Said Rabbi Yohanan, “Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose’s member was like a wineskin of nine kav; Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on’s member was like a wineskin of seven kav.” Rav Papa said, “Rabbi Yohanan’s member was like a wineskin of three kav.” And there are those who say: like a wineskin of five kav. Rav Papa himself had a member which was like the baskets of Hipparenum.

[Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsia, 84a]

CLASSICAL SAINTS AND GROTESQUE RABBIS

Biography, “Life writing,” is the most direct representation of the body of the individual in literature. As such, it is one of the most concentrated ways that a culture can express, reflect on, produce, and contest its discourse(s) of the body. Peter Brown has delineated important aspects of the classical (Greco-Roman) ideology that underlies the writing of saints’ lives in the Christian tradition, namely, the “civilization of the Paideia.” Two of the pivotal elements he isolates of that civilization are: (1)
“They believed without question that moral paradigms that had bitten to any depth in the soul would and should show themselves by reassuringly consistent body-signals”; and (2) “Continuity through replication was what the ‘Civilization of *Paideia* could achieve.’”2 It can be seen that these two tenets working in tandem and synergy would tend strongly to produce the saints’ lives as copies one of the other, and, indeed, the sameness of hagiographies has often been remarked in the literature, most recently by Carolyn Dinshaw, who writes, “Saints’ lives not only seem all the same to readers, they frequently are the same: the *Lives of Saints* Hubert, Arnold of Metz, and Lambert, for example, contain several portions in common; and the *Life* of Saint Remaclus is entirely an imitation of the *Life* of Saint Lambert,”3 the point being, of course, that such imitation is not a defect or sign of primitivity in the tradition but the very essence of its meaning, originating as it does in the two aspects of the civilization of *Paideia*, which Brown has described. The saint’s *Life* in the Christian tradition is, then, in a very important sense a representation of the continuity of classical culture in Christianity. And I mean “classical” in two imports, both in the sense of pertaining to the Hellenic heritage and in the sense of “the desire for order, correspondence and ultimate significance.”4

Brown regards the culture of late antiquity as uniform with respect to the civilization of *Paideia* and to its production of “people as classics.” He explicitly refers to the sensibility of the “Late Antique reader—pagan, Jewish or Christian.”5 In this essay, I wish to explore precisely the problematic status of this sensibility in late antique Judaism and particularly in its internal cultural conflict. There are two rabbinic Jewish cultures in this period, one in Palestine and one in Babylonia, and while there is much interchange and convergence between them, in areas that are not explicitly controlled by the religious law, there is also much that differentiates them. Since the

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5Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” p. 1. Note that on p. 11 Brown remarks on “figures in Late Antiquity who were thought of as less dramatically removed from the average ethical life of their fellows, as were the heroes of the Christian ascetic movement: thus it took me a long time to begin to understand the pagan *theios aner*, the rabbi, even the saintly bishop; and the later role of the Muslim holy man was, at that time, unknown to me.” The question of what constitutes the culture of late antiquity that is relevant for the study of Judaism is still open. I do not mean to produce Greco-Roman culture here as a unity but merely to indicate some themes of the popular culture that I think would have been in the context of the rabbinic texts and with which they would have been interacting in various ways. It is interesting to remark that there is a category of “saints” in rabbinic literature, whose biographies do have much more of a uniformity with each other, but who are not regarded as role models. In fact, they are often presented as rather problematic figures.
first is a part of the Hellenistic world and the second is not, we have a unique opportunity to study certain types of cultural difference, influence, and resistance to influence.6 One of the most important types of subtexts found in the Talmud is, indeed, biographical narratives of the rabbis.7 However, in stark contrast to the hagiography of the classical Christian tradition, not only are these lives sharply differentiated from each other but they also manifest a singular disregard for order and correspondence, indeed for imitatio. The lives of these rabbis, who are the heroes of the talmudic culture, are often represented in the Babylonian talmudic literature more as grotesques than as classics.8 On my reading, it is precisely the ideology of Paideia, in both its Hellenic and Christian forms, that is at question.

The biography of the holy Rabbi El'azar the son of Shim'on in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Baba Metsia 83b–85a) is surely one of the strangest of “hagiographies” in the literature. Certainly a learned discussion of traditions comparing the size of the penis of our hero with that of

6Notice that Brown is very thoughtful and careful with regard to his claims about Judaism in general. Thus he warns: “The reader must always bear in mind the composite nature of any overall presentation of Judaism, drawn as it is largely from the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud—that is, from writings of widely differing periods and regions. Such sources may serve to delineate certain general horizons and to emphasize certain options taken among the rabbis of Palestine and Babylonia in the course of the late antique period; but they can be used only with great caution” (Peter Brown, The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity [New York, 1988], p. 35, n. 7). And again: “But an effort to do justice to the particularity of certain strains of Christian thought and practice should not be held to justify the systematic dismissal of the complex and resilient ecology of moral notions that characterized the Mediterranean cultures of the age; still less should it encourage us to ignore the profound changes in the structure of ancient society in this period. If renewed study of the actual sexual practices and attitudes of Judaism, in Palestine and the Diaspora, . . . render parts of it out of date, or set my narrative in a more cogent social framework, no one would be more delighted than myself” (p. xvi). My current research project, tentatively entitled “The Embodiment of Torah: The Discourse of Sexuality in Talmudic Judaism,” of which this essay forms a part, is an attempt to meet the urgent need for a study such as Brown envisions.

7As Eli Yassif (see below, n. 8) points out, these individual stories are very rarely organized into continuous running narrative lives. This is not to be taken, in my view, as a sign of an early state of literary development, for the saint's life was clearly an available paradigm for the rabbinical redactors of the talmudic literature, but is in itself a cultural practice of significance. These discontinuous biographies, as I call them, have the semiotic function of producing their subject as if he or she were actually alive and present. That is, by the very intermittence and multigenic nature of the traditions about a given rabbi, their very literariness is partially obscured, as it is not in our text here. I hope to return to this matter in another article.

8The element of the Menippean in the Babylonian Talmud has hardly been recognized by scholars. The question of satire in the Talmud and satirical treatment of its rabbinic heroes has been brilliantly dealt with by my student Isaac Abecassis (Afik) in his doctoral dissertation, Hazal's Perception of the Dream (Ramat Gan, 1989), especially chap. 7. See also Eli Yassif, “The Cycle of Tales in Rabbinic Literature” (Hebrew), Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature 12 (1990): 103–47, who refers to our text as “Rabelaisian.”
others of the holy rabbis is not something we expect to find in the Talmud. Following the principle of Robert Darnton that it is precisely when we “don’t get the joke” that we have a site for beginning to read a culture, this bizarre biography, the complete text of which is presented below in an appendix, is the subject of my essay. Enormous phalli, particularly on clerics, inevitably remind of Rabelais, suggesting that our text is somehow part of the grotesque tradition, associated so strongly by Mikhail Bakhtin with cultural issues centering around procreation, and, indeed, investigation of the text shows that the thematics of the material body, the grotesque reproductive body, is its major emphasis. The narrative, as we will see, focuses almost obsessively on issues having to do with the body of its subject—his shape, his sexual functioning, his reproductive capability, a fantastic operation on his body, pus and blood that are produced by his body as a result of disease, and the fate of the body after death. Moreover, the text also explicitly dramatizes issues having to do with gender and sexuality, and as recent Renaissance research has shown, the thematics of the grotesque are closely bound up with gender issues as well.

One of the fascinations of this study is to see how a topos or rather a connected series of topoi are inflected through the particular concerns of a non-European culture. Previous scholarly work on this text has generally focused on determining the so-called kernel of (historical) truth, which the text is alleged to preserve. Other work has challenged the kernel of truth model. The following articles all challenge the dominant historical interpretations: Shamma Friedman, “Literary Development and Historicity in the Aggadic Narrative of the Babylonian Talmud: A Study Based upon B.M. 83b—86a,” Community and Culture: Essays in Jewish Studies in Honor of the 90th Anniversary of Gratz College, ed. Nahum W. Waldman (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 67—80, and “Towards the Historical Aggada of the Babylonian Talmud” (Hebrew), preprint from The Saul Lieberman Memorial Volume (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 4—14; Ofra Meir, “Vinegar, Son of Wine”—between Tradition and Innovation” (Hebrew), Leves for Literary Research 4 (1988): 9—18; and Yassif, pp. 114—19. All of these studies advance our understanding of the redaction of these texts and of their formal literary properties. None attempts to deal with them as culturally significant documents. However, the work that they do is a necessary prelude to the present analysis, for according to the dominant paradigm in Science of Judaism research (the nineteenth-century paradigm still dominant in Jewish studies, although somewhat receding in the last decade) the stories were not understood as literary documents at all but mirabile dictu as more or less accurate historical chronicles. Friedman’s studies particularly directly challenge the historical research paradigm.

It is so unexpected that nearly all commentators quite “interpret” it out of existence. The word ‘evreh itself in Aramaic means exactly “member” and can refer, as the English, to other parts of the body. Accordingly, some interpreters claim that the innards are being referred to here, while others say it is talking about arms or legs. However, just as in English, the word when unqualified otherwise means membrum virile. As we shall see, this interpretation is, moreover, the one strongly suggested by the context.

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culture, different in religion as well as in cultural history from the one that produced Rabelais’s great novel as the epitome of the grotesque.

The text both gestures to and refuses the conventions of hagiography and the ideology that underlies them. It functions, therefore, as a kind of staging ground for the cultural conflict between two discourses of the body—one that seemingly valorizes the classic body ideal and one that contests it. The protagonist is not presented as in any sense a flawless or exemplary person, although he is one of the heroes of the culture; indeed, his behavior is grotesquely inappropriate. Finally, in spite of the fact that our text’s evaluation of his character is very ambivalent, at the same time, several of the topoi of saints’ lives are actuated in the narrative, namely his near miraculous feeding by the sailors,13 the incorruptibility of his body after death, and the miracles that his corpse performs. The text thus evokes and revokes those very topoi. I read the text, therefore, as a text of cultural conflict between two anthropological traditions, the civilization of Paideia, the classic (and the consequent doctrine of the saint), which had a profound effect on the rabbinic world, and the other, grotesque tradition, which contests the notion of the classic body.

