

THE SPIRIT AMONG THE SAGES: *SEDER*
OLAM, THE END OF PROPHECY, AND
 SAGELY ILLUMINATION¹

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The rabbinic sages are typically assumed to have used rational principles of exegesis to interpret Scripture and to have eschewed illuminated interpretation as found in Qumran. Philip S. Alexander in his essay "A Sixtieth Part of Prophecy: The Problem of Continuing Revelation in Judaism" writes that it is a "fundamental rabbinic dogma that the Torah was given once and for all, and that decisions as to its meaning lie solely with the competence of the collectivity of the Sages, relying on argument and persuasion."²

¹ Based on a paper delivered November 18, 2012, Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois. Midrash Session Presentation: "The Spirit among the Sages: Illuminated Exegesis, the Putative 'End of Prophecy', and Tannaitic Midrash."

² Philip S. Alexander, "A Sixtieth Part of Prophecy: The Problem of Continuing Revelation in Judaism," in J. Davies, G. Harvey, and W.G.E. Watson, eds., *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of*

Alexander quotes the famous Talmudic story about the dispute over the oven of Akhnai, with its powerful declaration by Rabbi Joshua that the Torah is not in heaven, and that the law follows the rule of the majority. Rabbi Eliezer's appeals to miracles and a heavenly voice are disregarded as having no standing. Alexander writes that this is "a ringing affirmation of the rabbinic doctrine that prophecy has ceased."³ In the remainder of his essay Alexander nuances his conclusions and duly notes that even for the rabbis, lesser modes of divine communication did continue. He concludes that while prophecy never entirely disappeared even with rabbinic Judaism, yet rabbinic ideology was loath to acknowledge that fact, and the rabbis "chronologized the relationship between prophetism and scribalism: prophets belong to the past, scribes to the present."⁴

This view that the rabbis emphasized the discontinuity between their activity and that of the prophets is widely held, but has not gained universal assent. Frederick E. Greenspahn in his essay "Why Prophecy Ceased" notes that the rabbis "did not feel out of touch with the divine" and that "The tradition of the holy spirit's departure itself allows for the continuation of divine communication via the Bat Qol, whereby God's will is revealed to those who, in an earlier age, would have merited the holy spirit..."⁵ Responding to this claim, Benjamin D. Sommer takes Greenspahn to task for stating that "prophecy continued after its supposed demise," and Sommer underscores rabbinic sources stating that prophecy did in fact cease. Regarding messages by the *בַּת קוֹל*, Sommer points out that they were not regarded as "full-fledged prophecies" and that the *בַּת קוֹל* "had no authority in halakhic matters."⁶

John F. A. Sawyer (JSOT Supplement Series 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 414–433, here 415.

³ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 432.

⁵ Frederick E. Greenspahn, "Why Prophecy Ceased," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108,1 (1989), 37–49, here 43.

⁶ Benjamin D. Sommer, "Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115,1 (31–47, here 39).

John R. Levison, "Did the Spirit Withdraw from Israel?," vigorously supports the view of Greenspahn. Focusing on *Tosefta* Sotah 13.2–4, "When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the last of the prophets, died, the Holy Spirit ceased in [from] Israel," Levison argues that in the broader context of *Tosefta* Sota, the meaning of this particular passage is that the Holy Spirit had ceased temporarily, and that the passage is actually "an affirmation of the renewal of the Holy Spirit among the rabbis."⁷

More recently, L. Stephen Cook has engaged in a comprehensive review of the primary and secondary sources, and concludes that "Second Temple Jews did, on the whole, tend to believe that prophecy had ceased in the Persian period."⁸ He summarizes the rabbinic view as follows: "Upon the deaths of the last prophets at the end of the Persian era, the Spirit of prophecy withdrew from Israel and had not as yet returned... In this connection, it is telling that the rabbis never appeal to contemporary prophets nor to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in order to give incontestable, binding force to their halakhic decisions."⁹

It is clear that scholars have examined much the same evidence on this topic but, emphasizing one pole or the other between continuity vs. discontinuity, have come to different, often opposing, conclusions. Rather than rehashing the same material yet again, the rest of this chapter will focus on an early rabbinic source that in my view has not received the attention it deserves and, when cited at all, has generally been truncated and misread.

Seder Olam is an early work concerned primarily with Biblical chronology. It is part of the rabbinic corpus and is often associated with the genres of Midrash and Aggadah. Chaim Milikowsky calls it "an exegetically-based chronography focusing on the biblical

⁷ John R. Levison, "Did the Holy Spirit Withdraw from Israel? An Evaluation of the Earliest Jewish Data," *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997), 35–57, here 55.

