Review: The Talmud Meets Church History
Author(s): Daniel Boyarin
Reviewed work(s):
  Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts by Virginia Burrus
  'Equipped for Victory': Ambrose and the Gendering of Orthodoxy by Virginia Burrus
  The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy by Virginia Burrus

Source: Diacritics, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 52-80
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566244
Accessed: 09/02/2010 04:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jhup.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Diacritics.
THE TALMUD MEETS CHURCH HISTORY

DANIEL BOYARIN


[1] Prologue: Morningside Heights, 1941—A Talmudist Meets a Church Historian

In 1944, my teacher Saul Lieberman published a classic essay in which he treated talmudic martyrlogy in the context of patristic literature.1 The article had been written under the inspiration of his meeting and friendship with Henri Gregoire, the great Belgian church historian, then a refugee from the Nazis in the Morningside Heights neighborhood in New York, where Lieberman, the great Lithuanian talmudist, had also found refuge and where the two met. Nearly a half-century later, this student of Lieberman’s met another church historian, Virginia Burrus, in Morningside Heights under happier circumstances, when both of us were participants at a conference on asceticism at Union Theological Seminary, and a similar intellectual interaction began. This paper represents some of the first fruits of that second encounter and aspires to modestly continue the enterprise begun by the first.

[2] Intertextuality and Interdisciplinarity

Averil Cameron has recently written:

The myth of early Christianity as the resort of the poor and underprivileged is precisely that, and a very convenient one it has been. It is a myth that rests, moreover, on the fallacy of an original Christianity uncontaminated by external influences; but its holders then have to explain how this “new” faith could make

I wish to thank Chava Boyarin, Erich Gruen, and Froma Zeitlin for reading earlier versions of this essay and providing very helpful comments.

1. Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea.” I plan to engage in a detailed reading of this article in another essay, tentatively entitled “‘The Martyrs of Caesarea’; or, Zionism and the Art of Writing.”
the leap to center stage. Thus, we have been told, “the naiveté of the early Christian speech came in the course of time to wed itself to the cultures of the world.” But while much of current New Testament scholarship is directed at the internal (that is, theological) articulation of the texts, there is also a perceptible trend towards a mode of interpretation that balances the external and internal factors operative in the literary texts. It is thus less a question of the degree of “influence” of Greco-Roman or Jewish literary or philosophical elements on early Christian writing than of their integral relationship. [37–38]

Judaism also (and Jewish scholarship) has had a stake in inscribing itself as pure and uncontaminated, for reasons that Philip Alexander has articulated: “The attempt to [lay down a norm for Judaism in the first century] barely conceals apologetic motives—in the case of Christianity a desire to prove that Christianity transcended or transformed Judaism, in the case of Jews a desire to suggest that Christianity was an alien form of Judaism which deviated from the true path” [3]. Indeed, the very distinctness of Judaism has been articulated by Jews as precisely its distance from a “syncretistic” Christianity whose defining feature is that it is somehow a composite of Judaism and Hellenism.

In this essay, in conversation with some of the work of Burrus, I wish to begin to suggest a few of the ways that study of the Talmud can be further enriched through the engagement of talmudic scholars with the recent sophisticated (and especially gender-oriented) work being done on early Christianity. Indeed, I will be hinting (and in future work explicitly arguing) that we have to begin seriously thinking about Judaeo-Christianity as a single cultural system: contentious, dialectical, polemical, and sometimes friendly, but—I hasten to add—not moralistic in the homogenized “family values” sense implied by the modern usage of this term. I put forth here, as a case in point, that the richest contexts for understanding the sets of cultural tensions that gave rise to a particular talmudic text are to be uncovered in contemporary patristic literature. From the point of view of a New Historicist approach to talmudic literature, this suggests that the relevant documentary and literary intertexts are much broader than those that I have proposed in earlier work, especially in the introduction to Carnal Israel, where I posited a wide-ranging collection of Jewish texts as the relevant intertext for Jewish cultural poetics. The difference between the analysis of this talmudic text as presented here and the version in my coauthored book Powers of Diaspora, written before my encounter with church history, is indicative of the shift in my reading strategies engendered by this meeting. In the talmudic texts that will be analyzed here, we find dramatized social contestation that is nearly identical to conflicts found in contemporary (ca. fourth century, to which the talmudic text can plausibly be assigned) patristic texts and documents. These contentions have been brought to the fore in the work of Virginia Burrus, especially in her recent book, The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority and the Priscillianist Controversy. Looking beyond the official doctrinal conflicts that orthodox heresiologists have identified as the reason for Priscillian’s execution, Burrus “finds broader underlying social conflicts” being “negotiated through the ‘talk’ about Priscillian” [5]. Looking at the talmudic text with lenses burnished by her account of the Priscillianist fracas, I have found startlingly similar social conflicts being negotiated within the borders of a single extended passage of talmudic legendary narrative. Furthermore, close study of the textual analyses of this feminist scholar have enabled me to see other (gendered) patterns and meanings in the talmudic passage that neither I, nor others, appear to have seen before. In both late ancient

2. I would like to acknowledge here the productive influence of Karen King’s work on the use of “syncretism” vis-à-vis Gnosticism in the construction of “authentic Christianity” in the development of my own thinking about the use of Christianity in the production of “authentic Judaism.”
Christianity and Judaism, ideal male identity was secured in part via cross-gender identification with female virgins. Affinities, it seems, run strong and deep. This essay, based essentially on a reading of the work of one scholar, is intended to serve as a vade mecum to the riches that are around to be uncovered when scholars of Talmud enter into conversation with the scholarship on early contemporary Christianity, and I dare say, the opposite will likely prove true as well. In this early version of this study, I am focusing broadly on the ways that the work of Burrus has stimulated my investigation of the Talmud in new directions, so this will be a kind of idiosyncratic review of her oeuvre to date, as well as the partial payment of an intellectual debt. This review is idiosyncratic in that it treats only those aspects of Burrus’s work that have opened ways into the talmudic text, and indeed, into only one talmudic passage at that. In later avatars of the same study, a more synthetic approach to the presentation of the issues will be attempted: in particular, my forthcoming Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism will treat these issues and texts in much greater detail and in conversation with many more Christian texts and scholars of early Christianity, for which and whom the encounter with Burrus’s work provided my own initial vade mecum.

[2.1] Accommodation, Resistance, and the Hidden Transcript

The two key themes that Burrus identifies as having been active in the development of the Priscillian controversy are the contest between private and public as valorized loci for Christian worship and study and the question of accommodation to or alienation from Roman power. “Heresies” were being defined (and heretics killed) in order to produce an orthodox Christianity controlled by bishops and conforming in its culture to the culture of the Empire. In the talmudic text that I will read in this paper, both of these themes are centrally contested, although they are inflected somewhat differently from the ways that they appear in Burrus’s archive. The differences can be accounted for by attending to the different location of the rabbis of Palestine and Parthian Babylonia with respect to both Roman culture and Roman power. Although we will see that some of the rabbis adopted strikingly accommodationist stances vis-à-vis the “Evil Kingdom,” none of them had been or ever could be simply and straightforwardly Romans, as were many of the bishops, and even many of the ascetic “monks” and scholars of the fourth century as well, for example such figures as Sulpicius Severus and Jerome—both high-class Roman citizens—as discussed by Burrus [Making of a Heretic 126–29]. As Kate Cooper has reminded us, following Alan Cameron: “In late fourth-century Rome, among the litterati ‘pagans’ and ‘Christians’ were first of all Romans” [89]. In contrast to figures such as these, the rabbis always belong to a linguistic minority and a dominated social and cultural entity within the Empire, no matter what their socioeconomic status within Jewish society. All the more striking, then, is the extent to which we find convergence between

3. Obviously, I am not claiming to be the first or the only talmudist to read or make use of patristic scholarship, but there is much, much more to be done in this field, as I hope this case study of the work of one historian of late ancient Christianity will make obvious. See especially Jacob Neusner, Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: History, Messiah, Israel, and the Initial Confrontation.

