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► **To cite this version:**

Gavin McDowell. Rabbinization of Non-Rabbinic Material in Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer. G. McDowell; R. Naiweld; D. Stökl Ben Ezra. Diversity and Rabbinization: Texts and Societies in Late Antique Judaism between 400 and 1000 CE, 8, OpenEdition Books, pp.381-412, 2021, CAMBRIDGE SEMITIC LANGUAGES AND CULTURES, 978-1-78374-993-5. hal-03928869

HAL Id: hal-03928869

<https://hal.science/hal-03928869>

Submitted on 7 Jan 2023

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Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures

Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

EDITED BY GAVIN McDOWELL, RON NAIWELD,
AND DANIEL STÖKL BEN EZRA



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<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

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Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (eds), *Diversity and Rabbinitization Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1000 CE*. Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures 8. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0219>

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L'École Pratique des Hautes Études has kindly contributed to the publication of this volume.

	ISBN Paperback: 9781783749935
	ISBN Hardback: 9781783749942
Semitic Languages and Cultures 8.	ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781783749959
ISSN (print): 2632-6906	ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781783749966
ISSN (digital): 2632-6914	ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781783749973
	ISBN Digital (XML): 9781783749980
	DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0219

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13. RABBINIZATION OF NON-RABBINIC MATERIAL IN PIRQE DE-RABBI ELIEZER

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1.0. Introduction

The title *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PRE) seems to tell us all we need to know about the religious proclivities of its author.¹ The eighth- or ninth-century work is pseudonymously attributed to a rabbi, one of the most frequently quoted Sages in the Mishnah, R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. The work also imitates classical Midrash by placing different traditions in the mouths of various other Sages apart from R. Eliezer, although these are probably also pseudonymous.² Many of its traditions have parallels in earlier rabbinic literature, and PRE 46 plainly states that while Moses was on Mount Sinai, he learned the Oral as well as the Written Torah.³

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- 1 This article was supported by Labex RESMED (ANR-10-LabX-72) under the program *Investments for the Future* (ANR-11-IDEX-0004-02).
 - 2 Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 286 notes d and e.
 - 3 In the absence of a critical edition, I have used the Yemenite manuscript JTS Enelow 866 (Eliezer Treitl's 1π), available at <https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx?mishibbur=640000&page=1>. I have also consulted the online synopsis of Eliezer Treitl, available at <https://manuscripts.genizah.org/Global/home>. The standard printed edition is *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser: nach der Edition Venedig 1544 unter Berücksichtigung*

In short, the work quotes rabbinic sources, appeals to rabbinic authority, and is even attributed to an early, authoritative Tanna. The question of who wrote PRE seems like an open and shut case: there can be little doubt that it is a rabbinic composition.⁴

Despite this, PRE remains an unusual work within rabbinic literature. First, most rabbinic works written prior to PRE were collective endeavours, while a good case can be made that PRE is mainly the effort of one author.⁵ Second, PRE retells biblical history—at least the story of the Torah—in a more or less chronological order. In this respect, it shares some superficial similarities with Second Temple compositions, such as Jubilees, but also Christian works, such as the Syriac Cave of Treasures (fifth or sixth century).⁶ That the closest analogues of this work should be of non-rabbinic origin is unsurprising, since the third

der Edition Warschau 1852, ed. by Dagmar Börner-Klein (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004). There is also an English translation, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer: The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great*, trans. by Gerald Friedlander (New York: Hermon Press, 1970), made directly from a European manuscript (and not the printed edition).

- 4 Steven Daniel Sacks, *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), dedicates his whole book to showing the various ways in which PRE is a natural successor to classical rabbinic literature.
- 5 See, for example, Jacob Elbaum, 'Rhetoric, Motif and Subject-Matter—Toward an Analysis of Narrative Technique in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 13–14 (1991): 99–126 (Hebrew).
- 6 For a critical perspective on PRE and Jubilees, see Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein, 'Pseudepigraphic Support of Pseudepigraphical Sources: The Case of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer', in *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 35–53. For the Cave of Treasures and PRE, see Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, 'Pirke De-Rabbi Eliezer and Eastern Christian Exegesis', *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 4 (2007): 217–43. For both, see my thesis, Gavin McDowell, 'L'histoire sainte dans l'Antiquité tardive: les *Pirkê de-Rabbi Eliézer* et leur relation avec le *Livre des Jubilés* et la *Caverne des trésors*' (PhD diss., École pratique des hautes études, 2017).

unique quality of this work is its non-rabbinic source material.⁷ In addition to elements from Second Temple literature, PRE is conversant with Christian apocrypha, Qur'anic exegesis, and even a hint of 'Gnostic' mythology. In many cases, PRE marks the first attestation of these traditions in rabbinic literature, but the work was not marginalized on account of these novelties. On the contrary, it was very popular. It is extant in at least a hundred manuscripts, of which approximately eighteen are complete.⁸ It was cited by great medieval luminaries, such as Rashi⁹ and Moses Maimonides,¹⁰ and large sections are reproduced in medieval midrashic collections, such as Yalqut Shim'oni.¹¹

Why was this strange composition welcomed with open arms by rabbinic Jews? I would like to suggest that the solution lies precisely in the 'rabbinization' of this outside material. Although PRE knows many outside legends, they never appear in their original form. They are always adapted to present a coherent worldview with the parallel traditions known from existing rabbinic works, which is why one can say that they are truly 'rabbinized' instead of simply 'judaized'. I propose to look at three

7 Discussed passim in two recent monographs: Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), and Katharina E. Keim, *Pirquei DeRabbi Eliezer: Structure, Coherence, Intertextuality* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

8 The most detailed manuscript study is Eliezer Treitl, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer: Text, Redaction and a Sample Synopsis* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi 2012) (Hebrew). See also Lewis M. Barth, 'Is Every Medieval Hebrew Manuscript a New Composition? The Case of Pirqé Rabbi Eliezer', in *Agendas for the Study of Midrash in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Marc Lee Raphael (Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary, 1999), 43–62. It is also available online: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pre-text-editing-project/midrash-study-agenda/>.

9 See his comments to Gen. 27.9 (citing PRE 32), Deut. 12.17 (citing PRE 36), and Jon. 1.7 (citing PRE 10).

10 *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.61 (citing PRE 3), 1.70 (citing PRE 19 [printed edition: PRE 18]), and 2.26 (citing PRE 3 again).

11 E.g., Jonah §550 cites the end of PRE 9 and all of PRE 10.

such traditions, all coming from different religious provenances—Christian, ‘Gnostic’, and Muslim.

