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“Behold Israel According to the Flesh”: On Anthropology and Sexuality in Late Antique Judaisms

I

In his *Adversus Judaeos*, Augustine lays the following charge against “the Jews”:

*Behold Israel according to the flesh* (1 Corinthians 10:18). This we know to be the carnal Israel; but the Jews do not grasp this meaning and as a result they prove themselves indisputably carnal.

Augustine’s allegation needs a little unpacking. He begins by quoting a hermeneutic remark made by Paul, in the Epistle to the Corinthians, in reference to a verse of the Hebrew Bible that speaks of “Israel.” In this remark, Paul claims that the verse refers to Israel “according to the flesh,” that is, “Israel” understood literally; he thus implies that there is also an “Israel according to the spirit” that refers to the Gentile (and Jewish) believers in Christ. Augustine argues that Israel according to the flesh does not understand that there is a carnal and a spiritual sense to scripture, and therefore, it is condemned to remain forever and indisputably carnal and not spiritual. In other words, the hermeneutic practices of the rabbinic Jews, their corporeal existence as a people and their emphasis on sex and reproduction are all stigmatized as “carnal” by the Father. This accusation against the Jews, that they are indisputably carnal, was a topos of much Christian writing in late antiquity. It was not only a polemic ploy but a commonplace taxonomic description of the difference between Christians and Jews. I propose in this essay to account for this practice of Augustine and the others who characterize the Jews as carnal, and to assert the essential descriptive accuracy of the recurring Patristic notion that what divides Christians from rabbinic Jews are their discourses of the body. Sexuality is not just a subheading under ethics but is situated at the core of alternate individual and collective self-understandings. I hope to show the pivotal position of sexuality by exposing the correlations between three moments in two Jewish subcultures. The three moments are anthropology (the ontology

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of human beings), anthropogenesis (the origin of human beings), and the
discourse of sexuality.

Not only church fathers but also one of their leading modern inter-
preters, Peter Brown, regards the fundamental difference between
Christianity and "Judaism" as having to do with the body and sex in
the two cultures:

The division between Christianity and Judaism was sharpest in this. As the
rabbis chose to present it, sexuality was an enduring adjunct of the per-
sonality. Though potentially unruly, it was amenable to restraint—much as
women were both honored as necessary for the existence of Israel, and at
the same time were kept from intruding on the serious business of male
wisdom. It is a model based on the control and segregation of an irritating
but necessary aspect of existence. Among the Christians the exact opposite
occurred. Sexuality became a highly charged symbolic marker precisely
because its disappearance in the committed individual was considered pos-
sible, and because this disappearance was thought to register, more signif-
ically than any other human transformation, the qualities necessary for
leadership in the religious community. The removal of sexuality—or, more
humbly, removal from sexuality—stood for the state of unhesitating avail-
ability to God and one's fellows, associated with the ideal of the single-
hearted person.³

Although in this passage Brown sets up the opposition between a
reified Judaism and Christianity, he as much as any other scholar has
made us aware that this opposition is not the relevant taxonomy, for
the gran rifuto is just as Jewish in its social origins as the acceptance of
sexuality (whatever that means) by the rabbis. Brown makes this point
explicitly in a passage near the one cited:

It is claimed that a disgust for the human body was already prevalent in the
pagan world. It is then assumed that when the Christian church moved
away from its Jewish roots, where optimistic attitudes toward sexuality and
marriage as part of God's good creation had prevailed, Christians took on
the bleaker colors of their pagan environment. Such a view is lopsided. The
facile contrast between pagan pessimism and Jewish optimism overlooks
the importance of sexual renunciation as a means to singleness of heart in
the radical Judaism from which Christianity emerged.⁴

My design in this essay, by focusing more intensively on the Jewish
side of this equation than Brown has done, is to sketch both the culture of
the body in that "radical Judaism" as well as the rabbinic reaction to
it. I suggest, however, that Brown's "radical Judaism" was not so radical
but, in fact, was rather typical of the ideologies of various Jewish
subcultures around the Mediterranean.⁵ Furthermore, in the first cen-
tury these orientations to the body are not to be separated out as
“Jewish” and “Christian.” That division, an artifact of later centuries, is anachronistic for this period, and Pauline religion itself should be understood as a religio-cultural formation contiguous with other Hellenistic Judaisms. Among the major supports for such a construction are the similarities between Paul and Philo—similarities which cannot easily be accounted for by assuming influence, since both were active at the same time and in two quite separate places. The affinities between Philo and such texts as the fourth gospel or the Letter to the Hebrews afford only slightly less compelling evidence, because it is possible that these texts already knew Philo. I take these affinities as prima facie evidence for a Hellenistic Jewish cultural koine, undoubtedly varied in many respects but having common elements throughout the eastern Mediterranean.6

Moreover, as Wayne Meeks and others have pointed out, in the first century it is impossible to draw hard and fast lines between Hellenistic and rabbinic Jews.7 On the one hand, the rabbinic movement per se does not yet exist, and on the other, Greek-speaking Jews like Paul and Josephus refer to themselves as Pharisees, and Paul is referred to as a disciple of Rabban Gamaliel, the very leader of the putative proto-rabbinite party. Rather, I suggest that there were tendencies which, while not sharply defined, already in the first century separated Greek speakers more acculturated to Hellenism from Semitic speakers who were less acculturated. These tendencies, I hypothesize, were to become polarized, leading in the end to a sharp division between Hellenizers who were absorbed into Christian groups and anti-Hellenizers who formed the nascent rabbinic movement. The fact that the church adopted Philo exclusively while the rabbis ignored him is an allegory for this relationship, through which the Christian movement became widely characterized by its connection with Middle and neo-Platonism. In fact, this connection (between philonic Judaism and Christianity) was realized in antiquity as well, for popular Christian legend had Philo convert to Christianity, and even fairly recent scholarship attributes some of his works to Christians.8

**Defining the Human Being: Philo, Paul and the Rabbis**

One of those tendencies of Greek-speaking Judaism seems to have been the acceptance of what might be broadly called a platonic conception of the human being. For Philo, “the soul may be seen as entombed in the body.”9 This was a commonly held conception through much of the Hellenistic cultural world.10 Philo speaks of the body as “wicked
and a plotter against the soul," as "a cadaver and always dead," and claims that "the chief cause of ignorance is the flesh and our affinity for it. Moses himself affirms this when he says 'because they are flesh' the divine spirit cannot abide. Marriage, indeed, and the rearing of children, the provision of necessities, the ill repute that comes in the wake of poverty, business both private and public, and a host of other things wilt the flower of wisdom before it blooms. Nothing, however, so thwarts its growth as our fleshly nature."

Paul also uses such platonizing imagery, but significantly, without such negative attributes. The clearest example appears in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

It is beyond any doubt that Paul refers here to a resurrection in the body; however, the resurrected body is not the same kind of body as the one "that we dwell in" now. Paul considers some kind of a body necessary, in order that the human being not be naked, and he polemicizes here against those who deny resurrection in the flesh. Crucially, however, Paul maintains an image of the human being as a soul dwelling in or clothed by a body. The body, while necessary, and in some sense positively valued by Paul, is, as in Philo, not the human being but only his or her house or garment. The coincidence between Philo's and Paul's anthropologies, in spite of their differences, leads me to think that such platonizing notions of the human being were commonplace (although not necessarily universal) among Greek-speaking Jews. Certainly, such concepts of the human being became very common among the fathers of the church who promulgated such metaphors for the body as the "prison, tomb, fetters, vestment, ugly mask, garment of skin, dwelling place" of the soul.

Rabbinic Judaism, in contrast, defined the human being as an animated body and not as a soul trapped or even housed in a body. Alon Goshen Gottstein has brilliantly articulated this difference:

Rabbinic anthropology differs in this respect from Hellenistic [including Hellenistic Jewish], and later—Christian, anthropology. The distinction between soul and body may be seen as a soft distinction rather than a hard one. There is much talk of soul and body in the rabbinic sources. There is also a recognition of their different qualities. However, there is not a
fundamental metaphysical opposition between these two aspects. There may be an existential confrontation, but metaphysically soul and body form a whole, rather than a polarity. Crudely put—the soul is like a battery that operates an electronic gadget. It may be different and originally external to the gadget. However, the difference is not one of essence. Nowhere in Rabbinic literature is the soul regarded as Divine. It may be of heavenly origin, but is not Divine. More significantly, the gadget and its power source ultimately belong together, rather than separately. Thus the soul is the vitalizing agent, whose proper place is in the body, not out of it.

