



# The Angelized Rabbis and the Rabbinized Angels. The Reworked Motif of the Angelic Progeny in the Babylonian Talmud (*bShabb* 112b)

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**Abstract:** The myth of the fallen angels, as it is known from the intertestamental literature, narrates the story of the angels who break the divine law, marry earthly women, and beget malevolent hybrid progeny. The latter element of this narrative can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, where it is invested with new significance: these are the distinguished rabbis who are the heavenly messengers' offspring. I start this paper by outlining the traces of the rabbis' familiarity with the myth of the fallen angels and then move on to an analysis of the tradition about the angelic origins of the sages found in *bShabb* 112b. I offer that this passage should be read as exemplifying the practice of associating rabbis and angels that permeates the whole Babylonian Talmud. I base on two methodological paradigms: cognitive linguistics, which allows for the translation of this problem into two conceptual metaphors (SAGES ARE ANGELS and ANGELS ARE SAGES), and the *Elyonim veTachtonim* – a system of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the traditions involving supernatural entities, which permits to locate all the Talmudic passages utilizing these metaphors and to interpret their place in the broader conceptual network. The data show that the sages and rabbinized biblical figures are frequently juxtaposed with angels, and the main dimension of comparison is their intellectual proficiency. When it comes to the mapping of specific rabbinic competencies onto the angels, the most popular is the ability to engage in halakhic scrutiny and teaching. In sum, this presentation of the sages as angels can be taken as an expression of the sense of elitism entertained by the Babylonian sages and, as such, sheds additional light on the interpretation of the passage in *bShabb* 112b.

**Keywords:** angelology, Babylonian Talmud, conceptual metaphor

The myth of the fallen angels (hereinafter the MFA) is one of the popular narratives found in religious literature that draws inspiration from Gen 6:1–7. Its script could be summarized as follows: a group of angels breaks the divine law, cohabits with the earthly women, and begets hybrid semi-celestial creatures, who then engage in various acts against humanity. God, in turn, dispatches a division of righteous angels who punish the rebels and destroy their progeny. The insurrection is thwarted, but some fallen angels and their children remain intact and continue to afflict humanity ever after. According to the most popular version, the angels sire the giants

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(e.g., *1 En.* 7:1–6; *2 En.* 18:3), whose cadavers are then transformed into demons (e.g., *1 En.* 15:8–12; *T.Sol.* 70–71), but there are also variants in which these are the latter who are born from these unions (e.g., *Jub.* 10:1–7). As such, the MFA explains the origins of evil in the world by tracing it back to the primeval cosmic misalliance.<sup>1</sup>

An often-repeated assertion is that the MFA did not penetrate the literature of early Rabbinic Judaism and emerged only in the later works such as *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* or *Sefer ha-Zohar*. This claim is based on the statement transmitted in the Palestinian midrash *Gen. Rab.* 26:5 and attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, according to whom the “sons of God” (Heb. בני האלהים) of *Gen* 6:1–7 refer not to the supernatural beings (Aram. בני אלהיא) but to the antediluvian aristocracy, “the sons of judges” (Aram. בני דיניא).<sup>2</sup> However, as I argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> there are several hints scattered in the Babylonian Talmud (hereinafter the BT) suggesting that at least some of the rabbis were familiar with the MFA. First, the BT transmits the angelic name “Azazel” in the phrase שַׁעִיר לְעִזָּאוֹזַל used in the protocol of Yom Kippur fest (*bYoma* 37a, 62a–b, 67b, and *bHul* 11b) and in *bYoma* 67b the sages disclose that this is a toponym: the place is called “Azazel” because it atones for the deeds of “Uzza and Azael,” the evil angels known for teaching sorcery to the generation of Enosh (*3 En.* 5). Second, *bNid* 61a explains that Og, the Rephaite warlord of gigantic height and strength (*Deut* 3:11), is the grandson of Shamhazai, the fallen angel known exclusively from the MFA as transmitted in *1 En.* 6:1–8; 8:1–3, *TgPsJ* ad *Gen* 6:4, and the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q201 3:6; conjectured in 4Q202 2:5, and 4Q530 2:3–23). Third, according to *bErub* 18b, after witnessing Cain’s crime, Adam decides to withhold from cohabitation with Eve so as not to beget any more wicked offspring but experiences ejaculations (Heb. שכבת זרע) that lead to the formation of three types of demons: רִוְחֵינ, שְׂדֵינ, and לִילֵינ. The text remains mute about the mother of these entities, but according to the Palestinian variant in *Gen. Rab.* 20:11, the first man was seduced by evil spirits (Heb. רִוְחוֹת). Thus, it is possible to spot the structural similarity to the MFA: Adam, the archetypal human (Heb. אָדָם) of biblical prehistory, cohabits with some supernatural beings and begets hybrid creatures just like “the daughters of human” (Heb. בְּנוֹת הָאָדָם) of *Gen* 6 and the primeval women of the later reiterations. Fourth, according to *bSanh* 109a, the builders of the Tower of Babel are turned into רִוְחוֹת, שְׂדֵימ, and לִילֵינ, and from the contextual literature, both Rabbinic (e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 31:12, *Deut. Rab.* 184) and Christian (e.g., Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.17.2–3, 9.8.12), it is clear that we could interpret these craftsmen as giants. From this perspective, the transformation of the builders of Babel into demons parallels the Enochian motif of the metamorphosis of giants’

1 Reed, *Fallen Angels*; Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits*.

2 Hirsch, “Fall of Angels,” 332–333, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11442-nephilim> (access 18.02.2023).