The Bakhtinian topology of the grotesque provides eminently powerful tools for reading this text as a cultural document, in spite of the fact that the source of this text is in a very different cultural field from the one that Bakhtin himself was treating. The question that arises in my mind, then, is, What does this say about Bakhtin? In other words, does this support a view of the grotesque body that would locate it in universal, ahistorical, almost psychological sources and archetypes, or perhaps is there another possibility to explain this remarkable convergence? After reading the text in the light of Bakhtin’s work on the grotesque body in Europe, I will come back to this historical-theoretical issue in the last section of this essay.

PANTAGRUEL IN PUMBEDITA

At first glance, the text seems readable as a sort of sociopolitical satire, an attack on certain rabbis who were grotesquely fat in body and, by implica-

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13In the talmudic text itself no explanation is given whatsoever for why “sixty sailors came up from the sea and came to him carrying sixty purses and they made him sixty relishes, and he ate them.” I interpret this as a version of the topos of the saint in the desert being fed miraculously. The eleventh-century French commentator Rashi declares that the sailors fed the rabbi because the pronouncing of his name saved their ship from disaster in a storm. Rashi seems to have had good authority for his tradition, which he simply cites as fact. This interpretation would still preserve the point that we have a topos of the saint’s life here, namely, the miracles performed by him. For a possible other case in which Rashi preserves a legend which the Talmud only hints at, see my “Reading Androcentrism against the Grain: Women, Sex and the Study of Torah,” Poetics Today, vol. 12 (in press).
tion, undisciplined and gluttonous, and who allowed themselves to be recruited by the Roman authorities to betray their fellow Jews:

They brought Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on, and he began to catch thieves [and turn them over to the Romans]. He met Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald, who said to him, “Vinegar son of Wine: how long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?” He said to him, “I am removing thorns from the vineyard.” He said to him, “Let the Owner of the vineyard come and remove the thorns.” One day a certain laundry man met him, and called him, “Vinegar son of Wine.” 14 He said, “Since he is so brazen, one can assume that he is wicked.” He said, “Seize him.” They seized him. After he had settled down, he went in to release him, but he could not. He applied to him the verse, “One who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards himself from troubles” (Prov. 21:23). 15 They hanged him. He stood under the hanged man and cried. Someone said to him, “Be not troubled; he and his son both had intercourse with an engaged girl on Yom Kippur.” In that minute, he placed his hands on his guts, and said, “Be joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is thus when you are doubtful, when you are certain even more so. I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you.” But even so, he was not calmed. They gave him a sleeping potion and took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink. But no fat stinks. It does if it has red blood vessels in it, and this even though it had red blood vessels in it, did not stink. He applied to himself the verse, “Even my flesh will remain preserved” (Ps. 16:8–9).

The rabbi is recruited by the Roman authorities as a sort of collaborator, who turns over Jewish tax evaders to the Roman authorities. This behavior is roundly condemned by the narrative. Rabbi El'azar is called “Vinegar son of Wine” (that is, Wicked One Son of a Saint—see below) and asked, “How long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?” For our purposes here, what is important is to pay attention to the homology

14 The clever laundry man, who often opposes the rabbis and sometimes bests them, is a topos of talmudic legend. For a similar confrontation in Greek literature, one could cite the confrontation of Kleon by the “sausage maker” in Aristophanes' Knights 877–80, cited in John J. Winkler, The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece (London, 1989), p. 54.

15 Although on the surface the rabbi is certainly applying the verse to the condemned man, who if he had not been so brazen would not have gotten into trouble, on another (ironic?) level the verse is applicable to Rabbi El'azar himself. He is certainly experiencing a great deal of remorse already at this point and will have considerable troubles later on in the story as a result of his not “guarding his mouth and tongue” by keeping silent and not condemning the laundry man to the Romans.
between the grossness of his body and that of his deportment. The rabbi is clearly grotesquely obese if several basketfuls of fat could be removed from his body, and his activity is portrayed as a grotesque violation of the integrity of the body of the Jewish people. The association of the grotesqueness of body and of behavior is underlined by being doubled in another rabbinic figure, Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Rabbi Yose, who performs similar services for the Roman government and is also marked as an inferior son to a superior father: “To Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Yose there also occurred a similar situation. Eliahu [the Prophet Elijah] met him and said to him, ‘How long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?’ He said to him, ‘What can I do? It is the king’s order.’ He said to him, ‘Your father ran away to Asia Minor; you run away to Lydia.’ When Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Yose and Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them and not touch them.”

Since the second rabbi who engaged in the wicked activity of delivering Jews to the Roman authorities is also presented as being grotesquely obese, we can hardly miss the message that the transgression of the flesh signifies as well transgression of the spirit. The narrative emphasizes the doubling of these two characters in two ways: first by telling us explicitly that a “similar event happened to Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Yose,” but then by relating that “when Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Yose and Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them and not touch them.” The image is that their stomachs were so grotesquely large that with the two rabbis standing face to face, there was room under their abdomens for the ox to walk through comfortably. They are twins of a sort, and the significance of their bodies for their morals seems well established. However, lest we still miss the message, the text goes on immediately to tell us of Rabbi Yohanan's classic beauty and that, in opposition to the fat rabbis who turn thieves over to the Roman authorities, he turns them back to Torah: “One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan's classic beauty and that, in opposition to the fat rabbis who turn thieves over to the Roman authorities, he turns them back to Torah: “One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a brand new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of the pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan. . . . He taught him [the thief, Resh Lakish] Mishna and Talmud and made him into a great man.”

As I have mentioned, up to this point the text can be read as socio-political satire, insisting that it is the fat rabbis who “persist in sending the people of our God to death,” while Rabbi Yohanan, he of the classic beauty, turns them back to Torah. On that reading, we would understand it as being an attack on rabbis, who out of self-indulgence allowed themselves to betray their fellow Jews for material gain. Moreover, the confrontation between the rabbi and the laundry man, as representative of the proletariat, also suggests a reading in this direction. As is well known, many scholars
also read the grotesque tradition in the West as a vehicle for protest against the indulgence of the clerical and ruling classes. Bakhtin argued that such readings of the grotesque tradition reduce its significance by erasing its roots in such fundamental and ancient themes as fecundity and the continuity and renewal of culture. Indeed, the sequel to our story makes it abundantly clear that something other than political protest is at stake in our text, for Rabbi Yohanan, that classic beauty of a rabbi, is ultimately shown to be nearly as ambivalent a figure as his grotesque fellows. In the end, his stance toward Resh Lakish is also that of executioner, just as was Rabbi El'azar's toward the unfortunate laundry man:

Once they were disputing in the Study House: “The sword and the lance and the dagger, from whence can they become impure?” Rabbi Yohanan said, “From the time they are forged in the fire.” Resh Lakish said, “From the time they are polished in the water.” Rabbi Yohanan said, “A brigand is an expert in brigandry.” He said to him, “What have you profited me? There they called me Rabbi and here they call me Rabbi!” He became angry, and Resh Lakish became ill. [Rabbi Yohanan's] sister [who had married Resh Lakish] came to him and cried before him. She said, “Look at me!” He did not pay attention to her. “Look at the orphans!” He said to her, “Leave your orphans; I will give life” (Jer. 49:11). “For the sake of my widowhood!” He said, “Place your widows’ trust in me” (Jer. 49:11). Resh Lakish died [as a result of Rabbi Yohanan's anger, which was a kind of curse], and Rabbi Yohanan was greatly mournful over him. The rabbis said, “What can we do to set his mind at ease? Let us bring Rabbi El'azar the son of Padat whose traditions are brilliant, and put him before him [Rabbi Yohanan].” They brought Rabbi El'azar the son of Padat and put him before him. Every point that he would make, he said, “There is a tradition which supports you.” He said, “Do I need this one? The son of Lakish used to raise twenty-four objections to every point that I made, and I used to supply twenty-four refutations, until the matter became completely clear, and all you can say is that there is a tradition which supports me? Don't I already know that I say good things?” He used to go and cry out at the gates, “Son of Lakish, where are you?” until he became mad. The rabbis prayed for him and he died.

The tragic ending of this narrative suggests strongly that it is a mistake to read the earlier part as a historical reflection of political tension between Jews who wanted to cooperate with the Roman authorities or who were

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16See Bakhtin, pp. 305–12, for critical discussion of this interpretative tradition.

17“Rabbi” means teacher, so Resh Lakish is saying that when he was the chief of the gang, he was also honored by this title.
corrupt and cooperated with the Romans and those who dissented from such collaboration. Rabbi Yohanan did no such evil, is not presented as grotesque in body, and still comes to a bad end. We need more complex cultural models to understand such a self-contradictory text. Once again, Bakhtin provides the models. He has discussed similar ambivalences in the European grotesque tradition: "The soul of the people as a whole cannot coexist with the private, limited, greedy body. There is the same complex and contradictory character in the bodily images related to the banquet: the fat belly, the gaping mouth, the giant phallus, and the popular positive image of the 'satisfied man.' The fat belly of the demons of fertility and of the heroic popular gluttons (for instance, Gargantua in folklore) are transformed into the paunch of the insatiable simonist abbot. The image, split between these two extremes, leads a complex and contradictory life."^{18}

It is precisely this complex and contradictory association of the grotesque body—on the one hand with exploitation and on the other hand with such positive images as fertility and fecundity—that will provide an important clue to a richer reading of our text. As Bakhtin has shown, the grotesque body is the uncontained body. The topoi of exaggerated size, detachable organs, the emphasis on the orifices, and stories of dismemberment are all representations of the body as interacting with the world, not self-enclosed as the classical body:

All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an inter-orientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all of these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.^{19}