2.0. Christian: The Temple and the Cross

The first tradition involves a curious alteration in PRE’s retelling of the story of Esther (PRE 49–50). In the biblical book of Esther, the villain Haman prepares a gibbet with the intention of executing his Jewish rival Mordechai (Est. 5.14). In the end, Haman is hoisted by his own petard: the Persian king orders that Haman be hanged on the gibbet prepared for his rival (Est. 7.9). This episode plays out differently in PRE 50. In fact, it directly contradicts the Bible. The eunuch Harbonah tells the king about the gibbet in the biblical book. In PRE 50, the eunuch is a disguised Elijah:

The king commanded that they hang him on the wood. What did Elijah, of blessed memory, do at that very moment? He assumed the appearance of Harbonah, one of the king’s servants. He said to him, “My lord the king, there is a beam of wood in the house of Haman from the house of the Holy of Holies, fifty cubits high.” How do we know it came from the house of the Holy of Holies? It is written: “He built the house of the forest of Lebanon one hundred cubits long and twenty [read: fifty] cubits wide and thirty cubits tall” (1 Kgs 7.2). The king commanded that they hang him on it to fulfill what is written, “Let the wood be pulled from his house and hang him on it” (Ezra 6.11).

Instead of using the beam Haman has prepared for Mordechai, the king has a beam from the Temple pulled out of Haman’s house in conformity with a decree cited from Ezra. In the book of Ezra, the verse, from the Aramaic section, is part of a letter permitting the reconstruction of the Temple. Those who oppose this decree are subjected to the punishment outlined in the prooftext: “A beam shall be removed from his house, and, lifted up (זקיה), he shall be slain upon it” (Ezra 6.11). The word זקיה could also be translated as “crucified”; the Syriac word ܙܩܝܗܐ, derived from the same trilateral root (*zqp*), is routinely used for the cross of Christ.¹²

12 Some examples are cited in the passages below.

With this alteration in the story of Esther, PRE participates in a longstanding Jewish tradition that implicitly identifies Haman with Jesus. The two men have three points in common. The first is, simply, the manner of their deaths. In the Hebrew text of Est. 7.9, the king orders that Haman be hanged (תִּלְוֶהוּ), but in the Greek text (and Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.246, 261, 266, 267, 280), Haman is crucified (σταυρωθήτω). Late Antique Jews did not overlook this coincidence, if the Theodosian Code (*Cod. Theod.* 16.8.18) is any indication: it proscribes the burning of Haman in effigy precisely because it looked too much like a crucifix.¹³ The Theodosian Code provides an outsider's perspective, but a Byzantine-era Aramaic piyyut for Purim demonstrates that the resemblance was intentional. In this poem, Haman interviews a succession of villains from biblical history, including Nimrod, Pharaoh, Amalek, Sisera, Goliath, Zerah the Ethiopian, Sennacherib, and Nebuchadnezzar. Between Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, Haman encounters an anonymous individual whose identity is nevertheless quite clear:

You thought to yourself
That only you were crucified,

13 Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 237: “The governors of the provinces shall prohibit the Jews from setting fire to Aman in memory of his past punishment, in a certain ceremony of their festival, and from burning with sacrilegious intent a form made to resemble the saint cross in contempt of the Christian faith, lest they mingle the sign of our faith with their jests, and they shall restrain their rites from ridiculing the Christian Law, for they are bound to lose what had been permitted them till now unless they abstain from those matters which are forbidden.” See also the text and analysis in T. C. G. Thornton, ‘The Crucifixion of Haman and the Scandal of the Cross’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 419–26 (423), and, most recently, Hillel Newman, ‘At Cross Purposes: The Ritual Execution of Haman in Late Antiquity’, in *Between Personal and Institutional Religion: Self, Practice, and Doctrine in Late Antique Eastern Christianity*, ed. by Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Lorenzo Perrone (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 311–36 (312).

But I share [it] with you.
 [I was] nailed to wood
 As my image in [the house of] idolatry¹⁴
 Is painted on wood.
 They nailed me to wood,
 My flesh lacerated by blows,
 The son of a carpenter.
 Afflicted by the scourge,
 Born of a woman,
 Yet they called me Christ!¹⁵

The second point of contact between Haman and Jesus is Edom. Haman is genealogically linked to Edom via Agag (Est. 3.1; 1 Sam. 15) and Amalek, the grandson of Esau (Gen. 36.12), while Jesus is spiritually connected to Edom, since in rabbinic literature Edom is a cipher for Rome, including Christian Rome.¹⁶

The third point of contact—the one that might be least familiar—is that both men died during Passover. Passover is already a subtext of the biblical book of Esther, although it is easy to miss.¹⁷ After being slighted by Mordechai, Haman casts lots in the month of Nisan (Est. 3.7) to determine when to enact his plan to exterminate the Jews. The lot (*pur*) falls in Adar, when

14 מרקוליס, literally “Mercury”.

15 Translated from Michael Sokoloff and Joseph Yahalom, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity: Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of the Sciences and Humanities, 1999), 216 (Hebrew). For another translation (and discussion), see Ophir Münz-Manor, ‘Carnavalesque Ambivalence and the Christian Other in Aramaic Poems from Byzantine Palestine’, in *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. by Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 829–43 (832–33).

16 The classic study is Gerson Cohen, ‘Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought’, in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. by Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19–48.

17 Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. by Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 166–67, first drew my attention to this significant fact.

Jews now celebrate Purim, but Haman promulgates his edict against the Jews eleven months earlier, on 13 Nisan (Est. 3.12). In response to this edict, Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia, immediately calls a three-day fast (Est. 4.16) before approaching the king. On the third day (Est. 5.1), Esther requests the king's presence at a banquet she will prepare for him and Haman that very night (Est. 5.4). At the banquet, Esther invites the king and Haman to another banquet the next day (Est. 5.8). During this second banquet, Esther exposes Haman's plot, and he is swiftly hanged (Est. 7.9).

Rabbinic tradition clarifies the sequence of events. *Seder Olam Rabbah*, the standard rabbinic chronology, dates the events of Esther precisely, starting with the promulgation of the edict on 13 Nisan. Esther's fast begins immediately and lasts three days, from 13–15 Nisan. On 15 Nisan, the date of Passover, she appears before the king and holds the first banquet in the evening. On 16 Nisan Haman is hanged.¹⁸ This is in fact the date of Easter, the Christian *Pascha*, according to the Johannine chronology.¹⁹ The chronology found in *Seder Olam Rabbah* also appears in the Babylonian Talmud, where Rav indicates that, since the end of Esther's fast coincides with the beginning of Passover, Mordechai did not depart (ויעבר) after hearing Esther's announcement (Est. 4.17) but rather transferred (העביר) the festival to a fast (b. Meg. 15a). The Babylonian rabbis were also aware that Jesus died on the eve of Passover (b. Sanh. 43a), as in the Gospel of John.

