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Better Left Unread: Rabbinic Interpretations of Prophetic Scrolls

Abstract: This paper analyzes classical rabbinic interpretation of two visions from the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Both of these visions — one from Ezekiel, and one from Isaiah — involve the unexpected presence and examination of a mysterious scroll whose contents, while known, are never explicitly read. Rabbinic interpretations of these scrolls further this lack of focus on the written contents of the scrolls by emphasizing their material, physical dimensions: their relationship to other scrolls, their size and shape, and their putative relationship to the body of God. I argue that this focus on the scrolls as material objects in later interpretation suggests that the rabbis conceive of the knowledge contained therein as a material component of the world. This hints at a larger set of assumptions at play in rabbinic literature, in which divine wisdom acts as a blueprint for the world.

1 Introduction

Twice in the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible — the collection of oracles, narratives, prophecies, and poems collectively known to the ancient rabbis as the "*Nevi'im*" — a prophet has a vision of a scroll he does not read.[1] These visions are not statements about the literacy of the prophets in question, but rather testaments to the multivalent layers of meaning present in the image of a scroll.[2] Neither of the scrolls are said to be blank: both visions provide a general statement about the scroll's contents, but the vision makes it quite clear that it

1 Ezekiel 2:8–3:3; Zechariah 5:1–4.

2 There is a substantial amount of scholarly discourse on the question of early Israelite literacy, but such questions are not of great concern to us here. More important is the widespread understanding of the materials and implements of reading and writing. For an account of the intertwined relationship between literacy and biblical composition, see Schniedewind 2004, 84–90. Schniedewind carefully discusses the lack of images of writing and reading in the earlier prophets, like first Isaiah and Hosea, and the later association of writing with prophetic activity, which is what we see in Ezekiel and Zechariah. Importantly, he also points out that even these earlier prophets made oracles that were recorded, collected, and edited by a scribal class.

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is not the writing that lends import to the scroll. It is the scroll itself, as an object, an artifact, and a vision, that carries meaning. These two visions of scrolls and their subsequent reception in rabbinic literature provide us with an opportunity to investigate ideas about the role of texts and written materials as conveyers of knowledge that goes beyond the written word.

The prophet gives meaning to these unread scrolls. He makes them part of a broader message: for Zechariah, the flying giant scroll is a curse, whose effects are all-encompassing and broad, affecting all those in the land who steal and swear;[3] for Ezekiel, who consumes his scroll, the scroll is at first "dirges, lamentations, and woe," but it becomes nourishment, comfort, and sweetness.[4] The scrolls are not mere symbols, although their symbolic functions surely encompass potential allegorical interpretations. They are the message, material emblems of the transmission of knowledge from the deity to the prophet — and then, put into words and written on text, transmitted from the prophet to the people. They are images that "work" because of the particularities of how knowledge was transmitted in Ancient Israel.[5] As the norms for the transmission and production of knowledge change, so too do the images that bolster and underscore the legitimacy of that production and transmission. The images at play in the biblical text itself, rooted in a particular time and place, take on a different meaning in the later rabbinic context, in which the transmission of knowledge occurs in rubrics largely organized by a Roman culture in the wake of the Hellenistic age.[6] Such changes remind us that though the significance of a literary image is culturally contingent on a particular reading, the significance is not *limited* to a single reading. The different ways that later rabbis envision the significance of the images at play here are an instructive reminder of this fact.

I use these scrolls and their later materializations in late ancient rabbinic literature as an entry point into thinking about the intertwined nature of materiality and knowledge in late antique Judaism, as overlaid onto similar discourses in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature. A scroll is a concrete, material object, and in the ancient world, a reasonably common one (at least, among the

3 Zechariah 5:3.

4 Ezekiel 3:3.

5 Sanders 2017 has argued cogently for a model of Near Eastern knowledge transmission rooted in the structures of the Aramaic scribal class.

6 Annette Yoshiko Reed has documented much of this transition and its ramifications: see Reed 2020. While her analysis is focused heavily on the 3rd century CE, the complicated lineages she traces are part of the substrate of rabbinic literature.

literate, cultured elite).[7] Knowledge, on the other hand, is abstract — or so we often treat it. What can a scroll in a vision, a scroll written about by a prophet, and then interpreted, reinterpreted, and retold by later rabbis, tell us about the way knowledge, writing and prophecy interact? What can this intersection tell us about the rabbis who formulated it? In this essay, I argue that moments in rabbinic literature such as these — the later interpretations of prophetic scrolls — offer glimpses into the rabbis' expansive conception of knowledge as an underlying principle of the material world, contained not only in writing, texts, Torah, the ossification of processes of knowledge transmission, and the ever-controversial books, but also in the forms, contexts, vessels, and shapes of the material world itself. The flying and consumed scrolls of Zechariah and Ezekiel are not symbols or floating signifiers: they are knowledge itself, and knowledge in both the particular and the expansive sense. After briefly contextualizing the rabbinic movement within broader trends of knowledge, expertise, and education in the later Roman empire and introducing the biblical texts in question, I move on to examine classical Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts that take up these prophetic visions in detail. From there, I move to a more expansive discussion of rabbinic texts that conceive of knowledge as embedded in the material foundations, and even origins, of the world, before concluding by articulating how discourses of knowledge transmission are intertwined with, and inseparable from, discourses of materiality.

2 Rabbis, Books, and Knowledge

The rabbis of the late-antique eastern Mediterranean strategically used discourses surrounding the practice of reading to craft an image of their own authority that transcended, and even claimed to reject, other forms of book-oriented knowledge in the Eastern Mediterranean. This strategy does not mean that the rabbis were unfamiliar with the practice of reading, or even broader, text-based strategies of pedagogy and knowledge production. On the contrary, they were implicated in, and familiar with, the materials, technologies, and practices of reading that were current in the broader Roman Empire and Mediterranean basin of late antiquity.[8] The selective use of language involving texts,

7 For older, but fuller accounts of the scroll form, see Cavallo/Chartier 1999, especially 83–89. See also the foundational work in Roberts/Skeat 1983, 5–10.

8 For the most important discussion of early rabbis as Roman provincial elites, see Lapin 2012.

composition, and reading can be understood as a strategy of self-formation and authorization that sets them up as privileged outsiders to an educated world circumscribed, in the early centuries of the Common Era, by the Greek tradition of *paideia*.[9] This particular relationship *to* paideia was tempered by earlier discourses of Aramaic pedagogy that are visible in texts of the Hebrew Bible, as well as other ancient Near Eastern literature. What makes the rabbinic discourse of knowledge transmission distinctive is a particular understanding of transmitted wisdom and knowledge as a material substance, an understanding that is visible at particular moments in rabbinic literature, especially in biblical interpretation.

One aspect of the rabbis' strategic use of reading is in their construction of knowledge in concrete, material terms. The rabbis of the early *midrashim* and *Talmudim* understood knowledge as something physical, rather than abstract. That physicality was present in language that understood knowledge as a thing written and read, present in the accoutrements of the scribe and scholar — but certainly not limited to them.[10]

In some ways, the prophetic visions under discussion here can be read as standard images of "books" and literary production, but the rabbis derive their message in ways far beyond the writing they contain. Crucially, the rabbis "read" these scrolls *differently* than the ways in which the biblical prophets seem to read them, illustrating both changing conceptions of how knowledge is constructed and transmitted, and shifting networks for power and knowledge. These are both moments, for the rabbis, where the prophet is focused on the object of a scroll as a medium of transmission, and the scroll's location and material qualities as signifiers, as opposed to the textual content therein. The content is ultimately significant as well, of course: but the significance of what is written, according to rabbinic interpretation, does not overshadow the material medium of transmission itself. The scroll itself becomes the message. By considering these texts as texts that construct knowledge in a particular, material way, we have an opportunity to think about the stakes of knowledge as material for late ancient rabbis.

