# "Honour with Silence the Words of Your Creator"

## *Moses' Silence in b*Menaḥot *29b in Light of its Jewish and Christian Context*

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אמרי במערבא אכול תמרי ושדי קשייתא לבר

They say in the West:

"eat the date and throw away the stone"

– Bavli *Hagiga* 15b (Ms. British Library 400)

One of the most famous narratives in the Babylonian Talmud relates how Moses, before receiving the Torah, ascends onto Mount Sinai, towards God, while God descends from heaven (see esp. Ex 19). Here, he witnesses a peculiar scribal practice: instead of fully spelling out the laws Himself, God "binds coronets to the letters" of the Torah, and thereby leaves the task of Scripture's full interpretation to Rabbi Aqiva. Moses is then permitted to visit the future and witness this famous rabbis' intellectual prowess. Moses is utterly overwhelmed by this experience and musters strength only when he hears Aqiva connect a particular law to Moses himself. Moses then asks God two questions: first, why He chose him rather than the intellectually far more accomplished Rabbi Aqiva, and second, why God eventually let Aqiva's life end in gruesome martyrdom, a scene which Moses was equally permitted to witness. God both times refuses to answer, twice reprimanding Moses with the words: "Be Silent! For so it has arisen in my mind." The Neoplatonic theme of silence as a form of dealing with the inadequacy of speech when facing the divine has deep roots in Judaism and Christianity, and was especially prevalent in late antique Syriac Christian discourse. In the following, I will introduce the story of Moses' visit to Aqiva along with current scholarship and then briefly sketch the development of Jewish and Christian views of silence in the face of God, arguing that the Talmud both critically engages and incorporates aspects of this Jewish and especially Christian tradition.

### The Rabbinic Story in Current Research

The narrative of Moses' ascent towards heaven has been discussed from innumerable angles in previous literature, yet very few of these discussions have focused on the historical context of the Babylonian Talmud (henceforth: "the

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Bavli," or simply "the Talmud") beyond the confines of Jewish or even rabbinic culture itself.[1] However, few recent articles diverge from this inward-looking path.[2] Michal Bar Asher-Siegal has pointed to the marked contrast between, on the one hand, the way in which the rabbinic story portrays Moses as coming to earth in order to learn from Rabbi Aqiva and, on the other hand, the way in which monastic literature portrays Moses as coming to the earth in order to instruct the Christian desert fathers.[3] Yakir Paz has further broadened our understanding of the story's central image by illustrating the use of "crowns" in various scribal traditions, including not only Jewish, but also Greek and Coptic (though not Syriac) Christian manuscripts.[4] I myself have argued that the story

1 The most noteworthy studies, in my view, include Azzan Yadin-Israel, *Scripture and Tradition: Rabbi Akiva and the Triumph of Midrash* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 103–118; idem, "Bavli *Menaḥot* 29b and the Diminution of the Prophets," *JAJ* 5 (2014): 88–105; Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 182–202; Nachman Levine, "Reading Crowned Letters and Semiotic Silences in Menachot 29b," *JJS* 53 (2002): 35–48; and Yonah Fraenkel, "Hermeneutic Problems in the Study of the Aggadic Narrative," *Tarbiz* 47 (1977–1978): 139–172 [Hebrew]; see also the following note. For a discussion of the text's hermeneutics in relationship to contemporary discourse, see, e.g., Laurence I. Edwards, "Rabbi Akiba's Crowns: Postmodern Discourse and the Cost of Rabbinic Reading," *Judaism* 49 (2000): 417–434. On the rabbis' penchant for self-criticism in relationship to this story see also Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. 231–236; Boyarin's contribution, though valuable, should generally be seen in light of criticism such as that offered by Adam Becker, "Review: Positing a "Cultural Relationship" between Plato and the Babylonian Talmud," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011): 255–269.

2 Yadin-Israel rightly criticizes the early contextualization of the story in the third century offered by Yair Furstenberg in idem, "The *Agon* with Moses and Homer: Rabbinic Midrash and the Second Sophistic," in Maren Niehoff, ed., *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 299–328; see Yadin-Israel, "Bavli *Menaḥot* 29b," 95–101. Yet Yadin-Israel's own contextualization of the story in Second Temple literature is equally not unproblematic, as he freely admits (ibid., 101). In my view, both the Second Sophistic and Second Temple Judaism should be considered as preparing the broader intellectual climate which the Talmud inhabits several centuries later, especially since the rabbis themselves perpetuated some aspects of Hellenistic culture in Mesopotamia as argued with some justification by Daniel Boyarin, "Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia," in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–363 (see also the previous note).

3 See Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, "Moses in the Apophthegmata Patrum and in Rabbinic Literature," in Michael Sommer et al, eds., *Mosebilder: Gedanken zur Rezeption einer literarischen Figur im Frühjudentum, frühen Christentum und der römisch-hellenistischen Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 403–414.

4 See Yakir Paz, "'Binding Crowns to the Letters' – A Divine Scribal Practice in Its Historical Context," *Tarbiz – A Quarterly for Jewish Studies* 86 (January-June 2019): 233–267 [Hebrew]. Paz develops previous suggestions by Shlomo Naeh, "The Script of Torah in Rabbinic Thought (B): Transcriptions and Thorns," *Leshonenu* 71 (2010): 89–123 [Hebrew].

can best be appreciated as told in deliberate and measured contradistinction to Christian typological models, especially those emphasizing the visual. Of special importance for the story of Moses' visit to Aqiva is the narrative of Moses' visit to Jesus, the so-called "transfiguration," which shaped both the oral as well as the material worldview of many Late Antique Christians from Rome to Ctesiphon and beyond.[5] In the following essay, I will briefly present the story in Bavli *Menaḥot* 29b and summarize the most salient aspects of my previous results, and then consider how the Jewish and Christian tradition, and especially the East and West Syrian patristic record, can help us appreciate further nuances of the Talmudic story when it comes to the role of reverent silence vis-à-vis the Holy One, Blessed be He.[6]

The Talmudic passage in Bavli *Menaḥot* 29b (here cited according to Ms. Vatican 118), relating Moses' ascent towards the heavens during the giving of the Torah on Sinai, narrates the following:[7]

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| Rav Judah said in the name of Rav, | אמ' ר' יהוד' אמ' רב:[8] |
| At the moment when Moses ascended on high, | בשעה שעלה משה למרום, |
| He found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting | מצאו להקב"ה שהיה יושב וקושר |
| and binding coronets to the letters. | כתרים לאותיות |
| He said to Him: "Lord of all the worlds, | אמ' לפניו רבונו של עולם |
| what impedes your hands?" | מי מעכב על ידיך[9]? |
| He said to him: "One man (*adam eḥad*) there is, | א"ל[10] אדם אחד יש |
| who will be in the future (*she'atid*) | שעתיד להיות |
| after several generations | בסוף כמה דורות |

5 See Holger Zellentin, "Typology and the Transfiguration of Rabbi Aqiva (Pesiqta de Rav Kahana 4:7 and Bavli *Menahot* 29b)," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 25 (2018): 239–268.

6 The final compilation of the Babylonian Talmud remains disputed, with dates ranging from the fifth to the seventh century; see e.g. Jeffrey Rubinstein, ed., *Creation and Composition: the Contribution of the Bavli Redactors* (*Stammaim*) *to the Aggada* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005). I hold that the Bavli's deep acculturation within Sasanian Persia, along with its intense cultural affinities to the Late Roman *Diocese of the East* that stretched from Palestine to Mesopotamia, make both the East and the West Syrian tradition relevant for its contextualization; see also note 28 below.

7 In addition to Manuscript Vatican 118, which preserves an important reading regarding Aqiva's "glory" (see note 23 below), I have consulted the Vilna and Venice prints, as well as manuscript Vatican 120, Munich 95 and Paris AIU 147A. The texts do not show wide variations; notable variants are given in the footnote. Where Vatican 118 abbreviates the text, I have provided the reading of the Vilna print in the footnotes. All translation of rabbinic texts are my own, often based on the Soncino and Donaldson versions.

