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Contents

Recognizing the Anti-Mysticism Polemic in Genesis Rabbah: A Bourdieusian Reading*

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Midrash Genesis Rabbah takes aim at a variety of ideological adversaries, but the most subtle polemic is directed at sages who went beyond standard hermeneutical practices to embrace mystical approaches to Torah learning. This essay seeks to expose the use of satire and other literary forms of critique among passages treating cosmology and Torah study. Analytic tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu, especially as they pertain to exposing the use of the symbolic language intrinsic to the establishment of systems of social authority, will be employed to delineate the ideological conflict among sages developing diverse approaches to ascending the religious hierarchy within early rabbinism.

INTRODUCTION

The first eleven chapters of Midrash Genesis Rabbah are dominated by polemical passages pertaining to cosmology. The targets of these polemics can only rarely be identified with certainty. We recognize themes that appear to respond to the ideological challenges of gnostic dualism, common paganism (idolatry), and various theological positions thought to have been prevalent among Jewish sectaries.[1] Why the editors of Midrash Genesis Rabbah decided to leave the

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1. See, for instance, Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, "Rabbinic Literature's Hidden Polemic: Sacred Space in the World of the Sages," in *Jerusalem and Other Holy Places as Foci of Multireligious and Ideological Confrontation*, vol. 37. Jewish and Christian Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 25–49. On the terminology related to adversaries in polemical passages, there are numerous studies. Rabbinic literature uses terms for pagan ("idol worshipper"), *kutim* (Samaritans), *tzadukim* (Sadducees), and *minim*, who are commonly defined as "[Jewish] sectarians of sorts holding heretical views" – as Louis Jacobs would have it. But there are also additional terms that function as stand-ins for people – perhaps Jews – asking difficult questions, identified with expressions such as "a certain Philosopher asked," or "a noble woman (*matrona*) asked." The bibliography is extensive. For a recent summary of the state of research see Ishay Rozen-Zvi, "Early Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism," in *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Matthias Henze and Rodney A. Werline (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2020), 501–2. See also Richard Kalmin,

identities of their ideological adversaries indeterminate is unlikely to move beyond speculation. Minimally, we can assume the darshan believed his target audience would recognize the purpose of his diatribes. Still, given the very explicit naming of names in the Christian *adversus haereses* literature, which commenced some two centuries before the assumed redaction of Genesis Rabbah, the darshan's practice remains a conundrum.[2]

Strangely enough, in Midrash Genesis Rabbah (=GnR) there is one adversary identified directly: the Jewish mystic. In this study, I will endeavor to show that the conflict between rabbinic sage and mystic is best framed as a struggle over social authority rather than ideology. I will engage Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic language in order to contextualize the very specific literary strategy employed by the darshan of Genesis Rabbah in specifically combatting mysticism (as opposed to Christianity or other sectaries, which are also targets). Bourdieu suggests that within any given culture, variations in genre, style, and discourse structure – to name just the most prevalent tools available to an author – frequently served as modalities for promoting social differentiation. By situating literary structures within what Bourdieu calls a common "field of production," the function of literature for the acquisition of "symbolic power" – a concept I will define momentarily – becomes blatantly evident. Anything written by a mystic familiar with rabbinic tradition could have been composed using the same literary forms employed by the darshan of the midrashim. Based on Bourdieu's ideas, we recognize the mystic's decision not to adopt the stylistics of the early midrashim to be a conscious act of social differentiation aimed at increasing social and cultural capital.

The study of tensions between mystics and more mainstream rabbinic sages is hardly new. David Halperin suggested that the Hekhalot literature in general was a challenge to rabbinic authority.[3] These writings express a resentment

"Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity," *The Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 2 (1994): 155–69; Stuart S. Miller, "The Minim of Sepphoris Reconsidered," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (1993): 377–402; Louis Jacobs, "Halakhah and Sectarianism," in *A Tree of Life: Diversity, Flexibility and Creativity in Jewish Law* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 93–109; Ruth Langer, *Cursing the Christians?: A History of the Birkat HaMinim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Michal Bar Asher Siegal, *Jewish-Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chap. 1. On the social phenomenon of sectaries from the Second Temple period onward, see Albert I. Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccadbean Era: An Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 91–99.

2. For a diachronic consideration of the binary designation, Jew/non-Jew (*goy*), see the consideration in Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "What If We Got Rid of the Goy? Rereading Ancient Jewish Distinctions," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 47, no. 2 (2016): 149–82, and his extensive bibliography of relevant studies and sources.

3. David Joel Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 442–43.

of the rabbis, which Halperin analyzes on the basis of psychological theory (Freud, Erikson, etc.). "Certain Jews, who felt a frustrated longing to rise in their social world, saw the heavenly ascension as a paradigm for their own struggle against the forces that held them down. These forces were the rabbis."[4] Shifting the emphasis from psychology to sociology, Ra'anan Boustan suggests rabbinic literature and the Hekhalot "reflect tensions within Jewish society between groups with different sociological profiles." They were both preoccupied, however, with certain common themes, such as "acquisition of Torah-knowledge and the value of rabbinic authority."[5] Since the emergence of rabbinic hegemony was gradual, a diversification of cultural forms arose over centuries. Diversity would remain the rule in Jewish history due to the geographic and political variables at work in Jewish life. However, I shall argue that some of that "diversity" was invented specifically to facilitate the gamesmanship typical of sociological rifts.

This study will elucidate the literary strategies employed by the darshan (editor) of Midrash Genesis Rabbah, which were established to mount a polemic against mystics within the Jewish community of their day. The darshan had to develop a very specific literary approach because of the nature of mystical literature. Sages to whom ideas and experiences are attributed in the earliest works of Jewish mysticism are also central figures in the classical midrashim. Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Aqiva, Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah, Rabbi Abahu, and select others, populate both the Hekhalot and midrashim. Attribution is a literary strategy meant to imbue a new work with authenticity and authority. All of the midrashim are built upon fictional attributions, and the Hekhalot literature is similarly constructed on a "scaffolding of 'pseudonymous attribution.'"[6] This tactic dates back to remote antiquity throughout the literary cultures of the ancient Near East, and was sustained in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish literatures deep into the medieval world. When Second Temple period writers ascribed origins to biblical figures, such as Abraham, Enoch, Moses, or Solomon, they sought to establish authority by means of a historical figure of renown in remote antiquity. However, the phenomenon is somewhat different in the Hekhalot. By attributing the origins of their ideas to select sages already

4. Halperin, 448.

5. Ra'anan S. Boustan, "The Emergence of Pseudonymous Attribution in Heikhalot Literature: Empirical Evidence from the Jewish 'Magical' Corpora," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (2007): 500. Boustan does not associate himself with any particular sociology of knowledge or social theory.

6. Boustan, 21. For summaries of the scholarship on this theme, see Michael Chernick, ed., *A Great Voice That Did Not Cease: The Growth of the Rabbinic Canon and Its Interpretation* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2009), 14–20; Alyssa Gray, "Review: Alon Goshen-Gottstein. Is Critical Rabbinic Biography Possible?: The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abnya and Eleazar Ben Arach" (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)," *Prooftexts* 23, no. 3 (2003): 376–82.

renowned in the mainstream literatures, the writers of Jewish mystical tracts sought to exploit the cultural and social capital already accrued by their adversaries. This appropriation of the adversary's own authority figures is hardly a neutral attempt to establish credibility. Such a strategy is specifically designed to outflank the rebuttal of a rival, as I will elucidate further below.

ON THE DATING OF TEXTS AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Before delving deeper into the thesis of this study, I wish to address the problem of dating our literary sources. The dating of all classical rabbinic literature remains hopelessly circular. There is no source external to the corpus that allows for a temporal anchoring through citation or some other kind of reference. I will be operating under the assumption that Midrash Genesis Rabbah was composed around the beginning of the fifth century, when rabbis were transitioning from having been "marginal in the Jewish world" to taking ever-greater control of ritual practice, Torah exposition, and synagogue prayer.[7] The early fifth century presently functions as a working convention. The absence of influences common after the rise of Islam and Karaism, and close affinities to the Yerushalmi, help provide credibility to the early fifth century being a plausible if not certain date of redaction.[8]

As for the dating of the earliest mystical literature, there is no scholarly consensus at this time. One can find scholars advocating for origins in the Tannaitic era as well as the Gaonic period.[9] I will be referencing Hekhalot literature and

7. Schwartz, *Imperialism*, 199. Arguing the same position is Haim Lapin, in a number of works: *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); "The Origins and Development of the Rabbinic Movement in the Land of Israel," in *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Stephen T. Katz, vol. 4. The Cambridge History of Judaism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206–29; "Aspects of the Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 500–800," in *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an Age of Transition, 400–800 C.E.*, ed. Kenneth G Holum and Hayim Lapin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2011), 181–94.

8. For a recent discussion of the development of Midrash Genesis Rabbah, particularly in comparison to the Yerushalmi, see Hans-Jürgen Becker, "Texts and History: The Dynamic Relationship between Talmud Yerushalmi and Genesis Rabbah," in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2020), 145–58.

9. For a summary of the state of the scholarship on dating, see James Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Some scholars are now arguing that "the initial literary formation of Hekhalot materials now stands much closer in both time and space to the earliest Genizah manuscripts from approximately the eighth to eleventh century"; Ra'anan Boustan, Martha Himmelfarb, and Peter Schäfer, eds., *Hekhalot Literature in Context: Between Byzantium and Babylonia* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), xiii. However, in contrast, Michael Schneider endeavors to date the attribution to R. Abbahu in Hekhalot passages regarding the "tradition of seventy names" to the end of the third century; Michael Schneider,

Sefer Yetzirah, but the latter most certainly achieved its final form after the seventh century, and the date of the former remains highly contentious.[10] I am going to argue that the relative dating of these works is ultimately irrelevant to the internal rabbinic polemic being outlined in this study. That something similar to the Hekhalot literature was available to the Genesis Rabbah editors is incontrovertible given the intense derogatory depiction of mystics in the passages about to be considered. Thus, each work – Genesis Rabbah and the Hekhalot – should be seen as metonyms for the internal social conflict waged among sages. My methodological assumption plays off the notion of "intertextuality" as explored by a variety of literary and sociological theorists since Julia Kristeva first coined the term in the 1960s. As Graham Allen writes,

> [Texts] are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. . . . The act of reading . . . plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations.[11]

In a sense, the particularity of a text dissolves into a cultural repertoire, which is what permits us to use literary fragments to analyze underlying sociological dynamics. This is a fundamental concept in Bourdieu's writing. By proposing a "sociology of knowledge" Bourdieu endeavored to outline the relationship between procedural rules that were followed unconsciously, and more self-conscious attempts by individuals to influence social conventions. I believe the tension between these two aspects of the workings of society are in tension in the texts I will discuss. Whether the authors of the discrete documents are addressing a specific text rather than a social phenomenon is not as important as the identification of the phenomenon as it is reflected in a network of textual witnesses.

"Seventy Names and Seventy Books: 'Fourth Ezra' and Hekhalot Literature," *Jewish Studies* 52 (2017): 6.

10. On the dating of Sefer Yetzirah see Tzahi Weiss, *Sefer Yeṣirah and Its Contexts: Other Jewish Voices* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Weiss argues that Sefer Yetzirah "is not a part of rabbinic literature" but instead derives from marginal Syriac Christian circles that developed theories of letters stemming from earlier Hellenistic sources. In contrast, traditions that the world was created with the letters of God's ineffable name stemmed from the Second Temple period (p. 30). I will not be relating specifically to the contents of Sefer Yetzirah, but, rather, to the phenomenon of letters as a force in creation. See also Weiss's discussion of the reception history of this work, in "The Reception of Sefer Yetsirah and Jewish Mysticism in the Early Middle Ages," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 1 (2013): 26–46.
11. Graham Allen, *Intetextuality*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), 1–2.

Ra'anan Boustan analyzes the relationship between the theurgy in the Hekhalot writings and the folk religion that produced magical bowls, amulets, and other enchanted accoutrements.[12] He notes that "late antique Jewish magical sources offer no positive evidence for the existence of Heikhalot literature *as a fully realized class of texts* organized around a specific group of 'pseudonymous' rabbinic heroes."[13] He is not saying that the literature did not exist at all; he is rather stating that there was a disconnect between magical epigraphy and the use of attributions now evident in the Hekhalot writings. Only with the beginning of the Islamic period do Jewish magical sources manifest an association between the sages in the Hekhalot writings and broader Jewish magical discourse.[14] Boustan recognizes that the evidence drawn from magical epigraphic evidence can facilitate two possible conclusions. Either practitioners producing incantation bowls and the like were ignorant of or simply had no use for the Hekhalot literature and its rabbinic sages, or the literary form of the proto-Hekhalot traditions was not yet employing attributions like those now populating the Hekhalot fragments.

The evidence I will review in this study will not support either position definitively; however, it may contribute to a sense of what is most likely. I believe the false attributions prevalent in mystical literature, including the earliest forms of the Hekhalot writings, developed as a very specific attempt to gain symbolic power. It may very well be that some of the manuscripts in circulation did not adopt and adapt the very limited attributions that came to dominate the Hekhalot literature sometime after the seventh century, while other copies integrated sparingly select sages in the numerous fragments that constitute this corpus. Eventually, the framework which includes Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Aqiva, and a few other sages, proved advantageous to the literature's advocates. While Boustan situates the emergence of what he calls "Hekhalot style discourse" in fifth- or sixth-century Palestine, he dates the redactional process to after 650.[15] From that point forward, themes from the Hekhalot traditions were integrated or harmonized with more mainstream literary genres (such as *Midrash on Proverbs*).

I am not at all concerned with showing a direct relationship between GnR and any specific mystical text. Nor am I going to consider the question of whether Hekhalot literature reflects what some scholars relate to as an autonomous "mystical Judaism," which "was temporally prior and . . . developed in opposition to 'mainstream' rabbinic Judaism."[16] I fully accept the chaos of cul-

12. Boustan, "Pseudonymous Attribution."
13. Boustan, 37.
14. Boustan, 37.
15. Boustan, 19.
16. This is the position against which Boustan is writing, in "Rabbinization and the Making of

tural phenomena as the only historical "mechanism" we can confidently ascribe to every moment of human history. There never has been a singular form of Judaism and there has never been a single school of people producing *the* Jewish literature. But just because you have a diversity of literary forms does mean that various literary schools were in tension over symbolic power. In this study, I am suggesting that GnR itself signals a struggle over cultural capital and names just one of its adversaries directly – the Jewish mystic.

I wish to complicate matters yet a bit more. Even if we accept the working date of 400–420 for Genesis Rabbah, there is absolutely no reason to believe that what we now have in the Theodor-Albeck critical edition was identical to the first edition on the day it was completed. More than likely, there was no such singular day of completion. Rather, it is more feasible to imagine that multiple curated collections circulated simultaneously, eventually to be coalesced into what we now recognize as Midrash Genesis Rabbah. In effect, with this image in mind, GnR would have circulated in multiple forms quite like what the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* teaches us regarding the fragmentary character of the textual transmission of Hekhalot.

That said, there can be no doubt that GnR contains satirical polemics against the kinds of religious practices that are documented in the Hekhalot writings and Sefer Yetzirah, regardless of when these works reached their final forms. My hypothesis is simply that versions of these literatures were sufficiently well-formed and in circulation at the time GnR was redacted so as to make an anti-mystical polemic pressing.