3 Kosior, “The Affair of Uzza and Azael,” 294–322.

cadavers into evil spirits (e.g., *I En.* 15:8–12 and *T.Sol.* 70–71). I concluded that the sages were familiar with the MFA but decided to rework it as a part of their quest for differentiation from among other religious and cultural traditions of the era: these are not the angels who are responsible for the existence of demons but God, the creator and ruler of all things.

## 1. Between Angels and Donkeys

In this paper, I offer follow-up observations and focus on how the Talmudic rabbis altered the motif of the angelic progeny. The point of departure for my considerations is a unique passage from *bShabb* 112b, which speaks about the angelic origins of sages. The tradition is entangled in a halakhic discussion: Rabbi Yohanan gives an insightful remark which is met with enthusiasm by Rabbi Hizkiya, who exclaims, “this is not a human!” (Aram. לית דין בר אינש), hence suggesting a supernatural status of Yohanan. Right afterward, the sages furnish the following teaching.

**Rabbi Zeira said that Rava bar Zimuna said: If the early generations are characterized as sons of angels** {Heb. אַם ראַשׁוֹנִים בְּנֵי מַלְאָכִים}, **we are the sons of men** {Heb. אַנּוּ בְּנֵי אַנְשִׁים}. **And if the early generations are characterized as the sons of men, we are akin to donkeys** {Heb. אַנּוּ כַּחֲמֹרִים}.<sup>4</sup> **And I do not mean that we are akin to either the donkey of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa or the donkey of Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair, who were both extraordinarily intelligent donkeys; rather, we are akin to other typical donkeys.**<sup>5</sup>

The textual context of this passage and the humorous punch line invite interpreting it simply as an innocuous allegory: the earlier scholars were not literally sons of angels, just as the later ones are not literally donkeys. However, there are at least two reasons for treating it as a possible reference to the MFA. First, the text contains vocabulary and concepts suggestive of the *in illo tempore* reality. The term

<sup>4</sup> Note that this is the only comparison that deploys the participle כֹּ (Vilna edition). Given the traditions concerning donkeys (e.g., *bAbodZar* 5b, *bShabb* 51b), the expression might be taken as a suggestion that the sole purpose of those later scholars is merely carrying what they received from the earlier ones – as if ironically travesty the meaning of the term תְּנָאִים (Eng. “repeaters”). However, there is some variation in the manuscripts: München 95, Vatican: Vat. ebr. 487/82 and Oxford: Heb. c. 27/10–15 have אַנּוּ חֲמֹרִים, while Oxford 366 and Vatican 108 have אַנּוּ בְּנֵי חֲמֹרִים. The structure and terminology of the passage suggest that the latter reading should be preferred, and accordingly *bShabb* 112b would read: “If the earlier sages were the sons of men, we are the sons of donkeys.”

<sup>5</sup> All the Talmudic sources are quoted after Steinsaltz – Weinreb – Schreier, *Koren Talmud Bavli*. The citations retain the orthography and visual convention: the bold font indicates the translation, the standard font – the supplement, while the square brackets contain editorial comments. The curly brackets indicate my own additions.

used in reference to the “earlier ones” (Heb. רֵאשׁוֹנִים) is ambiguous and simply indicates the sages preceding the contemporary ones without disclosing their identity as if locating them in the distant past.<sup>6</sup> Analogically, the phrase “sons of men” (Heb. בְּנֵי אָנוּשִׁים), occurring exclusively in this passage in the scope of the entire BT, is highly evocative of analogical biblical expression בְּנֵי אָדָם denoting explicitly a descendant of Adam the forefather, i.e., a member of the human race. Finally, the text transmits the ideas typical for the narrative of the lost Golden Age:<sup>7</sup> the angelic wisdom is attributed to the early rabbis, and from the context, it is clear that the subsequent generations were less than perfect in this regard. Second, just like various reiterations of the MFA, our passage deals with the matters of hierarchy. Rava bar Zimuna, himself a Palestinian Amora, relies on a set of comparisons based on the underlying assumption of the great chain of being, in which humans are situated higher than animals but lower than supernatural creatures such as angels or demons.<sup>8</sup> The most outspoken Talmudic passage tackling this issue comes in *bHag* 16a, but there are also other fragments entertaining the idea of a hierarchy of beings. For instance, *bBer* 4b compares the swiftness of Michael, Gabriel, seraphim, and Elijah; *bShabb* 88b–89a has the ministering angels oppose the presence of Moses in the sacred Sinaitic space in front of God, while in *bGit* 68b Solomon the king of Israelites and Asmodeus the king of demons debate the matter of superiority. The hierarchy of beings and their ascription to the specific place was one of the popular subjects tackled by the BT, and given its prevalence, we could argue for its importance to the rabbis who – just like the authors of the *First Book of Enoch* or *Book of Jubilees* – used it as a legitimization for their outlook.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Methodology: Metaphor and Modeling

Although our fragment is a unique case of explicit acknowledgment of the angelic provenance of rabbis, there are numerous other Talmudic passages associating angels and sages, and they should be treated as the backdrop for this interpretation of *bShabb* 112b. To present the tendencies which emerge from these accounts in an orderly manner, I need to ground my scrutinies in two methodological paradigms. First, the association of rabbis and angels is a case of a conceptual metaphor that I understand as experiencing one phenomenon (the target domain) in the categories

<sup>6</sup> Ta-Shma, “Rishonim,” 339.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, “Golden Age,” 3626–3630.