⁸ L. Stephen Cook, *On the Question of the "Cessation of Prophecy" in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 192.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

period" and translates the title as "ordering of the world."¹⁰ He considers the traditional attribution to the second-century Tannaic sage Rabbi Yose ben Halaftha (c. 160 C.E.) essentially accurate, though with the understanding that Rabbi Yose was not author, but transmitter and editor of a still earlier work. The language of *Seder Olam* is Mishnaic Hebrew; the eminent Hebraist Moshe Bar-Asher lists it together with Mishnah, Tosefta, and the halakhic midrashim as comprising the literature of the Tannaim.¹¹

Chapter thirty, the last chapter of *Seder Olam*, reaching the end of the Biblical period, makes reference to "Alexander of Macedon who reigned twelve years." It continues,

Until here prophets would prophecy through the Holy Spirit; from here on "Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise" etc. "For it will be pleasant if you keep them within you" etc. "That your trust may be in the Lord" etc. "Have I not written for you thirty sayings" etc. "To show you what is right and true" etc. (Prov. 22: 17–21) So too it says, "Ask your father and he will inform you, your elders and they will tell you" (Deut. 32:7)¹²

This passage of *Seder Olam* quotes six verses, five from Proverbs 22 and one from Deuteronomy 32. I have presented them as they appear translated in Milikowsky's 1981 Yale dissertation. Milikowsky is the foremost contemporary student of *Seder Olam*, having devoted decades to analyzing this work and related matters; his efforts have culminated in the publication of a two volume

¹⁰ Chaim Milikowsky, "Seder Olam," in Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson, eds., *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2006), 231–237, here 231.

¹¹ Moshe Bar-Asher, "Mishnaic Hebrew: An Introductory Survey," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 369–403, here 369.

¹² Chaim Milikowsky, *Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronography* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1981), 546.

Hebrew critical edition (2013), a landmark scholarly achievement.¹³ The critical edition gives us the same six verses.¹⁴ I emphasize this point because in discussions of the putative 'end of prophecy' in *Seder Olam*, scholars almost invariably adduce only one verse from Proverbs, Prov. 22:17. For example, Benjamin Sommer cites the passage as follows: "Alexander of Macedonia reigned for twelve years. Until that time prophets spoke prophecies through the holy spirit (היו הנביאים מתנבאים ברוח ק); from that time on, 'Incline your ear and listen to the words of the Sages.'"¹⁵ Similarly, L. Stephen Cook: "'A valiant king will arise ... and when he arises, his kingdom will be broken and separated in the four directions of the sky' (Dan. 11:3–4). That is Alexander the Macedonian who ruled for 12 years. Until that time there were prophets prophesying by the Holy Spirit; from there on 'bend your ear and listen to the words of the wise' (Prov. 22:17)."¹⁶

The historian Isaiah Gafni, in an essay titled "Rabbinic Historiography and Representations of the Past," presents this source as follows: "He is Alexander of Macedon who ruled for twelve years; until that time the prophets prophesied through the Holy Spirit, from then on bend your ear and hear [or: heed] the words of the sages."¹⁷ Sid Z. Leiman quotes thus: "Until then, the prophets prophesied by means of the holy spirit. From then on, give ear and listen to the words of the Sages."¹⁸

¹³ Chaim Milikowsky, *Seder Olam: Critical Edition, Commentary, and Introduction, 2 vols.* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2013)

¹⁴ Milikowsky, *Seder Olam* (2013), Volume One: Introduction and Critical Edition, 322–323.

¹⁵ Sommer, "Did Prophecy Cease?", 34.

¹⁶ Cook, *On the Question*, 156.

¹⁷ Isaiah Gafni, "Rabbinic Historiography and Representations of the Past," in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 295–312, here 303.

¹⁸ Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976), 66.

Scholars of an older generation followed the same pattern; see Ephraim Urbach's Hebrew essay "When did Prophecy Cease?";¹⁹ the English translation of his rabbinic theology, *The Sages*, quotes *Seder Olam* as follows: "This is Alexander the Macedonian [i.e. Alexander the Great], who reigned 12 years. Till now the prophets prophesied through the medium of the Holy Spirit; from now on incline your ear and hearken to the words of the Sages."²⁰ Some of these exemplars do not even indicate that *Seder Olam* is quoting a verse. In this they may have followed a misleading cue in the Ratner edition, widely used by scholars before the appearance of Milikowsky's work. Ratner places the word 'שנאמר,' introducing a Biblical quotation, *after* Prov. 22:17, suggesting that the words *הט אינך ושמע דברי חכמים* are part and parcel of *Seder Olam*'s Mishnaic Hebrew and not a Biblical quote at all.²¹ This is certainly a testament to *Seder Olam*'s literary skill, weaving the language of Proverbs so artfully with its own diction that the seams are barely visible; but this adds to the temptation to view the subsequent Biblical verses as superfluous and to drop them altogether. And the intermingling of the Biblical and Mishnaic registers of this passage is intensified by those scholars who chose to capitalize the word 'sages,' thus conflating Biblical Wisdom figures with rabbinic virtuosi hundreds of years later.

