

“Meat from the Heavens”: The Prohibition on Meat Consumption Imposed on Adam and the Jewish-Christian Polemic*

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■ Abstract

Toward the end of the Noahide commandment pericope in the Talmud (b. Sanh. 56–60), we find a *sugya* (pericope) featuring the prohibition on meat consumption imposed on Adam and its permission to the Noahides. This unique *sugya* pieces together halakic and haggadic sources that reinterpret the Garden of Eden story and address the complex relationship between humans and animals. This article will examine this *sugya*, focusing on its closing story, which describes a pietist who merits a gift of heavenly flesh. I will demonstrate that the story has many levels of meaning, grounded in both its immediate and wider contexts, and claim that it conceals a polemic with a similar Christian story (Acts 10), which describes impure meat that descends from the sky, undermining the cultural and halakic divisions between Jews and non-Jews. The comparison between the two stories reveals opposing worldviews with regard to law and lawlessness, utopia and redemption.

■ Keywords

Noahide commandment, haggada, Bavli, Acts, Judeo-Christian polemic

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■ Introduction

Various ancient cultures tell about a precultural era in which humans avoided eating meat. The Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh tells of Enkidu, a legendary primitive man, who lived in the field together with animals and refrained from eating them. The Roman poet Ovid speaks of the golden age of humankind, when humans ate only wild fruits and plants.¹ A similar description of the primeval age appears in the Bible. The menu offered by God to the first human beings in Gen 1 consists exclusively of foods from the plant world. The first mention of eating meat appears only in God's words to Noah in Gen 9 in the aftermath of the flood. This primordial account serves as a "state of nature," which underlies the establishment of the ethical status of animals and their relationship to humankind, in the human world known to us. It is also the first explicit law presented to humanity in the Bible, and as such calls for a discussion of the meaning and nature of law.

The rabbinic discussion of these verses and the prohibition of eating meat imposed on the first human beings is concentrated in an intriguing passage in the Babylonian Talmud.² The present article is devoted to an analysis of that passage and the rabbinic exegesis contained within it, in comparison to alternative ancient interpretations. As will be demonstrated, the different interpretations have implications for the shaping of the relationship between humankind and animals. This article will focus on a short and unique story cited in the passage. This story describes the miraculous rescue of a pious sage, who received a gift of meat from heaven. In the talmudic *sugya* (pericope) in which it appears, the story functions as proof of the existence of "meat from the heavens" and focuses on the human-animal relationship. However, an analysis of the various contexts in which the story is situated reveals a hidden polemical aspect of the story—it is engaged in conscious polemic with a similar story from Christian literature. In this context, the story deals with questions of law and lawlessness, utopia and redemption. I will examine the nature and significance of the connections between these two issues in the different contexts of the story.

Methodologically, this article fits into two contemporary currents in the study of the Babylonian Talmud. One current deals with the flexibility of textual and genre boundaries in the study of the haggadic (non-halakic) material in the Talmud. It was generally acceptable to see the haggadic passages as distinct from their textual contexts, and as an independent literary genre, fundamentally different from the halakic material. However, in recent decades, scholars have challenged these long-accepted distinctions and suggested more flexible boundaries.³ In this article I will

¹ Rod Preece, *Sins of the Flesh: A History of Ethical Vegetarian Thought* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2008) 35–43.

² Over the last decade, several studies have been devoted to the attitude toward animals in ancient Jewish literature. For an overview, see Beth E. Berkowitz, *Animals and Animality in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018).

³ These questions have been widely discussed in the study of haggadic talmudic stories. See, for instance, the survey of the topic in Barry. S. Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) 11–40. For an

examine the flexibility of these boundaries, in terms of both literary delineation and genre affiliation.

The second current of research upon which this article is based relates to the flexibility of the cultural boundaries of the Babylonian Talmud. In recent years, scholars have shown increasing interest in the links between the Babylonian Talmud and Christian sources. Moreover, recent scholarship has uncovered more encrypted satires of the Gospels in the Babylonian Talmud.⁴ Therefore, my analysis joins, and strengthens, this trend.

■ The Story in Literary Context

The story appears in Tractate Sanhedrin 59b of the Babylonian Talmud:⁵

R. Simeon b. Halafta⁶ was walking on the road,
when lions met him and roared at him.
Thereupon he said: “The young lions roar for prey seeking their food from
God.”⁷
Two lumps of flesh descended⁸ from heaven.
They ate one and left the other.
This he brought to the *beit midrash* (study hall)
and propounded: Is this flesh impure or pure?⁹
They [the scholars] answered: Nothing impure descends from heaven.

example of this notion of widening and shifting contextual spheres in haggadic stories, see Yonatan Feintuch, “Reading Talmudic Stories in Multiple Halakhic Contexts: The Hasid in the Graveyard, Rav Ada b. Abba and the Lovesick Man,” *JJS* 68 (2017) 284–307, and the literary survey cited at the beginning of the article. See also idem, *Face to Face: The Interweaving of Halakha and Aggada in the Babylonian Talmud* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2019) (Hebrew). On the different approaches to rabbinic stories in general, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 3–15.

⁴ As Yair Furstenberg has argued, while “we find no evidence of Palestinian rabbis having any direct knowledge of the New Testament . . . Babylonian material suggests a new self-confident attitude towards Christianity in general and the knowledge of Christian texts in particular”; Yair Furstenberg, “The Midrash of Jesus and the Bavli’s Counter-Gospel,” *JSQ* 22 (2015) 303–24. See also Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). For a current overview of research on the topic, see Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 1–34.

⁵ Translations from BT Sanhedrin revised from the Soncino Babylonian Talmud, translated into English, according to the Yemenite MS of Yad ha-Rav Herzog; important variants will be noted in footnotes.

⁶ In MS Karlsruhe Reuchlin 2: “Ishmael b. Tahlifa”; MS Florence: “Shimon b. Tahlifa.”

⁷ The second half of the verse appears in MSS. Munich 95, Karlsruhe Reuchlin 2 and Florence. From the content of the story, it is clear that it is essential to the midrash.

⁸ Thus, in all MSS. In the printed editions we find “descended for him.” See the discussion of this point below.

⁹ This line is missing in the Yad ha-Rav Herzog Yemenite MS, in MS Karlsruhe Reuchline, and in MS Florence (as well as in Agadot ha-Talmud). R. Judah Albargeloni apparently did not have this sentence in his *Sefer ha-Yetzirah*; see Mordechai Sabato, *A Yemenite Manuscript of Tractate Sanhedrin and Its Place in the Text Tradition* (Jerusalem: Yad ben-zvi, 1998) 202 (Hebrew).

