Plato and the Talmud

Jacob Howland

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This innovative study sees the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem through the lens of the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud. Jacob Howland argues that these texts are animated by comparable conceptions of the proper roles of inquiry and reasoned debate in religious life, and by a profound awareness of the limits of our understanding of things divine. Insightful readings of Plato's *Apology, Euthyphro,* and Chapter 3 of tractate Ta'anit explore the relationship of prophets and philosophers, fathers and sons, and gods and men (among other themes), bringing to light the tension between rational inquiry and faith that is essential to the speeches and deeds of both Socrates and the Talmudic sages. In reflecting on the pedagogy of these texts, Howland shows in detail how Talmudic aggadah and Platonic drama and narrative speak to different sorts of readers in seeking mimetically to convey the living ethos of rabbinic Judaism and Socratic philosophizing.

Jacob Howland is McFarlin Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa. He is the author of *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates' Philosophic Trial* (1998), and *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (1993). He also edited *A Long Way Home: The Story of a Jewish Youth, 1939–1949*, by Bob Golan (2005), and has published numerous articles.

Plato and the Talmud

JACOB HOWLAND
University of Tulsa

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For Irv and Sharna Frank, of blessed memory

Contents

Acknowledgments *page* ix

Introduction: Athens and Jerusalem 1
The Nature of the Inquiry 14

1 Talmudic and Platonic Writing 26
Scripture, Midrash and Mishnah Forms, and Oral Torah 26
The Mishnah and the Gemara 37
Halakha, Aggadah, and Talmudic Pedagogy 42
Interpretative Imagination: Talmudic and Platonic Storytelling 51
Philosophy in Action: The Case for Socrates 55
Philosophy and Tradition: Plato's Complex Pedagogy 63
The Ambition of the Texts 70

2 Rabbis and Holy Men 76
The Context and the Mishnah of Ta'anit 3 78
Ḥoni in the Gemara: Self-Knowledge, Heroism, and Community 86
Salvation and Exile 101

3 Prophets and Philosophers 105
Socrates' Strangeness 108
Socrates' Faith 111
Socrates as Exemplar 115
Socrates as Prophet 119
Emulating Socrates: Philosophical Pedagogy and Judaism 126

4 Fathers and Sons 132
Socratic Paternalism and the Promise of Community 133
Euthyphro, Socrates, and the Fathers of Athens 136
Meletus, Son of the City 144

Beginning from the Beginning: The Erotic and Prophetic Philosopher 149
Meletus and Euthyphro: Archaic Aspirations 157
Back to the Beginning: Socrates 160

5 Words and Deeds 164
Elazar and the Ugly Man 166
Models of Merit: The Sages in Action 172
Another Ugly Man: Naḥum of Gam Zu 182

6 Gods and Men 188
Piety in Action: Definition and the Dramatic Paradigm 190
The Mantle of Piety: Euthyphro's Divine Revenge 194
Exposing Euthyphro: Socrates' Philanthropic and Philotheistic Therapy 199
Philosophy as Piety: A New Beginning 209
The Grammar of Socratic Religious Invention 217

7 Miracles and Necessity 222
Praying for Miracles: The Ambivalence of the Rabbis 228
The Moral Economy of Miracles 234
Mercy and Humility 247

Epilogue: Texts and Traditions 253

Works Cited 261

Index to Biblical and Rabbinic Texts 271

General Index 275

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Introduction

Athens and Jerusalem

What has Plato to do with the Talmud? The question is more than fair. The Platonic dialogues and the Talmud are separated in time by a millennium, and in spirit by the immeasurable gulf between the orienting concepts of the world that is by nature and the Word that is revealed by God. Plato's dialogues are philosophical dramas centered on the speeches and deeds of Socrates, while the Talmud comprises a detailed yet economically constructed law code (the Mishnah) coupled with an expansive and remarkably free-wheeling commentary (the Gemara). Socratic philosophizing consists in the critical examination of human opinions before the bar of reason; Talmudic inquiry measures itself by the comprehensive revelation of God in the Torah.[1] In origin, orientation, style, and substance, Platonic and Talmudic

[1] In the strict sense, the term "Torah" refers to the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch. In an expanded sense, it refers to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as the Tanakh, an acronym for *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). In the broadest sense, Torah includes the Talmud and other rabbinic legal and ethical writings and interpretations of Scripture.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Scripture and citations of the Hebrew text are drawn from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, which incorporates the new JPS translation of 1985. The Talmud will be cited parenthetically in the text. Quotations from the Babylonian Talmud (BT) indicate the translation used; quotations from the Jerusalem Talmud (JT) are drawn from Neusner's *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*. Except where noted, translations of Greek texts are my own. Plato's dialogues and letters are cited parenthetically in the text by standard (Stephanus) line number, following *Platonis Opera* 1979–82.

writing would seem to be worlds apart. Must not the fruits with which these texts reward their readers be equally disparate?

One might reply that Athens and Jerusalem are united by a shared devotion to the acquisition of wisdom. But because this devotion springs from fundamentally different experiences, Judaism and Greek philosophy embrace distinct conceptions of what wisdom is and how it can be achieved. In the view of Leo Strauss, these conceptions are radically incompatible. "According to the Bible," Strauss observes, "the beginning of wisdom [*ḥakhmah*] is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom [*sophia*] is wonder."[2] The "one thing needful according to Greek philosophy" is thus "the life of autonomous understanding," while "the one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love."[3]

Strauss notes that the Jewish life of obedient love takes its bearings by the recollection of the "absolute sacredness of a particular or contingent event" – the historical moment when God entered into a covenantal relationship at Sinai with a group of former slaves wandering in the wilderness, and thus constituted the people Israel (117).[4] The covenant that God presents to the Jews as a divine command is for Him a free act of self-limitation (114–15) – an act in which the omnipotent and therefore intrinsically mysterious God establishes Himself as "incomprehensible and yet not unknown."[5] Because He is omnipotent, knowledge of God, as well as knowledge of the natural and moral order of the world, is rooted "in trust, or faith, which is radically different from theoretical certainty." While theoretical certainty seems to follow from speeches or what speeches reveal, trust is evoked by deeds:

> The biblical God is known in a humanly relevant sense only by His actions, by His revelations. The book, the Bible, is the account of what God has done and what He has promised. In the Bible, as we would say, men tell about God's actions and promises on the basis of their experience of God. This

[2] Strauss 1997c, 379–80. Strauss here contrasts Proverbs 1:7 with Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b11–13.

[3] Strauss 1997a (henceforth cited parenthetically in the text), 104.

[4] Cf. Bernard Levinson's commentary in Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar 2000, 23–27.

[5] Strauss 1997b, 306. For Strauss, the mystery of God is summarized in the Name of God recorded at Exodus 3:14, *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* – "I shall be What I shall be" (Strauss 1997c, 393).

experience, and not reasoning based on sense perception, is the root of biblical wisdom. (119)

In the Jewish tradition, Strauss summarizes, "there is no beginning made by an individual, no beginning made by man" (120).[6]

The life of autonomous understanding, by contrast, is an intellectual quest "for the beginnings, the first things" that is guided by the idea of nature, understood as an intelligible, unchanging, and only partially hidden "impersonal necessity" that is "higher than any personal being" (110–11).[7] As the fundamental order or structure of what is – a domain that ranges from individually existing beings to the ultimate reality or wholeness of the Whole – riddling nature (*phusis*, the root of our word "physics") arouses a love of wisdom (*philosophia*), the pursuit of which is both fearless and hopeless in comparison to the sacred awe of the Jews (109). While the rabbis relate that the Hebrews accepted God's Torah (literally, "teaching" or "instruction") even before they knew its content,[8] Plato's word for philosophical desire is *erōs*, the Greek term for the intrinsically clever and resourceful passion of sexual attraction.[9] What is more, philosophy aspires ultimately to learn what is good, something the Jews claim to have been revealed to their forefathers by God.[10] The alternative of Greek philosophy and Jewish faith is thus one of essentially

[6] Strauss relates this point to the "favored form of writing" in the Jewish tradition, the commentary (120).

[7] Plato (*Republic* 474c–80a) characterizes philosophy as a passionate striving to attain knowledge of the stable, self-subsistent beings referred to in the dialogues as *ideai* or *eidē* (Ideas or Forms).

[8] For the various sources of this rabbinic legend, see Ginzberg 1910–38, 6.30–31 n. 181. Cf. Exodus Rabbah 27.9 in Midrash Rabbah (a major collection of rabbinical interpretations of Torah, henceforth MR), 3.329: "[W]hen God revealed Himself on Sinai, there was not a nation at whose doors He did not knock, but they would not undertake to keep it; as soon as He came to Israel, they exclaimed: *All that the Lord hath spoken we will do, and obey* (Ex. XXIV, 7)."

[9] Plato, *Symposium* 203d.

[10] Lachterman (1994, 6–7) notes that, while Plato identifies "the Good" – the unifying and ordering principle of the Ideas – as the highest and most difficult object of philosophical inquiry (*Republic* 504d–11e), the Torah declares, "He [the LORD] has told you, O man, what is good" (Micah 6:8; "the LORD" is the JPS rendering of "YHWH" or "Yahweh" [יהוה] as opposed to "the Lord," which renders "Adonai"). Cf. Kallen 1918, 10–11: "for the Jews … *the fear of the Lord* … is the beginning of wisdom, while for the Greeks it is the *love of the Good* which is the beginning of wisdom" (emphases in original).

individual "progress" or essentially communal "return": while wisdom is the philosopher's distant aim, for the Jews it consists in faithfully remembering and practicing what God has already taught the community in the plain language of the Torah.[11]

Strauss's concern with the conflict between "the biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life" arises from his intuition that it is nothing less than "the secret of the vitality of Western civilization" (116). This conflict cannot be resolved, because divine omnipotence is "absolutely incompatible with Greek philosophy in any form" (110). This is not to say that there are not significant points of agreement between Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible. They agree about the importance and content of morality, and they agree that justice consists in submission to a divine law – although each solves the "problem" of divine law "in a diametrically opposed manner" (105–07). Such concinnities help to explain the "attempt to harmonize, or to synthesize, the Bible and Greek philosophy" that has, at least "at first glance," characterized "the whole history of the West." But this attempt is in Strauss's view "doomed to failure":

> The harmonizations and synthesizations are possible because Greek philosophy can *use* obedient love in a subservient function, and the Bible can *use* philosophy as a handmaid; but what is used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one. (104, emphases in original)

Does Strauss's analysis of the relationship between Greek philosophy and the Bible leave room for, much less invite, a meaningful comparison between Plato and the Talmud? To begin with, Strauss rightly frames the problem of the relationship between what he calls "Athens" and "Jerusalem" in terms of competing ways of life. What is at issue is not simply what one knows, but how one *lives*; wisdom – whether it is conceived as *ḥakhmah* or as *sophia* – is in each case understood to be primarily and essentially manifested in a certain form of human existence. Strauss also correctly emphasizes the significance

[11] While philosophy as a discipline might be said to progress (cf. 94–95), such progress is nevertheless entirely dependent on individual achievement. Thus, although wisdom can in principle be shared by everyone, Plato's depiction of the consummation of the philosophic quest as the ultimate satisfaction of erotic longing (*Republic* 490a–b) underscores the personal or private nature of this quest.

of morality and law in both traditions. But while he acknowledges the possible use of wonder and autonomous understanding in Judaism, and of obedience and humility in Greek philosophy, he does not discern the essential roles that these elements actually play in both traditions. These roles are particularly evident when one contemplates, not the Bible and Greek philosophy in general, but Plato and the Talmud in particular.

Consider the aforementioned problem of divine law. While rational analysis and reflection are essential features of inquiry and argument in the Talmud, it is less widely recognized that the quest for truth, "wherever and however it can be found," is favorably represented in the Hebrew Bible as well.[12] But in the Jewish tradition, the quest for truth takes place within the horizon of a revealed Law (here capitalized to indicate its divine origins) that comprehensively orders human life and is passed down from generation to generation. Simply by inquiring into what is by nature, however, Greek philosophy implicitly calls into question the teachings of ancestral law, custom, or convention (*nomos*); not coincidentally, *nomos* is the term that renders the word "Torah" in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures prepared in Alexandria during the third through the first centuries BCE.[13] Yet this difference should not be allowed to obscure a deeper similarity. For it is nature or *phusis* that is for the philosophers, as the Torah is for the Jews, the ultimate beginning and measure of thought and action, and it enjoys this status precisely because it presents itself as "given" independently of human activity.[14] Put another way, philosophy uncovers or discovers the order of nature,

[12] Hazony 2008, 278. Hazony provides ample evidence for his conclusion that "the biblical God is portrayed as revealing his truths and unleashing his deeds in response to man's search for truth. He even longs for man's questioning and seeking" (281).

[13] Ginzberg (1928, 65) deplores "the inaccurate rendering of the Hebrew word 'Torah' by 'law,'" a term that fails to convey that Torah is "an expression for the aggregate of Jewish teachings … compris[ing] every field and mark of culture." "Law" certainly gives no sense of the Torah's role as the animating principle of the whole world of traditional Jewish life. Even *nomos* is too narrow a term, because it is inevitably understood, thanks to Greek philosophy, as a human construction that must be distinguished from nature or *phusis* – a distinction that is entirely foreign to the Jewish conception of Torah.

[14] In Plato's formulation, philosophy is distinct from poetry in that it is an art of acquisition (specifically, the acquisition of knowledge) rather than one of fabrication

but does not produce it; in subordinating itself to nature, philosophy is no more autonomous, in the literal meaning of "self-legislating," than thought that begins from the Torah. Nor is this subordination merely theoretical, because the philosophers' understanding of *phusis* directs their deeds just insofar as it guides their thought.

Of course, nature does not address human beings, much less legislate for a human community; where God speaks, nature is silent. But for the Greek philosophers, the order of nature includes the end or good at which things aim; because nature is teleological, it is also implicitly prescriptive.[15] In particular, the philosophers find in the human inclination to learn and capacity for rational understanding a natural basis for the superiority of the philosophical life.[16] This superiority, however, is not recognized in the laws or customs of any actually existing political community. Indeed, the Greeks' widespread ignorance of the worth of philosophy is a common theme in philosophical writing.[17] As the public trial and execution of Socrates at Athens in 399 BCE makes clear, the problem goes beyond ignorance. It is not coincidental that Socrates was convicted of impiety and corruption, for the religion of the Greeks militates against philosophy. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Greek poetic tradition – the primary vehicle for the formation and transmission of religious myth – teaches that human life is limned by intrinsically mysterious powers. But unlike the Bible, the myths of the poets do not recognize a God who creates

(*Sophist* 219a–c). Cf. Fisch 1997, 56, which compares the attitude of scientists toward natural phenomena to that of the rabbis toward the Torah.

[15] Socrates' quest for knowledge of the Good is motivated by his observation that, while what is good is that which "every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything," the soul "is in perplexity about it, and unable to grasp sufficiently just what it is" (*Republic* 505d–e). Cf. the opening line of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and deliberate choice, seems to aim at some good; the good has therefore been well defined as that at which all things aim" (1094a1–3). In his *Physics*, Aristotle discerns teleology in all that grows by nature, including plants and animals.

[16] Socrates' judgment that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (Plato, *Apology* 38a) is, for the philosophers, the decisive consequence of the observation with which Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics*: "All human beings desire by nature to know" (980a21).

[17] The pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes complains that, while the cities glorify victory in athletic competition, "it is not right to prefer physical strength to noble Wisdom" (Freeman 1977, 21 [frag. 2]); Adeimantus, Socrates' companion (and Plato's brother!), opines that philosophers are either "useless" or "vicious" (*Republic* 487b–d).

an ordered universe suited to human welfare, offers special instruction to human beings in the form of revelation, and rewards and punishes with justice tempered by mercy. The Greek tradition in effect acknowledges the "welter and waste" of which Scripture speaks (*tohu vabohu*, Genesis 1:2), but not the God whose breath or spirit hovers over these troubled waters.[18] Because the philosophers see ordered nature where the poetic tradition sees chaos, there is, as Plato writes, "an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607b). Aristotle accordingly begins his *Metaphysics* by explicitly disputing the belief, widely disseminated by the poets, that human excellence – in this case, in the acquisition of wisdom – is likely to arouse the jealousy of the gods (982b–83a).

The preceding reflections suggest an analogy between the self-understanding of the Greek philosophers and that of the Jews. The philosophers recognize no revealed teaching, but they have the guidance of *phusis*, and in their own view this sets them apart as the few from the many.[19] While the point must not be pressed too far, one could say that nature is the (admittedly only partially articulated) Law of the Greek philosophers,[20] which in certain respects differs from all other, merely human laws, customs, and conventions (*nomoi*) no less than the way of the Jews as taught in the Torah differs from the ways of "the nations" (*hagoyim*).[21]

[18] "Welter and waste" is the translation of Alter, *Genesis* 1996. According to Hesiod, everything – including Earth, Heaven, Day, Night, Eros, and all the gods – originally sprang from Chaos (*Theogony* 116; Hesiod 1914, 86–87). That the poets assume reality is fundamentally fluid and disordered is confirmed at Plato, *Theaetetus* 152d–e; cf. 160d, where Socrates links Homer with Heraclitus.

[19] Consider Heraclitus's characterization of the *logos*, the intrinsic governing order of the cosmos, of which "the many" are ignorant inasmuch as they "live as if they had understanding peculiar to themselves" (Freeman 1977, 24–25 [frag. 2]). In the *Republic*, Socrates explains that philosophers are in fact the few among the few; of the minority of human beings who have a nature suited to philosophy, only a small number remain uncorrupted by their relatives and fellow citizens (496a–b).

[20] The reverse is not true, however. Brague (2003) emphasizes that, for the Jews, "nature" – the stable order of the created world, which is the same for all human beings everywhere and at all times – is significant not in itself, but as the "framework for events situated in time" (49). Relative to its status for the Greek philosophers, nature is thus devalued in favor of "history," specifically, the unfolding of God's unique relationship to the people Israel.

[21] In frag. 114, Heraclitus proclaims: "If we speak with intelligence [*xun nōi*], we [philosophers?] must base our strength on that which is common to all [*xunōi*],

Other affinities between "Athens" and "Jerusalem" on the subject of law come to light when one compares the Talmud's attitude toward Greek thought to the pedagogical caution of the Platonic dialogues with respect to the role of philosophy in civic life. At first sight, the Talmud's opinion of Greek intellectual endeavors seems unambiguous: "Cursed be a man who rears pigs and cursed be a man who teaches his son Greek wisdom!" the Gemara declares.[22] But this turns out to be far from a blanket condemnation of Greek thinking. Setting aside the problem that we do not know what "Greek wisdom" (*ḥakhmat yevanit*) means in this context, neither here nor elsewhere does the Talmud explicitly forbid its study; it only prohibits teaching such wisdom to children.[23] The thirteenth-century scholar Israel of Toledo connects the quoted statement from tractate Sotah with Rabbi Eliezer's injunction against allowing children to engage in "excessive reflection."[24] If, as Rabbi Israel thinks, "excessive reflection" refers to the "science of logic," or alternatively to "dialectics and sophistry,"[25] Eliezer's prohibition bears comparison to Socrates' assertion that no one under thirty years of age should be exposed to dialectical argumentation, lest he be "filled with lawlessness" (*Republic* 537e). Be that as it may, both Socrates and the rabbis make a sharp distinction between the formative education of the young that is achievable through good laws and those modes of thought – including techniques of critical analysis and argumentation – that only mature adults may safely pursue.[26] This distinction is underscored by yet

as the city on the law, and even more strongly. For all human laws [*nomoi*] are nourished by one, which is divine" (Freeman 1977, 32). Cf. the "Aleinu" prayer, a part of the daily liturgy in which Jews praise the Lord "Who has not made us as the nations of the lands [*shelo asanu k'goyey ha'aratzot*]."

[22] BT Sotah 49B (Soncino trans.), repeated at BT Bava Kamma 82B.

[23] Lieberman 1962, 100–03.

[24] BT Berakhot 28B (Neusner trans.).

[25] Lieberman 1962, 103.

[26] Note that the Mishnah also includes a prohibition, promulgated at the time of the Jewish revolt of 66–73 CE, against a man's "teach[ing] Greek to his son" (Sotah 9:14; all translations from the Mishnah are drawn from Neusner's *The Mishnah*). On the role of Jewish law in shaping habits, emotions, and desires, and in training the body as well as the mind, see Berkovits 2002, 3–39 ("Law and Morality in Jewish Tradition") and 41–87 ("The Nature and Function of Jewish Law"). Berkovits errs, however, in characterizing the "Socratic-Platonic" position as the view that goodness is simply a kind of knowledge, and that "reason itself … [can] cause man to act ethically" (10, 15). The first and most important part of the education of citizens in the *Republic*'s city in speech, for example, consists in training body and soul so as

another Talmudic passage concerning Greek wisdom. Asked whether one who has "studied the entire Torah" may study *ḥakhmat yevanit*, Rabbi Ishmael quotes Joshua 1:8: "This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night." "So go, find a time that is neither day nor night," Ishmael instructs the questioner, "and that is when you may study the wisdom of Greece" (BT Menaḥot 99B, Neusner trans.). Ishmael does not explicitly forbid the study of Greek wisdom, but merely restricts it to a time that looks, at first, like no time at all. Strikingly, the Athenian Stranger of Plato's *Laws* concurs: in the best regime, a regime rooted in the educative power of good laws, philosophical discussion (particularly about the existence and nature of the gods) will take place among a select group of actual and potential civic leaders meeting in private only during the twilight between dawn and sunrise (951d) – a time that is precisely "neither day nor night."

I am not suggesting that the rabbis read the *Laws*. Neither Plato nor Socrates is mentioned by name in rabbinic literature.[27] Greek and Latin philosophical terms are furthermore conspicuously absent from the rabbinic writings, even though the rabbis were evidently acquainted with Hellenistic literature, knowledgeable about philosophical discussions, and in some cases interested in philosophical questions.[28] This absence is presumably explained by the rabbis' informed judgment that philosophy was foreign to their basic concerns.[29] In particular, they seem to have distinguished between the active life of morality and service to God that they embraced as Jews and the life of contemplation that they took to be the philosophical ideal.[30]

to produce settled dispositions that are simultaneously moderate and courageous. This is achieved not by an appeal to reason, but by using the arts of music and gymnastic to shape the emotions and desires of the young, and to arouse in them a love of order and beauty – a process that Socrates compares to taming animals, tuning instruments, molding putty, and dying wool (see 374d–417b with 429e–30b, and cf. Howland 2004a, 96–104). A similar procedure is followed in the regime laid out in Plato's *Laws*, in which the Athenian Stranger asserts that law must look toward the whole of virtue (705d–e).

[27] Harvey 1992, 88. Lieberman (1963, 135) asserts that the rabbis "probably did not read Plato."

[28] See Lieberman 1962 and 1963 with Harvey 1992.

[29] Harvey 1992, 101; cf. Lieberman 1963, 135.

[30] See the story told at Exodus Rabbah 13:1 about the encounter between the philosopher Oenomaus of Gadarah and the rabbis (MR 150–51), with the analysis of Harvey 1992, 94–95.

Within the context of Greek thinking, however, Socrates is something unexpected: a philosopher for whom the *vita contemplativa* is inseparable from the *vita activa*, and whose intellectual pride is tempered by religious humility.[31] Plato's *Apology of Socrates* depicts the defense speech the philosopher offers at his public trial on the charges of impiety and corrupting the young. Socrates claims in the *Apology* that he began to engage in his distinctive philosophical activity – the process of questioning his fellow citizens and, inevitably, exposing the incoherence of their opinions – in order to test the oracle of the god at Delphi, which had declared that no one was wiser than he. Socrates explains that he came to understand the oracle to mean that he is wiser than others just to the extent that he recognizes his own ignorance. By examining and refuting his fellow Athenians, he shows that human wisdom is "worth little or nothing" (23a–b). In this way, he simultaneously serves the Athenians and the Delphic deity: Socrates humbles others in argument in order that they may come to share his knowledge of ignorance and his humility in relation to the wisdom of "the god," and so turn in earnest to the quest for truth and the care of their souls (cf. 29d–30a). Nor is the *Apology* the only dialogue in which Plato exposes the religious depths beneath the bright logical surfaces of Socratic philosophizing. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates maintains that he serves "the god" as a philosophical midwife (149a–151d). In the *Symposium*, he presents the philosophical achievement of wisdom as the culmination of an initiation into the quasi-religious mysteries of *erōs* (207a–212a). In the *Republic*, he characterizes as a kind of prophecy the soul's access to the intrinsic goodness and wholeness of what is (505e–506a). And in various dialogues, Socrates speaks of the divine being (*daimonion*) that directs his philosophical activity.[32] The overall picture of Socratic philosophizing that emerges from these dialogues is one in which the love of wisdom that springs from wonder is moderated by a sense of awe before, and responsibility to, that which presents itself as divine.

[31] Unless the context indicates otherwise, all references to "Socrates" are to the character who goes by this name in Plato's dialogues.

[32] *Apology* 31d, 40a; *Euthydemus* 272e; *Republic* 496c; *Theaetetus* 151a; *Phaedrus* 242b–c; *Alcibiades I* 103a; *Theages* 128d–131a. *Daimonion* is a diminutive of *daimōn*, a term used of a range of divine powers or beings.

If Jerusalem is at least partly reflected in the Platonic dialogues in the role that openness to divine beings or powers plays in Socrates' self-understanding as a philosopher, Athens is at least partly folded into Jerusalem in the Talmudic rabbis' love of rational inquiry. What may look like polar opposites from within the philosophical and religious traditions – either fear *or* wonder, either simplicity of heart and obedient love *or* autonomous understanding – stand together in creative tension in Talmudic inquiry. Readers who come to the Talmud after a long acquaintance with Plato cannot fail to be struck by the dialectical character of rabbinic thought, by the text's preference for raising questions rather than furnishing answers, and by its open-ended, conversational form.[33] These features of the Talmud suggest that, while the tradition treats the letter of the Torah as absolute and unalterable, the meaning and specific application of God's instruction is in practice subject to multiple reasonable interpretations.[34] Put another way, the very simplicity of God's revealed teaching (cf. Deuteronomy 30:11–14) entails that reflection alone can determine how to embody this teaching in every aspect of life.[35]

[33] These observations form the subject of Neusner 1997, which offers an extended reflection on the significance of the fact that "important traits, form and substance alike, of Classical dialectics of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, are replicated in the Gemara's argument" (ix). Perhaps because he is primarily interested in the structure of halakhic inquiry, Neusner emphasizes the systematic dimensions of Greek philosophy and Talmudic thought. Boyarin (2009) takes a postmodern, literary approach that focuses specifically on the relationship between the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud as seriocomic texts; like Neusner, however, he treats these texts essentially as monologues (albeit self-critical ones). The present study might be said to attend exclusively to the "serious" theoretical and pedagogical ambition of the dialogues and the Talmud, as opposed to their low or "comic" elements (Boyarin 2009, 31), except that there is always a certain laughable or nonvicious circularity in serious Socratic inquiry (see, e.g., *Theaetetus* 196d–e). But this study differs from the books by Boyarin and Neusner – the two studies closest to my own in subject matter – in refusing to see Socratic dialogue or rabbinic debate as the mere surface of underlying philosophical systems or "absolutist" monologues (Boyarin 2009, 145).

[34] Cf. Halbertal 1997: most legal discussions in the Talmud "preserve and clarify the wealth and multiplicity of approaches to the problem at hand." The text thus "does not determine a fixed judicial norm but rather sets a range of opinions among which future generations can choose" (72, 73).

[35] This is true even according to the traditional belief that God revealed the whole of the unwritten or Oral Torah to Moses along with the Written Torah. In that case, reflection and inquiry are needed to fill in those parts of the Oral Torah that were either not passed on by Moses or forgotten over the course of time (cf. Schimmel 2006, 13–14).

In this fundamental sense, revelation does not restrict thought, but rather focuses and motivates it. Beyond this, the rabbis regard the study of Torah as the fullest expression of the love of God. Seen in this light, the Talmud resembles a prayer of thanksgiving: in meticulously recording the play of the rabbinic mind, it magnifies God. In rabbinic Judaism, the humility of faith is thus the precondition for the expression of the majesty of intellect, which manifests itself in the moral seriousness and theoretical richness of an extraordinarily robust literary and legal tradition.[36]

A further affinity between the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud comes to light when one asks what these texts seek to accomplish as pedagogical writings – writings that aim to shape the minds and mold the ethical and spiritual dispositions of their readers. This question, which stands at the heart of the present study, is motivated by a number of clear similarities between these writings. Like the Bible, both the dialogues and the Talmud repeatedly turn the attention of their readers toward the same fundamental question: "How should I live?" In addressing this question, they develop complex chains of philosophical and exegetical reasoning, offer theological speculation and moral exhortation, advance interpretations of other texts, and construct codes of law.[37] Perhaps most important, they tell stories about people dealing with issues that might arise in the course of everyday life. These people exemplify various strengths and weaknesses of character and intellect, which are reflected in their judgments and actions. In narrating or dramatizing a variety of humanly revealing speeches and deeds, both the Talmud and the dialogues provide a range of moral and intellectual models that readers might choose to imitate.

[36] Cf. Soloveitchik 1978, which observes that both humble faith and sovereign intellect are evoked by the simultaneous hiddenness and self-revelation of God. Note, too, that the Talmud's emphasis on the intellect is consistent with the sustained emphases of Scripture. Brague (2003) underscores the "remarkable" fact (in the context of ancient religion) that God's communication to the people Israel at Sinai is "in the form of words" that speak "to the clarity of the intelligence and of the heart"; the Law thus "encourages a reflective choice of life." Nor is this communication restricted to the Law. Because God's creation is the result of speech (Genesis 1:3: "God said: 'Let there be light'…"), the world itself contains an intelligible *logos* or order in which He may be sought (46–47).

[37] The Platonic counterpart to the Mishnah is the *Laws*, which develops a code of law for a city that is to be colonized by the people of Crete (702b–e).

The Platonic dialogues and the Talmud are also animated by certain shared convictions about the life worth living. They concur that the unexamined life is a deeply impoverished one, that the examination of life must take place in partnership with others, and that it is incumbent upon us to live up to our best understanding of things. Both accordingly present or represent debates covering a broad range of topics, and rich with ethical, legal, metaphysical, and theological implications. In doing so, they propose many more questions than answers, and give voice to various – and frequently incompatible – intellectual and moral perceptions. In these ways, both the dialogues and the Talmud compel the reader to assume primary responsibility for what he or she takes away from them. Yet while these texts exemplify confidence in reason, their confidence is tempered by humility before the mysteries of our existence. Both texts consequently seek to stake out a middle ground between the blindness of faith undisciplined by critical thought, and the sterility of reason bereft of wonder before the divine.

The foregoing reflections are not intended to challenge Strauss's assertion that Greek philosophy and Judaism cannot be synthesized or harmonized. But they are intended to introduce a crucial claim about the philosophical and religious lives that are represented in the dialogues of Plato and the Talmud. Put simply, I argue in this book that the tension between rational inquiry and faith, between the attempt to extend the frontiers of understanding and the acknowledgement of impenetrable mysteries, is essential to the being both of Socrates as a philosopher and of the Talmudic rabbis as Jewish sages. This claim goes beyond the observation that both Socratic philosophizing and rabbinic thought combine elements of rational inquiry and faith. My point is rather that the intellectual and spiritual existence of Socrates and of the rabbis unfolds on the border between what is known and what is unknown – between what can be confidently asserted and argued for, and what we must humbly admit to be beyond comprehension. In different ways, the contradiction implicit in Strauss's observation that God is "incomprehensible and yet not unknown" – the simultaneous opposition and cooperation between the religious faith or trust that binds us to the mysteries of God or the gods, and the philosophical passion for knowledge that guides us toward what the intellect can grasp – thus stands at the heart of both

the dialogues and the Talmud. One overarching aim of the present study is to bring this animating tension to light.

THE NATURE OF THE INQUIRY

This book aims to illuminate the inner connection between the exemplary lives of philosophy and faith as these are portrayed in the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud, and to clarify the ways in which these texts seek to educate their readers to live these lives. I do not argue that Socratic philosophizing and Talmudic Judaism are ultimately or essentially compatible, for they are not. Plato and the Greeks knew nothing of the revealed God of the Torah. The consequences of this fact are visible in the relative radicalism of Socratic inquiry – whose explicit formulation of certain fundamental questions, such as "What is piety?," is inconceivable in the context of the Talmud – and in the fundamentally different conceptions of things divine, God or the gods, and piety that are advanced in the Platonic and rabbinic writings. But in spite of these fundamental differences, I believe that a meaningful comparison of Plato and the Talmud is both possible and desirable.

This project must nevertheless reckon with a serious concern. A distinguished professor once remarked that "we modern scholars who approach the Talmud as philologists and historians will always remain bunglers in this field of study."[38] With rare exceptions, however, no other approach is really possible for the modern scholar. For centuries, the study of the Talmud occupied an essential place in the lives of Jewish communities in Europe and North Africa. In the modern era, it was the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic communities of the Slavic countries (most notably Poland) and of Lithuania that constituted the leading centers of Jewish culture. The understanding of the Talmud in these communities was profound, because the Torah was the animating principle of their life, and the rabbinic scholar their highest ideal.[39] But the Holocaust obliterated the thousand-year-old world of the Jewish *shtetl*, drove Yiddish to the brink

[38] Theodor Nöldeke, quoted at Ginzberg 1928, 73.

[39] See Ginzberg 1928, esp. 1–34 and 59–87. Ginzberg notes that there was "in Poland and Lithuania … no learned estate because the people itself was a nation of students" (4).

of extinction, and, by one estimate, claimed the lives of "over 80 percent of the Jewish scholars, rabbis, full-time students and teachers of Torah alive in 1939."[40] For the most part, the social conditions under which a Jew might achieve the most intimate familiarity with the Talmud and its ideals no longer exist. Most academicians who wish to study the Talmud today are consequently bound to approach the text as an artifact of a vanished world – and so are, and will remain, "bunglers."

It does not follow, however, that we self-conscious bunglers should not study the Talmud. The Talmud contains too much wisdom to be ignored, even – or rather, especially – when this wisdom has come to seem far removed from our everyday lives. And there is a further, very important consideration: more than one orthodox scholar has observed that even those who today strive to duplicate the original *Lebenswelt* of rabbinic Judaism – choosing, for example, to live and raise their children in orthodox Jewish enclaves in the United States or Israel – have lost touch with the wholeness of the Talmud's understanding of Judaism. In an essay first published in 1974, Eliezer Berkovits describes as a "spiritual tragedy" orthodox Judaism's inability to sustain the "original vitality and wisdom" of rabbinic Judaism as a "comprehensive ethos."[41] Berkovits attributes this original vitality to the rabbis' "understanding of the overriding intentions of the Tora," an understanding that neither was nor could be "formulated … explicitly," but was rather "absorbed into their [the rabbis'] own consciousness as the result of a life of dedication to Tora and its living realization." But with the written codification of Jewish law in texts such as Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulḥan Arukh*, and the increasing reliance of Jewish communities on these texts to settle practical religious and moral questions, this living, essentially oral understanding of "the comprehensive Tora" and "the totality of the ethos of the law" was gradually lost.[42] Other authors have noted related changes in orthodox Jewish life in the decades after World War II, including a decisive shift of authority in the determination of Jewish practice from family and communal traditions to written codes of law, and the collapse in Jewish practice of an internal hierarchy of

[40] Greenberg 1977, 8.
[41] Berkovits 2002, 89–102 ("Conversion and the Decline of the Oral Law").
[42] Berkovits 2002, 93, 96, 97.

values.[43] For these reasons, Jewish orthodoxy, no less than Jewish secularism, needs to become reacquainted with the living wisdom that produced, and is reflected in, the Talmud.

While we cannot reanimate the actual life-worlds of the Talmud and the Platonic dialogues, we *can* attempt to inhabit the writings of Plato and the rabbis by means of an informed intellectual imagination. It may well be that the understanding of the alternative of the philosophical life and the life of faith that results from such an attempt will be marked by a certain unavoidable abstraction. Indeed, Strauss's observation that "no one of us can be both a philosopher and a theologian. . . . but every one of us can be and ought to be either the one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology, or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy" is itself an excessively abstract formulation from the perspective of the Torah, which teaches a whole way of life and not a "theology."[44] Yet Strauss rightly observes that "Western man became what he is and is what he is through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought. In order to understand ourselves and to illuminate our trackless way into the future, we must understand Jerusalem and Athens."[45] The comparative study of Plato and the Talmud responds to the challenge and the imperative of self-knowledge by pursuing one as yet largely unexplored way of reacquainting ourselves with the twin springs of the distinctive intellectual and spiritual life of the West.

Plato left perhaps as many as thirty-five dialogues.[46] The Jerusalem Talmud contains almost a million words. The richer and more elegant Babylonian Talmud, with which the present study is almost exclusively concerned, runs to roughly 2.5 million words.[47] Obviously, no single study can hope to encompass all of this material. In selecting

[43] See the editor's Introduction to Berkovits 2002, xii, with the articles cited at 342, nn. 5–8. The most important of these is the detailed discussion of Soloveitchik 1994.

[44] Strauss 1997a, 117.

[45] Strauss 1997c, 377. Cf. Strauss 1997a, 117: "the very life of Western civilization is the life between [these] two codes [of the Bible and Greek philosophy], a fundamental tension."

[46] The Introduction to Pangle 1987 provides a good discussion of the debate about the authenticity of the thirty-five dialogues included in the traditional canon of Thrasyllus.

[47] Akenson 1998, 366.

the texts examined in this book, I have been guided by two considerations that arise from my intention to compare the philosophical and rabbinic ways of life. First, certain dialogues and tractates are particularly illuminating with regard to the relationship between rational inquiry and faith, because they deal with subjects such as prophecy and miracles. Second, the content of the Talmud can be roughly divided into argumentation pertaining to religious law and codes of conduct (*halakha*) and the free-wheeling, nonhalakhic discourse known as *aggadah*, a multifarious category that embraces, among other things, narrative, folklore, theology, homily, and biblical interpretation.[48] While Talmudic debate on matters of halakha is rich with philosophical implications, it is on the whole of limited interest to readers who are not observant Jews. Aggadah, however, has the kind of universal appeal and accessibility that characterizes both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Platonic dialogues. This is particularly true of narrative aggadah pertaining to the lives of the exemplary rabbis the Talmud calls "sages" (*ḥakhamim*), for it is in this material that the people of the Talmud come to life as whole human beings – men who struggle, suffer, and rejoice; who quarrel, love, pray, get rich, and go hungry; and who, above all, try to live a life of Torah. If the halakhic disputation of the Talmud shows what it means to think like a sage, it is through aggadic narrative that readers may grasp what it means to *be* a sage. The stories of the sages are furthermore perhaps the primary means by which the Talmud is able to draw readers of all faiths and backgrounds into reflection and debate on humanly fundamental issues. And it is this combination of dramatic narrative and philosophical depth that makes Talmudic aggadah a literary cousin of the Platonic dialogues.

Mindful of the foregoing considerations, I have chosen to focus on short Platonic and Talmudic texts: Plato's *Euthyphro*, a dialogue about piety (which we will study in connection with Socrates' defense in the *Apology* against the charges of criminal impiety and corruption),

[48] Although this distinction is helpful in describing the main emphasis of my inquiry, it is admittedly somewhat artificial, because halakha and aggadah are intimately intertwined in the Talmud. While aggadah often illustrates or amplifies the thought inherent in the halakha, and may even furnish grounds for halakhic inferences (see Chapter 1, n. 102), aggadic materials are sometimes subject to the close scrutiny characteristic of halakhic argumentation.

and the third chapter of tractate Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud (18B–26A). These texts deal with a common set of issues, including human and divine judgments of merit, religious and moral extremism, and the partnership between human beings and God or the gods. Among the possible Talmudic alternatives, Ta'anit 3 also stands out because it has an abundance of aggadah. The aggadah of Ta'anit 3 – roughly 75 percent of the Gemara – consists almost exclusively of tales drawn from the lives of the sages, as well as legends involving other ordinary and extraordinary Jews. These tales, many of which concern miracles, present a broad range of concrete examples of thoughtfulness, piety, and moral virtue. The present study is an interpretative exercise that compares this aggadic material to an important part of the story the Platonic dialogues tell about the speeches and deeds of Socrates.[49]

Reading the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* alongside Ta'anit 3 will establish that the tension between rational inquiry and faith in which Strauss finds "the secret of the vitality of Western civilization" is in fact an essential feature of both the philosophical life of Socrates and the reflective lives of the rabbis. More specifically, I argue that these texts are animated by comparable conceptions of the proper roles of inquiry and reasoned debate in religious life, and by a profound awareness of the limits of our understanding of things divine – an awareness that has both ethical and theoretical consequences. Plato and the rabbis, I maintain, regard thinking that is in the broadest sense theological – that reflects on our relationship to God or the gods, and to human beings in the light of this relationship – as an activity no less sacred than traditional rituals of prayer and sacrifice. Their writings are furthermore indispensable to this intellectual activity, both because they educate readers to undertake it, and because they provide the essential materials and contexts in relation to which it unfolds.

Although there is no exact equivalent of our concept of "religion" in the dialogues or the Talmud, the character of sacred thought in these texts is illuminated by a long tradition of speculation on the

[49] Moshe Shoshan has pointed out to me that the aggadic material in Ta'anit 3 is unusual with respect to both its quantity and its largely theological orientation. However, I believe that this material *is* representative of the Talmud's pedagogical use of stories about the rabbis.

etymology of the Latin word *religio*.[50] This tradition connects the concept of religion with *relegere*, "to go through or over again" in reading, speech, or thought; *religare*, "to bind anew"; and *reeligere*, "to choose again, or seek out what one has lost."[51] These etymologies emphasize repetition and reaffirmation of the ties that bind worshipers with one another and with God, as one sees, for example, in the Israelites' frequent renewal of the covenant in Scripture and in the Jewish liturgical calendar of Torah readings.[52] But they also reflect assumptions common to the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud. These texts, which simultaneously recapitulate and transform earlier reflective practices, invite readers to participate in the inquiries they present or represent. This process of learning and thinking, not just about the text, but *through* it, is sacred because it aims to recreate a binding relationship with the community of past and present inquirers and with God or the gods. This is the shared backdrop against which the nonetheless significant differences between Platonic and rabbinic thought can most fully be appreciated.

Another overarching aim of the present study is to illuminate the special pedagogical roles of Talmudic aggadah and Platonic narrative and drama. While the dialogues and the Talmud articulate and defend certain philosophical or religious accounts of the truth, they are equally concerned to teach readers how to learn – as well as what it means, in human terms, to do so. These texts are accordingly remarkably self-reflective.[53] They constitute curricula in the examined life that simultaneously present the subject matter to be learned and show by example how to go about learning it. While the philosophical argument of the dialogues and the halakhic disputation of the Talmud are crucial to the achievement of both of these

[50] In modern Israeli Hebrew, the adjective "religious" (as opposed to "secular") is *dati*; in biblical Hebrew, *dat* means "decree, law, usage," and so has much the same range as the Greek term *nomos*.

[51] See the overview of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II.81.1, and cf. Hoyt 1912.

[52] On the renewal of the covenant, see esp. Deuteronomy 29–30, Joshua 24, and Nehemiah 9–10.

[53] Cf. Michael Fishbane's observation that the literary tradition of the rabbis "display[s] its paideia [Greek: 'education'] in full view" by producing texts that include "interpretations, … debates, and … conflicts" (Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar 2000, lv).

ends, the same is true of the more purely literary dimensions of these texts.[54] In particular, the dramatic and narrative elements of the dialogues and the Talmud contain moral and religious teachings that can be unearthed only by literary interpretation. Thus, the dialogues respond to a question like "What is justice?" not simply (and perhaps not even primarily) on the level of philosophical argument, but also by furnishing a concrete exemplification of justice in the speeches and deeds of Socrates. The same is true of the Talmud, which uses aggadic narrative to present conceptions of justice, mercy, charity, and the like as these are concretely embodied in the lives of the sages. This use of narrative and drama, I argue, is indispensable to the pedagogy of these texts. For the rabbis, as for Socrates, to learn is to make the truth one's own by appropriating it in a practical as well as a theoretical sense; it is both to know, and to live up to what one knows. The truth that one learns in this deep sense – including especially the truth about our essential human ignorance – becomes an attribute not just of one's opinions or assertions, but of one's whole existence.[55] The dialogues and the Talmud accordingly use drama and narrative to display the essential unity, in the lives of the philosopher and the rabbinic sage, of the processes of inquiry and the practices of everyday life. In this manner, these texts teach readers while compelling them to reflect on how to apply this teaching in their own lives.

Finally, studying the Talmud alongside the Platonic dialogues will help us to see that Talmudic aggadah about the sages and Platonic drama and narrative seek mimetically to convey nothing less than the living ethos of Talmudic Judaism on the one hand and of Socratic philosophizing on the other – dispositions of mind and character that cannot be encapsulated in purely legal discourse or philosophical argumentation. This function of aggadah emerges clearly in the work of Eliezer Berkovits and Max Kadushin. In pondering the rabbis' understanding of the fundamental, essentially ethical principles and

[54] Even the structure of Socratic argument and halakhic disputation reflects literary devices designed to attract and hold the attention of the reader, such as the use of rhetorical climax. See Jacobs 2006, 53–69. The logical form of *reductio ad absurdum* favored by Socrates produces a rhetorical climax whenever it is successfully employed in actual conversation.

[55] Socrates suggests as much in remarking that the philosopher who has "coupled with that which truly is" and "begotten intelligence and truth" would "know and *live truly*" (*Republic* 490b, emphasis added).

values of the Torah, Berkovits speaks of the "halachic conscience" – the spirit rather than the letter of the law, which informs the rabbis' application of Jewish law to actual life situations.[56] As an intuitive understanding of the hierarchy of core Jewish values, the halakhic conscience mediates between established law and the unique circumstances of human existence, thereby transforming "the generality and abstractness of the Written Tora … into *torat hayim*, a Tora of life." Because "no general law speaks to the specific situation," written codes of law are always "somewhat 'inhuman' "; in this sense, "only the Oral Tora, alive in the conscience of the contemporary teachers and masters," can "redeem" the written law.[57] Berkovits's understanding of the halakhic conscience is echoed in Kadushin's characterization of the intrinsic and essential "value-concepts" of rabbinic Judaism as dynamic, constantly developing, organically interrelated, and yet ultimately indefinable.[58] So, too, Berkovits's notion of the redemption of Written Torah through the mediation of the halakhic conscience is paralleled by Kadushin's seminal conception of the "steady concretization" of rabbinic value-concepts by the extension and increasing application of halakhic judgments to everyday life and the development of aggadic interpretations of Scripture – the means, according to Kadushin, by which the rabbis were able to achieve both an ever-increasing knowledge of the mind of God and an ever more precise and complete adherence, in practice, to His will.[59]

Taken together, the reflections of Berkovits and Kadushin – one an orthodox rabbi, the other a conservative rabbi – converge on one essential point: the core understanding of rabbinic Judaism, its intuition of the ethos of Torah as a whole, eludes explicit formulation. No set of definitions or principles, and no legal code, can capture this ethos, much less transmit it to future generations.[60] This is why

[56] Berkovits 2002, 59–62.

[57] Ibid., 96–98.

[58] These value-concepts include Torah, Israel, God's love, and God's justice. See Kadushin 2001, esp. 1–7, and cf. the basic "Tora principles" mentioned at Berkovits 2002, 59.

[59] Kadushin 2001, 79, 99, 109; cf. Herford 1962, 75.

[60] Soloveitchik (1994, xx) writes that "[a] way of life is not learned but rather absorbed. Its transmission is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school." Cf. Ginzberg 1928, 27: "Religion to be a vital influence must be lived, not taught."

Berkovits insists that the halakhic conscience cannot be committed to writing, but is sustained and passed down through "Oral Tora." What cannot be said, however, may sometimes be shown, and it is the burden of Talmudic aggadah – including, in particular, narrative aggadah about the sages – to teach the values and transmit the ethos of rabbinic Judaism *mimetically*. To show what cannot be said is also the function of narrative and drama in the Platonic dialogues. For what the dialogues attempt to convey to their readers – to say it again – is philosophy as a way of life, including what we might call, following Berkovits, the "philosophical conscience" that allows Socrates to apply his best understanding of the Ideas of justice, courage, and the like to the concrete circumstances of everyday life.[61]

The present study represents but one voice in a fascinating conversation about some of the richest parts of our shared intellectual heritage, a conversation in which having the last word is neither possible nor desirable. It is furthermore one of the small blessings of authorship that readers may often learn even from a book's mistakes. A fair test of my interpretation is whether it helps, in one way or another, to disclose some new levels of significant meaning in the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud. I shall be more than satisfied if the present study stimulates readers to return to these texts with fresh questions, and prepares them to hear some previously unexpected answers.

The plan of the book is straightforward. Chapter 1 reflects on the nature of the Talmud and the Platonic dialogues as written works. What do these texts give us, and what do they ask of us? What explains their basic structure and literary characteristics? I argue that the dialogues and the Talmud simultaneously preserve and transform oral traditions that might otherwise have been forgotten. Each text constitutes a curriculum that is intended to inform and sharpen the minds of readers as well as to mold their spiritual and ethical dispositions.

[61] Nor is it contradictory to suppose that written works like the Talmud and the dialogues can perform an essentially "oral" function. Berkovits (2002, 100) makes a crucial point about the commitment of "Oral Tora" to writing: "The whole of the Gemara testifies to the unavoidable struggle of the spoken word of the halacha with its solidification in a text.... Whereas the Mishna was indeed a transformation of the spoken word into the written one, the Gemara was the writing down of the spoken word in a manner that preserves its essential spoken quality." The same is true of the dialogue form employed by Plato. See Chapter 1, 49–55.

Both are pedagogically complex writings that speak to different sorts of readers in different ways, paying special attention to the tension between creative and critical reflection, on the one hand, and custom and tradition on the other. And both tell stories that are designed to show what it means to live the life of a philosopher or a rabbi.

From this point, the book develops more like a conversation than a systematic argument. Subsequent chapters shuttle between Ta'anit and the *Apology* and *Euthyphro* in an attempt to trace the way these texts weave together understanding and mystery, human purposes and divine givens, into a fabric that reflects both the expansive activity and the discriminating receptivity of thought.

Chapter 2 examines the story in Ta'anit 3 of Ḥoni HaMe'aggel, a charismatic Jewish miracle worker who intercedes with God on behalf of his community. Ḥoni succeeds in bringing rain during a drought even though he behaves in a way that makes him, in the eyes of the rabbis, not only unworthy of God's special attention and assistance but actually deserving of punishment. Ḥoni's story, which raises basic questions about self-knowledge and the limits of human understanding, fits a pattern known to both the Greeks and the Jews of antiquity – that of the hero who is estranged from the very community he saves. Chapter 3 reflects on Socrates' self-presentation in Plato's *Apology*. Because Socrates' relationship to "the god" cannot be understood in the familiar terms of the Greek tradition, it poses a problem for the Athenians much like the one Ḥoni poses for the rabbis. In his exemplary piety and wisdom, as well as in the way he tells his story, Socrates resembles the Hebrew prophets – men who understood themselves to be engaged in a moral mission at the behest of God. Chapter 4 takes up Plato's *Euthyphro*, a dialogue whose main dramatic action is structured around the theme of the relationship between fathers and sons that also plays a central role in the Ḥoni story. By using this theme as a context for comparing Socrates to Euthyphro, his interlocutor, and Meletus, his accuser, this chapter begins to articulate the nature of Socrates' pedagogical care for his fellow citizens. Socrates exercises this care by engaging in philosophical dialogue – a process of circling back to, and thinking critically about, the ultimate beginnings of human existence.

Chapter 5 returns to the Talmud. This chapter considers a series of stories in Ta'anit 3 about the various (and frequently incompatible)

attempts of the sages to exemplify the teaching of Torah in their lives. These stories emphasize the wisdom contained in the recognition of one's own ignorance, as well as the openness to new sources of learning that follows from this humbling self-knowledge. They also evoke personal responses that reveal something essential about who we are, and where we might find ourselves in the field of moral possibilities opened up by the examples of the sages. These are only some of the ways in which the text of Ta'anit itself exercises a kind of Socratic care for its readers. Chapter 6 examines Socrates' radical revision, in the *Euthyphro*, of the poets' depiction of the Greek gods. I argue that Socrates' revised theology aims to help the Athenians become better human beings and citizens. But because his philosophical activity is spurred by modes of direct access to god or the gods that both limit and guide his reflections on piety and divinity, Socrates' love of wisdom incorporates a sense of reverence before, and responsibility to, that which surpasses comprehension. Chapter 7 picks up the threads of the previous one by exploring two conflicting theological perspectives implicit in the aggadah of Ta'anit 3. The first holds that God is unwilling to abrogate the internal necessity of the order He established at the creation of the world. The second holds that God regularly performs miracles for the sake of righteous individuals, including the sort that involves changing the order of creation. By simultaneously incorporating both of these perspectives, Ta'anit 3 encourages rational inquiry that is moderated by a profound awareness of our human ignorance.

The Epilogue offers a synoptic reflection on the main analogies between the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud that emerge over the course of this study. Ta'anit 3 and the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* teach that "human being" is a relative concept, inasmuch as our thoughts and actions are properly measured by a divine standard. These texts use similar means to educate their readers for membership in an ideal or aspirational community of teaching and learning, and to convey to them the experience of being called by God or the gods to participate in such a community. They depict the education they offer as a means by which the soul, embracing as a sacred gift the opportunity to learn the most needful things, might liberate itself from the internal bonds of ignorance and habitual thoughtlessness. Mindful that they are speaking to very different kinds of readers, Ta'anit 3 and

the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* undertake this education with a mixture of hopefulness and caution.

A few concluding remarks about what readers may expect. This book is not a historical study. While I am not competent to pronounce on the influence of Greek thought on the rabbis, I also am not concerned with this question. Nor do I wish to mine Plato and the Talmud for information about the culture of the rabbis or the ancient Athenians, although I have certainly benefited from studies that do just this. Rather, I propose to approach the texts on their own terms, allowing them as far as possible to dictate the assumptions that guide our reading. While this approach asks readers imaginatively to assume certain spiritual and intellectual frames of mind, it does not presuppose that we can learn from the Talmud only if we are pious Jews, or from Plato's Socrates only if we share his metaphysical assumptions. Were this the case, the philosophical and faith traditions of Athens and Jerusalem would have nothing to say to each other. But Alfarabi, Averroes, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas – to name only the leading examples of thinkers who stand, in one way or another, in both traditions – have found that they do have something to say to each other.[62]

Finally, I have attempted to write a book that will be accessible to a wide range of readers. While the issues examined in the following pages are of scholarly interest, on the deepest level they concern us not as theologians or philosophers, but as human beings. Like us, Plato and the rabbis lived in deeply troubled times, yet they responded to the disintegration of their worlds with unsurpassed creative energy. Guided always by the question of how to succeed in what the Greeks called *eu prattein* – living well and doing right – they sought to make whole what was broken in the individual, in society, and in relation to the divine. Nor did they keep their thoughts to themselves, but chose instead to disseminate them in writing. It is with this simultaneously hopeful and willful act of spiritual and intellectual generosity that we begin our study.

[62] Maimonides' efforts to harmonize the Torah with Aristotle are informed by the Muslim Alfarabi and paralleled in the Christian tradition by Aquinas. Cf. the writings of the Alexandrian Jew Philo, who argues that Moses was the teacher of the Greek philosophers, and, in modern times, the reflections of Søren Kierkegaard on the relationship between Socratic philosophizing and Christian faith (discussed in Howland 2006).

1

Talmudic and Platonic Writing

This book reads the aggadah of Ta'anit 3 alongside Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. A well-founded reading must begin by considering the nature of the texts at hand. The present chapter reflects on the literary characteristics of the Talmud and the Platonic dialogues with a view to establishing the fundamental interpretative assumptions of this study.

With regard to the Talmud, we must start by asking some basic questions. How do the Mishnah and the Gemara function as instruments of teaching and learning? What is the purpose of Talmudic aggadah? How does the aggadic material in the Talmud relate to its halakhic content? One way to address these questions is to inquire into the relationship between the literary genres of the Talmud and the earlier tradition of sacred writings. This approach leads us back to the origins of the Jewish literary tradition in the Bible.

SCRIPTURE, MIDRASH AND MISHNAH FORMS, AND ORAL TORAH

It is important to state at the outset that the beliefs and practices of Judaism were initially formulated and transmitted as an oral tradition, retained in memory and passed down through successive generations over the centuries. At some point, essential parts of this tradition – starting with the Torah proper, the Pentateuch – began to be committed to writing, presumably as a response to a crisis that caused its

bearers to lose confidence in their ability to maintain the tradition in a purely oral form.[1] This loss of confidence seems to have been precipitated by Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the Temple of Solomon and resettlement of the best part of the Judeans in Babylonia at the beginning of the second decade of the sixth century BCE.[2] In any case, the oral tradition certainly did not cease just because parts of it were written down. In fact, the earliest sacred writings of the Jewish tradition suggest the contrary. Four characteristics of the Hebrew Scriptures deserve special mention, because they establish a pattern that serves as a literary benchmark for later Jewish writings; to varying degrees, all four of these imply the continuing fundamental importance of the oral tradition in relation to the emerging tradition of sacred writing.

The first of these four characteristics is the literary diversity of the Scriptures, a diversity that reflects the richness of the oral tradition on which they are based: an overall frame of narrative embraces, among other things, "stories, documents, bits of poetry, hymns, mnemonic litanies of dos and don'ts, rules for priestly ritual, and architectural details of votive structures."[3] The second is the adherence of the Scriptures to what one scholar has called "the grammar of Judahist religious invention," the basic rule of which is "always ascribe as much as possible to earlier figures; older is better, creativity cannot be admitted."[4] That what is old has authority simply because it is closer to the revelation at Sinai must also have been a presupposition of the original oral tradition; we will soon see that it would later become a guiding assumption of the notion of Oral Torah that was developed by the Pharisees and articulated by the rabbis in tractate Avot

[1] Cf. Nielsen 1954, 33.

[2] Nielsen (1954, 39) asserts that "the Old Testament as written literature may in all probability be ascribed to the period between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the time of the Maccabees [in the mid second century BCE]." Herford (1933, 7) maintains that the Pentateuch "received its final form" around 400 BCE. Akenson (1998, 23) supposes that the first nine books of the Bible – Genesis through Deuteronomy, plus Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings – were composed during the Babylonian exile.

[3] Akenson 1998, 29.

[4] The first five books of the Torah thus came to be attributed to Moses by the author-editor(s) of 2 Chronicles, and the Psalms attributed to King David (Akenson 1998, 65, 73–74). "Judahism" is the name Akenson gives to the text-centered tradition inaugurated in the production of the Hebrew Scriptures (28).

of the Mishnah. The third distinctive literary characteristic of the Hebrew Scriptures is their inclusion of inconsistencies, particularly in the citation or repetition of earlier items. It has been observed that the presence of inconsistencies effectively places a burden of critical judgment on the reader; the text was not meant simply to be memorized, because it implicitly posed questions that could be answered only by the reader's active intellectual participation.[5] But inconsistencies in the text might also point toward its relationship to an oral tradition that can resolve them. If this is correct, the Scriptures would in certain respects be analogous to notes written for the purpose of delivering or remembering a lecture, the meaning of which can be fully grasped only in relation to the larger context of teaching and learning in which they originated.[6] The fourth important literary characteristic of the Scriptures is what has been termed "the Jewish predilection for justified law."[7] In contrast with other collections of ancient Near Eastern law, the law of God is not presented in the Bible as something to be blindly obeyed; rather, it is accompanied by justifications or reasons.[8] In preferring to *explain* the law rather than simply to impose it, the Bible "invites the receiver of the law to join in grasping the beneficent effect of the law, thereby bestowing dignity on him and giving him a sense that he is a partner in the law."[9] In this connection, we may note that the Torah describes Moses not only as publicly declaring the law, but also as accompanying this declaration with

[5] Akenson 1998, 9, 53, 81. This is true even if, as Halbertal (1997) demonstrates, the Torah initially characterizes itself as an unproblematic text whose function is "announcing and telling" and only later (in Psalm 119, in which "God and Torah become interchangeable") comes to be characterized as one that "requires probing, not only reciting or reading" (8, 14–15).

[6] Cf. the assertion of Schimmel (2006, xx) that the inaccessibility and incompleteness of the Mishnah – features one would not expect to find in what is essentially a code of law – were purposely intended by its authors, so that the text could not be understood independently of the tradition of Oral Torah. Frieman (1995, xix–xx) quotes with approval Moshe Ḥaim Luzzato, who makes the same claim with respect to the aggadah of the Gemara.

[7] The quoted phrase is the subtitle of Halivni 1986.

[8] Thus Halivni (1986, 5–17) observes that the narrative in Genesis and the first chapters of Exodus functions as a preamble to the articulation of the law that establishes "God's right to issue commandments" (13), and notes the multiplicity of "motive clauses" explaining the reasons for particular commandments.

[9] Ibid., 14. Halivni asserts that the justificatory nature of Jewish law "remains, to this day, the most unique characteristic of Jewish learning" (92).

oral explanations, and thus furnishing an authoritative prototype for the oral activity of explicating Scripture that the rabbis would later call *midrash*.[10]

What is the nature and purpose of midrash? It is necessary to address this question in order to achieve even a rudimentary understanding of aggadah, halakha, and the literary form of mishnah. While this will unavoidably involve some historical speculation, my goal is not to produce a precise history but to illuminate the literary characteristics of the Talmud.

The origins of midrash have been traced to the central importance that the written Torah assumed in Jewish life as a result of the reforms of Ezra. After Cyrus decreed an end to the Babylonian captivity in 538, the returning exiles rebuilt the Temple. In the following century, they were reorganized by "Ezra [who] came up from Babylon, a scribe expert in the Torah of Moses" who "had dedicated himself to study [*lidrosh*] the Torah of the LORD so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel" (Ezra 7:6, 10). The "entire people" having assembled, Ezra read the Torah aloud to "all who could listen with understanding" (Nehemiah 8:1–2). When Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites had read and "giv[en] the sense [*som sechel*]" of the whole of the Torah (in whatever form it existed at that time),[11] the people collectively pledged "to follow [*lalechet*] the Torah of God,[12] given through Moses the servant of God, and to observe carefully all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, His rules and Laws" (Nehemiah 8:8, 10:29–30). In this way, "the Book of the Law … as read and interpreted by Ezra, was for them [the people Israel] the only authority they were bound to follow."[13]

[10] Nielsen (1954, 47) observes that "Moses' own oral declaration of the law is expressly designated in Deut. 1.5 as an explanation of the words of the law" (Nielsen refers here to the verb *baer*, "to make distinct, to explain or expound"). Lauterbach (1951, 186–88) establishes that "the phrase 'to study in the manner of Moses' is used [in the Talmud] to indicate the Midrash-form."

[11] Cf. Herford 1933, 31; Herford 1962, 56.

[12] *Lalechet* is the infinitive of the verb *halakh*, "to go, follow," from which the noun *halakha* (which literally means "walking") is derived.

[13] Lauterbach 1951, 164. Cf. Wright 1967, 49: "from the time of Ezra's reform, the Law actually became the organizing principle of the community of the restoration." In order that the people Israel might "live *for* the Torah, *by* the Torah, and *with* the Torah" (Herford 1962, 58, emphasis in original), he ordained that the

In the activity of Ezra we see the early beginnings of midrash. The word *midrash* builds on the root *drash*, which "means basically 'to seek'" in the Hebrew Scriptures; in rabbinic literature, midrash comes to mean "study" or "inquiry," and specifically the interpretation of both legal or prescriptive (halakhic) and nonlegal (aggadic) portions of Scripture.[14] Midrash can be either a verb or a noun; it designates both the process and the product of interpretation.[15] Emerging after prophecy ceased, midrash is "a substitute for direct intervention, through either prophecy or revelation"; midrash differs from these forms of divine intervention in that it "seeks [in the sacred writings] … rather than being 'seized' and 'told.'"[16] The results of this seeking came to be known as aggadah and halakha.[17]

As literally a "declaration" of Scripture, aggadah (from *higid*, "declare, make known, expound") was originally "applicable to all the results of the interpretation of Scripture"; later, the term was understood specifically to designate any nonlegal biblical interpretation.[18] Aggadic midrash originally occurred in the context of the public reading of the Bible on various occasions, which might be followed by preaching that developed and "applied to the needs of the present" the meaning of "the historical records and of the prophecies and the ethical lessons" of Scripture. Halakhic midrash was developed in the emerging community of scribes as a means of determining the "full meaning and correct application of the legal material of the Torah."[19] In connecting legal statements with

Torah should be publicly read aloud on Monday and Thursday as well as on the afternoon of the Sabbath (BT Baba Kamma 82A).

[14] Wright 1967, 35 n. 7, 41–42. Halivni (1986) observes that the combination of *drash* and *torah* in Ezra 7:10 suggests the exposition of a text, and thus "connotes an exegetical activity similar to that engaged in by the rabbis of the Talmud" (15). On the "rabbinical exaltation" of Ezra (Herford 1933, 33), see BT Sukkah 20A and BT Sanhedrin 21B: "when the Torah was forgotten in Israel, Ezra came up from Babylonia and placed it on solid foundations"; "Ezra was worthy for the Torah to have been given by him, had not Moses come before him" (Neusner trans.).

[15] Midrash can also refer to "the corpus of work that has collected these interpretations" (Holtz 1984, 178–79).

[16] Halivni 1986, 16.

[17] It is unclear when these two terms were introduced (Herford 1933, 50). "Halakha" appears in the Mishnah as an already "apparently quite familiar" technical term (Herford 1962, 72 n. 1).

[18] Ibid., 78–79 n. 3.

[19] Wright 1967, 50, 52; on the homiletic purpose of aggadah, cf. Kadushin 2001, 63, 68.

a biblical proof-text, halakhic midrash displays the predilection for justified law evinced in the Scriptures. Scholars disagree, however, about when midrash was institutionalized as a method of explicitly validating religious practices and customs with reference to the written law.[20] In any case, the literary form of halakhic midrash is both distinct from, and seems to predate, that of mishnah, which presents "laws … codified according to subject, generally independent of their Scriptural backing."[21]

Before we consider the mishnah form, we should note that the primacy of the written Torah in Jewish life after the reformation of the community by Ezra inevitably conferred authority on those who possessed special interpretative expertise – in the first instance, the scribes or scholars (*soferim*, lit. "men of the book [*sefer*]") who succeeded Ezra, and who prepared the way for those who came to be known as "rabbis" after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. After Ezra, to be a scholar involved learning the midrash.[22] The authority of interpreters who were skilled in midrash was furthermore enhanced by the gradual establishment of the Tanakh as a sealed canon (an authoritative text to which no new texts of equal importance may be added),[23] for the tradition of halakhic midrash meant that the existing text had to be mined for answers to any

[20] According to Lauterbach (1951, 164–65), it was from the time of Ezra that "the teachings of the Halakah (for all such rules, customs, practices, and traditional laws constituted the Halakah) had to be represented as an interpretation or an exposition of the Written Law." Lauterbach's arguments are challenged in Halivni 1986, which argues that legal rulings came to be "transmitted with the appropriate Scripture" only in the second century BCE, to which he dates portions of the biblical commentaries known as Midrashei Halakhah (21–34). Wright (1967) takes no exact stance on this question, but observes that the "public reading and teaching of the Torah" led, over time, to the development of midrash as a means of elaborating the "ethical and inspirational teaching" of Scripture as well as "the full meaning and correct application of the legal material of the Torah" (50).

[21] Wright 1967, 51. According to Halivni (1986, 43), the change from midrashic to mishnaic form took place around the end of the first century CE; Lauterbach (1951, 184–86) dates it to between 270 and 165 CE. Yet the mishnah form never entirely replaced midrash (Lauterbach 1951, 167).

[22] Lauterbach 1951, 165–66.

[23] Exactly when canonization occurred is unclear. Halbertal (1997) supposes that the canon was largely established during the Second Temple era (16). Akenson (1998) dates the general acceptance of the separate and privileged status of the Pentateuch to 400 BCE, but maintains that the canon was not "set" until the second through the fifth centuries CE (76, 140).

and all questions that might arise about the application or extent of religious law.[24]

The mishnah form differs from halakhic midrash in that it transmits law apodictically, supporting its judgments neither with reference to the Bible nor with independent arguments. However, neither the Talmud nor later rabbinic writings mention when this innovation occurred, or explain what caused it.[25] Some scholars suggest that law organized in mishnah form was easier to memorize, but this is counterintuitive.[26] Others argue that the mishnah form originated as a response to a particular problem of legal authority. After Antiochus III took over the province of Judea at the beginning of the second century BCE, a Council or Sanhedrin of priests and laymen assumed authority to teach and interpret the law and regulate religious life.[27] This Sanhedrin found it difficult to furnish legal justifications for customs and traditions that had entered into Jewish life during the relatively anarchic period stretching from Alexander's conquest of the Persian empire to the end of Ptolemaic rule in Judea (332–198 BCE). The problem was that some practices of a religious nature that were deemed worthy of approval could not be derived from the Torah, either by means of the existing interpretative tradition or by new midrashim. In response to this problem, the priestly members of this Sanhedrin, forerunners of the Sadducees, claimed the authority (on the basis of Deuteronomy 17:8–13) to decree ordinances (*gezerot*) that

[24] Halbertal (1997, 19) observes that "the moment the text was sealed, authority was removed from the writers of the text and transferred to its interpreters; denied to the prophets and awarded to the Sages."

[25] Lauterbach 1951, 170. Lauterbach reviews prevalent theories at 172–82.

[26] Lauterbach (1951, 171) observes that it would appear to be *more* difficult to remember laws independently of their connection with Scripture. This is confirmed in Chajes 1960, 14–15: "far-fetched Biblical interpretations" were especially useful in "assist[ing] the memory in preserving *halachoth* transmitted orally." Cf. Schimmel 2006, 39–40: midrash may have been "a mnemonic to facilitate the purpose of remembering [the law]." Memorization was in any case necessary, because BT Gittin 60B and BT Temurah 14B suggest that there was originally a prohibition against committing new laws to writing (cf. Halivni 1986, 40). Strack (1931) argues against the existence of a formal interdiction (cf. Chajes 1960, 14 n. 4), but offers several reasons for the original oral form of the Mishnah, including the fear that other nations could easily translate the written law and so lay claim to Israel's distinctive identity (12–18).