Of course, in the first volume of his new critical edition, devoted to the text, Milikowsky faithfully transcribes all five verses from Proverbs, as well as the one from Deuteronomy 32. Yet he too appears to fix his gaze only on the first of the five verses from Proverbs. In the second volume of his work, devoted to commentary, he refers to "the two verses cited here, Proverbs 22:17 and Deuteronomy 32:7."²² To be sure, this remark follows in the footsteps of an earlier scholar of liturgy, Naphtali Wieder, who

¹⁹ *Tarbiz* 17 (1946), 1–11, here 2.

²⁰ Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1979), vol. 1, 565.

²¹ *Seder Olam Rabbah*, edited by Ber Ratner (New York: Talmudic Research Institute, 1966 [Vilna, 1897]), 140.

²² Milikowsky, *Seder Olam* (2013), Volume Two: Commentary, 531.

speaks of the two verses as the "motto of Rabbinic Judaism."²³ In any event, Milikowsky's extensive discussion of this key *Seder Olam* passage does not engage the five verses from Proverbs, a strikingly large sequence, when the first verse would have served just fine—or so many readers have assumed.

In part, lack of attention to these verses may reflect a more widespread pattern, evident in some scholarly readings of rabbinic literature, especially midrashic texts, whereby Scriptural citations are dismissively labeled as 'prooftexts,' treated as little more than rhetorical flourishes, grace notes that provide ornamentation to the main point, but are not essential to it. I vigorously take issue with this attitude, but even if we were to entertain it momentarily for the sake of argument, it is certainly not appropriate here. *Seder Olam*'s deployment of verses always adheres to the plain sense and is on point, directly and clearly relevant to pursuing the text's chronographic goals. As Milikowsky writes, "The modes of exegesis found in *Seder Olam* are radically different from those common in midrashic literature. *Seder Olam* does not disregard grammar, context or logic when reconstructing dates and ages."²⁴ When several verses are quoted, they are all required to develop the idea at hand. So we must ask, What did *Seder Olam* have in mind with its perseverant citation of no less than five sequential verses from one chapter of Proverbs?

²³ Naphtali Wieder, *The Formation of Jewish Liturgy in the East and the West*, vol. I (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998), 339, n. 94.

²⁴ Chaim Milikowsky, "Trajectories of Return, Restoration and Redemption in Rabbinic Judaism: Elijah, the Messiah, the War of Gog and the World to Come," in J. M. Scott, ed., in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Suppl. to the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, vol. 72; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 265–280, here 279; *idem*, "Appendix Two: *Seder Olam* As a First or Second Century Composition," 198–200, appendix to "Josephus Between Rabbinic Culture and Hellenistic Historiography," in James Kugel, ed., *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism* (Suppl. to the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, vol. 74; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 159–200, here 198.

I present the five verses here, first in Hebrew and then in translation.

22:17 הט אונך ושמע דברי חכמים ולבך תשית לדעת.

22:18 כי נעים כי תשמרם בבטן יכנו יחדו על שפתך .

22:19 להיות בה' מבטחך הודעתך היום אף אתה.

22:20 הלא כתבתי לך שלישים במועצות ודעת.

22:21 להודיעך קושט אמרי אמת להשיב אמרים אמת לשלחך.

22:17 Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge.

22:18 For it is pleasant if you safeguard them in your belly; Let them be established together on your lips.

22:19 That you may put your trust in the LORD; I have made them known to you today—Yes, you!

22:20 Indeed I wrote down for you a three-fold lore, of counsels and knowledge.

22:21 To let you know certainty—words of truth, that you may bring back words of truth to the one who sent you.

While Milikowsky's edition does not transcribe all verses in full, I have supplied the endings of each verse. The scribal וּגְּ—present in Milikowsky's text at vs. 20–21, and more copiously in the mss.—is an invitation for the reader to complete the verse. It should also be noted that Oxford University Bodleian Library ms Opp. 317, designated by Milikowsky as manuscript A, transcribes all five verses in full.

