

“She Returned to Her Father’s House”: The Death of R. Chaninah ben Teradion

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Why was Rabbi Chaninah ben Teradion wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned to death? The Talmud Bavli in Tractate *Avodah Zara* offers several answers to this question by telling a story that evolved over the course of several hundred years. This essay will analyze the Bavli narrative of Rabbi Chaninah ben Teradion’s death and trace the earlier texts which are its building blocks.

The context in the Bavli is a discussion of Mishnah *Avodah Zara* 1:7 which prohibits giving non-Jews either the tools or the structures with which to kill Jews:

We do not sell them bears and lions and all things which could harm

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the masses. We do not build with them a *basilika*¹, a *gardum*², a stadium, or a *bimah*³ ...

The Mishnah is concerned that if Jews sell ferocious animals to non-Jews or help them to build places where executions happen, they will be aiding and abetting the murder of innocents. Non-Jews are portrayed as somewhat arbitrary in their legal proceedings, which is both a source of their danger and also a means of escape. On Bavli *Avodah Zara* 16b, R. Eliezer is caught on charges of sectarianism, which he evades with well chosen words of ambiguous flattery. Later, in Bavli *Avodah Zara* 17b-18a, the story of the execution of R. Chaninah ben Teradion is sandwiched between the tale of the arrest and miraculous acquittal of R. Elazar ben Perata and the near arrest and miraculous escape of R. Meir.

Translation and Structure

- I. It was taught in a *beraita*: When R. Elazar ben Perata and R. Chaninah ben Teradion were arrested, R. Elazar ben Perata said to R. Chaninah ben Teradion, “Fortunate are you that you were arrested on one charge, woe to me that I was arrested on five charges.” R. Chaninah said to him, “Fortunate are you that you were arrested on five charges and you will be saved, woe to me that I have been arrested on one charge and will not be saved. Because you have occupied yourself with Torah and with acts of kindness and I have only occupied myself with Torah.”
 - A. This is as Rav Huna [taught], for Rav Huna said, “All who occupy themselves only with Torah, it is as if they have no God, as it is said,

1. An elevated structure on which the accused was judged and at times executed. Rashi, BT *Avodah Zara* 17a, s.v. *basilika*.
2. “A small platform (usually raised one step) on which the accused is questioned (and at times tortured as part of questioning)” as defined in Daniel Sperber, *A Dictionary of Greek and Latin Legal Terms in Rabbinic Literature* (Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University Press, 1984), 76.
3. “An elevated platform serving as seat of judge or tribunal” as defined in Daniel Sperber, *A Dictionary of Greek and Latin Legal Terms in Rabbinic Literature* (Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University Press, 1984), 70.

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*And there were many days in Israel without a true God*⁴. What is [the meaning of] *without a true God*? All who occupy themselves only with Torah, it is as if they have no God.

- B. And did [R. Chaninah ben Teradion] really not occupy himself with acts of kindness?
1. Is it not taught in a *beraita*, A person should not give his money to the charity purse unless it is in the charge of a Sage like R. Chaninah ben Teradion.
 2. He was appointed because he was trustworthy, but he did not do it.
 3. Is it not taught in a *beraita*, [R. Chaninah ben Teradion] said, "I confused Purim money with charity money and distributed them to the poor."
 4. He did [acts of kindness], but not as it was needed to be done.
- II. They brought R. Elazar ben Perata.
- A. They said to him, "Why did you study and why did you steal?" He said to them, "If the sword, then not the book and if the book, then not the sword. And since not this one, also not that one."
- B. [They said to him], "Why do they call you Master?" [He said] "Master, the master of weavers."
1. They brought him two coils [of thread] and said to him, "Which is the warf and which is the weft?" A miracle occurred and a female wasp came and sat on the warf and a male wasp came and sat on the weft. He said to them, "This is the warf and this is the weft."
- C. They said to him, "And why did you not come to the House of Avidan?" He said to them, "I am old and feared that you would trample me with your feet."
1. They said, "And until now how many old men have been trampled?" A miracle occurred on that day an old man was trampled.
- D. [They said to him], "And why did you set your slave free?" He said to them, "That never happened!"
1. One of them stood to testify against him. Elijah came disguised as one of the important figures of the government. [Elijah] said

4. Chronicles II 15:3.

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to him, “Since miracles have occurred for him in all of the other [charges], in this as well, a miracle will occur and you will display your perfidy.” He did not heed him and stood to talk. A letter was written by the important government figures to be sent to the Caesar and it was sent with that man. Elijah came and threw him 400 parasangs. He left and did not return.

III. They brought R. Chaninah ben Teradion.

- A. They asked him, “Why have you occupied yourself with the Torah?” He replied, “Thus the Lord my God commanded me.”
- B. At once they sentenced him to be burnt, his wife to be slain, and his daughter to be consigned to a brothel.
 1. The punishment of being burnt came upon him because he pronounced God’s Name in its full spelling.
 - a. And how did he do this? Is it not taught in a Mishnah⁵, these are those who have no portion in the world to come: One who says the Torah is not from Heaven, and the resurrection of the dead is not from the Torah. Abba Shaul says: Even one who pronounces God’s Name in its full spelling.
 - b. It is different when one is teaching oneself. As it is taught in a *beraita*, *Do not learn to do [like the abominations of those nations⁶]* — but you learn to understand and to instruct.
 - c. Rather then, what is the reason that he was punished? Because he pronounced God’s name in public.
 2. And his wife was to be slain, because she did not prevent him [from doing it].
 - a. From this it was deduced: Anyone who has the power to prevent [one from doing wrong] and does not prevent, is punished for him.
 3. His daughter to be consigned to a brothel, for R. Yochanan related that once she was walking in front of some great men of Rome who

5. Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10:1.

6. Deuteronomy 18:9.

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remarked, “How beautiful are the steps of this maiden!” Whereupon she took particular care of her steps.

- a. And this is as R. Shimon ben Lakish said: What is the meaning of the verse, *the sins of my heel surround me*⁷? Sins that a person grinds with his foot in this world surround him on the day of judgment.

IV. As the three of them went out they justified upon themselves the [Divine] Judgment.

A. He said: *Rock whose ways are perfect*⁸.

B. And his wife said: *God is faithfulness and has no iniquity*⁹.

C. His daughter said: *Great is counsel and multitudinous is the plot for your eyes are open upon the ways of all people to give each person according to his ways and the fruits of his actions*¹⁰.

D. Rabbi said: How great were these righteous ones, that verses of justification of [Divine] Judgment came to them at the time of justifying [Divine] Judgment.

V. Our Rabbis taught: When R. Yossi ben Kisma became ill, R. Chaninah ben Teradion went to visit him.

A. He said, “Chaninah my brother, do you not know that this nation was empowered by God? They have destroyed God’s home and burned God’s palace and killed God’s pious ones and destroyed God’s good ones and they still exist! And I heard that you sit and study Torah and assemble groups publicly and have a Torah scroll resting in your bosom.” [R. Chaninah] said, “Heaven will have mercy.” [R. Yossi ben Kisma] said, “I am telling you sensible things and you say to me Heaven will have mercy! I would be surprised if they do not burn you and the Torah scroll in fire!”

B. [R. Chaninah] said, “Rabbi, what am I for the world to come?” [R. Yossi ben Kisma] said, “Has any event come to your hand?” [R. Chaninah]

7. Psalms 49:6.

8. Deuteronomy 32:4.

9. Deuteronomy 32:4.

10. Jeremiah 32:19.

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said, "I confused money of Purim with charity money and I distributed both to the poor." [R. Yossi ben Kisma] said, "If so, may your portion be as my portion and your fate as my fate."

