

# Prophecy and Prophets in Stories

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# Elijah and the Messiah (b.Sanh. 98a)

Eric Ottenheim

## 1 Introduction

Rabbinic literature testifies to the literary phenomenon of the physical appearance of the prophet Elijah in narratives about Rabbis. What role does Elijah's presence as a 'narrative prophet' perform in the Talmudic editorial strategy?<sup>1</sup> This study focuses on a case study, the narrative describing Joshua ben Levi's meeting with the Messiah (b.Sanh. 98a). Our aim is to assess how Elijah's presence is associated with Messianism. To accomplish our goal we will assess its form and rhetoric in relation to the Talmudic discourse in which it is embedded. Recently, scholars have underlined the role of the anonymous editors of the Talmud, the *stammaim*, in framing traditions within the *sugya*. Is our story the product of their literary activity or does it incorporate an old tradition?<sup>2</sup> Since our story lacks any parallel in the Palestinian sources, which precludes a source-critical analysis, we will turn to early Jewish and Christian sources to assess its motifs from a tradition-critical perspective. This will enable us to assess Elijah's role in evoking and commenting on Messianism.<sup>3</sup> However,

<sup>1</sup> Also Moses appears, though seldom, for example in the Academy of R. Akiva: b.Men. 29b. Note the similarity between Elijah's and Moses' appearance on a mountain in the Gospels: Mark. 9:2–20; Matt. 17:1–9; Lk. 9:28–36.

<sup>2</sup> A. Schremer, 'Stammaitic Historiography', in: J.L. Rubenstein (ed.), *Creation and Composition. The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada*, Tübingen 2005, 219–224 and literature cited there. Major work on Talmudic stories as resulting from Talmudic editing has been done in the work of Rubenstein, notably his *Talmudic Stories. Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*, Baltimore/London 1999; *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Baltimore/London 2003; *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, Baltimore/London 2010. Rubenstein shows how Babylonian Talmudic stories do not seek to provide historical or biographical information as such but to adduce exempla and dialogues to address the concerns of the Talmudic discussion as shaped by the editors, the *stammaim*. D. Kraemer, *Reading the Rabbis. The Talmud as Literature*, New York, Oxford 1996, offers a fine example of a reader-response approach by pointing to the Talmud's open discursive character, its ambiguities and the evocative character of its narratives, addressed to a Jewish elite of Rabbinic students (10–12).

<sup>3</sup> Generally on Palestinian traditions in the Babylonian Talmud, accentuating the role of language and conceptual development, R. Kalmin, 'Problems in the Use of the Babylonian Talmud for the History of Late-Roman Palestine: The Example of Astrology', in: M. Goodman, Ph. Alexander (eds.), *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine*, Oxford 2010,

before engaging the text we have to address briefly the Biblical legitimization of the eschatological modality of Elijah's career as a 'narrative prophet'.

## 2 Elijah and Messianism

Elijah's presence among the Rabbis is no continuation of prophecy as a genre nor a corollary of his popularity as a Biblical prophet. Firstly, the Babylonian Talmud has it that prophecy ceased to exist with the last Biblical prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.<sup>4</sup> This tradition should not be read as a historical report on the end of prophecy as such. Prophetic figures and apocalyptic topoi linger in Early Judaism and even among some of the early Rabbis, but apocalyptically based claims on authority become contested and gradually disappear.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the saying rather marks, in retrospect, the shift from canonical prophecy to a new archetype of religious authority: the Scriptural Sage.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Rabbinic midrash is rather restrained in its appreciation of the zealous fighter Elijah, even on his mysterious ascension to Heaven (2 Kgs. 2:11). His struggle against idolatry is criticized in Rabbinic midrash as being too harsh or excessive.<sup>7</sup> Elijah's presence as a 'narrative prophet' rather alludes to his role as the harbinger of the 'Day of the Lord':

<sup>165–183</sup> On other criteria, J.L. Rubenstein, 'Criteria of Stammaitic Intervention in Aggada', in: Rubenstein, *Creation and Composition*, 419–420, 439.

<sup>4</sup> Baraita in b.Sanh. 11a; b.Yom. 9b; b.Sot. 48b; compare t.Sot. 13:3. The Talmud notes that also in Biblical times prophecy was more widespread; b.Megilla 13a distinguishes between prophets who were needed for the requirements of the day and prophets whose prophecies extended beyond those needs; only the second category became part of Scripture.

<sup>5</sup> R. Eliezer relies on miracles and a divine voice to prove his point against the majority of the Sages: y.M. Qat. 3:1; b.B. Mes.59a/b; compare J. Goldin, 'On the Account of the Banning of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. An Analysis and Proposal', *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 16/17 (1984/85), 85–97. On the Bavli's reconfiguration of the R. Eliezer traditions, D. Steinmetz, 'Agadah Unbound. Inter-Agaric Characterization of Sages in the Bavli and Implications for Reading Aggada', in Rubenstein, *Creation and Composition*, 293–337.

<sup>6</sup> Waiting for a prophetic authority to decide on a legal issue is still attested in 1 Macc. 4:46; New Testament sources configure the expectation of an eschatological prophet as well (Lk. 7:16, 9:8 etc.). On the validation of prophecy in Rabbinic sources, E.E. Urbach, *The Sages. Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Translated from the Hebrew by I. Abrahams), Jerusalem 1975, 117, 301–302, 564–567.

<sup>7</sup> The following midrash is significant: 'Thus you find that there were three types of prophets. One insisted upon the honor due the father as well as the honor due the son. One insisted upon the honor due the father without insisting upon the honor due the son; and one insisted

Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the fathers, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction. (Mal. 4:5–6, NRSV, adapted)<sup>8</sup>

This verse paves the way for the post-Biblical, eschatological career of Elijah in early Judaism.<sup>9</sup> Christian interpretation of John the Baptist, who as an Elijah *redivivus* preaches the arrival of the Kingdom of God and announces Jesus as the Messiah, is legitimized by this verse.<sup>10</sup> Elijah topoi are used to depict some

upon the honor due the son without insisting upon the honor due the father' (Mek. Pisha 1, ed. Lauterbach, 8). The father being God and the son Israel, Jeremiah is presented as a prophet who honours both the Father and the Son and his reward is the doubling of his prophecy. Elijah, however, only honours the Father, on the basis of the midrashic understanding of the paronomastic use of the absolute infinitive form in 1 Kgs. 19:10: 'And he said: I have been very zealous (**קָנַתִּי**) for the Lord, the God of Hosts'. In the following narrative (1Kgs. 19:16), Elijah is ordered to go to Damascus, anoint two kings and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat as a prophet 'in your place' (**בָּيְמֶה**). According to the midrash God was displeased with Elijah's performance, in particular with his zeal (**זָנוֹת**). Jonah, who tries to flee from God's presence, is lauded as a prophet who is keen on the honour of Israel, since he knew Nineveh would repent and thus put Israel to shame. Compare also A. Wiener, *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism. A Depth-Psychological Study*, London 1978, 46–50.

