

# Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Me'ir, the Talmud, and Menippean Satire

Daniel Boyarin

## 1. Who Was Rabbi Meir?

Who Was Rabbi Me'ir?

The grave of Rabbi Meir Baal Hanes is one of the holiest sites in the Jewish world. Rabbi Meir is known as “Baal Hanes” which means miracle maker. Very few know his real name, thought to be Rabbi Nahori or Rabbi Mischa. He was called Meir because it means “to illuminate,” as he brought his followers to know the light of G-d.<sup>1</sup> The Talmud states that Rabbi Meir was one of the most important scholars of the second century C.E. He was one of Rabbi Akiva's students and an active participant in the Bar Kochbah revolt. Rabbi Meir was the author of Haggadot and Halachot that are still studied today. Although he was a revered scholar, he was a very humble man who loved the land of Israel. Though he died in The Diaspora, he was brought to Tiberias to be buried on holy soil. After his death, thousands of Jews continue to come to his grave to receive his blessings and miracles.



How To Order blessings at the rabbi meir grave

Simply choose a blessing from the list provided, fill out the appli-

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

1. For a recent discussion of the relation of Rabbi Me'ir to light and light symbolism, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Rabbi Me'ir, the Illuminated and the Illuminating: Interpreting Experience,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden, 2006), pp. 227–43.

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cation form with your information, and we will provide you with a video record sent to your inbox within 15 business days for just 36\$.  
Order Form for Blessings by the rabbi.



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Fill out the application form with the information regarding the person you would like the candle to be lighted for his behalf. We will light the candle on your behalf and send you an authentic certificate of the candle lighting to your email within 15 days for just 18\$.

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2. [www.jewishbless.com/pages/rabbi.html](http://www.jewishbless.com/pages/rabbi.html)

DANIEL BOYARIN is the Hermann P. and Sophia Taubmann Professor of Talmudic Culture at the University of California, Berkeley, where he teaches in the rhetoric and Near Eastern studies departments. His most recent book, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (2004), won the award for historical research from the American Academy of Religion in 2006, the year in which he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This essay is part of a forthcoming book, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbits*, which will appear in 2009, Deo volente. He doesn't think that venues like this are the occasion for humor.

Were Rabbi Me'ir Catholic, one dares to imagine that a life like this would justify beatification, at least, if not canonization. There are, after all, certainly the requisite miracles both in life and in death, for as another website would have it:

Some charities in Eretz Yisrael call themselves the “Charities of Rabbi Me'ir Baal Hanes.” This is a reference to a story told in the Talmud about the great Sage, Rabbi Me'ir, who was able to ward off serious dangers to himself and others by the simple declaration of “G-d of Me'ir, answer me!” It is a tradition that one who gives charity in memory of Rabbi Me'ir merits having his prayers answered in the merit of this great tzaddik [holy man]. Rabbi Me'ir's tomb in Tiberias is a popular site for visiting and praying to have miracles performed in the merit of this “master of the miracle”.<sup>3</sup>

The storied burial site of the second-century Palestinian Rabbi Me'ir in Tiberias is virtually the Lourdes of the Jews, visited more often than any other such site in the Jewish world, and myriad miracles of healing and other saving graces are known to have been caused by him since the Middle Ages and will be attributed to him in the future. It fell to his fate, however, to be a Jew and not a Catholic, so absent any formal notion of naming saints in rabbinic Judaism, his apparent proximity in lifestyle to Catholic saints will have to do for his canonization in this collection of hagiographies. The modern Rabbi Me'ir somehow seems—not so surprisingly perhaps—closer in his profile, not only to a St. Jude, but to a nineteenth-century Hassidic *Wunderrabbiner* or a twentieth-century North African miracle-working saint than to any figure that we could locate in late antiquity. Going back, however, to the time and text in which his “biography” came into being, the Babylonian Talmud, we will find—again not surprisingly—a somewhat different profile: earthier, wilder, indeed an altogether rather indecorous affair.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I want to interrogate this

3. Rabbi Meridel Weinbach, “Rabbi Me'ir the Master of the Miracle,” [ohr.edu/yhiy/article.php/984](http://ohr.edu/yhiy/article.php/984)

4. Although he is a Palestinian Rabbi of the second century, my interest here is in his legends as found in the Babylonian Talmud. His hagiographic narratives by the redactor/authors known in scholarly parlance as the *stamma'im*, including the very narrative that afforded him (much later) his nickname and power, belong, therefore, to late antiquity. Although at least some of these stories have partial sources or earlier versions in Palestinian literature, they are told in the Babylonian Talmud in the Babylonian Aramaic language and thus constitute a Babylonian corpus in their own right. It is, moreover, that corpus (owing to the dominance of the Babylonian Talmud in Jewish reading) that has formed the ongoing tradition of Rabbi Me'ir as well. Within the confines of this paper, of course, I shall have opportunity to analyze only a small part of the corpus. In another version, as a chapter in my forthcoming book *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, a more expansive selection of stories is treated.

indecorum itself, making a rather simple attempt to historicize sanctity, by which I mean hagiography (allowing that term its broadest possible scope), arguing that the Talmudic accounts of Rabbi Me'ir's life are as characteristic of the culture of the time of their production as the modern accounts are of theirs. The feature that I will focus on most directly in this text is a certain heterogeneity or hybridity in the presentation of the Rabbi in the Talmud, arguing that this very hybridity in the presentation of the holy man's life is one key to the import of the Talmud itself as a religious document and text.

Hybridity, even incongruity, is the very soil in which myriad late ancient texts were nurtured. One of the most characteristic features of the literature of later Hellenism (second through the fifth centuries) is its indecorous mix of earlier genres and linguistic registers. As educated by Mikhail Bakhtin, the period is a time of literary and cultural upheaval associated with the development of such literary forms as Menippean satire, the parodic dialogues of Lucian, and the novel. Menippean satire, also known as *spoudogeloion* ("serious laughing"; the seriocomic), is a peculiar type of literature produced by and for intellectuals in which their own practices are both mocked and asserted at one and the same time; hence, its cognomen. It was apparently originated by one of the earliest of the cynics, Menippus of Gadara, in the third century BC. Indeed, antiquity only refers to Menippus as *spoudogeloios*,<sup>5</sup> hence Bakhtin uses the two terms—*Menippean* and *spoudogeloios*—as virtual synonyms. To be sure, it is not certain if there truly ever was (before the Renaissance) a single genre that could be called Menippean satire. Whether or not the Menippean satire should be identified as a particular genre, however, Bakhtin's evocation of it provides provocative heuristic impetus to renewed ways of thinking about the Talmud. Writers have seen the Menippean narrative, from Lucian's *Icaromenippus* on—a key text to be treated more fully in the book form of this research—as "a proper envelope for the comic presentation of scholarly wrangling and debate."<sup>6</sup> The Talmud, then, not surprisingly, shares affinities with what Bakhtin calls the Menippea.

Bakhtin has written of the Menippea,<sup>7</sup>

5. See R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, introduction to *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Berkeley, 1996), p. 11.

6. Joel C. Relihan, "Menippus in Antiquity and the Renaissance," in *The Cynics*, p. 282.

7. The term *Menippea*, as opposed to Menippean satire, is, I think, Bakhtin's own coinage, referring to what is for me the most useful notion of a trans-genreing or transtextual collection of Menippean elements, modified through time and place. The significance of Bakhtin for this aspect of the Talmud is briefly anticipated in Joshua Levinson, "The Cultural Dignity of Narrative," in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen, 2005), pp. 361–82.

A very important characteristic of the Menippea is the organic combination within it of the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and (from our point of view) crude *slum naturalism*. The adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth. The idea here fears no slum, is not afraid of any of life's filth. The man of the idea—the wise man—collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression. This slum naturalism is apparently already present in the earliest Menippea. Of Bion Borysthenes the ancients were already saying that he “was the first to deck out philosophy in the motley dress of a hetaera.”<sup>8</sup>

Although, as I have mentioned, there has been much discussion within classics departments about the actual historical validity of Bakhtin's identification of a specific genre (or rather the scope he claims for it),<sup>9</sup> there can be no doubt, I think, that he has captured in his descriptions something vital and vitally important in the literary taste or mood of late antiquity, a certain knowing breaking of decorum, of mixing (whether organically or not; I think not) that which had been kept carefully apart before. As Bakhtin says, the Menippea is characterized by “a striking combination of what would seem to be absolutely heterogeneous and incompatible elements: philosophical dialogue [halakhic dialectic], adventure and fantasticality, slum naturalism, utopia, and so forth” (*PD*, p. 134). What we have here is not so much genre as a literary and even cultural mood.<sup>10</sup> Seen in that light, we could consider the collisions of which Bakhtin speaks between the lofty and the “slum naturalism” of the Menippea as a system similar to that which has as its goal the illumination of one language by another or dialogism in its most powerful sense. The literary taste reflected by this widespread cultural form in the *Kulturgebiet* is especially characterized by violations of decorum, by the yoking together of that which in other times and places would be kept distinct. The essential aspect of this set of literary practices is that it is the product of intellectuals, and the intellectuals themselves are also the subjects and objects of its narratives.

