Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer

Aramaic Stories of Wandering in the High Seas of Late Antiquity

Abstract This paper analyses both Jewish and Christian travel narratives of Late Antiquity, arguing for common mythological tropes that fused into new stories with adapted meaning and morality. The Syriac 'Life of Barsauma' and several stories in the Babylonian Talmud feature a sea that is home to threats and wondrous creatures that need to be dealt with. At the roots of this phenomenon lies a shared mythological storyworld. Be it the taming of the waves, magical birds, or treasures in the depths, there seem to exist narrative patterns ready to be picked up by Christian and Jewish authors in the late antique Near East. The way in which these authors handled the arsenal of traditional stories, tells us about the evolution of their classical storyworlds and late antique perception of the sea in general, as well as the intercultural exchanges of the epoch.

Zusammenfassung Im vorliegenden Aufsatz wird ausgehend von einer Analyse jüdischer und christlicher Reisenarrative der Spätantike dafür argumentiert, dass sich in ihnen gemeinsame mythologische Archetypen erkennen lassen, die im jeweiligen Kontext adaptiert und mit neuer Bedeutung und Moralität ausgestattet wurden. Sowohl im syrischen ‚Leben des Barsauma' als auch in mehreren Geschichten aus dem babylonischen Talmud ist die See von Meeresungeheuern und anderen mysteriösen Kreaturen bevölkert, was darauf hindeutet, dass den Texten ein gemeinsames Korpus an Erzählelementen zugrunde liegt. Sei es das Zähmen der Wellen, seien es magische Vögel oder Schätze auf dem Grund des Meeres – christliche und jüdische Autoren des spätantiken Nahen Ostens griffen offenbar auf bekannte narrative Muster zurück. Wie diese

Contact

Dr. Reuven Kiperwasser,
Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
Department of Comparative Religion,
reuven.kiperwasser@gmail.com

Dr. Serge Ruzer,
Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
Department of Comparative Religion,
Mt. Scopus, 9190501 Jerusalem,
serge.ruzer@mail.huji.ac.il

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Autoren mit den Vorlagen umgingen, erlaubt Rückschlüsse auf die spätantike Entwicklung erzählerischer Welten, auf die Wahrnehmung des Meeres (in Regionen, die nicht selbst am Meer lagen) und auf den interkulturellen Austausch in dieser Region.

Introduction

According to a typical pattern of ancient shipwreck stories, when a storm breaks out and the sailors' skills prove inadequate, they turn for help to the patron deity – for the storm is deemed to be a sign of divine displeasure. The adventures of the biblical prophet Jonah provide a well-known example of this pattern, and they are often replayed in stories told by Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity.[1] With the dramatic tempest motif, the sea voyage was likewise a well-known topos in Greco-Roman storytelling, exemplified inter alia in the mythological encounters of Odysseus during his travels.[2] Jewish and Christian narrators would sometimes invoke it too – with or without the shadow of Jonah's narrative.

Whereas in the biblical story God intervenes in the course of the sea voyage but does not reveal himself to travellers, in the sea voyages of Greco-Roman mythology gods do appear to seafarers against the background of a mighty tempest. One finds Bacchus (Dionysus) sailing incognito through the Mediterranean with Tyrrhenian pirates and transforming his troublesome fellow travellers into dolphins (Pseudo-Hyginus, 'Fabulae' 134). Of comparable fame is the story of a shipwreck, with sailors being miraculously saved by the goddess Isis (Apuleius, 'The Golden Ass' 11). It appears that in the Mediterranean mythological context, sea travel afforded ample opportunity to introduce a benevolent deity into the narrative.

The Jewish and Christian sea voyage narratives turn out to be a hybrid creation, combining references to both biblical and broader mythological patterns of narration. Leaving aside biblical allusions, we turn here to stories composed primarily of mythological elements. We will analyse comparatively a selection of roughly contemporaneous rabbinic and Christian texts, recounting miraculous encounters on the high seas.

On the Jewish side, the Babylonian Talmud, the literary monument of the Jews living in late antique Sasanian Babylonia (southern Iraq), will offer the main reference points. In its tractate Baba Bathra 73a–75b, in the section introduced with the opening formula "one who sells a ship", after a short halachic discussion, there is an

1 See discussion in Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, Sea Voyages Tales in Conversation with the Jonah Story. Intertextuality and the Art of Narrative Bricolage, in: Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing 20 (2019), pp. 39–57.

2 See Robert Foulke, The Sea Voyage Narrative, London 2001, pp. 33, 40, 58.

extensive collection of aggadic sources. Abraham Weiss dubbed this section – because of its stylistic and linguistic homogeneity – the "tractate of wonders and visions". It contains Babylonian aggadic material, as well as traditions originating in the Land of Israel, reworked by Babylonian redactors.[3] Whereas the Land of Israel substratum seems to go back to the fourth century, the later redaction may be tentatively dated to the sixth to seventh centuries.[4]

The main Christian witness will be the sea voyage story appearing in the 'Life of Barsauma' – probably a late fifth-century composition, written in Syriac, which relates to early fifth-century events.[5] According to the 'Vita', Barsauma may have been born in the village of Beth Awton in the district of Samosata around 384 CE and probably died on 1 February 456 in his monastery south-east of Melitene. The 'Vita' was composed by Barsauma's disciple Samuel, shortly after the death of his master. Andrew Palmer suggested recently that the text could be "as early as 456".[6] The protagonist here is one of the so-called 'wandering monks' and, consequently, this very long composition contains chains of travel stories, some of them sea voyages with plenty of miracles and adventures.