It is not surprising that the grotesque cultural tradition manifests extraordinary ambivalence on this aspect of the body as well. The opposing principles of corporeal fecundity and corporeal degradation in illness and death are one of the sources of that ambivalence, and they are powerfully animated in the talmudic story. Images of decay, dismemberment, and bodily mortification pervade the story. We have already seen that the rabbi performs a kind of purity test on himself. In order to demonstrate that his actions with regard to the Jew that he sent to his death were righteous ones,
he attempts to prove (to himself) that his body is indeed a classical, impermeable one. He begins by making the claim that since he is so certain that he is righteous, he is equally sure that his body will be impervious to the depredations of worms after his death. That is, he experiences himself as a classical body, the body that is pristine and closed off from the outside world. Ironically enough, the test that the rabbi devises in order to prove his self-image is precisely one that undermines it. He has the integrity of his body violated even in his lifetime in the bizarre operation of removing basketfuls of fat from his stomach and having them placed in the sun to see if they will, indeed, be immune from rotting. We have, then, a fantastically sardonic moment of the very apotheosis of the grotesque being claimed as a proof for the classic. As Bakhtin has already pointed out, the image of the body part grown out of all proportion is "actually a picture of dismemberment, of separate areas of the body enlarged to gigantic dimensions." It is thus exciting to see how the talmudic text bears out Bakhtin's remarkable insight by combining in one moment the monstrous belly that "hides the normal members of the body." and the actual dismemberment of that monstrous organ. Indeed, the image of what is done to the body of the rabbi is almost comparable to giving birth, to a kind of lunatic cesarean section. This association makes perfect sense in the logic of the grotesque body, because it is precisely in the association of fertility and death that the grotesque draws its power. Moreover, obesity itself is an issue of gender, being associated with the maternal grotesque body. Again, as in so much of the matter of this document, we find its obsessions doubled and redoubled in the plot, for once again, after Rabbi El'azar's death, his body is put to the test of impermeability:

When he was dying, he said to his wife, "I know that the rabbis are furious with me and will not take proper care of me. Let me lie in the attic and do not be afraid of me." Rabbi Shmuel the son of Rabbi Nahman said, "Rabbi Yohanan's mother told me that the wife of Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shim'on told her that 'not less than eighteen and not more than twenty-two [years] that he was in the attic, every day I went up and looked at his hair; when a hair was pulled out, blood would flow. One day I saw a worm coming out of his ear. I became very upset, and I had a dream in which he said to me that it is

20Ibid., pp. 328, 238.
nothing, for one day he had heard a rabbinical student being slandered and had not protested as he should have.”

Again, we have exactly the same situation of the very zenith of the grotesque in precisely the place where the text is claiming to represent the classical. The theme of the saint’s body that does not rot after death is a topos of hagiography. But the grotesqueness of its handling in this text, and particularly the grotesque denouement, with the worm coming out of the rabbi’s ear, suggest not a hagiography but a satire or parody on hagiographies. Although the text reduces the force of the image by moralizing it, its power “to upset” does not really disappear. If a worm is seen coming out of the ear of a corpse, the suggestion is certain that the cavity is, in fact, full of worms. In order to better understand this moment, we have to remember that until the modern period, the corpse was believed to produce the very worms that devoured it. The corpse is said “to beget” the worms, that is, to give birth to them. A more powerful icon, then, of death in life and life in death, of the imbrication of death in the production of life, is hard to imagine.

We find another particularly strong and disturbing connection between the grotesque body of Rabbi El’azar and the female reproductive body in the description of his illness, where the text tells us exactly that “in the evening, they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus.” The text signals by a formal device the gender-related issue at stake here. These sixty vessels of the blood of dying cannot be separated in this text from the exactly sixty issues of feminine blood that will be brought before the rabbi at another point in the story (see below) and that will be powerful representation of the fecund principle. Our text of the grotesque body, then, turns very significantly on explicit thematic issues having to do with sexuality, gender, and reproduction. The Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque body and its complex and ambivalent connection with death and birth thus provides a conceptual model for reading what is often taken as a series of individual textual moments as a complex (but not organic) textual system.

22 Recently it was reported in the Israeli press that a group of French Jews, buried in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, were reinterred in a mass grave in Jerusalem because their remains had been disturbed. One was found to have had his corpse preserved intact and was given, therefore, a separate grave since this “miraculous” preservation proved his holiness. A more relevant comparison, perhaps, to a satiric reflection of this topos is, of course, the story of Father Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov. Another possible cultural source for this theme is a motif of Hellenistic romances regarding the preservation of a dead lover, which would make it a sort of early predecessor of William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” See Moses Hadas, Three Greek Romances (Garden City, NY, 1953), p. 151 (cited in Friedman, “Towards the Historical Aggada of the Babylonian Talmud” [n. 10 above], p. 8, n. 27).

23 Compare the birth of Pantagruel, as discussed in Bakhtin, p. 328.
The theme of reproduction begins explicitly to obtrude in the sequel to the anecdote about the two fat rabbis and thus connects the theme of grotesque obesity with the theme of fecundity: "A certain matron said to them, 'Your children are not yours.' They said, 'Theirs are bigger than ours.' 'If that is the case, even more so!' There are those who say that thus they said to her: 'As the man, so is his virility.' And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: 'Love compresses the flesh.' And why did they answer her at all? Does it not say: 'Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness'? In order not to produce slander on their children, that they are bastards." The Roman matron who sees the two obese rabbis cannot believe that they could possibly perform sexually, so she challenges the legitimacy of their children. The rabbis provide what, at first, seems to be a paradoxical answer, stating that their wives have even bigger abdomens than they do. The matron, quite appropriately, argues that if that is the case, then it is even more the case that they could not make love to them, to which they answer either that the size of a man's penis is in keeping with the size of the rest of his body or, alternatively, that desire has the power to compress the flesh. It is at this moment in the text that the account of the gargantuan phalli of the rabbis is produced.

Beginning from this incident, the text produces a phenomenal series of stories that all use anxiety over gender and reproduction as a major motif. The most obvious sign of this thematic concern is the fact that when Rabbi El'azar returns to the House of Study, his first activity is to permit marital sex for sixty women who have had a flux of blood that may or may not be menstrual. According to rabbinic practice, when a woman has a discharge, if it is certainly menstrual blood, then she and her husband are forbidden to have sex until after the period and a purification ritual. However, if it is doubtful as to whether the discharge is menstrual or not, a stain is shown to a rabbi who makes a judgment based on his expertise. In our story, Rabbi El'azar was shown sixty of such stains and judged them all to be non-menstrual, thus permitting intercourse for these wives. All of the sixty children born of the intercourse permitted by Rabbi El'azar were named after him, signifying him as in some sense their parent. My claim for the significance of this narrative moment in signaling the thematic emphasis of the text is occasioned by its very gratuitousness. We could have had the rabbi performing any feat of halakhic (rabbinic law) ingenuity in order to prove the great loss to Torah of the years that he was away from the House of Study, but precisely the halakhic feat that he performs is one concerned with sexuality and reproduction. The choice of this particular halakhic matter as the example of Rabbi El'azar's great ability is a strong symptom, then, of what our text is "about": "One day he went to the Study House. They

24I will be dealing with the highly problematic significance of these practices in another chapter of the present research from several points of view.

25That is, what its cultural business is. Notice that in the parallel text of the Palestinian tradition nearly the same story is told, but all of the themes having to do with sex and procrea-
brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure. The rabbis murmured about him, saying, 'Is it possible that there is not even one doubtful case among those?' He said, 'If I am right, let all of the children be boys, and if not, let there be one girl among them.' All of them were boys. They were all named after Rabbi El'azar. Our rabbi said, 'How much procreation did that wicked woman prevent from Israel!'

The guilt for the prevention of this procreation is displaced from the rabbis themselves, who by their undue stringency in applying their laws prevented wives from having intercourse with their husbands, and projected onto the wife of Rabbi El'azar, whose only guilt was in protecting her husband from maltreatment by those self-same rabbis. Moreover, the "credit," as it were, for the procreation that took place is taken by the rabbis for themselves in the naming of the children after the rabbi. This reading suggests a source for the tremendous tension that our text manifests around the grotesque, reproductive body. I think the conflict in the text shows a great deal of anxiety about the role of the rabbinic community in the reproduction and genealogy of Israel and first and foremost about their own genealogies, that is to say, of their own continuation through replication in their offspring.

The problematic of reproducibility is insinuated into our text immediately by the epithet awarded to Rabbi El'azar ben Shim'on, to wit, "Vinegar son of Wine." Rabbi Shim'on, the father of our hero, was one of the holiest and most ascetic of all of the rabbis, a man who was famous for his entire devotion to the study of Torah alone as well as for his implacable opposition to the Romans. His son, as signified by his obesity as well as by his willingness to serve as errand boy to the Romans, is not "Wine son of Wine," as would be hoped for, but "Vinegar son of Wine," a decidedly inferior product. Exactly the same applies to Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Rabbi Yose, again an ignoble son of a noble father. With great (dramatic) irony, it is these two men who are challenged by the Roman matron insisting, "Your children are not yours." Their obesity prevents them, she suggests,
from being able to have intercourse with their wives. They answer her, however, in convincing manner that indeed they are the fathers of their children, so as to prevent their children from being mocked. The matron misreads the signification of their bodies, thinking that their grossness and grotesqueness in body signify an interruption of genealogical connection between them and their children. However, we, the readers, know that the genealogical signification that does not obtain is not the physical one between these men and their children but the spiritual one between these men and their fathers. The fathers were wine; the children are vinegar. However, notice that this very figure both preserves and contests the possibility of reproduction, for vinegar is both like and unlike wine in appearance and taste. It is, moreover, not a totally unworthy product. One has taken a loss when one's wine turns to vinegar, but not by any means a total one. Genealogy is thus problematized but not entirely discarded by this figure.

Moreover, according to the rabbinic culture, the turning of wine into vinegar was an uncontrollable event; they attributed it to bad luck, thus emphasizing by their figure all the more that the unworthiness of these sons was not a sign of inadequacy on the part of the parents, and therefore, paradoxically, they are denied even the comfort of being provided with a possibility of changing or controlling the situation.

