

## Once Again: “Oseq be-Ma‘ase Merkava” and Qaddish in bBerakhot 21b

In an amazing article for the *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge*, Vol. 26, 1999, pp. 1–5 Daniel Abrams recently discussed a sentence in the Babylonian Talmud, *Massekhet Berakhot* 21b, which – according to his opinion – seems to be “a neglected talmudic reference to Ma‘ase Merkava”. After a brief survey of some aspects of recent debates on early Jewish mysticism and the dating of some Hekhalot texts<sup>1</sup>, he looks at a short passage from *Berakhot*, which deals with the question when prayers are to be or are not to be interrupted. In *bBer* 21b we read in the name of Rav Dimi in the name of Rabbi Yuda and Rabbi Shim‘on, the disciples of Rabbi Yoḥanan: “One does not interrupt to respond to anything, except for *yehe sheme rabba mevarakh*, for which, even if he is engaged [*oseq*] in *ma‘ase merkava* he stops”. Since in this short sentence the term *ma‘ase merkava* can be found, Abrams concludes “that a fixed text of Ma‘ase Merkava was read in the synagogue in third-century Palestine.”<sup>2</sup> Although the text “does not reveal the identity of any specific text”, the formulation “*oseq be-ma‘ase merkava*” leads Abrams to suggest that in this passage a picture of an “individual” is drawn, who “is reading a fixed text and is not studying (or expounding on) the biblical text of Ezekiel or entering into some mystical experience from which he could not respond to the prayers of those in the room.”<sup>3</sup>

Abrams provides the reader of his article only with a short translation of the relevant passage from a *sugya* which deals with prayers requiring a *minyan*, a prayer-quorum of at least ten adult men. His translation of the text is based on David Halperin’s rendering of the text<sup>4</sup>, but he has checked some of the most

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<sup>1</sup> See on this also his “Ma‘aseh Merkabah as a Literary Work. The Reception of Hekhalot Traditions by the German Pietists and Kabbalistic Reinterpretation”, *JSQ* 5 (1998) pp. 329–345.

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Abrams, “A Neglected Talmudic Reference to Ma‘ase Merkava”, *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 26 (1999) p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Abrams (see note 2) p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. David Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, AOS 62, New Haven Con. 1980 p. 153 note 1. For a similar translation (based, however, on the Vilnius Edition) see Maurice Simon, *Berakoth. Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, in: I. Epstein (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Zera‘im*, London 1948 p. 127. An alternative translation can be

important manuscripts of this tractate including a hitherto unpublished Geniza-Manuscript as well.<sup>5</sup> In support of his suggestions Abrams points out that by contrast to other rabbinic discussions the word עסק – used in this passage from Bavli Berakhot – does not mean “expound (דורש) on the *Account of the Chariot* but engages in it (עוסק).”<sup>6</sup> He understands the passage therefore reflecting a situation when a single prayer in synagogue “was engaged in its interpretation which is characterized as *derash*”.<sup>7</sup> In a footnote he tries this to underline referring to *Tosefta Hagiga* 2,1 (Ed. Lieberman II p. 380)<sup>8</sup> and *Tosefta Megilla* 3,28 (Ed. Lieberman II p. 361f), although these texts are clearly not speaking of a fixed text, but of an “exegetical activity concerning the ‘merkava’ alone”.<sup>9</sup>

Before I want to make general comments on Abrams’ suggestions on bBer 21b, I would like to introduce two other important texts which were not mentioned by Abrams and which have also been “ignored” by all scholarly studies.<sup>10</sup> The first and most important of these texts is found in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Massekhet Berakhot 5,1 (8d)<sup>11</sup>. There we read in a *sugya* on how to take one’s leave from a friend<sup>12</sup>:

[A] Elia too took leave of Elisha only after speaking words of Tora: ‘(As they still went on and talked [ודברו], [behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elia went up by a whirlwind into heaven.]’ (II Reg 2,11)

[B] And what were they engaged in (במה היו עוסקין)?<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Aḥawa be-Rabbi Ze’ira said: They were engaged in the recitation of the *shema*. In accord with what is said [in the *shema*’

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found in Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia. An American Translation I: Tractate Berakhot*, BJS 78, Chico CA 1984 p. 156.