I emphasize that this is not about mysticism in the abstract, but, specifically, the function of a written literature that exerts influence through an expanded circulation. Nor is this about magic in terms of that vast marketplace of amulets and incantation bowls that were ubiquitous in Greco-Roman and Byzantine times. The mystic's attitudes to religious practice and Torah interpretation were decidedly different, if not fully at odds with, that of the midrash's darshan. But the degree of difference is what should make them largely irrelevant to one another. In theory, people clash over issues of mutual concern and not over issues that are of relevance to only one party. Thus, the fostering of racism, misogyny, scapegoats, and other pejorative depictions of population groups all stem from a "problem" in the polemicist rather than the polemicized. Still, victims are not chosen randomly. Whether rooted in a social reality or an imaginary sense of "the other," polemics support what Bourdieu defines as symbolic power in real time.

Early Jewish Mysticism," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 4 (2011): 484; see his note no. 5 for numerous references advocating this binary perspective on Jewish mysticism.

THE VALUE OF IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT

The tensions between the darshan's writing and mystical literatures were purposefully fabricated. Much of the Hekhalot literature is devoid of biblical proof texts and only rarely requires biblical passages to construct its imagery.[17] While there is no question that "varieties of religiosity can coexist in the same social group," GnR suggests a concern for differentiation that is motivated less by ideology than by a quest for social control.[18] If, as Seth Schwartz argues, the rabbis of the late fourth and fifth centuries were focused on establishing a "common ideology," then the sages who sought to differentiate mystical practice from what they proposed as the mainstream form of religious practice found it useful to marginalize practices that sought to undermined their own group's authority. The emphasis, however, remains on the social dynamics rather than ideas, per se, even though they are, admittedly, closely linked.

To evaluate the nature of the threat presented by Jewish mystics to their non-mystical rabbinical counterparts, I will employ Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of how language and its symbolic power are used to facilitate a group's control of any given community. Such control is required to frame certain figures as authoritative leaders, while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of others. On the surface, these polemics appear to yield what we might think of as a *gnoseological order* – a delineation of the limits of knowledge left implicit within a literary work. However, the polemics do not actually attack the ideas of the mystic; rather, they disparage personal behaviors.

Were the mystics actually interested in religious authority? Ira Chernus has drawn attention to how the Hekhalot literature contains passages that are clearly addressed to all of Israel and not just the practices of elite sages. Such passages are specifically meant to inform the community as to how their religious practices – such as daily prayer – affect the unfolding of history.[19] Chernus focuses on the "important thematic affinities" between liturgical practices and the mystic's rituals that "function ultimately for the good of the whole community. And this good is a result of the information brought back by the mystic – whether it be liturgical or eschatological."[20] With Bourdieu's insights in mind, we can see the rather broad soteriological concerns Chernus

17. See, however, Arnold Goldberg, "Quotation of Scripture in Hekhalot Literature," trans. Brigitte Kern, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* ו, no. 1/2 (1987): 37–52, who seeks to undermine Scholem's remarks that Merkavah mysticism is fundamentally devoid of exegetical practices, as articulated in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 46.

18. Schwartz, *Imperialism*, 259.

19. Ira Chernus, "Individual and Community in the Redaction of the Hekhalot Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (1981): 253–74.

20. Chernus, 257.

highlights as direct evidence of the mystics awareness of how symbolic power, and other forms of social capital, function in the community at large. Had the mystic not sought to acquire symbolic power among their own adherents, they would not have offered an epistemological system that directly undermined rabbinic hermeneutics and discipleship, while engaging the very same attributions emblematic of midrashic literature.

Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic language and symbolic power will be elucidated more fully in the next part of this study. His insights permit us to explicate concretely how the depiction of mysticism in GnR is part of a strategy for galvanizing Rabbinism's authoritative hold on the establishment of religious beliefs and practices. As noted, at no point does the darshan attempt to discredit the specific ideas of the mystic. There is no extended polemic against magic, nor is their a discrediting of the depiction of the celestial world. Instead, the darshan adapts the literary strategy he engages for discrediting Gnostics, Christians, and other sectaries. His literary tool of choice is satire, but with something of a twist.

When a seemingly random philosopher approaches a sage to ask a question, we know in advance that the philosopher will be satirized. This is also true of a Roman official, even an emperor, or a member of a sect. These fictional dialogues amount to satires or parodies in which adversaries are depicted as being both dull-witted and blatantly wrong regarding whatever biblical texts and ideas are under consideration.[21] That strategy could not be employed regarding Jewish mystics. Using Bourdieu's sense of the dynamics of literary production, we will see that the darshan was confronted by an intractable dilemma created by the mystic's strategic appropriation of figures already consecrated in the darshan's own literature. Having constructed their literature on the basis of "received knowledge" drawn from the same sages that populate the darshan's writings, the writers of the Hekhalot literature strategically undermine their adversary's ability to refute the ideas that populate their writings. What is the darshan to do? How can he undermine such an appropriation?[22] The darshan

21. On satire and parody in rabbinic literature, see (especially on ben Zoma), Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy. A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings*. Studia Post-Biblica, v. 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), pt. III; Holger Michael Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Daniel Boyarin, "Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Meʿir, the Talmud, and Menippean Satire," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 3 (2009): 523–51; James A. Diamond, "King David of the Sages: Rabbinic Rehabilitation or Ironic Parody?," *Prooftexts* 27, no. 3 (2007): 323–426; Scott F. Spencer, "Song of Songs as Political Satire and Emotional Refuge: Subverting Solomon's Gilded Regime," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44, no. 4 (2020): 667–92.

22. The exact problem confronted the Deuteronomist with regard to his invention of the prophet. Having fashioned the Moses figure in a very specific way, he still had to deal with the other forms of "prophecy" prevalent in ancient Near Eastern society that were competing for legitimacy.

had to sidestep the question of the mystic's imagery and opt, instead, to delegitimize the behavior of characters not named in the Hekhalot materials. Or, as we will see in one case, the darshan will identify by name sages when they are still children in order to discredit their teachers. It was simply impossible to depict a sage – regardless of whether it was ben Zoma or Rabbi Ishmael – as in any way deficient in their knowledge of Torah because of the way those figures functioned within midrashic literature. The darshan can do nothing to prevent such acts of appropriation, something he understands quite well because he had been practicing the very same strategy throughout his own corpus.

In the remaining parts of this study, I will introduce the usefulness of Bourdieu's ideas for shedding light on the darshan's anti-mystical polemics. I will then analyze the textual evidence supporting my thesis, after which I will draw some further conclusions about the social implications of anti-mysticism in the midrashic literature.

BOURDIEU ON LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLIC POWER

Pierre Bourdieu relates to "power" as symbolic when it is established and reinforced on the basis of socially acquired authority rather than authority imposed in a totalitarian regime or by conquerors. Symbolic power needs to be distinguished from the use of physical force, which does not depend upon authority at all. The person who seizes and sustains power using force lacks the symbolic power held by those who acquired and sustain authority through the accrual of social and cultural capital. Anyone can act violently; those with symbolic power do not need to act violently, even though they may be sanctioned to employ force to keep order within a given community. The acquisition and sustaining of symbolic power is, for Bourdieu, a primary concern of social, political, and religious life. We are to understand this struggle as a never-ending contest "to win everything which, in the social world, is of the order of belief, credit and discredit, perception and appreciation, knowledge and recognition – name, renown, prestige, honour, glory, authority, everything which constitutes symbolic power as *recognized power*."[23]

Tensions between Rabbinism and mysticism are framed by distinct modes of religious expression, each of which is meant to dominate the community's discourse. The tensions are perpetual. Normative stances are eternally engaged in legitimizing their power to determine practical and symbolic senses of

See my discussion of this phenomenon (as linked to Deut 18:9–22) in *Etched in Stone: The Emergence of the Decalogue* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 65–66. See also an analysis of the Deuteronomist's writings in light of Bourdieu's sociology

23. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 251, emphasis added.

history, meaning, and especially a sense of what is "right," or "the good." As Léna Pellandini-Simányi explains, a locus of social, political, or religious power is engaged in both unconscious and well-devised competitive strategies to maintain and advance its acquisition and legitimation of ever more symbolic power.[24] The mystic is as intent on establishing a competitive symbolic power as the darshan is intent on increasing the legitimization of what he wants to become "normative" discourse.

In "Religious Authority and Mysticism," Gershom Scholem depicted mystics as working from within a community that embraced well-established rites and customs.[25] Save for the truly reclusive figures, Scholem saw mystics seeking to influence "normative" culture, a historical circumstance made blatantly manifest in the mystic's choice to "communicate their 'ways,' their illuminations, their experience to others" in writing, just like their non-mystical counterparts.[26] Scholem sees mystics as embracing two "contradictory or complementary aspects: the one conservative, the other revolutionary." The conservative strands express a commitment to the earlier source material, while the revolutionary deviates from previous forms of religious expression. The mystic adopts modes of expression that diverge from the discourse structures dominating the literature of their non-mysticism-focused counterparts. These subversive practices challenge the orthodoxy of a religious field, which is established and defended by the mystics' mainstream counterparts. The contradictory or complementary aspects described by Scholem are undoubtedly reductionist categories, but they are not solely scholarly inventions. Social systems are, by their nature, complex. Any narrative reducing life's events to a linear or binary contrast is bypassing its natural messiness.

This is to say that boundaries within a society are naturally fuzzy and often highly permeable. Individuals may occupy the space of more than one subgroup simultaneously, without contradictory implications. That acknowledged, symbolic power strives for a narrative that obfuscates these natural characteristics of life. Religion, which Bourdieu relates to as a form of politics, creates mechanisms by which control of an otherwise unwieldly reality seems plausible. Bourdieu suggests that "every political field tends to be organized around the opposition between two poles." Competing factions participate in "a system of deviations on different levels and nothing, either in the institutions or in the agents, the acts or the discourses they produce, has meaning except relationally,

24. Léna Pellandini-Simányi, "Bourdieu, Ethics, and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Review* 62 (2017): 651–74.

25. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), chap. 1.

26. Scholem, 7.

by virtue of the interplay of oppositions and distinctions."[27] Thus, the kind of historiographic reductionist description offered by Scholem is, according to Bourdieu, engaged by authoritative figures seeking to simplify and clarify social relations. Group differentiation, then, may hinge upon exaggerated depictions of minute distinctions amidst a sea of commonalities, all for the sake of gaining authority over a community's modes of communication.[28]

In antiquity, individual sages may have moved freely among ways of life (Bourdieu's *habitus*), but they could not garner symbolic power in multiple social systems simultaneously. I take this insight as axiomatic. By virtue of this axiom, the appearance of the same sage in the Hekhalot and midrashim exposes a struggle for symbolic power. No real Rabbi Ishmael could occupy both spaces and actually hold onto any semblance of authority. Symbolic power is contingent upon unequivocal allegiances. In order for performative utterances to wield symbolic power, an intended audience must recognize the well-defined authority of a speaker. The power is manifest in the ability of any given speaker to "produce and impose the representation of [their] own importance."[29] To achieve this, contrasts between legitimate and illegitimate modes of communication will occupy an ideological community's literature. The practice permits community members to recognize which discourse structures carry authority, and by implication, which are deviant.

In the case of Midrash Genesis Rabbah, all acts of communication that failed to conform to the darshan's stipulated hermeneutic structures lacked legitimacy, regardless of how similar their thematic content might appear. Stylistics became an effective mode for differentiating sanctioned from unsanctioned discourse. Despite the fact that there is an infinite array of rhetorical possibilities, stylistics (including genre and other aspects of discourse structure) can function as a tool within a community to frame a binary opposition within a culture. This Bourdieu sees as a common tendency operative in all social systems. Cultural representations are conceptualized and then expressed through very specific rhetorical strategies. The choice of genre or discourse structure is understood to be part of a strategy for securing and furthering one's hold on symbolic power. These abstract ideas will become clear below when we look at examples.

The exposition of creation as a theme in Genesis Rabbah obviously stems from a commitment to deal with every verse of the Book of Genesis. The character of Genesis Rabbah's treatment suggests a desire to define the forces

27. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 185.

28. Bernhard Lang briefly explores the language of hyperbole in depicting threshold moments in history, in "God and Time: An Essay on the Bible's Cyclical View of History," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 35, no. 2 (2021): 306.

29. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 76.

that influence both nature and history, which, for the darshan, are one and the same. Nature is designed to facilitate a certain form of history, including principles of justice, retribution, moments of historical redemption, and history's own demise through a final salvation. Also built into nature is a system of exchange values that permits the individual and a community to participate in a terrestrial and celestial marketplace of goods simultaneously – the former synchronously and the latter asynchronously.

The darshan simultaneously forbids and, in turn, fully elucidates these and other aspects of this world structure. While the Hekhalot literature frequently focuses on the relationship between the supernal and subordinate heavens, the darshan will treat aspects of the same cosmological phenomena, but with different emphases. The mystic ascends to the heavens to acquire knowledge, the darshan receives his knowledge about the heavens through his hermeneutic. Consider, for instance, Genesis Rabbah 1,4, where we learn that six things were actually created or contemplated prior to the creation of the world: Torah, Throne of Glory, Patriarchs, Israel (people), the Temple, the Name of the Messiah; Repentance is added as an addendum. The theme is expanded in various ways as the passage continues, but each step is supported with a biblical verse as "proof," conforming to standard midrashic discourse. While explaining the way Torah and primordial elements functioned prior to creation, the passage also invokes the following words of Ben Sira (3:21):

> בגדול ממך אל תדרש בחזק ממך בל תחקר במפלא ממך בל תדע במכסה ממך אל תשאל במה שהרשית התבונן ואין לך עסק בנסתרות.
>
> About that which is greater than you, do not inquire; about that which is mightier than you, do not investigate; about that which is more wonderous than you, do not try to know; about that which is concealed from you, do not ask; scrutinize what which you have been permitted [to study]. You have no business with hidden things.[30]

30. Genesis Rabbah 8,2. The phrase could also be rendered using the superlatives "too great for you, too hard for you, too wonderful for you, etc. If the language is meant to be taken as connoting superlatives, then theoretically, there should be no need for a prohibition, for that which is beyond the human ken is not about to be understood. On Ben Sira in rabbinic literature, see Jenny R. Labendz, "The Book of Ben Sira in Rabbinic Literature," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (2006): 347–92. See also b. Hag. 13a and the extensive discussion pertaining to the appearance of this passage in the Yerushalmi's parallel, in Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Die grossen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palästinas: zur literarischen Genese von Talmud Yerushalmi und Midrash Bereshit Rabba* (Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 17. I note that my approach in this article is quite different from claims made by Becker elsewhere regarding the "self-referential system" of rabbinic literature. Becker writes, "meaning is here [in rabbinic literature] produced through the relations of linguistic signs to one another and not through their reference to extra-linguistic phenomena. In relation to what we call history, the texts create their own, rather static reality";

Forbidding but then performing precisely what is forbidden appears to be self-contradictory. The ironic engagement of a non-Scriptural work to constrain thematic treatments of Torah fosters what Bourdieu calls "misrecognition." For Bourdieu, all social fields of interaction produce knowledge (*connaissance*) specific to each field. Knowledge possessed by an individual constitutes a form of capital that yields prestige and power. Bourdieu's *connaissance* does not exclusively mean knowledge of facts or of things and places, "it also means being familiar in an implicit or tacit way, and knowing how to do things, such as how to act or how to engage in different social situations or in relation to different orthodoxies."[31] In the case of the darshan, the knowledge extends to how one derives meaning from Torah. Denying access to certain kinds of knowledge is a way of controlling the marketplace's exchanges. Here the control over knowledge is dependent upon misrecognition (*meconnaissance*). Misrecognition, or "seeing falsely," results from well-formed social practices, which are promoted to bring about misattributions of causes, or the invalid assignment of meanings, or unsupported ascriptions of authority. For instance, within any society, there are underlying social processes that generate hierarchies which are not consciously acknowledged as promoting and sustaining social differentiation. The education system, which awards "credentials," is one such system. The possession of a credential has meaning and power quite independent of whether the possessor is competent, honest, or knowledgeable. And yet, in most societies, both ancient and contemporary, education is thought to constitute a mechanism for social mobility. As Bourdieu makes clear, educational systems result in a peculiar form of social engineering that sustains the power already possessed by those who have full access to the educational system. Credentialing requires that some source of authority maintains its power without challenge. The more entrenched an educational system becomes in the economic structures of a society, the less likely it is that members of that society will recognize the defective character of the credential system. That failure to recognize a defect is typical of *misrecognition* fostered by social hierarchies. Such processes are mostly invisible, and they evoke classifications and hierarchies that are experienced as "natural" rather than socially constructed.

