

**AVNIMOS HAGARDI AND ABBA YOSEF
HABANNAI:
THE BUILDER AND THE WEAVER AND THEIR
COSMOGONIES, A LITERARY READING**

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הדא הוא דכתיב: "כובד אבן ונטל החול וכעס אויל כבד משניהם (משלי כז, ג)"
שאל אבנימוס הגרדי את רבותינו זכרונם לברכה אמר להם, "הארץ היאך נבראת תחלה?"
אמרו לו: אין אדם בקי בדברים אלו אלא לך אצל אבא יוסף הבנאי
הלך ומצאו שהוא עומד על הקרויא. אמר לו שאלה יש לי לשאול אותך
אמר לו איני יכול לירד מפני שאני שכיר יום אלא שאל מה תבקש
אמר ליה היאך נבראת הארץ תחלה
אמר ליה: נטל הקדוש ברוך הוא עפר מתחת כסא הכבוד וזרק על המים ונעשה ארץ
וצרורות קטנים שהיו בעפר נעשו הרים וגבעות, שנאמר, (איוב לח, ט) "בצקת עפר למוצק ורגבים
ידובקו"

וברור הוא הדבר באזני בני אדם, שנאמר, "כובד אבן ונטל החול"
מהו "כובד אבן"? מי שהוא רואה את ההרים ואת הגבעות, אינו אומר "היאך ברא הקב"ה את אלו!?"
מהו "ונטל החול"? אלא החול שהמים עומדים עליו למעלה והוא נתון מלמטה והוא נושא אותם
אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא יקרה היא בעיני בני אדם ורואין כאלו יגיעה היא לפני
ואינה יגיעה שנאמר (ישעיה מ, כח) "לא ייעף ולא ייגע"
—במה אני ייגע? במי שהוא מכעיס לפני בדברים בטלים
כמה דאת אמר "הוגעתם ה' בדבריכם (מלאכי ב, יז) "
הוי: "וכעס אויל כבד משניהם".

Midrash Ex. Rabbah 13:1

That is what it says, "*The weight of a stone and the burden of sand;
the vexation of a fool is heavier than both of them* (Prov. 27:3)"

Avinmos HaGardi said to our Sages of blessed memory, "The earth, how was it
created at first?"

They said to him, "No man is versed in those things, but go to Abba Yosef the
Builder."

He went and found him standing on the roofing-beam (“*hakeruya*”).
He said to him, “I have a question to ask you.”
He said to him, “I can’t come down because I am a day-hire, but ask what you wish.”
He said, “How was the earth created [at] first?”
He said to him, “the Holy One Blessed Be He took earth from beneath the Throne of Glory
and threw it on the water and it became Earth, and the small pebbles in the earth became mountains and hills,
as it says, “*When the dust was poured into a mass and the clods cleaved together* (Job 38:39).”

“And the matter is clear in the ears of men, as it says, “*The weight of stone and the burden of sand* (Prov.27:3).”

What is “*the weight of stone*”?

Who is that sees the mountains and hills and does not say, “How did the Holy One Blessed Be He create these!”?

What is “*the burden of sand*”?

That is the sand on which the waters stand above, and it is placed below and it carries them.

Said the Holy One Blessed Be He, “It is heavy (“*yekarah*”) in the eyes of men and they see it as if wearying before Me and it is not a wearying, as it says, “He will not tire and will not become weary (Isa. 40:28)”.

In what *do* I become weary?

In one who angers Me in idle words, as it says, “You wearied God with your words,” (Malachi 2:17).

That is [the meaning of]: “*The vexation of the fool is heavier than both of them* (Prov. 27:3).”

This Midrashic story seems arcane, enigmatically mysterious. We could choose to read it innocently without understanding it and enjoy it (it is evocative and picturesque) or we could read it *methodically* and still not understand the depths of its meanings. The latter project seems well-worth the effort. The Midrash may be deliberately enigmatic because its content is theological—and *not* speculative as a species of cosmological philosophy¹. It may be essentially satiric, appearing to entertain cosmological speculation, but ultimately rejecting it. This Midrash, in any event,

¹ While the story in which Abba Hilkiyah as a day-worker wouldn’t speak to the sages (BT *Taanit* 23b), is discussed by Yonah Fraenkel (*Sippur HaAggadah: Ahdut shel Tokhen veTzurah*, Tel Aviv 2001, 132-138) and Shulamit Valler (“The Story of Abba Hilkiyah in the Talmud Bavli: Historical Document or Literary Creation?” [Hebrew] *LeUriel*, 2001, 279-300), there has been little or no literary analysis of this story beyond Avigdor Shinan’s notes in his edition of *Shemot Rabbah*.

with its parallels in rabbinic literature, is considered to be one of the seminal texts of articulated Jewish cosmogony. The enigma of the Midrash may be a function of it being complex, multi-layered, or even ambivalent.