[27] Lauterbach 1951, 200. Herford (1962, 23) gives 196 BCE as the approximate date of the Sanhedrin's establishment.

were independent of, and unconnected by interpretation with, the Torah. The Sanhedrin's lay members, forerunners of the Pharisees, rejected the priests' claim to authority and gradually developed an alternative solution: the customs and traditions in question could be justified as falling under the rubric of Oral Torah – unwritten teachings that God revealed to Moses at Sinai in addition to the Written Torah, and that had been handed down through successive generations of sages.[28]

While the foregoing account of the origin of the mishnah form is necessarily speculative, it offers a coherent explanation of the origins of the conception of Oral Torah – the category under which part of the Mishnah, tractate Avot, presents the whole.[29] That established customs whose origins were obscured by the passage of time might have seemed much older than they actually were is by no means implausible, especially if one recalls that Judaism was originally entirely an oral tradition, and in large part continued to be one. The seminal idea of Oral Torah – a conception that furnished "the real point of cleavage between Sadducees and Pharisees,"[30] and in terms of which the rabbinic successors of the Pharisees understood their own activity as reflected in the Talmud – identified most of the content of the

[28] Lauterbach 1951, 200–29; Herford 1933, 64–67; Herford 1962, 60–64. Wright (1967) gives a different account of the mishnah form: it is the codification "without biblical proof-texts" of halakhic statements that were originally derived by midrash (42, cf. 51). Schimmel (2006, 150–51) advances a similar view. But this does not explain why the interpretative grounding of legal statements would have been omitted in the mishnah form. Lauterbach (1951, 229) states that the motive for the mishnah form was always "the absence of a sound Midrash"; Schimmel (2006, 158–59) speculates that "the Midrashic style was abandoned because it lacked the necessary authority" – specifically, because "when a *halachah* is stated to be derived from a Scriptural passage, it is open to the argument that the passage concerned has been misinterpreted."

[29] Avot traces the Oral Torah from Moses through the generations, down to the rabbis whose thought is recorded in the Mishnah. While this tractate as a whole may be a later addition to the Mishnah (Akenson 1998, 330–31), Halivni (1986, 47) dates its oldest layer, which lists the chain of tradition, to the beginning of the second century CE.

[30] Herford 1962, 64. The Sadducees "adhered to the written text alone and rejected the unwritten, traditional Torah" (63). Schimmel (2006, 9) states that the Sadducees "had to admit that there had always been an oral law to explain, expound and supplement the Written Law, but they would argue that the original Oral Law was not one and the same with that taught by the Sages."

Oral Torah with that of the Written Torah.[31] This means that much of the Oral Torah could in principle be discovered in, and thus placed on the foundations of, the Written Torah. And in fact, the actual work of the scribes and the rabbis consisted in finding the midrashic means to connect existing traditions with Scripture, and in deriving new laws from Scripture and from the tradition by means of interpretation and logical inference – that is, in developing the Oral Torah and connecting it with the Written Torah.[32] This intellectual work was necessary because only part of the Oral Torah had been preserved, either because Moses did not pass on to succeeding generations all that God had revealed to him, or because some of the teaching that he did pass on had been forgotten over the course of time.[33]

Although the fragmentary and incomplete character of the Oral Torah might seem to be wholly lamentable, it was in truth an essential precondition for the future flourishing of rabbinic Judaism. It simultaneously focused and elevated the scholarly study of the Jewish tradition and its sacred writings, giving this study both a well-defined purpose and a special dignity that it would otherwise have lacked. It has been well observed that the notion of Oral Torah transformed both the understanding of Scripture and the status of its interpreters, turning the latter into partners with God in a revelation that unfolds in the medium of a "cognitive discipline,"[34] and changing the former from "a closed revelation to an open one … from a text long ago set and hardened … to a text whose meaning was plastic."[35] The

[31] Cf. Schimmel 2006, 85, quoting D. Z. Hoffman: "The Written Law and the Oral Law 'are one and the same Divine Law.'" The same point is implicit in Ben Bag Bag's well-known advice regarding the Torah: "turn it over and over because everything is in it" (Avot 5:22). But Chajes (1960) observes that Oral Torah includes traditional halakhic practices "for which no support can be found in Scripture" (111, cf. 19), as well as *takkanot* (enactments) and *gezerot* (decrees) that were necessary "for the purpose of protecting the walls of the law against breaches" (35).

[32] Cf. Chajes 1960, 10, 13, 29.

[33] Schimmel 2006, 13–14.

[34] Hartman 1997, 51, cf. 36; Schimmel 2006, xvii, which cites BT Shabbat 10A: "Any judge who judges a case in truth and fidelity even for a single moment is regarded by Scripture as though he were turned into a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, in the works of creation" (Neusner trans.).

[35] Herford 1962, 66, cf. 85. Cf. Herford 1933, 73: "in the conception of the Unwritten Torah was implied the belief in the continuous progressive revelation of God, and that his authority was made known in the reason and conscience of those who sought to know his will."

idea that the implicit content of the Written Torah was progressively unfolded in the tradition of Oral Torah simultaneously liberated the interpretative imagination and authorized its findings. Authorized, because the interpreter understood himself to be articulating the latent meaning of the text, ideas that "existed in the mind of God … [and were] imparted to Moses"; liberated, because the interpretative imagination was given license to "play round and over the contents of Scripture."[36] In its "freedom of utterance," according to which men "declared as true and right what their reason compelled them to own as the highest," the conception of the Oral Torah may be said to resemble prophecy.[37] As a form of ongoing revelation rooted in interpretation, it both extends and fundamentally transforms the activity of earlier generations of prophets.[38]

The comparison of Oral Torah to prophecy might nevertheless seem strained, because while the prophet faithfully communicates the Word of God, the results of midrash often depart radically from the obvious meaning of God's written revelation. One's doubts might be further strengthened by the fact that, although halakhic midrash employed certain exegetical rules, these were "merely a helpful guide for the haggadist,"[39] and by the observation that rabbinic midrash frequently provides contradictory interpretations – sometimes offered by one and the same person – of the same passages of Scripture.[40]

[36] Herford 1962, 80, 85. Cf. Hartman 1997, 37, on the Talmud's paradoxical combination of enormous interpretative freedom and an unconditional acceptance of revelation.

[37] Herford 1933, 70, 71. Herford notes (at 72) that the Talmud itself suggests this comparison: "From the day on which the house of the sanctuary was destroyed, prophecy was taken away from prophets and given over to sages" (BT Baba Batra 12A, Neusner trans.). Cf. Hartman 1997, 7.

[38] Herford 1933, 72. In its confidence that "the living word of God can be mediated through the application of human reason (the autonomous spirit) to the revealed norms of Torah," Talmudic Judaism moves beyond "the model of the prophet who directly mediates between God and human beings" (Hartman 1997, 40; cf. 7, 33–34).

[39] Wright 1967, 62; Kadushin 2001, 120. These principles of interpretation are outlined at Strack 1931, 93–98; cf. Steinsaltz 1989, 147–54, and Chajes 1960, 21–22, 154.

[40] Kadushin 2001, 73. Chajes (1960, 160) finds Talmudic justification for this practice at BT Sanhedrin 34A, which explains that Jeremiah 23:29 ("Behold, My word is like fire – declares the LORD – and like a hammer that shatters rock!") means "Just as a hammer splits a rock into many pieces, so a verse of Scripture may yield a number of arguments" (Neusner trans.). Chajes adds that the Talmud gives the

Yet even in aggadic interpretation, the text of Scripture rarely becomes merely a pretext for communicating insights developed independently of it.[41] This is because the halakhic and aggadic interpretations of the Pharisees and the rabbis were guided by a shared set of ideas that constituted the spiritual and ethical core of Judaism, ideas that were nourished by the oral tradition of Jewish teaching and learning and that were implicit in the written Torah. These are the ideas that Max Kadushin has characterized as the unwritten "value-concepts" of rabbinic Judaism, and that Eliezer Berkovits describes as the "halachic conscience" – conceptions of the ethos of Torah as a whole that necessarily transcend any attempt at definitive formulation.[42]

Because scholars who embraced the notion of Oral Torah could not at first support their interpretations of Scripture by appealing to any definite authority, they were initially guided solely by their individual and collective wisdom – individually, by their own inner sense of the meaning of the core conceptions of the written and unwritten tradition, and collectively, by the judgments of other accredited teachers in the "supreme religious legislative body whatever it might be, whether the great Beth-Din in Jerusalem or, after the fall of Jerusalem, the Assembly of the Rabbis at Jabneh or Usha or Tiberias," that was responsible for ruling on matters of halakha.[43] In time, a record of halakhic rulings and opinions took shape and was itself taught as Oral Torah. It was this record that eventually came to be known as *the* halakha, and that the rabbis attempted to collect and organize as a whole in the Mishnah.

sages "permission to expound [aggadic] passages in any way they deem proper in order to attain their object, which is to impress … upon the multitude [some edifying idea]."

[41] Wright 1967, 65. Wright concurs with the assertion of Kadushin (2001, 114) that in aggadic midrash the biblical text generally serves as a stimulus to the interpretation. Kadushin also observes that the rabbis distinguished between *peshat* and *derash*, the plain meaning of the text and its midrashic interpretation, and were guided by the principle that "a biblical verse never loses its plain meaning" (115, citing BT Shabbat 63A). But cf. Halbertal 1997, 19: one consequence of canonical sealing was that "with the passage of time the literal meaning of expressions [in Scripture] gradually deteriorated, just as a hook on which too much is hung eventually snaps under the weight."

[42] See the Introduction, 15–16, 20–22.

[43] Herford 1962, 74.

THE MISHNAH AND THE GEMARA

After the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the people Israel once again faced the problem of how to carry on in the absence of the cultic center of their religion. But the religious life of the Jews had already begun to shift in a way that prepared them to encounter God no less intimately in their sacred writings than in the sanctified space of the Temple. The rabbinic inheritors of the tradition of the Pharisees accordingly attempted to reconstitute a Temple of "head and hearts" in the collective life of the Jews.[44] In the vision of social and religious renewal promulgated by the "new rabbinism," the rabbi "served as the new priest, the study of Torah substituted for the temple sacrifice, and deeds of loving-kindness were the social surrogate for the sin-offering."[45] The rabbis viewed the activity of *talmud Torah* or Torah study as the highest of all obligations;[46] *talmud Torah* was not merely "an act of liturgy – work in the name of and for the sake of God," but an act in which even God engaged.[47] Torah accordingly came to have a twofold meaning: it encompassed "a *book*, on the one side, and an *activity* – the act of learning – on the other."[48]

[44] Akenson 1998, 295, which also notes the important parallels between the Mishnah and the Christian creation, in response to the crucifixion of Jesus and the Temple's destruction, of a "completely new set of sacred texts" (the New Testament). Cf. Strack 1931, 18: "the formation of the New Testament and its growing recognition acted as a spur for the Jews by codifying the oral law to create an authoritative supplementary continuation of the Old Testament."

[45] Neusner 1978, 33. This vision of renewal extended and adapted the ideas of late Pharisaism, which "propose[d] to replicate the [Temple] cult in the home, and thus to effect the Temple's purity laws at the table of the ordinary Jew, and quite literally to turn Israel into a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation,'" thus teaching the rabbis to "stress … the universal keeping of the law" (Neusner 1979, 22–23).

[46] Fisch (1997, 47) explains: "Talmudic culture constructs the Hebrew covenant primarily as a Covenant of Works, a matter of righteousness related to action, of practical performance and reward"; however, as "a prerequisite to all deeds, Torah-study … outweighs all deeds." Cf. the sources Fisch cites at 205–06 n. 6, and see note 76 to this chapter.

[47] Neusner 1978, 4; Neusner 1964–69, 3.284–86. At BT Avodah Zarah 3B we read: "And has not R. Judah said Rab said, 'The day is made up of twelve hours. In the first three the Holy One, blessed be He, goes into session and engages in study of the Torah …'" (Neusner trans.). Cf. Exodus Rabbah, 47.4 (MR 3.539): "For it was with the aid of the Torah that I created heaven and earth, as it is said, *The Lord by wisdom founded the earth … By his knowledge the depths were broken up*, etc. (Prov. III, 19f)."

[48] Neusner 1978, 43, emphases in original.

The Mishnah (from the verb *shanah*, "to repeat," "to study," "to heed oral instruction," "to teach") is a recapitulation of the tradition of Oral Torah as developed by the scribes and rabbis who succeeded Ezra. These include the five Zugot or "pairs" (heads of the Sanhedrin from Yose ben Yoezer and Yose ben Yoḥanan to Hillel and Shammai, roughly 200 BCE to 20 CE) and especially the Tannaim (from the Aramaic word for "repeater"), men who lived in Judea and the Galilee during the first two centuries CE.[49] The Mishnah is divided into six "orders" or divisions (Zeraim, Mo'ed, Nashim, Nezikin, Kodashim, Tohorot; respectively, "Agriculture," "Appointed Times," "Women," "The Order of Damages," "Holy Things," and "Purities") comprising sixty-three tractates. Composed in concise, formulaic language and completed around 200 CE under the leadership of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (Judah the Prince), the Mishnah seems initially to have been transmitted orally, but was ultimately preserved in writing.[50] The vast majority of its content pertains to the determination of halakha.[51] Even so, much of the halakhic content of the Mishnah is immediately applicable not to everyday life, but to the vanished world of Jewish existence that centered on the Temple. For a major part of the Mishnah's accomplishment is its literary recreation, and in some respects reinvention, of religious life at the end of the Second Temple period. Together with several thousand details of Temple ritual and a seemingly exhaustive description (in tractate Middot) of the Temple's structure, the Mishnah includes directions for conducting in one's own home rituals that formerly centered on the Temple, like those of the Passover celebration discussed in tractate Pesaḥim.[52] The Mishnah was thus a primary vehicle for "keep[ing] the Temple in existence as

[49] Mielziner 1968, 22–23; Steinsaltz 1989, 30–31.

[50] When this occurred is uncertain; see Strack 1931, 18–20. Akenson (1998) supposes that the Mishnah began to be committed to writing in 135–150 because of fears that the rabbinic teachings would be forgotten during the persecutions and dislocations that followed the Bar Kokhba Revolt (324). Mielziner (1968, 5–6 n. 1) maintains that Yehudah Hanasi probably "wrote out the Mishnah in full." Note that, while individual legal opinions in the form of mishnah are less easy to remember than those in the form of midrash, the organization and concision of the Mishnah as a whole may have served a mnemonic purpose.

[51] Whereas in Scripture legal components are embedded in an overarching narrative, the Mishnah "has very few bits of narrative … and no sustaining story whatsoever" (Akenson 1998, 299); indeed, some tractates of the Mishnah contain no aggadah (Halivni 1986, 58).

[52] Akenson 1998, 307–311, 340.

a focal concept, while moving the actual centre of religious practice elsewhere – into the Rabbinical courts and academies and into each home."[53]

While the Mishnah's roots in the tradition of Oral Torah are manifested in its creative combination of recollection and respect for the past with innovation and openness toward the future, the text is in certain respects unique. To begin with, it is unclear whether the Mishnah is a law code or merely an anthology of different legal opinions.[54] In any case, the Mishnah speaks apodictically and autocratically; it does not provide midrashic or logical justifications for its halakhic pronouncements.[55] It thus runs counter to the normal predilection of sacred writings in the Jewish tradition for justified law – "law that is expressly reasonable, that seeks to win the hearts of those to whom the laws are addressed."[56] Perhaps most striking, the Mishnah is "the first canon of its kind known to us, a canon that transmits the tradition in the form of controversy: the House (school) of Shammai said one thing, the House of Hillel said another, and so on."[57]

[53] Akenson 1998, 311. On the academies, see Neusner 1964–69, 3.195–271, 4.279–402, and 5.133–216 with Rubenstein 2003 (esp. the introductory overview at 16–38).

[54] See the sources cited at Halbertal 1997, 157 n. 1. A different surmise has been developed by Jacob Neusner, who finds in the Mishnah's "deep, inner logic of word patterns, of grammar and syntax," not simply a mnemonic device, but a "mode of thought attuned to abstract relationships" that underlie "the accidents of life" and thus constitute the basic "principle of reality." The Mishnah thus invites its readers to participate in an essentially philosophical endeavor: the discovery and description "of what *is*, and of what is real" (Introduction to *The Mishnah*, xxiii, xxiv, xxvii, emphasis in original). Neusner's characterization of the Mishnah as an essentially metaphysical undertaking – and of the rabbis as, at bottom, systematic philosophers – is controversial; see Akenson 1998, 304–06, for a brief discussion of his debate with E. P. Sanders. While the Talmud may at least aim to achieve a complete and coherent system of halakha (cf. Neusner 1997, 77–79), its ethical thought and theological speculation – the topics with which the present study is concerned – are far from systematic, and in certain respects reflect an essentially "Socratic" knowledge of ignorance (cf. Mielziner 1968, 268).

[55] Indeed, it rarely cites or refers to the Bible, and is thus, at least superficially, "totally indifferent to Scripture" (Neusner, Introduction to *The Mishnah*, xxxv). But Neusner notes that the Mishnah sometimes repeats Scripture in its own words, sometimes works out the facts of Scripture in unpredictable ways, and sometimes takes up problems that are in no way suggested by Scripture (xxxviii–xxxix).

[56] Halivni 1986, 4.

[57] Halbertal 1997, 45. Halbertal adds that, although in the Bible "there are different legal codes and they do disagree on some matters, the Bible does not present them in opposition."

It has been aptly observed that "Mishnah not merely permits exegesis, it demands it."[58] The Mishnah's silence about its relationship to the larger tradition, together with its inconclusive form, posed a problem that once again spurred the rabbis to make a virtue of necessity. Interpretation that sought to make the Mishnah comprehensible in the established terms of the tradition – that sought, in the words of one scholar, to "tame" it[59] – was not long in coming. We have seen that tractate Avot explains the Mishnah's indifference to Scripture by tracing its teachings back to Moses, thereby making the case that the Mishnah *is* Torah.[60] But the rabbinic successors to the Tannaim, men who came to be known as Amoraim (from Aramaic, "discussers"), did not rest content with this explanation. Reviving the traditional form of Midrash, the Amoraim developed a form of commentary known as *talmud*, a word stemming from *lamad*, "to study," and *limmad*, "to teach, instruct" as well as "to derive a statement by exegetical means or otherwise."[61] One of the early meanings of talmud (before the production of *the* Talmud) was "the exegetical discussion and proving of halakhic statements" – specifically, a discussion that "starts from the halakhic statement and seeks to find a biblical foundation or motivation for it."[62]

The first sustained and integrated commentary on the Mishnah was the Tosefta, a collection of Tannaitic materials (*baraitot*; sing. *baraita*) not included in the Mishnah but referred to frequently in later rabbinic writings, especially including the Gemara.[63] But the Gemara was more directly anticipated by the Sifra, a commentary on Leviticus that implicitly critiques the scripturally independent statements and arguments of both the Mishnah and the Tosefta by repeatedly justifying (and sometimes correcting) Mishnaic assertions through an appeal to Scripture.[64] This specific form of justificatory

[58] Neusner 1978, 53. Cf. BT Sotah 22A (Neusner trans.): "those who repeat Mishnah traditions destroy the world," for "they teach law based on their own repetition of traditions [without adequate power of reasoning]."

[59] Akenson 1998, 304.

[60] Neusner, Introduction to *The Mishnah*, xxxvi.

[61] Strack 1931, 5.

[62] Wright 1967, 42 n. 27.

[63] Baraitot referred to in the Gemara are also drawn from other collections of rabbinic midrash, including the Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre (Mielziner 1968, 18–21).

[64] Akenson 1998, 339–52; Neusner, Introduction to *The Mishnah*, xxxvii. The Sifra is part of the Midrashei Halakha, collections of biblical commentaries in which Halivni (1986) finds a specific antecedent to the Amoraim's practice of

commentary on the Mishnah culminated in the Gemara, the Talmud in the narrowest sense of the word.

Two distinct versions of the Gemara exist. The one that emerged in centers of Jewish learning in Palestine is recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud, or Yerushalmi. The later and much longer Babylonian Talmud, or Bavli, sprang from the rabbinical movement established by refugees who fled from Palestine after the Bar Kokhba War.[65] The Bavli contains commentary on thirty-seven of the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah, and was put into its final form by anonymous author-editors – rabbinic successors of the Amoraim commonly known as Stammaim (Aramaic for "anonyms") – sometime around the sixth century CE.[66]

It is unclear whether the Gemara (from the Aramaic verb *gemar*, "to complete," the Gemara being the completion or perfection of the Talmud)[67] always existed in written form or, like the Mishnah, was originally transmitted orally.[68] In any case, the text we possess is in crucial respects the product of the Stammaim. The Amoraim subjected the Mishnah to detailed analysis, explaining its content by arguments rooted in Scripture as well as by independent arguments. A great part of their work consisted in harmonizing the Mishnah with the baraitot of the Tosefta and other Tannaitic teachings that were not included in the Mishnah, with the aim of achieving a comprehensive and coherent system of religious law.[69] But it was the Stammaitic redactors who placed the Amoraic traditions within *sugyot* (sing. *sugya*, "a woven fabric of sustained discussion centered around and

"complementing the Mishnah with formulas like [the question] 'From whence do we know these things' … [and the answer] 'Scripture says' "(53–55, cf. 3).

[65] Neusner 1964–69, 3.96.

[66] Steinsaltz (1989, 33) lists six generations of Tannaim (between 20 and 200 CE), one transitional generation (200–220), five generations of Amoraim in the Land of Israel (220–375), and eight generations of Amoraim in Babylonia (220–500), which became the center of rabbinic scholarship after Roman persecutions in Palestine in the early fifth century (Akenson 1998, 349). The term "Stammaim" was coined by Halivni, who dates the completion of the redaction of the Bavli to the beginning of the sixth century (1986, 3, 81). Chajes (1960, 254–70) discusses in detail the question of the dates of composition of the Mishnah and the Talmuds.

[67] Mielziner 1968, 56.

[68] Mielziner (1968, 59–60 n. 1) and Akenson (1998, 378) defend the former view; Halivni (1986, 83) maintains the latter.

[69] Neusner 1997, 79.

interspersed with fixed laws") as well as "within a sustained superstructure of their own invention."[70] In doing so, the Talmud's author-editors fabricated nothing less than a "world of … discourse [that] plays itself out in an endless series of fictitious study-sessions, in which a variety of opinions, voiced over periods of up to three hundred years, are made to meet in lively discussion."[71] The result was something unique in Jewish literature: a freewheeling conversation that has no apparent boundaries, moves in unpredictable directions, and touches on a vast array of topics "ranging from profound theological observations to trivial folk tales and from intricate legal discourse to magic, science, and demonology."[72]

HALAKHA, AGGADAH, AND TALMUDIC PEDAGOGY

The Gemara advances a distinctive conception of the intrinsic value of intellectual activity. It interprets the tradition in new ways, and uses it for novel ends. And it develops and expands the category of aggadah, employing it for its own specific pedagogical purposes. Let us consider each of these points in turn.

For the Gemara's author-editors, "theoretical learning was a main mode of worship, worth pursuing even if it does not lead to practical decision making."[73] Unlike the Mishnah, the Gemara explicitly values not simply the results of thought but its activities – the unfolding of reflection, the construction of arguments, and the play of debate. The give-and-take of engaged minds accordingly moves front and center; the process of thinking is more important than its products,

[70] Halivni 1986, 71, 79; Rubenstein 2003, 4. Rubenstein argues that "the Bavli's dominant culture" is the product of the Stammaim (1).

[71] Fisch 1997, 52. Cf. the remarks by Graetz and Delitzsch quoted at Mielziner 1968, 104 and 107: the Talmud is a "laboratory of thought" and "an immense speaking-hall, in which thousands and tens of thousands of voices, of at least five centuries, are heard to commingle."

[72] Halbertal 1997, 72. Cf. Rubenstein 2003, 12: the Talmud's literary genres include "law, narrative, exegesis, homily, [and] maxims."

[73] Halivni 1986, 77; cf. 107: in the Bible, studying Torah is merely "a means or instrument for observance"; in rabbinic literature, study by itself becomes "a separate mitzvah [commandment]." On the rabbinic conception of worship through study, cf. Neusner 1978, 42, with Neusner 1979, 18–19. Steinsaltz (1989) seems to go too far, however, in asserting that "the ultimate purpose of the Talmud is not in any sense utilitarian – its sole aim is to seek out the truth" (2).

as is clear from the text's unwillingness to pronounce judgment on the issues it considers.[74] The Gemara "preserve[s] and clarif[ies] the wealth and multiplicity of approaches to the problem at hand"; "instead of refuting and thereby favoring one of two or more opposing interpretations, the *sugiyot* attempt to maintain the validity of opposing interpretations against potential challenges, challenges which are raised and refuted in turn."[75]

In brief, thinking becomes a sacred activity in the Gemara. Yet thinking is not meant to substitute for action, but to potentiate it. Rabbinic literature repeatedly warns against study without observance.[76] Nor is the open-ended, dialectical form of the Gemara inconsistent with the need to make halakhic decisions, and thus ultimately to choose one of the available alternatives. Such decisions do not in themselves imply that the rejected views are false; indeed, "any decision … that is the result of honest discussion and an attempt to seek out the truth through discussion is acceptable."[77] In thinking through Talmudic sugyot, readers furthermore increasingly come to share in a vibrant intellectual community. For the Gemara goes beyond merely *representing* a community of worship through study: the form of the Talmud in a literal sense – the shape and distinctive layout of

[74] Halivni 1986, 76; Fisch 1997, 52.

[75] Halbertal 1997, 72. The Talmud "seem[s] to refrain as far as possible from closure" not only on "theoretical, moral, metaphysical, [and] exegetical issues," but (more often than not) even on matters of halakha, preferring instead to present a multiplicity of conflicting voices without rendering final judgment (Fisch 1997, 53).

[76] See the sources cited at Halivni 1986,148–50 n. 8. Michael Widlanski has pointed out to me that the priority of deeds over study is implied in the well-known anecdote about Ḥanina ben Dosa's killing a serpent that was plaguing the community (BT Berakhot 33A). Ḥanina brings the serpent back to the Academy and shows it to his colleagues, as if to say: "Your wisdom must manifest itself in practical action." Cf. Eleazar b. Azariah's remark, in the Mishnah, that one whose wisdom is greater than his deeds is like "a tree with abundant foliage, but few roots"; such a tree is easily toppled "when the winds come" (Avot 3:17). Herford (1962, 126) notes that the rabbis regarded "the distinction between right and wrong … [as] no mere theoretical opinion, but the basis of a practical demand. It was to be acknowledged in act, by the doing of right and the refraining from wrong." He adds that "Judaism … places before everything else the *doing* of the will of God" (126, emphasis in original; cf. 109–10). Cf. Kadushin 2001, 80, which describes "rabbinic concepts" as "drives to action," with Ginzberg 1928, 51, 57: "what was learned at the school [i.e., rabbinical academy] realized its true purpose only when it was put to practical use in everyday life"; "the crown of the Torah has value only if the man that wears it joins it to the crown of good deeds" (cf. 81).

[77] Halivni 1986, 77.

its pages – indicates that readers are meant to be full partners in the "multi-voiced colloquy" it records. A "seductive visual artifact" that was from the first "almost certainly a codex," the Gemara is shaped like a book rather than a scroll because it is in essence a "series of marginalia, and marginal notes, arranged around a central text." The "visual format" of the Gemara is thus that of an "interactive text" which "draws … students into its orbit," inviting readers "to act upon the material (by studying it and arguing about it), in a way that replicates the inventive activities of the author-editors."[78] The Gemara furthermore regards the act of study not as an individual endeavor, but as a communal one. Properly undertaken in the company of others, *talmud Torah* unfolds in discussion and debate – a process to which each is meant to contribute "in his own way and according to his talent."[79]

The rich heritage of Oral Torah is evident in the Gemara's artful combination of respect for tradition and innovation in its interpretation of the Mishnah, a text it regards as second in authority and importance only to Scripture. On the surface, the Gemara assumes what one scholar has termed a "traditionalist" attitude: it reveres the Mishnah as well as the sages whose thought is recorded therein.[80] For example, disputation in the Talmud seems to obey the rule that Amoraim can reject the positions of earlier Tannaitic rabbis only if

[78] Akenson 1998, 378–79, 394. Cf. Kraemer 1996, 12: "the structure and content of the document force *reader intervention* in the text, cancelling the possibility of a passive reader.… the Bavli's authors anticipated that '*talmud*' would be the product of a dialogue between text and reader" (emphasis in original).

[79] Neusner 1964–69, 3.135. Cf. the Talmudic sources that "laud study with a partner and condemn solitary study" assembled at Rubenstein 2003, 52. Neusner (1997) observes the Talmud's "insistence on the priority of a medium of formulation and transmission that is, by its nature, public"; in particular, "the Talmud is not only best studied orally, but cannot be studied except in dialogue, two voices interchanging" (35, 39). The importance of community is one of the major lessons of the story told in Ta'anit 3 about Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer. See Chapter 2 of this volume.

[80] The terms "traditionalism" and "antitraditionalism" are drawn from Fisch 1997. While the tension between traditional authority and the spirit of innovation is a central feature of the Talmud, Fisch arguably exaggerates this tension, possibly because he reads back into the Talmud the traditionalist emphases of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy (cf. 186). In contrast to Fisch, Berkovits (2002) and Kadushin (2001) emphasize the consistently flexible and creative character of rabbinic thought in the Talmud.

they find other Tannaim to support them.[81] Yet the Gemara is also "antitraditionalist," occasionally reinterpreting the Mishnah in ways that transform or even reverse its meaning.[82] Sometimes it suggests that material should be interpolated into the Mishnah. What is more, a review of the relevant scholarship concludes that it "seems probable that at least some of the unparalleled BT Baraitot are not Tannaitic" but are in fact Amoraic inventions posing as Tannaitic sayings.[83] Perhaps most remarkably, "on more than 200 occasions … the author-editors of the Bavli permit the Sages to suggest what the scriptures 'should' have said on a given subject."[84]

The Gemara's combination of innovation and respect for the authority of the tradition is connected with the different ways in which the concept of Oral Torah came to influence rabbinic thought. While this concept initially gave the emerging tradition of *talmud Torah* the status of an ongoing revelation, the record of halakhic opinion that was developed under the rubric of Oral Torah inevitably acquired ever-increasing authority. Thus contemporary Jewish orthodoxy, which emphasizes the halakhic record even to the exclusion of Talmudic aggadah,[85] is inclined to embrace a version of traditionalism that regards the understanding of later generations as necessarily inferior to that of earlier ones, simply because the latter are closer to

[81] Halbertal 1997, 73; cf. Chajes 1960, 111–12, and Mielziner 1968, 40.

[82] Halbertal 1997, 72; Akenson 1998, 374. Fisch furthermore shows that there is a contradiction between the "traditionalist rhetoric" of the Bavli and how the text actually handles disagreements between Tannaitic and Amoraic positions (see esp. 119–28). However, one should keep in mind that even Talmudic antitraditionalism is essentially traditional, in that the tradition furnishes both the questions it addresses and the tools it uses to address them.

[83] Goodblatt 1979, 288.

[84] Akenson 1998, 375.

[85] In his Introduction to Berkovits 2002, David Hazony observes that "it is common practice in most yeshivot today to skip over the agadic passages of the Talmud, on the assumption that they have no important bearing upon the halachic discussion." He adds, however, that "if, as Berkovits insists, the rules of the halacha are merely one reflection of a set of higher moral principles, and the rules alone cannot suffice to provide the content of these values, then the interspersion of agadic material becomes reasonable, for it is in the tales and aphorisms of the rabbis that these moral principles are presented as part of an actual life full of unique situations; it is these stories that permit the student of halacha to study the application of values in complex, living circumstances, in a way that the study of a cut-and-dry legal code never can" (xviii).

the revelation at Sinai.[86] On this understanding, controversy about the halakha is the result of flaws in the chain of transmission (as described in tractate Avot of the Mishnah) by which the teaching that Moses received at Sinai was conveyed to subsequent generations. But the Talmud includes an alternative explanation of controversy: far from being a sign of decline, it is built into the tradition because revelation is not fully determined. This perspective is illustrated in a baraita concerning whether one should refrain from learning because there is so much dissension among scholars. The Tannaitic sage Eleazar ben Azariah rejects this conclusion on the ground that the words of the sages and their disciples are all equally Torah:

> Scripture says, "… they are given from one shepherd." One God created them, one responsible authority gave them, the master of all deeds said them. So you, make your ears like a hopper and draw into them, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit. (BT Ḥagigah 3B, Neusner trans., emended)

The clear implication of this passage is that "multiplicity in the tradition reflects the very nature of the canon as a text with many meanings"; "God gave the Torah with one reading and with the opposite one as well."[87] The assumption that the text was intentionally given with multiple (and often inconsistent) meanings removes the

[86] Cf. Hartman 1997, 11. The Introduction to Frieman 1995 offers a succinct statement of the "closer to Sinai" school of thought. The traditionalism of contemporary orthodoxy also implies that the written word of Torah cannot adequately be understood apart from the received oral teaching that unlocks its hidden meaning, a teaching that only the greatest vigilance can protect from further erosion. From this perspective, developments that make Scripture available for study independently of the "tightly guarded succession of tradition," as did the Septuagint, have a "tragic effect" in that they render the text vulnerable to misinterpretation and thereby weaken the chain of transmission of Oral Torah (Frieman 1995, xxvi).

[87] Halbertal 1997, 53; cf. the related rabbinic texts cited at 160, n. 17 and n. 19. Compare the Gemara at BT Gitin 6B, which has God studying Torah interpretations: "Then R. Ebiatar found Elijah. He said to him, 'What is the Holy One, blessed be He, working on these days?' He said to him, "He's occupied with the passage on the concubine in Gibea.' 'And what's he say about it?' He said to him, 'My son Ebiatar – this is what he says, and my son Jonathan – this is what he says.' He said to him, 'God forbid! Is anything subject to doubt before the Heaven?' He said to him, 'Both this position and that represent the words of the living God' " (Neusner trans.).

constraints on inquiry and interpretation imposed by the "closer to Sinai" account of controversy. At any time, the rabbinic mind can produce new knowledge and need not be limited to reconstructing the forgotten content of an original revelation. By the same token, later generations of scholars need not assume that their understanding is necessarily inferior to that of their predecessors.[88]

Three points deserve emphasis in connection with the Talmud's incorporation of both traditionalist and antitraditionalist voices. First, the Talmud has a good pedagogical reason for including both voices, for it thereby allows different sorts of readers to benefit from the text in different ways. Dutiful adherence to an authoritative tradition offers a level of spiritual and intellectual comfort that many may be unwilling or unable to relinquish. These readers would be ill-served by being compelled to participate in the creative inquiry that characterizes the most active spiritual and intellectual partnership with God. Conversely, readers capable of participating in such a partnership would be ill-served by a text that did not both invite them to think for themselves and reward them for doing so.[89] In this specific sense, the Talmud employs esoteric writing. I do not mean by this that the Talmud contains a set of secret doctrines. Rather, it invites all readers to notice problems inherent in the surface of the text, and to come to the aid of the text by using its resources to think for themselves. For some, traditionalism is the solution to such problems; for others, it is itself a problem on the surface of the text. In this way, the Talmud stretches the intellectual and spiritual powers of its readers while allowing them to avoid difficulties and complexities

[88] A more radical explanation of controversy in the Talmud is offered in Kraemer 1990, the thesis of which is that the Bavli argues against the assumption "that the truth, either religious or rationalistic, could be identified" and posits that "human approaches to the truth … are all, of necessity, merely relative" (7). While Kraemer is right to emphasize the Talmud's sense of the fallibility of human reason with respect to the understanding of a "single," divine truth (cf. 171, 189), this fallibility is itself a fundamental, nonrelativistic truth, the recognition of which constitutes a crucial piece of the self-knowledge that the Talmud makes available to its readers.

[89] Fisch 1997, 180–88, offers a different explanation for the presence of both traditionalist and antitraditionalist voices in the Talmud: because the text addresses itself simultaneously to teachers as well as to students, and to beginning as well as advanced students, it conceals its advanced, antitraditionalist lessons beneath a traditionalist veneer that is suitable for beginners.

for which they may not be ready.[90] Nor is there anything devious or underhanded about this practice of esotericism; it seeks to do justice to all readers by giving each what he or she needs.[91]

Second, the tension between traditional authority and the spirit of innovation is felt most keenly in matters of halakha. Remarkably, "no one is granted hegemony" over the interpretation of Scripture in the Talmud, even where such interpretation concerns the scriptural basis of halakhic rulings.[92] The same is true of Talmudic debate on metaphysical, theological, and moral issues. In all of these domains – which have to do with "issues regarded as doctrinal by other religions"[93] – the tradition recorded in the aggadic portions of the Talmud provides material for reflection, but has no authority over the thought of later generations.[94] And third, interpretative innovation in the Gemara, as elsewhere in the rabbinic tradition, goes hand in hand with textual conservatism. If the rabbis enjoyed "enormous interpretative freedom and mastery over the revealed text," it was precisely because they took to heart Ben Bag Bag's assertion that everything is contained in the Torah (Avot 5:22).[95] For interpretative innovation seems to be a necessary consequence of the assumption that *any* permanently fixed

[90] Cf. Hartman 1976, 43, which quotes a passage from Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah* in which one Talmudic sage refuses to teach another material he judges the latter to be unprepared to learn. This use of esoteric writing as a powerful pedagogical tool is clarified and strongly defended in Melzer 2007. I return to the pedagogical usefulness of obscurity at the end of the chapter.

[91] Strauss 1952 is the classic study of the traditional practice of esoteric writing for prudential, political, and pedagogical reasons – a practice so widespread that "it is difficult to find a single major philosopher who did *not* somewhere make open and approving reference to the practice of esotericism, regarding either his own writings or (more commonly) those of others" (Melzer 2006, 280, emphasis in original). On the basis for the nevertheless "almost visceral" disinclination of scholars to acknowledge esoteric writing, see Melzer 2007, 1015–17.

[92] Fisch 1997, 86.

[93] Fisch 1997, 53.

[94] Hartman (1997, 194) writes: "The choice between the different views is left to the sensibilities of the individual reader. All that the Talmud demands of its readers is that they find some approach that will enable them to maintain their commitment to the *mitzvot* in the world as they experience it."

[95] Hartman 1997, 37. Note, however, that because "the strings of consonants that constitute the bare and partial syntax of the Hebrew Scriptures" is in itself unreadable, the text could not be made to say anything meaningful at all apart from "some initial interpretive act of elucidation" (Fisch 1997, 56). The insertion of vowel points, punctuation, cantillation marks, and accents, Fisch observes, "renders a Torah scroll ritually unfit for religious purposes."

written body of law or practical instruction can provide answers to every question that may be raised by the ceaselessly changing particulars of daily life.[96]

A nice illustration of the Gemara's interpretative innovation is furnished by its midrashic justification for a claim set forth at Sanhedrin 44B: "the study of Torah is greater than the offering of the daily sacrifices." The Gemara finds a Scriptural basis for this assertion, and therefore for the rabbinical practice of *talmud Torah* as a whole, in Joshua 5:13–15. The biblical text reads as follows:

> Once, when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him, drawn sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and asked him, "Are you one of us or of our enemies?" He replied, "No, I am captain of the LORD's host. Now I am come!" Joshua threw himself face down to the ground and, prostrating himself, said to him, "What does my lord command his servant?" The captain of the LORD's host answered Joshua, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so.

Compare the Gemara's commentary:

> He [the angel] said to him [Joshua]: "in the afternoon you neglected the daily afternoon sacrifice. And now you neglect the study of Torah." Regarding which of them did you come? He said to him: "I am *now* come" [i.e., that he came to reprove Joshua specifically for neglecting the study of Torah]. Immediately: "and Joshua spent the night in the midst of the valley" [*b'tokh ha'eymek*, Joshua 8:13]. And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: This teaches that he spent the night in the depths of [*b'omkah*] the law.
>
> Shmuel Bar Unyah said in the name of Rav: The study of Torah is greater than the offering of the daily sacrifices, as it is said: "I am now come." (BT Sanhedrin 44B, Steinsaltz trans.)

The intellectual creativity of the rabbis is fully on display in this passage. The Gemara imagines a justification for the angel's appearance that is not actually mentioned in the text. While not entirely an argument from silence, the only positive evidence for its explanation of the angel's appearance is that Joshua supposedly spent the night in study, a claim which itself rests on the thinnest of reeds – namely, a verbal echo suggested by a verse from another chapter. All of this is in the service of providing a divine justification for the activity in

[96] Cf. Halbertal 1997, 79.

which the rabbis themselves excelled, a justification that more than excuses their inability to continue the practice of Temple sacrifice. One should note that the Gemara *does* seem to be looking for such an excuse, because this desire explains why a discussion of Joshua is an appropriate context in which to proclaim the superiority of Torah study. By the time of Rav (a first-generation Babylonian Amora),[97] it would have been impossible for the Jews to reinstitute the sacrifices without taking up arms and reconquering Jerusalem as a preliminary to rebuilding the Temple. Had they attempted to do so, they would have been following in the footsteps of Joshua, a military leader whose sword scattered the local tribes from the Land of Israel after the death of Moses. This is the futile path the Bar Kokhba fighters had chosen to follow. But the Gemara decisively dismisses any lingering urge to revive the tradition of Jewish military might. Instead, it moves in exactly the opposite direction, figuratively beating swords into plowshares. It turns the general Joshua into a *yeshiva bocher* – a student of Torah, like the rabbis themselves.[98]

Perhaps most important for our purposes, Sanhedrin 44B also helps to clarify a crucial pedagogical function of aggadah in the Talmud. In its reading of Scripture, the Gemara turns Joshua's encounter with the angel into a reflection on the question "How should one live?" As we have just seen, the rabbis attempt to justify their answer to this question by appealing to the religious tradition. They draw on the authority of Joshua, a biblical hero, in order to establish the legitimacy of a new kind of hero, the rabbinic scholar of Torah. The language of heroism is appropriate here because the Talmud, like the Bible, furnishes its readers with models that they may choose to imitate in their own lives. It is able to do so because it expands the range of aggadah well beyond nonlegal biblical interpretation. Besides "fables, geography, medicine, astronomy, etc.," Talmudic aggadah incorporates folklore about the lives and sayings of the rabbis.[99] Aggadah thus becomes a means of furnishing readers

[97] The Babylonian rabbis went by the title *rav*. Like Yehudah HaNasi, who was known simply as "Rabbi," Abba Arikha was honored with the name "Rav."

[98] I owe this turn of phrase to Rabbi Marc Fitzerman. This process was reversed in the twentieth century, when events compelled at least some of the Torah students of Europe to become warriors in the army of the Jewish state of Israel.

[99] Wright 1967, 43.

with models of the life they may hope to attain through *talmud Torah*. As part of this process, the Talmud uses narrative to fashion a new legend or myth, that of the rabbinic sage, which showcases the glory of living a life in which every act is performed in accordance with Torah.[100] Much of the Talmud's teaching is thus "mimetic" rather than doctrinal, and this includes its halakhic content: it intends not simply to transmit the conclusions of rabbinic thought, but also to provide instructive and inspirational examples of quintessentially rabbinic teaching and learning, speaking and acting.[101] In a word, the Gemara interweaves halakha with aggadah in order to exhibit concretely to its readers what it means to think, speak, and act like a rabbi. In this way, it aims to pass down to future generations nothing less than the whole ethos of rabbinic life.[102]

INTERPRETATIVE IMAGINATION: TALMUDIC AND PLATONIC STORYTELLING

It has been well observed that, while "rabbinic thought cannot be coordinated into a system," it possesses an "organismic, conceptual coherence."[103] The nonsystematic nature of Talmudic inquiry is evident in its approach to the basic value-concepts of rabbinic Judaism.

[100] Indeed, "the rabbi *was* 'Torah,' not merely because he lived by it, but because at his best he constituted as compelling an embodiment of the heavenly model as did a scroll of the Torah itself"; "study of the [rabbinic] master … [thus] constituted a vital part of 'Torah.'" (Neusner 1964–69, 5.148, 163, emphasis in original). The myth of the rabbi transforms "ordinary, natural actions, gestures, and functions," including eating, drinking, washing one's hands, and so forth, "into rituals – the rituals of 'being a rabbi'" (Neusner 1979, 20). For a detailed discussion of these rituals, including the rabbis' distinctive vocabulary, manner of dress, and code of comportment, see Neusner 1964–69, 3.130–49, 4.290–309, and 5.146–68.

[101] Fisch 1997, 52. Nor is historical accuracy a high priority. Cf. Goldenberg 1984, 157: in the Talmud "great rabbinic leaders … became both disembodied bearers of an elaborate legal tradition and also heroes of a marvelously rich tradition of legend."

[102] Beyond this, aggadah is often an integral part of halakhic inquiry. Yitzḥak Lifshitz has pointed out to me the presence of the pattern halakhic question/aggadah/halakhic conclusion both in the Talmud (e.g., at Shabbat 30A–B, where the question concerns the law about putting out a burning lamp for the sake of a sick person on the Sabbath) and in the Sheiltot of Rav Aḥa, eighth-century homilies on Jewish law that reflect an ancient tradition of public instruction.

[103] Kadushin 2001, 70.

As one scholar has noted, "the Talmud … does not discuss questions such as 'What is justice?' and search for a definition"; rather, "the talmudic concept of justice … is articulated through intricate interpretations of the Mishnah and presented through distinctions among cases."[104] Yet the Talmud articulates or "concretizes" value-concepts not only in halakhic debate, but also – and perhaps even primarily – by means of aggadah. Stories about the speeches and deeds of the rabbinic sages play a particularly important role in this connection, because they provide "an almost perfect reflection of the way in which the value-concepts function in day-to-day living, in speech and in action."[105] What is more, such stories repeatedly pose the question of how to live up to the ideals of the Torah, while at the same time providing concrete examples of the various ways in which the sages themselves try to do so.[106]

It is crucial to observe that Talmudic aggadah makes specific intellectual and moral demands of the reader. In particular, stories about the sages call upon the reader to inhabit or animate the text by means of an act of sympathetic imagination, for only in this way can one gain any meaningful understanding of the value-concepts that these stories are designed to communicate. Consider the following example, which is drawn from a baraita related in the Gemara of Ta'anit 3.[107] Rabbi Elazar was riding on an ass, pleasantly absorbed in the contemplation of his own achievements in *talmud Torah*:

> And he [Elazar] was very happy, and he was proud of himself because he had learned much Torah. A certain man happened to meet him who was

[104] Halbertal 1997, 92.

[105] Kadushin 2001, 59. This is why Kadushin asserts that aggadah has more to teach us about the rabbinic value-concepts than halakha. Lorberbaum 2004 takes a similar approach to the significance of aggadah; see esp. 129–43.

[106] Note that even a comprehensive knowledge of the halakha would not in itself suffice to answer this question. Cf. Herford 1933, 54: "The duty of showing kindness, pity, love, etc. is certainly part of what God requires from man; but these are general, not special; they can be expressed in unnumbered ways, and could never be fixed by any definition."

[107] All translations from Ta'anit are drawn from the Steinsaltz edition. *Tractate Ta'anit, Part I*, contains the first chapter of the tractate, and *Tractate Ta'anit, Part II*, contains the second through fourth chapters. References to Ta'anit (included parenthetically in the text) contain the standard page number in the Hebrew-Aramaic printed version, followed by the part and page number in the Steinsaltz edition.

extremely ugly. He said to him "Peace be unto you, my teacher." But he did not return his [greeting]. He [Elazar] said to him: "Worthless person, how ugly is that man! Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?" He said to him: "I do not know, but go and say to the craftsman who made me: How ugly is this vessel that you made!" (20A–B, II.81–82)

Elazar begs the man's forgiveness, and as soon as he reaches his destination, he enters the Academy and expounds: "A person should always be soft as a reed, and should not be hard as a cedar. And therefore, the reed merited that a pen be taken from it with which to write the Torah scroll, tefillin, and mezuzot" (20B, II.83).[108]

We shall examine the whole baraita in detail in Chapter 5. But even these brief excerpts suffice to convey the baraita's basic message that to learn Torah is one thing, but to "write" Torah in the medium of one's life is another. Living up to the Torah, in turn, requires that one be able imaginatively to stand in the shoes and see through the eyes of another. To do so is to be able to see past the surface of things – in this case, the superficial ugliness of the anonymous man – and into the only partially hidden interior of things. This exercise of moral imagination is furthermore precisely what is required to interpret the story of Elazar and to grasp what he has learned. The baraita is thus, among other things, a story about what is required to learn from aggadic narrative. Note, too, that no special education is needed in order to engage in the act of moral and literary imagination that unlocks this story's meaning. Rather, it belongs to everyone – including the simple man who reminds Elazar of what his scholarly accomplishments have caused him to forget – to learn and to teach the most basic lessons of aggadic narrative.[109]

This last point is worth dwelling on for two reasons. First, it helps to distinguish the Talmud's own understanding of the universally accessible meaning of narrative aggadah from the philosophical use of scriptural aggadah championed by Maimonides. Maimonides, too,

[108] Tefillin (phylacteries) and mezuzot contain miniature scrolls inscribed with biblical verses.

[109] Some scholars maintain that the tradition of Oral Torah furnishes interpretative keys without which the meaning of Talmudic aggadah remains inaccessible. This is the position taken by Rabbi Moshe Ḥaim Luzzato, who is quoted at Frieman 1995, xix–xx. But Luzzato makes an exception for "instructive aggados dealing with moral-ethical Torah wisdom, for they are of such obvious benefit that no one can speak against them or misunderstand them" (xix).

asserts that the meaning of aggadah is universally accessible, but he interprets this meaning as the univocal hidden content that is symbolically or figuratively indicated on the surface of the text. This content is the inner, metaphysical teaching of Scripture, a meaning that may be known independently of Scripture and that is accessible to the philosophical intellect of Jews and non-Jews alike.[110] While such an approach may yield profound insights into scriptural aggadah, it implies that these insights are available only to a few, philosophically educated readers, and it rules out alternative interpretations of the same text. The story of Elazar, however, makes it clear that Talmud uses narrative aggadah in order to teach basic moral truths, that these moral truths may be understood by the many as well as by the few, and that this understanding is essential to the being of the Talmudic sage. Second, the story of Elazar helps bring to light the essential connection between aggadic narrative in the Talmud and Plato's use of narrative and drama. For these elements of the Platonic dialogues call upon readers to exercise precisely the same capacity of sympathetic imagination that is required in order to understand the meaning of narrative aggadah in the Talmud.

Consider the case of Plato's *Republic*, a dialogue about justice. While the *Republic* involves extensive philosophical argumentation and debate, its teaching about justice is also – if not indeed primarily – conveyed mimetically. Like all of Plato's dialogues, the *Republic* takes the form of a story or *muthos*; in this case, the story, narrated by Socrates, is about the events of "yesterday" (327a). Socrates calls attention to this point when he remarks that he and Glaucon should proceed to educate the warriors of the city in speech *hōsper en muthōi muthologountes*, "just like men telling tales in a tale" (376e; cf. 501e). Both the dialogue as a whole and the stories told within it furthermore require interpretation. In putting together the parts of a story into a whole so as to grasp their inner coherence, and thereby making distinctions and connections that go beyond what is explicitly stated, interpretation involves the intellectual function of "emplotting or synthesizing."[111] Still more fundamentally, interpretation involves imagination, because only by

[110] Kadushin 2001, 102–07; Halbertal 1997, 30. Hartman 1976 includes an extensive examination of Maimonides' philosophical interpretation of aggadah; see esp. 29–65.

[111] Downing 1984, 175.

imaginatively putting oneself into a story can one see the shape of its parts and the gaps that need to be filled in. Socrates underscores the cooperation of imagination and intellect in interpretation when he remarks that the proper judge of the misery or happiness of the tyrant – a judgment that is essential to understanding the *Republic*'s teaching about justice and injustice – is "he who is able in thought to *enter into* a man's character and to *see through* it" (577a, emphases added). Glaucon asks us to make a similar judgment when he invites Socrates to imagine what it would be like to possess a ring that renders one invisible, thereby permitting its wearer to do injustice without being punished (359b–60d). Just so, the reader who wishes not simply to comprehend philosophical arguments, but to develop the inner understanding that issues in philosophical speeches and deeds, must animate the text of the Platonic dialogues by attempting imaginatively to enter into and see through the eyes of Socrates.[112]

In sum, the narrative and dramatic elements of the Platonic dialogues play essentially the same role in relation to their argumentative content as narrative aggadah about the sages does in relation to the Talmud's halakhic content. In both cases, these modes of storytelling *show*, rather than say, what it means to appropriate and express the truth in one's everyday life – whether this is the truth of philosophy or of Torah. Talmudic and Platonic narrative and drama thus keep the reader's attention focused on the harmony of speech and deed, of thought and action, that is essential to the being of the philosopher and the rabbi alike.

While this parallel use of storytelling is perhaps the most important point of contact between Talmudic and Platonic pedagogy, it is not the only one. In order to complete our introduction to the literary characteristics of the texts we will be studying, we now turn directly to the Platonic dialogues.

PHILOSOPHY IN ACTION: THE CASE FOR SOCRATES

Like the Talmud, the Platonic dialogues are creative responses to a social and political crisis. And like the Talmud, the dialogues

[112] See Howland 2005 for further discussion of the philosophical significance of storytelling in the *Republic*.

simultaneously preserve and transform an oral tradition that might otherwise have been forgotten.

Socrates philosophized in speech, but composed no philosophical writings. Plato, his devoted companion, began to write his dialogues in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, a conflict of twenty-seven years that ended when the Spartans starved the Athenians into submission in 404 BCE. Unlike many Athenians, including those most strongly allied with the democratic faction, Socrates remained in the city during the brief postwar rule of the Thirty Tyrants, a ruthless Spartan-installed oligarchy that murdered roughly 1,500 of his fellow citizens.[113] When the returning democrats defeated the oligarchs in battle in 403, Socrates fell under their suspicion. Well known for his practice of philosophizing in public, he was tried and executed in 399 for the crimes of impiety and corrupting the young.

In form and substance, Plato's dialogues are characterized by a combination of continuity and innovation. While the historical Socrates philosophized in the medium of spoken discourse, "Socrates" now speaks to us in and through written documents, primarily those authored by Plato.[114] He is present in the dialogues as a character in a series of stories that recreate the world of Athenian life in the fifth century BCE, all of which – like the "fictitious study-sessions" of the Talmud – must be presumed at least to some degree to be Platonic inventions.[115] It is only the act of reading that allows us to hear what Socrates has to say, and to participate meaningfully in the inquiries he initiates.

As to substance, the dialogues responded to the moral and political disintegration of Athens by attempting to turn the minds of their readers toward an intellectual world of goodness and wholeness – an intrinsically knowable order of stable, self-subsistent entities (the Ideas or Forms) that derive their being and intelligibility from the Good,

[113] On the numbers executed by the Thirty, see Krentz 1982, 79, and Strauss 1986, 54–55.

[114] Xenophon, a contemporary of Plato, also wrote dialogues featuring the speeches and deeds of Socrates. On Xenophon's Socratic education and significant philosophical legacy, see Howland 2000.

[115] Some of the conversations presented in the dialogues come down to us through dubious chains of transmission, while others obviously could not have occurred. In the *Menexenus*, Socrates memorializes Athenians who died in a war that occurred long after his death in 399; in the *Symposium*, at which Socrates is present, Aristophanes refers to an event that took place in 385 (193a).

which Socrates describes as the ultimate object not only of philosophical aspiration but of human longing as a whole.[116] Plato's insight that the perception of this transcendent realm of being may serve to ground human existence, even if it can never be wholly contained therein, finds partial expression in his dialogues: just as the Mishnah describes a Temple-centered Jewish life that exists only in the imagination, the *Republic* and *Laws* describe ideal regimes that subsist, like "patterns laid up in heaven," only in the speeches of philosophers.[117] His larger accomplishment, however, was to rehabilitate desire as such. Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* notably identifies the passionate longings that the Greeks associated with *erōs* – the term for sexual desire that was extended to other, equally potent yearnings – as the source of the Athenians' futile and destructive quest for power and glory.[118] But the speeches and deeds of Plato's Socrates teach that the problem of erotic longing lies in its orientation, not its amplitude: human desire is properly directed toward the achievement of wisdom, conceived as the philosophical understanding of the nature and goodness of what is.[119] In the *Republic*, Socrates employs a striking image of passionate consummation to express this point:

> It is the nature of one who is really a lover of learning … not [to] lose the keenness of his passionate love [*erōs*] or desist from it until he should touch the nature itself of each thing that is with the part of the soul that is suited

[116] *Republic* 504e–11e; cf. 490a–b.

[117] *Republic* 592b.

[118] Thucydides' infrequent use of *erōs* and its cognates make this clear. Pericles at one point encourages the citizens to "realize the power of Athens" and to become lovers (*erastai*) of the city (*Thucydides Historiae* 1979–80, 2.43.1). At 3.45.5, the Athenian Diodotus speaks of the dangers inherent in the "lust for all" (*erōs epi panti*). Arguing in the Assembly against the ultimately disastrous expedition to Sicily, the Athenian general Nicias presciently warns his fellow citizens against being "sick with desire [*duserōtas*] for things that lie far away" (6.13.1); nevertheless, "a passionate desire [*erōs*] for the enterprise fell upon [*enepese*] everyone alike" (6.24.3). In Greek literature, the verb *piptein*, "to fall in or on," frequently signifies the attack of an enemy or of disease (as in Thucydides' use of *enepipte* at 2.49.4).

[119] *Republic* 514a–18b; *Symposium* 201d–12a; *Phaedrus* 244a–57b. Eros is presented in these dialogues as the unifying principle of the "soul" (*psuchē*, the animating power that moves the body and departs from it at death). In the *Republic*, Socrates identifies three parts of the soul – intellect, spiritedness (*thumos*), and appetite – each of which has its own erotically charged desires; in the *Phaedrus*, in which he also represents the soul as a tripartite whole (a charioteer and two horses), he states that the "wings" of eros sprout in every part (251b).

to lay hold of such a thing, and it is the part akin to it that is suited. Having drawn near it and coupled with that which truly is, and having begotten intelligence and truth, he would know and live truly and would be nourished and thus cease from labor pains, but not before. (490a–b)

Though they know it not, what human beings want most fundamentally is to come into the presence of the eternal, transcendent truth. But this is not merely an intellectual process: philosophical education essentially involves the redirection or "turning" of the whole soul – including one's desires as well as one's intellect – toward this truth (*Republic* 518e–19b). Little wonder that later religious thinkers found Plato so congenial.[120]

As Plato suggests in remarking that his writings are "of a Socrates grown beautiful [or 'noble': *kalos*] and young" (*Second Letter* 314c), Socrates is *himself* an object of erotic aspiration for his companions and for the dialogues' readers. Those who spend time with him may be "struck and bitten by philosophy" when they come to see that his inner qualities are "divine and golden and wholly beautiful and amazing" (*Symposium* 216e–17a, 218a). The longing for wisdom is thus intertwined in the dialogues with the yearning to be like Socrates – for it is Socrates, more than anyone else in the pages of Plato, who has "drawn near" the truth and been transformed by it, and who "know[s] and live[s] truly." Socrates denies having students or being a teacher (*Apology* 33a), presumably because his pedagogy consists in trying to enable others to learn through their own efforts.[121] Yet he nevertheless seduces as all great teachers do, inspiring his companions by his moral and intellectual seriousness, passion for learning, and depth of insight to attempt to philosophize as he does in order to achieve something like his nobility of soul. In the case of Socrates, this seductiveness is so powerful that it easily reaches us through the medium of writing; even a poor secondhand account of what he says is enough to "astound" and "possess" those who hear it (*Symposium* 215d).[122]

[120] Augustine, for example, confesses to God that "if I had not come across these books [of Plato] until after I had been formed in the mould of your Holy Scriptures … I might have thought it possible for a man who read nothing but the Platonist books to derive the same spirit from them alone." Augustine 1961, 7.20 (154–55).

[121] As Seeskin (1987) aptly observes, Socrates is unlike other teachers in that he seeks not to fill students in, but to draw them out (6–7).

[122] The foregoing reflections barely begin to address the significance of eros in the dialogues. On eros in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, see Rosen 1987, Ferrari 1987,

By providing Socrates with a literary afterlife, the dialogues help to lay the foundations of the kind of tradition that the Talmud needs only to recapitulate – a text-based tradition of critical, rational inquiry into all aspects of human life. Plato differs from the Stammaim also in that he could not assume a receptive audience for his writings. The Bavli reproduces the thought and narrates the deeds of hundreds of sages whose religious and political authority in Jewish communities had been acknowledged for centuries by the time the text appeared in its final form.[123] The dramatic core of the Platonic dialogues, by contrast, is constituted by the speeches and deeds of Socrates, whose unprecedented and largely unwelcomed philosophical practices caused him to be executed for crimes against the community. While the Talmud can take for granted that its readers will already be charitably disposed toward the sages who populate its pages, the dialogues must persuade their readers not simply that the Athenians were mistaken in silencing Socrates – a thought that probably nagged at the consciences of many of his fellow citizens in the years after his execution – but that he in fact deserves a serious and respectful hearing.

The dialogues make the case for Socrates by employing a variety of literary means to draw readers into the philosophical examination of life. Not least among these is Plato's dramatization of various encounters between Socrates and other men who lead lives that the Athenians – and indeed, most human beings – would be inclined to regard as far more choiceworthy than his, simply because they possess a larger share of honor, wealth, political power, and other apparent goods. In conversing with these men, including famous generals and politicians like Alcibiades and Nicias, award-winning dramatists and rhapsodes like Agathon and Ion, and renowned sophists and rhetoricans like Protagoras, Hippias, and Gorgias, Socrates proves through adept cross-examination that they are ignorant of the very subjects in which they claim expertise. On a deeper level, he frequently shows that the received opinions on which his interlocutors base their claims are themselves incoherent. Such demonstrations are a necessary precondition for philosophizing,

and Griswold 1996. On the connection between philosophical eros and prophecy, see Chapter 4 of this volume, 151–56.

[123] See the summary of the role of the rabbinate in Jewish life in Babylonia at Neusner 1964–69, 3.95–102.

for only those who admit their ignorance will be moved to seek knowledge (cf. *Symposium* 203e–04a). But as the youths who follow Socrates in order to watch him at work are well aware, his impressive displays of intellectual superiority are also good sport, provided that one is not their target. Socrates reports that these same young men are often moved to imitate him (*Apology* 23c); as a consummate storyteller, Plato could reasonably expect a similarly positive response from many of his readers. Here, too, we see Plato's pedagogical erotics in action – although given the role that *thumos* or spiritedness plays in the way interlocutors, bystanders, and readers respond to Socratic refutation, one might just as well speak of pedagogical thumotics. By presenting readers with the pleasures of a competitive spectacle from which they (unlike Socrates' interlocutors) may learn about their own ignorance without fear of public embarrassment, Plato's dialogues promote an informed admiration for Socrates' intellectual accomplishment. In doing so, they function, at least on the level at which they are most widely accessible, as a much-needed advertisement for Socratic philosophizing.[124]

As we have already begun to see, the literary characteristics of the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud reflect a common set of pedagogical intuitions. Like the Talmud, Plato's writings are animated by the assumption that genuine learning requires the stimulation of discussion and debate, because it occurs only when one thinks things through for oneself. More precisely, philosophizing involves both exposing one's beliefs to the public scrutiny of dialogue, and subjecting to private or internal examination the opinions advanced by others.[125] The dialogues promote these activities by inviting readers to engage in discussion both with them and about them. If Plato never speaks in his own voice in the dialogues, it is presumably in order to preserve the intellectual space required for this exchange of ideas – a space in which readers can most freely develop their own thoughts and assess those of others. Because they aim to provoke reflection and not to indoctrinate, the dialogues emphasize questions rather

[124] Not coincidentally, the so-called Socratic dialogues that prominently feature the deflation of an interlocutor's intellectual pretensions are probably the ones most commonly studied in introductory undergraduate philosophy courses.

[125] Cf. the passages cited at Seeskin 1987, 1–2, in which Socrates insists that his interlocutors say what they really think.

than answers, and they invite readers to enter into multiple unfinished conversations.[126]

Like the Talmud, the dialogues teach largely by example, mimetically representing the process of inquiry rather than (merely) didactically presenting a body of instruction. Plato's dialogues are essentially philosophical dramas in which the action consists primarily in the sorts of things people do in discussion: making claims, providing examples, raising objections, quoting poetry, telling stories, agreeing, disagreeing, and sometimes getting angry. These discussions are not free-floating, but are shown to arise from everyday circumstances. Plato situates them in the framework of a larger story because narrative is the form most appropriate to the dialogues' core teaching, which consists in the transmission not of a philosophy but of a way of life – that of the philosopher.

Socrates proclaims at his public trial that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (*Apology* 38a). Taken as a whole, the dialogues constitute a relatively complete portrait of Socrates' version of the examined life.[127] Most of the dialogues begin in everyday circumstances that spontaneously give rise to a discussion of some philosophical issue – the nature of piety, for example (as in the *Euthyphro*), or courage (the *Laches*), or justice (the *Republic*).[128] The point of these philosophical discussions is not simply to acquire knowledge for its own sake (although Socrates makes it clear that knowledge of what is beautiful or noble or good *is* desirable in

[126] The Neoplatonist Olympiodorus accordingly warns against the attempt to reduce the dialogues to a set of philosophical doctrines: "When he [Plato] was about to die, he saw in a dream that he had become a swan and was going from tree to tree, and in this manner he caused the greatest trouble for the bird-catchers. Simmias the Socratic judged that Plato would elude those after him who wished to interpret him. For the interpreters who attempt to hunt out what the ancients had in mind are similar to bird-catchers, but Plato is elusive because it is possible to hear and understand his words in many ways, both physically, and ethically, and theologically, and literally, just like those of Homer as well." Westerink 1956, 2.156–62.

[127] Socrates does not appear in two dialogues, the *Laws* and the *Epinomis*, and is largely silent in three others, the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Timaeus*. In these dialogues, the examined life is represented by other philosophers – the Athenian and Eleatic Strangers and Timaeus. In the *Parmenides*, a young Socrates is taught by the famous philosopher for whom the dialogue is named.

[128] Exceptions include the *Timaeus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*, which are prearranged conversations featuring visiting philosophers.

itself), but rather to guide action. Euthyphro contravenes Athenian custom in taking his father to court, claiming that it is necessary to do so in order to rid his household of religious pollution. But does Euthyphro really know what piety requires in this situation? If not, his reason for prosecuting his father evaporates. Lysimachus and Melesias wish to educate their sons; perhaps this man here, who is putting on a display of fighting in armor, will teach them to be courageous. But what is courage?[129] For Socrates, as these examples suggest, philosophical reflection is neither a refined pastime nor simply one alternative among many intellectual pursuits. Rather, as a means of examining the basic beliefs that guide human action, it is an indispensable part of what human beings ordinarily understand by living well.

On first reading the dialogues, one is likely to conclude that Socratic inquiry is generally unsuccessful, because it regularly fails to achieve its stated aim of answering a basic question of the "What is x?" sort. Yet Plato's dramatization of these apparent failures is essential to the erotic instruction of the dialogues. It has been well observed that the moral and intellectual dimensions of Socratic inquiry are inseparable.[130] Socratic philosophizing is a social and collaborative endeavor; even the silent and interior process of thinking, Socrates claims, is "a sort of conversing [*dialegesthai*]," in which the soul proceeds by "asking and answering itself" (*Theaetetus* 189e–90a). Socrates accordingly asks his interlocutors to be cooperative (in participating in a joint inquiry), honest (in saying what they believe), gracious (in submitting to criticism), reasonable (in admitting what they don't know), and courageous (in continuing the investigation once their ignorance has been revealed).[131] It turns out that most of Socrates' respondents are lacking some or all of these philosophically indispensable traits of character. But we know this only because Plato narrates or dramatizes the process of inquiry in the dialogues. This is also how we know what it would mean to possess the virtues that

[129] The dialogues in which these conversations occur are, respectively, the *Euthyphro* and the *Laches*.

[130] Seeskin 1987 provides an excellent elucidation of this point.

[131] Ibid., 3–4, 33–34. In other words, Socrates "examine[s] not just beliefs but the people who hold them" (Weiss 2006, 3 n. 9).

are required to philosophize as Socrates does, for most (if not all) of them are on display in Socrates' conduct.[132]

In fine, Socrates embodies the unity of thinking and acting, moral virtue and intellectual excellence. He teaches by example what it would mean to live up to one's best understanding of what is right and good – a goal shared by the rabbis of the Talmud.[133] The Athenian general Laches makes this clear when he indicates that he is willing to speak with Socrates about courage only because he has had a chance to observe his bravery in battle. "Whenever I hear a man discussing virtue or some wisdom who is truly a man and worthy of the speeches that he is uttering," Laches explains, "I rejoice extraordinarily upon seeing that the speaker and the things said are suitable and harmonious with each other."[134] This remark nicely articulates Socrates' own view of the proper harmony of speech and deed. Philosophy not only illuminates the path we are to follow, but, as the unity of speech and deed, it *is* that path. One might even say that, as a way of life, Socratic philosophizing is the Platonic analogy to the halakha – an ever-unfolding road paved by critical reflection.

PHILOSOPHY AND TRADITION: PLATO'S COMPLEX PEDAGOGY

The Platonic dialogues, however, do not make it easy for readers to follow in the footsteps of Socrates. Paradoxically, to imitate Socrates

[132] The qualification is necessary for the reason advanced in Weiss 2006, 76–77 n. 18 and 87 n. 42: while Socrates does not hesitate to invoke the "say what you believe" rule when his interlocutors seek to disavow responsibility for the opinion that is being tested, he himself frequently fails to abide by it. Indeed, Socrates employs a variety of argumentative tricks in order to "puncture the bloated self-image of others" (4). Note, however, that such "puncturing" is merely preparatory to honest philosophical discussion.

[133] Ginzberg (1928, 83) stresses that "for the Jews of antiquity" and later centuries, "character and learning … are mutually dependent on each other." The importance the Talmud accords to goodness in action as well as thought is illustrated negatively at BT Mo'ed Katan 17A (cited and discussed at Neusner 1964–69, 3.140–41), where Rav Judah excommunicates a neophyte on whose vast learning the rabbis depend to settle academic disputes because he has earned a bad name. Cf. Ta'anit 24A–B, II.135–36, where Rabbah laments that his generation, although theoretically far superior to that of Rav Yehudah, is nonetheless deficient in righteousness.

[134] *Laches* 188c–d, trans. of James H. Nichols, Jr., in Pangle 1987.

is to think for oneself, and in this decisive respect not to imitate anyone at all. A related difficulty confronts thoughtful readers who wish to live in the manner of the sages. While the rabbis are unanimous in their desire to live up to the Torah, the Talmud compels its readers to choose, in matters that remain undetermined by established halakhic practice, among a multitude of exemplary ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, many of which are inevitably incompatible. And there is the further problem that some individuals – possibly including Socrates, and certainly including some of the Jewish heroes celebrated in the Talmud – may enjoy a relationship with God or the gods that cannot be reproduced, in part because it cannot be fully understood. As we shall begin to see in Chapter 2, this is an important theme of both the Platonic and the rabbinic texts we will be studying.

In certain ways, however, the dialogues *do* provide positive guidance concerning what is worth knowing as well as how to go about learning it. Like the rabbis, Socrates is primarily interested in human life, and only secondarily, and just insofar as it pertains to human life, in the scientific examination of natural phenomena. The fundamental questions that concern him are metaphysical, ethical, religious, and – in a broad sense that includes psychological and anthropological issues – political.[135] Like the rabbis, Socrates emphasizes the importance of intellectual humility and self-knowledge, particularly about one's own ignorance. Finally, the Platonic dialogues, like the Talmud, repeatedly – if almost always indirectly – raise the problem of the appropriate balance between traditional beliefs and practices and critical reflection.