Becker continues: "the static composition of rabbinic texts conflicts with the dynamic character of historical processes, so that every attempt to secure from these sources something for historiography invariably gives the impression of observing a single frame from a long movie strip," Becker, "Texts and History," 145–46. The field in linguistics known as "pragmatics" undermines the truth of such claims, but in this article I will employ Bourdieu's concept of symbolic language to suggest that the midrash is anything but self-referential in the passages discussed. It may be that the references are only identifiable via implicature, but this characteristic is not unique to rabbinic literature.

31. David James, "How Bourdieu Bites Back: Recognising Misrecognition in Education and Educational Research," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 45, no. 1 (2015): 99–100.

MISRECOGNITION AND SOCIAL AUTHORITY

Determining whether something is misrecognized depends upon a comprehensive analysis of any given social system. Those with power in a society – that is, those who benefit most from systemic misrecognition – have little interest in supporting such analyses. Misrecognition is only sustainable when it remains concealed. People do not recognize the range of dispositions and propensities that comprise their conceptualization of the world (Bourdieu's *habitus*).[32] Rather, they see the end result – the way society is, the way the marketplace is, the way an authority makes pronouncements, the way a government functions, the way a religion stipulates behaviors, etc. Circumstances are "attributed to another available realm of meaning, and, in the process, interests, inequities or other effects may be maintained whilst they remain concealed."[33] Because of the struggle over authority and the exercise of legitimate interpretation, the dynamics of misrecognition enable the darshan to undermine the methodology and social impact of competing religious factions, all the while elucidating the same or similar themes pursued by the outlying mystic's ideology. I will elucidate this theme in greater detail below with examples from Genesis Rabbah.

Abstractly speaking, the conflict appears to be as much about ideas as it seems to be about intellectual and social domination, but the darshan shapes the polemic selectively and focuses almost exclusively on the latter. Consider the matter of theurgic incantations. The use of magic is altogether absent from Genesis Rabbah's first eleven chapters. There is no attempt to disparage it, or refute its validity. Instead, the darshan assertively demonstrates that he can treat many of the same themes occupying the mystic, barring those that he chooses not even to acknowledge. The polemic is framed as the problem of authority instead of providing a point-by-point refutation of esoterica. We recognize this by tallying which ideas are confronted and which are altogether missing from the discourse, especially when it comes to the biblical creation narrative.

From its veiled origins in the second century through the tension with Karaism in the eighth century, Rabbinism would be in a constant struggle to control the genres of discourse that would serve as identifying markers, separating it from other ideologies and concretizing its own internal hierarchy among its own intellectual elite.[34] The purpose of any given discourse structure

32. Habitus will be described more fully below. The most extensive discussion appears in "Structures and the Habitus," which is chapter two of Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

33. James, "How Bourdieu Bites Back," 100.

34. See Zeev Safrai, "Rabbinic Recruitment Policy in the Mishnaic and Talmudic Period: A Sociological Inquiry into Rabbinic Society," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 11 (1993): 25.

is located in its utility for the exercise of symbolic power, which is a principal focus of those sages responsible for Genesis Rabbah's creation narratives. Surely the same could be said of other genres shaped by rabbinic authority.

NORMATIVITY AND HABITUS

Bourdieu elucidates how normativity in all socio-political matters requires a constant exertion of power by any group seeking to shape a society's tastes, ethics, and common social practices – what he labels the *habitus*. Habitus is a predominantly unconscious, internalized sense of the world, primarily acquired through acculturation. Religions and their education systems are among the most powerful and effective methods for acculturation. Both use implicit violence to shape the behaviors and attitudes of adherents. Habitus "delimits tastes, bodily gestures, ways of eating, sitting and talking" – pretty much everything we do in social contexts, extending to our core beliefs, or what Bourdieu considers "normative ideas."[35]

Given that Jewish mysticism has always involved a refinement of religious practices – contemplation, theurgy, or ritual – it has always constituted (and still does constitute) a potentially powerful, competing force in the shaping of Jewish habitus. Were the mystic not interested in shaping the Jewish habitus as an alternative to normative Rabbinism, he would not have produced the various literatures we associate with Jewish mysticism. Or alternatively, had he not sought to undermine the habitus of Rabbinism, he would have written using the forms of discourse we meet in the dominant midrashic anthologies.

The darshan does not need to offer a comprehensive refutation of mysticism quite simply because, as Bourdieu explains, once symbolic power is secured, the details of difference become largely irrelevant. The darshan only needs to establish the legitimate form of discourse, thereby gaining sufficient control of habitus formation. Once achieved, their strategy for sustaining domination needs to permit the conservation of limited resources, which requires polemics to be highly focused so as to avoid the dilution of symbolic power.

The implications of this thesis for the compositional origins of Midrash Genesis Rabbah – particularly the motivations evoking its form – invert the relationship between the midrashic corpus and the earliest esoteric literatures. Rather than trace the way mystical passages employ earlier midrashic themes, this essay suggests there are many passages in Midrash Genesis Rabbah that respond to the presence of strong esoteric writings and practices which constituted a threat to rabbinic authority. But those passages are not referenced directly; nor is their content. Midrash, as a genre, is meant to shape the shared

35. See the discussion in Léna Pellandini-Simányi, "Bourdieu, Ethics, and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Review* 62 (2017): 654.

representations associated with the religious habitus of those able to read it. The invention of a hermeneutic that maintains that the words of Scripture do not mean what they seem to mean, that they contain intentionality beyond their standard semantic valences, is all about the acquisition of symbolic power through interpretation. The symbolic system itself lies outside the domain of natural language. The circularity is unavoidable. Those who invented the concept and who interpret on the basis of the concept of midrashic meaning are those who acquire the authority through the very system they invented.

The origins of this tension between natural language and a consciously invented symbolic language are explored in Elliot Wolfson's consideration of *sensus litteralis* and *sensus spiritualis* in his discussion of *peshat* and *sod* in the Zohar.[36] Wolfson argues that the Zohar "operates with a theological conception of *peshat* that assumes that the Torah, the divine image, comprehends the mystical meaning in its most elemental and ideogrammatic form. The hidden and revealed, therefore, are not distinct spheres of meaning from the vantage point of the divine author or the kabbalist who has penetrated the innermost depths of Torah. . . ."[37] This Zoharic conceptualization of textual meaning, Wolfson suggests, "reverts to the conception of *peshat* that emerges from rabbinic writings where it signifies *authorial intention*, as determined through an *authoritative teaching*, rather than the simple or literal meaning, connotations that become standard in the medieval exegetical tradition."[38]

Wolfson's description applies to the midrashic program quite directly. The interaction of intention and authority in Midrash Genesis Rabbah's treatment of Scripture leads to a conflict that is mistakenly depicted as related to how mystical and normative Rabbinism treat *exoteric* meaning. As a corrective, Wolfson argues that it was early Tannaitic and Amoraic Rabbinism that invented the notion that meaning emerges independently of "the more normative literal-historical-grammatical" understanding of language and literature. Rabbinism's early premise, that the Torah contains the intention of the divine, hinges on the conviction that the exoteric and esoteric meanings are inseparable senses of Scripture. As Yochanan Breuer notes, "in midrashic literature itself," there is no attempt "to differentiate between [*peshat and derash*], neither by explicit remarks nor by the terminology employed."[39] In fact, it makes little sense to

36. Elliot R Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics," in *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 56–110.

37. Wolfson, 60.

38. Wolfson, 60, emphasis added. See also Martin I. Lockshin, "'Peshat' in Genesis Rabbah," in *Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context*, ed. Sarit Kattan Gribetz, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 213–32.

39. *Sod* as a hermeneutic principle does not appear in Genesis Rabbah. In 49,2, the word, drawn from Ps 25:14, might have provided an opportunity to discuss esoteric meaning, but it does not

distinguish such meanings in Genesis Rabbah, which exhibits no clear line between exoteric and esoteric.[40] The Rabbis "restricted the application of *derasha* to Scripture alone," signaling the need for a distinct hermeneutic.[41] All midrashic meaning is, then, by definition, distinct from what linguists might call "ordinary meaning" – that is, meaning that emerges from what we experience in common colloquial instances of speech acts. Torah meaning doesn't have two kinds of meaning – literal and figurative; Torah meaning is non-ordinary meaning because it was not the speech act of an ordinary being.

This is what makes the function of citing Ben Sira, noted above, such a remarkable polemical strategy. The language of Ben Sira is not open to *derasha*. The darshan appeals to an authority whose rules of interpretation stand altogether outside of midrashic and mystical uses of Scripture. That is what proves so jarring and strategically effective about the citation. The interpreter must relate to the passage from Ben Sira literally; there is no other option because Ben

happen there. Yochanan Breuer, "Three Midrashim and Their Exegetic Method," *Hebrew Studies* 45 (2004): 175.it seems that the verses are interpreted in a typical midrashic manner, namely, imaginatively and creatively, unlike the approach of modern scholars. An investigation of the literary and linguistic aspects of the verses reveals that these midrashim actually reflect valid \"peshat\" interpretations of the type that modern scholars may be willing to consider. Indeed, two of the interpretations discussed are found in medieval and modern exegesis, but scholars have not noticed that they are already found in the midrash. The reason for this that a single, standard midrashic terminology is used for all kinds of interpretation; consequently, only a thorough investigation can detect the \"peshat\" interpretations in midrashic literature. One implication of this article is that scholars interested only in the plain meaning of biblical texts should not overlook the \"peshat\" traditions preserved in midrash."," container-title":" Hebrew Studies"," ISSN":"0146–4094"," note":" publisher: National Association of Professors of Hebrew (NAPH

40. Wolfson's distinction stands in great contrast to the common sense of *peshat* found in the literature. See, for instance, Yonah Frenkel, "There is no doubt that the Sages of the Oral Torah approached the biblical text with the attitude that as the first step in understanding Scripture one should learn and know the *peshat* [literal?] meaning," in Frenkel, מדרש ואגדה (Tel Aviv: Open University Press, 1996) I,43. Lockshin believes we can distinguish *peshat* "as an exegetical methodology that is distinct from midrash" in Genesis Rabbah, and that this characterization is found in many rabbinic texts. For Lockshin, *peshat* connotes a greater sensitivity to literal meaning ("'Peshat' in Genesis Rabbah," 218). While there are refined discernments in Lockshin's study, I do not believe the terms *mamash* and *vaday* should be taken as equivalent to "literal." In the examples provided, the assertions are just as imaginative and missing from the biblical text as more elucidatory midrashim. That is, the meanings asserted with *mamash* are just as absent from the text as are expansive parables. Lockshin's conclusions notwithstanding, there is no sense that *derash* is distinct to certain kinds of texts and not others, and the same could be said for *peshat* meaning, even based on Lockshin's definition. Since there is no explicit distinction in Genesis Rabbah itself, the approach to each passage sees all potential meanings as equally midrashic. On this theme, see Richard Kalmin's critique of Yonah Fraenkel's definition of midrash in "The Modern Study of Ancient Rabbinic Literature: Yonah Fraenkel's Darkhei Ha'aggadah Vehamidrash," *Prooftexts* 14, no. 2 (1994): 198–200.

41. José Faur, "Basic Concepts in Rabbinic Hermeneutics," *Shofar* 16, no. 1 (1997): 3.

Sira is not Scripture – it does not contain divine intentionality. Consequently, we are left to understand all aspects of the midrash that would appear to violate Ben Sira's adjuration as signaling something other than a contradiction. That is only possible if the authorial intent embodied within Scripture *includes* the discourse the rabbis provide. Differentiation, then, will be established through a discourse of authority rather than theme. By implication, Ben Sira sets up the darshan's normative argument that the mystic lacks the authority to elucidate their approach to cosmology because their meanings are not embodied in Scripture. As such, the prohibition in Ben Sira relates explicitly to the mystic's non-normative (i.e., non-midrashic) mode of discourse, while the darshan's exposition of pre-creation circumstances (GnR 1,4) proves to be altogether appropriate and solidly based on Scriptural proof texts.

Throughout Genesis Rabbah there is an aggressive demarcation of authoritative and non-authoritative meanings. The darshan is very aware that his concept of language and meaning only applies to Hebrew Scriptures and not other kinds of texts.[42] Discourse structure is not a neutral mode of expression; it is as instrumental in an authority's strategy for establishing normativity as anything related to content.[43] The mystic, however, relates to language usage quite differently, while also seeking to establish his authority. The incantations that populate his world are his own invention and consequently function at the most literal level imaginable. Misinterpretation, or misuse, results in a failure to achieve ascension into the celestial world.

BOURDIEU'S CONCEPTS OF SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Bourdieu did not dedicate an entire book specifically to the study of religion. This is because he saw religious discourse as falling under a broader category of political discourse rather than as a separate cultural phenomenon. Bourdieu discusses religion in the context of other fields and his discussions of other fields are frequently imbued with religious terminology. Hence, we read: "Religion and politics achieve their most successful ideological effects by exploiting the possibilities contained in the polysemy inherent in the social ubiquity of the

42. On this theme, see Faur, "Basic Concepts in Rabbinic Hermeneutics"; David H. Aaron, "The Doctrine of Hebrew Language Usage," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan Avery-Peck, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2000), I, 268–88; II, 202–11; "Language and Midrash," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan Avery-Peck, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 400–411.