The text, then, seems to bear out the suggestion that its issue is a rabbinic anxiety about their own "continuity through replication." The mistakenness of the matron's taunt that the children of the two fat rabbis are not theirs only underlines through its ironies the truth that they are not truly sons of their fathers. The theme is unmistakably taken up, once more, in the remarkable sequel to our story on the next page of the Talmud: "Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on [after the latter's death]. He asked, 'Does that righteous man have a son?' They answered, 'He has a son, and any prostitute who is hired for two [coins], would pay eight for him.' He came and ordained him 'Rabbi' and gave him over to Rabbi Shim'on, the son of Issi, the son of Lakonia, the brother of his mother [to teach him Torah]." The son of Rabbi El'azar, he who had once been dubbed "Vinegar son of Wine," is again presented as an unworthy son to his father. The problematic of continuity through procreation is intensely signified in this brief incident. On the one hand, we have an unbeautiful father who has a son whose body is so beautiful that

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28Another possible interpretation, suggested to me by David Satran, is that the matron perceived the grotesque size of their genitals, and her taunt was that they could not possibly have had intercourse for that reason, to which they replied, "theirs are larger than ours," that is, our wives' genitals are larger than ours. However, it is clear that the Talmud did not understand it this way, for then the challenge that even more so is it doubtful that their children are theirs makes no sense.

29This last point was suggested to me by Elliot Horowitz.
whores are willing to pay four times their normal fee in order to sleep with him. On the other hand, he is presented again as the highly unrighteous son of a (suddenly saintly) father. Thus, we find that the comfort of belief in survival through reproduction is twice challenged in the same figure; he neither looks like his father nor follows in his footsteps. The story, moreover, suggests as well a response to this tragic despair—namely, reproduction through education. “When he became great, he went and studied in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Shemaia. He heard his voice and said, ‘This one’s voice is similar to the voice of Rabbi El’azar the son of Shim’on.’ They said to him, ‘He is his son.’ He applied to him the verse, ‘The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that wins souls is wise’ (Prov. 11:30). ‘The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life’: this is Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on, and ‘he that wins souls is wise’: this is Rabbi Shim ‘on, the son of Issi, the son of Lakonia.” That which genealogy could not secure, education does.

This story is immediately doubled by an even more remarkable one: “Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi Tarfon. He asked, ‘Does that righteous man have a son?’ [For Rabbi Tarfon] had lost his children. They said to him, ‘He has no son, but he has the son of a daughter, and any prostitute who is hired for four, hires him for eight.’ He said to him, ‘If you return [to Torah], I will give you my daughter.’ He returned.” This is a recapitulation of several of the themes we have seen so far. Rabbi Tarfon has no living sons and, moreover, his (only?) grandson is as far from Torah as could be. The rabbi takes him under his wing through a displaced erotic relationship, a situation we will be meeting again and interpreting later on. I read here the extraordinary tension that the rabbinic culture seems to feel between the desire on the one hand to pass on the mantle of Torah from father to son and their anxiety that in a profound sense people do not reproduce each other.

I think we can locate this tension in a cultural reversal within the rabbinic tradition in its transition from the biblical weltanschauung as well as in an inner conflict of paradigms within the rabbinic society. The rabbis are in a strong sense the inheritors of the priestly role in Israel. This transfer of authority is dramatized in the Talmud (Yoma 76b), where all of the people who were following the High Priest upon his departure from the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement turned and followed Shemaia and Aytalyon, semilegendarily founding figures of the rabbinic movement, when the latter appeared.30 Notice that the very activity in which Rabbi El’azar engages, the distinction between menstrual blood and blood that

30The issue is made even sharper there by the fact that these two rabbis are not only not hereditary priests but they are converts. I am grateful to Joshua Levinson for reminding me of this source.
does not cause impurity, is par excellence a priestly task. Concerns with pro-
creation and genealogy are very critical in the priestly culture of the Bible,
and an impotent priest was even disqualified from serving at the altar and
blessing the people.31 The signifier of biological filiation has a strong an-
choring in the values of the culture. As such, the rabbinic mantle should
have passed from father to son, as does the crown of priesthood. But it does
not, at least not in any straightforward way. On the one hand, the rabbis
have created a sort of meritocracy to replace the religious aristocracy that
the Bible ordains. Filiation is no longer from father to son but from teacher
to disciple.32 But the desire that genetic replicability be homologous with
pedagogical replicability persists. The text ends with the comforting con-
clusion, “Said Rabbi Parnak in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, ‘Anyone who

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31 For an excellent discussion of this matter from a comparative anthropological perspec-
tive, see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Reli-
gion and Ancient Judaism (Bloomington, IN, 1990), pp. 141–76.
32 See ibid., pp. 206–16 and 229–34. Of course, the rabbinic interpretation of biblical
“father” and “son” as “master” and “disciple” is common. See, for example, Sifre Deut. sec. 34
(p. 61), sec. 182 (p. 224), sec. 305 (p. 327), sec. 335 (p. 385). The New Testament polemicizes
against the Pharisees for turning their followers against their biological parents. Becoming a
“disciple of the sages” often meant accepting a rabbinic father in place of one’s biological fa-
thetr. See the story of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan,
par. 6, p. 43, and parallels. However, this meritocracy is also not simple, for on the other hand
the institution of the patriarchate, an institution of both temporal and religious power and
prestige, is precisely a hereditary office. The issue of this institution and its hereditary nature is
raised in our text in the story of Rabbi El’azar and Rabbi as children (see Appendix). Rabban
Shim’on ben Gamliel, the patriarch, has power to protect his son in this world, perhaps:
“Rabban Shim’on ben Gamliel said, ‘I have one chick among you and you wish to cause him to
be lost from me!’” But the other Shim’on, who had no such power while alive, being repre-
sented as nonexistent then (“Shall he who has a father live, and he who has none shall die?”)
can take care of his son from the next world (“Some say that his father appeared to the rabbin in a
dream and said, ‘I have one chick that is with you, and you do not want to bring it to me’”). The text
thematizes by repeating in this phrase the conflict between temporal prestige and power and
eternal prestige and power. But finally, it is Rabbi, not Rabbi El’azar, who carries the mantle,
not only of political power for his time but of central cultural prestige for the Talmudic Juda-
ism of the time of our narrator as well. However, the institution of the patriarchate and its
hereditary nature were a source of political and cultural conflict all through the early stages of
the rabbinic period. The political dimensions of this cultural conflict are, of course, very sig-
nificant but beyond the scope of the present article. For the passing of rabbinic offices from
fathers to sons, and the tension of this hereditary principle with that of Torah meritocracy, see
Gedalyahu Alon, Jews, Judaism and the Classical World: Studies in Jewish History in the Times of
the Second Temple and Talmud, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 436–57; Moshe
Beer, “The Sons of Moses in Rabbinic Lore” (Hebrew), Bar-Ilan: University Yearbook of Judaic
in Jewish Leadership,” Immanuel 10 (1980): 57–61; Isaiah Gafni, “‘Scepter and Staff’: Con-
cerning New Forms of Leadership in the Period of the Talmud in the Land of Israel and
Babylonia” (Hebrew), in Priesthood and Kingdom: The Relations of Religion and State in Judaism
and the Gentiles, ed. I. Gafni and G. Motzkin (Jerusalem, 1986/87), pp. 84–91. I am grateful
to Steven Fraade for these references.
is a disciple of the wise and his son is a disciple of the wise and his grandson is a disciple of the wise, the Torah will not cease from his progeny forever.” According to this apothegm, the very relationship of replication through discipleship is, paradoxically, precisely what guarantees that one’s physical progeny will be a replication of one. The very bravado of this statement, however, reveals more anxiety and the strength of desire for this to be so than any confidence that it is indeed the case.33

This problematic orientation toward bodily filiation is figured in our text in another way as well, that is, Rabbi Yohanan’s sitting on the steps of the ritual bath, so that the last face the women would see before sleeping with their husbands would be his, and they would have beautiful children. Now, on one level, all we have here is a topos of folk literature that an embryo is affected by appearances the mother has seen either during pregnancy or at the time of conception.34 As such, this would not be a particularly remarkable story. However, according to talmudic morality, thinking of another person while having intercourse with one’s spouse is accounted as a kind of virtual adultery. The theme of the importance of the sexual partners having no images of another person at the time of intercourse is emphasized over and over in rabbinic literature. It even carries over into halakhic prescriptions for the act of love, for example, that sexual intercourse should be practiced at an hour when no voices will be heard from the street. Violation of this principle is represented as resulting in children of a sort of mixed genealogy who are not lovely.35 An exception is made in our case. In fact, I believe that this is a correct reading of the challenge the rabbis make to Rabbi Yohanan: “‘Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?’ He replied, ‘I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, “A fertile son is Joseph, a fertile son by the spring”’ (Gen. 49:22), and Rabbi Abbahu said (of this verse), ‘Do not read it “by the spring” but “out of reach of the Eye.”’” 36

Ostensibly, the challenge that the rabbis made to Rabbi Yohanan is something like, “Are you not afraid that by calling attention to your beauty, you will be attracting the Evil Eye?” And the Rabbi’s reply is made to mean

33It is, indeed, quite ironic that the one figure in our narrative who does seem to have transferred his qualities to his son is the laundry man, of whom it is said “that he and his son had intercourse with a betrothed girl on Yom Kippur.”


35See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 20b.

36The words for “spring” and “eye” are homonyms in the Hebrew, and the preposition “by” can also mean “above, out of the reach of.”
merely, “I am of the seed of Joseph who are proof from the Evil Eye.” However, I am convinced that there is another meaning lurking within Rabbi Yohanan’s words, which the Talmud has either willingly or unwittingly obscured. The whole verse that Rabbi Yohanan quotes is, “A fertile son (or young man) is Joseph, a fertile young man by the spring; the daughters walked on the wall.” The last word can, however, be taken as a verb meaning “to look.” The verse, so read, becomes an exact authorization for Rabbi Yohanan’s practice: “A fertile young man is Joseph, he is a fertile young man alongside the ritual bath [the spring]; the daughters walked to look at him.” It is as if, therefore, what Rabbi Yohanan is proposing is that he would, spiritually, become the father of all of these children, transferring his qualities to them, through the thoughts of their mothers at the moment of intercourse with their physical fathers. If my reconstruction of Rabbi Yohanan’s midrash is correct, then, the original challenge must have been, “Isn’t it immoral for you to be sitting near the ritual bath and introducing yourself into the thoughts of these women as they sleep with their husbands?” and Rabbi Yohanan’s answer would be: “I am exceptional because of my beauty and have a precedent for my actions. Joseph, my ancestor, also behaved thus.” This reading is doubled by Rabbi Yohanan’s very claim to be of the seed of Joseph as well, for he certainly could not have meant that literally he was a physical descendant of Joseph, the tribes of Joseph having been long exiled from Palestine and lost. He meant, on my reading: “I am of the spiritual seed of Joseph; just as he was beautiful of form and spirit and sat by the ritual bath and produced spiritual progeny, so also I.” The beauty of Joseph and his ardent sexual purity were, of course, both topoi of the culture and would have been easily recognized in Rabbi Yohanan’s claim. Rabbi Yohanan thus embodies the ideology of the classic.