- C. They said: it was but a few days before R. Yossi ben Kisma died and all of the great ones of Rome went to bury him and they eulogized him greatly.
- VI. And when they returned they found R. Chaninah sitting and studying Torah and assembling groups publicly with a Torah scroll resting in his bosom. They brought him and wrapped him in the Torah scroll and surrounded it with vines and ignited the fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that his soul would not leave him quickly.
- A. His daughter exclaimed, "Father, that I should see you in this state!" He replied, "If it were I alone being burnt it would have been a thing hard to bear; but now that I am being burned and the Torah scroll [is being burned] with me, the One who seeks retribution for the Torah Scroll will seek retribution for me."
- B. His students said, "Rabbi, what do you see?" He said to them, "The parchments are burning but the letters are flying." "You should open your mouth so that the fire will enter you." He said to them, "It is better that [my soul] be taken by the One who gave it, but the man should not injure himself."
- C. The Executioner said to him, "Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you bring me into the life of the world to come?" He said to him, "Yes." he replied. "Swear to me." He swore to him.
- VII. [The Executioner] raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul left quickly.
- A. The Executioner then jumped and threw himself into the fire. And a voice from Heaven came out and said, "R. Chaninah ben Teradion and the Executioner are invited into the life of the world to come."
- B. When Rabbi heard it he wept and said: One may acquire his world in a single hour, and one may acquire his world in many years.

Literary Analysis

The story of the arrest and execution of R. Chaninah ben Teradion is told in the context of the arrest and acquittal of R. Elazar ben Perata. The story has seven parts. Part I introduces the simultaneous arrest of both Rabbis and R. Chaninah's prediction that R. Elazar ben Perata would escape but that he himself would not. Part II describes the charges levied against R. Elazar ben Perata and the wiliness and unabashed deception that he employs to win his freedom. By contrast, in part III, R. Chaninah ben Teradion immediately concedes the truth of the charges against him and the story elaborates upon the reasons that he and his family are to suffer. Part IV details R. Chaninah ben Teradion, his wife and his daughter all publicly accepting God's judgment upon themselves. In part V, the story goes back in time to recount a conversation in which R. Yossi ben Kisma predicts R. Chaninah's death if he continues to publicly teach Torah. This part is thematically linked to part III and part IV in that R. Chaninah ben Teradion consistently and stoically accepts his fate. Yet, instead of seeking a transgression for which R. Chaninah's death is a punishment, in part V R. Chaninah is presented as the quintessential hero, willing to continue to study Torah despite the danger. Parts VI and VII describe the scene at R. Chaninah ben Teradion's death, and concludes with the conversion and voluntary martyrdom of his executioner.

Each part of the story functions as its own mini subsection. The seven part structure serves to highlight the middle part, part IV which is the core of the story. In part IV R. Chaninah ben Teradion, his wife, and his daughter recite verses indicating their complete acceptance of God's judgment. This part has been lifted almost verbatim from *Sifrei Devarim* 307, which will be discussed below. R. Chaninah's refusal to try to escape his fate is the essential element of the story and it stands out all the more since it is presented in the context of R. Elazar ben Perata's audacious arguing. R. Chaninah's unwillingness to engage in this kind of verbal jousting is both admirable and suspect. The story wavers between faulting him for his death and glorifying his willingness to die. A key question that the story explores is whether R. Chaninah's death is a fitting punishment or an awe-inspiring martyrdom.

- I. It was taught in a *beraita*: When R. Elazar ben Perata and R. Chaninah ben Teradion were arrested, R. Elazar ben Perata said to R. Chaninah ben Teradion, "Fortunate are you that you were arrested on one charge,

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woe to me that I was arrested on five charges.” R. Chaninah said to him, “Fortunate are you that you were arrested on five charges and you will be saved, woe to me that I have been arrested on one charge and will not be saved. Because you have occupied yourself with Torah and with acts of kindness and I have only occupied myself with Torah.”

The opening of the story establishes two key themes. One, that R. Chaninah ben Teradion is resigned¹¹ to his fate, and the second that he assumes that his fate is the result of malfeasance on his part.

A. This is as Rav Huna [taught], for Rav Huna said, “All who occupy themselves only with Torah, it is as if they have no God, as it is said, *And there were many days in Israel without a true God.*¹² What is [the meaning of] *without a true God*? All who occupy themselves only with Torah, it is as if they have no God.

The fault which R. Chaninah ben Teradion attributes to himself is an all-encompassing focus on Torah to the exclusion of doing other good deeds. This foreshadows later parts of the story where R. Chaninah’s commitment to Torah study at all costs will be criticized by R. Yossi ben Kisma. Right from the start, R. Chaninah is associated with a complete immersion in Torah study. His identification with Torah study will be literalized as the story continues and the Torah scroll becomes his second skin.

B. And did [R. Chaninah ben Teradion] really not occupy himself with acts of kindness?

1. Is it not taught [in a beraita], A person should not give his money to the charity purse unless it is in the charge of a Sage like R. Chaninah ben Teradion.
2. He was appointed because he was trustworthy, but he did not do it.
3. Is it not taught in a beraita, [R. Chaninah ben Teradion] said, “I

11. Interestingly, Gerald Blidstein reads R. Chaninah’s resignation in light of the *Bavli*’s assertion later that R. Chaninah insists on teaching Torah publicly and he claims that “Perhaps this is the ironic meaning of Hanina’s reply to Elazar: my crime—that of open spiritual confrontation—will not permit me to be saved.” Gerald Blidstein, “Rabbis, Romans, and Martyrdom — Three Views” *Tradition* 21 (1983–85), 57.

12. Chronicles II 15:3.

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confused Purim money with charity money and distributed them to the poor.”

4. He did [acts of kindness], but not as it was needed to be done.

The Talmud now is faced with a quandary. Could the righteous martyr R. Chaninah ben Teradion really not have done good deeds? A *beraita* is cited, evincing that R. Chaninah was a faithful charity collector. The Talmud concludes that R. Chaninah had indeed done good deeds, but not to the extent nor in the manner that they should have been done.

Jonathan Wyn Socher, in his article, “Protest or Pedagogy? Trivial Sin and Divine Justice in Rabbinic Narrative”¹³ notes that rabbinic stories about Divine Justice tend to question God’s justice and to resolve the question by accusing the suffering righteous person of a minor transgression. Socher argues that these two tendencies are conflicting:

The first considers events that reveal the limits of rabbinic abilities to interpret their world in terms of divine justice ... The second is a pedagogical motif that is prevalent in rabbinic ethical literature: Sages uphold small virtues and warn against small vices for their students as religious elites, employing dramatic claims of drastic consequences. This motif implies a very strong confidence in God’s justice, not a struggle with theodicy.¹⁴

Socher claims that the impulse to question God’s justice is the opposite of the desire to claim that God’s judgment is so exact that even minor transgressions are punished. In his analysis of several rabbinic tales, he demonstrates that editors vary between emphasizing the challenge to Divine Justice and stressing the appropriateness of the punishment. It is worth noting that in the stories Socher examines, the one who suffers challenges God’s judgment, and someone else explains the suffering as punishment for a small sin. In the case of R. Chaninah, he himself provides a reason for his punishment and the *Bavli* editors question whether in fact R. Chaninah had transgressed as he claimed he had.

This tango between wanting to blame R. Chaninah ben Teradion and

13. Jonathan Wyn Socher, “Protest or Pedagogy? Trivial Sin and Divine Justice in Rabbinic Narrative” *HUCA* 74 (2003), 243–278.

14. Jonathan Wyn Socher, “Protest or Pedagogy? Trivial Sin and Divine Justice in Rabbinic Narrative” *HUCA* 74 (2003), 246.

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wanting to defend him continues throughout the story. There is a simultaneous desire to find a reason for R. Chaninah's death and to contest that reason, so as not to besmirch him.