43. See the discussion in David J. Halperin, "A New Edition of the Hekhalot Literature," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 3 (1984): 549, who notes that "it is far from obvious that the 'how-to' aspect of the celestial journey will fit the role of center" in the Hekhalot material.

legitimate language."[44] By "legitimate language" – frequently referred to as "standard language" – Bourdieu has in mind the form of discourse stipulated as legitimate by whatever social or political entity has the power to make such a designation. Already in this simple framing we recognize the potential for seeing midrashic discourse as an engagement with the polysemy Bourdieu associates with legitimate language. It is, in effect, a controlled polysemy. Bourdieu, to a large extent following Foucault, recognized that we need to emphasize *language as discourse* over language as an independent symbolic system. "What circulates on the linguistic market," he suggests, "is not 'language' as such, but rather discourses." Bourdieu elucidates how discourse is "stylistically marked" in the production process, permitting it to be distinguishable from common (natural) language usage "in so far as each recipient helps to *produce* the message which he perceives and appreciates by bringing to it everything that makes up his singular and collective experience."[45]

Midrashic discourse is stylistically marked through the use of genres and their corresponding rhetorical patterns. While many of the darshan's tools appear to be nothing more than formalisms, they collectively contribute to the system's ability to concretize and differentiate Rabbinism's forms of symbolic power. Formulaic expressions are, among other things, devised to signal interpretive procedures. Bourdieu argues that language's infinite generative potential, paired with its "originative capacity," permits highly distinguishable modes of discourse within any given language. The power of any social group is situated in its ability to produce what will be collectively recognized as the legitimate representation of existence.[46] At the same time, mastery of the literary form serves as a social and intellectual demarcation. Those who master and use the standard (legitimate) language are themselves "legitimate thinkers." For Rabbinism, one component of legitimacy entails controlling the production of images through the manipulation of biblical verses by requiring hermeneutic methods and their corollary formulaic modes of expression. Even if sages might come to identical "conclusions," their interpretations will be considered illegitimate if their discourse structure fails to conform to standardized practice.[47] As Bourdieu writes, "The right utterance, the one which is *formally correct*, thereby claims and with good chance of success, to utter what is right, i.e., what ought to be."[48]

The standardization of a discourse practice is not easily accomplished. Social

44. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 39.
45. Bourdieu, 39.
46. Bourdieu, 42.
47. See p. 166ff. See also Adiel Schremer, "Avot Reconsidered: Rethinking Rabbinic Judaism," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 3 (2015): 287–311, who attributes the structure of Avot to competing discourse structures (without using that terminology) associated with discrete schools.
48. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 41–42, emphasis added.

and intellectual homogeneity assures a group's chances of self-preservation, while also permitting variations of usage – creativity – without sacrificing linguistic coherence. The social process is circular. Social homogeneity may result from the use of standard language, and the strengthening of standard language promotes homogeneity. To secure power, a group must promote "new usages and functions" that become indispensable in the formation of a standard language. That standard language has the appearance of being impersonal, anonymous, and, above all, a natural development, while taking on the work of normalizing forms of literary productivity. The authors of Midrash Genesis Rabbah (as in other midrashim) aggressively sought to normalize a specific form of literary expression to promote what would be perceived as a standard treatment of biblical verses and to strengthen an association between authoritative interpretive practices and rabbinic power. Both the midrashim and the Hekhalot literature were targeted at the same intellectually elite stratum of Jewish society. The act of differentiation, therefore, was designed to take place within this singular class, region, and ethnicity.

Every struggle for symbolic power "unfolds between groups, defined by specific sets of capital and their relations to one another."[49] Bourdieu speaks of social, cultural (intellectual) and economic forms of capital.[50] Different groups endeavor to acquire symbolic power initially from within "existing rules," by maximizing the symbolic profit based on their capital assets. This vying for power does not, initially, question the basis upon which symbolic power is secured. Sometimes, groups seek to change the rules of discourse in their own favor. This might involve attempts to redefine how symbolic capital is granted, "so as to *increase the value* of their existing assets."[51] However, sometimes, in order to realign the basis for symbolic power, groups will foster new forms of capital that lie beyond normative notions of value. This approach enables them to promote their own qualities as the most valuable form of capital. In a sense, the group stops competing for symbolic power within the standard marketplace established by the normative forces and creates a parallel marketplace, with a distinctive social currency of exchange. This is not unlike the creation of crypto-currencies at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which serve as alternatives to nation-based currencies. The creation of an alternative system of capital takes shape when the mystic offers an "experience" as a gateway to knowledge (cultural capital) that is at odds with, or even violates, the normative modes of inquiry legitimized by Rabbinism. We can see mysticism

49. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 270.

50. The advantages of this approach over more standard Marxist thinking are manifold. But Bourdieu's ideas provide greater insight into exchange patterns in society that are non-economic. Bourdieu also permits us to avoid reductionist definitions.

51. Bourdieu, 475, emphasis added; see Pellandini-Simányi, "Bourdieu," 655.

as establishing forms of capital that simultaneously compete with and bypass older established forms.

The sage-disciple relationship, which is central to Rabbinism, functions as a major vehicle for the acquisition of cultural and intellectual capital. Avot's insistence that each aspiring sage is to establish for himself both a mentor and a study partner (1:6) is stipulated at the beginning of a long, arduous process of knowledge acquisition. The disciple is defined as a "servant" to his master-mentor (1:4). The former is to sit at the feet of the latter. In effect, the mentor-disciple structure establishes the dominant habitus that defines the status of individuals, using learnedness and other forms of accrued merit as modes of differentiation. (1:12). In this manner, Rabbinism emulated Stoicism and Epicureanism, among other Greco-Roman philosophical schools.[52]

In contrast, the Hekhalot literature provides an opportunity to bypass the need for this toilsome habitus, offering the practitioner rituals and incantations designed to gain power over the Prince of Torah.[53] Once achieved, that practitioner may instantly acquire encyclopedic knowledge of Torah and intimate knowledge of creation, even the Mishnah! (§303). As Rabbi Ishmael proclaims after receiving the gift from *Sar Hatorah*, "I never again forgot anything of what I heard from my master and from my learning."[54] This gift of knowledge did not come without protest from angels, as the Hekhalot authors anticipated the normative rejection of any system that would bypass the non-miraculous master-disciple process of Torah study.

Genesis Rabbah also makes clear that there is an antagonistic relationship between the angels and God in various matters related to creation. This is especially the case regarding the creation of Adam and Eve.[55] But in the Hekhalot literature, God rejects the contrarians – as he does in Genesis Rabbah – albeit for the sake of an outcome that would be anything but normative. Excited by Israel's newly professed love of Torah, God "eagerly offers them the praxis so that, if they merit it, every Israelite may become a sage."[56] So much for a rabbinic meritocracy! I will return below to passages in which GnR signals awareness of alternative models of knowledge acquisition that conflict with the prescribed sage-disciple paradigm.[57]

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52. On the sage-disciple relationship see Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*. Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), I, chap. 3; Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 30–34.
53. The Prince of Torah segment includes §§281–306. See Davila, *Hekhalot Literature*, chap. 3.
54. See the discussion in Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 420.
55. See especially GnR 8,5–8.
56. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature*, 164.
57. Swartz recognized that the *Sar Hatorah* material "bears on the question of the social and behavioral context of knowledge in societies informed by scholasticism." He argues that "we

The mystics are as much concerned with the values of esteem and influence as are others seeking to exercise rabbinic authority, but rather than compete in the accumulation of capital integral to the emerging normative Rabbinism, they invent a new form of capital. The social process is akin to printing a new currency. Unable to increase profits within Rabbinism's discourse structures, the mystic opts for alternative structures that compete in an altogether different sphere of values. Bourdieu discusses at length how "each [group] is trying to impose the *boundaries* of the field most favorable to its interests or . . . the best definition of conditions of true membership of the field (or of titles conferring the right to the status of writer, artist or scholar) for justifying its existence as it stands."[58] This summarizes quite succinctly what it taking place in the tension between authoritative rabbinic voices and those fostering a religious discourse we would recognize as mysticism.

CONSECRATED AVANT-GARDE VS. NEW AVANT-GARDE

There is a paragraph in Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art* that serves the student of religion quite well. All we need to do is swap out "the writer" for the role of the "sage" in rabbinic Judaism.

> One of the central stakes in literary (etc.) rivalries is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, that is, among other things, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who is authorized to call himself writer (etc.) or even to say who is a writer and who has the authority to say who is a writer; or, if you prefer, the monopoly of the *power of consecration* of producers and products. More precisely, the struggle between occupants of the two opposite poles of the field of cultural production has at stake the monopoly on the imposition of the legitimate definition of the writer, and it is comprehensibly organized around the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy.[59]

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cannot understand the substance of a culture's sacred teachings . . . unless we understand how that substance is conveyed through prescribed patterns of behavior, social institutions, and the advancement of ethos. This premise is implied in the use of the term "scholasticism" in his study (14). This insight is remarkably close to Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*, although there is no specific reference to his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

58. Pierre Bourdieu, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanual (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 223.

59. Bourdieu, 223.

Following Bourdieu, we might think of the mystic as the "new avant-garde" who stands against the "consecrated avant-garde." Frequently, the avant-garde is stigmatized by normative forms of religion as "heresy." Bourdieu writes:

> In the literary or artistic field, those last to arrive in the avant-garde may take advantage of the correlation which people tend to establish spontaneously between the quality of the work and the social quality of its public in order to try to discredit the work of the avant-garde already in the course of consecration, by attributing the lowering of the social quality of its audience to a renunciation or slackening of subversive intention. And the new heretical rupture with forms which have now become canonical may rely on a *potential audience* which expects of the new product what the initial audience expected of the product previously consecrated. The new avant-garde occupying the position . . . abandoned by the consecrated avant-garde will find it all the easier if it justifies its iconoclastic ruptures by invoking a return to the initial and ideal definition of the practice, that is to say, to purity, obscurity and to the poverty of its beginnings; literary or artistic heresy is made against orthodoxy, but also with it, in the name of what it once was.[60]

As noted, the specialized language code of midrash divorces language usage from everything linguists associate with natural language production. When this language game was first proposed, it constituted an avant-garde in search of a consecrated status. Eventually, Rabbinism would establish a learning system that permitted its discourse structures to acquire the sought-after symbolic power. "The code, in the sense of cipher, that governs written language, which is identified with correct language, as opposed to the implicitly inferior conversational language, acquires the force of law in and through the educational system."[61] Despite continued claims that midrash has its origins in oral traditions, the writing of midrash makes completely clear that it is first and foremost about promoting an ideological code in written form. That code is learned through a rigorous rehearsal process – what would amount to an "education system" in antiquity. No one thought in the form of a *petichtah*; no one would naturally converse using the terse, elliptical syntax of midrash. The codifiers of Midrash Genesis Rabbah were forging a "standard language" while constructing a literary form that employed a highly encoded discourse. This language and its discourse structures were constantly competing for the same symbolic power sought by alternative forms of discourse, one of which was mysticism. Rabbinism's literary forms would eventually facilitate

60. Bourdieu, 255.
61. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 49.

an unconscious submissive posture by those pursuing alternative forms. This implied that Rabbinism's forms of discourse had achieved legitimacy in a way not shared by other forms.

> All symbolic domination presupposes, on the part of those who submit to it, a form of complicity which is neither passive submission to external constraint nor a free adherence to values. The recognition of the legitimacy of the official language has nothing in common with an explicitly professed, deliberate and revocable belief, or with an intentional act to accept a 'norm.' It is inscribed . . . in dispositions which are impalpably inculcated, through a long and slow process of acquisition, by the sanctions of the linguistic market, and which are therefore adjusted, without any cynical calculation or consciously expressed constraint, to the chances of material and symbolic profit which the laws of price formation characteristic of a given market objectively offer to the holders of a given linguistic capital.[62]

Cultivation of these "dispositions" is for the purpose of symbolic profit. Bourdieu understood all social exchange contexts as involving cultural, social, and monetary capital.[63] Rabbis participated in each of these fields of exchange. Those responsible for the literary product now called *midrashim* sought to control *how* one would speak of any given topic. The standardization of the linguistic practice was akin to the establishment of a currency. Bourdieu is keenly aware of how the rhetorical structures contribute to the eventual dominance of a given discourse authority over other contenders. This dominance is not an act of charity or an uninterested development. Instruments of literary production, "such as rhetorical devices, genres, legitimate styles and manners and, more generally, all the formulations destined to be 'authoritative' and to be cited as examples of 'good usage,' confer on those who engage in it *a power over language and thereby over the ordinary users of language, as well as over their capital*."[64] The discourse of the darshan and the discourse of the mystic are in direct competition for control of the Jewish habitus.

The concept of linguistic capital adds the sense that language usage is neither natural nor governed consciously. "Standardization" emerges through those social or political factions that are able to dominate the proliferation of a given form of literature over time. Capital in Bourdieu's writings is always defined relationally to a field of practice; it serves as a form of symbolic power culturally, socially, and economically. Even monetary forms of capital only have power by virtue of the beliefs people hold regarding a currency's potency.

62. Bourdieu, 51.
63. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).
64. Bourdieu, 57–58, emphasis added.

Linguistic capital concerns the exertion of power through the control of discourse structures, which are always serving a larger social or cultural purpose. Language standardization – in Bourdieu's sense of this term – contributes to a group's ability to exert power over other forms of discourse. Linguistic capital is manifest through standardization, just as a currency's worth as an exchange vehicle is relative to the standardization of its usage. Achieving the unique powers granted by linguistic capital are parallel to controlling the value of a currency in an economic market. In the case of early Rabbinism, conflict unfolds among various elite groups, some of which found expression in literary contexts.[65] Both in the diaspora and in Roman Palestine, a newly devised form of Hebrew discourse came to dominate Rabbinic literature despite the fact that Aramaic and Greek had displaced vernacular forms of Hebrew in an increasingly polyglossic society. Even the invention of a formalized Rabbinic Hebrew constitutes the creation of a new form of cultural currency, intent on wielding symbolic power.

Bourdieu repeatedly emphasizes that those seeking to sustain a standardized language are engaged in a perpetual struggle against competing powers and natural forces. Having achieved legitimacy, a standardized discourse does not contain within itself the power required to ensure its own perpetuation over time. The dynamics of social reality result in a continuous process of creative production, necessitated by the "unceasing struggles between the different authorities who compete with the field of specialized production for the monopolistic power to impose the legitimate mode of expression."[66] The invention of rabbinic literature is the result of these unceasing struggles among various personalities and schools of thought to achieve a monopoly over the consecration of various forms of cultural capital. "When the only usable, effective capital is the (mis)recognized, legitimate capital called 'prestige' or 'authority,' the economic capital that cultural undertakings generally require cannot secure the specific profits produced by the field . . . unless it is reconverted into symbolic capital."[67] With this understanding of social dynamics, we are able to see how the rabbi and the mystic – parallel to the author or publisher or art critic – must vie for the accumulation of capital that "consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects . . . or persons . . . and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation."[68]

Ironically, the actual authors of Rabbinism's midrashic works remain

65. See Zeev Safrai's discussion of elite groups in "Rabbinic Recruitment."

66. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 58.

67. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 75.

68. Bourdieu, 75.

anonymous. The darshanim, through an intricate system of multi-generational attributions, substituted mythic figures from antiquity to account for the origins of exegetical insights. That strategy ascribed responsibility for the production of the currency and its value to figures whose mythical authority, established long ago, was unassailable. This stands in contrast to mystical texts, which are largely devoid of textual interpretation. Attributions are altogether fanciful. As noted above, there is a difference between those texts that employ the sages who also populate the midrashim, and those practices, more typical of the Second Temple period, that ascribe works to biblical characters. In the latter category falls Sefer Yetzirah, as its colophon reads: "This is the Letter Book of Abraham our Father, which is called The Rules of Creation (הלכות יצירה)." Both kinds of ascriptions are equally fictitious, and both seek symbolic power. Only the Hekhalot's fake attributions suggest a more direct adversary than that confronted by Sefer Yetzirah's author. Still, both authors endeavored to lend the newly fashioned work the capital of a historical figure whose accumulation of capital was well known.

