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“If a Man Would Tell You”

The Bible, the only treasure which escaped the fire of Jerusalem, was in the greatest possible danger. The doctrine of God, as taught and believed in synagogues and the houses of the Jews, was at stake.¹

To speak of scepticism as a philosophy that is embedded in rabbinic literature carries the risk of using an unsuitable, external category to decipher the codes of an epistemic, theological, and social system which is very remote from both “Athens” and us. When interpreting phenomena occurring in a culture other than one’s own, it is necessary to be careful not to impose external theoretical frameworks (analytical categories) on the subject of study. One should rather learn how the studied culture understands and categorises its discursive (and other) practices. Dan Ben Amos called these practices “ethnic genres.”² Ethnic genres, he argued, could be identified either by members of the studied group or by the one studying them. The subject of this study, the rabbinic circles of late antiquity, functions as a somewhat imagined “ethnos.” This trans-generational and spatial group was often well aware of its own rules of creativity, as Galit Hasan-Rokem has shown.³ As Ben Amos argues, reading with ethnic genres in mind rather than analytical categories does not entail losing the benefits that these categories may hold or disregarding them; rather, it is a call to proceed with caution. Scepticism itself is a rather diverse and somewhat unstable sign.⁴ Rather than superficially dwelling on the differences between philosophical, religious, and scientific scepticism, for this discussion of what I see as a rabbinic form of engagement with scepticism, I would like to borrow the four main axes around which sceptical theories revolve: the existence of truth; the proper means of the production of knowledge; their relationship to authority; and the concept of doubt. In order to do so, I would suggest studying a group of texts which thematises the process of examining the ways in which rabbinic knowledge is produced. This group, fortunately, has a very clear stylistic feature, or discursive marker, which allows us to connect its members. I am referring, of course, to the

1 Arthur Marmorstein, “The Background of the Haggadah,” in *Studies in Jewish Theology*, ed. Myer S. Lew and Joseph Rabinowitz (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1950), 4.

2 Dan Ben-Amos, “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres,” *Genre* 2, no. 3 (1969): 275–301.

3 Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Did the Rabbis Recognize the Category of Folk Narrative?,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 19–55.

4 Richard H. Popkin, “Skepticism,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/skepticism>, accessed 20 April 2018; Richard H. Popkin, “Skepticism,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Collier Macmillan, 1967), 449–61. Both contain a bibliography on the subject.

group of texts which open with the words “if a man would tell you” and their close variants. There has only been one study of these texts as a distinctive group.⁵ At the very least, the members of this group share the first instinct that is essential to scepticism: doubt.

My objective in this paper will be to attempt to formulate the relationship between truth, epistemology, and authority within this group of texts. I shall argue that the expression “if a man would tell you” functions as a discursive marker which rabbinic literature utilises in order to suggest an engagement with what we have learnt to call “scepticism”: doubting epistemology as well as authority. The phrase “[and] if a man would tell you” is found more than one hundred times in rabbinic literature, up to the period of the Tanḥuma genre. The overwhelming majority of the corpus where this phrase occurs is Palestinian, whereas it appears only fourteen times in the Babylonian Talmud. A noteworthy study of these texts was published by Arthur Marmorstein in 1950,⁶ but since then, they have not been further studied as a group and their rhetorical and discursive function and attributes have remained unexplored. While Marmorstein made a significant contribution, his study was not without its problems.

Marmorstein justifiably identified the “if a man would tell you” texts as part of the rabbinic tradition of the diatribe, a form that he considered to be rooted in the Cynic and Stoic philosophical traditions. He made three main claims. Firstly, he proposed that the expression “if a man would tell you” is used by homilists to introduce hypothetical counter-arguments, whether alleged or real, to their biblical interpretation. Secondly, he suggested that they should be grouped together with five other groups of texts that he saw as similar, if not identical: “Anyone who says ...,” “So that they would not say ...,” “An answer to those who say ...,” “So that they may not say ...,” and “If they would say ...” (כל מי שאומר, שלא יאמרו, תשובה למי) (אם יאמרו, שאומרים, שלא ליתן פתחון פה). Finally, he claimed that all these groups are polemical in function and that the hypothetical or real speakers in all of the groups are hostile to rabbinic teaching; that is, all apart from a small group of texts that start with the phrase “do not wonder if ...” (אל תתמה). He believed that this group represented an inner-rabbinic voice, although in my view, this group is irrelevant to the discussion. The support for Marmorstein’s assertions is often wanting, either because he believed it to be self-evident, or because it was part of his more fundamental claim that there was a dispute between rabbinic Judaism and the Marcionites that was pivotal to rabbinic self-definition.

It is difficult to agree with Marmorstein on many of his points, all of which either lead towards or are the building blocks of his broader argument that all of these aggadic passages are polemical in nature and that Marcion was the single

⁵ Marmorstein, “The Background of the Haggadah,” 57–71.

⁶ Marmorstein, 57–71. Marmorstein consistently dates the sources on the basis of the names of the tradents and not based on the composition in which they appear.

greatest threat to rabbinic theology. His argument might have been stronger if only biblical verses were indeed the focus of all the diatribes mentioned, as the Bible stood at the heart of interreligious dispute in late antiquity, but this is not always the case. For example, almost none of the sources in the "if a man would tell you" group in tannaitic literature⁷ and in the Babylonian Talmud⁸ are anchored on the interpretation of a verse. Furthermore, not all the speakers are hostile to rabbinic teaching, nor are they outsiders to rabbinic circles. Indeed, looking closer at the identity of the speakers reveals that the groups that Marmorstein categorised together do not, in fact, belong together.

The group that starts with "so that they would not say" (שלא יאמרו), for example, is an enormous group with over 200 sources as early as the second and as late as the seventh century. These sources concern things that are done not for their truth value or necessity, but rather in order that it may not seem to anyone, irrespective of whether they are an Israelite or not, that the Law is being transgressed (מראית עין). These have an entirely different relationship to truth from the "if a man would tell you" group, which at least attempts to appear to be searching for truth and reasserting truth as a value.

The group starting with "so that they may not say" (שלא ליתן פתחון פה), however, has the specific function of rejecting the hypothetical or actual claims of non-Jews (the "nations of the world") or heretical Jews, as they are directly mentioned. It includes, for example, the much-discussed polemic regarding the notion of "two powers in heaven."⁹ It is mostly tannaitic¹⁰ and has very little continuation in classi-

7 *m. Ed.* 1:6; *t. Menah.* 13:1; *t. Nid.* 6:4; *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3; *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* 17:10 (Hoffmann edition, 103).

8 *b. Ber.* 10a; *b. Hag.* 16a; *b. Meg.* 6a–b, 31b; *b. Nid.* 52b; *b. Sanh.* 80a; *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 9b; *b. Ned.* 40a.

9 See Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, reprint ed. (Boston, MA: Brill, 2002); Adiel Schremer, "Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39 (2008): 230–54; Stephen Waers, "Monarchianism and Two Powers: Jewish and Christian Monotheism at the Beginning of the Third Century," *Vigiliae Christianae* 70 (2016): 401–29; Menahem Kister, "The Manifestations of God in the Midrashic Literature in Light of Christian Texts" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 81 (2012): 103–42; Menahem Kister, "Metatron, God, and the 'Two Powers': The Dynamics of Tradition, Exegesis, and Polemic" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 82 (2013): 43–88; Daniel Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven; or, The Making of a Heresy," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 331–70; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Jewish-Christian Relations and Rabbinic Literature—Shifting Scholarly and Relational Paradigms: The Case of Two Powers," in *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 15–43; Daniel Boyarin, "Once Again: 'Two Dominions in Heaven' in the Mekhilta" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 81 (2012): 87–101.

10 *Mek. of Rabbi Ishmael*, Shira 4 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ismael*, 129–30); BaHodesh 5–6 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, 219–21, 223); *Mek. of Rabbi Shimeon*, Beshalah 15:3 (Epstein and Melamed edition, 81); *Sifra*, Dibura deNedava 2:5 (Finkelstein edition, 2:22 and varia in 4:63), *Sifre Num.* 119 (Kahana edition, appendix 1, ל"ב); *Sifre Num.* 143 (Kahana edition, appen-

cal midrash.¹¹ This group is focused on authority rather than on epistemology or truth. In fact, it categorises only utterances from “proper” sources of authority, such as from (“orthodox”¹²) rabbinic Jews, as true. The “anyone who says” (כל מי שאומר) group is focused on the punishment or reward for uttering certain things and has nothing to do with doubt.¹³ The phrase “an answer to those who say” (תשובה למי שאומרים) appears only once and in a rather late source (*Pesiq. Rab.* 47), and “if they would say” (אם יאמרו) is merely a plural version of “if a man would tell you” and should therefore be classified with it.¹⁴ I am arguing here, through a detailed taxonomy, that the group that has “if a man would tell you” as a discursive marker is unique, as it preserves a moment of hesitation in the rabbinic discourse. As opposed to the complete negation of the false opinions and theologies of others as reflected in the “so that they would not say” (שלא ליתן פתחון פה) and the “anyone who says” (כל שאומר) groups, the doubts raised by the sources in this group are seriously considered, at least in part, and at times cause a change of heart.