<sup>8</sup> Krzeszowski, *Angels and Devils in Hell*, 277–280; Szwedek, “Angels and Devils,” 3–20.

<sup>9</sup> The classical treatment of this problem was offered by Peter Schäfer (*Rivalität*, 41–74). Schäfer argued that the rabbis portrayed righteous Israel as superior to angels.

of another one (the source domain) based on their perceived similarity.<sup>10</sup> The crucial component of this process is metaphoric projection – the mapping of specific source domain features onto the target domain. An often-repeated example is TIME IS MONEY: this core metaphor is reflected in the way people project selected facets of the more concrete source domain of MONEY, such as countability and value, upon the more abstract source domain of TIME, which allows them to think about the latter in terms of the former as something to be saved, lost, managed, invested, etc.<sup>11</sup> This projection is partial: only some aspects of the source domain are mapped upon the target domain, and only some of the aspects of the target domain are addressed by the source domain. This core metaphor highlights the importance and scarcity of both resources (as perceived in the West) but hides one difference: while people can make money during their life, they cannot do so with time. Whereas the proponents of this paradigm emphasized the unidirectionality of the metaphoric projection, the later adherents stressed that such mapping is possible only when there is some initial similarity between the domains. Hence, conceptualizing TIME as MONEY means that some aspects of MONEY are already present in TIME.<sup>12</sup>

With this understanding of metaphor, I can now deconstruct the problem of similarity between angels and sages. This pair can be seen as two conceptual domains bearing some initial resemblance allowing for the projection. The traditions found in the BT reflect two core metaphors: SAGES ARE ANGELS, and ANGELS ARE SAGES. As I will show, the first one is provided explicitly, and the texts directly compare the rabbis to the angels in various respects (e.g., Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai in *bShabb* 25b). The second metaphor is implicit, and the texts resort to metaphoric projections with specific rabbinic features mapped onto the angels (e.g., Gabriel in *bMenah* 29a).

Such comparisons and mappings are present throughout the BT and constitute a tendency that is apparent only if we switch to the macroscale perspective. This brings me to the second methodological paradigm, which is the *Elyonim veTachtonim* (hereinafter the EvT).<sup>13</sup> It is a system of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the traditions involving supernatural entities (hereinafter the SEs) currently deployed to the scrutiny of two corpora: the Hebrew Bible and the BT. The main tool of the EvT is a database – a structured collection of data together with the methods of access, organization, selection, retrieval, and modeling<sup>14</sup> – maintained in the spreadsheet file format (.xlsx). The meticulously analyzed sources that feature the SEs are divided manually into units, i.e., the smallest genre-coherent portions of text, which are inserted into the database and annotated with tags (pieces of metadata). The ontology of tags consists of over 600 hierarchically arranged items pertaining

<sup>10</sup> Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 16–25. Evans – Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 156–160.

<sup>11</sup> I adhere to the graphical convention established by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (*Metaphors*).

<sup>12</sup> Fauconnier, *Mappings*, 1–33.

<sup>13</sup> *Elyonim veTachtonim*, <https://elyonimvetachtonim.project.uj.edu.pl/> (access 18.02.2023).

<sup>14</sup> Rydberg-Cox, *Digital Libraries*, 15.

to both the formal features (e.g., language, literary genre, or attribution) and contents (e.g., class and type of a SE, sort of interactions that unfold between a SE and a human, or a field of expertise of a given SE) of the studied accounts. The inventory plays two functions: a thematic concordance resulting from a careful close reading of all the units contained therein and a repository of data and metadata allowing for the quantitative analysis in the search for general regularities.

The adoption of the EvT system allows me to address the problems stemming from the specificity of the BT: this is a massive and internally diversified work containing a variety of traditions involving law (halakhah), biblical interpretations (midrash), and stories (aggadah). These were produced in Palestine and Sasanian Empire throughout the first centuries of the Common Era by three groups of sages: Tannaim, Amoraim, and Stammaim.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the BT does not offer a coherent system of teachings and should be considered a pool of dispersed religious, moral, and juridical opinions of specific clichés and individuals.<sup>16</sup> The EvT system enables us to see through this diversity with the help of the distant reading involving the recognition of the associative contexts of given terms, calculations of the popularity of specific ideas, and correlations of metadata.<sup>17</sup>

