

The Making of the Talmudic Narrative

The previous chapters have examined the macrostructures of imperial period and late antique works of scholarly erudition – their genre – before moving to microstructures and looking at their organization, and their formation, and how these structures may relate to and explain the Babylonian Talmud. The present chapter will examine the structure of one distinct part of erudite compilations: the story or narrative.

The tale (*mythos/fabula*) and its close relative, the narration (*diēgēsis/narratio*), were crucial components of imperial period and late antique education.¹ In order to assess, from scratch, how stories, and in particular the erudite story, were constructed, this chapter will start with a brief discussion of the Greco-Roman curriculum, its singular nature, and its impact on other language cultures in the Mediterranean area. A brief survey of the time's aesthetics will show in what ways they are reflected in the conceptualization and makeup of stories, including talmudic stories. It will be shown that the same methods employed to produce complex erudite books such as the Talmud are at work, in miniature, in stories. This significantly facilitated their integration into a composite text.

¹ Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nicolaus suggested starting with the tale, while Theon began with the saying (*chreia*) and the maxim (*gnōmē*) and only then proceeded to the tale. All of them let the narration follow the tale (see the chart in George A. Kennedy, *Pro-gymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, WGRW 10 [Leiden: Brill, 2003], xiii).

THE LATE ANTIQUE STORY
AND PROGYMNASMATIC TRAINING

Recent scholarship has called new attention to the fact that the Babylonian Talmud, as well as rabbinic literature in general, show clear signs of the use of rhetorical patterns in the composition of arguments (*sugyot*) and homilies.² This interest goes hand in hand with a renewed focus on rhetoric in classics as well as in patristics, which increasingly engage each other in the concept of the “Third Sophistic.”³ The consensus that rhetoric, despite having originated in the law courts of the Greek polis, later became “the bedrock upon which the composition of orations, speeches and sermons was built at a time when opportunities for public speaking were numerous” is growing.⁴ Indeed, rhetorical speaking was an essential part of late antique entertainment, the court system, education, and politics.⁵ Different reasons have been identified for this increasing popularity of rhetoric and its spread beyond the courts, including the “massive administrative organization of the Roman Empire and its cultural system,” which necessitated and produced a standardized way of communication, or the public competition between “sophists, bishops, philosophers and other public figures.”⁶ These deeply connected factors

² See David Brodsky, “From Disagreement to Talmudic Discourse: Progygnasmata and the Evolution of a Rabbinic Genre,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan, *AJEC* 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), and Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), respectively.

³ See Robert J. Penella, prologue to *The Purpose of Rhetoric in Late Antiquity: From Performance to Exegesis*, ed. Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas, *STAC* 72 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). See also Ryan C. Fowler and Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas, “A Prolegomena to the Third Sophistic,” in *Plato in the Third Sophistic*, ed. Ryan C. Fowler, *Millennium-Studien/Millennium Studies* 50 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014); the concept has been criticized by others for its terminology, which seems to suggest “that there had been a break when in fact there was continuity” (Averil Cameron, “Culture Wars: Late Antiquity and Literature,” in *Libera Curiositas: Mélanges d’histoire romaine et d’Antiquité tardive offerts à Jean-Michel Carrié*, ed. Christel Freu, Sylvain Janniard, and Arthur Ripoli, Bibliothèque de l’Antiquité Tardive 31 [Turnhout: Brepols, 2016], 310).

⁴ Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas, foreword to *The Purpose of Rhetoric in Late Antiquity: From Performance to Exegesis*, *STAC* 72 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. vii.

⁵ My paraphrase of Jaclyn Maxwell, “Sermons,” in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, ed. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 348.

⁶ Cited according to Quiroga Puertas, foreword, vii and viii, respectively. On the increasing standardization of education, which was responsible for the distinct literary culture of late antiquity, see Lieve Van Hoof, “Performing Paideia: Greek Culture as an Instrument for Social Promotion in the Fourth Century A.D.,” *Classical Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (May 2013).

ultimately led to a comparatively uniform curriculum shaped by “publicly funded and managed schools ... attested all across the Empire.”⁷

Administrative needs alone can be met with alphabetization, grammatical training, and the introduction of basic protocols, that is, the type of writing necessary for everyday bookkeeping, formal letters, and documents.⁸ There is no practical need to go beyond such basic abilities, particularly because there existed no obvious link between wealth and education prior to the imperial period: trades and specialized crafts, which did not necessarily require full literacy, were passed on within the family. The wealth of those who held offices was also inherited or acquired through booty, the discovery of mining deposits, or tax revenues.⁹ The increased competition among the elite in the wake of the Roman Empire’s expansion may have been one reason for the investment in literacy and, especially, literary production as a means for building reputation.¹⁰ Another reason was the competition between Alexander’s heirs about the true successors of the Greek heritage, to which the Ptolemies responded with an unprecedented investment in intellectual sponsorship.¹¹ Patronage would continue to allow people to have a profitable occupation as an orator, author, or even “literary manager of others,” as imperial education could include everyone, “slaves and freedmen as well as the elite.”¹² With literacy becoming a prestigious social pursuit, it is not surprising, then, that the imperial-period curriculum went far beyond basic alphabetization.

Rhetoric, which penetrated speech as well as writing, promised defense and persuasion, both crucial abilities in a world where quarrels were likely to end up before a judge. Rhetoric made people believe that the

⁷ Noel Lenski, “Searching for Slave Teachers in Late Antiquity,” in “Ποιμένα λαῶν: Studies in Honor of Robert J. Penella,” ed. Cristiana Sogno, special issue, *RET Supplément* 7 (2019): 134–135.

⁸ See, e.g., the examples in Roger S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Greco-Roman East*, Sather Classical Lectures 69 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 27–53.

⁹ Robin Barrow, “The Persistence of Ancient Education,” in *A Companion to Ancient Education*, ed. W. Martin Bloomer (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 281.

¹⁰ See Helmut Krasser, “Universalisierung und Identitätskonstruktion: Formen und Funktionen der Wissenskodifikation im kaiserzeitlichen Rom,” in *Erinnerung, Gedächtnis, Wissen: Studien zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Gedächtnisforschung*, ed. Günter Oesterle, *Formen der Erinnerung* 26 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

¹¹ See Francesca Schironi, “Enlightened Kings or Pragmatic Rulers? Ptolemaic Patronage of Scholarship and Science in Context,” in *Intellectual and Empire in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Philip R. Bosman (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹² Jaś Elsner, introduction to *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture*, ed. Jaś Elsner and Michel Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

right words, written or spoken, had the power to subdue enemies, physical or metaphysical, and to effect substantial change.¹³ Written amulets, so-called *voces magicae*, and theurgy testify to the importance of persuasive language in what might be termed “cosmic courtrooms.”¹⁴ These were skills of interest to everyone.

Yet rhetoric served not only the purpose of persuasion but also entertainment. Rhetoric changed the way in which diverting texts were written and presented. One influential example is the sophist Lucian, an author famous for his pastiches of well-known scenes, full of allusions and comic exaggerations. Lucian saw an excellent mastery of language as a form of delightful acumen. This is perhaps best illustrated in the *hommage* he wrote for his teacher Demonax, whom Lucian characterizes primarily as a master of quick-witted responses.¹⁵

The appealing promises of the late antique, Greek-based rhetorical curriculum were manifold, and there does not seem to have been an alternative curriculum in the Mediterranean and adjacent areas. Thus, while some bishops may have considered adapting the curriculum, that is, replacing Greek and Roman myths and tales that served as exercises with biblical ones, they did not and could not think of replacing its rhetorical goals.¹⁶

The critical steps in shaping students’ ability to craft their own texts was taken in the formative process between the beginner’s curriculum – that

¹³ Catherine M. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World*, Divinations: Rereading Late Antique Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁴ See Árpád M. Nagy, “*Daktylios Pharmakites*: Magical Healing Gems and Rings in the Greco-Roman Worlds,” in *Ritual Healing: Magic, Ritual and Medical Therapy from Antiquity until the Early Modern Period*, ed. Charles Burnett and Ildikó Csepregi, Micrologus’ Library 48 (Florence: Sismel – Ed. del Galluzzo, 2012), on the transformation of gems and amulets in late antiquity. Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler refers to theurgy as a “ritual in ink” in *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition*, Beiträge zur europäischen Religionsgeschichte 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), esp. 278–285. East Syrian schools promoted studying to “strip off the old man with all his ways” and “to put on the new man who through knowledge is renewed in the likeness of his Creator [see Eph. 4:22–24].” Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 209.

¹⁵ Graham Anderson, *Lucian: Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic*, Mnemosyne Supplement 41 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 64–66.

¹⁶ See Jan R. Stenger, “Athens and/or Jerusalem? Basil’s and Chrysostom’s Views on the Didactic Use of Literature and Stories,” in *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity: Reflections, Social Contexts and Genres*, ed. Peter Gemeinhardt, Lieve Van Hoof, and Peter Van Nuffelen (London: Routledge, 2016).

is, alphabetization and acquaintance with grammar – and the more advanced study of rhetoric for juridical or deliberative purposes with an accomplished orator. This formative process, in which students learned how to go about their own written compositions, has been described in various *progymnasmata*, “preliminary rhetorical exercises.” Still extant *progymnasmata* in Greek are those ascribed to Hermogenes (second century), Aphthonius (fourth century), Libanius (fourth century), Nicolaus (fourth to fifth centuries), and Aelius Theon (fifth century).¹⁷ Except for the exercises ascribed to Libanius, however, no treatise comes with an actual set of exercises. Rather, they describe the literary forms to be studied and how to teach them only in technical terms, usually on the basis of a single example. This implies that teachers were forced to choose their own examples based on which they would teach rhetorical principles. Considering the above-mentioned discussion among bishops, it may therefore be assumed that teachers who taught Hebrew or Aramaic composition chose examples from the Hebrew Bible or the Mishnah to teach rhetoric.¹⁸

The *progymnasmata* did not train students to freely write their own stories. Quite the opposite: they were taught how to transform other stories or to enhance a maxim (*gnōmē*) with an action and a speaker, thereby creating a *chreia*. The bulk of the plot was thereby already given, forcing students to practice not originality but exegetical flexibility. In a juridical context, this flexibility served to transform the argument of an adversary into its contrary by artfully highlighting and enhancing certain points, or to reveal contradictions. Although this method could produce quite creative outcomes, the art of bending meaning was taught very mechanically at an early stage.

People wrote (and still write) according to their training. The somewhat mechanical methods applied to transform motifs were certainly responsible for the enormous number of books and treatises that late antique authors were able to produce. Lucian, for example, wrote variant after variant of motifs and twists found in earlier stories, and then he wrote again variants of

¹⁷ On the lifetime of Nicolaus, see Craig A. Gibson, “The Alexandrian Tychaion and the Date of Ps.-Nicolaus ‘Progymnasmata,’” *Classical Quarterly*, 59, no. 2 (December 2009). Aelius Theon has long been dated to the first century. Yet the prosopographic investigation by Malcolm Heath points, rather, to the fifth century; see Malcolm Heath, “Theon and the History of the Progymnasmata,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 43, no. 3 (2002).

¹⁸ Interestingly, the bishops did not reach the same conclusions: Chrysostom wanted to exchange the texts, while Basil thought it better to reserve biblical texts for higher education; see Stenger, “Athens and/or Jerusalem?”

these variants. Graham Anderson illustrates Lucian's stereotyped reworking by showing how Aphthonius suggested reworking a maxim.¹⁹ According to Aphthonius, a maxim could be altered by adding praise for its author, paraphrasing it, explaining the reason for the maxim, proving it right by virtue of the truth of its contrary, comparing it to a similar case, giving an example of a situation/action in which the maxim fits, adding a similar statement by another person as testimony to its truth, or by appending an epilogue to it.²⁰ A maxim (*gnōmē/sententia*) could be true, plausible, or hyperbolic in its content, and simple or composite in its style.²¹

Similar exercises were also suggested by different *progymnasmata* as exercises for the *chreia*. The *chreia*, a saying attributed to a person and sometimes enhanced with an action, can be considered the most prominent form of a miniature story in late antiquity. In modern scholarship, it has often been translated incorrectly as “anecdote,” which is likely to provoke incorrect assumptions regarding the truthfulness or the amusing character of its content.²² Most of all, a translation of the *chreia* as “anecdote” hides the highly technical makeup of these short stories. The set of methods for slight change (*exergasia*) of the *chreia* was the same for maxims or sayings. Hermogenes provides a nice example of how these methods affect a saying (*logikon*):

[*Logikon*] Isocrates said that the root of education is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.

Praise (*epainos*): “Isocrates was wise,” and you will slightly develop the topic. Then the *chreia*, “He said this,” and you will not state it in bare form but expand the statement. Then the **cause** (*aitia*), “For the greatest things are wont to succeed through toil and in the end given no pleasure, but things of importance are the opposite.” Then from a **comparison** (*enantion*), “For just as farmers need to reap fruits by working the soil, so also with speeches.” Then from an **example** (*parabolē*), “Demosthenes, by shutting himself up at home and working hard, later reaped the fruit in the form of crowns and testimonials.” It is also possible to attempt [to bring **proof**] from other [sources]; for example, “Hesiod said,

¹⁹ See Anderson, *Lucian*, 3.

²⁰ See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 100–101.

²¹ See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 99 (Aphthonius the Sophist [§7R]).