8 The Vilna print spells out אמר רב יהודה אמר רב.

9 All other witnesses have "Your hand" in the singular, as ידך.

10 The Vilna print spells out אמר לו.

and Aqiva the Son of Joseph is his name, ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו,
who will interpret each tip and tip [of the coronets or letters] שעתיד לדרוש על כל קוץ קוצץ וקוצץ[11]
as heaps and heaps of laws." תילי תילים של הלכות
(Moses) said to Him: "Lord of all the worlds, show him [to me (*hare'hu lo*)]!" אמ' לפניו רבונו של עולם הראהו לו,[12]
He said to him: "Turn around." א' לו חזור לאחוריך.
(Moses) went and sat at the end of eighteen rows. הלך וישב בסוף שמונה עשרה שורות,[13]
And he did not comprehend what they said (*lo hayah yode'a mahen 'omrim*). לא היה יודע מהן או'[14]
His strength dwindled. תשש כחו
As they came to an issue, וכיון שהגיעו לדבר,[15]
His disciples said to him: "Whence do you know?" אמרו לו תלמידיו[16] מניין לך?
He said to them: "It is a law of (lit. "to") Moses from Sinai." אמ'[17] להן הלכה למשה מסיני,
(Moses) was set at ease. נתיישבה.[18]
[He returned] and came before the Holy One, blessed be He. ובא[19] לפני הקב"ה,
He said to Him: "Lord of the World, אמ'[20] לפניו רבונו של עולם,
You have a man (*adam*) like this and you give Torah through me?" יש לך אדם כזה ואתה נותן תורה ע"י[21]?

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11 The witnesses vary widely on the precise terminology here; see also *'Eruvin* 21b. On the "tips of letters," which may originally have indicated a "biblical periscope," see Paz, "Binding Crowns to the Letters," Naeh, "Script of the Torah", 108–111, as well as the criticism of Yadin-Israel, "Bavli Menaḥot 29b;" see also the earlier pertinent views of Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 196–197.

12 Manuscript Vatican 118, which nonsensically reads "show him to him," seems faulty here: all other witnesses indicate "show him to me," הראהו לי.

13 The number of rows varies between eight and eighteen in the witnesses, see the discussion in Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 198.

14 The Vilna print spells out ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים.

15 The Vilna print reads "as he (i.e. Aqiva) came to one issue," ביון שהגיע לדבר אחד.

16 The printed versions here have the students address Aqiva as "Rabbi," רבי.

17 The Vilna print spells out אמר.

18 All other witnesses here add "his," i.e. Moses' "mind," דעתו. The expression is used elsewhere for Moses in the Bavli: his strength first wanes (and then recovers) when he expects God to dismiss Israel, soon after Moses warns God that the nations may think His, i.e. God's, strength had waned if He did not save his people (both in *Berakhot* 32a). The link between intellectual prowess and strength of the mind is made when the waning of Joshua's strength leads him to forget three hundred of the laws that Moses has taught him, in *Temurah* 16a.

19 All other witnesses here read "he returned and came," חזר ובא.

20 The Vilna print spells out אמר.

21 The Vilna print spells out על ידי.

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|---|---|
| He said to him: "Be silent, for so it came in My thoughts." | א"ל שתוק כך עלתה בי במחשבה.[22] |
| He said to Him: "Lord of the World, you showed me (*hir'itany*) his Torah, now show me (*hare'ny*) his glory (*shevaḥo*)." | א' לפניו רבונו של עולם הראיתני תורתי הראיני שבחו,[23] |
| He said to him: "Turn around!" | אמר לו חזור לאחורך.[24] |
| (Moses) turned around. | חזר לאחוריו, |
| He saw (*ra'ah*) as they weighed (Aqiva's) flesh in the marked stalls, | ראה ששוקלין בשרו במקולין, |
| He said to Him: "Lord of the World, this is Torah and this is his reward?" | אמ' לפניו רבונו של עולם, זו תורה וזו שכרה? |
| He said to him: "Be silent, for so it came to [my] thoughts." | א"ל: שתוק, כך עלה במחשבה לפניו.[25] |

I have previously argued that the Bavli's story uses and transforms aspects of Christian typology in order to tell a rabbinic story that is both open and apprehensive towards aspects of Syriac Christian culture. A number of narrative, paradigmatic, and verbal markers strongly suggest that a typological paradigm was both on the mind of the one(s) telling this story (or its Babylonian redactor) and on the mind of the implied audience.[26] The focus in the Bavli lies on

22 All other witnesses here (in a variation of wordings) specify that the thought came up "before me, in my [i.e., God's] thoughts," כך עלה במחשבה לפני. The expression of "thoughts arising" is firmly linked to God's plans for creation, both in the Palestinian and in the Babylonian rabbinic tradition, see e.g. Vayiqra Rabba 29:1; Pesikta deRav Kahana 23:1; Midrash *Tehilim* 92:2; Bavli *Berakhot* 61a, *Pesaḥim* 54a; *Ketubot* 8a.

23 All other witnesses read "his reward," שכרו, as below, a change likely made in line with Exodus 33:18, הראני נא את־כבדך, see note 45 below. Moreover, all other witness correctly read תורתו instead of the corrupted תורתי.

24 The printed versions here omit לאחורך.

25 Manuscript Vatican 118 reads "for so it came to *His* thoughts," all other witnesses have "my thoughts," לפני, see also note 22 above.

26 For my previous study, see note 5 above. There is no proof that the classical rabbis would have been aware of any given patristic text, or of any given church father; recent studies on this contentious issue include Arkady Kovelman, "Rabbi Meir as a Messiah," *Jewish Studies* 51 (2016): 1–19; Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Eyal Ben Eliyahu, "The Rabbinic Polemic against Sanctification of Sites," *JSJ* 40 (2009): 260–280. See also the important, yet exaggerated concerns raised, e.g., by Adiel Schremer in his *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Despite our lack of definitive proof, I have previously argued for the relevance of specific aspects of patristic discourse in as far as it permeated popular Christian discourse more broadly, see, e.g., Holger Zellentin, "Rabbi Lazarus and the Rich Man: A Talmudic Parody of the Christian Hell (Yerushalmi *Hagiga* 2.2, 77d and *Sanhedrin* 6.9, 23c)," in Asaph Ben-Tov and Martin Mulsow, eds., *Knowledge of*

Aqiva's "glory," according to Ms. Vatican 118, or his "reward," according to all other witnesses: his martyrdom along with the cannibalistic communion of those who slew him and sold his remains for human consumption. At the same time, the Bavli scales back some of the even richer claims about some rabbis' role in the giving of the Torah that are found in the Palestinian rabbinic tradition. The Bavli's story, I argued, must be read in dialogue with other Talmudic statements and narratives that feature visits not of Moses but of Elijah to earth, such as the famous story of the Oven of Akhnai in *Bava Metsi'a* 59a–b.[27]

The central Christian tradition with which the story of Moses' ascent towards heaven in *Menaḥot* 29b enters into dialogue, I sought to illustrate in my previous study, is that of the transfiguration of Christ (see Luke 9:28–36, Matt 17:1–9 and Mark 9:2–8). I emphasized the importance of this Gospel narrative as a living tradition when it comes to considering its rabbinic reception history, yet I equally argued that the account in the Gospels itself provides a clear starting point. In this story, the themes of human incomprehension of divine realities, as well as the theme of silence, both play a noteworthy role that will co-determine the present inquiry as well. I will therefore briefly present the gospel narrative of the transfiguration and expand on my previous study by illustrating how it helps us better to understand the Bavli's use of the theme of silence.

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*Religion as Profanation* (New York, London: Springer Publishing Company, 2019), 23–94; idem, "The Rabbis on (the Christianization of) the Imperial Cult: Mishna and Yerushalmi *'Avodah Zarah* 3.1 (42b, 54–42c, 61)," in Catherine Hezser, ed., *Jewish Art in its Late Antique Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 319–355; and idem, "Jerusalem Fell After Betar: The Christian Josephus and Rabbinic Memory," in Ra'anan Boustan et al., eds., *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, 2 vols. (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2013), 1:319–367.