As noted, central to Bourdieu's idea of symbolic power is the concept of "misrecognition." By this, Bourdieu defines underlying processes and generating structures of any field of discourse that "are not consciously acknowledged in terms of the social differentiation they perpetuate. . . ."[69] Misrecognition is a bit different from simply *being deceived*. This is because those who are dominated will over time internalize their condition of domination as normal, inevitable and natural, and through that internalization, contribute to the furtherance of misrecognition. In effect, one *learns to misrecognize* in such a way as to justify further investment in various forms of cultural capital. Of course, there is always someone who benefits from the perpetuation of misrecognition, which Bourdieu describes as "an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes and apprehends the social world as a natural world."[70] Mis-recognition, as a form of mis-cognition, leaves the perceiving (dominated) subject unaware that *they* are producing the meanings for what they think they are *intrinsically and naturally meaningful* forms of capital in the external world. Those acculturated to grasping what is "legitimate" or "normal" in their society do not want to know that the objects or individuals garnering the most power have gained that power by virtue of what Weber called "charisma," rather than through some natural value. Employing Weber's concept that the sociology of religion was part of a broader sociology of power dynamics in a society, Bourdieu suggests charisma fosters a belief in "legitimacy." As such,

69. Michael Grenfell and David James, *Bourdieu and* Education:Acts *of Practical Theory* (London: Falmer Press, 1998), 23–24.

70. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 141.

we can say that charisma and legitimacy are merely "the product of the countless crediting operations through which agents attribute to the object the powers to which they submit."[71] The internalization process results in those who are dominated imagining that they are generating an autonomous understanding of their own state-of-being. The specifics of this state-of-being are not fully defined by those who exert power over the dominated. Rather, the dominated, by virtue of their mindset, misrecognize their own circumstances in life. In effect, they contribute to the perpetuation of a group's power and the values associated with that group, without awareness of how political or religious creativity filters perceptions of reality. While the shaping of symbolic power undoubtedly entails acts of deception, misrecognition involves both a cognitive acquiescence and an active engagement on the part of those misrecognizing the sources of symbolic power.

Bourdieu relates to misrecognition as an everyday occurrence. For example, money requires an act of misrecognition. A piece of gold or a currency has absolutely no intrinsic value. Rather, the value emerges on the basis of a social arrangement that does not want participants in the marketplace to highlight the non-intrinsic value of a currency. Something is not recognized for what it is because the dominant system of meaning production controls *both* the production and processing of information. The same structure is evident within most religions. In Rabbinism, everything from esteem among sages and the population at large, to the acquisition of merit (*zekhut*) for entry into the world-to-come, entailed a system of exchange contingent upon the misrecognition of the religious system's procedures and forms of capital. Adherents perceive their fulfillment of mitzvot stipulated by authoritative rabbis as something beneficial to their future prospects for eternal life. They do not simultaneously recognize how the rabbinate's control over the *zekhut* system, manifest in the delineation of daily behaviors, sustains the rabbinate's social and religious dominance, which entails various forms of capital rewards – not just cultural, but also economic in nature.

Drawing from Weber's sociology of religion, Bourdieu would maintain that "all action is interested, including symbolic pursuits." All practices – political, religious, social, etc. – involve a logic of economic value within a much broader system of exchange. "All goods," regardless of whether they are material or symbolic, "present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation."[72] For a person to participate in any given exchange system, they must perceive that the system is functionally integrated among

71. Bourdieu, 141.

72. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 178. See also the discussion in David L. Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chap. 4.

all of the fields of practice comprising daily life. Humans do not experience the world in discrete fields. Exchange values, whether material (e.g., goods that can be exchanged) or symbolic (esteem, privileges, etc.), must be transferable or convertible among all fields of practice.

Aggadic discourse, rather than being ancillary to the halakhic project, provides those ideological foundations instrumental in the development of trust in a standard exchange system. Bourdieu identifies the object of social science as a "reality that encompasses all the individual and collective struggles aimed at conserving or transforming reality." The struggles take place among those who "seek to impose the legitimate definition of reality, whose specifically symbolic efficacy can help to conserve or subvert the established order." Consequently, a great deal is at stake in the control of aggadic lore, even though aggadah may appear irrelevant to the halakhic project most directly concerned with the regulation of social behaviors. Aggadah, by elucidating fields of practice that contribute to belief and value formation, fosters recognition (albeit, often through misrecognition) of legitimate social interactions.

The aggadah is but one of a number of literary tools employed by Rabbinism to impose definitions of legitimacy on social reality. In effect, the aggadic midrashim, as well as aggadic passages in the Talmud – all of which employ standardized rabbinic discourse structures – contribute to the way one conceptualizes and experiences the world. In this sense, both aggadah and halakhah foster a singular practice of misrecognition, without which the entire exchange system associated with Rabbinism would collapse. According to Bourdieu, this scenario for conserving or subverting an established order is replicated in all human societies; only the specific vehicles fostering misrecognition differ. I hope to show that this very concept is at work in Midrash Genesis Rabbah's combative stance against mysticism, not in terms of its themes, but in terms of the former's attempt to delegitimize the discourse structures employed by the latter.

FIELDS OF PRACTICE

"Mysticism" in this context is a label for what Bourdieu calls a field of practice. This is not in conflict with the common tripartite division of Jewish mysticism into theosophy, meditation/ contemplation, and theurgy. Each of these labels identifies a discrete field of practice, but in social contexts they are usually integrated in some fashion. That is, no field of practice constitutes a discrete, closed system. One advantage to Bourdieu's sociology of knowledge is that we do not need to think of Rabbinism and Mysticism as two different "movements"; rather, they are discrete *fields of practice*. Each field of practice bears its own habitus, while providing the tools needed for the acculturation of its practitioners.

Regarding creation mythology – the subject of this study – mysticism functions primarily through the use of language's theurgic rather than interpretive powers. The texts scrutinized below will employ language in an unconsecrated way, thereby representing "heresy" in the sense of an avant-garde at odds with legitimate language usage. When comparing the genres and formalisms of the midrashim to the aggadah of mystics, we uncover a rejection of those discourse structures rabbinates sought to standardize. The tension between the language of mysticism and the language of the darshan is enmeshed in a struggle over the form and character of Jewish society. Rabbinism, which is deeply invested in forming a social hierarchy of scholars that would eventually function more broadly in shaping Jewish society, devalues the mystical which privileges the individual's subjective experience – theosophic, ecstatic, and theurgic – and diminishes the sage's social capital by making them less integral to the religion's exchange system. Even as this is true, the core of the tension regards the formation of habitus. The language of mysticism rejects the social implications of a standardized language that yields a homogeneous mode of discourse.

Because theurgy will be a central component in discourse on the power of letters in creation, I wish to include Bourdieu's useful reflections on the destabilizing threat of magic for any established system of symbolic power. In the following paragraph, we can easily substitute the "mystic" for the "magician," and "theurgy" for "magic," to yield a description of what the Genesis Rabbah darshan is confronting in real time:

> In matters of magic it is not so much a question of knowing what the specific properties of the magician are, or those of instruments, operations and magical representations, but of determining the foundation of the collective belief, or, better, of the *collective misrecognition*, collectively produced and maintained, which is at the source of the power that the magician appropriates. If, as Mauss indicates, it is "impossible to understand magic without the magic group," it is because the power of the magician is a *legitimate imposture*, collectively misrecognized, and hence recognized. The artist who, in attaching his name to a *ready-made*, confers on it a market price which is not measured on the same scale as its cost of fabrication, owes his magic efficacy to a whole logic of the field that recognizes and authorizes him; his act would be nothing but a crazy or insignificant gesture without the universe of celebrants and believers who are ready to produce it as endowed with meaning and value by reference to the entire tradition which produced their categories or perception and appreciation.[73]

Especially powerful is the observation that the "mystic" must produce something that has meaning "by reference to the entire tradition which produced

73. Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 169.

[his] categories or perception and appreciation" (as suggested by Scholem, noted above). Without this kind of cultural anchoring, the mystic is unable to compete for social and intellectual capital. And yet, at the same time, the mystic is changing the rules of discourse, just enough to change the balance of assets enjoyed by those with the most power.

When framed according to Bourdieu's sociology of knowledge, we recognize that differences in discourse structures are frequently seized upon to construct what are meant to appear as unbridgeable chasms in social practices. This would be yet another instance of fostering misrecognition. What motivates differentiation is a desire for social control, which is always contingent upon who controls the standardization of discourse. Regarding mysticism within the Jewish community, we generally do not see a direct rejection of a specific religious insights.

All language usage deemed "legitimate" implicitly result in thoughts deemed legitimate, and the opposite is also the case. Categories such as legitimacy, truth, lucidity, as well as contrary concepts, such as heresy, falsehood, delusion, deception, etc., are never understood independent of a language game. In this sense, midrashic language, just as much as mystical discourse, is representational only internal to its own rules. Some philosophers of language would argue this is true of all discourse practices.

COMPETING OVER HABITUS: THE DARSHAN AND THE MYSTIC

Various adversaries, mostly only vaguely identifiable, are addressed by the darshan in Genesis Rabbah. The goal is always to optimize the hierarchy's hold on symbolic language and its accompanying power. This is especially difficult to achieve when other social groups employ the same lexicon but with different meanings.

The Hekhalot literature has been depicted as "so chaotic that it is no easy job to define a center for its content." Nonetheless, scholars identify two broad themes as dominating this literature's purpose.[74] There is an extended consideration of how a practitioner might ascend to the heavenly sphere to undergo a transformation into a "being of fire." This permits the sage to join the liturgical recitation of the angelic beings in the divine throne room. The ideal is to be seated on God's throne, possibly even in God's lap. The person successful in this ascension (or "descent to the chariot," as the text frequently depicts it), is granted an array of theurgic powers.

A second related theme involves an expansion of those magical powers by gaining control over angels, particularly the שר התורה (Prince of Torah),

74. Halperin, "A New Edition," 549.

who is able to "grant expertise in rabbinic Torah lore without the need for the normal arduous study."[75] The material treating control over the Prince of Torah takes "up at least as much space in the *Hekhalot* manuscripts as does the heavenly ascent," and consequently, the vision of God on the throne may be considered a step in the procurement of supernatural powers that provide extensive earthly benefits.[76]

The Hekhalot literature includes detailed instructions on how to achieve these goals. The ritual practices include recitations of refined poetry, lists of divine names, and nonsensical strings of phonemes (*nomina Barbara*). As Davila emphasizes in his contrast with Second Temple period apocalypses, the Hekhalot literature focuses on "this instructional material rather than on stories involving the adventures of its protagonists."[77] The great exception is the well-rehearsed story of the four sages who made the ascension to *pardes*.[78] Part of the extended narrative included in the Talmud is also included in Midrash Genesis Rabbah; it will be discussed below. Except for naming a small cluster of sages, the Hekhalot literature does not echo citation rubrics found in midrashic literature. And yet, one of its primary themes – awareness of and engagement with angels – will also find articulation in Genesis Rabbah (also noted below). This is not to say that the midrashic literature is a thematic variant of the Hekhalot writings. While judgments regarding the closeness or distance in thematic material may be a subjective discernment, the distinctiveness of a literature can be established on the basis of both thematic and structural characteristics. On the one hand, the physical intimacy expressed in the Hekhalot writings sound altogether distinctive, and yet in various midrashim God's communication of mitzvot on Sinai are described as taking places through kisses, invoking the verse, "Let him kiss me with the kisses from his mouth."[79] On the other hand, nothing could be more subversive of standard rabbinic discourse than a system that bypasses the learning of Torah through the master-disciple relationship that dominates the midrashim.

No one would think of Genesis Rabbah as a document focused on theurgy. However, the personal experience of God is not altogether foreign to the midrash, although the way of achieving this experience is radically different from anything depicted in the Hekhalot writings. The Hekhalot literature is

75. See the summary of these themes in Davila, *Hekhalot Literature*.
76. Halperin, "A New Edition," 549.
77. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature*, 2. But see, also, Ira Chernus's discussion of the ten martyrs story, Chernus, "Individual and Community."
78. b. Ḥagigah 14b–15a; Hekhalot Zutarti, §§338–39, 344–46, 348; G7; Merkavah Rabbah §§671–73;
79. See Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2,2; Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 22,3 (111a); Tanhuma *Vayeleh* 2, referenced and discussed in Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism: Studies in the History of Midrash* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 34.

principally a manual of magic. The ascension and the coercive powers over the Prince of Torah (and other angels and demons) are the result of a practitioner perfecting the rituals that can bend the nature of the world to the will of the sage. David Halperin interprets a number of passages as suggesting that once an individual has garnered control of angels through an ascension, he can sustain indefinitely his powers simply through daily recitation of various blessings.[80] This belief presents a massive challenge to any community seeking to establish standardized (legitimate) discourse structures in the formation of a dominant habitus.

The symbolic power of a discourse structure is meant to take hold of an audience. If you are only concerned with your own personal spiritual experience, you do not endeavor to write what we now have as the Hekhalot literatures. Even as a manual of magic, meant to serve the individual mystic seeking personal gain, the literature is deeply invested in fostering a genre of discourse that is in direct competition with the discourse structures of the midrashic literature. Chernus suggests the mystic saw himself as having a "responsibility to inform" the community regarding "events which occur in the upper world" so as to teach how engagements with communal prayer in the lower world can influence the celestial realm.[81] Itamar Gruenwald argues that the mystic was intent on teaching that common prayers, even those of the non-mystic, truly have celestial power. Extending this idea yet further, Arnold Goldberg suggested that the mystic was offering a new worldview, which suggested that heaven constituted a vast sacred region within the world that was readily accessible to those who were just.[82] Chernus would expand this thesis to argue that the redactor of Hekhalot Rabbati "certainly felt that the mystic's responsibility to his community must override any inclination toward secrecy; i.e., his communal responsibility must supercede his private esoteric concerns."[83]

There is certainly truth to the assessment that the mystic was not exclusively concerned with his private experience, but the argument that prayer on earth influences matters on high is not exclusive to the mystic. What is exclusive is the literary form and how it is used to establish habitus. That is what we find satirized in Midrash Genesis Rabbah. The emphasis on magic, the saliency of the individual's experience, and the subversive character of depicting control

80. Halperin, "A New Edition," 550.

81. Chernus, "Individual and Community," 256.

82. Arnold Goldberg, "Quellen und Redaktionelle Einheiten der grossen Hekhalot (1973)," in *Mystik Und Theologie Des Rabbinischen Judentums: Gesammelte Studien I*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Margarete Schlüter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 76: "Dieses Weltbild bezieht den Himmel wie einen unermesslichen sakralen Bereich in die Welt ein, der Himmel ist ja dem Menschen, der Seele des Gerechten, zugänglich geworden."

83. Chernus, "Individual and Community," 258.

over the Prince of Torah, are substantive ideological features that differentiate normative Rabbinism from mysticism. However, there are no direct refutations of the mystic's message or specific beliefs as there are with *minim* or other ideological challenges – both external and internal to the Jewish community. The thematic differences may provide the grounds for tensions, but ultimately, the conflict concerns symbolic power and the establishment of habitus. The rabbis present themselves as able to say pretty much anything the mystic can say, but their shaping of discourse is radically different. The mystic who does not present a challenge regarding habitus – that is, the mystic who does not write, or who does not inspire writing – is not the target of Genesis Rabbah's darshan.