18 See *Seder Olam: Critical Edition, Commentary, and Introduction*, ed. by Chaim Milikowsky, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2013), I, 319 (chapter 29).

19 Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 153, cites Euty chius of Constantinople (d. 582 CE), who writes in his *Sermo de Paschate et de Sacrosancta Eucharistia* 4 (*Patrologia Graeca* 86:2396B–C): “Therefore, Christ's church also celebrates his holy resurrection, which happened when the sixteenth (day) began. Having driven out the fourteenth of the moon [14 Nisan, the Day of Preparation], she (the church) also does not any more celebrate together with the Jews.”

PRE knows all three connections between Haman and Jesus. First, the opening of the Esther story (PRE 49) is dedicated to the genealogy of Haman, looking backward to his descent from Edom via Amalek and forward to Titus, the Roman conqueror of Jerusalem, who, like Haman, is also a fixture of Jewish-Christian polemics: in the medieval Christian imagination, Titus's campaign against Jerusalem was revenge for the crucifixion of Jesus.²⁰ Second, PRE 50 addresses the issue of fasting during Passover raised by the Babylonian Sages, citing the same proof-text but offering a different interpretation:

She [Esther] said to him, "Go, gather all the Jews and fast on my behalf. Neither eat nor drink for three days and three nights" (Est. 4.16). Mordechai said to her: "Isn't the third day the day of Passover?!" She said to him, "Elder of the Jews, if there is no Israel, for whom is Passover?" Mordechai understood and did everything that Esther commanded. It is written, "And Mordechai departed" (Est. 4.17). What is the meaning of "And Mordechai departed (וייעבר)"? Rather, he transgressed (עבר) the commandments of Passover.

Later in the same chapter, the narrator specifies that the second banquet—and Haman's death—occurred on 16 Nisan. This is the universal reading of the extant manuscripts, although the *editio princeps* has 17 Nisan.

The final connection is the manner of their deaths, and this is where PRE innovates. Haman is not merely crucified; he is crucified on wood from the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum housing the Ark of the Covenant, which the high priest entered only once per year, on Yom Kippur, to sprinkle the blood from the atonement sacrifice.

The death of Haman at the end of PRE 50 does not defer to any rabbinic tradition, but it does resemble Jesus's death in the Cave of Treasures, which, like PRE, is a tendentious retelling of biblical history. The Cave of Treasures follows the Johannine chronology and so dates the crucifixion to the eve of Passover, 14 Nisan. At the beginning of the Passion narrative, the narrator reveals that the cross is the Ark of the Covenant:

20 See Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, 38–49.

Know, my brothers, that when Pilate compelled them to enter the tribunal, they [the Jews] said to him, “We are unable to enter the praetorium because we have not yet eaten the Passover” (cf. John 18.28). When the sentence of our Lord’s death was handed down from Pilate, they hurried and entered the Temple (ܟܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܝܟܘܢ) and brought out from there the poles of the Ark. They made from them the cross (ܥܘܠܡܐ) of Christ. In truth, it was fitting that those beams which once carried the covenant should now carry the Lord of the covenant (Cav. Tr. 50.20–21).²¹

This arresting tradition is not simply mentioned in passing but further developed throughout the Passion narrative. After the death of Jesus, the cross is returned to the Temple: “When he [Joseph of Arimathea] removed the body of the Lord from the cross (ܥܘܠܡܐ), the Jews ran, took the cross (ܥܘܠܡܐ), and placed it back in the sanctuary (ܟܘܢܘܢܐ) because it was the beams of the Ark” (Cav. Tr. 53.6).²² Finally, at the end of the Passion narrative, Cav. Tr. 53.13 simply states: “His cross [was made] of wood from the Temple” (ܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܗܘܝܟܘܢ ܕܗܘܝܟܘܢ).²³ Thus Jesus, like Haman, is crucified on beams from the Holy of Holies.

This tradition underlines the connection between Jesus and the Temple which runs throughout the Syriac work. The first half explains how the body of Adam came to be interred at Golgotha, the future site of the crucifixion (Cav. Tr. 23). The work’s description of the binding of Isaac strongly implies that Golgotha and the Temple Mount are the same:

21 British Museum Add. 25875, 46r:17–46v:8. The versification comes from Alexander Toepel, ‘The Cave of Treasures: A New Translation and Introduction’, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, ed. by Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila, and Alexander Panayotov (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 531–84, which is a translation of the same manuscript, generally considered the *codex optimus*. For other textual witnesses (and a dissenting opinion on the value of the British Museum manuscript), see Su-Min Ri, *La Caverne des trésors: Les deux recensions syriaques*, 2 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 1987).

22 British Museum Add. 25875, 49r:15–21.

23 British Museum Add. 25875, 49v:2–3.

Isaac was twelve years old when his father took him and ascended the mountain of Jebus to Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God. Mount Jebus is the mountain of the Amorites. On that very spot the cross of Christ (✠) was fixed. And on it sprouted the tree that bore the lamb who redeemed Isaac. This place is the middle of the earth, the grave of Adam, the altar of Melchizedek, Golgotha, the skull, and Gabbatha (cf. John 19.13). There David saw the angel carrying a fiery sword. And there Abraham offered up Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice. He saw the cross (✠), Christ, and the salvation of our father Adam (Cav. Tr. 29.3–8).²⁴

The text not only identifies Moriah (Gen. 22.2; cf. 2 Chron. 3.1) with Golgotha, which, by the time the Cave of Treasures was written, had become commonplace in Christian tradition,²⁵ but also insists that Golgotha is where David saw the angel. In the Hebrew Bible, this location is unambiguously the Temple Mount (2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21). Therefore, in the Cave of Treasures, Jesus is apparently crucified on the Temple Mount, an ‘historicized typology’ emphasizing the sacrificial nature of Jesus’s death as described in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “He entered once for all the holy place and obtained an eternal redemption—not by the blood of goats or calves but by his own blood” (Heb. 9.12). In the Cave of Treasures, Jesus’s blood is literally translated into the Holy of Holies via the cross/Ark of the Covenant. The Cave

24 British Museum Add. 25875, 25v:7–26r:1.

25 From the accounts in John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1977), one can cite the Breviarius of Jerusalem (60: “There Abraham offered Isaac his son in the very place where the Lord was crucified”), Theodosius (65: “In the city of Jerusalem by the Sepulchre of the Lord is the Place of the Skull. There Abraham offered his son as a sacrifice”), the Piacenza Pilgrim (83: “You can see the place where he was crucified, and on the actual rock there is a bloodstain. Beside this is the altar of Abraham, which is where he intended to offer Isaac and where Melchizedek offered sacrifice”), and Adomnan’s description of Arculf’s pilgrimage (97: “And between these two churches [Calvary and the Martyrium] comes that renowned place where the patriarch Abraham set up an altar, and arranged a pile of wood on it, and took up his drawn sword to sacrifice Isaac his son”).

