Rabbi Akiba on Divine Providence and Human Freedom

*Abot 3:15–16 and *Abot de Rabbi Nathan (B) 22:13–15*

**Stephen Hultgren**

In *Abot 3:15* the following saying is attributed, implicitly by its placement within the series, to Rabbi Akiba: "All is foreseen (תפונת), but freedom of choice is given (הון וחוזה); and the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the excess of works." This saying has rightly been regarded as important for understanding the theological outlook of the Pharisees and their rabbinitic successors. Its first half seems to cohere with, and thus to confirm, Josephus' reports on the Pharisees, according to whom divine providence and human responsibility cooperate in human actions: "They [the Pharisees] attribute everything to Fate and to God; they hold that to act rightly or otherwise rests, indeed, for the most part with men, but that in each action Fate cooperates" (*B. J.* 2:162–63). And again: "Though they [the Pharisees] postulate that everything is brought about by fate, still they do not deprive the human will of the pursuit of what is in man's power, since it was God's good pleasure that there should be a fusion and that the will of man with his virtue and vice should be admitted to the council-chamber of fate" (*A. J.* 18:13). The

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3 The translations follow *Josephus*, trans. H. Thackery et al., *Loeb Classical Library* (10 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926–1965). See also, slightly differently, *A. J.* 13:172: "As for the Pharisees, they say that certain events are the work of Fate, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not." On the difference between *A. J.* 13:172 and the other two places, see below.

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saying attributed to Akiba also coheres with other rabbinic utterances regarding the relationship between divine providence and human freedom.  

This reading of Akiba’s dictum has not gone uncontested. Urbach argued that the verb הַיְדָה in Akiba’s statement does not carry the sense of divine foreknowledge but rather of God’s observance of human actions, so that Akiba intends only to emphasize human responsibility: Humans have free will. God watches their actions and will hold humans accountable for them. People must act in consciousness of that.  

Despite the considerable attention that has been paid to this saying, there remains a lack of precision in the secondary literature as to how Akiba held divine providence and human freedom to coexist. Did Akiba think that God foresaw human actions, or did he think that God even predetermined human actions? Or, as Urbach suggested, was Akiba not speaking about divine knowledge or predetermination at all, but only about divine observation? The purpose of this article is to show that there is another tradition attributed to Akiba, which has been surprisingly neglected in past scholarship on this question, which may help illuminate the meaning of Akiba’s dictum. The tradition appears in 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan (version B) (ARN B) 22:13–15.

ARN B 22:13–15

We begin by presenting the text.  

22:13. Rabbi Akiba says: There is a just man and things go well for him, and there is a just man and things go badly for him. There is a wicked man and things go well for him, and there is a wicked man and things go badly for him.

“There is a just man and things go well for him.” It was destined (תקב) that possessions were not to be taken away from him because he was able to persevere in his righteousness, and his possessions were not taken away from him so that he might be a completely just man (כהן הגדול).

22:14. “There is a just man and things go badly for him.” It was destined (תקב) that his possessions would not be taken from him, but they were taken from him so that he might be a completely just man (כהן הגדול).

“This is a wicked man and things go well for him.” It was destined (תקב) that his possessions would be taken away from him, but they are not taken from him so that he might repent, as Scripture says: “For my text is one among others cited in this section. In his article “Fate and Free Will in the Jewish Philosophies according to Josephus,” Moore attributes to Akiba the view that God has foreknowledge of human actions but does not foreordain them. (HTR 22 [1929] 380) Differently, Louis Finkelstein writes of 'Abot 3:15: “Man is free to do what he will, but his decisions, and the results which must flow from them, are predetermined.” (Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956] 204–05)

Friedrich Avermaine considers interpretations both with reference to God’s foreseeing (foreknowledge) and with reference to God’s watching, and prefers the former; see “The Tension between God’s Command and Israel’s Obedience as Reflected in the Early Rabbinic Literature,” in Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment, ed. J.M.G. Barclay and S.J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2006) 60–62; see p. 61 n. 34 for an extensive list of literature.


Saldarini, Fathers, 138 n. 16, notes that manuscripts R (Vatican 303), P (Parma, de Rossi 327) and H (Halberstam) have “but” here (752 in R and P; see Becker, ibid.), but there is no adverbiale sense. I follow his emendation to “and.” See further below.
name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you... For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned?" [Isa 48:9, 11] 10

22:15. "There is a wicked man and things go badly for him." It was foreseen (יהָבָא) that he would be a violent man who goes out to the marketplace and goes on a crossroad and kills people and outrages them. He goes to the government and informs on them and the government keeps its power over them. Consequently, it is said: "And hate lordship" ['Abot 1:10].

I have followed Saldarini's translation. 11 Hiding behind this English translation, however, are several weighty text-critical problems that must be discussed, since they affect the interpretation of the passage in significant ways. 12 Here we are assisted by the new synopsis of the manuscripts of both versions A and B of 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan, edited by Hans-Jürgen Becker. 13

(1) In Schechter's text the first paragraph reads: "R. Akiba says: There is a just man and things go badly for him; there is a just man and things go well for him," the reverse of Saldarini's translation. Presumably Saldarini has translated it thus to conform the translation to MSS R and P 14. In the explication of R. Akiba's statement the order of discussion is, of course, that given by Saldarini: the just man for whom things go well, then the just man for whom things go badly.

(2) While MS P contains four men, MS R does not have P's third man, the wicked man for whom things go well. It is likely that P has the correct text. The schema of four men — the two just men for whom things go well and badly respectively, and the two wicked men for whom things go well and badly respectively — also appears in the preceding saying of R. Jose in ARN B 22. A similar schema also appears in b. Ber. 7a. Since even MS R balances the just man for whom things go well with the just man for whom things go badly, it is most likely that in the original statement Akiba balanced the wicked man for whom things go badly with a saying about the wicked man for whom things go well.

(3) In the discussion of the just man for whom things go well Saldarini emends the word "but" (וְנַעֲשֶׂה) to "and," since there is no adverative sense (as explained in note 9). The odd appearance of the word נא may be due to the phrase נָא לְיָדָיו יְבֵא הָאָדָם, which appears later (22:14) and which may have influenced the text here. 15

(4) MS R and MS P differ on whether the possessions of the just man for whom things go well are not taken away "so that" (MS R) he may be (or become) completely just or "because" (MS P) he is completely just. MS P has the more likely reading. Support for this judgment comes from b. Ber. 7a, where there is a schema of four men similar to the one here and where it is said that "a righteous man who prospers is a perfectly righteous man" (יְזִידָא דִּבְרָא יְזִידָא) and "the righteous man who is in adversity is not a perfectly righteous man" (יְזִידָא דִּבְרָא יְזִידָא). It would agree with this if Akiba said that it was destined that this man's possessions would not be taken away because he is able to persevere in his righteousness and (not "but"). That his possessions are not taken away because he is (therefore) perfectly just (יְזִידָא דִּבְרָא יְזִידָא). MS R's phrase, "so that he may be perfectly just," appears in MS P with respect to the just man for whom things go badly, where it is more appropriate. This man suffers in order that, through suffering, he may become completely just. The idea here, presumably, is that through suffering the righteous man will be led to self-examination and repentance, so that he might become more (or even completely) righteous. This idea is common in pre-rabbinic and rabbinic tradition. 16

(5) There is disagreement among the manuscripts as to whether the second just man, for whom things go badly, was destined to lose his possessions but did not lose them so that he might repent (MS R), or was destined not to lose them but did lose them so that he might become completely just (MS P). There is also disagreement as to whether it is the just man for whom things go badly who repents (MS R) or the wicked

10 See n. 12.

11 See n. 8. The Hebrew text on which Saldarini's translation is based is Philipp Feldheim's 1967 reprint, with corrections, of Salomon Schechter, ed., 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan (Vienna: Ch. D. Lippe, 1887) 23b-24a (pp. 46-47) (see Saldarini, Fathers, 1 n. 1). The Schechter/Feldheim edition must now be compared against the synopsis of Becker (see n. 8).

12 Two other minor notes about Saldarini's translation may be made here. In the first paragraph he presumably left out by accident the word "go which is necessary for the meaning and which I have therefore included in brackets. In the fourth paragraph Saldarini cites the Scripture quotation as being Isa 48:9, 11, to include the reference to God's delivering anger in 48:9, although the Schechter/Feldheim text refers only to 48:11.

13 See n. 8.

14 For description of the manuscripts, see Saldarini, Fathers, 1-3; and Becker, 'Avo de-Rabbi Nathan, xxvi-xvii.

15 The phrase appears in reference to the wicked man for whom things go well in P. In R the phrase also appears (probably incorrectly; see below) in reference to the second just man (for whom things go badly). Since R is a later manuscript than P (Becker, 'Avo de-Rabbi Nathan, xvii, dates P to 1289 and R to the 15th century), this reading was probably not known to P and would not have influenced P's reading on the first just man.

man for whom things go well who repents (MS P). As already noted, MS R does not mention the wicked man for whom things go badly. If we attempt to reconstruct an older text for the just man for whom things go badly, there are four possibilities:

(a) It was destined that his possessions would be taken away from him, but they were not taken away from him so that he might become a completely just man.

(b) It was destined that his possessions would be taken away from him, but they were not taken away from him so that he might repent.

(c) It was destined that his possessions would not be taken away from him, but they were taken away from him so that he might become a completely just man.

(d) It was destined that his possessions would not be taken away from him, but they were taken away from him so that he might repent.