²² Henry A. Fischel, “Studies in Cynicism and the Ancient Near East: The Transformation of a Chria,” in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Studies in the History of Religions 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 372–411, translated *chreia* as “anecdote,” which seems to have had a great impact on the study of rabbinic texts. He further associated the *chreia* (or “*chria*”) with the *exemplum* (Greek: *paradeigma*), a figure of different purpose and structure. Fischel similarly used this notion of *chreia* in his monograph, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings*, Studia Post-biblica 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

‘The gods put sweat before virtue,’ and another poet says, ‘The gods sell all good things to us for toil.’” At the end you will put an **exhortation** (*prosthēseis*) to the effect that one must be persuaded by the person who has said or done this. (Hermogenes, *Progym.* [7–8])²³

The tale (*mythos/fabula*) and the narration (*diēgēsis/narratio*) were similarly subject to this systematic change by students. The narration had as its distinctive features the identification of the protagonists and indications as to where and when a certain event took place. The event itself did not need to be true but had to be plausible. The tale, on the other hand, is described as plainly fictitious in the *progymnasmata*. But the quality of a tale was likewise assessed by its plausibility. Such plausibility could be achieved by associating certain traits with suitable characters, like beauty with the peacock and cleverness with the fox, or by adapting a given plot to accommodate new protagonists.²⁴ For some writers of *progymnasmata*, a tale, by definition, featured animals, a definition refuted by Theon and Aphthonius.²⁵ Aphthonius further distinguished between the rational, the ethical, and the mixed tale. In the rational tale, humans *do* something, while the ethical tale transfers human characteristics to animals, and both features appear together in the mixed one.²⁶

According to the *progymnasmata*, tales have a didactic purpose, and the lesson should be highlighted either in the beginning or in the end, in the form of a saying or maxim. These sayings or maxims can be replaced at will to give a tale a different direction, depending on the point somebody wishes to make. An *epimythion*, a tale followed by a gnomic statement, might then read as follows:

It was the height of summer and the cicadas were offering up their shrill song, but it occurred to the ants to toil and collect the harvest from which they would be fed in the winter. When the winter came on, the ants fed on what they had laboriously collected, but the pleasure of the cicadas ended in want. Similarly, youth that does not wish to toil fares badly in old age. (Aphthonius, *Progym.* 2R)²⁷

²³ Translation follows Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 77, with slight emendations based on Hugo Rabe’s edition, *Hermogenis opera*, *Rhetores Graeci* 6 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913), 7–8.

²⁴ Hermogenes 2; see Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 74. The attribution of human qualities to animals made the beastly figures prone to being turned into humans for other purposes. Henry A. Fischel, “Story and History: Observations on Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism,” in *American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Semi-Centennial Volume: A Collection of Original Essays*, ed. Denis Sinor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 65–66, considers the possibility that the replacement of animals in political fables with names of rabbis may be responsible for certain stories.

²⁵ See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 24.

²⁶ See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 96.

²⁷ Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 96.

Tales could further be enhanced with descriptions and additional dialogue, or they could be shortened by the omission of these very features.²⁸ Apparently, then, late antique stories were defined and structured by a distinct and qualified set of methods for variegation.

The language of a tale should be clear and simple, as Nicolaus emphasized, and deviate “little from that used in ordinary conversations.”²⁹ The moral value of the tale or its consistency could be acclaimed or refuted. This was an important exercise, as Theon explained, since it prepared students for the refutation or confirmation of a juridical argument.³⁰ The purpose of these exercises was to help students realize that statements and actions could be used independently from their original context to create a different meaning. At this stage, sayings and actions from a “textual witness” were used as stand-ins for the juridical argument or case. The examples were wisely chosen so that their moral and instructive content offered an additional pedagogical benefit. This instructional habit of using quotations as proof obviously left its mark on late antique writing culture. *Chreia* and maxims have been found to underscore arguments in texts as diverse as private letters, amulets, or incantations, where they were used as claims to tie someone down (as in *defixiones*) or to set someone free (as in amulets).³¹ The same sort of intercessional authority was transferred to whole books, which were worn as pendants for apotropaic purposes.³²

It appears that the late antique story was built with or around sayings and maxims: they constituted a small unit (the *chreia*), introduced or appended the plot, or appeared in dialogues in the form of quotes or direct speech. Yet the progymnastic curriculum had more to offer regarding crafting a plausible story. In later stages, students were trained

²⁸ E.g., Hermogenes on fable (Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 74–75) or Theon on the same subject (23–28).

²⁹ Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 136.

³⁰ See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 23–28.

³¹ See Lillian I. Larsen, “School Texts,” in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, ed. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018) for two examples of maxims in letters (477) and for the discussion of a *historiola* in the text from an amulet bowl that relies on a biblical verse as proof (477n127). Incantations were generally replete with verses from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, or Homer; see Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory*, STAC 84 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

³² John Chrysostom, *Stat.* 19.14 (NPNF 9:470). Miniature codices: P. Oxy. I 0006 (Acts of Paul and Thecla); P. Ant. 1.13 (Acts of Paul and Thecla); P. Oxy. XIII 1594 (New Recension of Tobit); P. Oxy. VI 0850 (Acts of John); P. Oxy. VI 0849 (Acts of Peter); P. Oxy. III 0404 (Shepherd of Hermes); P. Oxy. VIII 1080 (Revelation I); and P. Oxy. VII 1010 (6 Ezra).

in “vivid description” (*ekphrasis*) and in speech in character (*ethopoeia*). Accomplished students of progymnasmatic training thus had a useful and certified set of tools at their disposal that allowed them to make sense of a text, to use it as proof for or against an argument, or simply to compose a plausible new version of an old story. They were also able to mix and match the learned writing methods for different purposes. In fact, students had no choice but to write along these lines even if they did not choose a career in the courtroom; this was how they were trained, what they knew, and what the audience expected.

One result of progymnasmatic training in a nonjuridical context is what I will call the “exegetical story.” This type of story combines the inquiry (*thesis*, discussed in detail in Chapter 1) with a tale or narration. It is found specifically in rabbinic and monastic literature. Like the “exegetical inquiry,” the exegetical story takes as its starting point one or two conflicting sentences from works considered to be “textual witnesses,” such as the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. These conflicting “testimonies” are explained through a story, that is, a rather elaborate simile, before concluding with a maxim, saying, or quote from a “witness.” As I will discuss an exegetical story from the Talmud further below, I will illustrate this point here with an example from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (*Apophthegmata Patrum*), a work written around the end of the fifth century:

A brother visited Abba Silvanus at Mount Sinai; he saw the brothers working and said to the elder, “Labor not for the meat that perishes (John 6:27); Mary has chosen the good part” (Luke 10:42). The elder said to Zachariah, his disciple, “Give the brother a book and put him in a cell without anything else.” So, when the ninth hour came the visitor watched the door, expecting someone would be sent to call him to the meal. When no one called him he got up, went to find the old man and said to him, “Have the brothers not eaten today?” The old man said to him, “Because you are a spiritual man and do not need that kind of food. We, being carnal, want to eat, and that is why we work. But you have chosen the good portion and read the whole day long and you do not want to eat carnal food.” When he heard these words the brother made a prostration saying, “Forgive me, abba.” The old man said to him, “Mary needs Martha. It is really thanks to Martha that Mary is praised.” (*Apophthegmata Patrum*, Silvanus 5)³³

³³ Larsen, “School Texts,” 479. Translation by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London: Mowbrays, 1984), 223. Larsen quotes this story as an example of narration (*diēgēsis*), since it indicates the place (Mt. Sinai) and time (the ninth hour). For a discussion of parallels between this story and the criticism of physical work expressed in a story in b. Shabb. 33b, see Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 159–160.

The story starts with two verses from the New Testament (John 6:27; Luke 10:42). These verses do not conflict with each other but, rather, with the physical labor that monks must perform. The story needs to bring proof against the two textual witnesses. This proof is found in the physical needs of man and in a contextual interpretation of the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42). Exegetical stories in the Talmud proceed in the exact same way, always aiming at proving or disproving a conflict, either between textual witnesses or between such a witness and daily experience.³⁴ These conceptual parallels between rabbinic and monastic “exegetical stories” are suggestive of a literary training that adhered to the same stylistic concepts and objectives.

THE LARGER IMPACT OF THE *PROGYMNASMATA*

There is no evidence of a conceptually different curriculum that would compare to the *progymnasmata*. It was the only curriculum proposing a continuation of literary training after basic alphabetization. In addition to the preserved *progymnasmata*, many others, now lost, seem to have circulated. The uniformity among the proposed exercises in the extant treatises, however, suggests that the lost curricula must not have differed much in content either.³⁵ The exercises covered rhetorical subjects such as the attributed saying or action (*chreia*); the maxim (*gnōmē*); the reminiscence (*apomnēmoneuma*); the fable (*mythos*); the narration (*diēgēsis*); refutation (*anaskeuē*); confirmation (*kataskeuē*); the amplification of a brave or faulty deed (*topos*); vivid description (*ekphrasis*); the introduction of a speaker (*prosōpopoeia*); praise of living people (*encomion*); of the dead (*epitaphios*); of the gods (*hymn*); invective (*psogos*); comparison (*syncrisis*); imitation and speech in character (*ethopoeia*); inquiry (*thesis*); the introduction of a law (with focus on refutation or confirmation); as well as paraphrase and elaboration (*exergasia*).³⁶

³⁴ For typical exegetical stories, see the samples in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Stories of the Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010): b. Yevam. 105b (two biblical verses), b. Ta’an. 21a (two biblical verses; like in the monastic example above, the topic can similarly be phrased as “to work or not to work”), b. Ta’an. 23a (exegesis of a baraita), and b. Shabb. 156b (exegesis of a maxim).

³⁵ See Robert J. Penella, “The *Progymnasmata* and Progymnasmatic Theory in Imperial Greek Education,” in Bloomer, *Companion to Ancient Education*, 163.

³⁶ See the list in Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, xiii.

The curricula were translated into other languages in the Mediterranean. There is an Armenian translation of Aelius Theon's *progymnasmata*, carried out by the so-called "Hellenizing School" (ca. 570–730 CE).³⁷ A Latin translation was produced by Priscian (ca. fifth century CE) of (pseudo-)Hermogenes's treatise. Worth noting is the fact that Priscian substituted the Greek examples with examples from Latin authors, such as Terence, Sallust, Virgil, and Cicero.³⁸ It was indeed not difficult to substitute the exercises' few suggested literary examples with those from a different body of literature, since the treatises, with the exception of Libanius's *progymnasmata*, were mainly theoretical. As mentioned above, even instructors who wanted to teach based on Greek examples had to come up with additional examples themselves. Based on the popularity of the *progymnasmata*, it seems feasible that the curriculum was translated into Aramaic, the Sasanid *lingua franca*, as well. Jewish teachers would have substituted the original examples from Greek (or Persian) poets with examples from the Hebrew Bible, Aramaic texts written by Jews ("Judaized texts"), and maybe early rabbinic texts (pending the teacher's involvement in this tradition).

Admittedly, there is no evidence of an Aramaic, Syriac, or Coptic translation of these curricula. Then again, there is ample evidence in Jewish Aramaic, Syriac, and even Coptic texts for the application of the writing standards taught through *progymnasmata*.³⁹ In the case of Syriac, even without proof of an extant translation of *progymnasmata*, by the sixth century, "Syriophone education" spread "even amongst the lower end of the literacy spectrum ... being increasingly assigned a prestige equal to that of Greek."⁴⁰ Teachers might also have translated the Greek standards directly into the local language without writing a formal translation of the curriculum. In any event, bilingual learning

³⁷ See Philonis Alexandrini, *De Animalibus: The Armenian Text with an Introduction*, trans. Abraham Terian, Studies in Hellenistic Judaism 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholars Press, 1981), 7.

³⁸ See Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 73.

³⁹ See Brodsky, "From Disagreement to Talmudic Discourse," on *progymnasmata* and the construction of the argument in both Talmuds. See Catherine M. Chin, "Rhetorical Practice in the Chreia Elaboration of Mara bar Serapion," *Hug* 9, no. 2 (2008), on a Syriac letter marked by progymnasmatic training, and Janet Timbie, "The Education of Shenoute and Other Cenobitic Leaders inside and outside the Monastery," in Gemeinhardt et al., *Education and Religion*, on such features in a Coptic text.

⁴⁰ Daniel King, "Education in the Syriac World of Late Antiquity," in Gemeinhardt et al., *Education and Religion*, 176.

had become the standard rather than the exception since the translation of the Greek curriculum into Latin.⁴¹ Many texts testify to bilingualism and immediate translation of Greek script, grammar, and style into another language.⁴² Transfers of Greek idioms to late Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic have been observed in abundance, and Mesopotamian incantation bowls bear witness of people with the ability to write in several languages and scripts.⁴³

Learning in late antiquity involved traveling, which meant that many students acquired their knowledge from different teachers and in various settings.⁴⁴ In the case of Sasanid Babylonia, cultural fluidity was also promoted by geography: the Mesopotamian plain was a flat border area between the Roman and the Sasanid Empires. There was no exact demarcation or closable frontier, and the region allowed for and benefited from considerable exchange.⁴⁵ Indeed, cultural boundaries seem to have been defined less by territorial frontiers than by foundational myths that were, again, the basis of grammatical learning. For Priscian, it

⁴¹ See Dennis Feeney, *Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 119–121.