"Tradition," of course, meant one thing for Plato and Socrates and another for the rabbis. The Greek city (*polis*) was akin to an independent congregation whose members were united by a particular set of religious practices that structured and informed everyday life. In general, Greek religion consisted of ritual, or customary modes of

[135] Curiously, this is not true of the character of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comic drama first performed in Athens in 423 BCE. Aristophanes' Socrates studies the great motions of the heavenly bodies and the infinitesimal motions of lowly fleas and gnats, but shows little interest in the intermediate region of human life. For further discussion see Chapter 3, 109–11, with Howland 2004a, 13–15.

religious observance such as sacrifice, and myth, or stories about the gods and their relationship with human beings. The origins of the mythical tradition may be traced largely to the poets, as the Athenian historian Herodotus makes clear when he asserts that Homer and Hesiod "created for the Greeks their theogony … gave to the gods the special names for their descent from their ancestors[,] and divided among them their honors, their arts, and their shapes."[136] But quite apart from the pan-Hellenic influence of certain poets, Greek religious ritual and myth had a strongly local character. Every city had its own ancestral ways and customs, which it regarded as divine in origin.[137] These *nomoi* embraced not just religious lore and practice, but also traditional judgments about what is noble or base, praiseworthy or shameful, and just or unjust – judgments that every generation of fathers took pains to impress on the next generation of sons.

The Platonic dialogues engage the tradition most obviously on the level of myth. We have seen that the Talmud occasionally compares the rabbis to the legendary heroes of the Bible, as in the transformation of Joshua in tractate Sanhedrin from a general into a student of Torah. So, too, the dialogues adapt the traditional tales of the poets not simply in order to present the character of Socrates within a familiar frame, but to set forth a new kind of myth centered on a new kind of hero, the philosopher.[138] In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates explicitly compares himself to Achilles, the great hero of Homer's *Iliad*. But in doing so, he turns Homer's Achilles into something he was not – a champion of justice.[139] Plato's Socrates is thus not simply a new Achilles, but a new *kind* of Achilles.[140] He is a philosophical warrior, whose weapons are virtue and intelligence rather than size

[136] *The History*, 2.53 (Herodotus 1987, 155).

[137] Cf. Fustel de Coulanges 1980, esp. 178–85. The ancient Greeks also maintained a cult of the household, whose rites of worship and formulas of prayer were specific to each family; Fustel describes this domestic religion in detail (7–31), and we shall see in Chapter 4 that it plays an important role in the *Euthyphro*.

[138] Segal 1978 offers an indispensable account of this process; see also Howland 2004a, which extends Segal's exploration of Plato's use of Homer's *Odyssey* as a literary subtext of the *Republic*.

[139] "Straightaway may I die," Socrates' Achilles says, "after I impose justice [*dikēn*] on the one doing injustice" (28d). In the original Homeric passage (*Iliad* 18.95–104), Achilles says nothing about justice.

[140] Cf. Weiss 2006, 2: "Plato's Socrates is a fighter. His interest lies … in arousing, provoking, confronting, and combating those who are either complacent or

and strength, and who fights not for honor and glory but for what he understands to be just.[141]

Plato's representation of Socrates as a new sort of hero points in two different directions, depending on whether one considers the novelty or the continuity of his example. On the one hand, Socratic philosophizing is an independent endeavor that regards *nomos* with a critical eye. This emerges clearly in Plato's *Cratylus*, a dialogue in which Socrates briefly considers, and then dismisses, an account of the origins of language that is strongly reminiscent of the concept of Oral Torah.

In the *Cratylus*, Socrates inquires into the adequacy of language in revealing the nature of what is. The basic elements of language are "names" (*onomata*), a word that is used in the dialogue to designate not only proper names, but also nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The word "name" thus covers all words that identify things, actions, and their characteristics. As "instrument[s] of teaching and of distinguishing being [*tēs ousias*]" (388b), names are the primary tools of philosophy. But how do we know that these tools are well formed? Socrates' playful answer takes the form of a philosophical myth. Names are established by "the lawgiver" (*ho nomothetēs*), in whose own name we can hear the word "namegiver" (*onomathetēs*; 388e–89a). The lawgiver/namegiver "looks away toward the name that belongs by nature to each thing, and … establish[es] its form [*eidos*] in letters and syllables" (390e). In fashioning spoken words from unsounded, natural names,[142] the lawgiver is supervised by "the dialectician," who knows best how to use names for the purpose of teaching and learning (390c). The dialectician possesses the very wisdom that Socrates seeks: he knows the nature of each thing that is, and he knows the process of philosophical teaching and learning by which human beings may acquire this knowledge. In supervising the lawgiver's

overconfident in their moral beliefs." Weiss goes on to note the prevalence of militaristic images in Socrates' characterization of his activities (2–3).

[141] Because piety may be understood as justice toward the gods (*Euthyphro* 12d–e), this is consistent with the claim of Seeskin (1987) that the *Apology* presents Socrates as "the consummate religious hero" (74). Cf. Weiss 2006, 4: "Socrates is a man on a mission. It is a mission that is divine in the sense that matters most, namely, that it serves the sacred purposes of seeking truth, promoting justice, and improving the lives of people."

[142] That the natural names are "inherently unsounded" is observed in Sallis 1985, 214.

establishment of names, he is moreover able to communicate this wisdom either without language (which is, so to speak, under construction), or in a language that is not accessible to human beings. In their knowledge and intellectual capability, the lawgiver and the dialectician are gods, or akin to gods.

Taken at face value, Socrates' myth about the origins of language guarantees the adequacy of language as a medium of philosophizing. The pedagogical relationship between the dialectician and the lawgiver furthermore bears a striking resemblance not only to that of god and lawgiver in the political traditions of various Greek cities, but also to God's instruction of Moses in Oral Torah.[143] However, Socrates does not claim that the dialectician's wisdom was passed down from the lawgiver to later generations, as the Oral Torah is said to have been passed down from Moses. This wisdom could perhaps be inferred from the nature of the language itself – a process that would be akin to the rabbinic reconstruction of Oral Torah – except that Socrates' story about the origins of names starts to deteriorate (perhaps in imitation of the inevitable transformation of language over time) almost from the moment he utters it.[144] In the end, Socrates flatly admits that the language he speaks – and uses to philosophize – was not established by wise divinities but by ignorant, confused men, "very ancient human beings" who, "just like many of our present wise men, always get dizzy on account of twisting around greatly in the course of inquiring into the way things stand with regard to beings" (411b). It follows that wisdom cannot be retrieved through the reconstruction of an authoritative tradition, but must be won through independent reflective efforts – efforts that are themselves always open to critical reexamination. In this sense, Socratic philosophizing is necessarily and essentially antitraditionalist.

On the other hand, Plato's dialogues evince the same sort of cautious complexity that characterizes the Talmud's pedagogical rhetoric. Plato unquestionably inspires admiration for Socrates' accomplishment of bringing philosophy into the public square in a vivid

[143] Minos is supposed to have established the laws of Crete under the tutelage of his father Zeus (*Laws* 624a–25a; *Minos* 319c ff.), and Lycurgus, the founder of Sparta, is alleged to have established laws for his city after consultation with the oracle at Delphi (*Laws* 624a, 632d; cf. 634d–e).

[144] On the stages of this deterioration, see Howland 1998b, 144–45.

and vigorous manner.[145] Yet he implicitly corrects the Socratic model of philosophizing in two basic ways. First, some dialogues feature other philosophers whose conceptions of the nature of philosophy and its proper relation to the political community differ from Socrates' in significant respects.[146] Most provocatively, the Stranger from Elea implicitly identifies Socrates as a kind of well-meaning sophist (or sham philosopher), and sets forth an argument for the legal suppression of just the kind of public questioning of ancestral ways and customary opinions in which Socrates engages.[147] Second, Plato himself departs from Socrates' example in declining publicly to interrogate others, employing instead the less confrontational and more indirect educational medium of writing. In these ways, the dialogues invite us to reflect critically on Socratic philosophizing in its original, oral form, and to consider the ways in which Plato may be pointing toward his own philosophical accomplishment in declaring his writings to be "of a Socrates grown beautiful and young."

In the *Apology*, Socrates at one point calls himself a model or pattern (*paradeigma*) of human wisdom, which, he explains, consists in the recognition of one's ignorance (23a–b). As an act not of slavish imitation, but of thoughtful appropriation, Plato's moderation of his mentor's example is itself paradigmatic of what it means to learn from the exemplary philosophizing of Socrates. Although he criticizes Socrates' public antinomianism, for example, the Eleatic Stranger nevertheless acknowledges the inadequacy of law – which is necessarily general in form – to deal with the unique circumstances of particular human situations.[148] Comparing law to written instructions

[145] Cicero, for example, famously praises Socrates as "the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men … and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil" (Cicero 1927, 5.10–11).

[146] See note 127 to this chapter. Zuckert 2009 offers a detailed comparison between Socrates' manner of philosophizing and those of the other philosophers represented in the dialogues.

[147] *Sophist* 226b–31b; *Statesman* 297d–300c. For discussion of these passages see Howland 1998b, 198–206, 272–79. The sophists were public intellectuals who taught theoretical and practical knowledge (often including the art of speaking persuasively) for a fee. In the Platonic dialogues, they are portrayed as being more interested in money and honor than in the quest for truth. See Chapter 3 of this volume.

[148] This is the same point Berkovits (2002, 96–97) makes with respect to Jewish law.

left by a trainer or physician who cannot be present to supervise the individuals in his care, the Stranger observes that it would be foolish to insist on following these instructions when the trainer or physician returns (*Statesman* 295c–e). The Stranger thus calls attention to the living wisdom and judgment about the whole of human life (*phronēsis*) that is both the object of philosophical inquiry (272c) and the source of good laws. The Stranger associates *phronēsis* with "the art of measurement … relative to the mean, the fitting, the opportune, and the needful, and everything settled toward the middle and away from the extremes" (284e). Because this nonarithmetical mean is not fixed, but "comes to be" relative to the unique circumstances of human life (284d), *phronēsis* – like the fundamental value-concepts of Torah and the halakhic conscience of the rabbis – transcends any attempt at definition. But what cannot be defined can sometimes be displayed, and just as Talmud utilizes "the writing down of the spoken word in a manner that preserves its essential spoken quality" in order to show the halakhic conscience in action, Plato writes dialogues in order to convey the vital *philosophical* conscience or *phronēsis* of Socrates.[149]

Plato's manner of philosophizing reflects the counsels of prudence and decency, which dictate that philosophers should refrain from forcing others to bear intellectual burdens for which they are unsuited. But it is also consistent with a philosophical case for respecting custom or convention that he puts in the mouth of Socrates. At *Republic* 537e–38c, Socrates compares the situation of a young man who begins to philosophize with that of a child who has been raised by "pretended parents" and later makes the shocking discovery that he has been adopted. Under the circumstances, the young man would be likely to reject and dishonor the parents who adopted him, "unless he was by nature very decent" (538c). As Socrates goes on to explain, the youth's "pretended parents" are an image of the ancestral ways of

[149] The quotation, which describes the Gemara, is from Berkovits 2002, 100. Socrates displays his philosophical conscience at *Apology* 32b–d, when he relates that he attempted to block the trial of the generals at Arginusae as a group and later refused to comply with the request of the ruling oligarchs to arrest Leon of Salamis. Munn (2000, 186) argues that Socrates' opposition to the collective trial of the generals in fact had no statutory basis; Kraut (1984, 22–23) notes that Socrates refused the order to arrest Leon not because it was illegal, but because it was unjust. If these scholars are correct, Socrates' behavior in these two instances is dictated by a sense of justice that transcends the actual laws of Athens.

the regime in which he happens to have been raised; the search for his true parents is akin to the philosophical quest for what is noble, good, and just by nature (*phusis*) rather than by custom or convention (*nomos*). Socrates makes it clear that the young man's bitterness toward his adoptive parents is unwarranted, for they have raised and cared for him, and helped to make him who he is. They thus have at least as good a claim as his birth parents to be his "true" father and mother.[150] So, too, philosophers who seek self-knowledge do well to honor and respect the laws and customs of the communities that have nurtured them and helped to mold their identities, even as they call into question the accepted truths that they uncritically absorbed as children.

THE AMBITION OF THE TEXTS

The dialogues' philosophical and pedagogical defense of *nomos* bears comparison to the Talmud's extraordinarily detailed attention to the tradition of Oral Torah. But these features of the Platonic and Talmudic writings should not be allowed to obscure their shared pedagogical ambition.

The nature of this ambition may be expressed in terms of the distinction between normative canons (those that are obeyed and followed) and formative canons (those that have a central place in the curriculum, providing a shared vocabulary and shaping the intellectual, moral, and spiritual habits of readers).[151] The Talmud exercises different sorts of formative influences on different sorts of readers. For some, the Jewish sacred writings as a whole, including the Talmud, constitute a normative canon as well as a formative one: later scholars must always defer to the halakhic judgments of those closer to Sinai. For others, the Talmud is a formative canon that teaches readers to respect the halakhic norms established by the rabbinic tradition, but nevertheless to regard them as subject to emendation by critical reflection. Everything depends on which of the Talmud's various perspectives on the nature of religious life one is prepared to embrace.

[150] Cf. Socrates' use of the analogy between laws and parents at *Crito* 50e–51b.
[151] Halbertal 1997, 3.

I suggest that Plato's dialogues aspire to be a new formative canon for the Greek world, one that seeks to train readers to approach the traditions in which they have been raised with a combination of critical reflection and respect. The Platonic dialogues present a new model of education, that of philosophy. Taken as a whole, the dialogues constitute a written curriculum. This curriculum does not replace, but is superadded to, the largely unwritten, normative and formative canons of traditional belief and custom that will already have helped to shape the minds and characters of the dialogues' readers. There is also a crucial sense in which the Platonic curriculum is normative: while it does not present rules of behavior that must be obeyed, it promotes the implicit norms of the Socratic, examined life, including a commitment to articulating and defending one's own thoughts in philosophical dialogue and a sense of intellectual confidence tempered by humility.

The Platonic curriculum echoes the Jewish predilection for justified law in resisting unreflective obedience to received teachings.[152] Like the Talmud, the dialogues attempt to transmit an understanding of the spirit of wise laws rather than just the letter of the law. In the *Laws*, for example, the Athenian Stranger tells his companions that the conversation they have gone through about the nature and structure of a well-ordered political community would be an ideal model for the education of the citizens in such a community, and that this conversation should be preserved in writing and studied by the young (811c–12a).[153] The Platonic curriculum nevertheless counsels respect for the established *nomoi* of actual communities. Nor is this counsel grounded solely in prudential and pedagogical considerations. As we have seen, customary or traditional beliefs (about piety, courage, and so forth) furnish the starting points for philosophical reflection by providing the matrix in which problems and potential solutions initially come to light. The philosophical truth is thus implicit in that which is already familiar to everyone as a matter of ordinary experience. To put this point in terms of the image we considered earlier,

[152] Cf. Halivni 1986, 5, which quotes Plato's *Laws*, 722d–23b, on "the value of accompanying codes of law and discrete laws with justificatory clauses."

[153] The importance of this passage is underscored by its location at the center of the dialogue. On the significance of this fact, see Howland 1998a, 633–36.

an adopted child who is looking for her birth parents would do well to start by interrogating her adoptive father and mother.

Like the Talmud, Plato's dialogues also present an originally oral activity – Socratic philosophizing – in written form. Plato calls attention to this fact in the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates criticizes the written word because it is pedagogically defective. In the first place, it is actually an impediment to the cultivation of wisdom as an inner, living ethos, instead "produc[ing] forgetfulness in the soul of those who have learned it … as through reliance on writing they are reminded from the outside by alien marks, not from inside, themselves by themselves" (275a).[154] Second, the written word is repetitive, remains silent when questioned, speaks indiscriminately to all kinds of readers, and is incapable of defending itself from unjust accusations (275c–e). Socrates' criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus*, together with certain references in Aristotle's works to Platonic doctrines that are not set forth in the dialogues, have given rise to an interpretation of Plato that posits the existence of an *ungeschreibene Lehre* – an "unwritten teaching" that constitutes the true core of Plato's philosophy.[155] On this interpretation, the inquiries represented in the dialogues are deliberately incomplete; the "gaps" in these inquiries are to be filled in by oral instruction, which is to be offered only to those students who have shown themselves to be intellectually and morally prepared to receive it.[156] But because Plato's oral philosophy is unavailable to us in its original form, the work of interpretation consists primarily in reconstructing this philosophy on the basis of the "fragments" of Plato's thought that have come down to us in the dialogues and other writings.[157]

The "unwritten teaching" interpretation of the dialogues deserves mention because it resembles the "closer to Sinai" reading of the Talmud in several important respects. Both schools of interpretation posit authoritative oral traditions – one passed down by God, and the other originating in a philosopher of "sovereign" understanding and

[154] Trans. of Rowe 1986.

[155] This is the view of the so-called Tübingen School, which has been championed most notably by Konrad Gaiser, Hans Joachim Krämer, and Thomas Szlezák. It is set forth clearly and succinctly in Szlezák 1999.

[156] Ibid., 15–17, 62.

[157] Ibid., 111, 118.

godlike wisdom.[158] Both understand the primary task of the reader to be filling in the "gaps" and silences of the text by reconstructing, and possibly developing and extending, these oral traditions. Both are furthermore plausible ways of understanding the writings they address. My concern is therefore not to try to refute either of these schools of interpretation, but merely to make two observations.

First, the *ungescreibene Lehre* school compels us to choose between understanding the philosophy of Plato's Socrates as a quest for wisdom characterized by the knowledge of ignorance, or as the achievement of wisdom in the form of a closely guarded authoritative doctrine. This choice resembles the one students of the Oral Torah must make in weighing the authority of tradition against rabbinic innovation in matters of interpretation. The simultaneous plausibility of both interpretations of the dialogues furthermore suggests that Plato's writings, like the Talmud, are esoteric in the sense specified earlier: they teach different sorts of readers in different ways, speaking to each sort in the voice it is best prepared to hear. Like the Talmud, the dialogues thus display the kind of pedagogical flexibility that the champions of Plato's unwritten teaching associate with speech alone.[159] Second, Socrates' criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* also apply to certain forms of speech. In the dialogues, in fact, Socrates is himself occasionally accused of repetitiveness, excessive silence, and unmanly vulnerability in speech.[160] But these are not necessarily deficiencies from a pedagogical point of view. A speaker who answered every question and always fully explained himself would run the risk of treating others as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge; perhaps this is why Socrates is in the habit not of answering philosophical questions, but of asking them. Conversely, the resistance of a philosophical text to easy interpretation is arguably a spur to active inquiry

[158] Ibid., 104–05, 116–17.

[159] Note also the assertion of Szlezák (1999, 41) in connection with Socrates' criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus*: if Plato had believed in the philosophical effectiveness of writing, "this would have been the place … to have declared it." But dramatic reasons alone suffice to explain the absence of such a declaration. In particular, Szlezák seems implicitly to assume here that Socrates, who philosophized only in speech, is simply a mouthpiece of Plato, one of the greatest practitioners of philosophical writing.

[160] See especially the condemnations of Socratic philosophizing set forth at *Gorgias* 484c–86d and in the *Clitophon*.

and independent thinking.[161] A significant part of Socratic philosophizing furthermore consists in reading and talking about texts (and here is yet another point of comparison to the Talmud): in a surprising number of dialogues, Socrates is engaged in the philosophical interrogation of the written word.[162] In studying Plato's writings and wrestling with their meaning, Plato's readers may come to develop the same skills Socrates displays in these dialogues.[163]

The preceding reflections suggest that it is possible to construct a Socratic defense of Platonic writing.[164] Such a defense would work for Talmudic writing as well. Yet it is crucial to observe that the Platonic dialogues do not – and cannot – *reproduce* the experience of conversing with Socrates, because the text inevitably interposes itself between the reader and the subject under investigation. In talking with Socrates, Euthyphro (for example) is compelled to question what he thinks he knows about piety. In this as in other conversations, Socrates serves, to borrow an image from another dialogue, more or less as a midwife of Euthyphro's thoughts.[165] But for Plato's readers, the matter is not so simple. Socrates does not speak with *them*, but with Euthyphro, and just insofar as they study and learn from this conversation, they will begin to think about piety not by directly investigating their own views but by pondering what *Socrates* thinks. In doing so – and, needless to say, in studying Plato's other dialogues – readers are inclined to make Socrates into something more than an intellectual midwife. One might respond that the dialogues as a whole are meant to assist readers in giving birth to their own thoughts, but this does not quite capture their significance for those who have undertaken a serious and sustained study of their content. I have suggested that the dialogues aspire to be a formative canon. But just to the extent that they

[161] Cf. Howland 2003, 87–88, and the more extensive reflections in Melzer 2007, 1018–26.

[162] For some examples see Howland 2003, 91 n. 21.

[163] A similar point could be made about the skills one can learn by studying the Gemara's presentation of how the sages read, interpreted, and debated Mishnah and Scripture.

[164] Just such a defense is offered in Burger 1980, which observes that, "by issuing a warning against its potential deceptiveness, the dialogue [i.e., the *Phaedrus*] calls forth from its reader the activity of interpretation which enables it to overcome the very danger it announces" (97). Platonic writing might even constitute a rhetorically judicious improvement on Socratic speech; cf. Howland 2003, 95–98.

[165] *Theaetetus* 148e–51d.

succeed in this endeavor, they give their readers something like a second nature – reordering their desires, providing them with a philosophical vocabulary, and thereby shaping their habits of mind and character. The correct image for this relationship is not that of the midwife, but rather that of the adoptive parent.

The fundamental point of the paradox I have just described is that the character of Socrates in Plato's dialogues functions as a kind of mask. Behind this mask lies Plato's writing, and it is in engaging this body of writing – in learning from it how to think, and in making the text the focal point of dialogue and debate with other Socratically educated individuals – that we may live an examined life on *Plato's* terms.[166] Something similar is also true of the Talmud. We may imagine that we are being taught by Rabbi Akiva or Rava, but we are really rising to the challenges and provocations of the text itself. To fail to attend to this distinction is to risk missing the enormous pedagogical ambition inherent in both Platonic and Talmudic writing.[167]

[166] Cf. Nietzsche 1966, §190: Plato "var[ies] … [Socrates] into all of his own masks and multiplicities"; "what is the Platonic Socrates after all if not *prosthe Platōn opithen te Platōn messē te Chimaira* [Plato in front and Plato behind, in the middle Chimaera]."

[167] This pedagogical ambition is not inconsistent with the complex political ambition Stanley Rosen observes in Plato's dialogues. According to Rosen, Plato's *Republic* inaugurates the Western tradition of philosophical constructivism in politics. In this respect, Plato's decision to write dialogues rather than to philosophize in the marketplace is only superficially a retreat from the direct involvement of philosophy in politics. In fact, Plato "differs sharply from his teacher and contradicts by example the political reticence expressed by Socrates," in that he "dares to interfere with the contemporary political situation through the power and artistry of speech" (Rosen 2005, 242).

2

Rabbis and Holy Men

In the preceding chapter, I described the Talmud and the Platonic dialogues as complex writings that draw readers into their argument and action, encouraging them to question the text, to uncover problems inherent in its surface, and to search its depths for solutions. I also asserted that the moral and intellectual capacity of sympathetic imagination is an interpretative key that can unlock the inner meaning of aggadic and Platonic storytelling. In this chapter, we shall begin to see concretely what these claims amount to as we start to think through the Mishnah and Gemara of Ta'anit 3.

Ta'anit 3 and Plato's *Euthyphro* exemplify a distinctive feature of both the dialogues and the Talmud: the employment of narrative and drama to explore central themes and questions and thus to develop, at least implicitly, an overall argument. While Ta'anit as a whole reflects on a set of related halakhic issues pertaining to religious fasts, Ta'anit 3 is unusually rich in aggadic material relating to the lives and deeds (many of them miraculous) of certain rabbis and other Jewish "holy men."[1] So, too, the philosophical argument of the *Euthyphro* is embedded within the story of an encounter that occurs at a defining moment of Socrates' life – the beginning of the legal proceedings that will soon result in his conviction and execution. And while these two texts begin in different places, their overall

[1] This term refers to men with extraordinary powers and special access to, or intimacy with, God. Cf. Green 1979, Green 1977, and Avery-Peck 2006.

intellectual momentum causes them to converge on a conception of piety that adequately reflects our ignorance, as well as our knowledge, of God or the god(s).

On the level of explicit argument, the *Euthyphro* rethinks conventional notions of the gods and of piety in a way that brings these central elements of the Greek religious tradition closer to the kind of rational and ethical conception of religious life embraced by the rabbis of the Talmud. But the new understanding of piety toward which this argument points incorporates a keen awareness of human ignorance in relation to the gods; this knowledge of ignorance, and the longing for wisdom that springs from it, is concretely expressed in Socrates' relationship to Euthyphro, to his primary accuser, Meletus, and to the Athenians in general. For its part, Ta'anit 3 begins by affirming rational processes of interpretation and evaluation rooted in the basic covenantal framework of Judaism. But its aggadic narrative makes it clear that these traditional resources cannot fully explain the phenomenon of the individual whom God favors with extraordinary capabilities, including in particular the power to perform miracles.[2]

The present chapter reflects from the side of the Talmud on the convergence of inquiries just noted. It focuses on the way Ta'anit 3 first establishes key elements of the rabbinic conception of piety, and then proceeds to use the story of Ḥoni HaMe'aggel ("Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer"), a first-century BCE holy man and miracle worker, to explore the limits of this conception. The story of Ḥoni takes up close to half of the Mishnah, and introduces what is by far the longest single section of the Gemara; this section, which is composed entirely of aggadic material, is primarily concerned with holy men and sages who intercede with God on behalf of their communities.[3] As we shall see, the Gemara's failure to make Ḥoni's heroism fit the model of rabbinic piety has a curious result. Ḥoni's greatness lies not in what he teaches,

[2] Note that *God* is the ultimate source of miracles (Kadushin 2001, 158; Guttmann 1947, 365); the divine powers of "miracle-workers" are "indwelling" or "channeled" (cf. the quotation from the Hasidic Maggid of Miedzyrzec at Green 1977, 338).

[3] By "section," I mean a stretch of text that is understood to correspond to a distinct part of the Mishnah, as indicated by its citation of the Mishnaic text. Thus, the Mishnah tells the story of Ḥoni at 19A (II.65–67), while the Gemara takes up the matter of Ḥoni at 23A (II.116) and does not turn to the next part of the Mishnah until 25B (II.153).

but in *who* he is; he is remembered for his remarkable powers and what he does with them. But because the rabbis cannot make sense of his special relationship with God – because, in this crucial respect, Ḥoni remains a mystery – he cannot be imitated. He thus turns out to be pedagogically irrelevant as an example for others, a fact the Gemara almost cruelly underscores by contrasting his ultimate isolation and loneliness with their rabbis' flourishing community of teaching and learning.

The Gemara's discussion of Ḥoni also helps to open up some important avenues of inquiry into another extraordinary figure, that of Socrates. Indeed, the more than passing resemblance between Ḥoni and Socrates will establish a fruitful framework for our interpretation in Chapter 3 of Socrates' self-presentation in the *Apology*.

THE CONTEXT AND THE MISHNAH OF TA'ANIT 3

Ta'anit (the Hebrew word "fast"), a tractate in the Order of Mo'ed ("Appointed Times"), deals, as its title announces, with episodes of religiously motivated abstinence from food. While some fasts – such as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement – have a definite place in the Jewish liturgical calendar, Ta'anit is especially interested in fasts that the rabbis decree in response to emergencies that endanger a community. Foremost among these is drought, a frequent occurrence in the arid climate of the Land of Israel and Babylonia. Fasting is required when a community is threatened by drought and certain other afflictions, because the rabbis interpret such emergencies as Heaven-sent warnings or punishments in response to sin, to which the community is obliged to respond in turn with repentance and prayer.

The systematic side of Talmudic thought is apparent in the overall structure of Ta'anit, which begins by establishing the scientific and theological basis for the traditional practice of praying for the blessing of rain at certain fixed times during the year and fasting in response to drought. The rabbis are aware that, in any given locale, rain regularly falls in certain seasons and not (or not so much) in others, and that the same is true of different types of rain, for example, heavy rain versus drizzle. A lack of rainfall, or of a particular type and quantity of rainfall, is thus to be expected at certain times

of the year and is not to be understood as a divine portent.[4] But dangerous abnormalities in the ordinary cycle of rain, especially including drought during the growing season, do qualify as portents. How do we know this? The rabbis' certainty on this point depends not simply on their observations of the natural order of meteorological phenomena, but also on a theological argument establishing that rain is directly under God's control – unlike, for example, winds and dews, for which it is not necessary to pray as they come regularly.[5] In the absence of such an argument, it would make little sense to pray for rain or to fast in response to unseasonably dry weather.

The required argument is provided early in the first chapter of Ta'anit by the Gemara's citation of Scripture in support of Rabbi Yoḥanan's assertion that "there are three keys in the hands of the Holy One, blessed be he, that were not entrusted to the hands of an agent, and these are they: the key of rains, the key of a woman giving birth, and the key of the resurrection of the dead" (2A–2B, I.13–14). Yoḥanan's implicit comparison of rain to childbirth and resurrection underscores the essential significance of rain for life itself, as does the Gemara's comment that the reason he fails to mention a fourth key recognized by other rabbis in the Land of Israel – "the key of sustenance" – is that "rains are the same as sustenance" (2B, I.14). So important is rain that the Gemara even considers whether the day of rain is greater than, or merely equivalent to, the day of resurrection, the day on which the Torah was given, and the day when Heaven and Earth were created (7A, I.77–78; 7B, 85). More generally, Ta'anit's interpretation of the phenomenon of insufficient rain accords perfectly with the theodicy articulated in the Torah, which teaches that providing and withholding rain are primary means by which God rewards or punishes the Jews for observing or failing to

[4] The Gemara thus acknowledges that Babylonia, which is watered by the Tigris and the Euphrates, does not require as much rain as the Land of Israel, and that the rainy season – and therefore regular prayers for rain, which start at the time of the fall festival of Sukkot in the Land of Israel – starts later in Babylonia (10A, I.119–20; cf. 2A, I.7–13). Ta'anit's empirical observations of rain and related phenomena extend even to distinctions between the advantages and disadvantages (depending on the season) of different types of winds, dews, and clouds: cf. 3A–3B, I.27–33.

[5] 3A, I.27–32. While God does not withhold winds and dews as such, He may nonetheless withhold *beneficial* dews and winds (3A–3B, I.28, 32).

observe His commandments. The alternatives are set forth clearly at Deuteronomy 11:13–17:

> If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late.... Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the LORD's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.

Like similar passages elsewhere in the Tanakh, this one shows that the subject of rain is intimately connected with the tradition's understanding of the covenant, and of God's response to righteous and blameworthy behavior as measured by the covenant.[6]

The general interpretative framework established in Ta'anit 1 sets the stage for the specific inquiry undertaken in Ta'anit 3, which examines a range of issues surrounding various ways of responding to drought and other calamities, including prayer and fasting.[7] The first half of the Mishnah of Ta'anit 3 discusses special circumstances in which the alarm must be sounded after the first rainfall of the season.[8] It is necessary to sound the alarm by blowing the *shofar* – and, presumably, to fast – if the plants in the field "have changed" (which might suggest a problem relating to their growth), if the rains stop for a period of forty days or longer, or if rain falls in insufficient quantities (18B, II.61–62). The Mishnah indicates its understanding of the religious significance of these crises by quoting Amos 4:7: "[regarding] a city on which rain did not fall, as it is written 'And I will cause it to rain on one city, but on one city I will not cause it to rain, one portion

[6] Cf. Leviticus 26:3–4: "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit." 1 Kings 8:35–36 suggests that God withholds rain in response to sin, and provides rain in response to repentance, in order to teach the Jews "the proper way in which they are to walk" (*haderekh hatovah asher yelkhu bah*).

[7] The first part of Ta'anit 1 (2A–10A) deals with regular prayers for rain; the second part (10A–15A) and the whole of Ta'anit 2 (15A–18B) concern special prayers that are recited in times of drought.

[8] Steinsaltz notes that when the Mishnah uses the expression "they sound the alarm," it appears to mean that the rabbinical court "immediately decrees a series of the most severe fasts on which the shofar [ram's horn] is sounded" (II.61, note on 18B).

will be rained upon, etc.,' that city fasts and sounds the alarm …" (18B, II.62). In the fourth chapter of Amos, the prophet complains on God's behalf that, although He has punished the Israelites for their iniquity, they have failed to return to Him. In citing Amos, the Mishnah thus makes it clear that it regards both insufficient rain and crops of unusual appearance as signs of disfavor that God may show in response to the unworthiness of a particular community.

According to the Mishnah, cases of plague and other calamities that might afflict a particular city, including collapsing buildings, blight, mildew, locusts, the appearance of savage beasts in populated areas, and "the sword," are also to be interpreted as divine punishments for which the alarm must be sounded (19A, II.63–64). In all of these cases, the primary purpose of sounding the alarm is not to obtain the notice and assistance of God – who obviously knows of the sufferings He is inflicting – but rather to alert the community to the need to repent and atone through the act of fasting. In general, the first half of the Mishnah concludes, the alarm is sounded "for any trouble that may come upon the community … except for excessive rain" (19A, II.65). Given that excessive rain was the very first instrument by which God punished human beings (Genesis 6–7), this last caveat is somewhat surprising. But aside from the fact that the climate of the Land of Israel (like that of its near neighbors in Mesopotamia) is one in which it is far more probable that there will be too little rain than too much, praying for the cessation of rain would implicitly demonstrate a lack of faith in God's guarantee that He will never again flood the earth (Genesis 9:11).[9]

The second half of the Mishnah relates a story about Ḥoni HaMe'aggel that at first blush seems to be only tangentially related to what has come before. In this story – which is highly unusual both because it is rare to find a substantial piece of aggadah in the Mishnah, and because of the "virtual absence of miracle-stories" in the Mishnah[10] – the people make a special appeal to Ḥoni to pray for rain during a time of drought. Although Ḥoni is in Jerusalem, he does not pray publicly in the Temple; he addresses God privately,

[9] Cf. Green 1979, 632. Avery-Peck (2006) notes that excess rain "represents no real danger and so does not warrant God's intercession"; furthermore, "asking for something like the cessation of rain … can have horrible results" (153–54).

[10] Green 1979, 625; cf. Avery-Peck 2006, 151.

after the manner of a son beseeching his father.[11] Ḥoni is so successful that the people request that he pray for the rain to cease, at which point he asks them to "go out and see if the *Even HaTo'in* [a stone that stood at one of the high points of Jerusalem] is covered" (19A, II.66). This may be the link that joins the Ḥoni story with the first half of the Mishnah. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz observes that, just as "rain in general is a blessing, and blessings should not be rejected," Ḥoni's request with regard to the *Even HaTo'in* is a way of saying that "as long as that stone is not covered by water . . . I will not pray for the rain to stop, for one should not reject a blessing" (II.65, 66, commentary on 19A).

As we have seen, the Mishnah of Ta'anit 3 is guided by the assumption that certain calamities are punishments meted out by God in response to a community's unworthiness, an assumption that reiterates a basic theological tenet of the Torah. The Mishnah has already warned against sounding the alarm for excessive rain because excessive rain is actually a blessing, although it may look like a curse. If Steinsaltz's interpretation of Ḥoni's reference to the *Even HaTo'in* is correct, the Mishnah regards this point as sufficiently important that it bears repeating: excessive rain presents a problem *because it looks like a punishment, although it is not.* But we need not rely on Steinsaltz's reading to notice that the Mishnah's treatment of excessive rain implicitly raises important questions about its Torah theodicy. How do we know when we are being punished? More generally, what are the signs of God's favor or disfavor?

Nor does the Mishnah stop here. For the story of Ḥoni raises the other fundamental question that is provoked by its Torah theodicy: what

[11] S. Safrai 1994, 7; cf. Büchler 1922, 212–13. Safrai has established that Ḥoni – like Ḥanina ben Dosa (discussed in Chapter 7) – belonged to the Ḥasidic movement that existed from the first century BCE through the Tannaitic period. Safrai (1965) furthermore shows that Büchler (1922) is incorrect in regarding the Ḥasids as sages whose special intimacy with God derived from their being especially "scrupulous in the observance of the commandments"; in fact, they were "a certain defined group" with its own literary tradition and a distinctive set of halakhic practices. Rabbinic literature preserves no rulings in the name of the Ḥasids, who valued deeds more than study, and whose actions displayed "confidence in providence and in the salvation resulting from right behavior, and even in the miracles which were to be revealed to them" (Safrai 1965, 18–19, 32–33). The story of Ḥoni is one of several in the Talmud that reflect the uneasy relationship between "Ḥasidic charismatics" and Pharisaic sages like Shimon ben Shetaḥ (S. Safrai 1994, 7–8, 10). Ḥoni seems to be the same man as the Onias to whom Josephus refers at *Antiquities* 14.22–24.

makes an individual or a community worthy of favor or disfavor? When Ḥoni is first asked to pray for rain, he confidently instructs the people to "bring in the [earthenware] ovens for the Paschal sacrifices so that they will not dissolve." After his first prayer goes unheeded, Ḥoni resorts to magic. He draws a circle around himself and utters what amounts to an incantation: "Master of the Universe! Your children have turned their faces to me, for I am like a member of your household [*k'ben bayt l'phaneykha*, lit. 'like a son of the house in Your eyes']. I swear by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children."[12] When the rain begins to fall lightly, he responds: "I did not ask [for] this, but [for] rains [to fill] pits, ditches, and caves." When it begins to fall heavily, he complains: "I did not ask [for] this, but [for] rains of benevolence, blessing, and generosity." Ḥoni's shockingly imperious manner of addressing God provokes Shimon ben Shetaḥ, a Pharisaic predecessor to the rabbis (and one of the five Zugot) who was at that time the head of the Sanhedrin, to tell him that, were he not Ḥoni – and thus, as Rashi notes, a great man – "I would decree a ban upon you." But as it stands, Shimon is frankly at a loss as to how to respond. He can do little more than turn Ḥoni's metaphor of "sonship" into a rebuke.[13] "What shall I do to you," Shimon wonders, "for you act like a spoiled child before God and He does your will for you, like a son who acts like a spoiled child with his father, and he does his will for him? And about you the verse says: 'Your father and your mother shall be glad, and she who bore you shall rejoice' [Proverbs 23:25]" (19A, II.65–67).

Even the most cursory reading of this story suggests that Ḥoni is favored by God in spite of the fact that he behaves in a way that would make anyone else, in the judgment of a powerful and important sage who "serves … as the representative of rabbinism in the traditions about the pre-Destruction era,"[14] not only unworthy of God's special

[12] Following Büchler 1922 (see esp. the note on 246–47), Goldin (1963, 237) claims that there is "no trace of thaumaturgy" in Ḥoni's behavior. But Green (1979) argues more persuasively that Ḥoni's unusual oath, his reference to the name of God, his use of the "ancient magical symbol" of the circle, and his claim to be a son of God all strongly suggest that he is practicing "an ancient Jewish magical rite" (635).

[13] Green 1979, 636. Cf. Daube 1975, 373: in relation to the "petulant child" Ḥoni, Shimon and his colleagues "represented the adult core of Judaism."

[14] Green 1979, 637–38. Green notes that "the post-70 rabbis, descendents of the Pharisees, regarded Simeon [Shimon] as a founding father" (637). For useful

attention and assistance but actually deserving of punishment.[15] It has been well observed that Ḥoni's magic is a challenge to the authority not only of Shimon, but also of the emerging rabbinic tradition as a whole.[16] But this challenge does not arise from the mere exercise of supernatural powers, for the Gemara (including, as we shall see, that of Ta'anit 3) regularly credits Amoraic sages with the power to perform various sorts of miracles.[17] These included conversing with Elijah, the angels, and God, coming back from the world beyond in dreams, controlling heat and fire, causing death by means of a curse, and producing rain.[18] Rather, the deeper problem posed by Ḥoni concerns the *source* of his powers. The rabbis, too, were "holy men" with extraordinary abilities, but they were such "by virtue of what they *knew*"; their "magical powers" arose "both [from] knowledge of Torah *and* [from] the very act of studying Torah."[19] Yet Ḥoni's conduct alone suffices to show that he is not a rabbi.[20]

summaries of his life and deeds, see *Jewish Encyclopedia* 1901, XII.357–58, *s.v.* "Simeon ben Shetaḥ" and "Shimon ben Shetach" in Frieman 1995, 285–87.

[15] Büchler 1922 regards Ḥoni's prayer as "exceptional and even unique" in "its daring attitude to God and its presumptuousness," and observes that the ban of excommunication to which Shimon refers is a "severe disciplinary punishment which, at that time, as it appears, was only imposed on a public man for a grave and public sin" (221, 254).

[16] Green 1979, 625: "As the new masters of holiness the rabbis claimed for themselves and their piety the religious authority which once had belonged to the priests and the [Temple] cult. Consequently, any Jew who claimed access to God outside the new rabbinic structure would have seemed to them suspect. Charismatic figures who professed supernatural powers – magicians, miracles-workers, or 'prophets' – naturally would have presented a challenge to the emerging rabbinic piety and claims to authority." Avery-Peck (2006, 149–51) and Bokser (1985, 43–44) follow a similar line.

[17] From the rabbinic perspective, "supernatural" access to God was the "entirely *natural* result of the possession and mastery of Torah" (Green 1979, 642, emphasis added). Note, however, that "with the sole exception of the Ḥoni-tradition, no miracle stories about the Tannaim appear in Mishnah, and of the few such stories which do exist, most occur first in the *gemara*-stratum of the two Talmuds" (Green 1979, 625).

[18] Neusner 1964–69, 3.102–10.

[19] Neusner 1964–69, 3.104, 119, emphases in original. At 119, Neusner also observes that the sage's mere repetition of " 'words of Torah' . . . constitute[d] an incantation formula of prophylactic power."

[20] On the oddity of Ḥoni from a rabbinic perspective, see esp. S. Safrai 1994, which establishes that the tales of the Ḥasids bear a close resemblance to New Testament stories about Jesus. Like the Ḥasids, Jesus addresses God with filial intimacy, relies

Significantly, the Mishnah does not attempt to resolve Shimon's perplexity. Shimon implies that Ḥoni is righteous and wise – the verse of Scripture immediately preceding the one he quotes reads "The father of a righteous man will exult; he who bore a wise son will rejoice in him" (Proverbs 23:24) – but he does not actually observe these qualities in Ḥoni's comportment toward God. Indeed, the context of the verse Shimon cites implicitly calls attention to Ḥoni's bad behavior: the speaker of Proverbs, a book of fatherly wisdom, has just advised "my son" that to spare the rod is to spoil the child (23:13–14). In sum, Ḥoni simply does not fit into the basic framework in which the rabbis evaluate righteous and blameworthy conduct, and much of the power of this Mishnah lies in its honest acknowledgement of this problem.[21]

Considered as a whole, the Mishnah of Ta'anit 3 reiterates, and then proceeds to question, the seemingly straightforward teaching that God rewards the good and punishes the bad, as measured by His covenant with the Jewish people. The Mishnah's questions do not undermine this core teaching about God's justice, which stands at the very heart of the Jewish faith. Rather, in warning us that the distinction between blessings and punishments and between the worthy and the unworthy is sometimes unclear, the Mishnah forces us to reflect on the limits of our ability to apply this teaching in making sense of our experience.

on miracles, considers poverty to have ethical and spiritual value, and emphasizes deeds even at the expense of Torah study (6–16).

[21] This is true in spite of the fact that, as Green (1979) notes, the Mishnah begins a process of "rabbinizing" Ḥoni that is significantly extended in the Gemara (629, 638–39, 644); like the rabbis, Ḥoni prays to God and refuses to reject a blessing (cf. Avery-Peck 2006, 154). But Green's assertion that Ḥoni appears in the Mishnah as a way of "documenting the claim that the new religion of the rabbis had superseded the old religion of the priests" (641) is unpersuasive; if that were true, we would expect the Mishnah to go much further in rabbinizing Ḥoni than it does – and in any case, to go at least as far as the Gemara. Ḥoni's appearance in the Mishnah implicitly acknowledges that charismatic holy men "had a significant place in Jewish life in the first centuries" (Avery-Peck 2006, 150); beyond this, the Mishnah seems to use the Ḥoni story as a means of expressing the Tannaitic rabbis' awareness of the limitations of their own religious and ethical worldview. Cf. Green's admission that "the basis for such intimacy [as Ḥoni enjoys with God] is never stated" in the Mishnah (634).

ḤONI IN THE GEMARA: SELF-KNOWLEDGE, HEROISM, AND COMMUNITY

The Gemara's response to the Mishnah of Ta'anit 3 is richly nuanced and thought-provoking. The Gemara develops and deepens the Mishnah's main line of inquiry in a manner that addresses two more questions of direct practical relevance. First, how do our assumptions about what constitutes divine favor or disfavor and about moral worthiness or unworthiness influence our treatment of others? Second, how *ought* we to treat others, given the difficulty of distinguishing between divine blessings and punishments and of determining who is worthy or unworthy in the eyes of God? In raising these questions, to which we shall turn in Chapter 5, the Gemara aims not only to make us aware of our relative ignorance in relation to God's judgments, but also to promote a way of treating others in which this awareness occupies a central place.

At present, we are particularly concerned with the way the Gemara uses the story of Ḥoni to reflect on the Mishnah's central issues of worthiness and unworthiness, blessing and punishments. The Gemara's discussion of Ḥoni is longer and more detailed than the Mishnah's, and is nothing less than a masterpiece of Talmudic writing. In its dialectical subtlety and complexity, this stretch of text (23A, II.116–21) resembles a well-balanced mobile with many moving parts. While the Gemara views Ḥoni from a variety of perspectives, none, it implies, is fully adequate; rather, each perspective is both essential to, and limited by, the equilibrium of the whole. This equilibrium becomes evident as the reader moves from the surface of the text into its depths. The Gemara employs a variety of strategies to reinterpret the tale of Ḥoni in a manner that, at least superficially, attempts to make it less threatening to the rabbinic mind than it appears to be from the perspective of the Mishnah. Even as it does so, however, it signals to the attentive reader its awareness of the limitations of these strategies.

The Gemara begins its discussion of Ḥoni by quoting two baraitot on the subject. As is often the case in the Talmud, each baraita is introduced by the phrase "our Rabbis taught" (*tanu rabanan*); here as elsewhere, what is taught is the full depth of the problem at hand. The first part of the first baraita reads as follows:

Our Rabbis taught: "Once, most of Adar had passed and rains had not fallen. They sent for Ḥoni HaMe'aggel: 'Pray that rains may fall.' He prayed, but rains did not fall. He drew a circle, and stood within it, in the way that the Prophet Habakkuk had done, as it is said: 'I will stand upon my watch, and set myself upon the tower, etc.'" (23A, II.116)

In comparing Ḥoni to the minor prophet Habakkuk, the baraita adds an element to the Ḥoni story that is absent from the Mishnah. What does this comparison imply?

Like all the prophets whose words are recorded in Scripture, Habakkuk is a defender of righteousness and a spokesman of God. The "tower" (*matsor*, literally a "siege-enclosure" or "rampart") from which Habakkuk exercises his "watch" in the verse the Gemara quotes (Habakkuk 2:1) suggests both the moral elevation that allows him to stand in judgment of human behavior and the penetrating prophetic understanding with which he is endowed, "the 'seeing' of things veiled from the common eye and the 'declaring' of the things thus seen."[22] Elsewhere in the Talmud, Habakkuk is put forth as a paragon of faith and an example of the efficacy of prayer.[23] In general, then, the association of Ḥoni with Habakkuk implies that the former is a righteous man favored by God with special powers of vision and moral discernment.

The immediate continuation of the verse quoted in the baraita reveals a more specific connection between Ḥoni and Habakkuk. Habakkuk is prepared to turn a critical eye on God as well as man: he has ascended to the tower "wait[ing] to see what He will say to me, what He will reply to my complaint" (Habakkuk 2:1). His "complaint" is twofold. Habakkuk first wonders why God ignores the violence and injustice of the people Israel that the prophet has repeatedly decried (1:1–4). When God replies that He is preparing divine judgment through the Chaldeans, Habakkuk observes that this punishment is excessive (1:5–17). Comparing the Chaldeans to one who gathers mankind in his net like the fish of the sea, "the one in the wrong devour[ing] the one in the right," Habakkuk asks: "Shall he

[22] *Jewish Encyclopedia* 1901, X.215, *s.v.* "Prophets and Prophecy."

[23] BT Sotah 49A with BT Makkot 24A ("Habakkuk further came and based them [the 613 commandments] on one [commandment], as it is said, 'But the righteous shall live by his faith' [Habakkuk 2: 4]," Neusner trans.).

then keep emptying his trawl, and slaying nations without pity?" (1:13, 1:17).

Habakkuk challenges God much as Abraham did when he questioned Him about the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:23–32). In particular, he calls upon God to provide justice that is appropriately tempered by mercy. By comparing Ḥoni's stance in the circle with Habakkuk's station at the watchtower, the baraita suggests that Ḥoni should be seen in a similar light: while he implicitly acknowledges the need for divine justice in response to iniquity, he regards the drought that is God's instrument as too harsh a punishment. Remarkably, God concurs: just as He reassures Habakkuk that the righteous will be rewarded and the Chaldeans will suffer due retribution (2:4–5), He signals His agreement with Ḥoni by providing precisely the requested sort of rain.

If we pause to ask what the Gemara hopes to accomplish in citing a baraita that compares Ḥoni with Habakkuk, it becomes evident that it is concerned to explain what the Mishnah allows to stand as an open question, namely, why God heeds Ḥoni even though he acts like a spoiled child. Ḥoni says that the people have turned to him because "I am like a son of your house," and thus on more equal terms with God than others.[24] Indeed, Ḥoni is so familiar with God that he effectively dares to boss Him around. The Mishnah offers no reason for God's indulgence of Ḥoni, presumably because it cannot find one. The Gemara, however, is dissatisfied with this explanatory gap, which it begins to fill by elevating Ḥoni to the status of a prophet – a man whose moral vision entitles him not only to measure the conduct of other human beings, but even to argue with God on matters of justice.[25]

[24] As a "son" of God's house (*ben bayt*), Ḥoni is evidently closer to his heavenly "father" than the people Israel, God's "children" (Green 1979, 634); this closeness allows him "brazenly [to] make requests of his father that someone else cannot make" (S. Safrai 1994, 7). Safrai (1965, 19) sets forth a somewhat different interpretation. Suggesting that *ben bayt* be read as "house born," meaning "domestic slave," Safrai connects Ḥoni's relationship with God to that of Ḥanina ben Dosa as depicted at BT Berakhot 34B (where Ḥanina is said to be closer to God than Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, just as a "slave before a king" is closer than a "minister before a king").

[25] At the same time, Green (1979) notes that the Gemara diminishes the grandeur of Ḥoni's miracle by moving the date of his miraculous action back one month from Passover (which is celebrated in the month of Nissan and "normally marks the end of the Palestinian rainy season") to the month of Adar (629).

The Gemara goes on to introduce several other elements that are missing from the story of Ḥoni in the Mishnah, and that collectively aim to make God's deference to him intelligible within the framework of the rabbinic tradition. The Mishnah presents Ḥoni as acting on his own initiative when he first demands more rain, and then less. In the baraita, Ḥoni's successive requests for heavier and then lighter rains, and finally for a cessation of rain altogether, are motivated by his "disciples." After Ḥoni swears "by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children," the rain begins to come down in drops. The baraita continues:

"His disciples [*talmidayu*] said to him: 'Master [*rabi*], we have seen you, but let us not die. It seems to us that the rains are falling only in order to free [you from] your oath.' He said: 'I did not ask [for] this, but [for] rains [to fill] pits, ditches, and caves.' They came down strongly [lit. 'in anger'], until each and every drop was enough to fill the mouth of a barrel. And the sages estimated that no drop was less than a *log*.[26] His disciples said to him: 'Master, we have seen you, but let us not die. It seems to us that the rains are falling only in order to destroy the world.' He said before Him: 'I did not ask [for] this, but [for] rains of goodwill, blessing, and generosity.' They fell in their normal way, until all the people went up to the Temple Mount because of the rains." (23A, II.116–17)

Whereas the Mishnah says nothing about Ḥoni's vocation, the baraita explicitly identifies him as a "rabbi" with a following of students. This characterization of Ḥoni is surprising for two reasons. First, it stands in tension with the baraita's earlier implication that Ḥoni is a kind of prophet; as we have seen, the scholars who came to be known as rabbis filled a void in the proclamation of the living word of God left by the *end* of the period of prophecy and the canonization of the Tanakh. Second, the title "rabbi" was first used a century after Ḥoni's time.[27] The Talmud's willingness to resort to this anachronism is the first of several indications that both the Tannaim who produced the baraita, and the Stammaim who included it in the Gemara, were

[26] A *log* is a liquid measure equivalent to the volume of six eggs (Steinsaltz 1989, 287).

[27] *Jewish Encyclopedia* 1901, X.294, *s.v.* "Rabbi"; cf. Avery-Peck 2006, 154. Note also that Scripture uses different words than this baraita for "master" (*rosh*, lit. "head") and "disciple" (*ben*, lit. "son"); see, e.g., 2 Kings 2:3: "Disciples of the prophets [*b'nai hanvi'im*] at Bethel came to Elisha and said to him, 'Do you know the LORD will take your master [*roshekha*] …?' "

uncomfortable with the notion that Ḥoni might have been favored by God for any reason other than his status as a scholar of Torah. For the rabbis, it is excellence in *talmud Torah* that confers the greatest merit on a Jew. In attributing such excellence to Ḥoni, as they clearly do in the sequel (23A, II.121), they attempt to make him – if not also his conduct – fit squarely into familiar and trusted categories of evaluation.

Ḥoni's relationship to his disciples is also noteworthy. Whereas the Mishnah leaves us with Shimon's impression that Ḥoni is a spoiled child, the Gemara suggests that he (also) demonstrates the ethical responsibility and maturity of a wise parent. Ḥoni not only implores God to show fatherly forbearance toward His "children," but also furnishes an example of what such forbearance would look like. His disciples alternate between the fear that they will die of drought-induced hunger and the fear that they will die in a world-destroying flood, and Ḥoni lends a sympathetic ear to their expressions of concern. While the Mishnah shows Ḥoni acting alone in demanding that God dial up and then dial down the rains, the Gemara presents these demands as a consequence of Ḥoni's compassion for his disciples – the children of his own intellectual family.

That Ḥoni's compassion involves a measure of indulgence toward human childishness is clear from his final prayer for a complete cessation of rain:

> "They [the rains] fell in their normal way, until all the people went up to the Temple Mount because of the rains. They [i.e., Ḥoni's disciples] said to him: 'Master, just as you prayed that they should fall, so pray that they should go away.' He said to them: 'So have I received [the tradition] that we do not pray on account of too much good. Even so, bring me a bullock for confession.' They brought him a bullock for confession. He laid his two hands on it, and said before Him: 'Master of the Universe! Your people Israel whom You brought out of Egypt cannot [bear] too much good nor too much punishment. You became angry with them – they cannot stand. You bestowed good upon them – they cannot stand. May it be Your will that the rains will stop and there will be relief in the world. Immediately the wind blew, and the clouds dispersed, and the sun shone, and the people went out in the field and brought for themselves truffles and mushrooms." (23A, II.117–18)

The last request for Ḥoni to intercede with God comes not from his disciples, but from "all the people." Creatures of the shadows, the

people Israel cannot bear either the brilliant light of God's goodness or the deep darkness of His anger. Like children, they mistake great blessings for great punishments; they cannot even distinguish between these extremes, much less endure them, and so must be shielded from both. Ḥoni is an exception to this general rule, as the text emphasizes by artfully using repetition to link him, the "Master" (*rabi*) of disciples, with God, the "Master of the Universe" (*ribono shel olam*).[28] But because human weakness *is* the rule, Ḥoni is willing to set aside the traditional interdiction against praying for the withdrawal of a blessing.

The last part of the baraita qualifies Ḥoni's heroism by employing the figure of Shimon ben Shetaḥ as a kind of counterweight to its representation of him. Given the conflict between Shimon and Ḥoni, the Gemara's emphasis on Ḥoni's merit would seem to entail that Shimon's criticism of him is misplaced. Yet Shimon's response to Ḥoni in the Gemara is longer and, if anything, more critical than the version presented in the Mishnah. Thinking through this response allows us to appreciate Shimon's extraordinary devotion to the Torah and to understand more fully the challenge that Ḥoni poses to his rational and systematic conception of piety. The Gemara thus ensures that Shimon's noble example will stand before its readers as an attractive and accessible alternative to its larger-than-life characterization of Ḥoni.

Shimon's critical response to Ḥoni replicates the corresponding part of Mishnah, but includes two additional sentences not found therein. First, after telling Ḥoni that he has thought about "decree[ing] a ban" on him, Shimon adds: "For if the years were like the years of Elijah when the keys of rain were in Elijah's hand, would the name of Heaven not have been desecrated by you?" Shimon is referring to 1 Kings 17:1, the beginning of the Bible's narration of the story of the prophet Elijah: "Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding.'" In his commentary, Steinsaltz follows Rashi's interpretation of Shimon's point: "in such a case [of

[28] In replicating certain basic features of God's relationship to the people Israel, Ḥoni fits a pattern established in Scripture by Elijah, whose "charisma symbolizes his Lord's manifest power"; "as Elijah acts on earth, so God acts in heaven; as God acts in heaven, so his prophet does on earth" (Ackerman 2003, 6). I pick up the connection between Ḥoni and Elijah later in this chapter.

conflicting oaths] one oath or the other . . . would have been false, causing the Name of Heaven to be desecrated" ("Notes," II.118–19). But as we shall see directly, Shimon's reference to Elijah also helps to illuminate his own conflict with Ḥoni over who speaks for God. Second, the baraita adds a sentence amplifying Shimon's comparison of Ḥoni to a spoiled child: "And he [the spoiled child] says to him: 'Father, take me to wash me in hot water, rinse me in cold water, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates'" (23A, II.118–19). The full significance of these two additions to the Mishnah emerges only when we consider what the Talmud elsewhere relates about Shimon.

The head of the high court known as the Great Sanhedrin, Shimon was a teacher and defender of the law as taught in the Torah and interpreted by the scholarly tradition. He is said to have introduced mandatory school attendance for children in Judea, so that they might study the Torah and the teachings of the scribes (JT Ketubot 8:11). Shimon's scrupulous adherence to the Torah is illustrated in a baraita that quotes him as follows:

> "May I [not] see the consolation, if I did not see someone running after his fellow into a ruin, and I ran after him, and I saw a sword in his hand, and his blood dripping, and the slain one writhing [in agony], and I said to him: 'Wicked one, who killed this one? Either I or you. But what can I do, for your blood is not given over to me, for the Torah said: 'By the mouth of two witnesses shall he that is worthy of death be put to death' [Deuteronomy 17:6]." (Sanhedrin 37B, Steinsaltz trans.)

Shimon is morally certain that the man with the sword has just committed murder, but he refrains from acting on this knowledge because he feels bound by the letter of the law. Strikingly, Shimon's internal conflict expresses itself in this passage in the same language – "But what can I do [*aval mah e'eseh*]?" – that he uses when he confronts Ḥoni, but the nature of his self-control differs fundamentally in these two cases. In the first, the Torah constrains Shimon from punishing one whom the indisputable evidence of his senses declares to be a criminal; in the second, the indisputable evidence of his senses constrains him from punishing one whom his Torah-based piety declares to be blameworthy. Taken together, these two anecdotes suggest that Shimon possesses both self-control and self-knowledge: he knows what he knows (the law as set forth in the Torah) as well as what he does not (the mind of God as reflected in His indulgence of Ḥoni).

Shimon's conception of piety as adherence to a text-based system of law that is rational and teachable nevertheless makes him wary of religious powers and relationships that are not comprehended within this conception. On the most obvious level, the problem he raises with regard to Elijah concerns what happens when more than one individual claims a direct relationship with God of the sort associated with prophecy. In such a case, the self-assertion of these actual or would-be prophets, each of whom insists on having the ear of God, might produce a contradiction – an outcome that is particularly anathema from Shimon's systematic viewpoint, quite apart from the fact that it desecrates the Name of Heaven. While Shimon ultimately cannot argue with Ḥoni's success, students of the Talmud will know that he follows the Torah in drawing the line at the exercise of another sort of mysterious power, namely, witchcraft. "Let no one be found among you … who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead," Deuteronomy declares (18:10–11). Shimon is said to have executed eighty witches in Ashkelon (JT Sanhedrin 6:6); he presumably had this verse of Scripture in mind when he did so.

Most important for our purposes, Shimon's brutal suppression of witchcraft points toward a deeper level of significance in his reference to Elijah. Elijah's oath at 1 Kings 17:1, which he addresses directly to King Ahab, responds to Ahab's establishment of the cult of Baal in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Elijah, whose very name (*Eli-Yahu*, "My God is Yah[weh]") announces his divine mission,[29] boldly sets himself against both Ahab and Baal, effectively declaring that *his* God *alone* rules in Israel. He goes on to perform great miracles that prove the supremacy of the God "of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel" in the eyes of the people, including calling down fire from Heaven after the prophets of Baal fail to do so (1 Kings 18:36–39). But he subsequently slaughters all 450 of Baal's prophets (1 Kings 18:40), thereby also wiping out the human spokesmen of God's already-vanquished competitor. This brings us back to Shimon, who imitates Elijah in executing the witches of Ashkelon. Like Elijah, Shimon is willing to use overwhelming force in an attempt to establish not simply the absolute rule of his God, but the absoluteness of his own claim to

[29] Ackerman 2003, 6.

speak for God.[30] Shimon's history of violence not only lends a dark gravity to his observation that he might have placed a ban on Ḥoni, but also helps us to see the most fundamental meaning of his allusion to 1 Kings 17:1. Like Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal to call down fire from Heaven, Shimon's encounter with Ḥoni – which concerns the control not of fire, but of water – is nothing less than a high-stakes struggle to determine what conception of God will prove to be victorious at an important moment in the life of the people Israel. Who is the God of Israel? Is the truest image of God to be found in the speeches and deeds of Shimon and the sages, and the truest understanding of Him in their teachings? Or are there other, very different, but no less adequate human images of God and ways of relating to Him? These are the most basic questions raised by Shimon's confrontation with Ḥoni.[31]

Shimon's commitment to the law also indirectly illuminates the Gemara's second addition to this part of the Mishnah's narrative – Shimon's comment that Ḥoni acts like a child who demands special treats like "nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates." While Shimon speaks as a father of the community in a religious and political sense, the special poignance of this remark emerges when one considers that he may be thinking of his relationship to his own son, whom he was far from pampering. While the Yerushalmi relates both Shimon's execution of the witches of Ashkelon and his son's death

[30] It is worth noting that Shimon defeats the witches through his intimate knowledge of both their desires and their magical art. "I am one of yours," he tells them, and he offers to prove it by producing "eighty handsome young men, dressed in clean clothes, who will have pleasure with you and give you pleasure too." (Unbeknownst to the witches, Shimon has brought these young men with him. He has their number, both literally and figuratively: "They [the witches] said to him: 'We want them! We want them!'") When he instructs each young man to lift his partner, the witches lose their magical capabilities, and can be safely executed. Shimon knew that their magic channeled chthonic powers, and so was neutralized when contact with the earth was broken (JT Sanhedrin 6:6).

[31] A curious footnote to this confrontation is the Gemara's insistence, immediately prior to its discussion of Ḥoni, that "in the days of Shimon ben Shetaḥ … rains fell for them on Tuesday nights and on Friday nights, until wheat became like kidneys, and barley like the pits of olives, and lentils like dinarim of gold" (23A, II.115). The existence of a drought during the time of Shimon seems to undercut the point the Gemara is trying to make in this passage, which is that past generations were rewarded by God with abundant rains and harvests in proportion to their great righteousness.

at the hands of false witnesses (JT Sanhedrin 6:3), it presents these as separate incidents; Rashi, however, weaves them together in his commentary on Sanhedrin 44B in the Bavli. As Rashi tells the story, the false witnesses were relatives of the witches, who testified against Shimon's son in a capital offense; although the witnesses retracted their testimony, the retraction was not accepted, and Shimon's son was put to death. According to the Yerushalmi, Shimon wished to save his son, but his son convinced him to carry out the sentence of execution, saying: "Father, if you seek to bring salvation [for Israel] by your hand, make me as a threshold [i.e., let the law take its course]" (JT Sanhedrin 6:3). Whatever his own wishes may have been, Shimon evidently consented to his son's execution for the sake of the law, which the rabbis understand to require carrying out a sentence once a court has issued its ruling, even when witnesses retract their testimony.[32]

Like the Mishnah, the first baraita on Ḥoni tells the story of his prayers for rain and Shimon's response. While this baraita emphasizes Ḥoni's unique merit with the aim of explaining God's indulgence of him, it is also deeply sympathetic to Shimon's Talmudically mainstream piety – a rational and systematic adherence to the Torah that, unlike Ḥoni's mysterious gifts, can be widely taught and practiced. The Gemara, however, is not content to let matters stand here. It goes on to set forth another baraita that quotes the praise lavished on Ḥoni by "the men in the Chamber of Hewn Stone" – the official meeting place, as Steinsaltz explains, of the Great Sanhedrin (23A, II.119). Once again, however, this shining tribute to Ḥoni brings with it a comet's tail of unresolved questions.

The members of the Sanhedrin provide an interpretation of Job 22:28–30 that applies these verses to Ḥoni. The whole baraita reads as follows:

> Our rabbis taught: "What did the men in the Chamber of Hewn Stone send to Ḥoni HaMe'aggel? 'You shall also decree a thing, and it shall be established for you, and the light shall shine on your ways' [Job 22:28]. 'You shall also decree a thing' – you have decreed from below, and the Holy One, blessed be He, fulfills your word from above. 'And the light shall shine upon your ways' – a generation that was in darkness you have enlightened with your prayer. 'When men have been humbled, you say: There is a lifting up'

[32] BT Sanhedrin 44B; cf. Steinsaltz's "Notes" at *Tractate Sanhedrin: Part III*, 175–76.

[Job 22:29] – a generation that was humbled, you have lifted it up with your prayer. 'And he will save him with lowered eyes' [Job 22:29] – a generation that was lowered by its sin, you have saved it with your prayer. 'He will deliver one who is not innocent' [Job 22:30] – a generation that was not innocent, you have delivered it with your prayer. 'And he will be delivered by the pureness of your hands' [Job 22:30] – you have delivered him with your pure deeds." (23A, II.119)

What is striking about the Sanhedrin's praise of Ḥoni is not the content of the biblical verses it quotes, but their context. Like Ta'anit 3 as a whole, Job is a reflection on the basic theodicy of the covenant, with special attention to the problem of evaluating merit. But unlike Ta'anit 3, the story of Job does not inquire into the difficulty of distinguishing between blessings and punishments; what *is* at issue is whether severe suffering – which is obviously not a blessing – must always be understood as God's punishment for sin. In quoting from Job 22, the members of the Sanhedrin implicitly identify Ḥoni with Job and themselves with the speaker, Job's friend Eliphaz. What, if anything, does this imply?[33]

Job is faithful and righteous and knows himself to be so. In the midst of great misfortune, he seeks answers: Why, he asks, do I suffer? Job's friends, foremost among whom is Eliphaz the Temenite, insist that he must have deserved his misfortune. God is just: He rewards righteousness and punishes sin. "Think now," Eliphaz asks Job, "what innocent man ever perished? Where have the upright been destroyed?" "Do not reject the discipline of the Almighty," he advises his friend; "He injures, but He binds up" (Job 4:7, 5:17–18). Eliphaz maintains the same line of argument when he speaks again in Job 15 and, for the third and last time, in Job 22: "You know that your wickedness is great, and that your iniquities have no limit" (22:5). In the verses quoted by the Sanhedrin, Eliphaz is enumerating the good things Job can expect *if* he returns to God: "Accept instruction from

[33] When the Bavli elsewhere cites Job 22:28, it admittedly does so as proof of God's support of righteous men, and without any suggestion that the context is significant (Shabbat 59B, Ketubot 103B, Sotah 12A; cf. Bava Metzia 105B). Nor does the context appear to be significant when the verse is applied to Moses in Midrash Rabbah (Numbers Rabbah 18.12 [MR 6.724], Deuteronomy Rabbah 5.13 [MR 7.114], Exodus Rabbah 21.2 [MR 3.260]). But as I will argue later, the context is clearly appropriate when the rabbis cite Job 22:28 in connection with the story of Jacob.

His mouth; lay up His words in your heart. If you return to Shaddai you will be restored . . .” (22:22–23).

The first question we need to ask is whether this context is relevant to our understanding of the baraita quoted earlier. That it might be is clear from the fact that the rabbis are obviously sensitive to this context in at least one other instance where repentance is connected with transformation and blessings. Midrash Genesis cites Job 22:28 in explicating Genesis 33:18, and once more in connection with Genesis 35:9.[34] In Genesis 33, Jacob wrestles with an angel, who tells him that he will henceforth be named “Israel,” and reconciles with Esau, whom he had previously cheated of his birthright; having done so, he “arrived safe in the city of Shechem” (33:18). In Genesis 35:9, God appears to Jacob; in the next verse, He (again) renames him “Israel.” The connection between these events is not hard to see: because Jacob comes to Esau “tainted with his own guilt,” he can make peace with him “only as he becomes a different man.” Jacob’s transformation is signaled by his new name: “when Jacob becomes Israel he can achieve reconciliation with his brother. . . . Jacob is a new man who asks forgiveness, if not in words then in manner, who limps toward him [Esau] with [a] repentant air and not deceitful arrogance.”[35] Jacob thus fits the pattern that Eliphaz describes of repentance that brings blessing.[36]

Assuming that the context of Job 22:28–30 is indeed relevant, what could the Sanhedrin be getting at in applying these verses to Ḥoni? We may begin by noting that, while Eliphaz speaks prospectively about the good things that will happen if Job repents, the Sanhedrin speaks retrospectively, applying Job 22:28–30 to the good things Ḥoni has *already* experienced and accomplished. Eliphaz’s

[34] Genesis Rabbah 79.3, 82.2 (MR 2.729, 753).

[35] Plaut 1983, 221–22.