of Treasures is not the only text to identify the wood of the cross as formerly part of the Temple, but it is one of the earliest. Later medieval legends about the wood of the cross would routinely identify the Temple of Solomon as the penultimate destination of the cross prior to the crucifixion.²⁶

If the Cave of Treasures places the wood of the cross in the Holy of Holies, then PRE takes it back out. PRE's modification of the death of Haman can be understood as part of an ongoing polemic against Christianity, particularly the Christian appropriation of Temple traditions for their own 'temple', the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.²⁷ The legend eventually filtered into the Toledot Yeshu tradition (where the cabbage stalk serving as the cross comes from the Temple), completing the hermeneutic circle in which traditions about Jesus inform traditions about Haman and vice versa.²⁸

3.0. 'Gnostic': Cain, Son of the Devil

The second tradition involves the lineage of Cain. PRE 21, the story of Cain and Abel, opens with the statement that Cain was not the natural son of Adam but instead the offspring of a heavenly being:

26 Gavin McDowell, 'La Gloire du Liban viendra chez toi (Is 60,13): À l'origine de la légende du bois de la croix', *Apocrypha* 29 (2018): 183–201.

27 See Joshua Prawer, 'Christian Attitudes towards Jerusalem in the Early Middle Ages', in *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638–1099*, ed. by Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1996), 311–47 (326–28).

28 On this theme, see Sarit Kattan Gribetz, 'Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and Toledot Yeshu', in *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited*, ed. by Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 159–80. For the cabbage stalk, see Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, 'On Some Early Traditions in Toledot Yeshu', in *Toledot Yeshu in Context*, ed. by Daniel Barbu and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 43–58.

The rider of the serpent had intercourse with her [Eve], and she conceived Cain. After this, Adam came to her, and she conceived Abel, as it is written, “And Adam knew Eve, his wife” (Gen. 4.1). What is the meaning of “know”? He knew that she was with child. She saw that his form was not like those from below but those from above. When she noticed, she said, “I have acquired a man through the LORD” (Gen. 4.1).

The “rider of the serpent” is Samael, the devil, who is introduced in PRE 13. The chapter opens with the ministering angels conspiring to lead Adam astray on account of their jealousy of his wisdom. Samael, their leader, descends to earth, recruits the serpent as a partner-in-crime, and mounts and rides upon it (ועלה ורכב עליו). The chapter goes on to describe Samael’s total possession of the serpent, his instrumental role in the sin of Adam and Eve, and his expulsion from heaven. Samael is therefore the father of Cain.

There is a Jewish tradition which states that the serpent—but not the devil—lusted after Eve. This tradition is older than rabbinic literature and is hinted at already in 4 Maccabees, when the mother of the seven martyred sons makes a final declaration before her own death. She says, “I was a pure virgin and did not even leave my father’s house, but protected the rib that was built [from Adam]. No seducer corrupted me in the wilderness, nor did the destroyer, the deceitful serpent, defile the purity of my virginity” (4 Macc. 18.7–8). These verses allude to Genesis, but the contrast of corruption and defilement with purity and virginity suggests a sexual element not present in the biblical book.

A comparable rabbinic tradition, attributed to R. Yohanan, appears three times in the Babylonian Talmud. “Why are the nations contaminated? Because they did not stand on Mount Sinai. When the serpent came to Eve, he injected filth into her. Israel, who stood on Mount Sinai, their filth departed, but those who did not stand on Mount Sinai, their filth did not depart” (b. Shabb. 145b–146a; cf. b. Yevam. 103b and b. Avod. Zar. 22b). This tradition states outright that Eve slept with the serpent, although it does not equate the serpent with the devil

or even state that the serpent is the father of Cain.²⁹ The logic of this tradition prevents such an interpretation, since the “filth” which the serpent injected into Eve infected all her descendants, including ones born from Adam, and not just the line of Cain. The Talmud is in keeping with other rabbinic traditions that imply the serpent lusted after Eve while remaining a mere animal (Gen. Rab. 18.6, 20.5; Avot R. Nat. A 1; t. Sotah 4.17–18; b. Sotah 9b). The identification, or at least the association, between Satan and the serpent was extremely common in Christian and Muslim tradition, but this was not the case in rabbinic literature. PRE is, in fact, the first rabbinic work to introduce this motif.

Rabbinic literature prior to PRE does not indicate that anyone but Adam was the father of Cain. PRE, by invoking Samael as the “rider of the serpent”, appears to harmonize two traditions by identifying the rider of the serpent, rather than the serpent itself, as Eve’s sexual partner. The idea that Cain was the son of the devil is not found in the Talmud or Midrash, but it is found in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan’s translation of Gen. 4.1, which, however, has now omitted the serpent from the equation. The sole manuscript of this Targum (British Library Aramaic Add. 27031) reads, “Adam knew his wife Eve, that she was pregnant from Samael, the angel of the Lord.” The printed edition offers a variant: “Adam knew his wife Eve, that she desired the angel, and she conceived and bore Cain. And she said, ‘I have acquired a man, the angel of the Lord’.” The question naturally arises whether Targum Pseudo-Jonathan precedes or follows PRE. Without rehearsing the arguments, there are many cogent reasons for suspecting that the Targum depends on PRE.³⁰ For the purpose of the present article, we can bracket out the Targum as something technically distinct from rabbinic literature: PRE is still the first rabbinic work to introduce this tradition.

29 Pace Arnold Goldberg, ‘Kain: Sohn des Menschen oder Sohn der Schlange?’, *Judaica* 25 (1969): 203–21.

30 See Gavin McDowell, ‘The Date and Provenance of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: The Evidence of Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Chronicles of Moses’, *Aramaic Studies* 19 (2021): 1–34, and the bibliography cited there.

The shared tradition of PRE and the Targum, both dependent on Gen. 4.1, should be carefully distinguished from a New Testament tradition (1 John 3.12) that Cain was “from the evil one” (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ).³¹ This verse does not refer to Cain’s ancestry but rather to his moral behaviour. The same Epistle states a few verses earlier that “One who sins is [a child] of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning” (1 John 3.8) and goes on to speak of Cain’s evil *deeds* (his envy, the murder of his brother) rather than his congenital evil *nature*. The same idea is probably present in the infamous declaration in the Gospel of John (8.44):

You are [offspring] of your father the devil, and you desire to carry out the wishes of your father. That one was a murderer from the beginning. He is not established in truth, for truth is not in him. When he speaks falsehoods, he speaks in accordance with his own, for his father is also a liar (ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ).

