Synopses and Lists
Textual Practices in the Pre-Modern World

EDITED BY TERESA BERNHEIMER AND RONNY VOLLANDT

Cover image: A fragment of a numbered and tabulated list of 22 biblical and rabbinic passages relating to the Sabbath, each referenced by means of a short lemma (T-S D1.76 from the Cambridge Genizah Collection). Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

The fonts used in this volume are Charis SIL, SBL Hebrew, SBL Greek, Scheherazade New, Estrangelo Edessa, and Serto Antioch Bible.

A RABBINIC EPISTEMIC GENRE: CREATING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH LISTS AND CATALOGUES

Lennart Lehmhaus

1.0. Lost in Lists

Despite the character of dryness, formality, and boredom usually associated with lists such as telephone books, index lists, or inventories, these hybrid textual forms are all around us and they play a crucial part in our lives. Eva von Contzen has aptly remarked that the "relative simplicity of the form accounts for its remarkable versatility, and also the difficulties one encounters when trying to come to terms with 'the' list as form."[1] On the one hand, lists are commonly deemed useful because they structure and emphasise important details in a broad range of contexts. Authors of lists link one item to another, thereby creating chains that can take on different structures, be of various lengths, and serve multiple functions (commercial, referential, mnemonic, etc.).[2] Lists can be rather simple, with single items—shopping

---

[1] Von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 41.

[2] Belknap notes: "Lists consist of arrangements of entries and have been used for varied purposes throughout history. Lists enumerate, account, remind, memorialize, order. Lists take a number of sizes, shapes, and

lists, guest lists, lists of ingredients. Or they may feature much more complex entries—from a library catalogue or a menu to a sequence of safety procedures. In both forms, they constitute epitomes of information received in a specific form that differs considerably both structurally and graphically from other surrounding (textual) discourse, which is predominantly narrative. We may think of an easily browsable bullet point list of three (five, ten) items in a textbook, a table of contents, or the navigation index for a website.[3] Accordingly, lists as "adaptable containers" selecting from a "mind-deep pool of possibility" often provide order within texts and cultural contexts.[4] On the other hand, their fluidity and potentially infinite openness also borders on excess and uselessness that challenges any order and structure with futility, disintegration, and collapse.[5]

---

functions, ranging from directories and historical records to edicts and instructions." Belknap, *The List*, 6; see also p. 34.

[3] Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 20, stresses that many practical lists (timetables, dictionaries, tables of contents, conference schedules) have no direct relation to any continuous text, since their main purpose is extracting information or providing quick orientation rather than being read.

[4] Belknap, *The List*, 19.

[5] See Belknap, *The List*, 19; Mainberger, 'Ordnen/Aufzählen', 94–95. Compare the following remarks on postmodernist fiction, which hold true for many lists: "The lists… are direct confrontations with the arbitrary and capricious world of chance and chaos which lies beyond the man-made order." Alber, 'Absurd Catalogues', 352.

It is probably our own intimate acquaintance with these lapidary or expansive (e.g., music charts) formats whose every-day nature and ubiquity render their very existence as a discur-sive form, or even a genre, with a variety of functions almost invisible in most contexts.[6] But lists as a genre or a literary or textual form also have a long history which, according to some scholars, goes back to the incipient stages of writing and literary cultures.

In the present article, I focus on the forms and various func-tions of lists as adaptable containers as reflected in the practice of list-making in Jewish textual traditions from late antiquity, commonly known as rabbinic or talmudic literature.[7] These rab-binic works deploy lists for different discursive purposes (exeget-ical, homiletical, narrative) based on a long tradition derived

---

[6] Mainberger, 'Ordnen/Aufzählen', 97; Young, 'Un-Black Boxing the List'; Young, *List Cultures*.

[7] This corpus includes the early Mishnah (abbreviated as m) and its companion, the Tosefta, from Palestine in around the third century CE. Two later talmudic traditions commented and elaborated upon those earlier texts, often adding new material from their respective cultural background: the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud, from the sixth cen-tury; and the Babylonian Talmud (abbreviated as b), a vast tradition compiled between the sixth and eighth centuries in the region of today's Iraq. This body of texts is accompanied by other works subsumed under the label 'midrash', mainly from Palestine. These texts combine exeget-ical and homiletical approaches to the Hebrew Bible with ethical teach-ings and further discourse.

from biblical and other ancient Jewish traditions well embedded
in their surroundings in the ancient Near East.[8]

First, I will briefly introduce the history of ancient Jewish
lists, their broader cultural entanglements, and pertinent schol-
arship. Second, I sketch out some theoretical approaches to the
literary and epistemological features of lists that outline their
specific nature turning them into a powerful 'epistemic genre'. I
argue that the rabbinic texts deploy the versatility or affordance
of the list not only for ordering knowledge but also for the very
process of knowledge production. Consequently, lists do not
serve as mere containers for knowledge that circulated apart
from their usage. In fact, the rabbinic authors may have arrived
at certain conclusions precisely in and through lists in which spe-
cific concepts or taxonomies become manifest or substantiated.
Following this, the main argument will be exemplified by focus-
ing on complex types of list, which can be described as clusters,
sequences, or, most compellingly, as catalogues. The findings will
open up the discussion about rabbinic lists into the broader realm
of the history of ancient knowledge and the place of the rabbis
therein.

2.0. Premodern Jewish Approaches to Lists

Lists and enumerations of various forms can be found in almost
all Jewish traditions, from the Hebrew Bible to the Middle Ages

---

[8] For a discussion of the concept of ancient Mesopotamian *Listenwissen-
schaft*, see Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft'; Hilgert, 'Von "Listenwissen-
schaft" und "epistemischen" Dingen'; Veldhuis, 'Elementary Education
at Nipur'; Cancik-Kirschbaum, 'Writing, Language and Textuality'.

and beyond. However, scholarly engagement with this particular feature, while growing, is still limited.[9]

Scholars have mainly researched historical lists in the Bible, such as genealogies of biblical figures in Genesis or lists of kings and their royal houses, lists of priestly families, or lists of the tribes of ancient Israel.[10] Different lists include information about geography, the military, and administration, while others relate to ritual elements—ranging from features of the tent of congregation (tabernacle) or the temple, to ornamental details of the garment of the high priest (Exod. 27–28) or the markers of bodily fitness for the priestly office (Lev. 21.16–23)—and to religiously normative aspects—dealing with broad norms, as in the Decalogue, or with rather specific rules, such as Sabbath law (Exod. 31.12–17), intermarriage with converts, states and periods of ritual impurity (Lev. 15) or detailed dietary rules (Lev. 11.1–47).[11]

---

[9] For some preliminary studies, see Wünsche, 'Die Zahlensprüche'; Nador, 'Some Numerical Categories'.

[10] See Ron, 'Genealogical List'; Sergi, 'Alleged Judahite King List'. Compare Matthew P. Monger's study on the wives of the patriarchs in this volume.