The translation attempts to track the Hebrew closely; it being understood that in some places (especially v. 20) the original text has been much discussed and remains obscure. The aim here is not to resolve all uncertainties, but to gain some access to what *Seder Olam* had in mind.

For guidance, I turn to Michael V. Fox, who produced the *Anchor Yale Bible* volume on Proverbs, as well as Proverbs in the *Jewish Study Bible*. Fox treats verses 17 through 21 as a unit, an

introduction to what he calls the “Amenemope Collection,” referring to an older Egyptian wisdom treatise that this section of Proverbs closely resembles.²⁵ While this is unlikely to have been known to the authorship of *Seder Olam*, it is especially relevant for our purposes to take note of Fox's comments on verse 19, where he underscores the emphatic nature of the verse, as if it were written in boldface. First of all, the divine Name is highlighted by its forward placement in the verse, suggesting trust in God “rather than in your own independent powers and faculties.”²⁶ And the “you today—Yes, you!” is clearly emphatic; the passage arrives in a veritable shout, demanding attention. As Fox puts it, “The sole reason that you—with you specifically in mind—I have taught you these things today is to teach you to place your trust in the Lord alone.”²⁷

Turning to verse 21, Fox identifies קושט as an Aramaism; the clause is a superlative, literally “the truth of words of truth.” With the further occurrence of אמת in the second clause, the verse as a whole emphasizes “truth” three times. The effect is captured by Robert Alter, whose translation has “the utmost true sayings.”²⁸

Taking all this together, the message is an emphatic assertion of the ‘truth’ of sagely words, not based on human reason, but on trust in God. Sagely responses to queries can be accepted confidently, because they rely on Godly truth, not human reason. If this is indeed the “motto of Rabbinic Judaism,” as Naphtali Wieder has it, then the assertion of sagely authority is grounded in the rabbis’ closeness to God, not in any presumed superior rational faculties. This rules out any suggestion of legal positivism. One must hear the declamatory force of the ringing “you today—Yes, you!” and the repeated insistence on the “truth” of sagely teaching,

²⁵ Michael V. Fox, *The Anchor Yale Bible: Proverbs 10–31* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 707–713; cf. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs*, in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1482.

²⁶ Fox, *Anchor Yale Bible*, 708.

²⁷ Fox, *Anchor Yale Bible*, 709.

²⁸ Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010), 289.

not based on mental agility, but on spirit, on Godly intimacy—just as it was for the prophets. Like modern critical readers, *Seder Olam* takes Proverbs 22:17–21 as an ensemble, a unit of direct address and extraordinary power. This ensemble also mentions a written document (v. 20),—according to Fox, a reference unparalleled in Proverbs.²⁹ The combination of oral response to queries (v. 21) grounded in written text is of course precisely the culture of rabbinic Judaism.

All of this is quite different from the effect of *Seder Olam* based on the clipped text of v. 17 in isolation. The truncated reading that has governed scholarly discussion leaves the impression that the main point is the authority of sages. This further invites a suggestion of discontinuity, a disjunction between the prophetic period and the sagely period. And in turn, this allows for the scholarly commonplace that rabbinic determinations are based on human reasoning. We recall Alexander's formulation that "the Torah was given once and for all, and ... decisions as to its meaning lie solely with the competence of the collectivity of the Sages, relying on argument and persuasion."³⁰ A similar view is expressed by the eminent Israeli Talmudist, Yaakov Sussman, who writes of what he sees as the vast gap between the views on Scripture and prophecy held by the Dead Sea sect on the one hand, and the early sages on the other. According to Sussman, the sect held that Scriptural interpretation is guided by the "spiritual inspiration and numinous authority" of a designated charismatic interpreter (*Doresh ha-Torah*), while "the Pharisees held that the Torah is sealed, 'not in heaven,' meant to be interpreted by rational means (hermeneutic rules), that are available to any student of Torah with the intellectual capacity."³¹

Similarly, Ephraim Urbach's early articles on the end of prophecy have been summarized by Sussman as "Urbach's manifesto on the way one should approach the rabbinic world: as a

²⁹ Fox, *Anchor Yale Bible*, 709.

³⁰ See n. 2.