The rabbis are thus only one ideological group within late-ante Judaisms, and their anthropology is one of the main distinguishing marks of their difference. The soul is frequently likened in their writings to salt which preserves meat. Perhaps the most elegant demonstration of this thesis is the following extract from the daily prayer service of rabbinic Judaism. After urinating or defecating, the Jew is enjoined to pronounce the following blessing:

Blessed art Thou O Lord, King of the Universe, Who has made the human with wisdom, and created in it orifices and hollows. Revealed and known it is before Your Throne of Glory, that should any of these be opened or shut up, it would be impossible to live before You. Blessed Art Thou, the Healer of all flesh Who does wondrous things.

This text shows clearly two things: first, the acceptance of fleshliness, in its most material and "low" forms, as the embodiment of God’s wisdom; and second, the definition of the human as his/her body. No wonder that Augustine regarded the Jews as indisputably carnal.

However, the body was hardly unproblematic or uncontested in the rabbinic culture, where asceticism was prevalent. In a recent essay, Steven Fraade has formulated the question that must be addressed in a study of this discourse:

This broader understanding of asceticism sees it as responding, in a variety of ways, to a tension inherent in all religious systems: humans (whether individually or collectively) aspire to advance ever closer to an ideal of spiritual fulfillment and perfection, while confronting a self and a world that continually set obstacles in that path, whatever its particular course. How can one proceed along that path with a whole, undivided, undistracted "heart" (all one’s energies and intentions) while living among the distractions of the present world?

Fraade usefully sets the question for us by presenting this definition of asceticism (although “confronting a self” seems to beg some questions it ought rather to be asking). Asceticism is not, on his account, a product of dualistic contempt for the body; indeed, that dualistic contempt, which we find in several forms of ancient Judaism, is one response to
the ascetic tension. *Askesis* itself is religious athleticism, "the willful and arduous training and testing, often through abstention from what was generally permitted, of one's creaturely faculties in the positive pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection." 19

Though asceticism was not prohibited for the rabbis, sexual renunciation was. Everyone was expected to marry, have sex and have children, and people who refused to do so were hyperbolically stigmatized as murderers and blasphemers (Tosefta *Yevamoth* 8.7 and Babylonian Talmud *Yevamoth* 63b). The necessity for such hyperbole attests to the attractions of celibacy for Semitic-speaking Jews as well. To be sure, the rabbis were part of the Hellenistic world; however, in their conception of the body, they depart significantly from (or even resist) prevailing Hellenistic anthropological notions, which other Jews had assimilated. A dramatic anecdote encapsulates both the attraction of those Hellenistic notions and the rabbinic resistance to them:

Rabbi Akiva says, Anyone who commits murder diminishes the image of God, as it says, *One who spills blood of a human, by humans his blood will be spilled, for in the image of God, He made the human* [Genesis 9:6].

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah says, anyone who does not engage in procreation diminishes the Divine Image, for it says, *In the image of God, He made the human* [Genesis 9:6], and it is written [immediately following], *And as for you, be fruitful and multiply.*

Ben-Azzai says, anyone who does not engage in procreation is a murderer and diminishes the Divine Image, for it says, *One who spills blood of a human, by humans his blood will be spilled, for in the image of God, He made the human,* and as for you, be fruitful and multiply.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said to him, "Ben-Azzai, words are fine when accompanied by practice. There are those who interpret well and behave well, and those who behave well but do not interpret well. You interpret well, but do not behave well."

Ben-Azzai said to them, "What shall I do? My soul desires Torah. Let the world continue by the efforts of others!" (Tosefta *Yevamoth* 8.7, Babylonian Talmud *Yevamoth* 63b)

The biblical text reads, "One who spills blood of a human, by humans his blood will be spilled, for in the image of God, He made the human. And as for you, be fruitful and multiply." Rabbis Akiva and Eleazar disagree on the interpretation of the context. Rabbi Akiva understands that the clause referring to the "image of God" pertains to the murderer, while Rabbi Eleazar reads it as pertaining to the continuation of the text and thus to procreation. Ben-Azzai reads the entire text as one context and thus derives his strong principle that non-procreation is equivalent to both murder and the diminishment of the Divine Image. Rabbi Eleazar, quite naturally, attacks the celibate Ben-Azzai for hypocrisy, to
which he replies, that much as he would like to fulfill the commandment, he cannot, because his soul has such desire (the verb is exactly the one used in erotic contexts) for study. All of his erotic energy is devoted to the love of Torah; none is left for a woman. 20 We could read Ben-Azzai even more strongly as saying that he knows he ought to be performing the commandment to be married; indeed, he knows that he is both a murderer and a diminisher of the Divine by not marrying, but his lust for Torah prevents him. His argument is the exact analogue of the self-justification of the lecher who says that he knows that he should not be a-whoring, but he cannot help himself. 21 In fact, Ben-Azzai’s self-defense is modeled on that kind of statement, and his erotic terminology supports this reading. Both Ben-Azzai’s self-justification and Rabbi Eleazar’s condemnation of him are left to stand in the text, suggesting how lively the contest was in rabbinic times. But it should be emphasized that Ben-Azzai is a limit-case, an exception that proves the rule. All of the other rabbis were married, and marriage was the highly valorized norm for them, as well as for the populace.

The rabbis understood the human being as a body, therefore sexuality was an essential component of being human. In platonized formations, however, one can imagine an escape from sexuality into a purely spiritual and thus truly “human” state. 22 The rabbinic insistence on the essentiality of the corporeal and thus the sexual in the constitution of the human being represents a point of resistance to the dominant discursive practices of both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures of late antiquity.

II

One of the clearest ways of arguing for the rabbis’ resistance to the surrounding discourse of the body is to show that they cite that discourse while significantly modifying its meaning. The myth of a primal androgyne was widespread in late antiquity, particularly among Platonists in the Jewish (and later, Christian) traditions. 23 One of the motivations of this myth in midrash is to harmonize the two different accounts of the creation of humanity contained in the first and second chapters of Genesis:
Genesis 1:26–28
[27] And God created the earth-creature in His image; in the image of God, He created him; male and female He created them. [28] And God blessed them, and God said to them: Reproduce and fill the earth.

Genesis 5:1–2
This is the book of the Generations of Adam, on the day that God created Adam in the image of God He made him. [2] Male and female He created them, and He blessed them, and called their name Adam, on the day He created them.

Genesis 2:7ff.
[7] And God formed the earth-creature of dust from the earth and breathed in its nostrils the breath of life, and the earth-creature became a living being. [20] And the earth-creature gave names to all of the animals and the fowls of the air and all of the animals of the fields, but the earth-creature could not find any helper fitting for it. [21] And God caused a deep sleep to fall on the earth-creature, and it slept, and He took one of its ribs and closed the flesh beneath it. [22] And the Lord God constructed the rib which He had taken from the earth-creature into a woman and brought her to the earth-man. [23] And the earth-man said, this time is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called wom-an, for from man was she taken.

In the first story it seems clear that the original creation of the human species included both sexes, while the second narrative suggests an original male creature for whom a female was created out of his flesh. The contradiction of the two texts accordingly presents a classic hermeneutic problem.