[11] On biblical list-making, see Scolnic, *Theme and Context*, who focuses specifically on geographical knowledge and the itinerary list in Num. 33 that structures Israel's journey from Egypt into the promised land (see pp. 67–134). For military and administrative lists in the Bible, see, e.g., Ben Zvi, 'Levitical Cities'; Redditt, 'Census List'. On administrative lists in general, see Echterhölter, 'Jack Goody', 255–56; Young, 'Un-Black Boxing the List', 501–5; Young, *List Cultures*, 67–108.

Most scholarship, however, has refrained from touching upon discursive and epistemic dimensions or engaging with cultural and literary list theory.[12] Taking the list format for granted, they have focused on the content of lists compared with archaeological findings or non-Israelite traditions (Persian, Mesopotamian, or African).[13] Still, listing should also be seen as an instrument of religious instruction, with a prescriptive dimension, and as a marking of religious and cultural identity that creates a historical consciousness for and serves as the virtual collection of Israelite *Heilsgeschichte*, having a high value for generations of readers and interpreters to come.[14]

In the texts from the Dead Sea (Qumran), lists cover halakhic or ritual aspects and engage in the selection and exclusion of various others.[15] Similar to Greek lists, Qumranic texts also deployed lists to express cultural values and to define what was accepted by a certain group as authoritative tradition or textual

---

[12] For some issues of broader cultural and literary interest, see Coxon, '"List" Genre'; Tsumura, 'List and Narrative'; Golani, 'Three Oppressors'.

[13] See especially Deysel, 'King Lists'; Na'aman, 'Solomon's District List'. Von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 40, is also primarily interested in content or theme (e.g., names, places, species, mirabilia, treasures, alien nations, etc.).

[14] See Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 6. Compare the ordering of early Islamic history through lists, as discussed in Teresa Bernheimer's paper in this volume.

[15] See Golani, 'Three Oppressors'; Golani, 'New Light' (on false prophets). Compare the liturgical dimension in Rebecca Ullrich's study in this volume.

canon.[16] 'Canonisation' is important in later rabbinic discourse on 'external scriptures' or lists of forbidden targumim (Aramaic translations or paraphrases of Scripture).[17] Lists also played a crucial role for the appropriation of scientific knowledge, mainly calendrical and astrological/astronomical concepts, in various Second Temple traditions (Dead Sea Scrolls, Enoch) with a long afterlife (e.g., in late midrash).[18] From early on, ethical instruction through lists of virtues and vices—in manuals of conduct or midrashic ethical taxonomies—was a core feature of rabbinic tradition.[19]

As with classical Greek poetics, many studies have considered premodern Jewish lists as mere interjections or digressions but not as part of the central discourse, and so their format did not call for special attention.[20] However, the contrasting aspects

[16] See Noam, 'List of David's Songs'; Tzoref, '4Q252', on 4Q252 as a list of quotations and paraphrases from Genesis, sometimes supplemented by commentary. For Greek lists, see Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 2–3.

[17] See Alexander, 'Lists of Forbidden Targumim'. On canonisation, see the studies by Liv Ingeborg Lied and by Marilena Maniaci in this volume; or that of Martin Wallraff, on canon tables as an important step towards the 'sacralisation' of Christian writings.

[18] Reed, 'Ancient Jewish Sciences'; Jacobus, 'Calendars'; Stern, *Calendar and Community*.

[19] See Uusimäki, 'Ideal Ways of Living' (on Qumranic ethics); Schofer, 'Ethical Formation' (rabbinic ethical literature). For ethical lists in *Seder Eliyahu*, see Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft', 66–71; Lehmhaus, 'Making Moral Lists'.

[20] Cf. Asper, 'Katalog', 916 (epic catalogues).

of sequences of lists and their clear function of inclusion and ex-
clusion has been highlighted by Jacob Neusner for early rabbinic
texts.[21] Wayne S. Towner comparatively analysed the so-called
'enumeration of scriptural examples' in early midrashic literature
as a versatile micro-format pointing towards an entanglement be-
tween a "science of lists" and a "science of (written) language/
scripture."[22] Roy Shasha's first form-critical study, shaped by the
Frankfurt/Manchester school, accentuated the structural ele-
ments—a caption with a deictic (*we-ʾilu hen*; 'these are they')
and/or a numerical reference ('three things do X', 'three things
are X…') signalling items that follow in a list—and their functions
and formats: simple or compound lists, series or combinations of
several lists, or accumulations of lists addressing or contrasting
more than one topic.[23] Although these features can also be found
in abundance and in a more elaborated form in later talmudic
and midrashic texts, the scholarship of rabbinic lists is still in its
infancy.[24]

 A special example of cultural curating and tradition-build-
ing can be found in the so-called *Maʿase Torah* (lit. 'the work of

---

[21] Neusner, 'Mode of Thought', sees *Listenwissenschaft* as the prevailing
mode of reasoning in Mishnah and earlier midrashim (e.g., *Sifra*). Cf.
Bernard, 'Listing and Enlisting' on tractate Avot.

[22] See Towner, *Rabbinic 'Enumeration'*.

[23] See Shasha, 'Lists in the Mishnah', 36–51 (definition), 52–79 (form-
critical description).

[24] For some preliminary studies, see Keim, *Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer*, 209–
11; Adelman, *Return of the Repressed*, 265–69, Noegel, 'Abraham's Ten
Trials'; Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft'; Lehmhaus, 'Lore and Order'.

Torah') collections of simple or compound lists with a numerical caption.[25] These texts can be perceived as a long catalogue or 'encyclopedia' of lists which are sometimes contrastive and sometimes build up whole subtopics or thematic sections. Those range across different areas of knowledge including ethics, moral advice, elements of Jewish rituals and liturgy, biblical historiography or eschatology, and various branches of scientific knowledge (astrology/astronomy, dream interpretation, geography, geology, biology, botany, physics, and medicine). Those lists are often interspersed with biblical verses as proof texts, a phenomenon also known from other texts like *Seder Eliyahu*.[26] However, information from the Bible is not presented because of its special religious value but rather as scientific proof for taxonomies built through lists (types of plants, animal species, stones, etc.). Moreover, the texts' penchant for biblical history turns the lists at times into a rich resource for important events of Israel's history. Alternatively, they serve as a lexicon for place names or biblical and eschatological figures, or as a topical index.[27]

---

[25] This includes the work known as *Ḥuppat Eliyahu* ('The canopy of Eliyahu') and the *Midrash sheloshah we-ʾarbaʿah* ('Midrash of three and four'), as well as *Pirqe rabbenu ha-qaddosh* ('Chapters of our holy master'). The main portions of all texts feature lists with three or four items, but these are supplemented by other numerical lists, especially seven-item lists.

[26] See Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft', 66–71; Lehmhaus, 'Making Moral Lists'.

[27] See Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft', 71–83.

