Sacred or not sacred? Divine scriptural names and the Sages’ revaluation of ancient traditions

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# Abstract

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* (*Tractate of the Torah Scroll*) and *Masekhet Soferim* (*Tractate of the Scribes*) both list verses that contain potential divine names, such as ‘אדני’ and ‘אל.’ These names are classified as sacred when they refer to the Jewish God, and as not sacred when they refer to other entities, such as false gods or angels. This article argues that the core of the lists presented in these two tractates was based on ancient Second Temple traditions that were modified in the process of transmission. These changes were motivated by developments within Jewish thought and the shifting conception of normative Judaism is reflected in the development of the lists over time. Some of these changes were the result of internal Rabbinic developments and others were polemical responses to contemporaneous Christian belief systems and the Rabbinic need to define the boundaries of Judaism. Both of these are reflected in the lists. This article proposes that analysis of these lists and the relationship between them can serve as an example for Rabbinic attempts to reframe, rather than erase, their literary inheritance.

Keywords: *Tractate Sefer Torah* | *Tractate Soferim* | Divine names | Textual traditions | Biblical interpretation

# Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)

The process of transmitting and preserving the Hebrew Bible, from its outset, contained an inherent, ongoing tension between a commitment to preserve the sacred text and the motivation to ‘correct’ it so that it would correspond with the ideas and beliefs of the person transmitting the text. Textual, hermeneutical and theological problems did not disappear even after the gradual canonization process had concluded. With time, the resolutions to these problems would be provided by interpreters rather than scribes.

This article examines a key point in the history of how Rabbinic Judaism resolved hermeneutical challenges and inconsistencies by exploring the example of the interpretation of divine names. The divine name YHWH always refers unequivocally to God, but other divine names are ambiguous and can refer either to God as well or to false gods, angels, or even important humans.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This paper will discuss a list of verses found in *Masekhet Soferim* 4:5–24, which is based upon an earlier list in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* 4:4–6, and partly documented in parallels in early Rabbinic literature. The verses in the lists contain divine names such as ‘אדני’ and ‘אל’ that can also bear other, more prosaic, interpretations. A scribe writing a Torah scroll needs to know if these names refer to God, and are therefore subject to the taboo regarding erasure, or refer to non-sacred entities and may be erased without religious sanction (e.g., when written by mistake) as they do not refer to God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *Masekhet Soferim* are often overlooked as marginal texts in early Rabbinic literature. However, as A. Geiger noted, the lists in these texts are a window onto an entire world of hermeneutical lenses and interpretive traditions.[[4]](#footnote-4) I would like to reexamine the lists to offer two parallel explanations for the changes in them over time: In some instances, earlier interpretations had been lost, which prompted the Sages to expound new interpretations. In other instances, interpretations were motivated by a rejection of common Second Temple traditions following their subsequent adoption by Christianity.

Both the attempts to interpret verses in the wake of lost traditions and the rejections of traditional interpretations in the face of the development of Christianity are part of a much broader transformation that Judaism underwent from the Second Temple period to the period of Rabbinic Judaism. Although this subject has been addressed in the literature,[[5]](#footnote-5) this article adds a new and important perspective, by analyzing an oft-overlooked text that contributes greatly to our understanding of these two aspects of the development of the intellectual history of Rabbinic Judaism.

I have reviewed the whole list that appears in *Masekhet Soferim* and systematically compared every verse mentioned in it with all direct and indirect textual parallels in Rabbinic literature. In addition, I compared the list with the ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible, as well as with early Second Temple and early Christian literature. This article focuses on a few select cases, organized thematically and not sequentially. Though a full exploration of every relevant verse is beyond the scope of this article references to similar phenomena in the list feature in footnotes.

# The list(s) in Masekhet Soferim and *Masekhet Sefer Torah*

*Masekhet Soferim*, a collection dated approximately to the seventh century CE, deals with the rules for writing and reading from a Torah scroll. This ‘minor’ tractate is comprised of twenty-one chapters. The first five contain laws for the scribe, while the remaining chapters address various ritual aspects of reading the Torah as part of the synagogue rite. As has been noted by scholars, the redactor of *Masekhet Soferim* made use of earlier sources from classical Rabbinic literature. One of the sources for the first five chapters is *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, usually dated to the first centuries CE.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Higger’s edition of *Masekhet Soferim,* based on MS. Oxford 370.12, the list of sacred and not sacred names mentions more than 30 verses.[[7]](#footnote-7) The parallel text in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* lists only 14 verses (for details, see the table in the Appendix).[[8]](#footnote-8) All the verses listed in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* are also listed in *Masekhet Soferim* and appear in the same order. However, the verses supplemented in *Masekhet Soferim* are not documented in all manuscripts, and their locations in the list differ.[[9]](#footnote-9) The terms used in *Masekhet Soferim* to indicate whether a name is sacred or not match those used in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* only for the parallel material. The supplements to the list use slightly different expressions: Instead of ‘קדש’ [sacred], or, ‘חול’, [not sacred], the terms in the supplements are, ‘הרי זה קדש’, ‘it is sacred’, and, ‘הרי זה חול’, ‘it is not sacred’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Different parallel terms suggest different sources. Additional factors support the claim that the material in *Masekhet Soferim* that is not found in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* is of later provenance. First, *Masekhet Sefer Torah’s* commentary on the list’s components is shorter than that of *Masekhet Soferim*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Moreover, in the list in *Masekhet Sefer Torah,* the list is focused on divine names and the spectrum of possible interpretations to these names is limited: God, false gods, and angels. In the supplementary material, more extensive hermeneutical possibilities are laid out.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the following, I present the treatment of several cases that appear in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* that were modified in *Masekhet Sofĕrim* and other parallels. These modifications can be explained as resulting from two phenomena: 1. Later rabbis were unfamiliar with an ancient tradition and were attempting to adjust it to the familiar rabbinic world. 2. Later rabbis were familiar with the old tradition but rejected it due to internal developments or as a polemic response to Christianity.

# Modified Traditions

In the following discussion, I present some cases in which the redactors of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and its parallels were not familiar with interpretive traditions. These traditions seemed impossible to them, and they therefore tried to modify them in a variety of ways.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| *Masekhet Sefer Torah* 4:5 | *Masekhet Soferim* | Biblical Verse |
| All the names said regarding Micah are not sacred, including YHWH. | 4:10: All the names said regarding Micah are not sacred. Rabbi Yose says, those with *Yod He* are sacred, those with *Alef Lamed* are not sacred, except for, ‘the House of God (*’Elohim*) stood at Shiloh’. | Judg 18:31: They maintained the sculptured image that Micah had made throughout the time that the House of God (*ʾElohim*) stood at Shiloh. |
| All the names said regarding Naboth are sacred even, God *(ʾElohim*). | 4:13: And all the names said regarding Navot are sacred except for, ‘Navot has reviled god and king’. | 1 Kgs 21:13: … Navot has reviled God (*ʾElohim*) and king Then they took him outside the town and stoned him to death. |

The case of Navot is relatively clear: Jezebel, the Phoenician princess, used her political power to have Navot accused of cursing ‘God and the king’. In this instance, it is significant that the idolatrous Queen accused Navot of cursing God, and not pagan gods.[[13]](#footnote-13) In contrast, the case of Micah is more complicated, as it was a matter of lack of clarity to the Sages themselves.[[14]](#footnote-14) But the next case of Micha is more complicated. From the various supplements to the original rule in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* we can learn that later generations found it difficult to explain or accept.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Masekhet Sefer Torah* 4:5 | *bŠebu*. 35b | *yMeg*. 1:9 | *Masekhet Soferim* 4:10 |
| All the names said regarding Micah are not sacred, even <<Ya>>[[15]](#footnote-15). | All names said regarding <<Navot>> are sacred, regarding Mich<<a>>, not sacred.  R. Eliezer says: regarding Navot, sacred.  Regarding Micah, some are sacred and some are not. What is said in *Alef Lamed* is not sacred, in *Yod He*, sacred. Except for this name, even though it is in *Alef Lamed*, it is sacred, ‘the House of God (*ʾElohim*) stood in Shiloh’ ([Judg 18:31](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Judges.18.31)). | All the names said regarding Micah, even though they are written in *Yod He*, are not sacred, except one which is sacred, ‘the House of God (*ʾElohim*) stood in Shiloh’ ([Judg 18:31](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Judges.18.31)). | All the names said regarding Micah are not sacred. Rabbi Yose says, those with *Yod He* are sacred, those with *Alef Lamed* are not sacred, except for, ‘the House of God (*ʾElohim*) stood at Shiloh’ (Judg 18:31). |
| In Navot sacred, even El. |  | All names written in Navot, even though they are written in *Alef Lamed* they are sacred, ‘Navot has reviled God and king.’ | And all the names said regarding Navot are sacred, ‘Navot has reviled God and king’ (1 Kgs 21:13). |