II. They brought R. Elazar ben Perata.

- A. They said to him, "Why did you study and why did you steal¹⁵?" He said to them, "If the sword, then not the book and if the book, then not the sword. And since not this one, also not that one."
- B. [They said to him], "Why do they call you Master?" [He said] "Master, the master of weavers"
 - 1. They brought him two coils [of thread] and said to him, "Which is the warp and which is the weft?" A miracle occurred and a female wasp came and sat on the warp and a male wasp came and sat on the weft. He said to them, "This is the warp and this is the weft."¹⁶
- C. They said to him, "And why did you not come to the House of Avidan¹⁷?" He said to them, "I am old and feared that you would trample me with your feet."

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- 15. Gerald Blidstein claims that "To be a 'robber' in Roman parlance was really to be rebel, a fighter for Jewish independence." Blidstein assumes that all of the charges against R. Elazar ben Perata are accurate and his activist denial of them coheres with the assertion that he was an activist against Roman rule. Gerald Blidstein, "Rabbis, Romans, and Martyrdom — Three Views" *Tradition* 21 (1983–85), 56–57.
 - 16. Rashi explains that the R. Elazar ben Perata was able to identify the warp once the female wasp sat on it, because the warp "receives the weft as the female receives the male." See Rashi on *Talmud Bavli Avodah Zara* 17b, s.v. *ata ziburta*. Female wasps are larger than male wasps and only the female wasps have stingers, and so perhaps that was how R. Elazar ben Perata was able to distinguish between them. Tosafot, on the other hand, doubt that R. Elazar ben Perata would have been able to identify the sex of the wasps, "it is not so recognizable in such a small species between the male and the female." They posit instead that it was two different species. Tosafot on *Talmud Bavli Avodah Zara* 17b, s.v. *ata ziburta*.
 - 17. Reuven Kimelman notes "Caesarea itself had a meeting place (*odeum*) where religious controversies were held. The *odeum* is probably to be identified with one of the *בתי מדרש* of rabbinic literature." Reuven Kimelman, "R. Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third Century Jewish-Christian Disputation" *Harvard Theological Review* 73, no. 3–4 (July-October 1980), 571. Daniel Boyarin though argues "In the context of this story, it almost certainly must be a place for pagan worship and not a site for disputations between Jews, Christians, and pagans for if it were the latter, how would the Rabbi's attendance or absence been indicative of

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1. They said, “And until now how many old men have been trampled?”
A miracle occurred on that day an old man was trampled.
- D. [They said to him], “And why did you set your slave free?” He said to them, “That never happened!”
 1. One of them stood to testify against him. Elijah came disguised as one of the important figures of the government. [Elijah] said to him, “Since miracles have occurred for him in all of the other [charges], in this as well, a miracle will occur and you will display your perfidy.” He did not heed him and stood to talk. A letter was written by the important government figures to be sent to the Caesar and it was sent with that man. Elijah came and threw him 400 parasangs. He left and did not return.

The story then describes R. Elazar ben Perata’s escape from his charges. Using a combination of verbal games and outright lies, and aided by some miracles, R. Elazar manages to refute all of the charges. R. Chaninah has already explained that R. Elazar would be successful in this because of his good deeds. All the same, R. Elazar uses skill and trickery to refute the charges against him, in contrast to R. Chaninah who passively affirms the one charge levied against him.

The choice to tell the story of R. Chaninah ben Teradion’s death immediately after the tale of R. Elazar ben Perata highlights R. Chanina’s straightforward acceptance of his fate.¹⁸ This is further emphasized by the verses that he and his wife and daughter cite and by his exchange with R. Yossi ben Kisma.

his religious identity?” Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 167 n. 44. It could be, though, that R. Elazar ben Perata is being accused of not taking part in communal life, in which case it might be that there was a civic duty to attend disputations. It is worth noting that elsewhere in the *Bavli* where the House of Avidan is mentioned, it is also in the context of a non-Jewish authority asking a Rabbi why he has not come to the House of Avidan. See *Talmud Bavli Shabbat* 116a (Rava is asked why he has not come to the House of Avidan) and *Talmud Bavli Shabbat* 152a (R. Yehoshua ben Channaniah is asked why he has not come to the House of Avidan). Both Rava and R. Yehoshua ben Channaniah respond with seemingly made up excuses, but neither needs to rely on a miracle to help make their argument. The fact that the third generation Babylonian *amora* Rava and the *tanna* R. Elazar ben Perata are both asked about attending the House of Avidan seems to indicate that it is a trope rather than an actual place.

18. Others have understood R. Elazar ben Perata’s miraculous deliverance as an

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- III. They brought R. Chaninah ben Teradion.
- A. They asked him, “Why have you occupied yourself with the Torah?” He replied, “Thus the Lord my God commanded me.”
 - B. At once they sentenced him to be burnt, his wife to be slain, and his daughter to be consigned to a brothel.
 - 1. The punishment of being burnt came upon him because he pronounced God’s Name in its full spelling.
 - a. And how did he do this? Is it not taught in a Mishnah¹⁹, these are those who have no portion in the world to come: One who says the Torah is not from Heaven, and the resurrection of the dead is not from the Torah. Abba Shaul says: Even one who pronounces God’s Name in its full spelling.
 - b. It is different when one is teaching oneself. As it is taught in a *beraita*, *Do not learn to do [like the abominations of those nations²⁰]* — but you learn to understand and to instruct.
 - c. Rather then, what is the reason that he was punished? Because he pronounced God’s name in public.

The *Bavli* is attempting to answer two questions. Why do the Romans want to kill R. Chaninah ben Teradion? And, what has he done wrong such that God will let him be killed? In the *Bavli*’s opinion there are two separate crimes. The Romans accuse R. Chaninah of occupying himself with Torah, a charge to which he handily accedes. Still though, if all he had done was teach and study Torah, surely the Torah should have protected him²¹. Therefore the *Bavli* lists

indication of his greater worthiness than R. Chaninah. See Jan Willem van Henten, “Jewish and Christian Martyrs” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 178. I believe that the story is not highlighting the greater virtue of one party, but rather a calculated difference in responding to the hostile authorities.

19. *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1.

20. Deuteronomy 18:9.

21. See Jan Willem van Henten, “Jewish and Christian Martyrs” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 174 in which he claims that, “the great attention in the first account to the sins of R. Hanina as a means of explaining his execution, implying that his violent death functioned as a personal atonement, also seems to relativize

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another reason for R. Chaninah's punishment, other than teaching Torah²². He pronounced the name of God in public, as part of his teaching. The two crimes share similarities. In both cases, R. Chaninah in his zeal to study and to teach, ignores basic restrictions and boundaries.

R. Chaninah's original confession about himself, that he studied Torah to the exclusion of doing good deeds, also indicates an overweening passion for Torah. Yet public teaching is not a factor and so it seems to be part of a different tradition of R. Chaninah ben Teradion's misdeeds.

2. And his wife was to be slain, because she did not prevent him [from doing it].
 - a. From this it was deduced: Anyone who has the power to prevent [one from doing wrong] and does not prevent, is punished for him.
3. His daughter to be consigned to a brothel, for R. Yochanan related that once she was walking in front of some great men of Rome who remarked, "How beautiful are the steps of this maiden!" Whereupon she took particular care of her steps.
 - a. And this is as R. Shimon ben Lakish said: What is the meaning of the verse, *the sins of my heel surround me*²³? Sins that a person grinds with his foot in this world surround him on the day of judgment.

Reasons are also sought for the punishments of R. Chaninah ben Teradion's wife and daughter. Their misdeeds seem mild and do not warrant the harsh

his martyrdom or make it ambiguous." By contrast, Jonathan Socher argues that a goal of attributing a sin to a sage is that Rome is thereby disempowered. "This ...removes agency from Rome and the realm of political action and places it in the realm of the Rabbis' God. Rather than being killed for practicing Jewish law, they are being killed for not sufficiently fulfilling rabbinic ideals." Jonathan Wyn Socher, "Protest or Pedagogy? Trivial Sin and Divine Justice in Rabbinic Narrative" *HUCA* 74 (2003), 257.