8 Mal. 3:23–24 in the Masoretic text. Wiener, *Prophet Elijah*, offers a helpful overview of Elijah in all stages of Judaism.

9 Discussion in M. Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament: Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung des alttestamentlichen Propheten im frühen Christentum* (BZNW 88), Berlin 1997, 1–27. The eschatological reappearance of Elijah is the counterpart of his miraculous departure from earthly life in the heavenly chariot (2 Kgs. 2:11); like Henoch – compare M.M. Witte, *Elias und Henoch als Exempel, typologische Figuren und apokalyptischen Zeugen. Zu Verbindungen von Literatur und Theologie im Mittelalter* (Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft und Bedeutungsforschung Band 22), Frankfurt a.M. 1987, 18–41 – Elijah becomes a divinely ordained messenger between heaven and earth in early Judaism. On the eschatological Elijah in Rabbinic sources, Urbach, *Sages*, 659–661; 673; 680.

10 Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament*, 289–294 concludes that Mark pictures John as a figure like Elijah and also interprets his eschatological role as the announcer of Jesus, but does not identify John as the eschatological Elijah; Matthew on the contrary does, whereas Luke casts both John and Jesus as Elijah *redivivus*. The Gospels value the Biblical prophet Elijah more positively than the Rabbis do and his features merge with the eschatological Elijah.

other outstanding Sages as well, for example in their performance of miracles.<sup>11</sup> Above all, however, Rabbinic narratives feature Elijah as a physical person who meets Rabbis or who visits communities.<sup>12</sup> Elijah helps and saves individuals or communities from harm, engages in discussion on Torah exegesis or summons teachers to behave according to the pious, strict interpretation of Jewish law.<sup>13</sup> His presence is always introduced in a formal way as 'Rabbi X met Elijah and talked to him' or 'Elijah was with Rabbi X'. Elijah comes and goes. He has a preference for specific scholars, but Elijah's friendship with the early and middle 3. c. C.E. R. Joshua ben Levi is especially noteworthy.<sup>14</sup> Elijah studies Torah with this Rabbi and in his company visits the deceased R. Shimon ben Jochai who dwells in paradise, to solve a Scriptural issue.<sup>15</sup> When Joshua ben Levi dies, as the Talmud again states, Elijah fulfills his role as a harbinger in paradise: 'make way for the son of Levi, make way for the son of Levi!'<sup>16</sup>

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- <sup>11</sup> H. Lichtenberger, 'Elia Traditionen bei vor- bzw. Frührabbinischen Wundertätern', in: H. Lichtenberger, U. Mittmann-Richtert (eds), *Biblical Figures in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature*, Berlin/New York, 2009, 547–563 discusses Elijah typologies in Rabbinic accounts of Choni the Circle Maker and R. Chanina ben Dosa.
- <sup>12</sup> The Rabbis discuss Elijah's eschatological role according to Malachi as either restoring genealogical purity or establishing peaceful conditions (m.'Ed. 8:7); on his role and the suppressed Messianism in the Mishnah, J. Neusner, *Messiah in Context. Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism*, Philadelphia 1984, 29–30; see also m.Sheq. 2:5; m.B. Mes. 1:8; 2:8; 3:3–5.
- <sup>13</sup> R. Shimon ben Jochai is of the opinion that Elijah will come to solve Halakhic disputes (m.'Ed. 8:7). The Talmud uses the verbal יקנּו, 'let them stand', to indicate that the issue will remain unresolved 'until Elijah comes'.
- <sup>14</sup> Among them R. Eliezer, R. Nachum Ish Gamzo (1. c. C.E.), R. Meir, R. Akiba, R. Jose, R. Judah (all 2. c. C.E.), R. Yehuda ha-Nasi and R. Shimon ben Jochai (all 3. c. C.E.). On R. Joshua ben Levi, W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Palästinensischen Amoräer I*, Hildesheim 1965, 187–194.
- <sup>15</sup> Stories in b.Ket. 77b; Midr. Ps. 36:8 and other sources mentioned in Bacher, *Agada*, 190–191, n. 2. See on this complex and the role of Elijah as a 'mediator' and 'guide' as over against Satan, A. Amir, 'R. Joshua ben Levi and His Relationships with Elijah the Prophet, R. Shimon van Jochai and the Angel of Death', in: *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies. Jerusalem, August 16–24, 1989. Division C, Volume I: Jewish Thought and Literature*, Jerusalem 1990, 141–146. A. Seinfeld, 'R. Yehoshua ben Levi's final Ascent as a Model Tikkun Hanephesh', *JSJ* 43 (2012), 373–376 and n. 4 argues that Yoshua ben Levi's humility in this story is a model for the Talmud's view on how a righteous man can pass the test for eternal life.
- <sup>16</sup> See b.Ket. 77b; Bacher, *Agada*, 191, n. 5 qualifies this legend as a Babylonian tradition; compare Seinfeld, 'Tikkun Hanephesh', 376.

### 3 Elijah at the Cave of Shimon ben Jochai: Narratological Observations

The way and manner in which Elijah's presence articulates Talmudic eschatological discourse is apparent in the famous story of the Messiah at the gates of Rome:

- (A) R. Joshua ben Levi found Elijah (sitting) in front of the porch of the cave of R. Shimon bar Jochai.

He said to him: will I come in the world to come? He said to him: if this Master wants it! Said R. Joshua ben Levi: Two I see but the voice of three I hear!

He said to him: when will the Messiah come? He said to him: go and ask himself! And where does he sit? The gates of Rome. And what is his sign? He sits between the poor who endure sicknesses. And all make untie and tie in one time, he unties one and ties one, he says: perhaps I am wanted!, so he will not be restrained.

