# **Holy or Not Holy?**

# ***Divine Scriptural Names and the Sages’ Revaluation of Ancient Traditions***

Yonatan Sagiv

[sagivyonatan@gmail.com](mailto:sagivyonatan@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0002-0367-3986

The Department of Jewish History, Haifa University and The Hebrew University Bible Project  
Postal Address: The Hebrew University Bible Project, Mt. Scopus Jerusalem 9190501, Israel

**Abstract**

Tractate Sefer torah and Tractate of the Scribes’ – *Masekhet Sefer Torah and Masekhet Soferim* – lists verses that contain potential divine names, such as "אדני" and "אל". These names are classified as "holy" when they relate to the Hebrew God, or "not holy" when they carry other meanings such as false gods, angels, etc. This paper argues that the core list was established from ancient Second Temple traditions and it was modified in the process of transmission. The motivation for these changes is due to internal development of Jewish thought, to adjust the list into "standard" rabbinic concepts and beliefs changes. But they are also defining the borders of Judaism, and therefore carries a polemic aspect. In that manner, the list is a test case for rabbis attempt to reframe (as opposed to erase) their literary inheritance.

Key words: Tractate Sefer torah | Tractate Soferim | Divine names | textual traditions | Biblical interpretation

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

From its earliest days, the process of the transmission and preservation of the Hebrew Bible was under an ongoing tension between the commitment to preserve the sacred text and the motivation to "correct" it, in order to correspond to the transmitter's understandings, concepts and beliefs. Even after the gradual canonization process, textual, hermeneutical and theological problems did not disappear. Yet now, the answers would be provided by interpreters; not by scribes. The following discussion about Divine names is part of this phenomena. In many cases, divine names in the biblical texts are clear, as it refers to the Hebrew God, using the special name YHWH. However, some divine names are often ambiguous, as they can refer to the Hebrew God, as well as what would be considered false gods, angels, or even important humans.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This paper will discuss a list found in ‘Tractate of the Scribes’ – *Masekhet Soferim* 4:5–24, its parallel in the ‘Tractate of Torah Scroll’ – *Masekhet Sefer Torah* 4:4–6 and other parallels in early rabbinic literature. This list is a primary source of scribal customs and traditions. It deals with verses that contain divine names, such as "אדני" and "אל", which can also bear other, more prosaic, interpretations. Consequently, it is vital for the scribe to know if these names are a referent to God, and therefore subject to the Biblical taboo regarding erasure, or non-holy names, which may be erased, if written accidentally, without exposure to religious sanction.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *Soferim* are often overlooked as marginal in early rabbinic literature. But as A. Geiger already noted, the list in these tractates is a window into an entire world of hermeneutical lenses and interpretive traditions.[[4]](#footnote-4) I would like to reexamine the list and to focus on two key aspects that weren't discussed yet. One, is the history and the development of the list. I suggest that some difficulties in texts and context can be understood as the sages and later redactors efforted to understand early interpretations that were lost and were unknown for them. The second is that they are a cause of rejection of common Second Temple traditions that later were adopted by Christianity. These aspects are part of a much broader theme discussed research which is the transformation of Judaism from Second Temple period to rabbinical Judaism.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I have reviewed the entire list and systematically examined as best as I could for every verse mentioned in the list all the direct and indirect textual witnesses, parallels in the Rabbinic literature, Placing the list alongside the ancient translations to the Hebrew Bible, and early Second Temple, early Christian literature. For the sake of clarity and in order not to overload with the many details, the discussions below focus a few selected cases organized thematically and not sequentially. References to similar phenomena in the list are mentioned in the footnotes.