What Marmorstein may have been reacting to when he created his taxonomy is the fact that a statement which begins with the marker “if a man would tell you” (אם יאמר לך אדם) is often rejected by the speaker/writer/redactor of the diatribe. I assume that it was this, in addition to the somewhat provocative content of some of the texts in the “if a man would tell you” group, that led him to believe that *all* the hypothetical speakers in this group are hostile to rabbinic teaching. I propose here to take a more historical and methodical approach to examining the data in order to understand the function of this discursive marker in classical rabbinic literature and to group the texts that use it. In order to classify the sources, I will use the focal points that scepticism offers us, examining epistemology, authority, truth, and doubt. I believe that we must ask the following questions: What is the identity of the people who are posing the challenges? Is there a difference between those who ask their interlocutor questions and those who offer simple propositions? Are they “right” or “wrong?” Are they indeed refuted? And finally, why are their claims rejected?

In order to classify the appearances of the expression “if a man would tell you,” I would suggest initially organising them into five groups, corresponding to three

dix, ט”ט; *Sifre Deut.* 42 (Finkelstein edition, 89); 43 (Finkelstein edition, 96–97); 308 (Finkelstein edition, 347), *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* 5:7; 11:14; 19:1 (Hoffmann edition, 20, 35, 113).

¹¹ It appears only in *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 26 (Mandelbaum edition, 394); *Lev. Rab.* 21:8 (Margulies edition, 462); *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 9). In *Lev. Rab.*, it is directed not against the Gentiles, but against Satan. *Tanḥ. Jethro* 16 (Buber edition, Ex 79) recycles the material we already know.

¹² I use “orthodox” in the sense that Boyarin offers in his argument for the creation of orthodoxy and heresy in rabbinic Judaism in the second century: see Boyarin, “Two Powers,” 364–70.

¹³ *Gen. Rab.* 67:4 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 757–58); *Song. Rab.* 1:1; *Tanḥ. Zav* 7; and *Sifre Num.* 105 (Kahana edition, 260), which is the most relevant to the discussion and to which I shall return later.

¹⁴ This is what I have done here.

major variables: the identity of the speakers, the response, and the type of utterance they use. In the first group (G1), anonymous speakers make an argument which is rejected;¹⁵ in the second group (G2), unidentified people ask a question and receive a (positive) answer;¹⁶ in the third group (G3), an argument made by an identified speaker is accepted;¹⁷ in the fourth group (G4), an argument made by an identified speaker is rejected;¹⁸ and in the final group (G5), an argument made by an unidentified person is accepted.¹⁹ Analysing each group separately and the corpus as a whole will reveal the relationship between authority, truth, and the discourse therein.

A full and detailed taxonomy of the cases will not only undermine the validity of many of Marmorstein's assumptions, but will also enable us to understand the historical function of the formula "if a man would tell you." I shall now analyse each group separately in order to clarify both my own choices relating to the classifications and the function of the groups. I will then offer my own taxonomy.

15 *m. Ed.* 1:6; *b. Meg.* 6a; *b. Meg.* 6b, *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 9b; *y. Ber.* 4:3 (32b), four times; *y. Sanh.* 10:1 (50b); *y. Šeb.* 1:1 (4a) twice; *y. Ta'an.* 2:1 (9a) thrice; *y. Ta'an.* 2:2 (9b) four times; *y. Ter.* 11:12 (56a); *Gen. Rab.* 12:1 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 97–99); 17:6 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157); 44:19 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 441–2); 50:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 527); 69:4 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 793) twice; 94:9 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 1181); *Lev. Rab.* 23:2 (Margulies edition, 629, line 1 in the apparatus); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 3:5 (Mandelbaum edition, 43); 4:2 (Mandelbaum edition, 59); 5:1 (Mandelbaum edition, 100); *Deut. Rab.* Nitsavim 5 (Liebermann edition, 117); *Song. Rab.* 1:14 (3); *Song. Rab.* 2:2 (2); *Lam. Rab.* (Vilnius) 2:13; 4:1; *Eccl. Rab.* 2:11–12 (Hirshman edition, 140–42); *Tanḥ.* Noah 17 (Buber edition, Gen 44); Hukot 19 (Buber edition, Num 104); Ki Tetse 9 (Buber edition, Deut 39); *Tanḥ.* Vayera 1 (Warsaw, Gen 46); Ha'azinu 3 (Warsaw, Deut 245), Yelamdenu according to the citation in Talmud Torah Bereshit 131 (Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, vol. 1 [Penna: Jewish Publication Society, 1940]. 317).

16 *b. Ber.* 10a; *y. Ta'an.* 1:1 (3a); *Gen. Rab.* 55:15 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 585); *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31, four times); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (four times; Mandelbaum edition, 152); *Deut. Rab.* Ekev (Liebermann edition, 74, four times); *Eccl. Rab.* 12,10 (Vilnius edition) and 3,15 (Hirshman edition, 210–212) (three times); *Tanḥ.* Emor 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91) three times; *Tanḥ.* Nasah 31 (Buber edition, Num 41–42, four times).

17 *t. Menah.* 13:1; *t. Nidd.* 6:4; *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3; *Midrash Tannaim Deut.* 17:10 (Hoffmann edition, 103); *'Abot R. Nat.* B 37 (Schechter edition, 98); *b. Nid.* 52b; *b. Sanh.* 4a; *b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 4a; *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:1 (10a); *y. Hor.* 1:1 (2b); *Gen. Rab.* 78:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 919). In theory, *y. Šeb.* 4:2 (10a) could be included here too, but as it is not an opening of a dispute or discourse, I have decided to leave it out.

18 *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:9; *b. Hag.* 16a; *b. Sanh.* 4a; *b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 40b; *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b); *Tanḥ.* Baha'alotkha 16 (Buber edition, Num 52); Beshallah 24 (Buber edition, Ex 67), Nasa 30 (Buber edition, Num 31, three times); *Tanḥ.* Ki Tisa 24 (Warsaw edition, Ex. 244); Shoftim 12 (Warsaw edition, Deut 225).

19 *b. Meg.* 6a; *b. Meg.* 6b; *Deut. Rab.* Nitzavim (Liebermann edition, 117, twice); *Lam. Rab.* 2:13.

1 Five Different Groups within the Genre

1.1 Group 1, or, Are the Speakers Telling the Truth?

I shall start with the unidentified speakers who make claims, as they are the largest group. This group consists mainly of examples found in the early Palestinian amoraic literature (32/42), with only one tannaitic example (*m. Ed.* 1:6). All but one of its seven examples in the Tanḥuma genre²⁰ are repetitions of earlier sources, and the Bavli contributes three more. As we shall see, this group presents us with a phenomenon in which empirically just claims or claims that could be, or indeed are, accepted elsewhere in rabbinic literature as true are deemed to be false.

This happens in ten out of the sixteen cases taken from the Yerushalmi in this group. Eight of them revolve around the numbers of blessings in the *‘amidah*, one is about the interpretation of a mishnaic passage, and one is about a tradition concerning the Sabbatical year. As the majority of the cases in the group refer to the correct number of blessings, we will examine this text more closely.

In *y. Ber.* 4:3 (33b), there is a lengthy unit devoted to various attempts to explain why there are eighteen blessings in the *‘amidah*. Five explanations are given: the number of psalms which appear before the psalmist is answered; the eighteen spinal vertebrae;²¹ the eighteen invocations of God in Psalm 29; the eighteen times the three patriarchs are mentioned together in the Bible, and finally, eighteen different commandments relating to the construction of the Tabernacle. I will not analyse or quote here those explanations for the phenomenon which do not directly respond to a claim starting with the marker “if a man would tell you,” and I will consider only the first, third and fourth explanations just listed:²²

Why eighteen? R. Joshua ben Levi said: Because there are eighteen psalms from the start of the Book of Psalms to the verse: “and the Lord answers you in your day of trouble” (Ps 20:2). *If a man would tell you: there are nineteen, tell him: “Why are the nations in an uproar” (Ps 2:1) is not included [...]*

²⁰ I have separated the Tanḥuma group from the classical midrash sources because of its generally different poetics, its anthological nature, and its possible influences from the Bavli. This is a group of Palestinian midrashim on the Torah dated from the sixth to the ninth centuries. Some of them have been preserved in the collections we now call Tanḥuma, but others “travelled independently” as midrashim to a specific book (for example, the second part of *Exodus Rabbah*). On the basic characteristics of the group, see, for example, Moshe David Herr, “Tanḥuma Yelammedenu,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Volume 15*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971): 794–96; Ronit Nikolsky, “From Palestine to Babylonia and Back: The Place of the Bavli and the Tanhuma on the Rabbinic Cultural Continuum,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Tal Ilan and Ronit Nikolsky (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 284–305; Marc Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003).

²¹ Based on *m. ‘Ohal.* 1:8.

²² The parallel *sugya* in *b. Ber.* 28b adds another explanation: the eighteen times God is mentioned in the *Shema*’.

R. Levi said, [The eighteen blessings] correspond to the eighteen invocations [in Psalm 29]. [But what of] "Ascribe to the Lord?" (Ps 29:1) R. Huna said, *if a man would tell you* that there are nineteen [blessings], tell him that the rabbis at Yavneh established a [nineteenth blessing] concerning the heretics.