22. Yaakov Elman argues that the Babylonian Talmud expresses a belief that sometimes the righteous suffer even if they have not sinned. See Yaakov Elman, "Righteousness as its Own Reward: An Inquiry into the Theologies of the Stam" *PAAJR* 72 (1990-91), 35-67. In this story, though, the *Bavli* is actively seeking out a sin that could have caused R. Chaninah ben Teradion's suffering.

23. Psalms 49:6.

penalties meted out²⁴. R. Chaninah's wife is accused of not preventing him from teaching his students with the full pronunciation of God's name. Intriguingly, the text presumes that the wife had knowledge of her husband's pedagogy and a potential veto over what he taught.

R. Chaninah's daughter's punishment is especially grotesque. She has neither done nor not done an action, only taken more care with the way she was already walking. *Bavli Shabbat* 66b describes how the women of Jerusalem would walk in a deliberately seductive manner. Using a verse from Isaiah 3:16 as an anchor, the *Bavli* describes how the women would take mincing steps and line their shoes with alluring spices, such that when they came across the young men of Israel, the women would kick the ground, release the fragrances and "cause the evil inclination to enter [the young men] like the venom of a viper." In the *Bavli's* understanding of Isaiah 3:16, seductive walking is a metaphor for a mode of behavior that seems innocent (the women are not technically committing a violation), but is calculated to encourage sin.

By contrast, R. Chaninah's daughter did not deliberately entice the Romans. She was walking on her way, but she takes pleasure in their compliment and takes more deliberate care with her steps. The teaching brought by R. Shimon ben Lakish as a proof-text, that "Sins that a person grinds with his foot in this world surround him on the day of judgment" further highlights the seemingly trivial nature of the daughter's wrongdoing and the extremity of her punishment. For each of the three family members, there is a desire to find a transgression that justifies their fate. Simultaneously though, the mildness of their wrongdoing reifies their status as righteous people and makes it all the more impressive that they unflinchingly accept God's judgment.

IV. As the three of them went out they justified upon themselves the [Divine] Judgment.

A. He said: *Rock whose ways are perfect*²⁵.

24. Ra'anán Boustán points out that rabbinic texts "systematically attribute the martyr's suffering and death to his individual failings, however slight. The very triviality of these sins attributed to the martyr serves to represent the rabbinic martyr as a paragon of virtue." Boustán calls this, fittingly, "The Peccadillo Motif." Ra'anán Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 56, 63.

25. Deuteronomy 32:4.

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- B. And his wife said: *God is faithfulness and has no iniquity*²⁶.
- C. His daughter said: *Great is counsel and multitudinous is the plot for your eyes are open upon the ways of all people to give each person according to his ways and the fruits of his actions*²⁷.
- D. Rabbi said: How great were these righteous ones, that verses of justification of [Divine] Judgment came to them at the time of justifying [Divine] Judgment.

This is the core part of the narrative. R. Chaninah ben Teradion, his wife, and his daughter all willingly accept the decrees against them. Unlike R. Elazar ben Perata, they do not engage in subterfuge or ambiguous word play. Indeed, they do not even address their accusers directly. They understand their fate as an expression of God's will, and they recite verses indicating their complete submission. R. Chaninah and his wife each recite a half of the same verse in Deuteronomy, both proclaiming the flawlessness of God's ways. The daughter recites Jeremiah 32:19, which highlights the retributive and fair nature of God's justice. Indeed, the *Bavli* connects most closely her misdeed (of provocative walking) with her punishment (of forced prostitution). Rabbi, upon hearing this story, commends not only their choice of verses, but also their ability to summon those verses at the moment of judgment.

Their recitation of these verses indicates a certain cordoning off of the characters from their oppressors. They are not engaging with their accusers, neither pleading for mercy nor attempting to disprove the charges. Instead they see the persecutors as instruments of God's will. As such the authorities have no relevance of their own and no agency to do other than God has commanded.

- V. Our Rabbis taught: When R. Yossi ben Kisma became ill, R. Chaninah ben Teradion went to visit him.
 - A. He said, "Chaninah my brother, do you not know that this nation was empowered by God? They have destroyed God's home and burned God's palace and killed God's pious ones and destroyed God's good ones and they still exist! And I heard that you sit and study Torah and assemble groups publicly and have a Torah scroll resting in your

26. Deuteronomy 32:4.

27. Jeremiah 32:19.

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bosom.” [R. Chaninah] said, “Heaven will have mercy.” [R. Yossi ben Kisma] said, “I am telling you sensible things and you say to me Heaven will have mercy! I would be surprised if they do not burn you and the Torah scroll in fire!”

Here the chronology of the story shifts directions. The section begins again with “Our Rabbis taught,” generally indicating that the redactors are introducing a new piece of source material²⁸. We move back in time to a period before R. Chaninah’s arrest. R. Yossi ben Kisma offers an alternate vision of what it means to submit to God’s decree. He argues that God has empowered the Romans and so submitting to the Romans is on par with submitting to God²⁹. R. Chaninah ben Teradion does not engage with R. Yossi ben Kisma’s argument. Instead he replies, “Heaven will have mercy.” This could either be an indication that R. Chaninah accepts R. Yossi ben Kisma’s argument and so is hoping that God will forgive him for flouting the Romans. More likely though, he is brushing off R. Yossi ben Kisma’s advice.

Certainly, R. Yossi ben Kisma seems to understand it as a side-step. Bristling, he chastises R. Chaninah for ignoring sound advice and predicts a violent outcome for R. Chaninah and his Torah.

B. [R. Chaninah] said, “Rabbi, what am I for the world to come?” [R. Yossi ben Kisma] said, “Has any event come to your hand?” [R. Chaninah] said, “I confused money of Purim with charity money and I distributed both to the poor.” [R. Yossi ben Kisma] said, “If so, may your portion be as my portion and your fate as my fate.”

Once again, R. Chaninah does not dispute R. Yossi ben Kisma. He understands that he is likely to die for his continued public Torah study. This is a key moment in the martyrdom narrative, as it is critical that the martyr be

28. Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 25. I am indebted to Sara Labaton for bringing this point to my attention.

29. Boyarin suggests more strongly, “... there is more than a hint here, in the voice of R. Yose the son of Kisma, at a quietist theological position antithetical to that of the martyr. It is God who sent the Romans to rule over the Jews, and the rebellious act of provocatively gathering crowds to study in public is thus rebellion against God’s will.” Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 58.

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presented with the option to save himself and yet still choose to go forward with his course of behavior. Jan Willem van Henten, in his article, “Jewish and Christian Martyrs,” outlines the motifs of a martyr text:

Such martyr texts describe how a certain person, in an extremely hostile situation, preferred a violent death to compliance with a decree or demand of the (usually) pagan authorities. The martyr decides to die rather than obey the foreign government ... By giving up one's convictions, renouncing Jewish or Christian identity or stopping the activity that would force the foreign government to intervene, the would-be martyr could have prevented his or her execution³⁰.

R. Chaninah's interaction with R. Yossi ben Kisma reinforces the choice presented at the beginning of the narrative. It is not just that when arrested by the authorities, R. Chaninah did not choose to obfuscate or deny his Torah activities. The story claims that even earlier in a non-threatening environment, R. Chaninah was presented with the choice to save himself by ceasing the forbidden activity. R. Chaninah twice chooses, both with his colleague and with the authorities, to die rather than disclaim the public teaching of Torah.

It is noteworthy that the redactors do not tell the story in chronological order. We begin with R. Chaninah's arrest and then circle back to R. Yossi ben Kisma's earlier warning. Perhaps this is because the redactors wanted to contrast R. Elazar ben Perata's and R. Chaninah ben Teradion's differing responses to the charges against them. Once the comparison is set, the redactors introduce a second source, using the phrase “Our Rabbis taught” to mark the transition. This second source echoes and confirms R. Chaninah's refusal to try to deter his fate.

