The *Minim* of the Babylonian Talmud

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Introduction

How should we translate the term *min(im)* in the Babylonian Talmud? The current scholarly trend is to avoid translating it altogether, using the transliteration instead. However, as I will demonstrate, this practice hinders our ability to understand the stories' intended uses within Late Antique heresy-making discourses. At least with regard to several of the *minim* stories in the Babylonian Talmud, it is necessary to translate the Hebrew term into English as "heretics."

In what follows, I will survey the scholarly debate concerning the correct way to understand stories involving *minim* in rabbinic literature. I will then consider the Talmudic sources in the context of that debate, claiming that if some *minim* stories are to be understood as depicting Christian beliefs, then, in certain specific cases, *minim* should be understood as "heretics". The terms "heretics" and "heresy" will be discussed at length, and I argue that, in the texts under consideration, the figure of *the min* must be situated within the camps of those defined as holding "wrong beliefs." These beliefs, in the stories I examine, stem from Christian theology. This article relies on previous publications where it was demonstrated that in a list of stories in the Babylonian Talmud involving *minim*, these figures should be regarded as expressing Christian views.[1] They can only be read, I argued, if we assume that they express

contemporary Christian views about certain biblical verses. With this background, the current paper wish to address the following basic question: What is the correct way to translate and refer to the term *min* in the Babylonian Talmud?

Previous Literature on *Min*

Scholarship has long debated the precise meaning of the noun *min* (plural: *minim*), term that appear in stories in which they depict characters engaged in debates with rabbinic figures. Debates have focused on who the *minim* are and what they represent. I will not fully review the large literature on this topic in tannaitic, and, later, Palestinian sources here, as such a survey has recently been provided by Adiel Schremer[2] and David

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1 "'The best of them is like a brier': On B. 'Eruvin 101a and the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the Babylonian Talmud," in: *Perceiving the Other in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, Matthew Thiessen, Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal (eds.) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), pp. 131-146; "Matthew 5:22: The Insult 'Fool' and the Interpretation of the Law in Christian and Rabbinic Sources," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 234 (2017): 5-23; Co-authored with Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal, "'Rejoice, O barren one who bore no child': Beruria and the Jewish-Christian conversation in the Babylonian Talmud," in: *The Faces of Torah: Studies in the Texts and Contexts of Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade,* Christine Hayes, Tzvi Novick, and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal (eds.) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 199-220; "Minim Stories and Jewish-Christian Debates over Scripture: Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 102b," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 25 (2018): 1-18; "'Fool, look to the end of the verse': B. Ḥullin 87a and its Christian Background," in: *The Aggada of the Bavli and its Cultural World*, Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (eds.) (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), pp. 243-270; Co-authored with Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal, "The Hebrew-Based Traditions in Galatians 4:21-31," *Early Christianity* 9 (2018): 404-431.
2 Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged; Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Grossberg.[3] I will focus instead on a selection of articles, namely, those that relate to the meaning of the term in the Babylonian Talmud.

The term *minim* is unique to rabbinic literature but was known to Christian writers. For example, Jerome writes: "Up to the present in all the synagogues of the East among the Jews there is a heresy, which is called [the heresy] of the Minim, and it is condemned by the Pharisees to this day."[4] And Justin Martyr seems to refer to *minim* when he mentions the *genistae* as part of his list of Jewish sects in his *Dialogue with Trypho*.[5] While the exact etymology of the term "*min*" in Talmudic literature is unknown, scholars such as George F. Moore, Ismar Elbogen, Alan Segal, Marcel Simon, Martin Goodman, and Daniel Boyarin agree that the most likely derivation is from the identical word in Biblical Hebrew meaning "type" or "kind."[6] Since the derivation of the word is hard to determine, the

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3   David M. Grossberg, *Heresy and the Formation of the Rabbinic Community* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

4   Jerome's 403 letter to Augustine according to the translation in Grossberg, p. 50 n. 2.

5   *Dialogue with Trypho*, p. 80.

6   George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries*, Vol. 3 (1930), pp. 68; Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), p. 36; Alan. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp. 4-5, and note 2; Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135-425)* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 181; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 55; Martin Goodman, "The Function of 'Minim' in Early Rabbinic Judaism," *Judaism in the Roman World; Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill 2007), pp. 163-173, there p. 167. See additional less likely suggestion in Jacob Levy, (ed.), *Neuhebräisches und chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midrashim* (Leipzig: 1876-9), III, p. 104a (from the Arabic root man – 'to speak falsely'), and see Robert T. Herford, *Christianity in the Talmud and Midrash* (1903), pp. 362-5, for a possible connection to the root זן (Wilhelm Bacher in his review of "R. Travers Herford's *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 17 [1904]: 178, suggests this idea is taken from Friedmann, in his commentary on Pesikta Rabbathi, p. 101a). Herford also discusses other options, such as מאמין (suggested by Manuel Joël, *Blicke in die Religionsgeschichte zu Anfang des zweiten christlichen*

meaning was generally deduced from context.[7] Therefore, scholarly debates have revolved around attempting to link the reference to specific groups that existed in Late Antiquity, basing discussions on the rabbinic passages themselves.