*The Spiritual Androgyne: Philo*

In the interpretation of Philo, the first Adam is an entirely spiritual being, of whose noncorporeal existence it can be said that he is male and female. The second chapter introduces a carnal Adam, who is at first ungendered or male, and from whom the female is then constructed. Bodily gender is thus twice displaced from the origins of “man.” Further, in this reading, the creation of Eve, and thus sexuality itself, rehearses the Fall:

“...It is not good that any man should be alone.” For there are two races of men, the one made after the (Divine) Image, and the one molded out of the earth... With the second man a helper is associated. To begin with, the helper is a created one, for it says “Let us make a helper for him”; and in the next place, is subsequent to him who is to be helped, for He had formed the mind before and is about to form its helper.
A great deal can be learned from this short text of Philo. Most importantly, he resolves the hermeneutical contradiction that I have discussed above. Philo here regards the two stories as referring to two entirely different creative acts of God, and accordingly to the production of two different races of “man.” Since the texts of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 refer to two entirely different species, he can claim that only the first species is called “in the image of God.” That is, only the singular, unbodied Adam-creature is in God’s likeness and his male-and-female-ness must be understood spiritually. In other words, the designation of this creature as male-and-female means really neither male nor female, as Philo makes explicit:

After this he says that “God formed man by taking clay from the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life” (Genesis ii. 7). By this also he shows very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man thus formed and the man that came into existence earlier after the image of God: for the man so formed is an object of sense-perception, partaking already of such or such quality, consisting of body and soul, man or woman, by nature mortal; while he that was after the Image was an idea or type or seal, an object of thought, incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.

The second story refers, then, to humanity as we know it, and “woman” is explicitly marked as supplement. This double creation provides Philo with one of his two main (and only) sources for platonic “ideas” in the work of Moses, who, according to Philo, anticipated Plato’s philosophy.

Philo’s interpretation is not idiosyncratic. As Thomas Tobin has shown, Philo refers to a tradition he already knows. The fundamental point is that for the Hellenistic Jews, the one-ness of pure spirit is ontologically privileged in the constitution of humanity. Fraade elegantly summarizes this platonic Jewish anthropology in its relation to Philo: “Philo inherits from Plato a radically dualistic conception of the universe. In this view, the material world of sense perception is an imperfect reflection of the intelligible order which emanates from God. The human soul finds its fulfillment through separation from the world of material desires, a world that lacks true reality, and through participation in the life of the spirit and divine intellect; the soul finally reunites the true self with its divine source and thereby achieves immortality.” Since, as we have seen, the primal spiritual state is androgyny (in which male-and-female means neither male nor female), this fulfillment entails the return to a state of noncorporeal androgyny. This notion, moreover, has social consequences for Philo, which he presents in an image of perfected human life.
In *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo describes a Jewish sect called the Therapeutae that lived in his time on the shores of Lake Mareotis near Alexandria. It is clear from the tone of his entire depiction of this sect and its practices that he considers it an ideal religious community. The fellowship consisted of celibate men and women who lived in individual cells and spent their lives in prayer and contemplative study of allegorical interpretations of Scripture (such as the ones that Philo produced). Once a year, the community came together for a remarkable ritual celebration. Following a simple meal and a discourse, all of the members began to sing hymns together. Initially, however, the men and the women remained separate from each other in two choruses. The extraordinary element is that as the celebration became more ecstatic, the men and the women joined to form one chorus, “the treble of the women blending with the bass of the men.” This ecstatic joining of the male and the female in a mystical ritual recreates in social practice the image of the purely spiritual masculo-feminine first human of which Philo speaks in his commentary; indeed, this ritual of the Therapeutae is a return to the originary Adam. This point is valid whether or not the community of Therapeutae ever really existed, for the description is testimony to Philo’s translation of anthropology into social practice. If the community did exist, moreover, we have further evidence that Philo is representative of larger religious traditions and groups.

Whether Philo’s Therapeutae were actual or only ideal, there certainly were many other groups throughout the early-Christian world that believed that the first human being was a noncorporeal androgynous, and that “male and female” of Genesis 1:27 meant really “neither male nor female.” Not surprisingly, such groups, whether gnostic, Encratite or “Orthodox” Syrian Christians, all held to a rigid celibate ideal. Dennis Macdonald has documented how widespread among them was an (apocryphal?) Dominical saying that salvation in Christ consisted of putting off the garments of shame (the body and sexuality), making the two one, and erasing the distinction between male and female. The loss of virginity parallels the Fall, representing a descent from or disturbance to the one-ness of perfection. As Meeks puts it, “baptism restores the initiate to the virginal innocence of Adam, who had ‘no understanding of the begetting of children.’” Such notions, widespread in early Christianity, underlie the near-universal privileging of celibacy and virginity in all branches of the early church, however much they differed in that privilege’s extent.

There was, to be sure, extraordinary variety in the views on sexuality and marriage among the ancient Christians, ranging from extreme con-
demnination to warm appreciation. The most extreme Montanists and others like them denied the lawfulness of sex and marriage entirely. For them, the “male and female” of Genesis 1:27 could only be understood allegorically or as referring to the androgyne of the disembodied spirit. Less extreme ancient Christian authors also interpreted in this fashion. Thus Origen held a view of the dual creation that was quite similar to Philo’s. The anthropos of Genesis 1 consisted of pure soul created after the Image of God, but “differentiation within the human species subverted that primal perfection.” Origen permitted marriage, “yet a whole series of texts sees an impurity in sexual relations even when they are legitimated by marriage.” On the other hand, Clement (and others who supported marriage against the Encratites) also cited the verse “Male and female created He them,” as prefiguring the creation of woman and therefore as endorsing marriage.

Similarly, somewhat later, John Chrysostom wrote with great enthusiasm of the creation of humanity in two sexes and of sexual desire and intercourse as restoration of the “male and female” of Genesis, and even of the “neither male nor female” of Galatians 3:28. Many of the formulations of his later writings on sexual desire and marriage are nearly indistinguishable from those of the rabbis: “From the beginning God has been revealed as the fashioner, by His providence, of this union of man and woman, and He has spoken of the two as one: ‘male and female He created them’ [Genesis 1:27] and ‘there is neither male nor female [Galatians 3:28].’ There is never such intimacy between a man and a man as there is between husband and wife, if they are united as they ought to be.” And perhaps even more movingly, “But suppose there is no child; do they then remain two and not one? No; their intercourse effects the joining of their bodies, and they are made one, just as when perfume is mixed with ointment.”

But even those fathers who were in this latter category privileged virginity over marriage as the higher state. Clement, as I have said, was the most friendly of the fathers towards marriage, but “when he set out his own matrimonial ideal, it amounted to sexless marriage, lived as if between a brother and a sister.” Also Gregory Nazianzen, in the midst of an encomium to marriage, says “I will join you in wedlock. I will dress the bride. We do not dishonour marriage, because we give a higher honour to virginity.” The same John Chrysostom who so warmly and movingly praised desire and the intimacy of husband and wife remained a virgin, and highly valued the virginal life over the married state, while the rabbis disallowed virginity in principle. As close as some of these fathers come to the rabbis in their appreciation
of human sexuality, then, there remains an irreducible kernel of difference in the anthropologies. This difference is not so much in the ethics as in the fundamental understanding of human essence.

The Corporeal Androgyne: Palestinian Midrash

Palestinian midrash also knows and cites the myth of a primeval androgyne to resolve the two contradictory creation stories in Genesis, but Palestinian midrash metamorphoses the meaning and virtually reverses the myth. According to these midrashic texts, the primordial Adam was a dual-sexed creature in one body. The story in the second chapter is the story of the splitting-off of the two equal halves of an originary body:

*And God said let us make a human etc.* . . . R. Yermia the son of El’azar interpreted: When the Holiness (Be it Blessed) created the first human, He created him androgynous, for it says, “Male and female created He them.” R. Samuel the son of Nahman said: When the Holiness (Be it blessed) created the first human, He made it two-faced, then He sawed it and made a back for this one and a back for that one. They objected to him: but it says, "He took one of his ribs (tsela’)." He answered "[it means] one of his sides," similarly to that which is written, "And the side (tsela’) of the tabernacle" [Exodus 26:20].

In this text, we have two accounts of the origin of the sexes of humanity. The first interpretation is that the first human, the one called “the adam,” was androgynous. It had genitals of both sexes, and the act of creation separated the two sexes from each other and built them into two human bodies. The second statement (that of Rabbi Samuel) seems best understood as a specification and interpretation of the first, namely that the first human was like a pair of Siamese twins who were then separated by a surgical procedure. Both of these interpretations use Greek terminology to describe the original two-sexed (or two-faced) Adam, and as usual, the use of these “alien” words is not culturally innocent.