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

*Masekhet Soferim*, which as a collection is dated approximately to the seventh century CE, deals with rules for the preparation and reading of Holy Writ. This ‘minor’ tractate is comprised of twenty-one chapters. The first five contain laws that relate directly to the scribe; the remainder deal with different aspects of the ritual reading of the Hebrew Bible as part of the synagogue rite. As long observed by scholars, the redactor of *Masekhet Soferim* made use of earlier sources from classic rabbinic literature. In the first five chapters, the redactor also included material from *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, usually dated to the first centuries CE.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This scholarly consensus is proven also in this case. In Higger's edition of *Masekhet Soferim*, based on MS. Oxford 370.12, there are more than 30 verses in the list.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, the parallel list in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* contains only 14 verses (for details, see the table in the Appendix).[[8]](#footnote-8) All the verses in *Masekhet Sefer Torah* are included in *Masekhet Soferim* and appear in the same order. But the list of supplemented verses in *Masekhet Soferim*, are not uniform: some of them are not documented in all manuscripts, and their locations in the list differ.[[9]](#footnote-9) When incorporating material from *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, there is a uniform terminology; there is a lack of uniformity when dealing with material from other sources. Instead of "קדש", "Holy", or, "חול", "not Holy", the terms used are, "הרי זה קדש", "it is Holy", and, "הרי זה חול", "it is not holy".[[10]](#footnote-10) Different parallel terms, suggests different sources. In general, *Masekhet Sefer Torah’s* commentary on the list’s components is shorter than that of *Masekhet Soferim*.[[11]](#footnote-11) The theme of the core list is divine names. The spectrum of possible interpretations to these names is limited: God, false gods, and angels. In the supplementary material, further, more extensive hermeneutical possibilities are laid out. All these indicates their later addition and provenance.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Modified traditions**

**#10 and #11 Micha and Navot[[13]](#footnote-13)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Masekhet Sefer Torah*** | ***Masekhet Soferim*** | **Citation** | **Verse** |  |
| All the names said regarding Micah not holy, including YHWH (4:5). | All the names said regarding Micah are not holy. Rabbi Yossi says, those with *Yod Hei* are holy, those with *Alef Lamed* are not holy, 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 (אלהים) stood at Shiloh. | Judg 18:31 | 10 |
| All the names said regarding Naboth are holy even *Elohim* (4:5). | And all the names said regarding Navot are holy except for, "Navot has reviled god and king" (1 Kgs 21:13) (4:13) | … Navot has reviled God (אלהים) and king Then they took him outside the town and stoned him to death. | 1 Kgs 21:13 | 11 |

[[14]](#footnote-14) The case of Navot is relatively clear: Jezebel, the Phoenician princess, using her political power, had Navot accused of 'blessing', cursing, 'God and the king'. The lesson therefore is that the heathen Queen accused Navot of cursing meant God, and not foreign idols.[[15]](#footnote-15) The case of Micha is more complicated, as can be understood from the following parallels, introducing *Masekhet Sefer Torah*, *Masekhet Soferim* and parallels in the Talmudic literature:[[16]](#footnote-16)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Masekhet Sefer* *Torah* 4:5** | **b. Šebu. 35b** | **y. Megila 1:9** | ***Masekhet* *Soferim* 4:10** |
| All the names said regarding Micah are not holy, even <<Ya>>[[17]](#footnote-17). | All names said regarding <<Navot>> are holy. in Mich<<a>> not holy.  R. Eliezer says: in Navot holy.  In Micha some are holy and some not. What is said in *Alef Lamed* is not holy, in *Yod Hei*, holy. | All the names said regarding Micha even though they are written in *Yod Hei*, they are not holy, except one which is holy, "the House of God stood in Shiloh" ([Judg 18:31](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Judges.18.31)). | All the names said regarding Micah are not holy. Rabbi Yossi says, those with *Yod Hei* are holy, those with *Alef Lamed* are not holy, except for, “the House of God stood at Shiloh” (Judg 18:31). |
| In Navot holy, even El. | Except from this name, even though it is in *Alef Lamed*, it is holy, "the House of God stood in Shiloh" ([Judg 18:31](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Judges.18.31)). | All names written in Navot, even though they are written in *Alef Lamed* they are holy, "Navot has reviled God and king". | And all the names said regarding Navot are holy, "Navot has reviled god and king" (1 Kgs 21:13). |

*Masekhet Sefer Torah*’s core teaching that all *prima facie* divine names, (even the tetragrammaton), are in fact not sacred is a novel opinion. [[18]](#footnote-18) Two supplements to this core teaching are documented: the first appears in the Babylonian Talmud, attributed to R. Eliezer, that not all the divine names in Micha’s narrative are holy. A distinction must be drawn between those names written with an *Alef Lamed* (not holy), and those with a *Yod Hei* (holy). *Masekhet Soferim* relates a similar opinion in the name of R. Yossi. This later source appears to be an attempt in diminishing the novelty of the earlier teaching. In *Masekhet Soferim* and b. Shev., the terms are less clear, as evidenced by the attempt to explain the controversial source.