The hero of this miraculous story is R. Simeon b. Halafta, who was a member of the final generation of Tannaim. An initial reading of the story reveals that it can be divided into two scenes: one takes place on the road, and the second occurs in the *beit midrash*. The first scene is dramatic, unique and fantastical, while the second is a static one that describes the standard halakic process of the *beit midrash*. The story was briefly analyzed by Jonah Frankel, one of the fathers of the modern study of the haggadic story.¹⁰ The interpretive key to this story, per Frankel, is in understanding the figure of R. Simeon b. Halafta as one of those pious figures (*hasid*) who are capable of intuiting the truth behind everyday reality. R. Simeon is wholly convinced that the lions request their prey from God and are not interested in devouring him, as this is what the Bible describes.¹¹ The miracle that takes place in the story is perceived by the *hasid* as the natural order of the world. In the second part of the story, the pietist is unsure of the halakic status of the meat he is left with, and therefore he goes to the *beit midrash*. Halakic knowledge requires Torah scholars and the ways of the *beit midrash*, rather than the pietistic mode of religious understanding of reality. The central subject of the story is, therefore, R. Simeon b. Halafta's pietistic knowledge, as opposed to the halakic knowledge possessed by the scholars. Frankel's interpretation is based on his fundamental methodological approach to haggadic stories, which emphasizes the clear delineation of the haggadic story and its analysis as a complete, distinct literary unit. However, this interpretation, which sees the story as an example of a general literary pattern, does not provide an explanation of various unique details featured in the story. Thus, for instance, one must ask why *two* "lumps of flesh" descended from the sky in the first place, and why the lions left one for R. Simeon. Frankel likewise does not provide a satisfactory analysis of the specific subject of the story—the danger that animals pose to humans. An examination of the context in which the story appears will provide a deeper meaning to the story and identify additional aspects to it, first and foremost regarding the issue of human-animal relations.¹²

I will now turn to an examination of the talmudic *sugya* in which our story is featured. The talmudic discussion begins with a statement of R. Judah in the name of Rav comparing Adam and Noah and claiming that Adam was forbidden to eat meat. This statement is followed by four challenges that attempt to disprove this claim and prove that Adam consumed meat. The *sugya* opens with the following statement:

¹⁰ Jonah Frankel, *The Ways of the Midrash and the Aggadah* (Givatayim, Israel: Yad la-Talmud, 1991) 252–53 (Hebrew).

¹¹ It is possible that the verse was cited as a wish or prayer, that the lions should obtain their food (directly) from God rather than preying on R. Simeon.

¹² This critique of Frankel's approach can be found in the writings of many of the scholars of haggadah from the following generation (see above, n. 3).

Rav Judah said in Rav's name: Adam was not permitted to eat flesh, for it is written, "to you it shall be for food, and to all the beasts of the earth"—but the beasts of the earth shall not be for you.

But with the advent of the sons of Noah, it was permitted, for it is said, "as with the green grasses, I give you all these."

Now one might think that the prohibition of flesh cut from the living animal (*ever min ha-hai*) does not apply to them [the Noahides]—therefore it says, "you must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it."

One might think that this prohibition applies even to reptiles—therefore it is stated "but."¹³

R. Judah's statement compares God's words to Noah in the Noahide covenant, in Gen 9:1–3, with God's address to Adam in Gen 1:28–30. In the original state of the world following creation and preceding the sin of Adam and Eve, humans and animals both subsisted on vegetation: "God said: 'See, I have given you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.' And it was so." Humans and animals alike were given plants to eat: "I have given you . . . and to all the animals on the land." Rav interprets the verse to mean: "[I have given to the animals]—and not given the animals to you." Humans and animals are partners in the consumption of vegetation and cannot devour one another. When the descendants of Noah come along, however, Rav argues that they were permitted to eat meat: "every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these." Only at this point were the animals equated to the vegetation that the Noahides had consumed to this point.¹⁴ Despite this, Rav notes that this license to eat flesh was not complete, for the Noahides were prohibited to eat flesh cut from the living animal: "you must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it."

Rav's exegesis is based on the distinction between the two divine statements. In God's communication with Adam, we find "and master it," as well as "and rule" (Gen 1:28)—two phrases that express mastery and control of the earth, and only after this statement is Adam compared to the animals as regards the consumption of vegetation. In God's statement to Noah, however, the phrases of dominance do not

¹³ Further on we find: "How is this implied? R. Huna said: 'the blood thereof'—this shows that the prohibition applies only to those creatures whose flesh is distinct from their blood; this excludes reptiles, whose flesh is not distinct from their blood." The discussion of reptiles does not have a parallel in the Palestinian source we will examine below.

¹⁴ For the wider biblical context of the vegetarian ideal, see also Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Vegetarian Ideal in the Bible," in *Food and Judaism* (ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Gerald Shapiro; SJC; Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2005) 319–33. This type of interpretation of the words spoken to the Noahides first appears in Philo's *QG* (on Gen. 9:3): "Some say that through this [statement], 'as the herbs of fodder I have given you all things' the eating of meat is enjoined." The same idea appears in more detail in Philo's discussion of Gen 2:18–19 in *QG*; see Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis Supplement 1* (trans. Ralph Marcus; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951) 144.

appear. In their place we hear “the fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky” (Gen 9:2), which is followed by the permission to consume meat: “every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these.” These differences in phrasing, the substitution of fear for dominance, reflect a deep change in the relationship between humans and animals, from a dominance that was intended to create order in the world to a state of hostility and exploitation for human needs. This new situation is the one that produces the fear that animals now have toward humans, who have replaced dominance with exploitation.¹⁵

This Babylonian tradition has a Palestinian parallel in R. Johanan’s statement in Gen. Rab. 34:13: “R. Yosi b. Avin in the name of R. Johanan: Adam, who was not permitted to eat *besar ta-avah* (meat for pleasure), was not warned against [the consumption of] *ever min ha-hai*, but the Noahides, who were permitted to eat *besar ta-avah*, were warned against it.”¹⁶ The phrase *besar ta-avah*, which is used to indicate meat that is not the flesh of a sacrificial animal, and the phrase *heiter besar ta-avah* (permission [to consume] *besar ta-avah*, which appears only in *Bereshit Rabbah*) recall the permission to consume *besar ta-avah* granted to the Israelites. Thus, in Sifre Deut 75: “R. Ishmael says: this teaches us that *besar*