As an emblem of this self-conscious yoking together of the disparate,

8. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 115; hereafter abbreviated *PD*.

9. See *Bakhtin and the Classics*, ed. Branham (Evanston, Ill., 2002) and *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative*, ed. Branham (Groningen, 2005).

10. This point was clarified for me figuratively in conversation with Virginia Burrus and literally in Virginia Burrus, “Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance,” *Arethusa* 38 (Winter 2005): 49–88, esp. pp. 50–51.

there are few better than Lucian with his explicit mixing of seemingly incompatible forms and Petronius with his even more incongruous composites, and Petronius's text is marked, even by the most classical of classicists, as Menippean satire. In his introduction to the work, J. P. Sullivan has written: "Certainly a main characteristic of Menippean satire was the union of humour and philosophy (or whatever political, moral or aesthetic basis an author might substitute for this)."<sup>11</sup> The last (parenthetical) qualification is crucial for my argument. I hope to make a case here that the Talmud is Menippean satire (broadly speaking) in its union of humor and the halakhic dialectic, which is that political, moral, and aesthetic basis that substitutes for philosophy in the rabbinic culture.

One particular incident from *The Satyricon* will help me to set up my point. When we enter the text (not at the beginning because only a large fragment of the text is extant), we find a highly serious encounter under way, a discussion of that age-old topic of the vices (and virtues) of rhetoricians and professors of rhetoric (*declamatores*). The discussion takes the familiar form of a dialogue: Encolpius (the narrator hero) is against the rhetoricians, while Agamemnon, one of their number, defends them. It needs to be emphasized that the discussion is, as far as one can tell, an earnest one. The complaints that Encolpius expresses, while somewhat formulaic, are to the point. They are not at all like the Platonic attacks on rhetoric, at least in that there seems to be no implication of moral turpitude on the part of the professors here (or at least no more than anyone else is accused of in the satire), but rather an argument that with the formal and florid practices of "Asiatic" style and rhetoric true eloquence has been fatally damaged. Agamemnon's answer, to the effect that the fault is not with the *declamatores* themselves (he seems to grant the point that there is a fault somewhere in the system) but with the parents and the society as a whole, seems also earnestly meant. It makes, at any rate, important if not profound comments on practices of education. Agamemnon himself provides an eloquent account of what education had been in Rome (in the time of Cicero perhaps?) and what it ought to be. He finishes with quite a well-spoken "extempore" poem on education, but (Encolpius confesses) "while I was concentrating on Agamemnon's poem, I failed to see Ascyllus slip away."<sup>12</sup> On slipping away himself in search of his friend, Encolpius discovers him in a brothel, and hilarious, raunchy, and improbable adventures ensue. The novel, moreover, includes other such jangling juxtaposi-

11. J. P. Sullivan, introduction to Petronius and Seneca, "*The Satyricon*" and "*The Apocolocyntosis*," trans. Sullivan (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 20.

12. Petronius, *The Satyricon*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York, 1983), p. 24.

tions of serious and hilarious intercourse throughout its own course. William Arrowsmith has described the text “as a farrago, a potpourri,” arguing that incongruity is its very essence, and the mixtures of prose and poetry, high and low language, epic and doggerel are the very point of the text, such that “the condition of these ironies is the crisscrossing of crucial perspectives and incongruous styles: if we see how the realistic undercuts the fabulous, we should also see how the fabulous sometimes emerges from the realistic.”<sup>13</sup>

Such double undercutting is the watchword by which I shall read the Talmud and its doubled presentation of its heroes in this text. It seems highly plausible that if not Petronius himself, then his sources and his literary milieu, were well-known to the Babylonian rabbis. Saul Lieberman showed more than half a century ago, arguing for a “common oriental source,” that three proverbs known otherwise only from Petronius, as well as the famous Petronian story of the Widow of Ephesos, appear in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>14</sup> It seems then not so incongruous to be thinking of Encolpius when writing of that incongruous Babylonian version of Rabbi Me’ir.

In the sentimental hagiographies of medieval and modern Judaism, as exemplified above, however, there are no such incongruous and (in)organic combinations; Rabbi Me’ir would not be caught dead in the motley dress of a hetaera. In the readings of medieval and modern Judaism, the seemingly heterogeneous elements of the Talmudic text are carefully kept apart; no reading of the much-more-than-occasional “slum naturalism” of the biographical narrative would be allowed to disturb the loftiness of the search for the correct halakha.<sup>15</sup> I would like here then to expose a little-appreciated feature of the Talmud itself—its own yoking together, whether organic or, as I prefer, not, of “philosophical dialogue, adventure and fantasticality, [and] slum naturalism”—through a consideration of

13. Arrowsmith, introduction to Petronius, *The Satyricon*, p. ix.

14. Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II–IV Centuries C. E.* (New York, 1942), p. 154, referring for the story of the widow to earlier scholars. He notes, moreover, that in several instances of Greco-Roman proverbs appearing in rabbinic texts, the Babylonians are closer to the Hellenistic text than the Palestinians; see pp. 154–57. See too Arkady B. Kovelman, “The Miletian Story of Beruria,” *Vestník Evreyskogo Universiteta* 19, no. 1 (1999): 8–23. On Petronius and the Milesian, see Gottskalk Jenson, *The Recollections of Encolpius: The Satyricon of Petronius as Milesian Fiction* (Groningen, 2004).

15. In the Yeshiva tradition, the narrative was simply skipped in study; in the universities in Israel, it is taught in a separate department from that which teaches the halakhic parts of the Talmud; in yet another tradition, beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing through such figures as Rav Manitou, Rav Chouchani, and Emmanuel Lévinas, the narrative is converted to piety through allegorization.

the motley representation of this one representative rabbinic figure and an inquiry into the meaning of this presentation of a type of holy man. (Whether he quite fits the job description for saint or not, he's the closest thing we've got in rabbinic literature to a saint, a somewhat Foucauldian model of saint, to be sure.)<sup>16</sup> Beginning my exposition with an exemplification of Rabbi Me'ir as participant in the Talmudic equivalent of "philosophical dialogue," namely, the study of Torah or halakhic deliberation, I will then proceed to a consideration of his role in dramas of the less lofty varieties, ending with an attempt to explore the cultural or discursive significance of such seemingly outlandish versions of tonal hybridity.

## 2. Sainly Decorum: Rabbi Me'ir as Halakhic Hero

In the *imaginaire* of the Rabbis the study of Torah is the functional equivalent of philosophy in other Hellenistic cultures.<sup>17</sup> Michael Satlow demonstrated this by comparing the actual practices of living prescribed for Hellenistic philosophers and Talmudic Rabbis. In defiance of an alleged binary division of Greek as the search for truth and Jewish as the search for goodness, the Rabbis imagined the Torah-life on the model of the philosophers' *bios*, an ascetic practice of communal study that molds the self into the beautiful and the good. As Satlow puts it: "For the rabbis, *talmud torah* served the same function as philosophy did for these non-Jewish writers; *talmud torah* was the means by which the soul was made pure or whole, thus bringing the individual closer to the divine, or into the 'spiritual condition.' *Talmud torah* required the same mental and physical discipline demanded by the non-Jewish study of philosophy. Body and soul, working together in a disciplined (i.e., ascetic) fashion, can help a man overcome his evil inclination."<sup>18</sup> This practice is thus imagined as the most serious and praiseworthy of lives to be lived, and, for now, although I don't have the space to demonstrate it here (but will in the longer version of this project), suffice it to say that the Rabbi Me'ir of halakha is an exemplary figure of such a life; however, he was considered no less than the actual authorial voice of the Mishna. As we learn from the Palestinian Talmud, "Rabbi Yose the son of Halafta would praise Rabbi Me'ir before the people of Sepphoris, that he is a great sage, a holy man, a modest man"

16. See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford, 1995).

17. For Torah study as the equivalent of philosophy for the Rabbis, see Elias J. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 172–73, and David Stern, "The Captive Woman: Hellenization, Greco-Roman Erotic Narrative, and Rabbinic Literature," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 1 (1998): 115.