[36] Another interesting case that we can note only in passing is that of Noah, to which the rabbis apply Job 22:30: “He [God] will deliver the guilty; he will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands.” Commenting on Genesis 6:8 (“But Noah found favor with the LORD”), the rabbis are concerned to explain why God saved Noah from the Flood, in spite of the fact that He explicitly regrets having made human beings – including, as they suppose, Noah (Genesis 6:7). Their answer is that, although Noah has little or no merit – “less than an ounce,” according to Rabbi Ḥanina – God saves him by a gracious act of mercy (Genesis Rabbah 28.8 and 29.1 [MR 1.229–30]). On this interpretation, it is God’s hands that are understood to be “clean.”

prediction has been fulfilled, the Sanhedrin maintains, just insofar as the prediction is understood to refer to Ḥoni. Should we therefore regard Ḥoni as a repentant Job – a former sinner who, in the judgment of the Sanhedrin, has been favored by God because he has mended his ways? That would imply that Eliphaz was right, and God explicitly says that he was not: "After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temenite: I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job" (Job 42:7). It therefore seems more likely that the Sanhedrin uses these verses in order delicately to acknowledge its own misunderstanding of Ḥoni and his relationship to God. On this reading, the Sanhedrin as a whole is subtly conceding what its leader Shimon has already admitted: having been "rebuked" by Ḥoni's success just as Eliphaz is ultimately rebuked by God, it has come to recognize that the ethical and religious framework in which it has attempted to understand him is simply inadequate to this particular task.[37]

Setting these speculations to one side, it is indisputable that Ḥoni undergoes a dramatic reversal in the Gemara's final story about him. Whereas Shimon and the Sanhedrin are obliged to defer to Ḥoni, the Stammaitic author-editors of the Gemara have the last laugh, so to speak, at Ḥoni's expense. Having portrayed him as a religious hero who confounds Talmudic norms, the Gemara rounds off its discussion of Ḥoni with a strange tale about his death told by Rabbi Yoḥanan, a second-generation Amora of extremely high repute (23A, II.120–21).[38] While the previous stories arouse respect and admiration for Ḥoni, this one evokes pity – moderated, perhaps, by a bit of *Schadenfreude* on the narrators' part. It leaves us with a touching impression of Ḥoni's isolation – the price, it implies, that he pays for his heterodox heroism. The story drives its point home by contrasting Ḥoni's isolation with the fellowship that characterizes the community of the rabbis, whose collaborative work in the study houses and

[37] This interpretation is admittedly speculative. But since many other biblical verses could have served the purpose of praising Ḥoni, alternative explanations should speak to the Sanhedrin's use of Job in particular.

[38] He is mentioned more than 1,700 times in the Bavli (Frieman 1995, 384, *s.v.* "Yohanan").

academies of Palestine and Babylonia constitutes a tradition that is greater and more enduring than any individual.

Yoḥanan relates that the righteous (*tsadik*) Ḥoni, disturbed by a biblical verse that compares the captivity of the people Israel in Babylonia to a dream (Psalms 126:1), wondered whether it was possible to sleep for seventy years. He asked a man who was planting a carob tree how long it would take for the tree to bear fruit:

> He [the man] said to him "In seventy years." He [Ḥoni] said to him: "Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years?" He said to him: "I [lit. 'this man'] found a world with carob trees. Just as my forefathers planted for me, I too plant for my children."

After this, Ḥoni fell asleep for seventy years. Awaking to find the grandson of the man who planted the tree picking carobs from it, he decided to inquire about his own descendants:

> He went to his house [and] said: "Is the son of Ḥoni HaMe'aggel alive?" They said to him: "His son is not [alive], but the son of his son is." He said to them: "I am Ḥoni HaMe'aggel." They did not believe him. He went to the Academy [and] heard the Rabbis saying: "Our decisions are as clear as in the years of Ḥoni HaMe'aggel, who when he entered the Academy would resolve for them any difficulty that the Rabbis had." He said to them: "I am he," but they did not believe him, and they did not give him the respect that was due to him. He was distressed, he petitioned for mercy, and he died. Rava said: This is what people say: "Either companionship or death." (23A, II.120–21)

This story associates Ḥoni with yet more miracles, although only the second one – his death – is in any sense under his control. He is presented here as a man who is involuntarily made to feel the pain of exile. By miraculously sleeping for seventy years, the biblical term of an entire human life (Psalms 90:10), Ḥoni comes to experience something like what it was to be a Jew pining for Jerusalem by the rivers of Babylon. For a lifetime, he has no contact with anyone; when he awakens, he finds that he has lost his son, his place in the academy, and even his name. Ironically, Shimon's threat of excommunication is in this way effectively made good. The deeper point of this anecdote, however, is that Ḥoni was *always* an outsider, separated from others by his mysterious powers. Ḥoni's direct experience of his own virtual or latent condition of exile conveys an important lesson – not about the

biblical verse with which he was concerned, but about the indispensability of community and tradition.

Ḥoni's question to the man planting the carob tree ("Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years?") is revealing, for he does not seem to understand that the man might be planting the tree for the benefit of others. Like the anonymous ugly man who teaches Rabbi Elazar a lesson in humility, the carob farmer – who also remains nameless – is in a crucial respect wiser than his ostensibly learned interlocutor. The farmer explains that no man is an island; he is part of a tradition of planting and harvesting that extends through generations, and he wishes to sustain his offspring just as his forefathers have sustained him. But this explanation is evidently insufficient to awaken the proud and independent Ḥoni from his dream of self-sufficiency. The man's wisdom must therefore be demonstrated immediately and concretely. Ḥoni is put to sleep for seventy years so that he might experience firsthand his dependence on human community and the traditions that nourish it.

When Ḥoni cannot make himself known to his descendants, he turns to the rabbis. This is the community most relevant to Yoḥanan, the story's narrator, and to the redactors of the Gemara; in the sequel, it becomes evident that planting carob trees and harvesting their fruit is analogous to the activity of teaching and learning that takes place in the academy. The remark that Ḥoni overhears in the academy contributes to the Gemara's "rabbinization" of him by retrospectively confirming both his excellence in *talmud Torah* and his active participation in the communal process of decision making. It also enhances Ḥoni's heroic status by extending the sphere in which others depended on him, for it was he who would "resolve for them any difficulty that the Rabbis had." Yet at the same time, the rabbis leave no doubt that they can get on very well without him: to assert that "our decisions are as clear as in the years of Ḥoni HaMe'aggel" is to say that they do not now need his help. In every sense, Ḥoni's time is past.

But if the rabbis no longer need Ḥoni, it becomes clear to him that *he* needs *them*. In a sense, it is not true that the rabbis "did not give him the respect that was due to him," because their recollection of his major contributions to their work is in itself a sign of respect. What Ḥoni thinks he misses, however – and what would no longer

be forthcoming, even if the rabbis of the academy *did* acknowledge that he was Ḥoni – is the direct recognition of his superiority that he has grown accustomed to enjoying. The final irony in this story, however, is that Ḥoni may be mistaken even about what is distressing him. Rava, a leading fourth-generation Amora,[39] suggests that Ḥoni suffers not (as he supposes) from being denied the respect that is his due, but from the need for companionship. It is not enough for Ḥoni to be a "son" of God; he needs an earthly "family" more than a heavenly one, because he is, after all, only human. If Rava is correct, the most tragic part of Ḥoni's story may be that he dies without fully understanding the lesson he was meant to learn from his Rip Van Winkle–like experience.

We saw in Chapter 1 that the way Plato tells the story of Socrates reveals something important about the manner in which he has critically appropriated his mentor's example. The same is true of the way Gemara tells the story of Ḥoni. The Gemara's narration of Ḥoni's unfortunate end is particularly revealing, in that it provides a distinctly rabbinic perspective on the circle that gives him his name. Setting aside the question of the possible magical significance of the circle,[40] one thing is clear: the circle sets Ḥoni apart from every other individual and from the community as a whole, for he stands alone inside it. Whatever else it may be, the circle is thus a symbol of the isolation and loneliness Ḥoni experiences as a man who transcends others in his intimacy with God and in the unique powers this intimacy confers on him. Seen in this light, Ḥoni paradoxically lives up to his name just at the moment when he is deprived of it by his descendants and by the rabbis of the academy.[41]

SALVATION AND EXILE

The story of Ḥoni fits a pattern known to both the Greeks and the Jews of antiquity – that of the hero who is estranged from the very

[39] Rava is mentioned even more frequently in the Bavli than Yoḥanan – roughly 2,000 times (Frieman 1995, 255, *s.v.* "Rava").

[40] See note 12 to this chapter.

[41] Cf. Avery-Peck 2006, 157: this final story about Ḥoni portrays the ability to work miracles as "at best an ambivalent gift." Ḥoni's isolation is also temporal, as the story of his seventy-year sleep suggests: because Ḥoni's special powers are neither intelligible nor imitable, he is, pedagogically speaking, a man without a future.

community he saves. For the Jews, this pattern is established by Moses, who was not allowed to enter the Promised Land even though he brought the Israelites out of Egypt and sustained them in the wilderness for forty years. The reason is given in Numbers 20, which tells of a time when the Israelites were without water in the wilderness of Zin. The people complained bitterly to Moses, questioning his leadership and lamenting his decision to take them out of Egypt. God then told Moses to order "the rock" to yield water. After he instead caused water to flow from the rock by striking it, saying "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?," God rebuked him: "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them" (20:10, 12).

Remarkably, the rabbis' interpretation of this incident implicitly links Moses with Ḥoni as he is presented in the Gemara. The Midrash, which reads Moses' error as confirmation that "the Holy One, blessed be He . . . *Taketh the wise in their own craftiness* (Job V, 13)," states that the word *hamorim* (translated here as "rebels") may mean, among other things, "fools" (cf. the Greek *mōros*, "moron") as well as "teachers" (who, in this instance, are "trying to teach their instructors"). The Midrash goes on to explain precisely what provoked Moses:

> AND MOSES LIFTED UP HIS HANDS AND STRUCK THE ROCK ([Exodus] XX, 11). He struck it once and small quantities of water began to trickle from the rock; as it says, *Behold, He smote the rock, that waters* issued (Ps. LXXVII, 20); it was like a man having an issue which comes out in single drops. They said to him: "O son of Amram! Is this water for sucklings, or babes weaned from milk?" He instantly lost his temper and struck the rock TWICE; AND WATER CAME FORTH ABUNDANTLY (XX, 11), overwhelming all those who had railed at them [i.e., Moses and Aaron]. . . [42]

Ḥoni resembles Moses in several ways. Both fit the mold of the "divine man" whose closeness to God miraculously allows him to provide water for the community during a drought.[43] Both first bring forth a quantity of water that is judged inadequate by their respective communities, followed by a great abundance of water. Most important,

[42] Numbers Rabbah 19.9 (MR 6.759).

[43] This term is drawn from Green 1979, 621, where it describes a figure common to both the Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions.

while each is called a "son," both are represented as wise and mature in comparison to the childishness of those they serve. Though they do not know it, the critics of Moses hit upon the truth: he does indeed provide for people who, in mind and spirit, are mere "sucklings" and "babes."[44]

Among the Greeks, it is perhaps Oedipus who is most paradigmatic of the estranged hero. The savior and king of Thebes, Oedipus goes into exile after he discovers his crimes of patricide and incest. While the term "father" has great resonance in his personal history, Oedipus is also a father in a political and intellectual sense: in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the first words he speaks when he comes before the assembled Thebans – and the first words of the play – are "My children" (*Ō tekna*).

Socrates, too, is presented as a hero in the Platonic dialogues, although he represents a new type that defies categorization in the preexisting terms of the Greek tradition. While there are certain tragic elements in the tale of Socrates' public trial and execution, we shall see in the following chapters that Socrates' story is in significant respects analogous to Ḥoni's.[45] Each regards himself as standing in a special relationship to God or a god, and in neither case is this relationship fully intelligible to the wider community. Each feels divinely authorized to take up, in quasi-military fashion, a "watch" or "post" for the sake of the community, and each refuses to leave his post until the job is done. Both thereby come into conflict with the fathers of their communities. But each is in his own right both a father and a son, and much of the significance of both stories comes to light as one thinks through the personal and political dimensions of these relationships.

Looking ahead, it is already clear that several questions will inevitably force their way to the forefront of our attention. Can we understand Socrates, or will his relationship to what he calls "the god"

[44] Note, too, that the Gemara's attempt to understand Ḥoni in rabbinic categories is prefigured by the transformation of Moses, "an important figure in the world of magic," in the writings of Philo and Josephus. The latter present the miracles of Moses as a "secondary result" of his "possession of virtue, philosophically defined" – virtue understood, in other words, as "the attainment of wisdom and moral perfection" (Green 1979, 621).

[45] On Plato's adaptation in the *Apology* of tragedy, and specifically of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, see Howland 2008.

turn out to be just as mysterious as Ḥoni's relationship to God? More generally, does the role of "the god" in Socrates' philosophizing impede his ability to serve as a paradigm of the philosophical life that others may imitate? Let us begin to tackle these issues by considering what Socrates has to say for himself in the *Apology*.

3

Prophets and Philosophers

Plato's *Euthyphro*, to which later editors appended the subtitle "On The Holy" (*peri hosiou*), is one of a sequence of eight dialogues that tell the story of the last days of Socrates.[1] The conversation of the *Euthyphro* takes place immediately after that of the *Theateteus*, and shortly before Socrates' public trial in 399 BCE;[2] the *Apology of Socrates* comprises the defense Socrates presents at this trial. Just as the main intellectual drama of Ta'anit 3 arises from the confrontation of Shimon and Ḥoni, that of the *Euthyphro* consists of an encounter between Socrates and the young man for whom the dialogue is named. Socrates' interrogation of Euthyphro on the subject of piety – a subject about which his interlocutor, a self-proclaimed diviner, insists that he has special knowledge – is a timely and natural outgrowth of the immediate circumstances in which these men meet. Their conversation occurs at an Athenian judicial office (the Portico of the King Archon) to which Euthyphro has come in order to initiate legal action against his father, and to which Socrates has been summoned to respond to the preliminary indictment of three accusers, Anytus, Meletus, and

[1] The group *Theateteus*, *Euthyphro*, *Cratylus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* is the longest chronologically and dramatically unified sequence of dialogues in the Platonic corpus. It contains both Socrates' public trial and a parallel, philosophical trial presided over by the Stranger from Elea (concerning which, see Howland 1998b).

[2] At the very end of the *Theaetetus* (210d), Socrates leaves to meet the indictment of Meletus; it is in the course of discharging this obligation that he runs into Euthyphro.

Lycon. These men have charged Socrates with "corrupting the young and not worshiping the gods the city worships, but other, new and strange divinities" (*Apology* 24b–c).[3] As even the most casual readers of Plato may be expected to know, the archon will allow the indictment to go forward, and, in the days ahead, Socrates will be tried, convicted, and executed.

To understand the indictment against Socrates, we must try to see it from the standpoint of the civic tradition that his accusers take themselves to be defending.[4] For Socrates' accusers as Plato presents them in the dialogues, the charges of impiety and corrupting the young are intimately related.[5] Like every Greek *polis*, Athens had its own protecting gods to which it looked for safety (especially including Athena Polias, "Athena of the city"), and whose guardianship depended in large part on the city's "proper maintenance of friendship" with them by means of sacrifices, sacred feasts, and other religious rituals.[6] If there was merit in the allegation that Socrates worshiped new and strange divinities in place of the gods of the city, then he directly endangered the community by running the risk of offending the deities who watch over it. And if Socrates was indeed guilty of "not worshiping" (*ou nomidzonta*) the gods of Athens – literally, not acknowledging them in accordance with custom or convention (*nomos*) – then he presumably also helped to unravel the civic fabric. It requires little imagination to suppose that he turned impressionable youths (like the ones who often accompany him in the Platonic dialogues) against traditions of worship that effectively bound the Athenians together into a unified community, traditions

[3] Socrates reverses the official order of the indictment, which apparently put the impiety charge before the corruption charge. Burnet 1924, 182; cf. West and West 1984, 73 n. 38.

[4] It perhaps bears repeating that the present study is concerned with the figure of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, not with the historical Socrates. Brief discussions of the motives behind the prosecution of the latter may be found in Parker 1996, 199–207, which emphasizes the corruption charge, and Munn 2000, 284–91, which emphasizes the accusation of impiety.

[5] Meletus accordingly affirms in the *Apology* that Socrates corrupts the young by teaching them impious ways of thinking and acting (26a–b).

[6] Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 141–44; McPherran 1996, 23. Cf. Zaidman and Pantel 1992, 13 (quoting Louis Gernet): "The [ancient Greek] city considered itself to be … a 'concrete and living entity under the sure protection of the gods, who would not abandon it as long as it did not abandon them.'"

central to the *patrioi nomoi* or "ancestral ways" upheld by the fathers (*pateres*) of each successive generation.[7] Indeed, Socrates himself admits that he exercises what many parents must have taken to be a ruinous influence on future Athenian citizens. "The young who follow me on their own," he freely acknowledges in the *Apology*, "enjoy hearing human beings examined. And they themselves often imitate me, and they attempt to examine others in turn" (23c).[8] That Socrates stirred up spirited young men – youths whose age alone inclined them to rebel against paternal authority – was all too obvious, especially to those fathers who bore the brunt of their sons' imitation of his techniques of cross-examination and refutation.[9]

In the *Apology*, Socrates goes on the offensive against his accusers. In particular, he tries to account for the origins of the indictment in a way that will demonstrate the indispensability of his philosophical activity to the well-being of the Athenians. Socrates also speaks directly to his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and piety, and thus furnishes the philosophical and biographical context we need in order to assess the argument and the action of the *Euthyphro*. The present chapter accordingly focuses on the portrait of Socrates and Socratic philosophizing that emerges in the *Apology*.

In spite of his efforts, we shall see that Socrates remains an enigma for the Athenians who must judge him, just as Ḥoni does for Shimon and the redactors of the Talmud. This is largely because neither Socrates' unyielding chastisement of the Athenians, nor the relationship to "the god" that motivates his conduct, can be fully understood within the categories of Greek religious practice. Rather, reading the

[7] "Among the ancients, what formed the bond of every society was worship. . . . the city was the collective group of those who had the same protecting deities, and who performed the religious ceremony at the same altar" (Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 138). In the ancient Greek city, impiety was accordingly understood to be "the absence of respect for the beliefs and rituals shared by the inhabitants of a city"; impiety trials "were, it seems, the violent reaction of a civic community that felt its unity to be under threat, since religion was an integral constituent of its identity" (Zaidman and Pantel 1992, 11, 12).

[8] In translating material from the *Apology* and the *Euthyphro*, I have benefited from consulting West and West 1984.

[9] Hegel considers this "the real point" of the accusation against Socrates: "What his judges found unjust was the intrusion morally of a third into the absolute relation between parents and children. . . . [w]hoever does this, does injury to morality in its truest form" (Hegel 1974, 1.437).

Apology against the backdrop of the Jewish tradition helps us to see that the closest analogy to Socrates' religious self-understanding and mission is provided by the biblical prophets of Israel.

SOCRATES' STRANGENESS

Near the beginning of the *Apology*, Socrates notes that, because this is the first time in his life he has appeared in court, he is "simply foreign to the manner of speech here." He therefore asks the jury (which consists of 501 of his fellow Athenians) to be understanding of the way he speaks, "just as if I really were a foreigner [or 'stranger': *xenos*]."[10] But Socrates is not literally a foreigner, which in this context means a Greek speaker whose native dialect differs from that of the Athenians. What distinguishes his way of speaking from that of other accusers and defendants, he explains, is that from *him* the jurors will hear "the whole truth." In this, he implies, his manner of speech will be no different from that which he is accustomed to employ when he engages in philosophical discussion in the marketplace and elsewhere (17b–d).

It soon becomes clear that Socrates' devotion to understanding and articulating the truth separates him from his fellow citizens outside as well as inside the law court. For the Athenians, Socrates is a puzzle: because they cannot understand his overriding dedication to the acquisition of wisdom, they run the risk of confusing the philosopher with a type of public intellectual they *do* understand – the itinerant teachers known as sophists. As Plato represents them, the sophists employ their intellectual powers primarily as a means to acquire money and honor.[11] Because the sophists regard teaching and learning as a commercial and competitive enterprise, their approach to these activities differs fundamentally from that of the philosopher.[12]

[10] The size of the jury may be inferred from the text (see 36a with West and West 1984, 89–90 n. 65). Figures for the number of jurors on a single panel at Athens range from 200 to 6,000, with more important cases tending to have larger juries (Harrison 1998, 2.47; MacDowell 1978, 36–40).

[11] See esp. the opening pages of the *Greater Hippias* (281a–83b) and the *Lesser Hippias* (363a–64b).

[12] Aristotle 1991, 35 (*Rhetoric* 1.14, 1355b) states that "sophistry is not a matter of ability but of deliberate choice [*proairesis*]." *Proairesis* is Aristotle's term for the kind of moral decision that both reflects and determines one's character; see *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.2.

When the sophists engage in public debate, they aim above all to defeat their opponents in argument.[13] As with modern athletes, victory brings glory and enhances one's market value: sophists who triumph in competitive speaking can charge higher fees to students who want to learn the art of rhetoric for political purposes, while defeat brings nothing but shame. Socrates, however, repeatedly states at his trial that he charges no fee and lives in poverty (19d–e, 23b–c, 31b–c, 38b). Nor does he feel shame in being refuted. In fact, he welcomes refutation as an essential component of the cooperative search for wisdom: if his arguments are shown to be weak, he will have a better understanding of what he needs to learn.[14] The sophists are also constrained by public opinion in a way that Socrates is not. The customer, as the saying goes, is always right; because they must flatter potential students, the sophists cannot afford to be seen as critics of *nomos* (even if the private views they communicate to their students fundamentally contradict conventional opinions).[15] As he is bound only by his love of wisdom, Socrates is under no such constraint.[16]

The Athenians' confusion regarding Socrates is the first topic he addresses in his defense speech. As Socrates explains, he actually faces two sets of accusers and two sets of charges. Long before Anytus, Meletus, and Lycon came on the scene, the Athenians were persuaded by Socrates' "first accusers" that he was "a wise man, one who ponders [*phrontistēs*] the things aloft and has investigated all things beneath the earth, and who makes the weaker speech the stronger." These first accusers – among whom Socrates identifies only the comic poet Aristophanes (18c–d, 19c) – are even more dangerous than his present ones, because, he maintains, "their listeners believe that those who inquire into these things also do not believe in the gods [*ou theous nomizein*]" (18b–c). In Aristophanes' *Clouds* (first staged in 423), Socrates is represented as the head of his own school,

[13] Cf. the display of eristic or competitive speech presented by two sophists in the *Euthydemus*, men "skilled in fighting in speeches and in always refuting what is said, whether it is true or false" (272a–b).

[14] *Republic* 337d; *Theaetetus* 169b–c.

[15] At *Theaetetus* 152c, Socrates imputes just such a secret private teaching to Protagoras, the most famous sophist of his day.

[16] See *Republic* 493a–c and cf. *Gorgias* 481d–82a, where Socrates maintains that philosophy (the object of his eros) dictates what he says, just as the Athenian multitude (the object of Callicles' eros, inasmuch as it holds the keys to power) dictates what Callicles says.

the *Phrontistērion* or "Thinketeria," where he does indeed inquire into what is above and below the earth, and where one can also learn how to make an unjust and therefore "weaker" speech defeat a just or "stronger" one. In the privacy of his school, the character of Socrates explicitly teaches a would-be student who is about to swear an oath that "gods are not current coinage [*nomisma*] for us."[17] The play on "coinage" and "custom" (*nomos*; cf. the English "numismatics") suggests that Socrates regards gods – including those of Athens – not as independently existing beings, but as tokens of social exchange that are, so to speak, minted by each community. What is more, the *Clouds* portrays Socrates as worshiping his own peculiar gods, including Tongue (423) – a fitting deity for one who practices deceptive speech.

Socrates is surely right to suggest that Aristophanes in particular has tainted the jury and prepared the ground for his present accusers. Yet the *Clouds*, the earliest account we possess of what we would today call the "intellectual,"[18] is not simply an anti-Socratic diatribe. It is also a subtle and revealing presentation of the difficulty Socrates' fellow citizens encounter in trying to understand him. Aristophanes' Socrates resembles a sophist in his association with unjust speech, but the *Clouds* ultimately suggests that he is not one. While sophists seek money and honor, the *Clouds* depicts Socrates and his students as wretchedly poor men who are willing to endure many hardships for the sake of acquiring arcane knowledge – for example, how far a flea can jump as measured in flea-feet, a question that requires Socrates to make delicate wax booties for the insect.[19] Like present-day professors, sophists are eager for public attention, and often travel long distances to disseminate their teachings in foreign cities; Socrates and his students isolate themselves in their Thinketeria, do not readily

[17] *Clouds* 248 (citations of the *Clouds* are by line number, and refer to Aristophanes 1970). At 367, Socrates denies the existence of Zeus.

[18] Parker (1996, 203) describes Socrates as "literature's first don."

[19] *Clouds* 144–52, 175, 412–19. Socrates' students resemble the starving Spartans who surrendered to the Athenians at Pylos in 425 (*Clouds* 186; cf. *Thucydides Historiae* 1979–80, 4.3–38), a detail that suggests that they "practice an almost inhuman asceticism" (West and West 1984, 123 n. 39). The Talmud suggests that the lot of students in the rabbinical academies was not very different, inasmuch as they were exposed to poverty, hunger, and the weakness and sickness that these may produce (Neusner 1964–69, 4.292).

welcome outsiders, and are reluctant to discuss their inquiries with the uninitiated (*Clouds* 133–40).[20] All of this is deeply puzzling to outsiders. The character of Pheidippides – a spirited, horse-loving youth – at one point describes the inhabitants of the Thinketeria as "pale men, shoeless men … among them the wretched Socrates and Chaerephon" (103–04); one might grasp the combination of disgust and perplexity reflected in this remark by picturing Pheidippides as a nicely tanned but not very bright high school athlete (cf. 119–20) and Socrates and Chaerephon as scrawny, bespectacled engineers with plastic pocket protectors. Over the course of the play, Pheidippides is eventually compelled by his father, who wants his son to help him fend off his creditors, to enter the Thinketeria. There he becomes a "dexterous sophist" (1111), learning the unjust speech and using it – with poetic justice – to rationalize beating his father and threatening his mother (1321–1451).[21] Yet while Pheidippides' behavior in the *Clouds* both reflects and strengthens the popular perception that Socrates corrupts young men, it tells us little about his motivations. Pheidippides applies the lessons he learns in the Thinketeria to pursuits extrinsic to the school, but Socrates and his students prefer the intellectual life *inside* the Thinketeria, harsh and cheerless as it may be. The *Clouds* thus poses a fundamental question that it does not answer: why does Socrates choose to live the way he does?

SOCRATES' FAITH

Socrates responds to Aristophanes' puzzlement early in the *Apology*, when he tries to clarify what his philosophizing consists in and why he pursues it. Having denied both that he takes money for speaking and that he investigates the sorts of subjects he is associated with in the *Clouds* (19c–e), he goes on to maintain that he is also ignorant of the virtue of "human being and citizen" that the sophists claim to teach for a fee (19e–20c). But these denials raise another question: what *does*

[20] In the Thinketeria, Socrates pursues investigations in such scientific fields as entomology, astronomy, geometry, and linguistics; oddly, he shows no interest in human life, his primary philosophical concern in the Platonic dialogues.

[21] The sophistical Pheidippides nevertheless refuses to do injustice to his teachers Socrates and Chaerephon (*Clouds* 1467), a detail that suggests he has come to feel a sort of filial allegiance to these men.

Socrates do, which has given rise to the rumors about him (20c–d)? Socrates provides an answer in the form of a brief autobiographical narrative that purports to elucidate the origins of his philosophical quest. In a nutshell, he explains that his philosophizing consists in the cross-examination of his fellow citizens in order to see whether they can sustain their claims to wisdom, and that the task of interrogating the Athenians in this way has been imposed upon him by "the god at Delphi" (20d–24b). This explanation, he insists, is "the whole truth," even though to some he may seem to be "playing" (20d).

The story Socrates tells goes as follows. Socrates' companion Chaerephon once traveled to Delphi, the seat of the best-known oracle of the ancient Greek world, in order to ask the priestess of Apollo whether anyone was wiser than Socrates. Her reply was "that no one was wiser." But what does this mean? Chaerephon's report occasions in Socrates a kind of internal philosophical dialogue. "I am conscious that I am not wise, either much or little," he says to himself. "So whatever does he [the god] mean in asserting that I am the wisest? Surely he is not saying something false, for that is not sanctioned [*ou gar themis*] for him" (21a–b). The significance of these remarks can hardly be overemphasized: Socrates takes the Delphic oracle seriously because he presupposes that it is the mouthpiece of a god, and that this god must be speaking the truth. *Why* he believes these things, he does not say.[22] But these assumptions constitute the bedrock of the religious faith that he displays in the *Apology*, and are the foundation for all that follows.[23] Note, too, that Socrates also hints

[22] It does not follow from his silence on this point that his faith is "blind." As we shall see later, Socrates has reflective reasons for what he regards as divinely given admonitions; "discursive reason" is in this sense "a support for – rather than an obstacle to – extrarational revelation" (McPherran 1996, 9, 12). This applies also to the promptings of Socrates' *daimonion* (Corey 2005, 224).

[23] Socrates repeatedly insists that he is telling the truth in explaining that his philosophizing is the consequence of a divine communication or communications (20d, 38a; cf. 33c with note 29 to this chapter). But just as he predicts, many scholars nevertheless dismiss his story about the Delphic oracle as an instance of his habitual irony (cf. 37e–38a) or, at best, a pious fiction. See, e.g., Taylor n.d., 160; Hackforth 1933, 101–04; and the skepticism of West 1979. Recently, however, specialists in ancient philosophy and political theory have begun to take Socrates' piety seriously; cf. Seeskin 1987, McPherran 1996, and Corey 2005 (which argues against efforts by a number of scholars, including Hannah Arendt and Martha Nussbaum, to interpret Socrates as a "purely secular" figure).

here at what he does not know. Although he might be taken to imply that the god of whom he speaks is Apollo, whose divinity is customarily acknowledged by all Greek cities, he restricts himself throughout the *Apology* to the generic locution "the god" (cf. 23b, 28e, 29d, 30a, 30e, 33c). Supremely conscious of his own ignorance, Socrates seems to be in the dark about the god's identity; he is confident only that he has received a divine communication.[24]

Socrates' faith leads him to wrestle with an apparent paradox: what he thinks he knows about himself (that he is not wise) seems to conflict with what he thinks he knows about the god (that he speaks the truth). Because he seeks to understand the god, he must examine himself; because he seeks to understand himself, he must investigate what the god means. The significance of this double obligation can hardly be overestimated, for Socrates' reflection on the oracle concerns the two questions that – as readers of Plato will recognize – come to guide him throughout his life as a philosopher: "Who is Socrates?" and "What is wisdom?"

In his perplexity, Socrates devises a plan: he will "refute" the oracle by finding someone wiser than he (21c). On its face, this is a shocking proposal that even appears to confirm his impiety: if the plan succeeds, it would seem to follow either that the god has lied or that he is more ignorant than Socrates. But given Socrates' faith in the truth of the oracle, it makes little sense to suppose that he intends to produce a decisive proof of its falsity. Rather, he envisions his relationship to the god as a kind of dialogue, within which the refutation of the original "assertion" that no one is wiser than Socrates might lead to a clarification of the oracle's meaning.[25] "This man is wiser than I," he imagines telling the oracle, "but you said I was the wisest" (22c). Nor does questioning the oracle in this way involve any impiety. Indeed, Socrates responds to the news from Delphi in a religiously appropriate manner: at least with respect to what is revealed by the gods in oracles, the Greek tradition acknowledges that careful reflection is required to make sense of divine communications. Greek oracles were notoriously ambiguous, and several famous legends spelled out the dire consequences for those who failed to inquire into their

[24] Cf. *Theaetetus* 150b–51d, where Socrates is similarly vague about "the god" who compels him to serve as a philosophical midwife.

[25] Cf. Reeve 1989, 22–23.

meaning.[26] In fact, the admonition "Know Thyself" was inscribed in or on the temple at Delphi, as if to underscore that an oracle from the Pythia was to be received as a provocation to thought, and especially to self-reflection.[27]

What Socrates has already revealed about his philosophizing bears repeating. In the *Apology*, Socrates presents philosophy as an activity to which he is called by religious faith. To be sure, he brings to his encounter with Delphi a powerful desire for wisdom. Had he lacked philosophical eros, he would never have taken his quest to understand the oracle as far as he did.[28] But Socrates is confident that this quest is meaningful – that there is, in other words, some significant truth to be uncovered – because he trusts that the god knows what he himself does not. In brief, Socrates makes it clear that the Delphic oracle arouses, authorizes, and focuses his desire for wisdom, and that it is able to do so only because he is prepared from the outset to acknowledge the god's authority as a speaker of truth.

The picture Socrates sketches in the *Apology* of the relationship between faith and reason is not entirely unfamiliar to us. For the rabbis of the Talmud, faith is expressed through the interpretation and application of the content of revelation. Revelation that is embraced by faith thus provides a rich horizon for rational inquiry, furnishing it with starting points in the form of problems and principles as well as with an extensive array of interpretative materials. Inquiry, in turn, clarifies the rational content of God's revealed teaching. Socrates, of course, has no experience of revelation in the biblical sense; the Word of God is for him literally not much more than a word. Yet according to the *Apology*, the oracular communication from Delphi is the sine qua non of his philosophical activity.[29] Like the concept

[26] Lydia fell to Persia because King Croesus did not stop to think about the possible meanings of the oracle from Delphi that "if he made war on the Persians he would destroy a mighty empire" (Herodotus 1987, 1.53). So, too, Oedipus's fulfillment of the oracle that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother went hand in hand with his failure to question his identity as a native of Corinth. Cf. Heraclitus's remark that "[t]he lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals but indicates" (Freeman 1977, 31 [frag. 93]).

[27] Socrates takes this to heart. At *Phaedrus* 229e–30a, he claims to be wholly occupied with achieving self-knowledge "in accordance with the Delphic inscription."

[28] On the role of eros in the *Apology*, see Howland 2006, 68–71.

[29] Corey (2005, 217–18) convincingly argues that Socrates' philosophical conversations "must either have begun with the oracle, or else they took a dramatically

of Oral Torah, this communication authorizes his philosophizing by guaranteeing that his basic questions have answers, and thus that there is some meaningful truth that can in principle be discovered by inquiry. As with the rabbis, Socrates' reason also assists his faith; we will see directly that his philosophizing reveals the rationale behind the promptings of the god. In fine, neither Socrates nor the rabbis blindly embrace either faith or reason. On the contrary, the depth and dimensionality of understanding that both evince is made possible by the binocular vision that results only when the eye of faith and the eye of reason work together.

SOCRATES AS EXEMPLAR

When Socrates implements his plan to find someone wiser than he, he is surprised by the results in a way that causes him to rethink the oracle's meaning. The first person he interrogates is reputed to be wise, but in conversing with him Socrates discovers that he is not. What is more, the man refuses to admit his condition; Socrates' demonstration that he is ignorant merely makes him hateful "both to him and to many of those present." This experience helps Socrates to understand that his knowledge of ignorance is a sort of wisdom: while neither he nor the man he has examined "probably knows anything noble and good," he is wiser just to the extent that he acknowledges this fact (21c–d). Socrates' characterization of his ignorance also makes it clear that the "wisdom" he seeks is neither arcane nor essentially theoretical: it concerns what is noble and good, the knowledge of which is essential to living well and doing right.

In spite of the increasing hostility he incurs, Socrates continues to examine men reputed to be wise. In doing so, he repeatedly finds that these men are ignorant, yet unwilling to admit as much. This forces

different turn after the oracle's pronouncement." Note also Socrates' emphatic assertion that the god has commanded him to philosophize "from oracles, and from dreams, and in every way in which any other divine allotment [*moira*] ever ordered a human being to do anything whatsoever" (33c). Other dialogues confirm the dependence of Socrates' philosophical activity on various forms of divine guidance, including that of his *daimonion*. See, e.g., *Theaetetus* 150b–51d, where he explains that the god has compelled him to be a midwife of souls (note his reference to the *daimonion* at 151a), and *Phaedrus* 242b–43b, where his *daimonion* forces him to expiate his offense against eros.

him radically to revise his understanding of both himself and the oracle. He now sees himself as involved in what amounts to a heroic quest, the aim of which is to demonstrate the *truth* of the oracle. His description of this quest recalls the legendary labors of Heracles and the homeward voyage of Odysseus. "It is indeed necessary," he tells the jury, "to display my wandering to you as the labors of a man laboring in order that that the divination would turn out to be unrefuted for me" (22a).[30] After he finishes with the politicians, Socrates examines the poets and the manual artisans. He finds that the poets make what they make not by wisdom but "by some nature and while inspired [*enthousiadzontes*, lit. 'with a god within']"; "just like diviners and those who deliver oracles," they "say many noble things, but know nothing of what they speak." As for the manual artisans, they prove to be more knowledgeable than Socrates with respect to their specific fields of technical expertise, but they wrongly suppose themselves to be "wise" in other areas as well. Asking himself "on behalf of the oracle" whether he would prefer their combination of specialized (and therefore partial) knowledge and unacknowledged ignorance to his own knowledge of ignorance, Socrates answers "both [him]self and the oracle that it profits me to remain just as I am" (22b–e).

In the end, Socrates arrives at the following understanding of the oracle. The oracle's meaning is "that human wisdom is worth little or nothing." The god, Socrates explains, "seems [in the oracle] … to have used my name, making me an example [*paradeigma*], as if he would say: 'This one of you, O human beings, is wisest – he who, like Socrates, acknowledges that he is in truth worth nothing with respect to wisdom.'" In spite of the hostility and slander he has suffered (cf. 22e–23a), Socrates continues "seeking and investigating in accordance with the god any townsman or foreigner I suppose to be wise." "And whenever someone does not seem to me [to be wise]," he adds, "I come to the aid of the god and demonstrate that he is not wise" (23a–b). A little later in the *Apology*, Socrates makes it clear that his interrogations do not stop at this point, but actually go on to draw the moral consequences of his interlocutors' ignorance of "anything

[30] "Wandering" (*planēn*) is formed from the same root as the first word of the second line of Homer's *Odyssey*, which begins: "Sing to me, Muse, of a man of twists and turns, who wandered [*plangthē*] many ways when he had sacked the holy citadel of Troy" (Homer 1919, 1.1–2). Cf. West and West 1984, 70 n. 34.

noble or good." If the jury lets him go free, Socrates pledges, he will "obey the god" and "not stop philosophizing." He will "say just the sorts of things I am accustomed to," reproaching Athenians and foreigners alike for shamefully "car[ing] for how you will get as much wealth as possible, and reputation, and honor, but . . . neither car[ing] nor giv[ing] thought to prudence, and truth, and how your soul will be the best possible." "Know well," he adds, "that the god orders this" (29c–30a).

Socrates' interpretation of the oracle is noteworthy in several respects. It is striking that the god identifies him as an exemplary instance of human wisdom, because Socrates himself seems to attach little value to such examples. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks his interlocutor to teach him piety's essential nature – its *idea* or *eidos* (literally, "look" or "form"). Here as elsewhere in the dialogues, he seeks knowledge in the form of a philosophically rigorous and universally applicable definition, and he refuses to accept concrete examples – laden as they are with irrelevant particularity – as an alternative (cf. 6c–d). Socrates wants to know the pure and essential being of piety so that he may use *it* as a definitive measure – "so that, by looking toward it [the *idea*] and using it as a pattern [*paradeigma*], I may assert that whatever you or someone else does that is of this sort is pious, and that what is not of this sort, is impious" (6e). And yet, the god himself chooses to instruct the Athenians by pointing out a particular existing human being who exemplifies human wisdom. What sort of paradigm is Socrates, and what is the function of this paradigm? These questions take us to the heart of the pedagogical significance of the dialogues.

In exposing the shortcomings of Euthyphro's various attempts to define piety, Socrates employs what scholars commonly call the "Socratic elenchus" (from *elengchein*, "to refute"). As is regularly the case in the dialogues, the elenchus reveals the inadequacy of every definition that is proposed, but does not appear to lead to any positive knowledge of the essential nature in question (in this instance, the nature of piety). This is not the only problem with the elenchus. For even if it *did* succeed in producing philosophically rigorous knowledge, such knowledge would be of little use unless one were already predisposed to apply it – and most of Socrates' interlocutors are clearly not so predisposed, at least with respect to the knowledge of

virtue. The hostility Socrates incurs in cross-examining his fellow citizens shows that they are not even willing to admit their ignorance, let alone to embrace new knowledge. Other dialogues tell a similar story. Heedless of Socrates' pleas to continue the conversation, Euthyphro eventually just walks away. And far from being drawn by Socratic refutation onto the path of philosophical inquiry, the eponymous interlocutor of Plato's *Meno* – a dialogue on virtue – is intellectually paralyzed by it (79e–80b), as is appropriate for one whose name (*Menōn*) means "standing still."[31] Nor does it seem coincidental that Plato's earliest readers would have known of the historical Meno's infamous treachery against his fellow Greek mercenaries in Persia, about which Xenophon wrote in the *Anabasis*. "As others pride themselves on godliness and truth and honesty," Xenophon observed, "Menon prided himself on his power to deceive, to fabricate falsehoods, to mock at his friends."[32] A man of this sort would doubtless continue to be vicious even if he possessed a perfectly adequate definition of virtue.

If the elenchus fails to achieve knowledge of virtue in the form of a philosophically rigorous definition, the possession of which would in any case not suffice to make one virtuous, it would appear that the point of the elenchus cannot be simply to achieve this knowledge. Socrates' explanation of the oracle from Delphi furthermore seems implicitly to acknowledge the need for a kind of instruction that aims at reorienting the soul as a whole toward a morally better and more thoughtful life. These reflections suggest that Plato provides this essentially erotic instruction by writing dialogues that prominently feature the Socratic elenchus.[33] What is exemplary about Socrates – what makes him a suitable *paradeigma* in the eyes of the god – is his human wisdom, which consists in the knowledge of ignorance. The correlate of Socrates' human wisdom is the human virtue he displays

[31] Cf. Seeskin 1987, 3: "Protagoras becomes angry, Polus resorts to cheap rhetorical tricks, Callicles begins to sulk, Critias loses his self-control, Meno wants to quit."

[32] Xenophon 1964, 56 (2.6).

[33] Seeskin's assertions that the elenchus has certain rules but is not a method in any strict sense, and that "our knowledge of *elenchus* is derived by watching Socrates in action" (Seeskin 1987, 37), are supported in Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 155: "[T]here simply is no such thing as 'the Socratic elenchos.' … Socratic philosophizing … involve[s] the examination of the life-shaping beliefs of the interlocutor (and sometimes of Socrates himself) through the generic medium of *argument*, but not through a specific form of argument" (emphasis in original).

in never ceasing to examine himself and others.[34] His wisdom and virtue are demonstrated in his philosophical way of life, which is why he tells a story about himself in his defense speech. For while a definition is suited to conveying the essential nature of a class or kind, it is narrative that best articulates the distinctive look or shape of an individual life. Insofar as the Platonic writings in general tell Socrates' story in a full and detailed way, the *Apology*'s account of his relationship to the god thus furnishes a pedagogical justification for the literary form of the dialogues as a whole – one that applies equally well to narrative aggadah in the Bible and the Talmud.

SOCRATES AS PROPHET

In his defense speech, Socrates presents his conduct as a religiously exemplary form of service to the god, and that in two senses: he is a model of piety in his fidelity to the god under increasingly difficult circumstances, and he is an example of the radically limited character of human wisdom in comparison to divine understanding. However, Socrates does not follow the word of the god, but rather his own construal of that word – a point he underscores when he justifies his behavior by appealing to what the god "would" say, *if* he has understood the god's intentions correctly. His apparent humility is thus matched by confident self-assertion: he presumes to speak on the god's behalf, and thereby dons the mantle of a prophet.

Most important in the present context is the *kind* of prophecy in which Socrates engages.[35] Prophecy in the ancient Greek world consisted essentially of divination, which took various institutional forms and was "a regular and continual means for determining the will of the gods on almost any conceivable issue."[36] Divination was

[34] Seeskin 1987, 91; Socrates is thus "the standard of success" in elenctic examination (141). To the virtues of cooperative inquiry listed in Chapter 1 (see 62–63), we may add the generosity or philanthropy Socrates displays in attempting to improve the lives of others (cf. *Euthyphro* 3d). All of Socrates' virtues, and in particular his piety, are rooted in his recognition that the human condition is one of ignorance (cf. Seeskin 1987, 83).

[35] As posed here, this question concerns the social and political significance of Socrates' prophecy rather than the prophetic nature of his philosophical insight. On the latter, see Chapter 4, 151–56.

[36] Aune 1983, 23.

practiced by a *mantis*, a "diviner," "soothsayer," or "seer" who either utilized technical means (such as bird augury) or relied on direct inspiration. The mantis might be a cult official associated with a particular oracle, like the priestesses at Delphi, or a "free diviner"; the latter group comprised professionals employed by the Greek cities as well as freelance practitioners.[37] Socrates, however, fits neatly into none of these categories. To some extent, he resembles a freelance diviner who relies on inspiration. Toward the end of the *Apology*, for example, he claims to be "at that place where human beings deliver oracles, [namely,] when they are about to die," and he prophesies that vengeance will strike the men who condemned him to death (39c). But in speaking for and serving the god, Socrates does not restrict himself to determining the god's will or predicting the future in a particular set of circumstances. Rather, his prophecy consists essentially in his promotion, by means of a combination of interrogation and chastisement, of a broad message of moral reform.[38] Like a "gadfly," he tries to sting the Athenians into moral and intellectual wakefulness; in doing so, he claims to perform "the greatest good deed" for his fellow citizens, to whom he has been given as nothing less than a "gift of the god" (30d–31a, 36c).

The closest comparison to the kind of prophecy practiced by Socrates comes not from the Greek tradition, but from the Hebrew Bible.[39] The second division of the Tanakh, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), includes the "pre-classical" prophets and the "classical" or "literary" prophets; the speeches and deeds of the former are found in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, while those of the latter are recorded in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the books of the minor prophets.[40] The

[37] Ibid., 23–24, 35.

[38] Cf. Seeskin 1987, 9, 150.

[39] Socrates' resemblance to the Hebrew prophets has been largely overlooked by scholars. The second part of Strauss 1997c (398–405, titled "On Socrates and the Prophets") is the most significant discussion I have found. In the Christian and Muslim traditions, Socrates is frequently compared to the prophets, including Jesus and Mohammed. See McPherran 1996, 3–4 (with the sources cited at 4 n. 8), and Alon 1991, esp. 87–93; for a recent comparison of Socrates and Jesus, see Gooch 1996.

[40] "The Hebrew term for a prophet, *navi*, is cognate of the Akkadian verb *nabû*, 'to call,' i.e., 'one who has been called'.... [*Navi* is] translated in the Septuagint by the Greek word *prophētēs* ('prophet'), which means 'one who speaks on behalf of' or 'to speak for'.... [The prophet] is a 'forthteller' and spokesman as well as a 'foreteller'

classical prophets emerged when the Israelites were threatened by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. These included Amos and Hosea in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Micah and Isaiah in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, reformers who "stood on the institutional periphery of Israelite society" (where – much like Elijah – they "attempted to provoke both social and religious change"), but who differed from their predecessors in prophecy by the special emphasis they placed on moral rectitude as "the decisive factor in determining the national destiny of Israel."[41]

Thus Amos, the first of the classical prophets and a breeder of sheep by profession, speaks for God in calling the Israelites to account for their injustice, greed, heedlessness of the law, and desecration of holy places in the pursuit of bodily pleasures:

> … [T]hey have sold for silver
> Those whose cause was just,
> And the needy for a pair of sandals.
> [Ah,] you who trample the heads of the poor
> Into the dust of the ground,
> And make the humble walk a twisted course!
> Father and son go to the same girl,
> And thereby profane My holy name.
> They recline by every altar
> On garments taken in pledge
> And drink in the House of their God
> Wine bought with fines they imposed. (Amos 2:7–8)

Through Amos, God tells the Israelites to "let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."[42] But Amos's prophetic activity eventually brings him into conflict with the religious and political authorities of Israel. Amaziah, a priest of Bethel, denounces Amos to King Jeroboam II as a conspirator, forbids him to prophesy in Bethel, and orders him to return to Judah, his native land. In response, Amos delivers a detailed prophecy about the misfortune

and prognosticator. He is God's mouthpiece (Jer. 15:19); the one to whom God speaks, and who, in turn, speaks forth for God to the people" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2007, 16.567–68, *s.v.* "Prophets and Prophecy").

[41] Aune 1983, 85 (where Aune also notes that these men were "free prophets" who served neither in the Temple nor in the court of a monarch); *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2007, 16.579, *s.v.* "Prophets and Prophecy."

[42] Amos 5:24, American Standard Version.

that will eventually strike Amaziah's family and the Northern Kingdom as a whole (Amos 7:10–17).

Although Socrates serves a lesser god that the Master of the Universe who "formed the mountains, and created the wind" (Amos 4:13), he resembles Amos in a number of particulars. Socrates, too, is a "stranger" who nonetheless speaks the same language as the people he addresses, and who refuses to be silenced by exile (37c–38a). Like Amos, Socrates opposes injustice, even when his speeches and deeds bring him into conflict with the ruling powers. His "whole care," he explains to the jury, "is to commit no unjust or impious deed." As proof that in the pursuit of justice he "would not yield even to one man because of the fear of death," Socrates points to incidents in which he took great risks in defying the will of the people under the democracy, and later that of the ruling oligarchs, when they wished to act unjustly (32a–e). Like Amos, Socrates measures others by a divine measure, and thereby exposes the deficiency of the opinions by which they measure themselves.[43] Like Amos and the other Hebrew prophets, Socrates urges his fellow human beings to take thought for the well-being of their souls; when his words fail to awaken their minds (at least in numbers sufficient to save him), he prophesies to the men who voted to execute him "that vengeance will come upon you straightaway after my death" (39c).[44]

More generally, Socrates' account of himself in the *Apology* incorporates several distinctive literary elements characteristic of the stories of the prophets told in the Hebrew Bible. It has been well observed that the various biblical narratives of the dedication and commissioning of the prophets are characterized by four recurrent motifs. These motifs, which appear initially in the "lengthy prophetic dedication of Moses" in Exodus 3–4, include (1) "the humble occupation of the prophet"; (2) the prophet's "protest of inadequacy for the mission" and reluctance to accept his calling; (3) "the human

[43] "This is what he showed me: he was standing on a wall checked with a plumb line and he was holding a plumb line. And the LORD asked me, 'What do you see, Amos?' 'A plumb line,' I replied. And my Lord declared; I am going to apply a plumb line to my people Israel . . .'" (Amos 7:7–8).

[44] Cf. what God told Isaiah to say to the people: "'Hear indeed, but do not understand; see, indeed, but do not grasp.' Dull that people's mind, stop its ears, and seal its eyes – lest, seeing with its eyes, and hearing with its ears, it also grasp with its mind, and repent and save itself" (Isaiah 6:9–10).

response" of hostility to his prophecy; and (4) "the divine reassurance" of deliverance.[45] Each of these four elements also appears in the story of Socrates. (1) Although Socrates does not specify his occupation prior to his reception of the oracle from Delphi, he explains that he does not have either the scientific knowledge attributed to him by Aristophanes in the *Clouds* or the "noble" ability, claimed by the sophists, to educate human beings in virtue. If he possessed knowledge of the virtue of "human being and citizen," he asserts, "I would be pluming and priding myself on it"; as it is, he cannot justify charging any fee at all for his speeches (19c–20c). (2) When called by God, Moses protests that "I have never been a man of words … I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10), and Jeremiah complains "Ah, Lord GOD! I don't know how to speak, for I am still a boy" (Jeremiah 1:6). So, too, Socrates begins his defense speech by observing that he is "not a clever speaker at all"; "what you hear will be spoken at random in the words that I happen upon" (17b–c).[46] When he receives the oracle, Socrates objects that he is "not at all wise, either much or little." He initially resists the investigation of the oracle's meaning that launches his service to the god, finally deciding only "very reluctantly" to proceed with it (21b). (3) It has been justly remarked that "the life story of a [Hebrew] prophet is liable to be one of anguish, fear, rejection, ridicule, and even imprisonment," inasmuch as he brings the Word of God to an audience that is often hostile and, at best, indifferent.[47] Socrates shows little anguish or fear, but he certainly experiences rejection, ridicule, and imprisonment – to say nothing of death. (4) After he has been condemned to death, Socrates relates "something wondrous": his *daimonion*, the inner divine sign that frequently checks him if he is about "to do

[45] *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2007, 16.575, *s.v.* "Prophets and Prophecy." (For the sake of clarity, I have slightly rearranged the order of these four elements.)

[46] The Apostle Paul similarly observes that he preached to the Corinthians "not with persuasive words of wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:4). If Socrates' rough speech distinguishes him from the silver-tongued orators and sophists, it is also a mark of the true prophet, who turns a deaf ear to the people's call for "smooth words" (*ḥalakot*: Isaiah 30:10). On close inspection, however, Socrates' defense speech turns out to be masterfully constructed. Cf. Howland 2008, with the sources cited at 519, n. 1 and 2.

[47] *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2007, 16.575, *s.v.* "Prophets and Prophecy." The authors give examples from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, and Micah.

something incorrect," has not opposed him at any time during his defense speech. He interprets this as a form of divine reassurance – a "great proof" not only that he has acted correctly, but also that "what has happened to me [in being convicted and sentenced to death] has turned out to be good" (40a–c).[48]

Socrates' resemblance to the prophets of Israel helps us to see another detail of the *Apology* in a new light. In trying to explain why he persists in examining others even at the risk of death, Socrates offers the following analogy:

> This is how it stands, Athenian gentlemen, in truth. Wherever one should station himself, believing that it is best, or should be stationed by a ruler, it is necessary, as it seems, to remain there and run the risk.... I therefore would have done terrible deeds, Athenian gentlemen, if when the rulers whom you chose to rule stationed me [in battle] ... I stood fast ... but when the god stationed me ... I should have deserted my station. (28d–29a)

Socrates' implies in this passage that his service to the god is a kind of battle, an apt image given the hostility he incurs. The main thrust of this military analogy is already familiar to us: like Habakkuk on his watchtower and Ḥoni in his circle, Socrates stands firmly at his post. One might object that Socrates claims to have been stationed by the god, whereas Habakkuk and Ḥoni have stationed themselves. But a closer look at the quoted passage reveals a fundamental ambiguity on this point. We are initially led to expect that the analogy will follow the chiastic rhetorical pattern a : b :: b : a, but this is not what transpires: the sequence "[a] station himself ... [b] stationed by a ruler" is followed by "[b] rulers ... stationed me ... [c] the god stationed me." While this is not the first time that Socrates has blurred the distinction between himself and the god, the ambiguity he points to in this passage is arguably characteristic of prophecy as such. This is because the prophet's understanding of divine communication – to

[48] A comparison of the passages in which Socrates refers to his *daimonion* indicates that it takes the form of a divine voice that generally restrains him from doing wrong (but see *Phaedrus* 242b–c, where it requires him to "purify himself"). Rist (1963) writes that, for Plato, "Socrates' *daimonion* was a manifestation that ... he was under the protection of God and that his life fulfilled a specific purpose in the divine scheme" (16). Cf. Gooch 1996, 174: "sign and oracle ... work together in Socrates' experience, causing him to view philosophy as a religious duty."

say nothing of the deeds that follow from this understanding – is never an act of pure receptivity, if only because the prophet must find the right words to express the divine visions or voices that he or she has "seen" or "heard."

Socrates resembles Habakkuk and Ḥoni in another particular as well: all three attempt to initiate something like a dialogue with God or the god.[49] The story of Habakkuk begins with a question he poses to God: "How long, O Lord, shall I cry out and You not listen, shall I shout to You 'Violence!' and You not save?" (Habakkuk 1:2). The story of Ḥoni starts with actions (his drawing the circle and taking an oath of immobility) meant to elicit a divine response. For his part, Socrates responds to the oracle by trying to find someone wiser than he, and thereby to formulate a question that he hopes the god will want to answer. Unlike Ḥoni and Habakkuk, however, Socrates does not need to hear anything more from the god in order to finish the "conversation" that he has begun.

Of course, the similarities between Socrates and the prophets of Israel go hand in hand with certain fundamental differences. The story Socrates tells about his relationship to the god at Delphi makes it clear that his conception of the divine differs radically from the characterization of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. God speaks to His prophets, but the Delphic god never communicates directly with Socrates. And while the Hebrew prophets speak for God, God also "speaks" for them. When Yahweh sends down fire and rain at Elijah's command (1 Kings 18:41, 45), for example, He makes Himself known to the people as their true God. But Socrates' god performs no miracles, and speaks only through Socrates. Even the word of the god as spoken by the priestess – the answer "No," uttered in response to Chaerephon's question – is unintelligible until Socrates uncovers and explains its meaning. This fact, in turn, suggests something that will become fully apparent only when we turn to the *Euthyphro* in the next chapter: the crucial role that human reason plays in Socrates' conception of piety.

[49] In doing so, Habakkuk and Ḥoni aspire to, and at least partly achieve, the partnership or reciprocity between prophet and God that is perhaps best exemplified by Elijah. See Ackerman 2003, 22–23.

EMULATING SOCRATES: PHILOSOPHICAL PEDAGOGY AND JUDAISM

After the jury votes for conviction, Socrates states that he will not agree to stop philosophizing. He goes on to reflect on the difficulty of explaining why he refuses to do so:

> [I]f I say that this would be to disobey the god, and on account of this it is impossible to keep quiet, you will not be persuaded by me on the ground that I am speaking ironically. But if in turn I say that this happens to be the greatest good for a human being – to make speeches every day concerning virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking, and to examine myself and others – and that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, you will be persuaded by me still less if I say these things. Yet this is how things stand, as I assert, gentlemen, but to persuade you is not easy. (37e–38a)

In this passage, Socrates gives two reasons why he will continue to philosophize: that the god orders it, and that the unexamined life is not worth living. Neither reason, he predicts, will persuade the jury. But the passage is ambiguous: does the phrase "this is how things stand" apply only to the second explanation, or to the first one as well? Socrates' promise that he will tell the jury "the whole truth" (17b) obliges us to accept both explanations,[50] but we must consequently acknowledge that "the whole truth" is intrinsically complex. The truth is that Socrates both chooses the life of philosophy, *and* is called to this life by the god; his philosophical eros is fully coincident with his religious duty. Socratic philosophizing – the pursuit of wisdom and of the good of the soul that, as Socrates comes to understand, in itself constitutes the best life for a human being – blends seamlessly with Socratic piety, and it is impossible to say precisely where one ends and the other begins.

Socrates correctly senses that the jurors will be largely unpersuaded by "the whole truth." Theirs are simply not the ears for his mouth. But was it reasonable to believe that they *might* have been persuaded? And if they had been, could they have successfully emulated Socrates? We saw in the preceding chapter that Ḥoni was, pedagogically speaking, a dead end. In spite of the fact that the Gemara calls

[50] As Corey 2005 also maintains (215).

him a "rabbi," his greatness derived from a relationship with God that was irreproducible because it could not be understood, much less transmitted through teaching. Plato's dialogues are in themselves sufficient proof that Socrates is a far more promising teacher than Ḥoni. We have furthermore dispelled the worry that Socrates' relationship to the god at Delphi would turn out to be as unintelligible as God's deference to Ḥoni, for Socrates largely demystifies this relationship by offering a clear explanation of the god's purpose in singling him out. But these observations do not settle the question whether Socratic philosophizing is on some level sui generis – a class of which there is only one member. This would be the case if, for example, the legendary intensity and focus Socrates brings to philosophizing are a consequence of his relationship to the god or of his *daimonion* – for just as the *daimonion* is unique to Socrates, only Socrates has been called to philosophy by the god.[51] In that event, the virtues and characteristic activities of philosophy as Socrates displays them could be imitated and cultivated by others – but only up to a point.

While the question we have just opened up is extremely important, the evidence presented by Plato is insufficient to answer it decisively. This is because the reproducibility of Socratic philosophizing is an existential rather than a theoretical issue. In the last analysis, we must find the answer in our own personal responses to the dialogues. For it is only by trying to follow Socrates' example that one can determine whether, and to what extent, it is possible to do so.

Let us therefore shift our focus to a slightly different set of issues. Plato attempts to motivate his readers to live the examined life of philosophy. In comparison to the dialogues, does the Talmud have any advantage in achieving *its* pedagogical goal of promoting the life of *talmud Torah*? At *Apology* 37e–38a, Socrates emphasizes the coincidence of the life of reflection and inquiry with the life to which he has been called by the god. Perhaps the first thing to be said is that this

[51] In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades relates that, on campaign with the army, Socrates once stood "looking into" and "thinking" about some problem from one sunrise to the next (220c–d). Cf. the discussion at Bokser 1985, 44–51, of the treatment in the Mishnah and Tosefta of the question whether it is possible to teach students how to achieve the proper concentration in prayer. At *Republic* 496c, Socrates notes that his "divine sign" (*daimonion sēmeion*) has "perhaps occurred in some one other man, or no other, before."

coincidence is well known within the Jewish tradition. For the rabbis, the duty of studying Torah is universal, and may be deduced from the obligation of every Jew to adhere to God's law. "Whoever has learning in Scripture, Mishnah, and right conduct will not quickly sin," the Mishnah declares, "and whoever does not have learning in Scripture, Mishnah, and right conduct has no share in society" (Kiddushin 1:10). Yet the rabbis also recognize that the study and practice of Torah are supremely choiceworthy in and of themselves. "A person should always occupy himself in the study of Torah and in the practice of religious deeds, even not for their own sake," Rav is alleged to have said, "for, from doing them not for their own sake, he eventually will come to do them for their own sake" (BT Sotah 22B, Neusner trans).[52]

It is important to note Rav's implication that taking on the study and practice of Torah as a duty may be the only way for one to discover the intrinsically desirable character of these activities. In explaining that what he once perceived as his religious duty – the practice of "examin[ing] myself and others" and "mak[ing] speeches every day concerning virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking" (38a) – eventually became the object of his free and deliberate choice, Socrates seems to confirm Rav's insight about one important way in which human beings learn what is good. Indeed, there are a great many activities whose value is fully apparent only to those who have engaged in them for some time. But Rav's remark also underscores one apparent advantage of the rabbinic education of the Talmud in comparison to the Socratic education of Plato's dialogues. If the clear superiority of philosophy to other ways of life is evident only to those who *already* philosophize, there seems to be no satisfactory answer to the question of how to convince human beings to begin examining themselves and inquiring into virtue. By his own account, after all, Socrates was not himself initially persuaded to philosophize by another philosopher, but prompted to undertake this activity by a god. Like the classical Hebrew prophets, Socrates was furthermore "called" individually, and in a set of circumstances that is highly unlikely to be repeated.[53] Judaism, however, calls a whole

[52] Cf. BT Arakhin 11A, where Psalms 19:9, "The precepts of the LORD are just, rejoicing the heart," is interpreted as a reference to the joys of studying Torah.

[53] Cf. *Republic* 496c, where Socrates tells Glaucon that he has come to philosophy and "tasted how sweet and blessed a possession it is" because of his *daimonion*.

people to assume the obligations of living in accordance with the Torah, and does so at all times and places. Judaism thus provides what looks, at least initially, like a far better solution to the problem of philosophical education than Socrates is able to discover.

Rabbinic Judaism in particular has historically promoted habits of thought and action that enable more than just the few to understand something of what the Talmud teaches about the blessedness of the sages. The rabbis never wished to isolate themselves, but actively sought communal leadership. Because they desired "to transform all Jews into 'Israel' as they understood and defined it," they also attempted to bring as many students as possible into the academies. To this end, they eagerly recruited rich and poor alike, and made special provision for the support of the latter.[54] In these ways, rabbinic Judaism from its inception made becoming a sage an object of aspiration for ordinary people, and thus prepared a fertile cultural ground for the reception of the Talmud. Plato's dialogues, by contrast, repeatedly underscore the difficulties Socrates and others experience in attempting to persuade nonphilosophers of the superiority of the philosophically examined life. In the *Republic*, Socrates laments the fact that in actual human communities, most philosophically inclined natures are corrupted, while those few that are able to "keep company with philosophy in a way that's worthy" grow up spontaneously, like weeds (496b, 520b; cf. 497b). The solution Socrates proposes is to construct a community – the Kallipolis, or "noble and beautiful city" – that is ruled by philosopher-kings. Unlike all actually existing cities, the Kallipolis would intentionally seek to produce philosophers, employing an educational system that uses a judicious combination of playfulness and compulsion in order to achieve this end.[55] Significantly, the social and political structure that makes this education possible would have to rest on a religious myth, the so-called Noble Lie (414d–15c). But just as Socrates fails to convince the jury that the unexamined life is not worth living, the case for

[54] Neusner 1964–69, 3.102, 131–33. On the democratic character of the academies, see Ginzberg 1928, 50–51. Ginzberg observes that "the first communal duty [of the rabbis] as well as the highest … was to provide for the broadest possible dissemination of a knowledge of Jewish literature among the members of the community" (63).

[55] Howland 1998a, esp. 652–55.

such a city falls apart because it presupposes that nonphilosophers can be persuaded that philosophers are more fit to rule than they are.[56] Barring some highly unlikely stroke of fortune (499b–d), the Kallipolis must remain a city that exists in speech, but not in deed. And this means that philosophers will have to continue to spring up independently of the intentions of the communities in which they live.

As the *Republic* and the *Apology* indicate, a major part of Plato's approach to the problem of bringing people to philosophy was to write dialogues that explore this problem while introducing readers to the charismatic figure of Socrates. Beyond this, Plato gave philosophy a modest institutional presence in Athens by founding the Academy, a forerunner to the rabbinical academies of late antiquity as well as to the modern university. In this Academy, which consisted of a grove in a public park and a garden with some houses, Plato met and conversed with a small number of students, most of whom seem to have been young men.[57] These he taught a "method of enquiry" into a range of subjects (including metaphysics, logic, and mathematics) rather than "a fixed body of doctrine," thus bequeathing his successors a "fairly distinctive, though still quite open-ended, intellectual tradition."[58] Plato's efforts as a teacher and writer have in one sense been enormously successful: "academic" or university education is widespread, and, thanks to dialogues like the *Apology*, Socrates is commonly regarded as a leading intellectual hero – if not *the* leading intellectual hero – of the Western tradition. Yet while Socrates' glorious literary afterlife has produced almost universal admiration for his speeches and deeds, we frequently admire what we do not ourselves practice. Although Plato has certainly done a better job of making philosophy respectable to nonphilosophers than the historical Socrates did, it is not clear that his dialogues have proved to be any more effective than his teacher's pedagogical methods in promoting the genuinely philosophical examination of human existence. Indeed,

[56] It also presupposes that the first philosopher-king can be persuaded to rule. I argue elsewhere that neither of these conditions can be fulfilled unless the city in speech already exists (Howland 1998a, 656).

[57] Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Plato* 3.46 (quoted at Dillon 2003, 13) names sixteen disciples of Plato, including two women.

[58] Dillon 2003, 16, 29.

if what is at stake is pedagogical effectiveness at the highest level, the question has perhaps already been settled: the two greatest exemplars of Socratic philosophizing are arguably Plato and Xenophon, men who actually spent time in the company of Socrates.

What of the Talmud? The closest equivalent in Jewish life to the Socratic philosopher is the rabbinic sage who embodies the dynamic and creative values of Torah, respectfully exercising full intellectual partnership with earlier generations of rabbis in applying and developing the tradition of *talmud Torah*.[59] If producing and sustaining a community of such sages is indeed the highest achievement of the Talmudic education, then the Talmud has, over the many centuries since its completion, been remarkably successful.[60] But as we are reminded by recent criticisms of the forms that spirituality has assumed in the world of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy,[61] pedagogical power does not inhere in the text alone. For no written work can communicate a teaching that its readers are unprepared to receive.

[59] Cf. Hartman 1997, esp. 6–8.

[60] In the modern era, this is particularly true of the traditional Ashkenazic communities that were destroyed in the Holocaust. See Ginzberg 1928, 63–67.

[61] See Soloveitchik 1994 with Berkovits 2002, 89–102.

4

Fathers and Sons

Ḥoni HaMe'aggel, as we saw in Chapter 2, poses a kind of Talmudic riddle. Presented in Ta'anit 3 as a curious combination of prophet and rabbi, he is both a "son" to God and a "father" to his disciples and to the people Israel – a protector and savior of the community because of his mysterious closeness to the Lord. But for all its praise of Ḥoni, the Gemara makes clear just what is missing in his life: the genuine partnership and friendship that can take root and grow only between equals. This is the lesson the Gemara draws from Ḥoni's inability to make himself known to the rabbis of the academy, a detail that stands as Ta'anit's last word on this heroic but ultimately lonely man. "Either companionship or death," Rava brusquely concludes (23A, II.121) – implying that a solitary life is not worth living, and that it is in the academy that the human potential for meaningful friendship is most fully realized.

For the rabbis, academic life binds human beings with each other and with God in relationships that have distinct filial and paternalistic elements.[1] At the highest level, however, the rabbis are – or aspire to be – a community of equals.[2] This is the community of

[1] Neusner (1964–69) notes that, for the disciple, the rabbinic master took the place of the father: "The father brought the son into the world, but the master would lead him into the world to come. Whatever honor was due the father was all the more so owing to the master" (5.162).

[2] The caveat is necessary given that relationships within the rabbinic academies, as in modern academic settings, often deteriorated into competition and hostility. See Rubenstein 2003, esp. 54–79.

sages jointly engaged in study. To become a sage, one must first have learned at the feet of a master; to be a sage means also to be a master to one's own disciples. But the point of this educational system is not to perpetuate a hierarchy of academic domination and servitude. It is rather to produce rabbis capable of the sort of shared inquiry and dialogue that is recorded in the Talmud. At this level of achievement, human beings are partners in the study of Torah not only with one another, but also with God – for the Gemara boldly declares that He, too, engages every day in *talmud Torah* (BT Avodah Zarah 3B; cf. BT Gitin 6B), and even occasionally yields to the arguments of His rabbinic "children" (BT Bava Metzia 59B). While each sage brings his own special skills and insights to the community of *talmud Torah*, they all hold an equal stake in this intellectual community, because they all reproduce the image of God in the sanctifying activity of study.

SOCRATIC PATERNALISM AND THE PROMISE OF COMMUNITY

Both the paternalism of the rabbinic master-disciple relationship and the Talmudic vision of a community of teaching and learning are reflected in the Platonic dialogues, although with some significant differences. This becomes clear if one considers the way in which the dialogues surrounding Socrates' last days employ the images of "father" and "son" to characterize his relationship to the Athenians. In the *Apology*, Socrates states that his work on behalf of the god has caused him to neglect his family (23b). He has, in effect, made the Athenians his family: having left his private affairs "uncared for," he tells the jurors that he has "always done your business, going to each of you privately like a father or an older brother, persuading you to care for virtue" (31b). In speaking like a father or an older brother, Socrates employs shame to chastise his interlocutors for neglecting the condition of their souls (cf. 29d–e). But his paternalism differs from that of the rabbis because it explicitly extends only as far as his divinely appointed work as a moral and intellectual gadfly (cf. 30e–31a). Once Socrates succeeds in awakening others to the examination of life, he does not – in spite of popular perceptions – go on to play the role of the wise master who dishes out severe discipline and occasional

pearls of insight to his acolytes.[3] In the *Apology*, he denies ever having had "students" (*mathētai*) or being anyone's "teacher" (*didaskalos*: 33a), and even the admirers who are present when he is executed are referred to simply as his "friends" (*epitēdēoi*: *Phaedo* 58c). This terminology is consistent with Socrates' characterization of himself in the *Theaetetus* as a midwife of souls, a role in which he assists others in articulating or "giving birth" to their own understanding of things through question and answer in philosophical dialogue (148e–51d).