The vast majority of scholars tended to align the use of *min*, and its noun abstraction - *minut*, with heresy. Goodman notes that the creation of an abstract noun for discussing the religious beliefs of a group is unique in the early rabbinic strata:

> Even more striking is the coinage of the term *minut,* 'heresy; since the creation of an abstract noun to denote a religious tendency was not otherwise common in tannaitic texts (for example, there was no abstract noun in Hebrew for Pharisaism or Sadducaism).[8]

Marcel Simon goes further, by suggesting that Justin Matyr's use of the term *hairesis* is "the translation of the Hebrew minuth."[9] According to this interpretation, the *minim* were heretics who held false or harmful beliefs.[10] This reading of *minut* aligns the rabbinic passages with a parallel development in Christian sources.

The "mutual and parallel shaping of heresy as otherness" in ancient Christian and contemporaneous rabbinic writings, is described by scholars

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Jahrhunderts [Breslau: Schottlaender, 1880], II, p. 71) and מאני; see ibid. p. 365. See also Wilhelm Bacher, ''Le Mot 'minim' dans le Talmud de´signe-t-il quelquefois des Chre´tiens?'' *REJ* 38 (1899): 45.

7 Goodman, pp. 166-167.

8 Goodman, p. 166.

9   *Verus Israel*, p. 106

10 See for example the phrasing in Yaakov Sussmann, "The History of Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls - Preliminary Observations on *Miqṣat Maʿase Ha-Torah* (4QMMT)," *Tarbiz* 59 (1989): 54, n. 176 [Hebrew]. See also Boyarin, Goodman, Simon, and many others.

such as Daniel Boyarin[11] and Martin Goodman.[12] Boyarin wrote the following:

> Only in the rabbinic literature, that is, beginning with the late second-century Mishna do we find attested in any Jewish writings a word parallel in usage with the later Christian usage of *heresy* and *heretic,* namely, *minut* and *min.[13]*

Similarly, Marcel Simon concludes: "It seems that the term *hairesis* has undergone in Judaism an evolution identical to, and parallel with, the one it underwent in Christianity."[14] Shaye Cohen proposes "nearly identical" theories of self-definition by the rabbis and Church Fathers, and suggests that both were influenced by the "Oriental polemic against Hellenism."[15]

Such scholarship uses the vast body of literature on Christian heresiology to better understand *minut* in rabbinic and earlier Second Temple sources, and reveals that consideration of the Greek term in its context is fruitful.[16] John Glucker, for example, describes the historical

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11 *Border Lines*, p. 55. See also Stephen Goranson, "The Joseph of Tiberias Episode in Epiphanius: Studies in Jewish and Christian Relations," Ph.D. diss. (Duke University 1990), p. 97.

12 "The Function of 'Minim'," p. 165.

13 *Border Lines*, p. 54.

14 Marcel Simon, "From Greek *Hairesis* to Christian Heresy," in: *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem R.M. Grant*, William R. Schoedel, Robert L. Wilken (eds.) (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979), p. 106.

15 Shaye J. D. Cohen, "A Virgin Defiled: Some Rabbinic and Christian Views on the Origin of Heresy," *USQR* 36 (1980): 1-11, here p. 8.

16 The scholarship on Christian heresiography from the classic Adolf Hilgenfeld, *Ketzergeschichte des Urchristentums, urkundlich dargestellt* (Leipzig, 1884; rep. Hildesheim, 1964), is vast. For a survey of more recent scholarship from 1930-1990 see: Michel Desjardin, "Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Hairesis in the Early Christian Era," *Second Century* 8 (1991): 65-82. For an excellent summary, see the introduction by Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin, "Making Selves and Marking Others: Identity and Late Antique Heresiologies," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin (eds.)

development of the word αἵρεσις (*hairesis*). He begins with the verb αἱρέομαι (*aireomai*), meaning "to choose."[17] He describes its later uses and the emergence of αἵρεσις (*hairesis*) as an abstract concept, as a "school of thought," and as a "persuasion." He emphasizes that even when the term begins to be used to denote heresy, it always advocates orthodox doctrines, and never indicates the notion of an institution.[18] Heinrich von Staden demonstrates how these more neutral descriptions were used in patristic writings denoting "breaking away," and "separation."[19] Scholars such as Marcel Simon[20] and Alain Le Boulluec[21] focus on the discursive study of the term's usage in ancient religious texts, in Second Temple writers such as Josephus, in the New Testament (Acts), in Greek writers, and especially in the writings of the Church Fathers.[22] Such scholarship emphasizes the importance of clarifying the difference between ancient (mis)representations of the "other" and actual socio-historical realities, choosing to analyze the literary construction of "heresy" rather than dealing with heresy as a historical reality.

Building on Bauer's argument that orthodoxy is a historical idea that evolved out of the second century of Christianity,[23] Le Boulluec examines

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(Tobingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 1-27. For a good review on of history of scholarship on the non-Christian *haeresis* see David T. Runia, "Philo of Alexandria and the Greek *Hairesis*-Model", *VC* 53 (1999): 117-147.