18. Michael L. Satlow, "'And on the Earth You Shall Sleep': *Talmud Torah* and Rabbinic Asceticism," *Journal of Religion* 83 (Apr. 2003): 215.

(Mo'ed Katan 3, 5). And as Rabbi Yohanan was famously given to saying: "When the Mishna speaks anonymously, it is the voice (and opinion) of Rabbi Me'ir"; that is, his opinion is barely subject to question according to the redactor of that definitive and highly serious halakhic text.

### 3. Sleeping with Elijah: The Hero and the Hetaera

A close look at the very story that sanctified Me'ir in the later popular religious tradition will give us a sense of how wild, how bizarre, the Talmud allows such a hero of halakha to get in the aggada. The narrative incorporates themes familiar from late antiquity and especially the narrative patterns of the adventure-erotic love story. David Stern has already noted how little attention has been paid to the impact of Greco-Roman narrative on rabbinic literature and provides a major corrective to this fault, focussing especially on the genre so important for this story, the erotic and adventure narrative.<sup>19</sup> As Stern has pointed out the Greco-Roman novel is "actually a kind of love-and-adventure story."<sup>20</sup> The story of Rabbi Me'ir is a combination of these as well.

Bakhtin has introduced a very important set of reflections on the adventure story, writing that "in Dostoevsky, the adventure plot is combined with the posing of profound and acute problems; and it is, in addition, placed wholly at the service of the idea. It places a person in extraordinary positions that expose and provoke him, it connects him and makes him collide with other people under unusual and unexpected conditions precisely for the purpose of testing the idea and the man of the idea, that is, for testing the 'man in man.' And this permits the adventure story to be combined with other genres that are, it would seem, quite foreign to it, such as the confession and the saint's Life" (*PD*, p. 105). This last sentence provides an elegant introduction to Rabbi Me'ir's own greatest adventure, his trip to Rome to rescue a damsel in distress through powers and capabilities that mark him later as a "saint." He undergoes, like a knight of derring-do, a great peril and overcomes that, too, also via miraculous practices. From at least one point of view, this story has to be the central moment in the legend of Rabbi Me'ir. Certainly this story has conferred on him the status of a virtual Jewish St. Jude just as we have seen earlier:

19. See Stern, "The Captive Woman," pp. 91–92. At about the time that Stern was publishing his article, Levinson made the same point, writing that "the adoption and adaptation of Greco-Roman literary models in midrashic literature" had received little attention (Levinson, "The Tragedy of Romance: A Case of Literary Exile," *Harvard Theological Review* 89 [July 1996]: 228).

20. Stern, "The Captive Woman," p. 93.

Beruria, the wife of Rabbi Me'ir was the daughter of Rabbi Ḥanina. She said to him: It is painful to me that my sister is sitting in a prostitute's booth. He took a tarqeva of dinars and went, saying if she has done nothing wrong [that is, if she is sexually innocent], a miracle will take place for me, and if not, there will be no miracle. He dressed up as a soldier and solicited her. She said: I am menstruating. He said: I can wait. She said: There are many here more beautiful than I. He said: I understand from this that she has done nothing wrong. He went to her guard: Give her to me! The guard said: I am afraid of the king. He [Me'ir] took the tarqeva of dinars, and gave it to him, and said: Take the tarqeva of dinars. Keep half and use half for bribing anyone who comes. He [the guard] said: What shall I do when they are gone? He [Me'ir] said: Say "God of Me'ir answer me; God of Me'ir answer me," and you will be saved. He [guard] said: How do I know that this will be so? He [Me'ir] said: [Now you will see.] There came some dogs that eat people. He shouted to them, and they came to eat him. He said: "God of Me'ir answer me; God of Me'ir answer me," and they let him go. He gave her to him. In the end, the story was heard in the House of the King. They brought him [the guard] and hung him on the cross. He said: God of Rabbi Me'ir answer me; God of Me'ir answer me! They took him down, saying: What was that?! He said: This is what happened. [They wrote it on a bull of the state], and they engraved the image of Rabbi Me'ir on the gates of Rome, declaring: If a man comes with this feature and that feature, arrest him! When Rabbi Me'ir came there, they wished to arrest him. He ran away from them and went into a whorehouse. Elijah came in the guise of a whore and embraced him. Some say that he put his hand in Gentile foods and tasted them. They [the Romans] said: God forbid! If that were Rabbi Me'ir he wouldn't do such a thing. Because of these events [Rabbi Me'ir] ran away to Babylonia. [Abodah zarah 18a-b]<sup>21</sup>

In this short narrative we find packed an incredible number of themes and motifs that characterize the Menippea (and the novel) as described by Bakhtin: sex, fantasy, and religion all together. This story crowned Rabbi Me'ir as a saint in the Jewish tradition because of its several elements of miracle working. His sainthood, however, was not won in

21. I have produced a composite text from two excellent Sephardic witnesses: Ms. Paris 1337 and JTS 15. For the latter, see Babylonian Talmud, tractate Abodah zarah, ed. Shraga Abramson (New York, 1957). The Paris manuscript has some excellent readings from a literary point of view but is corrupt in other places, where I have filled in from the JTS manuscript. Nothing in this argument would suffer if only one or the other of the texts were adhered to.

a pious, lofty, and edifying tale but rather in a riotous hodgepodge of a parodic mixture of novelistic sexual incident, slum naturalism—to use Bakhtin’s term—parodic Gospel, and other comic elements.

There are three incidents of miraculous escape in the story, and comparing them to each other should prove instructive. The first miracle is done for the sake of the damsel in distress, the second to save the prison guard, and the third to save Rabbi Me’ir’s skin. The damsel in question has to prove, in fact, that she is a damsel in order for there to be a miracle. Otherwise, no miracle. Such tests of virginity are, themselves, a pointed feature of at least one ancient novel, *Leucippe and Clitophon* of Achilles Tatius.<sup>22</sup> Having passed the chastity test devised by her tricky brother-in-law, she is vouchsafed the promised miracle, but in a rather indirect manner. Rabbi Me’ir produces a miracle to prove to the guard that he will not be endangered if he is caught out for letting her go. And, indeed, the miracle happens, twice—the first time, as just said, to convince the guard and the second time to actually save him. These miracles, too, have a flavor of the literature of the time and place.

One of the ingredients in this wild compound seems to be parodies of Christian Gospel. As shown by Naomi Koltun-Fromm, the passion narratives are built in a not-insignificant way on a Christological midrash on Psalm 22.<sup>23</sup> Our little story of the guard being hung on the cross, saying some strange words in a foreign language, and being taken down from the cross suggests, in turn, a parody of the Gospel passion accounts.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, I would circumspectly suggest that this text is closely related to the Babylonian Aramaic parodic Gospels known as *Toledot Yeshu*, the *Acts of Jesus*. Although best known from the gaonic period, slightly later than the Talmud, their earliest forms are to be

22. See recent discussions in Helen Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius’s “Leucippe and Clitophon”* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 212–14, especially relevant in that the discussion is of virginity in a brothel, and Burrus, “Mimicking Virgins,” pp. 62–63. For more on the chastity test in this novel and its pre-history, see Kathryn Chew, “Achilles Tatius and Parody,” *Classical Journal* 96, no. 1 (2000): 63–64.

23. See Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Psalm 22’s Christological Interpretive Tradition in Light of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (Spring 1998): 37–57.