9 Brown 1992, 35–70.

10 This understanding was not limited to the rabbis, of course: the issue is simply that the materiality of rabbinic knowledge has yet to be fully described and analyzed. See Carr 2008 for more on this. My thinking on the materialization of the transmission of knowledge as critical for understanding the materiality of knowledge has been heavily influenced by Annette Reed. See, in particular, the discussion surrounding Reed 2020, 74–75.

The scrolls I discuss here are not, I think, scrolls that the rabbis understood as "actually existing," or as having direct analogues in the extratextual world. This allows us (and the rabbis) to consider them a bit more conceptually in relation to their own construction of knowledge. What can a scroll in a vision tell us about the way knowledge, writing, and prophecy interact? What can this interaction tell us about the rabbis who formulated it? Perhaps most importantly, it tells us that despite a baseline level of suspicion with which "new" written material was typically treated,[11] writing provided a useful vocabulary for the rabbis to frame their own understanding of knowledge as a material, concrete element: a literal blueprint and building block for the world in which they lived. Learning involves new knowledge by definition, but the rabbis were careful to frame that new knowledge within particular, specific discourses and settings. When confronted with an image in which the new information conveyed is tied inextricably to written material, the rabbis creatively ensure that the message the scroll conveys is present not in the written text to be read, but the material elements, presence, and movement of the scroll itself.

3 The Scrolls of the Prophets

Writing and the written word were laden signifiers in the ancient Near East. They were associated with priests and scribes, and a class of religious practitioners whose skills made them uniquely capable of communicating with deities, as well as interpreting their will made manifest in the world.[12] Even across the span of the "biblical period" (which is, of course, many periods, and several centuries), writing and reading remain both important markers of a certain educated class status, and links to divine and extra-human knowledge, both within biblical texts and in related literature.[13] Scrolls appear as prophetic signs twice in the Hebrew Bible: in Ezekiel 2–3, and Zechariah 5. Scrolls in general, of

11 Wollenberg 2017. Wollenberg argues that texts as sources of *new* information were regarded as highly suspicious. On the other hand, texts as receptacles of known information — well-known, studied, partially memorized and constantly recited stories, poems, and laws (such as the *Tanakh*) — were read in highly ritualized fashions, and understood as sacred, both conceptually and materially. While a Torah *could* be read for new information, as Wollenberg shows in her discussion, the idealized, positively-coded reading practice was either part of a highly formalized study, or a ritual lectionary.

12 See, for example, Satlow 2014, 31–51, Schniedewind 2004, 34–34.

13 Reed 2020, 11–21; 87–131.

course, appear much more regularly: Jeremiah's scribe Baruch writes one in Jeremiah 36, Deuteronomy 17 instructs a king to write a scroll of the law to keep with him at all times, and Numbers 5, the ritual of the suspected adulteress (or *sotah*), involves the writing, and then consumption, of a scroll for the performance of the ritual.[14] In this section, I will focus on the first two examples, from Ezekiel and Zechariah.

Before doing so, however, it is worthwhile to note that as remarkable as these textual moments seem to us, they are not as out of the ordinary as they seem. While they use images and materials (namely, writing surfaces and implements) unique to themselves, the performance of, and interpretation of, prophetic actions as "signs" was commonplace in prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible.[15] In the context of their composition, these textual excerpts should be read as part of the broader realm of textual discourse that uses performed, viewed, and interpreted signs in order to convey divine messages.[16]

The book of Ezekiel begins with the prophet's vision of the divine chariot leaving Jerusalem, carrying the presence of God with it, bearing it towards the Exile in Babylon. In chapter 2, the Presence of God speaks directly to the prophet, giving him a charge to speak to the Children of Israel.[17] His message is contained in a scroll, written front and back, and rather than simply showing it to Ezekiel, the Divine Presence demands that he consume it. The relevant text reads thus:

> "Open your mouth, and eat what I am giving to you." And I looked, and behold, there was a hand extended out towards me, and behold, in it was a scroll. And he spread it out before me, and it was written front and back, and written upon it were lamentations, dirges, and woe. And he said to me, "Mortal, what you find, eat; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the House of Israel." And I opened my mouth, and he fed me this scroll. And he said to

14 The biblical text refers to this writing surface as a *sefer*, but given its size and use, it is entirely possible that it was merely a scrap. While this is a likely incomplete discussion of scrolls in particular, there are, of course, other written materials present in the biblical text: the tablets of the Ten Commandments, written amulets, and others. See Picus (forthcoming).

15 See, for example, Nissinen 2019, 57–64 and Lundbom 2010, 144–145.

16 Friebel 1999, 14 refers to all non-verbal forms of communication in a prophetic book as a "sign-act;" these actions must be *intended* to relay information. I am grateful to Kerry Sonia for this reference.

17 Previous interpretations of the book of Ezekiel's beginning have seen the vision of the chariot, or *merkavah*, followed by the scroll, and then by Ezekiel's call narrative at the end of chapter 3, and the language of speechlessness that pervades it, as metaphoric of his ministry as a whole: the move from oral to textual prophecy, and the prophet's own inability to speak prophecies other than those of destruction and woe. Freibel discounts these interpretations, reading the prophet's speechlessness as a sign-act (Freibel 1999, 169–188).

me, "Mortal, feed your stomach, and fill your belly with this scroll, which I am giving to you." I ate it, and it was as sweet honey in my mouth. (Ezek. 2:8–3:3)[18]

Two elements of this vision immediately leap out as worthy of note. The Divine Presence hands Ezekiel a scroll inscribed on the front and the back. This scroll was presumably made of papyrus: parchment did not become a common or widespread writing surface in ancient West Asia until the Hellenistic period, and Ezekiel's vision pre-dates that by several centuries. Even so, writing appearing on both sides of the scroll would have been significant regardless of its material.[19] In addition to making the scroll much more difficult to manipulate and read, most writing surfaces were only prepared for writing on one side.[20] Beyond this, a rolled document being written on both sides would run the risk of ink smearing and becoming illegible. This is a text written without regard for the rules of the scribal trade, either written outside of their remit, or using imagined materials that neither smudge nor bleed. The double-sided nature of the scroll as a prophetic sign, of course, is meant to highlight the magnitude of woe and lamentation that Ezekiel will prophesy for the Judahite community in exile — but the mechanics of this double-siding are indicative of far more. If we ask ourselves how the image would have resonated with an audience that knew writing, it seems clear that any numinous qualities would have resided in both the writing *on* the scroll, and the double-sided scroll itself. Even if the biblical author is unconcerned with the unreal dimensions and qualities of the scroll, these are elements that matter deeply to the rabbis.

After being presented with this double-sided scroll, Ezekiel is instructed not to read it, but to eat it. This is a powerful metaphor of consumption, but it is also more than that: Rather than reading the dirges and lamentations that are on the scroll, Ezekiel internalizes (and ultimately transforms) them completely. Their

18 Translation is author's own, based on the NJPS and NRSV. Hebrew text taken from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

פצה פיך ואכל את אשר אני נתן אליך ואראה והנה יד שלוחה אלי והנה בו מגלת ספר ויפרש אותה לפני והיא כתובה פנים ואחור וכתוב אליה קנים והגה והי ויאמר אלי בן אדם את אשר תמצא אכול אכול את המגלה הזאת ולך דבר אל בית ישראל ואפתח את פי ויאכלני את המגלה הזאת ויאמר אלי בן אדם בטנך תאכל ומעיך תמלא את המגלה הזאת אשר אני נתן אליך ואכלה ותהי בפי כדבש למתוק

19 Roberts and Skeat are quite clear that scrolls in antiquity could be either papyrus or parchment, and that neither papyrus codices nor parchment scrolls would have gone against ancient expectations (Roberts/Skeat 1983, 5). Even so, papyrus was the more common writing surface in the Levant prior to the Hellenistic era.