Of these four options, a and b do not make sense when the statement about the just man for whom things go badly is taken as a whole. If his possessions are not ultimately taken away, then it makes no sense to say that things go badly for him. Therefore we should reconstruct an older text according to version c or d, probably c, which is P’s reading. (As noted above, it would agree with b. Ber. 7a and with other pre-rabbinic and rabbinic statements if Akiba said that the just man suffers in order to become more or even completely just.)

One can imagine, however, that a careless scribe who wrote MS R (or a careless scribe of an earlier manuscript on which R depends) mistakenly thought that, if things go badly for this man, then Akiba must have said that it was destined that his possessions should be taken away from him. Accordingly, this scribe would have written that it was destined that this man’s possessions would be taken away from him. That first mistake would also explain the two other differences between MS R and MS P. If R is ultimately based on a text like P, then the scribe of R (or of a previous manuscript on which R depends) may have omitted by scribal error mention of the wicked man for whom things go well. That is, having written about the just man for whom things go badly that it was destined that his possessions would be taken away from him, in P applies to the wicked man for whom things go well, the scribe of R skipped over the introduction of the wicked man for whom things go well and went immediately to the outcome (in P) for that man, namely, “but they [his possessions] are not taken from him so that he might repent, as Scripture says, etc.” Applying this statement to the just man for whom things go badly. Additional support for this is the observation that the quotation of Isa 48:9, 11, about God deferring his anger, which serves as the proof text for the statement about repentance, makes better sense in connection with a wicked man than with a just man. Therefore it is hardly likely to have stood originally in connection with the just man for whom things go badly, as in MS R. To be sure, there would be nothing surprising in a statement that God lets a just man suffer in order to lead him to repentance (see note 16). In that case, however, one would have to assume that R’s reading on the just man repenting is original but that the quotation of Isa 48:11 is secondary, since the quotation is not appropriate for a just man. On the whole, however, the evidence favors P’s reading. The kinds of errors that we have ascribed to R agree with Becker’s assessment of the scribe who wrote R, who seems to have been quite incompetent.17

On all counts, then, MS P offers the superior reading. Schechter based his text of ARN B on MS R,18 and the influence of R on Schechter’s text in 22:13–15 is clear. Saldañini’s text, which follows MS P closely, is the one likely to be closest to what Akiba originally said with respect to the first three men, with one exception.19 I follow MS P in reading with respect to the first man that “his possessions were not taken away because he is a completely just man,” rather than Saldañini’s “so that he might be a completely just man.”20 As far as the fourth man (the wicked man for whom things go badly) is concerned, neither manuscript seems to preserve in what sense things go badly for him, and it is difficult to know whether the manuscripts do contain was part of Akiba’s original saying. In any case, the words about this wicked man connect

17 Becker, Avo de-Rabbi Natan, xvii and n. 55. The fact that MS R, in its introduction (22:13), already omits mention of the wicked man for whom things go well suggests that 22:13 in MS R was written on the basis of a text that already omitted this man in 22:14. Thus the errors in R may already be dependent on an earlier, faulty manuscript. Note that in 22:9–11, R. Jose’s saying about the four men, MS R omits discussion of the wicked man for whom things go badly, even though it mentions that man in the introduction in 22:9.

18 Saldañini, Fathera, 2–3.

19 Becker, Avo de-Rabbi Natan, ix n. 3, notes the unsuitability of the category of the Untext for ARN and other rabbinic works. That caution is duly noted here. It does not mean, however, that we cannot attempt to determine what Akiba most likely originally said.

20 What is said about the first man seems redundant: “It was destined that possessions were not to be taken away from him because he was able to persevere in his righteousness, and his possessions were not taken away from him, because he is a completely just man.” The formulation of the first half of this statement diverges from the pattern in the statements about the second and third men, where it is simply said that it was destined that possessions would or would not be taken away, but not why. “Because he is a completely just man” expresses the same idea as that he was “able to persevere in his righteousness,” and, despite the redundancy, is probably evidence that “because he is a completely just man” was the original reading.
the saying attributed to Akiba back to the lemma from 'Abot 1:10, "and hate lordship."21

If we assume that Saldarini's text (with the noted exception) is the most plausible reconstruction and that it reflects at least relatively faithfully Akiba's actual views, then it may give us important insight into the meaning of Akiba's saying in 'Abot 3:15.22 In 'Abot 3:15 Akiba says that everything is foreseen (הוֹדָע), but freedom of choice is given. As mentioned above, the verb הוהָע has often been interpreted in the sense of divine foresight. God sees what individual humans will do before they do it, but they decide what they do in their own freedom. Or, if the saying is read in light of other rabbinic statements about divine providence or Josephus' comments on the Pharisees, Akiba's saying can be taken to mean that God cooperates in bringing about the actions that humans do in freedom. Urbach rejected this interpretation, favoring the view that the point of God's seeing (הוֹדָע) everything is that God holds humans responsible for their actions freely undertaken. Urbach's reading is not implausible. For support one could point, as Urbach himself does, to Ps. Sol. 9:4: "Our works (are) in the choosing and power (עֵצוֹתא) of our souls ... and in your righteousness you [God] oversee ([מִצְוֹת] human beings.23 It is possible that עֵצוֹתא represents an original התיה, and God's overseeing human actions is reminiscent of the תיה of 'Abot 3:15.24 Against Urbach, however, Akiba's use of התיה in ARN B 22:13–15 suggests that the word means more than that God sees human actions and holds humans responsible for them. It includes an element of providence and even of divine justice. In agreement with this, the verb מִצְוֹתא used in Ps. Sol. 9:4 often connotes divine judgment: God "visits" punishment on humans.25

Thus I accept the interpretation of 'Abot 3:15 according to which Akiba is reconciling divine providence and human freedom.26 It is not simply a statement about divine observation. I suggest, however, that ARN B 22:13–15 gives us additional insight into the meaning of his statement. If we may assume that ARN B 22:13–15 contains authentic teaching of Akiba, it is impossible to accept that התיה in 'Abot 3:15 means that human actions or their outcomes are immutably fixed or even foreseen (contra Lauterbach and Finkelstein; see n. 6), for ARN B 22:13–15 suggests that human response can change them. In other words, התיה indicates an outcome that God foresees as a matter of divine justice but that is not immutably fixed. By divine justice, the righteous man should enjoy well-being; he should not lose his possessions. By divine justice, the wicked man should suffer; he should lose his possessions. But divine justice does not always work so straightforwardly within this world. Sometimes the righteous suffer, while the wicked prosper. Yet this too serves a divine purpose. The suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked give the righteous and the wicked room to respond to the promptings of divine justice as that is worked out in the circumstances of life in this world.

It was a prevalent rabbinic idea, and one that Akiba shared, that God lets the wicked prosper in this world as a reward for their fulfillment of a few commandments in order that he might fully punish them in the world to come, while he lets the righteous suffer in this world for their few transgressions so that he might fully reward them in the world to come.27 Why the righteous suffer was a question that occupied devout

21 See Saldarini, Fathers, 139 n. 19.
22 I am assuming, of course, that the commentary on R. Akiba's four types of men in ARN B 22:13–15 (in its original form) comes from Akiba and not from a later commentator. I see no reason to doubt that.
23 Cited by Urbach, Sages, 1.260.
24 In his Hebrew translation of Ps. Sol. 9:4, however, Mosheh Stein translates עֵצְוֹתא with תיה (“Psalms of Solomon,” Ha-Sefarim ha-Hishtamim (ed. A. Kahana; 2 vols.; Tel Aviv: Masadaḥ, 1959) 1.2450). See also Ps. Sol. 14:8: “the ways of men are known before him always, and he knows the secrets of the heart before they happen.”
25 Cf. Ps. Sol. 15:12: “And sinners shall perish forever in the eye of the Lord’s judgment, when God oversees ([מִצְוֹתא] the earth at his judgment.” Stein translates מִצְוֹתא here with תיה (“Psalms of Solomon,” 455), but he uses the verb תיה in Ps. Sol. 9:4 (p. 450). In the LXX מִצְוֹתא is the most frequent translation for תיה. For the use of the Greek verb in connection with divine punishment see, e.g., LXX Exod 23:34; Ps 88:6 (MT 89:8); 88:33 (MT 89:33); Zech 10:3, Jer 5:9, 25; 11:22, 29:9 (MT 49:8); 34:6 (MT 37:8); 36:32 (MT 39:35); 97:20 (MT 30:20); 43:11 (MT 44:11).
26 As others have noted, texts such as Gen 45:5-8 and Exod 7:3 naturally raise the question of divine providence and human freedom, and it is no surprise that the Pharisees and rabbis pondered the relationship between them. See Charles H. Manekin, “Introduction,” in Freedom and Moral Responsibility: General and Jewish Perspectives, ed. C. H. Manekin (Bethesda, Md.: University of Maryland Press, 1997) 9, and in the same volume, Daniel J. Lasher, “The Obligation of the ‘Parapet’ and Moral Responsibility,” 135.
27 Sifre Deut 307 on 224 (Finkelstein ed., 345). For the attribution of a similar saying to Akiba, see Gen. Rab. 33:1 (and paralleled in Lev. Rab. 27:1). See further E. P. Sanders, “R. Akiba’s View of Suffering,” JQR 53 (1972–73) 336–357. Sanders follows A. Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinc Doctrine of God I: The Names and Attributes of God (London: Oxford University Press, 1927) 186, in attributing this teaching first to Akiba. Yet it should be noted that in b. Qidd. 40b (see also ARN A 39; Schechter, Aboth, 60a [p. 119]) this idea is already attributed to R. Eleazar b. Zadok, whom Bischler identifies as the Eleazar b. Zadok active in the first century (in the generation before Akiba); see Studies in Sin and Atonement, 318–19. Wilhelm Bacher attributes this saying to the same Eleazar; see Die Agada der Tanaiten 2 vols.: Strassburg: K. J.
Jews in the pre-rabbinic period, as is clear from the Psalms of Solomon, and the authors of these psalms had their answers: God lets the righteous suffer in order to punish them for their few sins, to purify them, and to lead them to repentance. But the question also touched on divine justice. Divine justice can be vindicated (so it was argued by the rabbis) in that God lets the righteous suffer in this world as punishment for their few sins, so that he might reward them in the world to come, while he lets the wicked prosper in this world as a reward for their few good deeds, so that he can punish them in the world to come. In this way the rabbis sought to reconcile belief in divine justice with the reality of life in this world. It is within this framework that human action finds its place. Divine justice works through suffering and prosperity in this world, and such suffering and prosperity become means for prompting human responsive action. In the case of ARN B 22:13–15 specifically, that means that humans can persist in their righteousness, persist in wickedness, or repent of their wickedness and become more righteous. Thus when Akiba says that “all is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given,” the point is that there is divine justice and that God has providentially ordered the world, but within the framework of divine providence and justice humans are able to respond to their circumstances and are able to influence their ultimate destiny. They have freedom (יִתְרוֹן) to change their fate.