The myth of the first human as androgyne is, of course, well-known from Greek literature as old as the pre-Socratic Empedocles, and it is mocked in Plato’s *Symposium*. The rabbis, however, were much more likely to have encountered the myth in its widespread form, known among both Jews and Gentiles in the first Christian centuries—the myth of the spiritual, primal androgyne. As I have already proposed, for Philo and his congeners the return to the original state of humankind
involves shedding the body and sexuality and returning to a purely spiritual androgyny. The rabbis (for whom the original state of physical androgyny was divided to create the two separate sexes) believed that the physical union of man and wife restores the image of the original whole human. What my reading proposes is the rabbinic usage of a topos of Hellenistic Jewish culture to reverse its meaning. The very allusion to the surrounding culture signals resistance to it.

The interpretation that the first human was an androgyne later split into two bodies is explicitly motivated by the same hermeneutic issue that led to Philo’s interpretation: the desire to render the two accounts coherent and produce them as a single narrative. But in addition to the widespread midrashic view that primal Adam was a physical androgyne, we also find readings which take him to be a male from whom the female was created, as in our culture’s interpretations of the story:

"And He took one of his ribs/sides (tsela\'): Rabbi Samuel the son of Nahman says, “one of his sides, as you say and the side (tsela\') of the Tabernacle on the North” [Exodus 26:20]. And Shmuel said, “He took a rib from between two of his ribs.”

First, the reading of Rabbi Samuel the son of Nahman is recapitulated in brief, namely that the first human was androgynous, and the so-called “rib” was really a side. However, his view is challenged by Shmuel, who understands the rib as a rib, and therefore holds that the first human was male and the woman a secondary creation. All of the rabbis assume that the two accounts describe the creation of one kind of humanity, not two kinds. According to the Talmud, Shmuel, who holds that woman was not created at the beginning, understands the verse, “Male and female created He them” to indicate that it was God’s intention to create both male and female at the beginning. Indeed, since a theory of dual creation such as Philo’s was precluded for the rabbis by their nondualist anthropology, there is no other way to read the verse. Thus, even Shmuel’s misogynistic stance understands sexuality and difference to be essential rather than supplemental to the constitution of the human. The traditional rabbinic marriage ceremony, in which the following blessings are chanted, also understands sexuality as essential:

[Blessed art Thou, O Lord King of the Universe,] Who created the Adam in His image, in the image of the likeness of His form, and constructed for him, from him, an eternal construction. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, the creator of humanity.

The Barren Woman will be exceedingly joyful and glad when she gathers
her children into her with happiness. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makes Zion happy in her children.

Make happy the loving friends, as you made your creature happy in the Garden of Eden in the beginning. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makes the groom and bride happy.

Blessed art Thou, O Lord King of the Universe, Who has created joy and happiness, groom and bride, bliss, rejoicing, elation and cheer, love, brotherhood, peace and friendship. Quickly, O Lord, our God, may there be heard in the hills of Judea the voice of joy and voice of happiness, the voice of the singing of bridegrooms from their bridal chambers and youths from their marriage celebrations. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makes the groom rejoice with his bride.

This ritual text is a reading of the creation of gender and sex as narrated in Genesis. Like Philo’s ritual of the Therapeutae, it is a translation into explicit social practice of the interpretive moment encompassed by midrash. The final moment of the ritual is the declaration that “makes the groom rejoice with his bride.” For this “rejoicing,” which certainly refers to the sexual act, God is praised and thanked throughout the ceremony. The happiness vouchsafed by God for his creature in the Garden of Eden will be restored—for a moment in the present and forever at the eschaton—in the joyful union of husband and wife. And at the eschaton, as well, this union will be the site of the greatest redemption.

In rabbinic culture, the human race is marked from the very beginning by corporeality, difference and heterogeneity. For the rabbis, sexuality belongs to the original created (and not fallen) state of humanity. There is no Fall from a metaphysical condition into sexuality in rabbinic Judaism. The midrashic reading of the text cited above presents the originary human person as dual-sexed, as two sexes joined in one body. The splitting of the androgynous body ordains sexuality:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother
and cleaves to his woman
and they become one flesh.

There is nothing in the biblical text or in our midrashic reading of it that indicates that marriage is a fall or a concession. The definitive rabbinic statement on marriage is the following, from Genesis Rabbah:

And God said, it is not good for the man to be alone: it has been taught: one who has no wife remains without good, without help, without joy, without blessing, and without atonement. . . . R. Hyya the son of Guma said, also he is not a complete human, for it says, “And He blessed them and called their name, Adam” [Genesis 5:2]. And there are those who say that he even decreases the likeness [of God], for it says, “In the image of God, He made
the Adam” [Genesis 9:6], and what does it say after this? “And as for you, be fruitful and multiply” [Genesis 9:7].

This midrashic text explicitly grounds the rabbis’ ideology of marriage in their interpretation of the creation stories of Genesis. The telos of marriage is return to the condition of completeness or even of imago dei in the act of marriage. No wonder, then, that Augustine and other Christian writers make reference to this difference between Judaism and Christianity and consider the Jews “indisputably carnal.”

III

The Jews disdained the beauty of virginity, which is not surprising, since they heaped ignominy upon Christ himself, who was born of a virgin. The Greeks admired and revered the virgin, but only the Church of God adored her with zeal.

John Chrysostom

In this passage the fourth-century Father represents the basic difference between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, as well as the Greek origins of the valorization of virginity. Once again, I would claim, this sensibility is grounded in cultural reality. In rabbinic culture, marriage is marked as positive while virginity is marked as negative. Within this framework, however, there is a range of ideologies toward sexuality among the talmudic rabbis. At one extreme is Rabbi Eliezer, who is said to have made love to his wife, “as if being forced to by a demon, uncovering an inch (of her body) and immediately covering it again.” He held that sex was only for procreation. His view on sexuality is closest to that of Clement, the most positive of the Fathers on sexuality. Each of the cultures should be seen not as a monologic language but as a heteroglossic collection of dialects. However, the range of possibility within the two formations is different. Sexual renunciation is simply not an option in the rabbinic cultural formation and ideology. But for some early rabbis in Palestine, a kind of ascetic sexual practice was possible. Their practice represents the rabbinic Judaism closest in appearance to the Hellenistic Judaisms of Philo and Paul. In fact, a fair amount of evidence suggests that the Palestinian Judaism of the rabbis of the second and third centuries most closely approaches (but does not merge with) the ideology of sexuality of the Hellenized Jews, while, as we move further in time and space from that moment, we also move further from that ideology.
Historical Variation in the Rabbinic Discourse of Sexuality

The most seemingly negative of the rabbinic figures on sex was Rabbi Eliezer.\(^{56}\) The story of how he made love to his wife is a *locus classicus* for ascetic sexuality:

They asked Imma Shalom [Mother Peace], the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, “Why do you have such beautiful children?” She said to them, “He does not have intercourse with me at the beginning of the night, nor at the end of the night, but at midnight, and when he has intercourse with me, he unveils an inch and veils it again, and appears as if he was driven by a demon.” (Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* 20a)

The story represents a highly negative attitude toward sexual pleasure. Rabbi Eliezer’s behavior—as if he is driven by a demon—apparently represents his conviction that he is only fulfilling an obligation that should not be enjoyed but should be performed as quickly as possible. The text presents a point of view (similar to that of the Stoics, Philo and Clement, among others) that sex is legitimate, but only for procreation, and when procreation is the sole rationale for sex, then the reward is beautiful children.\(^{57}\) Rabbi Eliezer is strongly attracted to asceticism as a religious model, the same asceticism that characterized the life of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, although as a rabbi, he could not choose celibacy. The fact that he, though so clearly ascetic, was nevertheless married, only strengthens this argument.