⁴² See Bagnall, *Everyday Writing*, 75–94, on bilingual Greek and Coptic as well as Greek and Syriac texts (95–116). On the influence of Greek on Syriac, see Aaron M. Butts, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire: Syriac in Its Greco-Roman Context*, Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

⁴³ See the many examples of Greek idioms in mishnaic Hebrew and Aramaic collected in Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission of Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.*, TSJ TSA 18 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962). On the bowls, see Jason S. Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings, and Priests: The Culture of the Talmud in Ancient Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 128–137, and Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 34–63. Fergus Millar, “Transformation of Judaism under Greco-Roman Rule: Responses to Seth Schwartz’s *Imperialism and Jewish Society*,” in *Empire, Church, and Society in the Late Roman Near East: Greeks, Jews, Syrians and Saracens (Collected Studies 2004–2014)*, ed. Fergus Millar, *Late Antique History and Religion* 10 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 328–330, describes the bilingual and bicultural environment of Jews in Palestine.

⁴⁴ See Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny*, Routledge Library Editions: Education 91 (London: Methuen, 1977), 90–96, and Edward Watts, “Education: Speaking, Thinking, and Socializing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 472–474.

⁴⁵ See Jan Willem Drijvers, “Rome and the Sasanian Empire: Confrontation and Coexistence,” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 449.

was important that students studying the Latin language became simultaneously acquainted with the Latin poets. Similarly, there are no translations of Greek myths found in rabbinic literature, only isolated and reappropriated motifs barely recognizable as such.⁴⁶ Clearly, as Blossom Stefaniw observed, “texts which were the object of grammatical study bound their readers into a historical and cultural lineage: the reader was connected to the past, in that she was brought into a relationship with the moral and literary patrimony passed down through ancient texts.”⁴⁷

A fully historical understanding of late antique texts is only possible if the formative training of their authors is considered. Based on Theon’s remark that “training in exercises is absolutely useful not only to those who are going to practice rhetoric but also if one wishes to undertake the function of poets or historians or any other writers,” Robert Penella posited an “abiding influence of these rhetorical exercises on the ancient mind.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the formative impact of the *progymnasmata* is most evident in the uniformity with which late antique literary culture presents itself. It was this uniformity, in fact, the overall notion of borrowing, fragmentation, and heterogeneity, which generated the long-held assumption of an intellectual decline in late antiquity, in contrast to the perceived originality and creativity of ancient authors. More recently, however, this mannerism has been acknowledged for its own beauty, which simultaneously coined and expressed the taste of the time.⁴⁹

In his seminal article “The Treatment of Narrative in Late Antique Literature” (1988), Michael Roberts pointed to some shifts responsible for the distinct style of late antiquity as compared to classical antiquity. These shifts, he argued, are not only visible in the way the structure of narratives changed but, tellingly, also in works of art. Late antique art seems to contrast the harmony and internal order of antiquity with discontinuities, fractures, and a “preference for juxtaposition over continuity.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ E.g., Samuel T. Lachs, “The Pandora-Eve Motif in Rabbinic Literature,” *HTR* 67, no. 3 (July 1974); or Maren R. Niehoff, “The Phoenix in Rabbinic Literature,” *HTR* 89, no. 3 (July 1996).

⁴⁷ Blossom Stefaniw, “Knowledge in Late Antiquity: What Is It Made of and What Does It Make?” *SLA* 2, no. 3 (2018): 272.

⁴⁸ *Progym.* 70, translated by Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 13; Penella, “The *Progymnasmata* and *Progymnasmatic Theory*,” 168.

⁴⁹ Marco Formisano, “Towards an Aesthetic Paradigm of Late Antiquity,” *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007): 283.

⁵⁰ Michael Roberts, “The Treatment of Narrative in Late Antique Literature: Ammianus Marcellinus (16.10), Rutilius Namatianus and Paulinus of Pella,” *Philologus* 132, no. 2 (1988): 185.

These changes, which seem to have occurred in tandem in art and speech, did not escape the notice of attentive contemporaries. Quintilian (first century), for example, criticized an overuse of *sententiae* (*gnōmai* in Greek), which led, in his assessment, to an uneven style.⁵¹ The trend nevertheless continued. *Sententiae* saturate late antique literature not only in the form and content of classical maxims with their general and moralizing character but also in the form of statements of a more technical nature (i.e., medical, architectural, agricultural, and so on).⁵² In general, there was an increasing trend toward the concise, short text, a phenomenon referred to by some scholars as “miniaturization.”⁵³ Preference was given to the condensed work and the short treatise. The fact that many brief stories or small excerpts eventually added up to multivolume *breviaria* sometimes masks this trend.⁵⁴

The diversity of the short *sententiae* that made late antique literary culture look like a patchwork quilt also found its reflection in fashion trends. Thus, Quintilian further lamented the new trend of exchanging the classical purple stripe of the toga for “multi-colored patches, *panni* or *segmenta*, applied to or embroidered on clothing.”⁵⁵ The taste for colorful and variegated “patches” apparently penetrated several areas of life. In literary compositions, these patches were reflected on a macrolevel by excerpts and on a microlevel by proverbs, recipes, or brief technical instructions.

⁵¹ See Roberts, “Treatment of Narrative,” 190.

⁵² See Marco Formisano, “Introduction: The Poetics of Knowledge,” in *Knowledge, Text and Practice in Ancient Technical Writing*, ed. Marco Formisano and Philip van der Eijk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 14. Thus, for example, Ammianus used eight times more *sententiae* in the fourth century than Tacitus did in the second; see Martin Hose, “Intertextualität als hermeneutisches Instrument in spätantiker Literatur: Das Beispiel Ammianus Marcellinus,” in *Spätantike Konzeptionen von Literatur*, ed. Jan R. Stenger, Bibliothek der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaften Neue Folge, Series 2, 149 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 89.

⁵³ E.g., Jacques Fontaine, “Unité et diversité du mélange des genres et des tons,” in *Christianisme et Formes Littéraires de L’Antiquité Tardive en Occident*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann and Alain Cameron (Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1977), 444–445, comparing three different Latin authors of the fourth century. Similarly, the miniaturization of rituals has been observed in the so-called PGM (Papyri Graecae Magicae, or Greek magical papyri) from Egypt; see Jonathan Z. Smith, “Trading Places,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 129 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 23–27, and Athanassia Zografou, “La nourriture et les repas dans les Papyri Graecae Magicae,” *Food & History* 6, no. 2 (January 2008): 59–60.

⁵⁴ See Thomas M. Banchich, “The Epitomizing Tradition in Late Antiquity,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, ed. John Marincola, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

⁵⁵ Roberts, “Treatment of Narrative,” 190, and references to such depictions in 190n28.

Like taste in clothing, taste in mosaics changed. Irving Lavin describes late antique mosaics as appearing amorphous and depthless at first, since they aim at assuring not one but multiple possible viewpoints.⁵⁶ This tendency is also reflected in the time's philosophy and its approach to truth and truth claims: whereas "Plato taught that truth is singular, objective and unchanging ... the sophists viewed reality as being multifaceted, relative and in constant flux."⁵⁷ Similarly, mosaics are characterized by their division of space into single blocks, while they also maintain a superior thematic unity. It was a design that "offered yet another possibility of which the classic system was incapable The composition could be extended infinitely in any direction without prejudice to the unity of the surface as a whole."⁵⁸

These mosaics, then, mirror the already familiar literary pattern of miniature units, such as excerpts, short stories, or *chreia*, which can – but do not have to – be strung together endlessly. Indeed, stories often seem to be constructed from individual scenes that make independent points. With only minor changes, one or more of these scenes can easily be used in another catena-like story. Roberts linked the possibility for dissection and the focus on the description of single parts to the progymnastic exercise called *ekphrasis* (description), and especially to the process *leptologia*, or *descriptio per partes*. *Leptologia* is the division of a scene "into its constituent parts which will then be enumerated in elaborate detail."⁵⁹ *Ekphrasis* marked the interface between art and narrative, vision and text, since it aimed at describing something so vividly that listeners and readers turned into spectators.⁶⁰ Training in *ekphrasis* seems also to have been the reason for the increasingly sensual and graphic stories in late antiquity.⁶¹

⁵⁶ See Irving Lavin, "The Hunting Mosaics in Antioch and Their Sources: A Study of Compositional Principles in the Development of Early Medieval Style," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 186–188.

⁵⁷ See Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric*, 24. This move toward inclusion of multiple viewpoints rather than a conclusive resolution of a problem is also manifest in the Babylonian Talmud, especially when compared to the Palestinian Talmud. See Daniel Boyarin, "Dialectic and Divination in the Talmud," in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 223–224. Boyarin, however, interpreted this feature differently, as a deficient form of dialectics, which is robbed "of its ultimate legitimacy as a method for arriving at truth" (224).

⁵⁸ Lavin, "Hunting Mosaics in Antioch and Their Sources," 188.

⁵⁹ Roberts, "Treatment of Narrative," 193.

⁶⁰ See Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 8.

⁶¹ See Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 167–191.

The late antique story preferred thematic unity even over chronological order.⁶² This observation finds support in Theon's *progymnasmata*, where he writes regarding the narrative:

It is possible to begin with events in the middle, go to the end, and stop with things that happened first, or, again, beginning from the end to go back to the beginning and stop in the middle, and also starting from the first events to change to the last and stop with those in the middle. So much for the arrangement of the order. (§87)⁶³

Similarly, the talmudic story deviates “from the strict temporal order, most often through flashbacks, such that events that occur later in the story are recounted earlier in the text.”⁶⁴

These few but significant observations show how much of late antique writing culture can be understood through the lens of the *progymnasmata*. They provided students with the intellectual tools for purpose-driven writing, classification, and problem-solving, and, in many ways, culture *tout court*.

THE TALMUDIC STORY

In the last sixty years or so, considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to explaining the nature and purpose of rabbinic stories. Comparative historical approaches spurred by Henry Fischel and literary analysis promoted by Yonah Fraenkel emerged simultaneously in the late 1960s.⁶⁵ These two schools, the former of which has since been criticized for its positivism and the latter for its decontextualizing approach, appear to have merged in recent years. They produced an approach that is critical regarding the historical reliability of the stories while also being sensitive to their cultural

⁶² Roberts, “Treatment of Narrative,” 194.

⁶³ Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 35.

⁶⁴ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Talmud*, 205.

⁶⁵ On comparative scholarship on rabbinic and Graeco-Roman texts in general, see Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric*, 15–23. On Fischel's and Fraenkel's contributions regarding talmudic stories, see Rubenstein, *Stories of the Talmud*, 7–10. On Fraenkel, see also Hillel I. Newman, “Closing the Circle: Yonah Fraenkel, the Talmudic Story, and Rabbinic History,” in *How Should Rabbinic Literature Be Read in the Modern World?*, ed. Matthew Kraus (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006). Another approach to the stories has been taken in folklore studies, which “views folk narratives as woven into the very fabric of rabbinic Aggadah and rabbinic literature in general and not merely as an amusing digression providing relief from heavier and more important matters” (Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Batya Stein, Contraversions [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000], 2). See there (1–15) for a summary of folklore studies and rabbinic literature.

context.⁶⁶ The purpose of the remainder of this chapter is to enhance these prior studies with an explanation of why the stories appear in their particular shape, how they were composed, and why we usually only find near or quasi parallels of certain motifs or stories in other works.

Most of the above-mentioned stylistic features of late antique stories have also been observed in talmudic stories but, to date, have not been linked to these. Based on the conclusions drawn in the previous chapters, an analysis of “the talmudic story” must consider the fact that the stories do not necessarily appear in the Talmud in the form in which they were originally composed. Instead, the stories may appear as excerpts in the shape that best suited the composers when arranging an adequate commentary on a certain lemma. In fact, the chain-like structure of late antique stories, with their easily detachable segments, makes them suitable for exactly such breakups and rearrangements. This obviously complicates the assessment of the actual story, especially since, as we shall see, the composers will apply – by default and similar training – the very same compositional methods to the story as the original author did. They will substitute dialogues or characters, if necessary, interrupt the story with associatively fitting excerpts, or add sayings to the concluding moral of the story. Then again, it is precisely the fact that the composers use the very same methods as the story’s author that enables an analysis of the story behind this tampering: the possibilities are limited and repetitive.

I will illustrate this point with a lengthy story found in the commentary to the lemma *qordiaqos* (b. Git. 67b–70b), with which the reader is already familiar through the discussion in Chapter 3 of that commentary’s structure and its assigned keywords (“cure,” “meat,” and “wine”). Familiarity with the story’s co-texts will facilitate its analysis from a compositional point of view. The story begins with two enigmatic biblical verses, which are used to explain each other. One of the verses is 1 Kgs. 6:7, where it is written that Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem out

⁶⁶ See Tal Ilan and Ronit Nikolsky, “מהתם להכא, From There to Here (bSanh 5a): Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia; An Introduction,” in Nikolsky and Ilan, *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, 7–18. Examples of this approach include the following: Rubenstein, *Stories of the Talmud*; Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature*; Richard Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud’s Narratives and Their Historical Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, “Zoroastrian Proselytes in Rabbinic and Syriac Christian Narratives: Orality-Related Markers of Cultural Identity,” *History of Religions* 51, no. 3 (February 2012); and the essays in the volume by Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, eds., *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, BJS 362 (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2018).

of stones so perfectly hewn that no sound of a chisel was heard while it was being built. In Eccl. 2:8, a book ascribed to Solomon's authorship, we read that he busied himself with *shidah* and *shidot*.⁶⁷ Both words, *shidah* and *shidot*, are unintelligible, biblical *hapax legomena*. The story's author(s) will interpret the terms as referring to male and female demons, based on the Aramaic word for demon, *shed*. This interpretation will first be contrasted but finally harmonized with a somewhat older rabbinic tradition, which claims that Solomon achieved this temple miracle by using the *shamir*, a mysterious "something" that carves even the hardest of stones.⁶⁸ Thus, like the above example from *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, this story follows the pattern of the "exegetical story" that takes as its point of departure biblical verses but also conflicting statements by long-gone teachers.