R. Eleazar b. R. Yose objected before R. Yose: It is written, "The God (*El*) of glory thunders" (Ps 29:3)—they should have established another blessing on its account. He said to him, "It was taught, they insert the references to the heretics and the sinners in the blessing concerning the slanderers [the twelfth], and the references to the elders and the proselytes in the blessing concerning the righteous [the thirteenth], and the reference to David in the blessing concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem [the fourteenth]. We have enough invocations [in the chapter] for each and every one of these subjects.

R. Ḥaninah in the name of R. Pinḥas: [The 18 blessings] correspond to the eighteen times that the [names of the] patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are mentioned together in the Torah. *And if a man would tell you* that there are nineteen [instances], tell him that we do not count this one: "And behold the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac'" (Gen 28:13); *and if a man would tell you* that there are only seventeen [instances], tell him that we do count this one: "And in them let my name [Jacob] be perpetuated, and the name of my father Abraham and Isaac" (Gen 48:16).²³

All the unidentified speakers challenging assumptions in this passage from the Yerushalmi are, in fact, right. The first speaker is correct in that there are indeed nineteen psalms, not eighteen, up to the moment that God answers the psalmist on his day of trouble in Ps 20:2. The second speaker, introduced to the discussion by R. Huna, is also right, as God is mentioned by name more than eighteen times in Psalm 29. His opinion is accepted to the degree that R. Huna agrees that there are indeed nineteen blessings in the *'amidah*, as *birkat ha-minim* was added.²⁴ R. Eleazar, however, claims that if we count the times God appears with the name *El*, there are indeed twenty invocations in Psalm 29, and according to the logic presented by R. Huna, we should add another blessing to the *'amidah*. The answer given by R. Yose reflects the difference between the Palestinians and the Babylonians (represented here by R. Huna) about the number of blessings in the *'amidah*.²⁵ R. Yose ends

²³ The translation here is a (slight) adaptation of Tzvee Zahavy's translation, published in Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel, Volume 1: Berakhot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 170–71.

²⁴ On *birkat ha-minim* and the different forms (and numbers) of the benedictions in the *'amidah*, see, for example, David Instone-Brewer, "The Eighteen Benedictions and the *Minim* before 70 CE," *Journal of Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (2003): 25–44; Uri Ehrlich, *The Weekday Amidah in Cairo Genizah Prayer Books: Roots and Transmission* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2013); Günter Stemberger, "Birkat ha-minim and the Separation of Christians and Jews," in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity*, ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 75–88; Yechezkel Luger, *The Weekday 'Amida in the Cairo Genizah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Orḥot, 2001); Ruth Langer, *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat Haminim* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁵ On the Babylonians' difficulty with not counting *birkat ha-minim* as an additional blessing, see Ezra Fleischer, "On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 435–38.

the counting game by showing that we can add more text to the existing blessings without changing their numbers and keep the traditional eighteen, corresponding to the eighteen invocations of the ineffable name. He does so by adding the *minim* to the curse of the informers, the elders and the proselytes to the blessing of the righteous, and David to the blessing of Jerusalem. A different variant on the theme of the number of blessings appears in *t. Ber.* 3:25, which nevertheless counts eighteen.²⁶ He thus rejects both the doubt raised by the unidentified speakers and R. Huna's opinion. In the next section, R. Ḥaninah attempts another explanation for the number eighteen, this time based on mentioning all the patriarchs in one verse. His discursive opponents justly claim that this is not the case.²⁷ Once again, the argument is about the details: Can we consider the verse in which Jacob speaks of his forefathers to be mentioning all three forefathers together? The point I wish to make here is that it is difficult to think of those who know how to count as Marcionite, as non-rabbinic, or to see their arguments as completely false, or "polemical," as Marmorstein suggested. The "unidentified speakers" seem to fulfil different discursive functions: personifying hypothetical counter-arguments, pointing out places where the claims are weak and should be further supported, or facilitating or explaining change (as in the case of R. Huna). The speakers do not seem to have a hidden agenda, and often they reflect opinions that are not foreign to rabbinic thought itself. The number of the blessings, at any rate, is an entirely inner-rabbinic dispute.²⁸

We find the same phenomenon of rejecting perfectly viable claims in six out of the seven cases of G1 in *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, in *Gen. Rab.* 17:6,²⁹ commenting on Gen 2:21, which has "and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh" (וַיִּסְגֵּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתָּנָה). In *Genesis Rabbah*, Rabbi Ḥaninah attempts a *draṣat 'otiyot* (a midrash of single letters in the Bible) regarding the end of the verse: "Rabbi Ḥaninah son of R. Adda said: from the beginning of the book to this passage the letter *samek* is not written. But when the woman was created, Satan was created with her. *And if a man would tell you* 'that is it which encompasses' (Gen 2:11), tell him that verse speaks only of rivers."

The letter *samek* undoubtedly appears in the Book of Genesis before the creation of woman, in Gen 2:11, which deals with the River Pishon, which encompasses (*sovev* סֹבֵב) Kush. However, R. Ḥaninah has the last word. A different midrash that

26 Fleischer, "On the Beginnings," 435–438; Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta, Volume 1: Seder zera'im 'alef* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987), 53.

27 The simplest way to count would be seventeen, including Gen 25; 28; 31; 32 (twice); 35; 49; Ex 2; 3 (three times); 6; Lev 26; 2Kgs 13; 1Chr 1 (twice); 2Chr 32; to this, one might add a second occurrence in both Gen 28 and Gen 32, making it nineteen.

28 Ezra Fleischer, "The Shemone Esre, Its Character, Internal Order, Content, and Goals" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 62 (1993): 179–223, here 182–83.

29 Theodor and Albeck edition, 157.

appears in *Genesis Rabbah* (with parallels in *Lamentations Rabbah*, *Pesiqta deRab Kahana*, and *Songs of Songs Rabbah*) has the following:

"I will Judge" (אֲנִי אֲדִין) (Gen 15:14). R. Eliezer in the name of Rabbi Jose, in those two letters the Holy One, blessed be He, promised our father to redeem his sons, and if they will repent from their bad deeds he will redeem them by 72 letters. R. Judan said, from "has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within *another* nation" to "by great terrors" (Deut 4:34) we find 72 letters. *And if a man would tell you* there are 75, take out (three letters that make) the second mentioning of "a nation (גִּוִּי)." ³⁰

It is difficult to prove that the argument of there being seventy-five letters here is wrong, as indeed seventy-five letters appear in the Bible. The rejection of the claim is no more convincing than that of R. Ḥaninah regarding the letter *samek*.

Working out of the specific examples given here and the other members of the group, a unified cause for the rejection of the arguments of the unidentified speakers does not seem to be possible, since it appears that the grounds for rejecting the claims of the speakers in G1 are too varied. They stretch from inconsistencies between verses to reading a different part of the verse, using a different counting technique, the observed natural world, a different system of categorisation, or a ruling of a *beit din*. To put it differently, the claims are not rejected on the basis of any coherent epistemology. They are also not being rejected because of the identity of the speakers, as most of the claims are not presented to the rabbinic collective by a member of an out-group.

There are two texts that may seem to be exceptions to this rule, which could be treated as polemical. One appears in *Gen. Rab.* 12:2 and in a parallel text in *Eccl. Rab.* 2:12, and the other appears in *y. Ta'an.* 2:1 (9a).³¹ The first has to do with a man who claims that he understands the cosmic order. While his interlocutor, R. Huna, rejects his claim as impossible, the subsequent opinions quoted are quite different and suggest that human beings can indeed understand some if not all of the natural world and the cosmic order.³² This is consistent both with the trend of rejecting acceptable claims that we saw earlier and with the speakers being people who do not necessarily come from outside of the rabbinic collective. This brings us to the famous passage from *y. Ta'an.* 2:1 (9a):

If a man would tell you: I am a god, he is a liar; I am (the) Son of Man, he will regret it; I go up to the heavens—he has said so, but he shall not do it.

³⁰ *Gen. Rab.* 17:6 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157).

³¹ *Gen. Rab.* 12:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 97–99), and in a parallel text in *Eccl. Rab.* 2:12 (Hirshman edition, 140).

³² See Reuven Kiperwasser, "'The Natural Order'—The Perception of the Nature in Rabbinic Thought" [Hebrew], *Akdamot, the Journal for Jewish Thought* 5 (1998): 35–52.

While Peter Schäfer sees anti-Christian polemic here,³³ and others even inner-Christian polemic,³⁴ I wish to probe the identity of the speaker and the nature of R. Abbahu's answer. Schäfer justly argues that Jesus is a better fit as the object of the question than Hiram, who claims to be a god in Ezek 18:2, or Nebuchadnezzar, who claims he will ascend to heaven (Isa 14:13), because only with the inclusion of Jesus is the whole sequence coherent. He is the only one about whom it was claimed that he was God, the Son of Man, and that he ascended to heaven. Schäfer also noted that the first two claims are refuted by an appeal to the same verse in Balaam's oracle (Num 23:19), "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?" The third claim about ascending to heaven, however, is not rejected on the basis of a verse (even if Isaiah could be utilised here). It is simply rejected outright.