4. It should be made clear that Burrus does not reify either of these sets of oppositions as “real” entities, and neither should we. These are, however, representations that are active in the texts and controversies of antiquity as terms of argumentation and self-fashioning, and likewise, I suggest, in the Talmud. They will be even more productive in further work on such oppositional figures as Rabbis Akiva and Eli’ezer, comparable to such figures as Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, that I intend to carry out in the future, deo volente. The important point to recognize here is that these cultural/political divides cut through the so-called religions as much as they cut between them.
their concerns and the concerns that motivate, according to Burrus, the powerful conflicts within the Christian society of their days. Differences are less surprising.

[2.2] Hidden Transcripts

In addition to the comparative horizon and analytical vista that Burrus’s work has afforded me, the other crucial interdisciplinary moment in this analysis of the talmudic text is the theoretical perspective of James C. Scott on the modes of discourse of colonized peoples. In his recent analysis of the modes of resistance of dominated populations, Scott argues eloquently against the notion of hegemony, claiming that the appearance of hegemony is only the “public script” which serves the purposes of both the colonizer and the colonized in situations of near-total domination: “In this respect, subordinate groups are complicitous in contributing to a sanitized official transcript, for that is one way they cover their tracks” [Domination and the Arts of Resistance 87]. It follows that what might appear to be accommodation to the culture of the dominating population might, in fact, be the very opposite. According to Scott, the discourses of dominated populations fall into four categories, the “public” within which they are actually working within the terms of the discourse of the dominators, the “hidden, offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power” and “where a sharply dissonant political culture is possible.” A third is the realm of the trickster tale within which the “hidden transcript” is encoded in a public one, and finally the speech of open rebellion. As Scott remarks, we rarely have access to the hidden transcript itself and most often must determine it from suspicious readings of the trickster material [Domination 18]. It seems that the talmudic discourse, however, gives us direct access to the “hidden transcript,” frequently thematizing the doubleness of its own trickster language. This literature, composed in a language that the conquerors did not know, provided a safe and private space within which to elaborate the transcript hidden away from the colonizer.5

A text from the Palestinian Talmud explicitly thematizes alienated strategies vs. accommodation (not, of course, collaboration) as the appropriate response to oppressive power:

They said to Rabbi Hyya the Great: Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai teaches, “‘You shall buy food from them [Edom = Rome] for money, and eat, and also buy water from them for money, and drink’ (Deut. 2:6): Just as water [is that] which has not been modified from its original state [lit. its creation], so also everything that has not been modified from its original state.” He rejoined to them: “But their liverwort, dried apricots, pickled vegetables, and parched corn are permitted.” All of the first three are not problematic because you can soak them in water and they return to their original state, but what about parched corn? Rabbi Yosi the son of Rabbi Bun in the name of Rav said, “Any food that can be eaten raw as it is, does not enter into the category of forbidden foods cooked by Gentiles, and one may use it raw for rituals that normally require cooked foods.” How, then, does Rabbi Hyya the Great explain the verse: “You shall buy food from them for money, and eat”?—If you feed him, you have bought and defeated him, for if he is harsh with you, buy/defeat him with food, and if [that does] not [work], then defeat him with money.

5. This was less true in the Middle Ages, when for a variety of historical reasons, the Talmud became available to non-Jews, and a sort of delayed-reaction violent response was generated, producing finally a self-directed censorship of the Talmud on the part of early modern Jews.
Two different interpretations of the verse in Deuteronomy lead to two almost directly opposed practices vis-à-vis the Roman overlords (or perhaps vice versa), one of direct alienation and one of (seeming) accommodation. The verse itself is explicitly about Esau, who (through his alternative name, Edom) is always in rabbinic literature an eponym for Rome. Seeing the verse in its immediate context will illuminate the interpretative controversy and its political/cultural meanings: “And He commanded the people, saying, ‘You are passing within the border of the Children of Esau who dwell in Se’ir, and they will be afraid of you, so be very careful. Do not provoke them, for I will not give you their land, not even to stand on, for I have given the Mount of Se’ir to Esau as an inheritance. You shall buy food from them for money, and eat, and also buy water from them for money, and drink.” Rabbi Shim’on bar Yoḥai, whose opposition to any rapprochement whatever with Rome was proverbial, pulls the verse completely out of its context—well-respected midrashic practice—and accordingly reads it formalistically and technically as a limitation on the possible forms of interaction between Jews and Gentiles. You can only acquire certain types of foodstuffs from them, he says, those that have a characteristic of water, namely that they are unprocessed. One can see immediately that such a regulation would have two powerful effects, a restraint on trade between Jews and Gentiles, as well as a powerful chill on eating together or sharing food, commensality (in addition to the chill that the kosher rules already prescribe.)

Rabbi Hiyya, however, is quite opposed to this view, both politically and midrashically. His notion is that Jews may purchase any sort of foodstuff from Gentiles, as long as it is kosher, of course. The Talmud asks, then, how he would go about interpreting the same verse that Rabbi Shim’on has read as strongly limiting commensality between Jews and Gentiles. Rabbi Hiyya develops a whole political philosophy of Jewish-Gentile interaction—actually of Jewish-Roman interaction—from this verse, a procedure justified by the fact that the verse actually does refer to the proper behavior of Israel toward the children of Esau, who via his “tribal” name, Edom, functions as the eponymous ancestor of Rome in rabbinic Jewish lore. The Bible explicitly says not to provoke them. An alternative to provoking them is also offered by the verse, which Rabbi Hiyya understands in a way that takes it out of its immediate biblical historical context and gives it new cultural power, namely as a suggestion to use gifts to turn their hearts favorably to their Jewish subjects. This is derived from the verse by typically clever midrashic punning, in addition to the mobilization of the foundational intertext: the story of the original Jacob and Esau. The phrase “buy food from them” can also, with only relatively modest stretching of the syntax—well within the bounds of midrashic practice—and none whatever of the lexicon, be read as “defeat them,” since the word “buy” and the word “defeat” are homonyms. The verse is thus read as: “With food, buy them, and [if that doesn’t work], break [defeat by suborning] them with money.” This is an obvious allusion to the situation within which the weak, “feminine” Jacob bought the favor of the “virile,” dominant Esau by giving him food. Baksheesh itself becomes institutionalized as a discursive practice of opposition to oppression. At additional points in this discussion, we will be observing how various “dishonest” practices, deceptions, are valorized by rabbinic and other colonized peoples.

6. I use this term advisedly. I do not have to assume that these are ipssissima verba of the “real” Rabbi Shim’on in order to mobilize what is said about him elsewhere in interpreting a passage attributed to him. The individual rabbis came to be personifications of particular ideological stances within the tradition, and we don’t have to know how “authentic” these personality sketches are in order to read them.
in direct opposition to the “manly” arts of violent resistance. As an Indian untouchable phrased it: “We must also tactfully disguise and hide, as necessary, our true aims and intentions from our social adversaries. To recommend it is not to encourage falsehood but only to be tactical in order to survive” [Scott, Domination 33; see also Ophir]. Rabbi Hiyya’s philosophy, then, is to follow the biblical injunction not to provoke authority by standing up to it but to attempt to oblige it, with the result that the authority will favor the entire people and act justly toward them. “Kill them with kindness” is the lesson. This “hidden transcript,” preserved before our eyes in the Talmud, provides an elegant demonstration of Scott’s argument that “What may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends” [Scott, Domination 34]. A neat comparison is afforded by the following injunction of an African American grandfather to his grandson in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: “I want you to overcome ‘em with yesses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open... Learn it to the young ‘uns” [qtd. in Scott, Domination 133]. If flattery fails, says Rabbi Hiyya, then defeat them by bribing them. Thus the conclusion: “If he comes to judge an orphan or a widow, we will find him propitious towards them.”