<sup>5</sup> MS Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter F2 I, fragment 159, verso. However, Abrams did not mention the oldest datable manuscript which contains the relevant passage: MS Florence National Library VII, I 7–9. A facsimile edition can be found in: *Babylonian Talmud. Codex Florence. Florence National Library II, I 7–9. The Earliest Dated Talmud Manuscript*, including an Introduction by David Rosenthal, Jerusalem 1972 p. 118. – See on this important textual witness (Italo-Ashkenazic, 1177!) also Michael Krupp, *Manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud*, in: Shmuel Safrai (ed.), *The Literature of the Sages I, Corpus Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum II/3*, Assen – Maastricht – Philadelphia 1987 p. 351ff.

<sup>6</sup> See Abrams (see note 2) p. 4 note 14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Abrams (see note 2) p. 4 note 14.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also *Mishna Hagiga* (Ed. Albeck II p. 394).

<sup>9</sup> Abrams (see note 2) p. 4 note 14.

<sup>10</sup> See the texts listed in Halperin (note 4), index p. 202.

<sup>11</sup> The most important textual witnesses of this passage can be found in: *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi*, ed. by Peter Schäfer and Hans-Jürgen Becker, Vol. I/1–2: *Ordnung Zera’im: Berakhot and Pe’a*, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 31, Tübingen 1992 pp. 136–137 (5,1/5).

<sup>12</sup> The following translation is based on Ms Leiden of the Talmud Yerushalmi. For a translation of Ed. Krotoszyn see Tzvee Zahavy, *Berakhot. A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*, The Talmud of the Land of Israel I, Chicago 1989 p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> The word עסק is rendered by Zahavy (see note 12) with “talking”; for our purpose I translate the word more literally. See Hanokh Kohut (ed.), *Arukh completum sive lexicon vocabula et res, quae in libris Targumicis, Talmudicis et Midrashicis continentur, explicans auctore Nathane filio Jehielis*, Vol. 6, New York 21955 p. 230; Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim*,

itself]: ‘And you shall talk [דבר] of the Lord the heavens were made [and all the host by the breath of his mouth]’ (Dtn 6,7).

[C] Rabbi Yuda ben Pazzi says: They were engaged in the creation of the world (בבריאת עולם). In accord with what is said: ‘By the word [דבר] of the Lord the heavens were made [and all the host by the breath of his mouth]’ (Ps 33,6).

[D] Rabbi Yudan bereh de-Rabbi Ayybo, said: They were engaged in the consolations of Jerusalem (בנחמות ירוש). As it says: ‘Speak [דברו] tenderly to Jerusalem, [and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins]’ (Jes 40,2).

[E] And Rabbanan say: They were engaged in Merkava (במרכבה היו עוסקין). In accord with what is said: ‘[And behold they were walking and talking [וידבר], and behold here was a chariot of fire and horses of fire]’ (II Kings 2,11).

Of course, this remarkable passage ends only with a reference to the word “Merkava”, while the word “Ma‘ase” (as in bBer 21b) is absent. From the context, however, it becomes clear that a similar practice or preoccupation as in the other passages must have been the object of the dictum of the Rabbanan in [E]. In [A] we hear about the “words of Tora”, in [B] about the *shema*‘ (Dtn 6,4–9; 11,13–21; Num 15,37–41), in [C] about the “creation of the world” (probably referring to Genesis 1–2), and in [D] about the “consolations of Jerusalem” (the famous passage in Deutero-Isaiah, beginning with “naḥamu, naḥamu ‘ami”). The last section then seems to refer to a similar occupation with a specific biblical text, even when the verse quoted, II Kings 2,11, is a verse that is found also in Hekhalot literature.<sup>14</sup> Although in this sentence “the study of Merkava” is not mentioned explicitly, but only “a chariot of fire” (רכב אש), it has to be taken as a reference to the *study of verses* in which a chariot is mentioned.<sup>15</sup> In my opinion this passage therefore shows that “la‘asoq be-Merkava” as in bBer 21b should not be taken as evidence for “a fixed text” called “Ma‘ase Merkava”. Although the word “Ma‘ase” is not mentioned in yBer 5,1<sup>16</sup>, there can be no doubt that “Merkava” here means nothing else than “Ma‘ase Merkava”, that is: the study of verses like II Kings 2,11. Even when the statement of the Rabbanan in yBer can be dated to the end of the tannaitic period according to the names of the other Rabbis mentioned<sup>17</sup>, it cannot be taken

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*the Talmudim Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, Vol. 2, London 1903, Repr. New York 1985 p. 1098 s. v. עָסַק. See also the German translation by Charles Horowitz, *Berakhot. Segenssprüche*, [ed. by Peter Schäfer and Frowald Hüttenmeister], Tübingen 1975 p. 138 who translates: »Womit befaßten sie sich?«.