These late antique texts are discussed together based on the following criteria. First, they share the Aramaic-Syriac language of narration,[7] which indicates a cultural proximity. Second, there is a geographical proximity too, as they were all produced by Talmudic and Christian storytellers residing in Mesopotamia, a terrestrial region far removed from the sea. To these one may add that the two communities lived in

3 The appearance of sailors' 'tall tales' inserted in the halachic discourse on 'one who sells a ship' was probably meant to provide justification for the mention of a ship in the opening line of the Talmudic section. See Abraham Weiss, The Literary Creation of Amoraim, New York 1962, p. 273.

4 Weiss (note 3) divided the haggadic material there into five or six sub-sections; cf. Reuven Kiperwasser, Rabba bar Bar Channa's Voyages, in: Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature 22 (2007–2008), pp. 215–242 (in Hebrew).

5 See Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, The Holy Land and Its Inhabitants in the Pilgrimage Narrative of the Persian Monk Barsauma, in: Cathedra 148 (2013), pp. 41–70 (in Hebrew); Aryeh Kofsky, Serge Ruzer and Reuven Kiperwasser, Reshaping Identities in Late Antique Syria-Mesopotamia. Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics and Narrative Strategies, Piscataway NJ 2016, pp. 181–216. For the Syriac text of the 'Vita', see Andrew Palmer (ed.), Life of Barsauma, forthcoming (henceforth 'Vita'). Thanks are due to Andrew Palmer for generously sharing the text, and to Johannes Hahn for first drawing our attention to this project of publishing the new full edition of the 'Vita'. For an earlier edition, see François Nau, Résumé de monographies syriaques, in: Revue de l'Orient Chrétien 18 (1913), pp. 270–276, 379–389; 19 (1914), pp. 113–134, 278–289. See also François Nau, Deux épisodes de l'histoire juive sous Théodose II (423 et 438) d'après la vie de Barsauma le Syrien, in: Revue des études juives 83–84 (1927), pp. 194–199.

6 See Andrew Palmer, A Tale of Two Synods. The Archimandrite Barsumas at Ephesus in 449 and at Chalcedon in 451, in: Journal of Eastern Christian Studies 66 (2014), p. 39.

7 It is generally supposed that we are dealing here with two related dialects, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Christian Syriac – another branch of Eastern Aramaic. However, how exactly to understand Syriac's relationship to other Late Aramaic dialects, inter alia to Western Aramaic, is still debated, see Aaron M. Butts, The Classical Syriac Language, in: Daniel King (ed.), The Syriac World, New York 2019, pp. 224–225.

the shadow of Iranian cultural presence.[8] The Sasanian-Persian context, which had already attracted the attention of the Wissenschaft des Judenthum scholars,[9] was later abandoned in the second half of the twentieth century; it has, however, undergone a fruitful revival in recent years.[10] In addition to the previous observations, we are inclined to think that the inhabitants of those inland areas, who rarely sail out, would be even more prone to embrace existing mythological models of the sea and/or to present the sea voyage in terms of its symbolic meaning. In other words, whether Christians or Jews, they would readily adopt the inherited contours of the imaginary picture of the sea as a vast threatening space with its bitter and hostile waves, mysterious treasures in its depths and wondrous creatures – monsters and gods – whom the sailors are destined to encounter.

In parallel to the enchantment with the wonders of the watery abyss, narrators are eager to send their protagonists for trials and tribulations on the high seas to allow the cherished values of their religious outlook to be tested and reconfirmed. In light of the geographical and cultural affinity highlighted above, recent research has paid due attention to the possibility of actual or indirect links between Babylonian Jewry of the Talmudic period and contemporaneous Syriac Christianity. Yet we refrain from setting the axis line of this inquiry on supposed Christian influence on rabbinic narrators or vice versa.[11] In distinction to that, we view the texts under

8 The shared Iranian cultural background was recently elaborated upon in Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, Introduction, in: Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (eds.), The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World, BJS 362, Providence RI 2018, pp. xii–xvii.

9 This was then part of a broader trend among scholars of rabbinic literature to pay attention to Middle Persian texts pertaining to such areas as philology, law, theology, and more generally the history of the Sasanian Empire. Regarding narratives, a number of significant parallels were identified, particularly in the realms of mythology, angelology and demonology, see Alexander Kohut, Ueber die jüdische Angelologie und Daemonologie in ihrer Abhängigkeit vom Parsismus, Leipzig 1866. For a brief overview of this period, see Geoffrey Herman, Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources, in: AJS Review 29 (2005), pp. 284–288.

10 For a review of early research on these questions, see Herman, Ahasuerus, The Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar (note 9), pp. 283–285. See also Yaakov Elman, Dualistic Elements in Babylonian Aggada, in: Herman and Rubenstein (note 7), pp. 273–311; Yaakov Elman, 'He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak': Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia, in: Rivka Ulmer (ed.), Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism, Studies in Judaism, Lanham 2007, pp. 129–164; Shai Secunda, The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context, Philadelphia 2014. Cf. Richard Kalmin, Migrating Tales: The Talmud's Narratives and Their Historical Context, Berkeley 2014.

11 For the influential paradigm of Christian influence on rabbinic traditions, see, for example, Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud, New York 2013; for suggestion of a Jewish influence on Christian authors, see Jacob Neusner, Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran, Leiden 1971, pp. 150–195; Sebastian Brock, Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources, in: Journal of Jewish Studies 30 (1979), pp. 212–32; Naomi Koltun-Fromm, A Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia, in: Journal of Jewish Studies 47 (1996), pp. 45–63; Aphrahat and the Rabbis on Noah's Righteousness in Light of Jewish-Christian Polemic, in: Judith Frishman and Lucas Van Rompay (eds.), The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian

discussion, which by no means exhaust the topic, as providing a road map of sorts for the two alternative, and complementary, directions of investigation: recovering the underlying – neither Christian nor Jewish – narrative patterns behind our late antique narratives and outlining the strategies of their adaptation to a Christian or Jewish religious agenda correspondingly.