24. In an earlier publication I had thought this to be a fragment of a lost Gospel and missed its parodic aspects entirely. Ruth Clements, in a personal letter, sent me in the right direction of Gospel parody. For further discussion, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif., 1999), pp. 176–77 n. 14.

found in the Talmud (mostly self-censored) as well.<sup>25</sup> There is a strong argument for this parodic appropriation in the curious incident of the dogs. This is based on a verse in the chapter of Psalms of which the Christological midrashists could make nothing: “Deliver my life from the sword; my soul from the power of the dog” (Psalms 22:21). The midrashic take is, having seen that your soul is saved from the power of the dog, you will see your life saved from the sword as well. It is almost as if our parodic narrator says to the Christians, I see you and I raise you one. I will produce a midrash on that verse, too, on the verse that stumped you. The words that the guard is taught to say, “Eloah dMe’ir, answer me,” may certainly embody a parodic allusion to the following well-known sequence in Mark’s passion narrative or a version close to it:

“Ha! You who destroy the temple, and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” Likewise, also the chief priests mocking among themselves with the scribes said, “He saved others. He can’t save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, that we may see and believe him.” Those who were crucified with him insulted him. When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is, being interpreted, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some of those who stood by, when they heard it, said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” One ran, and filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Let him be. Let’s see whether Elijah comes to take him down.” Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and gave up the spirit.  
[Mark 15:30–38]

There is, as I have remarked, sufficient sound parallel at least to suggest that the Talmudic phrase is a parody of the Aramaic of Jesus’ cry from the cross. The guard, instead of saying, of course, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacht-hani?” says, “Eloa dmeir aneni.” The sonic echo is, I reckon, just close enough to set up the parodic allusion, an allusion amplified by the pres-

25. The Byzantine and later *Toledot Yeshu* tradition begins already in the Babylonian Talmud but was censored out of the Talmud in the early modern period (at the time of the printing of the Talmud) by Jews fearing (understandably) Christian ill will. On the censorship issue, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Ha-Tsenzor, Ha-orekh veba-tekst: Ha-tsenzurah ha-katolitiv veba-defus ha-ivri ba-me ah ha-shesh* (Jerusalem, 2005); trans. Jackie Feldman under the title *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2007).

ence of Elijah as well in the story of Rabbi Me'ir's own miraculous escape in the brothel.<sup>26</sup> Just as Jesus was misunderstood, so the guard's strange words are also not understood, but as opposed to Jesus, these strange words lead to his salvation even if in a highly comic manner. It is not inapposite to see here also a self-ironizing comment in which the appearance of the miracle wrought by the saintly Rabbi Me'ir is explained by the most rationalistic and comic of means.<sup>27</sup>

There is, perhaps, some further evidence for this conjecture in another tale closely related to Rabbi Me'ir if not quite about him. In a further sequence of tales, Rabbi Me'ir's heretical teacher, the famous Elisha, the son of Abuya, is the protagonist. In one story, Elisha seeks to know his fate by using a typical Jewish form of oracle: he asks a child to read out the verse that he is studying at the moment. The child reads: "And to the wicked one God says; What business have you with declaring my statutes or taking my covenant in your mouth?" (Psalms 50:16). The child, we are told, however, stuttered, so instead of hearing the word "to the wicked one," *larasha*, our Elisha hears "to Elisha," *lelisha*, and, since the previous verse reads, "And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me," our Elisha despairs forever of his salvation. In the Gospel story it is one prophet's name that is misheard and in the Talmud, another prophet's name, one that, moreover, is closely related: Elijah and Elisha. Is it too much of a conjecture to argue from here that the Babylonian Rabbis were aware of this Gospel tradition if not, surely, of the Gospels themselves, and parodied them here?

The picture of Rabbi Me'ir inscribed on the gates of Rome is reminiscent of the *ecce homo* of the Gospels as well. Without pushing the point too far, I think it is not by any means out of the question that our little sequence is a parodic appropriation of the Gospel account. In general, of course, we would take such a text as a moment in a bitter polemic—a description that cannot be discounted—but the work of Galit Hasan-Rokem suggests a different direction to go in, one that sees a lighter, dialogical (which is not to say necessarily irenic) interplay of texts, allusions, parodies, and other forms so typical of the period of the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>28</sup> A text such as this, however, is located in several cultural, discursive, and literary contexts at

26. As pointed out to me by Burrus.

27. See Graham Anderson, *Sage, Saint, and Sophist: Holy Men and Their Associates in the Early Roman Empire* (London, 1994), pp. 93–94 on a somewhat comparable instance in Lucian.

28. See Hasan-Rokem, "Narratives in Dialogue: A Folk Literary Perspective on Interreligious Contacts in the Holy Land in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity," in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First–Fifteenth Centuries CE*, ed. Guy Stroumsa and Arieh Kofsky (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 109–29. See too Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 84–85.

one and the same time, in this case, according to my suggested reading, a parody of the Christian midrashic appropriation of Psalm 22, as well as other folk and elite international cultural sources.

We find a fascinatingly, tantalizingly related story in Apuleius. In *Metamorphoses* 9.17–21, we find the tale of a certain slave named Myrmex. Myrmex had been commanded on pain of his life to guard the chastity of Arete, the young and beautiful wife of the public figure Barbarus, while the latter was away on business. Determined out of fear and loyalty to carry out his charge, he even held on to the hem of her robe on the way to the bath house. Unfortunately the clever rake Philesitherus saw her on one of those excursions and, inflamed by her beauty and the obstacles in his path, became determined to “have” her. Approaching Myrmex with the offer of a significant bribe to be divided between the guard and the woman herself, he tried to get his way. Myrmex was at first horrified at the thought, but over time he became himself so inflamed with lust for the money that he gave in and easily persuaded the young woman to comply as well to receive her significant share of the money. Naturally the husband came home unexpectedly in the middle of the fateful night, but by being held off by a ruse of Myrmex he did not become aware of what was going on. However, the adulterer left his slippers under the bed, and, upon discovering them in the morning, the husband figured out what had happened and determined to carry out the death penalty for Myrmex. A funny thing happened on the way to the execution, though; Philesitherus himself encountered Barbarus with Myrmex in tow in chains and, quickly thinking and figuring out what had transpired, accused the slave of having stolen his slippers at the bathhouse the previous day. It had a happy end.

Without suggesting any form of dependence between the two stories, I would argue that there are, nevertheless, sufficient elements shared by them to relate one to the other. In both, the protagonist is a guard appointed to protect the “owner” of the woman (in one case from unchastity, in the other from chastity, as it were). In both cases, not only is there a bribe (a rather commonplace detail; after all, guards are there, as it were, to be bribed) but specifically a bribe to be divided in two in order to enable *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. In both cases, the compromised guard ends up in danger of his life, and in both he is saved by a funny sort of stratagem or miracle. I think it is not too much to conclude that the Talmudic story was drawn from the same cultural well from which Apuleius drew, and it is highly significant in my view that this lubricious tale has been adapted for the life of a Jewish saint. Rabbinic saints are, it seems, quite seriocomical in their sanctity.

The third miracle is interesting especially for its gendered and sexual aspects. As we have seen above, there are elements in this story, for instance

the chastity test, that are, as already mentioned, strikingly like *topoi* of the Hellenistic novels, for instance, Tatiüs's *Leucippe and Clitophon*. In that novel, both protagonists (male and female) can be said to have passed such tests. In the case of the male protagonist, it is a particularly striking parallel to our tale of Rabbi Me'ir's sister-in-law, for it is a third party (his lover Leucippe) who becomes convinced of his sexual innocence upon hearing from the woman he is living with that she has not had satisfaction from her "husband" because he is constantly complaining of (feigning, as we the readers know) illness. Leucippe herself undergoes virginity tests as well.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in another of the Hellenistic novels, Xenophon's *An Ephesian Tale*, the heroine is sent to a brothel and avoids her brothel duties through feigning sickness,<sup>30</sup> and in Tatiüs the heroine avoids violation through the excuse that she is menstruating, just as in our story,<sup>31</sup> a defense that Simon Goldhill claims is unique in Greek literature.<sup>32</sup> The sexual incident in Rabbi Me'ir's story thus connects his legend multiply with Hellenistic novelistic literature. There is, moreover, another such revealing nexus. In the Hellenistic novels, there is an incident-type that has become known as the *Scheintod*, the seeming death.<sup>33</sup> Frequently we think that the hero or the heroine has been killed only to discover very soon that he or she is still quite alive. There are also incidents of *Scheinsex*; the protagonist, who seems to have had sex, turns out to be still a virgin. It does not seem to me far-fetched to read this story of Rabbi Me'ir's apparent sexual activity in this novelistic context. The successfully maintained chastity of both Rabbi Me'ir and his sister-in-law in brothels would form a kind of doubling of this theme, analogous to the doubly maintained chastity of Leucippe and Clitophon in their tale. As there, so too in the Jewish text. The gendering of the two incidents works, however, quite differently (a point that I shall develop further in the longer version of this text).<sup>34</sup>

29. See Achilles Tatiüs, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, trans. John J. Winkler, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 272–73, 280–81.

30. See Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale*, trans. Anderson, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, p. 163. And see Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London, 1995), pp. 57–58. For such illness turned to other narrative purposes, that is, not feigned, see Tatiüs, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, pp. 226–27. Moreover, in yet another Greek novel, *The Story of Apollonius of Tyre*, "the motif of evasion of a prostitute's duties plays a major role" (Xenophon, *An Ephesian Tale*, p. 163 n. 23).

31. Mobilized actually by a friend and ally of her lover, not she herself; see Tatiüs, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, p. 225.

32. See Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 116.

33. See Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatiüs's "Leucippe and Clitophon,"* pp. 166–69.

34. Burrus has pointed us to the very different ways that virginity seems to have functioned for male and female protagonists of the novels; see Burrus, "Mimicking Virgins."