[2.3] The Trickster and the Martyr

If Esau is the legendary ancestor of Rome, Jacob, his brother, was the exemplary rabbinic male. It is important to emphasize to what extent Jacob (already in the Bible) is a virtual “trickster,” that figure of folklore all over the world who “represent[s] the weak, whose wit can at times achieve ambiguous victories against the power of the strong” [J. Boyarin]. Twice in his life, as described in the Bible, Jacob, the weak emblem of Israel, achieved victory, over Laban the ancestor of the Aramaeans and then—and much more relevant for later Jewish history—over Esau, the eponymous ancestor of Rome and thus of Christendom [Niditch 70–125]. These figures and their stories were, as we have seen, paradigmatic for Jewish (male) self-fashioning. The positive self-representation of Jewish maleness as “feminized” thus is overdetermined. On the one hand, it grows, as we have seen, from a valorization of certain types of activity over others and out of a need to define self over-against other. On the other hand, it develops as a response to the privation in a diaspora people of certain modes of power and the development of others as a compensation.

The Diaspora Jew is a trickster par excellence. As David Biale has recently remarked in his magisterial study Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History: “The rabbis built a much more durable political system than had any of the earlier leaders, whether tribal elders, kings, or priests, who were only partially successful in confronting an imperial world and in maintaining some partial semblance of Jewish sovereignty” [11]. That social system enabled the continued existence of the Jews as a deterritorialized cultural entity.

---

7. This thinking has been much influenced by the work of my brother, Jonathan, with whom I am now writing a book tentatively entitled Powers of Diaspora, in which we will attempt to hook up the Jewish experience of diaspora with the situation of postcoloniality in the modern world and in particular to the use of “diaspora” as a mode of thinking about that situation.

Erich Gruen has reminded me of an excellent early version of a Jewish trickster tale with a hidden transcript. In III Maccabees 7:10–16, Jews who had remained steadfast in the faith trick their Ptolemaic masters into allowing them to execute those who had become apostates on the king’s orders, “using the clever argument that those who were disloyal to their own commandments could not be trusted to be loyal to the king. Hence those who had actually resisted the royal orders triumph over collaborators by posing as protectors of royal interest.” This is a typical, rather clever interpretation of the passage and quite a convincing one indeed. The best edition of the text is Hadas, ed. and trans., The Third and Fourth Books of Maccabees [80–82]. See also Charlesworth 2: 528.
for nearly two thousand years. One of my underlying hypotheses is that part of the durability of the political, and thus cultural, system that the rabbis built was founded on antiphallic modes of resistance and the exercise of power, the use of the “weapons of the weak.” I am not, of course, claiming that this strategy is unique to the rabbis. Edwards remarks that “Cicero warns against the slippery ways of Greeks and Asiatics, which are to be connected, he says, with their lack of political power (Ad Q. fr. 1.16). By implication, those who have been conquered behave like other dominated groups, women and slaves.” What we learn from Jewish texts of late antiquity is that this was not only an accusation from without but a valorized representation from within at least one “dominated group.” Such modes of resistance were, moreover, coded as feminized from within the Jewish cultural system. We need only think of the Book of Esther, the paradigm book of diaspora politics, to see that this is so [Niditch 126–45; Levine].

The text to be read in this essay consists of an extended talmudic narrative that thematizes the trickster figure in tales of witty escapes by rabbis from the threat of martyrdom for teaching Torah. At the same time, this material also provides us with the exact opposite model, that of the martyr, a rabbi who bravely goes to his death in order to publicly deny the authority of the Romans. These two figures of resistance are known from dominated populations all over the world, as James Scott has remarked: “Those who did assert themselves defiantly won themselves a place in black folklore—that of the ‘baaad Nigger’—that is one of both admiration and fearful awe. Admiration, for having acted out the hidden transcript and fearful awe, for having often paid for it with their lives. . . . The more common folk hero of subordinate groups—blacks included—has historically been the trickster figure, who manages to outwit his adversary and escape unscathed” [Domination 41]. By the end of the narrative, however, a surprise awaits us, for the story leads us to a reading wherein the most powerful figure for the tricksterlike resistance of the Jewish People to the depravity that was “Rome” is a female virgin—in a brothel.

[3] The Virgin in the Brothel

In Tractate ‘Avodah Zarah 16b–19b of the Babylonian Talmud, we find a complicated and fascinating discourse having to do with Roman power, different modes of cultural resistance to it, and issues of sexuality and gender. Unwinding the intricately interwoven halakhic and aggadic expression of this text will help us understand how gender and the situation of a subjugated male population are entangled within the cultural formation of talmudic Judaism. Reading this text with Burrus as cicerone will help us also to begin to sort out the similar and the dissimilar between the Jewish and Christian discourses of gender and resistance in late antiquity.

The text opens with a discussion of the types of building projects that Jews may not engage in for or with Romans. These all turn out to be edifices that are connected with
the judging and execution of criminals and especially of seditious persons [see Hayes]. The Talmud condemns the complicity of Jews with Roman power, thematized, as we shall see, as “phallic,” and proposes either tricky or submissive ways of evading it. This halakhic context, the passage of the Mishna, sets the themes that will be elaborated in the Talmud’s much more complicated discursive forms. The talmudic text wanders and seemingly meanders. Its strategies of making meaning are not teleological as a philosophical or legal text would be but in some ways more like the strategies of a dream, in which the underlying thematics and meanings can be drawn out only by paying attention to repeating patterns, undertones, and overtones. As Laurie Davis has put it:

*Though the Gemara written in response to this Mishnah may seem to venture far afield from what Jews may or may not build, what they may or may not sell, the real topic of this Mishnah concerns injustice: its immediate and obvious source in the oppressive government, how Jews might unwittingly collude in their own oppression and the oppression of others, and the alternative pulls of coercion and seduction which power exercises. Thus the many stories that ensue all concern the ways in which Jewish men are either coerced or seduced into wrongdoing, whether they resist and what the consequences of their actions are.*

In other words, these are narratives that explicitly thematize the issues of hegemony, resistance, and transcripts, hidden and public, which are dealt with by both Burrus’s historical work on Priscillian and Scott’s theoretical work.

[3.1] The Seductions of Jesus: Rabbi Eliezer and the Christian

Following the halakhic discussion, we immediately embark on the following narrative, in which the link between the architectural theme—Jews may not participate in building places of judgment—and the “moral” themes is immediately rendered visible:

*When Rabbi Eliezer was arrested [by the Romans] for sectarianism, they took him up to the place of judgment [gradus]. The judge [hegemon] said to him: “An elder such as you, has dealing with these foolish things?!” He [Eliezer] said: “I have trust in the judge.” The judge thought that he was speaking about him, but he was speaking about his Father in heaven. He [the judge] said: “Since you have declared your faith in me, you are free [dimus].”*

*When he came to his house, his disciples came to comfort him, but he was inconsolable. Rabbi Akiva said to him: “Allow me to say to you one of the things that you have taught me” [an honorific euphemism for the student teaching the teacher]. He said to him: “Say!” He said to him: “Rabbi, perhaps you heard some matter of sectarianism, and it gave you pleasure, and because of that you were arrested for sectarianism.” He said: “By heaven, you have reminded me. Once I was walking in the upper market of Sephorris, and one of the disciples of Jesus the Nazarene, a man by the name of Jacob of Kefar Sekania, met up*

---

13. Lit., “the stairs leading up to the place of judgment,” one of the structures the Mishnah forbids Jews to participate in building [see Hayes]. For the gradus as equivalent to the catasta of such texts as the Passion of Perpetua and other early Christian martyrlogies, see Lieberman, Texts and Studies 69-71.

14. A provincial governor serving as judge.

15. The references to Jesus, found in both manuscripts, are deleted in the printed editions, as have nearly all such references since the first editions, owing to the Italian Jewish (self-)censors. In this way, the hidden transcript, which had threatened to become public owing to the wide
with me. He said to me, 'It is written in your Torah: “Do not bring the wages of a prostitute or the proceeds of a dog [to the house of your Lord]” (Deut. 23:19). What about using them to build a latrine for the High Priest?’ And I said nothing to him. And he told me that thus had taught Jesus his teacher: ‘“It was gathered from the wages of a prostitute, and to the wages of a prostitute it will return [Micah 1:7]”—it comes from a place of filth, and to a place of filth it will return’ [i.e., for building a latrine one may use the proceeds of a prostitute], and the matter gave me pleasure, and for that I was arrested for sectarianism, since I had violated that which is written: Keep her ways far away from you!’” [Proverbs 5: 8].