R. Chaninah is interested, though, in what will happen after his death. He wonders about his chances at a portion in the world to come³¹. Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma asks him if any event has come to his hand. This cryptic question seems

30. Jan Willem van Henten, “Jewish and Christian Martyrs” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 165–166.

31. Shmuel Shepkaru notes that Chaninah does not assume that martyrdom alone would guarantee a portion in the world to come. “This question to R. Jose ben Kisma projects Teradyon's own doubts regarding his fate after death. Voluntary death is not to be the determining factor of his fate.” Shmuel Shepkaru, “From After Death to Afterlife: Martyrdom and its Recompense” *AJS Review* 24 (1999),

to be understood by Chaninah ben Teradion as a query as to any particular merits he may have accrued? R. Chaninah responds with a description of his zealotry in giving charity. When he accidentally confuses two pots of money, he distributes both to the poor. This pious behavior impresses R. Yossi ben Kisma, leading him to proclaim, "If so, may your portion be as my portion and your fate as my fate³²."

Saul Lieberman suggests a different reading³³. He claims that generally the question of "Has any event come to your hand?" means "Have you engaged in any dubious behavior³⁴?" Lieberman claims that Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma is asking what is causing R. Chaninah to doubt his portion in the world to come. R. Chaninah responds that he confused two collections of money and even though he tried to correct it, perhaps it was problematic to change money from one purpose to another. R. Yossi ben Kisma's reaction is that if this is the worst thing that you can think of that you have done, "may your portion be as my portion and your fate as my fate."

R. Yossi ben Kisma disagrees with R. Chaninah's choice to continue public Torah study and predicts a horrible death for him, but ultimately, he wishes to share R. Chaninah's fate. This desire to share the martyr's fate and reward will be echoed again at the end of the story.

C. They said: it was but a few days before R. Yossi ben Kisma died and all

25. Shepkaru argues that a theology connecting martyrdom with personal reward begins much later with the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade, 32–44.

32. Shepkaru again notes, "Teradyon's merit is not based on his voluntary death; distribution of his own money to the poor secured his place in the world to come." Shmuel Shepkaru, "From After Death to Afterlife: Martyrdom and its Recompense" *AJS Review* 24 (1999), 26.

33. Saul Lieberman, "Redifat Dat Yisrael" in *The Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Saul Lieberman (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1975), 220.

34. Lieberman lists several other examples; *Talmud Bavli Beitzah* 9b, *Talmud Bavli Babba Kamma* 117a, *Talmud Bavli Niddah* 24a, *Talmud Yerushalmi Kidushin* 3:12, 64d. Lieberman, "Redifat Dat Yisrael." 220 n. 46. In all of these other cases, the person responds to the question with a legal ruling that they have recently rendered which is then rejected by the questioner. This perhaps is why Lieberman understands the question as accusatory. I think it is not necessarily the case. It could be a neutral question which in some cases leads the respondent to divulge erroneous decisions, but in other cases leads to a description of praiseworthy behavior.

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of the great ones of Rome went to bury him and they eulogized him greatly.

It seems that R. Yossi ben Kisma's illness was fatal and that his counsel to R. Chaninah was his parting advice. When R. Yossi ben Kisma dies a few days later, it is no surprise that the Roman nobles come out to mourn him in full force. Given that R. Yossi ben Kisma had been preaching the divinely ordained triumph of Rome and thus the requirement of Jewish obedience to Roman rule, it makes sense that he would be a favorite of the "great ones of Rome." The Roman nobles find R. Chaninah teaching Torah publicly as they are returning from R. Yossi ben Kisma's funeral. In this way, the R. Yossi ben Kisma story is folded back into the larger narrative of the death of R. Chaninah ben Teradion. The narrative returns to where it had been before the Yossi ben Kisma digression, namely directly after the decrees are pronounced against R. Chaninah and his family. In addition, the contrast of R. Chaninah's disobedience of Roman law is made all the more blatant as it follows the funeral of the great accommodationist.

VI. And when they returned they found R. Chaninah sitting and studying Torah and assembling groups publicly with a Torah scroll resting in his bosom. They brought him and wrapped him in the Torah scroll and surrounded it with vines and ignited the fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that his soul would not leave him quickly.

It seems that the story has now moved forward in time, to where we had left the characters in part IV. R. Chaninah, his wife, and his daughter have been informed of their punishments and each has accepted his/her own punishment without demur. R. Chaninah's punishment is now meted out in intricate layered detail. First he is wrapped in the scroll, then vines are placed to secure it around him and finally, wet wool is placed over his heart to prolong his agony. These details will help trace the evolution of the story, but they are also critical in that R. Chaninah's protracted death will give him a chance to have several crucial conversations.

A. His daughter exclaimed, "Father, that I should see you in this state!" He replied, "If it were I alone being burnt it would have been a thing hard to bear; but now that I am being burned and the Torah scroll [is

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being burned] with me, the One who seeks retribution (lit. asks about the insult) for the Torah Scroll will seek retribution (ask about the insult) for me.”

R. Chaninah’s daughter is the first to react. She does not question the decree, but she laments that she is to witness his suffering. The seeing of a martyrdom is a critical component of its power. Acts of martyrdom are not private. They are calculated to impact those who view them. It is not clear if the daughter is bewailing her father’s fate or her own fate in being forced to watch it. R. Chaninah responds by saying that it is better to be burned with a Torah than to be burned alone, because as God will surely seek vengeance for the burning of the Torah, God will avenge R. Chaninah’s death as well.

This is a puzzling statement. One might think it would be better to be burned without the Torah and that the burning of the Torah is its own distinct tragedy. Also, it is unclear why the eventual vengeance mitigates the pain that the daughter feels upon being forced to view her father’s suffering³⁵. Despite his initial acceptance of his fate, here R. Chaninah seems to feel that he is being wronged and he is comforted in his belief that God will right the wrong. This makes more sense if R. Chaninah’s crime is violating the Roman ban on teaching Torah. If instead, R. Chaninah’s death is a just punishment for pronouncing God’s name in vain, perhaps he is criticizing the overtly harsh way in which his death is executed³⁶. Either way, R. Chaninah’s statement is a departure from his completely passive stoic acceptance of his fate in part IV and highlights an internal tension within the story. Apparently one can accept God’s judgment and yet still seek retribution against those who carry it out³⁷. Additionally, the language that the *Bavli* uses *מי שמבקש עלבונה* “the one who asks about the insult of” may indicate that

35. Jonathan Crane sees this as R. Chaninah bequeathing “to her a particular world view, complete with its value system, in which she could take comfort.” Jonathan Crane, *Narrative and Jewish Bioethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 51.

36. See *Bavli Ketubot* 111a where God makes the nations of the world swear not to subjugate Israel too harshly.

37. See *Bavli Gittin* 56a where Nero says, “The Holy One Blessed be He wants to destroy His House and to put the blame on me” and Tractate *Kallah*, “And if you will not kill me God has many agents of death ... Rather in the end, God will extract retribution for my blood from your hand.”

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Rabbi Chaninah feels that there is something degrading about this public spectacle³⁸.

B. His students said, “Rabbi, what do you see?” He said to them, “The parchments are burning but the letters are flying.” “You should open your mouth so that the fire will enter you.” He said to them, “It is better that [my soul] be taken by the One who gave it, but the man should not injure himself.”

This is the first time in the narrative that students are introduced. Indeed, in all of the earlier iterations of this story, there are no students present. For the *Bavli* though, a teacher’s death is a time for important instruction to be conveyed to students and so of course they must be there. The students ask two questions and learn two important lessons. The first is “Rabbi, what do you see?” As opposed to the daughter who bemoans what she must see, the students are curious about what it is that R. Chaninah is seeing³⁹. They assume that as their master, he has a perspective and an insight that they do not possess and they want him to share it with them. He responds that even though the parchment is burning, he sees the letters flying upwards. Even though the Torah is burned, it is not destroyed. Presumably, since he and the Torah have become physically intertwined, the burning of his body similarly does not prefigure the destruction of the essential aspects of himself.