These notes are simply some literary observations on the story. The self-referential nature of the Midrashic story, which as been noted², might indicate that its theological significance may be in its *narrative* form as much as in its explicit theological content, and in fact, its narrative form may convey far more theologically than the discussion within it.³ It may therefore be productive to examine the literary features of the Midrash, since *that* is how the sages chose to express their position—rhetorically.

While the sages rarely if ever mention a Greek cosmology opposed to their own⁴, there *are* Midrashic accounts of both philosophical and theological exchanges between the sages and the Greco-Roman philosophical culture. There are questions asked to sages by “philosophers”⁵, “*hegemons*”⁶, emperors⁷ etc., as in the discourse of R. Yehoshua and the “sages of Athens”⁸, among others. The majority of such mediations, are expressed in metaphorical riddles or require exegesis, which is to say, they are presented in *literary* form.

The cosmogonic statements in the Midrashic account in Exodus Rabbah are derived almost *entirely* exegetically, and may, in the end, not be about physical origins at all, but are rather, like many enigmatic Midrashic statements, implicit allegorical

² Avigdor Shinan, *Shemot Rabbah*, Jerusalem 1984 (ad loc.).

³ As in several Midrashic stories *about* teachings, the narrative context is itself the lesson: *Gen. Rabbah* 58:3; *Gen. Rabbah* 78:12.

⁴ M. Simon-Shoshan, “‘The Heavens Proclaim the Glory of God...’: A Study in Rabbinic Cosmology”, *BDD* 20 (2008), 85.

⁵ In *Avot DeRabbi Natan* II:24 Avnimos HaGardi asks Rabban Gamaliel a philosophical question; indeed, Rabban Gamliel seems to receive the brunt of philosophical questions: *Mekhilta Yitro BaHodesh*; BT *Avodah Zarah* 54b; *Tanhuma Yitro* 16; “A philosopher asked Rabban Gamaliel”; again in *Gen. Rabbah* 1 and 20, Midrash Tannaim, Deut. 15:10, BT *Sanhedrin* 90b (theological or scientific questions); philosophers ask other sages: JT *Betzah* 2:5; *Gen. Rabbah* 11:6, and more.

⁶ BT *Berakhot* 3b, “A *hegemon* asked . . .” JT *Sanhedrin* 1:2; 1:4; *Sifrei Devarim* 351 (a *hegemon* asks Rabban Gamliel); *Sifrei DeAggadata Esther*; *Eliyahu Rabbah* 11; *Pesikta Rabbati* Gen. 1; BT *Hullin* 27a; *Bekhorot* 5a; *Tosefta Hullin* 2:24.

⁷ Rabbi Yehoshua with Hadrian (*Gen. Rabbah* 10:3, 13:9, 28:3, 78:1; *Ecc. Rabbah* 2:11; and *Ruth Rabbah* 3:2) and others: *Sanhedrin* 90b.

⁸ BT *Bekhorot* 8b; *Berakhot* 56a; *Shabbat* 152a; *Hullin* 59b and *Hagigah* 5b. Rabbi Yehoshua with Hadrian (*Gen. Rabbah* 10:3, 13:9, 28:3, 78:1; *Ecc. Rabbah* 2:11; and *Ruth Rabbah* 3:2) and others: BT *Eruvin* 101a; *Sanhedrin* 90b.

theological formulations⁹. They may in fact serve to underly a Midrashic mythopoesis, a creative act of exegesis having nothing to do with scientific investigations of the sages (as in their practical use of astronomy for Halachic purposes). It would be difficult therefore to contextualize the story in relationship to debates on cosmogonic speculation if the sages' professed lack of knowledge or interest in such speculation here is *itself* expressed only through literary metaphor.

It's argued in fact that the concerns of "cosmological" questions of the Midrash are really theological. BT Hagigah 12b–13a, for instance, "the *locus classicus* of rabbinic cosmology," offers a similar description of "the heavens resting on the waters, the waters upon the mountains, the mountains upon the wind, the wind upon the storm, and the storm suspended upon the arm of the Holy One, Blessed be He." Of this, Peter Schäfer notes that "cosmology blends into theology and we understand that they are "not really interested in the cosmological makeup of the world". . . not really interested in what the sixth heaven contains; as a matter of fact, . . . not interested at all in the inventory of the heavens," but rather in theological issues about God and Israel.¹⁰

Cosmogonic Issues

Maimonides (*Guide to the Perplexed*, II:26) famously questions a formulation in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3 which he understands to negate *creatio ex nihilo*. He does however note that the *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3 source correctly articulates that "the matter of the heavens and the earth are *altogether distinct*". The *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3 source says this:

"From where were the heavens created?" From the light of His garment. He took some of it, stretched it like a cloth, and thus they were extending continually, as it says: "You cover Yourself with light as with a garment, You stretch out the heavens like a curtain (Ps. 104:2)." *From where was the earth created?* He took of the snow beneath the Throne of Glory and threw it on the waters and the waters became congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed, as it says, "To snow He said, 'Be Earth' (Job 36:7)".