The sexual incident in Rabbi Me'ir's story connects his legend with other Hellenistic literature as well (along the lines of that which Stern has shown for other rabbinic passages), to such texts as those by Parthenius and Philostratus. There is an important parallel in Philostratus, namely, a reported slander in which Apollonius allegedly runs away to Scythia owing to a sexual slander against him, "though he never once visited Scythia or fell prey to sexual passion,"<sup>35</sup> closely paralleling Rabbi Me'ir's absconding for Babylonia under rather similar circumstances. It is entirely legitimate to inquire into the significance and import of such incidents recurring in the lives of holy men. Unless we take the reductive route of assuming that erotic material is there primarily and simply to provide titillation, to maintain the reader's interest and keep her or him reading, this type of incident ought to be seen as carrying some important ideological baggage in the literary practices of narrative during this period.

It seems certainly remarkable to me that the Talmud allows such a major and central figure of the study of Torah to be the hero of such a narrative, a narrative in which his actions leave him so ashamed of himself that he runs away to Babylonia. As I hope to have shown, or at least defensibly hypothesized, there is a gap between the dual presentations of the rabbinic sage and holy man in the halakha and the biographical legends such that it is not unreasonable to compare the Talmud in which both appear cheek-by-jowl to texts in which we find "the organic combination of philosophical dialogue, lofty symbol-systems, the adventure-fantastic, and slum naturalism [that] is the outstanding characteristic of the Menippea" (*PD*, p. 115). Departing from Bakhtin only in one way, however, I would suggest that this is not an organic combination, but rather it is precisely the inorganicism, the very indecorousness and jangling of these elements, that marks the Talmud as related both typologically and historically to the complex of literary practices and tastes known by Bakhtin as Menippea. Having gotten here, I will now attempt to make some tentative sense of this textual and cultural nexus.

#### 4. Encountering Decorum: The Saint Profaned

Stern suggests an interpretation answering to this desideratum. Comparing Parthenius's *The Love Romances* to rabbinic literature, he suggests that in the former "the erotic ordeal [is] the primary mode of contact through which their leading characters engage the larger world, a world that is explicitly represented as both sexually charged and dangerous." He

35. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. and ed. Christopher P. Jones, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 1:1:61.

goes on to say that “it is precisely these elements of the erotic narrative that became for the rabbis the essential building blocks of a cultural narrative, a kind of myth or foundational story that helped them explain to themselves their place in the pagan world and their uneasy relationship to that world; indeed, in its transformed shape, this narrative became for the rabbis one through which they represented their understanding of cultural influence itself.”<sup>36</sup> At about the same time that Stern’s article was published, I was making a related argument, citing and building on the work of a graduate student, Laurie Davis. Davis had written: “The rabbis see themselves as virgins in a brothel,” and more, “in these stories, sexual temptation is the conflation of a variety of different cultural tensions.”<sup>37</sup> Building on Davis’s insights, I pointed to the irony of the Rabbis using Rabbi Me’ir’s sister-in-law’s preservation of her chastity as a figure for their own maintenance of religious purity in the “brothel” of the empire when that figure itself, the virgin in the brothel, was shared, if not drawn, from Christian hagiographical literature.<sup>38</sup> In this context, I wish to point to another way of interpreting the particular nexus we find here.

### *The Adventures of the Torah on Earth*

“Resh Lakish said: A holy mouth [Rabbi Me’ir’s] said that?!” (Sanhedrin 24a). I would argue that, consistent with the practices of the Menippea itself, in the farrago that is the Talmud the most important intellectual practices of the rabbinic community are being advanced sincerely and queried at one and the same time with the effect, not of their undermining, but of their ironization. As Joel Relihan has remarked of the Menippean satire in its cynical origins, “This is the subversive nature of Cynic criticism, which invests authority in a character who cannot be taken seriously without qualification, and which toys with the idea of an absolute or transcendent truth and those who would proclaim it.”<sup>39</sup> “Toys with,” perhaps, but it does not in any way finally discredit either the character or the truth—at least with respect to the Talmud. Rabbi Me’ir is qualified as a

36. Stern, “The Captive Woman,” p. 99. See too Levinson, “The Tragedy of Romance,” pp. 233–34 for an interpretation in which it was the separation/reunion plot that particularly appealed to the Rabbis as a way of articulating their own historical position in respect to God.

37. Laurie Davis, “Virgins in Brothels: A Different Feminist Reading of Beruriah,” paper presented at Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1994; quoted in Boyarin, “The Talmud Meets Church History,” review of *Chastity as Autonomy*; “Equipped for Victory’: Ambrose and the Gendering of Orthodoxy”; *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy*; “Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius”; and “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” by Burrus, *Diacritics* 28 (Summer 1998): 74, 61.

38. See Burrus, “Mimicking Virgins.”

39. Relihan, “Menippus in Antiquity and the Renaissance,” p. 265.

source of absolute, timeless, perfect authority in the aggada, but his position as heroic bearer of truth is in no way destroyed. The overall semantic effect is, I would suggest, analogous to Bakhtin's own description of the carnivalized hero: "Carnivalistic legends in general are profoundly different from traditional heroicizing epic legends: carnivalistic legends debase the hero and bring him down to earth, they make him familiar, bring him close, humanize him; ambivalent carnival laughter burns away all that is stilted and stiff, but in no way destroys the heroic core of the image" (*PD*, pp. 132–33). The last point is critical for my reading, not only of the carnivalistic legends of the rabbinic heroes, but also, or even more so, for my reading of the Talmud itself, of the Torah study that is its primary theme, and of the Torah student that is its primary heroic image. The story I am about to cite represents almost a textbook case of one version of Menippean satire, the bringing down to earth of a conversation that had seemingly been taking place, as it were, in a heaven of the timeless and universal. As Alain Badiou states of his own philosophical thinking, "The statement 'truths are, for thought, compossible' determines philosophy to the thinking of a unique time of thought, namely, what Plato calls 'the always of time', or eternity, a strictly philosophical concept, which inevitably accompanies the setting-up of the category of Truth."<sup>40</sup> If the halakhic discourse of the Talmud is the cultural analogue of what philosophy is in other versions of late Hellenism, then this narrative undermining of the claims of that discourse to timeless unconditional truth represents precisely what Badiou calls antiphilosophy. This type of aggada is one of the techniques by which the Talmud communicates both its commitment to the Torahic vision of the world—"at its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern"<sup>41</sup>—and at the same time its understanding that even that most exalted of visions cannot provide a fully satisfactory explanation of the world.

We read in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Horayot 13b:

Our rabbis have taught: "When the Patriarch comes in [to the House of Study], all the people stand and they don't sit down until he asks them to. When the Chief of the Court comes in, they make for him one row of standees on each side [of the pathway in] until he sits in his place. When the Sage comes in, one stands and the other sits, until

40. Alain Badiou, "The (Re)Turn of Philosophy Itself," *Manifesto for Philosophy Followed by Two Essays: "The (Re)Turn of Philosophy Itself" and "Definition of Philosophy,"* trans. and ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany, N.Y., 1999), p. 123.

41. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), p. 310.

he comes to his place [In other words, the one student closest to him stands and then sits when has has passed him].”

The halakha—analogue in this important sense to Platonic philosophy—has presented itself as eternally valid, as that which was presented to Moses on Mt. Sinai in the form of Oral Torah, and the Mishna is considered the textual representation of that eternally valid Oral Torah. As such the teaching of the sages simply gives the halakha itself, anonymously, without historicism and without explanation, *sine ire et studio*. As Moshe Azar has recently put the point, “the linguistic presentation of the halakhot is, more than anything else, gnomic in that the addresser expresses timeless law prescriptions.”<sup>42</sup> The timelessness and gnomic quality of this law prescription is, however, immediately called into question in the continuation:

Rabbi Yohanan said: This Mishna was taught in the days of Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel.

Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel was the Patriarch, Rabbi Me'ir the Sage,<sup>43</sup> and Rabbi Natan was the Chief of the Court. When Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel used to enter [the House of Study], all would stand before him. When Rabbi Me'ir and Rabbi Natan used to enter, all would stand before them. Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel said, “Isn't it necessary to make a distinction between me and them?” He established this Mishna. That day Rabbi Me'ir and Rabbi Natan were not there. On the next day, when they came, no one stood up before them as they had been used to. They said: “What's this?!” They told them, “This is what Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel has established.”