According to *Masekhet Sefer Torah,* none of the divine names used in Judg 18:31 are sacred, even the tetragrammaton. This is a very surprising claim, given that the tetragrammaton is usually understood to uniquely refer to God.[[16]](#footnote-16) In later Rabbinic literature, we find refinements of this statement. In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Šebu’ot*(*bŠebu*.) 35b, a statement attributed to R. Eliezer attests that not all the divine names in Micah’s narrative are sacred. Instead, a distinction must be drawn between those names written with an *Alef Lamed* (not sacred) and those with a *Yod He* (sacred). *Masekhet Soferim* relates a similar opinion in the name of R. Yose.

The second refinement is that Judg 18:31 is an exception to the rule that names with *Alef Lamed* in the Micah narrative are not sacred since it refers to the legitimate *‘Beit ’Elohim’*, the tabernacle in Shiloh that has nothing to do with Micah’s idol or shrine. In *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, there are no exceptions to his rule. This specific tradition requires closer examination.   
Some Biblical scholars suggest a polemical reading of the story of Micah: Judean scribes composed a narrative whereby a thief and a priest for hire set up an illegitimate temple in the north. The background to this is the controversial temples for the bull cult that Jeroboam I established in Bethel and Dan.[[17]](#footnote-18) According to the redactor, all the characters in the story behave as if their deeds are acceptable before God (Judg 17:2–3, 5, 13; 18:5–6, 10).[[18]](#footnote-19) The later sources were unaware of the inherent polemic regarding the legitimacy of the Northern Temples but rather focused on Micah’s idol worship as an example of the religious failings of the ancient Israelites. Although discussions or references to Micah’s idol outside the Hebrew Bible are relatively rare, there is evidence that Judg 17:1–6, was understood as an independent unit, and that this was the original meaning of the teaching.

According to the Masoretic Text (MT), Judg 17:1–6 is an independent unit, delineated by *parashot petuḥot* (line breaks) on either side. It concludes with the redactor’s theme that as there was no king, ‘every man did that which was right in his own eyes’ (Judg 17:6).[[19]](#footnote-20) This division of the narrative is also reflected in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (*LAB*).[[20]](#footnote-22) In chapters 44–45, the author rewrites the Micah narrative, and in the process rewrites and omits several details from the Biblical source.[[21]](#footnote-23) According to this text, Delilah,[[22]](#footnote-24) Micah’s mother, encouraged her son to build an idol. MT reads: ‘I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord (YHWH) for my son to make an *idol*overlaid with silver I will give it back to you’ (Judg 17:3). In *LAB* 44:2, we read: ‘Take that gold and melt it down and make yourself *idols*, and they will serve *as gods* for you.‘[[23]](#footnote-25) The impression is that *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *LAB* share the same understanding that the divine names in the sketch of the Micah narrative in Judg 17:1–6, are false gods. Despite these thematic reasons that support it, the de-sanctification of the tetragrammaton in verses 2-3 remains a radical and unique reading of the Biblical text. When ‘translated‘ into halakhic terms, the consequence was *Masekhet Sefer Torah*’s surprising ruling that this appearance of YHWH is ‘not sacred’.

Based on these considerations, it seems likely that the passage referred to in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* ‘All the names said regarding Micah are not sacred,’ is limited to Judg 17:1–6. The composers of the later parallel lists and R. Yose/R. Eliezer appear to have assumed that the ‘Micah’ portion included all of Judg 17–18. This created a new hermeneutical problem, according to which ‘YHWH’ in Judg 17:13 and 18:6 should be read as not sacred; this is odd and it is unclear what the motivation for doing so would be. In response, they tried to minimize the radical reading by ruling that all mentions of *Yod Hei*, such as that said by Micah’s mother in 17:2–3, are sacred. However, understanding the reference of the names associated with Micah to include all of chapters 17-18 is incoherent and almost impossible since the speakers use ‘YHWH’ and ‘*’Elohim’* almost in the same context and with the same meaning. In Judg 18:5–6, members of the tribe of Dan asked the priest for divine guidance, and he replied that their way is guided by the Lord. They used the name ‘*’Elohim’* and he replied using the name ‘YHWH’. Can two names, uttered in the same conversation have different ritual statuses? Most unlikely. *Masekhet Sefer Torah* preserved the original interpretation that they are all non-sacred. This ruling, already at an early stage, was misunderstood, and modified by the Sages in later sources.

## #4 Exodus 22:27: Not to speak evil - of God or ‘gods’?

Another example of an early interpretation found in Masekhet Sefer Torah that later authorities found unacceptable can be found in the treatment of divine names in Exodus 22:27 ‘You shall not revile God, nor put a curse upon a chieftain among your people.’[[24]](#footnote-26) Exod 22:27 forbids cursing God (*’Elohim*) or a chieftain (nasiʾ). While it is clear that ‘chieftain’, can only refer to a flesh-and-blood human, ‘*’Elohim*’ can be interpreted both as referring to God or a human being. Since ‘chieftain’ and ‘God’ are parallel in the verse, there are strong grounds for presuming that they refer to similar entities.

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:4) and *Masekhet Soferim* (4:9) record a Rabbinic debate concerning this possible divine name. An anonymous opinion is that ‘*’Elohim*’ is used as sacred and as not sacred’ (משמש קודש וחול). R. Ishmael disagrees; in his view, it is a sacred name. This passage is best understood in the context of the well-documented debate between R. Akiva and R. Ishmael whether ‘*’Elohim’* here means God or human judges.[[25]](#footnote-27) However, the anonymous ruling is not identical to the opinion of R. Akiva. In *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *Masekhet Soferim*, Rabbi Ishmael’s opinion is that ‘*’Elohim*’ is always sacred, while the other opinion is that it can bear two meanings.[[26]](#footnote-28) *Masekhet Sefer Torah* generally rules that ‘*’Elohim*’ can be understood as God, false gods or angels, but it never refers to humans. Therefore, a different explanation must be suggested, that relates to the original ruling according to which *’Elohim*’ carries both meanings of sacred and not sacred.

A well-documented tradition from the Second Temple period, found in the Septuagint (LXX), Philo and Josephus, interpreted ‘*’Elohim*’ in this verse in the plural: ‘gods’ – ‘θεοὺς’. Philo and Josephus explained the prohibition as forbidding the Jews to curse the gods of other nations.[[27]](#footnote-29) Scholars have suggested that this advocacy of universal tolerance was an apologetic attempt by the Jewish community in Alexandria to present Jewish law as tolerant of other faiths and respectful to other nations.[[28]](#footnote-30) If we assume that the original text of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* did not include the opinion of R. Ishmael, then it corresponds exactly with this tradition, hereto unknown in the Rabbinic corpus.[[29]](#footnote-31) Accordingly, this interpretation of the verse was known in the Land of Israel at a relatively early point and this interpretation of the verse was not limited to circles that were Hellenized or consciously seeking accommodation with non-Jewish society. It is possible that a later redactor could not accept or was unaware of this rather pluralistic tradition. He therefore added the view of R. Ishmael, and thereby ‘wrapped’ this tradition in a different, well-known, Rabbinic debate transforming a reference to the gods of other nations into a conversation about human judges.[[30]](#footnote-32)

# Ancient tradition in a polemical context

So far, I have discussed rulings that were based on Second Temple traditions that had been lost. Later sages and redactors found them difficult to understand, therefore they modified them to make them consistent with their understanding and familiar traditions. In the following discussion, I will argue that some Second Temple traditions documented in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* were rejected due to a concerted effort to reframe the borders of Judaism during the period of the splitting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity.

## #9 Gen 18:3 – between God and angels

‘… He said, my lords (*’Adonai*) if it please you, do not go on past your servant’ (Gen 18:3).

The following table of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and its parallels illustrates how there was uncertainty regarding the exact verse referred to in the list and its exact meaning.

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| *Masekhet Sefer Torah* 4:5**[[31]](#footnote-33)** | bŠebu. 35b | yMeg. 1:9 | Masekhet Soferim 4:10 |
| All <<the names that are said>> regarding Abraham are sacred, except for the first. | All the names that are said regarding Abraham are sacred, except for one which is not sacred  ‘My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes’ (Gen 18:3). | All the names written in connection with our father, Abraham, are sacred, except for one, which is not sacred. | All the names that are said regarding Abraham are sacred except for one that is not sacred - as it is written, ‘he said, my lords, if I have found favor in your eyes,’ ([Gen 18:3](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Genesis.18.3)). But others say that this one is also sacred. |
| Rabbi Ḥanina <<the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says:>> sacred. | Ḥanina the son of R. Yehoshua’s brother, and R. Eleazer b. Azariah in the name of R. Eliezer of Modi’in say: this too is sacred. | ‘When they made me wander from my father’s house’ (Gen 20:13).  and some say that even that one is sacred, | ‘When they made me wander from my father’s house’ (Gen 20:13).  Rabbi Ḥanina the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says, sacred. |
|  |  | For without God, they would have already misled me. | For without God, they would have already misled me. |

Even though the parallel texts are not identical, they have much in common, and the impression is that they all came from the same source, a source that was very similar to *Masekhet Sefer Torah*. The passage from the Babylonian Talmud is the closest parallel to *Masekhet Sefer Torah*. It fills in some missing data: the verse that *Masekhet Sefer Torah* is referring to is Gen 18:3. Like all the other parallels, it differs from *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, in that they speak of ‘one’ occurrence, and not the order in which it appears, ‘first’. In addition, the ruling is handed down by R. Eleazer b. Azariah in the name of R. Eliezer of Modi’in. According to *yMeg.* the controversial verse is Gen 20:13, and it is an anonymous sage who disagrees. As for *Masekhet Soferim*, it represents a hybrid version. To the original rule in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* two supplements were added. One is close to the material found in *yMeg.*: the alternative identification of the controversial verse, the explanation to its sacredness, and conflating the anonymous dispute on Gen 20:13 with R. Ḥanina the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua (who disagreed regarding Gen 18:3).[[32]](#footnote-34) What were the motives of the redactors to add or change what seems to be the original meaning of the passage? To try to answer this question, we must take a closer look at Gen 18:3.

## Genesis 18:3 – Interpretive Traditions and Disputes

Gen 18:1 begins with the appearance of God to Abraham. The next verse describes Abraham lifting his eyes and seeing three men. Abraham runs towards the men and bows to them. In verse 3, Abraham addresses someone in the singular: ‘My Lord (אדני), if it pleases you, do not go on past your servant’. Whom is Abraham addressing? According to the *Masorah*, the word is vocalized אדנָי and is therefore clear that Abraham is speaking directly to God. He is beseeching Him to remain while he tends to his guests. If so, the narrative is quite convoluted, as in the next verse, verse 4, Abraham is clearly addressing his guests, offering them water to wash their legs and to sit under the tree. Another possibility offered is that Abraham is addressing his (singular) guest אדנִי, and as translated in the LXX, ‘κύριε’, ‘my Lord’.[[33]](#footnote-37) The problem with this solution is that the verb in the verse is in the singular, and not in the plural, as would be expected. Some have suggested that Abraham was addressing himself to the most senior member of the group.[[34]](#footnote-38) Yet, even so, how does Abraham’s theophany in the opening verse, verse 1, fit into the larger narrative?[[35]](#footnote-39)

The reading of verse 3 as a non-sacred name is also documented in the Samaritan Pentateuch, where the entire verse is explicitly reframed in plural: ‘ויאמר אדני אם נא מצאתי חן *בעיניכם* אל *תעברו* מעל *עבדכם*’. Also, in the recounting of this story in the Book of Jubilees and Josephus, it is clear that Abraham is addressing his guests and not God.[[36]](#footnote-40) *Masekhet Sefer Torah* reflects here an ancient tradition documented in different sources.

Nevertheless, the widespread Rabbinic understanding is different. According to this reading, in verse 3, Abraham is addressing the Lord and asking that he be allowed to take leave from Him in order to welcome his guests.[[37]](#footnote-41) The classic Aramaic translations represent this approach: ‘I beseech before you, O Lord, if now I have found grace and favor in your sight, let not the glory of your *Shekhinah* go up from your servant’ (*Tg. Ps-J.*).[[38]](#footnote-42) God grants Abraham’s request and his focus shifts from theophany to hospitality. Later, after their departure, Abraham returns his attention to God: ‘The men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord’ (Gen 18:22).[[39]](#footnote-43) This interpretation not only makes sense of the problematic plotline, it also distinguishes between God’s revelation and the visit of the three angels.

Philo offers another, more complex reading. According to him, there are two aspects to the story. First, he does not reject the factual nature of the story; Abraham saw three men and invited them to his tent. Philo’s reading here matches that of the sources discussed above such as the Book of Jubilees and Josephus. He claims that there is an additional, allegorical meaning, where these three persons are profound metaphysical symbols regarding the nature of God. A similar reading was developed later by Justin Martyr.[[40]](#footnote-44) Justin focused his argument against a Jewish interpretation he was familiar with: ‘God appeared to him, before the vision of the three men. Furthermore, those three whom the Word calls men were angels’ (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, §56, ed. Falls, 232). This interpretation is indeed represented in the traditions that we have absorbed above. According to him:

Moses … tells us that He who appeared to Abraham under the oak tree of Mamre was God, sent with accompanying angels to judge Sodom by Another who ever abides in the super-celestial sphere, who has never been seen by any man, and with whom no man has ever conversed, and whom we call creator of all and father … Do you not see, my friends, that one of the three who is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him who is in Heaven, is Lord of the two angels? (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, §56, ed. Falls, 231–237).

The ambiguity of one of the three who is both God and Lord aims to prove that the special messenger was Jesus, as he was one of the three angels escorted by two others.[[41]](#footnote-45) Justin rejects the Jewish reading that separates between Gen 18:1 and 3, between God and the angels. Later in the Christian tradition, a further step was taken, and the visit of the three visitors was interpreted as the trinity.

The modification of the first Divine name from not sacred to sacred in its later parallels is a rejection of the ancient Jewish tradition about Gen 18:3 that must have been known even by an outsider such as Justin Martyr. Understanding Gen 18:3 as Abraham’s asking God to stay and wait for him while he offers hospitality to his guests, distinguishes between the two scenes, which Philo, and more importantly, Christian scholars in the first centuries of the Common Era, read as one.[[42]](#footnote-46) As the understanding of this verse shifted and the interpretation that Abraham was speaking in this verse to God became more widespread, an alternative verse needed to be found for the ‘one’ divine name in the Abraham narrative that was in fact ‘not sacred’. This shift is reflected in the later parallels. By choosing Gen 20:13 as the new verse that contains a not sacred name, these later redactors gave up the symmetric phrasing and context of the original text. The phrase ‘the first’ was no longer appropriate, so it was modified to ‘one’. Gen 20:13 has a whole host of contextual and hermeneutical problems of its own, albeit of a different sort. Abraham defends his actions by asserting that he feared for his life and ‘when God (*’Elohim*) made me wander from my father’s house …’ The plural form of the verb ‘wander’ (הִתְעוּ) is uncertain and uncommon when referring to God. It carries the negative connotation of deception, of leading someone down a wrong path. Several alternative interpretations of this verse can be found in early sources, but they are secondary to the list and its development.[[43]](#footnote-47)

It seems, therefore, that the original teaching of the Rabbis was the same as the earlier Second Temple traditions; the name ‘אדני’ in Gen 18:3 refers to Abraham’s guests and is therefore not a sacred name. The original tradition was rejected and modified due to the polemic with the Christian interpretation.

## Ps 82:1: #22 Two Powers in Heaven

‘A Psalm of Asaph. God (*’Elohim*) stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings (*’Elohim*) He pronounces judgment’ (Ps 82:1).

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:6) and *Masekhet Soferim* (4:21) both rule that ‘*’Elohim*’’ in this verse should be understood as containing both a sacred and a not sacred name. As ‘*’Elohim*’’ appears twice in the verse, traditional commentators to *Masekhet Soferim* argued about how to interpret this ruling. Some have suggested that the teaching refers to both names; the first refers to the Almighty and is sacred, and the second, following a Rabbinic tradition, to human judges, and is therefore not sacred.[[44]](#footnote-48) Others rejected this suggestion, rightfully arguing that if so, the ruling should have read: ‘the first is sacred, and the last is not sacred’, as we find in other cases in the list.[[45]](#footnote-49)

The phrase ‘serves (משמש) as sacred and not sacred’, clearly bears a different meaning. Earlier, in Exod 22:27, #4, we saw that the meaning was that the divine name can bear multiple meanings.[[46]](#footnote-50) Some have therefore suggested that *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *Masekhet Soferim* are only ruling on the second part of the verse (‘among the divine beings (*’Elohim*) He pronounces judgment’).[[47]](#footnote-51) If so, why is the first part of the verse quoted, and what is the meaning of ‘sacred and not sacred’? What are the two interpretations that this term is meant to signify? A different solution should be considered.

Psalm 82, and especially verses 1–6, portrays God standing in the middle of His heavenly council. The exact meaning of this hymn, and its Mesopotamian background, is of great interest to scholars dealing with Biblical theology.[[48]](#footnote-52) Our focus, however, is on how verses 1–2 were understood in late antiquity.[[49]](#footnote-53) According to the Peshitta, ‘עדת אל’, should be interpreted as heavenly angels: ‘ ܐܠܗܐ ܩܡ ܒܟܢܫܐ ܕܡܠܐ̈ܟܐ܂ ܘܒܓܘ ܡܠܐ̈ܟܐ ܢܕܘܢ’, namely that God Almighty is standing in the assembly of his angels.[[50]](#footnote-54) Similar descriptions of God surrounded by his celestial retinue can be found in several Biblical and Second Temple texts. A second tradition to this verse, or to be more exact, to the first part of this verse, ‘*’Elohim* stands in the divine assembly’ is documented in early Rabbinic and Christian sources. According to this reading, ‘*’Elohim*’ means God or *Shekhinah*, and ‘the divine assembly’ is a congregation of His human followers or the community of believers.[[51]](#footnote-55)

A third tradition bases itself on the theme of justice found in verses 2–8 and assumes that ‘*’Elohim*’, can also denote other important entities, such as kings and judges. Therefore, the verse wishes to teach that human judges who sit in judgment, are sitting in the divine presence and should take heed.[[52]](#footnote-56)

There is, however, another tradition that may help explain this enigmatic teaching. A remarkable mid-first-century BCE document emerged from the caves of Qumran (11Q13), wherein the archangel Melchizedek is described as an ‘*’Elohim*’, a heavenly judge presiding over the final judgment of evil. With him are ‘the divine assembly’, his army of angels that will fight the wicked on the day of judgment.[[53]](#footnote-57)

It is the time for the <<year of grace>> of Melchizedek, and of [his] arm[ies, the nat]ion of the sacred ones of God, of the rule of judgment, as is written about him in the songs of David, who said: *’Elohim* will [st]and in the assem[bly of God,] in the midst of the gods he judges’ (Ps. 82:2) and] above [it] to the heights, return: God will judge the peoples’.[[54]](#footnote-58)

Semantically, ‘*’Elohim*’ may bear the meaning of either God or an angel.[[55]](#footnote-59) This reading is documented in early Christian writings. Justyn Martyr, again, in his Dialogue with Trypho interpreted Ps. 82 as follows:

… the Sacred Spirit says this people are all sons of the Most High, and that Christ Himself shall be present in their assembly to pass judgment on every race. Here are His words as spoken through David … God standeth in the congregation of gods … I have also proved at length that the Sacred Spirit calls Christ God (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, §124, ed. Falls, 340–341).

According to Justin Martyr, the first appearance of ‘God’ in Ps. 82:2 relates to both Jesus and God. A similar reading, we find in the words of Irenaeus: ‘‘God stood in the congregation of the gods. He judges among the gods.’ He [here] refers to the Father and the Son, and those who have received the adoption’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV:1, p. 418). These sources seem to be consistent, interpreting the first appearance of God in Pls 82:2 as referring not to God but to some other heavenly being.

Second Temple Judaism, based upon earlier Biblical traditions, knew of an angelic being who resides at the highest level of heaven.[[56]](#footnote-60) The exact identification of this divine being, its exact relation to God, and the entire conception of ‘two powers in heaven’ is quite ambiguous in this literature.[[57]](#footnote-61) Some scholars have argued that this early belief was an organic part of Jewish thought that slowly developed into a heresy, excluded from normative belief, even while leaving its traces on the literature, theology, and even practice in Judaism.[[58]](#footnote-62)

Returning to the tradition found in *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, we can now safely assume that the original teaching related solely to the first part of Ps 81:2 and embodied the ancient tradition. As the ruling, ‘sacred and not sacred’, refers to one specific name, the teaching is that ‘*’Elohim*’, relates simultaneously to God, and is therefore sacred, and also to an archangel, and therefore is also not sacred.

As the teaching of ‘two powers in heaven’ was rejected and no longer taught by the Rabbis, the later redactors of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* reinterpreted the earlier ruling. They accordingly now understood that the *first* appearance of the term ‘*’Elohim*’ was referring solely to God and is a sacred name. They then included the second part of the verse, ruling that the name therein was not sacred by incorporating their hermeneutical traditions of wherein the word ‘*’Elohim*’ can refer to powerful judges and ‘the divine assembly’ *(‘adat ‘el*) to the ‘community of believers. However, as we have already seen, this compromise caused hermeneutical headaches.[[59]](#footnote-63)

# Conclusions

The listin *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and its parallels was not a fixed list but rather a living document, subject to the winds of change by the Sages themselves and later by its transmitters. Some verses mentioned in the list reflect a widespread Second Temple tradition. These traditions were forgotten or at some points were considered as ‘border crossing’ as a result of internal Rabbinic evolution. There are also cases in which the ancient traditions were adopted and developed by Christian scholars. In these cases, the redactions carry a polemic aspect. In both instances, the original saying was reinterpreted and modified, not without causing textual problems.

From a wider perspective, this list is a ‘microhistory’ of two major issues in the study of ancient Judaism: the transmission and continuity of Second Temple Judaism into the world of the Rabbis, and their attempt to define the bounders of Judaism. Using a wide range of research tools, I have attempted to reveal some of these mysteries and look over the shoulder of the Rabbis as they dealt with their ancient legacy.

# Appendix: A comparative table of the lists in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *Masekhet Soferim*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Masekhet Sefer Torah[[60]](#endnote-1)* | Masekhet Soferim*[[61]](#endnote-2)* | Citation | Verse |  |
|  | the first is sacred, the second is not sacred (4:5). | but God (*’Elohim* ) … you will be like divine beings (*’Elohim* ) who know good and bad. | Gen 3:5 | 1 |
| the first is sacred, the second is not sacred … the first is sacred, the second is not sacred (4:4). | the first is sacred, the second is not sacred … the first is sacred, the second is not sacred (4:6). | For the Lord (YHWH) your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God … | Deut 10:17 | 2 |
| ’God of Abraham’ is sacred, ‘God of Naḥor’ is not sacred (4:4). | ’God of Abraham’ is sacred, ‘god of Naḥor’ is not sacred. ‘Their ancestral deities’ is not sacred (4:7). | May the God of Abraham and the god of Naḥor their ancestral deities (*’Elohei ’avihem*) judge between us … | Gen 31:53 | 3 |
| ‘God’ serves (משמש) as sacred and not sacred. R. Ishmael says, sacred (4:4). | ‘God’ serves (משמש) as sacred and not sacred. R. Ishmael says, sacred (4:8). | You shall not revile God, nor put a curse upon a chieftain among your people. | Exod 22:27 | 4 |
|  | This is not sacred (4:9). | But Jacob said … for to see your face is like seeing the face of God … | Gen 33:10 | 5 |
|  | This is sacred (4:9)/ | When he saw them, Jacob said, this is God’s camp. So, he named that place Maḥanaim. | Gen 32:3 | 6 |
|  | Sacred (4:9). | Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us … | Gen 23:6 | 7 |
| All <<the names that are said>> regarding Abraham are sacred, except for the first. Rabbi Ḥanina <<the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says:>>  sacred. | All the names that are said regarding Abraham are sacred except for one that is not sacred - as it is written, ‘he said, my lords, if I have found favor in your eyes’ ([Gen 18:3](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Genesis.18.3)). But others say that this one is also sacred. ‘When they made me wander from my father’s house’ (Gen 20:13). Rabbi Ḥanina the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says, sacred, for without God, they would have already misled me. | he said, my lords (*’adonai* ) if it please you, do not go on past your servant.  So when God made me wander from my father’s house … | Gen 18:3; 20:13 | 8 |
| All the names said regarding Lot are not sacred except for the last one (4:5). | All the names said regarding Lot are not sacred except for the last one ‘And Lot said to them, ‘Oh no, my Lord.’’([Gen 19:18](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Genesis.19.19)) (4:11). | But Lot said to them, Oh no, my lord (*’adonai*) | Gen 19:18 | 9 |
| All the names said regarding Micah not sacred, including YHWH (4:5). | All the names said regarding Micah are not sacred. Rabbi Yose says, those with *Yod He* are sacred, those with *Alef Lamed* are not sacred, except for, ‘the House of God stood at Shiloh’ (Judg 18:31).  (4:10) | They maintained the sculptured image that Micah had made throughout the time that the House of God (*‘Elohim*) stood at Shiloh. | Judg 18:31 | 10 |
| All the names said regarding Naboth are sacred even *’Elohim* (4:5). | And all the names said regarding Navot are sacred except for, ‘Navot has reviled god and king’ (1 Kgs 21:13) (4:13). | … Navot has reviled God (*’Elohim* ) and king Then they took him outside the town and stoned him to death. | 1 Kgs 21:13 | 11 |
|  | And all the names said regarding Gibeah of Benjamin, Rabbi Eliezer says not sacred. Rabbi Yehoshua says sacred. Rabbi Eliezer said to him, ‘And how is that possible? Does the Omnipresent make a promise and not fulfill?’ Rabbi Yehoshua said, ‘The Omnipresent already fulfilled his promise (4:14). |  | Judg 20–21 | 12 |
|  | It is sacred. Sages: it is not sacred (4:15). | Let me tell of the decree: the Lord said to me, ‘You are My son, I have fathered you this day. | Ps 2:7 | 13 |
|  | The first is not sacred, the second is sacred (4:16). | They go from rampart to rampart, appearing before (*’El* ) God in Zion. | Ps 84:8 | 14 |
|  | The first is not sacred, the second is sacred (4:17). | He has no set time for man to appear before God (*’el‘El*) in judgment. | Job 34:23 | 15 |
|  | The first is not sacred, the second is sacred. The first can be divided, the second cannot be divided (4:18). | … Let her name him Immanuel.  … it shall not succeed. For with us is God (ʿimanu *’el*). | Isa 7:14; 8:10 | 16 |
|  | The former is not sacred … (4:19). | So when God made me wander from my father’s house … | Gen 20:13 | 17 |
|  | … the latter is sacred (4:19). | Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression | Mic 7:18 | 18 |
|  | This is sacred (4:20). | Samaria must bear her guilt, for she has defied her God … | Hos 14:1 | 19 |
|  | Rabbi Natan says, ‘in the House of his God’ ([Hos 9:8](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Hosea.9.8)) is also sacred (4:20). | Ephraim watches for my God. As for the prophet, Fowlers’ snares are on all his paths, Harassment in the House of his God. | Hos 9:8 | 20 |
|  | This is sacred (4:20). | You must return to your God … | Hos 12:7 | 21 |
| Serves (משמש) as sacred and not sacred (4:6). | Serves (משמש) as sacred and not sacred (4:21). | … God (*’Elohim* ) stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings (*’Elohim* ) He pronounces judgment. | Ps 82:1 | 22 |
| The first is sacred, the second is not sacred (4:6). | The first is sacred, the second is not sacred (4:22). | God hands me over (*’El*) to an evil man … | Job 16:11 | 23 |
| The first is not sacred, the second is sacred (4:6). | The first is not sacred, the second is sacred (4:22). | Has he said to God (*’El*) I will bear [my punishment] and offend no more | Job 34:31 | 24 |
| This is not sacred (4:6). | This is not sacred (4:22). | Earth, do not cover my blood; Let there be no (*ve ’el*) resting place for my outcry | Job 16:18 | 25 |
|  | Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean said, ‘And let there be no resting place’ ([Job 16:18](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Job.16.18)), ‘And I have it in my power’ ([Gen 31:29](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Genesis.31.29)), ‘But you shall be powerless’ ([Deut 28:32](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Deuteronomy.28.32)), ‘when you have the power’ ([Prov 3:27](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Proverbs.3.27)), ‘to death’ ([Prov 2:18](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Proverbs.2.18)) - none of these are sacred (4:22). | … and let (*ve’el* ) there be no resting place …  … and I have it in my power (*le’el* ) …  … but you shall be powerless ( *le’el* ) …  … when you have the power ( *le’el* ) …  Her house sinks down to ( *le’el* ) Death … | Job 16:18; Gen 31:2, 29; Deut 28:32; Prov 3:27; 2:18 | 26 |
| Is sacred … (4:6). | Is sacred … (4:23). | [Necho] sent messengers to him, saying … it is God’s will that I hurry … | 2 Chr 35:21 | 27 |
| … is sacred. According to the words of Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda (4:6). | … is sacred. According to the words of Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda (4:23). | … refrain, then, from interfering with God who is with me, that He not destroy you. | 2 Chr 35:21 | 28 |
| is sacred, but the reader has to make sure to pause [after saying God’s name] (4:6). | is sacred, but the reader has to make sure to pause [after saying God’s name] (4:24). | O God, arrogant men have risen against me … | Ps 86:14 | 29 |
|  | All occurrences of the name Solomon in the Song of Songs are sacred, except one which is not. Which one is it? ‘There is Solomon’s couch’ (Songs 3:7) Others say: You may have the thousand, O Solomon (Songs 8:12). | There is Solomon’s couch, encircled by sixty warriors of the warriors of Israel  … You may have the thousand, O Solomon, and the guards of the fruit two hundred. | Songs 3:7; 8:12 | 30 |
|  | All references to ‘kings’ in Daniel are not sacred except one which is sacred. Which one is that? ‘O king—king of kings, to whom the God of Heaven has given kingdom, power, might, and glory’; (Dan 2:37). Others say: ‘My lord, would that the dream were for your enemy and its meaning for your foe’ (Dan 4:16) (5:21). | You, O king—king of kings, to whom the God of Heaven has given kingdom, power, might, and glory  … My lord ( *mari*), would that the dream was for your enemy and its meaning for your foe | Dan 2:37; 4:16 | 31 |

1. I wish to thank Steven Fraade; Michael Segal and Ishay Rosen-Zvi for their helpful comments and suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See: J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 544–546; Mach, *Studies*, 35–41; D. A. Teeter, *Scribal Laws: Exegetical Variation in the Textual Transmission of Biblical Law in the Late Second Temple Period*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, pp. 128–129; Tuschling, *Angels and Orthodoxy*, 99–101. Other examples will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Bible proscribes using divine names ‘in vain’ (Ex. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; ibid. 24:11 and Deut. 5:11). There is a well-documented practice – already in late Biblical literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls – to avoid writing the tetragrammaton at all in order to avoid erasing it by mistake. See: J. Ben-Dov, ‘The Elohistic Psalter and the Writing of Divine Names at Qumran’, in L. Schiffman et al (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Contemporary Culture. Proceedings of the Israel Museum Conference*, *STDJ* 93, Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp. 79–104; Tov, *Scribal Practices*, 218–221; I. Yeivin, ‘On the Writing of the “E-lohim” in Early Hebrew Manuscripts’ (in Hebrew), *Alei Sefer: Studies in Bibliography and in the History of the Printed and the Digital Hebrew Book* 11 (1984), pp. 37–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A. Geiger, Urschrift und Ubersetzungen der Bibel in ihrer Abhangigkeit von der inneren Entwicklung des Judentums. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Madda, 1928, pp. 279–299. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls changed dramatically our understanding of these matters. See for example: M. Kister, ‘A Common Heritage: Biblical Interpretation in Qumran and Its implications’, in M. E. Stone and E. G. Chazon (eds.), *Biblical Perspectives; Early Use and Interpretation of the Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Leiden: Brill, 1998, pp. 101–111 and B. J. Baumgarten, ‘Tannaitic Halakhah and Qumran: a re-evaluation’, in S. D. Fraade, A. Shemesh and R. A. Clement (eds.) Rabbinic Perspectives; Rabbinic Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 1–11. For a programmatic discussion of the parting(s) of the ways see: B. D. Ehrman, ‘Christian Persecutions and the Parting of the Ways’, in L. Baron, J. Hicks-Keeton & M. Thiessen (eds.), *The Ways That Often Parted: Essays in Honor of Joel Marcus*, Atlanta, GA: SBL Press 2018, pp. 283–307. For further discussion and references see the following discussions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See: I. Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, trans. E. J. Revell, Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1980, pp. 136–137; M. B. Lerner, ‘The External Tractates’, in Sh. Safrai et al (eds.), *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, Vol. 3 Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1987, pp. 367–409; L. Zunz, *Haderashot BeYiśraʼel Vehishtalshelutan Hahisṭorit* (in Hebrew), trans. M.A. Zack, H. Albeck. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1947, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a detailed description of the manuscripts, and other textual witnesses, see: D. R. Blank, ‘It's Time to Take Another Look at “Our Little Sister” Soferim: A Bibliographical Essay’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 90 (1999), pp. 1–26. I have followed the decision of Higger and the Academy of the Hebrew Language’s, ‘Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language’ (‘Ma’agarim‘) and chose Ms. Oxford as my primary text. As the need arose, other manuscripts and textual witnesses were also consulted. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a description of the textual witnesses, see: M. Higger, *Seven Minor Treatises* (in Hebrew) New York: Bloch, 1930*,* Introduction, pp. 16–17. Here too, I have followed the decision of Higger and the Academy of the Hebrew Language (‘Ma’agarim’) and chose Ms. JTS ENA 2237 as my primary text and used other witnesses as the need arose. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For example: #5, #7, #21, #25, and #26 in the appendix. Cases where manuscripts lacked a verse or two were not included. These might be scribal errors, because of homeoteleuton Sacred/Sacred. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, #5, #6, #13, #19, #20 and #21. There is also an incorrect usage of the term ‘First one is sacred and the last one is not sacred’ in #17 (see discussion below). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, #8, #9, #10, #11 (see discussion below), and # 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See: 1 Kgs 21:1–29 and Lev 24:10–23. For discussion, see: J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, AB. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 2000, pp. 2101–2128. A similar clarification is found in #27. See, Geiger, *Urschrift*, p. 280 and S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshutah*, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992 2nd ed, vol. 5, pp. 1094–1095. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. There is a small fragment from the Cairo Genizah (Manchester: B 4838, Fragment 1), which seems to have been a marginal gloss. Its version is close but not identical to the version in the Babylonian Talmud. Its fragmentary condition does not allow to reach any significant conclusions. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In Ms. JTS ENA 2237: ‘ביה.’ Corrected according to the other manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Medieval biblical exegetes also dealt with the challenge of properly interpreting the divine names in the Micha narrative. See, for example, Rashi’s commentary on Judg 17:5, 18:5–6; Kimchi on Judg 17:5, 18:5, 18:30, and Gersonides on Judg 17:3–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See: D. M. Gunn, *Judges*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 231–242 and N. Na’aman, ‘The Danite Campaign Northward (Judges XVII-XVIII) and the Migration of the Phocaeans to Massalia (Strabo IV 1,4)’, *Vetus Testamentum* 55 (2005), pp. 47–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See: Y. Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, trans. J. Chipman, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 328–329. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. In addition, in Judg 17:1, the name of the main character is spelled ‘Michyahu’. This may be an indicator of different source materials. See: R. G. Boling, *Judges*, AB. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1975, pp. 258–259. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. There is a Tannaitic tradition that during the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites carried Micah's idol with them. This tradition is based on reading Judg 17:1–6 as an independent unit. See for example: Sifre Num. §84 ed. Kahana 210, and discussion, ibid. 585–586. According to S. ʿOlam Rab. §23, Micha’s idol was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem by King Menashe. See: Milikowsky, C. Milikowsky, *Seder Olam* (in Hebrew), 2 vols. Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben–Zvi, 2013, vol 2., p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
21. Falsely attributed to Philo, most scholars estimate that it was written sometime between the middle of the first century CE, to the middle of the second century CE. See: H. A. Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 2 vols. Leiden; New York: Brill, 1996, vol. 1, pp. 199–210. Pseudo–Philo expands on the biblical material by describing the idol as being carved with figures of boys, a lion, an eagle, a serpent, and a dove (LAB, 44:5, ed. Jacobson, p. 167). See: F. J. Murphy, J. *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 173–174; pp. 252–254 and p. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
22. For this identification, see: L. Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold, et al., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909–1913, vol. 6, p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
23. Although the author of LAB rewrote Judg 17:1–6 freely, it seems that he understood that all the divine names mentioned in these verses are not sacred: ‘… your title will be ‘priest’, and you will be called “a worshipper of the gods”’ (LAB 44:2–3, ed. Jacobson, p. 166). See: Jacobson, *A Commentary*, pp. 1004–1006. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
24. See also discussion on #11; page??? [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
25. See for example: Mek. de R. Ishmael, Kaspah 19, ed. Horvitz–Rabin, 317 and Sifra Kedoshim, 9:7 ed. Weiss, 91c. There is a change in the Rabbinic literature regarding the names of the speakers, and whose opinion is what. See: M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (in Hebrew), 44 vols. 4th ed. Jerusalem: Hatchiyah, 1992, vol. 18, pp. 124–128. The interpretation of *’Elohim*’ as ‘judges’ may be implied in the Temple Scroll 64:12. see: D. R. Schwartz, ‘The Contemners of Judges and Men (110 Temple 64:12)’ (in Hebrew) Lĕšonénu, 47 (1984), pp. 18–24. The Aramaic translations, including the Peshitta, all rendered ‘*ʾElohim*’ as ‘judges’. See: Geiger, *Urschrift*, pp. 280–281; Maori, *The Peshitta*, pp. 147–148. A similar solution can be found in the passage about ‘*Bene Ha’Elohim’* in Gen. 6:2–4. See: Kugel, *Traditions*, pp. 179–183 and pp. 200–212. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
26. The Vilna Gaon also sensed that the text as it stood could not be harmonized with the R.Akiva/Ishmael debate. He therefore suggested amending the text of *Masekhet* *Soferim* (4, n.8) to make it consistent with the later sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
27. Philo, *Mos. 2:205*; *Spec. Laws*, 1:53; *QE* 2, §5; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.207; *Ag. Ap*. 2.237. See also, Joseph and Aseneth 10:12 (13), ed. Charlesworth, 216, n. v. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
28. See: G. Alon, ‘On Philo's Halakha’, in *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World: Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple and Talmud*. Translated from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977, p. 112, n. 40; J. Barclay, *Flavius Josephus, Translation and Commentary: Against Apion*. vol. 10. S. Mason (ed.), Leiden: Brill, 2006 p. 306, n. 958; Chester, *Divine Revelation*, p. 334; R. Goldenberg, ‘The Septuagint Ban on Cursing the Gods’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 28 (1997), pp. 381–389; Goshen-Gottstein, *Fragments*, vol. 2, 45–46; H. A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947, vol. 1, p. 175; Van der Horst, ‘Thou Shalt Not.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
29. *Yal. Shimoni* §856 quotes the passage from *Masekhet Soferim* but without the dissenting opinion of R. Ishmael. This may be a witness to a remnant of an earlier version of this tradition where the opinion of R. Ishmael was not included in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
30. Another example for this phenomenon can be found in **#**2, ‘For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords …’ (Deut 10:17). According to Sep. Torah4:4 and Sop*.* 4:6, in both phrases, ‘God of gods’ (*’Elohei Ha’elohim*) and ‘Lord of lords’ (*’Adonei Haadonim*), the first phrase is sacred, and the second is not. These expressions were somewhat documented in Biblical, post-Biblical and Rabbinic literature, but their exact meaning is not discussed (see, for example: Ps 136:2–3; Dan. 4:47; 1 En. 9:14, and its partial Hebrew parallel in 1Q19bis and 4Q381 76–77:14; the Ap. Zephaniah A, ed. Charlesworth, 508; Sifra Miluim 6 ed. Weiss 43c; b. Megila 31a). One ancient interpretation understood that this verse is directed towards those who believe in the divinity of the solar system or angels (see, for example: Deut 4:19–20; Philo, *Conf*. §173, and 1 Cor. 8:5). See: M. Segal, *Dreams, Riddles, and Visions: Textual, Contextual, and Intertextual Approaches to the Book of Daniel*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, p. 38; M. Weinfeld, Moshe. *Deuteronomy*, AB. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1991, pp. 206–207 and pp. 438–439; Wolfson, *Philo*, pp. 11–12, pp. 39–40 and p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
31. I completed the text using the other manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
32. The passage is fragmented and lacks a clear context. It may be that at one time, the text of this passage in *Mashkhet Sefer Torah* was identical to *Masekhet Soferim* but was later corrupted. Another possibility is that at a later date, a scribe decided to add material from *Masekhet Soferim*. *Masekhet Soferim* 5:9, repeats the unanimous opinion that the divine name in Gen 20:13 is ‘not sacred.’ This is further evidence to the lack of coherence in the text of *Masekhet Soferim*, and indicates that it should be treated as a secondary source vis-à-vis *Mashkhet Sefer Torah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
33. See: J. W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1993, pp. 245–246 and M. Zipor, *The Septuagint Version of the Book of Genesis* (in Hebrew), Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2005, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
34. Suggestion of R. Hiya Rabba (Gen. Rab. 48:10, ed. Theodor–Albeck, 486–488). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
35. Indeed, according to some Middle Ages interpreters, Gen 18:1 is a general statement – Abraham’s theophany – and the details of this experience are subsequently provided. See, for example, Rashbam on Gen 18:1; Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, §2:42, 3:42. For discussion, see, Gen. Rab. §48:3, ed. Theodor–Albeck pp. 479; E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 3rd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, pp. 60–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
36. ‘We appeared to Abraham’ (Jub 16:1). Josephus provides more details: ‘After God had issued this judgment concerning the Sodomites, Abraham, noticing three angels—and he was sitting near the oak of Mamre before the door of his courtyard—and thinking that they were strangers, stood up and welcomed them and leading them within his home invited them to enjoy his hospitality’ (Josephus, *Ant*. 1.19). See: M. Mach, ‘Studies in Jewish Angelology in the Hellenistic–Roman Period’ (in Hebrew), PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 1986, pp. 307–308. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
37. This understanding may have been emphasized due to the nascent understanding of the Jesus movement that the ‘three’ men were ‘foreshadowing’ the trinitarian idea. See: B. G. Bucur, *Scripture Re-Envisioned: Christophanic Exegesis and the Making of a Christian Bible*. The Bible in Ancient Christianity 13. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019, pp. 42–70; Kugel, *Traditions*, 341–343; D. Rokeach, *Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004, pp. 157–158, and C. von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2010, pp. 59–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
38. Tg. Neof. translated very similarly. Tg. Onq. is less detailed, but also understands that Abraham is addressing God. Cf. Sifre Deut. §27, ed. Finkelstein, 42; Lev. Rab. §11:5, ed. Margulis, 224; Cant. Rab. §1:13A. See, Chester, *Divine Revelation*, pp. 33–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
39. Gen. Rab. §18:7 ed. Theodor–Albeck p. 505 and parallels. See: Tov, *Textual Criticism*, pp. 59–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
40. Philo discussed these verses in *Abr.*§119–120, and *QG 1* §2*.* See: Wolfson, *Philo*, p. 126, pp. 202–204 and pp. 379–378; E. Filler, ‘Philo’s Threefold Divine Vision and the Christian Trinity’, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 87 (2016), pp. 93–113 and Rokeach, *Justin Martyr,* p. 157, n. 746. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
41. See: B. G. Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology: Clement of Alexandria and Other Early Christian Witnesses*. Vigiliae Christianae Supplements 95. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009, pp. 42–70 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
42. A similar rejection we find in Gen 19:18 (#9). According to Masorah; LXX (see: Wevers, Notes, pp. 276–277); Samaritan Aramaic translation; Peshitta and Sifrei Num. §42 (ed. Kahana 111) the term ‘אדני’ is this verse is not sacred. However according to *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and the Jewish Aramaic translations it is (see: *Minḥat Shai*, ed. Betser, 95–96). Here, again, we find an effort to distinguish between the angels and God, who is the only one who gives life (see: b. Shev. 35b and *yMeg.*1:9 [the Yerushalmi text was corrupted but cat be restored with *Hilkhot Sefer Torah*, discovered in the Cairo Genizah. See: S. Abramson ‘Rules of a Torah Scroll [Egypt’s Genizah]’ [in Hebrew], part II, *Sinai* 88 (1986), p. 6]). This effort is better understood if compared to Justine Martyr. According to him, Lot was referring to one that is both Lord and God was the one that talked to Lot – Jesus (Dialogue with Trypho §56, ed. Falls, p. 232). See: Rokeach, *Justin Martyr*, pp. 157–158. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
43. Compare for example, between Ps 119:176 and Isa 19:13. See: H. Gunkel, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted*, trans. M. E. Biddle, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997, pp. 221–222, and Tov, *Textual Criticism*, p. 85 n. 136. The ancient translations understood this problematic verse in various ways. In the SP, the LXX and the Peshitta the verb is in a singular form. Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neo. made some drastic changes: ‘תעי‘ was translated to ‘טעי’; and the subject was changed from God to the people. In Tg. Ps.–J. ‘’Elohim’ in the verse refers to idols. See: Chester, *Divine Revelation*, 336; Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, Vol. 3b, 832, n. 64; Maori, *The Peshitta*, pp. 89–90 and Wevers, *Notes*, pp. 294–295. Gen 20:13 is mentioned again in #17, but only in *Masekhet Soferim*. The absence of this verse from the list in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and the dispute over it in #8 is another indication of the secondary nature of *Masekhet Soferim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
44. See, Nahalat Ya'aqov, on Masekhet Sefer Torah (4:6), s.v. VeYesh. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
45. For example, #2; #8; #9; #18; #23 and #24. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
46. This is also the definition of ‘שמש’ in Rabbinic Hebrew. See: M. Moreshet, *A Lexicon of the New Verbs in Tannaitic Hebrew* (in Hebrew), Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1980, pp. 371–372; M. I. Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers: An Annotated Edition* (in Hebrew), 4 vols. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011–2015, pp. 616–617. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
47. As in #4. See discussion above. Some interpreters suggested that the enigmatic name that can be understood as both sacred and not sacred was ‘אל’ (*Nahalat Ya'aqov*, on *Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
48. See also Deut 32:8 (according to the reading found in the LXX and some of the texts from the Judean desert); 1 Kgs 22:19; Jub 15:31–32, and even explicitly in the later Midrash on Psalms §82:3, ed. Buber 185a. See: J. J. Collins, ‘Powers in Heaven: God, Gods and Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls’, in J. J Collins and R. A. Robert (eds.), *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, pp. 9–28; D. D. Frankel, ‘’El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82:6–8’, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10 (2010), pp. 2–24; R. Goldstein, ‘YHWH’s Inheritance and His Enthronement’ (in Hebrew), *Tarbiẕ* 85 (2018), pp. 5–28 especially pp. 15–16; L. W. Hurtado, ‘Monotheism, Principal Angels, and the Background of Christology’ in J. J. Collins and T. H. Lim(eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 546–564. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
49. There are two additional important aspects of Psalm 82 that will not be discussed here, as they are not connected directly to our subject. One is Psalms 82 as part of liturgy. See: P. L. Trudinger, *The Psalms of the Tamid Service: A Liturgical Text from the Second Temple*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004, pp. 40–51 and pp. 236–269. Second, verses 6–7 were interpreted in the Jewish and Christian traditions as referring to the sins of Adam and Eve and the golden calf made by the Israelites. See: D. Rokeach, *Justin Martyr and the Jews*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2002, pp. 103–109. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
50. LXX translated the verse literally, bearing the interpretation of ‘*’Elohim*’, as divine beings. Jerome also translated the verse literally in his Vulgate and homily to Ps 81:2. He was also aware of the Peshitta’s understanding, see: J. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies*. London: Duckworth, 1975, pp. 153–167. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
51. See, Mek. de-Rashbi 20:16, ed. Epstein–Melamed, p. 156 and parallels; John 10:34–35; See: C. Hayes, ‘“The Torah was not Given to Ministering Angels”: Rabbinic Aspirationalism’, in I. Rosen-Zvi et al. (eds.), *Talmudic Transgressions: Engaging the Work of Daniel Boyarin*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, pp. 123–160; M. Kister, *Studies in Avot de–Rabbi Nathan: Text, Redaction and Interpretation* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Department of Talmud; Yad Izhak Ben–Zvi, 1998, pp. 146–147. Regarding the term *Shekhinah* in early Rabbinic literature, see: E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrams. 2 vols. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975, vo; 1, pp. 37–65, G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim, New York: Schocken Books, 1965, pp. 104–109 and pp. 138–142. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
52. Several rabbinic texts indeed read this verse as a warning to human judges. See, for example: Gen. Rab. §48:7, ed. Theodor–Albeck, p. 482; b. Sanh. 6b and parallels. See: Edwards, *The Jewish Interpretation*, 17–77; ibid., *Exegesis in Targum*, 100–104. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
53. See: A. Aschim, ‘Melchizedek and Jesus: 11QMelchizedek and the Epistle to the Hebrews’, in C. Newman et al. (eds.), The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conferences on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus, JSJSup. 63, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 129–147; M. J. Davidson, Angels at Qumran: A Comparative Study of 1 Enoch 1-36, 72-108 and Sectarian Writings from Qumran. Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992, pp.255–264; Kugel, Traditions, pp. 276–293 and P. W. Van der Horst, ‘“Thou Shalt Not Revile the Gods”: The LXX Translation of EX. 22:28(27), its Background and Influence.’ SPhiloA 5 (1993), pp. 1–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
54. The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition, 1206–1207. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
55. In Exod. 3:2–6 for example, the burning bush episode, it is unclear who is speaking to Moses: the angel of God or God Himself (YHWH). This ambiguity was described by Trypho, ‘… so that in the apparition there were really two Persons together: Angel and God’ (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, §60, ed. Falls, 242–243). See, Rokeach, *Justin Martyr*, 27; R. M. M. Tuschling, *Angels and Orthodoxy: A Study in their Development in Syria and Palestine from the Qumran texts to Ephrem the Syrian*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, p. 87; C. A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1998, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
56. See: Colins, ‘Powers in Heaven’; Horbuy, *Jewish Messianism*, 64–108, 149–152; Kister, ‘Metatron’; Kugel, *Traditions*, p. 535; Y. Paz, ‘Metatron is not Enoch: Reevaluating the Evolution of an Archangel’, *[Journal for the Study of Judaism](https://brill.com/view/journals/jsj/jsj-overview.xml)* 50 (2019), pp. 52–100; A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism*. Leiden: Brill, 1977, pp. 260–267; Tuschling, *Angels*, 21–81; Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 135–183. For a different perspective, see: A. Goshen–Gottstein, ‘Shifting Scholarly and Relational Paradigms: The Case of Two Powers’ (in Hebrew), in M. Poorthuis et al. (eds.), *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, pp. 15–44. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
57. See previous note, and J. J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. Forms of the Old Testament Literature 20. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 390; W. Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ*, London: SCM Press, 1998; N. Mizrahi, ‘God, Gods and Godhead in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice’, in M. Kister et al. (eds.), *The Religious Worldviews of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, STDJ 127. Leiden: Brill, 2018, pp. 161–192; L. T. Stuckenbruck,’“Angels” and “God”: Exploring the Limits of Early Jewish Monotheism’, in E. S. Wendy North et al (eds.), *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, JSNTSup 263, London: T.&T. Clark, 2004, pp. 45–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
58. See for example: Apoc. Zeph. 6:11–15, ed. Charlesworth, 513, and tHul. 2:18, ed. Zuckermandel, 503; Bach, *Studies*, pp. 393–401; G. Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 197–198, 305–307, 381–382; D. Boyarin, ‘Beyond Judaism: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010), pp. 323–65; M. Kister, ‘“Let Us Make a Man” – Observations on the Dynamics of Monotheism’, in Y. Sussmann (ed.), *Issues in Talmudic Research* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2001, pp. 28–65; M. Schneider, *The Appearance of the High Priest: Theophany, Apotheosis and Binitarian Theology: From Priestly Tradition of the Second Temple Period through Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (in Hebrew), Cherub Press, Los Angeles 2012, pp. 134–143; A. Schremer, ‘Midrash, Theology, and History: Two Powers in Heaven Revisited’ *Journal for the Study of Judaism*39 (2007), pp. 1–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
59. As we have already seen above (#3, #4), a medieval textual witness supports this suggestion reading: *Sefer HaAguda*, 104, quoting *Masekhet Soferim*, ‘אלקים נצב בעדת אל משמש קדש וחול.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
60. For a description of the textual witnesses, see, Higger, *Seven*, Introduction, 16–17. I have followed the decision of Higger and the Academy of the Hebrew Language (‘Ma'agarim’) and chose Ms. JTS ENA 2237 as my primary text and used other witnesses as the need arose. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
61. For a detailed description of the manuscripts, and other textual witnesses, see, Blank, ‘It's time.’ Here too, I have followed the decision of Higger and the Academy of the Hebrew Language's, ‘Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language’ (‘Ma'agarim’) and chose Ms. Oxford as my primary text. As the need arose, other manuscripts and textual witnesses were also consulted. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)