- (B) He went to him. He said to him: Peace be with you, my master and teacher! He said to him: peace be with you, son of Levi! He said to him: when will the master come? He said to him: today (בַּיּוֹם).

- (C) He came before Elijah. He said to him: what has he said to you? He said to him: peace be with you, son of Levi! He said to him: he has assured you and your father of the world to come! He said to him: he has uttered lies to me, since he said to me: today I will come. And he has not come. He said to him: thus has he said to you: 'today, if you will listen to His voice' (Ps. 95:7)' (b.Sanh. 98a)<sup>17</sup>

The literary and narratological features of this tale are highly connected with its form, and we will discuss these together. The story features three scenes that

<sup>17</sup> Variant readings in Yalqut Shimoni, *Zechariah* 476 and *Tehillim* 652 will be noted in the discussion. We follow the text of the Steinsaltz edition (431) but discuss manuscript evidence, using R. Rabbinowitz, *Diqduqe Sofrim. Variae Lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum quum ex aliis libris antiquissimus et scriptis et impressis tum e codice monacensi praestantissimo collectae, annotationibus instructae auctore Raphaelo Rabbinowitz*, (reprint New York 1976), München 1868–1886, *Sanhedrin*, 60. Manuscripts have been consulted at the website of the Hebrew University: <http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/talmud/bavly/selectbavly.asp> (acc. March 11th 2014). On Talmud manuscripts, M. Krupp, 'Manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud', in: S. Safrai (ed.), *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates* (CRINT 11/3,1), Assen, Minneapolis 1987, 346–361.

essentially consist of dialogues, a preferred Talmudic editorial strategy.<sup>18</sup> Other indicators, however, suggest an older provenance of some of its elements. Whereas the dialogues are phrased in Aramaic with some Hebrew, the narrative itself is in Aramaic, which shows Talmudic redaction of an Amoraic tradition. The mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic in the dialogue points to Palestinian origins.<sup>19</sup> This observation is strengthened by assessment of the form. The narrative connectives are rudimentary: *אשכח לאליהו*, 'he found Elijah'; *אל לגביה*, 'he went to him'; *אתא לגביה אליהו*, 'he came before Elijah', without mention of time lapse or additional details. It is not the course of action nor the chronology but the dialogue that is central in this story; the final reaction of the proponent Joshua ben Levi is even lacking, which shows how the narratological strategy is totally subservient to the transmission of teachings.<sup>20</sup> These features are in contrast to the way Palestinian stories usually are supplied by the Talmudic editors with a commentary or additional linguistic features: this story, although very much like a riddle, lacks either element. The geographical setting is well defined though: a cave and the gates of Rome respectively. These settings carry meaning, however, in relation to the dialogues, as we shall discuss. The characters are not elaborated but only present in their words or actions. The only emotional feature appears when the story focalizes on Joshua's exclamation that the Messiah had been lying since he had not come. This may express a feeling of disappointment but it also focuses attention on the connection between this story and the Talmudic theme of the advent of the Messiah.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Talmud's editors prefer threefold structured narratives, Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 9, 253.

<sup>19</sup> The morphology is closer to Onkelos, see e.g. *אוחזת נא*, which suggests Babylonian redaction. However, it is not a pseudopigraphical fabrication. Firstly, the hybrid language points to redaction, secondly, Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 19 notes the reluctance of Talmudic editors in pseudopigraphically attributing stories to Amoraim and their conservatism in the amount of reworking.

<sup>20</sup> Compare for such editorial operations Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 256–260. Talmudic editors could be very conservative, though (260). This form facilitates memorization and makes this a typical example of oral literature, compare E. Shanks-Alexander, 'The Orality of Rabbinic Writing', in: C.E. Fonrobert and M.S. Jaffee (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge 2007, 48–49.

<sup>21</sup> This is an example of internal focalization. What is focalized is defined as the question that governs the *sugya*. On focalization: M. Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, London 2009, 38, drawing on the distinction in M. Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto 1985.

Concluding, the story's form and features point to Talmudic editing of an older midrashic tradition on Messianism. Its present Talmudic context, however, is the discussion on redemption and human merits.

#### 4 Literary Context

The Talmudic editors, partly reworking older traditions, compose an elaborate discussion (*sugyah*) on resurrection and the conditions for and the time of the advent of the Messiah. The *sugyah* finds its origin and its justification in a single lemma of the Mishnah: 'All Israelites have a part in the World to Come (...)' (m.Sanh 10:1). Our story concludes the part of the discussion dealing with the relation between redemption and repentance or merits, two central Rabbinic tenets.<sup>22</sup> It follows two exegetical traditions of Joshua ben Levi on the advent of the Messiah, phrased by his pupil, the early 4. c. C.E. teacher R. Alexandrai.<sup>23</sup> Together with the story on Elijah, this exegesis presents us with his view on Messianism and merits:

R. Alexandrai said: R. Joshua ben Levi pointed to a contradiction:

It is written 'in its time' (בשְׁתָה), and it is written; 'I will hasten it' (אֶחֱשִׁיבֵנָה) (Isa. 60:22): If they have merit (זֹכֶר), 'I will hasten it'. If they do not have merit (לֹא זֹכֶר), 'in its time'.

The full verse of Isa. 60:22 hints at a future restoration of Israel as a nation: 'The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the LORD; in its time I will hasten it' (ESRV). R. Joshua ben Levi solves the alleged contradictory statement on the time reference in the last lemma of the verse by claiming that it indicates two conditional prophecies, that of a divine acceleration of deliverance or of a set point in history. He operates with the Rabbinic hermeneutical rule that doublings in the Torah carry additional information: 'On its time' and 'I will hasten it' thus contain two messages of a meritorious or a non-meritorious redemption. This exegesis is followed by a

<sup>22</sup> Redemption is not a uniform concept in Rabbinic Judaism. Urbach, *Sages*, 649: 'The notions of 'the world to come' and 'the resurrection of the dead' are bound up with the problem of reward and punishment, and the doctrine of the soul and retribution. The portrayals of the 'End' and 'the days of the Messiah' are drawn from the vision of the 'the end of days' conceived by the prophets of Israel.'