Rabbi Eliezer’s point of view, however, is only one extreme pole of the dialectic of the discourse of sexuality in marriage in rabbinic literature. If it is possible to interpret the views of this rabbi as David Biale has done—“The goal . . . was a marriage in which a man could fulfill his procreative duties while remaining loyal to an ascetic sexual ideal”—it is certainly not possible to follow Biale and regard this asceticism in general as the “goal of the Rabbis,” for even in Palestinian stories, Rabbi Eliezer is presented as an extreme figure, and in Babylonian Talmudic texts his practice is sharply rejected.\(^{58}\) As Biale himself points out, the story’s implied prescription to wear clothes while having intercourse is vigorously contested by the following Babylonian Talmudic statement:

Rav Yosef cited a tannaitic tradition, “Flesh: This means the intimacy of the flesh, namely that he should not behave with her in the manner of the Persians, who have intercourse while dressed.” This supports the view of Rav Huna, for Rav Huna said, “One who says, I do not desire it unless she is in her clothing and I in mine, must divorce his wife and pay her the marriage settlement.” (*Ketuboth* 48a)

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Among the three debts that a man owes his wife are “her flesh, her covering, and her seasons” (Exodus 21:10). While the latter is normally understood to mean sexual relations and the former to mean food, Rav Yosef knows of a tannaitic tradition (perhaps of Palestinian origin) that interprets the first term to mean bodily intimacy, the touching of skin during sexual intercourse, and he interprets this to mean nudity during sex. Whatever the views of some of the Palestinian tannaim, such views were certainly not characteristic of the ethos of all of rabbinic Judaism. The pattern of an earlier asceticism replaced later (and especially in Babylonia) by an anti-ascetic discourse of sexuality can be found in several other passages of the Talmudic literature.

One of the clearest signs of early Palestinian ambivalence about the body and sexuality is the Talmudic discussion of requisite immersion in a ritual bath before resuming the study of Torah after sex:59

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said: How do we know that those who have had a seminal emission may not study Torah, for it says And you shall make them known to your children [Deuteronomy 4:9], and He appended to it: The day on which you stood before the Lord, your God at Horev: Just as there, those who had had seminal emissions were forbidden, so here, those who have had seminal emissions are forbidden. (Berakhot 21b)

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi draws an analogy between the receiving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai and the study of Torah for all of the generations. Just as the Jews were commanded not to have sexual intercourse for three days before receiving the Torah, so one who has had sex or another seminal emission is forbidden to study Torah until purifying himself by immersion in a ritual bath.

The Talmud, however (after some further discussion of this point irrelevant to our purposes), indicates unambiguously that the requirement of immersion in a ritual bath after sex was later abrogated. The anxiety about sexuality which this implied was incompatible with later rabbinic sensibilities around the body:

It is taught: Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra used to say: The words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity. There was a case of a student who was hesitating to speak in the presence of Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra. He said to him: My son, open your mouth and let your words be radiant, for the words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity, for it says Behold my words are like fire; a speech of the Lord [Jeremiah 23:29]. Just as fire is unsusceptible to impurity, so the words of Torah are unsusceptible to impurity. . . . Rav Nahman, the son of Yitzhaq says: The community is accustomed to follow the view of that venerable sage, Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra with regard to the words of Torah, in accordance with what Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra has said, “The words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity.” When Zeiri came, he said: They have rescinded
immersion, in accordance with the view of Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra. (Berakhot 22a)

The early Palestinian authority, Rabbi Yehuda ben Betayra, is represented as having opposed the entire principle of immersion after sex and before the study of Torah. He gives a technical midrashic reading in support of his position, arguing that since the words of Torah are like fire, they cannot be made impure by contact with an impure person, and that there is no reason for one made impure by seminal emission to refrain from the study of Torah. Passing through fire is one of the ways that objects become pure in rabbinic law, so the Torah would purify the one who studies it. The prohibition against the study of Torah in this state of impurity, however, did not have a technical basis in the laws of purity. Rather, it was based on a moral/psychological foundation: as the Torah had been received in a state of full concentration on spirituality, so also should it be studied. Otherwise, it would be impossible to understand why menstruating women, whose state of technical impurity is identical to men who have had a seminal emission, would be permitted to study Torah without immersion, a point made at several junctures in the Palestinian literature. Furthermore, by the Talmudic period, cultic impurity had been abrogated because of the destruction of the Temple. Clearly, then, those who held that one must immerse after sex did not do so because of technical, cultic impurity, but because of a sense that sex was somehow incompatible with holy activity. It follows, therefore, that Rabbi Yehuda ben Betayra’s objection to the requirement of immersion before Torah study constitutes a rejection of the moral notion that the earlier Palestinian text represented. Strong support was later given to his view by the Babylonian authority, Rabbi Nahman, the son of Yitzhaq, and the Palestinian tradition of Rabbi Zeiri. These later traditions indicate the shift in sensibility that took place diachronically—a shift that the text renders explicit by saying that the earlier practice had been abrogated. To have had sex was no longer an obstacle to fully serious Torah study, any more than menstruating had been an obstacle earlier in Palestine. I suggest that it is much more plausible to interpret this change as evidence for differing discourses of sexuality than for a shift in the status of Torah.

Further evidence of the incompatibility between enthusiastic acceptance of sexuality and the requirement of immersion after any seminal emission can be seen in a curious report of earlier attempts to ameliorate (perhaps) the effects of the requirement of immersion after sex on the lovelives of Torah scholars. The Talmud continues with the following report:
The Rabbis have taught: One who has had an emission upon whom nine pecks of water is poured is pure. Nahum the man of Gamzu whispered it to Rabbi Akiva who whispered it to Ben-Azzai who went out and taught it in the marketplace.

Two amoraim [the later authorities] disagreed about it in the West [Palestine], namely Rabbi Yose the son of Avin and Rabbi Yose the son of Zevida. One teaches it “taught it” and one “whispered it.” The one who says “taught it,” says [that he did so to prevent] the neglect of Torah study and the neglect of procreation, while the one who says “whispered it,” so that the Torah scholars will not be at their wives like roosters. (Berakhot 22a)

It is hard to imagine a more perfect representation of ambivalence. Either Ben-Azzai went out into the marketplace and declared that one need only take a shower after sex in order to study Torah and did so because he did not want scholars to neglect the Torah or their sexual obligations, or he did the opposite—he whispered it as his teachers had done—to prevent the scholars from having sex too often. In any case, this text renders explicit the tension between seminal pollution on the one hand, and affirmation of sexuality on the other. The Talmud leaves this question open, but the later halakha is codified in accord with the view of Rabbi Yehuda ben Betayra, supported by Rav Nahman the son of Yitzhaq, that the whole matter of seminal impurity is irrelevant for the study of Torah. In any case, we have seen evidence for a highly ambivalent set of notions about sex on the part of early Palestinian authorities and the reduction of that ambivalence in the later rabbinic (especially Babylonian) period. We will find this pattern repeated in the sequel.

Other early Palestinian authorities seem to hold a highly ironic, ambivalent stance toward sexuality. One of the most colorful expressions of this stance is the utterance of the Palestinian Resh Lakish cited (and contested) in the Babylonian Talmud: “Said Resh Lakish, ‘Come let us be grateful to our ancestors, for had they not sinned we would not have come into the world, for it says I said, you are all angels and heavenly creatures, but you have spoiled your behavior; therefore like Adam you will die [Psalms 82:6]’” (Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 5a). Resh Lakish’s gnomon is subtle and complex. At first glance it seems to encode a highly negative marking for sexuality, allowing it place only insofar as it leads to procreation—it is similar, then, to the ideologies of Philo and Clement. However, careful reading reveals a more complicated and sophisticated meaning. First, it is vital to realize that Resh Lakish’s statement says nothing direct about sexuality at all. The psalm that he cites refers only to social evils, such as mistreatment of the poor in courts that favor the wicked rich. Resh Lakish can be understood to
mean only that we should be grateful to our ancestors who sinned and, by sinning, brought death into the world, for without death there would be no generation, and we would not exist. Read this way, Resh Lakish does not explicitly call sexual intercourse sin. Though understanding that before sin the ancestors were like angels—did not die and therefore did not procreate—his apothegm nevertheless encodes strongly the association of sexuality with sin and death that lies at the bottom of Christian notions about the Fall and Original Sin. The Talmud did not accept these associations, for it continues: “Shall we say that had they not sinned, they would not have procreated? But it says, And as for you, be fruitful and multiply. Until Sinai. But [that cannot be correct, because] at Sinai it also says, Return to your tents, [which means] for the joy of intercourse. . . . Do not say, We would not have come into the world, but it would be as if we had not come into the world,” which Rashi glosses, “For they would have lived forever, and as long as they live, we would not have been significant at all.” The Babylonian Talmud could tolerate neither the ironic, ascetic implication of Resh Lakish’s original statement, nor the possible associations it had with Christian doctrine. The Talmud distorted his obvious meaning in order to escape from its implications, and provided some precious evidence for an alternative view of sexuality in the phrase, “the joy of intercourse.” Opposing one rabbinic view (which held that sex was only for procreation), there was another view that strongly encoded a value for sexual pleasure in its own right. This hardly fits Brown’s characterization of sexuality for “the Rabbis” as “an irritating but necessary aspect of existence.”