17 John Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978), pp. 166-192, and specifically p. 168 n. 18.

18 Glucker, pp. 181, 192.

19 Heinrich von Staden, "Hairesis and Heresy: The Case of the *haireseis iatrikai*," in: *Jewish and Christian Self-definition,* v. 3, *Self-definition in the Greco-Roman World*, Ben F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders (eds.) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 76-100.

20 From Greek *Hairesis*," pp. 101–116.

21 Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque IIe-IIIe siècles* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes) 1985. And see David T. Runia's review of the book in *VC* 42 (1988): 188-207.

22 See Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie,* pp. 37-39, 41-48.

23 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). And see Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie* pp. 547-549.

the development of heresy in five heresiographers: Justin, Hegesippus, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen. While focusing on the disjunctions between the Church Fathers' descriptions of the Gnostics and the "gnostic" documents discovered at Nag Hammadi, Le Boulluec stresses the constructed character of so-called heresy in these texts, which he calls "heresiological representations."[24] He finds that "with Justin there emerged an intellectual system aimed at excluding certain theological positions from Christianity," and explains how the concept of *haíresis* was "both simple and convenient."[25]

In addition to discussing the question of whether Justin was the inventor of heresy, or preceded by Greek, Roman,[26] or even Jewish/rabbinic writers,[27] Le Boulluec defines the function and use of the term "heresy" in this Christian discourse. According to his definition, the concept of heresy deprived the "heretics" of the designation "Christians," lumped together different groups and ignored their historical and sociological connections to Christianity.[28] Heresy as a concept is, in this reading, a way of converting difference into exclusion, instead of reacting and acknowledging the substance and development of differences.[29]

Minim and Christian Heresy

In light of this background, Daniel Boyarin's *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* explores the parallel processes of heresiology, as found in rabbinic *minim* stories and Christian writings, among other

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24 Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie,* p. 19.

25 Alain Le Boulluec, "Häresie," II: 2 ("Church history"), in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Brill online reference works. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2405-8262_rgg4_COM_09208. See also Boulluec *La notion d'hérésie* p. 37.

26 Rebecca Lyman, "2002 NAPS Presidential Address: Hellenism and Heresy," *JECS* 11.2 (2003): 209-222.

27 Boyarin, *Border Lines* (above, n.6), p. 41.

28 *La notion d'hérésie*, p. 551.

29 See Runia on this point.

things. Boyarin, however, goes one step further, and claims that these processes played a "powerful role" in the creation of the difference *itself*, between the two religions, thus shaping the religion itself. According to Boyarin, the heresiological differentiation led to the creation of the Christian *religion* as a category. Rabbinic passages show that the contemporary rabbis acted similarly, excluding the Christian "other," and thus creating the "autonomy brought by the self-definition of an "orthodox" Judaism vis-a-vis an "orthodox" Christianity, or Judaism as a religion."[30]

Conversely, Adiel Schremer counters these basic assumptions: the claims that *minim* are heretics, that *minut* is heresy, and that what makes them *minim* is their false beliefs. (Schremer is not the first to raise such objections; Lawrence Schiffman and Shaye Cohen, for example, have also made similar points.)[31] Schremer views the position he counters as part of what he calls a "Christianizing reading of rabbinic material," in which scholarship incorrectly applies Christian notions to rabbinic sources.[32] The conclusion of his study of early tannaitic material is that the term *minut* is not used to denote a theological difference, or a doctrinal disagreement, but rather a social one. In other words, *minut* is not centered on what people believe but rather on what they do:

> *Minim* accordingly, are constructed as Jews who separated themselves from the community… *Minut* is frequently spoken of as social

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30 *Border Lines*, pp. 11-12.

31 Lawrence H. Schiffman, "At the Crossroads: Tannaitic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, Volume Two, E. P. Sanders (ed.) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 115-156; and Cohen, Shaye J.D. "A Virgin Defiled: Some Rabbinic and Christian Views on the Origin of Heresy," *USQR* 36 (1980). See Karin Zetterholm-Lund, "'Jewishly'-Behaving Gentiles and the Emergence of Rabbinic Identity," *JSQ* 25 (2018): 321-344 which argues that the problem with early *minim* is that they represent a certain ethnic permeability between Jews and Gentiles.

32 Schremer, *Brothers Estranged*, p. 15.

segregation, and *minim* are depicted by various sources not only as expressing dissenting *views* but also as having different customs and ways of practicing their Judaism.[33]

Thus, it should not be assumed that minim are specifically Christians, and the polemics against them do not center on objections to dogma, but rather to separatism. Schremer's argument has merit and it follows in the footsteps of scholars such as Adolph Büchler in differentiating between earlier and later uses of the term *min* in rabbinic literature.[34] This is because Schremer only makes his claim with regard to early tannaitic literature. Since Christianity is seldom mentioned there, a more productive reading of the polemics would be with regard to the imperial cult and imperial power.[35]

While Schremer does not discuss *minim* in the later sources, such as the Babylonian Talmud, he consistently demonstrates the presence of later reworkings of early Palestinian sources in the Talmud. However, he does not seem to regard these reworkings as evidence of contemporary contact with *minim* (in the sense that Schremer believes this term was used in early sources). In one footnote, he even goes as far as to accept the Babylonian Talmud's own testimony, stating, "according to the Babylonian Talmud

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33 Schremer, p. 16.