THE ALPHABET OF CREATION

The power of letters in creation and, eventually, in magical formulae, is a prominent feature of Sefer Yetzirah. Tzahi Weiss argues that this difficult-to-date text does not employ any of the creation-related "methods that were known in rabbinic sources," including *gematria*, expositions on the final Hebrew letters, or a consideration of letter shapes. Instead, the focus is on the number twenty-two and various divisions of the letters into groups.[84] Greco-Roman sources are regularly analyzed for their influences on this work and these sources. Weiss distinguishes general alphabet mysticism from the writings that focus exclusively on the letters of the divine name. In this manner, the imagery in Sefer Yetzirah is so distinctive as to "not [be] a part of rabbinic literature," while the literature focusing on God's name is a rabbinic creation.[85]

The details regarding the functions of letters in Sefer Yetzirah and Midrash Genesis Rabbah differ considerably, but there is no reason to assume that what appears in the latter is "rabbinic" while what appears in the former is derived from non-Jewish sources. Both Midrash Genesis Rabbah and Sefer Yetzirah include adaptations of imagery contained in the cultural repertoire of Greco-Roman times, none of which has roots in anything we would recognize as distinctly "Jewish."[86] Thus, the discrepancy feels artificial. The biblical corpus contains nothing about the theurgic power of letters or their role in creation.

84. Weiss, *Sefer Yesirah*, 18. See Guy G. Stroumsa, "The Mystery of the Greek Letters: A Byzantine Kabbalah?," *Historia Religionum* 6 (2014): 35–43.

85. Weiss, *Sefer Yeṣirah*, 33. See b. Shabb. 104a and b. Ber. 56a.

86. There is an enormous literature on these commonalities and the debates continue. I treat this issue in my forthcoming work, *Subversive Principles: Toward an Ethics for Reading Avot*. See also Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Meṭaṭron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 41, no. 3 (2010): 323–65.

Nor is there any evidence from late Second Temple period that either the letters or the divine name, or the alphabet generally, functioned as elements in the creation of the world.[87]

The use of alphabet theory in midrash facilitates a profound misrecognition. The reader sees utterly foreign ideas as central to Rabbinism's conceptual structure. Whether that agenda was set by mystics or pagans and then adapted by Rabbinists cannot be determined. Ironically, sometimes Genesis Rabbah's discourse on letters is formulated as a polemic against Jewish adaptations of other Greco-Roman themes, and this is true in the context of other contrarian approaches. In effect, we often have Jews adopting Greco-Roman ideas combatting the ideas of other Jews who have adopted different pagan sources. There is, however, a difference in the debate with mystics. Whereas the rabbis often endeavor to argue against particular gnostic, sectarian, or Christian ideas directly, as noted, direct refutation of Jewish mystical ideas does not appear.[88] The midrash does not contain an overt refutation of anything like Sefer Yetzirah's peculiar ideology of letter theurgy, or for that matter, of anything at all. Of course, one might argue that this is because Sefer Yetzirah post-dates GnR. But the prevalence of alphabet magic in Greco-Roman circles (incantation bowls and other objects with writing) suggests the existence of this form of discourse long before Sefer Yetzirah.

Obviously, the power of letters as theurgic elements cannot predate the invention of the alphabet. Thus, while divine speech-acts were imbued with the power of creation already in Enuma Elisha, the magical powers of letters will only emerge with the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet by Aramaic dialects during the eighth century BCE. The idea that the letters constitute physical elements can be traced to Plato's *Timaeus* (48b), where fire, water, air and earth were thought of as "first principles and letters or elements of the whole."[89] Gershom Scholem already speculated that the idiom אותיות יסוד in Sefer Yetzirah was parallel to the Greek *stoicheia*, which connoted both letters and elements.[90] Weiss documents conceptual relationships between letters and

87. This stands contra Weiss (35), who suggests that a phrase in Jubilees 36 and in 1 Enoch indicate that it was by the name of God that "heaven and earth were created" (see Weiss, notes 8 and 9, delineated on p. 148). I believe the reading of the passage in Jubilees and 1 Enoch require reconsideration. Both passages involve swearing an oath by God's name. See Schneider, "Seventy Names," n. 60.

88. See note 1 above on the question of whether the adversaries, such as *minim* are themselves Jews or not.

89. Weiss, *Sefer Yesirah*, 19.

90. See the discussion in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 76–77, and in particular note 129 (p. 368), where Scholem makes clear that many expressions in Sefer Yetzirah suggest non-Hebrew roots, if for no other reason than their awkwardness as neologisms.

various forces of nature in Aristotle, Plutarch, Irenaeus and others.[91] However, Weiss suggests that the authors of Sefer Yetzirah did not adopt their ideas directly from Greek sources, but rather drew from Semitic language renderings, with Syriac as the most likely conduit.

The focus of the present argument is less concerned with the sources of Sefer Yetzirah than it is with the very notion that Midrash Genesis Rabbah was focused on presenting letter theory as an outcome of the rabbinic hermeneutic and its literary forms. The *petichta* and other narrative structures (e.g., מעשה היה, תנא רב פלוני, משל ל…) populate the literary units. These forms are altogether absent from the mystical literatures treating the same themes.

THE LETTERS, CREATION, AND THE JUVENILE INNOVATORS: GENESIS RABBAH 1§10–11

Sefer Yetzirah describes the creation of the world as resulting from "three groups of letters."[92] The discourse periodically includes biblical citations, but Sefer Yetzirah does not employ citation formulas in the highly disciplined fashion typical of the Genesis Rabbah discourse and other classical midrashim.[93]

91. See Weiss, *Sefer Yeṣirah*, chap. 1.

92. I will use the Hebrew text in Tzahi Weiss's Sefer Yesirah, which reflects Ms. Vatican 299/4, 66a–71b. Translations are based on those included in this volume by Peter A. Hayman, albeit, periodically with augmentation.

93. Consider that where they do appear, introductory locutions do not reflect the standardized practices in Genesis Rabbah. The erratic character of the citation formulas becomes evident with just a sampling of the first chapters. In ¶1 a fragment from Isaiah 57:15 appears as syntactically part of the author's own language. Ezekiel 1:14 first appears in ¶5 after the phrase שכך נאמר – an unusual formula in this corpus – but then again in ¶8 without an introductory formula. The formula שכך נאמר appears in *Tanna Debei Eliyahu Rabbah* once (9,1), and *Midrash Tanchuma* (Noach 3,10). Genesis 15:6 is quoted in ¶61 without a formula, but then the Aramaic term, דכתיב ("that it is written"), is used in the same pericope to quote Jeremiah 1:5. A section of Ps 93:2 is run into the narrative in ¶10, which is also the case with Job 37:6 in ¶13 and Ps 104:4 in ¶14. Similarly, ¶38 employs Ezekiel 3:12 without an introduction, but it does employ the predicational pronoun, "it is," to define the word "from his place." Material from Isaiah 57:15 and 6:3 appears in ¶56, but without citation formularies. Finally, ¶61 again includes the Aramaic phrase "that it is written." There are yet other locutions that appear to reflect phrases from biblical verses, but these are indiscernible from the author's own language choices (e.g., ¶47, Deut 33:27; ¶60 Qoh 7:14). The first nineteen paragraphs commence with a number, save for paragraph six, which begins, ומידתן עשר ("and their extent is ten"). Paragraphs 16 and 43 start with the near demonstrative followed by a number. Paragraphs 17–19 commence with "twenty-two letters"; paragraphs 23 through 31 begin with the words "three primary letters" (שלש אימות, literally, the "three maternals"), after which there are three paragraphs starting with the phrase "*He made [letter named] rule over [object named]*."

The theme of letters in creation is also part of the Genesis Rabbah's narrative (1§10–11), albeit with thematic concerns quite distinct from Sefer Yetzirah. In effect, the darshan's strategy involves two components: midrashic material that competes with mystical speculations on the function of letters during creation, and material that satirizes the mystic's enterprise. Here is 1§10, which belongs to the former category:

> (1§10a) R. Yonah in the name of R. Levi: Why was the world created by means of a *bet*? Just as a *bet* is closed on [three of] its sides, but open toward its front, so it is that you lack the authority (אין לך רשות) to expound concerning that which is above, below, before and after.
>
> (1§10b) Bar Qapara said: *Ask now regarding origins, which greatly preceded you, regarding the day God created man on earth, from one end of the heaven to the other; [has anything as tremendous as this since taken place or been heard of?*] (Deut 4:32). [You may expound] from the day upon which days were created; but you do not expound concerning what was before this time. *From one end of heaven to the other* you may investigate, but you do not investigate what lies beyond it.
>
> (1§10c) R. Yehuda b. Pazzi expounded on the act of creation in accordance with the interpretation of Bar Qapara.

There are a number of passages in the Talmudim as well as other midrashic anthologies that contain parts of this midrash, but each differs in significant ways.[94] It is beyond the confines of this study to consider how each passage crafts this theme, or to evaluate the shifts in themes that occur over the first five centuries of Greco-Roman rabbinic literature. I will note, however, that the Yeruslami (Ḥag. 77c) structures its discourse employing the rubric יכול ("I might have thought…"), while the Mishnah (Ḥag. 2:1) and Tosefta Ḥagigah (2:7) promote a generic and comprehensive condemnation of various interpretive acts. Literary characteristics that contribute to argument formation are not simply matters of stylistics. We learn from Bourdieu that the character of discourse reflects strategic maneuvering in the struggle for symbolic power. As such, the Yerusalmi and Genesis Rabbah do not simply repeat an earlier text; instead, they adapt sentiments and biblical materials that best facilitate the legitimizing of discourse.

The GnR darshan and their audience must already have a theory of letters as instruments of creation embedded in their conceptual structure for the passages in chapter one to make sense. The question, "Why was the world created by

94. For a comprehensive list, see Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "מה למעלה ומה למטה, מה לפנים ומה לאחור," in *ספר היובל ליחזקאל קויפמן: מחקרים במקרא ובתולדות האמונה הישראלית*, ed. Menahem Haran (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 112–21. Compare b. Shabb. 104a.

means of a *bet*?" would be meaningless without a belief that the presence of one, rather than some other, letter in God's creative speech act, was purposeful. The passage commences with a standard attribution, citing two generations of scholars. No biblical proof text functions at this stage, and for good reason. The polemical strategy entails a condemnation that is not going to be based on a midrashic expositional technique. The issue is *not* that human beings are unable to enquire as to primal happenings; rather, the darshan is going to argue that some people lack the authority to expound such things. The specific expression, employing second person address – "you lack authority" – should be seen as targeting any person who does not possess authority equal to that held by R. Yonah or his teacher, R. Levi. Bourdieu speaks of the "power to construct reality" as that which derives from a "gnoseological order," a control of knowledge that generates a "consensus on the sense of the social world," thereby sustaining the social order.[95] The generational transmission process is fundamental to the normative rabbinic enterprise. The terminology is specifically about authority and not about the epistemological possibility of knowing what is "above, below, before, after" (מה למעלה מה למטה מה לפנים מה לאחור). This last phrase also functions in Mishnah Ḥagigah (2:1 and see t. Ḥag. 2:7). As with the citation of Ben Sira above, the darshan has opted for a concept derived from non-biblical material so as to close off midrashic interpretation. Whether or not the Mishnah was the specific source for the darshan cannot be said; however, it is altogether clear that the Mishnah is not focused on establishing a hierarchy of authority. Here is the passage in question (emphasis added).

> One may not expound the topic of forbidden sexual relations before three [or more individuals]; nor may one expound the Creation Narrative before two [or more]; nor may one expound by oneself the Divine Chariot, unless one is a Sage and understands [its meanings] on his own. Whoever looks into four matters, it would have been better for him not to have come into the world: *what is above, what is below, what is before, what is after.* Whoever is not considerate regarding the honor of his creator, it would have been better for him not to have come into the world.

Tosefta Ḥagigah (2:7) similarly discusses what is "proper" to expound in various contexts. Authority is not mentioned in the relevant Tosefta passage either. The Mishnah's phrase, "whoever is not considerate regarding the honor of his creator" (שלא חס על כבוד קונו), might signal a specific form of interpretive

95. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1979), 79–80. See the discussion of how a gnoseological order functions in contemporary European political discourse in Ismael Cortés Gómez, "Antigypsysm as Symbolic and Epistemic Violence in Informative Journalism in Spain, 2010–2018," *Critical Romani Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 4–24.

effrontery, but the context is so vague as to leave the target unidentifiable. The introduction of the concept of authority for arriving at legitimate discourse about the opening passage of Genesis sets apart the darshan's usage of this material. The darshan does not simply anthologize; he shapes the material to serve their contextual purposes.

The concept of authority appears prominently in the Hekhalot literature. I believe a comparative study of the terms רשות and שלט with various usages in decidedly non-mystical texts is warranted. In the present context, I can only speculate that appeals to authority in mystical literature might best be seen as contrarian positions to more normative senses of Rabbinism's hierarchy. The same word used by two different factions signals the struggle for symbolic power. The exact expression, אין לך רשות, appears in a number of Hekhalot passages. In §93 we read: "R. Ishmael said: Thus they would teach regarding the Vision of the Chariot. One who apprehends the Chariot has no authority to stand except before three designates only: before the king, before the priest, and before the Sanhedrin…."[96] In §224 we are told that those who descend to the chariot *without authority* (שלא ברשות) will be beaten or killed by heavenly guardians. In §§656–57, the person who writes and speaks of the names of the angels that grants power can only do so when in possession of *authority*. I noted above that *Sar Hatorah* material presents angels as protesting God's willingness to offer encyclopedic knowledge on the basis of ritual practices. Might those angels be allegorically representative of more mainstream rabbinic ideology? The focus on authority as central to the possession of Torah is shared by normative Rabbinism and the mystic; however, what constitutes authority and who possessed it are not at all aligned.[97]

Bar Qapara is then depicted as offering a verse from Deuteronomy. I have deliberately translated the phrase כִּי שְׁאַל־נָא לְיָמִים רִאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר־הָיוּ לְפָנֶיךָ as "Ask now regarding *origins*, which greatly preceded you," where the words, "first days" is understood by the darshan to mean "origins [of creation]" rather than the generic expressions of modern English translations (e.g., "days past" (JPS 1917); "bygone days" (JPS 1985)). Conceptually, this verse treats both space and time, and in that sense echoes the four words of the first pericope (and Mishnah) – above, below, before, after. The effect of Bar Qapara's exposition is clear enough:

96. The phrase החושש במרכבה is difficult. Smith renders this "he who beholdeth the Merkabha," but that requires a rather long stretch from the basic meaning of חשש, which is to worry, fear, be apprehensive, or even sense; Morton Smith, trans., "Hekhalot Rabbati: The Greater Treatise Concerning the Palaces of Heaven" (2013), http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/HekRab/HekRab.pdf ad loc.

97. For a comprehensive consideration of the themes discussed here, see the sensitive reading of Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), especially chapter six, and in particular, 186–90 regarding the Haggigah passage.

here we have a *proof text* for the mishnaic sentiment, but the discourse is left disjunctive lest it appear as if one can interpret the words above, below, before, and after midrashically. That is not about to take place. We are told R. Yehuda b. Pazzi conformed to this stricture, but why R. Yehuda, and why this is tagged onto the end of Bar Qapara's exposition, remains ambiguous.