The special case of this problem is the understanding of the SE. It is possible to recognize the features shared by the Talmudic figures, such as ministering angels, evil spirits, and the specters of deceased persons. In fact, some of them appear to function as larger groups – yet, the BT does not address this subject explicitly. Hence, to approach the accounts featuring these entities, it is indispensable to introduce the etic concepts grasping the ideas that have not been formulated in the emic terminology of the BT. The EvT system addresses these issues by conceptualizing the SEs and their classes, which is easily applicable to the rabbinic way of thinking. Accordingly, a SE is a literary anthropomorphic agent possessing some counterintuitive features. The latter are understood as violating humans' innate cognitive expectations concerning phenomena belonging to specific categories. For instance, humans are material beings that cannot pass through other objects, and ghosts of the deceased violate this expectation.<sup>18</sup> The SEs studied within the EvT project are divided into four classes: angels, demons, ghosts, and monsters, which are conceptualized based on the prototypical model of classification: angels are helpful, follow the divine orders, and live in the heavens; demons are malevolent towards humans, inhabit their close vicinities, and act independently; ghosts are dead humans who appear as if equipped

<sup>15</sup> Halivni, *The Formation*, 3–9. For a broader context, see Gafni, “Rethinking Talmudic History,” 355–375.

<sup>16</sup> Samely, *Forms of Rabbinic Literature*, 2–22, 137–144.

<sup>17</sup> Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 65–70.

<sup>18</sup> Such understanding is inspired by the cognitive science of religion. Barrett – Burdett – Porter, “Counterintuitiveness in Folktales,” 271–287. Although the term “supernatural” is not devoid of its own problems, it remains a convenient etic category and in this regard I follow the argumentation presented by Ilkka Pyysiäinen (*Supernatural Agents*, vii–ix).

with some additional powers; monsters are large theriomorphic entities living on the fringes of civilization. The specimens belonging to each class differ in terms of their representativeness, and the class of angels exemplifies this well. The very name “angel” comes from the Latin *angelus*, which in turn is a Latinized form of the Greek ἀγγελος used in Septuagint to render the מלאך found in the Hebrew Bible, which signifies a “messenger,” both human and superhuman. With time these terms became used exclusively for the SEs, and later on, they started to denote a category of beings that included other celestial figures known from the Hebrew Bible, such as בני אלהים (e.g., Deut 32:8–9 following the Qumran manuscripts 4QDt<sup>a</sup> and 4QDt<sup>b</sup>; Job 1:6), שרפים (Isa 6:1–7), כרובים (Ezek 10:1–22), קדושים (e.g., Ps 29:7; 89:1–3, 6–19), or עירין (Dan 4:14), to name just a few.<sup>19</sup> The EvT system acknowledges various entities in the category of angels, both the prototypical (e.g., the angel of Yahweh or Metatron) and marginal ones (e.g., Dubiel or Ridya).

### 3. Data Analysis: Angelized Rabbis

Thanks to the arrangement of the Talmudic inventory of SEs,<sup>20</sup> it is possible to locate all the passages speaking about the similarities between angels and sages and – based on the quantitative analysis – to describe the specificity of this association in the macroscale. Two topical tags are crucial: the #simile tag is used to annotate the units in which humans are compared to SEs (the conceptual metaphor HUMAN IS A SE), while the #jurist tag indicates the units in which SEs betray knowledge of the matters pertaining to law, exegesis, cult, and theology (the conceptual metaphor SE IS A SAGE).<sup>21</sup>

Table 1. Number of units featuring SEs belonging to specific classes and annotated with the respective tag. The first row presents the total number of units featuring each class of entities

	angels	demons	ghosts	monster
in total	496	203	93	97
#simile	35	9	4	3
#jurist	43	8	1	2

Source: Own work.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Bamberger, “Angels and Angelology,” 150–152.  
<sup>20</sup> All the calculations were performed using version 008 *Chemah* of the Talmudic inventory ([https://elyonimvetachtonim.project.uj.edu.pl/en\\_GB/databases/babylonian-talmud](https://elyonimvetachtonim.project.uj.edu.pl/en_GB/databases/babylonian-talmud) [access 18.02.2023]).  
<sup>21</sup> I need to stress once more that the annotation process was not automatic and that the tags were deployed as a result of careful close reading of each and every unit. In other words, what I present here is not a vocabulary co-occurrence network but a human-created thematic concordance. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the need for this explication.

There is an apparent discrepancy in frequency, with angels being the most popular Talmudic SEs (Tab. 1). In addition to this, they are most often presented as the point of comparison to people and as proficient in halakhic matters, even though the #simile and #jurist belong to the less popular tags.

Table 2. Number of units featuring angels and annotated with the respective topical tags pertaining to the formal features

	language		attribution					actor			
	Hebrew	Aramaic	unattributed	Babylonian	Palestinian	Tannaïtic	Amoraic	Babylonian	Palestinian	Tannaïtic	Amoraic
#simile	13	5	3	8	8	8	12	0	11	9	2
#jurist	33	8	12	9	27	14	23	2	12	11	5

Source: Own work.

The formal profile of the units involving the angels is diversified (Tab. 2). Although there is a clear preference for the Hebrew language, these traditions originate from various contexts: both Palestinian and Babylonian regions and both Tannaïtic and Amoraic circles. Interestingly, in the cases with rabbinic actors, these are the Palestinian Tannaïm who appear most frequently.

Table 3. Number of units featuring specific types of literary characters compared to angels. The sum of the units (36) is not equal to the sum in Tab. 2 (35) because one unit (bQidd 72a) contains two comparisons

sage	biblical figure	other people	“son of Belial”	other cases
18	4	6	3	5

Source: Own work.