34 Adolph Büchler, *Studies in Jewish History: The Adolph Büchler Memorial Volume*, Israel Brodie and Joseph Rabbinowitz (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 245-274.

35 On the rabbis' attitude towards the imperial cult, before and after Constantine, see also Holger Zellentin, "The Rabbis on (the Christianization of the Imperial Cult:) Mishnah and Yerusalmi Avodah Zarah 3:1 (42b, 54-42c, 61)," in: *Jewish Art in its Late Antique Context*, Uzi Leibner and Catherine Hezser (eds.) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), pp. 321-357; Daniel Weiss, "The Christianization of Rome and the Edomization of Christianity: Avodah Zarah and Political Power," *JSQ* 25 (2018): 394-422.

itself *minim* were almost unknown in Babylonia."[36] He thus seems to acknowledge the references to Christianity in the Talmud, but not in the *minim* stories it preserved.

However, even within his limited corpora of tannaitic *minim* materials, Schremer must grapple with a few sources that do relate to *minut* as the holding of a theological view, rather than as the adoption of different customs and practices. This includes the explicit mention of Christianity and followers of Jesus. This occurs most famously, in Tosephta Hullin 2:20–24:[37]

בשר שנמצא ביד גוי מותר בהנאה. ביד המין אסור בהנאה... מפני שאמרו. שחיטת המין ע'ז ופיתם פת כותי ויינם יין נסך ופירותיהם טבלים וספריהם ספרי קוסמין ובניהם ממזרין... מעשה בר' לעזר בן דמה[38] שנשכו נחש ובא יעקב איש כפר-סמא לרפאתו משום ישוע בן פנטירא. ולא הניחו ר' ישמעאל. אמר לו. אי אתה רשאי בן דמה. אמ' לו. אני אביא לך ראיה שירפאני. ולא הספיק להביא ראיה עד שמת. אמ' ר' ישמעאל. אשריך בן דמה שיצאת בשלום ולא פרצת גדירן של חכמים. שכל הפורץ גדירן של חכמים לסוף פורענות באה עליו. שנ' "ופורץ גדר ישכנו נחש". מעשה בר' ליעזר שנתפס על דברי מינות והעלו אותו לבמה לדון. אמ' לו אותו הגמון. זקן כמותך יעסוק בדברים הללו. אמ' לו. נאמן דיין עלי. כסבור אותו הגמון שלא אמ' ר' ליעזר אלא לו. ור' ליעזר לא נתכוון אלא נגד אביו שבשמים. אמ' לו. הואיל והאמנתני עליך אף אני כך אמרתי. איפשר שהסבות הללו טועים בדברים. דימוס. הרי אתה פטור. כשנפטר מן הבמה היה מצטער שנתפס על דברי מינות. נכנסו תלמידיו לנחמו ולא קיבל. נכנס ר' עקיבא ואמ' לו. ר'. אומ' לפניך דבר שמא הרי אין אתה מיצר. אמ' לו. אמור. אמ' לו. שמא אחד מן המינין אמ' לך דבר של מינות והנאך. אמ'. השמים. הזכרתני. פעם אחת הייתי מהלך באיסתרטיא של ציפורי. מצאתי יעקב איש כפר-סכניא ואמ' דבר של מינות משם ישוע בן פנטירא והנאני ונתפשתי על דברי מינות. שעברתי על דברי תורה "הרחק מעליה דרכך ואל תקרב אל פתח ביתה" "כי רבים חללים הפילה" וגו'. שהיה ר' ליעזר או'. לעולם יהא אדם בורח מן הכיעור ומן הדומה לכיעור.

Meat which is found in the possession of a gentile is permitted for gain; in the possession of a *min* it is prohibited for gain… For they said, the [act of] slaughter done by a *min* is considered [as if it were done for the

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36 Schremer, p. 189 n. 48, and see his explanation on p. 23. And see my own *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 5-18 and especially note 63

