

Providence and Theodicy in the Writings of the Sages
Melton at JCC, December 1, 2011

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, page 13a – 13b

[It is taught in the] Tanna debe Eliyahu:23 It once happened that a certain scholar who had studied much Bible and Mishnah24 and had served scholars much,25 yet died in middle age. His wife took his tefillin and carried them about in the synagogues and schoolhouses and complained to them, It is written in the Torah, for that is thy life, and the length of thy days:26 my husband, who read [Bible], learned [Mishnah],

(23) This is the Midrash consisting of two parts, 'Seder Eliyahu Rabbah' and 'Seder Eliyahu Zuta'. According to the Talmud Keth. 106a the Prophet Elijah taught this Midrash, the Seder Eliyahu, to R. 'Anan, a Babylonian amora of the third century. Scholars are agreed that the work in its present form received its final redaction in the tenth century C.E., though they are not agreed as to where it was written. V. Bacher, *Monatsschrift*, XXIII, 267 et seqq.; in R.E.J. XX, 144-146; Friedmann, introduction to his edition of Seder Eliyahu.

(24) Kara refers to the study of the Bible; shanah to the study of the Mishnah.

(25) 'Serving scholars', i.e., being in personal attendance on scholars, was one of the requisites of an academical course.

(26) Deut. XXX, 20.

and served scholars much, why did he die in middle age? and no man could answer her. On one occasion I1 was a guest at her house,2 and she related the whole story to me. Said I to her, 'My daughter! how was he to thee in thy days of menstruation?' 'God forbid!' she rejoined; 'he did not touch me even with his little finger.' 'And how was he to thee in thy days of white [garments]?'3 'He ate with me, drank with me and slept with me in bodily contact, and it did not occur to him to be intimate [with me].' Said I to her, 'Blessed be the Omnipresent for slaying him, that He did not condone on account of the Torah!4 For lo! the Torah hath said, And thou shalt not approach unto a woman as long as she is impure by her uncleanness.'5 When R. Dimi came,6 he said, It was a broad bed. In the West [Palestine] they said, R. Isaac b. Joseph said: A divider was set between them.7

(1) Elijah, the supposed author of the Tanna debe Eliyahu; v. n. 1.

(2) Elijah was believed to visit the earth and speak to people.

(3) When a niddah's discharge ceased, she donned white garments and examined herself for seven consecutive days, which had to pass without any further discharge of blood before she became clean. During this time she was forbidden to her husband.

(4) He showed no unfair favoritism because of the man's learning.

(5) Lev. XVIII, 19.

(6) V. p. 12, n. 9.

(7) But they were not actually in bodily contact.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, page 33b

For R. Gorion-others state, R. Joseph son of R. Shemaiah-said: When there are righteous men in the generation, the righteous are seized [by death] for the [sins of the] generation; when there are no righteous in a generation, school-children are seized for the generation.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah, page 5a

R. Johanan, when he came to the [following] verse, wept: Behold, He putteth no trust in His holy ones.¹² If He does not put His trust in His holy ones, in whom will He put his trust? One day he was going on a journey and saw a man gathering figs; he was leaving those that were ripe and was taking those that were unripe. So he said to him: Are not those¹³ better? He replied: I need those for a journey: these will keep, but the others will not keep. Said [R. Johanan] this is the meaning of the verse: Behold He putteth no trust in His holy ones.¹⁴

(12) Job XV, 15.

(13) I.e., the ripe ones.

(14) I.e., God fears that the righteous, like the ripe figs, may later lose their excellence; hence they die young. Cf. Aboth II, 4.

Yeshayahu 57:1

Breishit 3:24

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XXXIV:2

2. The Lord trieth the righteous, etc. (Ps. XI, 5). R. Jonathan said: A potter does not test defective vessels, because he cannot give them a single blow without breaking them. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not test the wicked but only the righteous: thus, 'The Lord trieth the righteous.' R. Jose b. R. Hanina said: When a flax worker knows that his flax is of good quality, the more he beats it the more it improves and the more it glistens; but if it is of inferior quality, he cannot give it one knock but it splits. Similarly, the Lord does not test the wicked but only the righteous, as it says: 'The Lord trieth the righteous.' R. Eleazar said: When a man possesses two cows, one strong and the other feeble, upon which does he put the yoke? Surely upon the strong one. Similarly, the Lord tests none but the righteous; hence, 'The Lord trieth the righteous.'