20 See Lewis 1974, 39–69. While papyrus written on both sides certainly exists (see n. 41), Lewis suggests, according to ancient sources, that papyrus was *generally* understood to be inscribed on one side.

nature becomes a part of his prophetic charge in the same way that Isaiah's lips are purified with a burning coal in his call narrative.[21] A text is also consumed in Numbers 5, as part of the *Sotah* ritual. Sarit Kattan Gribetz traces this particular image in later rabbinic interpretation, showing how consumption is a particularly gendered way for the rabbis to discuss learning without bringing reading into the equation.[22] Ezekiel's consumption of the scroll, if it *is* intended to suggest a gendered mode of knowledge transmission, does so subtly — at least in comparison to the later rabbinic understanding of the *Sotah*, and other late ancient texts that understand eating as a particularly feminized mode of acquiring knowledge.[23]

The second prophetic image involving an unread scroll comes from Zechariah. Zechariah is a prophet of the Exile proper — his prophecies seem to have been written down later than Ezekiel's. In chapter 5, Zechariah relates a vision of a flying scroll.

> And again, I raised my eyes, and I saw, behold, a scroll was flying. And he said to me, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a flying scroll, twenty cubits long, and its width is ten cubits." And he said to me, "This is the curse which goes out over all the land. For everyone who steals, as is on one side, has gone unpunished, and everyone who swears, as is written on the other side, has gone unpunished. I have sent it out, (oracle of Yahweh of Hosts) and it shall come to the house of the thief, and to the house of the one swearing in my name in vain, and it shall lodge within his house, and utterly end their timber and their stones. (Zech. 5:1–4)[24]

The image of consumption is gone from Zechariah's vision of the flying scroll, but its double-sidedness remains. Zechariah adds an almost absurd size to the scroll — its width is only half its length, which is rare enough, but that width is already ten cubits: fifteen feet![25] If the miraculous nature of the scroll as high-

21 Isaiah 6:5–7. This call narrative, importantly, also takes place during a vision of the heavenly host.

22 Gribetz 2018. Rabbinic literature is, at times, concerned with keeping women separate from certain elements of Torah study and reading; *consuming* the text skirts this issue completely. Gribetz also notes that similar metaphors arise in early Christian discussions of ascetic women.

23 See also Boyarin 1994, 126–130.

24 ואשוב ואשא עיני ואראה והנה מגלה עפה ויאמר אלי מה אתה ראה ואמר אני ראה מגלה עפה ארכה עשרים באמה ורחבה עשר באמה ויאמר אלי זאת האלה היוצאת על פני כל הארץ כי כל הגנב מזה כמוה נקה וכל הנשבע מזה כמוה נקה הוצאתיה נאם יהוה צבאות ובאה אל בית הגנב ואל בית הנשבע בשמי לשקר ולנה בתוך ביתו וכלתו ואת עציו ואת אבניו

25 It need hardly be stated that this is far beyond the norm for the size of a scroll. Pliny states that there are never more than twenty sheets in a papyrus scroll, with the width varying con-

lighted by being written on both sides is downplayed, its miraculous nature, derived from its sheer size, is front and center. The fact that it is flying, of course, is similarly miraculous, and is an anomalous image. While its double-sided nature, as well as images of consuming scrolls, appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, flight is unique.

This was an image that troubled early interpreters even prior to the rabbis. The Septuagint, for example, translates "scroll" (מגילה/*megillah*) as "δρέπανον," meaning "sickle," or "scythe."[26] Myers and Myers state this is due to confusion with Joel 4:13, in which the word מַגָּל/*maggal*, which contains the same consonants as *megillah*, or scroll, means "sickle."[27] The word *megillah* was unlikely to be problematic to the translators in and of itself: other occurrences are translated as "κεφαλὶς βιβλίου." This is a reasonably common term for a scroll in ancient Greek, and certainly a preferred term for various LXX translators.[28]

The author or compiler of the text of Zechariah itself, of course, knows that this is an image that requires explanation: that is why the angelic interpreter of verses 3 and 4 explains the image's meaning, both to Zechariah and to the reader. The scroll itself is a curse — again, an image and association that we see in Numbers 5. Its size suggests the curse's magnitude, while its flight enables one to imagine just how far-reaching the curse inscribed on it might be. Myers and Myers point out that the length — twenty cubits — is not outside the realm of possibility, but a width of ten cubits is surely symbolic.[29] The dimensions of ten by twenty cubits, they argue, carry direct resonances to the dimensions of Solomon's Temple as described in 1 Kings; specifically, we should read it as a reference to the size of the *ulam*, or porch, or perhaps the dimensions of the golden *cherubim* that sheltered the Ark of the Covenant with their wings.[30] This is an association that the rabbis will also make.

The actual content of the scroll, beyond extremely vague language, is left undescribed. We know that it is against thieves and those who swear false oaths in the name of God — but very little else, including the actual wording. The

siderably (but never going over something close to a foot). See Pliny, *Naural History* xiii. 77–78; *apud* Lewis 1974, 37–39.

26 Rahlfs/Hanhard 2006.

27 Myers/Myers 1987, 277–278.

28 The word κεφαλὶς on its own properly refers to the beginning of a column, but combined with βιβλίου seems to indicate an entire scroll. It does seem that the LXX translators use the word metonymically. Cf. Lewis 1974, 78.

29 Myers/Myers 1987, 279.

30 Myers/Myers 1987, 280. The porch was symbolic of the meeting between priest and populace, as the only (or perhaps most notable) location where such meetings occurred.

wording of the curse, it seems clear, is not the important aspect: rather, the fact that it was written down, on a scroll, and that the scroll plays a part in Zechariah's vision are the aspects that the text's compiler, and later the rabbis, found most important.

As seen in the resonances between this text and Numbers 5, the *Sotah* ritual, connections between writing and cursing were common in the ancient Near East. Isabel Cranz explores this relationship, arguing that Zechariah 5, in conjunction with Ezekiel 2–3, relies on this widespread logic of cursing.[31] She connects these prophetic visions of scrolls to other narrative moments relating written documents and curses; Jeremiah 36:2–4, for example, relates Baruch the son of Neriah's recording of Jeremiah's curses, and the covenant ceremony of Deuteronomy 27–28 involves the establishment of stone slabs inscribed with the stipulations of an extensive curse.[32] This close association derives, Cranz argues, from ancient Near Eastern oath-swearing ceremonies.[33] Even beyond rituals of covenant and cursing, though, we can see that writing in the Hebrew Bible is never far from the numinous.

Even in the Biblical text itself, these two visions were tied to networks of knowledge that relied both on the establishment of a professional class of scribes and religious professionals, as well as a more casual and widespread understanding of their practices. The association of writing with religious, administrative, and even divine power means that prophetic images of writing were particularly potent, and ripe for interpretive creativity.[34] Inheriting a text that was largely constructed under the rubrics of an Ancient Near Eastern scribal pedagogy, but themselves inhabiting a world where knowledge production was largely shifting to a Hellenistic pedagogic model, the rabbis received these images through their reception of the Biblical text. They reinterpret, and indeed, re-understand the function of the scrolls therein in order to make them fit into their own conception of knowledge as hanging precariously between the bookish and the non-bookish, all the while remaining a strikingly material substance.

31 Cranz 2016.

32 Cranz 2016, 411; see also Quick 2017.

33 Cranz 20016, 415–416.

34 Satlow discusses the varieties of authority texts and writings could contain: oracular, normative, and literary. See Satlow 2014, 4–5.