37 MS Wien 46. See Schremer fourth chapter, pp. 87-100.

38 In MS Wien "Rama" רמה here and elsewhere

sake of] idolatry. Their bread is [considered as] the bread of a Samaritan, and their wine is deemed wine used for idolatrous purposes, and their produce is [considered] untithed, and their books are considered as magical books, and their children are *mamzerim…* There was a case with Rabbi Elazar ben Dama, who was bitten by a snake, and Jacob of Kefar Sama came to heal him in the name of Jesus son of Pantera and Rabbi Ishmael did not allow him. He said to him: "You are not permitted, Ben Dama!" He said to him: "I shall bring you proof that he may heal me," but he did not manage to bring the proof before he died. Said Rabbi Ishmael: Happy are you, Ben Dama, for you have expired in peace, and you did not break down the hedge of the Sages. For whoever breaks down the hedge of the Sages calamity befalls him, as it is said: "He who breaks down a hedge is bitten by a snake" (Eccl. 10:8). There was a case with Rabbi Eliezer, who was caught on account of *minut,* and they brought him up to the *bema* for judgment. That *hegemon* said to him: Should an elder of your standing occupy himself in these matters?! He said to him: I consider the Judge as trustworthy. That *hegemon* supposed that he referred to him, but he referred only to his Father in heaven. He said to him: Since you have deemed me reliable for yourself, I too have said [to myself]: Is it possible that these gray hairs should err in such matters?! [Surely not!] *Dimissus,* lo you are released. And when he left the court he was distressed to have been arrested on account of matters of *minut.* His disciples came in to comfort him but he did not accept [their words of comfort]. Rabbi Aqiva entered and said to him: Rabbi, May I say something to you so that you will not be distressed? He said to him: Speak! He said to him: Perhaps some one of the *minim* told you a teaching of *minut* that pleased you? He said to him: By Heaven! You reminded me! Once I was strolling in the street of Sepphoris. I found Jacob of Kefar Sikhnin, and he said a teaching of *minut* in the name of Jesus son of Pantiri, and it pleased me. And I was arrested on account of matters of *minut,* for I transgressed the teachings of Torah: "Keep your way far from her and

do not go near the door of her house" (Prov. 5:8–7:26). For Rabbi Eliezer did teach: "One should always flee from what is ugly and from whatever appears to be ugly.[39]

Here, *minut* and *minim* are discussed directly in relation to Christian characters, Jesus and his students. Schremer ultimately includes these cases under a broader umbrella-definition of his discourse of social boundaries, writing: "Many of these views can be related to an *existential* stance of denial of God, which was seen by Palestinian rabbis as leading to a renunciation of the Jewish community.[40] He suggests that the passages that explicitly mentioned Christianity were composed at the moment of change, when the "boundary *begins* to be constructed."[41]

Schremer's careful reading of the term *minut* in early rabbinic sources is important in its emphasis on the need to avoid careless assumptions about the identity of the *minim* and their possible relationship to Christians and Christianity. At the same time, his broadening of the definition of separatists and sectarians to include Christians due to their resultant beliefs in social separation brings us full circle, to the inclusion of wrong beliefs in the groups identified as *minim*. It therefore enables us to name at least some of its members 'heretics' in the dogmatic sense of the word. While not all *minim* should be automatically treated as heretics in the dogmatic sense, some certainly were, even according to Schremer.

In other words, the fact that there was never a clear delineation between political and theological arguments in the ancient world (as in our own modern world) compelled Schremer to broaden his definition. As articulated by Peter Schäfer:

[W]ith his stark contrast of "theological" versus "political" [Schremer] has set up a straw man that may be useful for developing a new theory

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39 Translation according to Schremer, pp. 71; 87-88, with changes.
40 ibid. p. 16.
41 ibid. p. 94.

but woefully fails to correspond to the historical reality. After all, it is a futile and naïve undertaking to attempt to separate neatly "theology" from "politics," and this is certainly true for late antiquity, the period in question.[42]

Since this sort of research strives to uncover the meaning of the term *minim* solely on the basis of textual context, the scholarly enforcement of rigid categories on ancient terms proves inadequate. The term heresy in rabbinic literature has a "semantic ambiguity" that allows scholars to read it according to their own, created, scholarly question.[43]

Minim as Heretics in the Babylonian Talmud

With this scholarship in mind, concerning the meaning of *minim* and heresy in general, and in rabbinic texts specifically, I wish to promote the claim that the Babylonian Talmudic *minim* should – at least in some cases[44] – be translated as 'heretics.' Chronology is crucial to this claim. I agree wholeheartedly with those methodologies that separate layers of rabbinic literature, and while earlier sources may be more ambiguous in their use of the term (employing it along the simplistic lines of either wrong beliefs or wrong deeds), in later sources, specifically the Babylonian Talmud, the term is more securely situated within the "wrong belief" camp.

My current research project focuses on several specific *minim* narratives in the Babylonian Talmud, and suggests that the heretic figure is meant to be understood in a Christian context.[45] In several articles, I discuss stories

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42 Schäfer, Peter. *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012), pp. 7-8.

43 As described in Grossberg, pp. 32-37.

44 I have examined the stories in B. Ḥullin 87a; B. Berakhot 10a; B. ʿEruvin 101a; B. Yevamot 102b.

45 Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Jewish–Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity: Heretic Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019).

that share a similar literary structure, including strong polemical language, and the formula, "Fool, look to the end of the verse." See for example the first part of one of these stories, in B. Ḥullin 87a:[46]

ת׳ש. א׳ל ההוא מ[נ]ינא לר׳. מי שיצר הרים לא ברא רוח. מי שברא רוח לא יצר הרים. שנ׳
"כי הנה יוצר הרים ובורא רוח". א׳ל. שוטה שבעולם. שפיל לסיפיה דקרא. "ייי צבאות
שמו". א׳ל. שטיא קרית ליה?...