The Gospel implicitly compares Jesus’s opponents (“the Jews”) to Cain, who is both the first murderer and the first liar (Gen. 4.8–9). The fourth-century heresiographer Epiphanius of Salamis mentions Christian groups (Cainites and Archontics) who interpreted John 8.44 in exactly this way and believed that the last clause (“for his father is also a liar”, more conventionally translated nowadays “for he is a liar and the father of lies”) refers to the father of Cain, whom they understood to be a spiritual power (Panarion 38.4–5 and 40.5–6). The orthodox theologian does not contest the text but only its interpretation. He believes the “devil” (διάβολος) in John 8.44 is Judas, called a devil elsewhere in the Gospel (John 6.70), and Judas’s “father” is Cain. Against Epiphanius, Cain is probably the intended referent

31 See, for example, Nils Alstrup Dahl, ‘Der erstgeborene Satans und der Vater des Teufels’, in *Apophoreta: Festschrift für Ernst Haenchen* (Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1964), 70–84, and Jan Doehorn, ‘Kain, der Sohn des Teufels: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu 1. Joh 3,12’, in *Das Böse, der Teufel und Dämonen (Evil, the Devil, and Demons)*, ed. by Jan Doehorn, Susanne Rudnig-Zelt, and Benjamin G. Wold (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 169–87.

in John 8.44, but this does not mean he is the child of a spiritual being. When John 8.44 is read in light of 1 John 3.8–12, it is not physical descent but Cain’s *imitatio diaboli* that makes him “of the evil one”.³² In any case, the *interpretation* of these verses (but not the verses themselves) dovetails with the tradition attested in PRE and the Targum.

What is surprising about the tradition in PRE and the Targum is not what it says about Cain but what it says about God. In both works, the *crux interpretatum* is the divine name in Gen. 4.1, which signifies not God but an angel—and not merely an angel but a fallen angel. In other words, ‘God’ in Gen. 4.1 means ‘the devil’. This brings us into the orbit of ‘Gnostic’ religion. A modern scholarly heuristic, ‘Gnosticism’ does not designate a single movement but is applied to several, including early Christian groups, such as the Sethians and Valentinians, medieval Christian dualists, such as the Bogomils and Cathars, and independent religions, such as Manichaeism and Mandaeanism.³³ These diverse groups share a belief in a universe where the Creator is not the highest god and in most (not all) cases is actively evil. The tension between the highest god and the Creator constitutes a kind of cosmological dualism. This Creator, identified with the

32 Similarly, 1 Clement 3.4–4.7 implies that Cain is the “devil” mentioned in Wisdom 2.24 (“By the envy of the devil death entered the world”, etc.) by juxtaposing an allusion to this verse with the moral example of Cain and Abel. I would also argue that Tertullian’s ambiguous phrase in *De Patientia* 5.15 (*Nam statim illa semine diaboli concepta*) is metaphorical; *illa* refers to *impatientia*, not Eve. He goes on to describe Cain as Adam and Eve’s son.

33 Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. by Robert McL. Wilson (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), and *The Gnostic Bible*, ed. by Willis Barnstone and Marvin W. Meyer (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), include all of these groups under the ‘Gnostic’ label. It should be noted that few specialists now embrace this maximalist position, and the coherence of Gnosticism as a category is doubtful. See Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

God of Israel, is the supposed father of Cain. Ordinarily, it would be preferable to speak of individual groups or texts rather than placing everything within one broad category, but this particular myth—the one animating PRE and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan—is so pervasive that it cannot be restricted to one group.

The most famous text to promote this belief is undoubtedly the Apocryphon of John, one of the many texts found among the Nag Hammadi codices (NHC II.1, III.1, IV.1) and also one of the few that was known before this discovery (from Berlin Codex 8502, BG 2). The plot of the Apocryphon is a particularly complex retelling of the opening chapters of Genesis. In the frame narrative, the resurrected Christ appears to John the Apostle and elaborates an extensive history ‘before the beginning’, including the origin of the Creator, Yaldabaoth, the misbegotten offspring of the divine being Sophia. Yaldabaoth believes that he is the only deity and sets into motion the events of Genesis. When he perceives light from the heavenly realms residing in Eve, one of his creations, he rapes her:

Then Yaldabaoth saw the virgin who stood by Adam. He was full of ignorance so that he wanted to raise up a seed from her. He defiled her and begot the first child and similarly the second: Yave, the bear-face, and Eloim, the cat-face. The one is righteous, but the other one is unrighteous. Eloim is the righteous one, Yawe is the unrighteous one. The righteous one he set over fire and spirit, and the unrighteous one he set over water and earth. These are called Cain and Abel among all generations of men (BG 62.3–20; cf. NHC II 24.13–25; NHC III 31.10–20; NHC IV 37.23–38.12).³⁴

Both Cain *and* Abel, identified with the names of God and angelic beings in their own right, are the children of this demonic entity, who is functionally the devil. Three other texts from Nag Hammadi attribute Cain’s paternity to one or more of the angelic Rulers of the World, including the Hypostasis of

34 *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2*, ed. by Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 136–41 (Synopsis 63–65).

the Archons (NHC II.4.89.17–30; 91.12), On the Origin of the World (NHC II.5.116.8–117.18), and the Apocalypse of Adam (NHC V.5.66.25–28).³⁵ All four of these texts, found in fourth-century manuscripts, are considerably earlier than both PRE and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. It is striking that Guy Stroumsa, in a monograph arguing for the Jewish origin of this myth, cannot cite any Jewish work earlier than these two.³⁶

The Nag Hammadi texts were eventually lost, but the belief persisted. Heresy hunters from the time of PRE and later confirm the ongoing presence of dualist sects and the accompanying belief that a wicked Creator is the true father of Cain. Stroumsa, following the lead of Henri-Charles Puech, identified the obscure sect of Audians as the most important witness to the motif of the seduction of Eve prior to the rediscovery of the Nag Hammadi texts.³⁷ The Audians are significant because they originated in the fourth century, when the Nag Hammadi texts were still circulating, yet they survived until the end of the eighth century, when PRE was written. They attest to the endurance of ‘Gnostic’

35 These texts contrast sharply with Logion 61 of the Gospel of Philip: “First adultery came into being, afterward murder. And he [Cain] was begotten in adultery, for he was the child of the serpent. So he became a murderer, just like his father, and he killed his brother” (quoted from James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 147). The Gospel of Philip alludes to the New Testament Johannine tradition (John 8.44; 1 John 3.8–12) and implicitly identifies the serpent with the devil, which the other Nag Hammadi texts never do. Nor is there any indication that the serpent/devil in this case is the Creator of the universe.