<sup>23</sup> Bacher, *Agada*, 195, n. 1: אַלְכָסְנָדְרִי, should be read as Alexandrai, following the usual rendering of the Greek ending -ος.

second tradition that solves the apparent contradiction between two apocalyptic verses from separate Biblical books:

R. Alexandrai said: R. Joshua ben Levi pointed to a contradiction:

It is written (Dan. 7:13) ‘behold, there came with the clouds of the sky עַמְּרוֹכֶב עַל חָמוֹר’ (‘עַמְּרֵנִי שָׁמְיָה’) one like a son of man’ and it is written: ‘עַנְּנוּ שָׁמְיָה’ (עַנְּנוּ זָכוֹר) humble, and riding on an ass’ (Zech. 9:9): If they have merit (זָכוֹר), ‘with the clouds of the sky’. If they do not have merit (לֹא זָכוֹר), ‘humble, and riding on an ass’.

The midrash notices the two equivalent verbs ‘coming’ in verses that were read as prophecies of a Messianic deliverer – Hebrew יָבוֹא in the first, not quoted, part of Zech. 9:9, Aramaic אֲתָה אֵא in Dan. 7:13 – and this legitimizes the midrash – following the Rabbinic rule of *gezerah shawa* – to connect the two verses.<sup>24</sup> Joshua reads both prophecies as containing two scenarios on the modality of the Messiah’s advent, either as a royal ‘Son of Men’ on the clouds or as a humble man riding on an ass.<sup>25</sup> Which of the two will be fulfilled is dependent on Israel having or not having merit. As we noticed, merit is a major topic in the Talmudic discourse on redemption: will there be redemption even without repentance? Although the dominant voice of the Talmudic discussion underlines the view of R. Eliezer (1. c. C.E.) and Rav (3. c. C.E.) that repentance is a necessary prelude for the Messiah to come (b.Sanh. 97b), the Joshua ben Levi traditions defend an apocalyptic form of Messianism. This is clear from his choice of texts: Daniel’s vision of a Son of Man embodies an apocalyptic vision of justice as a man-like figure.<sup>26</sup> Zechariah pictures an apocalyptic advent of

<sup>24</sup> Stemberger, *Einleitung*, 28–29.

<sup>25</sup> The midrash does not view the Messiah’s riding on an ass as reflective of a royal entrance, compare R. Mason, ‘Use of Earlier Biblical Material in Zechariah 9–14: A Study in Inner-Biblical Exegesis’, in: M.J. Boda and M.H. Floyd (eds.), *Bringing Out the Treasure. Inner Biblical Allusion in Zechariah 9–14* (JSOTSS 370), Sheffield 2003, 38–39. Note that the Talmudic editor inserts a curious dialogue here between King Shapur and Shmuel. Only a marvelous horse instead of an ass would befit a Messiah, so says the mocking Shapur, but Shmuel retorts that such a horse is not available in this world, thus the interpretation of *Rashi* (R. Shlomo ben Isaac, 11. c. C.E.).

<sup>26</sup> This verse has been interpreted in both Christian and Jewish sources as referring to a Messianic redeemer; see J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star. Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids 2010, 44–46. Collins assesses it as a ‘transformation of a royal mythology’, probably featuring Michael, the leader of the heavenly host.

a Davidic king.<sup>27</sup> By presenting these texts, the Talmud does not straightforwardly opt for one view on redemption as correlated to repentance or merits, but oscillates between varying opinions, including apocalyptic notions. However, by inserting these views in this particular phase of the *sugyah*, the discussion on redemption and merits is elevated to a new level. Joshua ben Levi's biblically informed Messianism combines the Rabbinic topic of merit, but not as a necessary prerequisite for a Messianic realization *per se*: Joshua ben Levi's exegesis on merits is not on whether or not Israel will be delivered but on the mode of the Messiah's coming: either as triumphant or in humility.<sup>28</sup> What role does Elijah's appearance to Joshua ben Levi play in this Talmudic discourse?

## 5      Opening Scene: Meeting Elijah at a Cave

- (A) R. Joshua ben Levi found Elijah<sup>29</sup> in front of the porch of the cave of R. Shimon bar Jochai. He said to him: will I<sup>30</sup> come in the world to come? He said to him: if this Master wants it!<sup>31</sup> Said R. Joshua ben Levi: Two I see but the voice of three I hear!

The story kicks off with a highly ambiguous spatial setting, the porch of a מערה, 'cave'. Shimon's cave is the cave where R. Shimon had to hide because

<sup>27</sup> 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech. 9:9 NRSV). On its intertextuality with Ps. 72 and Gen. 49, K.J.A. Larkin, *The Eschatology of Second Zechariah. A Study of the Formation of Mantological Wisdom Anthology* (CEBT 6), Kampen 1994, 68–77. On 'poor' or 'humble' as identification of the Servant with the oppressed in society and the allusion to Jes. 53:4, Mason, 'Use of Earlier Biblical Material in Zechariah 9–14', 37–38.

<sup>28</sup> Urbach, *Sages*, 683 overlooks this fact and harmonizes Joshua ben Levi with the view of Rav and especially R. Eliezer in the *sugya* that if Israel does not repent, redemption will not come.

<sup>29</sup> MS Karlsruhe adds: 'and Shimon ben Jochai'. On this manuscript see Rabinowitz in his introduction to *Sanhedrin* and Krupp, 'Talmud', 353. 'Sitting' is added in ms Firenze 9, one of the important Ashkenazic manuscripts, Krupp, 'Talmud', 348–349, 352; compare Rabinowitz, *Sanhedrin*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Plural 'will we come' (**אָמַרְתָּם**), refers to Joshua, thus the commentary in the edition of Steinsaltz a.l.. The rather odd use of the pluralis majestaticus by a Rabbi can, however, also be read as a diegetic element, preparing for the interpretation of the Messiah's words by Elijah, at the end of our story.

