of these interests allows the rabbis to explore them with more audacity than perhaps any other framework might have: it is both gravely significant and practically irrelevant.

59. Ibid., 235–38.

60. Ibid., 237.

C. The Nations and Israel in Gehenna: Song of Songs Rabbah 2.1.5

Whereas the previous text concludes with the ultimate condemnation of the nations, the eschatological narrative in SongR 2.1.3 concludes with the surprising condemnation of Israel. This midrashic pericope suggests that Israel is as sinful as the other nations, and—Israel itself admits—should go to Gehenna right along with the other nations. In contrast to the Babylonian texts discussed until now, this example below is from a slightly later (sixth–seventh c.) Palestinian compilation.⁶¹ While this does not constitute a systematic comparison, it is noteworthy that this sort of eschatological narrative is not limited to the Bavli.

Rabbi El'azar Ha-Mod'ai said: In the future, the ministers of the nations of the world will come and argue against Israel before the Holy One, blessed be he, saying: "Master of the Universe, they worshipped idols, and *they* worshipped idols; they engaged in illicit sexual activities, and *they* engaged in illicit sexual activities; they shed blood and *they* shed blood. Why are they going down to Gehenna and but *they* are not going down?"

And Israel replies to them and says: If so, let all the nations with their gods go down to Gehenna!

This is that which is written, [Mic 4.5] "For all the nations will go, each in the name of its god."

Rabbi Reuben said: If this hadn't been written it would have been impossible to say. As it were, [Is 66.16] "For with fire the Lord is judged"—It is not written "the Lord judges," but "is judged." This is that which David said in the holy spirit [Ps 23.4] "Even as I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall not fear evil, for the Lord is with me."⁶²

We can begin at the end of the passage, with R. Reuben's comment. His point reflects the rabbinic idea that God suffers with Israel. This concept is articulated elsewhere in rabbinic literature (bMeg 29b) regarding God going into *exile* with the Jews after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, but this text takes that concept further. Perhaps this is a difference merely in degree, not in kind. Nevertheless, the dramatic part of the passage is this frank statement: at the time of the final judgment of Israel and the nations, the nations will go before God and demand that Israel deserves to go down to Gehenna as much as they do. And Israel will

61. See Tamar Kadari, "New Textual Witnesses to Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah," *Zutot* 13 (2016): 41–54.

62. Translation based on MS Vat. Ebr 76.3. See appendix.

immediately agree. As it happens, this entails God joining Israel (“all the nations *with their gods*”) right there in Gehenna!

This stark self-criticism comes through the agency of the heavenly representatives of the non-Jewish nations. Christine Hayes⁶³ and Richard Kalmin⁶⁴ have written about the use of non-Jewish characters as mouthpieces for rabbinic anxiety and self-reflection.⁶⁵ In that respect this text fits in well with other self-reflective discourse the rabbis have engaged in. The eschatological context indicates yet again that eschatology can serve as a locus for rabbinic self-critique.

The nations’ criticism of Israel in this scene is extraordinary: the sins here are in fact the gravest sins of all (bSan 84a), and the Jews themselves confess that following the logic of their opponents, a logic nowhere challenged in this passage, they are guilty.

The biblical context of the verse from Micah quoted in this text and its vision of the “End Times”⁶⁶ are relevant. The opening of chapter 4 of Micah reads as follows:⁶⁷

- (1) In the days to come, the mount of the Lord’s house shall stand firm above the mountains; and it shall tower above the hills. The peoples shall gaze on it with joy,
- (2) And the many nations shall go and shall say: “Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may instruct us in his ways, And that we may walk in his paths.” For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
- (3) Thus he will judge among the many peoples, and arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war;
- (4) But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to disturb him. For it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke.

63. Christine Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim and Romans in b.Sanhedrin 90b–91,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine*, ed. H. Lapin (Bethesda, Md., 1998), 249–89.

64. Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York, 2006), 110–16.

65. See also Jenny Labendz, *Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture* (New York, 2013).

66. *Aparit ha-yahim* in Micah.

67. Vv. 1–3 have a parallel in Is 2.2–4.

- (5) Though all the peoples walk, each in the names of its gods, we will walk In the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.⁶⁸

This is a particularly positive picture for *both* Israel and the nations. The culmination of the passage (v. 5) is the line quoted in the rabbinic text. The NJPS translation starts the line with the qualifier “Though,” which may not be accurate. This verse might be asserting straightforwardly: They walk with their gods, and we walk with ours.