[The clasp of heaven is attached to the waters of the ocean, *as the waters of the ocean stand between the edges of heaven and earth and the waters of heaven spread on the waters of the ocean*, as it says, "*Who roofs His upper stories with water* (Ps. 104:3)."]

⁹ See also Michael Fishbane, "'The Holy One Sits and Roars': Mythopoesis and the Midrashic Imagination," *The Midrashic Imagination*, Albany 1993: 60-77.

¹⁰ "From Cosmology to Theology: The Rabbinic Appropriation of Apocalyptic Cosmology", *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought: Festschrift in Honor of Joseph Dan on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, R. Elior and P. Schäfer (eds.), Tübingen 2005: 39-47.

The *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* text seems largely a combined re-reading of the imagery of Ps. 104:1-6 with other poetic biblical texts about Creation (this will be very relevant in the way they are read in our story):

“You are attired with majesty and beauty. You enwrap Yourself with light like a garment; You extend the heavens like a tent-cloth. Who roofs His upper chambers in the waters; . . . He founded the earth on its foundations that it not falter to eternity. You covered the deep as [with] a garment; the waters stand on the mountains.” (Ps. 104:1-6)

Maharal (*Be'er HaGolah*, *Be'er* 4), as well as others¹¹, respond to Maimonides that *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer's* formulated question “From where were the heavens/earth created?” in no way negates creation from nothingness but simply provides a rhetorical opening for a discussion about the stages of Creation. As a proof-text, Maharal cites *Ex. Rabbah* 13:1¹² with its similar rhetoric: “How was the earth created [at] first?” . . . the Holy One Blessed Be He took earth from beneath the Throne of Glory and threw it on the water and it became Earth . . .”¹³

The Story As its Own Meaning

Though formulated similarly to the *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3 text, the *Ex. Rabbah* story, in which the pagan philosopher Avnimos HaGardi (“the Weaver”) questions the sages¹⁴ about the primordial nature of Creation, and how the world was first created, may have a very different meaning and subtext¹⁵. That question is addressed in both Talmudic¹⁶ and Midrashic sources that discuss *Mishnah Hagigah* 2:1, that it is unseemly to speculate on “What is Above?” and “What is Below?”

In our story, the sages answer that no man can answer these questions, and direct him to Abba Yosef HaBannai (“the Builder”) who apparently can. The philosopher finds Abba Yosef standing on the “*qeruya*”, “the roofing beam”, evidently building “above,” as Avnimos, below, says he has a question to ask about Earth below and Heaven above. Abba Yosef the Builder explains that he cannot come down from his work as he is paid by the day, but Avnimos should ask what he likes, which the latter goes on to do. To his question, Abba Yosef answers that the “Holy One

¹¹ Similarly, *Responsa Tashbatz*, III:53; Ramban, *Commentary to Gen.* 1:8; *Commentary to Song of Songs*, attributed to Ramban, 3:9; R. Jacob Anatoli, *Malmed Ha Talmidim*.

¹² See similarly, *Sifrei Ekev* 39; BT Yoma 54b and *Midrash Kohen* (*Beit Ha-Midrash* 2).

¹³ The Throne of Glory is itself among the things that were created (*Gen. Rabbah*, 1:4.)

¹⁴ He asks philosophical questions of R. Gamliel in *Avot DeRabbi Natan*, Ver. II:24.

¹⁵ Or how earth could be created first before heaven: *Yefeh Toar* ad loc, and others.

¹⁶ BT Hagigah 12a; JT Hagigah 2:1. On the question: *Mekhilta Beshallah Masekhta DeShirah* 8; *Mekhilta DeRashbi* 15:11; *Gen. Rabbah* 1:15; 4:1; *Ex. Rabbah* 15: 1; *Lev. Rabbah* 36:1; *Tanhuma*, Hayyei Sarah 3; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 18.

Blessed Be He took earth from beneath the Throne of Glory and threw it on the water and it became Earth and the small pebbles in the earth became mountains and hills.” He then cites a proof-text from Job 38:39: “*When the dust was poured into a mass and the clods cleaved together.*”

The marvel, “clear in the *ears* of men,” he adds, is “*The weight of stone and the burden of sand*” (Prov. 27:3): “Who sees the mountains and hills and doesn’t say, ‘How did the Holy One create these!’?” “*The burden of sand*” (ibid), “on which the waters stand *above* and is placed *below* and carries them,” appears “*heavy* in the eyes of men” but in fact: “He does not tire nor weary (Isa. 40:28).” What *does* weary Him is one who angers Him in *idle words* (*devarim betelim*), as it says, “You wearied God with your words (Malachi 2:17)”. Thus: “The vexation of the fool is heavier than both of them (Prov. 27:3).”