For the sake of clarity in the discussion following the story, distinct parts are labeled with letters. The very fact that it is possible to label the story's components in this way points to a similarity with the above-discussed feature of mosaics. Both, story and mosaic, are composed of distinct units. These units are, as shall be shown in due course, extractable and rearrangeable without disrupting the story – with the exception of the proem. Just as Theon suggested in his *progymnasmata* regarding proems in general, the proem in this story is a unique composition (*Progym.* §76).

THE CASE EXAMPLE: SOLOMON, ASHMEDAI, AND THE BUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

The composers placed the following story about Solomon and the demon Ashmedai in the narrative section of the composition. It follows upon a story about Rav Sheshet's dining at the exilarch's house, where the latter's servants tried to harm or even kill him, mostly by means of meat. The lengthy story, or rather story cycle, seems to have been chosen based on the keyword "wine," or "wine" and "cure." Within the commentary on *qordiaqos*, the story cycle will be followed by the "proofs," a list of recipes. The story comprises eight units (A–H), two of which belong together (D^G and G^D).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ שידה ושידות.

⁶⁸ This description can be derived from the Hebrew wording of the tradition and the parallel in the Palestinian Talmud (see b. Sotah 48b and y. Sotah 9:13–14).

⁶⁹ My translation is based on Ms. Munich 95; significant variant readings are indicated in footnotes.

A) “I busied myself with male and female singers and the delights of the sons of Adam: *shidah* and *shidot*” (Eccl. 2:8). “Female and male singers” belong to the category of singing. And the “delights of the sons of Adam” are ponds and baths. “*Shidah* and *shidot*” we translate here as “male demons and demonesses [*shidah v-shidatin*],” while in the west they say [it is] “a chest [*shidat*].”⁷⁰ Rabbi Yochanan said: “In Shihin, there were three hundred kinds of demons, but I do not know what such a demon [*shidah*] itself should be like.”⁷¹ The master said: “Here we translate as ‘male and female demons.’” For what did he require them? For it is written: “And the house, when it was built, was made of finished, hewn stones,” etc. (1 Kgs. 6:7).

B) He said to the rabbis: “How should I do this?” They said to him: “There is the *shamir* that was used by Moshe for the stones of the *efod*. Bring a male demon and female demons; maybe they know and will reveal [it] to you.” He went and brought them, and they applied pressure. They said: “We do not know, but maybe Ashmedai, the king of the demons, knows.” He said to them: “Where is he?” They said to him: “He is on such-and-such a mountain. He dug a cistern for himself and filled it with water and covered it with a flint rock and sealed it with a seal [*gushpanqa*].⁷² And every day he ascends to heaven and studies the literary unit of the heavens, and [then] he descends to the earth and studies the literary unit of the earth. Then he examines his seal, uncovers [the cistern] and drinks, covers and seals it [again], and sleeps.”

C) He sent Benaiah ben Yehoiada. He gave him a chain upon which the name was engraved and a signet ring (*yzqta*) upon which the name was engraved, tufts of wool, and skin-bottles of wine.⁷³ He went and dug a pit below [the cistern of Ashmedai] and let the water flow and stopped it up with tufts of wool. Then he dug a pit above [Ashmedai’s cistern] and let the wine flow [through this pit into the cistern of Ashmedai]. Then he filled them [both of his pits] up. Then he ascended and sat in a tree. When [Ashmedai] came, he inspected the seal, uncovered [the cistern], and found the wine. He said: “It is written: ‘Wine is a mocker, and strong drink is a roisterer, and everyone who is led astray by them will not grow wise’ (Prov. 20:1). And [further] it is written: ‘Fornication, wine, and fresh juice seize the heart’ (Hos. 4:11). I will not drink!” [But] when his thirst overcame him, he said: “‘Wine gladdens the heart of man and makes it cheerful’ (Ps. 104:15)].⁷⁴ I will drink!” He became intoxicated and fell asleep.

⁷⁰ The neglected grammatical concern for singular and plural here – at best, the terms could be translated with *a* male and female demons; see *DJBA*, see “שדחתן” – is a somewhat notorious feature regarding demons. The Middle Persian word for *dēw* is variably rendered with the Aramaic “ideogram ŠDYA, more often in the pl. ŠDYA’n’, often to be translated ‘demons’ even in the sg” (Alan V. Williams, “Dēw,” *Elr* 7:333–334).

⁷¹ This refutation is most likely based on y. Ta’an. 4:8 (79a), which reports that Rabbi Yohanan saw eighty chests of metal (שדחתן). See Dan Levene, “‘A Happy Thought of the Magicians’: The Magical Get,” in *Shlomo: Studies in Epigraphy, Iconography, History and Archaeology in Honor of Shlomo Moussaieff*, ed. Robert Deutsch (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 2003), 180n26.

⁷² גושפנקא.

⁷³ עיוקתא, signet ring.

⁷⁴ This citation from Ps. 104:15 is missing in Ms. St. Petersburg and Ms. Vatican 140.

Benaiah came, threw the chain upon him, [and] shackled him. When [Ashmedai] woke up, he struggled [with the chain]. [Benaiah] said to him: “The name of your master is upon you! The name of your master is upon you!”

D^G) When [Benaiah] was dragging him, [Ashmedai] came along. Every tree he passed, he rubbed against it and pulled it down. Every house he reached he pulled down.⁷⁵ He reached the hut of a certain old woman.⁷⁶ She came out and beseeched him. He bent his body over [the hut] and broke a bone on it. He said: “This is what is written: ‘A soft tongue can break a bone’” (Prov. 25:15). He saw a blind man lost on his journey, and he brought him back. He saw a drunken person and brought him back. He saw a bride whom they were celebrating and cried. He heard a certain man who was saying to a shoemaker: “Make me shoes that will serve me for seven years!” [and] he laughed. He saw a certain diviner who was divining over bread, [and] he laughed.⁷⁷

E) When he arrived there, they did not bring him in before Solomon for three days. On the first day he asked: “Why am I not being summoned to the king?” They told him: “He has been overpowered by drinking.” [Ashmedai] took a brick and placed it on another one. They told Solomon. He said to them: “This is what he told you: ‘Force him again [to drink]!’” The next day [he asked: “Why am I not being summoned to the king?” and] they told him: “He has been overpowered by his eating.” He took a brick [away] from the other. They told [Solomon]. He said to them: “This is what he told you: ‘Take the food away from him.’” After three days they brought [Ashmedai] in before [Solomon].⁷⁸

F) He [Ashmedai] took a measuring rod and measured four cubits and threw it in front of [Solomon]. [Ashmedai] said to him: “Indeed, when this man dies, he will have in this world only these four cubits [his grave]. Now that you have subdued the whole world, you are not satisfied until you subdue me?!”

He said to him: “I do not want anything from you. I want to build the temple, and I need the *shamir*.”

“It was not handed over to me. It was handed over to the prince of the sea, and he only gives it to the hoopoe because he trusts him to keep what he has sworn to him.”

“And what does [the hoopoe] do with it?”

“He brings it to the ‘mountains of nothing,’ where it resides. He places it on the tooth of the mountain, and the mountain splits. Then he gathers and brings seeds from trees, throws [them] there, and they sprout in it.” [And there are those who translate [its name as] “carpenter of the mountain.”]⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ms. Vilna speaks of only one palm tree and one house. The translation here follows Ms. Munich 95.

⁷⁶ According to Mss. Arras 889, St. Petersburg, Vatican 140, and Bazzano 21. Ms. Munich 95 has סיבתא דהתוא, an old woman.

⁷⁷ The word “bread [אריפתא]” is absent from the printed editions (Soncino and Vilna), but see Mss. Munich 95, Arras 889, Vatican 140, and Bazzano 21.

⁷⁸ Following Mss. Arras 889, Vatican 130, Bologna 145, and Vatican 140. Ms. Munich 95 reads: “At the beginning of the third day.”

⁷⁹ This addition appears in Mss. Arras 889, Bazzano 21, and Vatican 130.

They inspected the nest of the hoopoe, and there were hatchlings in it.⁸⁰ They covered the nest with translucent glass. When [the hoopoe] wanted to enter [the nest], it was not able to.⁸¹ It went and brought back the *shamir* in order to place it on the nest. He shouted at it, and [the *shamir*] dropped, and he took it. [The hoopoe] went and hanged itself because of its oath.

G^D) Benaiah the son of Yehoiada said to [Ashmedai]: “Tell me the meaning of all the words and deeds that astonished me.”

“What is the reason that you brought this blind man back when you saw him lost on his journey?”

[Ashmedai] said to him: “There was an announcement about him in heaven that he is completely righteous. And whoever provides him with satisfaction is entitled to the world to come.”

“And what is the reason that you brought this drunken person back when you saw him erring on his journey?”

“There was an announcement about him in heaven that he is completely evil. And I comforted him in order that he should already consume [his reward for] the world to come.”

“What is the reason that you cried when you saw this bride?”

“The husband will die within three days, and it will take thirteen years to wait for the *yavam* [to be old enough to get married].”⁸²

“What was the reason that you laughed when you heard a man say to the shoemaker, ‘Make me shoes [that last] for seven years?’” He said to him: “He has not seven days left, and he asks for shoes [that last] seven years!”

“And what was the reason that you laughed when you saw the diviner?”

He said to him: “He sits on the treasury; let him divine what may be below him!”

H) [Solomon] made him remain before him until he had built the temple.⁸³ One day, he was by himself. [Solomon] said to [Ashmedai]: “It is written: ‘Like the *toafof re'em* for him’ (Num. 23:22), and it is said that *ktoafof* are the servant angels, and *re'em* are the demons. How are you superior to us?”⁸⁴

“Cut the chain off from me and give me your seal ring (*yzqta*), and I will show you my superiority!” He cut the chain off and gave him his seal ring. [Ashmedai] swallowed [Solomon]. He placed one of his wings on the earth and one of his wings on the sky. He hurled him four hundred parasang away.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ms. Munich 95 continues F with: “and in it” The translation here follows Ms. Arras 889, T-S F1: בדקו.

⁸¹ Following Ms. Arras 889, T-S F1.

⁸² The *yavam* is the bridegroom’s younger brother, destined to marry his brother’s widow (see Deut. 25:5–10).

⁸³ Mss. Arras 889, Vatican 130, and Vatican 140 add, “until the end of Solomon’s kingship.”

⁸⁴ The translation of ראם כחזקתו is uncertain. Wilhelm Gesenius, ed., *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (Göttingen: Springer, 1962 [1915]), see ראם and חזקתו, proposes “horns of a wild bull,” as the context suggests a wild, untamable beast with horns. Note that this is the second time that the story makes use of an unclear quotation, which it will interpret according to its own needs. In Solomon’s interpretation he treats the preposition כ (like) as if it were an integral part of the word: *ktoafof* and not *k-toafof*.

⁸⁵ “Parasang” is the Persian mile; see *DJBA*, see פרסא #1.

Wherever [Solomon] arrived, he said: “I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem (Eccl. 1:12), and this is my portion for all my toil” (Eccl. 2:10). What does “and this” mean? Rav and Samuel; one said: “his stick,” and one said: “a leather bottle.”⁸⁶

[When he arrived before the Sanhedrin],⁸⁷ the rabbis said: “Since a madman [*shoteh*] does not adhere to one word alone, as what should he be classified?”

They said to Benaiah: “Does the king want you in his presence?”

He said to them: “No.”

They sent [a query] to the queens: “Does the king approach you?” They sent back: “Yes, he does.” [The rabbis] sent [a request] to them: “Examine his feet!” They said: “He comes in *moqa*-shoes.⁸⁸ And he solicits them during their menstrual period, and he even solicits Batsheva, his mother!” [The rabbis] brought Solomon and gave him a ring on which the name was engraved and a chain on which the name was engraved. When [Solomon] entered, [Ashmedai] saw him and flew away.

But even after these events, [Solomon] still feared [Ashmedai], as it is written: “Behold! The bed of Solomon is surrounded by sixty men of Israel. All of them carry a sword and are trained in warfare. Each has a sword on his side because of the fear in the night.” (Song. 3:7–8)

Rav and Samuel: One said: “a king [and then] a commoner,” and the other one said: “a king and [then] a commoner and [again] a king.” (b. Git. 68a–b)

I have already suggested in the introduction to this section that this story cycle made it into the commentary based on the keyword “wine.” Based on the fact that this story is followed by medical recipes, several scholars have argued that the story was added to the Gittin commentary on *qordiaqos* because of Solomon’s reputation as a healer and subduer of demons.⁸⁹ This argument may be strengthened by the fact that the proem to the commentary (not the proem to the story!) reads *qordiaqos* as *Qordiaqos*, the name of a spirit (*ruha*).⁹⁰ This interpretation was, however, already refuted in the proem itself (see Chapter 3), and Ashmedai,

⁸⁶ Ms. Vatican 140: גנודו, followed by the explanation אחריונא לישנא קודי “a *gondo*-leather bottle, which is called *godī* in another language [dialect].”