This study also aims to go beyond the classical narratology, which is interested mainly in the synchronic dimension of the poetics of narrative, to an interdisciplinary approach that focuses on the changing forms and functions of a wide range of narratives and the dialogical negotiation of meanings pertaining to issues of culture and context.[12]

Waters and Protective Patrons

The long passage from 'b. Baba Bathra' 73a–74b contains several stories that can be viewed as travel fiction, some of which take place in the desert, some in other terrestrial locations and, finally, some on the high seas. We will start from one of the latter, distinguished by a puzzling motif of subduing the waves with sticks with magic powers. The feat is described as routinely performed by the sailors themselves ('b. Baba Bathra' 73a):[13]

> Raba b. Barhana said: Seafarers told me: the top of the wave coming to sink the ship is shaped as the fringe of a white fire (צוציתא דנורא חיוורתא). We strike it with tree-branches with 'I am who I am, the Yah Lord of Hosts, Amen, Amen, Selah' engraved on them.

The paraphrase of Exod. 3:14 (RSV: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM .' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, I AM has sent me to you.'") is apparently used here as a magic formula proclaiming the God of Israel's dominion over the powers of nature, including the sea. One may suggest that the fiery light of the threatening wave is to be restrained by the light of God's countenance, which equals the light of

Interpretations, Louvain 1997, pp. 57–72; Serge Ruzer and Aryeh Kofsky, Syriac Idiosyncrasies. Theology and Hermeneutics in Early Syriac Literature, Leiden 2010, pp. 30–31, 43–48, 50, 56–59, 97–107; Elena Narinskaya, Ephrem, a 'Jewish Sage'. A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions, Turnhout 2010. For discussion of the existing appraisals of these links (from actual influence all the way to the Zeitgeist), see Adam Becker, The Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism' in Late Antique Mesopotamia. Rabbis and East Syrians, in: AJS Review 34, 1 (2010), pp. 91–113.

12 Ansgar Nünning, Narratology or Narratologies? Taking Stock of Recent Developments, Critique and Modest Proposals for Future Usages of the Term, in: Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (eds.), What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory, Berlin 2003, pp. 243–246.

13 The texts of the Babylonian Talmud quoted here are according to Ms. Paris 1337 with some emendations. Throughout this study, the English translation of rabbinic sources is ours.

the Torah. A passage from Herodotus, which, following Mary Boyce and others, we are inclined to view as adopting a pattern from ancient Persian culture,[14] indicates that the rabbinic story might have adopted a motif of broader circulation:[15]

> When Xerxes heard it he was exceedingly enraged, and bade them scourge the Hellespont with three hundred strokes of the lash and let down into the sea a pair of fetters. Nay, I have heard further that he sent branders also with them to brand the Hellespont. In any case, he enjoined them, as they were beating, to say barbarian and presumptuous words as follows: 'You bitter water, your master lays upon you this penalty, because you did wrong him not having suffered any wrong from him; and Xerxes the king will pass over you whether you be willing or no, but with right, as it seems, no man does sacrifice to you, seeing that you are a treacherous and briny stream.' The sea he enjoined them to chastise thus and he also bade them to cut off the heads of those who were appointed to have charge over the bridging of the Hellespont.

It may be supposed that the additional magic-tinged motif of engraving God's name is designed in the Talmud to provide a specific Jewish flavour to the common narrative pattern. One notes that writing the name of the God of Israel on any object would grant this object some magical power, which is a recurrent motif in the Babylonian Talmud and magical texts from Babylonia.[16] It seems that in the Jewish context the power of the Divine Name would be sufficient to calm the waves; therefore, the lingering necessity of flogging them seems to represent one more sub-motif inherited from the general mythological context. We will see, however, that the motif of physically punishing the waves is not exclusive to Jewish and Iranian compositions.

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14 Mary Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule, vol. 2, Leiden, Köln 1982, pp. 165–167. For a recent discussion of this Greek witness to ancient Iranian heritage, see Touraj Daryaee, Whipping the Sea and the Earth. Xerxes at the Hellespont and Yima at the Vara, in: Dabir 2 (2016), pp. 4–9. Daryaee compares the story in Herodotus to the one told about Yima the mythical king, who, according to Widewdat II, whipped the earth.

15 Herodotus, Histories 7, transl. by George C. Macaulay, New York 2004.

16 A paraphrase of Exod. 3:14 seems to be used there as a magic formula establishing the dominion of the God of Israel over the powers of nature; see 'b. Shevu'ot 35a', 'b. B. Batra 73a'. For an example of its usage in a magic bowl 1911/1 (5–7 CE) from the Schøyen collection, see https://www.schoyencollection.com/palaeography-collection-introduction/aramaic-hebrew-syriac/4-6-3-jewish-aramaic/ms-1911-1 (29 October 2021). See Christa Müller-Kessler, The Use of Biblical Quotations in Jewish Aramaic Incantation Bowls, in: Helen R. Jacobus, Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme and Philippe Guillaume (eds.), Studies on Magic and Divination in the Biblical World, Piscataway NJ 2013, pp. 227–245, esp. pp. 243–244. On magic in rabbinic lore, see also Yuval Harari, Moses, the Sword and 'The Sword of Moses': Between Rabbinical and Magical Traditions, in: Jewish Studies Quarterly 12, 4 (2005), pp. 293–329; cf. Naama Vilozny, Magic Art Between Judaism and Christianity: Aramaic Incantation Bowls and Christian Amuletic Pendants, in: Filip Vukosavović (ed.), Angels and Demons. Jewish Magic through the Ages, Jerusalem 2010, pp. 154–159.