The timeless Mishna is thus, somewhat ignominiously, historicized. That which we had thought to be Oral Torah given at Mt. Sinai turns out to be the product of human, all-too-human, jealousies and envies. At this point in the narrative, one crucial Menippean moment has already been produced. The aggada brings that claim to heavenly status right back down to earth and indicates that the given pronouncement of the sages is not eternal and superwordly but rather the product of some very human jealousy and even some sharp practice on the part of Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamaliel (waiting until his rivals were absent for the day to institute it). It is impor-

42. Moshe Azar, review of *Chagigah, the Linguistic Encoding of Halakhah* by N. A. Van Uchelen, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87 (July–Oct. 1996): 165.

43. This is a technical term for a not-entirely-understood office in the rabbinic academies (or at least one projected by the makers of Talmudic aggada). From this story itself, it seems as if it is intended to refer to the third in dignity among the hierarchy of the rabbinic institution.

tant to note that the only statement that is actually Rabbi Yohanan's (or even attributed to him) is the statement that this teaching was given in the time of Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel. All the following narrative is in Babylonian Aramaic and clearly a later Babylonian production, the implication of which is that formerly the disciples had treated the three officials of the House of Study equally, but now the halakha has been changed owing to the Patriarch's overweening jealousy of his status. This story is almost Lucianic (if not Petronian) in its expression of contempt for the Patriarch, but lest we see it as the propaganda of a particular antipatriarchal party among the Rabbis (there were such, for sure), we find out right away that its contempt is equally great for the Patriarch's antagonists.

The story goes on to indicate a somewhat scurrilous response in turn on the part of these others of the holy band of transmitters of the eternal Torah, including our hero, the saintly Rabbi Me'ir:

Rabbi Me'ir said to Rabbi Natan: "I am the Sage, and you are the Chief of the Court, let us establish a matter of our own." Rabbi Natan said to him, "What shall we do?" "Let's ask him to teach us Uqṣin, which he doesn't know, and since he has not learned, we will say to him 'Who shall recite the powers of God, recite all of his praise?' [Psalms 106:2] [which should be interpreted as:] For whom is it appropriate to recite the powers of God? For him who can recite all of his praise! We'll get him fired, and you will be the Patriarch and I will be the Chief of the Court."

Rabbi Jacob the son of Martyrs [?] heard him and said [to himself], "Perhaps, G-d forbid, he will be shamed." He went and sat behind the upper room of Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel. He repeated it [Tractate Uqṣin] and went over it; repeated it and went over it. He [Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel] said "What is he saying? Perhaps G-d forfend, there is something brewing in the House of Study!" He concentrated and investigated it and went over it.

On the morrow, they [Rabbis Me'ir and Natan] said, "Let the master teach us of Uqṣin." He began and taught. After he had explained it, he said to them, "If I had not studied it, you would have shamed me." He became angry and threw them out of the House of Study.

They [our exiles] would write their difficulties on sherds and throw them into the House of Study. Whatever [the other disciples] could resolve, they resolved, and what they couldn't resolve, [the exiled Rabbis outside] resolved and threw in [the answers].

Rabbi Yose said: "The Torah is outside and we are inside!?"

Rabbi Shim'on the son of Gamaliel said to them: "Let them in, but

fine them that their utterances will not be transmitted in their names.” They referred to Rabbi Me’ir as “Others” and Rabbi Natan as “There are some who say.”

It was shown to them in a dream: “Go and make peace with Rabbi Shim’on the son of Gamaliel.” Rabbi Natan went and Rabbi Me’ir didn’t go, saying, “The words of dreams neither raise nor lower [count for nothing].” When Rabbi Natan went, they said to him, “Granted that the buckle of your father [a badge of office] was efficacious for you in becoming the Chief of the Court, should it have been efficacious in becoming the Patriarch?”

Rabbi teaches Rabbi Shim’on the son of Rabbi [that is, cited the following tradition in this form to his own son, the grandson of Rabbi Shim’on ben Gamaliel]: “Others say: If it were *temura*, it is not sacrificed.” He [the son] said to him [the father]: “Who are these whose water we drink and don’t mention their names?” [Who are you citing as authorities but in this strange anonymous fashion?] He answered him, “People who wished to uproot your honor and the honor of your father’s house.” He [the son] said to him, “Your love and your hatred and your jealousy are all lost and gone” [Eccl. 9:6]. He [the father] answered him, “The enemy is dead, the swords are forever” [Psalms 9:7; the effectiveness of the past in the present]. He [the son] said to him, “Those words [apply] in a case in which his [the enemy’s] actions were effective. As for these, their actions had no effect.” He [the father] repeated it again and said in the name of Rabbi Me’ir: If it were *temura*, it is not sacrificed. Rava commented: “Even Rabbi who was a humble man said ‘They said in the name of Rabbi Me’ir’; he didn’t say, ‘Rabbi Me’ir said.’” [Horayot 13b-14a, following Paris 1337]

Our story is doubly deflationary. First of all, as already noted, it drags a moment of the halakha, indeed of the Mishna, the very “Oral Torah” itself, down from its otherworldly eternal status and mires it as the grossest of parodies of a historicist account. Secondly, however, it deflates the very claim of our rabbinic hero to superiority and turns his status right over from the most authoritative of the Rabbis to the most nearly marginalized, from the one who need not be named to the one who may not be named.

There are three incompatible accounts of Rabbi Me’ir’s anonymity in the Talmud. In reading these three accounts together, I would suggest that taken as such they thematize this peculiar holy man as an emblem of the very text he inhabits and that produces him and which he produces. The “serious” version affords this anonymity great dignity: “Rabbi Yohanan

says: The anonymous voice in the Mishna is Rabbi Me'ir" (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 66a). In this version it is Rabbi Me'ir's overwhelming superiority to his fellows that caused Rabbi Yehuda, the editor of the Mishna, to adopt his teacher's teachings nearly in their entirety (and in his own anonymous voice).<sup>44</sup> As we have seen, in the "serious" version, the halakhic dictum of Rabbi Yohanan just cited, Rabbi Me'ir's anonymity is represented as the sign of his great authority. He is, as it were, the anonymous voice behind the most authoritative text of all, the Mishna; Rabbi Yehuda the Patriarch, otherwise known just as Rabbi, is the actual author of the text. In what might be taken as the "serious" register of the tradition, Rabbi Me'ir is understood, then, to exercise and manifest his supereminent prestige through this anonymity. He is the one who need not be named because he is, in some sense, the author of the tradition. I would suggest that this aspect of the holy man is a representation, in effect, of the anonymity of the *stamma*, that anonymous voice that produces the Talmud (synchronically if not diachronically as well). Our own authority, says this anonymous voice, is guaranteed, certified by our namelessness and thus timelessness, our ahistoricity (very much, in that sense, like that of Plato).<sup>45</sup>

Our story, however, brings this lofty conception crashing down to earth in a rather cynical fashion. The reason that Rabbi Me'ir is not mentioned by name is not owing to his prestige but owing to an ignominious "punishment" on the part of the Patriarch. The story, read in this fashion, is thus a "Menippean" reflection, a "formulation of the inadequacy of human knowledge." There is, moreover, within the Talmud a third explanation of the "anonymity" of Rabbi Me'ir, which brings it ever closer to the Menippean tradition with all of its ambivalence:

Rabbah bar Shila once came upon Elijah the prophet. He said to Elijah, "What is the Holy One, blessed be he, doing?" Elijah replied, "He is reciting the teachings that are spoken by all of the rabbis—except for those of Rabbi Me'ir." "And Why?" [asked Rabbah bar Shila]. [Elijah] said, "Because Rabbi Me'ir learned the teachings of Elisha ben Abuya, who abandoned his faith." Rabbah said, "And Why?! Rabbi

44. For a tenth-century Babylonian rabbinic account of the wonders of Rabbi Me'ir's Mishna and the reason that Rabbi Judah chose it to be *the* Mishna, see *Igeret Rav Sherira gaon: Mesuderet bi-shene nushaot Nusah Sefarad ve-Nusah Tsarfat*, ed. Sherira ben Hanina and Benjamin Menasseh Lewin (Haifa, 1921), pp. 28–30. For some discussion of the passage (with a translation), see Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Transmitting Mishnah: The Shaping Influence of Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 79.

45. Compare Goldhill, *Who Needs Greek? Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism* (New York, 2002), p. 63.