36 Guy G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 35–70.

37 Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 41–42, citing Henri-Charles Puech, ‘Fragments Retrouvés de l’Apocalypse d’Allogène’, in *En quête de la Gnose*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), I, 271–300. See also Guy G. Stroumsa, ‘Jewish and Gnostic Traditions among the Audians’, in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First–Fifteenth Centuries CE*, ed. by Arie Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998), 97–108.

currents long after the supposed triumph of orthodoxy. The principal sources are Epiphanius (*Panarion* 70) in the fourth century and Theodore bar Koni (*Liber Scholiorum* 11.63) in the eighth. Epiphanius regards the Audians as schismatics rather than heretics and has nothing to say about their ‘Gnostic’ connections. Theodore bar Koni, on the other hand, enumerates the Audians’ reading curriculum, which sounds a great deal like the books that circulated among Epiphanius’s ‘Gnostic’ groups. After citing an Apocalypse of John (which resembles the Apocryphon of John) and an Apocalypse of Abraham (which does not at all resemble the extant work of that name), he mentions a series of books that each contain the key motif:

On reviling God through the coupling with Eve: He [Audi] states in the Book of Strangers, in the description of God: “God said to Eve, ‘Conceive from me before the makers of Adam come to you.’” Regarding the description of the Rulers, he states in the Book of Questions, “Come, let us overtake Eve, so that whosoever is born shall be ours.” Again, he says that the Rulers guided Eve and overtook her before she came before Adam. In the Apocalypse of the Strangers, he says, describing the Rulers, “Come, let us cast our seed into her, and we will have our way with her first, so that those who will be born from her shall be under our subjugation.” Again, he says that they led Eve away from the presence of Adam, and they knew her. The iniquitous Audi produced the same type of filth and wickedness about God, the angels, and the world.³⁸

Other Christian ecclesiastics, notably the historian Agapius of Manbij (d. 942) and the polymath Gregory bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), describe the beliefs of the Audians.³⁹ Their short summaries, which depend on a common source, are distinct from that of Theodore bar Koni. They mention the liaison between God and Eve but do not add any new information.

38 Theodore bar Koni, *Liber Scholiorum*, ed. by Addaï Scher, 2 vols. (Leuven: L. Durbecq, 1954), II, 320.

39 They are quoted in Henri-Charles Puech, ‘Fragments retrouvés’, 275–76.

Theodore bar Koni's description of the Audians mentions God and other angels fathering children on Eve but does not name Cain specifically. Cain, however, appears in the description of Manichaeism at the end of *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, the monumental book list of Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995 CE). According to him, Mani teaches:

Then Jesus came and spoke to the one who had been born, who was Adam, and explained to him [about] the [Light]-Paradises, the deities, Jahannam [hell], the satans, earth, heaven, sun, and moon. He also made him fear Eve, showing him how to suppress [desire] for her, and he forbade him to approach her, and made him fear to be near her, so that he did [what Jesus commanded]. Then that [male] archon came back to his daughter, who was Eve, and lustfully had intercourse with her. He engendered with her a son, deformed in shape and possessing a red complexion, and his name was Cain, the Red Man. Then that son had intercourse with his mother, and engendered with her a son of white complexion, whose name was Abel, the White Man.⁴⁰

The section occurs in a running commentary on the early chapters of Genesis, which Ibn al-Nadim labels "The Beginning of Sexual Reproduction according to the Teaching of Mani". This is the same context in which the Apocryphon of John and the Audians discuss the birth of Cain and Abel. It goes on to narrate the death of Abel and the birth of Seth, a "Stranger" distinct from the angelic Rulers. The section is valuable as the only extant fragment of Manichaean teaching about Cain. It is partially confirmed by the much earlier report of the fifth-century theologian Theodoret of Cyrrhus (*Haereticum Fabularum Compendium* 1.26), who states that Saklas (another name for Yaldabaoth) slept with Eve and fathered an unnamed child in the form of an animal.⁴¹ Manichaeism is rightfully distinguished

40 John C. Reeves, *Prolegomena to a History of Islamicate Manichaeism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 195. For the entire context, see *The Fihrist of al-Nadim: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. by Bayard Dodge, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), II, 773–803.

41 Nils Arne Pedersen et al., *The Old Testament in Manichaean Tradition: The Sources in Syriac, Greek, Coptic, Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, New*

from earlier ‘Gnostic’ movements, but the entire fragment has an undercurrent of the teaching also found in the Apocryphon of John and in the literature of the Audians.

The persistence of this belief knew no geographical limits. A succession of loosely related dualist groups eventually spread into Europe from the Caucasus during the Middle Ages: first Paulicians in Armenia, then Bogomils in Bulgaria, and finally Cathars in southern France.⁴² In the twelfth century, the monk Euthymius Zigabenus, at the behest of the Byzantine court, interrogated the Bogomil leader Basil and wrote an account of their beliefs in his *Dogmatic Panoply*. In Euthymius’s retelling of the Bogomil creation myth, Satanael, the firstborn of God the Father, revolts against his Creator and becomes the creator of his own world. Like Adam and Eve in the Apocryphon of John, the first man and woman are imbued with the breath of life from a higher power. Satanael therefore seeks to enslave them, beginning with Eve:

Eve was made similarly then and shone forth with the same splendour. Satanael became envious, repented, and was moved to plot against what he himself had made. He slipped into the inward parts of the serpent, deceived Eve, slept with her, and made her pregnant, so that his seed might [...] master the seed of Adam and, as far as possible, destroy it and not allow it to increase and grow. Soon she fell into labour and brought forth Cain from her coition with Satanael and his sister like him, named Calomena.⁴³ Adam became jealous and also

Persian, and Arabic (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 49, citing Istvan Pasztorkupan, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (London: Routledge, 2006), 206.

42 Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), is a recent and accessible introduction. One should also consult the classic studies of Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), and Dimitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

43 The name of one of the sisters of Cain and Abel (the other is Lebuda, Deborah, or a similar variant), attested in the Cave of Treasures and repeated in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. This latter document

slept with Eve and begot Abel, whom Cain immediately killed, and so brought murder into life. That is why the apostle John says that “Cain was of the evil one” (1 John 3.12).⁴⁴

The passage ends with a citation of the New Testament Johannine tradition, but it has been grafted onto a tradition that is fundamentally similar to the one found in the Nag Hammadi codices. Although a genetic link between the early Christian ‘Gnostics’ and the medieval dualists is usually denied, there is evidence here of a continuous tradition.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this data is that the basic myth, as found in PRE, is not some piece of *esoterica*. It was a current belief in numerous contemporary religious movements. One final indication of its popularity is the anathema attached to the *Palaea Historica* (ninth or tenth century), a biblical history similar to PRE, Jubilees, and the *Cave of Treasures*: “To those abominable Phundaitae who say that the adversary had intercourse with Eve and [from him] she gave birth to Cain—anathema” (7.5).⁴⁵ The Phundaitae are obscure (they are associated with the Bogomils),⁴⁶ but their belief is immediately recognizable. The *Palaea Historica* is not a learned text. It draws on oral tradition, local legends, liturgy,

was widely translated (Greek, Latin, Slavonic) and spread this tradition to every corner of Europe.