Let us now turn to the ‘Vita’ of Barsauma, an accomplished ascetic and miracle worker travelling from the East to the Holy Land to repair the spiritual deterioration that plagued the Christian communities under the instigation of demons.[17] Our protagonist’s mostly terrestrial travel is interrupted by the necessity to cover the last part of the expedition by sea, sailing from Laodicea on the northern Syrian Coast via Cyprus to the shores of the Promised Land. It is during this journey that a tempest ensues. The dramatic tempest episode in the ‘Vita’ is of a composite nature with various transmitters, all of them Barsauma’s disciples, offering their versions of the miraculous event. Here is the segment of the story where the motifs previously discerned in ‘b. Baba Bathra’ also appears (‘Vita’ 78.2, 5):[18]

> [2] At sea a great storm broke over them and many ships which were voyaging were lost. As for the ship on which the blessed Barṣauma was standing, the waves passed over her and hid her from view, but no water fell inside the ship herself.[19] The way the waves were spread out over that ship was like a tabernacle.[20]
> […]
> [5] The disciple who first saw a vision now looked out ahead of the ship. He was watching the sea: there, large as life, on the surface of the water, two angels were striding ahead of the ship, hauling it along with white ropes. Each held a staff of cornelian in his hand with which he pushed down the ocean waves in front of the ship. From that moment onwards not one of the sea’s waves reared up to cover the ship; and yet it was still blowing a raging gale.

The motif of a sea tempest, well attested in late antique sources,[21] appears in the ‘Vita’ twice, providing two versions of the event in which the storm is miraculously subdued.[22] In the current episode,[23] Barsauma, the miracle worker, although present,

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[17] See note 6 above.

[18] English translation follows that of Andrew Palmer, Appendix: The Life of Barsauma, in: Johannes Hahn and Volker Menze (eds.), The Wandering Holy Man. The Life of Barsauma, Christian Asceticism, and Religious Conflict in Late Antique Palestine (Transformation of the Classical Heritage Series), Oakland 2020.

[19] Cf. Exod. 14:22.

[20] Cf. Exod. 40:34.

[21] Regarding Jewish material, see, for example, Catherine Hezser, Jewish Travel in Antiquity, Tübingen 2011, pp. 161–196. For Byzantine accounts, see Jean Rouge, Ships and Fleets of Ancient Mediterranean, Middletown CT 1981, pp. 15–17.

[22] In a later instance (Sign 53), it is the presence of Barsauma, the ascetic wearing an iron *chiton* under his cloak (ܓܒܪܐ ܡܣܡܘܪܐ ܕܠܒܝܫ ܟܘܬܝܢܐ ܕܦܪܙܠܐ ܘܡܟܣܝܢ ܗܘܐ ܡܢ ܠܒܪ), to whom the authority is given “over the land and sea and everything” (ܫܘܠܛܢܐ ܥܬܝܕ…ܐܪܥܐ ܘܝܡܡܐ ܘܝܒܫܐ ܘܟܠ ܕܒܗܘܢ), that saves the travellers from shipwreck. See ‘Vita’ 79. Cf. Nau, Deux épisodes (note 5), pp. 188–191.

[23] ‘Vita’ 78.

remains, for the most part, a silent observer of the tremendous forces intervening on his and his disciples' behalf.[24]

The narrative, however, clearly portrays this wondrous protection as insufficient, since Barsauma's companions remain frightened and continue to weep (78.3), which justifies introducing more dramatic episodes in sections 78.3 and 78.4. We will return to them later on. In 'Vita' 78.5 quoted above, the angels pushed the gigantic waves away with the red staffs they held in their hands. The angelic vision is, of course, a typical feature of Christian *mirabilia.* Yet mysterious red staffs (ܫܒܘ̈ܛܐ ܕܣܘܡܩܐ) are puzzling. It is not possible to establish with certainty their meaning or whether they reflect a link to the branches mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud and/or in Herodotus' tale (see above). It may, however, be tentatively suggested that they are all related to the Persian cultic procedure of punishing the "bad water" – the rebellious element of nature that wickedly participated with Ahariman in the battle against the believers of the true religion. According to the Iranian doctrine, the saltwater had formerly been sweet but was then contaminated by the assault of the hostile spirit.[25] We may see the common pattern in the stories under discussion as conversing with backdrop mythological perceptions of hostile sea waves representing the powers of evil and chaos, destined to be overcome by the heroic voyager.

Winged Creatures

Its multi-staged plan distinguishes Barsauma's story: the narrator repeatedly emphasises the incomplete nature of the victory over the storm – a raging gale was still blowing (ܒܟܒܠ ܢܫܒܘ ܪ̈ܘܚܐ ܕܝܢ ܡܥܫ̈ܢܝܬܐ).[26] One can see here the deliberately chosen narrative strategy of manipulation of gaps and ambiguities which enables the transition to an alternative avenue of rescue provided by the intervention of a mysterious winged creature ('Vita' 78.8–9):[27]

> [8] Then the disciples of the champion [of faith] Barṣauma looked up and saw, right in front of their eyes, what looked like a bird flying towards them just above the surface of the sea; and set upon the head of that bird was what looked like a crown of cornelian (ܟܠܝܠܐ ܣܘܡܩܐ).

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[24] A salient feature of the narrative here is its composite character, with a number of seemingly independent sea-voyage redemption motifs collated together. The first of these motifs highlights Barsauma's presence as the true merit and reason for redemptive miraculous action: thanks to his standing in the middle of the ship, the gigantic waves though overarching the vessel did not flood it (ܘܒܓܘܗ̇ ܕܐܠܦܐ ܡ̈ܝܐ ܠܐ ܣܚܬܢ ܗܘܘ 'Vita' 78.2; cf. Exod. 14:22, 29). See also the development of the protecting walls of water motif in 'Midrash Psalms' 114.7, ed. by Salomon Buber, Vilna 1891.

[25] On the passage from Herodotus, quoted above, see Boyce (note 14), pp. 165–167.