The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish continues the theme of gender, sex, and reproduction. The former is extraordinarily beautiful, nearly androgynous, beardless, and so sexually attractive to the masculine Resh Lakish that the latter is willing to perform prodigious athletic feats to get to him. Moreover, compared to the other rabbis, he has the smallest penis as well, in the Hellenistic world a signifier of male beauty. Lest we

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37 It is even possible that this is the original sense of Rabbi Abbahu’s midrashic comment as well, for “going up from the spring” would be a very natural way in Hebrew to refer to returning from the ritual bath.

38 Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me make it explicit that “Rabbi Yohanan” here means the character Rabbi Yohanan in this particular text. Thus, no claim is being made that the historical Rabbi Yohanan was more or less influenced by Greek culture than any other rabbi but only that here he, as the representative par excellence of Palestinian rabbinism for the Babylonians, is a signifier of a certain cultural moment and cultural struggle. In other Babylonian stories about him, he himself is represented as grotesque in his person as well.

39 “The Greek aesthetic prefers discreet genitals, small in size” (François Lissarrague, “The Sexual Life of Satyrs,” in Halperin et al., eds., p. 56, and texts cited there). For classical male
miss the message, the narrator segues immediately into the story of Resh Lakish’s misidentification of Rabbi Yohanan as a woman: “One day, Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him and thought he was a woman. He crossed the Jordan after him by placing his lance in the Jordan and vaulting to the other side. When Rabbi Yohanan saw Rabbi Shim ‘on the son of Lakish [Resh Lakish], he said to him, ‘Your strength for Torah!’ He replied, ‘Your beauty for women!’ He said to him, ‘If you repent, I will give you my sister who is more beautiful than I am.’” As in the _Pai'deia_, Rabbi Yohanan does manage to produce Resh Lakish as a spiritual copy of himself, as he wished to produce infants who would be physical copies. Just as he is effeminate or androgynous, he feminizes Resh Lakish and, by doing so, reproduces him as a “great man”: “He agreed. He wanted to cross back [vault back on his lance] to take his clothes but he couldn’t. He taught him Mishna and Talmud and made him into a great man.”

The feminizing virtue of Torah is strongly represented in this story. As soon as Resh Lakish even agrees to study Torah, he can no longer vault back over the river on his spear. “His strength has been sapped as that of a woman.” What we have here is, in fact, an almost exact reversal of the pattern of Greek pederasty, in which an older man, marked as such by his beard, takes an adolescent under his wing and in an erotic relationship educates him and prepares him for full participation in civic life. At the end, the young man is a hoplite, a spear bearer. Here it is the beardless, androgynous one who takes the virile hoplite under his wing, educates him, and makes him a “great man,” sapping, however, his physical prowess and disempowering his “spear” in the process. To be sure, within the Jewish moral economy, the homoerotic implications must be displaced from a relationship between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan to his sister, a displacement that the text makes explicit.

beauty as being androgynous, see Paglia (n. 21 above), pp. 99 ff. In particular, for the small penis as a standard of male beauty, see pp. 114–15 there. In truth, I must admit that I am not certain that, given the size of a _kan_, Rabbi Yohanan’s penis is actually represented as small, but there can be no doubt that the contrast of nine and seven versus three suggests just that. In any case, we should not misunderstand that the rabbis considered themselves eunuched. Rabbi Yohanan does, after all, have a penis, one of at least normal size.

40The Talmud in Sanhedrin 26b explicitly refers to the Torah as “sapping the strength of a man,” and “his strength was sapped as that of a woman” is a common phrase in the talmudic literature.

41Michel Foucault, _The Use of Pleasure_, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 2, _The History of Sexuality_ (New York, 1985), p. 199, remarks on the appearance of the beard as the sign that the relationship between the man and boy must end and that now the young man ought to become the subject and not the object of pedagogy (and pederasty). See also Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux and François Lissarrague, “From Ambiguity to Ambivalence: A Dionysiac Excursion through the ‘Anakreontic’ Vases,” in Halperin et al., eds., p. 217; and Maud W. Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender,” in ibid., p. 405, n. 63.

42See _Pesiqta derav Kahana_ (n. 25 above).
Rabbi Yohanan’s almost androgynous quality is once more underlined in the text when in the discussion of why he is not mentioned in a list of beautiful rabbis, it is remarked that the others had splendor of face, but “Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face”: “Is that true? But haven’t we been taught by our master that ‘the beauty of Rabbi Cahana is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob. The beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam,’ and that of Rabbi Yohanan is not mentioned. Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face.” The Talmud raises an objection to the citation of Rabbi Yohanan as the very embodiment of beauty, because there is a tradition that lists beautiful rabbis and does not mention him. The answer is that Rabbi Yohanan, although beautiful, was left out of this list because he did not possess “splendor of face.” This phrase refers to the biblical verse in which we find the injunction to “give splendor to the face of an elder” [Lev. 19:32], which is interpreted in midrash to mean that one must grow a beard. What was lacking, then, in Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty was precisely that which defined his beauty for Resh Lakish, his effeminate appearance. The text seems then to contradict itself, asserting that the lack of the beard is a marker of beauty and at the same time that it is a defect in beauty. This text manifests, therefore, an ambivalence or anxiety about the value of virility; on the one hand, the signs of virility are what produce beauty in the male and, at the same time, it is the very lack of those signs that produce the male as beautiful. This ambivalence about the effeminate body of Rabbi Yohanan is thus the double of the ambivalence about the grotesquely masculine bodies of the fat rabbis. The ideal male seems to be feminized in this culture, but there would be then an understandable apprehension about the reproducibility of this ideal male.

I would claim that contestation of the significance of physical virility, substituting replication through teaching for replication through reproduction, is an attempt (doomed to failure, as it happens) to reduce this anxiety. The production of spiritual children, those who will follow in the moral and religious ways of the parent, is claimed by our text as more important than the production of biological children, not, I hasten to add, because of a hierarchical privileging of “spirit” over body but owing, rather, to a profound skepticism about replication of the qualities of the parent in the child. Spiritual excellence is claimed as superior to physical prowess. Reversing the Hellenic pattern, the masculine figure joins the “effeminate” one and, while losing his physical virility, becomes nevertheless, or accordingly, a “great man.” The narrative seems, therefore, to be

43 See Gleason, pp. 400–401, for the sources of one pole of this ambivalence.
44 In fact, one of the main points of this whole research project is to argue against such dualism in rabbinic culture.
45 Jonah Frankel already remarked on this reversal of expectations in his *Studies in the Spiritual World of the Stories of the Aggada* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1981), pp. 73–77. Frankel’s reading
challenging the cult of physical virility and male beauty. However, it would be very difficult to claim that our text substitutes for these values anything clear or unambiguous. Even pedagogical filiation is not left unproblematic by our narrative; the eventual treatment of the student by the teacher and its tragic result are an eloquent exposure of trouble in paradigm. Indeed, the concept of spiritual filiation replacing biological one is given a very bitterly ironic reading, when Rabbi Yohanan replies to his sister that she need not be concerned about the death of her husband (whom her brother is killing), because God is the “father of orphans.” We are left, therefore, with a highly inconclusive evaluation: the text seems neither able to inhabit comfortably nor to reject the importance of biological filiation as a signifier of value. Indeed, the text is not at all sure about the educability (or malleability) of human nature. Both Rabbi Yohanan with his assertion that Resh Lakish is still, as it were, a brigand and the latter’s answer that “there they called me Rabbi, and here they call me Rabbi” seem to express great reservation about whether anything at all has changed. So while the raising of spiritual progeny is produced by our text, on my reading, as a solution to a deep-seated problem in the culture, it was itself perhaps no less of a problem for the culture than the problem of procreation that it was supposed to solve. Having downplayed out of a certain despair the consequence of genetic filiation, the culture seems still very uncertain about the reliability of filiation through pedagogy as well. The result is the very anxious and conflicted text we have before us.

We see here the particular cultural configuration of the grotesque in our Babylonian Jewish field. In Bakhtin’s account, the grotesque body is the very triumph of life over death: “It is the people’s growing and ever-victorious body that is ‘at home’ in the cosmos. It is the cosmos’ own flesh and blood, possessing the same elemental force but better organized. The body is the last and best word of the cosmos, its leading force. Therefore it has nothing to fear. Death holds no terror for it. The death of the individual is only one moment in the triumphant life of the people and of mankind, a moment indispensable for their renewal and improvement.”

That this thematics of the continued life of the body is central to our text, just as in Rabelais, emerges from all that has been said about it here. Moreover, the theme is explicitly treated as well in the description of how the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish is of very great interest, but it entirely removes that story from its literary context as part of a larger narrative text, apparently assuming that it was attached here secondarily and by mere association. However, as Friedman, in “Literary Development and Historicity” (n. 10 above), pp. 79–80, nn. 49, 50, has already shown, there is no doubt but that the present editor carefully wove these two sources into a single narrative text, and it is that text that I am reading here. This does not invalidate Frankel’s reading as far as it goes, and, indeed, it is a necessary supplement to the interpretation I am giving here.