¹⁵ This permission had two additional qualifications, which also open with the Hebrew word *ach*, i.e., “but”: “But you must not eat flesh with its life-blood in it,” and “but for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning”—the prohibition on the killing of humans, by other humans or by animals. This, too, is a direct result of the change that had taken place between the two statements: Once consumption of animals is permitted, there is a need to limit the permission to kill, and to warn the animals, which are now hostile toward humans, as well as humans, who have now been permitted to kill animals, of the boundaries of this permission. Nachmanides notes, in his commentary on these verses, that one can understand from this prohibition that animals, too, were permitted to eat meat. A similar idea can be found in the apocryphal work *The Life of Adam and Eve*, in its Greek version, 10–13: “Eve saw her son, and the wild beast attacking him [...] ‘O you evil beast! Do you not fear to attack the image of God? How was your mouth opened? How did your teeth grow strong? How did you not remember the subjection, for you were once subjected to the image of god?’ Then the beast cried out saying, ‘O Eve, neither your greed nor your weeping are due to us, but to you, since the rule of the beast has happened because of you. How is it that your mouth was opened to eat from the tree concerning which God commanded you not to eat from? Through this also our nature was changed’” (M. D. Johnson, “Life of Adam and Eve: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *OTP* 2:273–75). Here, the change occurs as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, rather than following the flood. This story, which describes humankind as originally vegetarian, is similar to a story found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, about Enkidu, the natural man. Enkidu also starts off as a vegetarian and becomes a meat-eater only after he copulates with a woman. Despite the striking similarity of the two tales, however, the Epic of Gilgamesh describes this process as a necessary stage of development for humanity and seems to be offering a positive description of the transition from nature to civilization. It does not contain moral criticism of the type that we find in the Genesis story. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (3 vols.; Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 3:1501–3.

¹⁶ According to the Theodore-Albeck edition, similar to most of the textual witnesses. In MS Vatican 30, we find “Adam, who was not permitted to eat *besar ta-avah*, was not permitted to eat *ever min ha-hai*, but the Noahides, who were permitted to eat *besar ta-avah*, were permitted to eat *ever min ha-hai*” (this variant is not mentioned by Theodore-Albeck).

ta-avah was forbidden to the Israelites in the wilderness, and once they came to the Land of Israel Scripture permitted it” (and note the similarity to the Babylonian Talmud: “with the advent of the sons of Noah, it was permitted”). It is possible that the Amoraim took the phrase describing the process through which the consumption of meat was permitted, with which they were familiar from the Jewish halakic context, and used it with relation to the Noahides.¹⁷

The Talmud raises difficulties with Rav’s statement based on two sources. The first of these is the biblical verse relating the blessing given to Adam by God, and the second is a Tannaitic homily. The first question is derived from Gen 1:28: “God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth.’” The verse Rav cited as a proof-text appears immediately following this quote. According to the Talmud, there is an inherent contradiction between these verses, per Rav’s interpretation. The Talmud raises three difficulties from three phrases in the verse: “the fish of the sea,” “the birds of the sky,” and “all the living things that creep on the earth” (Gen 1:28):

[1] They challenged: “And rule over the fish of the sea?”; surely that means that they should serve as food? No. It refers to toil.

But can fish be made to work? Yes, like Rahabah. For Rahabah asked: What if one plowed with a goat and a *shibuta*?

[2] Come and hear: “and over the fowl of the heaven?”; surely this is in respect of food? No. It refers to toil.

¹⁷ Rav’s statement here is in contrast to R. Johanan’s statement at the beginning of the discussion of the Noahide commandments (b. Sanh. 56b), which claims that Adam was forbidden to eat flesh taken from a living animal, from which it appears that he was permitted to eat regular meat. The tension between the two statements was explained by commentators in different ways; see Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelema: Bereshit I* (Jerusalem, Beit Torah Shelema, 1978) 170–71 (Hebrew). I believe the tension between the statements is connected to the transition of the exegetical traditions from Palestine to Babylonia. The focus of the statement in Gen. Rab., attributed to R. Johanan himself, is the prohibition on eating *ever min ha-hai*. R. Johanan attempts to explain why Adam was not prohibited from it (because he was not permitted to partake of *besar ta-avah*), whereas Noah was (since he was permitted to eat *besar ta-avah*). He explicitly states that the prohibition on *ever min ha-hai* was instituted only after the Noahides were permitted to eat meat. This lines up with the assumption that appears in Gen. Rab. 16, that Adam was only obligated in six commandments, whereas Noah received the additional prohibition on *ever min ha-hai*. The Babylonian tradition quoted above, on the other hand, included the prohibition on *ever min ha-hai* in the list of prohibitions Adam received. Following this change, R. Johanan’s statement was altered as well. Now, the prohibition on the consumption of *ever min ha-hai* is no longer the focus, but rather the prohibition for Adam to eat meat, as opposed to the permission granted to the Noahides. *Ever min ha-hai* is only mentioned as an aside, at the end of the Talmud’s treatment of the question, and we are not told that Adam was warned not to partake from it, but rather that the prohibition was still in effect with regard to the Noahides. This is why the Babylonian Talmud cites its proof from the verses that relate to the permission to eat meat, whereas Gen. Rab. does not quote them, since this assumption serves as the background for what the midrash says. This is also the explanation for the difference in phrasing between the two sources: in Gen. Rab. we find “*besar ta-avah*” (in line with the halakic structure of the permission to eat meat), as opposed to “Adam . . . to eat flesh (*le-achila*),” in line with the phrasing of the biblical verse, “to you it shall be *for food (le-ochla)*.”

But can fowl be made to work? Yes, even as Rabbah b. R. Huna asked, for Rabbah b. R. Huna asked: According to the ruling of R. Jose b. R. Judah, what if one threshed [corn] with geese or cocks?

[3] Come and hear: “and over every living creature that creep upon the earth”—That refers to the serpent.

For it has been taught: R. Simeon¹⁸ b. Manassia said: Woe for the loss of a great servant who was lost from the world. For had not the serpent been cursed, every Israelite would have had two valuable serpents, sending one to the north and one to the south to bring him costly gems,¹⁹ precious stones and pearls. Moreover, one would have fastened a thong under its tail, with which it would bring forth earth for his garden and waste land.

The Talmud responds to the first difficulty, from the phrase “the fish of the sea,” with the phrase “no, it refers to toil.” Animals were therefore intended to toil on behalf of man, but man is forbidden to harm them. A similar structure is found also with regard to the second difficulty raised by the *sugya*, from the phrase “the fowl of heaven,” with an analogous question and an identical answer. In both cases the Talmud has difficulty imagining the practical application of the responses given to the difficulties—“but can fish/fowl be made to work?”—and provides proof for the likelihood of this work actually taking place from hypothetical halakic questions. The first of these is Rahabah’s question (in b. B. Qam. 55b) regarding the prohibition on plowing with the forbidden mixture of a goat and a *shibbuta* (a species of cyprinid fish), and the second is Rabbah b. R. Huna’s question (in b. B. Mesia. 91b) regarding the prohibition on preventing geese and hens from eating during the act of threshing, according to R. Yosi b. R. Judah, who derives his question from an ox, who works with his “hands” and legs (whereas here there are no hands). Both these questions are hypothetical and were intended to examine halakic edge cases. However, in our *sugya* they are cited as reinforcements for the claim that fish and fowl may indeed be put to work. The conclusion of this discussion is, therefore, that the verse describes hierarchical relationships—humans command nature and harnesses animals for their needs, but without mutual harm.²⁰

The nature of the third stage of questioning is different, as evidenced by the different literary style used. As opposed to the preceding two stages, the proof brought from the primordial serpent is not borrowed from a current reality (reflected in halakic questions), but rather from the natural state of the world before the original sin.