⁸⁷ Missing in Ms. Munich 95 but present in Mss. Arras 889 and Bologna 145.

⁸⁸ From Middle Persian *mōg*, shoe (*DJBA*, see “מוקא”).

⁸⁹ See David L. Freeman, “The Gittin ‘Book of Remedies,’” *Korot* 13 (1998), and Gilad Sasson, “In the Footsteps of the Tradition about Solomon the Magician in the Literature of the Sages” [in Hebrew], *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 6 (2007). On late antique Solomonic traditions, see Ra’anan Boustán and Michael Beshay, “Sealing the Demons, Once and for All: The Ring of Solomon, the Cross of Christ, and the Power of Biblical Kingship,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16, no. 1 (2015).

⁹⁰ See Lennart Lehmhaus, “*Listenwissenschaft* and the Encyclopedic Hermeneutics of Knowledge in Talmud and Midrash,” in *In the Wake of the Compendia: Infrastructural Contexts and the Licensing of Empiricism in Ancient and Medieval Mesopotamia*, ed. J. Cale Johnson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 87–88.

with whom Solomon has to deal, is called a demon, *shed*, not a spirit, *ruha*. Based on the clear distinctions between types of demons made elsewhere in the Talmud, this link seems weak.⁹¹ Moreover, the story makes no effort to depict Solomon as a healer and only makes a feeble attempt to portray him as a master of demons (B). And it is Ashmedai who cures the king's hangovers with his remedies (E). The story itself may indeed be satirically reversing the positions, but by way of the keyword method a purposeful satirizing of a whole talmudic commentary would not have been possible; if it happened, it was by coincidence. Based on the keywords, it may have been the recipes provided by Ashmedai, situated at the apogee of the story (E), that were responsible for the inclusion of the story cycle into the commentary on *qordiaqos*. Indeed, the first of these recipes refers not just to one but to two of the three assigned keywords: "cure" and "wine." Although the keyword method may appear mechanical and somewhat uninspired, it is the method's reliance on association and chance that, nevertheless, creates numerous exegetically inspiring links between excerpts.

Like a typical late antique story, the narrative has a thematically compelling plot, while at the same time being divided into independent scenes or miniature stories. Each miniature (labeled with letters above) contains a distinct plot and contains an exegetical, instructive, or moral statement of its own. Even the parts D^G and G^D, which clearly belong together, have been fashioned as two pieces that can be used individually, just as they actually are. It seems as if the author of the story was already generating excerpts for the next composer. Indeed, not infrequently, authors would reuse such excerpts themselves in future compositions.⁹²

The story's patterning further seems reflective of the writing surface on which it was composed: wooden tablets. Tablets were not only suitable for the composition of such concertina-like stories but dictated this very style. Indeed, if we think of the story's original surface as a wooden codex or a concertina-like notebook (*polyptychon*) that consist of tablets that are strung together, we can easily imagine each tablet to contain one scene. If so, excerpting and rearranging was not only a natural but also a

⁹¹ b. Pesah. 111b.

⁹² Philo of Alexandria's work *On Animals* is a good example of the versatility of an excerpt collection that resulted from an author's own compositions. Philo obviously went through the drafts of his works (which were apparently also classified), selected and digested the instances in which an animal was mentioned, and composed a book on the latter; see the index of Philonic texts used in Philo's work *De animalibus*.

noninvasive act. The tablets, each carrying a miniature story, could easily be detached, rearranged, tagged with a keyword, stored, and repurposed.

These material factors were simultaneously the cause and effect of late antique compositions, suggestive of the constant reuse of – literally – bits and pieces of stories in other compositions. For the proem of the *qordiaqos* commentary in b. Git. 67b, for instance, the composer of the Talmud excerpted one of the miniature stories of the Solomon-Ashmedai cycle, changed the name of the main protagonists, and substituted a medical recipe for the dialogue. This claim obviously needs substantiation since the story about Rav Amram being chased through the snow by the exilarch's household (b. Git. 67b) seems at first unrelated to the Ashmedai-Solomon cycle. The connection appears only after a thorough analysis of the characters and their verisimilitude. In late antique stories, "verisimilitude" refers to conformity with what is known about a certain character from earlier works. In the case of Solomon and Benaiah, the sources are the Hebrew Bible and earlier rabbinic traditions; in the case of Ashmedai, it might be the book of Tobit together with earlier rabbinic traditions.

As pointed out previously, verisimilitude was highly valued and encouraged by the *progymnasmata* because it was the decisive factor for the success of a story, the focal point of critics. In what follows, I will show how carefully, and in how much alignment with known biographical "facts," the characters in the present story were created. The connections between the above piece and the Solomon-Ashmedai story cycle can then be shown to have been based on careful research into its protagonists' prior literary lives.

CREATING A PLAUSIBLE CHARACTER

Solomon is a well-known biblical figure, and he appears in the above narrative in accordance with the biblical description of him as the king who built the temple in Jerusalem. He is also regarded here and elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud as the author (and "I") of the book of Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth (Shabb. 30a–b). Other than that, Solomon is rarely mentioned in rabbinic works, as Gerhard Langer's study has shown.⁹³

⁹³ See Gerhard Langer, "Solomon in Rabbinic Literature," in *Solomon in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, Themes in Biblical Narrative 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 127. An increased focus on Solomon can likely be observed from approximately the sixth to the ninth centuries, when *midrashim* (exegetical commentaries) were dedicated to books attributed to Solomon. Shir Hashirim Rabbah, Ecclesiastes Rabbah, and Midrash Mishle all likely date to this period (see Langer, "Solomon in Rabbinic Literature," 128).

The portrayal of Solomon is, in fact, ambivalent throughout rabbinic literature, which is consistent with the biblical account of his persona. The Bible says that Solomon built the temple (1 Kgs. 9), and God blessed him with incomparable wisdom (1 Kgs. 10), yet he loved women more than the God of Israel and committed idolatry in his later days (1 Kgs. 11). The story in Gittin presents Solomon exactly along these lines; he has a wanton lifestyle, including many women (E/H), but he is also wise enough to interpret Ashmedai's riddles (E) and to equip Benaiah with the tools necessary to catch the demon (C). Then again, he is not able to expound Scripture and foolishly asks Ashmedai for explanation (H). In addition, Solomon repeatedly depends on the help of the rabbis, first to tell him about the *shamir* (A) and then to restore the kingdom to him (H).

The dominant motif in segment (H), Solomon's replacement on the throne by a nonhuman being, is borrowed from a story recorded in the Palestinian Talmud.⁹⁴ Again, the Babylonian story takes a different turn than the Palestinian one, where the rabbinic sages beat up Solomon (y. Sanh. 2:6) rather than helping to restore his kingship. Instead, part (H) is clearly designed to support the quote with which it ends, a saying attributed to the Babylonian sage Samuel: Solomon was first "a king and [then] a commoner and [again] a king" (// b. Sanh. 20b). This move is suggestive of the author's obligation to incorporate everything that was known about a situation or a person. Indeed, the way in which Solomon's character is constructed points to the author having thoroughly examined biblical and extrabiblical sources concerning Solomon before he (or she) began to compose the story – just like the composers of the Talmud who went through their archive. Interpretations of 1 Chr. 29:23 and 1 Kgs. 5:4, now rendered in b. Sanh. 20b and b. Meg. 11b, for example, state that Solomon reigned first over upper and later over lower beings. This "fact" has been incorporated into Solomon's constant struggle over power with Ashmedai. Both Talmuds also state elsewhere that Solomon used the *shamir* to build the temple from hewn stones, while Moses used it to make the *efod* (b. Sotah 48b; y. Sotah 9:13–14). There was even

⁹⁴ The unnoticed usurpation of a king by someone in his likeness may be a plot of Persian origin, as reported by Herodotus (*Histories* 3.68–69); see Armand Kaminka, "The Origin of the Ashmedai Legend in the Babylonian Talmud," *JQR*, 13, no. 2 (October 1922): 222–224. While this might indeed have been, in some form or another, a stimulus for the Palestinian motif, the Babylonian story is clearly a variant of the latter. For a different opinion, cf. Yishai Kiel, "The Usurpation of Solomon's Throne by Ashmedai (b. Git. 68a-b): A Talmudic Story in Its Iranian and Christian Contexts," *Irano-Judaica* 7 (2019).

more information available about the *shamir*: In order to be stored safely and without harming anyone, the *shamir* needed to be wrapped in tufts of wool, placed in a box made of lead that was filled with bran from barley (b. Sotah 48b). Even that knowledge shaped the course of the present story. Although the story does not specify how the *shamir* was hauled to Solomon after it was obtained from the bird, the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew term for “tufts of wool” in the baraita in b. Sotah 48b appears in the list of equipment given by Solomon to Benaiah (C).⁹⁵ The connection of a bird with the *shamir* is made in a baraita in b. Hul. 63a, where a *dukifat*-bird is said to have brought the *shamir* to the temple.

Although the story alters and recontextualizes some elements, it stays completely within the plausible, taking into consideration what has been said earlier about a certain character or topic. In fact, *everything* that was previously said about a pertaining subject is taken into consideration at some point or another in the story. It looks like the author of this particular story had an archive at his disposal that was at least very similar to the one used by the composers of the Talmud. It is also conceivable that there existed tables and lists, created by users of the archive as they were studying, and that indicated which documents contained information on a given subject or even on a mishnaic term or lemma.⁹⁶ Whatever the auxiliary tool may have been, it seems that both the author of this story and the composers of the Talmud had access to the same sources: the story neither misses a reference to Solomon present in the Talmud, nor does it add a completely novel feature to his character. The same is true for the other two main characters, as we shall see.

Compared to King Solomon, Benaiah son of Yehoiada is a rather marginal figure in the Bible, with “only” eighteen mentions. Correspondingly, he is not often mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, but when he is, the references are very precise. In fact, every single one of Benaiah’s outstanding actions is remembered in the Talmud: that he smote the two “lion-like men of Moab,” that he killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day, and that he slew an armed Egyptian with the latter’s own spear (2 Sam. 23:20–21, expounded in b. Ber. 18a–b).⁹⁷ He is also compared to a robber

⁹⁵ Tufts of wool in Hebrew: צמר של ספוגין; in Aramaic, דעמרא גבבי.

⁹⁶ On late antique tables and tabular organization in late antiquity, see Andrew M. Riggsby, *Mosaics of Knowledge: Representing Information in the Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 42–82; on tables that facilitated lectures and literary productivity, see Matthew R. Crawford, *The Eusebian Canon Tables: Ordering Knowledge in Late Antiquity*, OPCS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jeremiah Coogan, “Transforming Textuality: Porphyry, Eusebius, and Late Ancient Tables,” *SLA* 5, no. 1 (2021).

⁹⁷ The translation “lion-like men of Moab” is uncertain; the original reads אראל מואב

(b. B. Qam. 79b) and to the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin (b. Ber. 3b–4a, in an interpretation of 1 Chr. 27:34). Both of these instances refer to the fact that Benaiah served as Solomon's assassin (e.g., 1 Kgs. 2:25, 29). Only the biblical mention of Benaiah as famous among the thirty brave men at David's court is not reiterated in the Talmud (2 Sam. 23:22–23).

In complete agreement with these biblical characterizations, Benaiah serves in the story under discussion as Solomon's hero, whom the latter sent to catch a lion-like figure, Ashmedai. Indeed, the king of demons seems to be of gigantic size when he is described brushing against trees and bending over a house (D^G), and animal-like when he hides his non-human feet in shoes (H). In addition, just as the biblical Benaiah kills a lion in a pit (Hebr. *bor*, 2 Sam. 23:20), Benaiah catches Ashmedai by digging one pit (Aram. *bira*) above and one beneath the cistern.

Ashmedai, by contrast, is absent from the biblical plot. His name is the Aramaic translation of the Greek name "Asmodeus," a demon who appears in the Hellenistic novel *Tobit*. The Asmodeus in *Tobit* kills the female protagonist's newlywed husbands on their wedding night, seven in a row. By contrast, the Ashmedai of the Gittin story cries over the bride who will soon be a widow and will have to wait thirteen years to marry the *yavam*, the groom's younger brother (D^G/G^D). He is portrayed as studying his daily portion of Torah in the heavenly academy, as well as in the academy on earth (B). He lives in a sober manner (C) and reasons based on biblical verses (C). Rather than destroying others, he hurts himself (D^G) and gives medical advice (E), while Tobit had to be given advice by an angel on how to get rid of Asmodeus. In his secluded lifestyle and seemingly deep and supernatural knowledge, Ashmedai comes much closer to the description of an anchorite monk in stories of the time than to contemporary portrayals of demons.⁹⁸ He predicts Solomon's end in the same way it is described in the Bible (F). When he tricks Solomon and usurps his throne, Ashmedai exposes the king's foolishness as much as his own deviousness, and when he solicits Solomon's wives, it is Solomon's accumulation of women rather than Ashmedai's behavior that is criticized. The only thing that is, from the perspective of rabbinic teaching, really worthy of contempt is that he does not care whether or not the women he is soliciting are menstruating.

If Ashmedai is not or at least not only Asmodeus by character, then who or what is he? The only other instance in which the Talmud mentions Ashmedai is quite telling. In b. Pesah. 110a, Ashmedai is said to

⁹⁸ See Kalmin, *Migrating Tales*, 116–118.

be the king of the demons.⁹⁹ A subsequent commentary discusses the nature of a king; some hold that “king” does not refer to someone causing harm, while others hold that a king is quick-tempered and does what he wants. The passage seems suggestive of the ambivalence that surrounded Ashmedai’s kingship, as well as kingship in general. In line with the excerpt now found in tractate Pesahim, the author of our story describes Ashmedai as unstable and untrustworthy like Solomon. Like Solomon, Ashmedai gets drunk, lusts after women, is at the same time pious and friendly, and knows remedies and the future. He is wise and foolish, kind and evil, rises to power and loses it again.