At this point we realize the story *self-referentially* replicates its own discussion. Avnimos, from *below* asks about how the Earth below was created before the Heavens above. Abba Yosef the Builder building *above* cannot come down to him below, since his coming down to answer questions while being paid for a day’s work would be forbidden by Torah law. For both practical and ethical Halachic considerations, he effectively stands *de facto* above the philosophical enquiry Below. But Avnimos can ask whatever he likes. It then becomes clear that the real significance is *in the story* and its interaction, not in the teachings or questions it replicates or explicates.

The story’s literary form and structure become particularly significant in creating the story’s meaning. In fact, the wordplay in the symmetric *opening* and *closing* inclusio (or actually, *exclusio*) reinforces the story’s central self-referentiality in the inherent opposition in the discussion between the *Builder* above and the *Weaver* below.

[Opening:] “He found him standing on the *roofing-beam* (הקרוא) (“*haqeruya*”) (“הלך ומצאו שהוא עומד על הקרוא”)

[Closing:] “Said the Holy One Blessed Be He, “It is *heavy* (יקרה) (“*yeqarah*”) in the eyes of men” (“אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא יקרה היא בעיני בני אדם ורואין כאלו יגיעה היא לפני”)

The “*haqeruya*”/“*yeqarah*” framing wordplay connects or contrasts Abba Yosef’s honest efforts as an upright laborer up on the *roofing-beam* (הקרוא, *haqeruya*) with the content of his commentary on Man’s false philosophical perceiving of God’s Creation: it is not *heavy* or wearying (יקרה) (“*yeqarah*”) for Him but actually *effortless*. What wears Him is “*Devarim Betelim*”, the idle speculation below of cosmogonic origins. The framing wordplay serves as the commentary itself.

It has the effect of contrasting the *honesty* of Abba Yosef's actual work up on the *roofing-beam* (“*haqeruya*”) with the *falsity* of philosophical perceptions perceived below of Creation as *heavy* (“*yeqarah*”) for God. The “*haqeruya*”/“*yeqarah*” framing or opposition serves to convey Abba Yosef's actual response to Avnimos's cosmological questions. God's Creation is not perceived or understood in philosophical speculation but replicated in its ethical purpose. The literary framing creates or suggests a philosophical equation, or more importantly a moral relationship, as the true commentary on the nature of God's Creation Above and Below, as they discuss it above and below. In the implied opposition, God's Creation which is effortless and not *wearying* (“*yeqarah*”) is replicated not in the *abstraction* of cosmogonic speculation but in Abba Yosef's *concrete* hard labor up on the *roofing-beam* (“*haqeruya*”).

The Self-Referential Replication

A. Shinan in his edition of *Shemot Rabbah* notes the comparison of Abba Yosef "the Builder" and God the Creator, offering a different reading. “The builder,” he writes, “who sits above is stood up in parallel to God the Creator, who sits on the Throne of Glory and deals with that which is below Him.”¹⁷ For Shinan, the story reflects the “great value of the laborer as opposed to the philosopher and man of analysis” (which in *his* reading includes “our sages of blessed memory”, as well). The sages do not know of these matters since *Maaseh Bereshit* is considered esoteric (Mishnah Hagigah 2:1) and not studied publicly. They therefore send Avnimos to Abba Yosef the Builder whose somewhat analogous creative work as a builder might be “closer to the problematic question”. Thus, in his reading, “the worker involved in his creative work sees no difficulty where the philosophers,” (—and the sages) do.” For Shinan, the laborer is not “obligated to honor the philosopher,” and further, the former's “involvement in creative work allows him to answer heavy [i.e. esoteric] questions, since he—like God—creates and builds” such that “here the worker is superior to the wise man.”

But in my reading of the self-referential aspect of the story, the acknowledgement that no man is versed ‘in those things’, the esoteric question of how “The earth, how was it created at first?”, underlies the position of the sages who profess little knowledge, *indeed little interest*, in speculation about things which are largely unknowable. Speculation about cosmogonic origins is therefore of little interest or value for them, so they send Avnimos to Abba Yosef, who evidently has what to answer about these questions. And as it turns out, that which *does* have theological value and benefit, the theological *purpose* of creation, is embodied in the integrity of Abba Yosef who observes the Torah.

¹⁷ Shinan's text has ומצאו שהוא יושב על הקרוייה, “and found him *sitting* on the roofing-beam,” and not ומצאו שהוא עומד על הקרוייה, “and found him *standing* on the roofing-beam,” as in the printed text and other manuscripts.