27 See Zellentin, "Typology and the Transfiguration of Rabbi Aqiva," esp. 256–268. My arguments are based on a close comparison of the even starker typological language found in the Talmudic story's Palestinian precedent in Pesiqta de Rav Kahana 4:7; my study engage two studies of Eyal Ben Eliyahu, "The Rabbinic Polemic against Sanctification of Sites," *JSJ* 40 (2009): 260–280 and idem, "Mount of Olives-Between Jews and Christians during the Roman and Byzantine Periods," *New Studies on Jerusalem, Proceedings of the Fourth Conference* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998), 55–63 [Hebrew]. On the importance of typological thought for the rabbis see also Zellentin, "Moses' Arms and the Brazen Serpent: A Sense of Typology in Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism," which has been submitted to a volume edited by Angelika Neuwirth and Islam Dayeh that is currently under review with Routledge.

## The Relevance of the Syriac Tradition for the Bavli

I hold that any inquiry into the relevance of Christian narratives for rabbinic culture must at least include, if not be focused on, the Syriac gospel tradition.[28] In their translation of the transfiguration scene, the Syriac gospels use the central term describing the emanation of the "divine glory," *shūbḥā*, in order to depict Jesus as appearing with a radiant glow, as witnessed by his disciples.[29] Here is the story according to Luke 9, in the Peshitta's translation:[30]

> 28 And it came to pass about eight days after these words, Jesus talked to Kafa (Peter) and Jaʿkov (James) and Yohanan (John), and he went up (*wa-sleq*) on a mountain to pray.
> 29 And while he prayed, the appearance (*ḥezwā*) of his face changed, and his clothes became white and dazzling.
> 30 And behold, two men were speaking with him: Moses and Elijah,
> 31 who appeared (*d-etḥzīw*) in glory (*b-teshbūḥtā*), and spoke concerning his departure which he was in the future about to accomplish at Jerusalem.
> 32 And Kafa and those who were with him were heavy with sleep; and when they awoke they saw (*wa-ḥzaw*) his glory (*shūbḥeh*), and the two men that were standing with him.
> 33 And when they [i.e. Moses and Elijah] began to leave him, Kafa said to Jesus: "Rabban, it is better to remain here; and we will make three shelters, one for

28 The gospel version that is most relevant for the Babylonian Talmud, I have previously argued, is the Syriac Peshitta. The witness of the Diatessaron has of course equally permeated Syriac culture, especially through the exegetical works of Aphrahat and Ephrem, yet the Peshitta offers the most relevant witness to the oral gospel traditions with which the rabbis may have been at least rudimentarily, and sometimes intimately familiar; see Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies*, esp. 138–143.

29 The transfiguration appears in Luke 9:28–36, Matt 17:1–9 and Mark 9:2–8, see also 2 Peter 1:16–3:18; on the typological character of the transfiguration, see already Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 [1939]), esp. 62–63. On the central image of "glory" in the Syriac tradition (which builds on Biblical imagery such as Exod 34:29) see e.g. Hannah M. Hunt, "'Clothed in the Body': The Garment of Flesh and the Garment of Glory in Syrian Religious Anthropology," *Studia Patristica* 642 (2013): 167–176 and Sebastian P. Brock, Sebastian, "The Robe of Glory: A Biblical Image in the Syriac Tradition," *The Way* 39 (1999): 247–259.

30 Peshitta translations in this essay are based on that of George Lamsa, *The Four Gospels According to the Eastern Version* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1933), with major modifications. Needless to say, this does not imply an endorsement of Lamsa's more adventurous theses on the importance of the Peshitta as a witness to the historical Jesus. The Syriac text of all Gospel citations, unless otherwise noted, is that of the Peshitta cited according to George Anton Kiraz, *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels: Aligning the Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshitta and Harklean Version* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004). My gratitutde to Ana Davitashvili for assisting me with the vocalization of Syriac transliterations.

you, one for Moses and one for Elijah;" because he did not know what he [probably Jesus, possibly Kafa] was saying (*w-lā yādaʿ-wā mānā āmar*).
34 And when he had said these things, there came a cloud and overshadowed them; and they were afraid when they saw (*ḥ-zaw*) Moses and Elijah go up (*d-ʿal*) in the cloud.
35 And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son (*hānaw ber ḥabbībā*); listen to him."
36 And when the voice came, they found Jesus alone. And they kept silent (*w-hennon shteq*), and they did not tell any man in those days what they saw.

In this scene, Late Antique Christians saw the fulfilment of the Old Testament (symbolized by Moses for "the law" and by Elijah for "the prophets") in the New Testament more broadly, and in Christ specifically, just as the Bavli sees the fulfillment of Moses' Written Torah in Aqiva's Oral Torah. There are two arguments for the importance of this narrative for the story of Moses' ascent towards heaven in the Bavli: first, the thematic and structural similarities between the two stories, and second, the sustained message the Talmud generates by diverting from the story about Jesus in specific and recurrent ways.

In order to calibrate the heuristic value of the similarities between the narrative in the Talmud and that in the Gospel, of course, we should note that just like our Talmudic story, the narrative of Jesus' transfiguration is equally modelled on Moses' own ascension to Mount Sinai. Jesus ascends to the mountain just like Moses once ascended Mount Sinai; later in the Christian narrative, Moses and Elijah later go up in a cloud, evoking the cloud from which God spoke on Sinai (see e.g. Exod 24:16). Jesus shines, just as light once emanated from Moses (see e.g. Exod 34:29–30), and the divine command to listen to Jesus seems to evoke the similar command to listen to Moses (see e.g. Deut 18:15). The key message of the transfiguration of Christ, most simplistically put, is to elevate his importance vis-à-vis Moses and Elijah, who seek him out.[31]

31 For a recent discussion of the passage within its compositional context in the Greek Gospel of Luke see François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 369–379.

The transfiguration is well received in Greek, Latin and Syriac patristic literature,[32] at some point also in the liturgies,[33] and of course in Christian art, which features the scene from at least the fourth century.[34] A passage in the Syriac fathers, namely in Ephrem's *Hymn on the Nativity*, may best illustrate the evocative power of the transfiguration scene for later Christians. Ephrem's hymns, written in the fourth century, in turn, formed the core of the Syriac tradition and were received and performed widely throughout Late Antiquity; his thoughts on silence will prove central here as well.[35]

Ephrem opens his *Hymn on the Nativity* by claiming that the nativity of Christ "gladdens kings, priests and prophets, for in it [the nativity] were fulfilled and realized all their words," i.e. the words and actions of many of these biblical characters, including Moses and Elijah, as we will see.[36] Ephrem's typology goes as far as claiming that the Hebrew Bible in its entirety foreshadows Christ's coming, and attacks "the Jews" who believe in the Scriptures but not in its Christological reading: "put to shame is the people that holds the prophets

32 To give but a few select examples, see Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 22; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 12:16; Augustine, Letter 55.15 (28); John Chrysostom, *Homily* 56 on Matthew (2), and Jacob of Sarug, *Homily on the Transfiguration of the Lord*. See also Colette Pasquet, "Révélation de la divinité du Christ dans le mystère de la Transfiguration chez Jacques de Saroug," *Connaissance des Pères de l'Église* 135 (2014): 42–52; Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 133–139; Emmanuel Khoury, "Mīmrō de Jacques de Saroug sur la Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur," *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988–1989): 65–90; Thomas Kollamparampil, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on the Transfiguration of our Lord*, 1 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008), 1–4; cf. also P. Yousif, "La Croix de Jésus et le Paradis d'Éden dans la typologie biblique de Saint Ephrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 6–7 (1975–1976): 29–48, and Goppelt, *Typos*, 62–63, 72 and 89.

33 On the transfiguration in the Eastern liturgy, which in Byzantium was officially introduced in the eighth century yet celebrated in Palestine much earlier, see, e.g., John Baggley, *Festival Icons for the Christian Year* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 58–71; also Jean Tomajean, "La fête de la Transfiguration," *L'Orient Syrien* 5 (1960): 479–482.

34 See, e.g., Sabine Schrenk, *Typos und Antitypos in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (*Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*; Münster: Aschendorff, 1995); Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, and my arguments in Zellentin, "Typology and the Transfiguration of Rabbi Aqiva," 243–250.