Me'ir found a pomegranate, ate the fruit and threw away the peel!"  
 [Elijah] said to [Rabbah], "Now he says, 'My son Me'ir,  
 says. . .'" [Hagigah 15b]

This version includes an allusion to yet another queer sequence of stories about Rabbi Me'ir's relations with his teacher, the famous heretic Elisha ben Abuya, known as Aher, the Other One, and thus also dispossessed of his name. In this version, Rabbi Me'ir is not cited in Heaven when they learn Torah there, when God repeats the teachings of the disciples there, owing to his loyalty and commitment to that teacher, lately become archheretic. One of the Babylonian *amoraim*, on hearing this sad report of Rabbi Me'ir's nonpersonhood from Elijah the Prophet, remonstrates with this messenger from God that the disciple did not take the master's heresies but only his kosher teachings of Torah, and thence, immediately, Rabbi Me'ir's name is once again mentioned in the Yeshiva in Heaven. The spirit of the Menippean satire is written all over this little story. Less corrosive in its attitude towards the sages than the last one, it marks rather a sort of Menippean ambivalence about them, their studies, and their discipleship rather than the cynicism so close to the surface of the former. The debasement of the lofty that is emblematic of the Menippea is doubled within the story. First, the Torah itself is taken down from her shelf of timeless and unchanging value in which nothing is ever added and nothing ever changed but only discovered as permanent and unvarying truth. The rabbinic hero/saint himself, together with his Torah, is removed from any idealized position as perfected human and brought down to earth with all of his competitiveness, pettiness, and slyness unblemished. He—together with his Mishna herself<sup>46</sup>—is the very type of the Bakhtinian carnivalized hero. As Dina Stein has emphasized to me, the limit case of the internal (Menippean) satire is reached with the figure of Aher who actually leaves the rabbinic fold. Although Rabbi Me'ir, his devoted disciple, follows after him, he goes only so far, only to the limits of violating the Sabbath, and then turns back. The essence of the story is in the reaching of the limit of halakhic authoritativeness and then turning back.

### *Rabbi Me'ir and the Second Sophistic*

A crucial support for this interpretation can be found in the fact that Rabbi Me'ir is portrayed in yet another Babylonian Talmudic text as a sophist and thus as a figure who stands directly against, as it were, the truth

46. Lest this personification sound extreme, I would adduce the fact that by the early modern period, a prominent Jewish mystic and lawyer can envision the Mishna as a female figure who comes to him in visions and instructs him; see R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (London, 1962).

claims of the halakha.<sup>47</sup> We need look no further than Lucian for evidence that, as late as his lifetime, sophists or rhetors were considered in important senses the opposite numbers of philosophers. Lucian himself thematizes this opposition while transgressing it flamboyantly, most floridly in his text known as *Twice Accused*. It is therefore of not inconsiderable significance that there is at least one highly important marker within the Babylonian corpus of Rabbi Me'ir traditions that stops just short of explicitly naming him as a sophist:

Rabbi Aha the son of Rabbi Hanina said: It is revealed and known before the One Who Spoke and the World Was that there was none like Rabbi Me'ir in his generation. Why then did they not establish that the halakha is [always] like his view? Because his colleagues could not determine his true opinion, since he would say of the impure: "pure" and of the pure: "impure" and find arguments [lit. faces] for this. We have a tradition that his name was not Rabbi Me'ir but Rabbi Miyasha. Why then was he called Me'ir [the Enlightener], because he used to enlighten the faces of the Sages in the halakha. . . . Rav said: the fact that I am sharper than my colleagues is because I saw Rabbi Me'ir from behind, and if I had seen him from in front, I would have been even sharper, for it says "let your eyes see your teachers."<sup>48</sup> Rabbi Abbahu said that Rabbi Yohanan said: Rabbi Me'ir had one disciple whose name was Symmachus who would say about every matter which is pure forty-eight proofs that it is impure and about every matter which is impure forty-eight proofs that it is pure.<sup>49</sup> We have a tradition that there was a senior disciple at Yavneh who would purify the impure creeping things with one hundred and fifty proofs. [Tractate Eruvin 13b (paralleled in the same tractate at 53a)]

It is hard to imagine a more ambivalent portrayal than this. The halakha is not in accordance with Rabbi Me'ir's views, even though he enlightened the Rabbis in halakha, because he was able to produce equally compelling arguments on both sides of any halakhic question (and did, at least according to this report!), and the disciples accordingly could not determine his true view. Rabbi Me'ir, it seems, was as disconcerting to his fellows as Carneades was for the Romans when he engaged in a similar intellectual and discursive practice.

47. For other indications of sophistic connections in the Talmud, see Boyarin, "Dialectic and Divination in the Talmud," in *The End of Ancient Dialogue*, ed. Goldhill (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 217–41.

48. Following the undoubtedly correct reading in ms. Vat. 109, Rabbi (Yehuda Hanassi) had certainly seen Rabbi Me'ir from "in front" as well.

49. The text found in some manuscripts that reads "who would say about every matter which is pure forty-eight proofs that it is pure" makes no sense whatever. I follow here the interlinear gloss in the complete Talmud manuscript, Munich 95.

This reported practice connects Rabbi Me'ir directly with sophists and sophism and indeed most strongly to Protagoras himself, the first and greatest of the sophists, as well as to Gorgias his fellow.<sup>50</sup> While this has been typically taken in the scholarly (and philosophical) world as Plato intended us to understand it, namely, as a kind of charlatanism, it is possible to reread it rather as precisely a commitment to a genuinely dialogical critique of the very institution of *epistēmē* itself, which, for the Talmud, as we have seen already, would be located in the realm of halakhic, not philosophical, knowledge.<sup>51</sup> This text perfectly encodes the particular and peculiar yoking that is the Babylonian Talmud. On the one hand, as Kovelman has noted, Rabbi Me'ir is presented here as no less than an antitype of Moses himself or, even better, as God himself to Rav's Moses, were it possible to say that, for, of course, it is Moses who only saw the back part of God and not his face. Kovelman himself believes that the comparison is in itself parodic. As he has written, "Yet to make this parody, he [the author of this text] must have been aware of a certain exegetical cliché. Exodus 33:12–23 ought to have been [that is, must have been] systematically construed even before the anecdote appeared as a demonstration of the capabilities and limits of human cognition."<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, the comparison to Moses is a hagiographical topos of the time and place of the composition of the Talmud, as evidenced by Gregory of Nyssa's life of Gregory Thaumaturgus, but on the other hand, the precise incident (parodically?) referred to in Moses' own biography is thoroughly within the thematics of an

50. This stance has been well described by Richard Enos:

Gorgias was the beneficiary not only of the theory of probability but also of a philosophical tradition that would establish tenets for support of his anti-Platonic view of rhetoric. A generation before Gorgias, Zeno formalized the notion of securing contrary conclusions from shared premises and established the dialectical method of arguing from contrary positions. . . . This system of inquiry proceeds from premises that are not agreed upon; the conclusions result in a choice of probable positions. Thus, contrary to the dialectic of Plato . . . , conclusions expose contradictory positions in relative degrees of strength. The apparent incompatibility of these paradoxical and antithetical positions prompted Plato to dismiss such notions as avoiding a quest for absolute knowledge . . . and attempting to confuse appearance with reality. Plato's objection to the philosophical implications of Gorgias's rhetoric concentrated upon the charge that such inquiries did not seek knowledge as a realization of virtue. . . . Consequently the inherent worth of rhetoric could in no way compare with that of the "art" of philosophy, which avoids deception and seeks truth . . . by examining knowledge of first principles. . . . Plato saw an unbridgeable gap between the examination of certain knowledge leading to virtue and the "deception" inherent in the relativism of sophistic rhetoric. [Richard Leo Enos, *Greek Rhetoric before Aristotle* (Prospect Heights, Ill., 1993), pp. 77–78]

51. I have undertaken such a rereading of Protagoras (not Plato's) in an argument that will form part of *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*.

52. Arkady Kovelman, *Between Alexandria and Jerusalem: The Dynamic of Jewish and Hellenistic Culture* (Leiden, 2005), pp. 82–83.

intellectual critique of the intellect and thus a *mise en abyme*, in my view, of the Talmud itself. The sophistic theme is thus perfectly congruent with the hagiography here.