This complex little text compresses within its almost humorous form several weighty matters of rabbinic culture and ideology. Perhaps most relevant here is the political function of the double entendre [Scott, Domination 4]. This story exemplifies an almost literal thematization of the “public transcript”/“hidden transcript” typology as analyzed extensively by Scott. Dominated people, according to him, “make use of disguise, deception, and indirection while maintaining an outward impression, in power-laden situations, of willing, even enthusiastic consent” [Scott, Domination 17]. Our talmudic narrative seems designed to illustrate the hypothesis, in the way the narrative elegantly encapsulates the public and hidden transcripts into one ambiguous linguistic utterance. The text has a theological dimension as well, however.

The basic theological question addressed is theodicy, a question that returns over and over in rabbinic literature: Why has God punished the apparently righteous? As we shall see, this is one of the major subthemes of the entire text-sequence that we shall be following in this essay. The basic rabbinic theological thought that answers this question is that somehow God’s punishments fit the crimes—“measure for measure” in rabbinic parlance. When Rabbi Eli’ezer says in this text, “I have trust in the Judge,” he fools the Roman hegemon, but not himself.16 He assumes that there cannot be any punishment without a crime and that the Divine Judge has found him wanting. Because he had been attracted and pleased by heresy in God’s eyes, that is, Christianity, therefore, the text tells us God allowed him to be arrested by the Romans for engaging in that very heresy. The Roman judge is, in a sense, only an unwitting avatar of God’s judgment on earth. The acceptance of the judgment is indeed what releases Rabbi Eli’ezer. This point will be returned to explicitly in a later episode of the legend cycle as well. In the context of the text that I am discussing here, this momentous theological issue is interleaved and imbricated with other questions that the rabbis ask about themselves and their place in the world. This opening story sets all the themes that will be developed throughout the text: sex, heresy, and the threat of violence.17 We will hardly be surprised to find gender prominently thematized in this context as well.

The strongest clue to this connection is the arbitrariness of the particular halakhic discussion between the rabbi and the Christian, for there is no special reason why it would be this specific issue that a disciple of Jesus would raise with a pharisee. The choice of an interlocution having to do with prostitution and the Temple must be laid at the door of the talmudic “author” of this legend, and its significance sought within the context of Jewish

---

16. The fact that the rabbi was using a fixed and conventional legal term does not weaken this interpretation at all. See Lieberman, Texts and Studies 76n136.
17. Interestingly enough, this episode has a parallel in Palestinian literature, namely in the midrash on Ecclesiastes, Kohellet Rabba 1. The context within which it is embedded, however, is entirely different there.
culture in general and on this talmudic passage in particular. I would suggest that the Talmud is here adumbrating a theme that will become more and more explicit and insistent as the text continues, one that associates prostitution with both heresy and collaboration with Roman power. The connection would seem to be—beyond simple misogyny that will associate anything negative with female sexuality—that which is powerfully seductive, almost irresistible, but extremely dangerous at the same time. This association is thematized within the text through a powerful analogy between the substance of the discourse of the “Christian” and the outcome of enjoying that very discourse. The Christian proposes a lenient reading of the verse that prohibits the taking of the earnings of a prostitute to the Temple, namely that although such earnings are forbidden for holy purposes, for mundane—and even lowly—purposes like the building of a toilet for the High Priest, they are permitted. A fairly typical midrashic justification for this conclusion is proposed by the Christian as well. Rabbi Eli’ezer “enjoys” this utterance, perhaps, for two reasons. First of all, there is the sheer intellectual pleasure of a clever midrashic reading, one that, I emphasize, is in method identical to “kosher” midrash, and second, the result of this midrash would be increased funding for the Temple. The rabbi is, however, punished for this enjoyment by the humiliation and fright of being arrested by the Romans for being a Christian, which he just barely escapes. The analogy seems clear: just as one may not take the hire of a prostitute for any purpose connected with holiness, so one may not take the “Torah” of a heretic for any purpose connected with holiness. Although the substance of the words of Torah seem identical—just as the money itself is identical—the source in “impurity” renders them unfit for holiness and their acceptance punishable. Sectarianism is homologous with prostitution. Moreover, the seductiveness of the heretical interpretation matches formally what its content encodes as well, for there also, the temptation is to make use for holy purposes of that which originates in impurity, the harlot’s wage. When Rabbi Eli’ezer inds himself for having violated the precept to “Keep her ways far away from you!” both of these moments are comprehended. As Davis puts it, “in these stories, sexual temptation is the conflation of a variety of different cultural tensions.” The verse refers literally to a “strange woman,” who will be, as we will see

18. This is patently the case, because in the parallel text, which is otherwise identical in every respect with the version in the Babylonian Talmud, the specifics of the conversation between R. Eli’ezer and the Christian are not given, but only that “he said something heretical to me and I enjoyed it.” The point that the only flaw in Jesus’s Torah is its origin (the only thing wrong with Christianity is that it is not Judaism—to mime E. P. Sanders’s famous pronouncement on Paul) is exclusive to the later texts and not to the early Palestinian source, Tosefta Hullin 2:24. It is not necessarily Babylonian in origin, however, since it is found in the (relatively) late (fourth century) Palestinian midrash on Ecclesiastes. Claudia Setzer [159] clearly gets the point that the Torah of the Christian is very similar to rabbinic Torah, and the only thing wrong with it is its origin. See also Philip L. Culbertson [55–61], who goes so far as to consider this a possible lost teaching of Jesus. Lieberman [Texts and Studies 76–80] certainly demonstrates the “authenticity” of the details of the trial, as portrayed in the Tosefta, but nothing that he says would indicate the ascription of any historicality to the midrashic dialogue between R. Eli’ezer and Ya’akov, nor to the midrash of Jesus as a “lost saying.” I fail to understand why Culbertson claims that Jacob Neusner, in Eli’eezer Ben Hircanus [199, 366], “repeatedly misses the point.” Neusner’s reading seems to me very close to being on target.

19. Might we want to find here perhaps an echo of an early representation that Christianity is marked by a certain leniency toward prostitutes? See Loewe 70–71. In my aforementioned monograph, this point will be specified and elaborated.

20. This is a metaphorization of what was a commonplace in their time and place: “The temptation to sensual indulgence, and the power of the sexually tempting to sway the judgment of those under their spell, served as a potent narrative emblem of the unpredictable factor of private interest in the action of public men” [Cooper 12].
immediately, glossed as either a prostitute, a sect, or the government, that is, participation in or collaboration with it.

The gendering of sectarian heresy, here Christianity, is supported by the fact that in the Proverbs verse that which one is enjoined to keep away from is “her ways.” The literal subject of the verse is the seductive “strange woman,” whose very lips drip honey but whose denouement is bitter. It is important to recognize here a major metaphorical shift. For the Prophets, the dominant metaphor is of a female Israel gone-a-whoring with myriad lovers, while here we find an Israel figured as a lustful male tempted sorely by a seductive female. This shift of metaphor of straying Israel from female to male is accomplished by repeatedly reading figures of sexual danger from Proverbs as if they were allegories for religious temptations and dangers. Foreign whores and seductive daughters are transformed, as we shall see below, into heresies and seductions of collaboration, thus rendering illicit their male partners, the errant Jews. At first glance, this claim may seem strange, since I and others have been arguing so strenuously that the rabbis see themselves as feminized [D. Boyarin, Unheroic]. However, on further reflection, there is no paradox here at all, for if the negative, abjected image of self is of the lustful male, the valorized image is precisely that of the virgin female.21 By the time we reach the end of this text, we shall see that the female virgin is indeed a model for the rabbis, in much the same way, as Burrus has taught us, that she performed symbolically for contemporary Christians, such as Ambrose of Milan.22 As we will see, through reading Burrus’s work, that contemporary of the rabbis also urges self-feminization as an antidote to the perceived evils of the male psyche. These interpretative suggestions and connections will become stronger as the text continues to develop these themes explicitly.