[26] 'Vita' 78.5.

[27] On these narrative strategies, see Meir Sternberg, Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction, Bloomington 1978, pp. 104–106.

> [9] That bird came and circled the ship three times, then turned to go back in the direction from which it had come. At this, the ship changed course and turned to follow the bird towards its destination. 'In my opinion, this is not even a bird, but a sign of peace sent by God,' one of the blessed Barṣauma's disciples remarked, 'We are going to reach land safe and sound.'

The winged creature, which the ascetic's disciples witness descending and circling the ship, is depicted as wearing a red crown. It is difficult to trace this image's origin and exact function, but it can be surmised that it indicates a high position in some mythological hierarchy. When the creature finally turned around, the ship immediately "changed its course and turned to follow the bird toward its destination".[28] When a mighty tempest threatens a ship, the salvific appearance of the heavenly bird is likewise attested, for instance, in 'b. Baba Bathra', in a story related by r. Yehudah Hindu'a (the Indian), a character unknown to us from any other rabbinic tradition ('b. Baba Bathra' 74b):[29]

Rav Yehudah the Indian (Hindu'a) said: 'Once we were sailing on a ship and we saw a precious stone with a sea monster encircling it.	רב יהודה הנדואה מישתעי זימנא חדא הוה קא אזלינן בספינתא וחזינא להההוא אבן טבא דהוה הדר לה תנינא
A diver descended to bring it up and the sea monster came and wanted to swallow the ship.	ונחית בר אמודאי לאיתוייה אתא תנינא קא בעי למיבלע לה לספינתא
Then Paškeza came and bit off his head.	אתא פשקנצ' קטעיה לרישיה
[The water turned to blood].	[ואיתהפוכו מייא והוו דמא]
The [sea monster's] fellow came,	אתא [תנינא] חבריה

28 'Vita' 78.9.

29 His nickname could be translated as 'Indian' – but apparently, in the sense of 'one who travelled to India.' See the new Sokoloff edition of the Brokelmann dictionary (Michael Sokoloff, A Syriac Lexicon, Winona Lake 2009, p. 346, and Michael Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods, Ramat Gan 2002, p. 380). It may, alternatively, indicate his ethnic background (cf. Syriac g*abra hindua* mentioned in Julius Landsberger, Die Fabeln des Sophos. Syrisches Original der griechischen Fabeln des Syntipas, Posen 1859, pp. 1–2, where it serves as a substitute for the 'African' in the Greek version). On the navigation to India in ancient times, see Lionel Casson, Ancient Naval Technology and the Route to India, in: Vimala Begley and Richard D. De Puma (eds.), Rome and India. The Ancient Sea-Trade, Madison 1991, pp. 8–11. This and the following story from the Babylonian Talmud were recently analysed by Daniel J. Frim, 'Those Who Descend upon the Sea Told Me'. Myth and Tall Tale in Baba Batra 73a–74b, in: Jewish Quarterly Review 107, 1 (2017), pp. 1–37. Our understanding of the story, however, as well as its translation, are different.

put it [the stone] on him (the sea monster), revived him and then he [sea monster's fellow] returned.	אותבה (יהליה) [עילויה] וחייא והדר
He [the sea monster] wanted to swallow the ship,	איתא קא [בעי למ]בלע לה לספינתא
But Paškeza came and bit off his head.	אתא ההוא פשקנצא קטעיה לרישיה
Then he took the stone and flew away.	שקלה לההיא אבן טבא ופרח
With Paškeza flying away, the stone was dropped onto the ship, where there were salted birds that we had with us.	בהדי דפרח נפל בספינתא והוו הנך ציפרי מליחי בהדן
[Then he] put it (the stone) on them. They lifted it and flew away with it.'	אותיבנה עלי' דליוה ופרחו

According to the Talmudic narrative, sailors, who believed it to be a common gemstone, accidentally discovered a mysterious object in the depths of the sea. Although it was guarded by a monster, *tanina*, thus indicating that it was destined for an extraordinary assignment, the daring diver,[30] trained in his craft, plunged into the sea to get it. Apparently considering it insufficient merely to swallow the diver, the angry monster tried to take in the entire vessel. Then, however, a winged creature, Paškeza,[31] killed the sea monster, thus saving the ship, which had come dangerously close to the location of the precious stone. Paškeza has already appeared earlier in this 'b. Baba Bathra' chain of stories, where it swallowed the giant serpent that had previously swallowed a giant toad, and after finishing its feast settled down on a gigantic tree.[32]

At first, this creature in the Babylonian Talmud was identified by Henning as a metamorphosis of the mythical Iranian Baškuč bird,[33] which in Persian lore

30 Sokoloff (note 4), p. 234.

31 On this creature in the Babylonian Talmud, see Kiperwasser (note 4), p. 232 (in Hebrew).

32 See Kiperwasser (note 4), p. 233–234. Talmudic commentators identify פשקנצא as a gigantic raven and this understanding was recorded by Sokoloff in his dictionary – to be emended in the new edition.