His students then suggest, quite reasonably, “You should open your mouth so that the fire will enter you.” He should open his mouth and end his pain sooner. R. Chaninah responds that even though the physical self is not a person’s ultimate essence, one should not hasten one’s own death, even in the presence of extreme suffering. This statement seems aligned with R. Chaninah’s complete acceptance of his fate in part IV.

38. Interestingly, the phrase *מי שמבקש עלבונה* does not appear elsewhere in rabbinic literature. There is a related phrase in *Avot* 6:2 where R. Yehoshua ben Levi castigates those who do not study Torah by saying “אוי להם לבריות מעלבונה של תורה”. There it seems that the Torah’s dignity has been offended, not through its active destruction by fire, but rather through a passive disengagement.

39. H.A. Fischel claims that martyrs were thought to have had a special power of vision, akin to prophecy, as they were about to die. H.A. Fischel, “Martyr and Prophet,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 37 (1947), 364–365. This would explain the students’ particular question of “Rabbi, what do you see?”

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- C. The Executioner said to him, “Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you bring me into the life of the world to come?” He said to him, “Yes.” he replied. “Swear to me.” He swore to him.

The Executioner, who presumably has heard this exchange, offers to intercede and end the Rabbi’s torment in exchange for a promise of passage into the world to come. R. Chaninah readily agrees to this, even though this falls somewhere in between him injuring himself and his life being taken by the One who gave it. Indeed, R. Chaninah’s consent to allow the executioner to hasten his death has been discussed in various responsa about ethics surrounding euthanasia and organ transplants⁴⁰.

VII. [The Executioner] raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul left quickly.

- A. The Executioner then jumped and threw himself into the fire. And a voice from Heaven came out and said, “R. Chaninah ben Teradion and the Executioner are invited into the life of the world to come.”

The executioner immediately acts and as R. Chaninah dies, the executioner throws himself into the fire as well. Instead of the martyrdom repelling those who see it, the executioner is so attracted that he willingly joins the martyrdom. Whether because of Chaninah ben Teradion’s oath to him, or as a reward for his own act of martyrdom, the heavenly voice invites both men into the life of the world to come⁴¹.

- B. When Rabbi heard it he wept and said: One may acquire his world in a single hour, and one may acquire his world in many years.

As a coda, Rabbi comments that some work their whole lives to gain entry into the world to come, while others with one grand sweeping gesture can earn the

40. See, for example, the responsa of Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg, *Tzitz Eliezer* X 25:6, *Tzitz Eliezer* XVIII 48, and of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Iggrot Moshe Choshen Mishpat II* 74:2.

41. Droge and Tabor note the irony of this, “If one can obtain life by a deliberate act of self-destruction, what happens to Hanina’s original statement that one must not hasten death, much less directly destroy oneself?” Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco:HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 102.

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same reward⁴². It is not clear whether Rabbi is weeping with frustration that some people like himself toil their whole lives in order to reach the world to come while others are fast tracked. Or perhaps he is overcome with emotion at the thought that the world to come is within anyone's grasp.

Literary Context

The story of the martyrdom of R. Chaninah ben Teradion exists in several earlier iterations. Its first appearance is in *Sifrei Devarim* 307.

Another thing, *The Rock whose ways are perfect*⁴³. When they caught Chaninah ben Teradion, a decree was decreed against him to be burnt with his scroll. They said to him, "A decree was decreed against you to be burnt with your scroll." He recited this verse *The Rock whose ways are perfect*⁴⁴. They said to his wife, "A decree has been decreed against your husband to be burned and against you to be killed." She recited this verse *God is faithful and has no iniquity*⁴⁵. They said to his daughter, "A decree has been decreed against your father to be burnt and your mother to be killed and against you to do work." She

42. Rabbi makes the identical proclamation twice more. In *Bavli Avodah Zara* 10b, the Roman officer Ketia Bar Shalom is executed for defending the Jews. As he is taken to be killed, he circumcises himself and bequeaths his worldly possessions to R. Akiva and his colleagues. A voice from Heaven proclaims that Ketia bar Shalom is invited into the life of the world to come. When Rabbi hears this, he weeps and says, "One may acquire his world in a single hour, and one may acquire his world in many years." Similarly in *Bavli Avodah Zara* 17a, R. Elazar ben Durdia sleeps with every prostitute he can find, but when he eventually repents and dies, a voice from Heaven proclaims that R. Elazar ben Durdia is invited into the life of the world to come. When Rabbi hears this, he again weeps and says, "One may acquire his world in a single hour, and one may acquire his world in many years." The executioner seems a composite of these two figures. Like Ketia bar Shalom, he is an outsider defending Jews against Roman rulers. But like R Elazar ben Durdia, he is also presumably a sinner, since his job is to execute people at the behest of the Romans. All three men perform a heroic deed on the day of their death, thereby taking what Rabbi sees as short-cut into the world to come.

43. Deuteronomy 32:4.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

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recited this verse, *Great is counsel and multitudinous is the plot for your eyes are open*⁴⁶. Rabbi said, “How great are these righteous ones, that in their time of trouble, they summoned three verses justifying the judgment, the likes of which are not found in all of scriptures, they focused their hearts and justified the judgment upon themselves. A philosopher stood up on his *aperchia*⁴⁷. He [the philosopher] said, “My master, do not be brazen that you have burned the Torah — from the place that she went out, she returned to her father’s house.” He [the ruler] said, “Tomorrow your judgment will be as theirs.” He [the philosopher] said, “You have given me good tidings, that tomorrow my portion will be with them in the world to come.”

The *midrash* is brought as a discussion of Deuteronomy 32:4: *The rock whose ways are perfect for all His paths are just, God is faithfulness and has no iniquity, He is righteous and straight*. The *midrash* demonstrates that what it truly means to believe that God is *the rock whose ways are perfect*, is to be willing to accept God’s judgment unquestioningly, no matter what it is. R. Chaninah, his wife, and his daughter are not told by the authorities why they are being punished, nor does the *midrash* question what they have done to deserve their fate. Instead they affirm their absolute acceptance of God’s decree by citing verses indicating God’s perfect Justice. Rabbi’s comment highlights the fact that even in their moment of devastation, they not only accept God’s judgment, but they do so with literary flair, calling up the most perfect verses.

The *midrash* does not actually describe the carrying out of the punishment, but it seems that as the Torah is burning, a philosopher addresses the ruler and claims that burning the Torah is not equivalent to triumphing over the Torah. Instead, she has simply returned to her father’s home⁴⁸.

46. Jeremiah 32:19.

47. Finkelstein suggests that the word should be *aphercus*, the ruler of the province, and that the phrase עמד פילוסופוס על אפרכייה שלו means that the philosopher opposed the ruler of his province. Finkelstein, *Sifrei on Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993), 346, n. 10.

48. Aharon Agus understands the idea of the Torah returning to her father’s house in a darker way:

The Torah ‘returns to her father’s house’ as if in widowhood; the tragedy of the Torah is congruent with that of the martyr and thus with that of Israel. But the return to the father’s house is also a return to a pristine state. Love may be again, there may ensue new relationships ... The

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This comment enrages the ruler who declares that the next day the philosopher will share the fate of the martyrs. Instead of protesting this verdict, the philosopher welcomes it, saying, “You have given me good tidings, that tomorrow my portion will be with them in the world to come.”

The philosopher plays an important role in the story. As the outsider, he witnesses the behavior of the martyr and rather than being repulsed, he is attracted and wants to share their fate. Yet his presence at the scene is odd. It is not clear why a philosopher would be at this execution or what about the martyrs is compelling for him. It is also not clear why he thinks that his death will guarantee him a portion in the world to come.