Come and hear: A certain *min* once said to Rabbi, "He who formed the mountains did not create the wind, and he who created the wind did not form the mountains, as it is written: 'For, lo, He who forms the mountains and creates the wind' (Amos 4:13)." He replied, "You fool, look[47] to the end of the verse: 'The Lord, [the God] of hosts, is His name.'" Said the other, "A fool you call me?" …

This story, alongside others with a similar literary structure, is a literary creation which is part of boundary-creating discourse that attempts to clearly mark the rabbinic position in opposition to that of contemporaneous Christians. If my analyses of these stories are correct, we can assume Talmudic awareness of the following, among others:

Christian controversy over the nature of the Holy Spirit; The place of Amos 4:13 in this debate; Christian teaching on Jesus's resurrection after three days; The term *euangelion* and its meaning as "the good tiding"; The use of this term specifically in reference to Jesus' return; The use of Psalms 69:22 in the passion narrative; The different Septuagint version of Micah 7:4 and the use of this verse in Christian polemics against Jews; The Christian concept of heavenly treasures; The use of Isaiah 54:1 in Paul and in early Christian writings; The concept of the virgin birth; The use of Hosea 5:6 in Christian polemics; and the Christian use of the *ḥaliẓah* topos in anti-Jewish polemics.[48] This list adds to our growing understanding of

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46 According to MS Vatican 122 with slight changes. See in details in *Jewish–Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity*, chapter 3.

47 Literally, "look down."

48 See *Jewish–Christian Dialogues on Scripture.*

the rabbinic authors' familiarity with Christian traditions and illuminates the complex relationship between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity.

Use of the term "fool" in these *minim* stories is part and parcel of the same discourse.[49] Recent scholarship has urged us to consider the more general function of such insults in the culture of the ancient world. Such slurs should not be seen as harmless words,[50] but rather as "genuine social weapons intended to cause serious injury."[51] But in addition to that, I have pointed to the specific theological ramifications of the insult "fool". When Jesus, according to Matt 5:22, demands an end to anger and hateful speech, he uses the same insult: "Whoever says to his brother or sister, "Raka" (Ῥακά), is liable to the council (συνεδρίῳ).[52] Whoever says, "Fool!" (Μωρέ) is liable to the hell of fire (γέενναν)."[53] Don Garlington proposes that "'fool' is a shot aimed not at one's IQ but at one's salvific condition or state of soul. That is to say, the fool has no part in the (eschatological) kingdom of God."[54]

I therefore propose that in Second Temple and New Testament passages (and continuing into rabbinic and early Christian literature), we find a semantic field containing several terms related to the proper

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49 Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, "Matthew 5:22."

50 See for example Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), I, 235: "[Ῥακά] a frequently used, quite harmless, condescending expression that meant something like 'feather brain.' 'Fool' (Μωρέ) is a common Greek word of abuse with a nuance of disrespect, but it too has little importance." And see n16 there for Chrysostom and Basil on this word.

51 Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), p. 192.

52 On the translation of this word as "the Sanhedrin," see survey and references in Robert A. Guelich, "Mt 5:22: Its Meaning and Integrity," *ZNW* 64 (1973): 42–44.

53 The bibliography on this unit is vast. For a survey of recent literature see, for example, John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 227-28.

54 Don Garlington, "'You Fool!': Matthew 5:22," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (2010): 61–84. The quotation appears on p. 68.

understanding of scripture. The insults *req/reqa* ("empty") and *shaṭya/shoṭe* ("fool"; equivalent to the Greek, Μωρέ) suggest that one's opponent's views are heretical.

The use of "fool" in Talmudic *min*-stories, accordingly, should not be read as an arbitrary insult that merely comments on the heretic's mental capabilities. In the Late Antique context, calling someone a fool carried a very specific meaning. It was a serious affront, and was meant to imply that the target misunderstood scripture. As a result, we should not be surprised to find rabbis calling *minim* "fools" in all of the Talmudic stories I have examined. The use of this term in Talmudic narratives describing encounters between rabbis and heretics is a component of the Late Antique heresy-making discourse that these writings participate in. The term "fool" signals that the views addressed belong to the "other" and that the boundaries of the rabbinic "we" and the heretical "they" have been reached. It is part of a discourse in which anxieties are clearly on display.

Use of the term "fool" can also be found in later Christian heresiological writing. See, for example, how Gregory, the fourth century bishop of Nyssa, begins his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* by explaining why there is a need to engage with false doctrines.[55]

> It may indeed be undignified to give any answer at all to the statements that are foolish; we seem to be pointed that way by Solomon's wise advice, "not to answer a fool according to his folly." But there is a danger lest through our silence error may prevail over the truth, and so the rotting sore of this heresy may invade it, and make havoc of the sound word of the faith. It has appeared to me, therefore, to be imperative to answer, not indeed according to the folly of these men who offer objections of such a description to our religion, but for the correction of their depraved ideas. For that advice quoted above from

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55 More on the theological argument in Gerogry's "On the Holy Spirit," see Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (Oxford; New York; Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 109-114.

the Proverbs gives, I think, the watchword not for silence, but for the correction of those who are displaying some act of folly; our answers, that is, are not to run on the level of their foolish conceptions, but rather to overturn those unthinking and deluded views as to doctrine.[56]

Gregory regards his opponents' views as heresy, and describes their claim as foolish, but as nevertheless dangerous. This is a prime example of Christian heresiological writing, a genre which I argue, bears similarity to rabbinic literary engagement with what they considered to be heretical views.