R. Simeon b. Manassia describes the serpent as a creature who was intended to be humanity’s loyal servant. The homily appears to be based on the notion of

¹⁸ This is what appears in all the textual witnesses, other than the Yemenite MS, where we find “Ishmael.”

¹⁹ The Hebrew text reads: *sandelchin* (from Greek: σαπδόνηξ). In other MSS, we find different versions; see Sabato, *Yemenite Manuscript*, 191.

²⁰ The two prohibitions discussed here are connected to limits placed on the ability of humans to use animals for toil, apparently in cases that would cause distress to said animals.

an extremely close relationship between Adam and the serpent, which stems from the biblical description and was further expounded in rabbinic midrash: the Torah states that the serpent was “the shrewdest of all the wild beasts” (Gen 3:1), and it appears, from his conversation with Eve, that he was capable of human speech. From the punishment he received—“on your belly you shall crawl”—the rabbis understood that, prior to the sin, the serpent walked erect on two feet, like Adam and Eve. For this reason, apparently, the serpent would have been the most appropriate candidate to serve as humanity’s servant, had he not been cursed.²¹ The two uses mentioned by R. Simeon, the bringing of precious stones from afar and the gathering of earth with his tail, are parallel to the two punishments the serpent received, as Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha) explained: “he had legs like a human . . . and when he was cursed it says ‘on your belly you shall crawl.’ And in contrast to the fastening of a thong underneath his tail in order to bring earth for man’s garden, when he was cursed he was told ‘and dirt you shall eat.’” The sin of the serpent and of Adam, however, turned this special closeness into a relationship of enmity between humans and this choice representative of the animal world.²²

Whereas the first three difficulties are based on God’s words to Adam in Gen 1, the fourth one is based on an exegetical narrative, which describes the history of Adam in the Garden of Eden:

[4] They challenged: R. Judah b. Tema said: Adam reclined in the Garden of Eden, whilst the ministering angels roasted flesh and strained²³ wine for him. Thereupon the serpent looked in, saw his glory, and became envious of him!

At first glance, this story was only cited here due to a particular detail that appears in it—the meat that the angels roasted for Adam. However, the haggadic nature of the story serves an additional purpose. In effect, the story continues the haggadic trajectory laid in the previous stage of the *sugya*. The question at the base of this story is linked to the serpent’s motivation in causing Adam and Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden. The accepted incentive in rabbinic literature is its lust for Eve.²⁴ Our story, however, suggests a different answer. Adam is described here as a master reclining before a dinner table, waited upon by the ministering angels, who

²¹ See, for instance, Gen. Rab. 20:5.

²² R. Simeon b. Manassia’s statement has a parallel in Gen. Rab. 19:1: “R. Simeon b. Elazar says: He was like a camel. The serpent detracted [man] of a great good, for were it not for [the curse], man would have been able to send goods [with the serpent], and he would leave and return to him.” Here, the serpent is described as an independent beast of burden, a sort of intelligent camel. In the Babylonian Talmud, in contrast, the emphasis is on his functioning as an almost-human “servant,” capable of bringing precious stones from afar. In Abot de-Rabbi Nathan, version 1, 1:3a, we find a close parallel to the Babylonian Talmud, with minor changes. In version 2, the statement is divided into two distinct statements.

²³ MS Munich 95 instead of *mesanenim*, “strained,” has *metzanin*, “cooled.”

²⁴ See, for instance, t. Sotah 4:18: “[the serpent] sought to kill Adam and wed Eve”; and Gen. Rab. 18:6: “because he saw them engaged in the ways of the world and lusted after her.”

prepare delicacies for him in the form of meat and wine. The serpent²⁵ sees this and becomes envious. A similar idea appears in both versions of the apocryphal Life of Adam and Eve. In the Greek version, we are told that the devil incited the serpent against Adam with the following words:²⁶ “I hear that you are wiser than all the beasts . . . and they associate with you. But yet you are prostrate to the very least. Why do you eat the weeds²⁷ of Adam and not the fruit of paradise? Rise and come and let us make him to be cast out of paradise through his wife, just as we were cast out through him.” The similarities between the stories are striking: The serpent is jealous of Adam because of his own greatness, on the one hand, and Adam’s mastery, on the other. In both stories the envy is also linked to the superiority of Adam’s food over that of the serpent and the other animals. In the Latin version, in chapters 12–16 we find similar motifs in the devil’s words to Adam, but here the envy is attributed to the devil himself, who is commanded to worship Adam with all the other angels.²⁸

It appears that the sin of the serpent (and the devil) was shaped, in the different versions of the homiletic story, as a parallel to Adam’s sin: The excessive closeness of Adam to God, “in the image of God He created him” (Gen 1:27), led to envy and to an attempt to usurp the master’s place: “and you will be like God, who knows good and bad” (Gen 3:5), which is expressed in the desire to eat a unique food (the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge/the delicacies served to man by the angels). Adam’s sin, too, had similar consequences: before the sin he served as God’s tenant farmer in God’s garden, but once he sinned and attempted to usurp God’s place, he was punished and expelled from the Garden of Eden.

A reading of the story in the context of the relationship between humans and animals reveals that this is the first juncture at which a relationship of enmity and fear of death between animals and humans appears. The damaged relationship between Adam and the serpent spread, after the flood, to the entirety of the animal kingdom and humanity, and included mutual murderous attempts. From this perspective, it appears we are dealing with a transitional stage between the two states described at the opening of the *sugya*: the state of the world in the days of Adam, who was not permitted to eat meat, and during the time of the Noahides, who were.

²⁵ As mentioned above, the serpent was intended to serve as humanity’s servant. The rabbinic word used here for servant—*shamash*—usually indicates the person responsible for serving food at a meal, and this is the role the angels fulfill in this story.

²⁶ Johnson, “Life of Adam and Eve,” in *OTP* 2:277.

²⁷ The Greek word ζιζάνιον used here signifies a type of inferior grain, which the rabbis refer to as *zonin*. It is possible that this is based on the distinction between Adam and the animals in Gen 1:29–30. Adam is given both plants and fruit to eat, whereas the animals are only given “all the green plants.”

²⁸ A similar idea appears in Pirqé Rabbi Eliezer 12, where it is said that Samael incited the snake against Adam because the angels feared him. For other ancient traditions about the serpent’s envy, see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 121–22.