Further scrutiny of the traditions about the angels and annotated with the #simile tag reveals several groups of humans compared to angels (Tab. 3): sages or rabbinized<sup>22</sup> non-sages, rabbinized biblical figures, and non-rabbinic folk. Apart from these three collectives, there is also a group of instances about the “sons of Belial” and the category of “other.” Let me now analyze each of them in more detail.

There are eighteen units featuring sages (Tab. 2). Almost all are the Palestinian Tannaïm, and nine of these units concern intellectual proficiency, which conforms to the tradition about the angelic origins of the early rabbis in *bShabb* 112b.

<sup>22</sup> By rabbinization, I understand the process in which the sages portrayed non-rabbis as if the latter were rabbis capable of Torah studies, halakhic speculations, and theological investigations. Naiweld, “The Rabbinization,” 339–357.



The unit in *bHag* 15b starts with a reference to Rabbi Meir, who was a student of Elisha ben Avuyah (the infamous Acher of *bHag* 15a–b), and then proceeds to the elaboration on the requirements for being a good teacher based on the interpretation of Mal 2:7. Accordingly, just like the biblical priest is the messenger of Yahweh, so should be a sage from whom his pupils can learn the Torah. The analogous tone is retained in *bHag* 15b and *bBBat* 8a, which emphasize the merits of studying. The fifth unit comes in *bPes* 33a and concerns the halakhic details of the status of the Passover bread. One of the rulings supplied by the sages lacks a clear explanation but is accepted anyway, and the text labels this decision with the biblical phrase “the decree of the watchers and the decision of the word of the holy ones”<sup>23</sup> (Aram. בגזירת עירין פתגמא ובמאמר קדישין שאילתא, Dan 4:14) thus indirectly comparing the sages to angels. Two units in *bNed* 20b juxtapose sages’ and ministering angels’ knowledge of prenatal life and conclude that both groups are “outstanding” (Aram. דמצייני).<sup>24</sup> In two units, the humans are compared to Satan, classified in the EvT system as an angel based on his presentation in the BT and the contextual literature of the era. The first such unit in *bTamid* 32a belongs to a more extended passage featuring Alexander III of Macedon engaged in a dispute with the elders of Negev. Endowed with halakhic expertise, Alexander asks numerous questions concerning the nature of God, thus challenging rabbis’ theological stance. Finally, he demands the answer why the sages oppose him, to which he hears: “Satan is victorious” (Aram. סטנא נצח). The comparison of Alexander with Satan is apparent, and even though this is not a typical act of appreciation, the sages acknowledge the king’s intellectual mastery. A somewhat similar tone is retained in the second unit featuring Satan in *bYebam* 16a. It is interwoven in a longer passage revolving around the halakhic problem of a rival wife of a daughter’s husband. Rabbi Yehoshua consults Dosa ben Harkinas, himself a follower of the school of Hillel, and learns that the latter has a sibling who belongs to the opposing school of Shammai. Dosa describes him in a series of rhyming expressions as Yonatan (Heb. יונתן), who is his younger brother (Heb. אח קטן) and the first-born of Satan (Heb. בכור שטן). From the subsequent part praising his halakhic skills as well as from Rashi’s commentary *ad loc.*, it is clear that comparison to Satan is the form of approval of Yonatan’s rabbinic aptitude.

In two instances, the sages are likened to angels due to their visual appearance. According to a unit in *bShabb* 25b, Yehudah bar Ilai used to wear a fringed linen garment on the sabbath, making him resemble the angel of Yahweh. The second unit in *bQidd* 72a contains a series of similes of various groups: Iranian priests are like destroying angels, Ishmaelites are like toilet goat-demons (Heb. שעירים של בית הכסא) while the Babylonian sages are like the ministering angels. The text does not

<sup>23</sup> All the biblical quotations come from the English Standard Version Bible.

<sup>24</sup> The gist of the text suggests that this should be read as referring to their intellectual expertise, but according to Rashi’s commentary, this means that both groups were wrapped in fringes (Heb. בציצית עטופים).

reveal the dimension of this comparison, but the preceding fragment dealing with the image of a stereotypical bear-like Persian suggests we should read it accordingly. This interpretation is bolstered by Rashi, who explains that, unlike the Ishmaelites who dress black and resemble the demons (Heb. שדִּים), the Babylonian sages, just like ministering angels, wrap themselves in elegant white robes.

Four units emphasize the sages' distinguished position as God's chosen ones, and according to *bSanh* 92b–93a, the rabbis are even more important than the ministering angels. This claim is supported by the biblical account of three righteous men thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's furnace and saved by an angel (Dan 3:25). Accordingly, the king sees the rabbinized Judeans before he notices the one "similar to the son of God" (Aram. דְּמָה לְבַר אֱלֹהִין). However, as the three remaining units show, the special status of the sages comes with a price. A longer piece in *bHag* 5a reiterates the biblical passage: "Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones" (Job 15:15), and one of the units refers it to Rabbi Alexandri's student who perished at a young age, thus corroborating the validity of the biblical quotation. In turn, a tradition transmitted in two variants in *bYebam* 121b and *bBQam* 50a recounts the case of Rabbi Nehunya, the well-digger's son who dies of thirst despite his father's occupation. The text explains that this is because God is particular with the righteous and supports this claim with a verse: "a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him" (Ps 89:8). These three units indirectly describe the sages as the "holy ones" (Heb. קְדוּשִׁים) and although this term can be used in various contexts, the way it is employed in the biblical quotations suggest we treat it as some celestial SEs belonging to the class of angels.