The second supplement is that Judg 18:31 is an exception to the above rule concerning the Micha narrative; this verse indeed contains a holy name. This is a puzzling teaching as this verse is referring to the legitimate "בית האלהים", tabernacle in Shiloh, and has nothing to do with Micha's idol or shrine. In addition, the ancient translations of the Micha narrative rendered practically all the divine names therein as holy, and thereby demonstrated a different understanding from the rulings of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and even the more tempered versions in its parallels.[[19]](#footnote-19) Therefore, this specific tradition requires a closer examination.

Some Biblical scholars suggest a polemic reading of the story of Micah. Judean scribe(s) composed a narrative whereby a thief, and a priest for hire, set up an illegitimate temple up north. The background to this is the controversial temples for the bull cult that Jeroboam I established in Bethel and Dan.[[20]](#footnote-20) Notice that according to the redactor, all the characters in the story behave as if their deeds are wanted before God (Judg 17:2–3, 5, 13; 18:5–6, 10).[[21]](#footnote-21) The later sources were unaware of the inherent polemic, but rather focused on Micha's idol worship as an example of the religious failings of the ancient Israelites. Although discussions or references to Micha's idol outside the Hebrew Bible are relatively rare, there is evidence that Judg 17:1–6, was understood as an independent unit, and this was the original meaning of the teaching.

According to the *Masorah*, Judg 17:1–6 is an independent unit, opening and ending with open portions (פרשות פתוחות). 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).[[22]](#footnote-22) In addition, there is a Tannaitic tradition that during the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites carried Micha's idol with them.[[23]](#footnote-23) This division of the narrative is also reflected in in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. In chapters 44–45, the author rewrites the Micha narrative, and in the process rewrites and omits several details from his Biblical source. [[24]](#footnote-24) This description as well is solely based on Judg 17:1–6.[[25]](#footnote-25) According to this text, Delilah,[[26]](#footnote-26) Micha's mother, encouraged her son to build an idol. The Masoretic text 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'.[[27]](#footnote-27) The impression is that *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and *LAB* share the same understanding that the sketch of the Micha narrative in Judg 17:1–6, is solely dealing in false worship made to false gods (so-called 'gods'). Despite the thematic reasons for this decision, the de-sanctification of the tetragrammaton remains a radical and unique reading of holy writ. When 'translated' to halachic terms, the consequence was a highly irregular definition of YHWH as "not holy".

Therefore, it seems correct to suggest that the ruling of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* refers solely to Judg 17:1–6. The composers of the later parallels and R. Yossi/R. Eliezer assumed that the 'Micha' portion included Judg 17–18. This created a new hermeneutical problem. They therefore tried to minimize the radical reading by ruling that all mentions of *Yod Hei*, such as in the mouth of Micha's mother in 17:2–3, are holy. But still, the more expansive understanding of the section of “Micha” is incoherent and almost impossible, and the proposed solution only partially solves the problem. In Judg 18:5–6, members of the tribe of Dan asked the priest for God's directions, 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 status? Most unlikely. *Masekhet Sefer Torah* preserved the original rulings. These rulings, already at an early stage, were misunderstood, and therefore modified in later sources and by the sages.

**#4 Exodus 22:27: Not to Speak Evil - of God or ‘gods’?**

Exod 22:27 forbids cursing God (אלהים) and chieftain (נשיא): “You shall not revile God, nor put a curse upon a chieftain among your people”.[[28]](#footnote-28) While it is clear that ‘a chieftain’, can only refer to a flesh-and-blood human, 'אלהים' can be interpreted both as a divine being and a human being. Since 'chieftain' and 'God' are in parallel with one another, they can be presumed to have the same meaning.