Let us now return to our *sugya*. As mentioned above, the story is cited in order to provide proof that Adam ate meat in the Garden of Eden. This proof is rejected with the following claim: “The reference there is to flesh that descended from heaven.” In other words, the source of the meat referenced in the story is not a natural one, which would be predicated on the killing of animals, but rather a supernatural one, provided by the angels. And indeed, a plain reading of the *baraita* indicates that the meat and wine are mentioned because they symbolize the ideal state of affairs in the Garden of Eden, where all possible delicacies are available and ready for consumption by Adam, without any toil on his part. Therefore, the idea that we are speaking of unnatural meat—meat “that is descended from heaven”—is in line with the story.

And here we find a question regarding the physical likelihood of the situation envisioned in the solution (similarly to the previous stages), and as a response we find the story with which we opened: “But does flesh descend from heaven? Yes, as in the story of R. Simeon b. Halafta, who was walking on the road. . . .” Seemingly, this story, too, is cited only in order to provide an example of flesh that originates from the heavens. However, the story digresses beyond this point and ties in to the previous two stages and the various ideas that were developed therein. The lions R. Simeon encountered were apparently prepared to eat him, due to their hunger (they “roared at him”). What we have here, therefore, is an inverted situation to the one discussed thus far in the *sugya*: now it is the animals who are desirous of consuming the flesh of the man they are confronted with!²⁹ The disruption of the harmonious relationship between humans and animals is mutual: humans kill animals in order to eat them, whereas animals consume humans for their own sustenance. When faced with this threat, R. Simeon quoted a verse from Psalms that describes the situation he encountered: “The young lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God.” The roar of the lions is interpreted by R. Simeon not as a cruel sound, which anticipates the consumption of the human victim with whom the lions are faced, but rather as a request from God to provide them with food. It is noteworthy that the entire psalm from which this verse is taken, Psalm 104, describes the harmony that pervades all of nature, and the attribute of mercy with which God directs his world and his creations. R. Simeon “interprets” the reality he faces through the lens of the biblical verse (and its harmonious worldview) and thus redirects the roaring of the lions from himself to God. Miraculously, two pieces of meat descend from the sky. The lions’ food arrives directly from God—from the heavens. This interpretation may help clarify the following details in the story: “they ate one and left the other.” The descent of the two lumps of flesh was apparently intended to serve the lions. To our surprise, however, the hungry lions leave one of the lumps of meat intended for them for R. Simeon. This would seem to express the idea

²⁹ Who, in another context, is described as *ba’al basar* (possessed of flesh), a euphemism describing one who is overweight; see b. B. Mesia 86a.

of a return to Eden.³⁰ As the result of R. Simeon's interpretation, the reality that preceded the original sin makes a brief appearance, and for a short moment man and animal return to the harmonious reality of the Garden of Eden, where they both receive meat from the heavens. The more familiar natural order features the consumption of meat as a product of the existential battle between humans and beasts, a type of zero-sum game, in which the existence of one party depends on the extinction of the other. Meat descending from heaven, on the other hand, leads to a state of harmony between humans and animals, which is expressed in the lions' generosity toward R. Simeon, which reflects the reality of the pre-sin Garden of Eden, in which both humans and animals ate plants together.

In the next stage of the story, R. Simeon takes the flesh to the *beit midrash* to enquire of its *kashrut* status, and the sages rule, "nothing unclean descends from heaven." The meaning of this ruling becomes evident in the conversation between R. Zera and Rava which follows the story: "R. Zera asked Rava³¹: What if something in the shape of an ass were to descend? He replied: Thou howling jackal!³² Did they not answer you (*lach*):³³ no impure thing descends from heaven?" A discussion of the halakic status of the meat, which appears lacking in any practical significance, ties in to the central theme of the story and of the *sugya* in general. R. Zera believes that the flesh that descended from the heavens was the flesh of pure animals and that this is the meaning of "no impure thing descends from heaven"; he therefore asks what would happen were an ass—an impure animal—similarly to descend. Rava reacts critically to this question. Rava's response can be interpreted in two ways. According to Rashi, Rava objects to the very raising of the question. Since

³⁰ This idea of the return to pre-sin harmonious reality first appears in Isa 11:6–9; the differences between the utopian description and the rabbinical narrative will be discussed below.

³¹ Thus in the Yemenite MS and in MS Karlsruhe. In MS Florence, we find "Rabba." According to the MSS testimony, this discussion takes place in Babylonia, and R. Zera is in discussion with his fellow student, Rava/Rabba. Only in MS Munich 95 and the printed version do we find "R. Abahu," and therefore it takes place in the land of Israel (with R. Zera's rabbi, R. Abahu). This conclusion is important for our understanding of the story's polemical background; see above, n. 4. Although R. Shimon himself is a Palestinian sage, the story has no Palestinian parallel, and it seems that it was shaped (and maybe created) in Babylonia.

³² Thus in the Aramaic text. The classic commentators interpreted that it refers to an animal, a jackal or a wild donkey. On the other hand, Michael Sokoloff, under the entries נאלא, ירורא, interprets this, according to various parallels, as a name for a demon and a ghost (idem, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* [Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002]). All have interpreted it as a derogatory name for R. Zera, but it is a strange and unusual use, and the language is too sharp. Dan Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Brill: Leiden, 2013) 7, also dealt with the interpretation of the phrase ירורא and offered a combined interpretation. According to him, the Babylonians represented the demons in figures of animals and birds. It is therefore possible to read the words of Rava, in their context, as referring to R. Zera's question about a wondrous donkey figure who descends from heaven, which is interpreted as ירורא נאלא—a demonic jackal or wild donkey—that is to say: "you mean נאלא ירורא? no impure thing descends from heaven." (I thank Avigail Manekin for her help in clarifying the subject).

³³ Thus in most textual witnesses. In MS Karlsruhe, we find *lo* ("him" in Hebrew).

“no impure thing descends from heaven,” it is impossible and the question is meaningless. Rabbi Meir Abulafia (Ramah) suggests a different understanding: Anything that descends is pure, no matter what its likeness on earth. Therefore, even were a likeness of an ass to descend, it would be pure. Impurity is a category that relates to the earthly realm and does not exist in the heavens.

This story serves not only as a proof of the existence of meat that descends from heaven but also as a window into the ideal state of affairs in the Garden of Eden. The Talmud concludes that this meat is of the type of meat given to Adam in the Garden of Eden; meat that is not based on mutual exploitation—humans do not kill animals and they do not kill humans. The pietist merits consumption of meat descended from heaven, like Adam in the Garden of Eden. The story therefore hints at the possibility of a return of the utopian reality to the post-sin world.