<sup>31</sup> MS Firenze 9: זֶה יָצַח אֲדֹנֵינוּ וְאָמַרְתָּם; ms Jad Harav Herzog: אָמַר יָצַח אֲדֹנֵינוּ זֶה.

he criticized Roman culture and power (b.Shab. 33b). This need to hide links the space with Elijah: like Elijah, Shimon ben Jochai escapes political persecution due to his uncompromising stand and is thus forced to learn the Talmud intensively.<sup>32</sup> However, the evolving dialogue associates the spatial setting with issues of life and death as well, which suggests that the cave is a burial cave, actually the regular meaning of this word in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>33</sup> R. Joshua ben Levi poses two questions. One is regarding his individual fate, the other concerns Israel's fate. Both use the verb 'come into/come' (אֵת), therewith creating a double eschatological sense of the verb אֵת: 'will I come (אֵת), i.e. to the world to come?)/'When will he (i.e. the Messiah) come (אֵת)?' This double questioning differentiates two eschatological perspectives, i.e. the individual and the collective.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the answer, **אָם יַרְצָחֶה הַדּוֹן זֶה**, 'if this master wants it' presents the reader with a riddle. This riddle is reinforced by the reaction of Joshua ben Levi: 'two I see but three I hear'. Who is the Master here and who does Joshua refer to by the third voice beside his and Elijah's?<sup>35</sup> From a narratological point of view, the mentioning of 'two' and 'three' is a diegetic [?] move to the next phase of the story, the physical meeting with the Messiah. This suggests that we may understand the voice and the divine appellation **רַבָּנָן**, 'Master', as refer-

<sup>32</sup> W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten. Zweiter Band. Von Akiba's Tod bis zum Abschluss der Mischna*, Strassburg 1890, 73, 143–146; he is also known for his alliance with Elijah. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 105–138 shows how this story addresses the tension between the Talmudic ideal of unabridged dedication to Torah study and the necessity of mundane affairs like economy etc.

<sup>33</sup> b.M. Qat. 17a; b.B. Qam. 117a (a resurrection story!); b.B. Mes. 84b, 85a, 85b (an Elijah tradition!); b.B. Bat. 42b, 58a.

<sup>34</sup> Although the Messiah and the 'World to come' are both notions of redemption, the one is associated with prophetic motifs and the other notion linked with the concept of (individual) reward and punishment, see Urbach, *Sages*, 650. However, in our story both dimensions of redemption seem intertwined. The Yalqut versions omit this question on his personal fate and the 'two I see but three I hear' reply.

<sup>35</sup> This issue is addressed differently by the commentators. *Rashi* answers both questions by referring to the *Shekhina*, the Divine presence. In his reading, Elijah is mediating between Joshua and God. However, nowhere in Talmudic literature do we find the *Shekhina* allowing or not allowing an individual to enter eternal life. The *Maharsha* (R. Shmuel Eidels, 1555–1631, Poland) mentions two possibilities: either it refers to the three Fathers of Israel, representing a typology for the merits of the Fathers, or to R. Shimon bar Jochai and his son, the latter clearly drawing on the cave tradition (b.Shabbat 33b). The *Maharsha*'s remarks are mentioned in his commentary on the Agadot of the Talmud (*Chiddushei Agadot*), printed separately in the Vilna edition.

ring to the Messiah himself, who, as the story unfolds, is simultaneously absent and present.

## 6 Tradition History

Two motifs require discussion: the cave and the question. The cave evokes a context of life and death, political danger, and Messianic expectations. In Biblical Hebrew מערָה designates either a cave stronghold (1 Sam. 22:1), a cave to hide in (Gen. 19:30, Josh. 10:16; 1 Sam. 24:3 etc.) or a burial cave (Gen. 23:9, 59:29 etc.). The Talmudic imagery is, however, not the result of midrashic activity or a retelling of a Biblical story.<sup>36</sup> The spatial rhetoric of the porch or gate of a burial cave (**אַפְתָּחָה דְמִעֵרָה**) combined with Messianic discourse shows narratological likeness to the portrayal in the Gospels of the tomb of Jesus.<sup>37</sup> Here, as in our story, issues of eternal life and Messianic hopes are addressed in the spatial setting of the entrance to the tomb (Mark 16:2–4; Matt. 28:2; Lk. 24:2; Jn. 20:1–2). A second analogy is the dialogue taking place: just as Joshua meets an unexpected person (Elijah), the women meet an angel (Matt. 28:2; two in Jn. 20:12) or a white-clothed man (one in Mark 16:5; two in Lk. 24:4). A final parallel is the motif of absence: in the synoptic Gospels the disciples are sent to Galilee to meet their master who is absent from this place (Mark 16:7; Matt. 28:7; Lk. 24:6), Joshua ben Levi will be sent from the burial cave to Rome to meet the Messiah.<sup>38</sup>

The second motif, Ben Levi's question on his personal fate, appears odd from an editorial point of view, since the Mishnah that instigated the Talmudic discussion already assures every single individual of Israel a part in the world to come: 'Every Israelite has a share in the world to come' (m.Sanh. 10:1).<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Joshua's use of the verb 'coming' aligns his personal fate with the 'coming' of the Messiah. This aligning of the uncertain fate of the individual

<sup>36</sup> 1Kg. 19:13 locates Elijah at the opening of a cave, but our narrative offers no clues to this scene.

<sup>37</sup> Matt. 28:1: τάφον, but Matt. 28:60, Mark 15:46, Lk. 23:53, and Jn. 19:41 (likewise Lazarus' tomb in Jn. 11:17) attest μνεῖσθαι, 'tomb'. Compare J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (x–xxiv). Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 28 A), Garden City 1985, 1544. The association with a burial cave is attested in Gen. 23:9 LXX where μνεῖσθαι appears for the burial cave of Sara.

<sup>38</sup> See discussion of Christian traditions of the empty tomb, the *praeconium paschale*, in Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1538–1540.

<sup>39</sup> This introductory phrase of the Mishnah is lacking in ms. Kaufmann but present in the equally important ms. Parma (de Rossi 138) and in all Babylonian versions of the Mishnah.

soul in relation to the advent of the presence of Messianic reality is a theme present in the Gospels as well.<sup>40</sup> The divine appellative 'Master' in the riddle-like answer 'if this Master wants it' reinforces the impression of the early provenance of these Messianic semantics.<sup>41</sup> In conclusion, the opening scene sets a stage that is highly suggestive of an older type of apocalyptic Messianic expectation that pairs the individual quest for eternal life with the advent of the Messiah.

## 7 How Can One Recognize the Messiah?

He said to him: when will the Messiah come? He said to him: go and ask himself! And where does he sit? The gates of Rome.<sup>42</sup> And what is his sign? He sits between the poor who endure sicknesses. And all untie and tie in one time, he unties one and ties one, he says: perhaps I am wanted!, so he will not be restrained.