Genesis Rabbah then continues with an additional exposition on the letter *bet*, associating the world's origins with "blessing." This passage identifies the *minim* as motivation for avoiding the use of *aleph* as the first letter of Torah, since the word "curse" also uses *aleph* as its first letter. This unit would appear to address a dualistic worldview, which sees physical creation as corrupt and inferior to the existence of the incorporeal world. I will not consider here the question of whether the *minim* are Jews gone astray or other religious sectaries. Jewish mysticism also contains its share of dualistic thinking, including the depiction of the world as having a greater and lesser ruler, Yahweh and the "smaller lord (אדני בקטן)... who is greater than any of the ministering angels" (§295). What is relevant for our purposes is that God is understood to employ words with specific letters so as to imbue the world with certain characteristics. Underlying the passage is the conviction that all meanings are encoded in the text regarding every imaginable issue that might arise in history. This, too, is an alternative theory of letters not explicitly offered in Sefer Yetzirah or other mystical sources. Access to these encoded meanings is only possible by means of Rabbinism's exegetical practices, and not by the gift of a revealed secret. In the Hekhalot literature we read that "the name by which heaven and earth were created" is a "wonderful and strange and great secret" (רז) which was revealed by God to Moses, and via Metatron to subsequent sages (e.g., §§166, 198, 201) (הרזים בסתורי), 278, etc.). Rabbinism sticks with its dialectics and eschews revelations.

In an ensuing passage, the letter *aleph* is depicted as lodging a complaint with God, told in the name of R. [El]azer bar Avinah in the name of R. Aha.

> [The letter *aleph*] said before Him: Master of the Universe, I am the first of the letters but you did not create your world using me. How come? The Holy One blessed be He answered him: The entire world and its contents was only created for the sake of Torah. Tomorrow, I am set to give my Torah at Sinai, and I will be commencing [the act] with nothing other than you, [by using the words] *I* (אנכי) *am the Lord your God* (Exod 20:2).

The personification of the letter *aleph* is similar to the personification of reified attributes. Only, in the case of the latter, the reifications of grace (*hesed*), truth, righteousness, and peace also represent ministering angels (מלאכי השרת).[98]

98. E.g., GnR 8,5.

This passage is meant satirically, with the complaint of a letter being akin to a whining angel. I do not believe we have adequate information to map the allegory onto a historical circumstance. A study analyzing the structural patterns of polemics remains a desideratum. Admittedly, the genre markers are not as strong as those in 1§11:

> R. Simon in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi. The rule was given to Moses at Sinai, that [the letters] מ נ צ פ כ [should assume different forms at the ends of words.] R. Yirmiya in the name of R. Hiyya bar Aba: This is what Seers instituted. It once happened on a rainy day, the sages did not come to the House of Assembly. Some youngsters were there and [seeing that the sages weren't coming] they said, Come let us engage in visions (בואו ונעסוק בצופים). They said, What is the reason that there are two *mems*, two *nuns*, two *tzadis*, two *peys*, two *kafs*? This teaches [that Torah was transmitted] from Utterance to utterance, from Faithful to faithful, from Righteous to righteous, from Mouth to mouth, from Hand to hand, i.e., from the Hand of the Holy One, blessed be He, to the hand of Moses. [The sages subsequently] took note of them and they developed into great learned men in Israel. And there are those who say that these children were R. Eleazar, R. Yehoshua and R. Aqiva. To them they applied the verse: *Even a child is known by his actions*. (Prov 20:11)

The author of this unit consciously manipulates standard meanings of themes and words in order to signal satirical intent. The passage must be taken as a literary unit, with each component serving a discrete purpose in constructing the overarching argument. The unit commences with a standard attribution, after which an abrupt but simple assertion follows: the stipulation that certain letters would have final forms at the ends of words was determined when Torah was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. No context for this assertion is provided. The purpose of the disclosure becomes clear in what follows. In effect, the darshan is sustaining the treatment of letters commenced in 1§10, but without a thematic segue.

At this point, a somewhat contrary position is articulated by R. Yirmiya, which holds that the provision regarding final letters was instituted by *tzofim* (sometimes rendered, "watchmen"), as if to suggest that it was not determined at Sinai. *Tzofim* may also signify prophets (e.g., see Avot d'Rabbi Natan A, ch.34), but we also note that the letters צ.פ.מ are three of the five letters bearing final forms. But the debate over who the *tzofim* were is hardly the purpose in the current passage. Discussing a parallel passage in b. Shabbat 103a–104a, Albert van der Heide suggests that the concern here is a myth that teaches final letters were stipulated at Sinai, but then fell into disuse. Rather than portray the prophets (*tzofim*) as independently innovating an aspect of the text written by

the hand of God, the prophets are portrayed as reinstating what was temporarily lost.[99] This legend is not needed for the GnR passage to make sense.

While of interest in their own right, each of the passages discussed by van der Heide (and others) pertaining to the wonderous inventions of these children are contextualized on the basis of decidedly different purposes. The first two pericopes in GnR serve as introductory material to the main story. The darshan wants to exploit the concept of final letters and the ambiguous term *tzofim*, but he will use these characteristics in a unique satirical manner that is not reflected in other passages employing the theme of precocious children.

How are we to know this is satirical? The situation described in Genesis Rabbah is utterly ridiculous. We are told that on a certain rainy day (יום סגריר) the sages did not bother to show up for work. In the Bavli, the story about "creative children" plays out without any hint of satire. "They said to R. Joshua ben Levi: One day children came to the house of study and said things the likes of which were not said even in the days of Joshua ben Nun." There follows a series of exegetical expositions that are commonly called *notariqon*, which involves interpreting the letters of a word as standing for an entire phrase.[100] Nothing here suggests a critique; no other characters are involved with the episode. We are not told why the children should just happen to begin expounding the meanings of words in this inspired manner.

In great contrast, our Genesis Rabbah narrative has the children playing a game in the absence of their teachers – exactly what we would expect children to do in the absence of supervision. Only their game looks nothing like normal childhood play. The darshan specifically manipulates the meaning of the pivotal term *tzofim* in the phrase "let us engage in visions" (בואו ונעסוק בצופים). The sentiment could alternatively be rendered, "let's play mystic!" or alteratnively, let's *speculate*. The preposition on *b'tzofim* takes the word commonly thought to designate seers or prophets, and makes it *something one does*. The game the children play is meant to emulate their teachers' behaviors. They ask: Why do five of the Hebrew letters have different forms at the ends of words? Words are then identified for each letter that are pertinent to the transmission of Torah from God to Moses: utterance (מאמר), faithful (נאמן), righteous (צדיק), mouth (פה), hand (כף). The children cleverly find words for each double-form

99. Albert van der Heide, "'Mem and Samekh' Stood by a Miracle: The Sugya on the Hebrew Script (Shabbat 103a–104a)," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 38/39 (2005): 137–43, b. Shabb. 104a, noting parallels with b. Meg. 2b–3a; y. Meg. 1:11 (71d); Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer 48 (116a). The theme of languages, or aspects of languages falling into disuse can be traced back to Second Temple period literature. Regarding the loss and revival of Hebrew, see David H. Aaron, "Judaism's Holy Language," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner, vol. 16. New Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 72–74.

100. van der Heide, "'Mem and Samekh' Stood by a Miracle," 140.

letter, relying upon nothing other than their imagination. There is no proof text, which is ostensibly the problem with what these youngsters would hear when their teachers manage to show up. Utterance, mouth, and hand all have to do with transmission of information (speech and writing); faithfulness and righteousness describe the figures involved, only in this case, the children must be referencing their teachers.

In contrast to the derelict teachers, at least some of the children are identified as becoming legitimate sages in Israel. We are meant to understand that these children are more dedicated than their mentors, who were dissuaded from fulfilling their obligation to teach the next generation by something as trite as inclement weather. Their physical absence symbolizes a critique of their instructional content. In contrast to their absent teachers, the children do the right thing. They envision the purpose of letters at the moment Torah was given by God to Moses. The Yerushalmi (Meg. 71d) adds a phrase which emphasizes how the destiny of Torah learning was placed in the hands of children: דלא יבטל נעביד בית וועדא, "let's play House of Assembly, so that [Torah learning] is not lost." But the GnR darshan does not include this step. I would suggest that he is less concerned with the children's accomplishment than he is with the teachers' failures and questionable teachings.

While the children offer a meaningful adaptation of the letter theme, this passage has absolutely nothing to do with the creation theme. The sole purpose is to satirize the fanciful treatment of letters, which in other contexts – particularly the proto-literary forms of Sefer Yetzirah – is related directly to the creation of the world. Here we learn that letter-play is child's play, even if it was performed by the likes of Eleazar, Yehoshua, and Aqiva – as youngsters.[101]

RABBI JOSHUA AND BEN-ZOMA: GENESIS RABBAH 2§4

Yet another instance of satire is found in the frequently rehearsed story of ben-Zoma seated before Rabbi Joshua and his disciples (GnR 2 §4, Theodor-Albeck edition, 17, 4ff.). Because of the numerous ambiguities, scholars have frequently conflated the GnR version with relevant passages in the Talmudim and Tosefta, thereby producing a composite reading.[102] There are, however, significant differences among the versions, prompting Halperin to suggest

101. Although there are scholars who date the material included in *The Alphabet of Rabbi Aqiva* to earlier periods, this midrash, in its current form, is most certainly a post-Gaonic document and thus will not be considered here. See Gabrielle Oberhänsli-Widmer, "Der Alphabet-Midrasch des Rabbi Aqiva (Frühes Mittelalter)," *Kirche und Israel* 33, no. 1 (2018): 56–72.

102. Parallel passages include t. Hag. 2.6; y. Hag. 77b; b. Hag. 15a.

that the GnR version is derived from a separate branch of the tradition, which he claims was independent of the others.[103] In contrast, Deborah Middleton argues that the differences "between Midrash Rabbah and the other accounts in the main consist of those of context and embellishment; thus to regard the version found in Midrash Rabbah as a separate branch of tradition is, to some extent, an exaggeration."[104] Middleton does not relate to this passage as "a mystical type of speculation," but interprets its inclusion in GnR as indicative of standard rabbinic exegesis on Genesis 1.

The GnR darshan is consciously manipulating their literary source to signal that he is satirizing a mystic's trance. Midrashic passages concerned with a sage's behavior rather than their intellectual expositions exemplify dramatic discourse structures that are to be distinguished from normative midrashic practices. Joshua Levinson, and, before him, Henry Fischel, among other scholars, have drawn numerous parallels between rabbinic literature and Greek literary prototypes, emphasizing the genre characteristics over direct thematic borrowing.[105] If nothing else, we should see the theatrical concern of this passage's plot as reflecting a sensitivity to the structural components that yield satire. Even the conclusion regarding ben-Zoma's demise is spoken by R. Joshua rather than told by the narrator. This passage constitutes an original satirical adaptation of a story that served other purposes in other contexts. Here is the text as it appears in GnR along with my translation, arranged on the basis of its dialogical structure:

כבר היה שׁמעון בן זומא יושב ותוהא
עבר ר׳ יהושׁע שׁאל בשׁלומו פעם ופעמיים ולא השׁיבו בשׁלישׁית השׁיבו בבהילות
אמר לו מה זו בן זומא מאיין הרגלים
אמר לו לא מאיין ר׳
אמר לו מעיד אני עלי שׁמים וארץ שׁאיני זז מיכאן עד שׁתודיעני מאיין הרגלים
אמר לו מסתכל הייתי במעשׂה בראשׁית ואין בין מים העליונים לתחתונים כב׳ וג׳ אצבעות

103. David J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven:, CT American Oriental Society, 1980), 98.

104. Deborah F. Middleton, "Whence the Feet," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985): 62.

105. Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy. A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings*. Studia Post-Biblica, v. 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1973); "The Uses of Sorites (Climax, Gradation) in the Tannaitic Period," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973): 119–51; *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York: KTAV Pub. House, 1977); Shamir Yona, "Rhetorical Features in Talmudic Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 77 (2006): 67–101; see especially, Joshua Levinson, "The Tragedy of Romance: A Case of Literary Exile," *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 3 (1996): 227–44; Joshua Levinson, "Enchanting Rabbis: Contest Narratives between Rabbis and Magicians in Late Antiquity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (2010): 54–94.

ורוח אלהים מנשבת אין כתוב כאן אלא מרחפת כעוף שפורח ומרפרף בכנפיו וכנפיו נוגעות ואין נוגעות

נהפך ר׳ יהושע ואמר לתלמידים הלך לו בן זומא ולא שהו ימים קלים ובן זומא בעולם

There is the incident of Shimon ben-Zoma, sitting[106] entranced.
R. Joshua happened to pass by and asked regarding his wellbeing once, a second time, and still no answer. He asked a third time; [ben-Zoma] answered startled.
He said to him: What's going on ben-Zoma? What's with your feet?
He responded to him: Not out of nothingness, Master.
He said: I swear by heaven and earth, I'm not going to move from here until you tell me what's wrong with your feet.
He said: I was contemplating the act of creation. Between the upper and lower waters there is only about a two or three finger widths. It is not written, the spirit of God blows, but rather, it hovers like a gliding bird who flaps its wings, but its wings barely touch [the waters].
R. Joshua turned and said to his disciples, ben-Zoma has lost it. Barely a few days had past and ben-Zoma was [no longer][107] in the world.

My focus here will be on the function of this story as satirizing what the Rabbinites take to be an illegitimate form of religious contemplation. But it is not the contemplation per se that troubles the Rabbinates; it is the behaviors that flow from it. What differentiates my reading from others is the focus on how the author crafts a discourse structure that serves to discredit certain behaviors. Discussions of this material by Lieberman, Urbach, Halperin, Segal, and others, concern how this passage intersects with the themes of creation ex nihilo, Sethian Gnostics, Jewish and non-Jewish cosmologies, even dualistic conceptions of heaven and earth. Scholars endeavor to link the specific locutions to various theories of creation.[108] Middleton argues that the passage is meant "as a warning to those who would occupy their minds with speculation on the

106. The Theodor-Albeck version reads עומד ותוהא, but there are a few editions that have "seated" יושב rather than "standing." This reading is to be preferred in order to fully appreciate the misunderstanding about the meaning of the word "feet." It is likely that other uses of the passage did not require this paranomasia as keenly as this satirical version.

107. One manuscript variant includes "no longer" (אינו בעולם), but according to Theodor-Albeck, the expression should be understand as a euphemism. Other passages discussed by Theodor-Albeck have more explicit expressions; see the notes ad loc., p. 18.

108. Saul Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 138–39; Efraim E. Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1979), 189–93; Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, 98; Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism*. Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, v. 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

subject of Creation." How can that be when every passage in GnR 1–11 adeptly speculates in one way or another on matters related to creation? Rather than focus on the thematic content, I will emphasize the literary effects, hoping to show that while subject matter frequently differentiated mystics from normative Rabbinates, the tensions were most prominently framed around the problem of authority. The story is meant to divide authoritative from non-authoritative forms of discourse about creation for the sake of establishing symbolic power relevant to biblical interpretation.

None of the ideological principles at play are nearly as important as the humiliation of the protagonist, who has fallen under the influence of the wrong sages. Nothing articulated in this passage by ben-Zoma, who never enjoys the title "Rabbi" anywhere in rabbinic literature, is particularly radical. What is off is his behavior. Liebes noted that ben-Zoma's behavior, in failing to stand before his elder, R. Joshua, suggests impertinence.[109] The passage is rife with word play and buffoonery. While the literary tools promote a comedy, the episode ends as a tragedy, a heuristic warning to all those attracted to non-legitimate forms of religious behavior.