Instead of being mere compilations of earlier rabbinic teachings, the *Ma'ase Torah* traditions have a unique nature that calls for studying them in their new historical contexts of early Islamic times and looking for structural parallels in Islamicate epistemic and literary culture(s).[28] The deliberate selection and variation of older lists indicates an openness for change and the ability of lists to be attuned to various discourses and contexts through extension, shortening, or alteration. Moreover, these traditions show that lists and enumerations are usually used and embedded in a practice bespeaking their potential to serve as epistemic tools of knowledge-making, a key aspect of this paper.[29]

3.0. List Theory, List Knowledge

Rabbinic texts contain lists within continuous texts and feature neither the specific vertical layout nor any other graphic detachment or emphasis (e.g., through other type or colour) discussed by scholars.[30] These lists, as a subform of the enumerative genre, but also as a "transmedial phenomenon,"[31] require a rather broad

---

[28] Such parallels might be found in ethical handbooks, compilations, and *florilegia* well embedded in the intellectual trends of the Abbasid period. On some similarities between early Islamic ethical traditions (*adāb*) and later rabbinic texts, see Lehmhaus, '"Hidden Transcripts"'; Lehmhaus, 'Making Moral Lists'.

[29] Mainberger, 'Ordnen/Aufzählen', 96.

[30] For a focus on the vertical and graphic layout of lists, see Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 21; Mainberger, 'Ordnen/Aufzählen', 91–92.

[31] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 3.

definition. Knowledge production through lists might take multiple forms. Commonly, lists and enumerations tend to compile items in a nominal sequence using single nouns or adjectives—be it names or characteristics of plants, objects, people, or the like.[32] The inclusive understanding of lists ranges from semantically linked enumerations and sequences of grammatically unconnected items (mostly nouns) to multi-column tables facilitating selective screening (e.g., timetables), or, finally, to catalogues with more detailed, at times narrative, expansions and explanations for each entry.[33]

Taking into account the versatility and the dynamic and fluid character of lists, the present discussion seeks to describe the interplay between the format of rabbinic lists and their possible functions. Most rabbinic lists have been compiled according to a certain system (alphabetically, numerically, geographically, chronologically, taxonomically, etc.) or following a thematic key (question), such as rabbinic lists of primordial things (*Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 3) or medical lists of what is beneficial or harmful for the body. Temporal-functional aspects, as in Goody's scheme, can help to parse the abundance of rabbinic lists: record-taking of the past; prescriptions of present or future actions

---

[32] Belknap, *The List*, 2.

[33] See Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', 91; Mainberger, 'Ordnen/Aufzählen', 91 (preferring enumeration over list); Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 7 ('list' as the most inclusive umbrella term). See also Young, 'Un-Black Boxing the List'; Young, 'On Lists and Networks'; Belknap, *The List*, 2: "A list of listings would include the catalogue, the inventory, the itinerary, and the lexicon."

(shopping lists or administration); and lexical lists with an ency-clopedic intention of collecting knowledge. The three dimensions of these ideal types, however, are often inextricably interwoven. In Jewish traditions, one often finds a merging of chronological and administrative functions, as in genealogies or lists of kings and priests, and a blending of prescriptions and religious or cultural knowledge, as in the Decalogue or the larger body of biblical laws and their afterlife in later texts. Moreover, record-making through lists not only provides a sense of chronology and historical awareness but also inscribes these items into the broader collective cultural consciousness.[34]

Rabbinic lists often feature less than three items, specifically when couplets or doublets serve as internal substructures for more complex catalogues.[35] While list formats can switch between vertical, horizontal, or tabular (raster) orientation, enumerative lists in rabbinic literature always progress horizontally, and are connected, due to the structure of Semitic languages, by 'and' (-ו) instead of by commas or any other typographical marker.[36] This allows for greater grammatical coherence or even

---

[34] See Goody, 'What's in a List?', 129–45; Young, *List Cultures*, 23–43. For a thorough discussion of Goody's theory and its limitations, see Echterhölter, 'Jack Goody'; Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 4–8.

[35] Milic, *Stylists on Style*, 416.

[36] The studies in this volume regarding list practice in Syriac (Matthew P. Monger, Liv Ingeborg Lied), medieval Jewish (Rebecca Ullrich), and Islamic (Maroussia Bednarkiewicz, Peter Tarras, Teresa Bernheimer) traditions suggest that horizontal, enumerative lists may have prevailed

for a (narrative) list fully resembling a sentence, a structure which distinguishes it from a vertical list of simple nouns. In some cases, repetition of wording or even of whole phrases may serve to indicate a new item or entry.[37]

Rabbinic lists display a complex interaction between "the individual units that make up a list (what does it hold?) and the function or purpose of the list as a whole (how does it hold together?)."[38] In many lists, captions prefigure and shape the understanding of the following items, whereby the items and their hierarchy may support the initial clue, but can also surprise or cast doubt on its coherence. Consequently, lists become open to (re)interpretation and rearrangement, inviting reutilisations and transformations that alter or add structure, content, and commentaries.[39] This expandability of the list format dovetails with

---

over vertical or tabular list formats in many premodern writing cultures—also due the need to utilise writing space efficiently, linked to the scarcity and precious value of manuscript material.

[37] See Belknap, *The List*, 19, 23, 30, on the vertical orientation and the horizontal progress of literary lists. See also Belknap, *The List*, 28: "In polysyndeton all the constituents are joined by a conjunction, often the word and. The repetition of the conjunction serves to call equal attention to each item in the list, as well as to generate momentum."

[38] Belknap, *The List*, 16. Cf. Shasha, 'Lists in the Mishnah'.

[39] Mainberger, *Die Kunst des Aufzählens*, 20; Doležalová, 'Potential and Limitations'; von Contzen, 'Lists in Literature'. See also Belknap, *The List*, 30–31 (lists as "at once accretive and discontinuous"); and Müller-Wille and Charmantier, 'Lists as Research Technologies', 743–44: "the list was a handy means to present and preserve knowledge in a concise and structured yet open-ended manner."

rabbinic discourse that is simultaneously ordered and highly as-
sociative. Authors and compilers could thus expand or shorten
lists, or populate existing lists with alternative items, sometimes
introduced through the marker 'some even say'.

The importance of the site or location of lists, and their
sudden or established appearance, becomes significant when the
Babylonian Talmud or works like *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* feature
whole sequences, networks, or clusters of lists.[40] For instance,
b. Gittin 70a creates an accumulation of lists connected via the
theme of what benefits or jeopardises the health of men, espe-
cially their virility and ability to procreate.[41] Another phenome-
non, is the deliberate creation of opposites through contrastive
lists as couplets or series, such as "six things heal a sick person
from their illness" versus "ten things are liable to send the con-
valesced person back to their illness" (b. Avodah Zarah 28b–
29a).[42]

---

[40] See von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 39; cf. Belknap, *The
List*, 30, on serialisation. The third chapter of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* con-
sists almost entirely of lists structuring the various steps in the process
of the creation. Chapters 6 to 8 also feature numerous lists explaining
astronomical and cosmological aspects, such as the number and names
of planets, constellations, and months, or the paths of the sun and the
moon.