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:4) and *Masekhet Soferim* (4:9) record a rabbinic debate concerning this possible divine name. An anonymous ruling is that 'אלהים' 'serves holy and not holy' (משמש קודש וחול). R. Ishmael disagrees; in his view, it is a holy name. This passage is best understood in the context of a well-documented debate between R. Akiva and R. Ishmael whether 'אלהים' here means God or human judges.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, the anonymous ruling is not identical to that of R. Akiva. One holds that 'אלהים' is solely holy, while the other thinks that it can bear two meanings.[[30]](#footnote-30) Furthermore, the general theme of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* is cases that 'אלהים' can be understood as God, false gods or angels, but it doesn't relate to humans. Therefore, a different explanation must be suggested.

A well-documented tradition from the Second Temple period -found in the LXX, Philo and Josephus - interpreted 'אלהים' 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.[[31]](#footnote-31) 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.[[32]](#footnote-32) If we assume that the original text of *Masekhet Sefer Torah* did not include the opinion of R. Ishmael, it then corresponds directly to this tradition, hereto unknown in the rabbinic corpus.[[33]](#footnote-33) It proves that this reading was also known in the Land of Israel and was not strictly the product of Jews living in Hellenistic society. What might have happened is that a later redactor could not accept or was unaware this rather pluralistic tradition. He therefore added the view of R. Ishmael, and thereby 'wrapped' this tradition in a different, well-

known, rabbinic debate and the gods of other nations were transformed into a different conversation about human judges.[[34]](#footnote-34)

**Ancient tradition in polemic context**

**#9 Gen 18:3 – between God and Angels**

'… he said, my lords (אדני) if it please you, do not go on past your servant (Gen 18:3).

Looking at *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and its parallels in the following table Illustrates that there was uncertainty regarding the exact verse implied in the tractate and its exact meaning.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Masekhet Sefer Torah* 4:5[[35]](#footnote-35)** | **b. Šebu. 35b** | **y. Meg. 1:9** | ***Masekhet Soferim* 4:10** |
| All <<the names that are said>> regarding Abraham are holy, except for the first. | All the names that are said regarding Abraham are holy, except for one which is not holy:  "My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes" (Gen 18:3). | All the names written in connection with our father, Abraham, are holy, except for one, which is not holy: | All the names that are said regarding Abraham are holy except for one that is not holy - 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 holy. |
| Rabbi Ḥanina <<the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says:>>  holy. | 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 holy. | "When they made me wander from my father’s house” (Gen 20:13).  and some say that  even that one is holy, | "When they made me wander from my father’s house” (Gen 20:13).  Rabbi Ḥanina the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says, holy |
|  |  | For without God, they would have already misled me. | For without God, they would have already misled me. |

Even though the parallels 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*. These parallels can be divided into three groups: *Masekhet Sefer Torah* and y. Meg.; b. Shev., and *Soferim*. The Babylonian Talmud is the closest parallel to *Masekhet Sefer Torah*. It fills 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 y. Meg. on the other hand, the controversial verse is Gen 20:13, and it is an anonymous sage who disagrees. As for *Masekhet Soferim*, it represents a hybrid version. A redactor supplemented with the material found in y. Meg.: 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).[[36]](#footnote-36) 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 examination of Gen 18:3.

**Genesis 18:3 – Interpretive Traditions and Disputes**

The exact meaning of this name, especially in the context of Gen 18:3 was a subject of some dispute in late antiquity, and as I will discuss below, part of a Jewish–Christian debate.[[37]](#footnote-37)

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 in the singular: 'My Lord (אדני), if it pleases you, do not go on past your servant'. Who is Abraham addressing? According to the *Masorah*, the word is vowelized אדנָי and is therefore clear that Abraham is speaking directly to God. He is beseeching Him to remain while he tends to his guests. However, 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 documented possibility offered is that Abraham is addressing his (singular) guest אדנִי, and as translated in the LXX, 'κύριε', 'my Lord'.[[38]](#footnote-38) The problem with this solution is that the verbs in the verse are 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.[[39]](#footnote-39) Yet, even so, how does Abraham’s theophany in the opening verse, verse 1, fit into the larger narrative?[[40]](#footnote-40)