There is another rabbinic text that helps to illustrate this conception of divine providence and justice and human action. It appears in the commentary on Deut 22:8 in Sifre Deut 229:

“If (אֶפְרָאָה) the falling one (פֵּרָאָה) should fall (פֶּרֶד) from it [the roof of the house]” [Deut 22:8]. This one was destined (יהָיָה) to fall, but merit [or protection: חף] is brought about by the innocent (יִתְרוֹן), and guilt [or condemnation: זִכְרִית] is brought about by the guilty (גֵּיוֹן).”

30 Tröhner, 1899–1903: 148–49. (There was an Eleazar b. Zadok II in the generation after Akiba.) The words of Eleazar b. Zadok I at the time of Vespasian, after the latter had brought in a physician to strengthen Eleazar’s father Zadok, would seem to support the attribution of the idea to Eleazar b. Zadok I. “Father, give them their reward in this world so that they should have no merit with respect to you in the world to come” (Lam. Rab 1.15; cited by Bacher, Die Aguda, I.47). The Pharisees apparently held the same view. In ARN A 5, the Sadducees’ mockery of this Pharisaic belief is reported: “The Sadducees said, ‘It is a tradition amongst the Pharisees to afflict themselves in this world, yet in the world to come they will have nothing’” (Schneidler, 13b [p. 26])

31 See the texts cited in n. 16 and Sanders, “R. Akiba’s View,” 332–33.

32 Cf. already 2 Macc 6:12–2:17: God punishes his people because of their sins quickly, both to discipline them and to prevent their sins from reaching too great a measure. He lets the wicked go unpunished for a time, so that he may punish them when their sins have reached full measure.

33 Sifre Deut 229 on 22:8 (Finkelstein ed., p. 262).

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37 Sifre Deut 229 on 22:8 (Finkelstein ed., p. 262).

38 The commentary takes the participle (יִתְרוֹן) not as an indefinite subject but to indicate that the subject of the sentence was destined (יהָיָה) to fall.31 There is a similar interpretation of Deut 22:8, attributed to the School of R. Ishmael, in b. Shabb. 32a. There, in fact, it is said that the “falling one” was destined to fall “from the six days of creation.”32 What is interesting is that the rabbis regard the fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of the commandment of Deut 22:8 as changing (at least temporarily) the destiny of the man who had been set to fall by God’s decree.33 The one who fulfills the commandment is innocent or meritorious (גֵּיוֹן), and his innocence redounds to the benefit or protection (זִכְרִית) of the one who had been destined to fall.34 The one who does not fulfill the commandment is guilty (גֵּיוֹן), and his guilt leads to the confirmation of the doom (זִכְרִית) of the one who had been destined to fall.35 In this case one’s action or inaction affects the fate of another person, whereas in ARN B 22:13–15 it affects one’s own fate.6 But the idea that one person’s merit or
guilt can affect the fate of others is not foreign to the rabbinic concept of personal merit, 37 so this difference between Sifre Deut 229 and ARN B 22:13–15 does not negate the usefulness of the parallel. In both texts the same idea is at work, namely, that human actions can influence the destiny of a person within the framework of divine providence and justice. Clearly the interpretation of Deut 22:8 that we find in Sifre was not derived directly from the biblical text; rather Pharisaic/rabbinic concepts of divine providence and human freedom were applied to the biblical text, the Hebrew wording of which lent itself to such a reading.

If we return to ARN B 22:13–15 we can see how these concepts apply to each of the men individually. The first man is righteous, and he is destined by divine justice not to lose his possessions. Because he is able to persevere in his righteousness, he does not lose his possessions, thereby showing that he is a completely just man (cf. b. Ber. 7a). To put it in terms of Abot 3:15, this man freely continues in righteousness, and the outcome agrees with his God-ordained judgment.

Let us turn next to the third man. He is wicked, and so divine justice foresees for him that he should suffer (lose his possessions). He prospers, however, and God thereby gives him an opportunity to repent. We are reminded of statements such as that of Paul in Rom 2:4: “Do you not realize that God's kindness (τὸ γέγονεν) is meant to lead you to repentance?” or that of Wis 11:23, “You [God] overlook people’s sins, so that they may repent.” 38 We must note here that the idea that God allows the wicked man to prosper in order that he might repent differs from the idea that God allows the wicked to prosper in this world as a reward for their few good deeds so that he can punish them in the world to come. These two beliefs do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive, however, nor does the difference necessarily call into question the authenticity of Akiba’s words in ARN B 22:13–15. Rather, this is precisely the point of Akiba’s statement in Abot 3:15 that “freedom is given.” When the wicked prosper, they have a choice as to how they respond. They can either respond in gratitude by repenting, or they can persist in their b. Mak. 10b) that explain apparently accidental deaths as a result of divine providence (for which see Lasker, “Obligation,” 155–57, and Urbach, Sages, 1:267). The latter interpretations treat of unintentional (not freely chosen) actions.


38 See also Wis 12:10; 2 Pet 3:9; Midr. Eccl. 7:15; and Philo, Prov. 2:6: "In the same way God too the Father of reasonable intelligence has indeed all who are endowed with reason under His care but takes thought also for those who live a mispent life, thereby giving them time for reform and also keeping within the bounds of His merciful nature, which has for its attendant virtue and loving kindness well fitted to keep watch as sentry around God's world."

wickedness. In the former case, the God-decreed destiny for the wicked can be altered. In the latter case, God’s justice will follow inexorably to its end, which is the punishment of the wicked in the world to come. 39

As for the second man, the text-critical problems require that we speak with some caution about how divine justice and human response work in his case. However, the conception is apparently somewhat like that in the case of the third man. By divine justice the just man should not lose his possessions. But, presumably because of his few sins, he loses his possessions. Once again, God gives this man an opportunity to respond. He may use his suffering as an opportunity to repent and to become completely righteous. Even if he does not do so, however, he can be confident that God lets him suffer in this world so that he might receive full reward in the world to come. 40

39 Cf. the saying in Midd. Eccl. 7:15: “For three reasons, said R. Josiah, the Holy One, blessed be He, shows forbearance with the wicked in this world: perhaps they will repent, perhaps they will perform some precepts for which the Holy One, blessed be He, can reward them in this world, and perhaps righteous children will issue from them.” The rabbinic understanding of divine justice was flexible in that it allowed the rabbis to explain both the well-being and the suffering of the righteous in this world, and both the well-being and the suffering of the wicked in this world. They could interpret well-being in this world as confirmation of a person’s righteousness, in accord with biblical promises, or they could interpret well-being as God’s temporal reward for the wicked for their few acts of righteousness, confident that God would punish them in the world to come. They could interpret suffering as the confirmation of a person’s wickedness, or they could interpret it as God’s temporal punishment for the righteous for their few transgressions, confident that God would lavish rewards upon them in the world to come. An example of this flexibility is found in the story in b. Sanh. 10a of the visit of R. Elezer’s disciples to their teacher when he was ill. Among the visitors was R. Akiba. While the other disciples wept, Akiba laughed. Asked why he laughed, he answered: “As long as I saw that my master’s wine did not turn sour, nor was his flask withered, nor his oil putrefied, nor his honey become rancid, I thought, God forbid, that he may have received all his reward in this world leaving nothing for the world to come.” R. Eleazar told them that “If I see him lying in pain, I rejoice [knowing that his reward has been treasured up for him in the next].” R. Eleazar asked him: “Akiba, have I neglected anything of the whole Torah [so as to suffer for his sins now]?” Akiba replied: “Thou, O Master, hast taught us, ‘For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not’ [Ecc 7:20].” In this case Akiba thought that at first Eleazer’s possessions might be a sign of his wickedness rather than his righteousness. But once he saw that Eleazar was ill, he took the illness to be God’s punishment for the few sins of a righteous man; hence Eleazer’s possessions are presumptively now to be taken as evidence of his righteousness. In ARN B 22:13–15 Akiba can treat both possessions (the first just man) and loss of possessions (the second just man) as pertaining to the righteous. Presumably, then, this flexibility could extend to interpreting the possessions of a wicked man either as a temporal reward or as God’s way of trying to bring the wicked to repentance, in agreement with older tradition.