The episode is situated outdoors. Ben-Zoma is sitting in public, such that R. Joshua could happen by, accompanied by his disciples. The presence of the disciples only becomes clear at the very end, but their role is fundamental to the unfolding of the episode. For ultimately, this is about authority and legitimacy and its role in public. R. Joshua will pronounce ben-Zoma lost, not in theory, not abstractly, but consequentially to disciples of ben-Zoma's generation. His pronouncement becomes reality. Everything that transpires in the episode is designed to illustrate how this young sage has departed from the sanctioned forms of speech and interpersonal interactions.

R. Joshua should not be the first person to speak. In the event that a master is walking along, the disciple should rise and greet the master. In this case, ben-Zoma shows no cognizance whatsoever of R. Joshua's presence. Questions ensue. With the third attempt to gain ben-Zoma's attention, R. Joshua asks "What's with your feet?" The expression is strained because the author seeks a play on the word מאין.[110] In the current context, the word can be read as an interrogative (what or where) or it can be read as "from nothingness." R. Joshua is simply trying to understand why ben-Zoma has failed to stand, jumping to the conclusion that there must be something wrong with his feet that would prevent him from standing. At that point, ben-Zoma moves into his own narrative, suggesting that the young sage is unaware of his having failed to respond appropriately to R. Joshua. He relates to the expression "What's with

109. Yehuda Liebes, *חטאו של אלישע: ארבעה שנכנסו לפרדס וטבעה של המיסטיקה התלמודית* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986), 130.

110. Henry Fischel sees this as drawing from the genre of Greek literature that ridiculed philosophers, and particularly Epicureans, as being absentminded, in *Rabbinic Literature*, 79.

your feet?" as meaning figuratively, "the basis out of nothing," or something like that. Ben-Zoma replies, לא מאיין ר׳, "Not out of nothingness, Master." The disjunctive discourse is sustained by the two figures failing to communicate, as R. Joshua asks one thing and ben-Zoma answers as if he had asked something else. This creates the quasi-comical tension within the narrative. Each stage of the exchange fails to constitute real dialogue.

After saying, "not out of nothingness," ben-Zoma launches into an exposition of the expression רוח מרחפת, which constitutes a second non-sequitur. He suggests that these words symbolize the hovering of God's spirit in the manner of a bird lightly flapping its wings. While not explicitly referenced, the imagery is likely based on Deuteronomy 32:11, which describes the eagle fluttering or hovering over its young (על גוזליו ירחף). On the surface, nothing in this imagery is particularly startling. But perhaps we are meant to see the "young" as disciples like ben-Zoma, who are protected by their senior sages. What is disconcerting is the failure of the interlocutors to communicate. The sequence of non-sequiturs negates the possibility of an intelligible response. The master turns to his disciples and condemns what they have just witnessed. Ben-Zoma is lost, figuratively and also literally. The discourse structure assumes that of a dialogue, but communication never takes place. The two characters are speaking on completely different planes.

Deborah Middleton argues that the phrase "Whence the Feet" is an idiom through which R. Joshua is asking, "What is the basis of your speculation or exposition; that is to say, what is it founded on?"[111] Furthermore, Middleton argues that R. Joshua found ben-Zoma's "exegesis . . . to be in error" so that "Ben-Zoma's death came as a direct result of his exposition." This interpretation, and many like it, would have R. Joshua engaging with ben-Zoma regarding some exegetical exercise. I would suggest the darshan's strategy is quite different. R. Joshua is exclusively interested in why ben-Zoma failed to behave appropriately. His unfitting comportment before an authority figure signals the problematic path taken by the young disciple. The entire episode is about two religious schools struggling for symbolic power. R. Joshua becomes the archetype for master-disciple normativity; ben-Zoma serves as the exemplar for non-conformity. The story is altogether reliant on a well-established cultural repertoire that clarifies the origins of the paradigms represented by both characters. That is why the discourse can be so cryptic. Or put differently: the discourse is only cryptic if an interpreter lacks the requisite cultural repertoire. That is true of all textual interpretation, but it is especially problematic when the poetics of a passage is structurally contingent upon highly nuanced implicatures. As Sperber and Wilson have made clear, "The more information [an author] leaves implicit, the greater the degree of mutual understanding she makes it manifest that she

111. Middleton, "Whence the Feet," 63.

takes to exist between her and her [audience]."[112] Irony, which is the poetic tool employed at the end of this passage, here entails a kind of hyper-critical or even scornful attitude. "The most common use of irony is to point out that situations, events, or performances do not live up to some norm-based expectation."[113] This is the function of the ben-Zoma passage. The norm-based expectation, however, is not predominantly related to the content of ben-Zoma's interpretation of "spirit hovers"; rather, its his behavior before the esteemed sage, Rabbi Joshua, that violates the convention valued by the darshan. The passage departs partially from its poetics of irony with the concluding words regarding ben-Zoma's demise. I say "partially," because the ideas are meant to be taken literally. The darshan signals the figurative overtones of the entire passage by proclaiming his death through euphemism. Nothing in the passage is conveyed using expressions that can be taken literally, but the sum of the parts is meant to be taken as hyper-literal. Symbolic power is never exercised ironically.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON BOURDIEU AND THE HISTORY OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

I would take as axiomatic the assertion that all writing is about *being read*, and that the desire to be read stems from the desire to have an impact on the reader – and often, a community of readers. In this paper, I have endeavored to depict the earliest writings thought to comprise "Jewish mysticism" as functioning within a field of cultural production that is occupied by other competing forms of writing. This is hardly a radical idea, but it shifts the emphasis considerably. Communities that occupy different fields of practice do not compete over symbolic power. I am suggesting that the darshan and the mystic are, indeed, in direct competition. That is also not an original idea, but by employing Bourdieu's sense of symbolic language, I hope to have shown how certain passages in Genesis Rabbah can be read as ironic addresses to questions of social authority. This is not to say that interpretations that emphasize the cosmological themes populating Genesis Rabbah should be displaced; rather, this is a matter of augmenting our understanding of the purpose of the midrash, based on an understanding of the darshan's polemical struggle to sustain their hold on symbolic power. I have also tried to recontextualize the purpose of this aggadic literature as related to the strengthening of habitus. The concept is enough to shift the discourse away from "religious phenomena," or questions of epistemology, so as to freely recontextualize the relationship between so-called "Rabbinism" and "mysticism" as one that unfolds in a single field of practice.

112. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 218. See also their treatment of this theme in *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 118–22.

113. Wilson and Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance*, 127.

Within that field, both forms of literature – that of the darshan (as the Rabbinist writer) and that of the mystic – are in competition for control of habitus.

For Bourdieu, all struggles over identity entail conflicts over the classification of people. The composition of any piece of literature contributes to that struggle, by endeavoring to establish a monopoly over the ability to "make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the di-visions of the social world, and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*."[114] We can represent the Rabbinism reflected in midrashic literature in any number of ways; and we can imagine the work of the individual mystic as a kind of liminal religious practice or as an attempt to influence the gnoseological order exclusively among adherents. This study endeavors to see the function of both of their literary contributions not in terms of how they worked internal to their respective reading communities, but by depicting them as competing over habitus within the same field of production.

What is at stake between the darshan and the author of a work like the Hekhalot, "is the power of imposing a vision of the social world through principles of di-vision which, when they are imposed on a whole group, establish meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity, and the identity of the group."[115] The "mystic" does not, according to such a depiction, produce "esoterica" while the darshan produces only "exoterica." I have suggested that the themes of both the darshan and the mystic are hardly discernible vis-à-vis this arbitrary distinction. What does differentiate the groups these figures represent are their literary and social practices. Practice is, by its nature, objectively neutral. The darshan offers a mode of religious practice that is no less "religious" or a "practice" than what the mystic offers. The historians decide to employ differentiating terms, not the practitioner, unless that practitioner is aware of their own participation in a struggle for legitimacy. If such consciousness is, in fact, in place – which should always be the case when group identity is concerned – then Bourdieu's understanding of this struggle provides us with a very powerful way of describing the historical phenomenon under consideration. The so-called mystic's writing would turn out to be as much about control of the habitus as that of the darshan's. As such, we reframe the relationship of their literary output as constituting two bodies of literature enmeshed in a sustained social conflict. This is surely not a matter of displacing scholarly insights regarding intellectualized categories, such as esoterica and exoterica. Rather, this is to supplement such insights through Bourdieu's approach, which enables us to analyze the forces behind the production of cultural artifacts. Bourdieu

114. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 221, emphasis in the original.

115. Bourdieu, 221.

has us exposing why they look the way they do – that is, exposing the *practice of the authors* within a world strained by multiple creators seeking legitimacy simultaneously within a single field of production.

I have analyzed the satirical depiction of alphabet aggadah and the behavior of ben-Zoma in Midrash Genesis Rabbah as part of the darshan's desire to impose a vision of the social world on a society that was intensely involved in acts of differentiation. Of course, Bourdieu would argue that all societies are constantly involved in sustaining acts of differentiation. Indeed, the moment any given community relaxes its desire to shape identity and unity, that community will begin to expire. Put differently, the group that does not struggle to influence habitus does not write, it does not produce cultural artifacts meant to delineate identity, and such a group drifts toward its demise.

The extent to which all such struggles for differentiation entail a desire for social legitimacy will depend less on some objective social reality and more on how the historian decides to emplot such struggles. I can imagine a small community of writers who write for themselves, without seeking any form of social acceptance. I suppose such acts of private writing, if eventually found, would have a role in a narrative adopting the practices of New Historicism, or some other kind of micro-historiography. They might be akin to the inventory lists found in Ashurbanipal's library, or the Cairo Geniza, none of which were meant to constitute "literature" – a term that does not require definition other than to say that it is a piece of writing meant to influence habitus. Still, understanding such a private group would provide us with a window into private lives, which themselves are always constructed on the basis of one habitus or another. This is to say that even the private life – or at least, much of what we think of as private – is constructed on the basis of systems derived from the public. We are social beings and our socialness requires habitus, even in private.

This study situates what might appear to be a highly individualized practice – the prayers or contemplations of the individual mystic seeking to ascend heavenward – within a field of practice that contains multiple simultaneous groups struggling for legitimacy. The mystic engages a private practice on the basis of a public habitus, the habitus that some writer endeavored to shape by writing down the methods for ascending to meet the Sar haTorah, or God himself. Bourdieu insightfully writes that the opposition between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate in any field of practice is imposed on the symbolic artifacts of that field "with the same arbitrary necessity as the distinction between the sacred and the profane elsewhere."[116] By differentiating the legitimate from the illegitimate, the darshan was fostering, according to Bourdieu's approach, the social and cultural valuation of two distinct modes of production. That valuation enables the legitimized group to create the dominant "market" of cultural artifacts (Bourdieu's "goods") and that market is always closely "allied

116. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 129–30.

with an educational system which legitimizes it." Rabbinism's market of consecrated cultural artifacts was directly linked to its own educational system – that of sage-disciple relationships – which is constantly depicted in the literature in the record of short chains of transmission (Rabbi Ploni in the name of Rabbi Almoni). In contrast, any marginalized group, or the avant-garde, which seeks to increase legitimacy, has two choices: it can endeavor to compete in the marketplace established by the hierarchy, or it can try to establish an alternative field of production, which Bourdieu sees as fulfilling demand external to the mainstream market. Both that marketplace and its products are "normally seen as socially and culturally inferior." Even when offering an alternative market, Bourdieu maintains that both those enjoying social legitimacy and those who seek to have their goods consecrated are always in direct competition with one another. The relationship of these various goods "depends very directly on the position they occupy within the field of production," a position determined by the dynamics of social hierarchy.

Legitimacy is never a constant; it can be undermined and fleeting. The cultural hierarchy is always involved in renewing "degrees of consecration," but even those acts are subject to subversive encroachments by producers of symbolic goods endeavoring to imbue their own work with a modicum of symbolic power. Whether or not they like it or know it, writes Bourdieu, this striving for legitimacy determines a person's ideology and practice. Often the barriers to achieving legitimacy result in a kind of practice that will be seen as transgressive conduct.

> [A]ll those marginal cultural producers whose position obliges them to conquer the cultural legitimacy unquestioningly accorded to the consecrated professionals expose themselves to redoubled suspicion by the efforts they can hardly avoid making to challenge its principles. The ambivalent aggression they frequently display toward consecratory institutions, especially the educational system, without being able to offer a counter-legitimacy, bears witness to their desire for recognition and, consequently, to the recognition they accord to the educational system.[117]

A story about bunch of children elucidating the meanings of final letters in the absence of their teachers demonstrates cognizance of a threatening, counter-cultural force. The consecrated community satirizes the outliers – the *visionaries* – who leave unattended the children who emulate their practices. The parody polemicizes against the abandonment of the consecrated master-disciple educational practice.

Similarly, ben-Zoma is depicted as a transgressor. His imperious failure to rise before the most esteemed sage of his generation is not neutralized by the astounding achievement of having actually ascended to the heavens to witness

117. Bourdieu, 131–32.

the beginnings of time. Not even being privy to the secrets of the universe could align ben-Zoma with the hierarchy of the consecrated. Both figuratively and literally, the passage depicts him as being unable to achieve the legitimacy the mystic seeks.

Bourdieu's insights also provide a sense of why both the hierarchy and the counter-cultural challengers engaged the very same sages. I have suggested that this is less indicative of an actual social fluidity than it is the result of a literary strategy. By employing the same sages as heroes, the counter-culture engages a clever strategy against which there is no defense. A fabulous example of this appropriation centers on the figure of Rabbi Aqiva. In one passage describing Aqiva's own ascension through the heavens, the angels of destruction attack to prevent him from going further. God himself admonishes them, saying, הניחו לזקן הזה שהוא ראוי להסתכל בכבודי, "Let this old man be, for he is worthy of seeing my Glory."[118] Aqiva, whose esteem is already well determined in the midrashic literature, is sanctioned by God directly to pursue the mystic's practice. In this case, the mystic seeks to commandeer the symbolic power of the hierarchy, suggesting that God sanctions the sage's expansion of habitus.

By contrasting the appearances of sages in both the Hekhalot literature and the midrashim, we might begin to expose what Bourdieu sees as the time-lag between the moment of cultural production and scholastic consecration.[119] Both the darshan and the mystic seek that consecration. Their literatures are mechanisms for exercising symbolic power. By using the same sages in their conflicting approaches to habitus, the mystic-author displays what Bourdieu sees as their "prophetic ambition," and that ambition goes hand in hand with "one's charismatic qualifications" – an idea Bourdieu borrows from Weber. The struggle between any given cultural force and those who seek to uproot it will result in the use and abuse of the very same symbolic language, albeit often with variations.

I cannot help but wonder whether a brief passage in Midrash Genesis Rabbah, depicting Rabbi Aqiva rather unflatteringly, was a sarcastic nod to the mystics' relentless appropriation of the hierarchy's sages. What else could they do but every now and again poke fun at their own heroes so as to undermine, however slightly, the appropriated heroes of cultural adversaries. There, in Genesis Rabbah 58,3 we read: רבי עקיבא היה יושב ודורש והצבור מתנמנם, "Rabbi Aqiva would sit, teaching, and his audience would fall asleep." Appropriator beware! It just goes to show that in the service of a polemic even the image of the most consecrated may be subjected to literary ignominy.

118. The text is published in Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 77n6, §3, "Lesser Hekhaloth."

119. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 123–24.