4 Rabbinic Interpretations

Sifre to Numbers

The earliest rabbinic interpretation of one of these visions appears in *Sifre Bamidbar*, or the *Sifre to Numbers*, a tannaitic rabbinic commentary on the book of Numbers, likely formed in the latter 3rd century.[35] This interpretation relates a completely disparate text to the vision of Ezekiel 2–3, and it does so through investigating themes of knowledge and its transmission through material objects. The text being interpreted, or the text of the lemma, is Numbers 12:6, which comes after Aaron and Miriam complain about Moses's prophetic authority: God summons the three of them to the Tent of Meeting and declares, "Listen to my words: If there will be prophets of Yahweh among you, I will make myself known to them in a vision, I will speak to him in a dream."[36] The interpretation is long — as rabbinic interpretations often tend to be — but it circles around the themes of prophecy, speech, and writing, by interpreting the scroll written front and back with reference to Moses being denied a vision of God's face (Exodus 33:17–23), while still being referred to as a prophet who spoke to him face-to-face (Numbers 12:6). God's body is even brought into the equation. Rather than relaying the entire interpretation at length, I will briefly summarize Sifre Numbers 103:1, and then focus on elements that are particularly important for our purposes.

Sifre Numbers 103:1 is a lengthy discourse interpreting Numbers 12:6–8, both continuously, and piecemeal. It begins by parsing the words the deity himself uses to speak to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, identifying a textual curiosity: when God speaks to rebuke Aaron and Miriam, he does so *politely*.[37] The word נא/*na* in biblical Hebrew, which God uses in Numbers 12:6, is a marker of a polite request — surely Yahweh is not in the habit of making requests![38] As with so many of Yahweh's actions, however, the rabbis interpret it normatively, rather than descriptively. God speaks politely to Miriam and Aaron because humanity should speak politely to each other. In what seems like a jump, the passage next turns to prophecy and vision. This isn't a jump at all, however: it is simply a continuation into the next verse, where God is explaining to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam why Moses has a different sort of access to divine knowledge

35 Strack/Stemberger 1996, 297.

36 ויאמר שמעו נא דברי אם יהיה נביאכם יהוה במראה אליו אתודע בחלום אדבר בו

37 Specifically, he uses the term נא/*na*.

38 Brown/Driver/Briggs 1906, 609.

than they do — and indeed, how that access works. God speaks to Moses clearly, rather than through visions or dreams. The *Sifre* then claims that he is trusted even more than God's ministering angels, although Rabbi Yose then objects: Moses is trusted the most, with only the ministering angels being trusted more.

Moses's access to divine wisdom is so unique, that Rabbi Yose places his trustworthiness above the trustworthiness of the angels that minister to God himself. The rabbis then argue about the actual mechanics of Moses's unique access to God. God states that he speaks to Moses "mouth to mouth." This phrase suggests a direct conversation between Moses and the deity, but this is tempered with another suggestion on the part of the rabbis: perhaps, instead of a revelation of direct speech from God, Moses spoke with the divine presence. After all, Exodus makes it quite clear that a direct conversation with God can be deadly. This is a significant moment: the rabbis of the *Sifre* (the *tannaim*) are positing the divine presence as a mediator between Moses and the word of God. The actual mechanics of this are difficult, however: the divine presence as a mediator makes some sense, provided it is understood as distinct from God's body itself. Therefore, discussion then turns to what it means for a human being to look at God and not be able to live, a reference to Exodus 33. Unsurprisingly, the rabbis look for puns here: "And live" is understood as being not a verb, but rather a plural noun ("and the living things"): *va-ḥai* becoming *v-ḥayot*. The rabbis move from discussing the mechanics of prophecy to a discussion of death at the hands of a divine revelation, or perhaps a face-to-face epiphany — but they do so entirely within the remit of a prophetic call narrative, Ezekiel 3, while also referencing the *ḥayot*, or beasts, of Ezekiel 1. A verse from the Psalms is brought in to close out this particular portion of the discussion, while still keeping it connected to the broader prophetic theme: The divine presence, the psalm makes clear, makes itself visible to humanity at the hour of death.

The interpretation continues on with the next words from Numbers 12:8. God is still explaining Moses's uniqueness in Numbers, and the rabbinic text moves from riddles, which God does not use for Moses, to the fact that Moses sees God's likeness: his image, or תמונה/*temunah*. It is this "image," or likeness, that finally links our text to the double-sided scroll of Ezekiel 2–3. In Exodus 33, God shows Moses his back instead of his face, and the rabbis, in a remarkable exegetical leap, connect that to the scroll written both front and back. At this point, I quote the *Sifre* itself.

> The Torah teaches, "and he beholds the likeness of Yahweh" (Numbers 12:8). This is a vision of his back. You might ask, "What is this, a vision of his back? Perhaps it is a vision of

> his face?" The Torah teaches, "And I will remove my palm, and you shall see my back" (Ex. 33:23).[39]

The likeness of Yahweh is not his face, but his back, since Scripture cannot contradict itself,[40] and Exodus makes it clear that Moses *never* sees God's face. The rabbis of the *Sifre* make another radical jump, then, into Ezekiel — this time focused on the idea of the "back," a term in Hebrew that can also mean "behind," or "after."

> "And he spread it out before me, and it was written front and back" (Ezek. 2:10). And don't even those who are light of intellect, and commoners, act thus, when they are writing [write on the front and back]? Why does the Torah say "front and back?" "Front" is in this world, and "back" is in the world to come." "Front" is the security of the righteous, and their afflictions in this world, and "back" is the gift of the reward of the righteous, and the punishment of the wicked, in the world to come.[41]

The image of the scroll written on two sides from Ezekiel 2 is transformed in the *Sifre* — if not in content, then certainly in reception. A scroll written on both sides, as noted earlier, is a rarity in the Biblical world, and an indication of something miraculous and fine: an ink that doesn't transfer, a papyrus or parchment that allows for writing on more than one face. Here, however, the rabbis understand it very differently. A scroll with writing on both sides is not a piece of writing to take note of: it is a piece of scrap paper, the province of the simple, or the commoner.[42] Even still, the rabbis understand the presence of writing on both sides as symbolic: it represents this world and the world to come, and can likely also be understood as the duality between the righteous and the wicked in both timelines. It is the association with scrap paper, however — and perhaps even of unknown written texts with negative outcomes in general, especially in religious contexts — that adds this vision's next dimension in the rabbinic imagination.

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39 Sifre Numbers 103:1
ת"ל ותמונת ה יביט זה מראה אחוריים אתה אומר זה מראה אחוריים או אינו אלא זה מראה פנים ת"ל והסירותי את כפי וראית את אחורי

40 This is, of course, one of the foundational claims of the early biblical interpreters, including the rabbis: see Kugel 2007, 14–17.

41 Sifre Num. 103:1 ויפרוש אותה לפני והיא כתובה פנים ואחור והלא אף קלי הדעת וההדיוטות עושים כן כותבים ומה ת"ל פנים ואחור פנים בעולם הזה ואחור לעולם הבא. פנים בשלוותם ויסורים של צדיקים בעולם הזה ואחור מתן שכרן של צדיקים ופורענותם של רשעים לעולם הבא

42 A few examples of papyrus scrolls like this exist, called *opisthographs*. See, for example, Perrot 2020.

> "And written upon it were lamentations, dirges, and woe" (Ezek. 2:10). The lamentations of the wicked, as it is written, "This is a lamentation, and it shall be intoned" (Ezek. 32:16). "Dirges," of the righteous, as it is written, "To the music of the ten-stringed harp, to the music of the lute, with melody and lyre together" (Ps. 92:4). "And woe," of the wicked, as it is written, "Calamity upon calamity is coming" (Ezek. 7:26).[43]

The text is particularly terse and difficult to understand here. The implication, however, is that the writing on the double-sided scroll — the dirges, lamentations, and woe — are directly connected to the fates of the righteous and the wicked, which in turn are connected thematically to the rabbinic understanding of God's face, and God's back. The double-sidedness of Ezekiel's scroll is the message: it is the present and the future, the benefit of living in God's presence, and the calamity of living in a world on which God has turned His back. The vision itself is a merism, in which the opposition of front and back with the present world and the world to come, and the extremes of divine favor, serve to contain the extensive possibilities of divine knowledge in a single vision of a single scroll. This is highlighted by the verses the *tannaim* cite: in the midst of a message of woe, the rabbis also cite Psalm 92, a joyous praise-psalm of the Sabbath day, to describe the "dirges" of Ezekiel's prophecy.