46I am indebted for this last comment to David Resnick.
47Bakhtin, p. 341.
Rabbi El'azar’s body continued to live (and speak) after his death. However, certainly in our text, something profoundly disagrees with Bakhtin’s optimistic depiction of the role of the grotesque. He seems somehow Candidean in the easy confidence that he has in the triumph of the body over death represented in an idyllic grotesque. The fecund and positive force of the grotesque is at the same time infused with images of horror and terror. Bakhtin may be right on Rabelais and the tradition that he culminates, but the talmudic text that I am reading here is clearly much less optimistic. I have my doubts about Rabelais as well. Certainly neither the image of an infant so gigantic that he suffocates his mother in being born nor a corpse being consumed by the worms that it has “begotten” supports these rhapsodic remarks about “triumphant life.” Indeed, where Bakhtin talks about “birth-giving death,” I think often we must think of “death-bringing birth.” The contradictions that these texts manifest in their discourses must be understood (and indeed Bakhtin admits as much at other points) as the product of tensions within the cultural-social fields in which they were produced. For the medieval Christian world the conflict is between an ancient pagan fertility cult and a later Christian cult of the hermetic and pure virgin body. I think that our text shows that the conflict in the Jewish culture is to be located in a different social field. Rather than being a clash over the issue of sexuality and reproduction per se, I would suggest that it is the question of reproduction as providing the kind of “triumphant life of the people,” the conquering of death that Bakhtin conjures that is the source of the inner tension of our discourse. For Bakhtin’s Rabelais, it is clear that his children will not only repeat the father and render him immortal but that “the father’s new flowering in the son does not take place on the same level but on a higher degree of mankind’s development. When life is reborn, it does not repeat itself, it is perfected.” This utopian desire is, it seems, the exact contrary of the Talmud’s fear that the “father’s new flowering” will be a bitter one, a “Vinegar son of Wine.” Reproduction, then, so far from continuing one’s existence into the future, only emphasizes the dissolution that death brings.

48The theme of resurrection is an important aspect of Bakhtin’s grotesque material body tradition (ibid., p. 299). In other talmudic grotesques this motif is also prominent. See, for instance, the story of Rav Kahana and Rabbi Yohanan in Baba Kamma and the story of Rabba “slaughtering” Rabbi Zeira while drunk and reviving him on Purim—the Jewish Carnival—in Megillah 7a.

49Bakhtin, p. 392. These images fit more with Paglia’s conception of fecundity as being terrifying, of liquid, female nature gone wild (n. 21 above). Where I part company with her is at two crucial and related points: one is her assumption that such images are somehow natural and not cultural in origin, and the second is her enthusiastic acceptance of the values implied by the imagery of classical male and grotesque female.

50Bakhtin, pp. 406 ff.
Bakhtin in Babylonia

Bakhtin himself seems to regard the category of the grotesque body as having its sources in the psyche and being therefore somehow above time and place. Although he is very careful to trace Rabelais's actual thematics to particularly elements of the cultural (and material) environment—the drought and plague of early modern France\(^{51}\)—the grotesque body itself is held to have its sources so far back in human history as to be ahistorical. Thus we find Bakhtin opining: “The starry sky, the gigantic material masses of the mountains, the sea, the cosmic upheavals, elemental catastrophes—these constitute the terror that pervades ancient mythologies, philosophies, the systems of images, and language itself with its semantics. An obscure memory of cosmic perturbations in the distant past and the dim terror of future catastrophes form the very basis of human thought, speech, and images. . . . The struggle against cosmic terror in all its forms and manifestations did not rely on abstract hope or on the eternal spirit, but on the material principle in man himself.”\(^{52}\) At first glance, the material that we have uncovered here seems to support such an understanding of the origin of the grotesque in elemental, ancient, and universal human fears and aspirations—even though I would not associate myself with Bakhtin’s overly optimistic reading of the grotesque body. The fact that the same categories are useful for understanding the texts of the Babylonian Jewish culture as for understanding the texts of early modern European culture would seem strongly to suggest such an archetypal reading of the evidence.

However, upon further reflection it seems that there might be another way of approaching this evidence. I would like to raise the daring hypothesis that the striking parallels between these talmudic stories and Bakhtin’s account of the European grotesque suggest that the roots of the European grotesque lie in a cultural realm that is both stereotyped as Oriental in classical culture and actually manifest in the ancient Near East. Rather than looking for practices or beliefs that belong to “man himself,” I propose that we look for such as are products of the Mediterranean Kulturgebiet. The classical body would have its sources, following my hypothesis, in a particular cultural field as well, one initially restricted to Greece itself, but afterward having enormous influence throughout the sphere of Hellenic cultural hegemony known as the Hellenistic world. The grotesque body image would have originated on this hypothesis, in the “Asiatic” cultural realm, and spread from there into Greece and then diachronically into European culture in general.

I cannot pursue the enormous research required to make such a wide-

\(^{51}\)Ibid., p. 340.
\(^{52}\)Ibid., pp. 336–37.
ranging hypothesis stick. However, our very text provides evidence for the suggestion that the imagery of the grotesque is native to the eastern Mediterranean and that Hellenic culture was considered somehow antithetical to it. We have already seen in the text that the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish seems best understood as a parodic representation of the Paideia of classical Greek culture. However, there is much more in the text that suggests such cultural conflict.

The strain in our narrative of Rabbi El'azar is, on my reading, a tension between text and intertext. It is important to make note of the fact that the text we are considering here is a Babylonian reworking of an earlier Palestinian text. This is significant because a priori we can assume a greater Hellenistic cultural substratum in Palestine, which was under Roman political and cultural hegemony, than in Babylonia, which was, of course, under Sassanian Persian rule at this time. In fact, I suggest, the Babylonian text that we are reading here marks a site of strain between the Palestinian late antique Jewish culture and a more Oriental culture, particularly in its orientation toward the body as signifier. We are fortunate in that in this case (as in almost no other) the Palestinian original of the extended Babylonian text has been preserved as well, so we can observe the work of the Babylonian redactor. In the Palestinian text, the significance of the body as an indicator of the moral state of the individual is thoroughly unproblematic.

53 There was very close connection between the two rabbinic communities of late antiquity. Literary traditions passed quite freely back and forth between them, and often the texts of one are reworkings of the texts of the other. In this case, where we have narratives about the lives of Palestinian authorities, we could assume a priori that the texts are based on Palestinian sources. However, in our case, as in almost no other, we can go further, for we have the actually extant Palestinian text which seems to have been the model and source for our Babylonian narrative. (See n. 10 above.) Friedman, in “Literary Development and Historicity,” p. 68, passim, shows precisely how the “Babylonian account is a literary recasting”; however, since his intention is still the “search for the historical Rabbi El’azar,” his critical sense leads him to disregard precisely the elements that in our reading will be most significant, exactly because it is they that most reveal the ideological conflicts that gave rise to the present (Babylonian) text. Thus, for example, he also remarks on the doubling of the story of Rabbi El’azar in the narrative about Rabbi Ishmael, “This BT [Babylonian Talmud] record of R. Ishmael is a secondary source, which developed from literary embellishment” (p. 71); however, for him the consequence of this undoubtedly correct suggestion is merely, “The embellishment cannot be used as historical evidence [contra, indeed, earlier scholars who did use it as historical evidence],” while, for me, it is precisely this doubling of the story on the part of the Babylonian author/redactor that produces its cultural-historical significance.

54 Although most previous scholarly work (see n. 10 above) has focused on the Babylonian text as a tissue of later additions and changes to the Palestinian one, my claim is that the Babylonian text should be read as a literary work in its own right (it goes without saying that I am not proposing that it be read in splendid isolation) with its own meanings and significations, just as we read Shakespeare’s histories in their own right and not as reworkings of the source texts. Comparing the texts can, however, be illuminating for the ways that it throws into relief precisely the literary work of the Babylonian author and thus of his discursive practice.
Thus in the Palestinian “original,” instead of a corpse begetting worms, we find one worm piercing behind the ear and, moreover, this event is predicted by the rabbi in his original statement of his righteousness and has a kind of classical justice; that is, the rabbi claims that since he sinned with his ear, his ear will be penetrable. Rabbi El’azar addresses his wife who is sad at the thought that he will die with the following words: “You are crying because you say, ‘Woe to that body which will go to the worms.’ And so it is, I will die, but no worm, God forbid, will have power over me, except for one worm which will pierce me behind my ear, because once I was going into the synagogue and I heard a voice of a certain person blaspheming, and being doubtful whether to prosecute him or not, I did not do so.”

In this text, the topos of the saint’s body that does not suffer any physical deterioration is firmly in place. The rabbi is convinced that because of his holiness and perfection in the keeping of the commandments, there will be no putrefaction of his remains. Moreover, owing to the reliability of the body as signifier, he knows precisely the one exception to this certainty. Because he sinned with his ear, that is, he heard blasphemy and did not react, therefore the ear will be punished by having one worm pierce there. The Babylonian rewriting of the Palestinian intertext is practically a parody of it, with nearly every motif exaggerated to grotesque proportions. The difference between a worm entering behind the ear and a worm coming out of the ear is an emblem of this difference: the first implies merely partial penetrability or vulnerability of the body, while the second implies a body full of—indeed “begetting,” giving birth to—worms.

