Rabbinic literature tells the story of Johanan ben Zakkai’s escape from Jerusalem during the Great Revolt (A.D. 66-70) and subsequent meeting with Vespasian in four different, but related versions. We shall attempt to explain the origin and development of these four versions by an analysis of their similarities and differences. The story occurs in slightly different form in the two versions of Abot de Rabbi Nathan [The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan], designated by Schechter as versions A and B 1). These two similar accounts of Johanan’s escape form together one tradition in the transmission of the story. Another version of the story is told in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin 2). The final version of the escape story is found in Lamentations Rabbah 3), and with Gittin forms another tradition in the transmission of the story.

Scholars have experienced constant and severe problems in dating rabbinic materials. In most cases neither the final compilations nor the traditional (and usually earlier) materials can be dated with any certainty. The Babylonian Talmud received its basic form in the fifth


3) Lamentations Rabbah 1:5 (31). The edition of Lamentations Rabbah referred to is that published in New York: Tiferet Zion Publication Society, 1963 (where the escape story is § 32). English quotations are taken from the Soncino edition, eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London 1939). This document will be referred to as Lam. Rab.
century ⁴), a date generally accepted by scholars. Lamentations Rabbah is a collection of earlier interpretations and sermon materials. Strack calls it one of the oldest Palestinian midrashim and dates it contemporary with the Palestinian Talmud ⁵). ARN has often been dated to the seventh to ninth centuries, when the other minor tractates of the talmud were edited. More recently J. Goldin has suggested a date in the third to fifth century ⁶). All of these estimates derive from general considerations and few seem capable of substantiation by detailed and suasive arguments. Even if we do accept a date of final composition, we must still analyze the sources for signs of oral and written development. Unfortunately, we are not dealing with a recognized and often used literary form whose development can be dated and controlled. Therefore, we must derive all our evidence from an analysis of the four versions themselves.

We shall preface our detailed, comparative analysis with a few general comments and an hypothesis. The versions of the escape story in Gittin and Lam. Rab. are closely related. Lam. Rab. contains expansions and additions which seem to be developments of and additions to the story as found in Gittin ⁷). The story as told in ARNA manifests a complex and more sophisticated literary style which gives clear motivation for Johanan ben Zakkai's actions and provides for his later meeting with Vespasian ⁸). Consequently, ARNA probably reached its present form at a relatively late period in the tradition. ARNB generally agrees with ARNA, but has two major characteristics in common with Lam. Rab. and Gittin: the hostility of the gatekeepers and the prediction that Vespasian will be emperor preceding Vespasian's grant of Jamnia to Johanan. Neusner suggests that ARNB, which contains elements from the Gittin-Lam. Rab. tradition and from ARNA, is a composite of the two ⁹). I will argue that all four versions of the escape story depend upon a Vorlage, a basic, original story which then developed through two traditions into four versions. Therefore, the peculiarities of ARNA, along

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⁷) Jacob Neusner, Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakcai (Leiden 1970), p. 166. We might argue that Gittin is an abbreviation of Lam. Rab., but this seems less probably, as we shall see.