40 Cf. Ps. Sol. 13:10: “For the Lord will spare his devout, and he will wipe away their sins and throw them with discipline.”
We have considered some texts that help us understand what יִשָּׂרֵא means in 'Abot 3:15. Now it will be useful to turn to a text that may help us to understand better the meaning of יִשָּׂרֵא. In a comment on Exod 15:26 Simeon ben Azzai says:

Once a man desires (יִבְדַל) to hearken of his own will, he is led to hearken [literally: they cause him to hearken; that is, God causes (or allows) him to hearken] both when it is his will to do so and even when it is not his will. And if it be his will to forget, he will be led to forget [literally: they cause him to forget; that is, God causes (or allows) him to forget] even when it is not his will. Freedom of choice is given [יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא], as it is said: "The scorners He lets scorn but unto the humble He giveth grace" [Prov 3:34].

The Hebrew text being commented on, Exod 15:26, has an infinitive absolute (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא). Simeon takes the double appearance of the root יִשָּׂרֵא to mean that if a man decides to obey or to disobey, God confirms him in his decision. The nature of this “freedom of choice” is noteworthy. God does not force a person on a certain course, but once someone has chosen a course, God confirms that person in it, apparently even against his or her own will. Simeon does not speak about divine providence or justice, but the nature of God's participation is clear. Once again it is clear that the theology has not been derived from the biblical text but has been applied to it. The double appearance of the Hebrew root provided the opportunity to uphold both human freedom and divine providence. That forgetting is put into opposition to hearingken is due to the infinitive absolute of the verb יִשָּׂרֵא in Deut 8:19, as a similar passage shows:

"If you will hearken" (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא). On the basis of this passage the sages said: If a man hearkens to one commandment, he is given the opportunity to hearken [literally: they cause him to hearken; that is, God causes

41 Mek. Hayyusa’ 1 on Exod 15:26 (Horovitz-Rabin, 158; Lauterbach II.97). The translation follows Lauterbach.
42 The appearance of both an active participle and a הַיֵּשָׂרֵא of the verb יִשָּׂרֵא in Prov 3:34 made that verse an appropriate proof-text for Simeon. The passage continues: "Others say: If thou take a pledge thou wilt pledge" [Exod 22:25; if thou seizest a pledge once, in the end many pledges will be seized from you.]. These other interpreters suggest a different reading of the infinitive absolute: what you will do finally will be done to you.
43 Urbaach rejects this interpretation of Simeon’s words (Soges, 1.268–69). He translates יִשָּׂרֵא and יִשָּׂרֵא as “for benefit” and “not for benefit,” in agreement with Ben Azzai’s saying in ‘Abot 4:2 (see below). As Urbaach notes, however, יִשָּׂרֵא can have the sense of “perforce” (see e.g. 2 Sam. 7:11). Note that shortly before Simeon’s comment, R. Eleazar of Modin similarly interprets יִשָּׂרֵא in Exod 15:26 with reference to voluntary (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא) hearingken and to reference to obligatory (יִשָּׂרֵא, divinely enforced), non-voluntary or perhaps non-optimal (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא) hearingken.

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him to hearken] to many commandments. For it really says: "If you begin to hearken you will continue to hearken." If a man forgets but one commandment, he will be led to forget [literally: they cause him to forget] many commandments. For it says: "And it shall be, if you begin to forget, that you will continue to forget (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא)" [Deut 8:19].

It is probably this view of things that lies behind Simeon ben Azzai’s saying in ‘Abot 4:2:

Run to fulfill the lightest duty even as the weightiest, and flee from transgression; for one duty (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא) draws another duty in its train, and one transgression draws another transgression in its train; for the reward of a duty [done] is a duty [to be done], and the reward of one transgression is [another] transgression.

This saying illustrates Simeon’s point in the Mekilta that once one has begun on a course of obedience or disobedience, God lets the person continue on that course. If we may assume that Simeon’s use of the phrase “freedom of choice is given” (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא) is owing to his teacher (and colleague), then it gives us some insight into how Akiba intends the same phrase in ‘Abot 3:15. God allows humans to choose the course that they will follow and even confirms them in it. A saying attributed to Akiba elsewhere would seem to support this: "At first it [sin] is like the thread of a spider’s web, but ultimately it becomes like a ship’s cable."

The sayings about the righteous and the wicked in ARN B 22:13–15 might seem to contradict this concept. According to the latter, does not God actually change the course of the righteous and the wicked by sending them afflictions or prosperity, rather than confirming them in their chosen course? Two points, however, must be made.

44 Mek. Hayyusa’ 1 on Exod 15:26 (Horovitz-Rabin 157; Lauterbach II.93), and Mek. Bahodosh 2 on Exod 19:5 (Horovitz-Rabin 208; Lauterbach II.203). Again the translation follows Lauterbach.
45 Bacher notes that the relationship between Akiba and Ben Azzai was not as simple as that of a teacher to a student. (Die Agada, 1.406–07) In any case, he considers Azzai’s phrase to be dependent on Akiba’s dictum. (Die Agada, 1.412)
46 R. Akiba uses the phrase יִשָּׂרֵא, הבנה in speaking of the authority to punish anees given by God to an angel (e.g., S. Beers, Midrash Suto [Berlin: H. Izakowski, 1894] 19), but there is no evidence that this usage has anything to do with the usage in ‘Abot 3:15.
48 For a (later, Amoraim) case where God is said to overlook a person’s יִשָּׂרֵא, see Gen. Rab. 67:3 (Theodor-Albeck 2.756–57), cited by Avenarius, "Tension," 64–65. In this case, the protective power of a person’s merit (יתבנה דָּבָר יִשָּׂרֵא) causes God to prevent an act from happening (cf. n. 32 above).
First, the just man in ARN B 22:13 who persists in his righteousness and who is thus completely just may be regarded as an example of someone who pursues righteousness and whom God confirms in his righteousness. Second, the point of ARN B 22:13–15 is not that God uses the prosperity of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous to engineer certain outcomes, that is, to manipulate the righteous or the wicked into changing course. God allows the wicked to prosper and the righteous to suffer, and this allowance ultimately serves God’s ends, for it enables God to reward the righteous and punish the wicked in the world to come. God’s justice will prevail in the end (cf. ‘Abot 3:15: “all [лись] is foreseen [יֹתֵכַּה]”). But it is precisely within this framework that God makes room for human freedom. Prosperity and adversity are given of life in this world, and they become opportunities for the exercise of human freedom. When the righteous suffer, they can use that suffering as an opportunity for self-examination and repentance, and thereby they can become more righteous. In any case, they can be sure that their suffering in this world means that they will receive a full reward in the world to come. If the wicked prosper, they can in gratitude repent of their wickedness. If they persist in their wickedness, however, they must understand that the prosperity that they enjoy in this world is their reward, and they will face punishment in the world to come.

To say that God allows the wicked to prosper in this world in order that he might punish them in the world to come, or to say that God allows the righteous to suffer in this world in order that he might reward them in the world to come, is an interpretation of reality that seeks to reconcile divine justice with the circumstances of life in this world. To say that God allows the righteous to suffer so that they might be led to become even more righteous or that God allows the wicked to prosper so that they might repent does not mean that God manipulates human response. Rather, that is an interpretation of reality that seeks to make room for both divine providence and human freedom within the framework of divine justice.49

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Josephus, the Pharisees, and Stoicism

R. Akiba’s dictum in ‘Abot 3:15 has been taken to cohere with Josephus’s statements about the Pharisaic doctrine of divine providence and human responsibility. In light of the new insight into ‘Abot 3:15 that we have gained from ARN B 22:13–15, it will be useful now to turn to the question whether the proposed reading of ‘Abot 3:15 makes sense in relationship to Josephus’s statements about the Pharisees, as well as Josephus’s own view of history.

In A.J. 13:171–73 Josephus gives a very short description of the three main Jewish schools in existence at the time of Jonathan the Maccabee: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. What is peculiar about this particular description of the Jewish sects, in comparison with the descriptions in B.J. 2:119–166 and A.J. 18:11–22, is that the only topic that Josephus discusses is the schools’ views on fate (ελεπτικόν). The discussion of this topic has no clear connection with the history that comes before it or after it. It seems likely, as previous scholars have concluded, that Josephus has drawn here on a source that sought to present the Jewish sects in terms that would be understandable to a

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49 One may compare this interpretation of reality with other ancient explanations for the suffering of the virtuous and the well-being of the vicious. Some ancient thinkers attributed this phenomenon to chance (τύχη); see Eric Eliason, The Notion of That Which Depends on Us in Platonic and Its Background (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 131 and 132 n. 56. However, the idea that God or the gods or fate allows adversity to befall the virtuous in order that they might become stronger was a common idea in ancient thought, including Stoicism. See, for example, Seneca, De Provincia, 2.1–12 and 4.5–8, especially 4.7: “In like manner God hardens, reviews, and disciplines those whom he approves, whom he loves” (in tisaque deus quos probat, quos amat, indurat, recognoscit).
Greco-Roman audience. The topic of fate was chosen as the most suitable means of presenting the differences between the sects, because this topic was one of great interest to the philosophical schools of the time and because it could plausibly be argued that the three Jewish sects had significant differences on the topic of divine providence, if not on fate as such.51

In Vita 12 Josephus says that the Pharisaic sect was very similar to the Stoic school among the Greeks. Fate (εὐμερεία) was an extremely important topic in Stoic philosophy,52 and it is probable that when Josephus remarks on the resemblance of the Pharisaic sect to the Stoics, he has this topic in mind above all. Therefore, in considering to what extent Josephus's statements about the Pharisees support the interpretation of 'Aboth 3:15 given above, it will be helpful first to compare what Josephus has to say about fate and divine providence with what the Stoics taught.