The story includes a list of binary oppositions: Between the (hunting) animal and the (hunted) man, between pure and impure, between heaven and earth, and between the pietist and the members of the *beit midrash*. However, these oppositions dissipate over the course of the story: the heavenly meat descends to earth—and thus the contrast between pure and impure loses its meaning. Following this, the beasts of prey become friendly to a man. Even the meeting between the pietist and the scholars of the *beit midrash* undermines the boundaries of practical halakah, which, it turns out, does not apply to meat that descends from the sky. And, as mentioned above, the context in which the story appears introduces another contrast—between a utopian and harmonic past and a conflicted present—which also dissipates during this unique interaction between the pietist and the lions.

We find, therefore, that the second part of the *sugya*, which turns to the haggadic story regarding Adam and the serpent in the Garden of Eden and to R. Simeon and the lion he encountered on the road, serves as a narrative basis for a description of the historical halakic process that appears in the first part. Thus, it clarifies the source of the halakic change that took place in the fundamental issue of the relationship between humans and animals.³⁴

³⁴ The *sugya* is constructed like a halakic one: It opens with a statement of a halakic nature, regarding prohibitions related to eating, followed by a series of *meitvei* (they challenged) *ta-shema* (come and hear) questions, which are characteristic of halakic discussions. In its first part, evidence is brought in from distinctly halakic contexts—the prohibitions on the mixing of animals and on preventing a working animal from eating—and only at its end are the haggadic components brought in. However, this survey is somewhat misleading, since the “halakic” discussion does not address questions of practical halakah, but rather, issues relating to the prehistoric background to the halakah—the lives of Adam and the Noahides. The proofs brought in the first part of the discussion, too, can best be classified as belonging to a middle ground: they relate to halakah but the cases described in them are hypothetical rather than practical. And the closing segment is, clearly, completely haggadic.

■ The Story in a Polemical Context: R. Simeon and Peter's Vision (Acts 10)

Yet, there is another level of meaning to the story of R. Simeon and the lions, which is revealed when it is compared to a similar story from Acts 10. This is the longest story in this book, and its importance is also indicated by a variety of literary characteristics.³⁵ It is also a widely acknowledged and quoted story in the Christian tradition, and a formative story in Christian-Jewish relations that deals with the moment of transition from halakic Judaism to Christianity.³⁶ It was used by Christians as a response for Jewish claims, and therefore called for a polemical Jewish response.³⁷ The chapter describes the Christianization of a Roman centurion of important standing by Peter (i.e., Simeon, also called “Kepa”), the foremost of the Christian apostles. The chapter opens with the story of a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius, who is described as “pious and God-fearing,” who is commanded by an angel to send emissaries to Peter in Jaffa. In parallel to the voyage of Cornelius's servants to Jaffa, the narrator then moves to Peter, and describes a miraculous vision that he receives:³⁸

9 About noon the following day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” 14 “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” 15 The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” 16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Following this, Cornelius's servants meet with Peter, who is troubled by the meaning of his vision, and he is commanded by the Spirit to go with them to Cornelius's home in Caesarea:

³⁵ As noted by Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 264.

³⁶ See Charles K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 1:495: “One thing is clear: Luke intended his reader to understand that he was witnessing a decisive step, perhaps the decisive step, in the expansion of Christianity into the non-Jewish world.”

³⁷ See Origen, *Cels.* 2.1–2, who cites it (mid-3rd cent.) as an answer to the “Jewish” claim against Christians for their disobedience to tradition. For an analysis, see Paula Fredriksen, “Origen and Augustine on Paul and the Law,” in *Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. David Lincicum, Ruth Sheridan, and Charles M. Stang; WUNT 420; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) 67–88. Origen maintained intellectual relationships with Jewish scholars; see Nicholas R. M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). One can assume, therefore, that the rabbis could have known the story even without reading Christian scriptures.

³⁸ This translation is taken from the New International Version of the New Testament.

25 As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. 26 But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.” 27 While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 28 He said to them: “*You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone “impure” or “unclean.”*”³⁹ 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. . . . 34 . . . I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. . . . 44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. . . .

At the heart of this story, we find Peter’s vision: the heavens open and a large sail/sheet descends from the four corners of the earth. The opening of the heavens is mentioned by various prophets to indicate divine revelation (see, for example, Ezek 1:1). A heavenly voice calls Peter to eat from the impure meat, but Peter refuses because he has never eaten “anything impure or unclean.”⁴⁰ The response of the heavenly voice is: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” The meaning of the vision is later interpreted by Peter as a divine directive to break down the boundaries separating Jews and non-Jews and as a prohibition on calling any human being impure. The gap between the vision, which ostensibly relates to the dietary laws and to the rejection, or cancellation, of the categories of pure/impure, and the way in which it is interpreted shortly thereafter—as relating to the tearing down of boundaries between the Jews and the non-Jews, whom the former had previously treated as “impure”—is striking. This gap led many scholars and exegetes of the story to claim that the vision was borrowed from an earlier source, as it dealt with the cancellation of eating prohibitions, even though the story, in its current form, focuses on the relationship of Jews and non-Jews.⁴¹ In any case, even in its present form, the vision has practical implications as well, as the breaking

³⁹ Italics added.

⁴⁰ Similar to Ezekiel’s words to God (4:14).

⁴¹ For an updated survey, see John R. L. Moxon, *Peter’s Halakhic Nightmare* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 14–16. This distinction is not universally accepted; see, for instance, the interesting suggestion made in Clinton Wahlen, “Peter’s Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity,” *NTS* 51 (2005) 505–18, and a similar suggestion made by Yair Furstenberg, *Purity and Community in Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2016) 219–21 (Hebrew). In the opinion of these two scholars, the vision was not intended to fully cancel eating prohibitions at all. See also Isaac Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts* (WUNT 2/355; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 294–364. Oliver’s thesis is that Luke-Acts does not seek to eliminate Jewish laws, and dietary laws in particular. Rather, Luke only argues for the moral purification of non-Jewish followers of Jesus: “He realigns the boundaries between sacred and profane to allow Jewish-gentile communion, even while presupposing the maintenance of a kosher diet on the part of the Jewish wing of the Jesus movement.” Even though in the original text of Acts it may not have meant to abrogate the dietary laws, that was what it came to mean in the entire non-Jewish church tradition. The rabbis were probably familiar with this story in its anti-nomistic version, which is reflected in Origen’s polemical, anti-Jewish response (see above, n. 37).

down of halakic boundaries relating to eating prohibitions would enable the cultural and social mixing of Jews and non-Jews. This is clearly stated in the next chapter of Acts (11:2–3): “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!’” Peter’s vision, therefore, is a harbinger of the radical change that the non-Jewish church is going to undergo, both in its approach to *mitzvot* and to halakic categories and in its relation to non-Jews. Cornelius, as noted above, is the symbol, within the book of Acts, of the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity. As several scholars have noted, this chapter is closely linked to Acts 15, in which the disagreement regarding the ties of the non-Jews to the church is resolved and in which the apostolic decree obligating the non-Jews only to keep basic commandments (parallel to the Noahide commandments) is enacted. These few commandments include limited eating prohibitions: the prohibition of meat from strangled animals and the prohibition on the consumption of blood.⁴²

The correlation between the Christian and rabbinic stories is clear: At its heart is, of course, the vision of the meat descending from heaven, but it also includes additional details: Both stories tell of a holy man who prays to God (and in both cases the man’s name is Simeon!) during a time of hunger (the man’s or the lions’), and in both stories the man merits a heavenly vision in the shape of meat that descends from the sky. To start with, the human recipient of the vision questions the permissibility of consuming the heaven-sent meat, but he is the recipient of an unequivocal statement rendering the meat pure and permitted for consumption. These parallels serve as a solid basis for a fundamental comparison between the two stories.