The culmination of this vision of the eschaton appears strikingly pluralistic. In fact, both the rabbinic text and the biblical text (if the qualifier “though” is mistaken) put the nations following their gods and Israel following their God on the same level. But whereas in Micah all peoples walk in an equally positive direction (to the House of the Lord), in the rabbinic text all peoples walk in an equally negative direction (Gehenna). One cannot avoid the transformation of this verse from an idyllic vision in the Bible to a dystopian one in SongR. That being the case, the rabbinic authors of this passage appear to be using eschatological discourse in an intentionally subversive way.

III. CONCLUSION: ESCHATOLOGY AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE

The eschatological narratives in this essay treat the eschaton as a setting that is full of ambiguity and complexity, rather than clear answers. In all of the above texts we see the eschatological context functioning as an arena in which the rabbis push their theological and ideological envelopes in surprising ways. While many eschatological texts serve as consolation, moral or theological exhortation, and explanations about the nature of the world, these texts demonstrate that eschatology may play other and even opposite roles for a religious community or body of literature.

The appeal of eschatology, particularly for the rabbis, comes into focus in this analysis. Eschatology frees the rabbis from the constraints of, as it were, polite conversation. There are various other ways in which the rabbis made themselves comfortable speaking in this way. One was to put words into others’ mouths: others like God, or biblical characters, or fictionalized non-Jews in the Graeco-Roman or Persian worlds in which they lived. Another way they did this was to set a narrative in the eschaton. They capitalized on this discourse’s relation to a different reality that had not yet arrived and that they did not appear to expect anytime soon. In other words, rabbinic eschatological narrative served, at least at times,

68. NJPS.

אמרו ומה הללו שנשתעבדו בהן כך אנו שנשתעבדנו ושלא נשתעבדנו בהן על אחת כמה וכמה. מיד תריץ ידיו לאלהים נשאה מלכות הרשעה קל וחומר בעצמה אמרו ומה הללו שאין אחיהם כך אנו שאחיהם על אחת כמה וכמה. אמ' לו הקב"ה לגבריאיל "גער חית הקנה". מאי גער חית הקנה אמ' לו גער בחייה וקני עדה. דבר אחר "גער חית קנה" גער בחייה שדרה בין הקנים שנ' "יכרסמנה חזיר מער". ר' חייא בר אבא אמ' ר' יוחנן: אמ' לו "גער בחייה" שכל מעשיה נכתבין בקולמוס אחרי. "עדת אבירים בעגלי עמים" ששחטו את אבירי כעגלים שאין להם בעלים. "מתרפס ברצי כסף" שפושטין ידיהן לקבל ממון ואין עושין רצון בעליו. "בור עמים קרבות יחפצון" מי גרם להן לישראל שיתפון[ר]ו בין האומות קרובות שהיו חפצין בהן.

b'Avodab Zarab 2–3b, MS Paris 1337

דרש ר' חנינה בר פפא ואיתומא ר' שמלאי לעתיד לבוא מביא הקב"ה ספר תורה ומניחו בחיקו ואומ' כל מי שעס' בזה יבוא וישול שכרו. מיד מתקבצין ובאין אומות העולם בערבוביא שנ' "כל הגוים נקבצו יחדו ויאספו לאומים". אומ' להן הקב"ה: אל תכנסו לפני בערבוביא אלא תכנס אומה אומה וסופריה שנ' "ויאספו לאומים" ואין לאום אלא מלכות שנ' "ולאום מלאום יאמין" ומתרגמי "ומלכו ממלכו יתקוף".... מיד נכנסת מלכות רומי תחלה.... אומ' להם הקב"ה במה עסקתם? אומ' לפניו: רבונו של עולם הרבה שווקים תקננו הרבה מרחצאות עשינו הרבה כסף וזהב הרבינו וכולן לא עשינו אלא בשביל ישראל שיעסקו בתורה. אומ' להם כל מה שעשיתם בשביל עצמכם עשיתם. שווקים להושיב בהם זונות מרחצאות לעדן עצמכם כסף וזהב שלי הוא שנ' "לי הכסף ולי הזהב". כלום יש בכם מגיד זאת שנ' "מי בכם יגי זאת" ואין זאת אלא תורה שנ' "וזאת התורה אשר שם משה." מיד יוצאין מלפניו בפחי נפש. נכנסת מלכות פרס אחריה.... אומ' להן הקב"ה במה עסקתם? אומ' לפיו הרבה גשרי' גשרנו הרבה כרכים כבשנו הרבה מלחמות עשינו וכולן לא עשינו אלא בשביל ישראל כדי שיעסקו בתורה. אומ' להם הקב"ה: כל מה שעשיתם לצורך עצמכם עשיתם גשרים ליטול בהן מכס כרכים לעשות בהן אנגריא מלחמו' אני עשיתי שנ' "יאי איש מלחמה". כלום יש בכם מגיד זאת שנ' "מי בכם יגי זאת" ואין זאת אלא תורה שנ' "וזאת התורה אשר שם משה" וגו'. מיד יוצאין מלפניו בפחי נפש. וכי מאחר דעילא (*) [ר]מי ולא זכת איהי למה לה דעילא סבור אינהו סתור בית