The reading of verse 3 as a non-holy name is also documented in the SP, where the entire verse in explicitly reframed in plural: 'ויאמר אדני אם נא מצאתי חן *בעיניכם* אל *תעברו* מעל *עבדכם*'. According to the rewritten description of this story in the Book of Jubilees and Josephus, it is clear that these exegetes understood that Abraham is addressing his guests and not God.[[41]](#footnote-41) Therefore, *Masekhet Sefer Torah* reflects here an ancient tradition documented in different sources.

But 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.[[42]](#footnote-42) 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 *Shkinah* go up from your servant' (*Tg. Ps-J.*).[[43]](#footnote-43) 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 toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord' (Gen 18:22).[[44]](#footnote-44) These two readings seem to solve not just the problematic plot line, but they also draw a line between God's revelation and the visit of the three angels.

But there was another, more complexed reading. This reading is discussed in Philo. 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 here corresponds to the sources discussed above. In addition, there is the allegorical meaning, where these three persons are profound metaphysical symbols regarding the nature of God. A similar reading was developed later by Justin Martyr in the discussion.[[45]](#footnote-45) Justin focused his argument against the Jewish interpretation that: "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).

This ambiguity is aimed to prove that the special messenger was Jesus, as he was one of the three angels escorted by two others.[[46]](#footnote-46) Justin turns out against the Jewish reading that separates between Gen 18:1 and 3; between God and the angels. Later on in Christian tradition, a further step was taken, and the visit of the three visitors was interpreted as the trinity. Therefore, it should be considered that *Masekhet Sefer Torah* is a kind of an answer or response that carries a polemic aspect. It is possible that this is also the reason why the original reading according to which the first appearance was not Holy was rejected. Since reading Gen 18:3 as Abraham request from God to stay and wait for him until he finishes to host his quests, draws even thicker line between the two scenes, which Philo but more important Christian scholars in the first centuries to the CA read as one.[[47]](#footnote-47) As the understanding of this verse shifted and it became more widely understood that in fact Abraham was speaking in this verse to God, a new alternative verse needed to be found for the 'one' divine name in the Abraham narrative that was in fact 'not holy'. This shift is reflected in the later parallels. By choosing Gen 20:13, these later redactors gave up the symmetric phrasing and context of the original *baraitah*. 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 problem 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 tricking an individual, or leading them down a wrong path, and indeed several alternative solutions can be found to this verse in early sources, but they are secondary to the list and its causes.[[48]](#footnote-48)

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 was referring to Abraham’s guests, and therefore not a holy 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 (אֱלֹהִים) stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings (אֱלֹהִים) He pronounces judgment. (Ps 82:1)

*Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:6) and *Masekhet Soferim* (4:21) both rule that 'אלהים' in this verse should be understood as both a holy and also a not holy name. As it appears twice in the verse, traditional commentators to *Masekhet Soferim* argued as to which occurrence the ruling was referring. Some have suggested that the teaching was referring to both names, the first to the Almighty, and therefore holy, and the second, following a rabbinic tradition, to human judges, and therefore not holy.[[49]](#footnote-49) Others rejected this suggestion, rightfully arguing that if so, the ruling should have read: 'the first is holy, and the last is not holy', as we find in other cases in the list.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The phrase 'serves (משמש) as holy and not holy', clearly bears a different meaning. Earlier, in #4, we saw that the meaning was that the divine name can bear multiple meanings.[[51]](#footnote-51) 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 (אֱלֹהִים) He pronounces judgment'). [[52]](#footnote-52) Yet, if so, why is the first part of the verse quoted, and what is the meaning of 'holy and not holy'? What are the two interpretations that this term is meant to signify? Therefore, a different solution should be considered.