[41] The captions of the lists read: "six things you will do and die," "eight
things beneficial in small but harmful in large quantities," "eight things
that diminish the semen."

[42] Another example from the Babylonian Talmud, b. Berakhot 57b, con-
trasts "three things enter the body without benefiting it" with "three

While some scholars emphasise material writing practices and literacy as prerequisites for lists, others see lists rather as challenging "the common assumptions about a dichotomy between orality and literacy/writing" because it occupies "a liminal or interstitial space."[43] Epic catalogues, genealogies, chronicles, itineraries, and recipes for instruction were in premodern cultures likewise bound to the curriculum of oral teaching and transmission, mostly learned by heart. Deeply embedded in a primarily oral rabbinic culture, rabbinic lists may have emerged as a mnemonic device that builds a bridge between these oral and written traditions. Many lists and catalogues, as will be shown, rely on anaphora, "a word or phrase [that] repeats at the beginning of subsequent clauses," or use repeated phrases and key words—all of which would make them an apt instrument for oral transmission and instruction.[44]

4.0. Lists as Epistemic Tools: Information, Instruction, Enquiry

It is commonly agreed that lists, albeit in diverse forms and for different purposes, are almost always tied to the collection and transmission of information—thereby creating knowledge. Lists

---

things benefit the body without being absorbed by it." Cf. Belknap, *The List*, 30, on the opposite or asyndeton.

[43] Young, 'Un-Black Boxing the List', 501–2.

[44] Belknap, *The List*, 10. On the oral dimension of enumerations, see Mainberger, *Die Kunst des Aufzählens*, 64–75. See also Jaffee, 'Rabbinic Oral Tradition'; Hallo, 'Midrash as Mnemonic', on mnemonic devices in midrash as substituting for concordances or dictionaries.

can thus be perceived as artefacts whose content and structure may point the reader to underlying concepts and epistemologies or, at times, even to cultural peculiarities or the historical context of their production. Lists transmitted over time embody epistemic conventions within a certain culture and time in a specific locality.[45] Other scholars, however, hold that it "is the *practice* that determines what a list or catalogue is and is not. Taken on its own, it is undetermined and, although laden with facts, it is unable to reveal its significance."[46]

4.1. Information

Robert Belknap summarised two fundamental functions of lists regarding knowledge: referential and epistemic. On one hand, they serve as "repositories of information… in which information is ordered… and easily located. On the other,… its role is the creation of meaning, rather than merely the storage of it."[47]

In his seminal study, Towner had already commented that lists in Jewish texts often serve to systematise "observations about nature, geography and man, and as pedagogical and mnemonic tools for conveying this information to students and posterity."[48] And Annette Y. Reed stressed that several Jewish texts

---

[45] See Belknap, *The List*, 27; Young, 'On Lists and Networks'; von Contzen, 'Lists in Literature'. Goody, 'What's in a List?', 90, discusses lists that "permitted wider developments in the growth of human knowledge."

[46] Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 20.

[47] Belknap, *The List*, 2.

[48] Towner, Rabbinic 'Enumeration', 4.

with scientific interest "encompass all varieties of knowledge," which they try to balance with "the epistemological monopoly of the Torah."[49] Similarly, many ancient lists or catalogues, with their classificatory purpose and advantages, went far beyond the ornamental and entertaining aspect.[50] While also demonstrating the authors' learnedness and artistry, they emphasised the cultural or religious value of objects and ideas, since "inclusion in a list endows an item with extrinsic value, thus making it worth re-listing."[51] While serving as circuits of knowledge, list-making entails complex procedures of selection, exclusion and inclusion, and ordering and classification that form the basis of a reality on which an empire or a ruling class can act.[52]

4.2. Instruction

Lists—especially catalogues, representing a culture or its parts in miniature—have a claim to closure or completeness. But more than just serving as a retrievable and condensed cultural storage device, they reproduce culture through a dynamic process of learning and teaching. This didactic use of lists can be witnessed in many traditions of the ancient Mediterranean and the Near

---

[49] Reed, 'Ancient Jewish Sciences', 22.

[50] See von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 35.

[51] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 2.

[52] See Schaffrick and Werber, 'Einleitung', esp. 304–7; Young, *List Cultures*, 67–108; Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 23–24. For lists in Pliny's encyclopedic work and its agenda of an all-encompassing Roman imperial superiority, see Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture*; Laehn, *Pliny's Defense of Empire*.

East,[53] often deeply connected to scribal education and the field of exegesis and interpretation, which can be also seen as the core expertise of the rabbinic sages.[54] Here, lists also functioned as an apt tool for the translation and explication of terms and their variants, such as names of measures, plants, stones, and so on.[55]

In some cases, ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, or Greek catalogues sometimes reference the titles and contents of other texts or objects included in certain physical collections or 'libraries' (e.g., the Library of Ashurbanipal). In other cases, their content conveys important implicit knowledge about the scope of a specific field of knowledge (a 'discipline'). As such, they allow for a (partial) reconstruction of the interest of later authors or even of the ancient curricula.[56]

[53] For ancient Mesopotamia, see Cancik-Kirschbaum, 'Writing, Language and Textuality'; Veldhuis, 'Elementary Education at Nipur', 137–46. For ancient Egypt, see Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', esp. 122–23; Quack, 'Ägyptische Listen'.

[54] See Neusner, 'Mode of Thought', 317–21, on *Listenwissenschaft* as the discursive backbone of the Mishnah, and Bernard, 'Listing and Enlisting', who sees the discourse of lists in Avot as a recruitment and training text for rabbinic students.

[55] See Steinert, 'Catalogues, Texts and Specialists'; Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', 112–13. On the translation of plant names in talmudic texts, see Lehmhaus, 'Beyond Dreckapotheke'.

[56] See Steinert, 'Catalogues, Texts and Specialists'; Steinert, *Medicine, Magic and Divination*. Compare the contributions by Liv Ingeborg Lied, Martin Wallraff, and Marilena Maniaci in this volume.

4.3. Enquiry

Lexical or scientific lists, catalogues, and encyclopedias often aim for a (partial) reproduction of the world by creating classificatory systems that reflect the underlying order or paradigms of knowledge in a given culture.[57] Going beyond the understanding of *Listenwissenschaft* as proto-science, recent studies have highlighted list-making and cataloguing as an epistemic practice with various functions. Transcending the practical focus of administrative lists, Mesopotamian authors dared to introduce more abstraction or intellectual playfulness, from which emerged new epistemic structures and ordering systems (e.g., alphabetical/phonetic).[58] Accordingly, thinking with and through lists involves some deliberate fragmentation of the world instead of a passive collection of things that already exist.

Ancient Jewish lists, among various other micro-forms, serve not only as 'containers' of previous tradition but also as methods of acquiring knowledge. Their specific hermeneutics and conceptualisations reflect a dynamic transmission process

[57] See Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 6, who discusses listing as knowledge production.