Abba Yosef is willing and able to address his questions, but all of his answers are *entirely* exegetically-derived interpretations of verses of the Torah or Scriptures, and not emanating from the understanding of a simple builder nor based on philosophical method. Since he embodies the Torah in practice and not in speculation, he necessarily stands above the philosopher, simply because for theological, ethical, reasons, he must do his work according to Torah law, and therefore cannot come down and answer questions while being paid to work. Since his answers to cosmological questions of origins are *rooted in exegetical interpretation of the Torah* and not philosophical speculation, he must observe and embody that Torah in practice. In this he replicates Creation and the Creator (also “above”) in his showing integrity through fulfilling the purpose of Creation. The story thus opposes the cosmogonic question of earth’s origins with the theological question of the purpose of that Creation. Abba Yosef does in fact have answers for Avnimos’ questions, though through exegesis and contextualized in the model of praxis and not speculation.

All this is contextualized within the framing wordplay of the opening: “He found him standing on the *roofing-beam* (הקרוא) (“*haqeruya*”) and the closing: “Said the Holy One Blessed Be He, “It is *heavy* (יקרה) (“*yeqarah*”) in the eyes of men.” But it is not heavy or wearying: what wearies Him is “*Devarim Betelim*”, the idle speculation about cosmogonic origins. “*Devarim Betelim*” generally opposes *Divrei Torah*, “*words of Torah*” (BT Berakhot 28b; 61b, etc.) or describes *heresy* (baraita, BT Avodah Zarah 17b). Abba Yosef’s subtle or not so subtle closing jibe about vexing “idle words” completes a critique implicit in his proof-text citations.

It becomes fairly obvious that “the fool” who angers and wearies God in idle cosmogonic questioning is Avnimos. And the “*Devarim Betelim*” of cosmogonic inquiry may also play against the “*Bittul Melachah*”¹⁸—a sluggish work-ethic Abba Yosef is not willing to adopt for ethical reasons.

The Satiric Proof-texts

In the Midrash, the sages tell Avnimos that no man can answer these questions and they direct him to Abba Yosef *HaBannai*, who in the rabbinic account, may or may not be a sage. The rabbis do not wish to be involved in such discussions, or what is more, if we take them at their word, *do not know the answers* nor even care to, having no knowledge or interest in speculation about the unknowable. Abba Yosef the *Builder’s* explanation on the roofing-beam of how God created the world is *entirely constructed* from exegesis of biblical verses, and *not* from philosophical speculation. As it turns out the proof-texts (and their allusions to others) are self-referential—and satiric.

¹⁸ BT Berakhot 16a; Qiddushin 33a; Bava Metzia 89b, etc.

The narrative's self-referentiality and satire are built on those citations. They clearly allude to verses describing God as *Builder or Roofer of Creation*. They plainly evoke Amos 9:6: "*Who built His upper stories in Heaven and founded His vault on earth; Who summons the sea's waters and pours them on the face of the earth*" (הַבּוֹנֵה בַשָּׁמַיִם מֵעֲלוֹתָיו וְאֶגְדָּתוֹ עַל אֲרֶץ) or Ps. 104:3, "*Who roofs His upper stories in the waters; Who makes clouds His chariot*" (הַמְקַרֵּה בַמַּיִם עָלֵינוֹתָיו), cited also in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3. Both verses appear in Midrashic or Talmudic sources about God described metaphorically as a *Builder* or as *roofing* His Creation. These sources often (notably *Gen. Rabbah* 1-4; BT Hagigah 12a; JT Hagigah 2:1) address cosmogonic questions about Creation or about whether earth or heaven was created first.

While in Midrashic sources Avnimos is presumed to be familiar with biblical verses¹⁹, our story presupposes that we *the readers* are assumed to be familiar with such sources, and that we *should* be aware that all the verses Abba Yosef cites suggest that Man cannot and should not comprehend God's creation.

For instance, Job 38:38, "*When the dust was poured into a mass and the clods cleaved together,*" is actually part of God's *confrontational* response to Job's questioning divine justice:

"Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell if you know understanding. Who placed its measures if you know, or who extended a line over it? (ibid: 4-5) *Do you understand everything until the breadths of the earth? Tell if you know it all*" (ibid:18). "[Do you understand] Who charges the skies with wisdom, and Who brings down the bottles of heaven, *when the dust was poured into a mass and the clods cleaved together?*" (ibid:37-38).

The Mal. 2:17 citation ("You wearied God with your words") is a response to philosophical questioning: "You wearied God with your words and you say, 'How have we wearied?' By your saying *every evildoer is good in God's sight* and He desires them or 'Where is the God of judgment?'" The full Isa. 40:28 citation that God does not become weary is aptly: "The Creator of the ends of the earth; He neither tires nor wearies; *there is no fathoming His understanding.*"

The "prooftexts", and certainly the assertion from Proverbs—"The weight of a stone and the burden of sand; the vexation of a fool is heavier than both of them" articulate that cosmogonic speculation's subtext is really the questioning of God and His justice. *These* are the idle foolish words that vex Him.