Additionally, Ashmedai is portrayed as being Persian throughout the story.¹⁰⁰ He seals the cistern with his *gushpanqa*, while Solomon gives his *yzqta* to Benaiah. Both terms refer to a signet ring, but one word is of Persian origin (*gushpanqa*), while the other is Aramaic (*yzqta*). Ashmedai also wears Persian *mōg*-shoes to hide his feet. He is obviously Persian, even a Persian demon, as other details reveal: He has wings like Persian demons and dragons do, and he swallows Solomon, just as, in Middle Persian literature, the demon Āz swallows Xēšma, or Ahriman swallows Tahmuras.¹⁰¹ Like Persian demons, Ashmedai dwells on a mountain.¹⁰² In fact, even the name “Asmodeus” is apparently a Greek translation of “Aēšma,” the name of the Persian demon of wrath. Based on the above-outlined late antique habit of writing a story based on another, it should be asked if maybe a story of Persian/Sasanid origin was decisive for Ashmedai’s character and the plot.

⁹⁹ Ashmedai is also named “king of the demons” on some Babylonian incantation bowls; see Shaul Shaked, James N. Ford, and Siam Bhayro, eds. *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, vol. 1 of *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 153 (JBA 26) and 222 (JBA 49). There are, however, other demonic kings mentioned; see Uri Gabbay, “The King of the Demons: Pazuzu, Bagdana and Ašmedai,” in *A Woman of Valor: Jerusalem Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Joan Godnick Westenholz*, ed. Uri Gabbay, Wayne Horowitz, and Filip Vukosavović, Biblioteca del Próximo Oriente Antiguo 8 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010), 58. For an assessment of references to Ashmedai in the Talmud and on the bowls, in an attempt to create a genealogy, see Alon Ten-Ami, “Further Discoveries Concerning Ashmedai: Ashmedai in Babylonian Incantation Bowls” [in Hebrew], *Pe’amim* 133–134 (2012), 185–208.

¹⁰⁰ Kalmin, *Migrating Tales*, 104.

¹⁰¹ See Jes P. Asmussen, “Aēšma,” *EI* 1:479–480. See also Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “Ahriman,” *EI* 1:670–673 (referring to the Pahlavi Rivayat [48, 93–95]: “I created this creation; and Āz, the demon-created, who has swallowed my creation, now desires to swallow me: I make thee judge over us”). For Tahmuras and Ahriman, see Götz König, *Die Erzählung von Tahmuras und Gamšid: Edition des neupersischen Textes in Pahlawi-Schrift (MU 29) nebst zweier Parallelfassungen*, Iranica 14 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 29–31.

¹⁰² Persian demons live on Mount Arzūr; see Jes P. Asmussen, “Arzūr,” *EI* 2:691–692.

FINDING THE TEMPLATE

The *progymnasmata* did not encourage students to write freely. Instead, students transformed stories by substituting characters or dialogues, adding a moral, or merging one plot with another. If the authors of talmudic stories had a background in rhetorical training, then they would have used templates for their stories as well. Indeed, many stories in the Babylonian Talmud appear to have such templates in the Palestinian Talmud. Then again, many do not. Except for the already discussed motif of Solomon's replacement by a nonhuman being in (H), for example, the scenes in the story cycle under discussion have no parallels in the Palestinian Talmud. We must therefore look elsewhere to find the model story or model stories for the scenes. Judging from Ashmedai's Persian attributes, at least some templates might come from Sasanid lore.

Sasanid lore is replete with stories of human heroes fighting demons, and one of these stories is indeed a near-complete match to one of the miniature stories in the Gittin commentary on *qordiaqos*. Yet, surprisingly, the episode is not found in the Solomon-Ashmedai story cycle (b. Git. 68a–b) but, rather, in the proem of exactly this commentary (b. Git. 67b). Reference is made to the above-cited story about Rav Sheshet, who flees from the exilarch's servants. Although the Solomon-Ashmedai story cycle seems to be sound and complete in its present state, one piece had been excerpted, and is now part of the proem together with several other excerpts that foreshadow the major "arguments" that will follow (see the discussion in Chapter 3). As discussed above, the distinct shape of late antique stories allows excerption of scenes without damaging the composition as a whole.

The template for this excerpt is found in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, a tenth-century collection of stories concerned with the deeds of Sasanid heroes and demons. Although the source is considerably later than the Babylonian Talmud, it is obvious that Ferdowsi did not invent the stories from scratch, since the Avesta already alludes to some of them. Rather, Ferdowsi collected the stories, wrote them down or rewrote them in verse form, and "composed the innumerable speeches he put into the mouths of his heroes, as well as the many long letters written at the dictation of the kings and other principal characters."¹⁰³ What may, therefore, be used for comparison with talmudic stories is the very basic storyline of Ferdowsi's narratives, not his embellishments.

¹⁰³ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *The Epic of the Kings: Shah-Nama, the National Epic of Persia*, trans. Reuben Levy, rev. Amin Banani, Persian Heritage Series 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967; repr., 2011), xvi.

The story in question, however, does not feature a figure mentioned in the Avesta but a popular Iranian hero named Rustam. Rustam, whose origins are still unclear, became the hero of many fights with demons. The onomastic and literary evidence points to the fact that “the Rustam legend was fully formed and well known in Western Iran by the seventh century.”¹⁰⁴ The parallel in the Talmud would represent an early testimony to these Rustam legends.¹⁰⁵

In this particular story, King Tahamtan sends Rustam to capture the demon (*dīv*) Akvān, who had appeared among the king’s herds in the shape of an onager. Rustam is given a royal lasso in order to capture the demon alive. When Rustam sleeps near the cistern, Akvān digs a hole around him until he can seize Rustam together with the soil on which he sleeps and carries him high up into the air.¹⁰⁶ Up in the air, the demon asks Rustam where he wants to be dropped: on a mountain or into the sea? Rustam reasons to himself that the demon will most likely do the exact opposite of whatever he tells him.¹⁰⁷ Thus, while secretly choosing the sea, he tells the demon to cast him onto a mountain. Immediately the demon drops him into the sea. Rustam swims back, fighting off the sea monsters with sword in hand. When he comes back to the cistern, he catches Akvān with his lasso and brings him to King Tahamtan, who finally slays him.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas Sims-Williams and Ursula Sims-Williams, “Rustam and His zīn-i palang,” in *From Aṣl to Zā'id: Essays in Honour of Éva M. Jeremiás*, ed. Iván Szántó, Acta et Studia 13 (Piliscsaba, Hungary: The Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2015), 252. On the one hand, the name “Rustam” became increasingly popular by the end of the Sasanid Empire; on the other, the earliest literary attestations of Rustam, a Sogdian text from approximately the eighth century, seem to be based on a Persian text (252). For an edition of the Sogdian fragment and a translation, see Nicholas Sims-Williams, “The Sogdian Fragments of the British Library,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18, nos. 1–2 (June–July 1976): 54–61. (My thanks to Sepideh Taheri, Tehran, for pointing this out to me.)

¹⁰⁵ In other cases as well, the Talmud has been said to provide the earliest references to Sasanid culture, as with the characteristic Persian belt, the *kustik*, mentioned in b. Sanh. 39a; see Jean-Paul de Menasce, “Early Evidence for the Symbolic Meaning of the Kustik,” in *Sir J.J. Zarthoshti Madressa Centenary Volume*, ed. Jivanji Jamshedj Modi (Bombay: Trustees of the Parsi Puchayet Funds and Properties, 1967), 17–18.

¹⁰⁶ The cistern plays only a marginal role in this story, but another story reports that Akvān and his son oversaw a cistern. Once, the prince Bīžan was kept prisoner. On top of the cistern, his enemies placed a stone that had previously been hurled from China to that place by Akvān. See Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh, “Akvān-e Dīv,” *Elr* 1:740, and Ferdowsi, *Epic of the Kings*, 164.

¹⁰⁷ This theme is very common in Persian literature on demons. Thus, “they are often called *vārūna*, [backwards, inside out], or *vārūna-kūy* [contrary].” See Mahmoud Omidshahar, “Dīv,” *Elr* 7:428–431.

¹⁰⁸ See Ferdowsi, *Epic of the Kings*, 146–151.

Based on this narrative, it is possible to suggest that when the Gittin story cycle originally reached the hands of the composers of the Talmud, it depicted Ashmedai chasing Benaiah through the snow, in an episode between what are now segments (B) and (C). Accordingly, Benaiah initially failed to capture Ashmedai but then outwitted him by filling up his cistern with wine and only then succeeded (C). The excerpt under question that was detached from the story cycle and used in the proem reads:

Rav Amram the Pious: When those from the house of the *resh galuta* [exilarch] wanted to cause him physical pain, they made him sleep in the snow. The following day they asked him: "What would be satisfactory to the master that we could bring him?"

He said [to himself]: "These [men]! Everything I tell them they will reverse to its contrary." [Therefore] he told them: "Red meat on coals and diluted wine." They brought him fatty meat on coals and undiluted wine. (b. Git. 67b)

If Rav Amram the Pious is replaced with Benaiah, we also find an explanation for the somewhat unusual appearance of snow in the story. As mentioned above, the Bible states that Benaiah killed a lion in a pit on a "day of snow" (2 Sam. 23:20). Considering the fact that the Aramaic word for "snow," *talga*, appears only five times in the entire Talmud, this cannot be a coincidence. We may therefore conclude that it was not Rav Amram who was chased through the snow by the exilarch's servants; it was Benaiah who was pursued by Ashmedai. Benaiah, the biblical slayer of lion-like men *and* a lion, seems, indeed, to have been a fitting and carefully chosen cultural translation of Rustam, who, in turn, is famous for seven heroic deeds, one of which is the killing of a cruel lion.¹⁰⁹

Based on the above analysis, it appears that the composers excerpted one of the miniature stories of the story cycle, changed the names of the protagonists and the dialogue, and placed a recipe against freezing into the new main protagonist's mouth. It remains to be asked why the composer specifically chose to substitute Benaiah for Rav Amram the Pious. After all, the two figures do not seem to have much in common. But the choice was most likely not motivated by Rav Amram's character but by the excerpt the composers wanted or had to use after the one about the chase through the snow. Such a technical and practical motivation would also

¹⁰⁹ See Abū'l-Qāsem Ferdausi, *Rostam: Die Legenden aus dem Šāhnāme*, ed. and trans. Jürgen Ehlers (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002), 75–77. Rustam was also known for deeds in which he would transform a "desolate poison-aided, waterless desert, combat a dragon, slay a sorceress, and kill the Great White Div who had taken Kāvus prisoner" (Fer-dowsi, *Epic of the Kings*, 52).

explain the friction between the two excerpts, which remains despite the alignment of names. As the two excerpts are arranged now, we learn that after Rav Amram successfully tricked the exilarch's servants into giving him food that sustained his body temperature (fatty meat on coals and undiluted wine), "Yalta heard. She brought him into a bathhouse. She made him stand in the water of the bathhouse until the water of the bathhouse changed and became blood, and it fell off from him 'coin by coin'" (b. Git. 67b).¹¹⁰ There is an obvious inconsistency between Rav Amram successfully tricking the exilarch's servants into giving him what he needed to stay warm (fatty meat on coals and undiluted wine) and the woman Yalta hearing that Amram was in pain. In an obvious rupture with the prior plot, the sequel negates the prequel's punchline. It is in instances like these that we encounter the sort of paper-cut method implemented by the composers: the Yalta sequel must be an excerpt or literal piece from another story. This notion is further substantiated by the lack of the usual semantic puns that often connect independent scenes.¹¹¹

If the thesis outlined in this book is more or less correct, and the composers worked with excerpts, it should be possible to find the rest of this Yalta and Rav Amram story. As it turns out, there is indeed a story that is a much better fit for the scene in which Yalta takes Rav Amram to the bathhouse:

Certain captive women came to Nehardea. They were brought up to the house of Rav Amram the Pious, and the ladder was removed from under them. As one passed by, a light fell through the opening; Rav Amram seized the ladder, which ten men could not raise, and he alone set it up and proceeded to ascend. When he had gone halfway up the ladder, he cried out, "A fire in the house of Amram! Fire in the house of Amram!" The rabbis came and told him, "We are embarrassed [by you]!" He said to them: "It is better that you be embarrassed by me in this world than that you be embarrassed by me in the world to come." He adjured his evil inclination [*yetser*] to depart from him, and it issued forth from him in the shape of a fiery branch of the date tree. He said to it: "Behold! You are of fire and I am of flesh, yet I am preferable to you." (b. Qidd. 81a)¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Translation follows Mss. Arras 889, Vatican 130, Vatican 140, and St. Petersburg. Ms. Munich 95 has: "... in the bathhouse, and it was blood [נתהו דמא]. ..."

¹¹¹ For examples of such paronomasia in talmudic stories, see Jonah Fraenkel, "Paronomasia in Aggadic Narrative," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 27 (1978), or Galit Hasan-Rokem, "An Almost Invisible Presence: Multilingual Puns in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹² Translation follows Reuven Kiperwasser, "Narrative Bricolage and Cultural Hybrids in Rabbinic Babylonia: On the Narratives of Seduction and the Topos of Light," in Herman and Rubenstein, *Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, 32–33.