<sup>14</sup> See *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by Peter Schäfer in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H.G. von Mutius, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 2, Tübingen 1981 §9 [MS Vatican Ebr. 228] and *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by Peter Schäfer, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 6, Tübingen 1981 pp. 150–151 [T.-S. K 1.144 2a, line 6–7].

<sup>15</sup> Comparable to Ez 10,2 where only a “galgal” is mentioned. As it is well known the word “Merkava” is not mentioned at all in the Book of Ezekiel. See on this Peter Schäfer, *Der verborgene und offenbare Gott. Hauptthemen der frühen jüdischen Mystik*, Tübingen 1991 p. 2 note 4.

<sup>16</sup> It might have been omitted.

<sup>17</sup> However, some of the Rabbis mentioned in yBer 5,1 are mentioned here for the first time; see e.g. “Rabbi Yudan bereh de-Rabbi Ayybo” and cf. Moshe Kosovsky, *Concordance of the*

as an allusion to “a fixed text” read in synagogue. The term “Merkava” seems to have a much broader meaning than Abrams suggests.

This broader meaning of the term Ma’ase Merkava can also be observed in a text which is found in Seder Eliyahu Rabba<sup>18</sup>, Chapter 18. In this not exactly datable and unique composition<sup>19</sup> various allusions to a kind of Hekhalot mysticism can be found.<sup>20</sup> In a short anonymous passage we read the following<sup>21</sup>:

Therefore I say, even if a man sits and occupies himself with Ma’ase Merkava (עוסק במעשה מרכבה) and with all Middot Tovot (מדות טובות), occasionally he should put all his own occupation aside and go to the synagogue or to a house of study – indeed to any place where new insights into Tora are discovered.

Obviously in this sentence the occupation with Ma’ase Merkava corresponds to the study of all Middot Tovot. Leon Nemoj in a footnote in Braude’s translation p. 249 has explained this phrase as follows: “What the author [sc. of Seder Eliyahu Rabba] clearly means is that no matter how advanced one’s *private studies* [sic!] may be – even if they deal with the *mystery of God’s chariot* or with the *highest ideals of moral conduct* (which, strictly speaking, do not come under the academic discipline of Tora), he should nevertheless put it all aside and go to the synagogue.” If the term Middot Tovot in this short passage does not point to a book or a fixed text but to an academic discipline<sup>22</sup>, then also “Ma’ase Merkava” must refer to a kind of expounding verses from Scripture privately<sup>23</sup>. The intention of the author of this sentence must have been very similar to that of bBer 21b. Both of them interpreted the term Ma’ase Merkava as a kind of study or preoccupation with some sort of (biblical) texts. Neither Seder Eliyahu nor the passage from bBer 21b refer to a specific writing called “Ma’ase Merkava”.

Finally, let me point to a last text which might shed further light on the question what might have been the meaning of Ma’ase Merkava in bBer 21b. In a Geniza fragment published recently by Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked<sup>24</sup> a prayer order is

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*Talmud Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud), Onomasticon – Thesaurus of Proper Names, Jerusalem 1985 [Hebrew] p. 84.*

<sup>18</sup> Ed. Meir Ish Shalom [Friedmann], Vienna 1902, Repr. Jerusalem 1969 p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> See Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, München <sup>8</sup>1992 p. 332f.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g. *Seder Eliyahu Rabba* 17 (Ed. Friedmann p. 85). See on the ‘mystical’ material in this Midrash Jacob Elbaum, “The Midrash Tana Devei Eliyahu and Ancient Esoteric Literature”, in: Joseph Dan (ed.), *Early Jewish Mysticism. Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 6,1–2, Jerusalem 1987 pp. 139–150 [Hebrew].

<sup>21</sup> For a translation see William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, *Tanna Dēbe Eliyyahu. The Lore of the School of Elijah*, Philadelphia 1981 p. 249.

<sup>22</sup> For “Middot” referred to in this text cf. also *Pseudo-Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, ed. Friedmann, Vienna 1904, Repr. Jerusalem 1969 p. 184. For a similar use of the term “middot ḥakhamim” cf. yYev 13,1 (13c).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the translation by Braude (see note 21) who adds “privately” to “occupies himself”.