The text continues directly with a halakhic passage that draws on the citation from Proverbs that was used in the story about Rabbi Eli‘ezer: “Keep her ways far away from you, and do not come near to the opening of her door” [Proverbs 5:8]. It begins with a typical midrashic exploration of the precise referent of “her” in the verse:

“Keep her [the “Strange Woman’s”] ways far away from you!” —This [refers] to sectarianism. “And do not come near to the opening of her door”—This is the government.

There are those who say: “Keep her ways far away from you!” —This is sectarianism and the government. “And do not come near to the opening of her door”—This is the prostitute. How far [must one keep away from the prostitute’s door]? Rav Hisda said: “four cubits.”

From here until the end of the text, these three themes will be intertwined. Somehow, sectarian heresy, prostitution, and collaboration with Roman power have become associated in the cultural “unconscious” of rabbinic Judaism, no doubt at least in part simply because all three are seductive and dangerous. The seemingly literal reading, that one must be wary of the sexual attractions of the “strange woman,” is tacked on here almost as an afterthought. However, as we shall see, there are overtones to this nexus that go far

21. Cf. the following comment by Virginia Burrus: “what is striking is the flexibility of the gendering of Ambrose’s discourse, represented as both transcendentally masculine in relation to a monstrously carnal femininity and ascetically feminized in relation to a grotesquely carnal masculinity” [“‘Equipped for Victory’” 469].

22. See discussion below of Ambrose and of Virginia Burrus, “Reading Agnes [25–46] and Burrus, ‘‘Equipped for Victory.’”
beyond this rather obvious and trivial observation. The association of negative Jewish behavior with the lust of the male customer of the prostitute is crucial to the main theme of the text: the transformation of the chaste Jewish male—and indeed the Jewish People—into female virgin as the one most fit to resist such sexualized enticements.

There is a fascinating parallel in Ramakrishna’s exhortation to his disciples to “become woman,” in order to transcend their own sexual desire to be with women. “A man can change his nature by imitating another’s character. By transposing on to yourself the attributes of woman, you gradually destroy lust and the other sensual drives. You begin to behave like women” [Gospel 176, qtd. in Roy]. As Parama Roy remarks, “This feminine identification was quite compatible with a marked gynophobia [sic].” Alice Jardine also reminds us that Daniel Schreber’s desire to become woman was an attempt to transcend sexual desire. Schreber wrote: “when I speak of my duty to go deeper into voluptuous pleasures, I never mean by that sexual desires towards other human beings (women) and even less sexual commerce, but I imagine myself man and woman in one person in the process of making love to myself,” upon which Jardine comments, “The desire to be both woman and spirit . . . may be the only way to avoid becoming the object of the Other’s (female’s) desire” [98–99]. For a slightly different take on this identification of male self with female, see for the ancient period Kate Cooper, who writes inter alia that “[i]f we assume for the sake of argument that wherever a woman is mentioned a man’s character is being judged—and along with it what he stands for—we can begin to see the rhetorical possibilities afforded by a female point of identification in a literature aimed at defending, or undermining, such sanctified Greco-Roman institutions as marriage, the family, and even the city itself” [9]. As in certain contemporary academic circles, but for different reasons, identification with women becomes a ploy in contests for power and prestige between men.

In the rabbinic text, the “foreign woman” of Proverbs, almost a perennial source of sexual excitement in many human cultures, becomes the primary metaphor for all that is exotic to Jews and thus alluring, whether political power or seductive foreign cults. Jews are faced with the dual temptations of collaboration with oppressors or of assimilation into the dominant cultural forms. Either of those seductive options provides an escape from the sometimes unbearable tensions of difference. They provide two means of being like all of the nations. On my reading it is precisely the allure of these two avenues of flight from the tensions of diasporized Jewish existence that is central to the text; these diversions are thematized as being similar to the forms of escape that sexual pleasure provides.

[3.3] Brer Rabbi and the Baaaaaad Jew

In this text, in which the paradigmatic case of heresy is Christianity, the continuation can be shown to thematize issues nearly identical to those at work in contemporary Christian constructions of orthodoxy and heresy, as presented by Burrus in her monograph on Priscillian: to wit, the issue of accommodation vs. resistance (Burrus’s “alienation”) and the closely related theme of the public vs. the private as valorized spaces for the religious life. To be sure, Carole Pateman has provided an extensive critique of the notion of public/private as a transhistorical dichotomy. Especially relevant is her discussion of the separation of production from the household and the development of the theory of a public/private separation [118–40]. But as Burrus has pointed out:

Indeed, as terms of “ordinary discourse” evoking “unreflectively held notions and concepts” that shape day-to-day lives, “public” and “private” may not appear in need of interpretation at all, but it is doubtful whether the dichotomous categories with which so many operate are in fact either as universal or as transparently “commonsensical” as is sometimes claimed. Indeed, I would suggest that the public-private distinction is most fruitfully applied to the study of the Priscillianist controversy precisely because it is an artifact of the very Mediterranean cultures that shaped the terms of the late-ancient controversy.

[Making of a Heretic 7]

We will see that this point is exemplified clearly in the late-ancient Jewish text as well, and how the historical analysis helps to make sense of that text.

In the next section of the text, two paradigmatic stories of response to Roman power are presented with directly opposing ideologies. One will be an indirect echo of the story of Rabbi Eli’ezer that we have encountered above, in which the potential martyr escapes through a kind of tricksterism, while in the other we have the model of the defiant martyr par excellence. The two figures are actually pitted against each other in the same story here, thus thematizing more directly the question of appropriate modes of resistance. The story of Rabbi Eli’ezer that appeared in the beginning of the text provided only one option, but now the options are multiplied and confronted in the form of dialogue between the two rabbinic protagonists. Although there is no direct resolution in the text of the contention between “masculine” defiance and “feminine” avoidance, and it would be foolhardy and reductive to produce one, I shall try nevertheless to show how the text encodes deceptiveness and conniving as at least an honored alternative to defiance as a mode of survival in a colonized situation. I am not arguing that this is a text that opposes martyrdom tout court—martyrdom was too prestigious a cultural practice for that—but this text serves to significantly reduce the exemplarity of defiance leading to glorified death as the only possible response to oppression. Similarly, the text seems to valorize the “private” option over the “public” one, as we shall see. The final result of the text is, it seems, the propounding of a female, virgin ideal as the model for rabbinic male behavior and subjectivity.

The story opens:

Our rabbis have taught: When Rabbi El’azar the son of Perata and Rabbi Ḥanina the son of Teradyon were arrested for sectarianism, Rabbi El’azar the son of Perata said to Rabbi Ḥanina the son of Teradyon: “Happy art thou who has been arrested for only one thing. Woe unto me who has been arrested for five things.” Rabbi Ḥanina the son of Teradyon said to him: “Happy art thou who has been arrested for five things and will be rescued. Woe unto me who has been arrested for one thing and will not be saved, for you busied yourself with Torah and with good deeds, while I only busied myself with Torah.”—This is in accord with the view of Rav Huna who said that anyone who busies himself with Torah alone is as if he had no God. . . .

As in the case of Rabbi Eli’ezer with which the whole cycle opened, here also the rabbis are anxious about justifying God’s punishment of apparently righteous men via their arrest by the Roman authorities. The notion, not by itself remarkable, that the oppressive empire is God’s whip, raises the question of resistance to a high theological pitch (as we will see) at the same time that it reinstates a rather simple theodicy. The rabbis, like Job’s friends, cannot stand the thought of a God who punishes without cause [D. Boyarin, Intertextuality 99]. In order, however, to both preserve the sense of Rabbi Ḥanina’s blamelessness and yet at the same time justify God’s actions toward him, the Talmud cites
a text which indicates that on one occasion he was holding two types of public moneys and, confusing them, distributed the money intended for one purpose to the poor by mistake. For that lack of care in the administration of public money, he was arrested and martyred, and, moreover, it is this carelessness that justifies the judgment put in his own mouth that he had not engaged in good deeds.24

The text goes on with the details of the trials of the two prisoners:

They brought Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata. They asked him: “Why did you teach and why did you steal?” He answered them: “If book, no sword and if sword, no book! Since one must be absent, the other must as well.”

Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata uses his wits to get himself out of trouble. He declares that there is a self-contradiction in the charges that they are accusing him of, for one cannot be both a scholar and a thief. Since, he says, the two accusations contradict each other, they cancel each other out. In effect, the rabbi is saying: either you are accusing me of acting like a “Jew” or you are accusing me of acting like a “Gentile.” But you can’t accuse me of both at the same time. In truth, of course, the rabbi is playing the trickster here, because his logic is totally inconsequential. Even were we to accept his premise that the book and the sword are absolutely incompatible, this would not be an argument that neither accusation is true; only that they can’t both be true. At the same time that it functions in the plot to establish Rabbi El’azar’s cleverness, his proverbial utterance announces a theme of the text. Torah is incompatible with the sword, thus repeating the theme established through the typology of Esau, the Roman, and Jacob, the Jew.25 This was apparently a Christian topos as well, as we learn from a story of Eusebius, the third-century chronicler of Christian martyrdom (among other matters) in Palestine. According to this source, a certain Roman soldier confessed himself a Christian and was given several hours to reconsider his confession or be martyred. “Meanwhile the bishop of Caesarea, Theotecnus, took hold of him and brought him near the altar. He raised a little the soldier’s cloak and pointed to the sword, then pointed to the book of the gospels, and bade him choose between the two. The sword and the book are incompatible” [Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea” 445]. As we will see, honesty is not the issue in our talmudic story, for the rabbi is being disingenuous in the extreme here, and his dishonesty will be rewarded with a miracle. The point is rather to bring out, as in the Eusebian parallel, the essential opposition between the Torah and violence.

The Romans ask him then:

Why do they call you Rabbi [Master]? He answered them: “I am the master of the weavers.” They brought before him two spools of thread and asked him: “Which is the warp and which is the weft?” A miracle took place for him. A male bee came and sat on the weft and a female bee came and sat on the warp.

“And why did you not come to the House of Abidan [the local Pagan Temple]?” He said: “I am old, and I was afraid that you would trample me with

24. For a somewhat similar issue having to do with the misuse of public funds in a roughly contemporaneous Christian text, see Maier.

25. Following Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea” 445. See also Mireille Hadas-Lebel, “Jacob et Esau ou Israël et Rome dans le Talmud et le Midrash.” Gerald Blidstein reads this text quite differently, arguing that just as Rabbi El’azar’s disclaimer of studying Torah was disingenuous, so was his claim of having been a “robber,” i.e., a violent rebel against the Romans, and he does have a point—if not an ineluctable one. Indeed, Blidstein speculates that the “good deeds” with which the rabbi busied himself were these acts of active rebellion [56–57]. I can no more disprove Blidstein’s reading than I can approve it. Different assumptions produce different hermeneutics.
your feet." They said to him: "Up until now how many old men have been trampled?" A miracle took place for him, and that very day an old man was trampled.

"Why did you release your slave to freedom?"26

"It never happened!"

One got up to testify against him [that he had released his slave]. Elijah came and appeared like one of them. He [the disguised Elijah] said to him [the potential witness]: "Since a miracle has happened for him in the other cases, a miracle will happen this time as well, and something bad will happen to you [lit. that man]."27 That man [who was betraying him] did not pay attention and got up to tell them. A letter had been written to the House of Caesar. They sent it with him [the informer]. He threw him four hundred parasangs, so that he went and never came back.

This is obviously a highly comic, even carnivalesque (grotesque) story of resistance, a trickster tale par excellence. Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata repeatedly uses rhetorical methods involving "double meaning [and] ambiguous intentions," precisely those tactics that a Roman polemicist of the second Sophistic would deride as effeminate [Gleason 37].

In the typical fashion of the folk narrative, three miracles take place for our hero. In the first, after he has lied and declared himself the "rabbi" of the weavers, a professor of weaving, the Romans test him by showing him two spools of yarn and asking him to distinguish between the weft and the warp, that is, between the insertive and the receptive, the "male" and the "female" thread. A miracle happens: a male bee sits on the weft and a female bee on the warp, and the rabbi is thus able to determine the difference and convince the Romans that he is, indeed, a weaver. In the next miracle, Rabbi El'azar informs the Romans that the reason he does not attend the pagan worship (that is the emperor worship) is because he is afraid of being trampled, and here as well a miracle takes place that convinces the Romans of the truth of his lie. Similarly, in the third case. Here a Jew is prepared to denounce the rabbi as having indeed freed his slave, which apparently in the world of the story was both illegal and a sure mark of adherence to Judaism, and through a highly improbable combination of circumstances and miracles, the denouncer is removed so far from the scene that he will never be heard of again. There is little doubt in my mind that we are in the realm of folk literature here, by which I do not mean a literature that is not of the rabbis themselves but rather to emphasize the close connections between the rabbinic class and the "folk."28 The values of the story are clear as well. Any sort of deception is legitimate, as long as it gets you off the hook with the oppressor, because his rule is absolutely illegitimate. Our protagonist here is a veritable Brer Rabbi.

Following the comedy, the tragedy. Our next protagonist is anything but a trickster:

26. It is at least worth noting that in this Jewish representation, manumission was considered a sign of adherence to Torah and disloyalty to Roman authority. It is not entirely clear to me (in fact, it is quite obscure to me) what the historical background for this judgment could be. However, issues surrounding Galatians 2: 28, 1 Corinthians 7, and Philemon seem not out of place in this matter.

27. In talmudic style, negative predicates are nearly always put into third-person sentences in order to avoid, in a situation in which the text was read out loud, predicating them of the speaker or his interlocutors, so "that man" frequently has to be translated as "I" or "you."

28. Galit Hasan-Rokem's The Web of Life—Folklore in Rabbinic Literature: The Palestinian Aggadic Midrash Eikha Rabba, in Hebrew, is very important in shifting this paradigm. This work, soon to be published in English, has had a profound effect on the way I understand the integration of so-called "folk" materials in rabbinic textuality.

66
They brought Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradion, and said to him: "Why did you engage in Torah?" He said to them: "For thus the Lord my God has commanded me!"

They immediately sentenced him to burning, and his wife to execution [by the sword], and his daughter to sit in a prostitute's booth.

* * *

When the three of them were being taken out, they justified their verdicts. He said, "The Rock, His action is blameless" [Deut. 32:4], and his wife said, "He is a God of faithfulness and there is no wickedness. He is righteous and true" [Deut. 32:4], and his daughter said, "Your judgment is great and Your perception is manifold, for Your eyes are open to all of the ways of human beings [to give each person according to his paths] and the fruit of his wickedness" [Jeremiah 32:19]. Rabbi said: "How great are these three saints, for at the moment of justifying of God's judgment, there occurred to them the three verses of justification of the judgment."