33 Walter B. Henning, Two Manichean Magical Texts with an Excursus on the Parthian Ending -ēndēh, in: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 12, 1 (1947), pp. 39–66, esp. pp. 42–43. The identification proposed by Henning was accepted by others, see Hans-Peter Schmidt, The Sēnmurw of Birds and Dogs and Bats, in: Persica 8 (1980), pp. 1–86; Daniel E. Gershenson, Understanding Puškansa, in: Acta Orientalia 55 (1994),

resembles the griffon.[34] A vision of the wondrous stone that is revealed to the eyes of the stunned seafarers from under the seawaters is also known to us from the 'Song of the Pearl', arguably a remnant of ancient Syro-Mesopotamian voyage poetry, later incorporated into the 'Acts of Thomas' (AoT):[35]

> 'If [you would go] down into Egypt
> and bring [back] the one pearl [ܡܪܓܢܝܬܐ],
> which is in the middle of the sea [ܒܝܡܐ ܩܪܝܒ],
> surrounded by the hissing serpent [ܚܝܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܪܩܐ],
> then you will put on your glorious garment
> and your toga which rests [is laid] over it […]'
>
> I passed through the borders of Maishan,
> the meeting-place of the merchants of the East,
> and I reached the land of Babel,
> and I entered the walls of Sarbug.
> I then went down into Egypt,
> and my companions parted from me.
> I went straight to the serpent [ܚܝܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܪܩܐ],
> around its lodging I settled
> until it was going to slumber and sleep,
> that I might snatch my pearl from it.
> Then I became alone and lonely,
> to my fellow-lodgers I became a stranger [ܠܒܝܬܗ̇ܘ̇].

The function of the poem in the general outline of the AoT is unclear. Some scholars who think that the AoT is a Gnostic composition and hence interpret the hymn along the lines of the Gnostic outlook, assume that the pearl is an allegory of either the

pp. 23–36; David Buyaner, On the Etymology of Middle Persian baškuč (Winged Monster), in: Studia Iranica 34, 1 (2005), pp. 19–30.

34 On its occurrence in Iranian lore, see L.C. Casartelli, Çyena – Simrgh – Roc, in: Congrès scientifique international des catholiques 6 (1891), pp. 79–86; C.V. Trever, The Dog-Bird: Senmurw-Paskudj, Leningrad 1938; Wolfgang Fauth, Der persische Simurg und der Gabriel-Melek Tāwūs der Jeziden, in: Persica 12 (1987), pp. 123–147; Schmidt (note 33); Hans-Peter Schmidt, Simorgh, in: Encyclopaedia Iranica, forthcoming. There is a closeness between Baškuč פשקנצא and Sēnmurw / Simurgh, also an Iranian mythical bird, who is viewed as the king of all winged creatures.

35 The Syriac version translated here is that of Taeke Jansma, A Selection from the Acts of Judas Thomas, Leiden 1952, pp. 35–40. For the summary of different scholarly approaches to this composition, see Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, The Hymn of Jude Thomas, the Apostle, in the Country of the Indians, in: Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas, Leuven, Paris 2001, pp. 108–113.

hidden light or of the soul's descent into this world.[36] Others discern here a didactic or just a rhetorical stratagem. However, the likelihood that this poetic fragment was inserted into the AoT induces us to analyse it as a separate unit.[37] Therefore, if we approach the poem as a product of an independent setting, it seems likely that it was based on a sailor story prototype. That prototype would be initially transmitted without its present narrative frame and would only eventually be put into the mouth of Thomas by the compiler of the AoT. Disconnected from the context of AoT, the story would read like a Babylonian fairy tale.[38] In such a tale, the stone could have possibly functioned as part of the royal regalia snatched from the Parthian court – hence the need to bring it back.

In the Talmudic narrative, however, the precious stone obtains a new meaning, correlative with some ideas of rabbinic eschatology. The stone there has the power to bring the dead back to life and is hidden in anticipation of the end of time. The winged creature appeared to act as the guardian of the sailors, placed under the special protection of God. The wondrous nature of the stone became manifest when the first monster's companion emerged from the bloodied waters and revived his killed mate. The resuscitated monster tried one more time to swallow the ship, ostensibly motivated by revenge and the desire to guard the stone. To properly deal with the danger, the winged creature had to kill the *tanina* again. It then seized the stone and carried it away to a new hiding place where it would be safely kept until the ordained time. Yet before that could happen, the stone, evidently on purpose, was dropped on the ship, with the result that the carcasses of the birds salted by the sailors came back to life. The birds, now alive, took possession of the stone and flew away, seemingly following their leader Paškeza.

Excursus

Although detached there from the sea-travel context, the motif of dead birds suddenly coming to life and flying away is known from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (IGT), usually dated to the first half of the second century.[39] At the beginning of

36 See the summary of these scholarly evaluations in Luttikhuizen (note 35), pp. 103–108 and Gerard Luttikhuizen, A Gnostic Reading of the Acts of John, in: Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas, Leuven 2001, pp. 119–152, esp. pp. 133 ff.

37 Klaus Beyer, Das syrische Perlenlied: Ein Erlösungsmythos als Märchengedicht, in: Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft 140 (1990), pp. 234–235.

38 This assumption is derived from the discussion by Beyer (note 37), pp. 238–240.

39 Regarding the history of research of this remarkable text, see Reidar Aasgaard, The Childhood of Jesus. Decoding the Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Eugene OR 2009, pp. 1–13. For discussion of later medieval reception of the tradition, see Mary Dzon, Jesus and the Birds in Medieval Abrahamic Traditions, in: Traditio 66 (2011), pp. 189–230. Having completed this study, we came across an interesting parallel of Jesus resurrecting a fried rooster in the apocryphal Book of the Cock (ca sixth century CE). We hope to address it in the future.

the composition, we are told how the five-year-old Jesus was playing with other "Hebrew boys" next to a running stream and made the muddy waters clean by the power of his word. This display of the child's miraculous powers is complemented by the following (IGT 2):

> He was playing at the ford of a stream […] [Then] he made soft clay and formed twelve sparrows out of it[40] […] [But] a certain Jew saw what Jesus did […] on the Sabbath [day]; he immediately went and announced to his father Joseph: 'See, your child […] has profaned the Sabbath.' Then Joseph came to the place, and seeing what Jesus did, he cried out: 'Why do you do on the Sabbath what it is not lawful to do?' [Then] Jesus clapped his hands and cried to the sparrows: 'Be [alive and] gone!' And the sparrows flew off chirping.[41]

When the other Jews saw Jesus bringing clay birds to life, they were first offended by what seemed like a violation of the Sabbath, but then mostly flabbergasted and told the leaders of the community about the miracle they had witnessed.