<sup>24</sup> See Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*, Vol. 2, in Collaboration with R. Leicht, G. Veltri und I. Wandrey, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 64, Tübingen 1997 pp. 176 and 186.

mentioned which is called “Seder ha-Merkava”.<sup>25</sup> The occupation with “Ma’ase Merkava” in bBer 21b might therefore also refer to a prayer or even a prayer order called “Ma’ase Merkava”. Because of the rabbinical objections against writing down *berakhot*, prayers or prayer orders might have been transmitted orally.<sup>26</sup> The mentioning of “Ma’ase Merkava” in bBer 21b therefore might be seen in correspondence to the other prayer mentioned in the debated sentence: the central doxology of the Qaddish (*yehe sheme rabba*). Rav Dimi is claiming that just as any occupation should be interrupted for responding to the central doxology of the Qaddish, also the occupation with a prayer containing mystical (or even magical) verses should be interrupted when hearing the congregation saying *yehe sheme rabba mevarakh*. As this famous doxology refers without any doubt to a well known but (at that time) not necessarily fixed prayer text, also the term Ma’ase Merkava might refer to a kind of (unfixed) prayer or even a prayer order including allusions to God’s chariot.

To summarize this short survey of the use of “asaq be-[Ma’ase] Merkava” I must say that the terms used in that text are too opaque to draw any clear conclusions from it. As I have tried to show, “asaq be-Ma’ase Merkava” might refer to:

(1) any kind of study of biblical texts like II Kings 2,11, Ezekiel 1 or 10, including the expounding and translation of these texts.<sup>27</sup> The phrase “la-‘asoq be-ma’ase merkava” might correspond to phrases such as “la-‘asoq be-divre Tora”.<sup>28</sup>

(2) any kind of oral lecture on Ezekiel.<sup>29</sup> Such lectures might have been connected with the rendering of Targumim (cf. bMeg 31a).<sup>30</sup> Targumim like these must not have been put into writing either.

<sup>25</sup> See T.-S. K 1.25 fol. 1a.1.1, and cf. Peter Schäfer, “Jewish Magic Literature in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41 (1990) p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> On the rabbinical objections to textuality see tShab 13,4 (Ed. Lieberman II p. 58); b. Shabbat 115b. Cf. Ismar Elbogen, *Studien zur Geschichte des jüdischen Gottesdienstes*, SAWJ 1, Berlin 1907 pp. 1f; idem, *Jewish Liturgy. A Comprehensive History*, translated by R.P. Scheindlin, New York – Jerusalem 1993 pp. 4ff; Ezra Fleischer, “On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer”, *Tarbiz* 59 (1989/90) p. 435 [Hebrew]; Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer. New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History*, Cambridge 1995 p. 119f.

<sup>27</sup> See on this mHag 2,1 and cf. Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 14, Leiden – Köln 1980 pp. 76f.

<sup>28</sup> See e. g. yHag 2,1 (77b); bSot 21b and bPes 50b.

<sup>29</sup> See Arnold Goldberg, “Der Vortrag der Ma’asse Merkawa. Eine Vermutung zur frühen Merkawamystik”, *Judaica* 29 (1973) pp. 4–23 = idem, *Mystik und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums. Gesammelte Studien I*, eds. Margarete Schlüter and Peter Schäfer, Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 61, Tübingen 1997 pp. 1–15.

<sup>30</sup> See Philip S. Alexander, “The Rabbinic Lists of Forbidden Targumim”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 27 (1976) pp. 177–191, especially p. 181. See also Rimon Kasher, *Targumic Toseftot to the Prophets*, Sources for the Study of Jewish Culture 2, Jerusalem 1996 pp. 190f.

(3) a prayer text including mystical or even magical phrases. Rabbinic prayer texts, however, were not written down and fixed until the Geonic period.

In conclusion, the suggestions on bBer 21b made by Daniel Abrams are not very convincing. The question to which kind of “Ma‘ase Merkava” bBer refers to can – in my opinion – not be answered exactly. Obviously, there is more than one answer to the question what could have been meant in bBer with “Ma‘ase Merkava”. The witness that “Ma‘ase Merkava” refers to a fixed text is indeed too brief to draw any conclusions from it. The first reliable witness for a fixed text called “Ma‘ase Merkava” can be found in my opinion only in a famous book list which has been discovered at the Cairo Geniza.<sup>31</sup> However, also in this case it can only be supposed that the writing “Ma‘ase Merkava” mentioned in this book list was identical with the macroform “Ma‘ase Merkava” found in the later manuscripts of Hekhalot literature or even with the “Ma‘ase Merkava” mentioned in bBer 21b.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, let me say, that it is also a principal methodological question if a text from the Bavli can simply be used as evidence for synagogal life in the tannaitic period as Abrams does. Even when it seems to be possible to date traditions according to names, especially in the Bavli attributions to certain Rabbis cannot always be taken as a reliable witness to a certain date or localization of a tradition.<sup>33</sup> With regard to bBer 21b the problem of a later attribution must especially be taken into consideration since in this text the nucleus of the Qaddish is mentioned. The Qaddish or at least its doxological kernel, however, is referred to in rabbinical literature – with one exception<sup>34</sup> – only in the Bavli<sup>35</sup> and in some post-talmudic writings.<sup>36</sup> It is not