What I am proposing, then, is that it was the ideology of the classic body that had specifically Western origins and that the grotesque has its origins further east, or in a common pre-Hellenic culture of the Mediterranean basin. There is more documentation for a hypothesis of difference between Palestinian (Westernized) and Babylonian talmudic cultures on the grotesque body as well. Thus the Palestinian texts of the period seem to show an acceptance of the classical principle that the body is an index of the state of the person, and that a beautiful body belongs with a beautiful spirit. In another Babylonian talmudic biographical legend, this tension between the body as index of the quality of the person or not is thematized explicitly as a conflict between Jewish and Hellenistic cultures, namely, the story in which Rabbi Yehoshua is taunted by a Roman maiden who asks why God stores his wisdom in such an ugly vessel:

Said the daughter of Caesar to Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Hanania, “Aye, such beautiful wisdom in such an ugly vessel!” He said to her,

55Pesiqta derav Kahana, p. 220.
56Compare also Friedman (“Literary Development and Historicity” [n. 10 above], p. 70), who remarks that in the Palestinian version of the story, Rabbi El’azar is represented as having had no doubts or regrets whatsoever about his actions on behalf of the Roman police.
“Does your father keep wine in clay vessels?” She replied, “And in what should he keep it?” He said, “Since you are important, keep it in gold and silver vessels.” She went and told her father, who had the wine put into golden and silver vessels, where it became vinegar. They came and told him. He said to his daughter, “Who told you this?” She said, “Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Hanania.” They called him and he asked him why had he spoken to her thus; he said, “It was just as she had spoken to me!” But there are beautiful ones who become wise? If they were ugly, they would have been even wiser!57

This story stages the conflict explicitly as a difference between the Hellenistic sensibility of the fictional daughter of Caesar and the rabbi, reflecting a perception on the part of its author that the doctrine “that moral paradigms that had bitten to any depth in the soul would and should show themselves by reassuringly consistent body-signals” is a foreign concept. According to Winkler, the idea that character can be read from physiognomic signs is as old as Homer, but really develops in the fourth century in connection with the Aristotelian literature.58 A passage from The Republic also makes this point eloquently: “When a man’s soul has a beautiful character, and his body matches it in beauty and is thus in harmony with it, that harmonizing combination, sharing the same mold, is the most beautiful spectacle for anyone who has eyes to see.”59 The talmudic story not only contests that beauty of body is an ideal and an enhancement to moral beauty and wisdom but, indeed, goes so far as to suggest that there is a contradiction between physical and spiritual excellence. Now, as I have indicated, the Ta'anit story marks the ideology of correspondence as specifically belonging to the Hellenistic other and in conflict with the Jewish ideology, while in our story of Rabbi El'azar the son of Shim'on, the same conflict is enacted intraculturally. It is significant that, as Pierre Hadot has recently shown, those traditions in Hellenistic culture, namely, the baroque and mannerism, which were explicitly opposed to the classical decorum in literature, were referred to as “Asiatic.”60 The two traditions, therefore, know each other as “other.”

57Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 7a.
58Winkler (n. 14 above), pp. 67–70. See also Gleason for a discussion of the place of physiognomics in Greek culture.
59Plato Republic 402D. Of course, the figure of Socrates himself problematizes for the Greeks this ideal as well, but I think it remains an ideal in Plato even when problematized as reality, while for the talmudic culture, one can question whether beauty and correspondence of body and soul are even ideals. In this context it is apposite perhaps to note that at a recent conference (it was reported to me) a well-known critic of the American mind proposed that it is a universal that being beautiful is considered preferable to being ugly.
We find the same pattern of Babylonian contestation of Palestinian/Hellenistic ideology at one other moment in our text as well. The assurance that one would find permanence through being replicated in one's descendants is also, it seems, of Greek provenience. For some texts of the Palestinian culture, having children who were identical to the parent was considered of great value, indeed, as a sign of divine favor, as we can learn from the following midrashic text:

This is what the verse says, *God will not diminish the eye of the righteous* (Job 36:7). What does this mean? God does not take away from the righteous their likeness [dugma]. Know this, for Abraham begat Isaac in his likeness, for it says, “These are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham, Abraham begat Isaac.” And Jacob begat Joseph in his likeness [dugmaterin], for it says, “These are the generations of Jacob, Joseph”; it does not say, Reuben, Simeon, but only Joseph. And furthermore it says, “For he is the son of his old age [ben zequnim]”; the very form of his ikonin is he to him. And this is “God will not diminish the eye of the righteous.”

The midrash wonders, Why is it that when the generations of these two patriarchs are being recounted, only one of their children is mentioned? The tacit answer is that the one who is mentioned is the one who was similar to his father, that is, the one who inherited the father’s pattern or likeness. We learn from here that the intention is to the physical form from the continuation where it says explicitly (by a typical midrashic pun on zequnim [old age]) that the son had exactly the ziv (face, appearance, radiance) ikonin (the son is the icon of the father). The likeness of the father thus continues to exist; hence, God does not take away from the righteous their likeness when they die.

The reward for righteousness is a kind of eternal life in the “continuity through replication” of which Brown has written, and the “true child” of

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62This hermeneutic assertion is based on an elaborate pun. The Hebrew word ‘ayin (“eye”) also has the meaning of “color.” From this sense derives a series of prepositions, such as me’ein and ke’in, which mean “according to the likeness of, or following the example of.” This is paralleled in later Hebrew by the same semantic development of the Persian loan word gaun (“color”), which also forms a preposition kegon, meaning “according to the likeness of” and also “for example.” The great eleventh-century French Bible commentator, Rashi, already anticipated this semantic comparison in his gloss on Song of Songs 1:15. Compare the similar use of Latin “color” as a synonym for “figura, exemplum, similitudo,” etc., in medieval Christian hermeneutics. From this there develops a midrashic topos by which verses that include the word “eye” can be glossed as having the sense of dugma as form or likeness, “figure” in both the sense of plastic form and also in the spiritual or moral significance.

63Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity” (n. 2 above), p. 6.
the parent is the one who is identical to him or her. I would connect this idea with the "continuity through replication" that Brown identifies as the legacy of the "civilization of Paideia" and thus with Hellenism. Further support for this suggestion can be adduced from Hellenistic tombs, which emphasize how the dead are "replicated exactly by the living, and would be passed down, yet once again, to their children," as well as by texts that exhort the philosopher to "bequeath a copy of himself to posterity." The Hellenistic provenience of this theme is indicated by internal evidence in our midrashic texts as well. All of the terms that refer to this "likeness" are drawn from the Greek. We have digma, digmaterin, and ikonin all occurring within a very short textual space. In accordance with the principle of talmudic studies first articulated by my late, great teacher Saul Lieberman that citation of a Greek term is citation of a Greek (inter)text, the repeated use of Greek terminology for "likeness" here helps us locate these texts and their values in the Hellenistic world of Palestinian Judaism. The identity of the child and the parent is thus an important value in the Hellenized Palestinian rabbinic culture. However, our Babylonian talmudic narrative indicates that there it was thoroughly problematized.

In all of these aspects of the text, we find topoi of the classic body being represented as belonging to the Hellenistic "other" of Babylonian Jewish culture, while the Babylonian text somehow produces grotesques as its native sons. While one text essentially does not provide positive evidence to build historiography upon it, at any rate, this interpretive possibility undermines any use of our text as an argument that the grotesque body is a universal of human culture. As an image it may be the production of a particular culture, native to the eastern Mediterranean, which spread from there into Greece, ultimately coming into conflict there with other cultural developments and strains. The binary opposition of classic and grotesque would be, on this hypothesis, not an inherent ahistorical opposition in the race memory or genes of humanity, or even the product of a universal response to the "human condition," but precisely, as it is apparently in our text, the record of the struggle for dominance of two cultural formations.

64 It is him or her, as could be shown from the continuation of the same midrash which draws the same lesson from the connection between Leah and her descendants.

65 These texts are cited by Brown, The Body and Society (n. 6 above), p. 7.

66 Lieberman seems to have anticipated Bakhtinian ideas of intertextuality and dialogism, long before Bakhtin became known in Western Europe: "All the Greek phrases in Rabbinic literature are quotations" (Greek in Jewish Palestine [New York, 1965], p. 6). See also my "Bilingualism and Meaning in Rabbinic Literature," Ficus: A Semitic/Afrasian Gathering in Remembrance of Alfred Ehrman, Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, vol. 58, ed. Yoel Arbeliman (Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 141–52. In this context, it is worth remarking that the citation of several Iranian terms in the Babylonian talmudic version of the tale is equally as significant in establishing its cultural intertext. See Friedman, "Literary Development and Historicity" (n. 10 above), p. 77, n. 20, for a list of such Iranian terms, all from the field of law and order.
APPENDIX

THE TALE OF RABBI EL‘AZAR THE SON OF RABBI SHIM‘ON

Babylonian Talmud “Baba Metsia” 83a–85a

Rabbi El‘azar the son of Rabbi Shim‘on found a certain officer of the king who used to catch thieves. He asked him, “How do you prevail over them? Aren’t they compared to animals, as it is written ‘at night tramp all the animals of the forest’?” (Ps. 104:20). There are those who say that he said it to him from the following verse: “He will ambush from a hiding place like a lion in a thicket” (Ps. 10:9). Said he to him, “Perhaps you are taking the innocent and leaving the guilty.” He said to him, “How shall I do it?” He said to him, “Come; I will teach you how to do it. Go in the first four hours of the morning to the wine-bar. If you see someone drinking wine and falling asleep, ask of him what his profession is. If he is a rabbinical student, he has arisen early for study. If he is a day-laborer, he has arisen early to his labor. If he worked at night, [find out] perhaps it is metal smelting [a silent form of work], and if not, then he is a thief and seize him.” The rumor reached the king’s house, and he said, “Let him who read the proclamation be the one to execute it.” They brought Rabbi El‘azar the son of Rabbi Shim‘on, and he began to catch thieves. He met Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald, who said to him, “Vinegar son of Wine: how long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?” He said to him, “I am removing thorns from the vineyard.” He said to him, “Let the Owner of the vineyard come and remove the thorns.” One day a certain laundry man met him, and called him, “Vinegar son of Wine.” He said, “Since he is so brazen, one can assume that he is wicked.” He said, “Seize him.” They seized him. After he had settled down, he went in to release him, but he could not. He applied to him the verse, “One who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards himself from troubles” (Prov. 21:23). They hanged him. He stood under the hanged man and cried. Someone said to him, “Be not troubled; he and his son both had intercourse with an engaged girl on Yom Kippur.” In that minute, he placed his hands on his guts, and said, “Be joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is thus when you are doubtful, when you are certain even more so. I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you.” But even so, he was not calmed. They gave him a sleeping potion and took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink. But no fat stinks. It does if it has red blood vessels in it, and this even though it had red blood vessels in it, did not stink.

67The title, of course, does not exist in the talmudic text. I will provide here brief exegetical notes for difficult passages that are not treated above in the main text.
He applied to himself the verse, “Even my flesh will remain preserved” (Ps. 16:8–9).

To Rabbi Ishma‘el the son of Yose there also occurred a similar situation. Eliahu [the Prophet Elijah] met him and said to him, “How long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?” He said to him, “What can I do? It is the king’s order.” He said to him, “Your father ran away to Asia Minor; you run away to Lydia.”