◆

It may be suggested that the rabbinic narrator in the Babylonian Talmud adopted the circulating mythical motif of the miraculously revived birds – the one also underlying the IGT – to embellish and reinforce the main idea of the story concerning the wondrous stone. Far away from human eyes, a stone with abilities to restore life remains a well-kept secret, until the dawn of the eschatological era. It would then be employed for reviving the dead of Israel. It can be noticed that there are a few speculations in rabbinic literature about how, and with the help of which agent, God will perform the ultimate miracle of resurrection.[42] Our story in 'b. Baba Bathra' represents one such speculation: here the vast dimensions of the sea, the place of primordial chaos in mythological thought, became a storage place for the keys to the eschatological future. In his Babylonian didactic tale, the rabbinic narrator mobilised the two

40 For a suggestion that the number twelve here may hint at the mission of the twelve apostles, see Dzon (note 39), p. 198. However, this motif – as well as other possible meanings of the typological number of twelve – is nowhere spelled out in the composition.

41 English translation is indebted to Bart D. Ehrman, The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings. A Reader, New York, Oxford 1998, pp. 127–128.

42 A common view among Palestinian rabbis is that at the end of time, God will resurrect the deceased with the help of the miraculous dew, an indication of which is found in a verse from Isaiah 26:19. See for example 'y. Berakhot' 5, 2 [9b] and 'Taanit' 1, 1 [63b]. However, in addition there also existed a belief that some secret agents able to revive the deceased were dispersed out in the mundane world. See for example Leviticus Rabbah 22.4. See also our discussion on 'b. Baba Bathra' 74b further on.

complementing motifs – a miraculous stone being retrieved by a diver and a miraculous bird rescuing the sailors.

These two motifs are not collated in the Christian narratives. The Acts of Thomas incorporated the diver motif as an obscure parable without elaborating on its meaning. The author of Barsauma's 'Vita' adopted only that of a salvific bird. It is instructive that he felt necessary to add a descriptive comment, that in his opinion: "this is not, in fact, a bird, but a sign of peace sent by God". This remark wraps up the strategy of adoption through adaptation / Christianisation inaugurated with the call to "give glory to God" at the beginning of the tempest episode.

All these disconnected narratives rely on the same miracle story prototype, where the depths of the sea are home to marvellous treasures guarded by winged creatures and to be recovered by the sailors. Whereas in the 'Song of the Pearl' the function of the treasure remains unclear, in the rabbinic versions it is destined to be kept there until the days of eschatological redemption and then bring about the resurrection of the dead. In the next section, we will discuss additional evidence for this eschatologically flavoured motif.

Treasure in the Sea

Having followed our travellers through the sea of Talmud up until now, we arrive at another example of the adoption strategy in the context of a rabbinic narrative, which belongs to a sequence of stories about wondrous objects found in the depths of the sea ('b. Baba Bathra' 74b):[43]

R. Yonathan relates: 'Once we were travelling on a ship.	ר' יונתן משתעי זמנא חדא הוה קאזלינן בספינתא
And we saw the small basket studded with precious stones and pearls and surrounded by a species of fish [Kara] called Karša.	וחזינן ההיא קרטליתא דהוו מקבע בה אבנים טובו' ומרגליו והוה הדר לה מינא דכוארא דשמיה כירשא
There a diver descends, to bring it and [the Karša] wanted to hit him [the diver] on his thigh.	והוה נחית בר אמודאי לאיתוייה ובעא דנישמטה לאטמיה
[He] ascended and threw [his] skin-bottle of vinegar [on the Karša?].	סליק ושקא זיקא דחלא

43 The text is according to Ms. Paris 1337 with some emendations according to other manuscripts, see note 8 above.

Following that, a bath-qōl [heavenly echo] came forth, saying to us:	בהדיה נפקא בת קלא ואמר׳ לן
"What have you to do with the small basket of r. Hanina b. Dosa's wife who is to store in it the purple-blue for the righteous in the world to com?!"'	מאי עיבידתיכו בהדי קרטליתא דביתהו דר׳ חנינא בן דוסא דעתידא למשדא ביה תכלתא לצדיקי לעלמא דאתי

This story should be read in the light of other variants of the sea-voyage plot,[44] especially the one concerning Rav Yehudah the Indian, quoted above.[45] Here the narrator relates that when sailing, he and his companions saw in the water a small basket studded with precious stones and pearls and guarded by a shoal of giant *Kara* fish.[46] Having descended into the water to retrieve the basket and the stones, the diver succeeds in outsmarting the guardian sea creatures. However, the heavenly voice (*bath-qōl*) comes forth and demands the seafarers to keep away from the basket, which, as it turns out, is destined to be in the post-resurrection era in possession of rabbi Hanina ben Dosa's wife. "Purple-blue" here is the dye used to colour the fringes of the traditional prayer cloak (*talith*); as for the long-lost secret of its preparation,[47] it will be, according to a popular belief, revealed anew in eschatological times.[48] It was once derived from a marine creature named *hillazon* on the seashores of the Land

44 See Raphael Patai, The Children of Noah. Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times, Princeton 1999, pp. 126–127.

45 'B. Baba Bathra' 74b.

46 See Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Y. Shapira, Irano-Talmudica I: The Three-Legged Ass and Ridyā in B. Taanith. Some Observations About Mythic Hydrology in the Babylonian Talmud and in Ancient Iran, in: Association for Jewish Studies Review 32, 1 (2008), p. 103, n. 38; Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Y. Shapira, Irano-Talmudica II: Leviathan, Behemoth and the 'Domestication' of Iranian Mythological Creatures in Eschatological Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud, in: Steven Fine and Shai Secunda (eds.), Shoshanat Yaakov: Ancient Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman, Leiden 2012, p. 216.