The true perception of the marvel, "clear in *the ears of men*" (בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי אָדָם), confirmed by Prov. 27:6, contrasts with the false perception of it being "heavy in *the*

¹⁹ *Gen. Rabbah* 65:20; *Ruth Rabbah* 2:8, etc.

eyes of men (בעיני בני אדם),” contradicted by Isa. 40:28. It is legitimate to marvel at the Creation but not to investigate it. That the Creation is marvelous is true; that it is difficult for God is false. In what *does He* become weary? In one who angers him in *idle words*, *Devarim Betelim*.”

Charmingly in the story’s opposition between Avnimos and Abba Yosef, while the latter is scrupulously ethical, even as he works innocently, he is quite capable of delivering a cutting critique in his exegetical explanations, and with, the story implies, a perfectly innocent straight face.

The Weaver: The Ahistorical Context

What isn’t worth investigating is the historical context: in a sense, there isn’t any. What matters rather is the larger rhetorical context of rabbinic cosmological discussions (some dialectic in nature, some mixing cosmology with theology, others Midrash and morality), as well as, perhaps, rabbinic engagement with outsiders. It is true that Avnimos HaGardi who appears in rabbinic literature as a philosopher friendly toward the sages, is identified²⁰ with the Cynic Oenomaus of Gadara, pagan philosopher of the school of younger Cynics during Hadrian’s reign (117–38). Of his several works, little of which survives, the most famous, *Kata Chresteron* (fragments preserved in Eusebius [*Praeparatio Evangelica* 1:7ff.]), attacks belief in oracles based on belief in free will. Julian (*Orationes* 7:209, 6:199), in the mid-fourth century, upbraids the historical figure for undermining reverence for the gods. For these reasons, Avnimos was, many suggest, of interest to the sages or popular with them. In some sources (BT Hagigah 15b; *Ruth Rabbah* 1:8), he is involved in philosophical dialogue with R. Meir.

But perhaps “Avnimos HaGardi” here may have little to do with the historical Oenomaus of Gadara=Avnimos *HaGaderi* or even *HaGardi*. The historical Avnimos HaGardi/Oenomaus of Gadara²¹ may well have existed and had congenial dialogues with the sages. But “Avnimos HaGardi” here may be a literary cipher, a figure for philosophical inquiry in general, even if the story is completely historically accurate. In a literary flourish, Avnimos *HaGadari* of *Gadara*, is transposed to Avnimos *HaGardi*, the *Weaver*, practitioner of the lowliest (and according to *R. Meir* in Tosefta Qiddushin 5:14, the most tainted) of Mishnaic professions²². The *Weaver* is opposed

²⁰ Graetz, *Geschichte*, IV, p. 46. See A. Hyman, *Toledot Tannaim VaAmoraim*, 946; *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. A. Pauly and G. Wissowa, 17, Nereiden–Numantia, 1936, col. 2249–51.

²¹ Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, Princeton 1993, 472, notes that Gadara as a city a little to the east of the Jordan River was very close to where the rabbis lived, and produced three other famous ancient Greek writers—the satirist Menippus (third century BCE), the poet Mel-eager (first century BCE), and Philodemus, the Epicurean philosopher (first century BCE).

²² *Tosefta Eduyot* 1:3; *Tosefta Qiddushin* 5:14; Baraita in BT Qiddushin 82a.

to Abba Yosef the *Builder* who as an honest laborer, a builder, emulates and replicates God's Creation and its purpose as a day-hire ("שאני שכיר יום"), who won't come down from his labor. In BT Taanit 23b Abba Hilkiyah, a day-hire ("שכיר יום הוא"), won't stop to talk to the Rabbis and "idle in his labor" ("מתבטל ממלאכתו", Rashi *ad loc.*). Avnimos the *Weaver*, however, involved below in the "idle words", *devarim Betelim* ("בדברים בטלים"), of philosophical inquiry doesn't labor even in his (lowly) profession.

The question Avnimos asks R. Meir in BT *Hagigah* 15b: "Does all *wool* rise that is placed in the *dyeing*-pot?" (the latter answers cryptically, "what was clean upon the body of the mother rises; what was unclean upon the body of the mother does not") is interpreted to refer to the danger in R. Meir learning from his apostate teacher, Elisha b. Avuyah (JT *Hagigah* 2:1, 77b)²³. It's argued that his question demonstrates a familiarity with Jewish issues,²⁴ and that, "Even the form of the dialogue bears witness to its genuine character, for this enigmatical mode of expression, which was called "speech of wisdom," was well-liked in Greco-Jewish circles."²⁵