I am not suggesting that Socrates ever dispenses entirely in his pedagogical relationships with the sort of intellectual and moral paternalism that one finds in the rabbinic academies. On the contrary, it is obvious in the Platonic dialogues that he is philosophically superior to all of his interlocutors, most of whom are young men, and that he exercises a high degree of control over the conversations in which he engages.[4] Perhaps it should also be said that Socrates' behavior is neither unreasonable nor inconsistent; a midwife, after all, must know enough about giving birth to guide the labor of body or soul toward the most fruitful outcome.[5] In any case, Socrates differs from the rabbis in that his paternalism is largely covert. Yet his ultimate goal is the creation of a philosophical community in which each member has an equal share. Like the masters of the rabbinic academies, Socrates aims to initiate and nourish genuinely philosophical dialogue, which is by definition a cooperative effort of two or more people who come together as partners in the search for wisdom. Occasionally, the Platonic dialogues even give us a glimpse of what such a community might look like – as in the partnership of inquiry that coalesces briefly around Socrates in the Piraeus, finding expression in the free-flowing all-night conversation of the *Republic*.[6] This is a vision of intellectual partnership that Ḥoni seems never to have entertained.

[3] This is the impression created by Aristophanes' *Clouds*. See the overview at Howland 2004a, 13–15.

[4] Cf. *Republic* 487b–c, where Adeimantus compares Socrates' skill in directing an argument toward a desired outcome with that of clever players of the board game *pettos* (which appears to have been something like checkers).

[5] Socrates' midwifery of souls also includes the ability to test the truth and fruitfulness of his interlocutors' ideas (*Theatetetus* 151c–e). For an extended discussion of the midwife image in the context of Socrates' relationship with the brilliant young mathematician Theaetetus, see Howland 1998b, 76–91.

[6] See Howland 2004a, 34–35, 37, 68.

If we track the images of "father" and "son" in the Platonic dialogues a bit further, we find that they apply also to Socrates' characterization of his relationship to the laws (*nomoi*) of Athens. In Plato's *Crito*, which depicts a conversation that takes place in the prison where Socrates awaits execution, Socrates rebuffs his friend Crito's attempt to encourage him to escape. At one point, Socrates speaks on behalf of the laws of the city. The laws tell Socrates that he is their "offspring and slave"; just as he did not contradict his father (*patēr*) when he chastised him, beat his father when he beat him, or "do any other such thing" to his father, so he must not do violence to his "fatherland [*patris*] and the laws," but must either persuade his city and fatherland (as he has already failed to do in court) or "revere" and "obey" them (50e–51c). Socrates' argument in the *Crito* establishes that, in addition to being a "father" and "older brother" of the Athenians at the behest of the god, he sees himself as a "son" of the laws.

The obvious problem this raises is that Socrates must serve two masters at once: the laws of Athens and the god who commands him to philosophize. What is more, we already know that he refuses to disobey the god, and so must submit to the punishment of the laws. One attractive solution to this problem is to understand Socrates' relationship to the laws in terms of the image of the adopted child that he employs when he speaks of the potential philosopher at *Republic* 537e–38c. The adopted child, he implies in that passage, owes much to his adoptive parents; these nonbiological but legal parents – who represent the *nomoi* of the community in which the child has been raised – have nurtured him and shaped his character. Yet he does not owe them everything, for it is his birth parents who have given him life, together with his natural endowment of physical, intellectual, and emotional capabilities.[7] This image suggests that Socrates can – at least in principle – do justice to the written and unwritten laws of Athens, even if his allegiance to the spirit of justice trumps his observance of the letter of the law.[8]

[7] Cf. Chapter 1, 69–70.

[8] Thus when he defies the command of the Athenian oligarchs to arrest Leon of Salamis, and later stands up to the democracy when the people wish to try the admirals of Arginousae en masse (*Apology* 32a–e), he refuses on the ground of justice to do what may in fact have been lawful in a technical sense. See Chapter 1, note 149.

In the last analysis, the image of the laws as parents in the *Crito*, like the comparable image in the *Republic*, articulates a problem rather than a solution. Socrates serves the god by philosophizing, and he will do so as long as he draws breath; this much is clear. In philosophizing, however, he seeks not merely to uncover what is by nature, but to understand, and to reflect in his speeches and deeds, the proper relationship between nature and custom. As we shall see, negotiating this complex relationship – which in Socrates' case means serving the god and seeking wisdom while simultaneously doing justice to his city and its citizens – is a major theme of the *Euthyphro*.

Of all the dialogues surrounding Socrates' last days, it is also in the *Euthyphro* that the theme of paternalism is most richly developed. One fruitful way to enter into the meaning and significance of this dialogue is therefore to approach it as a drama that focuses on fathers and sons, both in a literal sense and as an image of basic relationships that link human beings with one another, with their shared traditions, and with their gods.

EUTHYPHRO, SOCRATES, AND THE FATHERS OF ATHENS

We begin with a brief synopsis of the *Euthyphro*. With the dialogue as a whole in view, we will be prepared to focus more closely on the interplay between its action and its argument.

The first part of the dialogue (2a–5a) establishes the dramatic context from which the subsequent discussion about piety emerges. When Euthyphro asks Socrates why he isn't in Lyceum (a suburb of Athens where he can usually be found conversing with young men in a place of public exercise),[9] he explains that he has come to the Portico of the King Archon to answer the indictment of Meletus, and gives a brief description of the charges he faces.[10] Euthyphro is sympathetic. He opines that, in prosecuting Socrates, Meletus "begins to do ill to the city, starting from the hearth" (3a).[11] He attributes

[9] See West and West 1984, 41 n. 4.

[10] Socrates begins by discussing the corruption charge, although the official indictment seems to have mentioned the impiety charge first (cf. *Apology* 24b–c with Chapter 3, note 3). Corrupting the young is in Socrates' eyes evidently a more serious issue than not paying due reverence to the gods of the city.

[11] Burnet (1924, 93) interprets "the hearth" to mean "the heart of the state." Euthyphro refers to the hearth again at 4b–c, and Socrates makes an oblique

Meletus's hostility toward Socrates to his talk about the *daimonion* that occasionally comes to him; Socrates is subject to persecution as a result of the envy he incurs because of his special relationship to, and understanding of, things divine. Euthyphro, too, claims to be a victim of this sort of envy; he is laughed at and thought mad when he uses his powers of divination to foretell the future. In fact, his own relatives regard him as mad because of what he is doing this very day at the office of the King Archon: he is indicting his father for murder. Socrates, too, is taken aback at this news. While Euthyphro's behavior violates Greek norms of filial respect, he explains to Socrates that his father has incurred religious pollution, which can be expunged only through legal action. Those who object to the indictment do not understand "how the divine stands in regard to the pious [*to hosion*] and the impious [*to anosion*]" (4e), and it is his superior understanding of this subject that sets him apart from others.

Having heard that Euthyphro has expert knowledge of piety, Socrates proposes to be taught by him, and he is happy to oblige. His teaching, and Socrates' examination of it, take up the second part of the dialogue (roughly 5a–11e). Euthyphro agrees that there is some one *idea* or *eidos*, some "look" or "form," that all pious actions possess; it is this essential character of piety that he will teach Socrates. At first, Euthyphro misunderstands what Socrates wants. He states that what he is doing now in prosecuting his father is pious, but this is merely a single instance of piety; Socrates is looking for a definition that will cover all instances. After this false start, Euthyphro proclaims that "what is dear to the gods [*prosphiles*, what the gods "love" or "feel affection for"] is pious, and what is not dear is impious" (6e–7a). Socrates points out that, according to Euthyphro (who follows the mythical tradition on this point), the gods quarrel; different gods regard different things as pious. Euthyphro consequently amends his definition: "the pious is whatever all the gods love [*philōsin*]... [and] whatever all the gods hate [*misōsin*], is impious" (9e).

Socrates now presses Euthyphro on *why* the gods love what they love: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved?" (10a). Does the brute fact that the gods happen

reference at *Apology* 36d to the sacred hearth of the Athenians. I discuss both passages later in this section.

to love or hate certain actions make these actions pious? Or do the gods love what they know to be pious, and hate what they know to be impious? In the former case, which accurately describes the Greek deities as they are portrayed in the mythical tradition, the gods' passions determine what is pious; in the latter, their knowledge of what is pious determines their passions. At stake is the nature of the gods as well as our proper relationship to them. Are the souls of the gods ruled by desire, or intellect? If the former, all we need to know in order to do what is pious – and all we *can* know – is what the gods want from us. If the latter, they want what they want because of the good they perceive in it. There is thus a rational justification for what they ask of us – a justification that we, too, can hope to comprehend and appreciate.

Unfortunately, Euthyphro is hardly able to understand Socrates' question, much less answer it. In the third and final part of the dialogue (11e–16a), Socrates begins to guide him toward a more adequate definition of piety than he has yet managed to come up with. Prompted by Socrates, Euthyphro proposes that the pious is part of the just. More specifically, it is that part of the just which concerns the care or service (*therapeia*; compare our word "therapy") of the gods, the other part being the *therapeia* of human beings (12e). Socrates finds this promising. In serving the gods we assist them in some "wholly noble work" (13e), but what *is* this work? Unable to answer, Euthyphro states that piety is praying and sacrificing in a way that gratifies the gods. He thus comes round once again, as Socrates points out, to his earlier view that the pious is what is dear to the gods. Despite Socrates' pleas, Euthyphro is no longer willing to continue the discussion, and the dialogue ends.

We, too, will now circle back to the first part of the *Euthyphro*, where we may begin to pick up the threads of the dialogue's leading themes.

Euthyphro explains to Socrates that he is bringing a legal accusation of murder against his "very old" father, an action he claims to be necessary in order to purify his household. His father, he maintains, has incurred religious pollution (*miasma*) through the death of a laborer whom he tied up and subsequently neglected; the man had to be restrained after killing one of the family's slaves in a drunken fit of anger (4a–d). Two observations suggest themselves here. First, Euthyphro's prosecution of his father dramatically anticipates the

prosecution of Socrates, for he, too, is an old man who has allegedly defiled the community by his behavior. Socrates' accusers say that he is "most polluted" (*miarōtatos*: *Apology* 23d); in their eyes, his impiety is a contamination that is particularly likely to infect the most impressionable Athenians (cf. 2c–3b). Second, although Euthyphro's concern with ritual purity accords with the tradition (which sanctifies the family as well as the city, and obligates both fathers and sons to uphold the cult of the household), his behavior reflects a shocking religious extremism. Euthyphro categorically asserts that piety requires one to take legal action against the killer, whoever he may be, provided that he "shares your hearth and table" (4b–c). But while the tradition endorses legal action as a means of purification,[12] murder charges were normally brought by a member of the victim's family.[13] More important, the household religion that Euthyphro fancies himself to be defending was a very ancient cult of ancestor worship, centered on the hearth and presided over by the father of the family, in whose priestly office "the whole religion reside[d]".[14] In alleging that his father is ritually unfit to discharge this office – or even to share in meals prepared at the ancestral hearth – Euthyphro not only usurps his father's authority in matters of domestic religion, but also directly attacks the sacred community of the family. In spite of Euthyphro's opinion of Meletus, it is *he* who literally uses the courts to strike at the hearth (cf. 3a).

Under the circumstances, Euthyphro's behavior is nothing short of "an outrageous violation of the unwritten canons of filial piety" in ancient Athens.[15] It is no surprise that his relatives regard his behavior

[12] MacDowell (1978, 110) notes that "pollution [*miasma*] was a kind of supernatural infection, which was liable to spread from the killer to others who consorted with him.... So it was considered very important, for practical religious reasons, that legal action should be taken against anyone believed to be guilty of homicide."

[13] This would "probably [be] the closest adult male relative" of the victim. As MacDowell acknowledges, it is uncertain whether the law actually forbade nonrelatives to bring a case of homicide (MacDowell 1978, 59, 111). Burnet (1924) maintains that it did, and that Euthyphro's case was therefore probably dismissed (102, 104). In any event, Athens had no equivalent to the office of public prosecutor; many lawsuits were therefore brought by citizen "volunteers" (MacDowell 1978, 53–54).

[14] Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 78, 81 (cf. 7–31); see also Zaidman and Pantel 1992, 80–81. The cult of the family incorporated the worship of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, as well as the household divinities.

[15] McPherran 1996, 32.

as impious (4d–e). Socrates, who initially assumes that the dead man must have been a member of Euthyphro's family (4b), is also taken aback when he learns that he is prosecuting his own father:

> Heracles! Doubtless, Euthyphro, the many are ignorant of whatever is the right way [to proceed]. For I don't think it belongs to just anyone to do this correctly, but rather to one who is indeed already far advanced in wisdom. (4a–b)

This is a typical Socratic setup, and Euthyphro takes the bait: "Far indeed, by Zeus," he brags. More significant for our purposes, Socrates indicates from the first that he will by no means encourage the filial aggression of this would-be Pheidippides. On the contrary, he clearly intends to warn Euthyphro that his radical departure from the traditional norms of piety is unjustifiable in the absence of a strongly compelling argument. Socrates thus expresses just the sort of moral conservatism we might expect from one who is acutely aware of his own ignorance.

But Euthyphro is heedless of Socrates' warning, because he supposes that he is indeed wise in matters of piety. In the sequel, however, he inadvertently reveals that his alleged expertise in religious issues has little to do with why he is indicting his father. The story Euthyphro tells about the death of the laborer makes it clear that his behavior is motivated not by his understanding, but by emotion, and in particular by his anger and resentment against his father.

Euthyphro explains that when his family was farming on the island of Naxos, which was at one time under Athenian control, "a laborer of mine" got drunk and slit the throat of a slave.[16] Euthyphro's father tied up the murderer and threw him into a ditch while he sent to inquire of the exegete, an expounder of Athenian religious law, how he should proceed.[17] Naxos is roughly one hundred miles by sea from Athens, so it would have taken several days to receive the exegete's

[16] Although the dramatic date of the *Euthyphro* is 399 (or at the very earliest 400), this incident must have occurred prior to the relinquishment of Athenian allotments of land on Naxos at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404. See Burnet 1924, 105, which also discusses the legal reasons why prosecutions would have been delayed for several years after the reestablishment of the democracy in 403.

[17] The exegetes were specialists who "possessed a unique knowledge of the [religious] laws" and might be consulted "on points of ritual or to lay down rules of purification, for example in the case of a homicide" (Zaidman and Pantel 1992, 52).

response. In the meantime, because his father "paid little attention" to his captive and "showed little care" for him, he ultimately died "from hunger and cold and his bonds" (4c–d). These details suggest the deeper psychological truth that it is Euthyphro who feels neglected and uncared for by his father. In the first place, he is directly and personally invested in the events he relates: while it is a slave belonging to the family who gets his throat slit, it is Euthyphro's laborer that his father ties up and throws into a ditch. Still more important, Euthyphro fancies himself to be an expert in matters of piety. What need, then, to consult an exegete? In mistreating his man while simultaneously ignoring his qualifications on the very matter concerning which he seeks outside advice, Euthyphro's father seems to have neglected him twice over. Given Euthyphro's inflated sense of self-worth, together with his sensitivity to the fact that people laugh at him and think him mad when he puts his knowledge of piety into practice (3c, 4a), his father's behavior must have been an especially harsh blow to his ego.[18]

Having heard Euthyphro's story, Socrates asks him whether his knowledge of piety is really so precise that he needn't fear acting impiously in pursuing his lawsuit. After Euthyphro insists that it is, Socrates proposes that he become his student; this will help him, he claims, in defending himself at his own trial (4e–5b). One suspects, however, that Socrates' real motive is to teach Euthyphro that he is ignorant of that about which he claims to be wise. Be that as it may, the *Euthyphro* furnishes a concrete example of precisely the sort of examination of his fellow citizens that Socrates describes in the *Apology*, and it furthermore shows that Socratic cross-examination can be of immediate moral and practical significance. Euthyphro is never able to explain what piety is, and so cannot justify taking his father to court. Plato gives us no indication whether Euthyphro takes this point to heart, much less whether it ultimately deters him from

[18] Euthyphro's longing for distinction emerges clearly a little later, when Socrates asks him if he possesses such "precise knowledge" that he can be sure he is not acting impiously in prosecuting his father. Euthyphro responds that he would not "be any different from the many human beings" if he did not have this kind of knowledge (4e–5a). The unarticulated and unexamined assumption behind this claim is that he *must* be "different from the many." Cf. 3b, where he suggests that the many are easily misled.

pursuing the indictment; we know only that, after advancing several definitions of piety that prove to be inadequate, Euthyphro claims to be "in a hurry to go somewhere" and evidently rushes off (15e). Yet this much is clear: Socrates, allegedly a corrupter who turns the young against their fathers, proves in refuting Euthyphro to be just the opposite – the defender of an Athenian father, and of the filial respect he is owed by custom.

But Socrates is a complex figure. In exposing the emptiness of Euthyphro's "wisdom," he supports Athenian *nomos* in one respect while attacking it in another. Socrates is able to do both of these things simultaneously because Euthyphro is only partially antinomian; apart from his insistence on purifying his hearth and home by prosecuting his father, his understanding of religious ritual and myth is largely conventional. In particular, he unreflectively echoes the poets' representation of the gods as fractious and self-indulgent beings driven by powerful passions who need constantly to be propitiated by sacrifice. Thus, his "proof" that he is proceeding correctly in indicting his father (5d–6a) rests on the example of Zeus, who (according to Hesiod) ascended to the kingship of the gods by attacking his father, Cronos, when the latter attempted to swallow his own children.[19] For his part, Socrates confesses that he receives these kinds of stories "with annoyance," and even speculates that his obvious vexation at such tales may explain the indictment against him (6a).[20] The gods, he goes on to imply in various ways, are better understood as lovers of the spectacle of truth who are governed by reason – a view that is, not coincidentally, highly congenial to the practice of philosophy.

Socrates' critical scrutiny of Euthyphro's self-proclaimed expertise on matters of piety is at bottom a philosophical reflection on, and

[19] *Theogony*, lines 453–506, 617–819 (Hesiod 1914, 112–16, 124–38). Cronos had earlier castrated his own father, Uranos, when the latter tried to do away with *his* children.

[20] Cf. *Republic* 377d–78b, where Socrates criticizes the myths of Homer and Hesiod about the intergenerational violence among the gods. Socrates objects to these tales not because they are false, but because they are ignoble, and so should not be told to "thoughtless" children. At 378b, he observes that these stories could encourage a young man to "punish the injustices of his father in every way," because he "would be doing just what the first and greatest of the gods did." As Burnet (1924) notes, the philosopher Xenophanes and the rhetorician Isocrates expressed similar criticisms of Homer and Hesiod (114–15).

correction of, the Greek religious tradition as such. This point has important implications. Although Socrates is an old man, he criticizes a key part of the ancestral ways of Athens. These criticisms are tempered, however, by the fact that Homer and Hesiod also offer support for his own account of the gods as lovers of justice, just as the institution of the oracle supports his attempt to establish that critical reflection has an essential role in piety.[21] What is more, Greek *nomos* is flagrantly incoherent: while it insists that sons respect and obey their fathers, it simultaneously embraces a religious tradition that seems to legitimize filial rebelliousness. From this perspective, the corruption of the young that the would-be defenders of the fathers of Athens wish to lay at the feet of Socrates is a feature of the ancestral tradition itself.[22]

It is by now evident that there is a certain resemblance not only between Euthyphro's father and Socrates, but also between Socrates and Euthyphro. Euthyphro, who claims to be a seer (*mantis*: 3e), asserts that both he and Socrates are subject to envy and slander because they are religious innovators who enjoy special access to things divine (3b–c).[23] While we already have reason to doubt Euthyphro's claim to extraordinary knowledge, a more significant point of comparison between him and Socrates emerges only later, at Socrates' trial. We saw earlier that Euthyphro's indictment of his father amounts to an attack on the sacred community of the family and the cult of ancestor worship. But in the *Apology*, Socrates, too, seems to strike at the "hearth" or center of religious life – the religious life not of the family, but of the city.

After Socrates has been convicted on all charges, he has an opportunity to propose a suitable punishment. He introduces his proposal by reminding the jurors of his service to the Athenians. He went to each man privately, he explains, "attempting to persuade each of you not to care for any of his own things until he should care for himself … nor

[21] See Chapter 3, 113–14, and Chapter 6, 196 with note 15.

[22] Given the *Euthyphro*'s focus, it seems dramatically fitting that the ancestral laws of Draco and Solon were apparently inscribed on stone tablets at the Portico of the King Archon, where the dialogue takes place (MacDowell 1978, 46–47).

[23] Euthyphro refers specifically to Socrates' assertion that he receives private communications from his *daimonion* (3b), a word that is echoed in the indictment's reference to his worshiping "new and strange divinities" (*daimonia kaina*) instead of the city's gods.

to care for the things of the city until he should care for the city itself" (*Apology* 36c). One of these "things of the city" is the ritual of daily sacred meals that played a central role in the Athenian civic religion. Consumed by "men chosen by the city … in the presence of the sacred fire and the protecting gods," these meals were prepared on the hearth located at the city altar in the building known as the Prutanieon.[24] Socrates' proposal is that he be selected to partake in these sacred meals. While this honor normally went to Olympic champions and the like, Socrates claims that he is more deserving than any victorious athlete: "for he [the athlete] makes you seem to be happy, but I make you be so; and he does not need sustenance, but I do need it" (36c–e). This deliberately provocative proposal forces us to think about the difference between seeming and being, particularly as regards care for oneself and for the city.[25] Is Socrates an enemy of the city? Or is Euthyphro correct in asserting that the one who *truly* "begins to do ill to the city, starting from the hearth" (3a) is Meletus – the man in whose name Socrates' accusers have filed their indictment, and who resembles both Socrates and Euthyphro in his apparent concern for men and gods?

MELETUS, SON OF THE CITY

Euthyphro correctly deduces that Socrates has come to the Portico of the King Archon as a defendant rather than as a prosecutor. The case against him, Socrates explains, is a *graphē* – a lawsuit that claims the defendant has injured the public.[26] When Euthyphro asks who is indicting him, Socrates explains that he isn't even acquainted with the man; he is, as it seems to him, "someone young … and unknown," and his name is Meletus (2a). But Socrates has much more to say when Euthyphro asks him *why* Meletus is taking him to court. His

[24] Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 138, 148.

[25] On Socrates' reasons for provoking the jurors, see Howland 2008.

[26] See Burnet 1924, 88, and West and West 1984, 41 n. 4. Euthyphro's case, by contrast, is a private lawsuit of the sort that alleges injury done to the prosecutor. But he too is appearing before the King Archon, who was involved in cases having to do with religious matters, because "homicide created a religious pollution … which would affect the whole community unless it were purged" (Burnet 1924, 83).

remarks on this topic deserve to be quoted in full, because they take us to the heart of the issues at stake in the *Euthyphro*:

> What sort [of indictment has Meletus brought]? Not an ignoble one, as it seems to me. For a young man to have come to know about such a big matter is no mean feat. For that one, as he maintains, knows in what way the young are being corrupted, and who are the ones corrupting them. And he may be someone wise [*sophos*], and, looking down upon my ignorance, he is coming to accuse me before the city as before his mother on the ground that I am corrupting those of his own age. And he alone among the politicians seems to me to begin correctly. For it is correct to care first for the young in order that they may be as excellent as possible, just as it is fitting for a good farmer to care first for the young plants, and after this for the others. And moreover, Meletus is perhaps first purging us, the corrupters of the young shoots, as he claims. Then, after this, it is clear that, after having taken care of the older ones, he will be responsible for the most and greatest good things for the city, as is likely to happen for one beginning from such a beginning. (2c–3a)

Socrates' description of Meletus is an outstanding example of his irony, which must not be confused with sarcasm. In Socrates' complex form of irony, "what is said both is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another."[27] In the quoted passage, Socrates seems to be serious when he says that it is correct to care first for the young, and that the knowledge Meletus claims about how to do so is both noble and difficult. Beyond this, the image of the young as plants and Meletus as a farmer reveals something important about the way Athens educates its future citizens. At the same time, Socrates' description of Meletus gently mocks the young man's pretensions, and points toward the fault lines along which his big claims ultimately break down.

Socrates does not conceal his impression that Meletus, whose name itself is a kind of political advertisement (the Greek word for "care" is *meletē*), is ambitious to be recognized as a benefactor of the city. But he also suggests that the young man is right to focus above all on the problem of corruption. We already know that Socrates decries the ethical and intellectual slackness of his fellow citizens, telling anyone he happens to meet that, instead of caring (*epimeloumenos*)

[27] Vlastos 1991, 31.

for money, reputation, and honor, he should care (*epimelēi*) and give thought to prudence, truth, and improving his soul (*Apology* 29d–e). What is more, Meletus does well to concern himself with the souls of the young; as Socrates remarks in the *Republic* when he criticizes the violent myths about the gods that nurses tell to little children, "the beginning is the most important part of every work" (377a). Nor is there reason to doubt the sincerity of Socrates' suggestion that, if Meletus could successfully purge or purify the city of corrupters, he would indeed have achieved "the greatest good" for the Athenians. But he also implicitly raises several serious problems with Meletus's understanding of, and approach to, the issue of corruption.

Socrates points first toward a basic difference between his accuser and himself: while Meletus acts like a man who is wise (*sophos*), Socrates admits that his own condition is one of ignorance (2c). What does Meletus claim to know, and how has he come to know it? Although he has apparently never even spoken with Socrates, he asserts that Socrates corrupts his age-mates. If Meletus knows what constitutes the corruption of human beings, he must also know what constitutes human excellence; his wisdom must embrace precisely the knowledge of virtue and vice at which Socrates himself aims (*Apology* 20b–c, 29d–30b, 38a). But how has he acquired this wisdom? Too young even to have grown a full beard (2b), he could not have had sufficient time to have learned it through philosophical inquiry. Assuming that Meletus is not a god – for if anyone is wise, it may be the gods (cf. *Symposium* 204a) – there is one other possibility that is suggested by the example of Euthyphro: perhaps he has obtained wisdom from the gods through prophecy. Socrates does not pursue this possibility, but instead points us in a different direction when he says that Meletus accuses him before the city "as before his mother." A dutiful son of the city, young Meletus speaks for the *patrioi nomoi*, the ancestral ways of Athens; his "wisdom" is nothing other than the civic tradition, handed down from generation to generation.

That Meletus understands himself to be defending the Athenian ancestral tradition is confirmed in the *Apology*, when Socrates pauses briefly during his speech in order to cross-examine him. Socrates first asks him who makes the young better. Meletus is initially dumbfounded by this question, which prompts Socrates to opine that the

man whose very name is "Caretaker" has in fact "never cared [*ouden memelēken*]" (24d). Having finally gathered his wits, Meletus insists that "the laws" and "all the Athenians" improve the young and make them "noble and good," while Socrates alone corrupts them.[28] In response to this assertion, Socrates points out that the many do not improve horses; rather, this is the work of the few who are skilled in the art of horsemanship. Doesn't the same also hold true, he asks, of "all the other animals"? When Meletus fails to reply to this question as well, Socrates observes that he has clearly given no thought to the young (24d–25c).

Returning to the *Euthyphro*, the analogy Socrates offers at 2d–3a nicely brings out the reason for Meletus's thoughtlessness. Socrates suggests that Meletus cares for the young as a farmer cares for plants. This is a very rich image. Farmers work with domesticated plants, which they grow for food and profit. The farmer seeks to produce a consistent crop; if he succeeds in doing so, all the plants of a given species will be more or less identical, and one will be as good as another. Like all political communities, Athens aims for the same kind of consistency in attempting to produce the sort of citizens that will best serve its ends; this is especially true of the democratic and egalitarian regime under which Socrates was tried and executed. Domesticated plants are passive, both because the end or goal they serve is determined by the farmer, and because they absorb whatever they are fed; in these ways, they image the pliability every political community looks for in the young, whom it hopes to cultivate according to its own specifications.[29] In ancient Greece, this process of cultivation or civic education, whereby the ancestral ways of the community – including traditional judgments about what is noble or base, praiseworthy or shameful, just or unjust – are established in the souls of the young (*hoi paides*) as the authoritative framework of thinking and feeling, is called *paideia*.

[28] Meletus makes it clear in this context that Socrates does so particularly by promoting impiety. He vehemently agrees that Socrates corrupts by teaching young men "not to acknowledge in accordance with *nomos* the gods the city acknowledges, but other, new and strange divinities" (26b). Cf. *Euthyphro* 3b.

[29] Cf. the *Republic*, where Socrates indicates that the future citizens of the city in speech will be tamed, molded, tuned, and dyed (375a–e, 377a–c, 411e–12a, 429d–30c).

Socrates' horticultural image indicates that the goal of cultivating good citizens through *paideia* is not identical with that of educating good human beings. While Socrates makes it clear that he seeks to learn, embody, and promote both the virtue of a human being *and* the virtue of a citizen (cf. *Apology* 20b), one suspects that Meletus has never thought about the difference between these forms of excellence. This is understandable, because he has – one is tempted to say, like any good Athenian – uncritically assimilated the perspective of the city. As the city sees it, the virtue of the young lies in their capacity easily to be molded and imprinted through *paideia*. Meletus himself gives good evidence of this essentially passive capacity in his simultaneously unthinking and spirited defense of the ancestral ways. Part of the farmer's art furthermore involves eliminating plants that take root on their own – the unwanted weeds that serve themselves, so to speak, in growing according to their own natures, and that thereby threaten to spoil the crop by making it stunted and bitter. Socrates is himself one of these weeds; as he says elsewhere, philosophers "take root [*emphuontai*, from *emphuō*, 'to implant'] spontaneously, against the will of the regime in each [city]" (*Republic* 520b; cf. 491b). In attempting to promote the examined life, Socrates threatens the mechanical and unreflective implantation of Athenian customs and conventions in the souls of the young; just to the extent that he succeeds in spurring young men to think for themselves, he helps to make them less than wholly compliant to the ways of their fathers.

There is, however, a profound contradiction in Meletus's behavior. Meletus conceives of himself as a benefactor and savior of the city, a sort of farmer in his solicitous care and protection of Athenian nurslings, but he is actually more like a plant. Farmers and plants are worlds apart: one is active, the other is passive; one rules, the other is ruled; one forms, while the other is informed. Meletus believes that he is thinking for himself when he is simply parroting the lessons he has passively absorbed since the time he was a young child; he is thoughtless not because he is a farmer, but because he has been well farmed. He supposes that the city's teaching is wisdom, although he has never questioned or inquired into this teaching. He is ignorant, but he thinks himself wise. His condition is so widespread among the Athenians – not to say among human beings in general – as to be pandemic. Like Euthyphro, and indeed like everyone Socrates

examines in the course of solving the riddle posed by the Delphic oracle, Meletus lacks self-knowledge. But this diagnosis does not go far enough. In a deeper sense, Meletus falls short of fully *being* a self – if by "self" we mean the active, reflective center of awareness and responsibility that is, or ought to be, the source of our speeches and deeds. And Socrates suggests that it is the self in this exemplary sense, the philosophically wakeful unity of mind and character that seeks to know what is good and to live up to what it knows, that is ultimately at stake in his indictment.

BEGINNING FROM THE BEGINNING: THE EROTIC AND PROPHETIC PHILOSOPHER

Socrates calls attention to the problem of the self when he asks Euthyphro to become his teacher. He humorously explains that this would allow him to defend himself no matter what Meletus thinks of Euthyhpro's teaching on piety. If Meletus finds his teaching agreeable, he'll drop his charges against Socrates; if not, he will indict Euthyphro "on the ground that he is corrupting the old men, me and his own father, by teaching me and admonishing and punishing him" (5b). What makes this idea so funny is that Socrates pretends he would have no responsibility whatsoever for the thoughts Euthyphro might put into his head. This would be true only if Socrates were utterly pliable both morally and intellectually, and in this regard as passive as a plant.[30] But his condition is neither the passive ignorance of a plant nor the active wisdom of a god. Well aware of his own ignorance, Socrates opens his mind to the world beyond him, but because his thoughts and actions are born of inquiry and deliberation, he takes full responsibility for them.

Socrates points more obliquely, but also more profoundly, toward the problem of the self in the remarks on Meletus quoted earlier. He does so by using a turn of phrase that strikingly emphasizes the problem of the beginning of things. "It is clear," he says, "that, after having taken care of the older ones, he [Meletus] will be responsible for the most and greatest good things for the city, as is likely to happen for

[30] In that case, Euthyphro could by the same token blame his ideas on someone else, and so on ad infinitum.

one beginning from such a beginning [*archēs arxamenōi*]" (3a). In the Greek, the last two words are both forms of the root *archē* (pl. *archai*), a word whose meaning ranges from "beginning" and "origin" (as in "archaeology," the study of ancient things) to "first cause," "ruling principle," and "sovereignty" (cf. "architect," a master builder who produces a blueprint that is followed by subordinates, and the Athenian officials called "archons"). As is suggested by the conjunction of verb and noun in this phrase, the problem of beginning has two parts: the act of beginning and the beginning itself. Socrates invites us to ask about both dimensions of this problem with respect to Meletus, Euthyphro, and himself. In what *way* does each of these men begin, and what is it in each that performs the act of beginning? *From what*, or in relation to what, does each begin? The first question is, broadly speaking, a psychological one: what activity of the soul or psyche is responsible for the act of beginning? The second question is, again speaking broadly, metaphysical: toward what does the soul look, and on what does it depend, as it begins?

In addressing these questions, we must keep in mind the picture of the soul that Socrates sketches elsewhere in the dialogues. In the *Republic*, Socrates divides the soul into three parts, intellect, spiritedness (*thumos*), and appetite, each of which is characterized by its own proper activities and desires.[31] Intellect aspires to learn, while appetite embraces corporeal replenishments and pleasures (439d). *Thumos* is Homer's word for a warrior's "heart"; it is the seat of anger, which is roused especially "when someone thinks he's being treated unjustly" (440c), as well as the part of the soul that strives for victory and glory. Likening the psyche to a political community, Socrates explains that intellect rules the well-ordered soul, employing spiritedness to keep the appetites in check. In disordered souls, intellect has been overthrown as the soul's *archē* – the origin and ruling principle of its activity – and serves merely as an instrument for the satisfaction of spiritedness or appetite. The extreme of disorder in soul and city alike is anarchy (*anarchia*), a condition of riotous unruliness owing to the total absence of a sovereign power.[32] Conversely, because

[31] While Socrates introduces the tripartite soul at 435c–41c, this discussion is highly provisional and is corrected as the dialogue develops. Roochnik 2003 explores this "dialectical" dimension of the *Republic* in detail.

[32] Some degree of disorder, however, seems to be endemic to the human soul. Socrates at one point depicts intellect as a man, spiritedness as a lion, and appetite

only the soul that is ordered to the ends of reason is (literally) unanimous, only this soul is a "self" in the exemplary and Socratic sense – a genuine *archē*, in every sense of the term, of its own speeches and deeds. Yet the internal order that graces the best and most noble souls is, paradoxically, a consequence of passionate desire. The truly reflective soul is acutely aware of its own deficiencies; it knows that it lacks something fundamental, but cannot say just what this is. When properly developed, this consciousness turns longing as such into a longing for wisdom, about which the soul can speak only in the voice of prophecy because it does not yet know with any assurance what wisdom is, or what it does for the one who possesses it. Indeed, it is not reason that Socrates singles out as the most distinctive characteristic of the philosopher, but eros – the honorable urge to learn that draws the soul outward and upward toward the light of truth (cf. *Republic* 474c–80a).

Eros is a desire that belongs to no single part of the soul, but rather to the soul as such.[33] In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates regularly associates eros with prophecy, and in particular with the distinctly philosophical sort of prophecy to which he himself lays claim. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes remarks that the soul of one in love "is not able to say, but divines and speaks oracles about what it wants" (192d). Later in the same dialogue, Socrates claims that his own knowledge of eros was taught to him by a priestess, Diotima of Mantinea – a city whose very name is constructed from the word "diviner" (*mantis*: 201d). He goes on to explain that eros, a *daimōn* that links the human and divine spheres and binds together the realm of becoming with that of being, is itself a lover of wisdom (*philosophon*: 204b); at the culmination of the erotic quest for wisdom, the soul is filled with a transformative vision of what he calls "the Beautiful," a vision of truth that finally allows the soul to give birth to genuine virtue and so to achieve its proper internal order (211d–12b). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' *daimonion* forbids him to break off a conversation about eros – which is either "a god or something divine" – until he purifies

as a many-headed monster (*Republic* 588e–89b). In order to subdue appetite, the man must first tame the lion, and the two must work together to somehow bring the monster under control – a daunting task, to say the least.

[33] Thus each part of the soul possesses its own erotic energy. For example, Socrates describes the tyrant as a man whose appetites are led by unbridled eros that is "stung to madness" by a multitude of pleasures (572e–73b).

himself of the offense he committed against it when he denigrated it in an earlier speech (242b–c, e). Socrates is able to understand his error because "the soul is somehow prophetic," and because he himself is a "seer" (*mantis*: 242c). In a playful etymology, Socrates derives the so-called mantic art (*mantikē*) from what men of old named the "manic art" (*manikē*: 244c–d). He then delivers a palinode, or song of recantation, in praise of the heaven-sent madness (*mania*) of eros (244a–57b). In this palinode, he once again presents philosophical eros – which grows and is nourished through dialogue – as the route to a well-ordered and blessed life (256a–b).[34]

What are we to make of Socrates' use of the language of prophecy in connection with eros? We have already observed that eros points toward the solution to the problem of the personally and politically destabilizing "restlessness of human desire [that] continually propels us forward"[35] – the problem of the merely partial satisfaction that we derive from fulfilling every other, merely discrete desire. This solution, as we noted in Chapter 1, consists in the philosophical understanding of the Good, "the beginning [*archē*] of the Whole" (*Republic* 511b) that Socrates supposes is both the terminus of the soul's deepest longing (cf. 490a–b) and the source of the order and intelligibility of the beings he refers to as Ideas or Forms.[36] The goodness of the order of being, in turn, makes it worthy of human imitation, which produces an image of this order in the internal organization of the philosophical soul (500b–c). There is, however, one problem with the foregoing account: Socrates himself is not fully in possession of the solution to the problem of desire. In particular, the Good is a subject about which Socrates – a mere lover of wisdom,

[34] In the palinode of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells a myth of the soul that equates philosophical learning with the recollection of the beings above the roof of the cosmos, a vision of which each human soul was vouchsafed before it was embodied (249b–c). Socrates tells a similar story in the *Meno* (81a–e) and in the Myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*; cf. also Timaeus's assertion that, prior to their incarnation, human souls tour the cosmos and view "the nature of the all" (*Timaeus* 41e). Note that, as images of philosophical learning, recollection and prophecy are isomorphic; they differ only with respect to whether our access to the truth is metaphorically represented as retrieval or anticipation.

[35] Roochnik 2003, 67.

[36] As that which "enables the Forms to fit with one another in the way that bests suits each and all of them," the Good makes possible the decorous arrangement of Forms into an ordered whole or *kosmos* (Lachterman 1989–90, 156–57).

and so not yet a wise man – claims to have only a kind of divinatory or prophetic understanding. What is genuinely good, he explains to Glaucon in the *Republic*, is "that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything." "Divining that it [the Good] is something," Socrates observes, "the soul is at a loss and is not able to grasp sufficiently whatever it is, and doesn't have a firm trust of the sort that it has concerning the other things, on account of which it fails to obtain any benefit it might have had from the other things." Without knowledge of the Good, he adds, "I divine that no one will adequately know the just and noble things."[37] "You divine beautifully," Glaucon responds (505d–06a).

As Socrates makes clear in the foregoing passage, his understanding of the Good is rooted in his observation of what people actually *do*. This is in keeping with his insistence on the harmony of speech and deed. If Socrates is correct in asserting that every soul desires and pursues what is genuinely good, it makes sense to ask what "the Good" is. Conversely, it would involve one in existential contradiction to proclaim (for example) that this question is meaningless.[38] However, Socrates is well aware that the fact of desire does not in itself prove the existence of the object of desire. This is one reason why he speaks of divination in connection with the Good. But his talk of divination and prophecy is not meant merely to emphasize our ignorance about the ends of desire, for Socrates also intends to express his sense of the soul's genuine, if limited, foreknowledge of the Good. Note that Socrates subsequently warns Glaucon not to be deceived by what he has to say about the Good (507a), a gesture that

[37] In the absence of this knowledge, the soul cannot fully achieve the internal order that allows each part to do its proper work and exhibit its proper excellence. Cf. 443c–44a, where Socrates indicates that justice is the harmonious arrangement of the parts of the soul and city.

[38] In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates exploits precisely this kind of existential contradiction in order to refute the teaching of the sophist Protagoras that knowledge is perception. As Socrates explains this teaching, there is no independent measure of the correctness of any perception; what I perceive to be good (for example) will also be bad, simply because someone else perceives it otherwise. It follows that "nothing is one, nor something, nor of any sort whatsoever" (152d). But what Protagoras denies in speech, he accepts in deed. Why, Socrates wonders, does the sophist encourage people to admire and reward him for his wisdom "as if he were a god," when his own theory obliterates the distinction between men and gods and makes the very notions of wisdom and philosophical conversation ridiculous (161c–e)?

would be meaningless in the absence of such foreknowledge. The soul, it would seem, is not without prophetic resources in judging philosophical speeches, even about the highest and most fundamental things.

Socrates' discussion of the Good suggests another reason why he employs the language of prophecy and divination in connection with philosophical eros: the ultimate object of philosophy is intrinsically mysterious and elusive. The Good is the unifying principle of human desire and action, "that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything." To know the Good is thus to know human life as a whole. But the Good is also responsible for the goodness of the Whole of which the soul is a part, and knowing the goodness of the Whole presupposes knowing the Whole *as* a whole.[39] This knowledge of the wholeness of the Whole, however, is necessarily imprecise compared to knowledge of the parts. This is because the Whole as such consists not in the specificity of things, which can be known in a theoretically rigorous manner, but in their integrity as an ensemble of heterogeneous elements.[40]

Perhaps the greatest mystery of all, however, is that philosophical progress toward wisdom is possible in the first place. Socrates' discussion of the Good in the *Republic* consists of three images of the Whole – the Sun, the Divided Line, and the Cave – that try to make sense of this fact. Both individually and collectively, these images teach that philosophy is made possible by the imaging relationships that bind together the Whole in general and the soul in particular. In the image of the Sun (507c–09b), Socrates draws an analogy between the visible sphere of becoming and the intelligible sphere of being. The light that shines forth from the sun illuminates material things

[39] Note that the erotic quest for knowledge of the Whole would be deeply unsatisfactory if the Whole itself were not good. To the extent that what is no longer appears to be good (as is the case in much modern and contemporary thought), the contemplation of what is ceases to be an intrinsically worthwhile activity.

[40] For further discussion see Strauss 1988, esp. 38–40. The beginnings of philosophy in the human soul are furthermore no less mysterious than its end or goal. In the *Republic*'s Myth of Er (614b–21b), Socrates points out that the philosopher alone is able to overcome the necessity of forgetfulness and the constraints of habituation that hold sway over other souls with respect to their choice of life, but he offers no explanation of this ability. Socrates thus acknowledges the actuality of philosophy, but fails to explain its possibility (cf. Howland 2004a, 155–60).

and activates the power of vision in the eye, while providing becoming and growth to the visible realm as a whole; just so, the truth that shines forth from the Good illuminates the intelligible things (the Ideas) and activates the power of knowing in the soul, while providing being and essence to the intelligible realm as a whole. The Divided Line (509c–11e) correlates the degree of "truth" of the things in the realms of becoming and being with the relative "clarity" of the states of the soul that arise in relation to these objects. Just as the visible realm images the intelligible realm, philosophical ascent from opinion to knowledge is made possible by the imaging relationships that link the lower levels of truth and clarity with the higher ones. In the Cave image (514a–17a), Socrates likens the condition of human beings prior to philosophizing to that of prisoners in a cavern, whose chains allow them to see only the shadows cast by a fire on the back wall by some puppets that (unbeknownst to them) are manipulated by men above and behind them. However, the shadows are images of the puppets, which in turn are images of the human beings and "other things" in the sunlit uplands beyond the cave – the region that itself images the intelligible domain of the Ideas, to which the philosopher, liberated from his or her chains, may hope to ascend. So, too, the sun that illuminates the world outside the cave is imaged in the firelight that illuminates – however dimly or inadequately – the interior of the cave.

In sum, the images of Sun, Line, and Cave attempt to articulate the analogical structure of the Whole that makes learning possible. These images teach that the truth philosophy seeks is latent in ordinary human experience, because the Good and the Ideas are imaged – albeit in a fragmented and distorted manner – *within* this experience. And yet, Socrates makes it clear that these images of the Whole have been crafted by one who does not *know* the Whole.[41] His procedure, in other words, is circular: his explanation of the possibility of philosophy presupposes the very wisdom he still lacks. The question, however, is whether this circle is necessarily vicious. Socrates' recourse to the language of prophecy and divination suggests that it is not. Rather, it is a description of the

[41] Thus, Socrates tells Glaucon that he possesses only an "opinion" about the Good – not knowledge (506e).

unavoidable situation in which human beings find themselves with regard to philosophical interpretation.[42] This is the situation of the so-called hermeneutic circle, a phrase formed from the Greek word *hermeneuein* ("interpretation"), which is in turn derived from the name of Hermes, the messenger god who links the human and divine spheres. The entire inquiry of the *Republic* reflects this interpretative circularity: Socrates' reason for constructing the city in speech is that the soul is too difficult to see on its own (368c–d), but how could he recognize that the city resembles the soul without *already* knowing the nature of both? Little wonder that he calls his guess that the city will illuminate the nature of the soul a *hermaion* – literally, a "gift of Hermes" (368d).

When Glaucon at one point surmises that the Good is pleasure, Socrates warns him not to engage in blasphemy (509a).[43] Socrates' sense that sacred awe is appropriate to the Good suggests that the visibility of truth in human experience is nothing short of a godsend. Put another way, Socrates' religious language is a register of the gratitude he feels at the gift of learning. And learning is possible only because we find ourselves within a context of interpretation that we can negotiate, thanks to the erotic capacity of the soul.[44]

The beginnings of Socratic philosophizing are now visible, at least in outline. Socrates begins from human experience, which is to say that he begins in the middle of things. More precisely, he begins with the erotic longing for wisdom, which directs him prophetically toward the beginning of the Whole that he calls the Good. As the language of prophecy suggests, the process of learning is an essential way of relating to that which is divine. Indeed: for Socrates, the activity of philosophical inquiry is the grateful reception of a sacred gift.

[42] Cf. *Theaeteus* 196d–e, where Socrates complains that he and Theaetetus have been conversing "impurely" because "we've said thousands of times 'we recognize' and 'we don't recognize' and 'we know' and 'we don't know,' as if we somehow understood one another while still being ignorant of knowledge."

[43] *Euphēmein* literally means "use words of good omen"; its opposite is *blasphēmein*.

[44] The same considerations reveal the serious side of Socrates' claim, in the *Cratylus*, to speak with prophetic insight about the philosophical capacity of language – a power he playfully attributes to the inspiration of Euthyphro (396d; cf. 399a, 409d, 428c). For further discussion, see Howland 1998b, 131–63.

MELETUS AND EUTHYPHRO: ARCHAIC ASPIRATIONS

Returning to the *Euthyphro*, we ask first about that from which Meletus begins – the ruling principle of his activity as a would-be benefactor of the Athenians. For Meletus, the decisive beginning in this sense is the ancestral tradition. He reveres this tradition, as do all dutiful sons of the city, simply because it is old. Just as Oral Torah as described in Avot is a precious chain of received wisdom leading back to Sinai, the *patrioi nomoi* of the Greek city are authoritative because they preserve what is archaic. As Socrates observes in the *Republic*, the gods are among the "ancient things" (382d); only a tradition that is equally ancient can furnish unimpeachable knowledge about them. At the same time, however, Meletus *himself* wants to be a new beginning for the Athenians; he aspires to the *archē* in the sense of a ruling office, or, at least, to de facto political power. "Looking down" on Socrates' ignorance as might a god (2c), he already supposes – as does Euthyphro – that he far exceeds others in wisdom. But Socrates' horticultural image suggests that Meletus chases an illusion in hoping to "be responsible for the most and greatest good things for the city," for he is no more capable of sovereign responsibility than is a vegetable. The spirited desires for power and personal distinction that motivate his prosecution of Socrates have been nourished by the mother's milk of ancient lore, from which – like every generation of young Greeks since the time of Homer – he has absorbed the lesson that the best a man can do is to imitate Achilles in achieving a measure of heroic glory. Because his self-image as a wise leader and benefactor is nothing but a projection of this culturally augmented spiritedness, there is no original to which this image corresponds. With respect to the rational capacities and knowledge needed to rule, there is, so to speak, no "there" there. Meletus is intellectually a wholly subservient being, and is in this sense literally anarchic: he can originate no ideas, for there is no independent thought to originate them; he can direct nothing, for there is no responsible intelligence to issue directions. His is a soul that falls short of the very selfhood on which it prides itself.

The case of Euthyphro is similar to that of Meletus, although it is in some respects more complex. To begin with, his name is as rich

with significance as Meletus's. The Greek *Euthyphrōn* is naturally heard as a combination of *euthus*, "straight," or *euthu*, "straightaway, immediately," and the root *phrēn*, the "heart," "midriff," or "mind."[45] Putting these terms together, Euthyphro is either "Instant Mind" or "Straight Thinker." Both of these names tell us something about him; taken together, however, they point to a conflict in his self-conception. The first name characterizes the insight of prophets and diviners, and so describes what Euthyhpro takes to be his relation to the gods. As a self-proclaimed *mantis*, Euthyphro asserts that the gods give him knowledge directly or immediately, and thus – at least in comparison to the labor of philosophical inquiry – instantaneously. The gods are in this sense the *archai*, the governing sources, of Euthyphro's allegedly prophetic speeches and deeds. We may note in passing that Euthyphro could have protected himself from Socrates' cross-examination by insisting on this point. While one arrives at philosophical knowledge through the labor of thought, prophetic knowledge is directly vouchsafed by God or the gods, and so need not, on its own terms, justify itself by means of a logical argument.[46]

In any event, Euthyphro's insistence that he is a diviner falls flat: he never refers to any specific knowledge that has come to him through divination, and he even admits that he is laughed at when he makes such predictions. It is therefore difficult to take seriously his claims to be able to predict the future unerringly (3c). This seems to be a case of wishful thinking, an intellectual deficiency that comes to light also in the second interpretation of his name. "Straight Thinker" describes Euthyphro's odd combination of orthodoxy and unorthodox extremism. *Orthē doxa* is "opinion" that is "correct" or "upright" (*orthos*) in its alignment with the ancestral ways. But the ancestral ways are internally contradictory; Euthyphro's opinion is orthodox with respect to the traditional myths about the gods, but not with respect to his duty of filial devotion. Euthyphro's thinking proceeds straight from the tradition, but not without qualification; he begins by choosing the parts of the tradition that suit him, and ignoring the rest. Unlike

[45] Cf. *phronēsis*, "practical intelligence"; *phrontidzein*, "to ponder"; and *Phrontistērion*, the "Thinketeria" of Socrates in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes (*Clouds* 94).

[46] This is not to say that philosophical reflection cannot confirm what the gods have disclosed through prophecy, for Socrates shows in his response to the Delphic oracle that it can and does.

Meletus, in other words, he reflects critically – albeit certainly not profoundly – on the content of the ancestral ways. However, his thinking is deficient in two related respects. First, it is excessively abstract. As we have seen, Euthyphro starts by receiving some of what the tradition teaches – for example, about pollution, or about the quarrels of divine fathers and sons – and fearlessly (as he supposes) draws the consequences, looking neither left nor right as he does so. The result is that he mistakes a part for the whole, ignoring the complexity of real life (one must punish the wrongdoer, even if he is one's father) to such an extent that his thinking is positively geometrical in its abstraction. This is in fact a point of pride for him, as is clear from the quasi-mathematical language he employs throughout the dialogue.[47] Second, Euthyphro's radical and rebellious notions are a product not of his intellect but of his spiritedness, the real *archē* of his soul: they spring from a powerful longing for recognition, and even more from the anger and resentment he feels when this longing is frustrated.[48] His father takes the time to consult an exegete because he is a pious and traditional man; what Euthyphro presents as an even more scrupulous interpretation of religious law reflects a poorly concealed longing to punish his father while simultaneously outdoing or eclipsing him in piety.[49]

In sum, Euthyphro's governing desire, like that of Meletus, is evidently competitive and thumotic rather than erotic. Intellectual eros properly opens the soul outward and makes it receptive to the world that lies beyond it, but Euthyphro's thinking is a selective instrument that panders to his wounded self-regard. Put succinctly, his thought is poetry (in both the ordinary meaning of the word and the root sense of *poiein*, "to make," "to fabricate") that takes itself to be philosophy. Euthyphro produces or fabricates the "knowledge" about piety that he

[47] Euthyphro claims to possess a "great proof" and to be able to "demonstrate clearly" that his lawsuit is pious, and he readily agrees with Socrates' suggestion that piety is a kind of *epistēme* or scientific knowledge (5e, 9b, 14c). He is also eager to show Socrates that he knows "correctly" (*orthōs*: 4a12, 5b1, 5e4, 9a7, 9b2, 12d4, 14d9, 15c9, 15d7), "clearly" (*saphōs*: 5c8, 9b5 and b9, 15d4, 15e1), and "precisely" (*akribōs*: 4e4, 5a2, 14b1).

[48] As Aristotle notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, these two traits – thinking abstractly and being driven by emotion, both of which impede practical wisdom – are characteristic of the young (Aristotle 1979, 1095a2–11, 1142a11–20).

[49] I owe this point to Stephen Gardner.

supposes himself to have discovered, and he does so precisely after the fashion of the Greek gods as they are portrayed in the myths of Homer and Hesiod: he allows his love (for the honor and distinction that comes with special knowledge and expertise) and his hatred (for his father) to determine what is pious or impious, rather than the other way around.

On the deepest level, the disordered and erotically deficient souls of both Euthyphro and Meletus reflect the original tensions of the ancestral tradition. Hesiod teaches in his *Theogony* that the beginning of everything is Chaos, an *archē* that is nothing other than anarchy.[50] This beginning resembles the "welter and waste" (*tohu vabohu*) of Genesis 1:2, except that the God of Genesis brings the goodness of order to this watery chaos by a judicious series of divisions (light and darkness, heaven and earth, land and sea) that open up a space in which a distinctively human life becomes possible. Insofar as a tenuous order emerges from Hesiod's Chaos, by contrast, it is a consequence of the unruly and violent passions of the earliest deities, and is thus an indirect manifestation of Chaos itself. This original anarchy furthermore expresses itself in the behavior of Euthyphro and Meletus no less clearly than in the mythical battles of the *Theogony*. Their arrogant prosecution of two elderly Athenian fathers is only the latest echo of the resounding intergenerational violence of the primeval gods.

Taken together, Meletus and Euthyphro furnish two defective models of the human soul. Like the young shoots for whom he claims to care, Meletus is a passive and thoughtless recipient of the religious tradition. Incongruously, he nevertheless aspires to win honor and gratitude as a divinely wise and powerful protector of his cohort. In imagining himself to be of a wholly different order from the rest of the Athenians, he is, so to speak, a plant that dreams it is a farmer. The same is true of Euthyphro, whose "wisdom," like that of Meletus, is sheer presumption, and who also dreams a dream of greatness that springs from nothing more than the ungoverned motions of empty ambition.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING: SOCRATES

We have seen that the ancestral tradition decisively shapes the thought and character of Meletus and Euthyphro, even where they

[50] *Theogony* 116 (Hesiod 1914, 86).

seem to conflict with each other and with the tradition. This is the fundamental sense in which both men "begin from the beginning," but neither one is conscious of this fact. Indeed, both fancy themselves to be independent of the intellectual limitations of their plant-like fellow citizens and ignorant relatives. But this is itself an illusion born of ignorance. Because neither has reflected critically on his own nature or on the understanding of things he has drawn from the soil of the *patrioi nomoi*, neither is in a position to recognize, much less to address, either his own deficiencies or the inherent contradictions of the tradition.

What about Socrates? With regard to matters of piety, in what way, and from what, does *he* begin? We already possess part of the answer to these questions, for the cautionary examples of Meletus and Euthyphro provide an important clue: the Socratic act of beginning is both reflective and self-aware. *Nomos* and *phusis*, custom and nature, are the twin sources that have shaped us all, but to begin in a Socratic sense is not merely to have been molded by larger forces. It is rather to think actively and critically about these sources of the self. In doing so, however, one comes to see that thought is itself a beginning – that the self that is governed by intellect, and so is capable of living up to its best understanding of things, is an *archē* in its own right. This is a sovereign self, one that can legitimately take responsibility for its speeches and deeds because it is truly their author. Curiously, however, the thoughtful self is sovereign just to the extent that it subordinates itself to something else. This is because it is not thinking as such that governs the self, but the thought *of* something else. That which comes to be understood is thus another beginning that is higher than the thinking self because it guides this self. As we have seen, Socrates understands this guidance in terms of the erotic and prophetic activity of philosophizing. In submitting to philosophical eros, Socrates engages in a quest for truth and virtue. In doing so, he seeks to be able to measure himself not by what he happens to love, but by what is intrinsically lovable. And it is this desire that determines his entire orientation toward the problem of piety.

If Euthyphro is a "straight thinker" who, rather like a projectile, unreflectively embodies in his thoughts and actions the combined momentum of his nature and Athenian custom, Socrates is what one might call a "circle thinker." This expression suits Socratic inquiry

in more than one way. It describes the reflexive character of philosophical inquiry, which always involves an awareness not only of one's thoughts, but also of oneself as a thinker – of one's capacities and limitations, and the way one is attacking a problem. It also captures the movement of Socratic dialogue. When his interlocutors run into difficulties as they attempt to articulate and defend their views, Socrates typically advises them to reconsider their premises. Thus, he twice asks Euthyphro to think through the issue of piety "once more from the beginning." Socrates utters this very phrase – *palin ex archēs* – so often in the Platonic dialogues that it may be regarded as a hallmark of his philosophical style.[51] And this points us toward the deepest level of significance in the claim that Socrates is a "circle thinker": Socratic philosophizing is *essentially* thinking *ex archēs*, because it is thinking that returns to, and reflects critically on, the ultimate beginnings of human existence.

In the *Euthyphro*, the *archai* Socrates examines are the gods as the religious tradition understands them. He focuses on these beginnings because it is obvious that they have helped to make younger Athenians like Meletus and Euthyphro what they are – human beings who are so deficient in heart and deluded in mind that, like the "last men" whose appearance on the earth is foretold by Nietzsche's Zarathustra, they know neither longing nor love.[52] It is Socrates, not Meletus, who merits the name of "Caretaker." Because he tries to improve the Athenians both morally and intellectually, Socrates does not restrict himself to contemplating the divine things through the lens of tradition. Rather, he boldly sketches the outlines of a new story that corrects the ancient myths about the gods.

Socrates' philosophical mythology is central to his care for gods and men in the *Euthyphro*. We shall tell this story in detail in Chapter 6. For now, we may note that Socrates engages in his own version of the sort of religious innovation that characterizes the Jewish tradition. He, too, employs a "grammar" of religious invention. This is the grammar of philosophy, which aims to do justice to what is best in human

[51] Cf. *Charmides* 163d7, 167a9–b1; *Laches* 197e10–98a1; *Protagoras* 349a7; *Gorgias* 489d5; *Hippias Major* 303d11; *Meno* 79c3, e5; *Phaedo* 105b5; *Theaetetus* 151d3, 164c1, 200d5.

[52] "'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?' Thus asks the last man, and blinks" (Nietzsche 2003, 11).

beings by fashioning a more just and fitting image of that which is divine. Like the rabbis of the Talmud, Socrates begins at the beginning by reinterpreting the beginning. In the hands of the rabbis, God becomes a student of Torah and the interpretations thereof; in the hands of Socrates, the gods become lovers of virtue and wisdom. In both cases, the proper measure of these interpretations is not accuracy in a purely objective sense. It is rather the capacity of these interpretations to reflect the deepest moral and spiritual truth about the whole of human life, and thereby to elicit and nourish what is best and most divine in human beings. And it is in striving to achieve this end that Socrates manifests both fatherly care for his fellow citizens and filial devotion to his city.

5

Words and Deeds

The accomplishment of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues is considerably less flamboyant than that of Ḥoni HaMe'aggel, but what he lacks in flash he makes up in depth. This seems to be the lot of all true teachers. Socrates is comparable to Ḥoni because he claims to do the greatest good for the Athenians, and to be a gift of the god to his city. But unlike Ḥoni's dramatic rainmaking, Socrates' deeds are generally not regarded as beneficial, and they are certainly not miraculous.[1] Insofar as he does benefit the Athenians, it is by making them think about their lives and providing them with an example that is worthy of imitation. Ḥoni, on the other hand, is not a teacher, and the Talmud does not present him as someone who can, or should, be imitated.

While the Talmud works hard – somewhat too hard, in fact – to explain the merit it assumes Ḥoni must have possessed in order to win the favor of God, it concludes by drawing from his story a negative lesson about the overriding value of intellectual companionship. In doing so, the Talmud calls attention to the difference between Ḥoni's accomplishment as a miracle worker and that of the rabbis of the academy – including, at least implicitly, the accomplishment of the Talmud itself. The Talmud cannot bring rain, which, with the addition of

[1] Indeed, Socrates' ambiguity – is he a blessing or a plague for the Athenians? – is encoded in his self-presentation in the *Apology*: the god has set him on the city like a "gadfly" or horsefly on a horse (30d–31a), but a gadfly is a species of pestilence.

physical labor, human beings can turn into food that will sustain their bodies. But it does provide another sort of raw material that, with intellectual labor, can be turned into spiritual nourishment. In this way, the Talmud proves to care for its readers in an essentially Socratic manner. "Just as a plant grows and increases, so do words of Torah," Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah proclaims (BT Ḥagigah 3B, Neusner trans.), and the same may be said of the words of the Talmud. If we inquire into them and take them to heart, thus "planting" them in our souls and "cultivating" them in thought, they may grow and bear fruit in the form of an inwardly sustaining understanding.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates employs the same image of words as plants in order to illuminate the power of knowledge that is latent in speech. Like the farmer who sows seeds "in the appropriate soil, being content if what he sowed reached maturity in the eighth month," a man "who has pieces of knowledge about what is just, fine, and good" will use his "seeds" in a similarly serious manner. Such a man takes "a fitting soul [and] plants and sows in it words accompanied by knowledge, which are able to help themselves and the man who planted them, and are not without fruit but contain a seed, from which others grow in other characters" (*Phaedrus* 276b–77a).[2] And just as the farmer grows food to nourish the body (in this case, winter wheat and winter barley, staples of the ancient Greek diet that took eight months to reach maturity), the point of sowing seeds through words is to yield a continually regenerating supply of food for the soul.[3]

What does it mean to "plant" and "cultivate" in oneself the words of Torah, or the insights of philosophy? To do so is not simply to have memorized these wise words, but to understand and live by them. This unity of active thought and reflective action is the simultaneously rabbinic and Socratic ideal toward which the Talmud, like Plato's dialogues, proposes to guide its readers. Just how to achieve this lived understanding is one of the major themes of Ta'anit 3. At issue is not the letter of Torah, but its spirit; not religious observance in a narrow sense, but the whole human life of which halakhic correctness is but

[2] Translation of Rowe 1986.

[3] Although Socrates applies this image to spoken words, the context makes it clear that it may apply to certain written ones as well – including in particular those that attempt, like Plato's dialogues, to reproduce the relative advantages of speech. Cf. *Phaedrus* 275d–e. with Howland 2003, 90–91.

a part – the overall way of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting that best exemplifies the moral core of God's revealed teaching. This is merely a theme – and not an express teaching – because the rabbis know that students of Torah must come to their own conclusions, just as they must live their own lives; these are things that no one else can do on their behalf. Ta'anit 3 therefore presents its readers with a broad range of examples in the form of stories about different men struggling in different ways with the same basic problems, all of which promise to disclose fruitful insights to those who think deeply about their meaning.

This chapter examines a series of five stories told in a short stretch of text near the beginning of the Gemara of Ta'anit 3. Bound together by a set of common issues and literary motifs, these stories comprise only a small part of the aggadic material contained in the Gemara. Yet they are representative of the whole in their focus on grasping the wisdom inherent in the deeds of the sages. Most important, they constitute a coherent unit of instruction on the overarching question of how one should live. Working our way through these stories will therefore acquaint us directly with the subtlety and profundity of Talmudic pedagogy on this most fundamental issue.

ELAZAR AND THE UGLY MAN

The question of how one should live can be taken seriously only by those who recognize that they do not already know the answer. Ta'anit 3 accordingly introduces the problem of embodying the written word of Torah in one's speeches and deeds by means of a story that is distinctly Socratic in its emphasis on the humility that springs from the knowledge of ignorance. This is the story of Rabbi Elazar's encounter with an extremely ugly man that we touched on in Chapter 1.[4] It is a happy coincidence that this bit of aggadah not only addresses the question of living up to the sacred texts of the Jewish tradition, but also develops the botanical images of learning and living that are common to the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud.

The story of Elazar and the ugly man appears early in the Gemara of Ta'anit 3, in the context of its commentary on the part of the

[4] See pp. 52–54.

Mishnah that cites Amos 4:7, "And I will cause it to rain on one city, but on one city I will not cause it to rain" (18B, II.62). This section of the Gemara begins by noting that "Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: And both of them are for a curse" (20A, II.79). In other words, Rav Yehudah held that both cities mentioned in the verse from Amos were cursed, even though rain was withheld from only one of them – a view he may have derived from the context of Amos 4, in which the prophet lists the various ways in which God has punished the Israelites. In any case, this is the point at which the Gemara introduces a theme of central importance in the Mishnah: the theme of apparent blessings that are actually punishments or curses, and apparent curses that are actually blessings.

The Gemara goes on to offer four more examples along the same lines. The fourth is an ostensible curse, "And the Lord shall smite Israel as a reed is shaken in the water" (1 Kings 14:15), which it contrasts with an ostensible blessing, Balaam's comparison of the tents and dwellings of Israel to "cedar trees beside the waters" (Numbers 24:6). The first of these two verses, in which the prophet Aḥijah foretells the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, is actually a blessing, as Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani explained in the name of Rabbi Yonatan:

> Just as this reed stands in a place of water, and its stem grows again, and its roots are many, and even [if] all the winds of the world come and blow on it, they do not move it from its place, but it goes and comes with them, [and when] the winds have subsided, the reed stands in its place. (20A, II.80–81)

The reed furnishes a fitting image of the resilience of the people Israel up to the time of Shmuel.[5] Almost two millennia later, it has become clear that his elaboration of this image is also a prophetic description of the Jewish people's remarkable ability to weather the ill winds of history. And it is in the light of Shmuel's interpretation of the first biblical verse that the second one, which is uttered by "Balaam the wicked," discloses itself as a curse: "Just as this cedar does not stand in a place of water, and its stump does not grow again, and its roots are not many … if a southerly wind blows on it, it uproots it and turns it over on its face" (ibid.).

[5] Steinsaltz 1989, 33, lists Shmuel as a third-generation Palestinian Amora (active c. 290–320).

But this is not all. The Gemara advances one more reason why the reed should be preferred to the cedar: "And moreover, the reed merited that a pen be taken from it with which to write the scroll of the Torah, the prophets, and the Writings" (20A, II.81). This is a striking observation, because the cedar can legitimately claim to be at least as important as the reed in the religious life of the Jews. We know that the Temple of Solomon was constructed largely of cedarwood, in accordance with the explicit instructions of God; the same also appears to have been true of the Second Temple.[6] In nevertheless preferring the reed to the cedar, the Talmud implicitly favors the Torah over the Temple. The reason for this preference is not hard to grasp. The fate of the Temple in comparison to the Torah recapitulates the weakness of the cedar in comparison to the reed: whereas the house of God fell twice to the enemies of the people Israel (and remains in ruins to this day), His teaching has withstood all the storms of time.

In the immediate sequel, the Gemara connects the problem of distinguishing blessings from curses with the problem that the Mishnah raises in its discussion of Ḥoni: that of distinguishing between worthy and unworthy human beings. This problem is at the heart of a baraita that extends the images of the reed and the cedar to illustrate better and worse traits of character in human beings. The baraita begins as follows:

Our rabbis taught: "A person should always be soft as a reed, and should not be hard as a cedar. It once happened that Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon was coming from Migdal Gedor from the house of his teacher, and he was riding on an ass and traveling along a riverbank. And he was very happy, and he was proud of himself because he had learned much Torah. A certain man [*adam eḥad*] happened to meet him who was extremely ugly. He said to him 'Peace be unto you, my teacher [*rabi*].' But he did not return his [greeting]. He [Elazar] said to him: 'Worthless person, how ugly is that man! Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?' He said to him: 'I do not know, but go and say to the craftsman who made me: How ugly is this vessel that you made!' " (20A–B, II.81–82)

[6] At 2 Samuel 7:7, God tells the prophet Nathan to ask King David: "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Solomon subsequently acquired cedar from Lebanon and used cedar planks and beams as paneling for the Temple. Inside "all was cedar, no stone was exposed"; even the altar was covered with cedar (1 Kings 5:20, 6:9–20). At Ezra 3:7, we are told that, upon their return from exile in Babylon, the Jews "paid … to bring cedarwood from Lebanon" in preparation for rebuilding the Temple.

Elazar, a Tanna contemporaneous with Yehuda HaNasi,[7] is daydreaming as he rides his ass. His pleasant dream revolves around himself, for he is happy in the perception of his own wisdom. The name of the town from which he is coming suggests his state of mind: *migdal*, the Hebrew word for "tower," is built on the root גדל, signifying "big" or "great" (as in the adjective *gadol*). But Elazar is roused from his beautiful dream by the sight of a very ugly man. This man is not a scholar, and he is not great; he is literally a nobody, in that we never learn his name. Yet in his anonymity, he could be anybody; the baraita calls him an *adam*, a "human being," rather than an *ish*, a "man" as opposed to a woman. Although this human being addresses Rabbi Elazar with due respect, Elazar seems to be too stunned by the sight of his ugliness to respond appropriately. His expression of surprise is exceedingly rude, as is his question. But this should not distract us from the fact that it *is* a question, and that his question springs from wonder; the form of his utterance, at least, reflects a desire to learn. And learn he will, for Elazar has only just begun to wake up to his own ignorance.

It is Elazar's association of ugliness with worthlessness that is of particular interest to the Gemara. The term Steinsaltz translates as "worthless person," *reykah*, is an Aramaic form of the Hebrew *reyk*, meaning "empty."[8] In other words, Elazar, who is overflowing with self-satisfaction in the fullness of his own wisdom, infers the man's inner emptiness or worthlessness from his ugly exterior. This is precisely the sort of error a Torah scholar should not make: it is literally a mistake of interpretation, which is nothing other than the act of discerning the interior of things from their surfaces. The man responds in a way that picks up Elazar's dismissive image of him, and seems at first to confirm the rabbi's inference about his inner condition. He calls himself a "vessel," and admits his own ignorance ("I do not know"). But the apparent emptiness of this man proves to be fullness, for his knowledge of ignorance is just the lesson the proud Torah scholar – be he Elazar, or the reader of Ta'anit – needs to learn.