Psalm 82, and especially verses 1–6, pictures 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.[[53]](#footnote-53) Our focus, however, is how verses 1–2 were understood in late antiquity.[[54]](#footnote-54) According to 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.[[55]](#footnote-55) Similar descriptions of God surrounded by his celestial retinue can be found in several Biblical and he Second Temple texts. A second tradition to this verse, or to be more exact, to the first part of this verse, "אלהים נצב בעדת אל", is documented in the early rabbinic and Christian sources. According to this reading, 'אלהים' means God or *Shekhinah*, and 'עדת אל', a congregation of his human followers, or community of believers.[[56]](#footnote-56)

A third tradition bases itself on the theme of justice found in verses 2–8 and follows the conceptual assumption that 2'אלהים, can also connote other majestic beings, 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.[[57]](#footnote-57)

There is however another tradition that may help explain this enigmatic teaching. Out of the caves of Qumran emerged a remarkable mid-first-century BCE document (11Q13), wherein the archangel Malchizedek is described as an ‘Elohim’, a heavenly judge presiding over the final judgment of evil. With him are the 'עדת אל', his army of angels that will fight the wicked on the day of judgment.[[58]](#footnote-58)

It is the time for the <<year of grace>> of Malchizedek, and of [his] arm[ies, the nat]ion of the holy 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'.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Semantically, 'אלהים' may bear the meaning of both God, or an angel.[[60]](#footnote-60) This reading is documented in early Christian writings. Justyn Martyr, again, in his Dialog with Trypho interpreted Ps. 82 as follows:

… the Holy 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 Holy 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). A straight line can be drawn between these sources, interpreting the first appearance of God in Pls 82:2 as carrying the meaning not the plane expected meaning of God, but of a heavenly being.

From a wider perspective, Second Temple Judaism, based upon earlier Biblical traditions, knew of an angelic being that is elevated to the highest rungs of heaven.[[61]](#footnote-61) The exact identification of this divine being, its exact relation to God, and the entire concept of 'two powers in heaven' is quite ambiguous in this literature.[[62]](#footnote-62) Nevertheless, as pointed out by some scholars, what can be said is that this early belief was an organic part of Jewish thought and slowly developed into a heresy, excluded from normative belief, yet not without leaving its traces on the literature, theology, and even practice in Judaism.[[63]](#footnote-63)

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 imbedded the ancient tradition. As the ruling, 'holy and not holy', refers to one specific name, the teaching therefore is that 'Elohim', relates simultaneously to God, and is therefore holy, and also to an archangel, and therefore is also not holy.

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 'אלהים' was referring solely to God and a holy name. They then included the second part of the verse, ruling that the name therein was not holy by incorporating their hermeneutical traditions of 'powerful judges', or 'community of believers'. However, as we have already seen, this compromise caused hermeneutical headaches.[[64]](#footnote-64)