In A.J. 13:171–73 Josephus places the Pharisees between the Sadducees and the Essenes on the spectrum of divine determinism and human responsibility. The Sadducees “do away with Fate”53 and hold that all human affairs do not receive their τέλος according to it, but rather “all things lie within our power (ἐναντίον δὲ εὖ μην οὐσίων κείσθαι),” so that we are responsible for our own well-being and suffering. The Essenes make fate the mistress of all things, so that “nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with her decree.” To the Pharisees is attributed a median position, such that “certain events are the work of Fate, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves (καί ἡμῶν) whether they shall take place or not.”54


52 See Bobzien, ibid.
53 Σαδδουκαίοι δὲ γὰρ μὲν εὐμερείαν ἐσφυράζουσιν καὶ συνήθειας in B.J. 2:164. For use of the verb εὐμερεία in discussions of Stoic thought, cf. Alexander of Aphrodisias, On Fate 1:13: the Stoics “do away with” (ἐναντίονος) the human power to choose and to do opposites (cited by Bobzien, Determinism, 361). Contrast B.J. 2:164, where Josephus attributes to the Sadducees belief in precisely such power.

while humans determine other things, in the other two places Josephus speaks of fate and humans cooperating in each and every action. This reflects a difference between the classical Stoic view on fate and human responsibility and some later modifications of that view. An examination of Josephus’s writings indicates that he himself held a view of history close to that of B.J. 2:163 and A.J. 18:13 (see below).

The Stoics defined fate as an eternally ordered chain, or better, interconnection of causes, such that everything that happens was determined to happen.55 The early Stoics identified fate with nature, with God or Zeus, and with reason (the λόγος), all of which are in turn alternative terms for the active principle that orders the universe.56 Some of the Stoics also identified fate with divine providence (σωφρονία, providentia) insofar as the divine will establishes the series of causes in the universe. Other Stoics, however, distinguished divine providence from fate, in order, apparently, to prevent the attribution of evil to the divine will. Therefore Cleanthes, for example, could argue that what comes about according to the dictates of providence also happens by fate, but not vice versa.57 The Stoics, drawing on ancient Greek ideas, could also identify fate with necessity (δύναμις) insofar as the latter is the power that governs all things. As we shall see, however, the relationship between fate and necessity among the Stoics was not one of simple identification, because the Stoics, in order to preserve human responsibility, denied that every individual event that was fated was necessary in the strict, logical sense of the word.58

One of the classic problems with which the Stoics had to wrestle, and what is of greatest interest to us here, is how belief in fate was to be reconciled with human responsibility. It is clear that the Stoics had to respond to the criticism, which was often raised against their theory of fate in antiquity, that if everything that happens is fated to happen, human responsibility is undermined. Why should I act in one way rather

55 Bobzien, Determinism, 44–53. The Stoic concept of a chain or interconnection of causes must be distinguished from the modern mechanical notion of cause and effect, where “the effect of one instance of causation is the cause of the next” (p. 50). Rather, in Stoic thought “causes are bodies while and insofar as they actively produce [or contribute to producing] an effect in a body. Both causes and effects thus have a duration” (p. 51). Chrysippus is said to have used the image of interweaving (ἀνάτομος) to illustrate the Stoic conception of the interconnection of causes (p. 50, with references).
56 Ibid., 17, 45.
57 Ibid., 46, 47.
58 Ibid., 136–39, 290 and 310–11. Bobzien points out that phrases such as necessitas facti and δύναμις εὐμερείας to describe the inevitability of fated events appear to arise only in later Stoic thought (p. 142).
than another if everything that happens is fated to happen anyway? In order to understand how the Stoics avoided (or at least sought to avoid) this charge of fatalism, it is necessary to be clear on how they understood some fundamental concepts.

First, Chrysippus (ca. 280–207 BCE), an early Stoic teacher, distinguished between what he called, on the one hand, "perfect and principal causes," and, on the other hand, "auxiliary and proximate" causes. He gave his cylinder and cone illustration to try to explain the point. When one sets in motion a cylinder or a cone, the push of the hand is an auxiliary cause. It is responsible for initiating the movements in the cylinder or the cone, but only in an auxiliary way. The movements of the cylinder and the cone (in the case of a cylinder, its rolling; in the case of a cone, its spinning) each depend upon the internal nature and therefore an internal "cause" of the cylinder and the cone. The cylinder has "rollability," whereas the cone has "spinability." In neither case is the internal (principal) cause a necessary response to the external (auxiliary) cause.59 It is similar in the case of human actions. Although human actions are always determined by antecedent causes, they depend on (the internal) assent of the rational faculty. Therefore no external cause can ever force (and therefore make necessary) a subsequent human action. At most an external cause can prompt human response.60

There is a second distinction made by some Stoics that, in connection with this distinction between kinds of causes, helps us understand how they upheld (or tried to uphold) both fate and human responsibility. That is the distinction between fate and necessity. As we saw above, the Stoics could identify fate with necessity, insofar as the latter is the power that governs all things. But in another sense Chrysippus distinguished between fate and "what is necessary" (tò άνάγκητον), a distinction that is connected with his modal logic. Chrysippus defined non-necessity as that which is neither forced to happen nor hindered from happening by an external force or hindrance. Something can be necessary only if it is compelled or hindered by an external force or hindrance.61 Thus there is no contradiction in saying that an event is fated to happen but that it does not necessarily happen.

60 Ibid., 255–71 and 290.
61 Ibid., 121–19, 142 and 310–13.

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From a modern perspective this solution to the problem of the relationship between fate and human responsibility may not seem fully satisfactory, because it only seems to push the problem back one step. That is to say, since the Stoics taught that the human disposition, which is responsible for assent and action, is itself part of the outworking of fate,62 how does fate in the end not undermine human responsibility? The early Stoics, however, were not concerned so much about the problem of freedom of choice in actions as they were about moral responsibility for actions. In other words, for the early Stoics the locus of moral responsibility lay not in the free will but in human assent and action, and insofar as a particular assent and the subsequent action were not strictly necessitated by an antecedent external cause the human could not escape responsibility for the action, even if the human assent and action, as functions of a person’s character, were in fact fated to happen.63 The problem of the freedom to act in different ways was taken up in later Stoicism and especially in Middle Platonism. The Stoic Epictetus (ca. 55–135 CE) laid the groundwork for this problem with his concept of choice (προορισμός).64 On different metaphysical premises and as a response to what they perceived as the weakness of the Stoic reconciliation of fate and human responsibility, Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists separated human actions from fate, such that human actions are freely chosen and are not fated, while fate brings about the consequences of those actions.65 At times Josephus’s understanding of fate and human responsibility seems to agree more with the theory of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism than with classical Stoicism.

It is within this context that Stoic and other discussions of the topic of "that which depends on us" (το άνάγκητον) or "those things that depend on us" (το άνάγκητον), a concept that appears prominently in Josephus’s descriptions of the Jewish sects, are to be understood. Aristotle had already used this concept in a general way to discuss the difference between voluntary and involuntary actions and between actions made with or without rational deliberation.66 In classical Stoicism the concept...
does not have to do with the question of the will or freedom of choice in action; rather, it is a term used to attribute moral responsibility on the basis of human actions as a function of a person’s character. “That which depends on us” refers to our actions, not insofar as we do them as a matter of indeterminate freedom, but insofar as they are the result of our virtuous or vicious character. As in the case of the concept of “choice,” however, the topic of “that which depends on us” would come to be used in later debates (especially in Middle Platonism) about determinism and the freedom to act in different ways, and Josephus’s use of the term to designate a realm of action attributable to the human (and even the human will) separate from fate seems to reflect that later development.

The questions that arise now are the extent to which Pharisaic doctrine, as described by Josephus, agrees with these Stoic ideas, and the extent to which Pharisaic doctrine, thus understood, may help explain Akiba’s statements in ‘Abot 3:15 and ARN B 22:13–15. First it must be said that Josephus’s descriptions of the Pharisees and the other Jewish sects, as well as his discussions of his view of history, are rich in vocabulary used among the Stoics, and there can be no doubt that these descriptions are written under the influence of the debates over fate and human responsibility that were current in the Greco-Roman philosophy of his day. Second, it may be observed that Josephus’s descriptions are not totally consistent with each other, and it is evident that his different descriptions reflect either Stoic ideas at different stages of development or popular presentations of Stoic ideas that lacked nuance. We have already noted the discrepancy between the description of the Pharisaic view on fate in A.J. 13:172 and the descriptions in B.J. 2:163 and A.J. 18:13. In addition, the attribution in A.J. 13:172 to the Pharisees of the view that certain events, but not all, are the work of fate, while others depend on us (ταύτα δ’ ἐφ’ ζωοτοκεῖον), does not reflect the classical Stoic view. Rather, it is the view that Josephus attributes to the Essenes, namely, that fate is the mistress of all things (ταύτα δ’ ζωοτικά), that is closer to the classical Stoic view, for we have evidence that some of the Stoics spoke of fate in precisely these terms. It seems that Josephus (or rather his source), working from a simplistic schema according to which the Sadducees were complete libertarians, the Essenes were absolute determinists, and the Pharisees occupied a middle ground between them, used the concept of “that which depends on us” loosely to circumscribe a realm of action separate from the working of fate. That usage, as noted above, deviates from the classical Stoic view and is closer to later philosophical developments that made “that which depends on us” a kind of cause separate from fate. Josephus’s description of the Pharisaic view in B.J. 2:163, where fate and “that which depends on us” work together, is closer to the classical Stoic view.