- 44 Janet Hamilton, Bernard Hamilton, and Yuri Stoyanov, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World, c. 650–c. 1450: Selected Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 185 (slightly modified).
- 45 William Adler, ‘Palaea Historica (“The Old Testament History”): A New Translation and Introduction’, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, ed. by Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila, and Alexander Panayotov (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 585–672 (602–03).
- 46 The classic study with related texts (including Euthymius Zigabenus) is Gerhard Ficker, *Die Phundagiagiten: Ein Beitrag zur Ketzergeschichte des byzantinischen Mittelalters* (Leipzig: Barth, 1908). My knowledge of its contents is secondhand. Even though this book is in the public domain, I have been unable to secure a copy.

and devotional art, and it was apparently intended for popular reading (or reciting). A secret teaching—one that stays secret, in any case—does not need to be anathematized. Cain’s demonic paternity was widely believed across a diverse religious spectrum and needed to be contained.

PRE neutralizes the myth by embracing it. The Sages already taught that the serpent had seduced Eve; PRE slightly modifies this tradition through the introduction of another common motif, the presence of the devil in the Garden of Eden. Thus, the devil assumes a role previously attributed to the serpent. The reason for embracing the myth was to protect God’s integrity. It was not the LORD (as in Gen. 4.1) but rather Samael, an angel of the LORD, who seduced Eve and fathered Cain.⁴⁷

The very name Samael, though attested in classical rabbinic literature, is infrequent. For example, it appears only once in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sotah 10b) and sparingly in other works.⁴⁸ It is, however, one of the alternative names of Yaldabaoth in the Nag Hammadi texts (Apocryphon of John, NHC II.1.11.16–18; Hypostasis of the Archons, NHC II.4.87.2 and 94.25; On the Origin of the World, NHC II 103.27) as well as a common name for the devil among the Bogomils.⁴⁹ Later, Cain’s demonic heritage became standard in medieval Jewish mysticism. The Zohar (e.g., 1.54a) and related literature, depending on PRE, transformed the

47 A similar tactic was applied to Exod. 4.24, where, in the Masoretic Text, the LORD seeks to kill Moses. In the Septuagint (and the Targumim), this entity has become the “angel of the Lord”. The entity is identified as Mastema, a demonic figure (Jub. 48.2–3).

48 For other scattered examples, see Günter Stemberger, ‘Samael und Uzza: Zur Rolle der Dämonen im späten Midrasch’, in *Die Dämonen: Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt*, ed. by Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K. F. Diethard Römheld (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 636–61.

49 An alternative version of Euthymius Zigabenus’s report substitutes “Samael” for “Sataael”: see Janet Hamilton, Bernard Hamilton, and Yuri Stoyanov, *Christian Dualist Heresies*, 204–07.

harmonization of rabbinic and ‘Gnostic’ currents into a wholly Jewish tradition.⁵⁰

4.0. Muslim: The Penitence of Pharaoh

The third tradition comes from the end of PRE 43, a homily on repentance. The chapter cites several biblical kings (and one rabbi) who were terrible, yet penitent sinners, before ending with a strange example, the Pharaoh of the Exodus. Pharaoh, repenting at the moment of the destruction of his army at the Red Sea, is preserved from death by God. PRE then continues the story of Pharaoh and takes it in an unexpected direction:

R. Nehunya b. Haqanah said: “Know the power of repentance. Come and observe the example of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who rebelled against the Rock, the Most High, many times. Thus it is written, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should heed his voice?’ (Exod. 5.2). He sinned against him with the same language by which he did penance. Thus it is written, ‘Who is like you among the gods, O LORD?’ (Exod. 15.11). The Holy One, Blessed Be He, brought him up from the dead. From where do we learn that he did not die? It is written, ‘For by now [I could have stretched forth my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth]’ (Exod. 9.15). The Holy One, Blessed Be He, raised him from the dead to recount the power of his might. From where do we learn that he raised him? It is written, ‘And yet for this reason, I will raise you [to show you my power, in order that my name might be proclaimed throughout the earth]’ (Exod. 9.16).

“He departed and ruled over Nineveh. The people of Nineveh were writing fraudulent documents and robbing each other. The men were also sleeping with each other. Such were their evil deeds. When the Holy One, Blessed Be He, sent Jonah to prophesy about the coming destruction, Pharaoh listened. He rose from the throne and tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He decreed among all the

50 Oded Yisraeli, ‘Cain as the Scion of Satan: The Evolution of a Gnostic Myth in the Zohar’, *Harvard Theological Review* 109 (2016): 56–74.

people that anyone who would do these things would henceforth be burnt. The people fasted, from the lowliest to the mighty” (PRE 43).

The concluding example of Pharaoh is an integral part of both the individual chapter and the composition as a whole. It is a direct sequel to PRE 42, which recounts the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14), and it precedes the return to the Exodus narrative in PRE 44, which opens with the next major episode, the battle between Israel and Amalek (Exod. 17). PRE 43 answers the question of what happened to Pharaoh after the Exodus, revealing that he not only survived but was instrumental in the repentance of Nineveh some four hundred years later. The fate of Pharaoh was already a point of contention among the rabbis. Pharaoh’s rule over Nineveh, however, is gratuitous. It has no precedent in rabbinic tradition, and its purpose is not immediately clear.⁵¹

The Mishnah, the foundational rabbinic document, is also the first to allude to the repentance of Pharaoh (m. Yad. 4.8, citing Exod. 5.2 and 9.27), though briefly and without further specifying his fate. The question of Pharaoh’s survival appears for the first time in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (*Beshallah* 6):

“The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen” (Exod. 14.28). “Even Pharaoh”, according to the words of R. Judah. For it is written, “The chariots of Pharaoh and his forces [he cast into the sea]” (Exod. 15.4). R. Nehemiah says: “Except for Pharaoh.” About him Scripture states: “And yet for this reason, I will raise you” (Exod. 9.16). Others say that Pharaoh went down and sank in the end, as it is written, “For the horse of Pharaoh with his chariot and his horsemen went into the sea, and the LORD brought back over them the waters of the sea” (Exod. 15.19).⁵²

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- 51 Like the other two examples discussed in this article, the story of Pharaoh’s survival became more common (via PRE) in Jewish literature of the second millennium. See Rachel S. Mikva, *Midrash vaYosha: A Medieval Midrash on the Song of the Sea* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 181–89.
- 52 *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. by Saul Horowitz and Israel Rabin (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1931), 111 (Hebrew). This tradition also appears in Midrash Psalms 106.5.