Yalta heard. She brought him into a bathhouse. She made him stand in the water of the bathhouse until the water of the bathhouse changed into blood and it fell off from him “coin by coin.” (b. Git. 67b)

Although one might argue that Rav Amram was already free from his evil inclination by the end of the story in Qiddushin as well, several things tie in better here. First, it is a woman, Yalta, who wants to make sure that Rav Amram has really eradicated his uncontrolled lust for women. Second, the therapeutic measure, water, stands in direct relationship to the cry “Fire in the house of Amram,” which, Reuven Kiperwasser has shown, is a metaphorical reference to Rav Amram’s body.¹¹³ Third, a therapy against extended sunstroke, rendered in the proem of the commentary on *qordiaqos* and placed right before the story of Rav Amram in the snow, states that the patient should “go down and stand in water until his world becomes weak” (b. Git. 67b). This is exactly what Yalta does here, with the telling difference that Rav Amram is cold in the Gittin story, and only in the Qiddushin story is he hot (“on fire”) and in need of the indicated treatment. Fourth, there is a pun on the word “flesh” (*bissra*): while Rav Amram claims that his flesh is preferable to the fiery *yetser*, Yalta exposes the very weakness of this very flesh. It seems, therefore, more in accord with the literary ambition and aesthetics of talmudic stories to view the excerpt as an original scene of the Rav Amram story in Qiddushin rather than of the one in Gittin. This observation raises questions regarding the procedures and aspirations of the composers: how did this mix of story lines in Gittin happen, and how does it tie in with the composers’ *modus operandi*?

As discussed in Chapter 3, the composers, based on clues in the Palestinian Talmud, reached the conclusion that *qordiaqos* was a disease equal to a sunstroke that lasted three days. Accordingly, *qordiaqos* could be cured with the same therapy, “red meat on coals and diluted wine.” The composers then had to look for case stories with which to substantiate their claim, just as the Palestinian Talmud did with the story about the Tarsian weaver seized by *qordiaqos*. Although the text is corrupt, it appears that they gave him “red in something” and then “something in red” to drink. Going through their excerpt collection based on the selected keywords, they came across the Solomon–Ashmedai story with the scene in which Ashmedai asks Benaiah where he wants to be dropped, or something similar. The scene lent itself perfectly to such a recipe reversal. The fact that there was snow in the story allowed the composers to reverse not only the therapy but also the indication, as is reiterated by way of summary

¹¹³ See Kiperwasser, “Narrative Bricolage and Cultural Hybrids,” 34.

right before the excerpt: “Against the ‘sun’: red meat on coals and diluted wine; against the ‘snow’: fatty meat on coals and undiluted wine” (b. Git. 67b). The composers excerpted the passage with Yalta and Rav Amram in the bathhouse from the Qiddushin story, which was apparently classified under “cures.” They did this at first, perhaps, because they wanted to use the excerpt as proof of the efficacy of the recipe for extended sunstroke (“stand in water, etc.”) and then because it allowed them to show that the water therapy could also be used in reverse, against cold. The rest of the Rav Amram story, the part in which he is seduced by captive women, must then have been reclassified under “women” without the therapeutic part.

The Solomon–Ashmedai cycle is thus a good example of how the concise and independent nature of catena-like late antique stories allowed for migration into other contexts. In a few steps, including a plausible change of characters and a different dialogue, a whole new story could be created. Certainly, the composition of such a lengthy narrative required much research, since everything had to remain plausible and in harmony with earlier traditions, including the Hebrew Bible. Recognition of authors’ careful investigations into the prehistory of characters in talmudic stories, in turn, may help explain features that have left scholars puzzled. It may explain, for example, why Rav Kahana is called “Rav Kahana” in b. Bava Qamma 103a and not simply “Kahana,” as in the Palestinian parallel (y. B. Metz. 5:6, 10c): the Babylonian author aligned his take on the Palestinian with other traditions in the Babylonian, in which Kahana is called “Rav” throughout.¹¹⁴ Inquiry into a protagonist’s previous literary life to stay in character further explains why the Babylonian exilarch seems to be modeled on the Palestinian one.¹¹⁵

SUMMARY AND REPETITION: POTENTIAL AND LIMITS OF TALMUDIC STORIES

Jacques Fontaine has pointed out that late antique literature reveals an “extreme refinement” in the methods applied to generate allusion.¹¹⁶ In the above example, we saw how allusions to other stories and motifs

¹¹⁴ This difference was noted by Catherine Hezser, *Form, Function, and Historical Significance of the Rabbinic Story in Yerushalmi Neziqin*, TSAJ 37 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 352.

¹¹⁵ On this resemblance, see Isaiah Gafni, “The Political, Social, and Economic History of Babylonian Jewry, 224–638 CE,” in *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz, vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 792 and 802.

¹¹⁶ See Fontaine, “Unité et diversité du mélange des genres et des tons,” 442.

came into being, even though allusion was not what the authors of the stories had in mind. Rather, a careful search into the previous literary life of a character and the joining of these characters in any one story, together with the author's method of writing based on templates, inevitably produced this dense and complex web of allusions.

The procedures applied by the authors of talmudic stories were complex but consistently the same. One was expansion by addition of a dialogue, namely, speech in character as taught in the *progymnasmata*.¹¹⁷ This is a frequent feature of stories in the Babylonian Talmud that becomes obvious when (quasi-) parallel stories from both Talmuds are compared. But examples of such expansions by means of dialogue can also be found among stories within the Babylonian Talmud. The following example is a rare case in which the statement in Hebrew (*baraita*) that served as the basis for the expansion, as well as two expanded versions, ended up right next to each other due to their identical keyword ("demon"). The statement in Hebrew is as follows: "A single person should not go out at night, not on the night of the fourth day or the night of the Sabbath. Because Agrat bat Mahlat and eighteen myriads of angels of destruction go out [on these nights], and each and every one has permission to destroy in his own right" (b. Pesah. 112b). The account is brief and without dialogue. The only named character is the demoness Agrat bat Mahlat. Right after this *baraita* follows an expanded version:

Originally it was common for them [to swarm out] daily. One time she met Hanina ben Dosa and said to him: "If it were not publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, my son!' your blood would be valued in two small coins." He said to her: "If I am so important in heaven, I decree upon you that you shall never cross the world again." She said to him: "Leave a little room for me!" He left for her the fourth night and the night of the Sabbath. (b. Pesah. 112b)¹¹⁸

The purpose of this short inquiry is to explain why these demons would swarm only two nights per week. The reason is given in the demoness's encounter with Hanina ben Dosa, a figure known from the Mishnah. Hanina ben Dosa is a "man of the deed," a man through whom and for whom God performs miracles.¹¹⁹ This was apparently reason enough to choose him to stand up against the demoness.

¹¹⁷ For examples, see Libanius, *Libanius's Progymnasmata: Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, trans. Craig A. Gibson, WGRW 27 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 355–426.

¹¹⁸ Translation based on Ms. New York Columbia.

¹¹⁹ The figure appears repeatedly in the Talmud, in *baraitot* (b. Ber. 34b; b. B. Qam. 50a // b. Yevam. 121b; b. Ber. 33a) and in miniature stories, several of which are strung together in b. Ta'an. 25a.

Before analyzing the dialogue, a quick look at the *progymnasmata* may clarify the author's task at hand, namely, *ethopoeia*, the "imitation of the character of a proposed speaker" (Aphthonius, *Progym.* §34R).¹²⁰ The authors of the *progymnasmata* agree that the speech must be written from the perspective of the speaker in accordance with – and this point is most elaborated by Theon – age, gender, social status, and occasion, that is, with everything "aiming at what fits the speaker and his manner of speech and the time and his lot in life" (*Progym.* §116).¹²¹ The exercise basically asks authors to step into the shoes, as it were, of the conversation partners in the plot and, in our case, must figure out how a demoness would speak, and what she would say to Hanina ben Dosa, and what he would reply. The result is a combination of what is known about the demoness from the baraita, namely, that she is extremely dangerous and harmful, and what is known about Hanina ben Dosa, a wonderworker in special proximity to God. Thus, while the demoness expresses her desire to kill Hanina, heaven refers to the rabbi as "son." The motif of intermediary beings' hearing announcements in heaven about humans is a recurring one (see passage G^D in the Solomon–Ashmedai story above, b. Git. 68b). The heavenly decree gives Hanina the authority to negotiate with the demoness, leaving her certain nights to roam. In this way, the expanded story remains in agreement with the baraita stating that the demoness and her army roamed the earth two nights per week. Thus, here as well, depending on how much is known about the characters, speech in character has many restrictions but also innovative potential through the choice of character.

A version of this story underlines the restrictive nature of speech in character when the Palestinian "man of the deed," Hanina ben Dosa, is replaced by the Babylonian teacher Abaye:

And again, on another day she met Abaye. She said to me: "If it were not publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Nahmani and his Torah!' I would endanger you!" I said to her: "If I am so important in heaven, I decree upon you that you shall never cross the world again." (b. Pesah. 112b)¹²²

¹²⁰ Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 115.

¹²¹ Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 48.

¹²² Translation based on Ms. Munich 95. Ms. Munich 95 is the only text to read "me" in the first line. This may not be accidental, since it underlines the Babylonian outlook of the story. The same story also appears on several incantation bowls (by the same hand). That particular *historiola* is present in bowls JBA 1–JBA 10, as discussed in Shaked et al., *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 56–85. It reads: "I adjure you, and I beswear you, you evil spirit, who met Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, and Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said to her, to the

The announcement in heaven emphasizes Abaye's learning by identifying him with his teacher, Nahmani, thereby relating Abaye's authority to his teacher. The learned Abaye, then, does not leave "room" for the demon. In that sense, the Babylonian looks more heroic than the Palestinian Hanina ben Dosa, but the story as such fails, since it does not prove the baraita right. This problem is fixed by the composer, who adds a commentary to the story. In a question-and-answer format, this commentary clarifies that the demoness would nevertheless roam about on the fourth night and the night of the Sabbath, yet only on narrow streets.

I would like to return now to the issue of reusing lines (*exergasia*), which is ultimately a miniature version of the use of templates and excerpting. For example, a structurally identical sentence to the one attributed to Agrat bat Mahlat, "If it were not publicly announced in heaven ...," is placed into the mouth of Satan in b. Qidd. 81a. Satan says: "If it were not publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Rabbi Meir and his Torah!' I would value your blood [only] as much as two coins!" In spite of their identical formulation, however, the three statements each make recourse to another threat. The example exposes the creativity inherent in the convention of reusing well-made and successful scenes or even sentences in a different way. Most of all, the method is, again, timesaving and economical. At the same time, the method may easily result in tedious repetitions.

Yet there seems to be a certain restriction in play with regard to repetition: parallelisms are usually executed in sets of three, even if they are dispersed all over the Talmud. To give some examples: In the story discussed above, Rav Amram's skin falls off "coin by coin [*peschitti peschitti*]." In another story, a man swallows a snake that comes out after the treatment "piece by piece [*guva guva*]," while jaundice

evil spirit who met him in this very hour [בְּהַיָּא שְׁתָּתָא] the verse that is written: 'You make darkness, and it is night, wherein all the animals of the forest creep.' And again, I adjure and again I beswear you, you, evil spirit, that you should not go and not become to Mihranahid daughter of Aḥat, who is called Kutus, neither a companion of the night nor a companion of the day." (The translation follows Shaked et al., *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 60, with slight adaptation: "this very hour" instead of their reading, "at that time.") The writer of this adjuration emphasizes the time of the encounter as necessary for a juridical *diēgēma/narratio*. "The spirit," on the other hand, goes unnamed, apparently because it is not identical with Agrat bat Mahlat, who is of Palestinian origin. Hanina ben Dosa uses an authoritative biblical verse to ban the demon to the night (and thus to keep her away from the patient during the day), on the basis of which the advocate adjures the spirit to keep away from the patient *also* during the night. We do not know whether or not the people who wrote these bowls were identical with those whose exercises ended up in the Talmud. But it seems quite clear that they had enjoyed a similar rhetorical training.

leaves an affected Arab “little by little [*purta purta*]” after the appropriate therapy.¹²³ Two men, a demon, and a cedar “burst.”¹²⁴ Illness, discharge, and evil inclination each issue forth like branches, but like different types of branches in each case.¹²⁵ In three different stories, a wooden slip (*pitqa*) falls from the sky with a heavenly note on it.¹²⁶ There are so many such stock phrases and familiar motifs that they evoke the impression that everything is connected to everything in the Talmud.¹²⁷ According to the thesis for the formation of the Talmud put forward in this book, the sense of a web spanning the whole Talmud was generated by the detachment of stories and other pieces of information from their original compositions, in which the same idea or phrasing was reused several – mostly three – times, each time making a somewhat different point.

Late antique authors often reused catchphrases, and their stories repeatedly took similar turns and describe encounters between comparable protagonists or places. With regard to Lucian’s works, Graham Anderson referred to this feature as “self-pastiche.” Lucian repeatedly took his own literary creations as templates for new ones. He subjected his stories to the same methods of alteration and adaptation he had used when first fashioning individual scenes on the basis of scenes written by others.¹²⁸ This constant alienation of the same plot prevents the establishment of a chronology between the stories and the reconstruction of their actual source or sources: One might be tempted to propose an external source when, in fact, Lucian simply reused his own work.