<sup>31</sup> See Jacob Mann, *Text and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, Vol. 1, Cincinnati 1931 p. 657 [T.-S. 10 K. 20.9,4 fol. 2 verso line 142]. Mann, however, thinks that this refers to the mystical work “Ma‘ase Merkava” quoted by Rashi to bHag 13a, forming a part of the so-called Hekhalot literature. Cf. also Shlomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Vol. 2, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1973 pp. 191f. In this list already some geonic “books” (like Seder Rav Amram) are mentioned.

<sup>32</sup> Whether the text mentioned in this book list from the Geniza is identical with a text called “Ma‘ase Merkava” mentioned by El‘azar of Worms in a manuscript cited by Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd, revised edition, New York 1965 p. 76 note 3 is another question. See on this also Shaul Lieberman, *Shkiin. A Few Words on Some Jewish Legends, Customs and Literary Sources Found in Karaite and Christian Works*, 2nd edition, Jerusalem 1992 p. 13 [Hebrew]. However, it should be mentioned again that the name “Ma‘ase Merkava” for a macroform of Hekhalot-texts was given only by Scholem (see his book just quoted p. 101ff). It is not found in the manuscripts. Cf. Schäfer, *Gott* (see note 15) p. 74 note 1 and *idem* (Ed.), *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* III §§ 335–597, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 22, Tübingen 1989 p. XXVIII.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Stemberger (see note 19) p. 67f.

<sup>34</sup> Sifre Devarim § 306 (ed. Finkelstein p. 342). See on this Andreas Lehnardt, *Qaddish. Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Rezeption eines rabbinischen Gebetes*, Dissertation Free University Berlin 1999 pp. 101f.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. bBer 3a; 57a; bShab 119b; bSuk 38b–39a; bSot 49a.

<sup>36</sup> The name “Qaddish” occurs for the first time in Massekhet Soferim 10,6 (ed. Higger 214ff); see also Massekhet Soferim 19,9 (ed. Higger 337) and 21,6 (ed. Higger 357f). The doxology *yehé*

mentioned in the Mishna, the Tosefta and the Talmud Yerushalmi. Even the Targumim are not reflecting the texts of the Qaddish known today. The reference to a prayer using the aramaic formula *yehi sheme rabba mevarakh*<sup>37</sup> therefore points to a relatively late date of composition of bBer 21b – not necessarily to third-century Palestine.

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*sheme rabba mevarakh* is found as well in Qohelet Rabba 9,14 (25c); Midrash Mishle 10 (ed. Visotzky pp. 83–84); 14 (p. 112); Pseudo-Seder-Eliyahu zuta 20 (ed. Friedmann p. 33); Alfa Beta de-Rabbi Aqiva A *zayin* (Bate Midrashot, ed. Wertheimer II pp. 367–368); Tanhuma Bo 14 (84a). See also Midrash Avkir, ed. Buber p. 23 = Yalqut Shim’oni §408 Shemot 35,1 (119d), Midrash ha-Gadol Shemot 35,1 (ed. Margaliouth p. 722). See also the so-called ‘Apocalypse of David’ in Schäfer (ed.), *Synopse* (see note 14) §122 and Midrash Konen (Bate ha-Midrash, ed. Jellinek II p. 26).

<sup>37</sup> Or in Hebrew: *yehi shemo ha-gaddol* as in the Geniza-Fragment of bBer 21b translated by Abrams. The change from Aramaic to Hebrew and *vice versa* has found very different explanations. See on this my preliminary comments in: “‘Therefore they ordained to say it in Aramaic’. Some Remarks on Language and Style of the Kaddish”, in: Judit Targaona Borrás and Angel Sáenz-Badillos (eds.), *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century. Proceedings of the 6th EAJS Congress Toledo, July 1998. Vol. I: Biblical, Rabbinical, and Medieval Studies, Leiden – Boston – Köln 1999 pp. 303–310.*