It is almost as if the rabbis are trying to impart two messages. The first is that whether a prophet is like Moses, and speaks directly to the deity, or like later prophets who only encounter him in a dream, is unimportant. The content of the message comes from God one way or another; whether it is from direct speech, or a divine image of a floating scroll, the origin of either is the same. As the text says: "The Torah does not say 'Against my servant Moses,' but rather that 'You have spoken against Me,' speaking against my servant Moses."[44] The scroll is never *read*, however, despite its presence in this interpretation: the fact of it conveys the prophet's message, and even the biblical verses cited do not appear on it, but rather describe its contents in general terms.

The second message is one of woe and devastation, even in the midst of God's glory. It is a remarkable thematic movement for a passage that begins with a statement about polite speech, but this wide, sweeping movement is also tightly connected: prophetic discourse, polite speech, and the divine presence are all linked through the materiality of knowledge, brought together intelligibly by the image and presence of a scroll written on both sides. The section of *Sifre Bamidbar* just quoted above appears in later sources: we will see it again in

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43 Sifre Num. 103:1 וכתוב אליה קינים והגה והי קינים של רשעים שנאמר קינה היא וקננוה והגה של צדיקים שנא' עלי עשור ועלי נבל עלי הגיון בכנור והי של רשעים שנאמר הוה על הוה באה

44 *Sifre Bamidbar* 103:1.

the Babylonian Talmud, in a tradition that combines interpretation of Ezekiel 2 with Zechariah 5, and it is perhaps one of our clearest indicators of the rabbis' understanding knowledge as material. We move next, though, to a midrash from the subsequent period of rabbinic activity, the amoraic period, which cites Zechariah's giant scroll.

Leviticus Rabbah

Zechariah's flying scroll appears in a slightly later collection of midrash: Leviticus Rabbah, which is Palestinian, and was likely compiled in the fifth century CE.[45] Leviticus Rabbah is typically known as a "homiletic" midrash, as opposed to an "exegetical" midrash, although these distinctions are becoming less and less common.[46] The text is composed of two interpretive formats. The first format is what is classically known as the "proem," or *petiḥa*/*petiḥta* in Hebrew and Aramaic. In this highly intricate form, one verse from scripture — often, but not always, from Psalms or Proverbs — is linked through a process of homiletic "chaining" to another verse, with numerous intermediary verses expounded on the way.[47] The other format is significantly less crafted: this is a lemmatic commentary, identified by snippets of a verse from the text being commented upon (in this case, Leviticus), and interpretations identified by the word *gufa* (which is also the Aramaic word for "body"), which mark a word or phrase's "meaning."

Leviticus Rabbah 6:3 is an exegesis of Leviticus 5:1, which relates a law about the responsibilities of one with information when someone is publicly accused. The text reads: ונפש כי תחטא ושמעה קול אלה והוא עד או ראה או ידע אם לוא יגיד ונשא עונו, which translates to, "And when a person sins — and one hears a public imprecation, and he is a witness, or has seen or learned of the matter — if he does not testify, he bears the guilt." We can, I think, already see the themes that will connect the flying scroll to this verse from the Pentateuch: the flying scroll is a manifestation of the public imprecation, making it incumbent on all with knowledge to witness and to act. The text in question begins:

> Gufa: Do not let a false vow be a light thing in your eyes, for behold Zechariah saw it, "And I raised my eyes and I saw, behold, a scroll was flying," (Zech. 5:1). What does flying

45 Strack/Stemberger 1996, 291.

46 Visotzky 2003.

47 The classic treatment of the *petihta* is Heinemann 1971. See also Cohen 1981 and Vitotzky 2003, 23–30, where he argues for the essential incoherence of this category.

> mean? Floating. As it says, "And it flew to me, one of the Seraphim [and in its hand was a live coal, which he took from the altar with a pair of tongs]," (Isaiah 6:6). "And he said to me, 'What do you see?' And I said I see a flying scroll, [twenty cubits long, and ten cubits wide]." (Zech. 5:2). Rabbi Abbahu said, "Even the skin of an elephant and the skin of a camel are not this size," and you say here "This is the curse which goes out over all the land," (Zech. 5:3), from here it went out from the entrance to the sanctuary, which we learned [a technical term which means this is a reference to the Mishnah] has an entrance that is forty cubits high and twenty wide.[48]

The flying scroll of Zechariah is initially linked directly to Isaiah's call narrative: while Isaiah was purified, and given a message, by a burning coal touched to his lips, the rabbis are trying to make Zechariah's vision of the scroll into a similarly momentous event. The size of the scroll is, according to them, a direct reference to the fact that it flew out of the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem — which is even larger than this seemingly gargantuan scroll. The explanation continues, explaining why this vision — these two visions, really — are related to a section of the Pentateuch that discusses testimony and false vows.

> Rabbi Aibo said, "How come when man swears on a Torah scroll, we bring before him empty skin bottles? To show that yesterday, this bottle was full of sinews and bones, and now it is entirely empty. Thus will one who causes his companion to wear a false oath in the end go out entirely empty of his possessions." Rabi Assa said this is about a false oath, and Rabbi Yonah said this is even in regards to the truth.[49]

The connection between Zechariah's scroll and Leviticus 5:1 is made clearer here: the practices in question, at least in the rabbis' day, involve swearing on a Torah scroll. Rabbi Aibo references an interesting practice that we don't see elsewhere: whenever an oath is taken on a Torah scroll, empty wineskins are present as well. Functionally, these might be there after a libation, which was common enough as part of oath-taking practices in the ancient eastern Mediterranean — but Rabbi Aibo certainly does not understand them that way.[50] The passage continues, but enough of our themes have been revealed to end here. The flying scroll's size is an important element of its physicality, because the

48 LevR 6:3: גופא אל תהי שבועת שוא קלה בעיניך שהרי זכריה חמי ליה ואשא עיני והנה מגילה עפה מה עפה שייטא כמה דתימא ויעף אלי אחד מן השרפים ויאמר אלי מה אתה ראה ואמר אני ראה מגלה עפה אמר רבי אבהו אפילו עורו של פיל ועורו של גמל אינן במדה כאן זאת האלה היוצאת על פני כל הארץ מהיכן יצאת מפתחו של אולם דתנן פתחו של אולם גבהו ארבעים אמה ורחבו עשרים אמה

49 LevR 6:3: אמר רבי איבו מפני מה משביעין האדם בספר תורה ומביאין לפניו נודות נפוחים לומר אתמול היה הנוד הזה מלא גידים ועצמות ועכשיו הוא רק מכלן כך המשביע לחברו לשקר סוף שיצא ריקם מכל ממונו רבי אסא אמר על שקר רבי יונה אמר אפילו על אמת

50 See Sommerstein/Torrance 2014.

size associates it with the doorway of Solomon's temple's sanctuary. Its existence as a material scroll written on front and back also places it in direct contradistinction to the empty skin bottles and the Torah scroll used for oaths. Bereft of both their wine and the flesh that once animated them as living creatures, the skin bottles are nevertheless not valueless and empty. Like the giant scroll, they provide meaning in their very presence and materiality.

The wineskins' double emptiness connects to the double significance of the scroll of Zechariah's vision: its flight in Zechariah is the vastness of the curse, although the rabbis connect it to the prophetic call, while the size and the area the scroll demarcates are nothing less than a reference to the Temple itself. It is a powerful hermeneutic. The wineskins are important because of what they lack, and the scroll is important (and perhaps even comprehensible) despite whatever may be written upon it. Again, these might not be unique signs in prophetic discourse or rabbinic interpretation, but they center around a written object while studiously ignoring the fact of writing. This makes them significant elements in an attempt to think about the ideology of writing among the classical rabbis.