However, Schäfer disregards the problems created by the narrative structure: Is Jesus talking to R. Abbahu and we are witnessing his second coming, or is there another man who thinks he is a god, who went up to heaven to sit with God and keeps appearing to the sages? Is this a dramatisation of rabbinic dogma, or just R. Abbahu's view concerning a third-century Christian controversy?

The logic of this midrash is of particular interest. As with some other cases in this group, it is not without blemish. Let us follow the three claims and their answers again. The refutation of the first argument is based on a verse that says "God is not a man," read as proof that man is not God. There are two fallacies here. Firstly, the argument is circular in claiming that if God does not lie and men do, then God cannot be a man, so if someone claims that he is God, he is lying and is not God. If the man is indeed God, he is not lying, and therefore he is a god. The second is that there is a difference between being a god and being God. This is a difference that Christianity and many types of dualist heresies have noted. I also do not recall anyone regretting saying that he was the son of man,³⁵ or any rabbinic doctrinal teaching against sinless men who go to heaven without dying. In fact, the opposite appears as an answer to one of the questions asked by unidentified speak-

³³ See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 107–11; Samuel Tobias Lachs, "R. Abbahu and the Minim," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 60, no. 3 (1970): 197–212, here 198–99; Robert Travers Herford, *Christianity in the Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903), 62–63; Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Jesus in the Talmud," in Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Rabbinical Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1951), 545 ff., and also Ephraim E. Urbach, "Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam Stories" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 25 (1956): 272–89, here 277–78. Urbach sees this as an imagined dialogue between Balaam and a Christian.

³⁴ Oded Irshai, "R. Abbahu Said: 'If a Man Should Say to You "I am God"—He Is a Liar'" [Hebrew], *Zion* 47 (1982): 173–77, points out that even within the church, the divinity of Christ was contested by some. See the literature mentioned there.

³⁵ On the Son of Man in the context of "two powers," see Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 202–15.

ers in G2. To put it differently, the answers offered here by R. Abbahu are more negations, threats, and promises than real refutations. As with some other cases within this group, the point is not how valid the claims are, but their rejection, and we shall return to this point later.

1.2 Group 2: Those Who Ask Questions

Group 2, the group of questions asked by unidentified personae, includes fourteen early amoraic cases, one example from the Babylonian Talmud, and eleven examples from the Tanḥuma genre, of which only three are not original and four are repeated.

The early amoraic group consists of variants on the same questions: six ask about the possibility of something, and two ask "where" (is your God, *y. Ta'an.* 1:1 [3a]) and "when" (will God redeem Israel, *Eccl. Rab.* 12:10).³⁶ All the questions are answered by a verse or an allusion to a biblical story. All of those who ask questions may be part of the rabbinic group, borderline rabbinic Jews, or members of an out-group, but only in one case (*y. Ta'an.* 1:1 [3a]) is it clearly someone who is identified as a non-member of the Jewish collective. In the Tanḥuma group (4) and in the Bavli (1), another five are added about the possibility or impossibility of an event.

The group as a whole poses a hermeneutical challenge. All but the two "where" and "when" questions are answered by a straightforward affirmation. Seven of them ask about God: Can God make the poor rich?³⁷ Can God resurrect the dead?³⁸ Could Adam be alive today had he not sinned?³⁹ Could God create water upon water?⁴⁰ Turn water into dry land?⁴¹ To this list, *Deut. Rab.*⁴² adds another three questions: Does God accept those who repent? Does God open the wombs of barren women? And can God save from fire? These questions focus on the relationship between God and men, which we encounter also in the Bavli with the man who asks: "Does a slave rebel against his master?" (*b. Ber.* 10a). All the answers are supported by verses. The hermeneutical challenges are, however, how to interpret the nature of the questions; that is to say, are they meant to challenge what they may think of as rabbinic "dogma," or are they honest questions, seeking answers in the face of different theological and textual difficulties?

³⁶ Hirshman edition, 140.

³⁷ *Gen. Rab.* 55:15 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 585).

³⁸ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210); *Deut. Rab.* 'Egev (Liebermann edition, 74).

³⁹ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210); *Deut. Rab.* 'Egev (Liebermann edition, 74).

⁴⁰ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53).

⁴¹ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152–53); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210).

⁴² *Deut. Rab.* 'Egev (Liebermann edition, 74).

The oldest member of the group, found in *Gen. Rab.* 55:15, interprets the trials of Abraham as the Torah's way of teaching us about reward. Abraham wins great favour because of his loyalty to God. When someone asks, "Can God make rich whoever he pleases, and make poor whoever he pleases, and make whomever he wants king?", the affirmative answer takes the omnipotence of God as a given and focuses on God's ethical standard. God may do so, and His decisions are not arbitrary.⁴³ The man who may be understood as complaining that God does not favour him is therefore asked to measure himself against the scale of Abraham. I see no reason to think of the question asked as external to the rabbis, since the desire to understand God's actions is at its heart and graver questions about God's decisions in the face of the destruction of the temple are often raised. If, however, a person tells you that this question is polemical by nature, suggesting that God is not just, then tell him/her that we will address this question shortly.

A most interesting and much-repeated tradition is the one that appears as an opening of an obviously popular proem, which has survived in multiple versions.⁴⁴ I shall quote its beginning here as it appears in MS Munich of *Leviticus Rabbah*, as this is most likely its first documentation.⁴⁵

"That which is now, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what is pursued" (Eccl 3:15).⁴⁶ R. Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah. Rabbi Judah said: *If a man would tell you* that had the first man not eaten from that tree he would be alive and well forever, tell him this is "that which is now": Elijah is alive and well forever. "That which is to be, already is": R. Nehemiah: *If a man would tell you*, how is it possible that in the beginning the whole world was water upon water! tell him "[it] already is," as Okeanos is full of water. Shall he say, will the Holy One, blessed be he, dry it? Say to him "it has already happened"—"the Israelites walked through the sea on dry land" (Ex 15:19). "That which is to be, already is"—shall you say, is it possible that the Holy One, blessed be he, will resurrect the dead? Tell him this: "[it] already is," he has already resurrected the dead by the hands of Elijah and Elisha, and Ezekiel in the valley of Dura.⁴⁷

This is the first part of a very long proem which connects Eccl 3:15, "That which is now, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what is pursued," and Lev 22:27: "When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as

⁴³ This stance is also taken in a conversation between Matrona and Rabbi Jose repeated in *Gen. Rab.* 68:4 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 771); *Lev. Rab.* 8:1 (Margulies edition, 164–68); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 2:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 18–20).

⁴⁴ In *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152); *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210–12); *Tanḥ.* Emor 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91).

⁴⁵ Here, I have not chosen the version that Margulies reconstructed from many manuscripts, but rather that of MS Munich. On the problems presented by textual criticism, see Margulies's comments on pages 727–28 of his edition.

⁴⁶ Hirshman edition, 210–12.

⁴⁷ *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31).

the LORD's offering by fire." The whole proem functions as consolation to a nation which is based on interpreting the biblical lexeme *nirdaf* (נִרְדָּף) in the Ecclesiastes verse as "persecuted" rather than "chased" and as the sacrificial herbivores offered to God in the Leviticus verse. The first part of the proem is dedicated to fostering hopes for the future based on God's actions in the past. The Ecclesiastes verse is foremost read as a promise: God will stand by his people and redeem them. The proem follows a chronological order, from creation to salvation, and links biblical stories to the "rabbinic present" in which, as it is said, "Israel are pursued by the nations of the world" in the hope that "God will seek the pursued."

The proem is a long list of examples of situations that seem irreversible or catastrophic, but turn out to be merely temporary phases. This midrashic tradition (in its five variations⁴⁸) is the only instance where this verse from Ecclesiastes is ever quoted in rabbinic literature.⁴⁹

Marmorstein read the opening of the proem as a polemic answering an imagined "gnostic" allegation against the Bible, the nature of which is not entirely clear from his writings. We can assume that he saw it as a problem as it might point to inconsistencies in the Bible, or as reflecting inconsistencies within the nature of God Himself; that is, suggesting that he is either bad, or—perhaps even worse—that he is but the demiurge who created the earth for the higher God.

The four questions the speaker asks could be split into two dyads, one concerning life and death, the other concerning creation and the eschaton. We can read the first question of the first dyad as making two conflicting claims. The first is that if all men are mortal now but Adam was initially immortal, then "what is now" and "what has been" is not one and Ecclesiastes was wrong. The way the midrash refutes the claim is ironically not by mentioning the death of Adam and his mortality, but the possibility of immortality after Adam. The idea that Adam was created im-

⁴⁸ In *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 9:4 (Mandelbaum edition, 152); *Lev. Rab.* 27:4 (Margulies edition, 627–31); *Eccl. Rab.* 3:15 (Hirshman edition, 210–12); *Tanḥ. Emor* 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91).