This is a paradigmatic martyr story: martyrdom is witness to the greater jurisdiction of God's power and justice, which supersedes that of mere temporal authority. Accordingly when this Rabbi is asked, "Why do you teach Torah," he does not seek to evade an answer and thus culpability as his two predecessors in the text had done—both successfully—but defiantly admits to the "crime" and to the superiority of God's rule over him to that of the Roman ruler: "For thus the Lord my God has commanded me!" This admirable sentiment—analagous to the "Christianus sum" of the martyrs—is the precise antithesis to that of Rabbi Eli'ezer's duplicitous "I have trust in the Judge." Now the text of Rabbi Hanina, which pits God's true justice over-against the false justice of the Roman court, is also obligated to show that God's justice is just. The issue of "justification of the verdict"—a ritual and theological term—in rabbinic Judaism is thus central to the concerns of the text. Note the several readings of Rabbi Eli'ezer's statement that are set in motion particularly in contrast to the univocity of Rabbi Hanina's statements. "I have trust in the judge," first, is obviously to be (mis)understood by the Roman himself as a statement of trust in him. Secondly, Rabbi Eli'ezer states that he trusts in the Judge of the Universe that he will not be abandoned in his hour of trial and will be rescued, which he in fact is. But in the light of the antithetical echo story of Rabbi Hanina, we might begin to wonder if Rabbi Eli'ezer's statement is, in fact, not a lie, not only with respect to the hegemon but with respect to the Hegemon as well, for by seeking to escape the judgment that the Roman wishes to impose on him, is he not also seeking to escape the judgment that God wishes to impose on him? In other words, to put it sharply, could we not say that Rabbi Eli'ezer confesses by this action that neither judge is trusted by him at all? At first glance, then, and given the presuppositions of our culture, we might very well understand that Rabbi Hanina's story is being presented as a hermeneutical key to reading the stories of both Rabbi Eli'ezer and the farce of Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata, and the latter two come off badly.

The text, however, immediately disables such a reading in the sequel:

Our [ancient] rabbis have taught: When Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma became ill, Rabbi Hanina the son of Teradion went to visit him. He said to him: "Hanina, my brother, Don't you know that this nation was set to rule over us by Heaven, and it has destroyed His house, and burned His temple, and killed his saints, and destroyed his goodly things, and still it exists, and I have heard that you gather crowds together in public, with a Scroll of the Torah in your lap, and you sit and
teach!” 29 He [Hanina] said to him, “From Heaven they will have mercy.” He [Yose] said to him, “I say logical things to you, and you answer me: ‘From Heaven they will have mercy!’ I will be surprised if they do not burn you and the Scroll of the Torah with you.”

This passage is highly intelligible in the terms of Scott’s analysis of the role of “hidden transcripts” and the social sites within which they are elaborated in dominated communities. As he shows, in order for seditious discourse to be formed, there have to be “autonomous social sites” either hidden from the eyes of the dominating population or hidden from their ears because of “linguistic codes impenetrable to outsiders” [Domination 127]. The study of Torah in general in sites such as the Bet Hamidrash, or even more in public “crowds,” would precisely provide such an arena, and it does not matter, according to Scott, exactly what the discourse is in that arena. Insofar as it maintained the possibility of a hidden transcript, of a place within which the dominated Jews could elaborate their true views of their Roman (and Sassanian) overlords, it would serve this function. This is even more the case, of course, when the content expressed in the study of Torah itself incorporated encoded or open contempt for the rulers, as it did, I suggest, frequently enough. The response of the “Romans,” namely their efforts to prohibit the study of Torah, and particularly in crowds, would indicate their understanding—or at any rate, the narrator’s understanding—of the role of such gatherings in the maintenance of the “hidden transcript.” At the same time, there is more than a hint here at a quietist theological position, exactly antithetical to that of a martyr. It is God who has sent the Romans to rule over the Jews, and the rebellious act of provocatively gathering crowds to study Torah in public is thus rebellion against God’s will, not only that of evil humanity. This is the Jewish analogy, therefore, to the early Christian practices of provocatively inviting martyrdom. 30

The text sends us, it must be said, some ambivalent messages. Note the irony in the following incident:

They said: there did not pass many days until Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma died and all of the great of Rome went to bury him. On their way back, they found him [Rabbi Hanina] sitting and studying Torah and gathering congregations in public with the Scroll of the Torah placed in his lap. They wrapped him in the Scroll of the Torah and surrounded him with sticks of firewood and lit them and they brought wool swatches, soaked them in water, and placed them on his heart, in order that he not die quickly.

On the one hand, Rabbi Yose’s prophecy that Rabbi Hanina would suffer greatly because of his provocative behavior came true exactly as predicted—the Scroll of the Torah is burned also—but on the other hand, it was in a sense Rabbi Yose’s accommodating practice (his conformity to the public transcript) that occasioned the tragedy. Had he not been so accommodating, the “great of Rome” would have not been attending his funeral, and Rabbi Hanina would not have been arrested. This text simply will not settle down in

29. Davis makes the excellent point that Rabbi Hanina’s virtue, like that of his wife and daughter, was precisely about accepting God’s judgment, as articulated above, while here, paradoxically, his interlocutor claims that he has not sufficiently submitted himself to that very judgment [Davis, “Virgins”].

30. For a vivid recent evocation of this moment in early Christianity, see Bowersock 1-5. In a future piece of the present research, I shall be dealing at some length with Bowersock’s thesis in that book that martyrdom per se is a Christian practice, adopted by the Jews from them. Just to anticipate, I see rather—in keeping with the thesis of this essay—a shared cultural development among Jews and their “brothers according to the flesh,” the early Christians.
one place and take sides on the issue of accommodation to vs. alienation from classical, Roman culture, the issue that, as Burrus has shown, was so crucial in the background of the Priscillianist controversy.

I can now go back and interpret a part of the narrative that I have left untouched until now. This passage will strongly support the interpretation that I have been giving and amplify its meanings as well. Immediately after describing the punishments of the three members of Rabbi Ḥanina’s family, the text explains why God has allowed them to be so maltreated:

Him to burning, for he used to pronounce the Holy Name literally. How is it possible that he did such a thing?! For we have a tradition that Abba Shaul says that also one who pronounces the Holy Name literally has no place in the World to Come. He did it for the purpose of self-instruction, for as another tradition says: “Do not learn to do’ [pronouncing God’s name; Deut. 18:9], but you may learn in order to understand and to teach.” [If that is the case], why was he punished? Because he used to pronounce the Holy Name literally in public, and it says “This is my eternal name” [Exodus 3:15], but the word “eternal” is spelt as if it meant “for hiding.”

And his wife for execution, because she did not censure him.

And his daughter to sit in a prostitute’s booth, for Rabbi Yohanan said: She was once walking among the great of Rome, and they said, “How beautiful are the steps of this maiden!” And she immediately became more careful about her steps. And this is what Resh Lakish has said: “The sin of my heels will ambush me” [Psalms 49:6]. The sins that a person steps out with his heels in this world will ambush him at the Judgment Day.

Exploration of the details of these explanations, seemingly arbitrary, will strengthen the reading of gendered meanings in this text. Rabbi Ḥanina himself was condemned for doing something in public that he should have done in private. The two explanations for his punishment, namely, the “realistic” one, that the Romans had arrested him for illegally teaching Torah in public, and the theodical one, that God had arrested him for revealing his name to the public, have to be read as comments upon each other. It was appropriate, indeed, for him to be pronouncing God’s name as it is written and with its vowels in order to instruct himself, but this activity needed to be carried out in private, just as his study and teaching of Torah ought to have been in private, according to Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma. God’s name was given for hiding, not for public exposure to the eyes of the hostile Romans. In other words, the text is proposing a homology between the reasons for Rabbi Ḥanina’s capture by the Romans at both the pragmatic and the theological levels. God has meant the teaching of Torah to be a private, internal activity for the Jewish People in a hostile world, a “hidden transcript,” and not a matter of provocation and defiance. Resistance, according to this view—which I hasten to emphasize is, of course, not the only one in the rabbinic tradition—consists of doing what we do without getting into trouble and using evasiveness in order to keep doing it. Interestingly enough, Rabbi Ḥanina in defying the Romans was behaving in a way culturally intelligible to the Romans—behaving like a “real man,” a muscle-Jew—while Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma, through deceptive, “womanish,” complicity with the Romans, resisted their cultural hegemony.31