Babylonian Talmud

The final two rabbinic interpretations I will discuss here both come from the Bablyonian Talmud, or Bavli. Bavli Gittin 60a deals with the image from Zechariah, while bEruvin 21a interprets both visions — a fitting conclusion to this section. The Babylonian Talmud is a notoriously difficult text to study. Nominally a commentary on the Mishnah (albeit one that goes far beyond our standard ideas of commentary), the period of its composition, editing, and redaction extends from the 3rd century all the way to the cusp of the seventh or eighth. Each passage is composed of layers that come from different periods of rabbinic activity, and sometimes even different locations: here we attempt to read them holistically, and in the context of the later layers of redaction and editing that would have taken place in Babylonia.

Our passage in Bavli Gittin comes in the middle of a lengthier discussion that involves a variety of material texts and the restrictions and stipulations surrounding them. There is a debate over whether lectionary readings from the prophets, for example, must be read from the scrolls of the prophets, and not lectionary scrolls (the latest layer of the Bavli, the *stam*, mandates that lectionary scrolls are appropriate), as well as whether or not it is appropriate to write out individual portions of the Torah for children to study. Such practices, of

course, are familiar to us from the world of monastic education, but the Talmud gives us a glimpse into the debate over them in rabbinic communities.[51]

This particular discussion stems from an assertion made anonymously, in a *baraita* (a non-Mishnaic tannaitic tradition): that the Torah was given scroll by scroll, which presumably means book by book, rather than all at once, as a single document. The ramifications of this discussion are significant for the rabbis: the mode in which the Torah was transmitted can determine whether or not it is acceptable to copy it down in individual parts, or whether it must always be copied as a whole. This passage, though short, is particularly complex, because it relies on a midrashic association between individual instantiations of words in distinct verses. In this case, the linked words are "scroll" (*megillah*) and "take" (*laqo'aḥ*).

> Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Bena'ah, "The Torah was given scroll by scroll, as it is said, 'Then I said, 'Behold I have come with the scroll of the book that is written for me.'" (Ps. 40:8). Resh Lakish says that the Torah was given as a complete/sealed book, as it is said, "Take this Torah scroll," (Deut. 31:26). And on the other hand, isn't it written, "Take?" as well? [The implication here is that Resh Lakish's argument is irrefutable because of this word, so how does Rabbi Yochanan counter it?] That is about after it was joined. And on the other hand, isn't it written, "With a scroll of the book written for me?" This shows that the entire Torah is called a scroll, as it is written, "And he said to me, 'What do you see? And I said, I see a scroll flying.'" (Zech. 5:2).[52]

This is a remarkable assertion on the part of the rabbis: not only are they claiming to have knowledge about what the content of Zechariah's scroll is, beyond the general indication that it contains a "curse": they are identifying it as the scroll of the Torah itself. This fact is assumed to be so self-evident that it is used as evidence for another claim: that the Torah is only called a "scroll" when the entire manuscript is meant. This could be a reference to Deuteronomy 28 and the broader tradition of covenant curses that are contained in the Hebrew Bible.[53] This interpretation, indeed, seems most likely, even if it is not the only one available to us. I think that there is *also* a conflation here between scrolls as

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51 For an insightful introduction to this monastic material, see Lillian Larsen's contribution in this volume, and cited literature.

52 b. Git. 60a: א"ר יוחנן משום רבי בנאה תורה מגילה מגילה ניתנה שנא' אז אמרתי הנה באתי במגילת ספר כתוב עלי ר"ש בן לקיש אומר תורה חתומה ניתנה שנאמר לקוח את ספר התורה הזאת ואידך נמי הכתיב לקוח ההוא לבתר דאידבק ואידך נמי הכתיב במגילת ספר כתוב עלי ההוא דכל התורה כולה איקרי מגילה דכתיב ויאמר אלי מה אתה רואה ואומר אני רואה מגילה עפה

53 Quick 2017.

representative of a certain type of authorized, divine knowledge and the rabbinic idea of the Torah as a "text" that contains everything.

The last text, which brings together both biblical passages under examination, comes from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Eruvin. It is worth noting that despite the obvious similarities between these two passages, this is the first place where we see both interpreted together, or juxtaposed, in classical rabbinic literature.

Bavli Eruvin deals, in an overarching sense, with the concept of borders and limitations: an *'eruv* is the Sabbath boundary, a rabbinic invention which creates an area of habitation in which an observant rabbinic Jew can, according to *halakhah*, unproblematically carry items during the Sabbath. This does not mean, of course, that every word of Talmud on Eruvin's hundred and five double-sided folios deals with boundaries and limitations of this sort — but there is a striking prevalence of themes focused on measurements, the human body, and other boundaries. We see this concern manifested in several ways here. The overarching concern is the expanse of God's intellect, and the ability of humans to comprehend it: the spaces where the borders of divine knowledge rub up against the boundaries of human perception.

This selection comes five pages into a *sugya* that, in classic Talmudic fashion, spins off from a short Mishnaic passage about how to build a boundary around a well in such a way that drawing water from it is an acceptable activity on the Sabbath.[54] Even within the context of the *sugya*, as long and complex as it is, this particular section feels like something of a surprise: amidst lengthy discussion of the exact length of various perimeters and travel distances between locations, Rav Hisda presents a *drash*, or interpretive commentary, on a verse from the Psalms. The link is verbal: the "width" of the commandment is at stake here, and in the context of an almost mundane discussion of spatial sizes and distance, the physical size of Zechariah's scroll takes on a cosmic significance, along with the fences and roads discussed earlier in the *sugya*.

> Rav Hisda said, "Mari bar Mar would expound: What does this mean, "I have seen an end for everything, but your commandment is very wide" (Psalm 119:96). David said this thing, but he did not interpret it; Job said it, but he did not explain it; Ezekiel said it, but he did not explain it, until Zechariah son of Iddo came, and explained it. David [as the traditional author of the Psalms] said it, but did not explain it, as it is written: "I have seen an end for everything, but your commandment is very wide." Job said it, but he did not

54 m. Eruv. 2:1.

> explain it, as it is written: "Its [the end of the Almighty's] measure is longer than the earth, and wider than the sea" (Job 11:9).[55]

This is a particularly self-conscious bit of midrashic play. In asking for an interpretation of Psalm 119:96, the classic move would be to interpret it with reference to another biblical verse that makes use of some of the same vocabulary, or perhaps the same theme. Various verses from other biblical books are presented here, but the *drash* rejects them all as having no explanatory power, until the verse from Zechariah is brought forth: only with Zechariah is the notion of "width" both quantified and defined. Before Zechariah is invoked, though, verses from Job and Ezekiel are presented as being synonymous with Psalm 119:96. This synonymity is interesting, as it creates parallels where the reader might not have seen them before, providing insight into just how the rabbis of the Talmud chose to represent their own understanding (or one of their many playful understandings) of the text.

The verse from Job provides two axes of measurement for the extent of the divine measurement. Two large, seemingly endless, bodies are invoked: the earth, and the sea. This is a classic literary merism, as the two are opposed in such a way that suggests the totality of the world. Also important is the fact that we are still not entirely sure what is being measured. The text from the Psalms identifies the "commandment," or *mitzvah* of God, but the verse from Job, especially in a decontextualized context, is much vaguer, and has no referent. We can assume that the referent is the commandment from Psalms, but as the passage continues, it seems likely that the rabbis had something else in mind.