[58] Hilgert, 'Von "Listenwissenschaft" und "epistemischen" Dingen', esp. 277–309; Cancik-Kirschbaum, 'Writing, Language and Textuality'; Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft'; Echterhölter, 'Jack Goody', 248–49. Even scholars of early modern science have noticed that ancient Mesopotamian lists "group words by abstract categories like 'things of the heavens' and 'things of the earth' or, in an even more strikingly 'useless' manner, by initial sound"; Müller-Wille and Charmantier, 'Lists as Research Technologies', 744.

and active participation in wider discourses of ancient (scientific) knowledge. Lists create and (re)present patterns or concepts that guide the cognitive processes of their authors and their audience.[59] Such a process is triggered by the double nature of the list as being joined (the whole list) and a sequence of separate units (list items) in which each "possesses an individual significance but also a specific meaning by virtue of its membership with the other units in the compilation."[60]

The important potential of list-making has been observed in scholarship on early modern scientific practice. For the 'father of botanic taxonomy', the Swede Linnaeus, those "instruments of structured synopsis" became his central "research-enabling technology… to explore territories of the unknown." I will argue in the following that in rabbinic lists on varying topics, one may already find a similar "tendency to 'play around' with lists" and a "quasi-experimental approach" that turns cataloguing into taxonomic thinking. Accordingly, from early on, "lists exhibit the potential to generate the same kind of epistemic surplus that is so familiar today" from modern lab equipment.[61]

This description comes close to Gianna Pomata's approach to 'epistemic genres' in premodern sciences that will serve as a second theoretical underpinning for my discussion. In her view,

---

[59] See Young, 'Un-Black Boxing the List'. On knowledge-producing lists, see Pommerening, 'Bäume, Sträucher und Früchte', about ancient Egypt; Echterhölter, 'Jack Goody', esp. 248.

[60] Belknap, *The List*, 15.

[61] Müller-Wille and Charmantier, 'Lists as Research Technologies', 744–45.

these small text forms (e.g., recipes, case stories) do not consti-
tute simple devices or containers for indexing and conveying al-
ready self-contained knowledge. Rather, they serve as powerful
cognitive tools or vehicles that offer additional epistemic value
and advance the broader project of the production of knowledge.
Numerical list captions or guiding questions or categories resem-
ble core features of what Gianna Pomata designates as 'epistemic
genres', where they serve as "signposts indicating direction for
further observation and enquiry."[62] Rabbinic lists and catalogues,
as we will see, while facilitating the classification of phenomena,
observations, or experiences, additionally "challenge extant
knowledge formations, but also create new ones… (which
amount to new ways of seeing and doing)."[63]

5.0. Knowledge-Making through Catalogues in Rabbinic Texts

In this main section, I will concentrate on a few examples where
lists function explicitly as taxonomies or serve as flexible tools
for epistemological purposes. In this sense, and similarly to many
ancient and more recent (epic) catalogues, they both generate

---

[62] Pomata, 'The Medical Case Narrative', 8.

[63] Young, *List Cultures*, 26. See also Young, 'On Lists and Networks'; von
Contzen, 'Limits of Narration', 257: "Lists, because they encapsulate the
tensions and fascinations of narration and dis-narration, are a perfect
way of throwing new light on the complex interplay of the creation of
meaning in and through narratives, of involving the readers in the pro-
cesses of sense-making, and, ultimately, of the inextricable connection
between form and function that lies at the heart of all literature."

and transfer knowledge.[64] The following examples will demonstrate how a list-itinerary combines religious and medical knowledge, how lists explore and implement legal, medical, or ethical ideas, and how rabbinic authors appropriated a scientific subfield (pharmaceutics, dealing with simple remedies) and created a kind of encyclopedia or reference work. Due to limitations of space, I will only briefly mention here the knowledge-making function of lists that define concepts and create taxonomies. For example, a discourse ranging from the early Mishnah into the Babylonian Talmud strives for a classification system that defines behavioural patterns of the *shoteh* (lit. 'deviant', mentally ill or disabled) in a dynamic interplay with local knowledge and discriminatory labels and rules related to religious law. Other taxonomic lists refer to specific illnesses and seek to establish knowledge about their aetiology, symptoms, and possible therapeutic approaches. Different lists explore human behaviour by combining a sort of micro-sociological approach (character traits, motivations, etc.) with normative, prescriptive attitudes (morally right actions).[65] These taxonomical lists attest to the versatility of the format and the fluid continuum between lists, list clusters,

---

[64] See Belknap, *The List*, 10.

[65] On the *shoteh*, see Belser and Lehmhaus, 'Disability in Rabbinic Judaism', and Lehmhaus, 'Shoteh'; on illness taxonomies, see Lehmhaus, '"Curiosity Cures the Reb"', and Lehmhaus, 'Bodies of Texts'; on moral lists, see Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft', and Lehmhaus, 'Making Moral Lists'; on some similarities between early Islamic ethical traditions (*adab*) and later rabbinic texts, see Lehmhaus, '"Hidden Transcripts"'.

and expansive catalogues that often use guiding questions, 'headers', or narrative elements and proof texts for their epistemic project.[66]

5.1. Lists: Structuring Time, Organising Structure

One important feature of lists is their ability not only to store or stack list items together but also to structure actions. Consequently, lists impose order on and refigure time and temporality in the past, present, and future, or our awareness thereof.[67] One might think of the first aspect (the past) as in a catalogue of past events (a chronicle) or a list of specific key moments of Jewish history (i.e., *Heilsgeschichte*). The second aspect (the present) concerns the performance of lists and enumeration in the present which proceed in a specific temporary framework that might be stretched or prolonged, evenly clocked, or equipped with a varying and dynamic rhythm.[68] The last aspect (the future) can be exemplified by common shopping lists (or target lists or to-do lists), instruction manuals, or more elaborated catalogues of rules (e.g., law, etiquette, diet, and regimen) that aim at prescribing and codifying human behaviour and (re)actions.

One finds at least two of these temporalities—present and future—merged with other functions (prescription) and realised in a list on gestation in the talmudic tractate Berakhot, whose

---

[66] For the list type that starts with a definitory question, see Shasha, 'Lists in the Mishnah', 42–43. See also Pomata, 'The Medical Case Narrative'.

[67] See Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 28.

[68] See Mainberger, 'Ordnen/Aufzählen', 95.

main discourse revolves around rules for correct blessings and how to pray, albeit with many digressions.

Mishnah; m. Berakhot 9.3:

If someone's wife conceived and he said [a prayer]: Let it be [God's] will that my wife shall give birth to a male [child]—this is a prayer in vain....[69]

It has been taught [in a baraita]:

1. For the first three days, one should ask for [divine] mercy that [the seed] will not decompose.

2. From three to forty [days], one should ask for [divine] mercy that [the fetus] will be male.

3. From forty days to three months, one should ask for [divine] mercy that [the fetus] will not be a *sandal* (סנדל, lit. 'sandal') [i.e., a compressed fetus].