**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 sages themselves and later by its transmitters. Some verses mentioned in the list reflects a widespread Second Temple tradition. These traditions were forgotten or at some points were considered as 'border crossing' as a result of inner rabbinic evolution. But there are cases in which the ancient traditions were adopted and developed by Christian scholars. In these cases, the reductions carry a polemic aspect. In both cases, the original saying was reinterpreted, 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**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Masekhet Sefer Torah[[65]](#endnote-1)* | *Masekhet Soferim[[66]](#endnote-2)* | Citation | Verse |  |
|  | the first is holy, the second is not holy (4:5) | but God (אלהים) … you will be like divine beings (כאלהים) who know good and bad. | Gen 3:5 | 1 |
| the first is holy, the second is not holy … the first is holy, the second is not holy (4:4) | the first is holy, the second is not holy … the first is holy, the second is not holy (4:6) | For the Lord your God (ה' אלהיכם) is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God … | Deut 10:17 | 2 |
| "God of Abraham" is holy, "God of Naḥor" is not holy (4:4) | "God of Abraham" is holy, “god of Naḥor" is not holy. “Their ancestral deities” is not holy (4:7) | May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor their ancestral deities (אלהי אביהם) judge between us … | Gen 31:53 | 3 |
| “God” serves (משמש) as holy and not holy. R. Ishmael says, holy (4:4) | “God” serves (משמש) as holy and not holy. R. Ishmael says, holy (4:8) | You shall not revile God, nor put a curse upon a chieftain among your people. | Exod 22:27 | 4 |
|  | This is not holy (4:9) | But Jacob said … for to see your face is like seeing the face of God … | Gen 33:10 | 5 |
|  | This is holy (4:9) | When he saw them, Jacob said, this is God’s camp. So, he named that place Mahanaim. | Gen 32:3 | 6 |
|  | Holy (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 holy, except for the first. Rabbi Ḥanina <<the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says:>>  holy. | All the names that are said regarding Abraham are holy except for one that is not holy - 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 holy. "When they made me wander from my father’s house” (Gen 20:13). Rabbi Ḥanina the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua says, holy, for without God, they would have already misled me. | he said, my lords (אדני) 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 holy except for the last one (4:5). | All the names said regarding Lot are not holy 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 (אדני) | Gen 19:18 | 9 |
| All the names said regarding Micah not holy, including YHWH (4:5). | All the names said regarding Micah are not holy. Rabbi Yossi says, those with *Yod Hei* are holy, those with *Alef Lamed* are not holy, 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 (אלהים) stood at Shiloh. | Judg 18:31 | 10 |
| All the names said regarding Naboth are holy even *Elohim* (4:5). | And all the names said regarding Navot are holy except for, "Navot has reviled god and king" (1 Kgs 21:13) (4:13) | … Navot has reviled God (אלהים) 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 holy. Rabbi Yehoshua says holy. 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 holy. Sages: it is not holy (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 holy, the second is holy (4:16). | They go from rampart to rampart, appearing before (אל) God in Zion. | Ps 84:8 | 14 |
|  | The first is not holy, the second is holy (4:17). | He has no set time for man to appear before God (אל אל) in judgment. | Job 34:23 | 15 |
|  | The first is not holy, the second is holy. The first can be divided, the second cannot be divided (4:18). | … Let her name him Immanuel (עמנואל).  … it shall not succeed. For with us is God (עמנו אל). | Isa 7:14; 8:10 | 16 |
|  | The former is not holy … (4:19) | So when God made me wander from my father’s house … | Gen 20:13 | 17 |
|  | … the latter is holy (4:19). | Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression | Mic 7:18 | 18 |
|  | This is holy (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 holy (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 holy (4:20). | You must return to your God … | Hos 12:7 | 21 |
| Serves (משמש) as holy and not holy (4:6) | Serves (משמש) as holy and not holy (4:21) | … God (אלהים) stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings (אלהים) He pronounces judgment. | Ps 82:1 | 22 |
| The first is holy, the second is not holy (4:6) | The first is holy, the second is not holy (4:22) | God hands me over (אל) to an evil man … | Job 16:11 | 23 |
| The first is not holy, the second is holy (4:6) | The first is not holy, the second is holy (4:22) | Has he said to God (אל) I will bear [my punishment] and offend no more | Job 34:31 | 24 |
| This is not holy (4:6) | This is not holy (4:22) | Earth, do not cover my blood; Let there be no (ואל) resting place for my outcry | Job 16:18 | 25 |
|  | Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yossi 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 holy (4:22) | … and let (ואל) there be no resting place …  … and I have it in my power (לאל) …  … but you shall be powerless (לאל) …  … when you have the power (לאל) …  Her house sinks down to (אל) Death … | Job 16:18; Gen 31:2, 29; Deut 28:32; Prov 3:27; 2:18 | 26 |
| Is holy … (4:6) | Is holy … (4:23) | [Necho] sent messengers to him, saying … it is God’s will that I hurry … | 2 Chr 35:21 | 27 |
| … is holy. According to the words of Rabbi Yossi bar Yehuda (4:6) | … is holy. According to the words of Rabbi Yossi 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 holy, but the reader has to make sure to pause [after saying God’s name] (4:6) | is holy, 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 holy, 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 holy except one which is holy. 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 (מרי), 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. Following the warnings not to use the 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 or 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 discovering of the Dead Sea Scrolls changed dramatically our understandings on 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 on 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, Ha*-derashot Be-Yiśraʼel Ve-hishtalshelutan Ha-hisṭorit* (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. Cases where manuscripts lacked a verse or two were not included. These might be scribal errors, because of homeoteleuton Holy/Holy. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, #5, #6, #13, #19, #20 and #21. There is also an incorrect usage of the term "First one is holy and the last one is not holy" in #17 (see discussion below). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, #8, #9, #10, #11 (see discussion below), and # 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, #4 (see discussion below), #25, and #26. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Passages #8–11 in the list should be read as one distinct and autonomous unit, as they are quoted in the Talmudic parallels. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Independent units in b. Šebu. 35b, and y. Meg. 1:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 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 Ki-Fshutah*, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992 2nd ed, vol. 5, pp. 1094–1095. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 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 conclude any significant conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In Ms. JTS ENA 2237: "ביה". Corrected according to the other manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 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-18)
19. One exception: Tg. J. translation of "בית אלהים" (Judg 17:5), as "בית טעותא", "house of idols". Compare the literal translation in the Peshitta, "the house of God". [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 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-20)
21. See: Y. Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, trans. J. Chipman, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 328–329. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 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-22)
23. 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-23)
24. 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-24)
25. Further on, the author does refer to the subsequent chapters. He remarks on the divine punishment meted out to Micha, his mother, and the tribe of Benjamin (§44:8, ed. Jacobson, p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 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-26)
27. 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 holy: '… 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-27)
28. See also discussion on #11; page ??? [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 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, what is the opinion of Rabbi Akiva and what is the opinion of Rabbi Ishmael. See: M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (in Hebrew), 44 vols. 4th ed. Jerusalem: Hatchiyah, 1992, vol. 18, pp. 124–128. The interpretation of "אלהים" 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 "אלהים" as "judges". See: Geiger, *Urschrift*, pp. 280–281; Maori, *The Peshitta*, pp. 147–148. A Similar solution can be found in the famous portion of "בני האלהים" in Gen. 6:2–4. See: Kugel, *Traditions*, pp. 179–183 and pp. 200–212. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 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-30)
31. 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-31)
32. 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-32)
33. *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-33)
34. 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' (אלהי האלהים) and 'Lord of lords' (אדני האדנים), the first phrase is holy, 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-34)
35. I completed the text using the other manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 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 holy". 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-36)
37. The following discussion will be based on a shared understanding both Abraham's and Lot's visitors were in fact heavenly angels who only appeared as humans. See: N. M. Sarna, Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989, p. 129; Ginzburg, Legends, vol. 1, pp. 253–257. In the earlier sources the angels appear anonymously. They are later given names (see, for example, Gen. Rab. §50:2, ed. Theodor–Albeck, 516). See, von Heijne, *The Messenger*, 132, n. 70; Kugel, *Traditions*, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. 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-38)
39. Suggestion of R. Hiya Rabba (Gen. Rab. 48:10, ed. Theodor–Albeck, 486–488). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 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-40)
41. '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-41)
42. 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-42)
43. 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-43)
44. Gen. Rab. §18:7 ed. Theodor–Albeck p. 505 and parallels. See: Tov, *Textual Criticism*, pp. 59–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. 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-45)
46. 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-46)
47. 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 y. Meg.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-47)
48. 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-48)
49. See, *Nahalat Ya'akov*, on *Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:6), s.v. v’Yesh. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For example, #2; #8; #9; #18; #23 and #24. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. 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-51)
52. As in #4. See discussion above. Some interpreters suggested that the enigmatic name that can be understood as both holy and not holy was 'אל' (*Nahalat Ya'akov*, on *Masekhet Sefer Torah* (4:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. 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-53)
54. 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-54)
55. LXX translated the verse literally, bearing the interpretation of 'אלהים', 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-55)
56. 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-56)
57. 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-57)
58. 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-58)
59. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 1206–1207. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. 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-60)
61. 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-61)
62. 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-62)
63. 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-63)
64. 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-64)
65. 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)
66. 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)