Certain rabbinic texts, moreover, recognize the emotional value of married sex. Thus when a decision must be made about whether consummation is necessary for the construction of a valid marriage, it is made in the following terms: “Ravin asked, if she entered the marriage canopy but has not had intercourse, what is the law? Does the fondness of the marriage canopy effect the marriage or the fondness of intercourse . . .?” [Babylonian Talmud Ketubboth 56a]. Two things can be learned from this text. First, the validity of the speech-act of marriage is conditional upon a feeling of intimacy, and second, this feeling of intimacy is produced by—is one of the aims of—sexual intercourse.63

The strongest arguments that procreation was by no means the sole purpose of sex in rabbinic Judaism come from texts and situations in which sex and procreation are differentiated or even in conflict with each other, as in the situation of the barren wife. In the following story, procreation and erotic companionship come into conflict, and love prevails:
We will rejoice and be happy with you [Song of Songs 1:4]. There we have taught: If a man married a woman and remained with her for ten years and had no children, he is not permitted to refrain from procreation [i.e., he must divorce her and marry another].

Said Rabbi Idi: There was a case of a woman in Sidon, who remained ten years with her husband and did not give birth. They came before Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai; they wanted to get divorced one from the other. He said to them, “On your lives—just as you got married with feasting and drinking, so shall you separate in feasting and drinking.” They followed his suggestion, and they made for themselves a festival and a banquet, and she got him too drunk. When his sensibility returned to him, he said, “My daughter, choose any precious object of mine that is in the house, and take it with you when you go to your father’s house.” What did she do? When he was asleep, she told her manservants and maidservants and said to them, “Pick him up in the bed, and take him to father’s house.” At midnight he woke up. When his wine had worn off, he said to her, “My daughter, where am I?” She said, “in father’s house.” He said, “What am I doing in your father’s house?” She said to him, “Did you not say to me this very evening, ‘Any precious object which you have in your house, take and go to your father’s house? There is no object in the world which is more precious to me than you!’” They went to Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai. He stood and prayed for them, and they were remembered [she became pregnant]. (Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:31)

There is one startling moment of narrative illogic in this otherwise perfectly constructed tale. Why are we told that “she got him too drunk,” and then, “when his sensibility returned to him, he said . . .”? What function did his drunkenness play, if all that we know about it is that his sensibility returned to him afterward? And why was it important that he was too drunk? I think that the story delicately hints that they made love while he was drunk, and that during intercourse they realized that they loved each other too much to allow the halakha to separate them. This seems to have been her plan, for after all, “she made him too drunk,” too drunk to resist. Moreover, this seems to have been the rabbi’s plan. Otherwise, what was his intention in suggesting that they make a marriage feast to celebrate their divorce? Indeed, the very language he uses is suggestive, for he says literally, “Just as you coupled with feasting, so shall you separate with feasting,” the word “coupled” (nizdavagtem) having direct connotations of sexual intercourse. To be sure, he may not have predicted how clever the wife would be in achieving the goal, or what the means would be, but the story only makes sense if the rabbi was trying by gentle means and indirectness to deflect the couple from their pious path of divorce. It goes without saying that the story, considering the context, must recuperate the halakha by the deus ex machina of the miraculous pregnancy at the end; but by returning to each other for however long it took for the rabbi’s
prayers to work, the husband and wife had already violated the *halakha*, and the teller of the tale clearly approves. This legend encodes a moment of tension between a voice which perceived procreation as the sole or the overridingly important telos for marriage and one for which companionship was becoming increasingly important. This tension would bear some typological similarity to the development in the Roman world documented by Paul Veyne: “In the old civic code, the wife was nothing but an accessory to the work of the citizen and paterfamilias. She produced children and added to the family patrimony. In the new code, the wife was a friend, a ‘life’s companion’.” In point of historical fact, the practice did change, and the *halakha* that a man must divorce his barren wife came to be more honored in the breach than in the observance. Sexual companionship had come to be valued for its own sake, even when procreation was not possible. Further support for this point can be drawn from the following facts: in rabbinic practice, sex is recommended during pregnancy and following menopause; widowers are enjoined to remarry (by the Babylonian Shmuel, *Yevamoth* 61b) even when they have fulfilled the obligation of procreation; and they may even marry a woman proven to be sterile. To this should be compared, once more, Philo and Clement, for whom only procreation legitimated sexual intercourse.

The overall picture that I can guardedly draw is of an earlier Palestinian discourse on sexuality which seems closest in spirit to that of the Stoics, who considered sex to be an irritating and necessary part of human existence, but also an “enduring aspect of the personality.” However, the later tradition, and especially its Babylonian variant, strongly opposed this ambivalence. Both the earlier and the later views assert the value of procreation, but only the later and Babylonian variants seem to regard sexuality as a beneficence of God for the pleasure and well-being of humans.

I wish to propose a historical hypothesis to account for the relation between these two discourses of sexuality. As I claim above, in the first century there was no sharp distinction between Hellenistic and Pharisaic Judaism. Philo, Paul and Josephus all attest to this—even though all of them were highly acculturated, Greek-speaking urban Jews they show much Jewish (if not Hebrew) learning, and apparently their religious practice did not distinguish them from other Jews in Palestine. There appears to have been a fair degree of Greek culture among Semitic-speaking Palestinian urban Jews. Paul, however, created Gentile Christianity, which, aside from its christology, seems largely to have been contiguous with certain extreme allegorizing and spiritualizing tendencies within Hellenistic, platonized Judaism, at least in Egypt and likely in Palestine.
Philo, after all, rails against those who maintained that the allegorical meaning had replaced the physical practice of the Commandments, and thus suggests that such groups, not altogether different from Pauline Christianity, existed. With the increasing threat to the corporeal integrity of Jewish peoplehood from these platonizing tendencies within Judaism, which culminated in Christianity, the rabbis more and more rejected dualistic understandings of the relation of body to soul. Such rejection—which the Fathers characterized as carnality—became the very marker of the rabbinic formation. Increasing distance from both platonic dualism and Stoicism carried with it a logic that affirmed sexuality per se. That affirmation has been documented here. There was to be, however, a reversal of this historical tendency when Greek thought reentered the center of Jewish cultural practice in the Middle Ages.

IV

The religion and culture of the medieval Jewish scholastics, with Maimonides at their head, is quite distinct from the rabbis. Maimonides’s reading of the story of the creation of Adam and Eve introduces into the later rabbinic culture the very dualisms that the midrashic rabbis escaped from in theirs. Maimonides accepts and interprets the common rabbinic understanding of the Creation of Eve narrative as the splitting-off of two halves of an originally androgynous being. However, this story is no longer read literally as the creation of an androgynous body which is split off physically into two bodies, one male and one female; rather, it is thoroughly allegorized. Again, the content of this privileged, founding allegory thematizes and justifies the very form of allegory.