4. From three to six [months], one should ask for [divine] mercy that [the fetus] will not be stillborn.

5. From six to nine [months], one should ask for [divine] mercy that [the fetus] will come out safely.

[Interjection] However, does this plea for mercy have any effect?

Did not Rav Yitzhak, the son of Rav Ami say:

A. If a man emits seed first, [the woman] gives birth to a female [child].

B. But if the woman emits seed first, she gives birth to a male [child].

---

[69] Words in square brackets provide some additional information that makes the text more readable in English, while parentheses contain explanations of the preceding word or sentence.

> As it is said [in Scripture]: *If a woman emits seed she will give birth to a male [child] (Lev. 12.2)*.

> [If that is the case,] what are we dealing with [regarding the prayer for a male child]?

> [This is only effective] when both (man and woman) emit seed at the same time.[70]

The trigger of this talmudic discussion unit (*sugya*) is the base Mishnah concluding that any prayer for the (male) determination of a future child's sex, a crucial issue in Jewish halakhic thought, is futile.[71] This initial objection to an action based on the over-arching logic of the tractate (i.e., prayers on behalf of someone or for something) must have come as a surprise to the talmudic sages. The solution of R. Yosef, who introduced a biblical story of a miraculous sex transformation (Leah's daughter Dinah), does not satisfy the anonymous compilers of this talmudic tractate. Accordingly, they try to resolve the difficulties by resorting to a list on the development of the fetus taught in a source not in-cluded in the Mishnah, called a 'baraita'.

The list items or entries represent a more elaborate alterna-tive, a set of useful prayers, rather than simple (and futile) wishes for a male child. All the advice is based on rather exact know-ledge about the gestation process found in ancient Babylonian or Graeco-Roman texts on gynaecology and physiology. However, this knowledge is not theorised as such, but remains implicit. It is conveyed encapsulated in a list that relates specific time spans or periods from the moment of conception until birth to specific,

---

[70] b. Berakhot 60a.

[71] See Fonrobert, 'Regulating the Human Body'; Fonrobert, 'Sexed Body'.

potential dangers to the baby that prayer should help to avoid. Most instructions relate to being concerned about and praying for the unborn's survival (nos 1 and 4), healthy formation (i.e., not a 'sandal'; no. 3), and birth (no. 5). Only the second recommendation takes up the issue of determination of sex, which—according to other rabbinic texts and Graeco-Roman traditions—happens within the time span indicated (3–40 days).[72]

This list can be understood as belonging to the subcategory of the itinerary, in which actions are structured and ordered through time. Following Belknap, "the continuum of a single motion" or event (in this case, the pregnancy) "may be subdivided into discrete elements" (the various phases of the gestation process), and the development is expressed through an "elaborate listing of a series of events."[73] The catalogue of pregnancy prayers in b. Berakhot exemplifies the performative and processual aspects of prescriptive lists (recipes or therapies). In this, it shows how the "list and the narrative can work in tandem or, at times, merge closely together," since "how-to lists and recipes inform

---

[72] On rabbinic and Graeco-Roman embryology, see van der Horst, 'Seven Months' Children'; Kottek, 'Embryology'; Kessler, *Conceiving Israel*; Lepicard, 'The Embryo'; Shinnar, 'The Experiments of Cleopatra'. The concepts included gestation periods of different lengths for male children (40 or 41 days) and female children (80 or 81 days). For a brief discussion of Graeco-Roman embryological discourse, see Mulder, 'Ancient Medicine'.

[73] Belknap, *The List*, 3. The itinerary is similar to a recipe or a therapeutic instruction; the latter can be understood as a list of events or stages (of a journey) from illness to health.

you of the series of steps to be taken if you are to do something…
as the potential narrative seems to become enacted."[74]

Moreover, all three aspects of lists mentioned by Goody
merge here. One finds the chronology or record-taking aspect in
the temporal scheme or structure of the stages of pregnancy, as
well as the prescriptive dimension, as it indicates what to do
when.[75] Simultaneously, it embodies the encyclopedic aspect
through an accumulation of knowledge in a specific area (preg-
nancy or embryology) that can be transmitted and commented
upon. Finally, it also has a cognitive or epistemological function.
By including medical knowledge, it provides a reliable temporal
framework for the appropriate prayers through which the micro-
cosm of the human body and the macrocosm of divine creation
are inextricably connected.

5.2. The Vade Mecum in b. Gittin as a Catalogue

In the tractate *Gittin* ('writs of divorce') of the Babylonian Tal-
mud, one finds an elaborated cluster of lists, or rather a catalogue
of recipes, which complies with the characterisation of catalogu-
ing as a "major component of elaborate monumental works."[76]
This large chunk of discourse—spanning over four printed folio
pages—has been called by various scholars the 'Book of Reme-
dies', while others prefer to call it a vade mecum or medical

---

[74] Richardson, 'Modern Fiction', 328. On the list as a proto-narrative,
see Mainberger, 'Table of Contents'; von Contzen, 'Limits of Narration';
von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature'; Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen'.

[75] Compare the study by Martin Wallraff in this volume.

[76] Belknap, *The List*, 10.

handbook.[77] Mark Geller, who has extensively worked on this long textual unit, described its main features. The list is structured following the location of diseases in the body, which complies with a common ancient way of structuring lists from head to toe; this prevailed in ancient Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman medical traditions. Moreover, these entries ordered by body part illustrate the close connection between lists or catalogues and the physical equivalent in the empirical world. The body parts and their healing are represented and conjured via the list.[78]

The Gittin cluster comprises recipes for more than 40 ailments, and these all follow a stable pattern. Each entry introduces the ailment (-ל, *le-* 'for X') or the affected body part (e.g., 'for the head') followed by the instruction that the patient 'should take Y'.[79] While Aramaic dominates, certain elements (e.g., ingredients) or clues are delivered in Hebrew. This therapeutic advice

---

[77] See Veltri, *Magie und Halakha*; Freeman, 'Gittin "Book of Remedies"'; Geller, 'Akkadian Vademecum'; Geller, *Akkadian Healing Therapies*; Amsler, *Making of the Talmud*.

[78] See Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 8; this refers to Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, 78–88, esp. 83–88, who highlights a connection between body part enumerations and healing ex-votos depicting body parts, on the one hand, and the frequent head-to-foot structure of medical lists and curse tablets, on the other.