Given the lengthy discussions of the Talmud on the question of the Messianic advent, the reply of Elijah is blunt: 'go and ask himself' (זיל שיליה לך). Now the narrative shifts from a temporal dimension (*אימתה*, 'when?') to a spatial dimension (*היכנא*, 'where?'): Elijah's answer presumes, without further comment, that the Messiah is alive and leading a hidden existence somewhere. Joshua has to go from the 'gate of the burial cave' (*דמערתא אפיקחא דרומי*) to the 'gates of Rome' (*אפיקחא דרומי*).<sup>43</sup> There he will meet the Messiah sitting among

<sup>40</sup> Whereas Josephus (*Bellum Judaicum* II, 162–166) discusses the fate of the individual soul as a central topic about which the three major schools, Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes, are divided, he does not relate it to Messianism. In the Mishnah, the issue of individual responsibility for one's fate is underlined in a dictum of R. Akiva that 'all is foreseen but freedom of choice is given. And all is according to the majority of one's deeds' (m.Ab. 3:16). However, individual fate and the coming of the Messiah is connected in the Gospel traditions about a man who, approaching Jesus, asks him: 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'; Lk. 18:18 κληρονομήσω, 'inherit'; Matt. 19:16: σχῶ, 'get'.

<sup>41</sup> Fludernik, *Narratology*, 64, 100. In the Bavli the appellation can refer to a human ruler or owner (b.Meg. 13b; b.Ket. 42b etc.) but often refers to God; (b.Ber. 7b, 31b etc.). Jesus is referred to by the divine title κύριος ('Lord') and the Aramaic equivalent מֶלֶךְ (Rev. 22:20, 1 Cor. 16:22 provides in Greek script Aramaic אַמְּלָךְ, 'Master, come').

<sup>42</sup> For the reading קָרְתָּה, 'city', Rabinowitz, *Sanhedrin*, 60. This reading pertains in the standard Vilna edition, but mention of 'Rome' is made in the commentary *Hagahot HaGera*. Yalqut attests 'Rome'.

<sup>43</sup> Both *Rashi* and the *Maharsha* explain the expression 'gates of Rome' (*דרומי*) as rather meaning 'southern gate', with a different vocalization of the consonants, and

the people and sharing human suffering.<sup>44</sup> The Messiah sitting among the sick poor of Rome embodies a bitter irony; the Messiah who will deliver the oppressed people of Israel from the power of Rome is residing among the most immediate victims of this power centre.<sup>45</sup> The irony must have been clear for Christian censorship on these Talmudic texts. Since these censors took Rome as the seat of Western Christianity, they forced Jewish scribes to change it into the more neutral קָרְתָּא, 'town'.<sup>46</sup>

His presence among the sick evokes a question of visibility. The terminology מה סימניה appears in the Talmud in Halakhic contexts (lost objects) and in questions on symptoms of medical diseases.<sup>47</sup> This last context seems implied here, but the answer does not provide diagnostics, nor physical features but points to praxis: the Messiah is recognized by his specific manner of taking off and laying on bandages. By changing only one bandage at a time he is always

explain it as the southern gate of Paradise (Maharsha), or the southern gate of Paradise located opposite 'the town' (Rashi). Clearly their paradisiac imagery is secondary and draws on a tradition that the Messiah was born on the day of the destruction of the Temple and immediately carried off though to Paradise where he awaits his entry in the world, according to Rabinowitz, *Sanhedrin*, 60: 'from where the Messias will come'. The story is recounted in Midrash Ekha Zuta ed. Buber, 1894, p. 133. A. Berger, 'Captive at the Gate of Rome: The Story of a Messianic Motif', *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 44 (1977) 11 qualifies it as a 'neutralization and spiritualization'. Bacher, *Agada*, 190, note 4 aptly notes the linkage of the variant reading 'Gan Eden' with 'Joshua ben Levi in Paradise' traditions in b.Ket 77b and post-Talmudic midrashim.

44 The *Maharsha* admits that 'he does not know its meaning'. This remark is usually a rhetorical expression typical for Talmudic commentaries: he actually does know an explanation but does not like it (verbal information by Leo Mock, September 2013). Indeed, Rashi's comment suggests what the *Maharsha* did not like: the Messiah among the poor lepers recalls the suffering Servant in Isa. 53:4: 'Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, our suffering that he endured; we accounted him plagued, smitten and afflicted by God' (JPS translation). This exegesis agrees with R. Alexandrai's proposal for the name of the Messiah: the 'sick one' (*חולין*); Urbach, *Sages*, 685; on the versions of this text, see M. Fishbane, 'Midrash and Messianism: Some Theologies of Suffering and Salvation', in: P. Schaefer, M. Cohen (eds.), *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, Leiden 1998, 59.

45 Compare Urbach, *Sages*, 683. If we may assume that the tradition was created by R. Alexandrai, pupil of Joshua ben Levi, the reference is to end 3. c. C.E. Rome as the centre of the Roman Empire. However, by the time of the final editing of the Talmud, the middle of the 6. c. C.E., Rome had become the major centre of Western Christianity.

46 On Christian censorship of 'Rome' see Berger, 'Captive at the Gates of Rome', 11–12 and literature cited. Actually, Talmudic tradition has Joshua ben Levi visit Rome on another occasion (b.Ma'as. Sh. 53b).

47 Using the Bar Ilan CD-Rom database (version 15+), I have found three instances of מה סימניה: b.'Abod. Zar. 28a, b.Yom. 84a (both on tooth-ache), and b.Ket. 77b (eye disease).

prepared to depart immediately when called, a detail underlining the imminent character of Messianic reality.

## 8 Tradition History, Once More

Ben Levi's question on how to find the Messiah, מה סימניה, 'what is his sign?', is rather unexpected in the context of the Talmudic *sugyah*: editors use the Biblical word *תְּהִלָּה* when discussing the signs of Messianic era. As we saw before, the terminology does not evoke a diagnostic answer (what kind of sickness?) but a peculiar way of changing bandages. This visibility relates the word סימניה, a regularly used loanword from the Greek σημεῖον, to its presence in Messianic discourse in Christian traditions that discern the visible presence of the Messiah. John features the Messiah as performing 'signs' by healing (Jn. 4:54; 6:2), an activity lacking in the Joshua ben Levi narrative. More approximate is Luke's story of the shepherds in Bethlehem, when the angel announces them the birth of Jesus. The newborn Messiah will be recognizable by a specific spatial setting and by specific clothing: 'This will be a sign (σημεῖον) for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger' (Lk. 2:12, NRSV).<sup>48</sup> The similarity in the use of the term is not in a physical quality but in a peculiarity of his visible presence, both mentioning the act of swathing in bands of cloth, something that differentiates this person from his environment.