35 On Saint Ephrem and his impact, see, e.g., Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992).

36 Hymn 1.1; see Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Nativitate* (*Epiphania*) (CSCO 186; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1959), 1; trans. Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 63. I follow McVey's fine translation (with minor adaptations).

to be true; for if our Savior had not come, their words would have become lies. Blessed is the True One who comes from the True Father. He fulfilled the words of the true [prophets], and they are complete in their truth."[37] For Ephrem, the Hebrew Bible must be read as typology not merely when exegesis allows for it, but its anticipation of Christ must be posited at all times—a reading which he then illustrates by finding Christ in dozens of biblical narratives.[38]

Throughout this entire *Hymn on the Nativity*, Ephrem dozens of times follows the same pervasive pattern of a biblical figure "seeing" (*ḥ-z-y*) something good or evil, and then "anticipating" (*s-k-y*) or longing for (*r-g-y*) Christ as the one to come (*ʾ-t-y*) and fulfil (*sh-l-m*) the good or conquer the evil. The refrain and answer to each verse is "glory to you (*lek shūbḥā*), son of our Creator." In a first summary, Ephrem summarizes his typological thinking with a rhetorical question, asking "Who is able to glorify (*d-nshabbaḥ*) the true Son who rises for us, Whom just men (*zaddīqē*) yearned (*etragrag*) to see (*neḥzūneh*) in their lifetimes?"[39] Ephrem, in short, reads the actions of all the Israelite prophets entirely as yearning for Christ.

The transfiguration serves as a climax in Ephrem's pattern. Moses and Elijah are among those who do also "long for" (*r-g-y*) or "anticipate" (*s-k-y*) Christ as the one "to come" (*ʾ-t-y*), yet in contrast to the other Biblical characters who only see their own reality, these two prophets actually do "see" (*ḥ-z-y*) Christ, the one to whom the refrain states "glory to you" (*lāk shūbḥā*). The transfiguration is then understood in the following way:

> 34 Elijah yearned for him (*leh etragrag*) and without having seen (*ḥzāy*) the Son on earth, He believed and increased his prayers that he might ascend (*d-naseq*) and see Him (*neḥzēw*) in heaven (*ba-shmayyā*, cf. 2 Kgs 2:11).
>
> 35 Moses and Elijah saw Him (*leh ḥzaw*); the humble one (i.e. Moses, cf. Num 12:3) ascend (*sleq*) from the depth, and the zealous one came down from the height (*men rawmā*), and they saw (*wa-ḥzaw*) the Son in the middle.
>
> 36 They represented a symbol of His coming: Moses was a typos (*ṭūpsā*) for the dead, and Elijah a typos (*ṭūpsā*) for the living who will fly to meet Him when He comes.

37 Hymn 1.18–19; see Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem, Natìvitate*, 3; McVey, *Ephrem*, 64–65. See also Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 16:2.15.

38 On Ephrem's hymn, see David Bertaina, "Christmas with Mar Ephrem: The Nativity Feast in Early Syriac Tradition," *The Harp* 22 (2007): 49–92; Phil J. Botha, "The Poet as Preacher: St. Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *De Virginitate* XXXI as a Coherent, Aesthetic, and Persuasive Poetic Discourse," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 19 (2008): 44–72; see also see Andrew J. Hayes, "The Transfiguration of Moses: A Survey and Analysis of St. Ephrem's Interpretation of Exodus 34,29," *Oriens Christianus* 97 (2013–2014): 67–99 and Zellentin, "Moses' Arms."

39 Hymn 1.40, see Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem*, 6; and McVey, *Ephrem*, 68.

> 37 Because the dead have tasted death, He will repair them first, but those not yet buried will be snatched up to meet Him at the end (cf. 1 Thess 4:17).
>
> 38 Who will bring me to the end of enumerating the just men who anticipated (*d-sakkyeh*) the Son, whose number cannot be encompassed by our weakness (*da-mḥīlūtan*) of mouth?
>
> 39 Pray for me, my friends, that I may be strengthened (*d-etḥayyal*) once more to set forth their qualities again in another account as much as I am able.
>
> 40 Who is able to glorify (*d-nshabbaḥ*) the true Son Who rises for us, whom righteous men (*zaddīqē*) yearned (*etragrag*) to see (*neḥzūneh*) in their lifetimes?[40]

Ephrem here describes the spatial displacement of Moses and Elijah, from heaven and from below respectively, to meet Christ in the middle. In addition to functioning as symbols of the Old Testament, the two figures have become the representatives of the dead and the living: while Moses died and was buried like any other human being (see Deut. 33:1–34:12), Elijah had been taken up to God without dying (2 Kings 2:11–14). What Ephrem clearly adds to the exegetical tradition of understanding the transfiguration is his sense of longing for Christ, attributed to all of the biblical figures, and his heightened emphasis on the visual (repeatedly using the root *ḥ-z-y*), in line with the broad Christian tradition of visualizing the transfiguration in material culture.[41]

In light of his prominence in Syriac culture, Ephrem's hymn allows us to state that in the course of Late Antiquity, Christian culture had normalized typology and the example of the transfiguration, to a degree that it became an essential and ever-present part not only of patristic, but also of later Christian readings of the Bible, as well as of material culture. While individual typological strategies vary among the Greek, Latin and Syriac fathers, it is their common denominator that we can assume is representative of popular Christian discourse in general. They all preserve narratives of their Old Testament, all the while explicitly shifting their symbolic importance away from the Israelite past and towards the coming of Christ.

With this in mind, we can turn to the conceptual and verbal affinities between the Bavli story and the transfiguration scene in the Syriac Gospel, which range from the general to the specific. Some of the words and concepts shared by both stories are rather common, and some aspects may be due to

40 Hymn 1.34–40, see Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem* 5, and McVey, Ephrem, 68.

41 On the role of the visual aspects of revelation in Ephrem's hymns on the nativity, see Bert Daelemans, "Le Caché nous relève en se révélant. La révélation rédemptrice dans les Hymnes sur la Nativité de St. Éphrem," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 78 (2012): 29–80, and "Dieu sauve en se montrant. La révélation rédemptrice dans la troisième Hymne sur la Nativité de St. Éphrem," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 77 (2011): 351–398; on the transfiguration in material cultural see note 34 above, on the visual in Judaism see note 46 below.

both of the stories having a simultaneous engagement with the Biblical episode of Moses' ascent to Sinai. Intriguingly, some of the elements Ephrem highlighted in his reading of the Transfiguration equally seem relevant for the Bavli's story. The affinities between the stories I have previously indicated are the following, with some elaborations; note that the final two points of overlap will prove especially important for the present study:

– In both stories, Moses "goes up" towards heaven as expressed by the root *ʿ-l-h* in both texts (see Luke 9:34, cf. 9:28, where *s-l-q* is used). Moses' ascent itself, of course, is well attested in rabbinic literature, see, e.g., Bavli *Sanhedrin* 111a–b.[42] While both the story of the Bavli and that of the gospels are thus based on Moses ascent to Sinai in the Hebrew Bible, their respective "reenactment" of this episode is not dissimilar. Note that in his hymn on the transfiguration, Ephrem displays a heightened focus on vertical motions. Moses "ascends" from the depth and Elijah descends "from the heights in heaven" in Ephrem. Similarly, the Bavli describes the hour in which Moses "ascended to the heights;" both texts use the root *r-w-m*.
– Both stories, moreover, relate the biblical past of Moses to the action of a typologically conceptualized "man" at a future time as expressed by the word *ʿatid* in both texts (see Luke 9:31)—a future time which is already in the past at the moment of telling the story. Based on this chronological parallel I argued for the particular importance of the Syriac typological tradition for our understanding of the Bavli.[43]
– Both stories depict this "man" as a "son" and in messianic terms as expressed by the word *ben* in the Bavli and *bar* in the Gospel (see Luke 9:35).[44]

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42 See Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 200–201.

43 On the importance of relating the Biblical past, the "old," to the more recent rabbinic or messianic past, the "new old," see Zellentin, "Typology and the Transfiguration of Rabbi Aqiva," 240–242. The term *ʾadam ʾeḥad* in and of itself is inconspicuous; it is already attested (negatively) in Qohelet 7:28 and quite broadly in the Bavli (see, e.g., *Sanhedrin* 97b)—it is merely its broader typological acumen that makes it relevant for the present consideration. On the importance of comparative approaches to Adam see Zellentin, ibid., 251–253 and idem, "Trialogical Anthropology: The Qurʾān on Adam and Iblis in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse," in Rüdiger Braun and Hüseyin Çiçek (eds.), *The Quest for Humanity – Contemporary Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of the Qurʾānic Anthropology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), esp. 72–116.