> Ezekiel said it, but did not explain it, as it is written: "And he spread it out before me, and it was written front and back, and written upon it were lamentations, dirges, and woe" (Ezek. 2:10). Lamentations [*qinnim*]: This is the warning of the righteous in this world, and thus he said, "It is a lamentation, and they lament with it" (Ezek. 32:16). Dirges [*hegeh*]*:* This is the reward of the gift of the righteous in the future, and thus he said, "With the melody [*higgayon*] of the lyre" (Ps. 92:4). Woe: This is the warning of the wicked in the future, and thus he said, "Calamity [*hoveh*] upon calamity is coming" (Ezek. 7:26).[56]

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55 b. Eruv. 21a: אמר רב חסדא דריש מרי בר מר מאי דכתיב לכל תכלה ראיתי קץ רחבה מצותך מאד דבר זה אמרו דוד ולא פירשו אמרו איוב ולא פירשו אמרו יחזקאל ולא פירשו עד שבא זכריה בן עדו ופירשו אמרו דוד ולא פירשו דכתיב לכל תכלה ראיתי קץ רחבה מצותך מאד אמרו איוב ולא פירשו דכתיב ארוכה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני ים

56 b. Eruv. 21a: אמרו יחזקאל ולא פירשו דכתיב ויפרוש אותה לפני והיא כתובה פנים ואחור וכתוב אליה קינים והגה והי קינים זו פורענותן של צדיקים בעולם הזה וכן הוא אומר קינה היה וקוננוה והגה זו מתן שכרן של צדיקים לעתיד לבא וכן הוא אומר עלי הגיון בכנור והי זו היא פורענתן של רשעים לעתיד לבא וכן הוא אומר הוה על הוה תבא

The addition of the scroll from Ezekiel is confusing. It differs in style from the previous two prooftexts: individual words are re-interpreted with still more prooftexts from different biblical books, and the verse in question does not contain the root רחב/*r-h-v*, which signifies "width," and is present in the initial verse and the verse from Job. The Ezekiel interpretation, in fact, is almost identical to that found in the Sifre to Numbers, and indicates that this tradition circulated between texts and tradents in late antiquity. It is possible, however, and even likely, that it was inserted here not because of the texts that came before it, but as an antecedent to the interpretation that came after. It is tied to the passage's theme not through measurement, but through the materiality of a giant scroll, and concern over its physical properties.

> Until Zechariah son of Iddo came and interpreted it, as it is written: "And he said to me, 'What do you see?' And I said, 'I see a flying scroll, twenty cubits long, and its width is ten cubits,'" (Zechariah 5:2). And if you unfurl it, is it not twenty cubits by twenty cubits? And it is written: "It was written front and back" (Ezekiel 2:10). And if you split it, how much would it be — forty by forty cubits. And it is written: "Who measured the waters with his palm, and the heavens with a span…?" (Isaiah 40:12). We find that the entire world is but one three thousand two hundredth of the Torah.[57]

The notion of "width" is finally concretized with Zechariah's verse, and its interpretation is linked to the cosmic valence of the Torah itself. The scroll is conflated with Ezekiel's scroll, written front and back, and gone is any imagery of consumption: rather, the scroll is either unrolled to its full length, or "peeled," the front split from the back so that both writing surfaces are visible at once, and the size of the scroll doubled.[58]

There seems to be a tradition lying behind this one, suggesting that the scrolls of Zechariah and Ezekiel are the same scroll, and that they are God's Torah — or perhaps the original Torah. This idea, I think, helps us make sense of the rest of the passage: the measurement of the world is given in God's measurements, the divine palm and span — and the divine Torah is significantly larger than both of these. The entire world is but a small portion of the original

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57 b. Eruv. 21a, cont.: עד שבא זכריה בן עדו ופירשו דכתיב ויאמר אלי מה אתה רואה אני רואה מגילה עפה ארכה עשרים באמה ורחבה עשר באמה וכי פשטת לה הויה לה עשרין בעשרין וכתיב היא כתובה פנים ואחור וכי קלפת לה כמה הויה לה ארבעין בעשרין וכתיב מי מדד בשעלו מים ושמים בזרת תכן וגו׳ נמצא כל העולם כולו אחד משלשת אלפים ומאתים בתורה

58 Instead of adding the length and width of two new parchment sheets together, it seems that the length and width have been doubled individually. For more on mathematical mistakes and what they teach us in this context, see Courtney Roby's article in this volume.

Torah scroll in size, and it is also, suggestively, but a small portion of the divine Torah scroll itself.

These rabbinic interpretations, spanning a time range from the first to the fifth or sixth century, and a span of land from Palestine to Babylonia, show us a range of understandings that are remarkably similar to each other. Even with one early Palestinian tradition (*Sifre Bamidbar* 103:1) being reused wholesale in the Babylonian Talmud, these teachings reveal a growing conception of knowledge as material, and perhaps even artifactual. The scrolls, for us, stand in as an index of how certain types of knowledge were received, transmitted, and conceptualized. The absence of a tradition regarding the exact wording on the scrolls is indicative of the way a conception of knowledge as material is working in rabbinic interpretations of this motif.

Only in the *Sifre* tradition, repeated in the Bavli, is the content of the scroll even mentioned. Rather than being specifically delineated, a verse from Ezekiel is presented as a general summary of its contents: "dirges, lamentations, and woe." General as they are, however, two of these categories are textual types that come with highly formal, stylized, and ritualized practices and actions: dirges and lamentations. Both of these have their roots in traditions of communal mourning and lamentation,[59] and while such traditions might have changed dramatically from the time of Ezekiel's composition to the Tannaitic period, it is clear that the rabbis participated in traditions of lamentation and mourning as well.

The prophetic scrolls with writing are "artifactual," and suggest a *type* of knowledge, rather than something specific. Rabbinic interpretation focuses on their material qualities, with size and location being the most prominent. The knowledge they contain and transmit comes from the embodied reactions that these scrolls are meant to engender: the lamentation of a particular city's destruction, the dirge for a particular death or period of mourning. The *Sotah* scroll presents a parallel example to this: in the Mishnah, the rabbis disagree vehemently over the actual words that the scroll is meant to contain,[60] while the ritual itself, at least in its broad strokes, is relatively stable.

Another common theme in the rabbinic reinterpretation and reuse of the scrolls of Ezekiel and Zechariah is the focus on their size. The Bavli, as just shown, uses the stated size of the scroll, and then expands it in order to connect the size of the scroll to the size of the Torah itself — although in this case, the Torah in question is a primordial Torah, and not a synagogue scroll. Leviticus

59 Olyan 2004, 29–39; 49–51.
60 m. *Sotah* 2:3–4.

Rabbah connects the size of the scroll to the entrance to the Sanctuary, yet again underscoring a connection between the image of the scroll and the particularity of knowledge relating to size and distance. This focus on numbers and particularity appears in the later generations of rabbinic interpretation, rather than in our earliest tradition; whether it represents a largescale development, however, remains to be seen. What we *can* say, however, is that Leviticus Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud both connect these prophetic scrolls to objects with loaded ideological valences, and cosmic significance: the Temple and the Torah. Those connections are made materially — through size, through shape, and through proximity. Both of these referents, I think, are understood as microcosms — although in the Torah's case, it might be more correct to say that it is a macrocosm. Either way, the scroll in the prophetic vision is a model of something larger that leads the reader towards it: the Temple, or the Torah, which encompasses the world in turn. It is to this implicit connection between the Torah and the world, and the Torah *as* the world, that I turn next, before concluding.