In the Christian story found in Acts, the heavenly vision wins out over the halakic principles accepted on land and cancels them out completely. The heavenly Spirit instructs Peter that there is no longer any need for boundaries and distinctions between pure and impure, on both the halakic and the social fronts, apparently due to the anticipated messianic era that is imminently approaching. In the rabbinic story, on the other hand, the heavenly miracle is subjected to halakic discussion, and the pietist who receives the vision requires the determination of the scholars of the *beit midrash* regarding the status of the heavenly meat. Only they can determine such a question, in accordance with the rabbinic worldview, which places halakic determination in the hands of Torah scholars.⁴³

The rabbis provide ad hoc permission to eat the heavenly meat, and this meat, as mentioned above, symbolizes the utopian meat consumed by Adam in the Garden of Eden prior to the disruption of harmonious relations between humans

⁴² See Moxon, *Peter’s Halakhic Nightmare*, 6–12.

⁴³ The contrast between the decision based on the voice from heaven by Peter and the decision accepted in the *beit midrash* by the *hasid* is reminiscent of the famous story of Acknai’s stove (b. B. Mesia 59b). There, the decision of a voice from heaven is rejected by the decision of most sages.

and animals. Despite this license, however, the meat does not change the existing mundane reality, and the categories of pure and impure remain stable.

The main difference between the two stories, therefore, is the fundamental message each carries: Both stories deal with an erasure of the distinction between pure and impure. However, in the Christian story there is no place for barriers in this world. There is no distinction between that which comes from heaven and that which we find on earth—it all comes from heaven and is all pure.⁴⁴ This story is, therefore, one of the most initial and fundamental expressions of Christian lawlessness. The messianic age has already arrived with the advent of Jesus, and the true spiritual meaning (rather than literal-fleshly) of divine law has been revealed.⁴⁵

The Talmudic story, on the other hand, exists in the tension between the utopian and harmonious reality of the Garden of Eden and the complex reality that replaced it, of enmity between humanity and the animal kingdom. The story supplies only a local license to consume the meat, which, as we have established, represents the utopian reality of old and gives rise to hope for the future but does not reflect a fundamental change in the real world.⁴⁶

■ The Polemic in Its Wider Context: The Sugyot of the Noahide Commandments and the Jewish-Christian Polemic

The meaning of the hidden polemic is tied to the wider context of the Talmudic *sugya*, which appears toward the end of a collection of *sugyot* regarding the seven Noahide commandments.⁴⁷ Among other things, the Noahide commandments were shaped as a response to the Christian claims about the superiority of the Noahide covenant, made with the non-Jews and requiring minimal commitments on their part, over the covenant at Sinai, in which the Jews were entrusted with numerous commandments.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Pervo, *Acts*, 269, noted the link between the description of the vision and Gen 1:24–25. He claimed that the description of the vision served as Christian apologetics, inspired by the Jewish Hellenistic thought found in the *Letter of Aristeas*, which argued against Jewish law through an appeal to the goodness of the God reflected in Creation—“and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). A similar approach, based on the goodness of creation, appears in Paul’s words in the 1 Cor 10:25–26: “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.’”

⁴⁵ Early Christian thinkers held diverse approaches toward law and lawlessness. Some of them claimed that the Jewish halakic interpretation is wrong, while others maintained that it was appropriate for the Jews alone, or for past periods. A distinction should be made between the early perceptions of Paul and the apostles, who were quite ambivalent regarding the Jewish law, and the later attitudes that developed in the 2nd- and 3rd-cent. church and that in general had a more negative attitude toward Jewish law. See Fredriksen, “Paul and the Law” (n. 37 above).

⁴⁶ In light of this parallel, it is possible that R. Zera’s question, “What if something in the shape of an ass were to descend?” (and Rabah’s answer), is influenced by the Christian claims.

⁴⁷ In the same way that the meaning of the license to eat the heavenly meat in Peter’s vision is linked to the wider context of that story.

⁴⁸ See David Sabato, “The Noahide Commandments in Tosefta Avodah Zarah,” *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 16 (2019) 1–35 (Hebrew). According to my analysis, the Noahide commandments

The placement of the story in the context of the discussion of the seven Noahide commandments deepens the link to the story in Acts, and their orientation on this topic is reversed as well. The Christian story reflects a stance of lawlessness, which seeks to return to the pre-halakic state, perceived as a utopian one (or to the state of nature). The rabbinic story, on the other hand, reflects a Jewish halakic approach, which does not recognize the possibility of the arrival of a heavenly rule in the mundane world. In place of this, it identifies prohibitions and *mitzvot*—including the prohibition on consuming meat—as the utopian characteristics of Adam’s world.

The possible polemical context of the *sugya* is also apparent from the Christian exegesis on the license given to the Noahides to consume meat, discussed at the opening of the *sugya*. Justin Martyr cites proof for the inferior status of the *mitzvot* from the permission granted to the Noahides to consume meat:

God had granted to Noah, a righteous man, to eat every living thing, save flesh with blood, namely a carcass, was related to you by Moses in the book of Genesis. Now when Trypho was intending to say: *as green herbs*, I forestalled him: Why will ye not understand how the phrase *as green herbs* has been spoken by God, namely, that as God had made the herbs for food for man, so also He had given the living creatures as flesh for him. But since we do not eat some plants, so ye say that a distinction was appointed to Noah in animals from that time onwards. Your explanation is not credible . . . even though we do make a distinction between the green herbs, not eating all, it is not because they are *profane or unclean*, that we do not eat, but rather because they are bitter or poisonous or thorny. But all the sweet and most nutritious and finest, of both sea and land, we desire, and partake of them.⁴⁹

Per Justin, the permission to eat meat applies to all types of meat, with the sole exception of the meat of a carcass—this type of meat was forbidden, to non-Jews as well, in the decree of the apostles, in Acts 15.⁵⁰ Justin’s phraseology reveals that his interpretation is rooted in Acts 10.⁵¹

were developed mainly at the end of the Tannaitic and during the Amoraic periods. For a different approach, see Christine Hayes, “Were the Noahide Commandments Formulated at Yavne? Tosefta Avoda Zara 8:4–9 in Cultural and Historical Context,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum 70–132 CE* (ed. J. Schwartz and P. J. Tomson; Leiden: Brill, 2018) 225–64.