In A.J. 16:397, a passage that lends insight into Josephus’s view of history, he writes that fortune (τοῖχες), which he identifies here with fate (σφηματικόν), dedicates human actions (στειρά τίνας πράξεις)
ahead of time to the necessity of certainly happening (προσκεκλητόθη τῇ τοῦ γενέσθαι πάνως ἰδανή)⁵⁵. This passage is, once again, rich in vocabulary used by the Stoics.⁵⁶ Josephus’s conflation of fate and necessity represents either a later development in Stoic thought or a popularized understanding of Stoicism, since, as was shown above, while the early Stoics did identify fate with necessity, they did not conclude that fate makes all human actions happen necessarily.⁵⁶ Despite the statement that fate renders all human actions necessary, Josephus goes on to say that this doctrine of fate is to be interpreted in connection with (or is to be compared to) the doctrine that attributes something (τι) to us and that does not deny an element of human responsibility to differences in human actions. In this way Josephus clarifies that his view of history agrees with the Pharsiaic rather than the Essen doctrine of fate.⁷⁰ He also shows that his own view is closer to that which he attributes to the Pharisees in B. J. 2:163 and A. J. 18:13 than to the view that he attributes to them in A. J. 13:172, since he recognizes a role for fate in all human actions. Furthermore Josephus says that “these things” have been “philosophically discussed (πνευματικός) before our time in the Law,” which recalls his discussion of the Jewish “philosophies” (cf. B. J. 2:119 and 166, and A. J. 18:11) and indicates that he thinks that the Pharsiaic doctrine of fate and human responsibility is the one most in concurrence with the divine Law (cf. B. J. 2:162–63).

Thus, despite some inconsistencies, it is clear that Josephus’s view of history agreed with the doctrine of fate and human responsibility that he attributed to the Pharisees, and that this was in turn heavily dependent on Stoic thought, though not without differences from Stoic thought in its classical form. There are some other passages where Josephus discusses specific historical events that further support this conclusion. It will be useful to examine these here, because they will also indicate the way in which Josephus saw fate and human responsibility cooperating.

As we have seen, in A. J. 18:13 Josephus attributes to the Pharisees the view that it was God’s pleasure that the human will, with its virtue (δίκαιον) and vice (κακία), be fused with fate, and that this cooperation accounts for human actions. Josephus gives some specific examples of the cooperation of fate and human virtue and vice, and these examples show again that the view that Josephus attributed to the Pharisees was also the view that he adopted.⁷⁷

In B. J. 4:324–325 Josephus tells of the Zealots’ slaughter of the chief priests Ananus and Jesus, and he describes this event as the victory of vice (κακία) over virtue (δίκαιον). Yet shortly before this Josephus also says that the murder of Ananus was the ruling of fate (ἐξαγωγή) (4:297). Fate, Josephus writes, suggested (ἐνέπνευσεν) to the Zealots the idea of seeing open the gates of the city to allow entrance to the Idumeans, who proceeded to slaughter Ananus (4:316). Thus fate and human vice cooperated in his death. There is, however, a larger historical significance of this event for Josephus. Elsewhere Josephus praises Ananus’s diplomatic abilities and says that Ananus might have been able to prevent all-out war with the Romans (B. J. 4:321; cf. 2:651). His murder foreclosed that possibility and thus led to the prolongation of conflict. One result of the prolongation of the war was that the factions in Jerusalem slaughtered each other, and that led to the defilement of the temple. In Josephus’s view it was the defilement of the temple that led God to allow the Romans to conquer Jerusalem and burn the temple. Thereby God purged the temple of the defilement caused by the revolutionary causes (B. J. 4:323, 5:19 and 6:110; A. J. 20:166;

⁵⁵ Source: Josephus can speak of fortune in connection with the working of fate. Cf. B. J. 4:622, where he brings together fortune, divine providence, and fate (yet even here fortune seems to be thought of more in the sense of a fortunate coincidence of events than as a guiding power); cf. also B. J. 1:622 with 1:628 and with A. J. 16:397; and in B. J. 6:84 fate is responsible for a soldier’s fall, whereas in 6:63 fortune is responsible for such a fall (note that Josephus speaks of the inescapability of fate, while he emphasizes the uncertainty of Fortune [6:57]). But far more often he uses fortune to speak of the inconstancy of life and the changeableness of a person’s circumstances (e.g., exp. 8B. J. 4:40–42; A. J. 14:381, 18:299 and 20:57; see also B. J. 3:396 and 4:607; A. J. 15:179, 191 and 347; 17:122, 18:267; and 19:294). At times he can identify fortune with God, but in these cases fortune seems to be identified with God insofar as God is the one who brings changes in the circumstances of nations or people (B. J. 3:567, A. J. 15:374–76 and 19:16; cf. also B. J. 2:360 with 5:367). Elsewhere he distinguishes between fortune and God and brings fortune and divine providence (B. J. 3:391 [the reference to fortune here is text-critically uncertain]; A. J. 16:188 and 19:233). On fortune and God, see Lindner, Geschichte der Juden, 44–45, 92 and 143–44, where he argues that Josephus reinterprets the Greek τύχη concept via Jewish apocalyptic ideas in his connecting fortune with God as the one who causes the fortunes of nations to rise and fall. Josephus also uses fortune to speak of a person’s circumstances or lot in life (B. J. 1:353 and often) and in the sense of “good luck” (see especially the phrase δίκαιον τινος τύχης B. J. 1:45, 430 and 665; 4:438, 5:78, and 6:14).

⁵⁶ Besides fate and necessity, cf. the use of αἰσχύνοις (αἰσχύνοναι) among the Stoics (B. J. 3:393, 336).

⁵⁷ Josephus rarely uses ἀνάκοιτος (or ἀνακοιτος) in the sense of fate, but for possible examples of such a usage, see A. J. 7:322 and 10:246; B. J. 6:49 and 358, and 7:382 and 387.

⁷⁰ Since Josephus says in A. J. 16:397 that there is “nothing that is not brought about by her [Fate],” it would be possible to misinterpret Josephus as agreeing with the Essenes (see A. J. 13:172). Therefore Josephus clarifies his statement.

⁷⁴ Contra Lindner, Geschichte der Juden, 147 n. 1.
the city came as a result of human vice cooperating with divine providence.81 Although in A.J. 18:13 it is fate to which Josephus attributes the function of cooperation with human virtue and vice, it is clear from B.J. 2:162 that Josephus could identify fate with God. Therefore he could speak of God as cooperating with human actions to bring about a fated end. Thus in A.J. 1:14, in describing his purpose in writing his history, he comments:

But, speaking generally, the main lesson to be learnt from this history by any who care to peruse it is that men who conform to the will of God, and do not venture to transgress laws that have been excellently laid down, prosper in all things beyond belief, and for their reward are offered by God felicity; whereas, in proportion as they depart from the strict observance of these laws, things (else) practicable become impracticable, and whatever imaginary good they strive to do ends in irretrievable disasters (τὰς μαρτυρίας οὖν ἀνακηρύξεται).

The fact that Josephus makes "irretrievable disasters" dependent on human lawlessness and not merely a function of the working of fate shows

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80 Cf. Lindner, Geschichteausfassung, 93. According to B.J. 6:6250 and 6:676-68, the second temple was burned on the same day of the year that the first temple was burned, and this, says Josephus, was a matter of fate (τὸ ἐξ ἀνάμνησις ἡμέρας). In A.J. 10:277-81 Josephus interprets Daniel's prophecies as foreshadowing the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple and counts this as an instance of God's providence (προβολής). He rejects the Stoic and Epicurean view that excludes divine providence and that holds that the world operates by automatism (ἀυτοματικός; ἀυτοματομορία). Note that in Siret Num 112 (Horowitz-Rabin, 121) the terms Epicureans and Sadducees are used in close connection with each other (though they are not completely identified with each other), see Ludwig Wächter, "Die unterschiedliche Haltung der Pharisäer, Saduceer und Essene zur Heiligung im vorchristlichen Jensen," ZBRG 21 (1969) 104. In 'Abot 2:14 the Epicurean (アップοικός) is a religious skeptic, and the context suggests that such a person does not believe in divine retribution. It is likely that the Pharisees and the Sadducees viewed the difference between themselves and the Sadducees as analogous to the difference between Stoics and Epicureans. See also Lindner, Geschichteausfassung, 94.

81 In B.J. 2:539-40 Josephus reports that the Romans were close to capturing the city, when they suddenly retreated, thus prolonging the war. The reason that Josephus gives for the retreat is that God "because of those miscreants [his revolutionaries], had given for the retreat that is God," (τὰς ἐκτάσεις τῶν τούτων ἐν τῷ ἀληθευτικῷ τῷ ἀληθευτικῷ). In other words, God allowed the war to continue so that the Zealots could continue their fighting, defile the Temple with blood, and bring the Romans upon city and temple. In B.J. 2:532 Josephus tells how Florus bribed some Roman soldiers not to capture Jerusalem, even when they were able to do so, which led to the prolongation of the war, so that the Jews suffered "irretrievable disasters" (ἀνακρίβειας παραπληροφορίας). On the use of this term in connection with divine punishment, see on A.J. 1:14 below. See also B.J. 4:104.
that he did not hold to a simple divine predetermination of events. Rather it is the consequences of human actions that are made irretrievable by fate or by God. Divine justice works inexorably, and it is the part of humans to conform their lives to the will of God as laid down in his Law.\textsuperscript{83} As noted above, here Josephus seems to be closer to Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism than to classical Stoicism in the view that it is not human actions so much as their consequences that are the outworking of fate.