44 As Rubenstein aptly states, the name "Akiba" alone appears over 1,300 times in the Bavli, but the full name "Akiba ben Yosef" only about twelve times, less than 1 percent. So the appearance of the full name seems to be motivated by the desire to alliterate Yosef with *sof* (end). There is also an intriguing resonance of *me'akev* [sic] (restrains) and *akiva*," see idem, Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 185. The repeated use of the term

– Both stories place a strong emphasis on the visual; the "seeing" of this future man, as expressed, in the Bavli, by the root *r-ʾ-h* and the repetition of Moses' request for a vision of Aqiva, and of his glory (or reward), and in the Gospel by the pervasive prominence of the root *ḥ-z-y* (see Luke 9:29, 31, 32, 34 and 36).[45] An emphasis on the visual itself, of course, is not remarkable, given its importance in rabbinic and Syriac culture, yet Ephrem increased the Gospel's emphasis on longing and the visual further, as we have seen above (using, like Luke, root *ḥ-z-y*).[46] In the Gospel, it is merely the disciples that "see" Jesus in his glory, yet in Ephrem, Moses and Elijah "saw" him, just as in the Bavli Moses several times asks God to "show him" (Aqiva), and his reward.
– If we follow ms Vatican 118 of the Bavli, both texts speak about the "glory" of the future man, expressed by the root *sh-b-ḥ*, as in the gospels (see Luke 9:32 and cf. 9:31). While the Gospel already emphasized that Moses and Elijah appeared "in glory" (*b-teshbūḥtā*), Ephrem repeatedly emphasizes the "glory" (*shūbḥā*) of the "Adam," just as the Bavli, in manuscript Vatican 118, depicts "his glory" (*shevaḥo*), both using the root *sh-b-ḥ*.[47]
– Both texts make it very clear that the future man awaits martyrdom, as expressed by the events awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30–31) and the weighing of Aqiva's flesh in the market, respectively. The gruesome image of "weighing the flesh" of humans in the market is an element encountered elsewhere in the Bavli.[48] In the present context, however, the Bavli's

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"tip," *qots*, whatever its ultimate meaning in the story, equally evokes the idea of the eschatological "end," *qets*.

45 Menahem Fisch has suggested reading our story in light of Exod 33:12–23, which includes Moses' request, to God, "to let me behold Your glory" (*kebodekha,* Exod 33:18), a line of reading which Rubenstein has developed further; see Fisch, *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 192–195, and Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 190–192. Yet the biblical parallel only points to the typological contrast between Talmud and Bible, for in the former, as in the New Testament, the gaze is now turned towards the man, and away from the deity, which Moses longed to see in Exodus.

46 For the visual in Christian culture, see note 41 above, for the rabbis, see Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

47 On the centrality of the term "glory" in Syriac Christian culture see note 29 above; on the biblical notion expressed through a different term see note 45 above.

48 The phrase used here, of weighing Aqiva's flesh in the market, constitutes an ironic inversion of the statement made by Rav Ulla in Bavli *Hullin* 91a–b that the Gentiles would not "weigh the flesh of the dead in the markets." On Aqiva's martyrdom, see also Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 93–126.

depiction of Aqiva's flesh being offered for sale and presumably consumed after martyrdom is difficult to dissociate from the eucharistic consumption of Jesus' body—especially since Christians had long seen themselves confronted with accusation that recast the eucharist as cannibalism.[49]

– In both stories, the scene plays out in front of the "disciples," as expressed by the word *talmyd* in the Bavli and in the Gospel (the root is mentioned in Luke 9:18, the disciples are named in 9:28, 32 and 33). While the presence of disciples is ubiquitous in both New Testament and Talmudic texts, the students play specific roles as observers in both texts.[50]
– Two final similarities are central for the present inquiry. First, in both stories, one of those in the role of disciple is depicted as not being able to follow the events: in the Bavli, Moses, who joined the ranks of the disciples, "did not know what they (the rabbis) were saying," whereas in the Gospel, Kafa "did not know what he (presumably Jesus) was saying." The idea is expressed in very similar terms in Aramaic and Hebrew, *lo hayah yodeʿa mahen ʾomrim* and *w-lā yādaʿ-wā mānā āmar* (the main difference being the shift from the third person plural to the singular). The statement about incomprehension, to the best of my knowledge, has only one close parallel in rabbinic literature, Bavli *Hullin* 137b, to which we will presently turn in our consideration of the incomprehension of divine discourse in the Syriac tradition and in the Bavli.
– In both stories, the one depicted in the role of the disciple is eventually reduced to silence (employing the root *sh-t-q*): James and Peter "kept silent" after witnessing the transfiguration, in the Bavli, God twice tells Moses to "remain silent"—the statement to which this article is dedicated.

While none of the similarities between the Talmud and the Gospel would be striking on its own, their collective weight, especially in light of the typological drift of both narratives, seems to surpass the accidental by far.

Accordingly, the Bavli does not "cite" the Gospel narrative here, rather, the Bavli merely alludes to it, and even so it is more likely an oral rendering rather than the written version that matters for our reconstructions, as I stated

49 While the accusation of cannibalism in the context of the eucharist started in the second century (see e.g. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9), it was well and alive throughout late antiquity, see e.g. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26:5.4–6 and Bart Wagemakers, "Incest, Infanticide, and Cannibalism: Anti-Christian Imputations in The Roman Empire" *Greece & Rome* (*Second Series*) 57 (2010): 337–354; see also Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 92–93, 101–102 and 112–113.

50 In addition, students address Jesus as "Rabban" (see Luke 9:33); Aqiva's disciples address him as "Rabbi" only in the Vilna print.

above.[51] One could use the Bavli's imprecision as an argument against the relevance of typology and of the transfiguration for reading it—if it was the story's Bavli's main aim to evoke the transfiguration, why not be more concrete? Yet one can also turn this argument on its head and state that the pervasiveness of typological reasoning in Christian and rabbinic culture, and of the transfiguration scene in patristic literature, material culture and likely in Christian popular culture, allows the Bavli to keep its allusions oblique and understated, while relying on its audience to grasp its playful use of Christian typology in a rabbinic story, without the need to contaminate the textual surface with a clumsy or heavy-handed direct appeal to an outside tradition. It may well precisely *not* be the Bavli's main goal to "evoke" the transfiguration; perhaps it merely does so in order to eclipse it, *en route* to make a different point altogether. In my view, the Bavli's typological reading of Aqiva comes as close as possible to the Christian model, without, however, overstepping the line: Aqiva is perhaps "the one," but not a new Adam; he is a messianic figure, but not the Messiah; and he is martyred and his body consumed, but he is not yet resurrected. The way in which the Bavli constructs Aqiva here, in other words, may be the closest it can get to incorporating Christological claims without abandoning its commitment to rabbinic collectivism.

## Incomprehension and Silence

With these general arguments in mind, we can now turn to the themes of Moses' incomprehension, and to the silence God orders him to keep, in light of a broader Jewish and Christian context. Kafa, in the transfiguration narrative, "did not comprehend what he said" (*wela yadaʿ wa mana ʾamar*), a saying closely parallel when Moses, in Rabbi Aqiva's Bet Midrash, "did not comprehend what they said" (*lo hayah yodeʿa mahen ʾomrim*). The parallel is a close one, yet Jeffrey Rubenstein has equally noted that this phrase has a close Talmudic parallel in Bavli *Hullin* 137b, where it equally describes the incomprehension of the highest echelons of legal debate:

51 Bavli *Menaḥot* 29b does not even allude to the gospels in the approximate way in which it comes close to doing so in Bavli *Shabbat* 116a–b, on that passage see Zellentin, "'One Letter Yud shall not Pass Away from the Law': Matthew 5:17 to Shabbat 116a–b," in *Religious Identities in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Walking Together & Parting Ways*, ed. Ilkka Lindstedt, Nina Nikki, and Riikka Tuori (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 204–58 and Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies*, 137–166, and the literature cited there; on this passage see now also Yakir Paz, "The Torah of the Gospel: A Rabbinic Polemic against The Syro-Roman Lawbook," *Harvard Theological Review* 112 (2019): 517–540.