If anything, the formulation of a "wisdom speech" employing the metaphor of *wool* and *dye* such as *weavers* use (Mishnah Demai 1:4; 9:10; Tosefta Demai 1:29; Bava Qamma 11:11) might indicate the deliberate construction of the *weaver*-philosopher Avnimos HaGardi as archetypal figure of philosophy. Thus R. Abba bar Kahana (fourth-generation Amora) says, "There were no philosophers among the pagans like Bileam, and Avnimos HaGardi", the latter who tells the pagans that when Jewish children "chirp in study in synagogues and schools, Israel cannot be harmed for their father promised them, "The voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands the hands of Esau" (Gen. 27:22)" (*Gen. Rabbah*. 65:20). If Avnimos is a literary construction, the idea that "the rabbis regarded him as the greatest pagan or non-Jewish philosopher . . . due to his gibes at the gods and oracles, coupled with his sympathy and closeness to rabbinic circles", which "also indicates the measure of their unfamiliarity with Greek philosophy,"²⁶ may be irrelevant—or in fact untrue.

Abba Yosef HaBannai, in contrast to Avnimos, isn't mentioned in any other source (though R. Yehudah HaNasi reports aggadic resolutions of scriptures by Abba Yossi b. Dostai, R. Meir's contemporary²⁷). The suggestion that the sages sent Avnimos to him as a kind of Geviah b. Pesisa figure²⁸ may, however, be worth considering. In BT Sanhedrin 91a Geviah b. Pesisa, a non-scholar, volunteers to debate Alexander the Great since, he calculates, there's no harm if he loses, and if he wins, the

²³ Aruch, s.v. "Amar"; Maharsha, *ad loc.*

²⁴ See Daniel Sperber's *EJ* article, "Oenomaus of Gadara" (1971; 2008).

²⁵ "Oenomaus of Gadara", *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906.

²⁶ S. Lieberman, in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann, Cambridge MA, 1963, 129–30.

²⁷ *Sifrei Bamidbar* 42; *BT Yoma* 22a, etc.

²⁸ R. Akiva Zalman Brilant, *Midrash Rabbah HaMevoar*, Jerusalem 1990, *ad loc.*

victory will be all the greater. In the end, he wins in outrageously non-scholarly fashion. Abba Yosef HaBannai may be a simple builder though his weaving of biblical verses is magisterial. There are of course Midrashim about ignorant people's startling interpretations of texts²⁹; and on the other hand, many sages certainly worked at trades.

The Weight of Cosmogony: Abba Yosef on the Roofing Beam

Abba Yosef the Builder stands on the roofing beam, building and presumably—*roofing* the house³⁰, discussing how God *built and roofed* His world, while he himself does roofing in an honest day's work. As he does this, doing *his* work, he interprets *God's Creation*, deriving *entirely* from biblical *exegesis* of verses about the materiality of *earth, pebbles, water, sand, and stones* (in Job 38:39 and Prov. 27:3), how God created *His* world, as if *He were a roofer* in the Midrashic metaphor. But as a builder in second-century Roman Palestine, Abba Yosef the Builder would *himself* be roofing over the house's wooden roofing beams with *earth, pebbles, water, sand, and stones* to finish the upper house (a process described in Vitruvius, *de Architectura*, VII:3, as well as in Halachic and Aggadic sources in the Mishnah, Tosefta, Mekhilta, and Midrashim)³¹.

Several Midrashim employ the metaphor of God as Builder or Roofer of Creation.

Gen. Rabbah 1:1 opens by describing the Torah as God's primordial building tool, and in 4:1 describes *God's roofing* the world at the time of Creation: "A king of flesh and blood builds a palace and roofs it with stones, wood, and earth [to protect it from water]. But the Holy One Blessed be He did not roof His world but *with water*, as it says, 'Who roofs His upper chambers *with water*' (Ps. 104:2)."³²

Mekhilta (Beshallah Massekhta DeShirah 8³³) connects His *roofing* of Creation with Creation's order:

²⁹ *Gen. Rabbah* 78:12.

³⁰ R. David Lurya, *Hiddushei RaDaL*, ad loc., reaches exactly that conclusion.

³¹ Mishnah Sheviit 3:8; Sukkah 1:7; Bava Metzia 10:2; Middot 4:6; Kelim 20:5; Negaim 12:2;6; Tosefta Bava Metzia 11:3; BT Bava Metzia 116b, JT Moed Katan 1:4; *Mekhilta Massekhta DeShirah 8*, *Mekhilta DeRashbi* 15:11, *Gen. Rabbah* 1:1, etc.

³² R. David Lurya to *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3 (n. 55) argues that *Gen. Rabbah* 4:1, etc. reads Ps. 104:3, "Who roofs His upper stories *in the waters*" as: "Who roofs His upper stories *with water*," Radak, Ibn Ezra, and Amos Hakham, *Daat Mikra* ad loc. read it in fact as, "Who roofs His upper stories *with water*", referring to the division of the upper and lower waters (as Gen. 1:6, "Let there be an expanse *within the water*"). New JPS has: "Who roofs His upper stories *in the waters*".