In almost all the cases, the sages are compared to regular angels denoted by terms such as מְלַאכִים or מְלַאכֵי הַשְּׂרָת. In three units (*bBer* 17b, *bTaan* 24b–25a, and *bHul* 86a), the "echo" (Heb. בַּת קוֹל, literally "daughter of a voice," the emissary transmitting divine speech<sup>25</sup>) declares Rabbi Chanina to be the son of God. The latter expression is treated as referring to a SE belonging to the class of angels in the EvT system based on two biblical motifs: the king as a divine representative on earth (e.g., David in 2 Sam 7:4–16/1 Chr 17:7–14 or Solomon in 1 Chr 22:7–10) and a depute belonging to God's court (e.g., Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps 29:1).<sup>26</sup>

This picture should be supplemented by four units featuring rabbinized biblical figures: Moses, David, and Solomon. Hence, *bYoma* 4a–b recounts the giving of the Torah and explains that Moses had to wait for the revelation until he emptied his bowels and thus became pure like ministering angels; *bShabb* 56a–b retells the fragment from 2 Sam 19 and has Mephibosheth compare David to the angel of

<sup>25</sup> Noam, "Why Did the Heavenly Voice Speak Aramaic?," 157–168.

<sup>26</sup> This case should be seen against the background of the tradition according to which other humans are also sons of God: *bSanh* 98b speaks about the heavenly and earthy families, while *bAbodZar* 5a acknowledges the godly status of humanity before the fall and accuses Israelites of opportunism when they accept Torah solely to be granted life eternal.

God (Heb. מלאך אלהים), while in the tradition transmitted in *bShabb* 14b–15a and *bErub* 21b, Solomon utters a halakhic statement and is recognized by בן קור as the son of God.<sup>27</sup>

The remaining comparisons concern non-rabbis. In three units, the BT resorts to the biblical quotations (Deut 13:14; Judg 19:22) containing the phrase “sons of Belial” (Heb. בני בליעל) used in reference to vile people. Although the word בליעל appears to mean “worthlessness” or “wickedness” in Biblical Hebrew and although the BT adopts this abstract meaning, it is recognized as an angel in the EvT system based on the contextual literature: the Dead Sea Scrolls deploy it as the name for the dark angelic war master (e.g., 1QS 1:16–2:8; CD 4:12–15); the NT juxtaposes Βελιάρ<sup>28</sup> with Christ (2 Cor 6:14–15), while the apocrypha provide his more detailed description (e.g., *TLev* 18:4; 19:1).<sup>29</sup> Finally, a unit in *bAbodZar* 20b discourages from staring at women, even if one is “full of eyes” (Heb. מלא עינים) just like the angel of death capable of looking in all directions at once.

Taken together, these passages show that the rabbis focused on intellectual (especially halakhic) proficiency in their comparisons and simultaneously highlighted their distinguished position. This association is all the more suggestive given that hardly any other human figure is compared to an angel – and if it is, like Alexander the Great, then such a comparison is made based on the rabbinic proficiencies of a given individual.

#### 4. Data Analysis: Rabbimized Angels

Analogically to the angelic facets mapped upon the rabbis and the biblical figures, so did the sages rabbinize the angels featured in the BT. All the units annotated with the #jurist tag (Tab. 2) can be further divided into three main groups depending on what specific type of proficiency is involved (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Number of units in which angels display particular competencies

halakhah	teaching	cult	miscellaneous
26	8	5	4

Source: Own work.

<sup>27</sup> To these four instances, it should be added that in another four units (*bYoma* 75b, *bSanh* 98b, and twice in *bAbodZar* 5a), the whole nation of Israel is compared to angels.

<sup>28</sup> This appears to be a purposely distorted form of “Belial,” conveying the idea of lightlessness (Heb. בלי עור).

<sup>29</sup> Sperling, “Belial,” 169–171.