## 9 Meeting the Messiah

- (B) He went to him. He said to him: Peace be with you, my master and teacher! He said to him: peace be with you, son of Levi! He said to him: when will the master come? He said to him: today (*היום*).

Joshua goes to see the Messiah, the dialogue between them is terse and restricted to an exchange of formal greetings, followed by a direct question-answer element. Nothing more is mentioned, either regarding the Messiah, or Joshua. This dialogue awaits a further comment. It is here that Elijah comes in again.

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<sup>48</sup> Lk. 2:12 uses a passive participle form of σπάργω, 'to swathe in swaddling-clothes' (Liddell-Scott).

### 9.1     *Elijah the Scriptural Sage*

- (C) He came before Elijah. He said to him: what has he said to you? He said to him: peace be with you, son of Levi! He said to him: he has assured you and your father of the world to come! He said to him: he has uttered lies to me, since he said to me: today I will come. And he has not come. He said to him: thus has he said to you: **היום אם בקள תשמעו**, 'today, if you will listen to His voice' (Ps. 95:7)

The last scene brings us back to Joshua's encounter with Elijah. Elijah directly states what the Messiah has said. The formal greeting exchange between Joshua and the Messiah now turns out to contain a message: 'Peace be with you, Son of Levi' is interpreted as Joshua having a share in the world to come and the mentioning of his name 'Son of Levi' indicates that his father also is assured of eternity.<sup>49</sup> The language of the Messiah is approached like a Rabbi would explain Scripture, containing hidden meanings and unusual references, and Elijah is the authority enabled to unravel it. Elijah follows the same Rabbinic hermeneutic rule operative in the Joshua ben Levi exegesis discussed earlier that there is no superfluous expression and every detail is imbued with meaning.<sup>50</sup> Note also that his father was not included in the question of Joshua: the speech contains even more information than Joshua was seeking to find.

Elijah's hermeneutical approach becomes apparent as well in the last dialogue. Countering the reproach of Joshua that the Messiah has lied since he said he would come 'today' (**היום**) but did not come, Elijah turns the dialogue into an exegetical discourse. **היום** is a regular adverb for 'today' but is used in Biblical vernacular chiefly in conditional phrases, such as 'the day of...', 'the very day that...'.<sup>51</sup> The adverb is explained by Elijah as rather being an abbreviated quote: 'For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today (**היום**) you would listen to his voice!' (Ps. 95:7, NRSV). Hearing one word as a reference to Biblical verses is a common topic in Talmudic narratives and the narrative echoes the Midrashic

<sup>49</sup> Following Rashi's comment.

<sup>50</sup> On this aspect of Rabbinic hermeneutics, G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (8. Auflage), München 1992, 235–237.

<sup>51</sup> An optative clause 'I wish you listened', thus P. Joöon, T. Muruoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew. Part Three: Syntax. Paradigms and Indices* (Subsidia Biblica 14/II), Roma 1991, 615. More emphatically, **היום זהה**, (459). As in Biblical Hebrew (507) also the Mishnah uses **היום** as an adverb for 'today': m.Yom. 4:4; 6:1; m.Ned. 8:1; m.Shev. 3:11 (reflecting vernacular!); m.Ker. 6:7; m.Zav. 1:3; 6; m.Yad. 4:3 (narrative!).

technique of quoting only one word or part of a verse where the listener will know the full verse and its literary context. It is only curious that Joshua ben Levi would have missed the hint; the reader of course appreciates the ironical pun on the Messiah coming ‘today’.<sup>52</sup>

## 10 Elijah and Apocalyptic Messianism

Here our story ends and also the long discussion of the Talmud on the question of whether Israel would be redeemed or not without merit. However, the story does not just reinforce the dominant voice in the Talmudic discourse on redemption and repentance or other merits. It is elusive in its apocalyptic motifs of presence and absence, and the Messiah amidst the anonymous sick at the gates of Rome evokes a feeling of an imminent judgment on this world power.<sup>53</sup> The narrative evokes a Messianic presence, albeit hidden to the general public, waiting for the right conditions to appear on the political stage. Moreover, Joshua ben Levi is able to meet him and communicate with him about his fate. His Messiah is present, though only accessible to outstanding individuals such as Joshua ben Levi and through the mediation of Elijah. Moreover, the message he receives is clear: redemption is sure, but we do not know the date. As suggested by the commentary of the *Maharsha*, our story should be read in conjunction with the exegesis of Joshua ben Levi quoted just before the meeting with Elijah. His exegesis was on the modality of his coming: speeded up or on a set moment, humble or spectacular. The exegetical teachings of Joshua ben Levi and the narrative itself recall that Joshua ben

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<sup>52</sup> On wordplay and irony, Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 246–247. This Scriptural reply is elusive in its precise meaning, since no Midrashic comment is added as to whether repenting, having merits, keeping the Torah, or obeying is meant. A conditional reading of בַּיּוֹם in Ps. 95:7 is attested by the 3. c. c.E. R. Levi, referring to the Sabbath: ‘If Israel would have kept the Sabbath only one time as it should be, the Messiah would have come today.’ (y.Ta'anit 1:1); Yalqut, *Tehillim* 946 presents this tradition together with our story, but the Talmud does not hint at this possibility. Note that the mid-first c. letter to the Hebrews quotes this verse as well and comments that only by keeping faith ‘today’, Messianic presence will be realized (Heb. 3:13–14). ‘Today’ is the timeframe the community lives in now and in which it has to endure by keeping faith.

<sup>53</sup> During the Barcelona dispute (1260 C.E.) the convert Pablo Christiani initiated discussion of this text to prove that the Talmud knew the Messiah had come. Nahmanides had to be very cautious, not only since Christiani did have a point but, moreover, since his presence before the gates of Rome implied an apocalyptic verdict; Berger, ‘Captive Before the Gates of Rome’, 12–13.