All of this leads me to the view that the *minim* who are called "fools" in the rabbinic stories were intended to be read as "heretics." I stress that I do not make any sweeping claims here regarding the use of the term in *all* of the *minim* stories in the Babylonian Talmud.[57] However, the stories

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56 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Holy Spirit," *MPG* 45, 1301–1333 (and "De Spiritu Sancto, Adversus Macedonianos Pneumatomachi," in: *GNO*, vol. 3, part 1, Friedrich Müller [ed.] [Leiden: Brill, 1958], pp. 89–115), English translation in: *Gregory of Nyssa* [A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second series, vol. 5], translated into English with prolegomena and explanatory notes, under the editorial supervision of Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893), p. 315. Some of the text (but not this particular section) was translated and published in: Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Routledge 1999), pp. 39–46. This text is dated by scholars to either 380 (Jean Daniélou, "La chronologie des oeuvres de Grégoire de Nysse," in: *Papers Presented to the Fourth International Conference on Patristic Studies held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1963* [Studia Patristica, vol. 7], Frank L. Cross [ed.] [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966], p. 163), or shortly after the Council of Constantinople of 381 (Gerhard May, "Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa," in: *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse: Actes du Colloque de Chevetogne* [22–26 Septembre, 1969], Marguerite Harl [ed.] [Leiden: Brill, 1971], p. 59).

57 In one case (B. Ḥulin 87a), it is even possible to show how a later reworking of a *min* story within the Talmud itself (Sanhedrin 39a), changes the original anti-Christian meaning of the *min*-rabbi dialogue. See chapter 3 in *Jewish–Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity* and "'Fool, look to the end of the verse': B. Ḥullin 87a and

that I do address represent rabbinic literary grappling with what the authors considered erroneous: Christian theology and Christian readings of biblical verses and themes. Therefore, I find the use of the translation of "*minim*" as "heretics" to be accurate.

Translating *Minim*

Not only is the translation of *minim* as *heretics* in the case of these specific stories correct, it is *necessary*. Scholars such as Schremer make a point of verifying the translation of *minim*, because an incorrect translation can lead to the attribution of an incorrect meaning (in this case, heresy) to the term due to its use in Christian contexts. This principle is important in all scholarship, when trying to preserve a measure of neutrality while deciphering ancient civilizations through text. However, it is doubly important when dealing with a term such as heresy, which was used in ancient texts *precisely* for the purpose of eliciting a reaction in the listener that will lead to separation. Naming someone a "heretic" was part of the process of differentiating between oneself and the 'other' and we must be aware of "the power of naming to shape the perception and organization of social space, political status, and group boundaries."[58]

Using the terms 'heretics' and 'heresy' in conjunction with the Talmudic *minim* stories thus, purposefully, situates them within Late Antique heresy-making discourses. Naming is a tool in the process of creating a boundary, an entity, a phenomenon – one that is distinct and different. This was a prevalent tool in ancient times, as evident in the heresy-making discourses that have survived from that period. Heresy-making discourse has had a lasting effect: this "tagging" elicits meaning for readers of these texts in the years or even centuries following their creation.

its Christian background," in: *The Aggada of the Bavli and its Cultural World*, Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (eds.) (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), pp. 243-270

58 Iricinschi and Zellentin, "Making Selves" (above n.6), p. 20.

When we read a text from a different era, words echo in a particular way. Teaching Talmudic texts in English is far more difficult than teaching the same texts in the original Hebrew; when Hebrew is read by Hebrew-speaking students, they naturally have easier access to the texts that were written in their mother tongues. However, they often unconsciously apply modern meanings to ancient words that originally had a different meaning. Reading the texts in Hebrew allows us to glide through the text, without realizing the hermeneutical movement taking place in our minds. When we engage the text in translation and are forced to commit to a specific translation of a word or term, we are compelled to stop and reconsider those presuppositions.

Translations matter. For example, Moore defined the use of the terms *kat* (כת) and *minim* in rabbinic literature, writing that "a neutral word for party or sect is כת, while מינים implies disapproval."[59] While Moore does not feel the need to demonstrate his claim in certain texts, he clearly feels the weight of the Christian heresy discourse when reading the term *minim*. Words resonate in the scholar's modern mind.

If we leave the word *minim* untranslated – as is often the case in scholarship that is aware of the complicated history of terminology – we do indeed prevent a projection of borrowed meanings that stem from different sets of historical circumstances than the given term. However, we might also be missing the full meaning of the term as it was understood when these ancient texts were composed. The composers of the traditions preserved in the Babylonian Talmud used the term *minim* in specific historical circumstances. To their listeners, the term meant heresy, or "wrong belief." A story featuring the *min* was meant to be understood as a literary attempt to raise the issue of heretical thoughts. Aoiding the translation is also avoiding the weight of the term within the heresy-making discourse.

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59 Moore, *Judaism*, p. 68.