⁴⁹ This verse was in fact highly unpopular even among the contemporary Christians and other "heretics." It is translated but not elaborated on in the Peshitta; it is not referenced by any of the ante-Nicene Fathers, and is mentioned only thrice afterwards, in traditions that did not gain much popularity: Peter Chrysologus, Evagrius Ponticus, and Jerome. Chrysologus, an influential Jerusalemite theologian, reads the verse about all the persecuted who have insight into the knowledge of created things in his sermon 70 (see Peter Chrysologus, *Selected Sermons*, in *Saint Peter Chrysologus, Selected Sermons, and Saint Valerian, Homilies*, trans. George E. Ganss, paperback ed. [Washington: Catholic University Press, 2004], 119–23), while Evagrius Ponticus reads "have already been" as referring to John the Baptist still in his mother's womb, while no Christological reading is to be found (see Evagrius Ponticus, *Scholia on Ecclesiastes* 3.15, in *Evagrius Ponticus*, ed. and trans. Augustine Casiday [London and New York: Routledge, 2006], 135–36). Jerome, in his *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, reads the second part of the verse as referring to martyrs, whom God will avenge (see Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi, opera omnia*, vol. 23 of *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. Jacques Paul Migne [Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1845], 1040B).

mortal is not only manifested in Genesis, but also restated and reasserted in midrash, especially regarding Eve's part in bringing death to the world.⁵⁰ There is no heresy in claiming that Adam was initially immortal, and I cannot see why a tradition that is so well attested within rabbinic circles should be seen as some kind of Marcionite challenge to them.⁵¹ The challenge, then, is in the difference between every man and the first man: Is there indeed a fundamental difference between Adam and every man born of him? Was Adam unique, a case of what has been and now is not? In order to refute the argument that the ways of the world have changed, the text is willing to go to an extreme. R. Judah's answer focuses on making Adam's death (and perhaps accordingly everyone's death) a result of his personal sins and avoidable, inasmuch as sin is avoidable. A man without sin may live forever, and we have Elijah to prove it.

Theologically, the argument about the possibility of immortality for every person without sin may be far more dangerous to the rabbis than yet another contradiction in the Bible.⁵² It may validate Jesus as a sinless man, one who transcended the fate of Adam and did not die. It may also call for finding fault in each and every patriarch and prophet in the Bible. Moreover, Elijah has a part in the messianic future, as we can find in Mal 3:23–24,⁵³ a fact which may support a reading of Malachi 3 as referring to Jesus, a reading with which Marcion himself surprisingly agreed. The final refutation of the function of this question as Marcionite polemic lies exactly in Marcion's view of Malachi 3 as one of only three places in the Old Testament that refers to Jesus.⁵⁴ In other words, claiming that it is Marcionite propaganda in disguise is more likely to describe the answer given than the question asked by the "unidentified speaker."

In any case, while making Jesus's life story plausible, R. Judah insists that it was not unique. The second part of the dyad again finds a very close alliance between rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity. The resurrection of the dead stood at the heart of a well-known inner-Jewish dispute from the Second Temple period,⁵⁵ as well as at the heart of a dispute with the pagan world and between

⁵⁰ See, for example, *Gen. Rab.* 17:7 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 158); *y. Šabb.* 2:6 (20a); *'Abot. R. Nat.* B 9 (Schechter edition, 24–25); *Tanḥ.* Noah 1 (Buber edition, Gen 27–28). I thank Shoshana Cohen for helping me to make this connection.

⁵¹ An argument even Marmorstein himself struggled to make: see Marmorstein, *Studies in Jewish Theology*, 58.

⁵² The Babylonian Talmud even speaks of contradictions within Ecclesiastes itself (*b. Šabb.* 30b).

⁵³ 5:4 in NRSV.

⁵⁴ Edwin Cyril Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), 117–18.

⁵⁵ This is described, for example, by Flavius Josephus in *Ant.* 18.1; *J.W.* 2.8. On the importance of the doctrine of resurrection, see also Albert L. Baumgarten, "Josephus and the Jewish Sects," in *A Companion to Josephus*, ed. Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 261–72 (and see Cana Werman's contribution to this volume).

different followers of Jesus.⁵⁶ While Marcion's followers rejected it, it was essential to orthodox Christianity and even Arian Christianity, as Epiphanius shows.⁵⁷ As polemical questions, in other words, these put rabbinic Jews and the majority of Christians on the same side of the divide, a risk which I believe was greater in the Christian empire where the rabbis producing the texts lived than in the Marcionite sect. As far as polemics go, this is hardly a strong strategy.

The questions regarding water do not, to my knowledge, threaten rabbinic theology or specifically support the Marcionite theology of creation in any way. The question of where all the water that once covered the earth went after Gen 1:9 troubled some rabbis regardless of any foreign intervention. The answer—namely, into the (river) Okeanos⁵⁸—is given in *Gen. Rab.* 5:1 and again in *Lev. Rab.* 10:9, where the gathering of the water is mentioned as an example of how an apparently small vessel can hold a great amount. But why should God create too much water to begin with? Is He not omniscient? The answer to this is also given in *Gen. Rab.* 5:1, as there the water is kept as a sort of whip, always ready to flood the earth in case humankind turns evil. Since not even Marcion doubted the power of the creator God to form the world as He pleases, I cannot see why this would be the best representation of his "heresy."⁵⁹ We can read R. Naḥman's main question as being about chaos and order and God's ability to separate the two. When R. Naḥman affirms it, it is more of a refutation of pagan beliefs about the weak defeated God of Israel than of any heretical claim. Everything God wills, including the redemption of Israel, is possible, a fact that we learn from the (biblical) past. The affirmation of the omnipotence of God is so common in rabbinic literature⁶⁰ that I find it difficult to believe that in this instance alone it is an argument made against gnostic sects.

So how are we to understand these questions? I believe that they are indeed there to affirm some basic rabbinic theological conventions: God's omniscience,

56 See recently Yifat Monnickendam, "I Bring Death and Give Life, I Wound and Heal" (Deut. 32:39): Two Versions of the Polemic on the Resurrection of the Dead," *Henoch* 35 (2013): 90–118, and the literature mentioned there on the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and closely related "others" regarding the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

57 Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion, Book I (Sects 1–46)*, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 228, 295, 297.

58 On its importance and mythical function in Greek culture, see James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20–25; Arent Jan Wensinck, *The Ocean in the Literature of the Western Semites* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1918), and see also Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 70.

59 Marcion, however, would argue that the creator god is not God; see Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of an Alien God* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990), 13.

60 Marmorstein himself highlights this as essential in Jewish theology in *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 1, 160–79.

omnipotence, and ongoing commitment to Israel. While those questions may have been raised by Others, they could have been, and indeed were, raised by good rabbinic Jews, or at least by what Boyarin calls “synagogue Jews” as opposed to “study house Jews.”⁶¹ The amount of dogmatic freedom embedded in the answers, the way they ignore theological hazards which might be created by them, and the fact that the questions indeed do not correspond to any one specific known heresy, added to the overall structure and meaning of the proem, lead me to believe that the questions are not polemical by nature. This does not entail that they do not engage with defining rabbinic dogma, or that they do not have “others” in mind, but more likely that these texts are there to show that every question which may be brought in from the outside had already been solved in an inner discussion. The fifth-century texts, that is, if they take any interest at all in an alleged second-century interreligious dispute, do so as part of their own inner-religious legacy, not as part of a continuous engagement with a prominent threat.

This line of thought can be further stretched into the other questions in the group about the whereabouts of God and the date of the eschaton. Those are also inner-rabbinic questions, which are dealt with in many other places. The question which I find most telling is the one that asks about the whereabouts of God in *y. Ta'an*. 1:1 (3a), which has: “Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said: *If a man would tell you, where is your God? Tell him, in the big city of Rome. Why? One is calling to me from Seir (Isa 21:11).*” This is a very playful answer, and it is based on an assumption that the omnipresence of God is already established. It plays with the conventions of what polemic questions may look like or imply. At first glance, it may appear as if R. Joshua is admitting defeat: the Romans, who captured Jerusalem, presumably also captured its local god. This answer is more radical than the question, even if the epistemology is quite ordinary (learning from a verse). The exiled here is not the Shekhinah, but God Himself, and He is held captive in Rome. This may sound more like a Roman narrative than a rabbinic one, until the verse from Isaiah is quoted and the pun becomes clear. Since “Seir” is identified with Rome and “Dumah” is interpreted to mean Rome a little earlier on the page⁶² in the Talmud, Rome is the new dwelling place of God. But if we read the whole chapter in Isaiah, especially the parts of it not quoted here, the hidden transcript will become clear and the members of the rabbinic inner circle may burst out laughing, as intended by the midrash. If God is indeed in Rome, then redemption is near, as too is the fall of Rome. Rome is just another kingdom to be overthrown, and God’s presence there is the starting point of redemption. This question is a masterful play between public and hidden transcripts.⁶³ While on the public level, it pleases an imagined Roman,

⁶¹ Boyarin, “Two Powers,” 335.

⁶² Based on the graphic similarity between דומא and רומא.

⁶³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

on the hidden level, it completely usurps Rome. Here, just like in the four questions above, it appears that what the members of the community believe is far more important than what the "Others" might think. Let the Romans believe what they please, R. Joshua says; we know what they do not.

A pattern is starting to emerge. While all questions are answered by citing proof texts, the supposed refutations of hostile claims turn out to be more threatening theologically than the questions asked. The flexibility about certain "truths" that are expressed in the answers, as well as their sometimes radical (unintended?) consequences imply, I believe, that the answer given and those who quote them were not threatened by the questions themselves, but rather used them in order to reaffirm and creatively explore their own conventions.