The first group includes twenty-six cases in which the angels occupy themselves with halakhah. Fourteen of these (*bBer* 51b–52a; *bErub* 6b–7a, 13b; *bPes* 114a; *bYebam* 14a; *bSotah* 10b, 48b; *bBMesia* 59b, 74a; *bSanh* 94a; *bMak* 23b; *bHul* 44a, 87a; *bKer* 5b) feature *בַּת קוֹל* who serves mostly as the loudspeaker to express God's opinion on halakhic matters. The other twelve are more diversified. Hence, in *bArak* 10b, the ministering angels discuss the cultic nuances of the Day of Atonement with God, *bMenah* 41a has Rabbi Kattina debate with an angel on the proper execution of the precept of fringes, while in *bAbodZar* 20b, the messenger of death shares the details of his craft on the proper ritual slaughter. According to a unit in *bSanh* 38b, God consults his decisions with the ministering angels or heavenly family (Heb. פמליא של מעלה), while a unit in *bSanh* 44b attributes Gabriel with general halakhic expertise. A unit in *bBBat* 75a relates a semantic-linguistic discussion between Gabriel and Michael, who try and elucidate the meaning of the term כדכך known from the Isaian prophecy (Isa 54:12). Three units feature Satan the opposer: an elaborate Talmudic retelling of the *Book of Job* contains two units (*bBBat* 15b, 16a) in which he formulates accusations against the protagonist, while a unit in *bYoma* 67b addresses the problem of the commandments which lack the rational justification and labels them as the “the matters to which Satan opposes” (Heb. דברים שהשטן משיב עליהן). Not only are the angels fluent in the halakhic matters, but they also mirror human imperfections in this regard and, as such, are equally prone to error in argumentation and logic. This is reflected in *bMak* 12a, the text focuses on an eschatological passage in Isaiah 63 and interprets it as God annihilating the angelic prince (Heb. שר) of Rome. The latter will try to hide in one of the cities of refuge, and the text explains that this is due to his inaccurate knowledge of biblical law. Finally, some units are annotated with both #simile and #jurist. Hence in *bTamid* 32a, both Alexander and Satan are portrayed as halakhically competent; in *bPes* 33a, both the rabbis and Watchers (Aram. עיריין) issue valid decrees, while *bBBat* 75a hesitates whether the semantic discussion unfolds between the angels or rabbis.

The second group contains eight units in which the angels are entangled in the discourse of teaching and inspiration. A unit in *bHag* 15b resorts to a verse from Mal 2:7 and presents a sage as a priest who is like the angel of Yahweh teaching Torah. In *bNed* 20a, the ministering angels educate Rabbi Yohanan ben Dehavai on eugenics by drawing the connections between the specific circumstances of conception and the features of the newborn. A more extended passage in *bErub* 64b recounts the journeys of Rabban Gamaliel, and according to the text, the sage learns three halakhic traditions from the holy spirit (Heb. ברוח הקדוש), who is recognized as an angel in the EvT system. Two units (*bMeg* 3a–b and *bSanh* 44b) retell the biblical encounter of Joshua with the angelic prince of the army of Yahweh, who rebukes him for neglecting evening prayers and Torah studies. According to a unit in *bNaz* 4b, the Nazirite vow of Samson was made by an angel. A unit in *bQidd* 81a–b contains a memorable account of a certain Pelimo who boasts his righteousness but is

humiliated in confrontation with Satan. The passage ends with an ironic scene in which Satan teaches Pelimo the apotropaic means of repelling him with the verse “the Lord rebuke you, O Satan!” (Zech 3:2). Finally, a unit in *bMenah* 44a contains an anecdote about a certain pious man who, driven by his desires, travels overseas to meet a famous courtesan. However, as soon as he is about to engage in intercourse, his fringes transform into four quasi-angelic witnesses (Heb. עדים) who prevent him from sinning.<sup>30</sup>

The third group contains five units where the angels betray their knowledge of the cult and ritual. Two (*bZebah* 62a and *bMenah* 110a) reiterate the biblical tradition about the building of the second Jerusalem Temple, and accordingly, it is Michael the great prince (Heb. שר גדול) who manifests in a vision as the priest attending to the altar. Similar is the case of *bMenah* 29a, in which Gabriel teaches Moses the design of the candelabrum (Heb. מנורה). In *bKer* 5b, the בת קול explains to Aaron the halakhic status of the drops of sacred oil on his beard. Another unit comes in a passage in *bAbodZar* 3b, which presents God’s daily schedule. According to one opinion, in the evenings, the deity listens to the hymns sung by the angelic living creatures (Heb. חיות), resembling the Isaian שרפים, who thus appear as proficient priests.

Finally, the fourth group contains four units transmitting various less apparent accounts. Two (*bMeil* 14b and *bQidd* 54a) reiterate the traditions according to which the Torah was not given to the ministering angels as if somewhat downplaying their proficiencies, while two others (*bSotah* 14a and *bSanh* 94a) refer to hypostasized attributes of God (Heb. מדות, recognized as angels in the EvT system) specializing in juridical matters.

## Conclusions: Social and Mystical Elite

The gamut of the quantitative data I furnished above provides insight into the specificity and uniqueness of the relationships between rabbis and angels. First, no other class of SEs is used so often as the point of comparison for humans, and no other class is so often attributed with halakhic competencies. Second, the only humans who are likened to angels so frequently are the rabbis – non-rabbis can be like angels only if they manifest strictly rabbinic features. Third, the main dimension of comparison is intellect, but if any other attributes are mentioned, this is a graceful visual appearance and the distinguished position of God’s favorite. Fourth, the #jurist is the most popular tag pertaining to the angelic proficiencies, and the only other tag

<sup>30</sup> Although this passage does not deploy explicit terminology, the עדים are recognized as angels in the inventory based *inter alia* on the tradition in *bMenah* 43b, according to which the angel of Yahweh protects those who are careful about the tefillin.

similar in frequency is #military which speaks about the SEs manifesting their martial prowess. However, the units annotated with the latter contain nearly exclusively the scriptural retellings as if suggesting that the angelic war masters acted only in biblical times. Fifth, the sages are compared to the most generic types of angels which populate the whole BT, while the formal features of these traditions suggest that they originate from among various collectives of rabbis, which allows us to conclude that the metaphors ANGELS ARE SAGES and SAGES ARE ANGELS persisted throughout the subsequent generations. Together, these data prove an inherent and deeply rooted tradition of associating rabbis and angels.