⁴⁹ Justin, *Dial.* 20.1–3 (trans. A. Lukyn Williams; London: SPCK, 1930, 40–41, with slight alterations; see n. 50 below).

⁵⁰ One can trace three interpretations of the decree during late antiquity: appreciative, dismissive, and expensive. See Holger Zellentin, “Judaic-Christian Legal Culture and the Qur’an: The case of Ritual Slaughter and the Consumption of Animal Blood,” in *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* (ed. Francisco del Rio Sanchez; Turnhout: Brepols, 2018) 132–48.

⁵¹ The phrase “profane or unclean,” in the Greek source: κοινὰ ἢ ἀκάθαρτα (Williams translated this as “common and unclean”). This phrase also appears (three times!) in the story from Acts: in Peter’s words, in which he refuses to eat unclean and impure food; and in the words of the heavenly voice that commands him to do so. On this similarity, see Matthijs den Dulk, *Refiguring Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho* (London: Routledge, 2018) 145–54. There, den Dulk notes that this phrase does not appear anywhere in early Christian literature other than these two works, which both address the polemic regarding the Jews’ eating restrictions. He believes this testifies to Justin

In response to Justin's claim, Trypho was intending to say, using a precise reading of the words "as the green plants," that Noah, too, was commanded to distinguish between pure and impure. From Justin's reaction, it is clear that this Jewish exegetical tradition was well known to him. He knew in advance how Trypho would respond—and he rejected his claim. A similar tradition is known to us already from Philo's writings,⁵² whereas in Tannaitic literature the license given to Noah is similarly interpreted as a license limited to pure animals—in light of the restrictions it precedes in the Torah.⁵³ R. Judah in the name of Rav in our *sugya* is therefore departing from this exegetical tradition and suggesting a different solution:⁵⁴ He admits that the Noahides were permitted to eat the flesh of any animal (except the flesh of a living animal), but as part of the category of the Noahide commandments. In opposition to the perception of Noah as a representative of the desired human situation, at the end of the Tannaitic period, a new approach distinguished fundamentally between the two categories of the Noahide covenant and the covenant of Sinai. According to this approach, the permission granted to the Noahides is not relevant at all to the Israelites but instead represents a separate (and inferior) track available to non-Jews.

Moreover, our *sugya* introduces the new idea that Adam was forbidden to eat meat, but this prohibition was lifted from the Noahides, and they were permitted to consume animal flesh. The understanding of this permission in its "historical" context teaches us that it should not be viewed as a comprehensive, natural, and original one.⁵⁵ Throughout the course of the *sugya*, it is even portrayed in a negative

Martyr's use of Acts in cases in which the relationship between Jews and Christians is discussed.

⁵² See Philo, *QG* (trans. Marcus, LCL): "For not every plant is edible, and not all animals are safe and without fear to eat, for (God) knew of the poisonous animals and those that cause death, that exist among the other animals." Philo is also aware of the gap between the Noahide commandment and the commandment the Jews were given and seeks to cancel it out. He does not, therefore, recognize the different categories of Israelites/Noahides.

⁵³ See Sifra, Sherazim 2:1, 48a. The Sifra interprets the permission given to the Noahides in light of the eating limitations put in place by the Bible, synchronically, and does not distinguish between the Israelites and the Noahides.

⁵⁴ As mentioned above, in the parallel that appears in Gen. Rab., this interpretation is attributed to R. Johanan, in whose *beit midrash* the Noahide commandments were attributed to Adam. This interpretation, too, was intended as a reaction to the parallel Christian interpretation (known to us through Tertullian); see Sabato, "Noahide Commandments," 30.

⁵⁵ A similar approach to the problem appears in Lev. Rab. 13:2: "R. Tanhum b. Hanilai said: [This is similar to] a doctor who went to visit two patients, one who had the potential to live and one who did not have the potential to live. Of the patient who had the potential to live he said he should not eat this and this thing, and of the one who did not have the potential to live he told them: give him whatever he desires. Thus, the nations who will not merit the world to come [are told] 'as with the green grasses I give you all these' (Gen 9:3), but Israel, who will merit the world to come, [are told] 'these are the creatures that you may eat from among all the land animals' (Lev 11:2)." As opposed to what appears in Philo and in the Sifra, R. Tanhum b. Hanilai, a Palestinian Amora of the second generation, distinguishes between the commandment given to the Noahides, which he interprets negatively, as a dangerous permission given to the nations, and the commandment given to the Israelites, which he believes is tied to the potential to live. The prohibitions are therefore viewed

light, as a limiting of the prohibition that derives from a moral downfall and a deterioration of the relationship between humanity and animals, from which we should not conclude anything regarding the ideal state of affairs on earth.⁵⁶

as a virtue rather than as an unnecessary burden. It is possible that the change in the approach to this issue reflects the change that took place in the rabbinic understanding of the category of the Noahides. This shift took place at the end of the Tannaitic period and gained traction in the second generation of Palestinian Amoraim, when the differences between the two categories were accentuated and emphasized, as opposed to an earlier tendency to minimize and blur them.

⁵⁶ The historical interpretation of law is based on the rabbinic concept of “divine law.” As Christine Hayes convincingly showed, according to the Hellenistic concept of divine law, the law is universal, everlasting, and unchanging. Paul embraced this concept, and therefore he saw the biblical law not as a divine law but rather as a temporary set of rules. On the contrary, rabbinic (and biblical) divine law is the expression of a divine will: it is particular, it can change, and it incorporates human involvement. See Christine Hayes, *What’s Divine about Divine Law? Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 2015). The case of meat consumption, which is the first explicit law in the Bible, exemplifies those opposing concepts. In the Christian-Hellenistic approach, the natural law permitted every kind of meat for everyone, from the very beginning. According to the rabbis, the law evolved and changed, from forbidding all kinds of meat to permitting its consumption, and it differentiated between non-Jews and Jews, who were forbidden from eating unclean animals. This change reflects the basic character of the Noahide commandments in the eyes of the rabbis. According to one of the approaches in the adjacent *sugya*, as well as the plain reading of the biblical sources, the Noahide commandments were given following the flood and as a direct result of humanity’s moral deterioration, and they are minimal limitations deriving from a damaged reality. See Sabato, “Noahide commandments.”