1.3 Groups 3 and 4: Identified Speakers and Their Fate

Groups 3 and 4, which contain the sayings of identified speakers, are perhaps the only groups to exhibit a clear epistemology. Unfortunately, this epistemology is hardly revolutionary, and it can be boiled down to *ad hominem* arguments. The claims brought forth by members of the inner rabbinic circle are accepted. Such is the opinion of Rabbi 'Aqiba (regarding bringing a ram as an offering in *t. Menah.* 13:1 and the age from which a girl cannot refuse marriage and must get a proper divorce bill in *t. Nid.* 6:4 and *b. Nid.* 52b). The same holds true for the "elders" whose opinion is accepted in *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3, *b. Meg.* 31b, *b. Ned.* 40a, and a *beit din* in *Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy* 17:10. Arguments coming from the mouths of members of the extended rabbinic circle or borderline characters are rejected (a prophet in *b. Sanh.* 80a and *y. Hor.* 1:3 [5b]; children in *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3, *b. Meg.* 31b., and *b. Ned.* 40a; *yetzer hara'* in *b. Hag.* 16a). In this context, it is interesting to note that none of the speakers are identified as *not* being members of rabbinic society. In fact, tannaitic literature has a different formula for introducing hypothetical heretical or false arguments from the mouths of people who are directly marked as strangers (*'ummot ha-'olam*) or who are wrong: "So that they would not say" (שלא ליתן פתחון פה). This is the formula that introduces the familiar discussion of the questions of the two powers in heaven, the names of God, the appearance of "other gods" in the Bible, and so on.⁶⁴ To put it differently, tannaitic literature uses both

⁶⁴ *Mek. of Rabbi Ishmael*, Shira 4 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, 129–30); *BaHodesh* 5–6 (Horovitz and Rabin edition, 219–21, 223); *Mek. of Rabbi Shimeon*, Beshalah 15:3 (Epstein and Melamed edition, 81); *Sifra Leviticus* Vayikra D'nedava 2:5 *Sifre Num.* Korah, 119 (Kahana, Appendix 1, ל"ב); Pinhas 137, 143 (Kahana edition, appendix, ט"ז, ט"ח); *Sifre Deut.* 'Ekev 42 (Finkelstein edition, 89); 43 (Finkelstein edition, 96–97); Ha'azinu 308 (Finkelstein edition, 347), *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* (Mekhilta) 12:28; 31:4; 31:6 (Hoffmann edition, 60, 61, 62); *Midrash Tannaim on Deut.* 5:7; 11:14; 19:1 (Hoffmann edition, 20, 35, 113). In the amoraic period, this formula is not as dominant: it appears twice in *Lev. Rab.* (20:8; 21:10, Margulies edition, 462, 490), twice in *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* (12:20; 26:8;

“if a man would tell you” and “so that they would not say” to introduce arguments made by (collectively) identified rather than unidentified speakers. While the latter are mostly non-Jews, the former are always members of the rabbinic group.

In the amoraic period, things are not quite as clear, as “so that they may not say” (שלא ליתן פתחון פה) loses popularity and “if a man would tell you” grows in popularity. In classical amoraic midrash, the “so that they may not say” group occasionally refers to heretics, while at other times it refers to Satan or to all the inhabitants of this world; that is, the division of labour between the two discursive markers ceases to exist.

1.4 The Key: Group 5

The last group, group 5, consists of only three examples: *b. Meg.* 6a–6b and *Lam. Rab.* 2:13. However, these may hold the key to understanding the rhetorical function of all the groups. *Lam. Rab.* turns on its head the contextual meaning of one of the gravest verses in the Bible (*Lam* 2:8): “Her (Jerusalem’s) gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; there is no Torah; and her prophets find no vision from the Lord.” From this verse, the sages learn the following:

“Her king and princes are among the nations there is no Torah” (*Lam* 2:8). *If a man would tell you* there is *wisdom* among the nations, believe him, as it is written, “I will destroy the wise men from Edom, and understanding from the mountains of Esau” (*Obad* 1:8) [There is] Torah among the nations—do not believe him, as it is written, “Her king and princes are[.] among the nations there is no Torah,” her prophets are false prophets, and even if these prophets are true prophets, “they find no vision from the Lord” (*Lam* 2:8).⁶⁵

The frightful words about Jerusalem and her people are turned against the nations by changing the location of an imagined comma. Instead of reading “her king and princes are among the nations, there is no Torah,” one should read “her king and princes are, among the nations there is no Torah.” It is only the nations who do not have Torah, not *us*, and prophecy is lost to all. From this, we are to learn that the nations, here obviously non-Jews, cannot have Torah; that is, they cannot be *verus Israel*. But let us go back to the nature of the anonymous speaker’s arguments.

The *ad hominem* argument that decided the fate of the utterances in groups 3 and 4 is no longer relevant, as the same speaker makes both an argument which is accepted (there is wisdom among the nations) and one which is rejected (there is Torah among the nations). The proof text for the acceptance of the first argument

Mandelbaum edition, 218, 394), and twice in *Gen. Rab.* (1:10; 8:8; Theodor and Albeck edition, 61,91).

⁶⁵ *Lam. Rab.* 2:13.

is far more straightforward and convincing than that for the refutation of the second argument.

B. *Megillah* gives us two further examples in which the unidentified speakers who make claims are clearly a rhetorical tool rather than actual people. The first, in *b. Meg.* 6a, draws special attention to questions of epistemology:

Caesarea and Jerusalem. *If a man would tell you* that both are destroyed, do not believe him; if he says that both are flourishing, do not believe him; if he says that Caesarea is wasted and Jerusalem is flourishing, or that Jerusalem is wasted and Caesarea is flourishing, you may believe him, as it says, "I shall be replenished, now that it is wasted" (Ezek 26:2). If this one is replenished, that one is wasted, and if that one is replenished, this one is wasted.

Hypothetically, we could have learned from this, again, that an utterance may be deemed true or false on the basis of its agreement with scripture. However, the verse may have only an ornamental value, as in fact the verse which is the basis of this midrash unfortunately does not refer to Caesarea and Jerusalem, but to Jerusalem and Tyre. The once mortal enemy becomes nothing but a metaphor, and the powers of history reveal the ideological bias in the interpretation of the verse. The rabbis who want to claim that the animosity between Caesarea and Jerusalem is eternal, not political or circumstantial, ironically point to the negation of such assumptions made in the biblical past. Tyre is no threat in their days.

Tractate *Megillah* 6b in the Babylonian Talmud gives us an even more interesting unidentified hypothetical speaker, or rather, even less stable grounds for refuting him:

R. Isaac also said: If a man says to you, I have laboured and not found, do not believe him. If he says, I have not laboured but still have found, do not believe him. If he says, I have laboured and found, you may believe him. This is true in respect of words of Torah, but in respect of business, all depends on the assistance of heaven. And even for words of Torah this is true only of penetrating to the meaning, but for remembering what one has learnt, all depends on the assistance of heaven.

R. Isaac introduces the principles known in contemporary culture as *no pain no gain* as the basis for the objection to a man who says the opposite. However, the *sugya* qualifies R. Isaac's total rejection of the man's arguments and slowly begins to agree with his argument in some cases. The *sugya* is willing to compromise with R. Isaac's initial position on issues that do not immediately reflect on the professional guild of the rabbis. Merchants may be fortunate, some people have a better memory than others, but the unique skills the rabbis hold are not divine gifts, but the result of human effort. Why is this so? We are not told. We just have to accept it.

The axiomatic status of the claims here is paralleled by the decisive tone used in the two other members of this group. We are to accept that there is no Torah among the nations and that the opposition between Rome and Jerusalem is eternal, even if the proof texts are highly manipulated and without any proof in the case of understanding the meaning of Torah without years of study. In this group, we draw

closer and closer to a rabbinic “credo” of transcendental truths that cannot be denied: Rome is an eternal enemy, Gentiles (whether Christians or others) cannot have a true knowledge of Torah, and nor do others who study it outside the rabbinic schools or by way of revelation. Since the unidentified speakers in all instances here give one argument which is accepted and one which is rejected, it is difficult to interpret their function as threatening rabbinic orthodoxy. Rather, they are used in order to allow a manifestation of those things which should be considered pillars of rabbinic faith. To put it differently, the fifth group might point us to the function of the “speakers” not as markers of boundaries between the rabbis and their Others, but as enablers of the manifestation of rabbinic dogma. Therefore, it is not the quality of the arguments nor the identity of the people expressing them that is important here. The claimants are but rhetorical instruments, used to emphasise the power and authority of rabbinic teaching and to transform simple utterances into dogmatic statements.

Going back to the challenge posed by Marmorstein, we must ask ourselves again, after closely reading many of the sources which open with the formula “if a man would tell you,” whether those “who would tell you” indeed have only a polemical function, intended to overcome Marcionites, and what relationship between knowledge and power is manifested in them. A taxonomy of all the occurrences of the formula “if a man would tell you” may give us the answer.