My claim can be situated in relation to a broader discussion about how one should translate loaded terminology. In her 2005 book, *Why This New Race*, Denise Kimber Buell addresses these translation-related scholarly predicaments, specifically regarding the historical treatment of the terms *genos* and *ethnos*.[60] These terms are especially important in the present context when we consider that, as previously mentioned, scholarship has identified the origins of the Talmudic word *min* in the biblical term that is identical. This denotes "kind," or "species" and is rendered in Septuagint Greek as *genos*.[61] Buell shows how, among scholars, preconceived notions about nascent Christianity and its perceived wish to create a new universal religion, lead to an understanding of the use of the terms *genos* and *ethnos* in Early Christian writings as denoting a non-racial meaning, such as a class or a voluntary group of adherers. She argues that these terms must be read as intended in their time, with the appropriate "racial weight."

Buell emphasizes that scholarship has failed to recognize the importance of ethnic reasoning in these ancient Christian writings because of "how dominant modern ideas about race, ethnicity, and religion inform our approaches to and presuppositions about the meanings of those three terms." While it is clear that we, as readers, bring to the text our modern preconceptions of race and ethnicity, "our ability to measure of [sic] the persuasiveness of a reading for its context cannot be separated from our present assessment of the historical context."[62] Therefore, earlier scholarship tended to divide the terms used in the Christian texts in the following scheme: "race" and "ethnicity" denote a fixed or given facet of identity, whereas "religion" is voluntary. Alternatively, she suggests that race and ethnicity in early Christianity were concepts that were fluid and

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60 Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

61 Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel*, p. 181.

62 Buell, *Why This New Race*, p. 5.

subject to change: "concepts to which fixity is attributed but that are nevertheless malleable."[63]

While Buell redefines what *genos* and *ethnos* meant to early Christian writers, she still chooses to use the word "race" in the translation and title of her work.

> We need to reconsider the charge of anachronism in light of broader questions about how we write history. "Race," "ethnicity," and "religion" are all modern categories. The question of the viability of using these categories to speak about ancient self-understandings is partly about how to formulate an interpretive framework that accounts for historical difference while still being intelligible to the interpreter. But it is also about how to define these concepts now by asserting a difference between the present and the past. We can place modern categories into conversation with ancient ones without effacing their differences, even while we must also acknowledge that we can only understand those differences through the lens of our present.

Buell warns that scholars must be aware of the differences between early and late uses of a term. Scholarship must take into account the weight of the historical reception of ideas, and, in the case of *genos*, for example, the role it played in the violent history of anti-Semitism. Modern meaning cannot be attributed to a term in an ancient text. *However*, taking the opposite approach and avoiding the use of terms such as "race" when interpreting these texts means missing out on the full meaning of these terms in ancient times. Therefore, Buell chooses to use the word race cautiously and with nuance, thus engaging with the intended original meaning as well as with its ongoing meaning.[64]

I wish to take up Buell's call in the context of the Babylonian Talmudic narratives I address, specifically to "place modern categories into

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63 Buell, *Why This New Race*, p. 6.
64 See review by Karen King, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 34 (2006) https://bit.ly/2D6iARU

conversation with ancient ones without effacing their differences, even while we must also acknowledge that we can only understand those differences through the lens of our present." Taking into account the "heresy weight" derived from the Christian writers of the past, and as interpreted in modern Christian studies scholarship. Not only do I believe it is possible to translate *minim*, I propose it is mandatory to use the terms "heretics" and "heresy" specifically to describe these narratives and their function. These terms were used in a certain discursive way in the past and should be understood as such when read today. They were meant to generate a reaction in the listener: they mark the *min* as a heretic, they refer to Christian claims about scripture as heretical, they delineate a clear line, and mark what is beyond that line. Avoiding the translation involves avoiding the full range of meaning and semantic "weight" employed by the composers of these traditions.

I acknowledge, of course, that paradigmatic differences exist in the application of heresy in early Christian and rabbinic texts. Boundary making discourses may be similar to one another, but their portrayal is often culturally specific. I do not attempt to blur these lines. The scholarly discourse of "sameness"[65] is as much of a mistake as avoiding translation to preserve perceived differences. I therefore emphasize that use of the translation 'heretics' when discussing certain specific *minim* stories is correct for the Talmudic, rabbinic context in which these stories were composed. Heresy *should* be given the weight appropriate to the historical uses and cultural resonances of that exact term. I am convinced that while we should remember the differences, we must also engage with the past through our translations of these texts, as Buell suggested.

In conclusion, this article surveyed the scholarly debate concerning the correct way to understand stories involving *minim* in rabbinic literature and situated the Talmudic sources within that debate. It claimed that, at

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65 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies University of London; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 36-53.

least in regard to several of the *minim* stories in the Babylonian Talmud, it is fitting, and at the same time, necessary, to translate the Hebrew term *minim* into English as "heretics," thus, situating these stories within the Late Antique heresy-making discourses.

Abstract

How should we translate the term *min*(*im*) in the Babylonian Talmud? The current scholarly trend is to avoid translating it altogether, using the transliteration instead. This article demonstrates that this practice hinders our ability to understand the intended meaning of the term in these stories, within the context of late antique heresy-making discourses. The article surveys the scholarly debate concerning the correct way to understand stories involving minim in rabbinic literature, and it claims that, at least with regard to several of these stories in the Babylonian Talmud, it is necessary to translate the Hebrew term as "heretics."