> (Rabbi Yoḥanan) said to (Isi): "Who is the head of the yeshiva in Babylonia?"
> (Isi) said (to Rabbi Yoḥanan: "It is) Abba the Tall (i.e., the amora Rav)."
> (Rabbi Yoḥanan) said to (Isi): "You call him "Abba the Tall"? I remember when I sat seventeen rows behind Rav (who sat) before Rabbi (Yehuda HaNasi), and fiery sparks emerged from the mouth of Rav to the mouth of Rabbi (Yehuda HaNasi, ונפקן זיקוקין דנור מפומיה דרב לפומיה דר'), and from the mouth of Rabbi (Yehuda HaNasi) to the mouth of Rav (ומפומיה דר' לפומיה דרב), and I did not know what they said (ולא ידעינ' מהן אומרות). And yet you call him Abba the tall?"[52]

The Bavli's depiction of Moses, sitting in Aqiva's house of study and not being able to comprehend the halakhic debate clearly evokes Isi's vivid depiction of the intense exchange between Rav and Rabbi Yehuda haNasi, the heads of the Babylonian and Palestinian academies, respectively.[53] What Isi has witnessed, sitting like Moses in the last row, and like him "not knowing what they said," is the type of quasi-divine discourse symbolized by speechless fire emerging from the rabbis' mouth, an image likely deriving from God's "words" that are "like fire" (דברי כאש, see Jeremiah 23:29).[54] The inner-Talmudic parallel thus illustrates that the content of the communication in both passages belongs to a higher realm. The discourse between Aqiva and his disciples, just like that between Rav and Yehuda haNasi, belongs to a higher sphere, which a normal person—Isi or Moses—cannot comprehend, just as Kafa cannot follow the conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus in the transfiguration scene. In the account of the transfiguration, Kafa's incomprehension leads to the fact that the disciples remained "silent," whereas in the Bavli, God commands

52 Cited according to Manuscript Munich; other witnesses offer slight variants to the main phrase: Ms. Vatican 120–121 follows the cited version almost verbatim, Ms. Vatican 122, the Vilna and Venice prints have ולית אנא ידע מה הן אמרין.

53 See Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 198. Note the slight manuscript variance regarding Moses' incomprehension in the Bavli in note 14 above. While there are many instances of the phrase "he did not know" in the Bavli (see, e.g., *Megillah* 13b and *Bava Qamma* 103b), the phrase "he did not know what they were saying" is, to the best of my knowledge, paralleled only the present Bavli *Hullin* 137b (a reference which is missing in Zellentin, "Typology and the Transfiguration of Rabbi Aqiva," 266 n. 74), adding weight to the extra-rabbinic affinity.

54 Based on Jeremiah 23:29, God's fiery words become like sparks (ניצוצות) through their interpretation in Bavli *Sanhedrin* 34a and *Shabbat* 88a, see already David Stern, "Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies? Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 5 (1985): 102–103; see also Tanḥuma *Vayakhel* 7:12, where sparks emerge from the Cherubim, and Yerushalmi *Berakhot* 5.1 (9a). While sparks emerging from the mouth is a negative image associated with Leviathan in Job 41:11 and with punitive angels in the *Vision of Paul* 11, the image of a fiery divine outpouring appears equally in the Christian tradition, see e.g. Acts 2:3.

Moses thus. The inner-Talmudic parallel thus helps us contextualize the affinity between the transfiguration scene and the story in Bavli *Menaḥot* 29b. I will now argue that a fuller understanding of God's command to Moses to remain silent in the Bavli can only be gained in dialogue with a long Jewish and Christian tradition on silence and the divine, which I will briefly lay out before returning to our story.

Many of the types of silence we encounter in the Hebrew Bible or in Late Antique discourse, marking mourning or defeat, are less relevant for our story.[55] The Bavli's image of communication through fiery sparks in *Hullin* 137b, as well the context of God's command to remain silent in the face of incomprehension of the divine in *Menaḥot* 29b, both ultimately build on Middle- and Neo-platonic discourse. Already Plato speaks of thought as the "silent (ἄνευ φωνῆς) inner conversation of the soul with itself" (*Sophist* 263e–264a).[56] Based on such views, Plutarch stipulates that Socrates received silent (ἄνευ φωνῆς) communications from his personal *daimon* (see *De genio Socratis* 588 E), whereas Philo, likewise, suggests that one should approach God "without utterance of any voice" (Philo *De gigantibus* 52). Philo in particular developed theories of intellectual contemplation and silent prayer that proved fundamental for late antique pagans and Christians, yet rarely occur in late Jewish traditions.[57]

Such a train of thought does not generally stand in line with rabbinic inquiry. An exception may be the saying of Shim'on ben Gamliel in *Pirqe Avot*: "All my life

55 Silence, for example, is used to denote quiet suffering (see, e.g., Ps 32:3, Lamentations 3:27–31), or reducing someone to silence (e.g., Ps 31:18–19). Both types of silence are well-attested in rabbinic literature as well, see e.g., *Ekha Rabba* 1.1, where humans and God sit in order to mourn, and Bavli *Keritot* 12b, where a rabbi regrets to have remained silent during a legal disagreement. On silence in the Psalms and its Chrsitian reception history see Hermann Spieckerman, *Lebenskunst und Gotteslob in Israel; Anregungen aus Psalter und Weisheit für die Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 232–246, as well as Massimo Cacciari, "Silence biblique, silence néotestamentaire," in David Banon, ed., *Héritages d'André Neher* (Paris: Éclat, 2011), 167–178. A particular case of silence is the quietness of God in certain situations, as laid out perceptively in Eric D. Reymond, "The Hebrew Word דממה and the Root d-m-m I ("To Be Silent")," *Biblica* 90 (2009): 374–388.

56 Cited according to Harold N. Fowler, *Theaetetus and Sophist* (Loeb Classical Library 123; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 440–441.

57 See Menahem Luz, "Philo on Prayer as Devotional Study," in John Dillon and Andrei Timotin (eds.), *Platonic Theories of Prayer* (Brill: Leiden, 2016), 46–57; Tatjana Alknienė, "La prière à l'Un dans le traité 10 [V,1] de Plotin et la tradition philosophique grecque," in Filip Karfík and Euree Song (eds.), *Plato Revived: Essays on Ancient Platonism in Honour of Dominic J. O'Meara* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 339–340; and Anna Pawlaczyk, "The Motif of Silence in Philo of Alexandria's Treatise 'Quis rerum divinarum heres sit'. Some Remarks," *Polish Journal of Biblical Research* 1 (2000): 125–130.

I grew up among the Wise, and I found nothing better for a person (or "body") than silence (ולא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה, *Avot* 1:17, see also *Wayiqrah Rabba* 16:5).[58] Philo's ideas fell on more fertile ground among Neoplatonists; in the third century C.E., Plotinus and Porphyry further developed the theory of "silent prayer" as a way of communicating with God.[59] The notion of "silence and praying for mercy" (שתיקותא ומבעי רחמי), in turn, can equally be found in the Bavli, yet it is rare (see *Berakhot* 62a, here to rid a bathhouse of demons).[60] Hence, no matter what one makes of the platonic tradition of communicative silence, in *Menaḥot* 29b, God's order to Moses to remain silent—rather than to ask about God's hidden reasoning in choosing Moses instead of Aqiva as the recipient of the Torah and in allowing Aqiva's gruesome death—does not demand legal agreement, quiet suffering, or even silent prayer. Rather, God demands silence in order to indicate the end of the inquiry into His reasons: just as acts of creation, the matter simply arose in his mind.[61]

Such a tradition to limit intellectual inquiry is well attested in the Jewish and Christian tradition, and it will help us further to calibrate our understanding of God's silencing of a befuddled Moses. Ben Sira (in chapter three) had already enjoined his audience as follows:

> 17 My child, perform your tasks with humility;
> then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.
> 18 The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself;
> so you will find favour in the sight of the Lord.
> 20 For great is the might of the Lord;
> but by the humble he is glorified.
> 21 Seek not things concealed from you (פלאות ממך אל תדרוש),
> nor search those hidden from you (ומכוסה ממך אל תחקור)
> 22 Reflect on that which is permitted to you (במה שהורשית התבונן),
> you have no business with secret matters (ואין לך עסק בנסתרות).
> 23 Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you,

58 Cited in accordance with Mss. Kaufman and Parma de Rossi. Amram Tropper, in his discussion of the saying of Shim'on ben Gamliel, does not explore its philosophical context, instead stipulating that its message may by "ironic"; see Amram Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 82–83.