Against the consensus that Pharaoh drowned, there is R. Nehemiah's dissenting opinion that he lived, based on the words of God following one of the plagues. PRE seems conversant with this tradition, as it adduces the same proof-text (Exod. 9.16) to show that Pharaoh survived the waters of the Red Sea. However, the Mekilta mentions neither the repentance of Pharaoh nor any subsequent activities in Nineveh.

The question of Pharaoh's survival also preoccupied Muslim exegetes. The tenth *sūrah* of the Qur'an briefly recounts the Red Sea narrative (Q 10.90–92). In this case, Pharaoh's repentance is part of the canonical text, yet it is not clear whether Pharaoh lived or died following his sudden conversion. The three verses run:

[90] We made the Children of Israel pass through the sea, and Pharaoh and his army followed after them with oppressive enmity until drowning overtook him. He said, "I believe that there is no god except the God in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am one of those who submits (*muslimin*)." [91] Now? When you had disobeyed before, and you were one of the corrupters? [92] Today We will preserve your body so that you will be a sign to your successor. Indeed, many of the people are heedless of Our signs.

The meaning of the passage depends on whether "preserve your body" means that Pharaoh's life was spared or that his corpse was recovered to serve as a reminder of what happens to those who defy God. The verse is indeed ambiguous, but a commonly-cited tradition attributed to Ibn Abbas (d. 687 CE), the father of Qur'anic exegesis, states that Pharaoh died, but his body was preserved for posterity. The historian al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), in his *Tārīkh al-Rusul wāl-Mulūk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*), provides a representative example of this tradition:

Pharaoh cried out when he saw what he saw of the power and might of God. He acknowledged his weakness, and his soul forsook him. He called out: "There is no god except the one in which the Children of Israel believe, and I am one of those who submits" (Q 10.90). [...] Ibn Abbas said: Gabriel came to the Prophet (on whom be peace), and said: "O Muhammad! Would that you had seen me when I

stuffed black mud in the mouth of Pharaoh, fearing that mercy would overtake him.” God said: “Now? When you had disobeyed before, and you were one of the corrupters? But today we will preserve your body—which is to say, nothing from you will be missing—so that you will be a sign to your successor” (Q 10.91–92), that is, as an admonition and a clear proof. It was said that if God had not brought out his body so that they recognized him, some of the people would have doubted it.⁵³

Muslim exegetes believed that Pharaoh died. The main problem is whether God had killed someone who had repented. Therefore, the problem is resolved through the intervention of Gabriel, who covered Pharaoh’s mouth before he could fully repent and be saved.

Both PRE and the Qur’anic narrative turn on the idea of Pharaoh’s repentance. For this reason, early scholars of Islamic studies considered the two narratives to be linked. Abraham Geiger, in his famous monograph on the elements Muhammad ‘borrowed’ from Judaism, even considered PRE to be the source of the Qur’an.⁵⁴ There is no doubt now that PRE was written after the rise of Islam and is therefore the later document, which means that Islamic sources could have inspired the narrative in PRE instead.⁵⁵

Early Muslim exegetes and PRE began with the same motif, the repentance of Pharaoh, but produced opposing narratives. It is reasonable to think that PRE, which was written in Abbasid Palestine, might be responding to the Islamic tradition. However, if we presume that PRE is presenting a counter-narrative to Islamic exegetical tradition, another problem presents itself: why

53 *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed Ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje, 16 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), I, 488.

54 Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam: A Prize Essay by Abraham Geiger*, trans. by F. M. Young (Madras: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898), 127–29.

55 For a criticism of Geiger and others on this specific point, see Nicolai Sinai, ‘Pharaoh’s Submission to God in the Qur’an and in Rabbinic Literature’, in *The Qur’an’s Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: Return to the Origins*, ed. by Holger Zellentin (London: Routledge, 2019), 235–60.

does PRE associate Nineveh with Pharaoh? The answer might lie in the Qur'an. The tenth *sūrah*, in which the motif of Pharaoh's repentance is found, is called *Yūnus*—Jonah—in reference to a verse near the end (Q 10.98): "Why has there not been a city that believed so that their faith benefited them, apart from the people of Jonah? When they believed, We removed the ignominious punishment from them in this worldly existence, and We granted them enjoyment for a time." This is the sole reference to Jonah in his own *sūrah*. The verse is preoccupied with the repentance of the city Jonah visited (as opposed to the story of the fish), and, furthermore, this verse almost immediately follows the contentious verses about Pharaoh's repentance in Q 10.90–92.

I suggest that PRE was inspired by the apparent non-sequitur between Pharaoh and Jonah and searched for a way to fill the gap. If this is the case, PRE would be the first, and perhaps the only, Jewish example of early Qur'anic exegesis.

5.0. Conclusion

In each of these examples, I have found some way in which PRE is continuous with a pre-existing rabbinic tradition. I have also found ways in which PRE's version significantly differs from its predecessors. In all three cases, innovations seem to be derived from non-rabbinic—in fact, non-Jewish—sources. PRE has adapted them to seem like variants of older rabbinic teachings. Other religions might even appear to be dependent on rabbinic tradition. This ruse was less an act of deception than an act of survival. The eighth and ninth centuries were a time of great sectarian proliferation among not only Jews but Christians and Muslims as well. In addition to these religions, older dualist groups, such as the Manichaeans and Mandaeans, were thriving, newer groups were developing, and the Samaritans were still a vital force. All of them shared the history of ancient Israel and its ancestral heroes as part of their cultural DNA. Each one, however, had its own distinct version of that history. I propose that PRE, by assimilating such diverse traditions, was attempting to construct a 'correct' version for the faithful against similar

but false interpretations. This explanation accounts for certain peculiar features of PRE, such as its concentration on Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve, by far the most widely diffused cultural myth among the various groups. As a Hebrew book, however, it was intended for internal use. Like the Christian Medieval Popular Bible or the Islamic Stories of the Prophets, the work was not merely polemical but also catechetical.⁵⁶ Although pretending to be an ancient book, PRE was in fact ahead of its time.

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56 For the Medieval Popular Bible, see Brian Murdoch, *The Medieval Popular Bible: Expansions of Genesis in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2003). For the Stories of the Prophets, see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002), 138–64.

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