Given Josephus's view of history, there can be no doubt that he basically agreed with the understanding of the relationship between fate (divine providence) and human responsibility that he attributed to the Pharisees in \textit{B. J.} 2:163 and \textit{A. J.} 18.13. That should be no surprise, since he tells us himself that he followed the teaching of the Pharisees (\textit{Vita} 12). But our analysis helps us understand how Josephus understood fate (divine providence) and human responsibility to cooperate. God (or fate) does not determine human actions. Rather God (or fate) brings about situations that allow for - provide the opportunity for - the exercise of human virtue and vice. Together God (or fate) and human actions bring about a fated end. So, for example, God, by allowing the prolongation of the war, gave the Zealots an opportunity to act either in virtue or in vice. Their vicious actions led to the defilement of the temple and to the eventual Roman conquest, with the result that God had the Romans purge the temple by burning it. The destruction of the temple was fated, to be sure, but the Zealots' vicious actions, prompted (though not necessitated) by fate, were required in order for the fated end to be accomplished.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} Josephus gives numerous examples of "irretrievable disasters" that are brought about by the cooperation of God and human actions. In \textit{B. J.} 2:411 he says that after the cessation of sacrifices for the emperor the chief priests and the most notable Pharisees saw that they were faced with irretrievable disaster (\textit{ἀνεχώρησαν τοὺς συμφόρους}). He links the dissension in Jerusalem over this issue directly with the factional violence and hence the pollution of the temple (2.422-24) that would lead to the destruction of the city according to God's will. In \textit{B. J.} 5:732 he appeals to the rebels to surrender to the Romans rather than to bring "irretrievable disaster" (\textit{ἀνεχώρησαν τοὺς συμφόρους}) on themselves and the city. In \textit{A. J.} 16:188 he attributes to divine wrath or to fortune the increase in Herod's domestic troubles that led to "irretrievable disaster" (\textit{ἀνεχώρησαν τοὺς συμφόρους}) as a result of his impiety in opening David's tomb.

\textsuperscript{84} In \textit{B. J.} 4:297-98 fate, by bringing about certain conditions (adverse weather, suggests \textit{κρατίσων ἐπιστράτευσα}) a certain course of action to the Zealots (opening the city without detection), but it does not compel that action. According to \textit{A. J.} 8:419-20, fate enters human souls and flatters them, so that they are deceived. They incorrectly interpret oracles to their advantage (\textit{B. J.} 6:315; \textit{A. J.} 8:418) or dismiss them altogether (\textit{B. J.} 4:386 and 6:315). Even if they believe such oracles, their errors bring destruction on them (\textit{B. J.} 4:388).

\textit{Rabbi Akiba on Divine Providence and Human Freedom}\n
\textit{'Abot 3:15 Again}

If we return to \textit{'Abot} 3:15 and \textit{ARN} \textit{B} 22:13-15 in light of this discussion of Josephus, we can see how Akiba's statements are related to older Pharisaic doctrine. We have seen that the Stoics (at least the early Stoics) did not believe that fate compels human action; rather, fate prompts human action by providing an external stimulus to which the human can, but does not have to, assent and then act. Josephus's (Pharisaic) view of history is compatible with that view. Such an understanding of fate and human action can also explain Akiba's view as that can be reconstructed from \textit{'Abot} 3:15 and \textit{ARN} \textit{B} 22:13-15. God does not compel humans to act in certain ways, but, through his providential ordering of the world, God can and does prompt humans to respond to him.

There is one tradition attributed to Akiba that may seem to contradict the interpretation offered here. In b. \textit{'Abod. Zar.} 55a we read of this exchange between a certain Zunin and Akiba:

\textit{Zunin} said to R. Akiba: "We both know in our heart that there is no reality in an idol; nevertheless we see men enter [the shrine] crippled and come out cured. What is the reason?" He replied, "I will give you a parable: 'To what is the matter like? To a trustworthy man in a city, and all his townsmen used to deposit [their] money in his charge without witnesses. One man, however, came and deposited [his money] in his charge with witnesses; but on one occasion he forgot and made his deposit without witnesses. The wife [of the trustworthy man] said to [her husband], 'Come, let us deny it.' He answered her, 'Because this fool acted in an unworthy manner, shall I destroy my reputation for trustworthiness?' It is similar with afflictions. At the time they are sent upon a man the oath is imposed upon him, 'You shall not come upon him except on such and such a day, nor depart from him except on such and such a day, and at such an hour, and through the medium of so and so, and through such and such a remedy.' When the time arrives [sic] for them to depart, the man chanced to go to an idolatrous shrine. The affictions plead, 'It is right that we should not leave him and depart, but because this fool acts in an unworthy way, shall we break our oath?'\textsuperscript{85}

Urbač cites this story and states that Akiba "maintained the view that \textit{καίγεται} [sic] ['fate'] determined the time when the pains would come on and when they would cease, and likewise the remedy by which the cure would be effected. The conduct of the person concerned is unable to change anything in the chain of causation or in the natural order of the events. The future is necessarily predetermined."\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{83} Urbač, \textit{Sages}, 1.261.
This story might suggest that Akiba did believe in an immutable divine determination. As Urbach himself points out, however, the context of this story is not a discussion of divine providence and human freedom. The context is a discussion of idolatry. The point of the story is that miraculous cures in shrines devoted to idols offer no proof for the reality of idols. It is God who determines the day and time of affliction and healing. The man’s visit to the idolatrous shrine certainly reveals his sinfulness. There is no indication, however, that at issue is the question whether the man’s sinning or not sinning could alter the outcome. In the context of the story the primary function of the man’s visit to the shrine and of the coincidence of his miraculous healing with his visit is to raise the question of the reality and efficacy of idols. The man’s healing does not threaten belief in human freedom, but rather belief in monotheism. In recognition of this, Urbach goes on to ask whether it really was Akiba’s view that “the afflictions that were due to go were compelled to do so, and that the sin committed by the ailing person could not change this ‘compulsion’.” Urbach points out that in a later version of the story the man is said to be righteous, but because he committed apostasy (and so became wicked) God gave him his reward (the healing) in this world so that he could punish him in the world to come. In other words, the later version connects the story to the rabbinc theory of divine justice that we have discussed above. Although this connection is very likely secondary, even the older form of the story in b. *Abod. Z Key.* 55a would not be incompatible with Akiba’s understanding of divine justice in ARN B 22:13–15: God allows good things to happen to the wicked in order that they may repent. There is no warrant for reading the story as an Akiban lesson on absolute divine predetermination.

'Abot 3:16

The interpretation of 'Abot 3:15 offered thus far would be substantially strengthened if we could find another text that supports our interpretation. As it happens, in 'Abot 3:16, immediately following Akiba’s dictum in 3:15, there is a similitude, also attributed implicitly to Akiba by its placement in the series, which does support our interpretation of 3:15. We conclude our textual analysis, then, with a brief treatment of this similitude.

He [Akiba] used to say: All is given against a pledge, and the net is cast over all living; the shop stands open and the shopkeeper gives credit and the account-book lies open and the hand writes, [and every one that wishes to borrow let him come and borrow]; but the collectors go their round continuously every day and exact payment of men with their consent or without their consent, [for they have that on which they can rely]; and the judgment is a judgment of truth; and all is made ready for the banquet.

We begin with some textual and literary-critical observations. Variations of the similitude appear in ARN A 39:5, where it is without attribution, and in ARN B 44:11, where it is attributed to R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean. In both versions of ARN the similitude is preceded by what is clearly a parallel to 'Abot 3:14. Of these two versions, the similitude in version A is closer to 'Abot 3:16, the similitude in version B being rather truncated and some of its elements appearing in a different order from 'Abot 3:16. Comparison of the three versions leaves little doubt that 'Abot 3:16 preserves the similitude in the oldest form. The
version in ‘Aboth 3:16 is characterized by an almost poetic stichometry,96 which testifies to its originality over against ARN A and ARN B. As for the attribution to Akiba, that is likely, since the theme of creditors, debtors, and pledges seems to have been typical of his parables.97 Moreover, as we shall see, the point of the similitude coheres with Akiba’s sayings in ‘Aboth 3:15 and ARN B 22:13–15.

As Karl Marti noted, the actual similitude about the shopkeeper is set off from the first line (“all is given ... over all living”) and the last line (“and the judgment ... ready for the banquet”), which are not strictly part of the similitude.98 These two lines, however, are by no means unrelated to the similitude. The first half of the first line states that “all is given against sureties” ( opendir יפת пу), meaning that all that a person is (and has) is, as it were, on loan from God, for which the person’s life is itself security.99 The similitude of the shopkeeper makes a similar point when it says that the shopkeeper gives credit. The second half of the first line states that “the net is cast over all the living.” If, as is probable, this is an

parallel to ‘Aboth 3:16. Note also that in the similitude in version B the “collector” has apparently equated with God, an equation that is inappropriate (cf. Steenbergen, “Das Leben,” 206–08). Steenbergen, however, thinks it possible that the longer reading in ‘Aboth 3:16 is the latest of the three versions (see pp. 197–200). He was unable to take into account the evidence from Becker’s synoptic edition of ARN before the submission of his manuscript (p. 199 n. 10). But the longer reading that Schecchter supplemented from MS Eptstein (Steenbergen, “Das Leben,” 197; Schecchter, Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, 59a [p. 117] n. 3) is largely, though not completely, supported by MS Oxford Opp. 95 (see Becker, Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, 2:4), which may speak for the originality of the longer reading as found in ‘Aboth, contra Steenbergen.96

96 (1) All is given against a pledge, and the net is cast over all living; (2) the shop stands open and the shopkeeper gives credit; (3) and the account-book lies open and the hand writes; (4) and every one that wishes to borrow let him come and borrow; (5) but the collectors go their round continually every day and examine (of them) (6) and every creditor on without their consent, (or for they have that on which they can rely); (7) and the judgment is a judgment of truth; and all is made ready for the banquet.