Maimonides justifies his move toward allegorical interpretation by citing an explicit example from Plato: “For they concealed what they said about the first principles and presented it in enigmas. Thus Plato . . . designated Matter as the female and Form as the male.” This example, presented as if random and innocent, becomes in fact the master allegory of Maimonides’s writing. The connection between matter and the female, according to Maimonides, lies in the fact that “woman” is a name for that which needs to be joined to something else, and matter, of course, in Platonic-Aristotelian physics, desires to be joined with a form. What is astounding here is how quickly Maimonides’s ontology and its connected hermeneutic practice bring him to expressions of virulent misogyny, much more virulent, indeed, than any known in the older formation of midrashic Judaism:
How extraordinary is what Solomon said in his wisdom when likening matter to a married harlot, for matter is in no way found without form and is consequently always like a married woman who is never separated from a man and is never free. However, notwithstanding her being a married woman, she never ceases to seek for another man to substitute for her husband, and she deceives and draws him on in every way until he obtains from her what her husband used to obtain.\textsuperscript{72}

Maimonides's allegorization of "woman" and "man" as matter and form, and his physical philosophy of matter as always in need of form and always exchanging forms, essentializes woman (as the allegorized term) into an ontological whoredom. We typically refer to such allegory as "personification allegory," and forget that it is also a reification of persons. When those persons are not individual fictional characters but categories of real human beings, the social results can be dramatic—indeed devastating. Maimonides continues his exposition of the relation of matter to form in the following:

For example, man’s apprehension of his Creator, his mental representation of every intelligible, his control of his desire and his anger... are all of them consequent upon his form. On the other hand, his eating and drinking and copulation and his passionate desire for these things, as well as his anger and all bad habits found in him, are all of them consequent on his matter. Inasmuch as it is clear that this is so, and as according to what has been laid down by divine wisdom it is impossible for matter to exist without form and for any of the forms in question to exist without matter, and as consequently it was necessary that man’s very noble form, which, as we have explained, is the image of God and His likeness, should be bound to earthy, turbid, and dark matter, which calls upon man every imperfection and corruption... \textsuperscript{73}

Maimonides rivals nearly any neo-Platonist here in his horror of matter and his revulsion from bodily life. Now, as we might expect, Maimonides’s doctrine regarding sexuality sharply differs from that of the Talmudic rabbis: “With regard to copulation, I need not add anything to what I have said in my Commentary on Aboth about the aversion in which it is held by what occurs in our wise and pure Law, and about the prohibition against mentioning it or against making it in any way or for any reason a subject of conversation.”\textsuperscript{74} This characterization of “the aversion in which sex (and the body in general) is held” (according to Maimonides) by the Torah, needs only to be confronted by the Talmudic story of the disciple who hid under his teacher’s bed to observe him making love to his wife, “because it is Torah and I must learn,”\textsuperscript{75} to show how far the medieval rabbi has moved from the rabbis of the midrash. Where the rabbis of the midrash and the Talmud showed an easy acceptance of contained, married sex and of the body and,
BOYARIN, DANIEL, "Behold Israel According to the Flesh": On Anthropology and Sexuality in Late Antique Judaisms, Yale Journal of Criticism, 5:2 (1992) p.27

indeed, conversed about these subjects freely, for Maimonides they become subjects of shame and repression.76

Maimonides accepts and transmits the midrashic interpretation of the narrative describing the creation of woman at the same time as man. However, by introducing a Platonic conception of language and an Aristotelian physical theory, he effectively undermines the cultural import of that very midrash. Indeed, Adam and Eve were created as one, but this only means that matter and form never exist without each other—it means no more or less. However, this interpretation so far only accounts for the first part of the story, the creation of man and woman as a joined creature. What then is the meaning of the separation narrated in the second chapter of Genesis according to the midrash? Maimonides’s answer is that this second part of the story describes the conflict between form and matter. Even if, for Maimonides, matter was in harmony with form before the separation of the woman, this is no longer the case afterward. Hence matter—the body—will be referred to as a “helper which is over-against him.” Maimonides reads, in this respect, like a recapitulation of Philo, and with this moment, rabbinic Judaism has come full circle.

Notes

The following have read earlier versions of this essay and have been of enormous help: Albert Baumgarten, Jonathan Boyarin, Verna Harrison, John Miles, Ilana Pardes, Regina Schwartz, Brian Stock and an anonymous reader for The Yale Journal of Criticism. I would also like to acknowledge very helpful critical readings of a much earlier version of this text by the Cultural Critique Collective of Jerusalem. I hope that all of these readers have helped me avoid the pitfalls of reductionism and reification in the comparative analysis, but only I am responsible for the faults that remain. The paper was delivered at a colloquium of the Department of Classics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison on March 7, 1991 called “Historicizing the Sexual Body.” I thank the other participants—Arnold Davidson, David Halperin, Thomas Laqueur and Efron Zaitlin, who offered me many helpful critical comments.

1 For a fuller consideration of the hermeneutic dimensions of this moment, see Daniel Boyarin, “This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel: Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel” (forthcoming in Critical Inquiry 18.3).

2 Rabbinic Judaism is, by Augustine’s time, virtually the only kind of Judaism extant, although, as Brian Stock reminds me, it is quite unlikely that Augustine refers to living Jews at all. It is important to emphasize that rabbinic Judaism does not mean the Judaism practiced by rabbis, but the Judaism practiced by rabbis and those who considered the rabbis their spiritual authority.


4 Brown, “Late Antiquity,” 266.

5 Brown may very well have been referring to apocalyptic sects, such as the one at the Dead Sea. The literary evidence suggests that they were not a celibate community, but that they underwent periods of withdrawal from sexual relations. Whatever
Paul’s spiritual origins, the Christian community, as it developed, did not grow out of Palestinian Jewish apocalyptic. In support of my notion that the attitudes toward sexuality among the Fathers owe more to the Greek-speaking Judaism of Philo and his congener than to Semitic-speaking apocalyptic, I offer the fact that both Philo and Josephus describe the Essenes as a celibate group. There may or may not have been such a group, but in any case, these two Greek-speaking Jews have testified to their values by that declaration.


10 Brian Stock has reminded me that not all Platonists would have defined the human being as a soul trapped in a body either, that “some platonist thinkers, notably Philo, Plotinus, and Porphyry, thought that the soul was trapped in the body; others, those, for instance, interested in medicine, astrology, or other sciences, combined their otherworldliness with a model of macrocosm/microcosm, which placed greater weight on the body, sexuality, and one’s activity in the world” (private correspondence, February 1991). John Dillon has discussed this issue with regard to the Middle Platonists, e.g., Antiochus of Ascalon, and concludes that for him, “We are our minds not our bodies,” but remarks that, in a treatise on ethics, this same “second-rate philosopher”—one of the founding figures of Middle Platonism—could maintain that we are both mind and body. See John Dillon, The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 98. Dillon comments that these writers would somewhat modify their doctrine depending on the rhetorical needs of a particular genre. Nevertheless, it seems that most Jewish and Christian thinkers who adopted the platonistic dualisms as their philosophical base were led to a severe downgrading (at best) of the role of the body in the constitution of the human being. See also Tomás Spilil, S.J., The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel, no. 79, Cistercian Study Series, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986). Spilil writes: “No matter what school they belonged to, the philosophers arrived at the same conclusion: the body was despised as the ‘enemy’ of the soul, or it became a thing that was useful, like a ‘slave’; one either used it at one’s good pleasure or got rid of it. In the Platonic tradition the union of the body with the soul was viewed as a fall” (108).


The reason for my qualified language is simply that it is clear here, as well as in 1 Corinthians 15, that the resurrected body is of an entirely transformed nature, apparently a body without "flesh."


For similar formulations regarding Biblical Judaism, see Robinson, The Body, 14. See Nissan Rubin, "The Sages’ Conception of the Body and Soul," in Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society, eds. Simcha Fishbane and Jack N. Lightstone (New York: Ktav Publishers, 1989), 47–103, for a useful collection of "anthropological" rabbinic texts from various periods. Although Rubin describes a shift from a fully monistic conception of the person to a "moderate dualism," there is still nearly nothing that bespeaks an understanding of the human being as a soul trapped or imprisoned in a body or of the task of the soul to liberate itself from the body, as we see in Philo, Origen, Gregory and Basil, among many others.

In any case, Rabbi Meir’s famous dictum in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90b, "If a grain of wheat, which is buried naked, sprouteth forth in many robes, how much more so the righteous, who are buried in their raiment," is totally irrelevant. Rabbi Meir is arguing that the righteous will be resurrected with clothes on—literally, not figuratively! Indeed, if Rabbi Meir is using a traditional figure of speech, the very reversal of its meaning from a dualistic and philosophical valence to a concrete and mythological valence further demonstrates my paper’s point.

Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature" (paper presented in Berkeley, California, April 1991, at a conference entitled "People of the Body/People of the Book").