[79] See Geller, 'Akkadian Vademecum'. Amsler, *The Babylonian Talmud*, 177–91, distinguishes recipes of this 'verb'-type, because of the imperative (e.g., 'bring…') from another style of recipe in which the remedies follow directly after the indicated ailment. For an ancient Egyptian parallel, see Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', 102, where the ailment is featured in the caption followed by various recipes.

can be very simple, featuring just one remedy, but often includes more sophisticated approaches. The recipes are completed with descriptions of plants and other *materia medica* (animal parts, stones, food, etc.) and instructions on how to prepare and apply the remedies. A remarkable feature of these recipes is that they include not only the application of drugs but also the use of bodily techniques, rituals, and incantations. As an illustration, consider the following brief example from the Gittin vade mecum:

> For a [sick] spleen:
>
> Let one take seaweed[80] (lit. 'that lying on the water') and let one dry it in the shade and let him (the patient) drink [the dried plant or a powder made from it] two or three times per day in wine.
>
> [alternative recipe] If not,
>
> let one take the spleen of a virgin kid and smear it on an oven and let him (the healer?, the patient?) stand near it and let him say, 'just as this one spleen is dried up, may that spleen of so-and-so[81] dry up'.
>
> [alternative recipe] And if not,

---

[80] Printed text *šbbyny*, read as *škbyny*. The usual translation is 'seven leeches'—see Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 202—but this lacks any evidence from cognate languages. The translation here follows the reading of Geller, *Babylonian Medicine*.

[81] Lit. 'X (patient's name) son of Y (name of the patient's mother)'. Compare b. Shabbat 66b: "Abayye said: 'An expert told it to me: [Individual] incantations [have to be] with the name of the mother.'"

> let one smear it between the brick layers of a new house,
> and let him say accordingly (i.e., as in the previous rec-
> ipe).[82]

In this rather short entry for curing a sick spleen, one finds one piece of advice with a pharmaceutic or phyto-medical therapy ('seaweed' drunk in wine) and two instructions featuring an approach focusing on certain actions and pertinent formulas or incantations. This example also entails, like most other entries, a substructure that lists several alternative recipes. Thus, the straightforward introductory formula ('for X, take Y') is supplemented with another marker (ואילו לא, *we-ʾilu loʾ* 'and if not'). From the text itself, it is not entirely clear if this bridging formula is meant to indicate an alternative in case the first therapy fails or in case ingredients are lacking, or both.

However, in light of the present discussion focusing on list-making, I argue that the accumulation of alternative recipes for one ailment presents an apt strategy for collecting and cataloguing knowledge pertaining to ailments of various body parts or of the whole body (e.g., fever). The head-to-toe structure does not only figure in medical texts but can be also observed in poetical lists.[83] The 'for X' captions are easily browsable entry markers, similar to lemmata in a lexicon or encyclopedia, specifying the ailing body part or disease followed by the first or primary therapeutic instruction ('take Y'). The phrase *we-ʾilu loʾ* 'and if not' functions as a second, substructural marker highlighting every

---

[82] b. Gittin 69b, in Aramaic. The translation follows the reading of Geller, *Babylonian Medicine*. See also Geller et al., *Sourcebook*.

[83] Belknap, *The List*, 23–25.

alternative recipe. The catalogue consists, thus, of a lemma or entry ('for X') followed by a potentially open-ended sequence of various alternative therapeutic elaborations for the same item (ailment A: recipe 1; recipe 2; recipe 3 and recipe 3a; recipe 4; etc.). This order and its taxonomic structure conforms to what has been observed in a recent study:

> The catalogue, even if structured hierarchically by a taxonomic method, remains wedded to the simplest form of a list—that is, the arrangement of entries in a linear series that is read from top to bottom, while each individual entry is to be read from left to right.[84]

One basic difficulty of the Gittin catalogue of recipes in the Babylonian Talmud is that one cannot exactly discern its taxonomic hierarchy beyond the entries according to diseases or affected body parts. As already noted, from the text itself, it is not entirely clear if the alternative recipes are ordered on the basis of their expected or ascribed efficacy ('and if Y1 does not work, proceed to Y2') or if the order emphasises the availability of 'ingredients', which may not always have been readily available. The listing potentially also reflects the different therapeutic approaches from the easily procurable and rather pharmaceutical (plant-based) remedies to the more complicated cures, which often include prescribed actions and incantations.

---

[84] Müller-Wille and Charmantier, 'Lists as Research Technologies', 748. See also Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', 114. While linearity can be found in the talmudic catalogue, it does not comply with a vertical orientation (top to bottom).

Through this very structure, the catalogue also becomes an effective tool for actively exploring different approaches to and cures for the listed ailments. Besides this exploratory function, the catalogue also serves as a handbook for practical purposes. As such, it seems closer to similar collections (*euporista)* in Akkadian, Greek, Latin, and Syriac than to the rather complex pharmacological discourse in Galen and other medical authors, who like to theorise on anatomy and physiology before giving a treatment.

However, the Gittin cluster is not only a collection of existing knowledge: the very accumulation and condensation of information within the framework structure of the catalogue of recipes brings forth, shapes, and stabilises therapeutic insights. Consequently, such an endeavour also creates a field of expertise or a body of knowledge that is transmitted and serves as a pool of information from which future recipients can learn in various contexts (e.g., practice, instruction).[85]

Scholarship on the Gittin catalogue has often described it as an alien body within the talmudic discourse.[86] This would tally with Stephen Barney's observation that lists might appear as "in-

---

[85] See Steinert, 'Catalogues, Texts and Specialists', on how catalogues and lists shape and define whole fields of knowledge or ancient scientific disciplines. Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', 94–95, stresses the sequencing but also the limitation to the items contained in a list or catalogue that functions as a scaffold or skeleton of knowledge.

[86] See Freeman, 'Gittin "Book of Remedies"'; Veltri, *Magie und Halakha*; Geller, 'Akkadian Vademecum'.

truders" that interfere but also "potentially react with the narrative" in which they are embedded.[87] Accordingly, I argue that even if the list content has been derived from non-talmudic sources, the rabbinic authors sought to smoothly appropriate and integrate this catalogue by choosing multiple strategies. First, it seems very likely that the catalogue mostly contains therapies that were based on regional or local medical knowledge and practice (Mesopotamian, Mandean, Persian, etc.).[88] Second, the authors created dense connections on various levels: to a religious-medical discussion on the illness *qordiaqos* at the beginning of the chapter; a fading out of the core catalogue by adding some advice on diet and regimen ascribed to named sages; and through a discursive connection to narratives about a rabbinic sage and King Solomon, both related to therapies and the importance of knowledge.[89] In this, one may find some strategic resemblance to the ancient epic catalogue that "moves in and out, alternating grand sweep with intimate portrait. With narrative dynamism it also moves backward and forward in time."[90]

Finally, the breadth of the Gittin catalogue, the longest recipe cluster in talmudic texts, points us towards a notion of copiousness. On the one hand, it displays a wish for all-inclusiveness

---

[87] Barney, 'Chaucer's Lists', 190. Cf. Richardson, 'Modern Fiction', 328–29.

[88] See Geller, 'Akkadian Vademecum'. For the local character of knowledge production, see Cooper, *Inventing the Indigenous*.

[89] See Lehmhaus, 'Listenwissenschaft', 83–93. For a different strategy of embedding, see Amsler, *The Babylonian Talmud*, esp. 148–60.