המקדש ואנן מיבנא בנינן ליה. וכן כל אומה ואומה... וכי מאחר דעלו הנך תרתו ולא אהנו אינהו מא' עע' עילי אמרי אינהו אשתעבדו בהו בישראל אנן לא אשתעבדינן בהו אומ' לפניו: רבונו של עולם כלום קבלנוה ולא קיימנוה?... אומ' להם "ראשונות ישמעונו!". אלו שבע מצות שקבלתם היכן קיימתם?

אומ' לפניו: רבונו של עולם ישראל שקיבלוה היכן קיימוה? אומ' להן: אני מעיד בישראל שקיימו את התורה כולה. אומ' לפניו: רבונו של עולם כלום יש אב שמעיד על בנו דכתי' "בני בכורי ישראל". אומ' להן יבואו שמים וארץ ויעידו בהן בישראל שקיימו את התורה כולה. אומ' לפניו רבו' של עולם שמים וארץ נוגעין בעדותן הן שנ' "אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה חק' שמי' וארץ לא שמת".... אומ' להם יבואו מכם ובכם ויעידו בישראל שקיימו את התורה. יבוא נמרוד ויעיד על אברהם שלא נחשד על ע'ו יבא לבן הארמי ויעיד ביעקב שלא נחשד על הגול תבא אשת פוטיפד ותעיד ביוסף שלא נחשד על עבירה יבוא דרוש ויעיד על הניאל שלא ביטל את התפלה יבוא נבוכדנצר ויעיד בחנניה מישאל ועזריה שלא השתחוו לצלם יבוא אליפז התימני ובלדד השוחי וצופר הנעמתי ואליהוא בן ברכאל הבווי ויעידו בישראל שקיימו את התורה כולה שנ' "יתנו עדיהם ויצדקו" אלו ישר'.

אומ' לפניו: רבונו של עולם הנה לנו מראש ונעשנה. אומ' להם: שוטים שבעולם! מי שטרח בערב שבת יאכל בשבת ומי שלא טרח בערב שבת מהיכן הוא אוכל?! אלא אע"פ כן מצוה

קלה יש לי וסוכה שמה לכו ועשו אותה.... מיד כל אחד ואחד עושה לו סוכה בראש גגו והקב"ה מקדיר עליהם חמה כתקן' תמוז. מיד כל אחד ואחד מבעט בסוכתו ויוצא שני' "ננתקה את מוסרותימו" וגו'.... והקב"ה יושב ומשחק עלי' שני' "יושב בשמים ישחק" וגו'.

Song of Songs Rabbah, 2.1.3, MS Vat. Ebr 76.3

אתיא דרבנין כההיא דאמ"ר אלעזר המודעי דאמ' עתידין שרי אומות העולם לעתיד לבא שיבאו לקטרג את ישראל לפני הקב"ה ואומ' לפניו רבונו של עולם אלו עבדו ע"ז ואלו עבדו ע"ז אלו גלו עריות ואלו גלו עריות אלו שפכו דמים ואלו שפכו דמים מפני מה אלו ירדו לגיהנם ואלו (יר?דיו) [אינן יורדין] לגיהנם וישראל משיבין להם ואומ' אם כן הוא תרד כל אומה ואומה (ואלו?!"?היה) [היא ואלהיהא] לגיהנם הה"ד כי כל העמים ילכו איש בשם אלהיו אמ' [ר'] ר'אובן אלו לא היה הדבר כה' אי אפשר לאומרו כביכול כי באש י"י נשפט י"י שופט אין כתו' כאן אלא נשפט הוא שאמ דוד ברוח הקדש גם כי אלך בניא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי.