**Elijah the Prophet in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature: A Critical Edition, a Taxonomy of Excerpts, and an Analysis of Conceptual Trends**

Elijah the Prophet is one of the most prominent and prevalent Biblical figures in rabbinic literature. He is mentioned hundreds of times in Talmudic and midrashic literature, in a variety of thematic contexts, and in a range of literary genres. The preoccupation with the figure Elijah is related to important and central questions in the rabbinic world,[[1]](#footnote-1) such as the rules and boundaries of halakhic discourse, messianism and eschatology, the interest in and critique of religious and political fanaticism, etc.

A large part of the scholarly work to date on the figure of Elijah is anthological and, unfortunately, deficient, whether on account of its scope -- that is, it includes only part of the literary traditions about this figure[[2]](#footnote-2) -- or on account of the classification and analysis of the material. In addition, there is no reliable textual collection of references to Elijah in Talmudic and midrashic literature based on the manuscripts of all the compositions belonging to this corpus.

The goal of the proposed project is an examination of the various aspects of the figure of Elijah in the broad literary corpus of rabbinic literature, in an effort to trace developments in the sages' attitudes toward this figure, as well as various perspectives and worldviews expressed in the interpretive approaches appearing in the Talmudic and midrashic sources relating to this figure. From a methodological perspective this study will be based on philological-historical foundations, in an attempt to uncover the historical contexts in which various exegetical positions and traditions arose, as well as the history of these traditions themselves. This project will also methodologically probe the question of in what sense and under what circumstances it is possible speak of a “figure” when dealing with multiple and wide-ranging sources, and not with a single literary work.

The unique figure of Elijah the Prophet has garnered considerable interest in the scholarly literature. Several attempts have been made to collect and organize the various traditions about Elijah, such as that of Ish Shalom (Friedman) (1902-1904), Segal (1935), and Margolies (1960). These anthologies have contributed to a general impression of the range of areas that the figure of Elijah has been linked to in rabbinic literature, but they were not based on a systematic examination of the manuscripts of the sources, and they did not include all the references to Elijah in Talmudic and midrashic literature, nor did they provide an analysis of the conceptual trends that arise from the range of sources. Many studies have been devoted to the examination of a specific text or motif out of the entirety of sources dealing with this figure in the Bible and in rabbinic literature (Greenberg, 1981; Ayali, 1994, Zakovitch, 1990, and many others). There is a clear need, then, to provide a systematic, accurate presentation of all of the relevant textual traditions, as well as to analyze the data so as to point to any general trends in the sages’ attitude to Elijah, the questions and tensions bound up with this figure, and the various ways in which he was “used” so as to deal with issues that interested them. Contributions in this direction include Lindbeck’s 2010 book, which deals with the full set of stories about Elijah in the Babylonian Talmud, and Hedner-Zetterholms’s 2007 and 2009 articles, which examine specific aspects of the evolution of the sages’ attitude toward Elijah, and the relationship between the way this figure was depicted and the sages’ ideological orientations.

The proposed project is comprised of several layered components, each building on the previous ones. The first component is the compilation of a critical edition of all the references to Elijah in Talmudic and midrashic literature. This edition will be based on the primary textual witnesses to the various compositions, with each textual selection presented alongside its manuscript variants.

The second component will consist of a taxonomy of the various references along several major axes:

1. Different aspects of the figure: Elijah of the Biblical past, Elijah of the messianic era, and Elijah who appears and reveals himself in the rabbinic present. The Biblical story in the book of Kings provided the basis for the homiletic, literary, and conceptual evolution of the "historical" figure of Elijah in rabbinic literature. The final verses of Malachi's prophecy lay the groundwork for the hope that Elijah would return in the messianic era, and the description of Elijah's ascent to the heavens while still alive allowed for the development of the traditions and descriptions relating to his revelation in the present day. A classification of these passages according to these categories will allow for an examination of the relationship among the various aspects of this figure and a study of the conceptual trends that characterize the sages' attitudes toward each of these aspects.
2. Generic axis: Elijah figures in rabbinic literature written in a range of different literary genres, including commentary on Biblical verses, exegetical narratives that expand upon Biblical scenes, sages stories set in rabbinic times, normative halakhic rulings, and aggadic or halakhic deliberations. A classification of the sources according to these general categories will allow for an examination of the relationship among the nature of the genre, the different aspects ofthe figure (axis #1 above) and the thematic categories (axis #3 below).
3. Thematic axis: It is of critical importance to organize the full set of statements and traditions about Elijah into several thematic categories, including: messianism and eschatology, moral behavior and standards of piety, rules of halakhic discourse, zealotry Israel and the nations of the world, genealogical purity. A classification of the sources into general thematic categories will allow for an examination of the main questions and topics that the sages sought to explore by means of invoking the figure of Elijah.
4. Chronological axis: Each excerpt will be situated along a chronological axis by employing general distinctions between historical periods—Tannaitic, Amoraic, or post-Amoraic—in order to allow for an examination of the development of conceptual, homiletic, or literary trends, and an analysis of the historical contexts.
5. Geographical axis: A distinction between Palestinian and Babylonian traditions, which will allow for an examination any different trends and approaches between the two cultural centers.

The project will also include an examination of the context in which each of these excerpts about Elijah appears, and I will note its role in the larger framework of the Talmudic pericope or textual context.

Reference will also be made to Christian sources which deal with Elijah and which are important in understanding rabbinic sources, but the treatment of the figure of Elijah in Christian sources will not be an independent focus of this research.

A classification of the various appearances of Elijah will allow, in later stages of research, for an identification of the overlap between categories and an analysis of the trends that characterize various genres, periods, or compositions.

The critical edition and the taxonomy of excerpts will be uploaded to the internet and can serve as the foundation for further research by other scholars.

The third layered component, which is the ultimate purpose of the project, will be the publication of a series of studies that will examine various conceptual trends in the sages' attitude toward Elijah, and the different uses of this figure in order to deal with issues and questions that reverberated in the religious, intellectual, political, and social milieus in which the sages found themselves. A preliminary example of my methodological approach can be found in my recent article (see attached) "Did Elijah Show Respect to Royalty?" *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 46 (2015), 403-429. In this article I examined a single homiletic motif involving the Biblical figure of Elijah as depicted in the Mekhilta. I pointed out various strata in the Tannaitic text and proposed a historical reading of the homiletic motif. I argued that the Mekhilta's depiction of the Biblical Elijah as one who "showed respect to royalty" reflects a political ideology of integration into the Roman imperial world, and I demonstrated how it contends with an opposing ideological stance that regarded Elijah as a model of religious zealotry as expressed by a readiness to confront the authorities.

The topics that I seek to research in this component of the project include: The backdrop to and the dynamics of the critique of the Biblical figure of Elijah; conceptual trends expressed in the anticipation of Elijah's coming and the messianic roles ascribed to him; Elijah and the halakhic system; Elijah and "holy men," and more.

1. This stands in contrast to those who regard Elijah as a marginal figure belonging to the realm of folklore. A typical example of this approach is apparent from the title of S.M. Segal's book, *Elijah: A Study in Jewish Folklore* (New York, 1935). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is true of the anthologies of Segal (1935) and Margolies (1960), and of Lindbeck's more recent book, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology* (New York, 2010), which deals with Talmudic stories about Elijah, but does not treat other genres of rabbinic literature that deal with this figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)