The *midrash* is jagged, with several other aspects equally unclear. Why is the Torah burned? Is it burned together with R. Chaninah ben Teradion or merely at the same time? What is the work that the daughter must do? The *midrash* does not flesh out the issues, as its central theme is acceptance of God’s judgment. The *Bavli*, in part IV, recites this passage from the *Sifrei*, but provides a context that answers many of these questions. Part III of the *Bavli* relates the reasons why R. Chaninah and his family are punished as well as the nature of the daughter’s punishment. Part VI describes the exact process by which R. Chaninah and the Torah are burnt. The somewhat awkwardly placed philosopher is turned into the executioner, both of whom choose to share in R. Chaninah’s martyrdom. As we will see, there are two more refinings that the story will undergo between its first appearance in the *Sifrei* and its transformation into the *Bavli* narrative.

philosopher admonishes his overlord not to let his seeming power go to his head because, although the tragedy for Israel is real, it is at the same time a new beginning, an arrival.

Aharon Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom, and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), 132. In this understanding, the Torah’s marriage has ended and the Torah returns as widow to her father’s home. Yet, it is not evident to whom the Torah was married. Was she married to her physical presence on parchment, and with the burning of the parchment, came her widowhood? Was she married to R. Chaninah ben Teradion and with his death the marriage ended? Agus poetically extends the metaphor of the return to the father’s house, but it is not clear that the story can bear it out.

Tractate *Semachot*

The next retelling of R. Chaninah's martyrdom appears in Tractate *Semachot*⁴⁹ 8:12. The dating of Tractate *Semachot* is difficult⁵⁰. Dov Zlotnick claims:

We have thus found nothing in Sm pointing decisively to a late date. On the contrary, it can now be stated that the latest authorities mentioned in the text are the Tannaim of the fifth generation, Rabbi Judah the Prince and his contemporaries. Moreover, the language is Mishnaic Hebrew, and its style and structure, the literary formulation and sequence of the Halakah and the Aggadah, is always that of the Tannaim. In the absence of further textual evidence and in view of the fact that Sm is clearly identified as Tannaitic by the Gaon Natronai and by all medieval scholars, it seems preferable to submit to the authority of the ancients and suggest an early date — the end of the third century⁵¹.

According to Zlotnick, Tractate *Semachot* is to be considered a late tannaitic text. M.B. Lerner cites Zlotnick's arguments, but concludes that "the employment of certain editorial techniques, especially as far as the insertion of aggadic passages is concerned, does not preclude a somewhat later date⁵²." Based on the details of the story of the martyrdom of R. Chaninah ben Teradion, I will argue for a relatively early dating of *Semachot*, or at least an early dating of this particular passage, making it the second iteration of the story after *Sifrei*. *Semachot* presents this narrative:

49. Tractate *Semachot* is a euphemism for *Evel Rabbati* (Mourning). See M.B. Lerner, "The External Tractates," in *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 389.

50. Michael Higger explains that the composite nature of the minor tractates, as well as the likelihood that some *beraitot* are no longer recognizable as tannaitic material makes it exceedingly difficult to assert authoritatively when they were written. Michael Higger, *Treatise Semahot and Treatise Semahot of R. Hiyya and Sefer Hibbut ha-Keber* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1931), 13–14.

51. Dov Zlotnick, *The Tractate "Mourning"* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), 8–9.

52. M.B. Lerner, "The External Tractates," in *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 391.

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When Chaninah ben Teradion was caught for sectarianism, they decreed that he would be burnt, and that his wife would be killed and that his daughter would sit in a brothel. He said, "What was decreed against that poor woman?" They said, "to be killed." He recited regarding her, *God is righteous in all of His way and pious in all of His deeds*⁵³. *The rock whose ways are perfect for all His paths are just, God is faithfulness and has no iniquity, He is righteous and straight*⁵⁴. She said to them, "What was decreed upon that Rabbi?" They said, "to be burned." She recited regarding him *Great is counsel and multitudinous is the plot for your eyes are open upon the ways of all people to give each person according to his ways and the fruits of his actions*⁵⁵.

Right from the start, Tractate *Semachot* begins to clarify ambiguities found in *Sifrei*. *Semachot* announces that R. Chaninah was arrested on charges of sectarianism. Whether R. Chaninah was actually a sectarian or whether this was a trumped up charge is unclear. Additionally, *Semachot* explains that the work that the daughter was forced to do in is prostitution.

Additionally interesting is that in *Semachot* it appears that each character has heard of his or her own fate, but not of the others. R. Chaninah asks what is to befall his wife and upon hearing the answer, he justifies God's judgement with two verses. His wife asks about R. Channah's fate and then justifies it with the verse from Jeremiah 32:19 that the daughter had used in *Sifrei*. In *Semachot*, the ultimate acceptance of God's judgment seems to be a willingness to accept the suffering of a loved one. The daughter, though, does not recite a verse of justification, because she ultimately challenges God's justice.

And when they burnt him, they wrapped him in a Torah scroll and burnt him and the Torah scroll with him. And his daughter was yelling and prostrating herself before him and she said, "This is the Torah and the Reward for Torah?" He said to her, "My daughter, if you are crying for me and prostrating yourself for me, it is better for me to be consumed by a fire that has been fanned and not by a fire that has not been fanned, as it is said, *He shall be consumed by a fire that*

53. Psalms 145:17.

54. Deuteronomy 32:4.

55. Jeremiah 32:19.

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*has not been fanned*⁵⁶. And if you are crying on account of the Torah scroll, behold the Torah is fire and fire cannot consume fire, behold the letters are flying up in the air and the fire is only consuming the skin/parchment alone.

In *Semachot*, the mechanics of the burning are elucidated. It is not just that R. Chaninah and his Torah scroll are burned, but an additional detail is added. R. Chaninah is wrapped in the Torah scroll. Both are set on fire in a scene that is so horrific that his daughter screams, “This is the Torah and the Reward for Torah?” Her challenge is in stark contrast to the central theme of *Sifrei*, that of complete submission to God’s will. Here the daughter instead argues that what is happening is not in accordance with the way the world should be. Those who study Torah should be rewarded, not tortured.

Her father responds in a manner that is oblique. He claims that if her tears are for him, he prefers suffering in this world to punishment in the world to come⁵⁷. But if her tears are for the Torah that is burning, she need not fear, because the Torah is not being destroyed. Its letters are flying upward and only the parchment is burning.

This portion of *Semachot* seems to be a reworking of the end of the *Sifrei* passage. Instead of the philosopher proclaiming the inviolability of the Torah, those words are given to R. Chaninah. The philosopher has been dropped and now it is a story about a father and a daughter. In response to his daughter’s challenge, R. Chaninah reaffirms his faith in God’s justice and in the survival of Torah.

Tractate Kallah

The dating of Tractate *Kallah* has long been a matter of debate. Rashi (R. Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes 1040–1105 CE) claims that it is of tannaitic origin⁵⁸. Scholars of the modern era have dated *Masechet Kallah* to the Gaonic period⁵⁹.

56. Job 20:26.

57. This may be an indication that he believes himself to have done something worthy of punishment. Perhaps the sectarian charges were warranted.

58. Rashi on Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 114a, s.v. *bechol makom*.

59. See M.B. Lerner, “The External Tractates,” in *The Literature of the Sages*. First Part: *Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, ed. Shmuel

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Recently, David Brodsky has successfully argued in *A Bride Without A Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and Its Gemara* that Tractate *Kallah* is a product of the early Amoraic period. Brodsky begins by dating the first two chapters of *Kallah Rabbati* as earlier than the stammaitic layer of the *Bavli*. He demonstrates that these chapters share linguistic patterns with early amoraic material, but do not use the language associated with the stammaitic layer. Brodsky then argues that since the first two chapters of *Kallah Rabbati* function as a commentary to Tractate *Kallah*, Tractate *Kallah* “cannot be considered post-amoraic either, since a text cannot predate the commentary on it⁶⁰.”