My observations conform to the theses posited twenty years ago by Jonah Chanan Steinberg, who analyzed Jewish literature of Late Antiquity and argued that the sages strived for the elevation of Israel by portraying the distinguished figures from the past and present as angels.<sup>31</sup> His proposal, however, was criticized *inter alia* by Mika Ahuvia, who stated that the notion of angelization belonged to the rabbinic past and that the sages of later periods were more interested in imitating the deity rather than the divine messengers.<sup>32</sup> I wish to offer that both interpretations are valid because both represent the sages' elitist sentiment shown in the tendency to attribute God and angels with rabbinic proficiencies. My proposal is based on David Weiss Halivni's paradigm explaining the social background of the production of the BT. Consequently, if we follow his theses, we could say that the Stammaim, the final redactors of the corpus, played a decisive role in selecting and arranging the teachings they had received from the earlier scholars, and hence the BT *in toto* reflects chiefly their own outlook. This means that the apparent net of connections between sages and angels should be seen as a part of their agenda. In turn, numerous other scholars argue that one of the crucial components of the Stammaim's ideology was the sense of elitism. This sentiment of superiority consists of several premises. First, it is the assumption that from among various forms of religious expression, these are the Torah studies which are the pinnacle of piety (e.g., *bTaan* 21a) – and this is what puts the sages above the gentiles (Heb. גוים) and simple post-Judean folk (Heb. עם הארץ).<sup>33</sup> Second, the most advanced mode of these scholarly inquiries is the dialectics (Heb. פלפול), the ability to engage in the dynamic give and take on the halakhic and exegetical matters – and this puts the Babylonian sages above the Palestinian ones who focus on the memorization of traditions.<sup>34</sup> Third, the crucial element of the Stammaim culture is yeshivah: an exclusively male, corporate-like,

<sup>31</sup> Steinberg, *Angelic Israel*, 244–406.

<sup>32</sup> Ahuvia, *Israel among the Angels*, 46–49, 56–58.

<sup>33</sup> Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud*, 175–176.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobs, *Structure and Form*, 5, 19, 28–29. It is also worth noting that the Stammaim occasionally attributed the Palestinian sages with animosity towards the Babylonians. For instance, in *bMen* 100a, they explain that the Mishnaic (*mMen* 11:7) designation “the Babylonians” (Heb. הבבליים) refers not to the priests who returned from the Babylonian exile but to the Alexandrians. However, because the Palestinians hated

and highly competitive academic institution with a strict hierarchy based on piety and intellectual mastery – and hence the rabbis strive for constant self-development and surpassing their compatriots.<sup>35</sup> Fourth, unlike their Palestinian colleagues, the Babylonian sages are highly influenced by the rigid social stratification permeating the Sassanian Empire – and hence they constitute an insulated and highbrow sphere.<sup>36</sup> Fifth, the rabbis accentuate the matters of purity of lineage expressed in a set of restrictions concerning intermingling with other social strata marked with different levels of cleanliness (e.g., *bQidd* 71b, *bKetub* 28b) and with the gentiles (e.g., *bQidd* 69b) – and hence they do not mix with those of tainted descent.<sup>37</sup> Sixth, they portray their studies as conflicting with carnal desires personified as the evil inclination (Heb. יצר הרע), said to be particularly hostile toward scholars (e.g., *bQidd* 81a), and they tend to imagine women as sexual distractors who divert their energy from the Torah studies (e.g., *bQidd* 29b, *bErub* 54b) – and hence they are above those who fail to self-restrain.<sup>38</sup>

It requires little stretch of the imagination to see all these features as highly evocative of the portrayal of angels in the BT as well as in the intertestamental variants of the MFA: whatever the moral quality of their deeds, they are knowledgeable, distinguished, strictly hierarchized, separatistic, exposed to carnal desires, and forbidden to mingle with those, who are not of their kind. Such self-presentation of the Stammaim, taken together with the strong association with the heavenly messengers, invites interpreting our passage from *bShabb* 112b as a reworked motif of the angelic progeny found in the MFA. Accordingly, the expression “sons of angels” (Heb. בני מלאכים) used in reference to the earlier scholars (Heb. ראשונים) should be read literally: the angels do not beget vile demons or monsters – it is God who creates them<sup>39</sup> – but the distinguished rabbis who inherit their intelligence, virtue, and glamour, and become divine representatives and spiritual leaders among the peoples. Although Rava bar Zimuna’s remark expresses the belief that such scholars no longer existed, the majority opinion entertained implicitly in the BT *in toto* appears to state otherwise: sages are like angels, and angels are like sages.

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the Babylonians (Heb. ומתוך ששונאין את בבליים), they used their appellation as an invective. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for directing me to this source.

<sup>35</sup> Samely, *Forms of Rabbinic Literature*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Kalmin, *The Sage*, 1–12. See also Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 66, 154.

<sup>37</sup> Rubenstein, *The Culture*, 80–88. Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud*, 179.

<sup>38</sup> Kiel, *Sexuality*, 35–41. See also Boyarin, “Reading Androcentrism,” 29–53.

<sup>39</sup> Kosior, “The Affair of Uzza and Azael,” 304–307.

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