³³ And *Mekhilta DeRashbi* 15:11.

“A builder of flesh and blood builds *the lower house and then the upper but the Holy One Blessed Be He builds the upper story and then the lower*, as it says, “In the beginning God created the *heavens* and the earth.”

A person of flesh and blood roofs with wood and stones and earth, but the Holy One Blessed Be He *roofs His world with water*, as it says, “*Who roofs His upper stories with water*” (Ps. 104:3).

Ex. Rabbah 15:22 connects God’s roofing of Creation explicitly with *heaven* being created first³⁴:

“A person of flesh and blood, once he builds a house, then builds the upper stories, but God . . . once He stretched the roof paving, built on it and once He built on it, He stood them up on the air of the world on its place . . . as it says, “*Who roofs His upper stories with water* (Ps. 104:3)”: not with copper or iron, but with [roofing] beams of water, and then He built the upper chambers, not with stone and not with ashlar, but with mountains of water, as it says, “*Who roofs His upper stories with water*. (Ps. 104:3)”

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 3 in fact uses this connection in the parallel to our story:

From where was the earth created? He took of the snow beneath the Throne of Glory and threw it on the waters and the waters became congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed . . .

The clasp of heaven is attached to the waters of the ocean, *as the waters of the ocean stand between the edges of heaven and earth and the waters of heaven spread on the waters of the ocean*, as it says, “***Who roofs His upper stories with water*** (Ps. 104:3).”

This provides an equivalent parallel to the “burden of sand in our story,” “on which the waters *stand above* is placed *below and it carries them*,” as Abba Yosef the Builder formulates it.

In the self-referential equation Abba Yosef “***standing on*** the roofing-beam (עומד על הקרוי; “*omeid al hakeruya*”), explains to Avnimos *below* that the earth from beneath the Throne of Glory which the waters ***stand on*** from *above* (עומדים עליו) (למעלה) (“*omdim alav lemaalah*”) is in fact “*the burden of sand*” below that carries them. In the wordplay, the “burden (“*netel*”) of sand” (“נטל החול”), the earth *God lifted* (“*natal*”) (נטל . . . עפר) and easily threw is not *heavy* (“*yekarah*”).

God builds the upper story first and then stands the space of the world on its place, the upper story supporting the lower’s weight. In analogous parallel, Abba Yosef’s

³⁴ Parallel version in *Tanhuma*, Hayyei Sarah 3.

honest building of the upper story can existentially theoretically support the weight of the lower world, but for the burden of idle philosophical questioning below. So he cannot come down to discuss philosophical questions of God's roofing the world as he himself is involved in roofing as an honest builder, observing the Torah by which and for which the world was created. He'll do his best to answer questions about Creation but it's more important that he work honestly to replicate the Creation and its purpose.

This short and sweet elliptically terse (we are tempted to say *lapidary*) story of sand and stone is constructed in complex layers. Explicating "the weight of a stone and the burden of sand [the vexation of a fool is heavier than both]", Abba Yosef the Builder labors honestly above in the actual weight of stone and sand replicating Creation and enacts its *raison d'être* in observing Jewish law through an honest builder's ethical industriousness and not through philosophical inquiry. Creation is replicated in the weight of stone and sand, though the weight of Avnimos' vexing questions below are heavier than both.

Does Avnimos walk away with clarity, the questions he wove about the universe's cosmogony now answered, or does he perhaps walk away contritely? And if the Midrash is, as Maharal or Maimonides see it, a metaphorical formulation of metaphysical ideas, does he perhaps walk away mystified, scratching his head? And whether or not Avnimos himself understands the satiric critique, we as readers certainly should.

Our Midrash is doubtless a significant source of esoteric cosmogony. Maimonides in fact sees the snow's location under the Throne of Glory in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 3 as the source of earthly matter beneath the heavenly spheres, signifying God's remoteness from materiality. Maharal interprets the dust under the Throne of Glory as the very fine source of the material forced by divine dominion into being the physical.³⁵ But in terms of the story's significance all this seems largely beside the point. What's more: while Maimonides argues that Midrashim imbed *philosophical* secrets to conceal them³⁶ and both he and the Maharal demonstrate how this one does just that, the story eloquently argues *against* philosophical speculation. This Midrashic story is enigmatic because it is supposed to be. Yet despite this, or perhaps because of this, its meaning is entirely understandable, "clear in the ears of men."

³⁵ R. Shmuel Yafeh Ashkenazi, *Yefeh Toar* to *Gen. Rabbah* 1:6: "In the beginning He created a very thin matter, and this is the snow under the Throne," certainly seems to be influenced by this.

³⁶ *Moreh HaNevukhim*, I:71.