5 A Blueprint of Wisdom

A well-known late ancient rabbinic midrash on the first verse of Genesis begins not with sweeping claims of God's majesty and power as the creator of the world, but with a lexicographical query into a word that appears in Proverbs 8:30: אמון/*amon*.[61] Proverbs 8 is a lengthy discourse spoken by "Wisdom," sometimes referred to as "Lady Wisdom;" in verse 30, she is charting her own preexistence of the universe, and her role in the divine creation. The verse in question reads, "And I was at his side, an *amon*, and I was his delight every day, playing before him at all times." A few verses earlier, the speaker's preexistence is made clear: she states, "I was there when he established the heavens, when he set the horizon upon the ocean" (Proverbs 8:27). This context is necessary for understanding the rabbinic readings for *amon*. Even alone, the necessity of context combined with the formalized atomization present in the rabbinic reading reveals a remarkable tension between orderly, narrative read-

61 Gen. Rabb. 1:1. The early rabbis were not the only interpreters to have difficulty with this word, or even this entire passage: commentators disagree about its meaning. Michael V. Fox presents possibilities that generally fall into three camps: "artisan," as indicated by the rabbis, "constant," and "nursling" or "child" (which is the preference of the KJV and the NRSV). Fox 2000, 285–289.

ing, and the broader rabbinic conception of scripture as an endless ocean of verses in constant ebb and flow against each other. By attempting to define *amon* in the context of the world's creation, Genesis Rabbah is emphasizing one aspect of Proverbs 8, even as it transports it to another biblical book entirely.

Rabbi Oshaya, in whose name the rabbinic tradition is given, provides three possible translations for the rare word in question.[62] The first possibility is "tutor," translated with a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek *paidagogo*s, פדגוג. The tradition goes on to list "hidden" and "great" as the other possibilities before offering an entirely different exegesis. This tradition, marked by the rabbinic phrase "*d'var aḥer*," or "another thing,"[63] relates the word *oman* to *uman*, composed of the same consonants. It reads thus:

> Another interpretation: *oman* is an *uman*. The Torah says, "I was the tool of the workmanship/faith of the Holy One, Blessed Be He." In the custom of the world, when a human king builds a palace, he does not build it from his own knowledge, but from the knowledge of an *uman*, and the *uman* does not build it from his own knowledge, but he has parchments and notebooks to know how to make rooms, how to make gates. Thus the Holy One, Blessed Be He, looked at the Torah and created the world, and the Torah said "In the beginning, God created" (Gen 1:1). And "beginning" means nothing other than "Torah," and how you might say, "God acquired me at the beginning of his way" (Prov 8:22).[64]

According to Rabbi Oshaya, we should read the first verse of Genesis as "With the Beginning, God created," and understand "Beginning" as the Torah: an identification that the text makes explicitly, along with the connection of "Torah" with "wisdom." It is a particularly material sort of wisdom, however: the wisdom of a craftsman, who lays out plans and blueprints, creating conceptual and physical models of what is to come. The Torah, according to the very beginning of Genesis Rabbah, is nothing other than the physical blueprint of the world. It is also synonymous with wisdom, and it is the beginning of all. The world, then, is built on wisdom — but more than that, it is built *with* wisdom, and from wisdom.

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62 See above, n. 139.

63 A phrase which signifies a different interpretation of the same passage.

64 Gen. Rabb. 1:1: דבר אחר אמון אמן התורה אומרת אני הייתי כלי אמנתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא בנהג שבעולם מלך בשר ודם בונה פלטין אינו בונה אותה מדעת עצמו אלא מדעת אמן והאמן אינו בונה מדעת עצמו אלא דפתראות ופנקסאות יש לו לדעת היאך הוא עושה חדרים היאך הוא עושה פשפשין כך הוה הקדוש ברוך הוא מביט בתורה ובורא את העולם והתורה אמרה בראשית ברא אלהים ואין ראשית אלא תורה היאך מה דאת אמר ה׳ קנני ראשית דרכו

The biblical book of Proverbs is marked at various points by a concern for pedagogy and transmission: when read, the text itself speaks to the listener, formulating itself as a collection of wisdom being transmitted from a father to his children.[65] The text from Genesis Rabbah, likely dating from the fourth century, expands and modifies Proverbs' pedagogical bent. The text itself is the transmitted teaching of one generation to the next; but Rabbi Oshaya adds to that here, making the entire Torah, of which Proverbs is clearly part, into a teacher, a covering, a sense of magnitude, and ultimately, a blueprint. The transmission of knowledge from father to son becomes a part of the scaffolding upon which the world is built, incorporating, in the process, the ideas of shelter and enormity. The interplay between text-as-context and text-as-material is dizzying; the reader is ultimately left with a sense of the rabbis' understanding of wisdom as a divine artifact and tool of creation, while at the same time being the result of a process grounded in the basic realities of human existence.

This text highlights an important and under-examined feature of rabbinic discourse: the fluidity with which intellectual qualities we consider abstract, such as knowledge and wisdom, are portrayed as both physical, material substances and immaterial ideas. This fluidity can be ascribed, in part, to a slippage that at times seems to occur between the method of transmission, and the material being transmitted; Annette Reed has discussed this in earlier Jewish literature, particularly as a function of scribal discourse in the development of forms of knowledge that constitute angels and demons.[66] Aramaic literature in the Second Temple period, she argues, was characterized by a close attention to dynamics of how wisdom and knowledge was transmitted. Oral transmission from teacher to student was prioritized, and written texts came to be understood as material forms of this dynamic of transmission. Scrolls and texts were not knowledge itself, but rather a material manifestation of the process by which knowledge moved from one subject to the next.

Rabbinic discourses of pedagogy, transmission, and the construction of knowledge make use of this discourse, which in turn makes use of older biblical language and ideas about the inculcation of knowledge and wisdom between subjects.[67] It adds additional layers, however, dependent on the context and setting of a particular rabbinic text's composition: amoraic texts from Palestine

65 There is much work on this subject, but see the overview in Fox 2000, 80–82 for a helpful start.

66 Reed 2020, 113–115. Reed is here talking about the coalescence of ideologies of pedagogy and transmission into attitudes about writing and material books.

67 Carr 2005, 126–134.

participate in the discourse of *paideia*, for example, while later Babylonian texts situate knowledge as a product of formal academies — an intervention clearly dependent on the establishment of the early Medieval Islamic academies.[68] My goal here has not been to disentangle and separate these discourses in a particular set of rabbinic texts: indeed, they are so closely intertwined that such an enterprise would be ultimately meaningless. Rather, I present them as plausible background for the shifting and elusive ways that late ancient rabbis spoke about knowledge and wisdom as sometimes material, sometimes ephemeral, sometimes concrete, and always precious.

Learning was described in a variety of manners in classical rabbinic literature, but a common way to describe it, consistent with some of the interpretations seen here, was with sheer physical size: a famous example describes the intellect of an early generation as being as wide as the Temple gateway, the next generation as wide as the sanctuary door, and the current generation as wide as the eye of a needle.[69] This highly material construction of knowledge was made possible by an understanding of the *realia* of learning and reading — scrolls, parchment, papyrus, pens, the human voice, memory — not just as texts to be read or words to be heard, but rather as material objects that could signify in a variety of ways. It is for this reason that the writing on the scrolls of Ezekiel and Zechariah do not matter as much for what words are present: the fact of them, and the fact of the scroll itself, signifies as much as a text might have, just in a different fashion. This paper has served as a test case for this broad assertion: it should be reasonably uncontroversial to point out that knowledge was material for the rabbis, but analyzing the rabbinic interpretation of a few biblical passages focused on prophetic visions of scrolls as bearers of knowledge helps to tease out the specifics of that construction.

My contention here is both very large, and very small. My large claim is that the rabbis understood knowledge as material: as something contained in material, physical subjects and objects, that could be divided, subdivided, moved, and removed. Its presence in those objects could be understood and drawn out. In this way, the world is built on knowledge. My smaller claim, which hopefully helps to bolster and serve as a foundation for the larger, is that rabbinic interpretations of symbolic scrolls in prophetic texts are an aspect of this material understanding of knowledge. These scrolls are more than symbolic: they are urgent messages, containers of divine knowledge, and flying objects that are

68 For an overview of Palestinian rabbinic educational practices, see Hirshman 2012. On the Babylonian context, the classic work is Goodblatt 1975. See also, however, Brody 1998.
69 b. Eruv. 53a.

anything but floating signifiers. They are understood as concrete and real, and every aspect of their materiality conveys information: while they are not necessarily "better" left unread, understood properly, there is simply no need to read them.

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