When Rabbi Ishma‘el the son of Yose and Rabbi El‘azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them and not touch them. A certain matron said to them, “Your children are not yours.” They said, “Theirs are bigger than ours.” “If that is the case, even more so!” There are those who say that thus they said to her: “As the man, so is his virility.” And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: “Love compresses the flesh.” And why did they answer her at all? Does it not say: “Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness”? In order not to produce slander on their children, that they are bastards.

Said Rabbi Yohanan, “Rabbi Ishma‘el the son of Yose’s member was like a wineskin of nine kav; Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on’s member was like a wineskin of seven kav.” Rav Papa said, “Rabbi Yohanan’s member was like a wineskin of three kav.” And there are those who say: like a wineskin of five kav. Rav Papa himself had a member which was like the baskets of Hipparenum.68

Said Rabbi Yohanan, “I have survived from the beautiful of Jerusalem.” One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a brand new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of the pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan. Is that true? But haven’t we been taught by our master that “the beauty of Rabbi Cahana is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob. The beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam,” and that of Rabbi Yohanan is not mentioned. Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face. Rabbi Yohanan used to go and sit at the gate of the ritual bath. He said, “When the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, they will look at me in order that they will have children as beautiful as I am.” The rabbis said to him, “Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?” He replied, “I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, ‘A fertile son is Joseph, a fertile son by the spring’ (Gen. 49:22), and Rabbi Abbahu said (of this verse), “Do not read it, ‘by the spring’ but ‘out of reach of the Eye.’” Rabbi Yosef the son of Rabbi Hanina learned it from here, “And they will multiply like fish in the midst of the Land” (Gen. 48:16), just as the

68Rav Papa is also a legendary fat rabbi, as is known from several other Babylonian talmudic intertexts.
fish of the sea, the water covers them and the Eye does not prevail over them, so also the seed of Joseph, the Eye does not prevail over it."

One day, Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him and thought he was a woman. He crossed the Jordan after him by placing his lance in the Jordan and vaulting to the other side. When Rabbi Yohanan saw Rabbi Shim'on the son of Lakish [Resh Lakish], he said to him, "Your strength for Torah!" He replied, "Your beauty for women!" He said to him, "If you repent, I will give you my sister who is more beautiful than I am." He agreed. He wanted to cross back to take his clothes but he couldn't. He taught him Mishna and Talmud and made him into a great man. Once they were disputing in the Study House: "The sword and the lance and the dagger, from whence can they become impure?" Rabbi Yohanan said, "From the time they are forged in the fire." Resh Lakish said, "From the time they are polished in the water." Rabbi Yohanan said, "A brigand is an expert in brigandry." He said to him, "What have you profited me? There they called me Rabbi and here they call me Rabbi!" He became angry, and Resh Lakish became ill. His sister came to him and cried before him. She said, "Look at me!" He did not pay attention to her. "Look at the orphans!" He said to her, "Leave your orphans; I will give life" (Jer. 49:11). "For the sake of my widowhood!" He said, "Place your widows' trust in me" (Jer. 49:11). Resh Lakish died, and Rabbi Yohanan was greatly mournful over him. The rabbis said, "What can we do to set his mind at ease? Let us bring Rabbi El'azar the son of Padat whose traditions are brilliant, and put him before him [Rabbi Yohanan]." They brought Rabbi El'azar the son of Padat and put him before him. Every point that he would make, he said, "There is a tradition which supports you." He said, "Do I need this one? The son of Lakish used to raise twenty-four objections to every point that I made, and I used to supply twenty-four refutations, until the matter became completely clear, and all you can say is that there is a tradition which supports me? Don't I already know that I say good things?" He used to go and cry out at the gates, "Son of Lakish, where are you?" until he became mad. The rabbis prayed for him and he died.

And even so, Rabbi El'azar the son of Shim'on did not trust himself, perhaps, God forbid, such an incident would befall him again. He accepted painful disease upon himself. In the evening, they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus. His wife made him sixty kinds of relishes and he ate them. His wife would not let him go to the Study House, in order that the rabbis would not reject him. In the evening, he said, "My brothers and companions [that is, his pains], come!" In the morning, he said, "My brothers and companions, depart!" One day his wife heard him saying this. She said, "You bring them upon you. You have decimated the inheritance of my father's house." She rebelled and went to her family home. Sixty
sailors came up from the sea and came to him carrying sixty purses and they made him sixty relishes, and he ate them. One day she said to her daughter, “Go see what your father is doing.” He said to her, “Ours is greater than yours.” He applied to himself the verse, “From afar she will bring her bread” (Prov. 31:14).

One day he went to the Study House. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure. The rabbis murmured about him, saying, “Is it possible that there is not even one doubtful case among those?” He said, “If I am right, let all of the children be boys, and if not, let there be one girl among them.” All of them were boys. They were all named after Rabbi Elazar. Our Rabbi said, “How much procreation did that wicked woman prevent from Israel!”

When he was dying, he said to his wife, “I know that the rabbis are furious with me and will not take proper care of me. Let me lie in the attic and do not be afraid of me.” Rabbi Shmuel the son of Rabbi Nahman said, “Rabbi Yohanan’s mother told me that the wife of Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shim’on told her that ‘not less than eighteen and not more than twenty-two [years] that he was in the attic, every day I went up and looked at his hair; when a hair was pulled out, blood would flow.’ One day I saw a worm coming out of his ear. I became very upset, and I had a dream in which he said to me that it is nothing, for one day he had heard a rabbinical student being slandered and had not protested as he should have.” When a pair would come for judgment, they would stand at the door. One would say his piece and then the other would say his piece. A voice would come out of the attic and say, “I find for the plaintiff and not for the defendant.”

One day his wife was arguing with her neighbor. She said to her, “May you be like your husband, who is not buried.” Some say that his father appeared to the rabbis in a dream and said, “I have one chick that is with you, and you do not want to bring it to me.” The rabbis went to take care of his burial, but the townspeople did not let them, because all of the time that Rabbi Elazar was lying in the attic, no wild animal came to their town. One day, it was the eve of Yom Kippur, and the people of the town were worried and they went to the grave of his father. They found a snake which was surrounding the opening of the tomb. They said, “Snake, snake, open your mouth and the son will come in unto his father.” The snake opened for them. Our Rabbi sent to her to propose to her. She said, “A vessel which has been used for the holy, shall it be used for the profane?” There they say, “In the place where the master hangs his battle-ax, shall the shepherd hang his stick?” He
sent to her, “Indeed in Torah he was greater than me, but was he greater
than me in deeds?” She sent to him, “As for Torah, I know nothing; you
have told me, but as for deeds, I know, for he took upon himself suffering.”

As for Torah, what did he mean? When Rabban Shim’on the son of
Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald used to sit on benches, Rabbi El’azar
the son of Rabbi Shim’on and our Rabbi used to sit in front of them on the
ground and ask and answer. And the rabbis said, “We are drinking their
water,72 and they sit on the ground!” They built them benches and put
them upon them. Rabban Shim’on ben Gamliel said, “I have one chick
among you and you wish to cause him to be lost from me!”73 They moved
Rabbi down again. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha said, “Shall he who has a
father live, and he who has none shall die?” They took Rabbi El’azar down
as well. He became upset. He said, “They think we are equals. When they
put him up, they put me up; when they put him down, they put me down.”
Until that day, when Rabbi would say something, Rabbi El’azar the son of
Rabbi Shim’on used to say, “There is a tradition which supports you.”
From that day onward, when Rabbi said, “This is my answer,” Rabbi
El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on said, “This is what you will answer; you
have surrounded us with vain words, answers that are empty.” Rabbi be-
came upset. He came and told his father. He said, “Don’t feel bad. He is a
lion the son of a lion, and you are a lion the son of a fox.”74 . . .

Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi
Shim’on [after the latter’s death]. He asked, “Does that righteous man
have a son?” They answered, “He has a son, and any prostitute who is hired
for two [coins], would pay eight for him.” He came and ordained him
“Rabbi” and gave him over to Rabbi Shim’on, the son of Issi, the son of
Lakonia, the brother of his mother [to teach him Torah]. He taught him
and spread a mantle over his head. Every day he would say, “I wish to return
to my town.” He said to him, “They call you ‘sage,’ and place a golden
crown on your head, and call you ‘Rabbi’ and you say, ‘I wish to return to
my town!’” He said to him, “Here is my oath that I leave that be.” When he
became great, he went and studied in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Shemaia. He
heard his voice and said, “This one’s voice is similar to the voice of Rabbi
El’azar the son of Shim’on.” They said to him, “He is his son.” He applied
to him the verse, “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that wins
souls is wise” (Prov. 11:30). “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life”: this
is Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on, and “he

72A common figure for learning Torah from someone.
73That is, by distinguishing them as extremely talented children, you are attracting the
evil eye to them.
74There follow here stories about the sufferings that Rabbi took upon himself in order to
“compete” for holiness with Rabbi El’azar, stories that will be treated in another chapter of the
present research.
that wins souls is wise”: this is Rabbi Shim’on, the son of Issi, the son of Lakonia.

When he died, they brought him to the burial cave of his father. A snake surrounded the cave of his father. They said, “Snake, open the door and the son will enter to be with his father.” It did not open for them. The people thought that it was because [the father] was greater than the son. A voice came from heaven saying that it was because [the father] suffered in a cave, and the son did not suffer in a cave.

Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi Tarfon. He asked, “Does that righteous man have a son?” [For Rabbi Tarfon] had lost his children. They said to him, “He has no son, but he has the son of a daughter, and any prostitute who is hired for four, hires him for eight.” He said to him, “If you return [to Torah], I will give you my daughter.” He returned. There are those who say that he married her and divorced her, and those who say that he did not marry her at all, in order that people would not say that he returned for that. And Rabbi, why did he go to such lengths? For Rabbi Yehuda said that Rav said, “And there are those who say it in the name of Rabbi HYYA the son of Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan and those who say it in the name of Rabbi Shmuel the son of Nahmani in the name of Rabbi Yonathan.” “Anyone who teaches the son of his friend Torah, will be privileged to sit in the Yeshiva on High.”

Said Rabbi Parnak in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, “Anyone who is a disciple of the wise and his son is a disciple of the wise and his grandson is a disciple of the wise, the Torah will not cease from his progeny forever.”

The father went into hiding from the Romans for thirteen years for the crime of studying Torah.