97 Contrast Steenbergen, “Das Leben,” 197. But see Bacher, Die Agada, 1:331–32, 335, and the parable in Midrash Zuta on Song of Songs cited on p. 331 n. 3 (see Bacher, Midrash Zuta, 19). The statement that the “judgment is a judgment of truth (פורע צדק) agrees with Akiba’s statement elsewhere that there is no possible argument against God’s word but “every word [of God] is in accordance with truth and every decision in accordance with justice (נֵיבִּיה עָלַיִם אֵין וְשָׁלְמָה לִגְּדוֹל)”; see Mek. Bezahah 6 on Exod 14:29 (Horovitz-Rabin, p. 112; chapter 7 in Leuba, p. 340). This translation follows Leuba. In the dispute between R. Akiba and R. Pappas in this passage, Akiba upholds both human free will and divine justice. Akiba apparently rejects any arbitrariness in God’s justice; see the commentary in Bacher, Die Agada, 1:318–19.


99 See n. 90.


101 Marti, ‘Aboth, 84; Albeck, Shishah Shitra Mishnah, 367.

allusion to Eccl 9:12 and/or Ezek 12:13.101 then it is an image for a moment of judgment (perhaps at death) from which no one can escape.102 The similitude makes a similar point when it speaks of an open book inscribed with a person’s debts, thus a basis for accounting that no one can gainsay. After the similitude, the first half of the last line once again introduces the motif of judgment: “The judgment is a judgment of truth.” These words correspond to the open account book. The judgment is true because it is based on an objective record of one’s debts. The second half of the last line, “all is made ready (פורע צדק) for the banquet,” does not relate to anything in the similitude directly, but the image of the banquet, symbolizing eschatological salvation, is connected to the similitude theologically by the themes of eschatological judgment and of ordering one’s life in anticipation of it.103

We now turn to comment on some specific elements of the similitude. The image of the shopkeeper extending credit (פורע צדק) employs terminology that is used in rabbinc literature in contexts of (1) God rewarding the wicked in this world for their few good deeds, so that he can punish them in the world to come; and (2) God’s forbearance of sinners. Thus in ARN B 44 our similitude is immediately followed by this saying:

To the wicked credit is extended (פורע צדק), but to the just credit is not extended (פורע צדק). The wicked are extended credit in this world as though they were people who kept the Torah and as though their evil deeds are not remembered. Why is this? To give them the reward for the light commandment which they kept in this world, so that He might punish them in the age to come. The just are chastised in this world like men who burned the Torah and whose good deeds are not remembered. Why is this? To punish them with the loss entailed by a minor infraction which they committed in this world in order that He might give them a rich reward, complete in the age to come.104 (44:12–15)

We have here the now familiar idea that God lets the wicked prosper in this world as a reward for the light commandment that they have ful-

102 Steenbergen, “Das Leben,” 202–03 and 210–11, argues that the motif of the inescapability of judgment is a secondary moralization of the similitude, and that the original sense was the inevitability of death. But that is unlikely. The similitude itself clearly has judgment in view. Steenbergen is probably correct, however, that death is also in view here (see n. 33 above). Judgment comes at the moment of death (or after it).

103 Cf. ‘Aboth 4:16: “R. Jacob said: ‘This world is like a vestibule before the world to come: prepare yourself (יִנְנָךְ לָבֶן) in the vestibule that you may enter the banqueting hall.’” This saying is attributed to Akiba in the Kaufmann manuscript.

104 The translation follows Saadurani, Fathers, 275–76; cf. Schecchter, Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, 62a (p. 123); Becker, Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, 379. The word פורע צדק, which Schecchter emended to פורע צדק and which Saadurani translates as “complete,” probably means “from what is due to them”; cf. Sifre Deut 307 on Deut 32:4 (Finkelstein ed., 345).
stems from the fact that Akiba holds to the view that God visits temporal punishments upon people already in this world for their sins, which punishments do not, however, exclude a final judgment.

The sense of the statement that the collectors demand payment from people for what is due is not immediately clear. The statement does not fit within the imagery of the similitude. How could a person who is being visited by a debt collector not know that he is being visited? Theologically, however, the statement is comprehensible. The phrase can be translated as “with his consent or without it” (cf. Danby) or “whether he recognizes it or not.” The idea is presumably that people suffer temporal punishments for their sins, and they can either accept them as such or not, or, according to the second translation, they can either recognize them as such or not. Here the Psalms of Solomon may again provide some useful parallels. In Ps. Sol. 10:1–2 we read:

Happy is the man whom the Lord remembers with rebuking, and protects from the evil way with a whip (that he may) be cleansed from sin that it may not increase.

The one who prepares (his) buck for the whip shall be purified, for the Lord is good to those who endure discipline.

This text gives an example of a righteous person who accepts temporal punishments from God. The righteous person knows that the punishments are for his own good, because they cleanse him of his sins.

A second text (3:4–10) illustrates the sense of the second possible translation, namely, that a person may or may not recognize temporal punishments for what they are:

The righteous does not lightly esteem discipline from the Lord; his desire is (to be) always in the Lord’s presence.

The righteous stumbles and proves the Lord right; he falls and watches what God will do about him; he looks to where his salvation comes from.

The confidence of the righteous (comes) from God their savor; sin after sin does not visit the house of the righteous.

The righteous constantly searches his house, to remove his unintentional sins.


110 Jastrow, 316.

112 Cf. Stemberger, “Das Leben,” 206–08, who cites several rabbinic texts in which the image of “collectors demanding debt” is used for temporal punishments sent by God, and these temporal punishments call for the sufferer to acknowledge God’s justice. As Stemberger notes, the temporal punishments are almost viewed as acts of fate (Schicksal), which demand a response from those who suffer them.
He atones for (sins of) ignorance by fasting and humbling his soul, and the Lord will cleanse every devout person and his house. The sinner stumbles and curses his life, the day of his birth, and his mother’s pains. He adds sin upon sin in his life; he falls—his fall is serious—and he will not get up.

At issue is how people interpret their suffering. The righteous person recognizes that his suffering is due punishment for his sins, and he uses that suffering as an opportunity for repentance and self-examination. The sinner does not understand why he suffers. When he suffers he curses his life and never learns the goodness of God’s discipline (cf. 9:6; 10:3).

What all of the foregoing suggests for the interpretation of the similitude in ‘Abot 3:16 is that people have freedom to interpret and to respond to their well-being and their suffering. They can respond to the temporal punishments that come upon them as an opportunity for repentance, or they can ignore them and persist in wickedness. Likewise, they can respond with gratitude to God’s forbearance in punishing sins or not respond. This freedom to respond to the promptings of divine justice is precisely Akiba’s point in ARN B 22:13–15. The similitude is a call to all people—both the righteous and the wicked—correctly to interpret the working of divine justice in their lives so as to be prepared for the final judgment. Thus the similitude in ‘Abot 3:16 confirms our interpretation of ‘Abot 3:15 in light of ARN B 22:13–15. We also have a possible indication of how the first and second halves of ‘Abot 3:15 are related. The second half of ‘Abot 3:15, on divine judgment, would, however, require a separate treatment.

We have found that the tradition attributed to R. Akiba in ARN B 22:13–15 significantly illuminates how Akiba understood divine providence and human freedom to cooperate according to ‘Abot 3:15. God’s providence does not lie in foreordaining human actions, nor in mere watching of them, nor even in foreseeing them, as others have argued. Rather, through God’s providential ordering of the world, divine justice prompts human action in response to the circumstances of the world. Divine justice moves towards its inexorable end, and in that sense all is foreseen, but divine justice does not operate without regard to human freedom and responsibility. This interpretation of ‘Abot 3:15 and ARN B 22:13–15 receives support from the similitude in ‘Abot 3:16.

This understanding of divine providence and human freedom is similar to the classical Stoic view that fate prompts, but does not strictly necessitate, human action. Josephus’s accounts of the Pharisaeic doctrine of fate and human responsibility, as well as his statements about his own view of history, provide additional confirmation for this interpretation of ‘Abot 3:15. For Josephus, divine providence offers opportunities for the exercise of virtue and vice, and such virtue and vice cooperate with divine providence in bringing about events. Thereby divine providence (or fate) prompts, but does not necessitate, human action.

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113 The stumbling of the righteous and of the sinner (3:5, 9) probably refers not to their sins but to their suffering; see Michael Witzens, who adds Proverbs 24:16–18 as a parallel, in Sinners and the Righteous: A Comparative Study of the Psalms of Solomon and Paul’s Letters (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995) 39; following H. E. Ryle and M. R. James, ΨΑΛΜΟΙ ΣΩΛΟΜΟΝΟΣ: Psalms of the Pharisees, Commonly Called the Psalms of Solomon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891) 35.

114 Cf. also Ps. Sol. 18:4: “Your [God’s] discipline for us (so) as (for) a firstborn son, an only child, to divert the receptive person (אֹמֵד בְּרֶם כְּתוֹבָה) from unintentional sin.”

115 This is somewhat reminiscent of the Stoic idea that the wise man submits to fate (see Hobbes, Determinism, 354).

116 One can therefore give the whole of ‘Abot 3:16 a more positive interpretation than that implied by Stemberger, “Das Leben,” 211.

117 Here Josephus stands close to classical Stoicism. Elsewhere it seems that Josephus thinks that divine providence (or fate) brings about the consequences of actions that humans do on their own power apart from fate. In this aspect Josephus stands closer to the later Stoics and the Middle Platonists than to classical Stoicism.