The parallel to our *Bavli Avodah Zara* story that is found in *Masechet Kallah* only appears in some manuscripts of Tractate *Kallah*⁶¹. The story follows a statement found in all the manuscripts, that R. Eliezer ben Yaakov says a Sage may not contribute money to the charity collection unless a person such as R. Chaninah ben Teradion is appointed over it.

It was said about R. Chaninah ben Teradion that once he mixed up Purim money with charity money and he was sitting and wondering and he said “Woe to me, perhaps I am liable for death by Heaven.” As he was sitting and wondering the executioner came and said to him, “Rabbi, they decreed against you that you should be wrapped in your Torah scroll and burnt with it. [The executioner] stood and wrapped him in the Torah and surrounded it with vines⁶² and lit the

Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 395. See also H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, translated and edited by Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 229.

60. David Brodsky, *A Bride Without A Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and Its Gemara* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 34–86.

61. The story appears in MSS Oxford 2257, JTS R1283, and in the printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud.

62. Brodsky translates *חבילי זמורות* as a pile of sticks and notes that the word *זמורה* can also mean an officer’s rod or a phallus. Based on this reading, Brodsky notes, “It is not insignificant, then, that the executioner attempt to kill R. Hanina through these bundles of *zemorot*, bundles that homonymously at least represent both the phallus and the authority possessed by the executioner. In fact, when R. Hanina is standing in the fire wrapped in the Torah scroll, he becomes a giant phallus of sorts, the light emitted from them which puts out the fire should be understood, then, as the quintessential semen, containing the power to put out the fire and save R. Hanina.” David Brodsky, *A Bride Without A Blessing*, 168, n. 119. Needless

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fire, but the fire cooled and distanced from him. The executioner stood amazed and said, "Rabbi, are you the one about whom it was decreed that he should be burnt?" He said, "Yes." [The executioner] said, "And why is the fire going out?" [R. Chaninah] said, "I swore by my Maker that nothing would touch me until I know whether it was decreed upon me from Heaven. Wait one hour and I will let you know." The executioner was sitting and wondering. He said, "These people who decree life and death upon themselves — how does the government have any power over them?" [The executioner] said, "Get up and whatever the government wants to do to me, let it do." He said, "Empty-headed one! The decree has been agreed to by Heaven. And if you will not kill me, God has many agents of death. There are many bears and leopards and lions and wolves, and many snakes and scorpions that will kill me. Rather, in the end, God will exact retribution for my blood from your hand." And the executioner knew that it was so. [The executioner] jumped and fell into the fire and his voice was heard from the fire and he said, "Wherever you die, I will die and there I will be buried, and when you will live, I will live." Immediately a voice came down from Heaven and said, "R. Chaninah and his executioner are invited to life in the world-to-come."

This story contains several of the key elements of the earlier versions. R. Chaninah ben Teradion is burned to death with his Torah scroll and he accepts his fate as an expression of Divine Justice. As in the *Sifrei*, an outsider is attracted by the martyrdom and chooses to die along with R. Chaninah.

Yet, there are also key differences. The daughter and wife disappear from the story and the outsider, instead of being a philosopher is instead the executioner. No verses are cited and there is no meditation on the survival of the Torah. Instead the story essentially becomes a dialogue between the rabbi and the executioner. Rabbi Chaninah is presented at the outset as having done something wrong⁶³. The misdeed seems fairly trivial, but he worries that it

to say, my translation of תבילי ומרות as vines does not allow for quite as imaginative an image.

63. Brodsky notes that the given that the story follows R. Eliezer ben Yaakov's statement lauding R. Chaninah ben Teradion's trustworthiness as a charity collector, we would expect the story to demonstrate great reliability. As such, the *Bavli's* version of the tale, in which R. Chaninah's disbursement of all the monies to charity is seen

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warrants him death at the hands of Heaven. Right on cue, the executioner shows up to carry out the punishment.

The executioner does not list the charges against R. Chaninah and he promptly begins the preparations for R. Chaninah's death. As in *Semachot*, he wraps the Torah around R. Chaninah, but now a new detail is added. Vines are placed around the Torah Scroll to keep it in position and the fire is lit. Suddenly though, the story diverges into farce. The flames will not stay lit, the executioner is befuddled, and R. Chaninah explains that he has vowed not to die until he ascertains whether this is indeed a Heavenly decree. The executioner agrees to give him some time and now the executioner finds himself in the same position as R. Chaninah (ישב ומייה), sitting and wondering about the turn of events.

The executioner decides that if R. Chaninah is powerful enough to forestall his own burning, he will let him go free. R. Chaninah, instead of gratefully leaving, proceeds to insult the executioner and to explain that death comes from God, not people. If the executioner will not kill him, God will simply send another agent of death⁶⁴. It does not matter to R. Chaninah how he dies. The only difference is whether the executioner will be ultimately faulted for taking R. Chaninah's life.

This is a complicated argument, which is later echoed in the *Bavli* in Rabbi Chaninah's response to his daughter. It is possible for Heaven to decree that someone should die, but also for the agent of death to be held accountable for the killing. Interestingly, in *Kallah*, the executioner presumably decides to go through with the burning, but the story elides the actual moment of R. Chaninah's death. Instead it picks up just afterwards with the executioner joining R. Chaninah in the fire and declaring his devotion using the language that Ruth uses to evoke her fealty to Naomi⁶⁵.

In *Kallah*, R. Chaninah demonstrates his acceptance of God's judgment not through verses, but through his refusal to accept the executioner's offer of

as proof of his worthiness of entering the world to come would make more sense than the version that appears in Tractate *Kallah*, where his unreliability brings about his death. See Brodsky, *Bride without a Blessing*, 166. I would argue though, that the story here in *Kallah* demonstrates R. Chaninah's great sensitivity towards his charity duties, even if he is not always able to live up to his own standards.

64. See also *Bavli Taanit* 18b, *Sifra Emor* 9:5, and *Mechilta of R. Shimon Bar Yochai Exodus* 21:13 for a similar expression of inescapable Divine Justice.

65. Ruth 1:16–17.

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freedom. R. Chaninah displays ultimate agency, choosing his death instead of fleeing it. It is a story of R. Chaninah's faith in Divine Justice and the impression that this faith makes one an outsider. As such, the wife and daughter are not relevant to the story and so they disappear. The Torah scroll also does not seem to play a role here, but the tradition associating R. Chaninah's death with the burning of the Torah is so strong that the Torah remains a part of the story anyway.

Conclusion

In its earliest form in the *Sifrei*, the story of R. Chaninah ben Teradion is a straight-forward tale of a man and his family who accept a terrible decree upon themselves without questioning God. Over time aspects of this story are elaborated upon, re-arranged, and questioned. As the story is reworked into the Babylonian Talmud, the editors craft it into a sweeping tale of stubborn resistance to Roman rule paired with a fairly complete and stoic acceptance of God's judgment. Many themes are complicated by the editors. R. Chaninah both deserves his fate and does not. His acceptance of his martyrdom is both celebrated and suspected. He refuses to hasten his death and yet he agrees to allow another to end his torment. The artistry of the story is clear, especially when its agenda is not.

The editors of the *Bavli* used narrative to explore the pressing issues of their time. Should one submit to non-Jewish authorities? To what extent should calamities be understood as God's justice, manifest? Is resistance to a decree akin to rejecting God's judgment, or is it God's preference for Jews to employ any means necessary to survive? By taking up, and complicating, the story of the martyrdom of the *tanna* R. Chaninah ben Teradion, the editors of the *Bavli* tell a layered, subtle story that addresses the complex experience of Jews under foreign rule.