³¹ Yaakov Sussman, "The History of Halakhah and the Dead Sea Scrolls—Preliminary Observations on Miqsat Ma'ase HaTorah (4QMMT)," *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), 11–76, here 58, n. 185.

society characterized by a set of rational principles, not dominated by the guidance of revelation and prophecy typical of the Biblical world."³²

But this scholarly view, while well attested in later sources such as the Babylonian Talmud, is not appropriate for the early Tannaitic period. There is ample evidence that early rabbinic sages considered their decisions as guided by Holy Spirit. I hope to address Mishnaic, Toseftan, and halakhic-midrash texts on this topic in a subsequent essay, but for now I quote Menahem Kahana, who, in a close reading of *Mishnah-Tosefta Yadayim* among other sources, highlights the Tannaitic voice that sages determine halakhah by means of Spirit: it is true that sages deliberate, argue and vote, but these deliberations are themselves guided by divine Spirit.³³ Kahana cites Menahem Kister, who shows the connection between the early rabbinic notion of confirmation of sagely determinations by revelation on the one hand, and Qumran illuminated interpretation on the other.³⁴

Our passage in *Seder Olam*, as it reaches the end of the Biblical period, recognizes that the role of sage has replaced that of prophet, but there is no claim that the Holy Spirit has departed. This reading is buttressed when we note that an earlier passage of *Seder Olam* has it that "After the Torah was given to Israel, the Holy Spirit ceased from among the nations." מְשִׁנִּיתָה תּוֹרָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל

³² As presented by Oded Irshai, "Ephraim E. Urbach and the Study of Judeo-Christian Dialogue in Late Antiquity—Some Preliminary Observations," in Matthew Kraus, ed., *How Should Rabbinic Literature Be Read in the Modern World?* (Judaism in Context 4; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 167–197, here 177.

³³ Menahem Kahana, "On the Fashioning and Aims of the Mishnaic Controversy," *Tarbiz* 73,1 (2003), 51–82; see esp. 60–63.

³⁴ Menahem Kister, "Wisdom Literature and its Relation to Other Genres: From Ben Sira to Mysteries," in J. J. Collins, G. E. Sterling and R. A. Clements, eds., *Sapiential Perspectives: Wisdom Literature in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 20–22 May, 2001), Leiden 2004, 13–47, esp. 21–22 (cited by Kahana, 61, n. 45).

פסקה רוח הקודש מן האומות³⁵ But with reference to the transition from prophets to sages, the word פסקה, 'ceased,' is not used. It is proximity and continuity with the prophetic period that gives the assurance of truth to the words of the sages; conversely, only sages can illumine the sense of Scripture. The two complement each other and are mutually interdependent. What is emphasized is not rupture but succession, the transferral of authority to the sages precisely because they are successors to the prophets.

In an earlier study of *Mishnah-Tosefta Hagigah* and its restrictions on exegesis of certain Biblical passages, I argued that the concern was not secrecy, but the activity of *derashah* in the mode of inspired exegesis or pneumatic interpretation.³⁶ I showed that in the Tannaitic period, some modes of *derashah* were considered not merely inspired and pneumatic, but performative and transformative; that is, they could make things happen in the world. *Derashah* could unleash power, which may be dangerous and which needs to be governed by restrictive rules. By the same token, the assertion of this power supports rabbinic claims to be the genuine successors of the prophetic tradition and to be the legitimate stewards of the Divine presence within the Jewish people.

The present chapter attempted to demonstrate how a belief in sagely truth, based on divine proximity, rather than human reason, was already evidenced in the early text *Seder Olam*. Milikowsky's work makes *Seder Olam* available in a meticulously edited version. If his proposal for situating this text well before the end of the Tannaitic period finds wide acceptance—as I believe it should—then the impact on the study of early rabbinics promises to be wide-ranging and significant. I hope to have provided one significant example of how this might unfold.

³⁵ *Seder Olam*, end of ch. 21, Milikowsky, *Seder Olam* (2013), Volume One: Introduction and Critical Edition, 288.

³⁶ See Nehemia Polen, "Derashah as Performative Exegesis" in Lieve Teugels and Rivka Ulmer, eds., *Midrash and the Exegetical Mind: Proceedings of the 2008 and 2009 SBL Midrash Sessions* (Judaism in Context 10; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 123–54.

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***BLESSED BE HE, WHO REMEMBERED THE
EARLIER DEEDS AND OVERLOOKS THE
LATER:
PRAYER, BENEDICTIONS, AND LITURGY
IN THE NEW RHETORIC GARB OF LATE
MIDRASHIC TRADITIONS***

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Despite the important role that prayers, benediction and liturgy play as vivid elements of Jewish life, scholarship on the cultural history of these elements has played rather a marginal role for a long time. Earlier scholarship on liturgy, prayer and *minhag* largely focused on the immediate context of the Jewish prayer books (*siddurim*). Most studies mined rabbinic literature and Geonic responsa only for relevant liturgical *Halakhah*. Or, scholars looked for accounts of prayer or praying, attested in Talmudic and Midrashic sources, as evidence for the early formation history of

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