[7] Frieman (1995, 136, *s.v.* "R' Elazar B'R' Shimon)" puts him in the fifth generation of Tannaim; Steinsaltz (1989, 33) puts him in the sixth.

[8] Steinsaltz, "Language," II.82.

In instructing Elazar to "go and say to the craftsman who made me: How ugly is this vessel that you made," the man compels him to acknowledge a number of truths that have been at least temporarily obscured by his dream of wisdom. His profound response to Elazar's thoughtlessness communicates many things, including the following: (1) I am not self-made – and neither are you. We are both limited and dependent beings. (2) I am a vessel made by a craftsman; as the product of a craftsman, I serve the purposes of another – and so do you. (3) Your criticism of me is a criticism of my Maker – and of your Maker as well. By implication, it is as absurd for a human being to criticize his or her Maker as it is for a vessel to criticize the potter who made it. (4) To be in a position to criticize my Maker, you must know the purpose for which I was made. You must also know that my ugliness impedes that purpose. But your access to the mind of God is far too limited for you to be able to know these things. The evidence furthermore suggests that my ugliness *does* serve a purpose: it has provided an occasion for you to recognize your own ignorance, and this is an invaluable lesson for one who holds himself out as a teacher.

The man's words strike home: "When he [Elazar] understood that he had sinned, he got down from the ass and prostrated himself before him, and said to him: 'I have sinned toward you, forgive me!' " (20B, II.82). But the man refuses to forgive him, telling him instead that "I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him: 'How ugly is this vessel that you made!' " Elazar of course does no such thing, and this is precisely the point: if he cannot or will not say to God what he has said to the man, then he should not have judged him at all on the basis of his ugliness, much less given voice to his unkind thoughts. But Elazar is desperate to be forgiven, so much so that he follows the man for the rest of the journey:

> The people of his [Elazar's] city went out toward him, and they said to him: "Peace be unto you, teacher, teacher, master, master." He [the ugly man] said to them: "Whom do you call 'teacher, teacher'?" They said to him: "The man who is traveling after you." He said to them: "If this [man] is a teacher let there not be many like him in Israel!" They said to him: "Why?" He said to them: "He did such-and-such to me." They said to him: "Even so, forgive him, for he is a man [who is] great in Torah [*gadol b'torah*]." He said to them: "For your sakes I will forgive him, provided that he does not become accustomed to act this way."

The spectacle of a great scholar following and importuning an exceedingly ugly man must have struck the people of Elazar's city as very odd, particularly because it was customary for the greater man to walk in front (cf. 20B, II.85). The man's question to the people – "Whom do you call 'teacher, teacher'?" – is a good one, because on this day it is *he* who is the teacher.[9] In fact, this Jewish Socrates teaches the people as well as Elazar, both by explaining the rabbi's sin and by ultimately forgiving him.[10]

In the end, Elazar, too, gets to be a teacher. The conclusion of the baraita, in which Elazar presents his teaching in midrashic form, reveals what he has learned from having been made to confront his own ignorance:

> Immediately Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon entered [the Academy] and expounded: A person should always be soft as a reed, and should not be hard as a cedar. And therefore, the reed merited that a pen be taken from it with which to write the Torah scroll, tefillin, and mezuzot. (20B, II.82–83)

In saying that "a person should always be soft as a reed," Elazar is presumably referring both to his own behavior and to the example of the ugly man. He has learned to be humble like the lowly reed, and no longer haughty and disdainful like the lofty cedar. But the ugly man also proves to be "soft" in that he yields to Elazar's request to forgive him.

Elazar's final observation is especially noteworthy. According to him, the softness of the reed was the "merit" that earned it the privilege of furnishing a pen with which to write Torah. A human being who is as soft as a reed will presumably have a similar merit, and enjoy a similar privilege. In other words, Elazar suggests that being "soft" rather than "hard" makes it possible to live in such a way as to

[9] As always for Ta'anit, I here follow Steinsaltz's translation, but it should be noted that he translates *rabi* as "teacher" and *mori*, which is literally "my teacher," as "master."

[10] Socrates is also presented in the dialogues as notoriously unattractive. Theodorus begs Socrates not to get annoyed with him when he says that his student Theaetetus "is not beautiful, but he resembles you in his snub-nosedness and the bulging of his eyes, but he has these things less than you do" (*Theaetetus* 143e). Alcibiades compares him to the satyr Silenus, whose snub nose and grotesque features may be seen on a number of surviving Greek vases. He explains that, like certain statues of Silenus that open up to reveal beautiful images of gods, the superficial ugliness of Socrates conceals a divinely beautiful interior (*Symposium* 216e–17a).

furnish material for the writing of Torah. The underlying assumption of this teaching is that one's life *should* be worthy of being "read" like a text that teaches wisdom.[11] And this is clearly true of the part of Elazar's life that is written about here in the Talmud. The story of Elazar and the ugly man is Torah or "teaching" because it provides a powerful example of what it is to learn. Elazar is stunned to discover that his previous judgments about human merit were rooted in ignorance. On its face, his new understanding looks just as dogmatic as his old one: "a person should *always* [*l'olam*] be soft as a reed." But it is not dogmatic, because the humility that expresses itself as softness springs from the insight that even one "great in Torah" must be prepared to learn from anyone.

To learn, however, does not mean to be utterly impressionable. Extreme humility is inconsistent with the acquisition of wisdom. The reed is soft, but its roots are firm; just so, the act of learning is inseparable from that of making judgments, and thus taking a stance. Because the rabbis agree with Socrates that human beings must do their own learning through their own efforts, the Gemara invites us to think for ourselves: having used the story of Elazar to prepare us to learn from multiple sources, it goes on to present a series of conflicting examples of meritorious behavior drawn from the lives of the sages. These examples establish a set of basic oppositions – including those between study and business, moderation and moral extremism, virtue characterized by restraint and virtue characterized by positive action – that stake out the space in which worthwhile lives can be lived. Where we ultimately choose to locate ourselves in this space is up to us, but this does not relieve us of the responsibility to familiarize ourselves with the terrain.

MODELS OF MERIT: THE SAGES IN ACTION

In a stretch of text that starts very shortly after the story of Elazar (20B–21A, II.83–94), the Gemara comments on the portion of the Mishnah that mentions sounding the alarm for "plague or a collapse

[11] Wisdom must accordingly express itself in deeds. Thus Eleazar b. Azariah compares one whose wisdom is greater than his deeds to "a tree with abundant foliage, but few roots" – a tree, like the cedar, that is easily toppled "when the winds come" (Mishnah Avot 3:17).

[of buildings]" (19A, II.63). It does so by telling four stories about five sages, each of whom exemplifies a different conception of how to live up to the Torah. These stories all have something to do with walls or buildings that collapse, or at least threaten to do so. But the deeper theme that links them is the moral problem of the sort of life one ought to live. The first three of these stories may be conveniently considered together; the last one, about Naḥum of Gam Zu, deserves its own section because it incorporates the main themes of all the previous stories, including the one about Elazar.

The first example the Gemara advances in addressing the problem of how to live a life of Torah is that of Rav Adda bar Ahava, a second-generation Babylonian Amora.[12] So righteous was Rav Adda that other rabbis used him as a kind of talisman to protect them in dangerous situations. The Gemara relates that Rav Huna took advantage of him in this way in order to rescue some wine he had stored in a dilapidated building. Huna brought Adda into the building and "delayed him with a legal discussion until he had removed [the wine]"; after they departed, the building collapsed (20B, II.84). What, then, was the source of Adda's exceptional merit? The Gemara allows him to answer this question on his own behalf:

> His disciples asked Rav Adda bar Ahava: On account of what have you lived so long? He said to them: In [all] my days I have never become angry in my house, and I have not walked in front of someone who was greater than me, and I have not meditated in filthy alleyways, and I have not walked four cubits without Torah or without tefillin, and I have not slept in the study hall, neither regular sleep nor momentary sleep, and I have not rejoiced in the mishap of my fellow, and I have not called my fellow by his nickname. (20B, II.85)

Adda attributes his long life to his righteous behavior. What is most striking about the deeds he lists is their negative character: his merit consists not in performing especially good actions, but rather in having scrupulously refrained from doing bad ones. Put another way, Adda is much more concerned with sins of commission than with sins of omission; he is guided not by the question of what he ought to do in order to help others, but by an acute awareness of what he must not do in order to avoid transgression.

[12] Steinsaltz 1989, 33.

As if to highlight the cautious and inward-looking character of Adda bar Ahava's sense of morality, the Gemara immediately introduces the very different sorts of "fine things" done by Rav Huna. Readers of Ta'anit already know that Huna's conduct is offensive to Adda; the latter may never have become angry in his own house, but he does become angry with Huna after he notices that he has used him in order to rescue his wine (20B, II.84). The anecdote about the wine indicates that Huna is wealthy and, at least where business is concerned, self-serving, yet the Talmud holds him in high esteem. Huna was for many years the head of the rabbinical academy at Sura, a "major Torah center" in Babylonia.[13] So popular were his lectures that "when rabbis took their leave after R. Huna's addresses and shook their garments, the dust rose up and obscured the day, and people in the Land of Israel thought, 'So they've finished after the discourses of R. Huna over there in Babylonia' " (BT Ketubot 106A, Neusner trans.). Nor was Huna atypical in his attention to matters of business, for "most of the scholars [in Babylonia] did not make their living from their knowledge of Torah but, like the rest of the community, worked in agriculture, at a craft, or in trade."[14]

Because Huna was originally quite poor, he presumably developed a good understanding of the importance of money for a decent human existence.[15] The Gemara confirms this surmise in explaining the ways Huna used his wealth to benefit others:

> Every cloudy day they would take him out in a golden carriage, and he would survey the entire city.[16] And every wall that was dilapidated he would pull down. If its owner was able, he would rebuild it. And if he was unable, [Rav Huna] himself would rebuild it with his own [money]. And every Friday afternoon he would send a deputy to the market, and all the vegetables that were left with the vegetable dealers he would buy and throw into the river. . . .

[13] Ibid., 28.

[14] Ibid., 22. According to Graetz (1891–98, 2.545), the story of Huna's life "shows how indefatigable zeal for the Law went hand in hand with secular occupations, with agriculture and other industries."

[15] Cf. BT Megillah 27B (Neusner trans.): "Rav Huna was girded in straw and standing before Rav. He [Rav] said to him: What is this? He [Rav Huna] said to him: I did not have [wine for] Qiddush [a prayer of sanctification of the Sabbath day], so I pawned my belt and obtained for it [some wine for] Qiddush. He [Rav] said to him: May it be [His] will that you will be clothed in silk."

[16] Neusner translates "cloudy" (*eyvah*) as "stormy"; the point seems to be that on such days, wind and rain threatened to knock down walls in poor condition.

When he had some medicine, he would fill a water jug with it and hang it on the doorpost of his house and say: "Whoever needs [it], let him come and take." And there are some who say: He had a tradition concerning Shivta,[17] and he would set down a water jug and hang it and say: "Whoever needs [it], let him come and enter, so that he will not be in danger." When he would prepare to eat bread, he would open his door and say: "Whoever is needy, let him come and eat." (20B, II.86–88)

Riding around in his golden carriage as if he owns the town, Huna is the sort of philanthropist who likes to make a show of doing good. But the main point of this passage is that he *does*, in fact, do good. Huna's active concern with the health and nourishment of the citizens of Sura suggests that poverty and sickness were significant problems in the Jewish communities in Babylonia. Poverty was also a problem in Palestine, as the subsequent stories in this part of Ta'anit make clear. As we shall soon see, the Gemara turns the question of what to do about poverty into a touchstone for assessing the lives of Huna and the next three sages discussed in this part of the tractate.

Like many financially successful men and women today, Huna is guided by the conviction that spending money to address social problems can significantly improve the lot of human beings. But his reasoning is not always clear. Why, one wonders, does he buy up vegetables only to throw them in the river? In the part of the text omitted in the quotation just set forth, the anonymous voice of the Gemara takes up precisely this question, which it addresses in a series of objections and responses:

> But let him give them [i.e., the vegetables] to the poor!
> Sometimes they would rely [on this], and would not come to buy.
> But let him throw them to animals!
> He maintained [that] food fit for humans should not be fed to animals.
> But let him not buy them at all!
> You would cause them to sin in the future. (20B, II.86–87)

This bit of quintessentially Talmudic debate reveals something important about the Gemara's understanding, not only of Huna, but of the sages in general. As always when dealing with the sages, the Gemara assumes that Huna has good reasons for his conduct, even if these

[17] Steinsaltz explains that Shivta was an "evil spirit" that "endangered those who would eat without first washing their hands" (II.88, "Commentary").

reasons are not apparent. Indeed, it is the existence of such reasons that makes his conduct worthy of being remembered and studied. The Gemara accordingly searches out the kernel of wisdom inherent in his actions, reflecting on them from all sides much as it reflects on the Mishnah and Scripture – sacred texts about which it presupposes, as has been said of the Platonic dialogues, that "nothing is accidental … and everything is necessary at the place where it occurs."[18] The lives of the great rabbis are, so to speak, a book of wisdom, and not simply because they are accessible to us only in the form of a written record: their speeches and deeds teach by raising questions as well as furnishing answers, and thus by setting specific tasks for the reader. The Gemara often imitates the sages in this regard; what, for example, does it mean to say when it defends Huna on the ground that if one did not buy the leftover vegetables "you would cause them to sin in the future"? It is left to the reader to answer this question.[19] Note also that the Gemara here directly addresses "you," the reader, thereby confirming that its interest in Huna stems from its recognition that his deeds may serve as a model for one's own conduct.

The next piece of aggadah concerns Ilfa and Rabbi Yoḥanan, two early Palestinian Amoraim.[20] The story of these close friends picks up all the threads of the first two stories about Adda bar Ahava and Huna. It involves a dilapidated wall, and focuses on the problem of poverty. Most important, it reiterates the desire of the rabbis to adhere to the Word of God, while making evident in more than one way just how hard it is to do so.

Central to the story of Ilfa and Yoḥanan is the text of Deuteronomy 15:1–11, a passage that, both in itself and in the important role it plays in the history of rabbinic Judaism, underscores the extreme difficulty – if not the impossibility – of fully living up to the teachings of Torah. This passage, in which God commands the release of debts in the sabbatical year, is worth quoting in full:

[18] Strauss 1964, 60; cf. *Phaedrus* 264b–c on the "logographic necessity" of well-composed texts.

[19] Steinsaltz suggests that the vegetable dealers would "sin" by failing "to stock abundant quantities of vegetables" (II.87, "Commentary"). In other words, Huna bought up the unsold vegetables as a way of supporting the market.

[20] Ilfa was the older of the two. Steinsaltz (1989, 33) lists Yoḥanan as a second-generation Amora; elsewhere, Steinsaltz states that Ilfa was a first-generation Amora (II.88, "Sages").

Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts. This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow; he shall not dun his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the LORD. You may dun the foreigner; but you must remit whatever is due from your kinsmen.

There shall be no needy among you – since the LORD your God will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion – if only you heed the LORD your God and take care to keep all this Instruction [*kol hamitzvah*] that I enjoin upon you this day. For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you: you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you.

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware lest you harbor the base thought, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching," so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will incur guilt. Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the LORD your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

In these verses, as when Moses proclaims the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6–18), God addresses the individual Jew; the phrases "you shall practice," "you must remit," and so on, translate second person singular verb forms. Deuteronomy 15:4–5 states that "there shall be no needy among you … if only you heed the LORD your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day." But 15:11 explains that the reason God commands the remission of debts in the sabbatical year is that "there will never cease to be needy ones in your land." Read in connection with 15:4–5, the logical implication of 15:11 is that the people Israel as a whole – and therefore at least some individuals – will never cease to fall short of keeping God's commandments.

The phrase *kol hamitzvah* at 15:5 must be understood to include all of the terms of the covenant Moses sets forth in Chapters 5 through 28 of Deuteronomy. But we also learn from the Talmud that, in spite of the threat of divine punishment and the promise of divine

blessing at Deuteronomy 15:9–10, the Jews generally refrained from lending money as the sabbatical year approached. The situation was serious enough to merit the radical solution of a special rabbinic enactment:

> Hillel the Elder ordained the *prosbol*, for the good order of the world [*mipney tikkun haolam*] … [a loan against which] a *prosbol* [has been written] is not cancelled [by the sabbatical year]. This is one of the things which Hillel the Elder ordained. When he saw that people refrained from lending one another money [on the eve of the sabbatical year] and [thereby] transgressed that which is written in the Torah, "Beware lest you harbor the base thought," Hillel ordained the *prosbol* [whereby the court, on behalf of the creditor, may collect unpaid debts otherwise cancelled by the sabbatical year]. (BT Gittin 36A, Neusner trans.)

The *prosbol* of the pre-Tannaitic scholar Hillel "has often been labeled the most explicit example of a rabbinic decree that uproots or overturns a provision of the Torah."[21] But as we have seen, it does so in accordance with the Torah's own "realistic appraisal of Israel's limited capacity to live in all respects as a holy people."[22]

The problem that is raised in Deuteronomy 15:1–11 and underscored by Hillel's *prosbol* emerges in yet another way in the story of Ilfa and Yoḥanan. The anonymous voice of the Gemara narrates the following:

> Ilfa and Rabbi Yoḥanan were studying Torah, [and] they were very hard pressed [for money]. They said: "Let us get up and go and establish a business, and let us fulfill in ourselves: 'But there shall be no poor among you' [Deuteronomy 15:4]." (21A, II.88)

In this story, poverty is no longer just a problem that afflicts other members of the community, as it was for Huna. It directly threatens students of Torah, and undermines their ability to study. In deciding to abandon their studies in favor of making a living, Ilfa and Yoḥanan speak of "fulfilling" the words of Scripture. But it is unlikely that we are meant to take this literally, for we have seen that the plain meaning of Deuteronomy 15:4 is not that God desires the people Israel to

[21] Hayes 2006, 128. Not surprisingly, the quoted passage from Gittin 36A is followed by an argument to the effect that Hillel's *prosbol* does not actually contradict the Torah. Cf. Hayes 2006, 128–30.

[22] Plaut 1981, 1441, on Deuteronomy 15:11. On the "pragmatic feasibility" of Hillel's *prosbol*, see Berkovits 2002, 53–54, 92–93.

combat poverty by engaging in business. It is rather that poverty is a consequence of not obeying God's commandments.[23]

The story continues as follows:

> They went, sat down under a dilapidated wall, [and] ate bread. Two ministering angels came. Rabbi Yoḥanan heard that one was saying to his fellow: "Let us throw this wall down upon them and kill them, for they are forsaking the life of the World-to-Come and are engaging in life for the moment. The other one said to him: "Leave them, for there is among them one whose hour is waiting [lit., 'standing'] for him." Rabbi Yoḥanan heard, [but] Ilfa did not hear. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to Ilfa: "Sir, did you hear anything?" He said: "No." He said: "Since I heard and Ilfa did not hear, [I can] infer from this [that] it is for me that the hour is waiting." Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: "I will go back and fulfill in myself: 'For the poor will never cease out of the land' [Deuteronomy 15:11]." (21A, II.88–89)

That Ilfa and Yoḥanan are eating bread suggests that the scene described here occurs after they have begun to make money.[24] The judgment of the angels is clear: Ilfa and Yoḥanan should not have quit their religious studies. In caring for the sustenance of their bodies more than the nourishment of their souls, they foolishly prefer temporal life to the eternal life that can be won through *talmud Torah*. But the angels do not speak directly to either man; Yoḥanan overhears their conversation, and their voices are audible only to him. The Gemara does not explain how Yoḥanan knows that the voices he hears are angelic, why he is able to eavesdrop on the angels, or why Ilfa is not. We know only that Yoḥanan is convinced he has received reliable information from divine beings, both about the superiority of the life of study and about his own future. Because Ilfa did not hear anything, Yoḥanan deduces that he must be the one for whom "the hour [*sha'ata*] is waiting" – that he will, in other words, someday be great in the eyes of the angels.[25] No less important, he is also able to infer that he need not fear dying of hunger if he returns to his

[23] Yitzḥak Lifshitz informs me that, especially in aggadah, phrases from the Bible are often introduced for beauty and depth of expression, and not as an actual source for the ideas being advanced by the rabbis. Nevertheless, Yoḥanan and Ilfa's talk of "fulfilling" Scripture raises the question of what it would mean literally to do so.

[24] But Steinsaltz (in his "Commentary," II.88) and Frieman (1995, 179, *s.v.* "Ilfa") believe that the incident with the angels occurs as Ilfa and Yoḥanan are on their way to find a business venture.

[25] *Sha'ata* seems to mean in this context "propitious moment"; cf. Sokoloff 2002, 1168–69, *s.v.* שְׁעָתָא.

studies. This is doubtless a significant consideration for him, if not for the angels – who, being without mortal bodies, presumably have no direct experience of any of the ills that flesh is heir to.

Also noteworthy is Yoḥanan's way of telling Ilfa that he plans to return to his studies. Once again, Yoḥanan speaks of "fulfilling" Scripture, probably sensing that Ilfa is unlikely to be persuaded by information derived from voices that he himself has not heard. Yet it is significant that he calls his companion "master" (*mar*, here translated "sir"), showing special respect for Ilfa because he is older. One suspects that the main reason he remains silent about his experience is that he does not want to embarrass Ilfa, of whom the angels apparently think so little that they refrain from killing him only because he happens to be with Yoḥanan. In any case, Yoḥanan cannot seriously be using the Bible as a prooftext, because the verse he cites provides no better justification for returning to one's studies than for leaving them. "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land," Deuteronomy 15:11 reads, "which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land." If anything, this verse supports those who wish to *engage* in business: opening one's hand to the poor would be meaningless if there were nothing in it, and the practice of *talmud Torah* does not in itself generate wealth. More generally, Yoḥanan's rhetorical use of the Bible to support both pursuing business and refraining from business indirectly suggests the impossibility of consistently living up to the words of Scripture as a whole. And even if it were possible to do so, the story of Yoḥanan and Ilfa confirms something we already know – namely, that Scripture admits of multiple, and often inconsistent, interpretations. It is therefore unsurprising that the Talmud offers as models for its readers the speeches and deeds of hundreds of sages as opposed to just one, and that it makes no systematic attempt to establish a rank order of their lives.

Some readers may find in the present line of reflection confirmation of their suspicion that, in the interpretation of Jewish sacred writings, the wish is father to the thought – that the rabbis, in other words, simply read into the Tanakh and the Mishnah what they want to find there. This suspicion may be strengthened by the impression that some of the interpretative procedures regularly employed in the Talmud are insufficiently rigorous to support the conclusions

they are used to derive.[26] For the sake of argument, let us grant that these criticisms are well grounded. It remains the case that interpretations must be validated (although not necessarily assented to) by the community of interpreters if they are to have any significance in the religious tradition. In particular, the mere fact that an opinion is mentioned in the Talmud means that it has sufficient merit in the eyes of the rabbinic community to be recorded and preserved. Conversely, interpretations that fall short of this standard simply disappear. This point does not put to rest the concern that the text of Scripture or the Mishnah might mean something other than what the rabbis claim it does. But it does establish that these sacred writings cannot, within the context of the emerging tradition of rabbinic interpretation, be made to say whatever anyone wants them to say.

To return to the story of Ilfa and Yoḥanan, the friends go their separate ways. Yoḥanan returns to his studies, and Ilfa goes into business. But one day Ilfa comes back, and by this time Yoḥanan has become the head of the Academy:

> They said to him [Ilfa]: "If you, Sir, has sat and studied, would you, Sir, not be head [of the Academy]?" He went and suspended himself from the mast of a ship, [and] said: "If there is someone who asks me about a *Baraita* of Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Oshaya, and I do not derive it from our Mishnah, I will drop from the mast of the ship and drown." (21A, II.89–90)

The Gemara does not explain why Ilfa returns, but he is willing to risk his life in order to prove his expertise in *talmud Torah*. One suspects that his competitive instincts have been aroused by the success of his younger friend, especially because the rabbis of the Academy suggest that Yoḥanan's prestigious position should rightfully have been his. But the more important point is that Ilfa seems to have come to

[26] Many rabbinic principles of interpretation are analogical, and there is often dispute over their correct application. One such principle is *gezerah shavah*, which is used in Ta'anit 3 to deduce that the sun stood still for Moses as it once did for Joshua (20A, II.78). Steinsaltz explains that according to *gezerah shavah*, "if the same word appears in two Biblical passages, what is stated explicitly with respect to one passage may also be applied to the other" (II.78, "Commentary"; for a fuller description of this principle see Steinsaltz 1989, 150). Thus, at Ta'anit 20A, the appearance of the same phrase ("I will begin") at Deuteronomy 2:25 and Joshua 3:7 – or, alternatively, the appearance of the same word ("give") at Joshua 10:12 and Deuteronomy 2:25 – is the basis for the inference that God performs the same miracle in both contexts!

understand on his own what was implied in the angelic discussion Yoḥanan overheard – that, at least for a man of his abilities, a life spent in anything other than the study of Torah is not worth living. Having strayed from the rabbinic fold, Ilfa chooses a very dramatic way of demonstrating that he is worthy of rejoining the Academy. Ḥiyya and Oshaya are credited with the redaction of halakhic material that had not been included by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi in the Mishnah. The laws taught by these two "are considered the only correct version of the *halakot* omitted by Judah [from the Mishnah]."[27] By offering to prove on pain of death that he can derive any baraita of Ḥiyya and Oshaya from the Mishnah, Ilfa is proposing to undergo the ultimate test in Talmudic reasoning. As the Gemara goes on to show, he passes this test, correctly deriving a certain baraita from the teaching of Rabbi Meir in the Mishnah (21A, II.90–91).

Looking back from the end of the story, it is not clear what the angel means when he says that "there is among them one whose hour is waiting." Nor is it certain that Yoḥanan is the one he is referring to. Yoḥanan could not have become the head of the Academy were he not great in the knowledge of Torah. But as it turns out, Ilfa's knowledge of Torah is also great. Could it be that the angels allow only Yoḥanan to overhear them because they know that Ilfa will return to the study of Torah on his own? This interpretation reverses the superficial impression left by the story of Yoḥanan's eavesdropping, which is that there is hope for him, but not for Ilfa. On this reading, it is only Yoḥanan who needs help: the angels let him hear just what he needs to hear, even if what he understands from their conversation is not the exact truth. Put another way, even God's angels practice a kind of pedagogical esotericism – a thought that must have greatly encouraged the author-editors of Ta'anit.

ANOTHER UGLY MAN: NAḤUM OF GAM ZU

The last of the five sages the Gemara showcases at 20B–21A is Naḥum of Gam Zu, a third-generation Tanna and the teacher of Rabbi

[27] *Jewish Encyclopedia* 1901, 6.431. Cf. BT Ḥullin 141A–B: "Said to him [var.: them] R. Zira, 'Have I not informed you that every teaching that was not taught in the House of R. Hiyya or in the House of R. Oshaia is corrupt and you should not raise from it any objection in the House of Study?' " (Neusner trans.).

Akiva.[28] Naḥum's story picks up the main themes (and some minor ones) of all the previous stories in Ta'anit 3 that we have studied in this chapter, weaving them together in a way that presents as sharply as possible the overarching problem of what it means to write Torah in the medium of one's life. The narrative once again involves a dangerously decayed structure, centers on the problem of poverty, and approaches from a fresh angle the relationship between physical ugliness and spiritual beauty or nobility that was central to the tale of Elazar. But the most striking feature of Naḥum's story is his literal interpretation of the idea that a rabbi must embody his best understanding of Torah – an interpretation whose grotesque consequences find their closest modern parallel in Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony."[29]

Like Elazar, Naḥum is traveling on the road when he encounters a stranger who changes his life:

They related about Naḥum of Gam Zu that he was blind in both eyes, both his hands were cut off, both his legs were amputated, and his entire body was full of boils. And he was lying in a dilapidated house, and the legs of his bed were placed in bowls of water so that ants would not climb on him. Once his disciples wished to remove his bed and afterwards to remove the utensils. He said to them: "My sons, remove the utensils and afterwards remove my bed. For it is assured [lit. 'promised to you'] that as long as I am in the house, the house will not fall." They removed the utensils and afterwards they removed his bed, and the house fell. His disciples said to him: "Teacher, since you are a perfectly righteous man [*sh'tzadik gamor atah*], why did this happen to you?" He said to them: "My sons, I caused [it] to myself. For once I was traveling on the road to the house of my father-in-law, and I had with me a load [that was being carried] on three asses, one of food, and one of drink, and one with various kinds of delicacies. A poor man came and stood in front of me on the road, and said to me: 'My teacher, sustain me!' I said to him: 'Wait until I unload the ass.' I did not have time to unload the ass before his soul departed. I went and fell on his face, and I said: 'Let my eyes, which had

[28] Steinsaltz 1989, 33; cf. BT Shevuot 26A and Ḥagigah 12A.

[29] Whether or not Kafka was familiar with the Talmudic legend of Naḥum, this literary echo may not be entirely coincidental. Kafka's story describes a judicial execution accomplished by using large needles to inscribe on the naked body of the condemned man the law that he has violated. As Steinberg (1976) observes, the plans for the machine that is used in the execution resemble a Torah scroll, while the script the machine inscribes includes a main text surrounded by "flourishes" and "embellishments," after the manner of the Talmud (496–98).

no compassion for your eyes, become blind. Let my hands, which had no compassion for your hands, be cut off. Let my legs, which had no compassion for your legs, be amputated.' And my mind did not become calm [lit. 'become cool'] until I said: 'Let my entire body be full of boils.'" They said to him: "Alas for us that we have seen you like this." He said to them: "Alas for me, if you had not seen me like this." (21A, II.91–92)

Naḥum's disciples regard him as a "perfectly righteous man," a description he does not dispute.[30] Because his disciples offer this opinion only after the house collapses, it is unclear whether their judgment of him is based on their previous observation of his conduct or on the miracle they have just witnessed. In any case, Naḥum resembles Adda bar Ahava in that his righteousness is so great that God actively protects him against the collapse of dilapidated walls.[31] But his exemplary righteousness does not seem to square with his extreme physical deformity. The question his disciples pose to him – "Since you are a perfect *tzadik*, why did this happen to you?" – is really several questions rolled into one. Why would God let a truly good man suffer so terribly? Why would God protect Naḥum from the collapse of his house, if He did not protect him from the severe injuries he has already suffered? And finally, perhaps, there is some small, faint voice on the edge of consciousness that asks: is their teacher, after all, as righteous as he seems to be? It is natural for these questions to occur to Naḥum's disciples, because the shockingly bad condition of his body directly conflicts with their conviction about his inner excellence. As they soon learn, this is precisely the point: Naḥum's body is nothing if not an instrument of teaching. In calling down disfiguring curses upon his eyes, hands, legs, and skin, he has transformed himself into a kind of Torah scroll.[32]

Naḥum's poverty is evident from his ramshackle house. But at the time of the story he tells his disciples, he was wealthy enough to travel with three asses weighed down with food and drink. When stopped in the road by a starving man begging for sustenance, he asks the man

[30] The substantive *tzadik* is formed from the root *tzedek*, "justice, righteousness"; cf. *tzedakah*, "charity."

[31] Huna evidently lacked this degree of merit, because he had to rely on Adda to secure his wine; as for Yoḥanan and Ilfa, the wall that the angels refrained from pushing over on them would not have collapsed on its own (for otherwise it would not have needed to be pushed).

[32] This comparison was suggested to me by Rabbi Marc Fitzerman.

to wait while he unloads "the ass." Naḥum states that he "did not have time to do unload the ass before his soul departed," which implies that he could not have worked any faster. Perhaps, however, he could have fed the man without first unloading the ass, or found some other way to provide him with food before he died; were this not so, it would be difficult to explain his absolute conviction that he acted without compassion. In any case, the death in the road of this anonymous stranger changes Naḥum's life, just as the words of another unnamed stranger encountered on another road change Elazar's. But while Elazar learns humility, it would be misleading to say that Naḥum learns compassion. Another person might have responded to the man's death by vowing to live a life of active charity, perhaps following Huna's example of providing free food, water, and medicine to the needy. Naḥum moves in the opposite direction, rendering himself (with God's help) permanently unfit to assist other destitute people. Blind, dismembered, and covered with boils, he becomes – like the starving man who cries out for help – totally dependent on the kindness of others. Why does he choose to do this?

In spite of what he regards as a moment of terrible selfishness, Naḥum is actually the most selfless of the rabbis we have encountered in this chapter. His story is not about what he does (like Adda or Huna), or even about what he learns (like Elazar and, to some extent, Yoḥanan); it is about what others can learn from *him*. "Alas for me, if you had not seen me like this," he tells his disciples, and the emphasis here must be on the word "seen" – for it is the monstrous spectacle of his body that is his primary pedagogical tool. Naḥum teaches by effectively turning his body into a text that he himself has authored. The significance of this "text" unfolds in stages. Naḥum's extraordinary deformity draws people in, like a book that everyone wants to read: it provokes wonder in anyone who sees it, for it automatically raises a question – "How on earth did this happen?" – in the mind of the beholder. Because Naḥum can still hear and speak, he is able to entertain and to answer this question (as he does for his disciples), and so to decipher what is "written" in the medium of his body. He is able to make it known that his ugliness is a more or less permanent and public record of a moment of sin that would otherwise have passed unnoticed by everyone except God. In the symbolic language of Naḥum's flesh, the aesthetic is an index of the ethical,

the visible of the invisible; his enduring wounds tell the tale of a few seconds of unforgivable self-absorption. And once this is understood, it becomes clear that even his incapacity to care for himself furnishes its own lesson, for it allows the disciples who look after him to cultivate the compassion that he so conspicuously lacked when it was most needed.

One might suppose that a man on the very point of death by starvation is already too far gone to be saved by a meal offered only moments before he would otherwise expire. But this consideration is of no comfort to Naḥum, who obviously holds himself to the highest possible standards of moral duty. Having failed the starving man, Naḥum is tortured by what must be an unbearable sense of guilt. It is in this light that we may best understand God's obedience to his wishes, which might otherwise seem unfeeling or even cruel. God in fact proves to be both just and compassionate in granting Naḥum's fervent prayers for blindness and the other afflictions. In allowing him to become disabled and disfigured, God satisfies his desire to be punished; in publicizing the moral reason for his physical condition, Naḥum satisfies his desire to confess.

What can a reader take away from this narrative? In interpreting Naḥum's story, and thus "reading" and understanding the virtual Torah scroll of his ugliness, one is rewarded with a vision both of his moral beauty and of God's mysterious goodness. But appreciating Naḥum's extraordinary moral scrupulousness is one thing, and imitating it is another. It bears repeating that the sages we have encountered in this part of Ta'anit present us with a variety of examples we may wish to follow in our own lives, not all of which are compatible. Consider once again the sharp contrast between Huna and Naḥum. Huna's righteousness is his active charity; faced with poverty and disease, he reflects on what is needed and does what he can. Naḥum, on the other hand, paradoxically achieves "perfect" righteousness by making his body into a grotesque expression of his own failure to be perfectly righteous. Huna, who travels in a golden chariot to do his good works, calls attention to the resplendence of our capacity for charity, however limited this capacity may be. Having failed to do what perhaps no human being could have done under the circumstances, Naḥum teaches the ugliness of human selfishness, if not also the ultimate impotence of human beings in the face

of suffering. The Gemara does not offer an opinion as to which of these teachings is weightier. But we readers of Ta'anit will find that these stories evoke a response that contains a personal answer to this question – a response that tells us something essential about who we are, and where we might find ourselves in the field of moral possibilities opened up by the examples of the sages. And it is this modest inward revelation, this small but telling bit of self-knowledge, that may guide us as we compare the paths of life that are visible from where we stand. This is the remarkable accomplishment of Talmudic aggadah, an accomplishment it shares with the handful of great literary works – including the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures – of which it may truly be said: we think we are reading them, but in fact they are reading us.

6

Gods and Men

In at least one respect, Ta'anit 3 is perfectly consistent with the whole of which it is but a small part: the Talmud repeatedly and continually asks readers to reflect on how they might best embody God's teaching in the Torah. The Talmud is able to frame the question of the best life in just this way because it can legitimately assume that readers are already united in the worship of the God of Israel, acknowledge the Torah as an essential and unique body of divine instruction for human life, and have at least a rudimentary appreciation of the subtlety and complexity of this instruction.

In the context of the Platonic dialogues, no comparable assumptions are possible. The inquiry of the *Euthyphro* is consequently much broader and more rudimentary than that of Ta'anit. Its central questions have to do with who the gods are, and what they want from us. Are the gods selfish beings driven by violent passions, or are they guardians of justice? Do the gods demand unquestioning devotion, or do they encourage and reward critical reflection on the meaning of their communications to human beings? The dialogue poses these questions not because the Greek religious tradition fails to answer them, but because the answers it offers are not consistent. Those who explicitly claim knowledge of piety are therefore necessarily engaged in the activity of interpretation, even though they may not be fully conscious of the nature of this activity. But the *Euthyphro*'s relevance extends far beyond the likes of Meletus and Euthyhpro. In asking what interpretative assumptions are appropriate in "reading" the written

and unwritten "book" of religious *nomos*, the *Euthyphro* raises a matter of pressing concern to anyone who wants to do what is right in relation to both gods and men.[1]

Ta'anit 3 addresses the problem of how to live up to the Torah by offering readers a range of exemplary lives for critical consideration. The *Euthyphro*, by contrast, initially appears to reject attempts to define piety by using paradigmatic examples. When Socrates asks Euthyphro, "[W]hat do you assert the pious is, and what the impious," Euthyphro's first response is to point to his own behavior, which he presents as the instantiation of a larger principle. "The pious is just what I am doing now," he says, "proceeding against the one doing injustice concerning murders or thefts of sacred things, or doing wrong in any other such thing, whether he should happen to be a father or a mother or anyone else at all" (5d–e). The problem with this answer, Socrates points out, is that it is merely an example of piety, whereas he had asked Euthyphro to state what piety *is* – "to teach me," in other words, "that form [*eidos*] itself by which all the pious things are pious" (6d). Because Euthyphro repeatedly fails to articulate the "form" or "look" (*idea*: 5d) of piety, Socrates claims at the end of the dialogue that his hopes of learning from him about piety have been dashed (15e).

First appearances, however, are sometimes deceiving. While it seems clear that only a philosophical definition will satisfy Socrates' desire for a speech that captures the intrinsic nature or being of piety (*ousia*: 11a), it would be rash to conclude that his conversation with Euthyphro has nothing to teach us about this subject. Like the Talmud, the Platonic dialogues represent the process of inquiry within a framework of narrative. Plato seems to suppose that it is possible to learn from this combination of narrative and philosophical discussion something important about the virtues, even without having succeeded in establishing philosophical definitions of them.[2]

[1] Note, too, that Socrates elsewhere praises speech that is "written with knowledge in the soul of the learner" (*Phaedrus* 276a), a phrase that nicely describes the rabbis' attempts to internalize the Word of God by study and to exemplify it in action. In aspiring to the "living and ensouled speech of the one who knows," as Phaedrus describes it (276a), would readers of the dialogues not be indirectly attempting to internalize and exemplify *Plato's* written words?

[2] Compare, for example, the *Meno*, the *Laches*, the *Lysis*, and the *Theaetetus*, which fail to define virtue, courage, friendship, and knowledge, respectively.

What can one learn about piety from the *Euthyphro*, and how is this teaching conveyed?

PIETY IN ACTION: DEFINITION AND THE DRAMATIC PARADIGM

These questions concern the essential pedagogical accomplishment of the *Euthyphro*. To answer them, we must first consider what purpose a philosophical definition is intended to serve. The form or look "by which all the pious things are pious" (6d) is the being or essential nature of piety, the "visibility" of which to the intellect makes it possible, at least in principle, to identify any and all instances of piety. The being of piety, which is logically and ontologically prior to its definition, is what Socrates claims he wants to learn; the definition – which exhibits piety's essential nature, but does not produce or construct it – is merely a means to this end. Depending on whether it is an instrument of teaching or of learning, philosophical speech serves to articulate, or to turn the mind toward, beings whose visibility is independent of speech. Indeed, it would not be possible to produce a definition of *anything*, much less to employ it accurately, if one were unable to perceive the form of the thing one seeks to define.[3] A definition of piety, for example, articulates the form that is common to all instances of piety; the accuracy of this definition thus depends on having correctly identified these instances, which in turn depends on having perceived the form of piety in them. And even with an accurate definition of piety in hand, one cannot know whether a particular action coheres with this definition unless the form is perceptible in the action.

In brief, the attempt to define piety, or anything else, cannot succeed apart from some antecedent familiarity with the thing one is

[3] My use of the word "form" does not distinguish between the Greek terms *eidos* and *idea* (which Socrates uses interchangeably), and is not intended to evoke the discussion in the *Republic* and elsewhere of the Platonic "Ideas" or "Forms." I believe this procedure is justified by the fact that the *Euthyphro*'s characterization of being and knowing is straightforward and, as far as possible, free of technical terminology. Cf. Strauss 1953, 123: "That to which the question 'What is?' points is the *eidos* of a thing, the shape or form or character or 'idea' of a thing. It is no accident that the term *eidos* signifies primarily that which is visible to all without any particular effort or what one might call the 'surface' of the things."

attempting to define. One must know this thing at least to the extent of being able to recognize it when it is present. To take a humble example: if I can't pick a cow out of a lineup of animals, I have no hope of being able to define the form that is common to all cows. But as we have seen, the metaphorical representation of Socratic philosophizing as prophecy or recollection assumes that we *are* already familiar with the subjects of inquiry; this antecedent familiarity is the sacred gift that makes philosophy possible.[4] Euthyphro's first instinct – to offer an example of piety – is thus at least the beginning of an answer to Socrates' question.[5] Indeed, one might wonder whether Socrates is asking too much. Why would I need to define the form of a cow if I am already able to tell cows apart from everything else? In general I would not, although the definition might be desirable in itself (assuming that I value theoretical knowledge for its own sake) as well as useful in certain practical contexts (if, for example, it became necessary to distinguish between cows and other animals that very closely resemble them). But, for our purposes, the example of a cow is excessively trivial, because it is far easier to tell whether something is a cow than to determine whether an action is pious. Euthyphro, for one, seems to see piety where it is not present.

The present line of reflection suggests that, for us readers as well as for Euthyphro, the exercise of trying to define piety might be just as important as possessing the definition itself.[6] This is not just because, as we have already noted, Plato's dramatization of the process of inquiry teaches us about the virtues one needs in order to engage in Socratic dialogue.[7] Nor is it simply because we need an effective way to clarify our intuitions about piety, and to grasp the fundamental questions an inquiry into piety must confront – although Socrates' discussion with Euthyphro serves both of these ends. Rather, in

[4] See Chapter 4, 154–56.

[5] Cf. *Laches* 192b, where, just after Socrates faults Laches for giving an example of courage rather than a definition of it, he himself offers an example in order to clarify what a definition should look like.

[6] This is not to say that Euthyphro and we stand to learn the same things. Even if Euthyphro had both the inclination and the ability to learn from reading the *Euthyphro*, there is no text for him to study. But it is possible that, having been shown that he is ignorant of piety, he might have been persuaded to drop his prosecution of his father.

[7] See Chapter 1, 62–63.

deflating Euthyphro's pretensions, Socrates is guided by his own positive understanding of piety. In deed as well as in speech, Socrates' encounter with Euthyphro is thus a performance in which we are vouchsafed *a vision of piety in action*. This is not to say that Socratic piety *is* piety, plain and simple; after all, Socrates does not yet *know* what piety is. But it is precisely this ignorance that makes the Socratic life of inquiry a model of piety that demands our most serious consideration. In the absence of a philosophical definition, Socrates himself furnishes the most compelling pattern or example of piety (*paradeigma*: 6e) available to us.[8]

Early in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates refers to the "philanthropy" – literally, the "friendship for humankind" – that leads him "to seem to say profusely to every man whatever I possess" (3d). While this is the only occurrence of the noun *philanthrōpia* in the Platonic dialogues, the adjective *philanthrōpos* appears twice; in both contexts, it describes the attempt of a god to moderate the aggressive spiritedness (*thumos*) that, if unchecked, inevitably leads human beings to commit injustice. In one case, the moderating influence is eros; in the other, it is lawful order.[9] The philanthropy Socrates displays in the *Euthyphro* proceeds on two fronts, and harmonizes with both of these examples. Negatively, Socrates exposes the emptiness of Euthyphro's proud claim to be an expert on the matter of piety, thereby rendering him unable to sustain his assertion that piety requires him to prosecute his father. Positively, Socrates advances a conception of piety centered on the erotic activity of philosophizing.

We saw in Chapter 4 that Euthyphro's self-serving understanding of piety is rooted in his flawed character and in the incoherence of

[8] In this respect, Socrates plays the same paradigmatic role in the *Euthyphro* as he does in the *Apology*. Cf. Chapter 3, 117–19.

[9] In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes claims that Eros is "the most philanthropic of the gods, because he is an ally of human beings, and a doctor of those ills which, if they were cured, the greatest happiness would come to be for humankind" (189c–d). Aristophanes goes on to tell a myth in which he makes it clear that the original and primary "ill" of mankind is its desire for domination, which expresses itself in hubristic violence directed even against the gods (189d–93b). In the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger remarks that "human nature is in no way sufficient to manage the human things, when it rules autocratically over everything, without becoming swollen with *hubris* and injustice." As a result, the Stranger explains, Cronos, "being philanthropic," originally arranged for mankind to be ruled by divine beings (*daimones*) who provided "peace and sacred awe and good laws and justice without stint" (713c–e).

the Athenian religious tradition. Encouraged by the poets' myths about the gods, what Euthyphro regards as pious is a register of his most powerful desires and emotions – his longing for distinction and his anger and resentment against his father – rather than a determination of his intellect. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates attempts to remove the support for these thumotic emotions that Euthyphro and others find in the religious tradition, and to rethink the nature of the gods in a way that encourages reflective openness and solicits inquiry. In doing so, Socrates engages in religious invention, building on some parts of the religious tradition while correcting other parts. And it is especially in reflecting on the pedagogical function and "grammar" of this religious invention that we may come to understand what the *Euthyphro* can teach us about Socratic piety.

It could be objected that, if Socrates' primary aim is to temper Euthyphro's injustice, the *Euthyphro* does not convey Socrates' understanding of piety as such, but only a kind of political theology – a way of speaking about piety that is intended to promote justice. But in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates makes it clear that he regards piety as a subset of justice. That piety and justice go hand in hand is initially suggested both by Meletus's accusation that Socrates does an injustice to the Athenians by not worshiping the city's gods, and by Euthyphro's claim that piety requires him to prosecute his father for the crime of murder (4b–c). Socrates furthermore explicitly links piety with justice when he later gets Euthyphro to agree that justice is twofold: the part that concerns care of the gods (*therapeia*) is piety, while the other, unnamed part concerns the *therapeia* of human beings. This remark – which "appears noble" to Socrates (12e) – reflects on the level of speech what Socrates accomplishes in deed, for in the *Euthyphro* he does justice to both gods and men in a way that brings to light the essential connection between these activities.[10] In particular, Socrates' therapeutic treatment of Euthyphro's disordered character is inseparable from his critical revision of the traditional myths about the gods. Socrates' remark that Meletus proposes to "clean out" or "purge" (*ekkathairein*) the city of corrupters like himself

[10] As Lewis (1984) remarks: "The *Euthyphro* is a defense of Socrates' justice.... It is Euthyphron, not Socrates, who proposes what could be called a definition of justice: *therapeia*, 'therapy' or 'care.' It is Socrates whose deeds [in the *Euthyphro*] make that definition intelligible and bear witness to its truth" (231).

(3a) thus indirectly anticipates his own catharsis of impiety and injustice through dialogue.[11]

Chapter 4 focused on the first part of the *Euthyphro* (2a–5a), paying special attention to the characters of Euthyphro, Meletus, and Socrates and the problem of philosophical beginnings (*archai*). Socrates' care for men and gods unfolds in the second part of the *Euthyphro* (5a–11d), in which he refutes his interlocutor's attempts to define piety, and in the third and final part (11e–16a), in which he tries to guide Euthyphro toward a deeper understanding of piety. This chapter examines each of these parts of the dialogue in turn.

THE MANTLE OF PIETY: EUTHYPHRO'S DIVINE REVENGE

Euthyphro is confident that prosecuting his father for doing injustice is pious, and that not prosecuting him is impious. "Look how great a proof I will tell you," he adds, "that the law [*nomos*] is so disposed … not to yield to the one acting impiously":

> Human beings themselves happen to believe [*nomidzontes*] that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, and they agree that this one [Zeus] bound his own father because he [Cronos] swallowed his sons without justice, and that one [Cronos] in turn castrated his own father on account of other such things. But they give me grief because I am prosecuting my father when he has done injustice, and in this way they contradict themselves both concerning the gods and concerning me. (5e–6a)

Euthyphro's claim that people contradict themselves in opposing his decision to prosecute his father seems designed to appeal to Socrates, whose standard tactic in argument (to which the *Euthyphro* is no exception) is to show his interlocutor that his beliefs are incoherent. On the one hand, Euthyphro's actions contravene widely accepted social practices and norms of pious behavior. As Euthyphro himself points out, people believe that "it is impious for a son to proceed against his father for murder" (4d–e). On the other, people also acknowledge as a matter of custom or convention (*nomidzontes*) that Zeus is most just and that he bound his father. Euthyphro thus attempts to exploit an

[11] Cf. *Sophist* 226d, where *katharsis* is defined as the kind of separation (*diakrisis*) that "leaves behind" the better and "throws away" the worse.

internal contradiction in Athenian *nomos*. But the "law" he invokes at 5e in asserting that he acts piously is, by his own admission, just one part of the Greek religious tradition – the poetic myths about the gods, which he judges to be more authoritative than the moral conventions concerning the proper behavior of sons toward their fathers.[12]

Euthyphro's "proof" has obvious flaws. Besides offering no reason why the myths about the gods should have more weight than Athenian moral conventions in determining correct human behavior, Euthyphro is able to draw a practical conclusion from these myths only because he fails to distinguish between gods and men. He claims that he must prosecute his father so as "not to yield to the one acting impiously," just as Zeus did not yield to Cronos. But while Cronos's treatment of Zeus may be unjust, it is not impious; piety is not a virtue of gods, but of human beings with respect to the gods. Euthyphro's assimilation of gods and human beings is important, because it paves the way for his assumption that human beings are entitled – and in certain instances, such as the present one, even obligated – to do what the gods do.

Euthyphro insists that he acts from an understanding of the requirements of piety, but we saw in Chapter 4 that he is primarily motivated by the wish to avenge himself against his father for what he perceives as the latter's insulting indifference to him. This deeper psychological truth is reflected in certain telling analogies between the story Euthyphro relates about the events leading up to his lawsuit and the myth to which he refers in his "proof." Like Hesiod's myth, Euthyphro's story is a tale of wayward spiritedness that subverts the proper order of the soul, either by ignoring the intellect or by subordinating it to its own ends. Cronos castrates Uranos with a "jagged sickle,"[13] and Zeus ultimately binds Cronos and throws him down into Tartarus below Hades; Euthyphro's laborer slits the slave's throat (perhaps also using an agricultural tool), and his father subsequently ties him up him and throws him into a ditch. Plato's implicit

[12] Cf. Burnet 1924, 108: "Euthyphro is here represented as appealing from human judgments to a divine law which he professes to know." Burnet adds that Euthyphro "sympathizes with Socrates as a kindred spirit" because he believes that Socrates "sets himself above the merely human law of Athens" (113).

[13] *Theogony* 175 (Hesiod 1914, 90).

comparison of Euthyphro's father to Zeus is apposite, for it is he, not Euthyphro, who exemplifies the justice traditionally attributed to the divine king.[14] According to Hesiod, "far-seeing" Zeus observes the deeds of men from Olympus, where he takes counsel with his daughter *Dikē* ("Justice");[15] just so, Euthyphro's father imprisons the laborer in order to buy time to inquire of the exegete, for he is concerned to do what is required by Athenian religious practice. Euthyphro, however, arrogates to *himself* the authority to determine the law, and he closes his mind to any suggestion that he might be mistaken. This, too, is reflected in his story. Having gotten drunk, the laborer rebels against the paternal counsels of reason and allows his anger to boil over into violence.[16] If Cronos's castration of Uranos is, by comparison, cool and calculated – Hesiod calls him *ankulomētēs*, "wily"[17] – he nevertheless employs his intellect as an instrument of aggression. Euthyphro's prosecution of *his* father manifests the same deliberate subordination of reason to primal aggression; coming at least four years after the incident on Naxos,[18] his premeditated filial revenge is cold indeed.

Euthyphro's use of myth to justify his behavior elicits a revealing response from Socrates. "Is this," he asks, "why I am being prosecuted – because whenever someone says such things about the gods, I receive them somehow in ill humor? On account of which, as it seems, someone will assert that I am doing wrong."[19] It is unclear just what upsets Socrates. "Such things" presumably refers both to the poets' tales about the gods' vicious quarrels and to Euthyphro's use of Zeus's behavior as a justification for attacking his own father, but either of these would in itself suffice to rouse the indignation of one

[14] Zeus is also traditionally regarded as the protector of fathers. Cf. Strepsiades' appeal to *Zeus patrōios* ("Zeus, god of fathers") when he is quarreling with Pheidippides (*Clouds* 1469).

[15] *Works and Days* 225–72 (Hesiod 1914, 18–22). In the *Odyssey*, Homer declares: "The blessed gods do not love [*phileousin*] cruel deeds, but they honor justice and the righteous deeds of human beings" (Homer 1919, 14.83–84, translation slightly revised).

[16] Cf. Aristotle 1979, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102b31–32, which compares reason's guidance of the nonrational part of the soul to the advice of a father and friends.

[17] *Theogony* 168 (Hesiod 1914, 90).

[18] See Chapter 4, note 16.

[19] *Examartanein* literally means "to miss the mark thoroughly"; cf. *hamartia*, Aristotle's word for tragic error in the *Poetics*.

who cares about doing justice to gods and men. Socrates nevertheless tells Euthyphro that "if these things seem so to you, too, who know well about such things, it is necessary, as it seems, for us to concede them as well. For what are we to say, who ourselves agree that we know nothing about them?" (6a–b). In making it clear that he is aware of his ignorance about the gods, and is willing to yield to Euthyphro's knowledge – if that is indeed what it proves to be – Socrates sets an example that his interlocutor would do well to follow. Most important, Socrates will not allow his sense of indignation to overwhelm his understanding; emotion, he implies – including especially the powerful feeling of righteous anger that is stirred up by perceived wrongs – is properly governed by intellect. Note, too, that Socrates speaks of "us" and "we" rather than "me" and "I," as if to suggest that there are other self-consciously ignorant seekers of knowledge besides himself.[20] This suggestion, and the hope of unanimity he expresses in appealing to "the god of friendship" (6b), point toward an alternative to the strife-ridden cities of men and their Olympian counterpart – the community of philosophers united in the shared quest for wisdom.

Having been assured that Euthyphro "truly believes" not only the myths about Zeus and Cronos, but also "things still more wondrous than these, which the many do not know" (6b), Socrates presses his interlocutor on the issue of divine conflict. In doing so, he quietly introduces an image that captures the inevitably poetic nature of civic piety (in the general sense of *poēisis*, "making" or "production"), and that helps us to formulate the difference between his approach to the religious tradition and that of Euthyphro.

> Do you believe that there really is war among the gods against one another, and terrible hatreds and battles and many other such things, of the sort which are said by the poets, and with which our sacred things [or "temples"] have been adorned by the good painters, especially the robe full of such adornments that is led up to the Acropolis in the Great Panathenaea? Are we to assert that these things are true, Euthyphro? (6b–c)

Socrates refers to the sacral robe that the Athenians brought in procession to the Acropolis and presented to Athena during the "great"

[20] West and West (1984) regard the plural forms as mere modesty (47 n. 23), but it is unclear why modesty would be called for in the present context.

version of the annual Panathenaea, a festival honoring the city that was celebrated on an especially grand scale every four years. Richly embroidered with images of the gods and their adventures, Athena's robe not only illustrates the mythical tradition, but also, Socrates suggests, furnishes an image of the poetic or fabricated character of religious custom and convention as a whole. Like Athena's robe, *nomos* is a covering that obscures what lies beneath, although it is also more or less able (depending on how it has been "tailored") to indicate the underlying shape or nature of that which it covers.[21] At issue for Socrates is what the warp and woof of Athenian religious custom, including ritual as well as myth, both conceals and reveals about the nature of the gods.[22]

Early in the dialogue, Euthyphro suggests that he and Socrates are kindred souls, in that both "make innovations" concerning things divine (3b; cf. 5a, 16a); *kainotomein* literally means to cut (*temnein*) in a way that is new or strange (*kainos*). The image of Athena's robe helps us to see that Euthyphro innovates by cutting out part of the city's religious *nomos* – certain influential myths about the gods, and certain traditions regarding pollution, prayer, and sacrifice (4b–c, 14b) – and discarding the rest, including the sacred obligation that unwritten custom imposes on him to honor and respect his father. In responding to these religious innovations, Socrates makes some innovations of his own, but his procedure is both more radical and more conservative than Euthyphro's. While Euthyphro works exclusively with the prefabricated materials of the tradition, Socrates rejects the way the gods are commonly characterized by the poets. In presenting a new myth of the gods, he also implicitly transforms the

[21] As artificial products that are worn both to protect against nature's harshness and because of shame in the face of convention (cf. *Republic* 452c), clothes are symbols of *nomos* (just as nakedness is a symbol of nature or *phusis*; Howland 2004a, 113–14). Cf. Plato's *Statesman*, in which weaving is the primary image of statesmanship; the statesman artfully uses legislation to bind the parts of the soul and the city into a unified web (305e).

[22] At the Great Panathenaea, rhapsodies recited the Homeric epics in an extended competition. As Simon Goldhill observes, "such an institution … endows the text performed in and before the community with a considerable normative force for the community.… The work performed in the Panathenaia becomes the shared narrative of all Athenians" (Goldhill 1991, 173). The Panathenaea thus used the threads of Homeric myth to (re)weave the bonds of the Athenian religious tradition.

traditional understanding of rituals of prayer and sacrifice, at least to the extent that these rituals are intended to gratify the gods as the poets portray them.[23] Socrates' aim, however, is essentially conservative: it is to strengthen the moral content of myth and ritual by purging the tradition of elements that support injustice toward gods and human beings.

EXPOSING EUTHYPHRO: SOCRATES' PHILANTHROPIC AND PHILOTHEISTIC THERAPY

In the course of reflecting on the "transfiguring mirror" that the Olympian world presented to the Greeks, Friedrich Nietzsche remarks: "thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it."[24] Nietzsche's observation brings to light an implicit premise of Greek poetry as a whole, and therefore of Euthyphro's "proof" that he proceeds piously in prosecuting his father: the gods behave no better than men. In refuting Euthyphro, Socrates contests this assumption. A main part of his strategy is to drive a wedge between the unrestrained and self-indulgent conduct of men like Euthyphro and the conduct of the gods, and he does so by subtly but effectively revising the characterizations of the poets. In Socrates' telling, the gods cease to be driven by powerful thumotic and erotic passions such as anger, jealousy, the lust for honor, and sexual desire. Rather, their loves and longings – which he categorizes as modes of *philia* ("friendship" or "affection"), a less heated term than *erōs* – are governed by their understanding of what is noble, good, and just. In a word, Socrates' gods are eminently reasonable and decent beings; one could say that, while the deities of the poets reflect what man is, those of Socrates exemplify what he *ought* to be.

After Euthyphro reconfirms that the things the poets say about the quarrels of the gods are true, Socrates reminds him that he did not in any case teach him what piety is. He gave Socrates an example (prosecuting his father), but did not define the form or look of piety

[23] In particular, we shall see that Socrates' gods are not such as to welcome bribery through sacrifice. Cf. Isaiah 1:11, 17: " 'What need have I of all your sacrifices?' says the LORD.... Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow."

[24] Nietzsche 1967, 43 (section 3). He adds that this is "the only satisfying theodicy."

that all pious things and actions share (6d–e). Having agreed to state his teaching "in this way, too," Euthyphro asserts that "what is dear to the gods [*tois theois prosphiles*] is pious, and what is not dear [*mē prosphiles*] is impious." Socrates alters this definition somewhat in restating it: "the thing dear to the gods and the human being dear to the gods is pious, but the god-hated thing [*theomises*] and the god-hated man is impious" (6e–7a). The adjective *philos* covers a range of meanings, and can designate feelings of affection and friendship as well as pleasure. What pleases the gods, what they desire, or simply what they like – any of these could be correctly described as *prosphiles tois theois*. By the same token, what displeases the gods, what they dislike or feel aversion to – any one of these things is *theomises*, a term that (unlike Euthyphro's relatively neutral *mē prosphiles*) suggests active hostility.

Euthyphro's conception of piety is neither moderate nor nuanced, and gives no sense of the rich complexity of Greek religious life.[25] His first real definition of piety furthermore sits uneasily with his earlier assertion that he acts piously in imitating Zeus and Cronos. His definition nonetheless lays bare the basic implication of both the mythical tradition inaugurated by Hesiod and Homer and the rituals of petitionary prayer and sacrifice – namely, that piety boils down to pleasing the gods, whatever their wishes may be. This traditional conception of piety is essentially operational or functional. It is informed by the perception that the gods are extremely powerful beings who are given to helping their friends and harming their enemies. Best is never to cross them, and second best is to propitiate them when one does. It therefore makes sense regularly to offer sacrifices and libations in order to honor the gods as (one supposes) they wish to be honored, and to employ a variety of means – including oracles and various arts of divination – to determine more specifically what the gods want in any given circumstance.[26] From Euthyphro's narrowly pragmatic perspective, it suffices to know what the gods want; *why* they want it is, practically speaking, irrelevant. As he explains

[25] This complexity is nicely encapsulated in Vernant 1987, which discusses Greek religion from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

[26] These functions were combined in the sacrifices offered prior to battle, which would be "read" for favorable signs. Sacrifices were also performed prior to any meeting of the Athenian Assembly. See Burkert 1985, 113; Zaidman and Pantel 1989, 93.

later in the dialogue, piety is nothing more than the knowledge of how to gratify the gods in prayer and sacrifice. By employing this knowledge in speech and deed one may "save private families and the common things of the cities," while those who are ignorant of how to gratify the gods run the risk that they may "overturn and destroy everything" (14b).

We noted earlier that Socrates is displeased by the myths that depict violent quarrels between the gods. Given Socrates' philanthropic devotion to human beings, what he presumably finds most objectionable in Euthyphro's conception of piety is that it debases both gods and men. As Socrates hints when he substitutes "god-hated" for "not dear to the gods," Euthyphro's gods – the angry gods of Hesiod and Homer, the gods of the poets and the painters – inspire trepidation rather than love. Like a heavenly version of the Cosa Nostra, they are violent and unpredictable. The self-obsessed anger of the gods gives rise to the equally self-obsessed emotion of fear in human beings. Cowed by their destructive power, human beings pay the gods "protection" in the form of sacrifices. Where might makes right, obsequiousness and flattery are marks of intelligence; independence, inquisitiveness, and courage – virtues of the philosophical nature – are, on the contrary, signs of a dangerous stupidity. As the poet says in a verse that Socrates later takes issue with, "where there is fear, there is also reverence" (12b); fear, a passion that encourages unquestioning obedience to those with ample power to harm, is the real root of conventional piety. This conception of piety militates against human dignity and nobility, and in particular against philosophy – a point that is soon to be brought home by the conviction and execution of Socrates.[27]

[27] Euthyphro's conception of piety is evidently widely shared. In the *Republic*, the elderly Cephalus, who breaks off his conversation with Socrates in order to perform the sacrifices, emphasizes that the tales told by the poets make a man approaching death "twist and turn" with the fear that he will be punished for past injustices (330e). These injustices may include sacrifices owed to a god (331b). Later, Adeimantus complains that the religious tradition teaches the young that they can bribe the gods with "sacrifices and incantations"; if someone wishes to "ruin an enemy," he can thereby "at small expense injure just and unjust alike" (364c). Adeimantus's indictment of the tradition plays a crucial role in convincing Socrates to defend justice, which he does by constructing the *Republic*'s famous city in speech (cf. 367e–69b).

Socrates' disagreement with Euthyphro nevertheless reflects a conflict internal to the religious tradition itself. *Philosophia*, the love of wisdom, is the antithesis of piety as Euthyphro understands it. While fear and anger both turn the soul inward and close it off from the world outside, love has the opposite effect. In particular, the love of wisdom opens the soul up to what is above and beyond it, and thus makes possible a reflective encounter with things sacred and divine. Socrates' erotic, philosophical openness to the oracle Chaerephon receives at Delphi exemplifies precisely this sort of encounter. What is more, we have already seen that Socrates' thoughtful reflection on the meaning of the oracle harmonizes with the requirements of the oracle itself.[28] The religious tradition thus simultaneously supports Euthyphro's conception of piety as slavish gratification of the gods, and Socrates' intuition that critical, philosophical reflection can itself be a form of piety.

In responding to Euthyphro's assertion that piety is whatever is dear to the gods, Socrates effectively redefines piety around the process of questioning and inquiry that is already partially represented in the Greek tradition by the institution of the oracle. Socrates begins by reminding Euthyphro of his assertion that the gods quarrel. But what, he wonders, do they quarrel about? Do they "differ with" one another about greater and lesser numbers, lengths, or weights? If so, they could quickly settle their disputes by calculating, measuring, and weighing, and their differences would not lead to enmity or anger. Or do they differ about "the just and the unjust, and noble and shameful, and good and bad"? For it is about these matters that human beings, finding themselves unable to agree, "become enemies" (7b–d). Note that Socrates frames his questions in a way that implies that the gods are governed by reason. In particular, he suggests that the discord Euthyphro attributes to them does not spring from conflicting appetites and passions, as Hesiod and Homer relate, but from a "difference" or "variance" of opinion (*diaphora*: 7b) over issues that emerge on a relatively abstract level. "*If* the gods differ," Socrates says (7d) – implying that they may not disagree at all (cf. 8d–e), and therefore that there may, in fact, be no animosity among them – they dispute about fundamental questions of nobility, justice, and

[28] Chapter 3, 113–14.

goodness.[29] Now, we know that human beings do dispute about justice and the like, and Euthyphro's own behavior reminds us that their understanding of justice all too often reflects their particular longings and frustrations. If, on the other hand, it is plausible to suppose that the gods might not disagree about nobility, justice, and goodness, their passions must follow reason, rather than the other way around.[30] And that is precisely what Socrates goes on to suggest.

"Isn't it the case," Socrates asks Euthyphro, "that each set [of gods] loves [*philousin*] the very things it believes to be noble and good and just, and they hate the opposites of these things?" (7e).[31] "Very much so," Euthyphro replies. This seemingly innocent exchange represents a turning point in the dialogue, for Euthyphro has effectively conceded that the gods are not amoral beings governed by powerful passions. Insofar as their loves and hatreds are determined by their beliefs, the gods are reasonable; insofar as they love what they take to be noble, good, and just, they are morally responsible. Even if one supposes that Homer and Hesiod are right in discerning in the community of Olympians a reflection of the factional divisions of human political existence, it follows that these factions cannot be explained primarily in terms of political passions, for the gods are guided by understanding, not emotion. In this respect, one could say that divine "politics" is peculiarly philosophical; *if* there are opposing parties among the gods, the passions that animate these parties spring from distinct ways of cognizing nobility, justice, and goodness.[32] And while the gods might argue, it is doubtful that they come to blows (as Homer and Hesiod say they do); their shared love of nobility, goodness, and justice would presumably lead them jointly to consider where their beliefs might be at fault.

[29] Admittedly, even the quarrels of children can move quickly from a conflict on the level of desire ("I want this toy!") to a dispute about justice ("That's not fair!"). But this distinction is nevertheless significant, because on Socrates' view whatever disagreements may exist among the gods originate on the level of intellect, and do not reflect self-serving appetites and passions.

[30] Alternatively, the gods altogether lack passion and desire – a position Socrates rejects, inasmuch as he attributes *philia* to the gods.

[31] Burnet (1924, 119) suggests that *hekastoi*, "each set," reflects the division of the Olympians into bitterly opposed parties in the *Iliad*, one party favoring the Trojans and the other the Achaeans.

[32] If, however, one supposes that the gods are wise (cf. *Symposium* 204a), it would follow that they do not disagree at all about what is noble, just, and good.

We saw earlier that Euthyphro believes the violent conduct of Zeus and Cronos gives him license to act on the aggression he feels toward his father. But Socrates' revision of the poetic tradition effectively short-circuits Euthyphro's attempt to justify his behavior by appealing to that of the gods. Euthyphro believes to be unjust that which he hates, while Socrates' gods hate what they believe to be unjust. For Euthyphro, as for the gods of the poets, the wish is father to the thought. In thought and feeling, on the other hand, Socrates' gods – like Socrates himself – are guided by their intellectual receptivity to what is. These gods are accordingly models of reasonableness and decency. If they are not wise, they are nonetheless philosophical. And if they cannot directly teach us what is noble, good, just, or pious, they can at least show us by example how to learn about these things by peaceful and cooperative inquiry.

Socrates goes on to observe that, if Euthyphro is correct in asserting that the gods quarrel, they must disagree about what is just and unjust, and so must both hate and love the same things. But if so, the same things will be both pious and impious – assuming that Euthyphro is right in defining piety as whatever is dear to the gods (7e–8b). While Euthyphro concedes this point, he supposes that there is at least one thing about which the gods do not dispute: none of them asserts that "whoever kills someone unjustly need not pay the penalty" (8b). Socrates agrees: while human beings quarrel about "who the doer of injustice is, and what he did, and when," no god or human being – if the gods do dispute (see 8d and e) – "dares to say that the doer of injustice need not pay the penalty" (8d–e). In other words, the public speeches (if not the private thoughts) of both gods and human beings acknowledge the moral principle that injustice must be punished. In this respect, at least, the gods are not above the moral law that governs men. This represents a small but important step in Socrates' improvement of the poets' characterization of the gods.