Levi was not tricked by the Messiah in the Bible riddle. He understood him partially correctly, since the Messiah had come, and today really was that day, albeit only for him, since there were no merits of the whole people of Israel to come to them yet. The lesson Elijah teaches is that his generation is not worthy, whereas he, as an individual, was. Finally, it is striking that this exegesis is based on two texts, Dan. 7:13 and Zech. 9:9, which serve to legitimize Christian motifs in the Synoptic Gospels. While on trial, Jesus refers to Daniel's vision of the Son of Man coming 'with the clouds', and the Gospel narrative of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem features a Messianic interpretation of Zechariah.<sup>54</sup> Together with the exegetical interest in the word 'today' in Ps. 95:7, the Joshua ben Levi traditions address three major topics attested in Christian Messianic discourse. Added to the similar question on one's personal fate combined with the advent of the Messiah and our observations of the peculiar word סמנין ('his sign'), this leads us to the conclusion that the Joshua ben Levi traditions represent an old, apocalyptic type of Messianism. Remarkably, no apologetic or polemic features colour our story, and there is no reason to assess it as anti-Christian rhetoric.<sup>55</sup>

## 11 Elijah as a Narrative Prophet

Elijah's presence among (some of) the Rabbis triggers a narrative in which Messianic reality is articulated as a hidden presence and an imminent possibility. In the narrative the presence and absence of Elijah signifies the presence and absence of the Messiah; Joshua ben Levi meets both of them and talks to them. Elijah refers to the Messiah and Joshua ben Levi depends on Elijah to recognize his physical presence and understand his verbal utterings. Elijah evokes apocalyptic notions of physical presence of a human saviour but simultaneously comments on it citing the Rabbinic concept of meritorious obeisance to the Law and repentance. Elijah as a 'narrative prophet' embodies Messianic reality and refers to it. This function resembles the role of Elijah in Christian traditions. Conversely, however, and in conflict with the

<sup>54</sup> Jesus before the High Priest: Mark. 14:62; Lk. 22:69; Matt. 26:64. Entrance into Jerusalem: Mark 11:1–10; Lk. 19:28–40; Matt. 21:1–9.

<sup>55</sup> P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton, Oxford, 2007 argues that the Babylonian Rabbis were aware of Christian traditions, probably through Tatian's Diatesseron and the Syriac Peshitta, and especially from the Gospel of John. Moreover, the reaction of R. Joshua ben Levi to Christians is attested, albeit only in Palestinian sources. cf. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 60–61.

idea of Christian Messianism, the geographical location of Rome suggests the Messiah's suffering to be the result of Roman Imperial culture and oppression. Moreover, unlike the Christian concept this story does not suggest that the suffering Messiah alleviates or cures diseases, nor is his suffering labelled here as atoning.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, the analogical Messianic motifs probably point to Messianic motifs known in Jewish-Christian and Rabbinic circles alike: the suffering Messiah, the necessity of a sign, the quest for eternity, the hidden presence of the Messiah, the waiting for his reappearance, and the recourse to the Law as the necessary prelude to Messianic reality.<sup>57</sup>

Like John the Baptist in the New Testament, Elijah is the announcer (Mal. 4:5) of this Messianic reality.<sup>58</sup> He is, however, also its interpreter, corrects false assumptions and embodies the value of repentance or obeisance to the Law.<sup>59</sup> Typically Rabbinic, as well, is the manner in which Elijah knows how to decode the speech utterances of the Messiah, as either containing a hidden answer to the question of the Rabbi or as referring to the code of Scripture. He performs his role as a Rabbi would do, teaching the meaning of Biblical

<sup>56</sup> Urbach, *Sages*, 685–687 notes that in Talmudic tradition the sufferings of the Messiah are a precondition for the redemption, not redemption itself, nor atonement. However, Fishbane, 'Midrash and Messianism', 69 discusses the suffering Messiah (Isa. 53) as an old inner-Jewish development and points to liturgical texts (R. Eleazar Kalir) and Midrashic readings preserved in Raymundus Partini's *Pugio Fidei* where atoning suffering is attested as well. Apparently the idea of a suffering and atoning Messiah is less controversial in traditional circles: see apt remarks in the Schottenstein edition on the Messiah as having skin diseases (Lev. 13) and therewith fulfilling Isa. 53:4!

<sup>57</sup> D. Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Judaism and Christianity*, Stanford 1999 suggests conceptual similarities in Christian and Rabbinic sources to be the result of the crossing over of specific ideas and semantic concepts between different forms of 'Judaism'. In his *Borderlines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia 2004 he addresses similarities in logos-mysticism by tracing them back to tendencies operative in Second Temple Judaism. In his view Judaism and Christianity became separate religions only in the 4. c. C.E., i.e. after the historical R. Joshua ben Levi. Our case appears to be of the second category, but the possibility that certain Jewish-Christian ideas on Messianic presence infiltrated Rabbinic discourse should not be excluded.

<sup>58</sup> The association of Elijah's presence with a suffering Messiah is present in Matt. 17:10–13. Elijah's eschatological role is underlined in a quote from Malachi 3:23 LXX, and the impending suffering of Jesus is mentioned (Matt. 17:12) to give him a fate equal to that of John the Baptist; U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament I/2 Mt. 8–17*, Neukirchen Vluyn 3<sup>1999</sup>, 513.

<sup>59</sup> Repentance is the key concept in the proclamation of John the Baptist, who is portrayed as a prophet 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' (Lk. 1:17; compare Lk. 9:8), the eschatological Elijah who prepares for the day of judgment; Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament*, 105–106.

verses and guiding individual Rabbis as his pupils. In Elijah's presence as a narrative prophet and an eschatological person, the Rabbis find the embodiment of their hermeneutics; by doing so, they claim to know about the Messianic reality, which is at the same time both hidden and accessible to some mystical teachers. Within the Talmudic discourse Elijah acts as the corrective authority of heightened apocalyptic expectations. Thus, in terms of narrative rhetoric, Elijah represents the authority for conveying eschatological reality by evoking and canalizing apocalyptic notions. Indeed, as a narrative prophet Elijah underlines Rabbinic authority and, as such, he appears very much like the Rabbinic Sage himself.<sup>60</sup>

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60 I would like to thank Bob Becking and Hans Barstad for organizing the conference and facilitating interdisciplinary, scholarly debate on Prophecy; thanks to Leo Mock as well, for discussing this text.