For similar contradictions between the theory and practice of Hellenistic (Stoic) sages, see M. T. Griffin, Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics (Oxford: The Clarendon Press of Oxford University, 1976), 140.


Again, I follow Bal, *Lethal Love*. It is true, of course, that if the earth-creature is sexually undifferentiated (in one way or another), only the production of a woman turns it into a man.


My friend and colleague Albert Baumgarten reminded me of this point. See Tobin, *The Creation of Man*, 132.


See Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne,” 179. This hypothesis explains the otherwise seemingly unmotivated reference in Philo’s text to Plato’s *Symposium*, and especially to Aristophanes’ story of double-creatures (not necessarily androgynies by any means) at the origins of humanity. Philo is countering the “abhorrent” image of physically double bodies an ideal one of spiritually dual humans. Philo’s reversal will be double-reversed in part by the rabbis, as I argue below.


Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne,” 194. Meeks discusses gnostic rituals that consist of a reconstitution of the androgyne of the first human, and moreover considers the interpretation of various Pauline passages in light of these rituals (188–96). I have purposely omitted any discussion of Paul in this section, because the interpretation of his doctrine is so contested.

See Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase*, 221–270.

Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase*, 236. See also Crouzel, *Origen*, 94.


BOYARIN, DANIEL, "Behold Israel According to the Flesh": On Anthropology and Sexuality in Late Antique Judaisms, Yale Journal of Criticism, 5:2 (1992) p.27

42 Chrysostom, On Marriage and Family Life, 76.
43 Cohen, Be Fertile and Increase, 231–35, 237–38, 243–44.
45 Quoted in Ford, Misogynist or Advocate?, 25.
46 See Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne,” and Macdonald, “Corinthian Veils.” Neither seem to have sensed how different the rabbinc androgyne myth is from that of Philo and the gnostics.
47 Theodor and Albeck, Genesis Rabbah, 54–55. Genesis Rabbah, from which this quotation comes, is the classic and most important midrash on Genesis. This interpretation appears in several parallel versions, for which see Theodor and Albeck. As all midrashic texts, Genesis Rabbah is a collection of many different sayings from different rabbis and different periods in Palestine, around the fifth century or so, edited into a single, multivocal text. Its closest cultural congener is, accordingly, the Greek Fathers.
48 See Macdonald, There Is No Male and Female, 25.
50 It is striking how similar the midrashic readings are, in fact, to that of Bal in Lethal Love.
51 Theodor and Albeck, Genesis Rabbah, 157.
54 Theodor and Albeck, Genesis Rabbah, 152.
56 It is vital for me at this juncture to provide an important caveat. When I make a statement like the one in the opening sentence of this paragraph, I am not making a claim (positive or negative) about the undoubtedly historical figure of Rabbi Eliezer, which would require me to assume or prove the referential “truth” of traditions passed down orally, sometimes for hundreds of years, before being embedded in various stylized, literary, didactic, ideological documents of several genres. However, I do see important patterns in the representations of several of the rabbinc figures, patterns which enable them to be “read” as signifiers of ideological options and strains within the culture.

While I am making caveats, a further methodological note may be in order. I am treating virtually all of the works of classical rabbinc literature—that is, the Mishna, the Tosefta, the two Talmuds and the midrashic texts—that can be assumed to have been edited before the end of the Amoraic period or very soon thereafter. I accept Neusner’s point that there are ideological differences between these texts, and even more so that the representation of early authorities in late texts should be generally considered as evidence for the latter and not the former (and similarly for Palestinian sources in Babylonian texts). Essentially, texts should be read in context and not as atoms. I attempt throughout, where possible, to distinguish different ideological...
trends among rabbinic documents, as do Israeli historians like Isaiah Gafni. See, for example, his "The Institution of Marriage in Rabbinic Times," in The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory, ed. David Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13–30. I think that Neusner seriously exaggerates when he regards each document as the autonomous product of an "authorship." Whether Neusner likes it or not, intertextuality remains the condition of all textuality and of rabbinic texts explicitly. Once more, I repeat, this does not lead to a view of rabbinic texts (still more so not of "Judaism") as a seamless whole, but rather to an understanding that no document is a seamless whole.

57 The continuation of the story, however, renders this interpretation problematic:

I asked him, "What is the reason [for this strange behavior]?
 And he said to me, "In order that I not imagine another woman, and the children will come to be bastards."

Reading this text carefully, we see that it is not at all an unambiguous representation of a negative attitude toward sexuality. While Rabbi Eliezer’s behavior certainly would have had the effect of dramatically reducing the pleasure of sex, it is not presented as having that intention, but rather as being the expression in practice of a severe rabbinic prohibition on having sex with a woman that one does not fully desire or of fantasizing about another partner during sex. My student, Dr. Dalia Hoshen, first made me aware of this dimension of interpretation of this story in her doctoral dissertation on the religious personality of Rabbi Eliezer (Bar Ilan University, 1989).

58 David Biale, "From Intercourse to Discourse: Control of Sexuality in Rabbinic Literature" (paper presented in Berkeley, California at the Center for Hermeneutical Studies, Colloquium 60, 1989).

59 For an alternative reading of this material see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Re-organizing the Body: The Demotion of the Penis in the Emergence of Judaism" (paper presented in New Orleans at the American Ethnological Society, 1989).


61 To prevent confusion, it is important to realize that the rabbis do not distinguish between the body of desire and the body of procreation, a distinction that is itself possibly a result of platonization; see Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment," 49. For the rabbis, "procreation" includes sexual pleasure and is not a category distinguished from it.


63 See Brown, The Body and Society, 133 on charis: "the ‘graciousness’ created by intercourse—that indefinable quality of mutual trust and affection gained through the pleasure of the bed itself.” This notion was, it would seem, as foreign to Philo as it was to Clement. Indeed, I would claim that the later rabbinic ethos of married love is very similar to the doctrine of Plutarch as described by Foucault in The Care of the Self, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3 of The History of Sexuality (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1986). The similarity extends even to the approving references to Solonic laws regarding the frequency of intercourse owed by a husband to a chaste wife as a “mark of esteem and affection.” Compare to the Talmud Yevamoth 62b, “Anyone who knows that his wife is God-fearing and does not sleep with her is called a sinner.”


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to arise between duty and these extraneous tender feelings. What to do, for instance, if one's wife turned out to be sterile? 'The first man who repudiated his wife on grounds of sterility had an acceptable motive but did not escape censure [reprehensio], because even the desire to have children should not have outweighed lasting devotion to his wife,' according to the moralist Valerius Maximus" (42). I am suggesting that the story here represents at least a partial accommodation to these Roman mores, but one that "indigenous" ideas of the role of sexuality and intimacy had prepared for.

65 See Biale, "From Intercourse to Discourse." See also the remarkable text quoted by Winston in Philo of Alexandria from a nineteenth-century orthodox rabbi: "The Sages of previous generations could not find it in their hearts to permit in actual practice divorce against her will or the taking of a second wife because of childlessness" (369).


67 Until Paul's "conversion" of course.

68 This represents only one possibility of understanding Paul's position. It is, however, the interpretation that I find most compelling as I argue in a companion piece to this essay, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel."

69 I emphasize "scholastics," because there were other opposing tendencies in medieval Judaism as well. In fact, in his day, Maimonides' philosophy was considered by many—if not most Jewish authorities—as heretical. His allegorization of rabbinic myth and biblical anthropomorphisms of God were particularly controversial. Moreover, texts directly opposing his negative view of the body and sexuality were also produced at this time.

70 For much of what follows I am indebted to Sarah Klein-Braslavy, Maimonides' Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis: A Study in Maimonides' Anthropology (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986).


72 Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 431.

73 Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 431.

74 Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 434.

75 Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 62a. In another section of the present project, I shall undertake a fuller reading of that story and its congeners.

76 It is true that an anthology of rabbinic sayings could be produced in support of Maimonides's disposition. Nevertheless, the statement that copulation by the law is impossible to support from Talmudic sources, and indeed, the more traditional (i.e., non-Aristotelian) opponents of Maimonides roundly attacked him on this point, as well as on other points closely related to it, such as the corporeality of God and corporeal resurrection.