59 Andrei Timotin, "Porphyry on Prayer: Platonic Traditions and Religious Trends in the Third Century," in John Dillon and Andrei Timotin (eds.), *Platonic Theories of Prayer* (Brill: Leiden, 2016), 103. For a perceptive history of platonic and neo-platonic thought on silence, see, e.g., Nicholas Banner, *Philosophic Silence and the 'One' in Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

60 On the meaning and the textual tradition of *Berakhot* 62b, see David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 166–167. A treatise on rabbinic views of silence, to the best of my knowledge, remains a desideratum.

61 See note 22 above.

> for more than you can understand has been shown to you.
> 24 For their conceit has led many astray,
> and wrong opinion has impaired their judgement.[62]

In general, Ben Sira's advice not to investigate into divine secrets thus clearly shares more with the wisdom literature of his time, or perhaps with the Stoic tradition, than with middle-Platonic or even rabbinic thought.[63] While the rabbis more than occasionally evoke Ben Sira, they do not in general share his reluctance towards divine inquiry.[64] There are, however, clear exceptions, such as the rabbis' strict sanctioning of mystical inquiries. The Bavli thus cites Ben Sira's saying in *Hagigah* 13a, when commenting about the details of the heavenly realm:

> Until here, you have permission to speak;
> from this point forward you do not have permission to speak,
> as it is written in the book of Ben Sira:
> Seek not things concealed from you (במופלא ממך אל תדרוש)
> nor search those hidden from you (ובמכוסה ממך אל תחקור).
> Reflect on that which is permitted to you (במה שהורשית התבונן);
> you have no business with secret matters (אין לך עסק בנסתרות).
> It is taught (in a Baraita):
> Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said: What response did the Divine Voice provide to that wicked man, Nebuchadnezzar, when he said:
> "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14), thereby intending to rise to heaven?
> A Divine Voice came and said to him:
> "Wicked man, son of a wicked man, descendant of Nimrod the wicked, who caused the entire world to rebel against Him during the time of his reign."[65]

God's stern response to Moses' inquiry into His reasons for choosing, and then martyring Aqiva in *Menaḥot* 29b, can thus be argued to hearken back to a tradition of limiting inquiries into ultimate secrets elsewhere in the Bavli.[66] Yet

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62 Cited according to Manuscript Cambridge T-S 12.863, folio A I recto, translation following the NRSV with modifications.

63 See e.g. Sharon Lea Mattila, "Ben Sira and the Stoics: A Reexamination of the Evidence," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 473–501.

64 On the intriguing relationship of the rabbis to Ben Sira see Vered Noam, "Ben Sira: A Rabbinic Perspective," in J. K. Aitken, R. Egger-Wenzel and S.C. Reif (eds.), *Discovering, Deciphering, and Dissenting: Ben Sira Manuscripts after 120 Years* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 201–217; and Jenny R. Labendz, "The Book of Ben Sira in Rabbinic Literature," *AJS Review* 30 (2006): 347–392.

65 Cited according to the Vilna Print, see also *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:2.

66 On the prohibition to inquire beyond the limits of the creation, see already Mishna *Hagigah* 2:1 and its Talmudic commentaries in Bavli and Yerushalmi; also Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), esp. 209–210.

the saying of Ben Sira which the rabbis incorporated, merely demands an end to the inquiry, and the Bavli has God sharply rebuke Nebuchadnezzar—there is no talk here of silence.

In order fully to comprehend the use of God's command to Moses, then, we should take not only the Jewish and Platonic views on silence into account, but also the Syriac Christian view on silence when faced with divine mysteries. Again, a close look at Ephrem allows for a solid foundation in order to approach this tradition. In Hymn 70:7, Ephrem admonishes his audience as follows:

> Approach inquiry (*la-bṣātā*) based on your strength (*mesat ḥaylāk*)
> And when your heart wanders and gets lost
> Remain in silence (*b-shetqā*)[67]

While it is difficult to establish whether or not Ephrem here had the passage of Ben Sira quoted by the Bavli in mind specifically, it is clear that he, just like Ecclesiasticus and the Talmud, links the limits of inquiry to mental strength.[68] What Ephrem adds to this equation is the theme of silence, which he explores in detail throughout his extant oeuvre. For example, in another one of his *Hymns on Faith* (39) that opens with a condemnation of pagans and Jews who derided Jesus, Ephrem again equates that which can be interpreted to the mysteries beyond it, which must be treated with silence:

> 5 That which is spoken and can be interpreted (*wa-mṣē d-nettargam*)
> And explained (*wa-pshīq*),
> so that it can be discussed (*d-net'aqqab*), debated (*w-metdarrash*), and declared (*w-metpashshaq*)
> Belongs to the mouth, and interpreting (*metargem*) is related to it.
> But what cannot be debated (*metdarrash*) or declared (*w-metpashshaq*)
> is marked off by silence (*shetqā ṯḥūmeh-ū*, lit., silence is its border).
> for our mind is not akin to its hiddenness.[69]

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67 See, Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* (CSCO 154–155; Louvain: Durbecq, 1955), 1.215 (Syriac) and 2.187 (German trans.); see also Jeffrey T. Wickes, *St Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith* (The Fathers of the Church 130; Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 340 and Paul S. Russell, "Ephraem the Syrian on the Utility of Language and the Place of Silence," Journal of Early Christian Studies 8 (2000): 28.

68 Ephrem regularly cites Ben Sira, see Wido van Peursen, "Ben Sira in the Syriac Tradition," in *The Texts and Versions of the Book of Ben Sira*, ed. Jean-Sébastien Rey and Jan Joosten (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 146–147. In the present case, however, his plausible allusion cannot be linked with any certainty to the extant Aramaic versions of Ben Sira, see Paul de Lagarde, *Libri Veteris Testamenti Apocryphi Syriace* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1861), 4.

69 See Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem, Fide*, 1.129 (Syriac) and 2.106 (German trans.); the translation of this passage and the following is my own, in consultation of Beck Wickes, *St Ephrem*, 224. On the hymn, see also Russell, "Ephraem," 28. The theme of silence (*shetqa'*)

When trying to contextualize God's command to Moses, we thus have to consider the rabbinic discourse on the limits of inquiry, limited as the evidence may be. Yet we must equally note that the specific formulation in the Bavli may communicate to its audience that it here employs the fully developed discourse on silence as the only appropriate *response* to the limits of inquiry, which is a specifically Christian tradition.

The prominence of the Syriac discourse on silence, when compared with the scant rabbinic evidence, helps us gauge the Bavli's hint. Ephrem's hymns and *mīmrē* more broadly furnish central evidence for the Syriac understanding of the uses of silence in light of the limits of human understanding. Ephrem, in the words of Russel, held the following:

> While useful in and of itself, the range and power of language is increased when it is accompanied by its counterpart: silence. Proper use of these two tools in balance with each other allows humans to respond to any topic that confronts them in an appropriate and reverent manner, while still engaging with it actively as far as their ability allows.[70]

In light of the centrality of the notion of silence in Ephrem (and in the Syriac tradition more broadly, as we will see), reading God's unique command to Moses to remain silent, in *Menaḥot* 29b, takes on a new significance. The story may well allude to the Gospel's statement that James and Peter kept silent after witnessing the transfiguration in incomprehension, as I have argued above. More centrally, however, it rather seems that the Bavli, in presenting a typological counter-narrative to the transfiguration, portrays God as implementing specifically Syriac teachings on silence, which can be illustrated with a couple of further examples from Ephrem. It is, again, not one passage, but the entirety of the Syriac tradition against which we should read this aspect of the Talmudic story.

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as marking the end of inquiry is central to Ephrem's hymns on faith. Ephrem's *Hymn on Faith* 38:13, for example, is dedicated to the juxtaposition between silence and speech: here, God is portrayed as having added silence and having given "areas in which we could inquire," yet at the same time, God "held back other (areas) in which we could keep silence"; see also verses 2–4, 8–10, and 18–20; see Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem, Fide*, 1.127 (Syriac) and 2.104 (German trans.); see also Wickes, *St Ephrem*, 220, and Russell, "Ephraem," 27–28.

