

METATRON, GOD, AND THE 'TWO POWERS': THE DYNAMICS OF TRADITION, EXEGESIS, AND POLEMIC

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This article discusses two stories in the *Babylonian Talmud*, which are of great importance for understanding the religious world of the Sages and the polemic against the view that the Sages call *shte rashuyot*, 'Two Powers'.

1. The first story, in *BT Hagigah* 15a, is about Elisha Ben Abuya, who saw the angel Metatron sitting in heaven and concluded: 'there are two powers' (i.e., two gods, or godly figures). According to the story, Metatron was allowed to sit in order to write down the merits of Israel. According to a parallel source, the *Hekhalot* work known as *3 Enoch*, Elisha saw Metatron on his royal throne in heaven. According to both passages, upon seeing Metatron seated, Elisha was led to the mistaken conclusion that there are 'two powers'. This article shows that this tradition, with its two attestations (in the *Talmud* and in *3 Enoch*), combines two basic assumptions, each of which is known from ancient times: (1) figures who are worthy of it angels and human beings are permitted to sit on high. Among these figures is Metatron the Great Prince (according to *3 Enoch*) or the Heavenly Scribe (according to the *Talmud*); the two descriptions of this figure, the Great Prince and the Heavenly Scribe reflect a duality about Enoch in the traditions from Second Temple times. (2) According to an opposing basic assumption, only God Himself sits on high. This discussion is connected to the 'thrones' in *Daniel 7:9*. According to the interpretations of several Church Fathers, the plurality of 'thrones' proves that there is another divine figure, equal to God the Father, because in *Daniel* it is said explicitly that the angels *stand*; the two thrones for sitting must therefore be for the two persons of God, the Father and the Son. This argument, known from the Church Fathers, is precisely the reason for Elisha's error according to the story under discussion. These two opposite basic assumptions do not in themselves derive from theological conceptions; theological importance, however, is attached to them in Christian and Jewish sources. This accounts for the tradition of Elisha's heresy. This part of the article also contains a discussion of the controversy over the interpretation of *Daniel 7:9* in Talmudic literature. There is also an analysis of a fragment of *Hekhalot* literature. The article shows that the key to understanding the story is first of all scrutinizing the underlying tradition and its metamorphoses.

2. The second story, in *BT Sanhedrin* 38b, describes a dispute between Rav Idi and a heretic. A scrutiny of the *traditions* underlying this story is helpful in this case as well. An analysis of Rav Idi's argument clarifies the use it makes of exegetical traditions (some of them ancient), adapting them to the needs of polemic against the assumption of a plurality within the Divinity. It appears that this polemic was directed against arguments similar to the Christian arguments of Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. In this context the article also discusses a parallel passage from *Shi'ur Qomah* and two *Genizah* fragments from the *Hekhalot* literature. On the one hand, the similarity between Justin's perceptions and arguments to those attributed by the rabbis to the heresy of 'Two Powers' is evident; on the other hand, there is a striking affinity of the arguments in the *Hekhalot* fragment to those of Rav Idi, all of them making the point that even the highest heavenly power is not part of the Divinity.