In response to Socrates' observation that whatever is loved by some gods and hated by others is neither (or both) pious and impious, Euthyphro reformulates his original definition of piety: whatever all the gods love is pious, and whatever all the gods hate is impious (9d–e). Euthyphro's revised definition effectively separates piety from justice, for he and Socrates have just agreed that the gods recognize a

principle of justice that is independent of their loves and hatreds. This cannot be what Euthyphro intends, as it jeopardizes his insistence that he does what is pious in punishing his father's alleged injustice. Indeed, it opens up the absurd possibility that the gods might insist that men punish wrongdoers, while at the same time hating such punishment and regarding it as impious. These considerations presumably lie behind Socrates' warning that Euthyphro should consider whether his revised definition of piety "will most easily teach me what you promised" (9d). Socrates also asks whether they should reflect on Euthyphro's revised definition of piety – "or are we to let it go, and in this way welcome both our own claims and those of others, agreeing that something is so if only someone should assert that it is so?" (9e). This question concerns not only the proper conduct of philosophical inquiry, but also how we are to understand the communications of the gods to human beings through prophecies, oracles, dreams, and the like. Euthyphro accepts the practical teaching of the mythical tradition that the wish of the gods is our command. From this point of view, the effective truth of the matter is that what the gods say – at least insofar as it concerns our relationship to them – is so, simply because they say it. Socrates' characterization of the gods as reasonable and morally responsible beings, by contrast, implicitly invites us to inquire into the logic of their pronouncements, to ask for explanations, and, in brief, to engage them in philosophical argument – precisely as he does in response to the oracle from Delphi.[33]

Socrates next raises a question that Euthyphro initially fails to understand: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved?" (10a). In explaining this question, Socrates first gets Euthyphro to agree that there is a difference between "something carried and carrying, and [something] led and leading, and [something] seen and seeing," and furthermore between "something loved and, different from this, the thing loving" (10a). In each of these cases, the second, active term explains the first, passive term. In other words, Socrates explains (10b–c), it is because of the action of carrying, leading, seeing, or loving that the first term is affected in some way (carried, led, seen, or loved) or comes to be some sort

[33] Cf. Abraham's defense of the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25).

of thing (something carried, something led, something seen, or something loved). Thus, a thing is (something) loved because of the action of loving. But the reverse does not hold: the passive condition of being loved does not explain the action of loving.

Recall that Euthyphro had agreed to teach Socrates about piety. His definition identifies the pious as that which all the gods love. According to the reasoning we have just reviewed, piety is therefore a passive condition that is explained by the action of divine love. At the same time, Socrates now gets Euthyphro to agree that the gods love the pious because it is pious (10d); like the noble, the good, and the just, the pious is loved by the gods because it is intrinsically lovable (7e). If we put these points together, it is clear that Euthyphro has become entangled in a vicious circle of explanation: he appeals to the unanimous love of the gods to explain what makes a thing pious, and he appeals to a thing's piety to explain the unanimous love of the gods. What is more, Euthyphro has as yet shed no light on the *eidos* or *idea* of piety. As Socrates observes, defining the pious as whatever all the gods love tells us only about how the pious is affected – not what it is. Socrates therefore asks Euthyphro to start over "from the beginning" (11a–b).

So far, Euthyphro has failed to teach Socrates anything about the very subject on which he claims to be an expert. Euthyphro is frustrated by this failure, but he seems generally to grasp the logical problem Socrates has just pointed out: "whatever we propose somehow always circles around for us," he complains, "and isn't willing to remain wherever we may set it down" (11b). Euthyphro's inability to produce a speech that stands its ground under close inspection is certainly not unique among Socrates' interlocutors, and is shared even by Socrates (11d–e). Socratic reflection, it seems, ferrets out the tensions and contradictions inherent in any philosophical speech. For while the contradictions in Euthyphro's account of piety mirror those of the religious tradition, philosophical speech is arguably *always* intrinsically unstable, just because it is an incomplete or partial articulation of the visibility of what is.[34]

[34] See the brief discussion of the instrumentality of philosophical speech at the beginning of this chapter. If a speech about what is were to overcome all inherent tensions and contradictions, the "dialectic" of philosophy would be transformed into the completeness of systematic wisdom. This is precisely what Hegel claims

Not coincidentally, Socrates responds to Euthyphro's complaint by offering him a complex image that highlights the artificiality of speech in comparison to what it attempts to articulate. Socrates blames the instability of his own speeches as well as Euthyphro's on "our ancestor Daedalus," the Athenian who escaped from the labyrinth of King Minos of Crete and his Minotaur by fashioning wings for himself and his son Icarus. He tells Euthyphro that it is his "kinship" with Daedalus, who is said to have made statues so lifelike that they ran away unless tied down, that is to blame for the fact that "my works in speech run away" (11c; cf. *Meno* 97d). But Socrates surpasses Daedalus in one particular: "he made only his own things not stay still, while I, besides my own things, as it seems, also do this to those of others" (11d).

Socrates' philosophical speeches, like Daedalus's statues, are "works" (*erga*) or constructions that are intended to image natural realities. Just as Daedalus was able to make statues so lifelike that they imitate human motion, Socrates produces speeches, and transforms those of others, in such a way that they, too, "run away." But this is as far as the comparison goes. For we are meant to see that, in the decisive respect, Socrates is no more akin to Daedalus than he is to Euthyphro. That Daedalus's statues run away is an indication of the excellence of his craftsmanship in imaging living beings, but Socratic inquiry into ideas or forms is supposed to exhibit the nature of nonliving, stable realities. Socrates accordingly regards his power to animate speeches as a philosophical deficiency: "I am unwillingly wise. For I would wish that the speeches stand still for me and be firmly settled rather than, in addition to the wisdom of Daedalus, to get the wealth of Tantalus" (11d–e). Socrates seems to envision the possibility that the knowledge he seeks, like the food and drink that tantalized the legendary king, will forever remain just beyond his grasp. Yet he nevertheless describes his Daedalean power as a kind of wisdom. This is nothing other than the human wisdom he speaks of in the *Apology* – the knowledge of ignorance that enables him to dispel the opinion that he and others know what they are talking about when they in fact do not.

to have accomplished in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. For a comparison (and Kierkegaardean criticism) of Socrates and Hegel on these matters, see Howland 2006, 104–11.

If Daedalus – who knows how to make statues run like men, and men fly like birds – is associated with motion, Tantalus is associated with the pain of unfulfilled appetite. These themes come together in the person of Socrates. In using his knowledge of ignorance to set speeches in motion, Socrates' deeper aim is to arouse an erotic longing for wisdom in men who, supposing they are already wise, might otherwise remain at rest. In reflecting on the longing for wisdom, we are brought back to Socrates' distinction between the action of loving and the passive condition of being loved. In fact, philosophy is neither purely active nor purely passive; like all love, it unfolds in the middle ground between doing and suffering. As the active and deliberate pursuit of wisdom, philosophy is a path we may choose to follow, or from which we may abstain. But love – whether it is the gods' affection for the pious or the ignorant person's erotic love of wisdom – is not wholly spontaneous; rather, it is *elicited* by that which is lovable.[35] One could say that we simultaneously stretch ourselves toward wisdom, and are drawn by its attractive power.

Although a similar ambiguity is visible in the conduct of Euthyphro, who vacillates between an active and a passive conception of his own putative knowledge, Euthyphro remains unsusceptible to Socrates' Daedalean art because he is not genuinely erotic. As a self-proclaimed diviner, Euthyphro could have insisted that he is the recipient of divine information that neither can, nor needs to be, defended in argument, because it is a direct revelation of the mind of the gods. In this way, he could have claimed to know what is pious without having to try to establish the veracity of his understanding. But Euthyphro is drawn into conversation with Socrates because he is proud of his knowledge, and wants to be admired for his intellectual accomplishment. And yet, he is quick to blame Socrates for the inadequacy of his own account of piety. "You seem to me the Daedalus," he tells Socrates, "since, as far as I'm concerned, they [his speeches] would stay as they were" (11d). If Socrates succeeds in arousing a desire for wisdom in his conversation with Euthyphro, he does so only by reaching over the head of his interlocutor to Plato's readers.

[35] Indeed, the common expression "falling in love" suggests that love is something that simply happens to one.

Euthyphro is now out of ideas, and Socrates must take the lead in the last third of the dialogue (11e–16a). Through a series of skillful argumentative moves, Socrates has managed effectively to strip him of the web of religious *nomos* he had tailored to cloak his otherwise naked aggression against his father, and thereby to put him in a condition of *aporia* – the Greek word for "perplexity" that literally means "no way out." All of this is prefigured in the story Euthyphro tells about the events on Naxos.[36] In the psychological economy of this story, Euthyphro's laborer, a servant who no longer works "with us" (*par' hēmin*: 4c) but raises his hand *against* us, is nothing other than *thumos* run amok – angry spiritedness that refuses to heed the fatherly counsels of reason. And just as Euthyphro manifests a similarly rebellious (albeit more calculating and vengeful) spiritedness in charging his father with murder, Socrates does to Euthyphro in speech what Euthyphro's father did to the laborer in deed: he removes his argumentative weapons, immobilizes him in the bonds of logical circularity, and exposes him to the cold light of critical reflection. Beyond this, Socrates has subtly transformed the characterization of the gods in myth, building upon those parts of the religious tradition that emphasize the justice of the gods and the importance of critical inquiry in understanding their communications to human beings. He has thus prepared the ground for a new account of the relationship between men and gods, an account in which philosophy itself is a central manifestation of piety. Unlike Euthyphro, however, Socrates is motivated not by anger, but by friendship (*philia*) for human beings (*anthrōpoi*). But as he correctly predicts, it is just this poorly understood philanthropy that will lead the Athenians to take serious measures against him (3d–e).

PHILOSOPHY AS PIETY: A NEW BEGINNING

Because Euthyphro seems to Socrates to be "spoiled," Socrates tells him that "I will eagerly help [*sumprothumēsomai*: lit. 'with *thumos* to the fore'] to show how you may teach me about the pious" (11e). Socrates will not furnish the definition they are seeking. Instead, he

[36] In this particular sense, Euthyphro does turn out to be a prophet, if only an unself-conscious one.

will demonstrate how Euthyphro could teach Socrates about piety, were he of a mind to do so.[37] This is a remarkable moment in the dialogue: not only are the roles of teacher and learner now effectively reversed, but Socrates indicates here that he is about to provide the essential tools one would need in order to understand the nature of piety. Euthyphro may ignore Socrates' advice to exert himself (12a), but we readers would do well to take this advice to heart – especially because careful reflection will disclose levels of meaning in Socrates' demonstration that are not readily apparent. And if Euthyphro cannot learn from Socrates how to teach him about piety, perhaps we can learn how to teach ourselves.

Socrates begins by securing Euthyphro's agreement that "all the pious is just." But Euthyphro has difficulty following Socrates' next question: "Then is all the pious just? Or is the pious all just, but the just not all pious; rather, one part of it is pious, and the other [is] something else?" (11e–12a). To illustrate what he means, Socrates contrasts his view with that expressed in a certain verse of poetry:

> I am saying the opposite of what the poet composed who said:[38] "Zeus who enclosed/concealed/accomplished[39] and planted all these things you are not willing to speak of. For where there is fear, there, too, is reverent awe [*aidōs*]." (12a–b)

Unlike the person addressed by the poet, Socrates *is* willing to speak of Zeus, albeit not by name; what he says about this verse, and what he has been saying all along in the dialogue, directly concerns how we should understand the gods. Socrates takes issue with the poet's assertion that fear is always accompanied by reverent awe. *Aidōs* is the emotion properly felt in the presence of the sacred. But according to Socrates, we fear many things – including poverty and disease – that

[37] Euthyphro is not merely "spoiled" (a claim Socrates repeats at 12a), but lazy as well; Socrates exhorts him not to tire early and, moments later, to exert himself (11e, 12a).

[38] West and West (1984) observe that this phrase, *ho poiētēs epoiēsen ho poiēsas*, literally reads "what the maker made who made." Socrates evidently intends to distinguish his understanding of the relationship between awe and fear from the fabrications of the poets.

[39] The manuscripts vary, and it is unclear whether this word is *erxanta*, *sterxanta*, or *rexanta*. Burnet departs from the manuscripts, reading: "Even he who was the author of all these things will not revile Zeus who wrought it; for where there is fear there is shame" (Burnet 1924, 133).

inspire no awe in us, and in which we evidently do not detect any connection with the sacred (12b). This remark is significant, because the poets are more than willing to attribute disease and other misfortunes to the gods, and to explain them as divine punishments.[40] In other words, Socrates seems subtly to be challenging a key feature of the Greek religious tradition, and of the Jewish tradition as well – namely, that plagues and other misfortunes are heaven-sent. This suspicion is at least partially confirmed when he later flatly asserts that "it is clear to everyone … that there is no good for us that they [the gods] do not give" (15a).[41]

By severing the link between reverent awe and the fear of misfortunes like disease and poverty, Socrates effectively removes a mainstay of conventional piety. If the gods can – and do – harm us, our relations with them run the risk of being driven by the fear of what they may do to us if we fail to please them.[42] This is precisely how Euthyphro understands the practice of sacrifice: while gratifying the gods by prayer and sacrifice preserves families and cities, "the opposites of the things gratifying are impious, and they overturn and destroy everything" (14b). Socrates, for his part, suggests a very different reason for prayer and sacrifice. On the Socratic view, prayer and sacrifice would be motivated neither by fear nor (because the gods love what is noble, good, and just) by the equally self-regarding desire to flatter or bribe the gods, but by gratitude for the good things they give us.

[40] Notable examples of this include the plagues Apollo inflicts on the Greeks in Homer's *Iliad* and on the Thebans in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The former punishes Agamemnon's contempt for a priest of Apollo (Homer 1924, 1.93–100); the latter, the presence in the city of Oedipus, who has incurred pollution by killing his father.

[41] Compare Socrates' assertion that, in the city in speech, speeches and poems must be composed in accordance with the principle that the gods do not cause all things, but only the good things (*Republic* 380c).

[42] Judaism offers no analogy to this problem. In the English of the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, one frequently finds the phrase (or a variant thereof) "And the Israelites did what was offensive to the LORD"; it occurs, for example, seven times in Judges (2:11, 3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1). But the Hebrew literally reads: "And the children of Israel did evil [*v'ya'asu … et hara*] in the eyes of the LORD." In other words, the people Israel are judged by moral standards that God has already publicized (cf. Deuteronomy 17:2, where what is evil in God's eyes is identified with transgression of the covenant).

Socrates next tells Euthyphro what the poet *should* have written: "where there is reverent awe, there, too, is fear." "For is there anyone," he asks, "who, feeling reverent awe and shame [*aischunomenos*] in some matter, has not also feared and dreaded a reputation [*doxan*] for wickedness?" (12b–c). Socrates' question is complicated by the fact that he speaks here not only of *aidōs* but also of *aischunē*, the shame one feels in the face of others. This shame is not inspired by sacred things, but concerns what other people think – one's "reputation," or one's status in the realm of human "opinion" (*doxa*). It is thus possible – and, in the case of Socrates, more than possible – that reverent awe before the gods might lead one to discount or even disregard one's reputation in the eyes of men. Socrates' fidelity to what he understands to be the communication of the god at Delphi is a perfect example of this disengagement of awe from shame, for his public philosophizing leads directly to the widespread perception that he is an impious corrupter of the young. This is not to say that reverent awe is ever wholly free from fear. Socrates' *aidōs*, for example, is surely accompanied by the fear that he may fail to live up to the sacred word of the god. I believe that this is the inner meaning of Socrates' assertion that awe is part of fear.

Socrates goes on to suggest an analogy: "awe is part of fear just as 'odd' is part of number." By the same token, Euthyphro agrees, the pious is part of the just (12c–d). But what part would it be? As for number (*arithmos*), Socrates would say that the even is "whatever is not scalene, but rather isosceles." With these clues in mind, he asks Euthyphro to teach him "what part of the just is pious" (12d–e).

Before we consider Euthyphro's response, let us reflect on what might be suggested by Socrates' examples. While "being loved" did not get at the intrinsic nature or "being" (*ousia*) of piety (11a), the odd and the even *do* pertain to the *ousia* of number.[43] The distinction between the odd and the even covers all the natural or "counting" numbers.[44] Socrates observes that the even is *isoskelēs*, "equal-legged,"

[43] Cf. *Statesman* 262e.

[44] "The fundamental phenomenon which we should never lose sight of in determining the meaning of *arithmos* is counting, or more exactly, the counting-off, of some number of things." For the Greeks, "only that can be 'counted' which is *not one*, which is before us in a certain number." For this reason, "the unit as such is no *arithmos*"; "the smallest number of things or units is: *two* things or units" (Klein 1992, 46, 49, emphases in original; cf. 18, 21).

and the odd *skalēnos*, "with unequal sides." This is a reference to the geometrical fact that any continuous magnitude (e.g., a line or a surface) can be divided, ad infinitum, into equal parts. This is not true of whole numbers. Odd numbers cannot be divided into two equal parts, for one part will always be more or less than the other by at least one indivisible unit. In other words, the "property of 'being odd' can occur only in a field of discrete and indivisible units, since it always depends on a single, 'supernumerary' unit, indivisible 'by nature.' " Consequently, "*only* 'oddness' is characteristic of that which is countable as such, while 'evenness' represents … the possibility of unlimited divisibility and thus, in a way, the 'unlimited' itself." The odd is thus "prior" to the even, because it "imposes a limit on unlimited divisibility in the form of an indivisible unit."[45]

Socrates equates the odd with awe and the pious. If the relationship of awe to the remaining part of fear and of piety to the remaining part of justice is analogous to that of the odd to the remaining part of number (the even) with respect to the mathematical properties we have just observed, it would follow that awe "imposes a limit" on the rest of fear, just as piety "imposes a limit" on the rest of justice. In other words, the reverent fear that is appropriate in the presence of the sacred, and the justice that is properly displayed in relation to the gods, would for two reasons be prior to the rest of fear and justice. First, only these forms of fear and justice would be characteristic of fear and justice as such, just as only the odd is characteristic of number as such. Second, these distinctive forms of fear and justice would give definition to otherwise unlimited or indefinite continua, just as the odd limits the otherwise unlimited divisibility of continuous magnitudes. To state these points still more clearly, Socrates is suggesting that *aidōs* establishes boundaries for the rest of fear – which, as a projection of purely human concerns, would otherwise be as unlimited as our desires – and that doing justice to the gods similarly establishes a limit in relation to which one could measure justice toward human beings. This means that the question of what one should fear, and to what extent one should fear it, can be correctly approached only by looking toward the reverent awe that is proper to human beings. By the same token, doing justice to human beings requires one to be

[45] Klein 1992, 57, 59; emphases in original.

mindful of what is required in order to do justice to the gods. Thus, for example, any fear that impairs the capacity of human beings to feel reverent awe toward the sacred would on this view be ill-founded, just as any action that impairs the capacity of human beings to do justice to the gods would, for this very reason, be unjust.

These suggestions become more concrete in the immediate sequel. Pressed to say "what part of the just is pious," Euthyhpro declares that "that part of the just is reverent as well as pious which concerns the care or service [*therapeia*] of the gods, and the part that concerns the care or service [*therapeia*] of human beings is the remaining part of the just" (12e).[46] Significantly, Socrates for the first time approves of one of Euthyphro's definitions. "You seem to me to speak nobly, Euthyphro," he replies, "but I am still in need of a little something." In particular, Socrates is uncertain just what sort of care or service Euthyphro has in mind. For example, the horseman's skill is the *therapeia* of horses, the huntsman's skill is the *therapeia* of dogs, and the herdsman's skill is the *therapeia* of cattle. Each of these arts of care, Euthyphro agrees, is for the good and benefit of the one who is cared for. But we are already on dangerous ground. Socrates is right to assert that the care of horses, dogs, and cattle makes these animals better, but these sorts of skilled care ultimately serve the ends of human beings. We are in truth the masters of horses, dogs, and cattle, and we care for them only so that they may serve us better. This brings Socrates to a difficult question: "Is piety, then, being a *therapeia* of [the] gods, a benefit to [the] gods, and does it make the gods better? And would you agree with this – that whenever you do [*poiēis*, lit. 'make'] something pious, you make one of the gods better by your work?" Euthyphro's denial is emphatic: "By Zeus, not I" (12e–13c).

Perhaps, however, we should not be as hasty as Euthyphro in dismissing Socrates' suggestion. For while Euthyphro recoils at the implication that he might be attempting to master the gods through his knowledge of piety, his baseline understanding of piety as knowing

[46] While the usual term for "the pious" in the *Euthyphro* is *to hosion*, the word "reverent" in this passage translates *eusebes*. West and West (1984) explain that "*eusebes* is similar in meaning to *hosion* ('pious'), but *eusebes* emphasizes the reverence and respect, even fear, which one feels or ought to feel toward the gods" (46 n. 18). Meletus officially charges Socrates with *asebeia*, a lack of due reverence or respect for the gods of Athens.

how to gratify the gods – the understanding with which he begins his conversation with Socrates, and to which he ultimately returns (14a–b; cf. 15b) – effectively makes piety a means of turning the gods to our purposes.[47] Conversely, over the course of the *Euthyphro* Socrates tries to improve, not the gods themselves, but the way they are perceived by human beings. And he does so in the service of trying to make Euthyphro a morally better and more just human being.

Prompted by Socrates' shocking suggestion that he improves the gods, Euthyphro opts for the exact opposite of the notion he seems to have just advanced. He now explains that the *therapeia* human beings exercise in relation to the gods is that by which slaves care for their masters (13d). But masters, we may note, also care for slaves; while they have unequal shares of goods and obligations, masters and slaves stand in a mutually supporting relationship. The same is true of our care for horses and dogs, and for cattle raised for milk (but not for those fattened only in order to be slaughtered and eaten); huntsmen and farmers keep these animals as healthy and safe as possible, so that they might be of the greatest service to them. So, too, the proper relationship between gods and human beings may lie somewhere between the two extremes Euthyphro has just staked out. This would be the case if human beings and gods acted in *partnership* rather than striving to master one another. In this case, the gods would help us to live good human lives, and human beings would help the gods to achieve their ends – whatever these might be.

Socrates' next line of inquiry is premised on the notion that gods and human beings enjoy just this sort of mutually beneficial "working" relationship. In reply to Euthyphro's suggestion that we are the gods' slaves, he observes that piety would be "a certain skillful service to [the] gods" (13d). Thus, skillful service to doctors is for the sake of producing health; to shipwrights, for the sake of producing a ship; to architects, for the sake of producing a house. "Then tell me, before Zeus," he asks Euthyphro, "what ever is that altogether noble work [*pankalon ergon*] which the gods produce, using us as servants?" (13e). Note that Socrates implicitly seems to imagine a more equal relationship between gods and human beings than that of masters

[47] On obligating the gods through sacrifices and prayers, see Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 146 and 160, and cf. Strauss 1953, 51: "the attempt to bribe the gods is tantamount to trying to be the lord or employer of the gods."

and slaves: "servants" (*hupēretai*) could be slaves, but need not be, and in Athens, skilled medical assistants, shipbuilders, and housebuilders were presumably most often wage-earning freemen. Euthyphro, however, is unable to provide a satisfactory answer to Socrates' question; "Many noble things, Socrates," is all he can manage in reply. When pressed, he makes the excuse that "to learn precisely how all these things stand is a rather long work [*ergon*]," and he reverts to his initial definition of piety as "gratifying the gods by praying and sacrificing." While pleasing the gods "save[s] private families and the common things of the cities," Euthyphro explains, "the opposite of things gratifying are impious, and they overturn and destroy everything" (14a–b).

Socrates evidently did well to warn Euthyphro not to flag, and to exert himself (11e, 12a). His response to Euthyphro's failure to see the inquiry through to the end is extremely revealing: "You are evidently not eager to teach me. For you turned away just now at the very point at which, if you had answered, I would already have sufficiently learned the pious from you" (14b–c). This remark is as clear an indication as one could wish that Socrates understands piety as the service human beings render to the gods in the course of assisting them in a cooperative endeavor for the sake of some noble work or accomplishment. The *only* remaining question for Socrates is: what is this work? And the *Euthyphro* itself demonstrates what is needed in order to answer this question: we must inquire into the nature of the gods and how we may do justice to them, an inquiry that leads naturally to further reflection on human nature and its capabilities. For anyone who is seriously concerned with being pious, and who (like Socrates) still lacks knowledge of just what piety is, this philosophical inquiry *is* the "work" or "activity" (*ergon*) in which piety consists – "rather long" and tiring though it may be (14b).

After Euthyphro reintroduces his initial understanding of piety as, in effect, an art of commerce wherein human beings make requests of the gods and give them gratifying "honor and esteem" in return (14e–15a), Socrates points out that they are back where they started: Euthyphro has defined piety as what is dear to the gods, but what is dear to the gods has already been shown to be different from the pious (15c). Socrates accordingly once more asks Euthyphro to begin again "from the beginning [*ex archēs*] … as I will not willingly

give up out of cowardice until I should learn [what piety is]" (15c–d). The courage Socrates displays here consists not merely in his willingness to admit his ignorance of what others think they already know. It consists also in his unflagging persistence in publicly exposing the shameful incoherence of his fellow citizens' opinions, and the foolishness of their actions. "For if you didn't have clear knowledge of the pious and the impious," he tells his interlocutor, "there is no way you would ever have attempted to prosecute an elderly man, your father, for murder on behalf of a hired man. But in respect to the gods, you would have been afraid to run the risk of not doing it correctly, and you would have been ashamed before human beings" (15d). Thus admonished, Euthyphro chooses to walk away (15e); other, less charitable Athenians feel compelled to retaliate in court – dressing this vengeful action, as Euthyphro attempted to do, in the mantle of piety.

THE GRAMMAR OF SOCRATIC RELIGIOUS INVENTION

As depicted in the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*, Socrates lives in the midst of a crisis that in some respects he helps to exacerbate, and for which he formulates at least the outlines of a philosophical response. While this crisis is rooted in the internal contradictions of the Greek religious tradition, the occasion for its coming to a head is furnished by the end of the Peloponnesian War and the civil strife that followed it. This was a time for settling scores, a process in which Athenians naturally turned to the courts of law.[48] In proposing to purify Athens of religious pollution (*Euthyphro* 4c, *Apology* 23d), Euthyphro and Meletus claim the backing of the gods. Socrates responds to Meletus with a provocative counterclaim: he is supported in philosophizing by the oracle at Delphi and by his *daimonion*. This counterclaim is part and parcel of Socrates' attempt to exploit the pedagogical opportunity presented by unthinking religious partisans like these two young

[48] Lysias's courtroom speech *Against Eratosthenes*, which urges vengeance against the oligarchs who murdered his brother Polemarchus, exemplifies the dangerous temper of this period. Plato understood as well as anyone that these prosecutions could result in grave injustices. Cf. Howland 2004b, which argues that Socrates' conversation with Polemarchus in the first book of the *Republic* is on one level a critical reply to Lysias's speech.

men. By using their intellectual and spiritual momentum to entangle them in contradiction, he makes the incoherence of the tradition an explicit subject of reflection.

The tradition regards the gods as guardians of justice, the basic nature of which is intelligible to human beings. Yet it also holds that piety is doing what is pleasing to the gods, that what is pleasing to one god is displeasing to another, and that those who fear divine punishment for injustice and impiety can in any case bribe the gods with prayers and sacrifices. It would of course be possible to resolve this contradiction by abandoning the claim that the gods are concerned with justice, or, what amounts to the same thing, by defining justice as what any particular god wants at any particular time. In that case, knowledge of what is pious and just would be communicated immediately through prophecy or divination and would be self-certifying, in the sense that no argument in support of this knowledge would be necessary or possible. This would be a version of theological voluntarism – the notion that the will of God or the gods determines what is noble, good, or just, there being no independent standards of these things.[49] But when Socrates gives Euthyphro an opportunity to embrace the hypothesis of voluntarism, he refuses to do so (10c). Like Meletus, and surely like most Athenians as well, Euthyphro is convinced that he possesses genuine knowledge of what is just and pious. It is this conviction on which Socrates attempts to build, both in criticizing the religious myths of the poets and in laying the groundwork for a new, philosophical understanding of the gods.[50]

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates quite clearly expresses his disagreement with certain basic features of Greek religious custom, including in particular the myths of Homer and Hesiod about the most ancient deities. In this way, he distinguishes the *archai* or beginnings of genuinely philosophical thought about the gods from the archaic origins

[49] Were one to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures according to religious voluntarism, theft (for example) would be wrong only because God defines it as such; had God said "Thou shalt steal," His will alone would have made theft not only permissible, but morally obligatory. Cf. Berkovits 2002, 7–8.

[50] Perhaps it would be more precise to say that Socrates tries to build on the *courage* of this conviction – the intellectual pride or spiritedness (*thumos*) that underlies it. Cf. 11e with 14c: while Socrates "will eagerly help [*sumprothumēsomai*]" to show Euthyphro how he can teach him about the pious, it turns out that Euthyphro is "not eager [*ou prothumos*]" to teach him.

of the ancestral tradition. He does, however, embrace and develop other important elements of the tradition, such as the "unwritten canons of filial piety,"[51] the belief that the gods support the human desire for justice, and the institution of the oracle. This boldly constructive use of established beliefs and customs is a distinctive feature of the "grammar" of Socratic religious invention.

Because Socrates philosophizes publicly, his piety is explicitly political. It consists essentially in correcting or transforming the traditional myths about the gods in such a way as to support the activity of philosophical inquiry. By representing the gods as peaceful, preeminently rational beings who love the noble, the good, and the just, Socrates replaces the violently intemperate gods of the poets with what amounts to a divine model for virtuous human activity.[52] The traditional conception of piety that is implicit in Greek myth and ritual regards human beings as the simultaneously fearful and manipulative subjects of the gods. The tradition teaches that piety is doing what the gods want, or what they tell us to do. Euthyphro incoherently combines this teaching with the notion that piety is doing what the gods themselves do.[53] Socrates' philosophical conception of piety, by comparison, elevates human beings to the dignified status of intellectual and moral partnership with the gods – a notion that is reminiscent of the rabbis' understanding of the relationship with God that we may enter into through *talmud Torah*. Like the rabbis, who playfully depict God as a student of the Torah, Socrates'

[51] McPherran 1996, 32.

[52] Socrates does essentially the same thing in the course of his playful etymologizing in the *Cratylus*. At 395e–400d, he goes through the cosmos as a whole, transforming even the monstrous pre-Olympian gods into paradigms of philosophical wonder and thoughtfulness. Thus he connects Uranos – whose name is the Greek word for "heaven," the highest thing – with *ourania*, or "looking at the things above [*horōsa ta anō*], from which, meteorologists assert, a pure mind [*ton katharon noun*] comes to be present" (396c; for more detail, see Howland 1998b, 155–57). Cf. the great myth of the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates asserts that the gods journey to the outer surface of the cosmos, where they nourish themselves in intellectual contemplation of the hyperuranian ("above the heaven") beings (247b–d). In the *Republic*, Socrates effectively transforms the gods into Platonic Ideas in the course of establishing the rules of permissible poetry. "The god," he insists, "never departs from his own form [*idea*]," "remains forever simply in his own shape," lacks nothing in beauty or virtue and is therefore without eros, is a cause of all good things and nothing bad, and never lies (380c–83a).

[53] Cf. Strauss 1989, 197–98.

representation of what the gods do is guided by his understanding of what he himself does as a philosopher.[54] But Socrates' religious invention – unlike that of the rabbis – cuts against the grain of public prejudice, and therefore requires physical as well as moral and intellectual courage.

Another feature of the dialogues' Socratic religious invention, and one that it shares with both the Mishnah and the Gemara, is that innovation emerges within the context of dialogue and debate about traditional beliefs and practices. However, Socrates adheres to the additional rule that this invention cannot proceed without the consent of the interlocutor. This means that his partners in conversation share responsibility for the revised religious understanding that unfolds in dialogues like the *Euthyphro*. Meletus and the fathers of Athens, sensing that filial obedience in matters of custom is most easily secured by cultivating a certain plantlike torpor in the young (cf. *Euthyphro* 2c–d), nevertheless prefer to hold Socrates wholly accountable for these innovations.

Socrates' encounter with Euthyphro represents an attempt to jump-start the kind of shared inquiry that is already flourishing in the community of Jewish scholars by the time of the Mishnah. Immediately after Socrates observes that Euthyphro turned away when he was on the verge of teaching him what piety is, he informs his interlocutor that "it is necessary for the lover [*ton erōnta*] to follow the beloved [*tōi erōmenōi*]" (14c). A little later, he tells Euthyphro that "I am desirous, dear man, of your wisdom [*tēs sēs sophias*], and I am applying my mind to it, so that whatever you say won't fall to the ground in vain" (14d). These remarks are obviously ironic, for if Socrates ever supposed that Euthyphro might possess the wisdom he longs for, he surely no longer does. Yet here as elsewhere in the dialogues, we glimpse the serious aspiration of both Socrates and Plato to bring into being a philosophical community of inquirers united by the erotic love of wisdom, and dedicated to critical reflection on matters like piety and justice.[55] Such a community would bind

[54] Cf. his remark at Plato, *Philebus* 28c: "all the wise agree, truly exalting themselves, that mind [*nous*] is the king for us of heaven and earth."

[55] While this desire is most often frustrated, it is partially fulfilled in the philosophical community that emerges in the *Republic*. See especially the remarkable testimonial at 450b of Thrasymachus, who was initially bursting with anti-Socratic ire (336b–d).

its members not only with one another, but also with the gods – reasonable beings, as Socrates sees them, united by the love of nobility, goodness, and justice, and properly partnered with human beings in a shared work or activity (*ergon*).

It is important to stress the partnership that Socrates envisions between men and gods, because one might be tempted to conclude that the gods are rendered irrelevant by Socrates' turn from a consideration of their loves and hates to an investigation of the being of piety in itself. But piety cannot be actualized except in *relation* to the gods, who are, so to speak, the end that piety has in view. The gods also stand at the beginning of Socrates' philosophical piety, for it is his trust in the oracle that initially authorizes and focuses his philosophizing. Because this trust is an act of faith for which only ex post facto justifications may be offered, the gods effectively constitute a boundary or limit beyond which philosophical investigation cannot penetrate. The same point holds for Socrates' intrinsically mysterious experiences in relation to "the god" and to his *daimonion*. The humility engendered by the awareness of these mysteries is reflected in Socrates' knowledge of ignorance, and furnishes a counterweight to the confidence of rational inquiry. Indeed, Socratic philosophizing is perhaps above all characterized by this paradoxical combination of intellectual boldness and humility – a combination that sets Socrates apart from his fellow Athenians, but puts him squarely in the company of the rabbis.[56]

[56] Cf. the exploration in Soloveitchik 1978 of Judaism's "dialectical" understanding of the relationship between the "morality of majesty" and the "morality of humility."

7

Miracles and Necessity

The Platonic dialogues offer several different versions of Socrates' understanding of things divine. In the *Republic*, it is the Good that inspires in him a sense of sacred awe.[1] In the *Symposium*, Socrates relates that the priestess Diotima described philosophy to him as an initiation into the mysteries, not of the Good, but of the Beautiful (*to kalon*: 201d–12a). Like the Ideas, the Good and the Beautiful are intelligible beings that are accessible to the human mind through philosophical inquiry; as such, they are distinct from the other divinities of which Socrates regularly speaks – the gods. In the great myth Socrates tells in the *Phaedrus*, the gods serve as a model for the ascent of the soul through philosophy. They journey to the roof of the cosmos, where they "contemplate [*theōrousi*, lit. 'theorize'] the things outside the heaven" and feast on the spectacle of "being that really is, [which is] observable only to intellect, the steersman of the soul" (247b–c).[2] But as Socrates' recourse to myth suggests, his understanding of the divine beings is both indefinite and provisional. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates develops certain philosophically attractive hypotheses about the nature of "the gods"; in the *Republic*, he seems unable to decide between the alternatives of polytheism and

[1] At 509a, Socrates cautions Glaucon against blasphemy when the latter supposes that the Good might be pleasure.

[2] Even in the non-Socratic cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, the god or Demiurge who crafts the cosmos is clearly distinguished from the eternal pattern of intelligible being after which he fashions the visible sphere of becoming (28c–29a; cf. 27d–28a).

monotheism, and even switches from the plural ("gods") to the singular ("the god") in midsentence (380c). In the *Theaetetus*, he speaks of "the god" who "compels me to midwife" (150c); in the *Apology*, of "the god" he serves by philosophizing.

Plato presents Socrates' uncertainty about the nature of the gods not as a personal deficiency, but rather as an honest admission of our unavoidable human ignorance.[3] On the Socratic understanding, the exemplary human soul – the soul that passionately seeks wisdom, and that orders its emotions and desires to the ends of reason – is a paradox: it is what it is only in relation to a higher sphere of being that both arouses philosophical wonder and ultimately surpasses comprehension. Because it is rooted in a sense of reverence before, and responsibility to, a divinity that is only partially understood, Socratic philosophizing is profoundly aware of its own limitations. Indeed, it is not coincidental that Socrates expresses his knowledge of ignorance most forcefully in speaking about "the god" who calls him to philosophy (*Apology* 23a–b).

At first sight, it might seem that there can be no real analogy in the Jewish tradition to Socrates' tentative and exploratory understanding of the gods. While the language of the Torah is undeniably stretched to its limits in speaking about God, the Jews do not share Socrates' basic theological uncertainty.[4] The fundamental principle of Jewish faith is traditionally reaffirmed in the morning and evening prayers: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, The LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4).[5] For Socrates, the relationship between god or the gods and the intrinsic goodness of what is remains obscure; this is not the case in the Jewish tradition. The Torah, too, emphasizes the intimate connection between intelligibility and goodness. But whereas Socrates explains this connection with reference to the power of the Good, the Torah explains it as the work of God. In Genesis, God is responsible both for the order of creation and for the literal

[3] Cf. *Republic* 382d, where Socrates observes that "we" tell myths about the gods on account of "not knowing where the truth stands concerning the ancient things."

[4] But one hears a distant echo of Socrates' question about the number of gods in the fact that the one true God is often referred to by the plural noun *elohim*. Genesis 3:5 reads "but God [*elohim*] knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings [*elohim*] who know good and bad." Cf. Deuteronomy 10:17, where God is referred to as *elohay ha'elohim*, "God of gods."

[5] The *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* renders *eḥad* as "alone" rather than "one."

and intellectual "visibility" of this order. He creates by separation, first of light from darkness, and then of elements that stand forth in the light only because they have been lifted from the indiscernibility of original chaos or "formlessness" (*tohu*: 1:2) and placed apart from one another.[6] God observes that His successive acts of creation are "good," and that the whole of creation is "very good" (1:31). God is thus not merely the source of goodness in the world, but also the authoritative judge and guarantor of this goodness; in this precise sense, what is good is so just *because* it is good in His eyes.[7] Yet His judgment of good and evil is neither mysterious to human beings, nor unfamiliar to their minds and hearts. As God admonishes the Israelites in Deuteronomy: "Surely, this Instruction [*hamitzvah*] which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling [*lo niphlet*] for you, nor is it beyond reach.... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (30:11, 14).

Still, there is ample room in the Talmud for the Socratic experiences of wonder and perplexity with regard to God. In general, the Torah understands human experience in a way that supports Talmudic inquiry and debate. The created world as described in Scripture exhibits what one scholar calls "maximal consistency"; in creating, God "establish[es] firmly ... and install[s] forever." Because creation is for the Jews "the first stage in the economy of salvation," the "unshakable permanence of what the Greeks called *phusis*" is reflected in "the historical and evolving word of the Covenant."[8] The stability and permanence of God's creation, and the constancy and faithfulness of His historical words and promises, make possible rational inquiry into all aspects of human life. Thus, the Talmud employs the "quasi-scientific" concepts of *sidrey b'reyshit* and *sidrey olam*, "orders

[6] On the Socratic account, it is the Good that is the source of the intelligibility of what is. As the source of the arrangement of Ideas into an ordered whole or *kosmos*, the Good – whose illuminative power Socrates likens to the light of the sun (*Republic* 507b–09a) – allows the Ideas to show forth in the intrinsic character they already possess (cf. Lachterman 1989–90, 155–57). By analogy, Socrates states that the sun is responsible for the order of "the seasons and the years" (516b–c), and thus for the visibility of each thing that comes to be in season.

[7] The phrase "*God saw* that *x* was good" is repeated at 1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25, and 1:31. Similarly, God is the authoritative judge of what is evil; see Chapter 6, note 42.

[8] Brague 2003, 46, 47.

of creation" and "orders of the world," to refer to "forms of regularity" in nature.[9] Yet the rabbis also experience the presence of the living God as a mysterious and ineluctable limit on rational inquiry. God's limiting presence is felt in two basic ways, only one of which has an analogue in Socratic philosophizing. Just as Socrates receives crucial direction from the oracle at Delphi, the rabbis acknowledge that, even in the post-prophetic era, God occasionally communicates with human beings.[10] But rabbinic thought is also forced to reckon with an element that is absent in the context of Socratic philosophizing: the miraculous intervention of God in human life.[11]

Miracles are mysterious in more than one sense. Because God's creation of the world is itself miraculous, even the "everyday patterns of nature" may be considered a manifestation of His miraculous presence.[12] However, we are concerned here only with instances of (apparent) divine intervention. The Talmud provides no explicit definition of a miracle in this sense.[13] Nevertheless, in the Gemara of Ta'anit 3, as elsewhere in the Talmud, God is implicitly understood to act miraculously in two fundamentally different ways. The word "miracle" (*nes*) is accordingly applied to two types of events: those that involve a change in the established patterns of nature, and those "unusual happenings" as well as "everyday" events that do not involve such a change.[14] The conceptual distinction between these events is not entirely clear, because both would seem to involve a special act of God (however small it might be), and in this sense a divine

[9] Kadushin 2001, 147–49; cf. BT Sanhedrin 108B, BT Shabbat 53B. *B'reyshit*, "In the beginning," is the Hebrew name of the book of Genesis.

[10] In Ta'anit 3, God does so by means of dreams, voices from Heaven, and messengers like Elijah and the angels. See esp. 25A, II.145–46; 21B, II.100; 22A, II.102–03.

[11] It bears repeating that "all *Nissim* [miracles] are … the work of God, whether they come in response to prayer or whether … they appear to be performed by a human being" (Kadushin 2001, 158; cf. Guttmann 1947, 365).

[12] Bokser 1985, 72.

[13] Nor does it provide explicit criteria for identifying a genuine miracle as opposed to an instance of witchcraft, sorcery, or magic (Guttmann 1947, 364–65).

[14] Kadushin 2001, 153, 159 (although Kadushin cautions that, with regard to "everyday" miracles, "the entire question of whether they conform or do not conform to *sidre Bereshit* simply does not enter"); cf. Guttmann 1947, 364. Bokser (1985) similarly distinguishes between miracles that involve "an outright violation of nature" and those that involve the intervention of a "natural" event by a "miraculous coincidence" (72). An example of the former would be the sun's standing still in the sky; of the latter, rains falling in season at the last possible moment to save the crops.

intervention in the created world.[15] Aside from this difficulty, God's disposition to perform miracles, particularly what one might call "strong" miracles that violate the order of nature, is in general poorly understood. This is not simply because His reasons for favoring certain "miracle workers" are unclear, as we saw in the case of Ḥoni. Beyond this, the rabbis do not agree about what we ought to ask of God, or what we can expect of Him.

Is it reasonable to pray or expect that God will alter the established patterns of nature for the sake of an individual or even a whole community, or is it presumptuous to do so? At the risk of oversimplifying the many nuances of the text, it may be said that Ta'anit 3 presents two conflicting theological perspectives in wrestling with this question. The first, which the Gemara implicitly favors in determining the halakha, holds that God prefers to work through the order He established at the creation of the world; with very few exceptions, He is unwilling even temporarily to abrogate the internal logic and necessity of this order. One should consequently neither pray for miracles that require such abrogation, nor derive benefit from them if they should occur. The second maintains that God regularly performs miracles for the sake of, or at the request of, righteous individuals, including strong miracles that involve changing the order of creation. The first view broadly supports rational inquiry into human experience: because the structure of experience is almost entirely invariant, it is possible – at least in principle – both to understand this structure, and to make reliable predictions on the basis of this understanding. The second view more narrowly limits the scope of rational understanding and prediction, but compensates for this limitation by furnishing grounds for hope, even in the most dire circumstances: if God is disposed to perform miracles for the sake of the righteous, individuals and communities that are truly meritorious – assuming they can be correctly identified – have little to fear.

Regardless which of these theological perspectives one chooses to embrace, the Gemara of Ta'anit 3 considers miracles to be governed by a kind of *moral* necessity. In particular, the rabbis maintain that there is a moral economy in God's miraculous intervention in

[15] But as we shall see later in this chapter, the rabbinic tradition also includes an important challenge to this view, to the effect that God foreordained what men call "miracles" at the creation of the world.

human affairs. In articulating the rules of exchange by which this economy operates, the rabbis attempt to discern an intelligible structure in events that present themselves as intrinsically mysterious, and thereby to increase the range of operation of rational deliberation and judgment.[16] Yet this attempt is at least somewhat undercut by the Gemara's inclusion of widely divergent opinions and counterexamples. On the one hand, the Gemara repeatedly suggests that the ability to perform miracles is a gift God has given certain individuals on account of their scrupulous piety and extraordinary righteousness. On the other, the Gemara is clearly uncomfortable about the challenge that miracle workers pose to rabbinic rationalism, especially in cases – such as that of Ḥoni – where individuals possess miraculous powers of which they seem to be undeserving. And while it narrates with approval several stories about prayers that result in God's miraculous violation of the created order, the Gemara also includes explicit warnings *against* praying for, counting on, or benefiting from strong miracles.

I do not mean to imply that the teaching of Ta'anit 3 on miracles is simply incoherent. On the whole, one could say that the Gemara of Ta'anit 3 approaches the subject of miracles in a dialectical fashion: by offering a succession of different views on the aforementioned issues, the Gemara compels readers to rethink earlier assumptions in the light of later information. The result is a teaching about miracles that identifies the relevant questions and brings to light their full depth. In spite of the fact that it favors certain ways of resolving at least some of these questions, the Gemara furthermore makes ample room for exceptions and presents itself as open to correction.[17]

[16] Similarly, the majority opinion among the rabbis is that miracles are irrelevant in the determination of halakha (Kadushin 2001, 164; cf. the famous debate about the Oven of Akhnai at BT Bava Metzia 59A–B and the extensive discussion of miracles at Guttmann 1947, 366–97). This opinion reflects what Kadushin (2001) describes as a "a dominant trend [among the rabbis] deliberately to exclude the concept [of miracles] from large areas of experience" so as to give "the quasi-scientific concept [of *sidrey b'reyshit*] the right of way, as it were, in those areas" (165).

[17] It might be possible to resolve some contradictions by tracing the historical evolution of rabbinic thought about miracles. This would involve a reconstruction on the basis of Ta'anit and other texts. Such a reconstruction, however, would be of little relevance in the present context: our concern is to understand the issues as the Talmud presents them, and the Gemara makes no effort to supply a historical arrangement of the material pertaining to miracles.

In Chapter 5, we saw that the aggadah of Ta'anit 3 identifies several basic issues at stake in the question of how best to embody the teachings of Torah, and provides examples of very different approaches to these issues. In doing so, the Gemara effectively sketches the outlines of a whole domain of moral inquiry. The miracle stories of Ta'anit 3 accomplish something similar with regard to the subject of miracles, although these stories also cohere with the rest of the aggadah because they, too, are rich with moral insight. Like the Socratic conversations Plato dramatizes in the dialogues, these miracle stories call out for interpretation; in doing so, they draw the reader into a philosophical investigation that remains open and unfinished. And like Socrates' own theological reflections in the *Euthyphro* and elsewhere, the Gemara's overall approach to the subject of miracles in Ta'anit 3 is characterized by intellectual passion and imagination moderated by the knowledge of ignorance – a humble knowledge that often expresses itself in a mood of seriousness, but also, on occasion, in one of intellectual playfulness.

PRAYING FOR MIRACLES: THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE RABBIS

The Gemara of Ta'anit 3 almost immediately establishes that the question of whether and when a community should sound the alarm to fast and pray for rain is properly guided by close observation of the regular order of nature. The second sentence of the Mishnah reads: "[I]f plants have changed, they sound the alarm for them immediately" (18B, II.61). The Gemara comments: "Rav Naḥman said: 'Only [if] they changed, but [if] they dried up, no.'" The reason for the latter qualification is obvious: plants that have dried up will not continue to grow, even if they are well watered. But the Gemara goes on to ask why Naḥman found it necessary to add this qualification:

> This is obvious, [for] we have learned: "[If] they changed"!
>
> No, it was necessary where they produced stalks. You might have said [that] producing stalks is something. [Therefore] he tells us [that this is not so]. (19A, II.68–69)

The word "changed," the Gemara contends, obviously means something other than "dried up." In assuming that no one would think

to pray for rain when the crops are obviously dead, the Gemara indicates that the order of fasts and prayers discussed in Ta'anit 3 respects the natural order of generation and decay. This becomes still clearer when the Gemara observes that Naḥman's qualification was necessary lest someone think that the appearance of stalks "is something" when in fact it is not. In other words, experience discloses that the production of stalks in dried-up plants is a sign of merely temporary recovery.[18] To pray for rain simply because dried-up plants have produced stalks would be to pray for a strong miracle, whereas to pray that God will send rain in season to help plants that can recover with sufficient water is to ask Him to act in a way that does not violate the order of creation. The Gemara takes it for granted that the Mishnah of Ta'anit 3 means to limit its reflection on the proper order of fasting and sounding the alarm to the latter sort of prayers.

Given that the Gemara makes it clear from the outset that prayers for rain should not be offered when crops can be saved only by God's temporary suspension of the established order of creation, it is surprising to find that, a little later, it celebrates a man who prayed successfully for just such a strong miracle. The Gemara includes a baraita about a certain Nakdimon ben Guryon, a wealthy inhabitant of Jerusalem in the first century CE. Once, when "all Israel went up on pilgrimage to Jerusalem" during a time of drought, Nakdimon borrowed twelve cisterns of water from a Roman governor, pledging to pay him twelve talents of silver if the cisterns were not replenished by a certain date.[19] The day of the deadline arrived, and rain still had not fallen. The Roman official asked Nakdimon for payment in the morning, at midday, and in the afternoon, but each time Nakdimon replied that the day was not yet over. "As the lord entered the bathhouse joyfully, Nakdimon entered the Temple in sadness." Nakdimon's prayers were answered: "Immediately the sky became covered with clouds, and rain fell until the twelve wells were filled and overflowed." The official was forced to acknowledge God's miraculous intervention, and he even went so far as to use the language of Jewish benediction: "He said to him: 'I know that the Holy

[18] Cf. Steinsaltz's commentary on 19A and "Background," II.69.

[19] As a talent (*kikar*) was a unit of weight amounting to roughly twenty-seven kilograms (Steinsaltz 1989, 292), Nakdimon stood to lose a fortune.

One, blessed be He [*hakadosh barukh hu* (!)], did not shake His world except on account of you.' " But he nevertheless demanded payment on the ground that the sun had already set before the rains came. Nakdimon returned to the Temple to pray; "[i]mmediately the clouds dispersed and the sun shone" (19B–20A, II.75–77).

As is clear from certain literary elements – the twelve wells of water (one for each tribe), the increasing suspense as the official repeatedly requests payment, the contrast between the holy Temple and the quotidian Roman bathhouse – the story of Nakdimon presents a classic confrontation between a faithful Jew and a powerful pagan, the one acting for the sake of his God and his community, the other for personal gain. That God performs a strong miracle for Nakdimon is indicated by the official's comment that he "shook His world," and is confirmed in the sequel, in which the Gemara cites a baraita to the effect that "for three the sun was delayed: Moses, Joshua, and Nakdimon ben Guryon" (20A, II.78). The Gemara goes on to cite three separate arguments purporting to show that the sun did indeed stand still for Moses as well as for Joshua and Nakdimon (20A, II.78–79).[20] In doing so, it seems eager to establish the continuity of God's miraculous support of the people Israel from the time of Moses through the early period of rabbinic Judaism. Although this eagerness cuts against the grain of the Gemara's overall teaching concerning when it is appropriate for a community to pray for rain, it is important to note that Nakdimon's situation does not fall under the main rubric of discussion, and so may merit a different approach. Like the story about Ḥoni, the anecdote about Nakdimon concerns an individual who offers an extraordinary prayer on behalf of a community. It may also be significant that Nakdimon was able to pray in the Temple itself – an advantage the generations of the Diaspora, including that of Rav Naḥman, no longer enjoy.[21]

The next miracle story in the Gemara is one we have already touched upon.[22] It is the story of how Rav Huna took advantage of Rav Adda bar Ahava's exceptional merit in order to rescue some wine he had stored in a building that was on the point of collapse. When

[20] See Chapter 5, note 26.
[21] Steinsaltz 1989 lists Naḥman as a third generation Babylonian Amora (35).
[22] Chapter 5, 173–74.

Huna and Adda exited the building, it collapsed. Grasping what had just happened, Adda "became angry":

> He agreed with what Rabbi Yannai said: A person should never stand in a place of danger and say: "A miracle [*nes*] will be performed for me," in case a miracle will not be performed for him. And [even] if you say [that] a miracle will be performed for him, it will be deducted from his merits. (20B, II.84)

This passage makes two related points. First, one cannot count on God's performing a miracle.[23] On an earlier occasion, Huna had reassured Shmuel that it was safe to pass beneath a certain dilapidated wall, "for Rav Adda bar Ahava is with us whose merit is great, and I am not afraid" (20B, II.84). Huna's estimation of Adda's merit might have been incorrect, except that the text confirms Huna's judgment when it goes on to list "the [exceptional] deeds" for which Adda was rewarded with a very long life (20B, II.85). Yannai therefore seems to be warning not only that one's judgment might be mistaken, but that even great merit may not in any case guarantee a miracle. In pondering this point, it seems significant that Yannai is speaking not of miracles that benefit the community or God, but of miracles performed for the sake of a single individual; Nakdimon, by contrast, tells God that he acted not for his own honor, but "for Your honor, so that water would be available for the pilgrims" (20A, II.76).[24] Second, God keeps a balance sheet: if a miracle is performed, one pays for it with a share of one's merit. If true, this returns us to the first problem – for how can one be certain how much merit remains in a person's account?[25]

The Gemara's discussion of Adda bar Ahava leads a little later to another story about a dilapidated building – that of Naḥum of Gam Zu. Once again, the Gemara seems to call into question a view that was previously expressed, because Naḥum does precisely what Yannai

[23] Note that the miracle from which Huna benefits is not a strong one, because it does not violate the order of nature for a dilapidated building to fall later rather than earlier.

[24] On the other hand, God unquestionably benefits Nakdimon when He sends rain to refill the cisterns. Note also that Nakdimon requests a miracle on his *own* behalf in his second prayer, when he asks that the sun may break through the clouds so that he will not be liable to pay for the water: "Make it known that You have loved ones in Your world" (20A, II.77).

[25] And in the case of Huna, Adda, and the dilapidated building, on whose account does God draw?

warns that one should *never* do. As we have already seen, Naḥum depends on his merit to keep his house from collapsing while his disciples first remove the utensils from it; "as long as I am in the house," he assures them, "the house will not fall."[26] Like Adda and Yannai, Naḥum seems to agree that only those who are truly meritorious can expect God to perform miracles for them. But unlike Adda and Yannai, Naḥum seems utterly unconcerned that he might have underestimated his merit, or that he may have to pay for miracles that are performed for him with a deduction from his merit. Nor is Naḥum alone in this lack of concern, as becomes clear in the next story the Gemara tells about him.

In this second story, the community explicitly relies on Naḥum to produce a miracle if necessary: it sends him on an embassy to the Roman emperor, "for he is experienced in miracles" (*dimlomad b'nisin*: 21A, II.93). We may note in passing that neither Naḥum nor anyone else appears to be worried that he may exhaust his supply of miracle-worthy merit. In any case, the decision to make him an ambassador turns out to be a good one. Naḥum is to give the emperor a chest of "precious stones and pearls"; unbeknownst to him, however, thieves replace the jewels with earth while he is staying at an inn. When the embassy presents the emperor with a box full of dirt, he proclaims, "The Jews are laughing at me!" The emperor is about to put "them all" to death when Elijah, appearing in the form of a Roman, intervenes:

> He [Elijah] said to him [the emperor]: "Perhaps this earth is from the earth of their father Abraham. For when he would throw earth, it would become swords; straw, it would become arrows. For it is written: 'He makes his sword as dust, his bow as driven straw.'" (21A, II.93)

Strikingly, Elijah interprets the quoted passage, Isaiah 41:2, to mean the exact opposite of what it plainly says: to turn swords into dust is to *destroy* the weapons of war, not to multiply them. Perhaps the Jews, in the disguised person of Elijah, are mocking the Romans. Elijah does, after all, turn the swords of the Romans into "dust," at least metaphorically: after the earth miraculously helps the Romans to defeat an intransigent enemy, the emperor decides that, rather than

[26] 21A, II.92; cf. Chapter 5, 182–87.

putting the Jews to death, he will reward them with "precious stones and pearls" (21A, II.94).

The story of Naḥum's Roman adventure is yet another version of a classic biblical tale – that of the confrontation between the people Israel and "the nations" (*hagoyim*), with the deck seemingly stacked in favor of the latter. But while the story of Nakdimon takes place just before the destruction of the Second Temple, this one occurs just after that catastrophe. A defeated and humiliated nation, the Jews are obliged to pay homage to their conquerors.[27] Armed with nothing but righteousness before God, the seemingly lowly Jews once again prove stronger than those who would profit from their misfortune, and in this instance even prove to be the source of the (literally) earthly power of the greatest of the world's empires. Elijah's connection of Scripture with the contents of the chest, together with the assurance of victory that the chest confers on its possessors, suggests that it may be a stand-in for the Ark of the Covenant.[28] Miracles, we are meant to understand, are still possible in the Diaspora, provided the Jews remain true to their heritage. This is not all, for the story also takes account of the emergence of rabbinic Judaism: on close inspection, it turns out to be a parable about the power of Talmudic interpretation. Like an expert midrashist, Elijah effectively "defeats" the Roman emperor with the aid of a piece of clever biblical exegesis. Just as the thieves substitute earth for jewels without being detected, Elijah convinces the emperor to test the earth by slipping past him a piece of convoluted logic.

Our present concern, however, is with the miracle God performs for Naḥum. The last part of the story leaves no doubt that God alone is responsible for the Roman victory. When Naḥum returns to the same inn on his way back from Rome, the innkeepers ask him: "What did you take with you that they treated you with such great honor?" Naḥum replies: "What I brought from here I took there" – referring not simply or even primarily to the earth, but to his faith in the God

[27] Naḥum is a third-generation Tanna. The period for this generation of Tannaim is 80–110, only a few years after the destruction of the Second Temple (Steinsaltz 1989, 33).

[28] Cf. the role of the Ark in the story of the siege of Jericho (Joshua 6:4–13). At 1 Samuel 4, the presence of the Ark frightens the Philistines, who nevertheless prevail against the Israelites and capture the Ark.

of Israel and his righteousness. Once again, the unthinking pagans hear only what they want to hear, and so miss the deeper meaning of what is being said. They tear down the inn and rush off to Rome with the earth on which it stood, mistaking dust for gold, so to speak, in confusing an intrinsically worthless bit of earth with the infinite value of God's covenant. This time the earth fails the test, which proves to the reader (if any proof were necessary) that the miraculous power of Naḥum's gift to the emperor came from God and did not inhere, as if by magic, in the material of the gift itself. Naḥum returns home with undiminished treasure and a net gain of honor among the Romans as well as the Jews; literally and spiritually, his adventure seems to have cost him nothing. The innkeepers, too, get what they presumably deserve: they are put to death (21A, II.94).

The stories of Naḥum and Nakdimon are satisfying tales of just deserts, told for a people that needs to believe in God's power to achieve justice and act mercifully even by supernatural means. While both stories involve strong miracles that benefit the Jewish community as a whole, these miracles depend on the special merit of a particular individual – be he Nakdimon, whom the rabbis explicitly compare to Moses and Joshua, or Naḥum, who is "experienced in miracles." Although they would thus seem to trigger the moral accounting Yannai and Adda urge us to consider, neither story shows any awareness of the issues these men raise. Perhaps this is because such an accounting would interfere with the edifying message of these stories, or perhaps it is simply because the relevant moral calculations would be, to say the least, significantly complicated by the intertwining of individual and communal merits, goods, and risks in the situations they describe.

In any case, the Gemara of Ta'anit 3 goes on to develop and extend its inquiry into the moral economy of miracles. In particular, it uses aggadah in order to amplify the halakhic judgment that is implicit in the Mishnah and in the teaching of Rav Naḥman – the judgment that communities and individuals ought not to pray for strong miracles.

THE MORAL ECONOMY OF MIRACLES

The longest section of the Gemara of Ta'anit 3, which comments on the story of Ḥoni in the Mishnah and runs from 23A to 25B (II.116–53),

contains numerous anecdotes about wonder-working rabbis besides Ḥoni.[29] Considered as a whole, this sequence of anecdotes makes a case against praying for strong miracles. This case, which is not particularly consistent, includes a number of distinct propositions. First, strong miracles are generally pointless, because they do not improve the created order. Second, God is bothered by performing strong miracles, and may even punish those who put Him to the trouble of doing so. Third, one is in any event not permitted to derive benefit from such miracles. Fourth, strong miracles are deducted from one's rewards in the afterlife. Fifth, what look from a human perspective like strong miracles are in fact preestablished features of the created order. Let us consider each of these elements in turn.

The Gemara relates the following:

> Rabbi Mani was often found before Rabbi Yitzḥak ben Elyashiv, [and] said to him: "The rich [members] of the house of my father-in-law are causing me distress." He [Yitzḥak] said: "Let them become poor," and they became poor. He said: "They are pressing me [for support]." He said: "Let them become rich," and they became rich. He [Mani] said: "My wife [lit., 'the household'] is not acceptable to me." He said: "What is her name?" "Ḥannah." "Let Ḥannah become beautiful," and she became beautiful. He [Mani] said to him: "She has become presumptuous toward me." He said to him: "If so, let Ḥannah return to her plainness [lit., blackness]," and Ḥannah returned to her plainness. Two students who were before Rabbi Yitzḥak ben Elyashiv said to him: "Ask for mercy, Sir, on our behalf that we may become very wise!" He said to them: "It was with me, but I sent it away." (23B, II.127–28)

This narrative contains no suggestion that performing strong miracles diminishes one's merit, or that it poses any trouble at all for God. Yitzḥak, a Palestinian Amora of the fourth generation,[30] obtains four such miracles in succession, and does so with as little thought and effort as one might bring to the task of flipping a light switch. He is

[29] It is interesting that the deeds of Ḥoni make up the only miracle stories about Tannaim in the whole of the Mishnah (Green 1979, 625); the Jerusalem Talmud, which was completed perhaps a century or two before its Babylonian counterpart, contains only two miracle stories (Vermes 1972, 45). Yet the Gemara of Ta'anit 3 includes perhaps two dozen anecdotes about miracles performed by, or on behalf of, Tannaim as well as Amoraim. Perhaps this disparity can be explained by the gradually increasing confidence of rabbinic Judaism as a whole (cf. Bokser 1985, 43–44, 79).

[30] Frieman 1995, 379, *s.v.* "R'Yitzchak Bar Elyashiv."

twice obliged to reverse his work, because each miracle comes at a price that Mani is unwilling to pay. The underlying problem, we are meant to see, has to do with the defective characters of Mani as well as his wife and her family. Mani's in-laws are haughty in wealth and importunate in poverty; his wife is haughty in beauty; and Mani himself is a chronic complainer.[31] Seeing that he does nothing to improve Mani's situation, Yitzḥak learns his lesson and refuses to petition God for any more miracles.

The story of Yitzḥak contains some valuable moral lessons. Wealth and beauty do not make us better persons. Through the story of Elazar and the ugly man (20A–B, II.81–82) the Gemara has already taught that theoretical wisdom does not in itself make us better, either.[32] This may be a further reason for Yitzḥak's reluctance to grant his students their wish. In any case, the narrative itself makes us wiser, for we learn that the truly needful miracle is to become morally better human beings. This is furthermore a miracle that is perhaps within the capacity of everyone, provided only that we make the requisite effort.

The Gemara follows the story of Yitzḥak with that of Yose of Yukrat, a Palestinian Amora of the third, fourth, or fifth generation. Yose is mentioned nowhere else in the Talmud, and no teachings are cited in his name.[33] One suspects this might be because of his extremely hard-hearted and uncompromising behavior. The Gemara reports that, when Rabbi Yose bar Avin was asked why he left Yose of Yukrat and came to study with Rav Ashi, he said: "A person who has no mercy on his son or his daughter, how will he have mercy on me?" (24A, II.129). The Gemara continues:

What was [the incident regarding] his son? One day workers were hired by him [to work] in the field. It became late, and he did not bring them

[31] When we first encounter Mani in Ta'anit 3, he is complaining at the grave of his father that members of the House of the Nasi "are causing me distress" (23B, II.126–27).

[32] This lesson is reinforced a little later, when Rabbah laments that, although his generation is far more advanced in *talmud Torah* than that of Rav Yehudah, it is morally inferior – a fact he regards as proven by God's inattention to Rabbah's petitions for rain (24A–B, II.135–36).

[33] Frieman 1995, 415, *s.v.* "R' Yose of Yokeres"; Steinsaltz, "Sages" at 24A, II.128. Frieman puts Yose in the third or fourth generation; Steinsaltz puts him in the fourth and fifth.

bread. They said to his son: "We are starving!" They were sitting under a fig tree. He said: "Fig tree, fig tree! Yield your fruit, so that father's workers may eat." It yielded [fruit], and they ate. In the meantime his father came, and said to them: "Do not feel resentment against me [lit., 'do not seize in your minds'], for [the reason] that I am late [is that] I was engaged in a good deed [*amitzvah*], and until now I have been traveling." They said to him, "May the Merciful One satisfy you, as your son has satisfied us!" He said to them: "From where?" They said: "Such-and-such happened." He said to him: "My son, you have put your Creator to the trouble of causing a fig tree to yield its fruit out of its season; you [lit., 'he'] will die before your [lit., 'his'] time." (24A, II.129–30)

Yose had presumably contracted to pay the laborers at least partly in bread, and because he was late, this payment was not forthcoming. We cannot be sure that he could have avoided this problem, because the situation requiring him to perform a mitzvah might have arisen unexpectedly. Under the circumstances, Yose can have no objection to his son's feeding the laborers; from his point of view, the difficulty is rather the manner in which he does so. Yose's son performs a strong miracle in causing the tree to yield fruit both on the spot and out of season. That he is moved by mercy is suggested by the laborers' blessing, which implicitly compares him to the God of Mercy; his son's kindness, however, is in Yose's view irrelevant. Because the trouble Yose caused the workers was in his judgment counterbalanced by the mitzvah he performed, there was no need to trouble God further on the laborers' behalf. Yose is evidently a stickler for strict justice, understood as the maintenance of an exact equilibrium of goods and ills. This point is more clearly visible in the original text: the tree's yielding fruit "not in its proper time" (*lo bizmanah*) is exactly compensated for by the son's dying "not in his proper time" (*lo bizmanu*). Just so, the blessing the laborers bestow on Yose is answered in precise measure by the curse he bestows on his son.

Yose also shows no mercy – to say nothing of fatherly affection – toward his beautiful daughter. When he catches a man peeping through a hedge at her, he tells her to "return to your dust," on the ground that she is causing people to sin (24A, II.130). Although Steinsaltz remarks in his commentary that Yose's son and daughter actually do die, this inference is not warranted by the text. On the whole, however, one is inclined to believe Yose's assertion that God is troubled by being petitioned to perform strong miracles: while Yose

may be utterly without mercy, the text presents him as a man with an all-too-keen sense of justice. Even his ass, which he is accustomed to hire out during the day, is a strict reckoner of what is owed, and to whom: if too little or too much payment is put on its back, it refuses to return to its owner until the proper addition or subtraction is made (24A, II.130). The stubborn ass, the Gemara seems to suggest, is as good an image as any of Yose's own utterly inflexible commitment to justice.[34]

The Gemara may provide some further support for Yose's view of miracles in a story it tells later about Rava, but the evidence this story offers is somewhat ambiguous. King Shavor of Persia (Shapur II) "wished to cause Rava distress" for a punishment to which he had sentenced a Jew who had sexual relations with a non-Jewish woman. Shavor's mother, Ifra Hurmiz, warned him not to "have a confrontation with the Jews, for whatever they ask of their Master, He gives them"; thus, "[t]hey petition for mercy and rain comes." The story continues:

> He said to her: "That is because it is the time for rain. Rather, let them petition for mercy now, in the summer [lit., 'the season of Tammuz'], and let rain come." She sent to Rava: "Direct your attention, and petition for mercy that rain should come." He petitioned for rain, but rain did not come. He said before Him: "Master of the Universe! We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work You did in their days, in days of old, but we with our eyes have not seen [anything]." Rain came until the gutters of Meḥoza poured into the Tigris. His father came [and] appeared to him in a dream, [and] said to him: "Is there anyone who puts Heaven to so much trouble?" He said to him: "Change your place." He changed his place. The next day he found that his bed had been slashed by knives. (24B, II.138–39)

Like Nakdimon, Rava prays to God on behalf of the Jewish community. But the role of Ifra Hurmiz, who functions as an intermediary between Rava and the Persian emperor, gives this story a somewhat different form than those of Nakdimon and Naḥum. Rava's predicament is a difficult one: if he is unsuccessful in petitioning God for rain, Ifra's warning will prove hollow, and King Shavor will not fear

[34] On the resemblance between men and asses, cf. the saying attributed to Rava bar Zimona: "If the former generations were children of angels, we are children of mortals, and if they were children of mortals, we are children of asses – but not like the ass of R. Hanina b. Dosa or R. Phineas b. Yair, but like quite common asses" (BT Shabbat 112B, Neusner trans.).

to harm the Jews. This is why he persists, even when his initial prayer is not answered. Like Yose's son, Rava petitions for a miracle that violates the established patterns of nature because it occurs "out of season." The form of his second prayer is noteworthy, because its rather provocative contrast between hearing and seeing reflects something of the doubt that Shavor himself expresses. The "days of old" of "our fathers" may include not just biblical times, but the Tannaitic era; the generations of Ḥoni, Nakdimon, and Naḥum must seem doubly remote, because these men not only lived three or more centuries earlier, but also had the good fortune to live in the Land of Israel.[35]

What, if anything, does the ending of this story establish? Oddly, Rava is defended by a (presumably dead) Jewish father and a living Persian mother; his father comes to him in a dream in order to protect him from retribution for having caused God "trouble," just as Ifra protects him from the animosity of King Shavor. Rava is spared because he "changed his place" after his dream, but we are not entitled to infer that the knives that slashed his bed were sent by God. They may well have been wielded by agents of King Shavor, whose hopes had just been frustrated by Rava's success in bringing rain, and who might also be jealous of his mother's respect for Rava and his people.[36]

Immediately following the story of Yose of Yukrat, the Gemara narrates the deeds of Elazar of Birta, a third-generation Tanna.[37] Elazar was so generous that the charity collectors would hide from him, "for whatever he had he would give to them." One day, he went to the market to buy a dowry for his daughter, spied the charity collectors, and ran after them:

He said to them: "I adjure you, in what are you engaged?" They said to him: "With an orphan boy and an orphan girl." He said to them: "By [the

[35] On the superiority of the Land of Israel to Babylonia, see 21B, II.99: "They said to Rav Naḥman: 'There is pestilence in Eretz Israel.' He decreed a fast. He said: 'If the mistress is afflicted, the maidservant how much more so!' "

[36] According to the Talmud, Ifra shows this respect in more than one way. Once, having told an equally skeptical Shavor to "see how smart the Jews are," she posed a difficult test (identifying sixty types of blood) that Rava nevertheless passed (BT Niddah 20B, Neusner trans.). On another occasion, she sent Rava an animal sacrifice "with the request to offer it up in her name on behalf of Heaven" (BT Zevaḥim 116B, Neusner trans.). She also gave charity to the rabbis (BT Bava Batra 8A, 10B).