70 Russell, "Ephraem," 30, see also ibid., 21–37 and Pierre Yousif, "Parole et silence chez Saint Éphrem de Nisibe," *La Maison-Dieu* 226 (2001): 95–114. Among Ephrem's hymns on faith, many others focus on silence (*shetqa'*): 1:18–19 (which enjoins to keep silent before God); 2:4; 3:9 (which depicts the angels as praising God silently, a theme further developed in 4:1, 5, 14 and 17); 8:2 (on the silence of the Jews when faced with Moses' splendor); 10:2; 11:5–9 (on God's silence, a theme further developed in 54:2); 13:10; 16:12–13 (on prayer in silence); 20:1; 23:15; 37:18 (on the silence of the son); 43:3; 70:18 and 74:18.

Perhaps most relevant for our reading of the Bavli is the following excerpt from Ephrem's *Hymn of Faith* 57, which, after ruminations on the mind, sleep, and memory, ends as follows:

> (10) "From this, your own lowly word,
> You should miraculously learn the glorious word:
> the Word of God.
> If your own word ever does not know to tell itself,
> honor with your silence (*b-yad shetqāk*) the Word of your Creator,
> Whose silence cannot be inquired into (*d-lā metbṣē shetqā*)."[71]

The Bavli, in a sense, has God remind Moses to honor the decisions of His Creator with his own silence, quite precisely as Ephrem and many others after him had taught. The importance of the issue of silence in Syriac patristic thought only increased in centuries subsequent to Ephrem, both in the West and in the East Syrian tradition.[72] A final illustrative example from the former tradition is the *Letter of Exhortation Sent to Someone Who Left Judaism and Came to the Life of Perfection* written towards the end of the fifth century by Philoxenus of Mabbug. Here, we read the following about silence:

> 8. Stillness of place (*shelyā d-dūkktā*) leads one into (a state of) stillness of the mind (*shelyā d-reʿyānā*), and stillness of the mind raises a person up to converse with God (*la-mmalllā d-ʿam alāhā*). For even if a person has fallen silent (*shteq*)

71 See, Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem, Fide*, 1.154 (Syriac) and 2.155 (German trans.); see also Wickes, *St Ephrem*, 291; and Russell, "Ephraem," 29; see also *Hymn on Faith* 1.19. Ephrem's hymns are often laced with anti-Jewish tropes, in 57:1, for example, Jews again appear as "the crucifiers."

72 On John of Apamea (first half of the fifth century), see, e.g., Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "'More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue': John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2012): 303–331; on Philoxenus (turn of the sixth century), see B. Bitton-Ashkelony and Sergey Minov, "'A Person of Silence': Philoxenos of Mabbug, Letter of Exhortation Sent to Someone Who Left Judaism and Came to the Life of Perfection," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 82 (2016): 101–125; on Dadisho Qatraya (late seventh century), see Francisco del Río Sánchez, "Dadišoʿ du Qatar et la quiétude," in Alain Desreumaux, ed., *Les mystiques syriaques* (Paris: Geuthner, 2011), 87–98. On the elaborate discourse on silence in the Greek Christian tradition, see Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986); note also Sebastian Brock, "Secundus the Silent Philosopher: Some Notes on the Syriac Tradition," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie N.F.*121 (1978): 94–100; see also Gabriele Winkler, "Ein bedeutsamer Zusammenhang zwischen der Erkenntnis und Ruhe in Mt 11,27–29 und dem Ruhen des Geistes auf Jesus am Jordan: Eine Analyse zur Geist-Christologie in syrischen und armenischen Quellen," *Le Muséon* 96 (1983): 267–326 and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 105–131.

> from having conversation with one (i.e., humanity), he is not (yet) going to converse with the other (i.e., God). Therefore, as long as the mind does not become silent (*shteq*) from all agitations of the worldly commotion, it will not begin to stammer (*d-nlagleg*) in the conversation with God.[73]

Philoxenus, much like Ephrem, insists on silence as a precondition to engage in a conversation with God. On one level, I would argue that the Bavli agrees with the church father, and does not shy away from attributing such a view of silence to God himself. However, and this is a central caveat, the Bavli is a deeply dialectical text, and must always be thus understood. Attributing a certain view to God, in the Bavli, is not necessarily the same thing as condoning it, as it points out quite clearly in the previously mentioned parallel story of the Oven of Akhnai in *Bava Metsi'a* 59a–b.[74] The rabbinic story of Moses' ascent towards heaven, in clear contrast to the Syriac tradition on silence *generally* portrays God as engaged in intimate and exoteric conversation with his creatures, be they angels or men. Yet precisely at the point when the rabbis wonder, on the one hand, about the election of Moses over Aqiva, and on the other about the reasons for the latter's martyrdom, they portray God Himself all of a sudden as commanding silence rather than inquiry into His mysteries. Does the Bavli then portray God, in having Moses be silent, as instructing him to "honor with your silence (*b-yad shetqak*) the Word of your Creator, whose silence cannot be inquired into (*d-lā metbṣē shetqā*)," as Ephraim has it? Does it demand Moses' mind "to become silent from all agitations of the worldly commotion," as Philoxenus puts it?

The Bavli, in having Moses remain silent, I would argue, here integrates what it considers to be a valuable lesson from Christian thought. It marks this lesson as such, probing the limits of orthodoxy all the while reinforcing them: yes, silence is a meaningful response to the Divine unknown, yes, Moses does visit the living, yes, there is value in martyrdom, even if neither Aqiva nor anyone else have been transfigured. Yet by portraying God's proclivity to silence, the Bavli does by no means endorse God's action. The rabbinic storyteller, in my view, shares the stupefaction he projects onto Moses. It uses the Christian hermeneutical tools of typology and silence in the face of incomprehension of the divine. It elevates Aqiva at the same time as debasing Moses, situating its own discourse squarely in the middle—firmly committed to the memory of both, and firmly committed both to Aqiva's halakhic genius and to Moses' two simplistic, though existential, questions: why me and why this?

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73 Cited according to Manuscript British Library Add. 14,726, as edited and translated by Bitton-Ashkelony and Minov, "A Person of Silence," 116–117, for its date see 103.

74 See note 27 above.

There is, to conclude, no reason to posit that any rabbi ever heard any of Ephrem's hymns sung in a neighboring church or expounded in a debate, as likely as this may have been. The rabbis did not likely spend much time reading Philoxenus' letters to a Jewish convert to Christianity. Our story may or may not reflect any specific aspect of Syriac teaching on silence. Rather, the Syriac literature here cited illustrates the importance of silence as a response to the limits of understanding as one of the broader aspects of Syriac culture permeating the world of the Late Ancient Diocese of the East and of Mesopotamia, against which we can best understand this aspect of the Bavli story.

We can thus conclude that the notion of limiting one's inquiry may well occur in the rabbinic tradition, yet when it comes to silence in the face of incomprehension of the divine, we are dealing with a distinctly "Christian" tradition. The Bavli's story in *Menaḥot* 29b heaps paradox upon paradox, just as Aqiva would heap interpretation upon interpretation: God requires Moses to honor him in a rather Christian manner at the very moment that Moses is faced with his incomprehension of his own, rather than Aqiva's election and with his incomprehension of Aqiva's gruesome and non-triumphal martyrdom. Two types of hearing Moses' silence now emerge as false: hearing it within the confines of the rabbinic tradition alone on the one hand, or hearing it as engaging some reified form of "Christianity" on the other hand, are two extremes that would both be guilty of the same reductionist fallacy. Such a reading would construct a false dichotomy not so much between "us" and "them," between "Jewish" and "Christian," which clearly (?) remains in place in the Bavli, but between "aspects of our thought" and "aspects of their thought"—a distinction the Bavli does not always seem to uphold. As it clearly states, "eat the date and throw away the stone" (*Ḥagiga* 15b according to Ms. British Library 400). There is no reason not to use a good teaching just because it is Christian, just as it is permitted to use a good teaching from a flawed rabbi, provided this rabbi is like an angel (אם דומה הרב למלאך), as we learn here (ibid.). There is, however, also no good reason to let that teaching stand unexamined or unmodified.

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