The connection of one of the most authoritative of the rabbis with sophisticated manipulations of (a critique of) halakhic *epistēmē* strikes me as being of a great deal of importance and interest. The suggestion that I put forward is that the sophistry of Rabbi Me'ir is, in some sense, at the very heart of the Talmudic enterprise itself, an enterprise that both asserts the value of and critiques the limitations of intellect as means of knowledge and control of the world. If the function of Menippea is, as Relihan argues, to abuse scholars “for mastery of a learning that was insufficient to explain or to control the irrational and human world,”<sup>53</sup> then the legends about Rabbi Me'ir certainly fit into that genre.<sup>54</sup> Even though the term *abuse* might be off in tone for the Talmud, its overall import, I would suggest, is “that any attempt to reduce the strange phenomena of this world to rule and theory can lead only to the embarrassment of the theorist” (*AMS*, p. xi)—a point to be taken to heart by the modern theorist as well. If we see sophism in general as a resistance movement against philosophy in the Platonic sense (an internal resistance within Plato as well, as I shall argue at the end of this project), then this signposting of Rabbi Me'ir as a Sophist is of great importance. Graham Anderson has already shown how the figures of the Sophist and the holy man become connected within the movement of thought known as the Second Sophistic and following.<sup>55</sup> Rabbi Me'ir's sophism thus connects very explicitly with the Second Sophistic and points toward other Hellenistic parallels to stories and aspects of his Babylonian Talmudic life. The seriocomic, or Menippea in its broadest sense, represents an “intellectual attitude adopted toward the value of truth and the possibility of meaning” and not a mere style (*AMS*, p. 6). Far from being a *jeu d'esprit*, or “mere” folklore, or anything that can be dismissed at all, the biographical legends, the wilder and more bizarre the better, have to be read together with the halakha of the Babylonian Talmud as absolutely essential to any rich and full reading of that definitive text of historical rabbinic Judaism.

53. Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire* (Baltimore, 1993), p. x; hereafter abbreviated *AMS*.

54. As also the famous narrative about Moses and Rabbi Akiva which will be treated in another chapter of the present research. There, to be sure, Rabbi Akiva is abused quite literally, tortured by the Romans, while the inadequacy of the sages to even understand what they see, hear, and know is rendered explicit in the divine command to Moses to be silent. For the text and a preliminary analysis, see Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004), pp. 165–66.

55. See Anderson, *Sage, Saint, and Sophist*, pp. 37–38.

## 5. Saints Are Good for Thinking With: Notes toward an Interpretation

The biographic aggada of the Babylonian Talmud can be better understood when the legends of the Rabbis' lives, even the saintliest of them, are read as part and parcel of the carnivalistic legend tradition of the Talmud's world. The Rabbis of the Talmud seem indeed to be antiheroes as often as they are heroes or at any rate such deflated heroes as those whom Bakhtin describes. More specifically, there are important ways in which the aggada of the Talmud manifests narrative elements that are specifically associated with Menippean literature. There are stories of meetings between Rabbis and heavenly figures, of deaths and miraculous resurrections, "méssaliances, disguises and mystifications, contrasting paired images, scandals, crowning/decrownings, and so forth. (*PD*, p. 133).<sup>56</sup> Most importantly, the very carnivalization of the legends of late antiquity and in the aggada "made possible the transfer of ultimate questions from the abstractly philosophical sphere, . . . to the concretely sensuous plane of images and events" (*PD*, p. 134). In the aggada, Rabbis find themselves cheek-by-jowl with rulers, rich men, thieves, beggars, and hetaerae, the cast of characters of the Menippea (see *PD*, p. 135). My point is not, of course, to argue that the Talmud is Menippean satire but rather that it is part and parcel of an assemblage of heterogeneous literary forms and individual texts of its general time and place that participate in the Menippean genre or make use of it in various ways. As Relihan has written, "a mixture of incompatible elements will hardly do as a rigorous definition of a genre, and in fact this genre has coughed up quite a few idiosyncratic works that are often taken as sui generis. . . . The *Satyricon* has been seen as a unique cross-fertilization of genres; and the *Consolation of Philosophy* has given rise to similar wonderment" (*AMS*, p. ix). Indeed, as Relihan shows, it is a mistake to think of the Menippean as a genre; rather it should be discussed as a much broader classification of a literary system of late antiquity, one that in one sense is characterized precisely by its annihilation of genre (see *AMS*, p. 5). My suggestion here is that it will prove highly productive to consider the Talmud as part of that destruction of genres and new birth of hybrid forms. The halakha and aggada of the Talmud together produce such a hybrid, a *spoudogeloion* (serious laughing) of a text. As Bakhtin informs us, "The [seriocomical genres] are all—to a greater or lesser degree—saturated with a specific *carnival sense of the world*, and several of them are direct literary

56. In this regard, one of the classic moments of Menippea in Talmudic literature is surely the moment in which Elijah reports to us that at the moment of his defeat, as it were, in halakhic reasoning by Rabbi Yehoshua', God clapped God's hands and laughing declared, "My children have defeated me."

variants of oral carnival-folkloric genres. . . . In all genres of the serio-comical, to be sure, there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of *joyful relativity* characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism” (*PD*, p. 107). The thematization of epistemology via the commentary by intellectuals on their own practices seems particularly richly developed in this Mediterranean place and time and on all sides of the Mediterranean and its hinterlands. The particular combination that we find in the Talmud of sage, saint, and sophist seems to me to mark the moment of a culturally specific holy man that deeply connects the Talmud as a text and as a cultural product with the time-space of the particular anxieties, politics, and conditions—the pivotal intellectual problematics—of the eastern reaches of the Hellenistic world in late antiquity.

Richard Kalmin has already remarked “that in late antiquity the rudiments of a partly shared elite culture may have been emerging in Syria and Mesopotamia, perhaps a refinement of a rudimentary shared nonelite culture that had existed earlier.”<sup>57</sup> This emergence—and note the parallel relationship between elite and nonelite in the proposals of Bakhtin and the hypothesis of Kalmin—of a shared culture manifested itself in large part in a regeneration of the literary system, its breakdown and re-creation in the new genres of the *spoudogeloion*. Rabbi Me’ir’s life is, on this reading, a seriocomedy.

Jas’ Elsner has proposed a somewhat different frame for analyzing this material. Arguing that stories of saintly fools are much more widespread than any narrative of genetic connection would make sense of, he proposes “a deeper existential issue about the earthiness/fleshiness (carnality?) of sainthood—one met by all traditions and effectively philosophized by Christianity into the God/Man business but in fact no less present in the contradictions of Me’ir between fallen flesh (in the brothel) and saviour untouched by the brothel into which he must walk to rescue the damsel. What is surprising is how many traditions resort to the same (very interesting) techniques . . . to dramatise and play through a fundamental contradiction in sanctity.”<sup>58</sup> I do not dismiss such a model, which may prove very effective for articulating a certain kind of “deeper” meaning to various and disparate (perhaps even historically unconnected) traditions about holy men. However, at the same time, I would argue that the kind of

57. Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford, 2006), p. 174.

58. Jas’ Elsner, letter to the author, Oct. 2006.

historicist approach that I am offering here adds significant value by exposing a particular, more culturally specific ideological concern of the period and its texts. For this context, I can only provide the most sketchy adumbrations of an argument according to which the problematic of the saint or, at any rate, of this particular type of saint will be not only the universal problem of human fleshliness and its contradictions but also an encounter with a particular and marked weakening of trust in reason that is characteristic of the time and place, the late ancient Mediterranean world. We must also pay close attention to the fact that Rabbi Me'ir and his fellow saints of Torah are hardly saintly fools but rather scholars and intellectuals who, nevertheless, are provided frequently with bizarre and even grotesque lives.<sup>59</sup> In this, far from claiming uniqueness for them, I would nonetheless argue that they are situated in a particular historical time and space. Relihan has noted: "It is too modern to say that Menippean satire champions the eternal search for truth by a refusal to be limited by the straitjacket of reason and propriety, though certainly the genre is refreshing for its indulgence in fantasy and its general lack of the trappings of persuasion that seek to steer the audience of a diatribe or a verse satire. Menippean satire rises through time to philosophical formulations of the inadequacy of human knowledge and the existence of a reality that transcends reason, but in its origins the genre merely thumbs its nose at pretenders to the truth by a denial that anything other than common sense is valuable or apprehensible" (*AMS*, p. 29). This account of Menippean satire and the realization that various Talmudic narratives—notably this one—and even, in some sense, the Talmud *tout court* belong to this world open us up to richer and deeper interpretation of the text. If the theme of the Menippea is a philosophical formulation of the inadequacy of human knowledge and certainly of its limitations in bettering the world, then a genre in tension such as this would be a powerful way of making "possible the transfer of ultimate questions from the abstractly philosophical sphere, . . . to the concretely sensuous plane of images and events." Saints are good for thinking with. The hero/saint who is thus, paradoxically, humanized and brought down to earth and whose heroic core is ironized but not in any way destroyed is a figure that is good, I think, for thinking the tensions of a society that no longer quite believes in the ultimate truth of philosophy or human Torah study respectively but will not and cannot let go of them either.

59. See Boyarin, "Dialectic and Divination in the Talmud."