[37] Frieman 1995, 140, *s.v.* "R' Elazar Ben Yehudah Ish Bartosa."

Temple] service! They take precedence over my daughter." He took everything that he had and gave it to them. He had one *zuz* left, [with which] he bought himself wheat, and he went up [and] cast it into the granary.[38] His wife came, [and] said to her daughter: "What has your father brought?" She said to her: "Whatever he brought, he cast into the granary." She went to open the door of the granary, [and] she saw that the granary was filled with wheat, and it was coming out through the socket of the door, and the door would not open on account of the wheat. His daughter went to the Academy, [and] said to him: "Come and see what He who loves you has done for you!" He said to her: "By [the Temple] service! They are to you as consecrated, and you have [a share] in them only as one of the poor of Israel." (24A, II.131)

Like Naḥum of Gam Zu, Elazar does not ask for a miracle, but one is provided for him anyway. Commentators are divided as to his motives for allowing his daughter to have a share in the wheat "only as one of the poor." Rashi suggests that Elazar does not want to derive benefit from a miracle, although, as Steinsaltz observes, this does not explain why he would allow his daughter to take "even a small portion" of the grain.[39] Alternatively, *Iyyun Ya'akov* (a commentary on Talmudic aggadah) suggests that Elazar "did not wish to receive a reward for his righteous behavior in this world, as it would diminish the reward he was to receive in the World-to-come."[40] A simpler explanation than either of these is that Elazar was in the habit of giving away to charity "whatever he had," and this would include the wheat that appears miraculously in his granary.[41]

In any event, the principles to which Rashi and *Iyyun Ya'akov* appeal are both supported elsewhere in Ta'anit 3. The Gemara relates:

[Rav] Mari the son of the daughter of Shmuel said: "I was standing on the bank of the Pappa River, [and] I saw angels who looked like sailors bringing sand and loading boats, and it became fine flour. Everyone [lit., 'the whole world'] came to buy. I said to them: 'Do not buy from this, for it is the product of miracles.' The next day boats of wheat from Parzina came." (24B, II.137)

[38] A *zuz*, also called a *dinar*, was a small silver coin; 6,000 *dinarim* made one *kikar*, the equivalent of a Greek talent (Steinsaltz 1989, 291–92; cf. note 19 to this chapter).

[39] Steinsaltz, "Notes," II.131. A further difficulty with Rashi's explanation is that it is unclear why it would be permissible for anyone *else* to derive benefit from a miracle, including the poor.

[40] Quoted in Steinsaltz, "Notes," II.131–32.

[41] Note that the oath Elazar utters when he forbids the wheat to his daughter is the same one he swears when he gives the charity collectors the money for his daughter's dowry.

If "the whole world" came to buy the flour, it must have been in great demand, as in a time of famine. Yet the flour is forbidden, simply because it is the product of miracles. Neither Mari nor the Gemara finds it necessary to offer further explanations; it is evidently widely understood that one ought not to benefit from miracles. The miracles covered by this interdiction are presumably only those that violate the order of nature, like the one Mari witnesses; otherwise it would also be forbidden to benefit from rains sent by God in response to special prayers. What is the reason for the interdiction? The answer is suggested by the end of Mari's anecdote: boats of wheat came from Parzina on the following day. In other words, the needs of the community were satisfied in due time, and without any deviation from the ordinary course of events. Mari thus regards his experience as evidence that *sidrey b'reyshit*, the orders of creation that God deemed "good" when He brought the world into being, are indeed sufficient for human needs. Conversely, to derive benefit from strong miracles would be implicitly to deny the sufficiency, and thus the goodness, of God's creation.[42]

That miracles performed for individuals are subtracted from their reward in the world to come is suggested by an anecdote concerning the legendary miracle worker Ḥanina ben Dosa.[43] This anecdote is one of several stories in Ta'anit about Ḥanina, who furnishes an exception to the rule that one should not pray for strong miracles or derive benefit from them. Ḥanina freely calls on God to perform miracles on his behalf. This is clear from the very first mention of him in Ta'anit:

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa was walking along a road [when] rain came. He said before Him: "Master of the Universe! The whole world is at ease, and Ḥanina is in distress?" The rain stopped. When he came to his house, he said before

[42] Cf. the remark of Abaye on hearing of a case in which a widower grew breasts and produced milk for his suckling child: "Said R. Joseph, 'Come and take note of how great this man was, for whom such a miracle was done!' Said to him Abbayye, 'To the contrary! How miserable this man was, for whom the natural order of creation [*sidrey b'reyshit*] was reversed.'" BT Shabbat 53B, Neusner trans.

[43] The "most celebrated miracle-worker in rabbinic Judaism" (Vermes 1972, 39), Ḥanina was a second-generation Tanna, and – like Ḥoni – a Ḥasid (Steinsaltz 1989, 33; Safrai 1965, 18 ff.) Ta'anit 3 contains a significant proportion of the rabbinic miracle stories about Ḥanina (see 24B–25A, II.139–44); Freyne (1980, 230) offers a table that classifies all such stories according to the type of miracle performed.

him: "Master of the Universe! The whole world is in distress, and Ḥanina is at ease?" Rain came. (24B, II.139)

Recall that the section of the Gemara in which this anecdote is situated(23A to 25B, II.116–53) is ostensibly commenting on the Mishnah's story about Ḥoni, whom the anecdote inevitably brings to mind. Like Ḥoni, Ḥanina uses the phrase "Master of the Universe" (*ribono shel olam*) first in calling on God to produce rain, and later in calling on Him to make the rain stop. Neither man has any compunction about asking God to perform miracles, perhaps because both regard themselves as unusually close to Him. Ḥoni compares himself to a "son" of God's house, and is accused by Shimon ben Shetaḥ of "acting like a spoiled child before God" (23A, II.116–19); Ḥanina is praised daily by a "heavenly voice" (*bat kol*) that proclaims "The whole world is maintained for the sake of Ḥanina, My son, and Ḥanina, My son, suffices with a *kav* of carobs from [one] Friday to [the next] Friday" (24B, II.141),[44] and he, too, exhibits a childish self-indulgence in his relations with God. If "the whole world is in distress" when the rain stops, it must be because, as the commentators infer, there is a shortage of rain at the time.[45] Under the circumstances, Ḥanina's complaint about being out on the road in the rain strikes one as churlish. It is also a peculiar sort of self-centered exaggeration to assert that "the whole world is at ease" or "the whole world is in distress" except for Ḥanina: he is certainly not the only one getting wet or staying dry when he utters these words. And although it is conceivable that he is physically at ease when the rain stops, as his needs are so small that he may be personally unaffected by drought, he can be morally at ease only if he has no concern for the community as a whole. But perhaps Ḥanina is simply being playful. If so, he truly does stand apart from the rest of the world, as the *bat kol*, too, implies. Indeed, it would be difficult to find anyone in the Talmud besides Ḥoni whose self-confidence in relation to God is equally great or equally justified.[46]

[44] A *kav* is the equivalent in volume of two dozen eggs (Steinsaltz 1989, 287). Z. Safrai (1994) notes that carobs were generally eaten only "during the Sabbatical Year when there was a shortage of fruit as well as during years of sparse crops"; those who ate carobs on a regular basis were "ascetics and [the] wretchedly poor such as Ḥanina ben Dosa" (81–82).

[45] II.139, "Notes," and cf. Vermes 1972, 40.

[46] As with Ḥoni, the rabbis are not quite sure what to do about Ḥanina, because his behavior does not seem to justify the obvious favor God shows him. Cf. Daube

Two of the anecdotes about Ḥanina in Ta'anit 3 concern his wife, whom he indulges much as Ḥoni indulges the childish fears of his disciples. His wife's social anxiety is visible in the first anecdote, in which the Gemara relates that she used to burn something in the oven every Friday out of embarrassment at being too poor to prepare a proper Shabbat meal (24B–25A, II.141). Ḥanina cleverly exploits this anxiety in the second anecdote, while nevertheless seeming merely to follow his wife's instructions:

> His wife said to him: "Until when shall we continue to suffer so?" He said to her: "What shall we do?" "Petition for mercy that you should be given something." He petitioned for mercy, [and] something like the palm of a hand emerged, and he was given one leg of a golden table. She saw in a dream that the righteous are destined to eat at a table that has three legs, and [that] he would eat at a table with two legs. He said to her: "Is it pleasing to you that the entire world will eat at a table that is whole, and we at a table that is defective?" She said to him: "So what shall we do? Petition for mercy that it should be taken from you." He petitioned for mercy and it was taken from him. (25A, II.141–42)

Once again, Ḥanina contrasts his situation with that of "the entire world," except that in this instance the contrast is meant to wean his wife from the assumption that a miracle might improve her lot. Like Yitzḥak ben Elyashiv, Ḥanina performs a miracle which he then reverses. Both this anecdote and the earlier one about Yitzḥak suggest that, in general, strong miracles do not improve the created order; this anecdote adds the further point that miracles in this world are drawn on one's account in the world to come.

The final element in the case against praying for strong miracles is that, strictly speaking, there are no such miracles. The Gemara presents this view in the context of a story about Elazar ben Pedat, a major second- or third-generation Palestinian Amora.[47] This story

1975, the title of which – "Enfant Terrible" – refers to certain Talmudic figures who commit childish acts and are not accorded the full respect of the rabbinic tradition. Daube's two examples are Ḥanina and Ḥoni. Vermes 1972 is particularly good on the tradition's rationalizing disparagement of Ḥanina, traces of which are evident even in the material in Ta'anit 3 (see 43–44 on Ḥanina's goats).

[47] Steinsaltz 1989, 33; Frieman 1995, 134, *s.v.* "R' Elazar ben Pedas" (which notes that Elazar is mentioned thousands of times in the two Talmuds and the *midrashim*, and gives 279 as the date of his death). Steinsaltz gives the dates for the second and third generations of Amoraim as 250–90 and 290–320, respectively.

immediately follows the Ḥanina anecdotes, and challenges several of their main theological assumptions.

> Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat was very hard-pressed. He was bled [lit., "he did something"], and he did not have anything to eat. He took a clove of garlic and put it in his mouth. His heart became weak and he fell asleep. The rabbis came to ask about him, [and] saw that he was weeping and laughing, and that a ray of light was coming out from his forehead. When he woke up, they said to him: "What is the reason that you were weeping and laughing?" He said to them: "For the Holy One, blessed be He, was sitting with me, and I said to him: 'Until when will I suffer in this world?' And He said to me: 'Elazar, my son, would it be pleasing to you that I turned the world back to its beginning? Perhaps you would be born in an hour of sustenance.' I said before Him: 'All this, and [only] "perhaps"?' I said to Him: 'Are [the years] that I have lived more, or are [those] that I will live [more]?' He said to me: 'Those that you have lived.' I said before Him: 'If so, I do not want.' He said to me: 'As a reward for your saying "I do not want," I will give you in the World-to-Come thirteen rivers of pure balsam oil [that are as large] as the Euphrates and Tigris, that you may enjoy them.' I said before Him: 'This, and nothing else?' He said to me: 'And to your fellow, what shall I give?' I said to Him: 'But am I asking from a person who does not have?' He snapped his finger on my forehead, and said to me: 'Elazar, My son, My arrows on you, My arrows!'" (25A, II.145–46)

Elazar's story presents a remarkable set of reflections on the greatest mysteries of human existence, the creation of the world and the afterlife. Up to this point, the aggadah of Ta'anit 3 has supported the notion that God's providence is both general and particular. In other words, God provides for human beings both by creating a world that is well ordered with respect to the necessities of life, and by attending to the particular needs of worthy communities and individuals. Furthermore, God is understood to exercise particular providence both spontaneously and in response to prayer, and to do so through miracles that violate the created order as well as those that do not. God's answer to Elazar's question about how long he will suffer is therefore most unexpected, for two reasons. First, it indicates that God does *not* perform strong miracles ad hoc. For either He does not perform such miracles at all, or they are built into the created order from the beginning – which is simply another way of saying that there are no strong miracles, inasmuch as these are by definition a *violation*

of the created order.[48] Second, it indicates that, in determining the created order, God does not exercise particular providence in relation to individuals.

Let us consider the details of Elazar's dream. Like Ḥanina, Elazar is terribly poor. Elazar's dream invites further comparisons to Ḥanina, for it presents him as yet another "son" of God whose worth is comparable to that of the whole world. Of course, this may simply be Elazar's fantasy; in any case, his notable frankness and boldness before God reflect both the license and the hopefulness that are characteristic of dreams. Elazar resembles a keen disciple pressing his wise master for answers; visible as it is in the light that emanates from his forehead, the illumination with which he is rewarded is both figurative and literal. When Elazar inquires how long he must suffer, God evidently takes this question as an implicit request to bring him out of his extreme poverty. To do so would require God to perform a strong miracle on his behalf, for the text makes it clear that it would be contrary to the natural course of events for him ever to be anything other than very poor: in conceding that Elazar does not live in an "hour of sustenance," God indicates that his poverty is bound up with the generally wretched condition of the Jewish community in Palestine in the late third century.[49] But God will not perform such a miracle without "turn[ing] the world back to its beginning," in which case *perhaps* Elazar "would be born in an hour of sustenance." In creating the world, in other words, God looks to the whole, or at least to greater parts than individual human beings, and it is the larger patterns of the order He establishes that determine the lot of particular individuals.

Elazar can't quite believe what he has heard: "All this, and [only] 'perhaps'?" God leaves this question unanswered, allowing Elazar to work out the implications for himself. What Elazar comes to understand in doing so is of little practical consolation to him, as it means

[48] But Elazar's conversation with God (if it is indeed a genuine vision of Him) looks like a strong miracle, as does the beam of light that emanates from his forehead. Were these things preordained? The Gemara does not speak to this question.

[49] Sperber 1991 documents "the virtual breakdown of the money economy [in Palestine] from the later 260's onwards." This breakdown had "socio-economic effects … of deep and widespread significance," including "inflation, taxation, and poverty" (141, 142).

that his suffering is a consequence of the internal necessity of *this* created world. Yet what God has revealed to him is *theoretically* consoling to the rabbis, because it implicitly solves a problem we have already encountered – the problem that, in implying the insufficiency of the order of creation, strong miracles undercut the goodness of God's creative act as proclaimed in Genesis 1. This implicit solution is stated explicitly in Genesis Rabbah, where Rabbi Yirmeyah ben Ekazar – a Palestinian near-contemporary of Elazar[50] – provides the following gloss on Isaiah 45:12:

> Not with the sea alone did God make a stipulation [in advance, that it should divide to allow the Israelites to pass out of Egypt], but with everything which was created in the six days of creation, as it is written, *I, even My hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded* (Isa. XLV, 12). I commanded the sea to divide, and the heavens to be silent before Moses, as it says, *Give ear, ye heavens, and I will speak* (Deut. XXXII, 1); I commanded the sun and the moon to stand still before Joshua; I commanded the ravens to feed Elijah; I commanded the fire to do no hurt to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; I commanded the lions not to harm Daniel; the heavens to open before Ezekiel; the fish to vomit forth Jonah.[51]

In other words, what look like strong miracles from a human perspective are in fact preordained features of the course of events that God established at the beginning of the world.

It is also noteworthy that Elazar receives his divine lesson about things first and last in a dream. Elazar's dream is the Talmudic equivalent of a Socratic myth, for both dreams and myths, besides being ambiguous and open to interpretation, are questionable sources of information.[52] They are therefore appropriate literary devices for conveying inherently speculative reflections that cannot be independently confirmed by human reason. This consideration also helps to explain the combination of seriousness and playfulness in Elazar's encounter with God, a combination to which we are first alerted by his simultaneous "weeping and laughing." For as imaginative, tentative,

[50] Steinsaltz 1989, 35, lists him as a fourth-generation Amora.

[51] Genesis Rabbah 5.5 (MR 1.36–37); cf. Exodus Rabbah 21.6 (MR 1.267).

[52] Thus, for example, Steinsaltz observes: "the Geonim write that Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat's vision of the Holy One, blessed be He, was a dream, and the details may not necessarily have special significance" (II.145, "Notes").

and open-ended endeavors, theological cosmogony and eschatology are essentially modes of intellectual play about serious subjects.

Having pondered his alternatives, Elazar decides against asking God to roll the dice for him by recreating the world from the beginning. His decision is based on another crucial piece of information that only God could provide: he is past the midpoint of his life.[53] Encouraged by the knowledge that his time of earthly suffering is more than half over, Elazar chooses to stay the course.[54] Why does God reward him with thirteen rivers of balsam in the world to come? It is true that Elazar prefers this created world to some other possible world, but he does so only because he does not want to run the risk of unnecessarily adding to his suffering. In any case, God's message is clear: Elazar will enjoy an afterlife of such great abundance that even luxuries will be in virtually limitless supply. It is hard to tell whether Elazar is joking when he retorts: "This, and nothing else?" God plays it straight ("And to your fellow, what should I give?"), but His last words – "Elazar, My son, My arrows on you, My arrows!" – suggest that He takes pleasure in Elazar's audacious suggestion that, as the Master of the Universe, He presumably has limitless resources.[55]

MERCY AND HUMILITY

Anyone trying to work out the teaching of Ta'anit 3 on the subject of miracles would end up with several practical principles, along with concrete examples of exceptions to most of them. The overall teaching of Ta'anit 3 is that certain emergencies, most notably drought, are to be understood as divine warnings or punishments in response to sin, to which the community is obliged to respond in turn with repentance and prayer. However, while it is permissible in times of exigency to pray for things that are in accordance with the created order (for example, praying for rain during the rainy season), it is

[53] Cf. Plato, *Crito* 43c–44b, where Socrates learns the day of his death in a dream.

[54] Steinsaltz seems to get things exactly wrong when he asserts, in his commentary, that Elazar wept because "he had already lived out the majority of the years of his life" (II.146). Rather, Elazar's life of suffering causes him to weep, while his supernatural encounter with God brings him joy.

[55] Cf. God's delight at BT Bava Metzia 59B, when the rabbis disregard His miraculous intervention on behalf of Rabbi Eliezer: "My children have overcome me, my children have overcome me!" (Neusner trans.).

impermissible to pray for strong miracles. This halakhic judgment, which is implicit from the very beginning of the Gemara, admits of certain exceptions; most notable are the special prayers of Ḥoni and Nakdimon. The aggadah also introduces or suggests a number of subordinate principles that support the prohibition against praying for strong miracles; these, too, do not apply in all cases. The story of Adda bar Ahava illustrates Yannai's warning that one should not count on God's performing a miracle, but Naḥum of Gam Zu does just this. The anecdote about Yitzḥak ben Elyashiv indicates that strong miracles are pointless, because they do not improve the created order; the stories about Yose of Yukrat and Rava suggest that strong miracles disturb God, and may even result in divine punishment; those about Elazar of Birta and Rav Mari teach that one should not derive benefit from such miracles; those about Ḥanina ben Dosa, that strong miracles are deducted from one's rewards in the world to come. But as we have seen, the stories that illustrate these teachings are not wholly consistent; in supporting one rule or principle, they often furnish exceptions to others.

On the whole, Ta'anit 3 counsels readers to adhere to established practices of communal prayer in times of exigency. More generally, it teaches that we should be satisfied with the created order God has established, that apparent deficiencies in this order are often due to our own faults, and that we can nevertheless hope for God to show mercy toward us. The aggadah of Ta'anit 3 qualifies this teaching by indicating that God may nevertheless perform strong miracles for certain especially righteous individuals. In speculating on the moral economy of such miracles, the aggadah points toward some important questions: When, if at all, should we pray for a strong miracle? Who is qualified to do so? What are the costs of doing so? Most generally, what is the extent of God's mercy, both in this world and the next? From a theoretical as well as a practical perspective, this last question is perhaps the most significant one. This is because the Gemara leaves no doubt that it is always possible for God mercifully to suspend the ordinary rules that structure His performance of miracles, whatever they may be.

The twin themes of mercy and humility run quietly throughout Ta'anit 3, and rise to a crescendo at the end of the Gemara. The Gemara mentions three occasions on which God seems to have taken

pity on three different rabbis, finally heeding their petitions for rain simply because they were humiliated by having prayed without success.[56] In the last pages of Ta'anit 3, the Gemara quotes a baraita about a time when, after thirteen failed fasts, Rabbi Eliezer asked the congregation, "Have you prepared graves for yourselves?" When the congregants all burst into tears, rain fell. This story is followed immediately by another one:

> It also happened that Rabbi Eliezer went down before the ark and said the twenty-four blessings but he was not answered. Rabbi Akiva went down after him, and said: "Our Father, our King, we have no king but You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy upon us," and rains fell. The rabbis murmured. A heavenly voice [*bat kol*] went forth and said: "Not because this is greater than that, but because this one is forgiving [lit., 'passes over his retaliations'], but that one is not forgiving." (25B, II.150)

The *bat kol* suggests that Eliezer is at least as "great" as Akiva, and his accomplishments in *talmud Torah* bear this out. The Mishnah records roughly three hundred halakic teachings in his name,[57] and preserves the following opinion of his teacher, Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: "If all the sages of Israel were on one side of the scale, and R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus were on the other, he would outweigh all of them" (Avot 2:8). But Eliezer's greatness does not extend to his character. Akiva, by contrast, is extraordinarily kindhearted and forgiving. In petitioning God for mercy, his *moral* greatness counts for more than Eliezer's scholarly preeminence, for only Akiva treats his fellow human beings as he would have God treat us.[58]

The difference between Eliezer and Akiva emerges clearly in a related Talmudic passage. After the rabbis of the Academy at Yavneh decide against Eliezer's opinion concerning the ritual purity of ovens, they judge that further action is necessary. The baraita continues:

> They furthermore took a vote against him and cursed him. They said, "Who will go and inform him?" Said to them R. Aqiba, "I shall go and tell him, lest

[56] The three are Rabbi Yehudah Nesiah, the grandson of Yehudah Hanasi (24A, II.132), Rav Naḥman (24A, II.134), and Rav Pappa (24B, II.139).

[57] Frieman 1995, 144, *s.v.* "R' Eliezer ben Horkenus."

[58] The quoted passage cements the tradition's association of Akiva with mercy, for it is said to be the origin of the prayer "Avinu Malkenu" ("Our Father, Our King") a plea for mercy that is sung on the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2007, 739–40, *s.v.* "Avinu Malkenu").

someone unworthy go and tell him, and he turn out to destroy the entire world [with his curse]." What did R. Aqiba do? He put on black garments and cloaked himself in a black cloak and took his seat before him at a distance of four cubits. Said to him R. Eliezer, "Aqiba, why is today different from all other days?" He said to him, "My lord [*rabi*], it appears to me that your colleagues are keeping distance from you." Then he [Eliezer] too tore his garments and removed his shoes, moved his stool and sat down on the ground, with tears streaming from his eyes. (BT Bava Metzia 59B, Neusner trans.)

Akiva does not "keep his distance" from Eliezer, but reaches out to him in friendship. He treats Eliezer with enormous empathy and respect, dressing in clothes of mourning, rending his garments, and sharing in his colleague's lamentation. But Akiva succeeds only partially in quenching Eliezer's anger. Another baraita relates that "every place upon which R. Eliezer set his eyes was burned up." Eliezer's anger also produces a big wave that almost kills Rabban Gamaliel, the Nasi or head of the reconstituted Sanhedrin at Yavneh. The baraita continues:

Imma Shalom, the wife of R. Eliezer, was the sister of Rabban Gamaliel. From that time onward she never left R. Eliezer to fall on his face [in prayer]. [So great was the power of his prayer that if he were to recite certain prayers because of the injury done him, God would listen and destroy her brother.] One day, which was the day of the New Moon, she mistook, assuming that the month was a defective one; and others say, she was distracted by a poor man who came and stood at her door, and to whom she took out a piece of bread. She found that her husband had fallen on his face, and she said to him, "Get up, for you have killed my brother." Meanwhile the word came from the house of Rabban Gamaliel that he had died. (BT Bava Metzia 59B, Neusner trans.)

Read against the background of these passages from Bava Metzia, God's preference for Akiva over Eliezer with regard to prayers for mercy sends a clear message: we must exhibit forgiveness and forbearance toward others if we expect God to do the same for us.

Lest we are inclined to rely on God's justice rather than His mercy, the Gemara of Ta'anit 3 concludes by underscoring our general unworthiness in the eyes of God, and the consequent importance of humility in our relations with Him. Twice, the Gemara teaches, Shmuel HaKatan (a second- or third-generation Tanna)[59] declared a

[59] Steinsaltz 1989, 35; Frieman 1995, 305, *s.v.* "Shmuel HaKatan."

fast, and rains fell; in each case, "the people thought to say it was to the credit of the community." The first time, when the rain fell before sunrise (and so even before prayers were offered),[60] Shmuel related a parable: "To what may the matter be compared? To a servant who asks a reward from his master. He said to them: 'Give him and let me not hear his voice.' " In other words, God allowed the rains to fall not because He thought the community merited His favor, but because He simply did not want to be bothered by its petitions. The second time, when the rain fell after sunset (and so after the fast had been completed),[61] Shmuel offered another parable: "To what may the matter be compared? To a servant who asks a reward from his master, and he said to them: 'Wait until he is crushed and in distress, and afterwards give him' " (25B, II.155). Taken together, these parables suggest that we do well to humble ourselves in repentance when petitioning God; as the prayer "Avinu Malkenu" confesses, "we have no worthy deeds" (*ayn banu ma'asim*) to plead before Him.

The last anecdote of Ta'anit 3 echoes the themes of humility and mercy in a most unexpected way. Abaye and Rav were both of the opinion that "we do not recite Hallel [a prayer of praise and thanksgiving] except on a satisfied soul and a full stomach." But this raises a problem. The Gemara continues: "Is that so? But surely Rav Pappa happened to come to the synagogue of Avi Govar, and he decreed a fast, and rains fell for them before noon, and he recited Hallel, and afterwards they ate and drank!" The surprising response to this is also the last sentence of the Gemara of Ta'anit 3: "The people of Meḥoza are different, for drunkenness is common among them" (25B–26A, II.156–57). We may infer that God shows mercy on an undeserving community when he heeds the Meḥozan's prayers for rain. Rav Pappa follows God's lead in making his arrangements for the recitation of Hallel. Rather than insisting on the normal order of prayers, much less punishing the congregants for their drunkenness, he accommodates the service to their weakness. In doing so, he wisely forgoes strict justice.

Viewed from the end of the Gemara, the story of the merciless Yose of Yukrat takes on new meaning. As Rabbi Elazar discovers in

[60] Steinsaltz, "Commentary," II.155.
[61] Ibid.

encountering the ugly man, it is especially imperative for the learned to be "soft as a reed" and not "hard as a cedar."[62] Akiva is more worthy of emulation than Eliezer, because being sympathetic and forgiving is humanly more important than being right. The story of Yose thus stands as a warning against insisting absolutely and inflexibly on what we owe to God or to one another. For even with justice wholly on their side – and in speculative matters like miracles, it is hard to see how anyone could be sure of this – those who lack mercy are still in the wrong against God and man alike.

[62] Cf. Chapter 5, 168–72.

Epilogue

Texts and Traditions

Who is Plato's Socrates? Who are the rabbinic sages? The Platonic dialogues and the Talmud address these questions by mimetically representing the deeds as well as the speeches of these men. By telling stories about their experiences and reproducing their arguments in the form of "live" debate, these texts attempt to give readers a concrete and vivid impression of the inner being of Socrates and the sages. But the rewards of reading the dialogues and the Talmud are commensurate with the efforts of the reader, for only the combined work of logical analysis and literary interpretation can open up the depths of significance in the thoughts and actions represented in these writings.

This book has attempted to answer the two questions just posed by way of a comparative analysis and interpretation of selected Platonic and Talmudic writings. The preceding chapters have brought to light a number of analogies between both the form and the content of Ta'anit 3 and the *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. The most important of these fall naturally into three categories: the conceptual and practical spaces in which Talmudic and Socratic inquiry unfold, the main ideas that allow Socrates and the rabbis to negotiate these spaces, and the role of the texts in mediating the reader's relationship to these ideas. While this synoptic framework is too schematic to incorporate every significant detail of the texts we have studied, it will serve to bring into focus the main points of contact between them.

In the first place, Socratic philosophizing and rabbinic Judaism take root in the intermediate region between mortals and immortals, man and God. Put another way, both Socrates and the rabbis begin by making an essential distinction between that which is merely human and that which is divine. The significance of this distinction may be expressed as follows. The concept "human being" is twofold: it can refer to our given nature as members of a certain species, or to the exemplary being we may come to express in relation to a divine or superhuman standard. Socrates refers to this exemplary being when he asserts in the *Apology* that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being. Such a life is humanly possible, but it is not humanly desirable. It is a life that satisfies our animal nature, but not our moral, intellectual, and spiritual desires – desires that implicitly draw the soul toward transcendent being and goodness. This point is more forcefully expressed in a story from Ta'anit that we studied in Chapter 5: Rabbi Yoḥanan is eating bread when he hears two angels debating whether he and Rabbi Ilfa should be killed because they have forsaken Torah study in order to alleviate their poverty and hunger. In this instance, the judgment that a life that attends merely to the needs and satisfactions of the body is not worth living for a human being has the authority of a divine pronouncement, and so cannot be dismissed as just another human opinion.

The ideas that correspond to the distinction between human and divine being are those of a *sacred gift* and a *calling*. For Socrates, the partial visibility in human experience of the truth in whose light we may live good and virtuous lives, and therewith the possibility of coming to know this truth through philosophical inquiry, is a "godsend."[1] Socrates is personally called to philosophy by the oracle from Delphi; because he trusts that the god speaks the truth, he is confident that his endeavor to answer the questions "What is wisdom?" and "Who is Socrates?" is a meaningful one. In the Jewish tradition, God makes ethical and religious truth available to human beings through His revelation to Moses. At Mount Sinai, God both individually and communally calls the Israelites to assume the responsibility of living in accordance with the Torah.[2] For the rabbis, God's election of the Jews

[1] Cf. *Republic* 368d with Chapter 4, 156.

[2] As Bernard Levinson observes, "in the divine proclamation of the covenant [in Exodus 20], God, speaking as 'I,' directly addresses each Israelite as 'Thou,'

includes a lifelong obligation to engage in *talmud Torah*;[3] sometimes, as in the case of Rabbi Yoḥanan, they are even personally (re)called by a divine voice to the life of study.

To experience *talmud Torah* or philosophy as a vocation in the literal sense (from the Latin *vocare*, "to call") is to measure one's human existence by a divine measure, and specifically by one's fitness for active intellectual and spiritual partnership with God or the gods.[4] Few people, of course, are literally summoned by God or the gods to a life of learning and teaching. But Plato and the Stammaim found in writing a mimetic and dialectical art capable of turning or returning the souls of at least some readers to the lifelong pursuits of philosophy and *talmud Torah*. In using argument, narrative, and drama in order to convey the intelligence and nobility of Socrates and the sages, the dialogues and the Talmud attempt to arouse in their readers a desire to emulate these men and to think and act as they did. This is the reflective desire to "know and live truly" (*Republic* 490b) that Plato calls philosophical eros, and that the rabbis understand as the highest manifestation of the love of God.

The lives of Socrates and the sages are lived not only in relation to God or the gods, but also in relation to a community of inquiry. The distinction between the individual and the philosophical or rabbinic community reflects the honorific or exemplary concept of human being that emerges when one takes account of our potential to live up to a divine measure. The community is accordingly conceived not as a mass or aggregate of more or less identical units, but as a plurality of distinct individuals sharing a common life and dedicated to a common good. This community is never wholly actual, but always to some extent an object of aspiration: a republic of philosophers or sages, united as equals in the shared activities of teaching and learning.

While the Talmud represents the intellectual and social life of the community of sages in its aggadic narrative and dialectical reconstruction of halakhic argumentation, the Platonic dialogues provide

ungrammatically using the intimate singular form rather than the expected plural" (Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar 2000, 26).

[3] "Whoever does not have learning in Scripture, Mishnah, and right conduct has no share in society" (Mishnah Kiddushin 1:10).

[4] Cf. BT Gitin 6B with *Euthyphro* 13d–14c.

only hints about what a community of mature philosophers would look like.[5] Plato's mimetic reproduction of Socratic dialogue nevertheless concretely displays the education that is designed to make one fit for membership in this aspirational or ideal community. Although Socratic and rabbinic pedagogy differ in ways that reflect their particular ends – the former aiming to inaugurate a philosophical tradition, and the latter to convey and extend an existing tradition of thought – both Socrates and the sages are guided by an idea that is readily expressed in modern terminology, provided we do not give it a modern interpretation. This is the idea of the morally and intellectually *sovereign self*, the reflective individual who is both willing and able to make well-founded judgments and choices and to assume full responsibility for his or her speeches and deeds.[6] Yet the sovereignty of this self is by no means absolute. It extends only over its own internal order and conduct, and derives from its subordination, first, to the revealed order of God or the natural order of the Good, in the light of whose truth it desires to live, and second, to the community in which this divine truth may be fully realized.[7] And although this sovereign self is the precondition for membership in the ideal community of philosophers or sages, the understanding that guides it is paradoxically achieved only through participation in an *actual* (and therefore imperfect and impermanent) community of inquiry, be it that of philosophical dialogue or Talmudic study. Nor is the actual education of mind and character in these communities ever complete; the philosopher or sage who claimed to be wise would be a figure no less ridiculous than Rabbi Elazar, whose daydream of greatness in the study of Torah was punctured by the simple but penetrating insight of an anonymous Everyman.

This last point deserves special emphasis. In mapping the space in which a distinctively human life may be lived, the dialogues and the Talmud repeatedly call attention to the ignorance of even the

[5] A genuine community of inquiry forms briefly around Socrates in the *Republic*, but his companions in this dialogue are at best *potential* philosophers. The dialogue's first word, *katebēn* ("I went down"), is also its first indication that the ensuing conversation represents a partial ascent from the "cave" of everyday life (cf. 514a–17a with Howland 2004a, esp. 43–46).

[6] See Chapter 4, 149–51, 160–63.

[7] Socrates thus remarks that, in a "suitable regime," the individual philosopher "will grow more and save the common things together with the private" (*Republic* 479a).

wisest human beings – particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to God or the gods (cf. *Apology* 23a–b). Just as the forgetfulness of human ignorance is an essential characteristic of moral, intellectual, and religious extremism (as evidenced, for example, in the character of Euthyphro), the knowledge of ignorance lies at the root of human wisdom, moderation, and piety. This knowledge is reflected in the essential role of storytelling in the dialogues and the Talmud – a pedagogical device rooted in the insight that human wisdom is a living disposition of mind and character, the content of which no philosophical system or code of law could ever hope to capture. The opportunity to rediscover the knowledge of ignorance that goes hand in hand with a receptivity to things divine is one of the greatest gifts that the dialogues and the Talmud have to offer their readers.

The Talmud and the dialogues employ several different means to convey to their readers the conception of a community of deeply thoughtful and morally responsible individuals learning from and teaching one another. Some of these means are negative and indirect, as when Euthyphro is exposed as a slave to the thumotic emotions of pride, anger, and resentment, or when Ḥoni's exalted and seemingly enviable lot is shown to be one of isolation and loneliness. Some of them are positive, as in Ta'anit's depiction and explanation of the various and idiosyncratic ways in which different sages deal with the problem of poverty, or the *Apology*'s representation of the confidence with which Socrates defies his accusers. Most important, the Talmud and the dialogues use narrative, drama, and dialectical argumentation to draw readers into debates about fundamental moral and theological issues – issues such as the nature of piety, justice, and charity, concerning which the ordinary actions of everyday life at least implicitly require one to take a stand. But because the inner meaning of the stories they tell and the arguments they reproduce is accessible only by way of interpretation and analysis, and because they refrain from reaching final conclusions about the merits of the positions to which they give voice, readers can learn from these texts only to the extent that they think for themselves. Plato and the Stammaim thus work to make readers active partners in the process of shared inquiry by which alone they might become capable of assuming full intellectual and moral responsibility for their speeches and deeds.

Finally, Socrates and the sages face outward toward the wider world as well as inward toward their own actual and aspirational communities of teaching and learning. The difference between these communities and the wider world may be expressed as the difference between the few and the many, the aristocracy of philosophers and scholars and the multitude of nonphilosophers and nonscholars. As the following scriptural passage makes clear, this is a distinction that in its general form is present in Judaism from an early date:

> I the LORD, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenanted people, a light of nations [*l'or goyim*], opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6–7)

While Isaiah uses the contrast between darkness and imprisonment and light and liberation to express the moral responsibility of the Jews in relation to "the nations" (*hagoyim*), the same image is also central to one of the best-known passages in the Platonic corpus. At *Republic* 514a–17a, Socrates likens philosophical education to the process whereby prisoners in a dark cave may be released from the bonds of habit and ignorance and ascend to the illuminated region of truth and being. This image is intended, among other things, to counter the popular perception of philosophy as a perversion of mind and character – a perception expressed in Aristophanes' comparison of Socrates' school to a cave and his "half-dead" students to the shades in Hades.[8] For while Socrates and the sages understand their relationship to the wider world in terms of the idea of *the soul's liberation*, this relationship is perceived very differently by "the nations" and the society of nonphilosophers. Because the ignorant perceive neither the dimness of their understanding nor the chains that bind them, they cannot be expected to welcome the bringers of enlightenment and freedom. Socrates puts this point bluntly: "if they [the cave dwellers] were somehow able to get their hands on and to kill the one who attempts to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?" (517a). The trial and execution of Socrates, the imprisonment and martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva (see BT Berakhot 61B) and others, the frequent burnings of the Talmud in Christian Europe, and Hitler's

[8] *Clouds* 504, 508; cf. 103, 119–20.

war against Judaism as well as the Jews, all seem to confirm this grim surmise.[9]

The problem of the relationship between the few and the many is in some respects more complicated in the case of rabbinic Judaism than it is in that of Socratic philosophizing. This is because the rabbis are a few among the many Jews, just as the Jews are a few among the many nations; and while the many Jews are well disposed to them, the many nations are not. For Socrates, however, ethnic or political identity is irrelevant; philosophers may spring up in barbarian and Greek communities alike, and must confront the same basic prejudices wherever they appear.[10] In any event, the attitude of the Talmud and the dialogues toward the many is one of hopeful caution. Hopefulness is called for because the few are recruited from the many; a merely potential philosopher is also an actual nonphilosopher. Because they are accessible to the moral imagination and intellect of the many as well as the few, Talmudic aggadah and Platonic storytelling function as basic tools of this recruitment. Beyond this, Ta'anit teaches in the anecdote about Ifra Hurmiz and Rava that the rabbis may find friends even among the nations, and in the story of Rabbi Elazar and the ugly man that they must furthermore be open to learning from the simple wisdom of the many.[11] On this latter point, the dialogues seem to part ways with the Talmud: while they show Socrates being instructed by the philosopher Parmenides and taught about eros by the prophetic priestess Diotima, they contain no equivalent of the story of Elazar.[12] Socrates makes it clear, however, that the philosopher should not be dismissive of the customs and traditions of the larger community.[13] But this teaching is in part a manifestation of prudence.

[9] See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2007, 19.481–83, *s.v.* "Talmud, Burning of," and Rosenberg 2005, 97, which observes that the desecration of "Torah scrolls and all sancta of Israel" proves that the Nazis sought to eliminate not just "an inhuman subspecies" but also the ideas of Judaism of which the Jewish people were a living symbol and a source – "ideas that were diametrically opposed to those of Nazism."

[10] Cf. *Republic* 499c–d with 487c–d.

[11] Chapter 5, 166–72; Chapter 7, 238–39.

[12] See *Parmenides* 130d–e with *Symposium* 201d–12c.

[13] Consider his comparison of *nomos* to adoptive parents who have educated our minds and shaped our characters (*Republic* 537e–38c) and his defense of the norms of filial behavior in the face of Euthyphro's radical antinomianism.

The combination of hopefulness and caution with which the Talmud and the dialogues speak to their readers is especially evident in their pedagogical use of esoteric writing. This pedagogical esotericism allows readers to draw meaning from these texts in proportion to the intellectual and spiritual needs and capacities they bring to them. For some, the meaning of these texts resides in their relationship to an authoritative tradition of received wisdom. For others, their meaning lies not simply in what we can recover of the teachings they attempt to preserve, but also – and perhaps primarily – in the wisdom that these teachings may help us to discover in the future.[14] But whatever their interpretative assumptions may be, readers cannot predict how these writings will speak to them, or what fresh insights they might occasion.

The Platonic dialogues and the Talmud have richly rewarded the time and effort of many earlier generations of readers. As for what these writings may yet communicate to us, one might imagine them saying to their readers what God says to Moses: "I shall be What I shall be" (Exodus 3:14). To entrust ourselves to them is to reaffirm Socrates' faith in the truth of oracle and the rabbis' confidence in the wisdom of the Torah. As we open up the meaning of these texts and attempt to retrace the distinctive paths of rabbinic and Socratic thought, we come to find ourselves exploring the borders between comprehension and mystery, faith and knowledge. It is here, in the good company of past and present inquirers united by shared texts and traditions and by awe and wonder before a divinity that can be known, but never fully comprehended, that we may rediscover the sacred character of thought itself.

[14] Chapter 1, 45–49, 72–74.

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Index to Biblical and Rabbinic Texts

Hebrew Bible

Genesis
1, 246
1:2, 7, 160, 224
1:3, 12n36
1:31, 224
3:5, 223n4
6–7, 81
6:7, 97n36
6:8, 97n36
9:11, 81
18:23–32, 88
18:25, 205n33
33:18, 97
35:9, 97

Exodus
3–4, 122
3:14, 2n5, 260
4:10, 123
20:1, 102

Leviticus
26:3–4, 80

Numbers
20:10, 102
20:12, 102
24:6, 167

Deuteronomy
2:25, 181n26
5:6–18, 177
6:4, 223
10:17, 223n4
11:13–17, 80
15:1–11, 176–7
15:4, 178
15:11, 179, 180
17:2, 211n42
17:8–13, 32–3
18:10–11, 93
30:11, 224
30:11–14, 11
30:14, 224
32:1, 246

Joshua
1:8, 9
3:7, 181n26
5:13–15, 49

Judges
2:11, 211n42
3:7, 211n42
3:12, 211n42
4:1, 211n42
6:1, 211n42
10:13, 211n42
13:1, 211n42

2 Samuel
7:7, 168n6

1 Kings
5:20, 168n6
6:9–20, 168n6

8:35–36, 80n6
14:15, 167
17:1, 91, 93–4
18:36–39, 93
18:40, 93
18:41, 125
18:45, 125

2 Kings
2:3, 89n27

Isaiah
1:11, 199n23
1:17, 199n23
6:9–10, 122n44
41:2, 232
42:6–7, 258
45:12, 246

Jeremiah
1:6, 123
15:19, 121n40
23:29, 35n40

Amos
2:7–8, 121
4:7, 80–1, 167
4:13, 122
5:24, 121
7:7–8, 122n43
7:10–17, 121–2

Micah
6:8, 3n10

Habakkuk
1:1–4, 87
1:2, 125
1:5–17, 87
1:13, 87–8
1:17, 87–8
2:1, 87
2:4, 87n23
2:4–5, 88

Psalms
19:9, 128n52
77:20, 102
90:10, 99
126:1, 99

Proverbs
1:7, 2n2
23:13–14, 85
23:24, 85
25:23, 83

Job
4:7, 96
5:13, 102
6:17–18, 96
22:5, 96
22:22–23, 96–7
22:28–30, 95–6
22:30, 97n36
42:7, 98

Ezra
3:7, 168n6
7:6, 29
7:10, 29

Nehemiah
8:1–2, 29
8:8, 29
10:29–30, 29

Mishnah

Avot
2:8, 249
3:17, 43n76, 172n11
5:22, 34n31, 48

Kiddushin
1:10, 128, 255n3

Sotah
9:14, 8n26

Babylonian Talmud

Avodah Zarah
3B, 37n47, 133

Bava Batra
8A, 239n36
10A, 239n36
12A, 35n37

Bava Kamma
82A, 29–30n13
82B, 8n22

Bava Metzia
59A–B, 227n16
59B, 133, 247n55, 249–50
105B, 96n33

Berakhot
28B, 8

33A, 43n76
34B, 88n24
61B, 258

Gitin
6B, 46n87, 133, 255n4

Ḥagigah
3B, 46, 165

Ḥullin
141A–B, 182n27

Ketubot
103B, 96n33
106A, 174

Makkot
24A, 87n23

Megillah
27B, 174n15

Menaḥot
99B, 9

Mo'ed Katan
17A, 63n133

Niddah
20B, 239n36

Sanhedrin
21B, 30n44
34A, 40n20
37B, 92
44B, 49, 95

Shabbat
10A, 34n34
30A–B, 51n102
53B, 223n9, 241n42
59B, 96n33
63A, 36n41
112B, 238n34

Sotah
12A, 96n33
22A, 40
22B, 128
49A, 87n23
49B, 8

Sukkah
20A, 30n14

Ta'anit
2A–B, 79
3A, 79
3A–B, 79n4
7A, 79
10A, 79n4
18B, 80–1, 167, 228
19A, 81, 82, 228
19B–20A, 229–30
20A, 167, 186n26, 230, 231
20A–B, 52–3, 168, 170–1
20B, 173, 174–5, 231
20B–21A, 172
21A, 178, 179, 182, 183–4, 232, 233, 234
23A, 31, 87, 89–90, 92, 94n, 95–6, 98–9, 132, 242
23B, 235, 236n31
24A, 236–8, 239–40
24A–B, 63n133, 236n32
24B, 238, 240, 241–2
24B–25A, 241n43
25A, 243, 244
25B, 249

Jerusalem Talmud

Ketubot
8:11, 92

Sanhedrin
6:3, 95
6:6, 93, 94n 30

Midrash

Genesis Rabbah
5.5, 246
28.8, 97n36
29.1, 97n36
79.3, 97
82.2, 97

Exodus Rabbah
13.1, 9n30
21.2, 96n33
21.6, 246n51
27.9, 3n8
47.4, 37n47

Numbers Rabbah
18.12, 96n33
19.9, 102

Deuteronomy Rabbah
5.13, 96n33

New Testament

1 Corinthians 2:4, 123n46

General Index

Abaye, Rav, 251
Adda bar Ahava, Rav, 173, 230–1, 232, 234
aggadah (*see also* midrash)
  as declaration of Scripture, 30
  as tool of intellectual recruitment, 259
  comprises nonbinding interpretations and opinions, 48
  definition of, 17, 30
  devalued relative to halakha, in contemporary Jewish orthodoxy, 45
  intertwined with halakha in Talmud, 17n48, 45n85
  pedagogical significance of, 19–22, 45n85, 50–5
  requires interpretation, 52–4, 176, 228
  solicits sympathetic imagination, 52–3
Akiva, Rabbi, 182–3
  brings rain, when Eliezer fails, 249
  is extraordinarily kindhearted and forgiving, 249–50
  is a student of Naḥum, 182–3
  martyrdom of, 258
  more worthy of emulation than Eliezer, 252
  originates Avinu Malkenu prayer, 249
Amoraim
  generations of, 41n66
  successors of Tannaim, 40
Amos, 81, 121–2
archē (beginning)
  ancestral tradition as, 157, 160–1, 218–19
  gods as, 158, 162
  of Socratic philosophizing, 156, 161–3, 218–19
  of the Whole, 152
  soul or self as, 150–1, 161
Aristophanes, 109–11, 123, 258
Aristotle, 7, 72
Ashi, Rav, 236
Athena
  protector of Athens, 106
  sacred robe of, 197–8

baraitot
  Amoraic inventions posing as, 45
  defined, 40
Bar Kokhba War
  Babylonian rabbinical movement established by refugees from, 41
  futility of, 50
  possibly spurs commitment of Mishnah to writing, 38n50
Berkovits, Eliezer, 15, 20–2, 36

carobs, 99–100
cedar, compared to reed, 171–2
covenant, *see* God; rain

Delphic oracle, *see* Oral Torah; Socrates
drought
  as divine portent, 78, 79
  triggers prayer and fasting, 78, 80

Elazar, Rabbi
  absurdity of pride of, 256
  acknowledges his sin, 170

Elazar, Rabbi (*cont.*)
and importance of mercy, 251–2
and knowledge of ignorance, 166
expounds value of humility in the Academy, 171–2
learns from a Jewish Socrates, 171
recognizes beautiful wisdom of anonymous ugly man, 168–71
story of, illustrates pedagogy of aggadic narrative, 52–4
ugly teacher of, compared to Naḥum of Gam Zu, 183
Elazar ben Pedat, Rabbi, 243–4, 245, 246–7
Elazar of Birta, Rabbi, 239–40
Eleazar ben Azariah, Rabbi, 46, 165
Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi
compared to Rabbi Akiva, 249–50, 252
fails to bring rain, 249
forbids children to engage in excessive reflection, 8
is cursed by rabbis at Yavneh, 249
is unforgiving, 249, 250
miraculously kills Gamaliel, 250
scholarly preeminence of, 249
Elijah, 84, 91–4, 121, 125, 232, 233
eros (*see also* Platonic dialogues; Socrates)
and prophecy, 151
as divine madness, 152
as divinity, 151
as Socratic or philosophical passion, 3, 57–8, 114, 126, 151–6, 159, 192, 202, 208
is antithesis of fear and anger, 202
of gods, 199
Plato's reorientation of, 57–8
esotericism
in Plato's dialogues, 73, 260
in the Talmud, 47–8, 73, 260
of the angels, 182
Euthyphro (*see also* Meletus; religious invention; Socrates)
as poet, 159–60
attempts to master the gods, 214–15
claims expert knowledge of piety, 105, 137, 140, 141, 142–3, 159, 218
claims to be a diviner, 143, 158, 208
combines imitation of gods with servitude to them, 219
combines orthodoxy with unorthodox extremism, 139, 158
compares himself to Socrates, 137, 143
defines the pious, 137–8, 189, 200, 216
explains piety in a viciously circular manner, 206
foolish pride of, 208
gods of, as divine Cosa Nostra, 201
imitates gods in prosecuting his father, 142, 194, 195–6, 199
is driven by anger and resentment to indict his father, 140–1, 159, 195–6
is not genuinely erotic, 208
meaning of the name of, 157–8
separates piety from justice, 204–5
soul of, is anarchic, 160
story of death of his laborer, prefigures relationship to Socrates, 209
turns away from inquiry at critical moment, 216
violates norms of filial piety, 139–40, 194, 195
Ezra, 29–31, 38

Gamaliel, Rabban, 250
Gemara, 1
combines innovation with respect for tradition, 44–5, 48–9
dialectical form of, 43
interpretative innovation in, 49–51
is Talmud in narrowest sense, 41
preserves spoken word, 22n61, 69
represents and constitutes a community of worship, 43–4
values process of thinking more than its products, 42–3
visual format of, 44
God (*see also* miracles; prophecy; rain; *talmud Torah*)
as craftsman, 170
as judge and guarantor of goodness, 3, 224
as source of miracles, 225–6, 233–4
calls Jews to *talmud Torah*, 254–5
compared to gods of Greek poets, 6–7
compared to Socrates' gods, 219–20
contest between spokesmen for, 93–4
covenant of, with the people Israel, 2, 19, 79–80, 85, 96, 177, 224, 234
creation of, 224–5, 241, 244–7
is bound to worshipers through study, 19, 47, 133
judges merit in mysterious ways, 85, 86
knowledge of, is rooted in trust or faith, 2–3
law of, 28

love of, 12, 255
mercy of, 248–9
mystery of, 2, 225
Name of, 2n5, 260
signs of favor or disfavor of, not self-evident, 82
simultaneous hiddenness and self-revelation of, 12n36
speaks, while nature is silent, 6
subordination of the sovereign self to, 256
Good, the (*see also* Whole, the)152–6
and the Beautiful, 222
and the Platonic Ideas, 56–7, 152
sovereign self is subordinated to, 256
Greek philosophy
and biblical faith, as springs of Western spiritual and intellectual life, 16
and poetry, 5–6n14
as a way of life, 22
is guided by nature, 3
is ultimately incompatible with Judaism, 2, 4, 14
Talmud's low opinion of, 8–9
wisdom according to, 2

Habakkuk (*see also* Ḥoni HaMe'aggel)87–8, 124, 125
ḥakhmah (wisdom), 2, 4
ḥakhmat yevanit (Greek wisdom), 8–9
halakha (*see also* aggadah; midrash; Mishnah; Oral Torah)
correctness according to, is religious observance in a narrow sense, 165–6
defined, 17
excessive generality of, 21
explanations of controversy about, 46–7
redacted by Ḥiyya and Oshaya, 182
Socratic way of life as version of, 63
taught as Oral Torah, 36
halakhic conscience, 21
Ḥanina ben Dosa, Rabbi
belongs to Ḥasidic movement, 241n43
challenges understanding of the rabbis, 242–3n46
is a legendary miracle worker, 241
like Ḥoni, is a "son" of God, 242
poverty of, 242, 243
regularly prays for strong miracles, 241–2
wife of, 243
Hebrew Bible (*see also* religious invention)
accessibility of, 17
and philosophy, 4, 5
canonization of, 31, 36n, 41
compared to Greek poetry, 6–7
literary characteristics of, 27–9
wisdom according to, 2
hermeneutic circle, 155–6
Herodotus, 65
Hesiod (*see also* poets)
depicts gods as lovers of justice, 196
inaugurates tradition of religious myth, 65, 200
represents angry, quarreling gods, 142, 195–6, 201, 202, 203, 218
teaches that Chaos is the origin of everything, 160
Hillel, Rabbi, 38, 39, 178
Ḥiyya, Rabbi, and Oshaya, 181, 182
Holocaust, the, 14–15, 258–9
holy men (*see also* rabbis)76–8, 85n21
Homer (*see also* poets)
and Achilles, 65, 157
depicts gods as lovers of justice, 196n15
fashions violent myths about the gods, 160, 202, 203, 218
inaugurates tradition of religious myth, 65, 200
Ḥoni HaMe'aggel (*see also* Ḥanina ben Dosa, Rabbi; Shimon ben Shetaḥ; Socrates)
as "son" of God, 81–3, 88, 132
as father of his disciples, 89–90, 132
as prophet and rabbi, 89
as spoiled child, 46, 85, 88, 90, 94, 242–43n46
belongs to Ḥasidic movement, 82n11, 241n43
challenges authority and understanding of the rabbis, 84–5, 227
compared to Habakkuk, 87–8, 124–5
complexity of Gemara's discussion of, 86
indulges childishness of human beings, 90–1
is inimitable, and thus pedagogically irrelevant, 78, 126–7, 164
is "rabbinized" in Ta'anit, 85n21, 90–1, 100
isolation of, 98–101
miraculously controls the rain, 89
miraculously sleeps for seventy years, 99

Ḥoni HaMe'aggel (*cont.*)
Mishnah and Gemara of Ta'anit 3 dwell on, 77
resembles Moses, 101–3
resorts to magic to bring rain, 83–4
significance of the name of, 101
success of, is a rebuke to the Sanhedrin, 98
tragic misunderstanding of, 101
Huna, Rav (*see also* Naḥum of Gam Zu, Rabbi), 173, 174–6, 184n31, 230–1

idea or *eidos* (form), 117, 137, 189, 190, 199–200, 206
Ifra Hurmiz, mother of King Shavor, 238–9, 239n36, 259
Ilfa, Rabbi, 176, 178–9, 181–2, 254
Imma Shalom, wife of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, 250
Isaiah, 258
Ishmael, Rabbi, 9
Israel of Toledo, Rabbi, 8

Jacob, 97
Jesus, 84–5n20, 120n39
Job, 95–8
Joshua, 49–50, 65, 230, 234, 246

Kadushin, Max, 20–1, 36
Kafka, Franz, 183

law (*see also* halakha; Mishnah; *nomos*)
and formative education, 8–9, 128
and mishnah form, 32
and morality, 4–5
divine, 4–6
of God, is accompanied by explanations, 28, 30–1, 39
of the Greek philosophers, 7

Maimonides, 15, 25, 53–4
Mani, Rabbi, 235–6
Mari, Rav, 240–1
Meir, Rabbi, 182
Meletus, 105, 136–7
anticipates Socrates' catharsis of injustice and impiety, 193–4
as farmer of young plants, 145, 147, 148, 220
as son of Athens, 146
aspires to political power, 157
claims divine backing in purifying Athens, 217
claims knowledge of justice and piety, 218
compared to Euthyphro, 144
compared to Socrates, 145–6
falls short of genuine selfhood, 147–8, 157
manifests original Chaos, 160
meaning of name of, 145, 146–7
Meno, 118
midrash
aggadic, 30, 36
and the plain meaning of the text, 36
halakhic, 30–2, 35–6
origins and nature of, 29–31
substitutes for prophecy, 30
Midrash Rabbah, 3n8
miracles (*see also* Mishnah)
and *sidrey b'reyshit* (orders of creation), 224–5, 241, 244–7
are deducted from one's merit, 231
are still possible in Diaspora, 233
exceptions to teaching of Ta'anit 3 on, 229–30, 231–4, 235, 241, 248
moral economy of, 226–7
moral uselessness of, 235–6
of Amoraim, 235n29
overall teaching of Ta'anit 3 on, 235, 247–8
performed out of mercy, 237
restrictions on praying for or benefiting from, 226, 227, 229–30, 234, 235, 240, 241
should not be counted on, 231
strictly speaking, do not exist in strong form, 243–7
strong, defined, 226
two types of, 225
Mishnah (*see also* Moses), 1
absence of miracle stories in, 81
and the New Testament, 37n44
collects and organizes halakha, 36
contains very little aggadah, 38n51
demands exegesis, 40
orders of, 38
presents law without justification, 39
purposely left incomplete, 28n6
recreates life of Second Temple period, 38
second in authority only to Scripture, 44
transforms spoken word into written word, 22n61
transmits tradition in the form of controversy, 39
mishnah form, 32–3
Moses (*see also* Ḥoni HaMe'aggel; Nakdimon ben Guryon)
and other Hebrew prophets, 122–3
as estranged hero, 102–3

declares and explains the law, 28–9
God's instruction of, 33–5, 67
Mishnah traced back to, 40, 46
proclaims Ten Commandments, 177
revelation of God to, makes truth available, 254
sun stands still for, 181n26, 230, 234

Naḥman, Rav, 228, 229, 230, 234
Naḥum of Gam Zu, Rabbi (*see also* Nakdimon ben Guryon)173
and victory of Jews over the nations, 233
as perfectly righteous man, 184
body of, as Torah scroll, 184–6
compared to Rabbi Elazar, 240
compared to Rav Huna, 186
compared to Rava, 238
encounters starving man, 183–4
extreme moral scrupulousness of, 186
leads embassy to Rome, 232–4
miracles of, 231–4
on writing Torah in the medium of one's life, 182–7
Nakdimon ben Guryon, 229–30, 231, 233, 234, 238
Neusner, Jacob
on Greek philosophy and the Talmud, 11n33
on the Mishnah, 35n54
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 162, 199
Noah, 97n36
Nöldeke, Theodor, 14
nomos (custom, convention, law) (*see also archē*)5, 7, 19n, 50
and the lawgiver, 66–7
Aristophanes' Socrates claims gods exist only according to, 110
as adoptive parent, 69–70, 71–2, 135
as source of self, 161
clothes as symbol of, 198n21
embodies ancestral traditions, 106–7, 146, 157, 158, 160–1
has divine origins, 65
incoherence of, 143, 158, 160–1, 194–5, 218
religious, written and unwritten, 188–9

Oedipus, 103, 211n40
Oral Torah (*see also* halakha; Sinai, revelation at)11, 21, 27–8
and Delphic oracle, 114–15
and Plato's account of the origins of language, 66–7
and unwritten teaching of Plato, 72–3
and written Torah, 33–5
as spur to interpretation of Scripture, 34–5
extends and transforms prophecy, 35
flaws in transmission of, produce controversy over halakha, 46
influence of concept of, on rabbinic thought, 45–7

paideia (civic education), 147–8
patrioi nomoi (ancestral traditions), *see nomos*
Pappa, Rav, 251
Peloponnesian War, 56, 57, 140n16, 217
Pharisees, 27, 33, 36, 37
philosophical definitions, 190–2
phusis (nature), 5, 6–7, 70, 161, 198n21, 224
piety
and human ignorance, 77
and religious pollution, 137, 138–9, 217
as functional or operational concept, 200
as subset of justice, 138, 193, 212, 213–15
is relative to the nature of the gods, 188–9, 200
is rooted in fear, 201
poetic nature of, at Athens, 197–8
traditional conception of, amounts to pleasing the gods, 200, 219
Plato (*see also* Platonic dialogues)
Academy of, 130
Apology, 10, 58, 60, 68, 105–30 passim, 133–4, 141, 143–4, 146–7, 148, 207, 222, 223, 253, 254, 257
Cratylus, 66–7
Crito, 135–6
Euthyphro, 17–18, 61, 105, 117, 136–49 passim, 157–63, 188–220 passim, 222, 228, 253
Laches, 61, 63
Laws, 9, 57, 71
Meno, 118
Phaedo, 134
Phaedrus, 72, 151–2, 165, 222
Republic, 7, 8, 10, 54–5, 57–8, 61, 69, 129–30, 134, 135–6, 146, 148, 150, 151, 152–6, 157, 222–3, 255, 258
Sophist, 68
Statesman, 68–9
Symposium, 10, 58, 60, 146, 151, 222
Theaetetus, 10, 105, 134, 223

Platonic dialogues
aim to create community of inquiry, 255–6
and Plato's "unwritten teaching," 72–3
as curriculum in examined life, 19, 61–2
as normative and formative canon, 71, 74–5
as tool for recruiting philosophers, 259
balance tradition and critical reflection, 64–70, 259
doctrinal elusiveness of, 61n126
embody tension between rational inquiry and faith, 13–14
emphasize knowledge of ignorance, 256–7
hopefulness of, 259, 260
implicitly criticize Socratic philosophizing, 68
pedagogical ambition of, 70–5
pedagogical caution of, compared to that of Talmud, 8–9, 67–70, 259
pedagogical erotics of, 60, 62, 118, 255
preserve and transform oral tradition, 56
require readers to think for themselves, 55, 257
respond to social and political crisis, 55–8
share pedagogical intuitions with Talmud, 60–1, 63
successfulness of, compared to Talmud, 127–31
teach mimetically, 12, 20, 22, 54–5, 63–4, 118–19, 189–90, 255, 257
words of, as plants to nourish the soul, 165
poets (*see also* Hesiod; Homer)6–7
attribute misfortune to the gods, 211
divine myths of, 142, 160, 193, 194–6, 197–8, 199
ignorance of, 116
poverty
in third-century Palestine, 245
rabbinic approaches to problem of, 174–5, 177–9, 180, 183–6
prophecy (*see also* eros; midrash; Oral Torah)
in ancient Greece, 119–20
in the Jewish tradition, 30, 35, 120–5
is vouchsafed directly by God or gods, 158
philosophy as, 10, 151–6
rabbis
academies of, 39, 129, 132–3
and the nations, 258–9
as heroes of a new myth, 51, 65
as holy men, 84
become partners with God in study, 19, 47, 133
broadly promote education, 129
combine faith with rational inquiry, 12, 18
dialectical character of thought of, 11
experience wonder, and know their own ignorance, 18, 224–5, 228
fellowship of, 98–101
intellectual creativity of, 49–51
love open-ended inquiry and dialectical thought, 11
on the sovereign self, 256
strive to live up to their knowledge, 20, 43n, 76, 165–6
value-concepts of, 21, 51–2
rain
as blessing, 78
as essential manifestation of God's covenant, 80
as real or apparent punishment, 81, 82
God directly controls, 79
is essential to life, 79–81
prayers for, must respect natural order, 228–9
Rashi, 83, 91–2, 95, 240
Rav, 49–50, 128, 167, 251
Rava, 99, 101, 132, 238, 239, 259
religion (*see also* piety; poets; *thumos*)
and Athenian civic tradition, 106–7, 144, 197–8
etymology of the word, 18–19
extremism in, rooted in forgetfulness of one's own ignorance, 257
of the Greeks, 6–7, 64–5, 200
of the household, 139–40
religious invention
in the Hebrew Bible, 27–8
in the Talmud, 48–50, 219–20
of Euthyphro, 198
of Socrates, 162–3, 193, 197–8, 199, 202–3, 209, 211, 217–21

Sadducees, 32, 33
Sanhedrin, the, 32–3, 38, 95–8
scribes, 29–31, 34, 38
Septuagint, 5, 46n, 86
Shavor, king of Persia, 238–9
Shimon ben Shetaḥ
as counterwight to Ḥoni, 91–5

death of son of, 94–5
executes witches, 93
is a Pharisaic sage, 82n11
is perplexed by Ḥoni, 83–5
possesses self-control and self-knowledge, 92
Talmudically mainstream piety of, 93–5
threatens to place a ban on Ḥoni, 83, 91, 99
Shmuel bar Naḥmani, Rabbi, 167
Shmuel bar Unyah, Rabbi, 49
Shmuel HaKatan, Rabbi, 250–1
Sifra, 40
Sinai, revelation at, 2, 254
Oral Torah originates in, 33, 157
proximity to, as source of authority, 27, 46, 47, 70, 72
Socrates (*see also* Euthyphro; Meletus; Platonic dialogues; religious invention; *talmud Torah*)
aims to create philosophical community, 133–4, 220–1
and the Delphic oracle, 10, 112–16, 118, 123, 125, 127, 149, 202, 205, 217, 221, 254
and "the god," 10, 103–4, 112–13, 116–17, 119–20, 124–7, 135, 221, 223, 254
as a mask of Plato, 75
as hero of Platonic myth, 65–6, 116
as midwife, 134
as paradigm of human wisdom and piety, 68, 116–19, 192, 202
cares for Athenians, 145–6, 162–3
compared to Ḥoni, 78, 103, 107, 124–7, 164
criticizes violent myths about the gods, 196–7, 199
daimonion of, 10, 23, 29, 114–15n, 123–4, 127, 137, 143n, 151–2, 217, 221
enigmatic nature of, 107–8
envisions partnership with gods, 215–16, 219
exposes interlocutors' ignorance, 59–60, 117–18
faith of, 111–15, 221
gods of, are models of reason and decency, 204, 205, 219
has knowledge of ignorance, 10, 115–18, 140, 197, 207–8, 221, 223
imitation of, is paradoxical, 63–4
indictment against, 105–7, 144–5
irony of, 145, 220
is a "circle thinker," 161–2, 216–17
is divinely called to philosophy, 126, 254–5
is not a sophist, 108–11
literary afterlife of, 59, 130–1
moral conservatism of, 140, 142, 199
on reverent awe, 211–15
paternalism of, 133–4
philosophical conscience of, 22, 69
piety of, as care for gods, 138, 161–2, 193, 198, 199, 214
redefines piety as philosophy, 202, 216
resembles prophets of Israel, 108, 120–5, 128
soul according to, 150–6, 223
the sovereign self according to 149–50, 256
unifies speech and deed, 10, 20, 22, 63, 165
unravels civic fabric, 106–7
virtues of, required for philosophizing, 62–3
sophia (wisdom), 2, 4
sophists, 108–9
soul, *see* Socrates
Stammaim, 41–2
Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin, 82, 91, 237, 240
Strauss, Leo, 2–4, 13, 16, 18

Ta'anit 3
abundance of aggadah in Gemara of, 18
concludes by emphasizing mercy and humility, 248–52
is linked with *Euthyphro* and *Apology* by analogies of form and content, 253–60
main intellectual drama of, 105
models ways to live up to the Torah, 165–6
topics covered in, 80
Talmud (*see also* aggadah: esotericism; Greek philosophy; Platonic dialogues; religious invention)
aims to produce and sustain a community of sages, 131, 255–6, 257
as curriculum, 19
as normative and formative canon, 70
Babylonian (Bavli), 16, 41
burnings of, 9, 258, 259n
cares Socratically for its readers, 164–6
centrality of, in traditional Jewish communities, 14
combines faith with philosophical passion, 13

Talmud (*cont.*)
diminishing importance of, in contemporary Jewish life, 15–16, 45n85
hopefulness of, 259, 260
Jerusalem (Yerushalmi), 16, 41
literary genres of, 42
mimetically teaches living ethos of rabbinic Judaism, 20–2, 51–2, 255, 257
pedagogical ambition of, 70–5
pedagogical successfulness of, 127–31
privileges questions over answers, 13
provides a range of moral and intellectual models, 12, 20, 166
Talmudic sages, 17, 20
as incompatible models of merit, 172, 186
as objects of aspiration for ordinary Jews, 129
lives of, as book of wisdom, 176
words of, all equally Torah, 46
talmud Torah (Torah study)
and Socratic conception of piety, 219
as obligation, 37, 128
as ongoing revelation, 45
as route to eternal life, 179
as vocation, 255
God engages daily in, 133
is properly undertaken in the company of others, 44
scriptural basis of, 49–51
Tannaim
defined, 38
generations of, 41n66
Temple (*see also* Mishnah)
of Solomon, 27, 168
replaced by sacred writings, 37, 168
Second, 29, 37–9, 168, 233
theological voluntarism, 218
Thucydides, 57
thumos (spiritedness), 60, 150, 159, 160
as philosophical attribute, 209, 217, 218n50
is inflamed by Greek religious tradition, 193, 195–6, 199
moderation of, 192
Torah (*see also* Oral Torah; *talmud Torah*),1n1, 3
as book and activity, 37
difficulty of fulfilling words of, 178–80
emphasizes connection between intelligibility and goodness, 223–4
inaccurately translated as "law," 5n13
letter of, is unalterable, 11
living ethos of, resists formulation, 21
living up to, as main theme of Talmud, 4, 53, 165–6, 188
meaning of, is subject to multiple interpretations, 11, 46–7, 180
originally preserved orally, 26–7
rabbinic interpretations of, are not arbitrary, 180–1
study of, magnifies God, 12
theodicy of, 79–80, 82–3, 85
withstands storms of time, 168
words of, as plants, 165
Tosefta, 40–1
traditionalism and antitraditionalism, 44–9

Whole, the (*see also archē*), 3, 152, 154–6

Xenophanes, 6
Xenophon, 56n114, 118

Yannai, Rabbi, 231, 232, 234
Yavneh, Academy at, 249–50
Yehuda, Rav, 167
Yehudah HaNasi (Judah the Prince), Rabbi, 38, 50n97, 182
Yirmeyah ben Ekazar, Rabbi, 246
Yitzḥak ben Elyashiv, Rabbi, 235–6, 243
Yoḥanan, Rabbi, 49, 79, 98–100, 176, 178–82
and the life worth living, 254, 255
Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi, 249
Yonatan, Rabbi, 167
Yose bar Avin, Rabbi, 236
Yose of Yukrat, Rabbi, 236–8, 251–2

Zeus
and Cronos, 142, 194, 195–6, 197, 200, 204
exemplifies justice, 196
plants all things, 210
Zugot, 38, 83