[90] Belknap, *The List*, 11.

for this valuable encyclopedic compilation of recipes for the whole body. On the other, in the guise of long, almost excessive lists throughout history, the Gittin catalogue also interacts with its broader contexts by disrupting the usual halakhic discourse, adding new elements and parsing the rhythm of the chapter and the whole tractate differently.[91]

6.0. Conclusion

While some scholars prefer a dichotomy between poetic or literary lists and epic catalogues, on the one hand, and more pragmatic, everyday lists, on the other, many others challenge such a rigid distinction by analytically merging practical, poetic, and epistemic features.[92] As lists are "a powerful tool for propagating, but also revising, ingrained cultural systems of worth,"[93] rabbinic authors deployed them to transmit and modify the discourse of earlier halakhic traditions, adding new items and entering into a process of knowledge-making. Whether one considers rabbinic lists in the form of complex lists or broader catalogues, one notices "the joined but flexible nature of list components, operating somewhere between the extremes of detached isolation and rigid

---

[91] See Belknap, *The List*, 19; von Contzen, 'Limits of Narration'; Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 20.

[92] Eco, *Die unendliche Liste*, 113; Belknap, *The List*. For a critique, see Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 4–8; von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature'.

[93] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 2.

unification."[94] The items or entries display equality or difference, gradual differentiation (e.g. of symptoms, or recipes), or a process (therapies, embryological phases). Rabbinic lists "function to facilitate various forms of interaction between human beings… while also standing as a record or an index of… this interaction,"[95] especially when they are concerned with normative or legal questions (halakha) connected to medical or social issues (embryology, illness, therapies). Recent studies have stressed "the power of lists to stand in for objects, to act as the interfaces by which we access them. As a result, these lists become our experience of the things in them; more than just mediators or translations, they are, in some sense, the things themselves."[96] This happens, for example, with ingredients and other objects useful for the preparation of a remedy or the enactment of a therapy. Lists evoke the very materiality of the necessary objects but also conjure and reassure the involvement and reality of malevolent beings (e.g., demons) and apotropaic helpers.

Rabbinic lists and catalogues also challenge their readers to establish "connections, whether associative, temporal, or causal, between the separate items of the list as well as between the list and the surrounding narrative context."[97] The lists cast out their nets and form connections that expand into their broader contexts. For instance, taxonomic lists often draw on legal (halakhic)

---

[94] Belknap, *The List*, 27, discussing Nicholas Howe's description of the list as 'catenulate' in *Old English Catalogue Poem*.

[95] Young, 'Un-Black Boxing the List', 501–2, 505.

[96] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 11.

[97] Von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 48.

triggers (healing on Shabbat; who can be deemed 'sane', etc.). As shown above, the catalogue of recipes in Gittin is anchored in various ways in its immediate chapter and the broader tractate.

Lists in rabbinic discourse interfere with or intrude into a different discourse—be it midrashic exegesis, homiletical speech, or talmudic halakhic discussion. However, although they are the discourse's other and stand out, they are well integrated and also possess a narrative rhythm of their own (e.g., the itinerary of pregnancy, the therapeutic instructions).[98] From ancient times on, we find lists either as proto-narratives inviting later elaboration or as index lists that condense information of an elaborated format into a brief enumeration. While we rarely find any narrative expansion of lists, rabbinic texts use simple lists to form more complex clusters and catalogues, as in the case of the Gittin vade mecum, or even a whole 'midrash of lists', as in the *Ma'ase Torah* tradition. Lists lend themselves as if naturally to their expansion into catalogues or encyclopedic collections in which the former items of simple lists are transformed into entries featuring longer textual units, commentary, or even sub-lists.[99]

Rabbinic lists and catalogues should be studied in relation to their epistemic genre and their world-making/knowledge-producing function, since "cataloguing, listing, enumerating, and indexing can be perceived as attempts to order the world.... [L]ists are instances of cultural coherence and cultural identity; they are

---

[98] See von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 45–47, on the list as the narrative's other.

[99] On proto-narratives and lists as a pool of key terms, see Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', 19–20; Hoffmann, 'Aufzählungen', 117–21.

indicative of a particular view on the world."[100] Rabbinic lists can grant us a glimpse into the epistemic concepts underlying their knowledge. But, in fact,

> to list… is to do more than record; it is to display, to lay out, to arrange—to create reality—whether that be to represent a moment of complete awareness of the world or just to experiment, to conjure by naming…. By compiling, a writer can evoke for the reader an object or an action in all its definite and peculiar aspects.[101]

Simultaneously, the recipients are invited to decode the meaning of the list and its parts.[102] This seems to dovetail with rabbinic hermeneutics and reading practices which operate with gap filling and 'dialogical reading'.

But the discussion has shown that lists and catalogues do not function as simple containers or pools for accumulating the already known. Rather, through their structure or new captions that subsume surprising items, they can point towards new relations between parts of the body, illnesses, elements of nature, or social behaviour, which sometimes might even reflect a specific cultural embeddedness or certain historical circumstances. Here, list-making transcends the purpose of storing knowledge, and moves towards an 'epistemic game' of implicit questions and a

---

[100] Von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 35 (on Foucault).

[101] Belknap, *The List*, 19–20. See Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 2–3, on the ekphrasis function of the catalogue.

[102] Von Contzen, 'Theorising Lists in Literature', 49, 38. Cf. Mainberger, *Die Kunst des Aufzählens,* and Mainberger, 'Table of Contents', on the need to make sense and the necessary embeddedness into practice.

process of enquiry that facilitates the creation, discovery, and exploration of new insights and their potential relationships.[103] These aspects stand out in the rabbinic experimentation with new classification systems, such as taxonomies of illnesses, disabilities, or moral behaviours, or the alternative parsing of pregnancy and associated prayers. The rabbinic deployment of lists illustrates the "powerful potential that list-making has to open up new research agendas."[104]

In addition to the epistemological functions, "lists can carry objects across vast expanses of time and space,"[105] and thus one may use lists as a pool for another, more elaborated list, catalogue, or other format. The catalogue presents itself as an apt medium with some advantages over direct oral transmission or learning by doing or showing. This is a very prominent feature to be observed in the catalogue in Gittin and the whole genre of *euporista*, which sometimes border on becoming inclusive handbooks or encyclopedias of practical medical knowledge. As mentioned before, catalogues and encyclopedias may be understood as cultural inventories "which evoke, and ultimately create, the material world of another time."[106] Lists stabilise and underline

---

[103] See Echterhölter, 'Jack Goody', 243–45, who mentions, for instance, Borges's *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* or the Japanese *Pillow Book* in relation to fictitious and unordinary list categories.

[104] Müller-Wille and Charmantier, 'Lists as Research Technologies', 749. See also Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 8.

[105] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 11. See also Müller-Wille and Charmantier, 'Lists as Research Technologies', 747–48.

[106] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 14.

the cultural weight and importance of their contents. Their representation might "even supplant and supersede physical objects themselves."[107] In rabbinic catalogues, one finds knowledge and whole epistemic systems fixed, and these become accessible and transmittable between Palestine and Babylonia, and between late antiquity and later periods.

---

[107] Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 3. See also Young, *List Cultures*; Young, 'On Lists and Networks'.