2 General Taxonomy

The earlier Palestinian texts group (not including *Tanḥuma*, *Deut. Rab.*, *’Abot. R. Nat.* (B), and the Bavli)⁶⁶ have fifty-seven members.⁶⁷ Of these, the biggest group (G1) is the group of unidentified speakers who make an argument which is rejected (about 56 %, 32/57). The second-largest group, about 26 % (G2), includes the questions from unidentified speakers (15/57). The third-largest group (12.5 %) includes the cases in which an identified person, generally belonging to the rabbinic circle, makes a claim which is accepted (seven, of which four are tannaitic sources, two-thirds of the tannaitic texts studied here). The fourth group (G4) consists of the identified “tellers” whose claims are rejected (2/57, about 3.5 %, one of which is tannaitic). The fifth group (G5) is made up of unidentified speakers who argue for something whose argument is accepted (1/57, about 1.7 %).

In classical rabbinic literature, then, between 14 % and 49 % of the arguments made by such hypothetical speakers are accepted (G3 + G5 + parts of G2). This alone

⁶⁶ The Babylonian sources do not seem to know any of the Palestinian amoraic traditions, nor are they familiar with the *Tanḥuma*, *’Abot R. Nat.*, or *Deut. Rab.*

⁶⁷ For the full statistical distribution, see the table at the end of this section.

sets them apart from the groups of text Marmorstein considered close or identical in (polemic) function.

In the later midrash sources (*Tanḥuma*, *Deuteronomy Rabbah*),⁶⁸ the questions group is the largest (G2, 40 %, 11/27), followed by the anonymous claims (G1, 27 %, 7/27), G4 (identified speakers with rejected claims; 27 %, 7/27), and G5 (anonymous accepted claims; 4 %, 2/27). Group 3, identified claims which are accepted, is absent. This is significant, as it seems that the Tanḥuma group understood the marker "if a man would tell you" as more polemical: all the claims made by the people "who would tell you" are rejected.

In the Bavli and *'Abot de Rabbi Natan*, G3 is the biggest group (33.3 %, 5/15). G4 comes second with four (27 %), G1 is third with three (20 %), G5 has two (13.3 %), and G1 comes last with one (6 %). To put it differently, almost half the claims are accepted, and most of them (60 %) are identified, a rather different distribution from that found in both the early and late strictly Palestinian groups.

The Babylonian Talmud seems to hold a unique and specific link to the tannaitic group, and it differs from the Palestinian amoraic sources in that much like in the tannaitic group, the people "who would tell you" never ask questions. Moreover, the identity of the speaker seems to be an influential factor on the acceptance or rejection of their claims. Some known rabbis' opinions are accepted (*b. Nid.* 2b; see *t. Nid.* 6:6); others, identified as "elders" or "youngsters" (*b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 40a), are accepted or rejected *ad hominem*.

	Tanai- tic	PT	Gen R	LevR	PsRK	Son- nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanḥ.	DeuR	Total
Sum	6	19	9	5	7	2	3	6	57	14	1	20	7	99
G1	1	15	7	1	3	2	2	1	32	3		6	1	42
G2		1	1	4	4			5	15	1		7	4	27
G3	4	2	1						7	4	1			12
G4	1	1							2	4		7		13
G5							1		1	2			2	5

⁶⁸ I have separated the Tanḥuma group from the classical midrash sources, for reasons I have explained in an earlier note. See also Marc Bregman, "Early Sources and Traditions in the Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu Midrashim" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 60 (1991): 269–74; Bregman, *The Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu Literature*. Jacob Elbaum, "On the Character of the Late Midrashic Literature" [Hebrew], *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, division C: *Jewish Thought and Literature* (1986): 57–62; Ofra Meir, "The Hermeneutic Story in Early and Late Midrash" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 86 (1980): 146–66; Gila Vachman, "On the Uniqueness of the Redaction in 'Midrash Ḥadash' on the Torah" [Hebrew], *Iggud* 1 (2008): 253–63.

2.1 Ad Hominem? Exploring the Identity of the Speakers Who Ask Questions or Make Claims

For thirty-seven of the fifty-seven speakers who make claims or ask questions in the earlier sources, there is no reason to assume they do not belong to the rabbinic circle.⁶⁹ Another two are marginal characters in it (children, an angel),⁷⁰ seventeen are borderline characters, which should also be counted as part of the in-group,⁷¹ and only one is clearly a non-rabbinic speaker. This is the person in *y. Ta'an*. 1:1 (3a) who asks: "Where is your God?"

In the later midrash group, something new and surprising happens. A fifth (6/27) of the speakers are marked as foreign and hostile to the rabbis;⁷² for about 40% (12/27), there is no reason to assume they are not part of the inner rabbinic circle,⁷³ and another third (9/27) are speakers whose identity as rabbinic Jews needs further examination (those who pose questions).⁷⁴ In the Babylonian Talmud group,⁷⁵ two thirds (10/15) are clearly rabbinic and a third (5) belong to an extended rabbinic circle (child, prophet, and the evil inclination winning each soul).⁷⁶

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanh	DeuR	Toyal
Sum	6	19	9	5	7	2	3	6	57	14	1	20	7	99
In-group	5	14	8	1	3		3	1	37	9	1	8	3	58

69 *m. Ed.* 1:6; *t. Menaḥ.* 13:2; *t. Nid.* 6:4; *Midrash Tannaim Deut.* 17:10 (Hoffmann edition, 103); *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3; *y. Ber.* 4:3 (33b) (four times); *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:1 (10a); *y. Sanh.* 10:1 (50b), *y. Šeb.* 1:1 (4a) (twice); *y. Ta'an.* 2:2 (9a–9b) (four times); *y. Ter.* 11:2 (2b), *y. Hor.* 1:1 (2b); *Gen. Rab.* 12:1; 17:6; 44:19; 50:10; 55:15; 69:4; 94:9 (twice) (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157, 441–42, 527, 585, 919, 1181); *Lev. Rab.* 23:2 (Margulies edition, 528); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 3:5; 4:2; 5:11 (Mandelbaum edition, 43, 59, 100), *Eccl. Rab.* 2:11 (Hirshman edition, 140).

70 *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:9; *Gen. Rab.* 78:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 919).

71 These include two people who make arguments, in *y. Ta'an.* 2:1 (9a) and *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b). The rest are people asking questions, whose identity is not clear. They could be members of the rabbinic circle, or "heretics."

72 *Tanh.* B'haalotkha 16 (Buber edition, Num 52); Beshalach 24 (Buber edition, Ex 67); Emor 3 (Buber edition, Lev 81); Nasa 30 (Buber edition, Num 41); *Tanh.* Ki Tisa (Warsaw edition, Ex 244); Shoftim 12 (Warsaw edition, Deu 225).

73 *Tanh.* Noah 17 (Buber edition, Gen 44); Emor 12 (Buber edition, Lev 90–91) (thrice); Hukot 9 (Num 104); Ki Teze 9 (Buber edition, Deut 9); Vayera 1 (Warsaw edition, Gen 46); Ha'azinu 3 (Warsaw edition, Num 245); Yelamdenu according to the citation in Talmud Torah Bereshit Genesis 131 (Mann, *The Bible as Read*, 317); *Deut. Rab.* Nitzavim (Liebermann edition, 117, three times).

74 *Tanh.* Nasa 30 (Buber edition, Num 41); Nasa 31 (Buber edition, Num 41–42, four times); *Deut. Rab.* 'Egev (Liebermann edition, 74, four times).

75 Supported by the single example from *'Abot R. Natan* B 9 (Schechter edition, 24–25).

76 *b. Hag.* 16a; *b. Sanh.* 90a (twice); *b. Meg.* 31b; *b. Ned.* 40a.

(continued)

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanh	DeuR	Toyal
Ext. In-group	1		1						2	5		1		8
Border-line		4		4	4			5	17			5	4	26
Out-group		1							1			6		6

2.2 Rejection or Acceptance of an Argument

A quick look at the table here would allow us to see that most of what the "men who would tell you" would tell you will be rejected, in either earlier or later sources (58/99). A little over a third would still be accepted (36/99). In other words, while it is likely that an utterance or question from a "man who would tell you" would be rejected, there is still a very good chance that it would not. As this data does not discriminate between different types of speakers, either by the type of utterance they produce (argument or question) or by their identification, further analysis according to group is necessary (and will appear after the table).

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tanh	DeuR
Confirmed	4	2	2	4	4		1	4	21	5	1	7	2
Rejected	2	14	7	1	3	2	2	1	32	8		13	5
Neither		3						1	4	1			

The majority of the arguments made by the hypothetical speakers (G1) in the early group are rejected, while questions (G2) are usually answered in the affirmative. Groups 1 and 4 (rejected argument) make up 80 % (34/42) of the cases in the arguing groups. The accepted arguments are a small minority which makes up the remaining 20 % (8). In the later Palestinian group, out of the sixteen arguments (i.e., the sum of G1+G4), fourteen are rejected (87 %). In the Babylonian Talmud, while 50 % (7/14) of the arguments are rejected, another 50 %, an unprecedented number, is accepted.

The questions (G2), however, show a different pattern. All of them behave in the same way. If we accept them as real questions, then the arguments applied in them are always reaffirmed. If we think of them as ironic or polemical, they are always rejected.