47 See R. Isaac Herzog, Hebrew Porphyrology, in: Ehud Spanier (ed.), The Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 44, 110–112. Chronologically, the last mention of *tekhelet* in rabbinic literature of Palestinian provenance is found in the Midrash 'Tanhuma' (Shelah 28, on Num. 17:5), with the lament "and now we have no 'tekhelet', only white". Herzog hypothesised that that it was the Arab conquest of the Land of Israel that brought an end to the snail-based dyeing industry among the Jews.

48 This belief is not emphatically pronounced, but it can be derived from some sources. For example, in the 'Tanhuma' mentioned above, explaining that *tekhelet* is no longer available, the *midrashist* uses the expression *nignaz* (stored away or hidden), see Shamma Friedman, The Primacy of Tosefta in Mishnah–Tosefta Parallels (Shabbat 16.1), in: Tarbiz 62 (1993), pp. 313–338 (in Hebrew). He has shown that the verb *g-n-z* is primarily used in the negative sense of making an item unusable without destroying it (pp. 323–324), so that whereas it is currently impossible to fulfil the precept, it will become feasible in the future. Even more explicit in this regard is the passage from 'b. B. Bathra' addressed above.

of Israel and probably exported to other countries.[49] The idea that the "purple-blue" will be rediscovered in the eschatological era seems to have been an innovation of the Babylonian Jewry.[50] It deserves notice that for the narrator both r. Hanina b. Dosa, a charismatic miracle worker,[51] and his wife have long been dead and thus the mention of them here refers the audience to the future age of resurrection. It stands to reason that the end-of-days focus of the story should inform our understanding of the function of the precious stones in this narrative.

We can see how in the two rabbinic stories a backdrop tall tale of the guarded sea treasure discovered by unaware sailors, originally devoid of explicitly religious markers, is subjected to an attempt to infuse it with the adopted eschatological meaning. The basic underlying plot brings the protagonist to explore the depths of the sea, relating the wondrous finds and the encounters with miraculous creatures. Its reworking establishes a link to specific rabbinic ideas: resurrection, ritual demands transferred to the hereafter, and involvement of prominent rabbinic figures

As for the elaboration of Barsauma's 'Vita' above, the central element of the supposed background folk story – the treasure hidden in the sea – is absent. The lack of interest in this topic is in agreement with the difference in focus: whereas in the Talmud the emphasis is on the wonders of the sea adventure, in the 'Vita' the sea travel is only a preface to the true climax of the protagonist's heroic sojourn in the Holy Land. However, both use the meaningful space of the sea as – to borrow the especially useful expression introduced by Joshua Levenson to illustrate the journey as a process of obtaining meaning – the locus of intense semiotic traffic,[52] in which nothing is thrown into the sea as unnecessary baggage, but everything finds its place among the building blocks of the narrative bricolage.

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49 A number of archaeological sites along the northern coast of Israel and extending up to the port city of Sidon attest to a well-developed murex-based dyeing industry in the region; see Nira Karmon and Ehud Spanier, Archaeological Evidence of the Purple Dye Industry from Israel, in: Ehud Spanier (ed.), The Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 149–157; Israel A. Ziderman, Reinstitution of the Mitzvah of Tekhelet in Tzitzit, in: Tehumin 9 (1988), p. 438 (in Hebrew).

50 See 'b. Sotah' 46b and Reuven Kiperwasser, Elihoref and Ahia. The Metamorphosis of the Narrative Tradition from the Land of Israel to the Sassanian Babylonia, in: Tal Ilan and Ronit Nikolsky (eds.), Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia. From There to Here, Leiden 2014, pp. 268–269.

51 See Joseph Blenkinsopp, Miracles: Elisha and Hanina Ben Dosa, in: John C. Cavadini (ed.), Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity, Notre Dame IN 1999, pp. 57–81; David Levine, Holy Men and Rabbis in Talmudic Antiquity, in: Joshua Schwartz and Marcel Poorthuis (eds.), Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity, Leiden 2004, pp. 45–58; Chanah Safrai and Zeev Safrai, Rabbinic Holy Men, in: Ibid., pp. 59–78.

52 See Joshua Levinson, Travel Tales of Captivity in Rabbinic Literature, in: Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing 17, 1 (2016), pp. 75–95, esp. p. 76.

Summing Up

We have discussed a number of wondrous-sea-voyage traditions exemplifying a variety of balancing acts between the inherited backdrop of mythological motifs and their reworking in light of the specific religious agendas – either Christian or Jewish – of late antique narrators. Three mythological patterns were singled out: divine intervention calming down the mighty tempest; a treasure hidden in the depths of the sea, guarded by a monstrous creature; and wondrous birds coming to the sailors' rescue. We have observed that for our Syro-Mesopotamian Aramaic-speaking narrators, the sea retains its threatening appeal and therefore the sea voyages provide for a meaningful liminal experience that challenges the narrators' religious outlook. For them all, undeniable differences notwithstanding, the sea represents the chaos embodied in the universe according to its mythical perception. Subsequently, various strategies for dealing with the tension inherent in the liminal sea adventure have been discerned – inter alia, alleviating the mythic flavour of the background tradition.

With some overlap in the basic strategies, one notes the distinguishing Jewish motif of the sea as the storage place for the treasure that is destined to serve during the era of eschatological resurrection. Christian narrators, with their own foundational resurrection-centred notions, seem to lack interest in that motif. Both Jewish and Christian sea adventures discussed in this study remain focused on adjusting the traditional sailors' tall tales to their new – either Christian or Jewish – religious agenda. Exemplifying the adjustment strategies, late antique Jewish and Christian sources also seem to reflect the underlying shared myths. They thus have the potential to complement our picture of such mythological perceptions of the sea and sea voyages.