¹²³ b. Shabb. 109b and b. Shabb. 110b, respectively.

¹²⁴ b. Shabb. 30b; b. Pesah. 110a; and b. Sanh. 101a, respectively.

¹²⁵ b. Shabb. 109b; b. Yevam. 64b; b. Qidd. 81a. It is probably no coincidence that these random examples come in groups of three, an important number in the structuring and organization of many things, and texts. See Louis Jacobs, “The Numbered Sequence as Literary Device,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983), on numbers as structuring elements in the Babylonian Talmud. See also Ausonius’s *Riddle of the Number Three* (Book Location) for his perception of the omnipresence of this number. However, the examples here refer to an arrangement of threes that predates the Talmud, since the stories with identical motifs are now separated and part of different tractates. The convention not to reuse a motif more than three times, or to use it three times, may have been the author’s/authors’, or a school’s.

¹²⁶ b. Yoma 69a; b. Sanh. 64a; and b. B. Metz. 86a, respectively.

¹²⁷ For the term “stock phrases,” see also Rubenstein, *Stories of the Talmud*, 53. See Zvi Septimus, “Trigger Words and Simultexts: The Experience of Reading the Bavli,” in *Wisdom of Bat Sheva: The Dr. Beth Samuels Memorial Volume*, ed. Barry S. Wimpfheimer (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2009), on the interrelatedness of stories in terms of shared vocabulary.

¹²⁸ See Anderson, *Lucian*, 1–22, esp. 7.

Lucian's external sources seem to have been quite a manageable supply of works, including the Greek myths of Homer, some comedies, and the Platonic myths.¹²⁹ Others, too, departed from and relied on such a comparatively modest set of works. The Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry, for example, was able to list the set of works with which his teacher Plotinus had been engaged when writing his commentaries (*Plot.* 14.3).¹³⁰ The authors of the stories included in the Talmud may have had a similarly limited supply of works at their disposal, including the Hebrew Bible, baraitot, and the Palestinian Talmud, along with some story and maxim collections.

So much literature has been lost, however, that it is impossible to even approximate the stories and collections available to these authors. In the *Institutio oratoria*, for example, Quintilian mentions the value of excerpting passages from the works of a comedian named Philemon (10.1.72). Said Philemon apparently wrote ninety-seven plays, of which not a single work survived in its entirety; only fragments or merely the titles of fifty-three of his works are extant. He also had a son who, under the same name, wrote a total of fifty-four plays, of which only two fragments and no titles survived.¹³¹ The paradoxographical work *Rivers and Mountains and What Is Found in Them*, written around 300 CE, cites a wealth of authorities and works that are mostly unknown.¹³²

One may wonder how such works would relate to the concise stories that we find in the Talmud, which often have the shape of plot summaries rather than fully fleshed-out stories. Indeed, even comparatively long stories in the Talmud as the one discussed above only cover a few folia. Yet it seems inconceivable that authors of talmudic stories would, after conducting exhaustive searches for plot, summarize whole books only to obtain a concise template for a story they then rewrote. The possibility of collections of ready-made plot summaries seems more reasonable. Such plot summaries began to emerge in the second century as prefixes to comedies.¹³³

¹²⁹ Anderson, *Lucian*, 7.

¹³⁰ See Han Baltussen, "Philosophical Commentary," in McGill and Watts, *Companion to Late Antique Literature*, 301.

¹³¹ *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, vol. 3, ed. William Smith (London: Taylor & Murray, 1849), see "Philemon."

¹³² Paul T. Keyser, "Science in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries CE: An Aporetic Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World*, ed. Paul T. Keyser and John Scarborough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 837.

¹³³ For the plot summaries to Plautus's plays, or those crafted by C. Sulpicius Apollinaris for the comedies of Terence, see Gesine Manuwald, "The Reception of Republican Comedy in Antiquity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Comedy*, ed. Martin T. Dinter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 272.

Because of the previously described loss of many relevant sources, it is rather rare that we come across an obvious case of plot-summary use. Yet a story in one of the talmudic commentaries discussed in Chapter 3 appears to build upon what may originally have been such a plot summary, in this case a summary of (pseudo-)Lucian's version of Lucius's metamorphosis into an ass:

Yannai happened to come to a certain inn. He said to [the waiters]: "Give me water to drink!" They approached him with porridge. He saw her lips moving. He spit out a little bit [of the porridge], and it turned into scorpions. He said to them: "I drank from yours, now you drink from mine." He gave her to drink, and she turned into a donkey. He rode on it and descended on the marketplace. Her friend came and broke the spell. Thus, he was seen riding on a woman in the marketplace. (b. Sanh. 67b)

Short as it is, the story contains the most prominent scenes of (pseudo-)Lucian's novel *Lucius or the Ass*. These include the transformation of a human being into a donkey, a person of the opposite sex's riding on it, and the public humiliation following the revelation of the donkey's actual human nature.¹³⁴ Like Lucius, Yannai is not at home when the transformation happens and, in both stories, women are involved in the metamorphosis in some way. Significantly, the actual process leading to transformation is different, most likely because (pseudo-)Lucian describes a method unmentioned by rabbinic literature. In this scene, Lucius rubs himself with oil, a practice that could too easily be confused with the biblical anointing of a king. Rather, substantial change is brought about in the Mishnah and elsewhere in the Talmud by murmuring.¹³⁵ In keeping with these literary standards, here, too, murmuring charges the porridge with change-effecting potency.

All in all, it seems that the more rhetorical the role of the story is, the shorter it becomes, since the story is used as an argument, and not primarily to entertain people. The story about Lucius, how he turned into an ass, and his long period of suffering until he finally regained his human form, makes the same point as the short story about Yannai in the Talmud, namely, that witchcraft is not to be engaged in lightly. However, while (pseudo-)Lucian's version of the story and the even longer Latin one by Apuleius elaborate on their morals in a verbose style that requires several hours of serious reading, the talmudic version makes an instant point, allowing for even more proof to be added to the same argument in a fraction of that time.

¹³⁴ See Lucian, *Lucius or The Ass* (MacLeod, LCL), §13, §23, and §54.

¹³⁵ E.g., m. Sanh. 10:2, and b. Ta'an. 22b.

In conclusion, it can be said that the distinct style of the late antique story – a concise but apt scene that can be attached to others to create lengthy story cycles – seems to be the result of at least three major factors: (1) the territorial expansions of the Roman Empire that led to an increase in knowledge, and which then had to be condensed again in order to remain useful (Chapter 1); (2) the limitations imposed by accessible, convenient, and cheap writing material such as wooden tablets and other flexible, portable writing surfaces (Chapter 2); and (3) the impact of the rhetorical, and still court-influenced, curriculum, which focused on the argumentative potential of the story.

The content of the stories was shaped against two factors that could be seen as restricting the story's potential: a set of authoritative texts that dictated and framed plausibility, and the author's use of templates. Yet an author's in-depth inquiry into characters and plot could unearth unexpected connections to other topics and lead to a substantial and informed transformation of the template. Authors, talmudic and else, seem to have been supported in their search for plot and moral by collections of stories, gnomologies, sayings, and glossaries.¹³⁶ Both the limits and the potential of the late antique story resulted from the fixed set of methods outlined in the *progymnasmata*, all the way supported and pressed by the materiality of writing.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that the Talmud is not only an erudite construct in its entirety but that this erudition is likewise mirrored in its parts, that is, the excerpts used by the composers. The compositional

¹³⁶ E.g., the *Gnomai of the Council of Nicaea* (Egypt, late fourth century), see Alistair C. Stewart, *The Gnomai of the Council of Nicaea* (CC 0021): *Critical Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 35 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015). Collections of sayings are, for example, m. Avot, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, or the late antique and Byzantine collections of the *paroimographoi*. For a Greek edition of the *paroimographoi*, see Ernst von Leutsch and Friedrich W. Schneidewin, eds., *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum* (1839; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 257, mentions collections by Didymus Chalkenterus (Alexandria) and by Lucillus of Tarrha (Crete). On glossaries, see, in general, James E. G. Zetzel, *Critics, Compilers, and Commentators: An Introduction to Roman Philology, 200 BCE–800 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 234–252, who delineates the different types of glossaries, such as *differentiae*, lists of identical words with different meanings; or the opposite, *synonyma*; bilingual glossaries; and *notae*, instructions about abbreviations. As examples of orations, see, for example, those by Himerius (Robert J. Penella, *Man and the Word: The Orations of Himerius*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 43 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007]).

processes evident in talmudic stories, for example, are not much different from the ones applied by the composers of the Talmud to compile the work. Thus, the author of a story similarly started off with pieces of other people's writings, such as a template story and one or more maxims or sayings, arranging the two in the most plausible way and enhancing them with details of an inquiry into the chosen topic's or protagonist's prior literary life. Flexible and size-limited writing surfaces, such as tablets, ostraca, papyrus scraps, and the like affected the morphology of the story, its concise style and individual scenes, but also facilitated the arrangement of several such scenes into a whole, and their possible subsequent rearrangement or exchange.

Like Chapter 3, this chapter has highlighted the deep connection between rhetoric and writing, as well as the relationship of late antique rhetoric to its original purpose, namely, advocacy and defense in court. The stories of the Talmud mostly – if not always – argue for something. The dialogues they feature are elaborate, sharp, and filled with clever repartee: exemplary rhetoric, in sum. We might, therefore, ask whether some, if not all, of the texts used in the Talmud are the leisurely product of rhetorically trained men, or men *in* rhetorical training.

Indeed, Catherine Hezser has described the most typical talmudic stories as “case-stories consisting of a case-description ... and a decision part.”¹³⁷ The following passage, which has two quasi parallels in the Palestinian and one in the Babylonian Talmud, is a good example. The parallels illustrate not only the adjustments made by the respective composers – a corrective discursive note in the Palestinian Talmud (y. Pesah.) and a discursive introduction in the Babylonian – but also how scribal methods and content were taught.¹³⁸

As is the case with most stories in talmudic literature, the stories of the following example are not integrated without slight friction into the commentaries in tractates y. Bava Metzi'a, y. Pesahim, or b. Pesahim. The texts were obviously written for their own sake and not to fill their present spots. This justifies thinking of them as individual texts, that is, school exercises. If so, they were not excerpts taken from longer texts but, rather, were stored directly with the tablet or ostrakon on which they were written.

I would suggest the following scenario to explain the shape of this and many similar short exercises. First, the teacher discussed the case (now found in y. Pesahim) with the students. Then they dictated the case to the class and asked the students to devise a resolution for it: Somebody

¹³⁷ Hezser, *Form, Function, and Historical Significance*, 97.

¹³⁸ Translation follows Hezser, *Form, Function, and Historical Significance*, 95.

y. Pesah. 1:4/27c)	y. B. Metz. 3:4/9a–b	b. Pesah. 13a
A person deposited a double sack of breadcrumbs with Rabbi Hiyya the Elder.	Rabbi Yohanan Haqoqah deposited with Rabbi Hiyya the Elder a double sack filled with leaven.	For Rabin ben Rabbi Adda said: “An event.” A person deposited a double sack filled with leaven with Yohanan Haqoqah. And mice perforated it, and the leaven was bursting forth and came out.
Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Bun said: “It was Yohanan Hiqoqiah.” He went [and] asked Rabbi. He said to him: “Let it be sold through the court at the time of the removal [of leaven].”	He went [and] asked Rabbi. He said to him: “It shall be sold through the court at the time of the removal [of leaven].”	And he went before Rabbi. The first hour he said to him: “Wait!” The second, he said to him: “Wait!” The third, he said to him: “Wait!” The fourth, he said to him: “Wait!” The fifth, he said to him: “Go out and sell it in the market.”

deposits bread with a sage and does not collect it before Passover Eve. Who would the sage ask for advice and what would be the ruling?¹³⁹ Such an example mostly tested the ability to build a conclusive argument. All three examples succeeded, which was most likely the criterion for their inclusion in the Talmuds. In terms of elaboration and style, the Babylonian example clearly surpasses the other two with its miniature *ekphrasis*, a vivid description, regarding the bag damaged by mice, as well as with the suspense created in the last part, when the answer is

¹³⁹ Indeed, the exact shape of the deposited leaven was apparently left to the students' imagination. One thought that breadcrumbs would be a plausible option, two thought more straightforwardly about leaven, and one thought about *kutah*, a Babylonian speciality made from old bread. This example is added in y. Pesah. 1:4/27c.

withheld until the right time has come to act. Rhetoric is about the ability to produce a sound argument. The topic with which rhetoric is most profitably matched is law, its original source. Rabbinic concern for law and rhetoric were a perfect match.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that scholars of rabbinic texts increasingly treat rhetorical training as the cause and effect of rabbinic literature, instead of thinking of rhetoric as something that merely left traces in that literature. Rhetoric defined literate and argumentative thought; it was not merely a method for composing and performing orations. In 1949, David Daube made a similar claim: "Hellenistic rhetoric is at the bottom both of the fundamental ideas, presuppositions, from which the Rabbis proceeded and of the major details of application, the manner in which these ideas were translated into practice."¹⁴⁰ There may be a wealth of different cultural influences in the Talmud, but the way in which they were analyzed, scrutinized, and matched with older traditions is clearly based on educational principles outlined in the *progymnasmata*. These, as we have seen, were adopted and translated freely by other language cultures, who detached them from their basis in Greek grammar and myth.

¹⁴⁰ David Daube, "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric," *HUCA* 22 (1949): 240.