2.3 The Empirical Status of the Claims

In the earlier sources, it is easy to see that two groups stand out. Empirically correct arguments are the biggest group (24), followed by the empirically uncertain (23). Only three out of fifty-seven arguments or implied arguments can be interpreted as empirically invalid. This indicates, above all else, that it is not the content of the claims which functions as the deciding factor of their acceptance. The relationship to truth here is thus undermined, or the definition of truth itself found inadequate. In the latter group, we see a clear similarity between the Palestinian and Babylonian sources. The dominant category of appearances of “if a man would tell you” has little or no relationship to empirical knowledge (19/42). Such is the case, for example, in *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 9b, where one is instructed not to buy a field for the price of a dinar (thus participating in the game of guessing when the eschaton is coming). This signifies a shift in the function of our discursive marker.

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son- nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tan	DeuR
Empirically right		11	6	1	2	2	2		24	2		3	2
Empirically wrong	1	1	1						3	2			
Empirically irrelevant	2	3	1					1	7	9	1	9	
Empirically uncertain	3	4	1	4	5		1	5	23			8	5

It is specifically important to notice that within G1, the rejected anonymous arguments, almost half (21/42) of the claims brought forth by the hypothetical speakers are empirically correct or true.⁷⁷ By “true,” I mean something which is “empirically” or exegetically confirmed; that is, something which indeed exists in the world or in the biblical text (for example, there are indeed seventy-five letters in the quoted verse, not seventy-two).⁷⁸ Fourteen cannot be decided;⁷⁹ for four, the question is

⁷⁷ *y. Ber.* 4:3 (32b) (four times); *y. Ta’an.* 2:2 (9a–b); *y. Ter.* 11:2 (56a); *Gen. Rab.* 17:6 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 157); *Gen. Rab.* 69:4 (twice, Theodor and Albeck edition, 793); *Gen. Rab.* 44:19 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 441–42), *Lev. Rab.* 23:2 (Margulies edition, 528); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 4:2; 5:11 (Mandelbaum edition, 59, 100); *Song. Rab.* 114; *Song. Rab.* 2:2; *Lam. Rab.* 4:1 (twice).

⁷⁸ *Gen. Rab.* 50:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 527).

⁷⁹ *m. Ed.* 1:6; *t. Menah.* 13:1; *t. Nid.* 6:4; *y. Mo’ed Qat.* 3:1 (10a); *y. Sanh.* 10:1 (50b); *y. Šeb.* 1:1 (4a) (twice); *y. Ta’an.* 2:1 (9a) (three times); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 3:5 (Mandelbaum edition, 43); *Lam. Rab.* 2:13 (twice); *Eccl. Rab.* 2:11 (Hirshman edition, 140).

irrelevant,⁸⁰ and only three are clearly wrong: the members of the court who state that left is right and should be listened to anyhow and the man who argues that Venus and the first lights of dawn appear at the same time in the morning sky.⁸¹

The question group (G2) once again follows a different pattern. Two are irrelevant to any "right or wrong judgment" (for example, the question asking about the date of redemption in *Eccl. Rab.* 12:1:10), and for the remaining twelve, deciding if the claims are right or wrong is a doctrinal rather than an empirical question (for example, whether there has ever been a man who was free of sin).

	Tan.	PT	GenR	LevR	PdRK	Son-nR	LamR	EccR	Sum	BT	AdRN	Tan	DeuR
Empirically uncertain	3	7	1	4	1+4		1	1+3	25				
Confirmed	4	1	1	5	4		1	5		6	1	8	
Rejected	1	10	7		3	2	2			7	1	10	
Other		1											

3 Conclusion: Truth, Epistemology, and Doubt

Looking closer at the group of speakers who ask or tell something, who express doubt about a given or speculated assumption, gives us a glimpse into rabbinic epistemology and its somewhat flexible nature. The expression of doubt from hypothetical people who make claims or ask questions focuses our attention on the arbitrariness or ideological bias of the claims made against them. At times, this focus leads to a change of heart in the collocutor. At others, it does not. This very difference forces us to accept that we cannot say anything certain about the relationship between positivism and truth in the group of texts studied here. On the one hand, in the cases where the doubt raised does lead to a change of heart, such as the case of the man arguing for the existence of nineteen benedictions in the *'amidah* before R. Huna, it may seem that positivism/objectivism is an adequate epistemology. However, it is in the cases where the observed reality or textual reality is rejected that we find that "seeing is not believing." Otherwise acceptable means of argumentation may be rejected in favour of either the authority of the person making the claim, the "dogmatic" status of the claim made, or a different, more important claim that someone may wish to make. This is not the familiar rejection of the observed

⁸⁰ *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:9 (twice); *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b); *Gen. Rab.* 72:2 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 919).

⁸¹ *Midrash Tannaim Deut.* 17:1 (Hoffman edition, 103); *y. Hor.* 1:3 (5b); *Gen. Rab.* 50:10 (Theodor and Albeck edition, 527).

world in favour of learning from verses as expressed, for example, by R. Yoḥanan in *b. B. Bat.* 75a, with parallels in *b. Sanh.* 100a, and *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 18:5 (Mandelbaum edition, 297–8), who kills his student who only believes his interpretation of a verse after seeing it manifest in reality,⁸² but at times, a rejection of a reading of a verse in light of “a greater argument” which needs to be made. This argument is at times expressed and at times left for us to understand by ourselves. These cases come close to threatening what may be labelled as rabbinic dogma, or rather they can be identified as attempts to dogmatise claims which have no epistemological superiority over others. To put it differently, what the hypothetical interlocutors are really asking is whether this is a final answer and also whether we favour one demonstrable truth over performative aesthetics; ultimately, they wonder whether we can know.

If we had to reconstruct rabbinic dogma from this genre, we would end up with a rather frightening list. The questions may give us more or less familiar themes: the dead will be resurrected, the world was created of water alone, the borders between the sea and dry land are not stable, a man cannot be a god, nor a son of God, and no one can tell when redemption will come; God rewards the righteous. However, they also give us rather unusual themes: God will dwell in Rome until the eschaton, a man can live without sin, and a man may live forever. If we add to this the questions from the later sources, we must also add the rather familiar list: God opens the wombs of barren women, God accepts those who repent, and God can save people from fire. However, we must also add the entirely unacceptable ones: David did not sin, Joshua did not fight on the Sabbath, Gideon did not sacrifice outside of Jerusalem, and Elijah did not sacrifice outside of Jerusalem. If we read the claims as having dogmatic implications, we may get an even stranger picture, including that right is indeed left, that nineteen is indeed eighteen, that counting is an unstable practice, that Satan and woman are internally bound together, and that Jerusalem and Caesarea cannot coexist.

However, we can learn that the mindset specific to rabbinic epistemology assumes that a dichotomy between true and false does indeed exist. In it, while false is always false, truth has many forms. In other words, while there may be more than one truth, not everything is true. It is also clear that there are mechanisms that allow one to distinguish a true argument from a false one; however, they are not always explicitly defined. With respect to the limitations in participating in the production of knowledge, rabbinic literature seems to be egalitarian in the sense that every person who uses the agreed-upon rules of knowledge production may add to the community’s body of knowledge. The quality of performing such an act of production must nevertheless be evaluated, and it may still be rejected.

⁸² See Dina Stein, “Believing Is Seeing: A Reading of *Baba Batra* 73a–75b” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999): 9–32 (especially 23–25).

This epistemological soup is created by the very same problem I presented at the start of this chapter: attempting to read rabbinic literature through philosophical terms that are foreign to it. If we accept the rabbinic truth-making procedure and relationship to truth as being different from that of philosophy, the smoke clears. The place where this group of texts takes its meaning is a place where truth exists—albeit a polymorphic rather than a philosophical logocentric truth—and where its performative, memorable value outweighs logic as a vehicle for reaching it. The "if a man would tell you" group, then, indeed signifies the existence of doubt. But this doubt is not necessarily in the minds of those Others who ask the questions or make the claims in the texts, but in the mind of the implied rabbinic narrator.

The fact that some of the answers to the questions asked are theologically dangerous, combined with the lack of epistemic stability in the group of those who make claims, leads me to believe that the function of the discursive marker "if a man would tell you" is somewhat homoeopathic: a small dose of doubt is used to eradicate even larger doubts. If rabbinic culture allows its members and its "extended family" to raise doubts about accepting the rabbis' authority, in trusting them, paradoxically, it remains protected. The way this group of texts functions may be compared to the parables of Jesus as he himself defined them in Mathew 13:10–16: to reinforce the sense of belonging and favoured status of the members of the group.

One person may argue that he is God, another that he is without sin, some may say that nineteen is actually eighteen, or that God is in exile—all can be equally accepted or rejected based on the same lines of argument and the same modes of knowledge-production, as long as the people trust the rabbis, their leadership, their spiritual and interpretative authority. The only reason we are not to believe a speaker who is introduced by the words "if a man would tell you," as we have learnt, is not because his claims may not be true, or because he is not a "good Jew." It is simply because he falls under the discursive marker that tells the audience that even though the counter-argument may be bad, and even if the person who is asking is one of us, or not one of us, the important thing is that the one who answers the question must be believed, accepted, and followed, and all of this without a shadow of a doubt.

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