31. See Brown on Ammianus’s admiration of Christian martyrs, because “they had put their bodies ‘on the line’ by facing suffering and death” [65]. See also Barton: “[The Roman] looked for the contest when one proclaimed one’s Nomen or identity. The Romans, for instance, recognized that the man or woman who proclaimed Christianus sum or Judaeos eimi were doing so as challenges.” Rabbinic texts, on the other hand, counseled Jews to disguise themselves as non-Jews in order to avoid being martyred [Theodor and Albeck 984; see also Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea” 416, esp. 423].
Rabbinic culture was originally formed at a moment of great ferment within Roman society, in the period known as the Second Sophistic (approximately the second century CE), when new gender paradigms were forming throughout the Empire, and Jews and Christians were playing important roles in such formations. Both early rabbinic Jews and early Christians performed resistance to the Roman imperial power structure through “gender-bending,” thus marking their own understanding that gender is implicated in the maintenance of political power. Thus various symbolic enactments of “femaleness,” as constructed within a particular system of genders—among them asceticism, submissiveness, retiring to private spaces, self-castration, and an analogously interpreted circumcision—were adopted variously by Christians or Jews as acts of resistance against the Roman culture of masculinist power wielding. This point is made by Burrus about early Christianity: “For men, the pursuit of Christian ascesis entailed the rejection of public life and therefore of the hierarchies of office and gender; in this respect, their opponents were not far off the mark when they insinuated that male ascetics were ‘feminized’ through their rejection of the most basic cultural expressions of male identity” [Making of a Heretic 14].

In addition to the question of gender and power vis-à-vis Rome, which is most actively mobilized by this text, there is perhaps another subtheme of public and private hovering under its surface, one that has to do with internal power relations within rabbinic society, relations we might wish to refer to as relations of class. In recent work, Cynthia Baker has argued persuasively that for the rabbis, the Bet Hamidrash, the Study House, functioned as private space in another sense, a sense internal to Jews and not only in the conflict between Jews and Romans, for the Study House is the quintessential place for the formation of rabbinic identity over-against Others who are Jews, the so-called ignorant, the ‘Am Ha’aretz [see Baker, “Neighbor”]. According to talmudic texts analyzed by Baker, one who studies Torah in the presence of these Jewish Others is compared to one who has sexual intercourse with his bride in their presence, continuing a commonplace rabbinic metaphor of Torah study as the act of love, the Torah as bride for the rabbis, and the privacy that such a relationship connotes—as well as, of course, marking clearly once again the gender of those who have exclusive access to Torah. In addition, then, to provoking Rome, Rabbi Hanina may have been inviting the wrath of the other rabbis by convening congregations and teaching Torah in public spaces analogous to the synagogues (“congregations”) which were still, at this early time, under the control of the nonrabbinic parties among the Jews, or even worse, in the virtual equivalent of the marketplace, that site of “social intercourse at its most chaotic and uncertain, and therefore most dangerous” [Baker, “Bodies” 405]. This interpretation of Torah as virtually esoteric knowledge, almost as a mystery, is strongly supported by the doubling in the text, whereby convening of public congregations for the teaching of Torah is made analogous to the revealing of God’s Holy Name in public.

Crucial to my reading, however, is the fact that Rabbi Hanina’s own sin, the sin of public exposure of the Torah to the gaze of Others, whether Jewish or Roman, is then doubled by the sin of his daughter. She, like the Torah “bride” of her father, is also revealed in that same marketplace. Exposed to the predatory male gaze, ethnicized as both “Roman” and the province of the powerful males of Rome, she does not evade the gaze but seeks to enhance her object status further. Having thus rendered herself a sexual object, she is punished by being turned into a whore, the ultimate depersonalized sexual object. Although the text is couched in the form of a critique of the woman here, and that (unfair) judgment, that blaming of the victim if you will, ought not to be papered over in our reading, at the same time there is encoded here a critique of the male gaze itself. It is no accident that it is the important men of Rome who are represented at this moment; they are the proverbial (or stereotyped) “construction workers” for this text. As Rashi
comments, citing the Proverbs verse, “[a] respectable king’s daughter remains indoors,” which is at one and the same time a “sexist” demand for a kind of purdah for women and, since the Daughter of the King is Israel herself, a comment also on the proper behavior of Jews in general. Through this doubling, then, the approved practice for Jews is gendered feminine, while the behavior of the Romans is gendered masculine. The violence of their gaze is contiguous with the greater violence of their bloodshed, and the resistance of the Jew is to be veiled: “eternal” through being “in hiding,” as the double meaning of the verse implies. Remain indoors, as it were. Continue to live, continue to maintain Jewish practice, but do not behave in ways that draw attention to us or provoke the hostile intervention of the ruling powers. It is God who has sent them to rule. Thus the text ultimately endorses the view of Rabbi Yose the son of Kisma (and the practice of Rabbi El’azar ben Perata as well) but does not by any means entirely erase or delegitimate the way of Rabbi Ḥanina.

The end of the daughter’s story is once again highly illuminating. In her ultimate redemption, and via the mode in which she preserves herself, she will be installed, an archetypical female virgin, as a positively marked, valorized model for Jewish masculinity:

Beruria, the wife of Rabbi Me’ir was the daughter of Rabbi Ḥanina. She said to him: It is painful to me that my sister is sitting in a prostitute’s booth. He took a tarqeva of dinars and went, saying if she has done nothing wrong [i.e., if she is sexually innocent], there will be a miracle, and if not, there will be no miracle. He dressed up as a soldier and solicited her. She said: I am menstruating. He said: I can wait. She said: There are many here more beautiful than I. He said: I understand from this that she has done nothing wrong. He went to her guard: Give her to me! The guard said: I am afraid of the king. He [Me’ir] took the tarqeva of dinars, and gave it to him, and said: Take the tarqeva of dinars. Keep half and use half for bribing anyone who comes. He [the guard] said: What shall I do when they are gone? He [Me’ir] said: Say ‘God of Me’ir save me,’ and you will be saved. He [guard] said: How do I know that this will be so? He [Me’ir] said: [Now you will see.] There came some dogs that eat people. He shouted to them, and they came to eat him. He said: ‘God of Me’ir save me,’ and they let him go.

He let her go.

In contrast to a Roman heroine in such a situation—not to mention a Christian martyr—the daughter of Rabbi Hanina does not stand up to her oppressors and defend her chastity in a demonstrative way, which might have brought upon her their wrath and her death. Rather, she tricks her way out of the situation through lies and wiles (rather like the Three Billy Goats Gruff and the troll from European folklore). All that is necessary for God to perform miracles and for her to be saved is that she succeed at the task. The “dishonorable” means are totally irrelevant. At the same time, however, the text is thematizing the vulnerability of the people without power. Without the miracle, they would be eaten alive by the “dogs.” And lest we think that the counsel of tricksterism is intended only for women, the text goes on to immediately disable such a reading:

The matter became known in the house of the king. They brought him [the guard] and crucified him. He said ‘God of Me’ir save me,’ and they took him down and asked: What was that? He told them: This is how the events took place. They wrote it on the gates of the city, and they engraved Rabbi Me’ir’s face on the gates of Rome and said: If a man who looks like this comes, arrest him! When Rabbi Me’ir came there, they wished to arrest him. He ran away from them and
went into a whorehouse. Elijah came in the guise of a whore and embraced him. Some say that he put his hand in Gentile foods and tasted them. They [the Romans] said: God forfend! If that were Rabbi Me’ir he wouldn’t do such a thing. Because of these events [Rabbi Me’ir] ran away to Babylonia.

The most striking aspect of this sequence is, of course, the escape via entering into the whorehouse and disguising himself, once again, as a customer of the prostitutes. This time, however, it is not to test the chastity of someone else but to save his own skin. Just as it was considered by the Jewish text entirely proper for the young woman to pretend to acquiescence in prostitution in order to preserve her life, so is it entirely proper for Rabbi Me’ir to disguise himself and pretend to (or maybe actually) violate the Jewish law in order to keep himself alive, in accord with the principle that the commandments are given to live by and not to die by. Rabbi Me’ir runs away to Babylonia, a safer place for the study of Torah, and not so incidentally the place where this story was formulated. In the end, then, there is a perfect analogy between the male Rabbi and the young female Jew. The text culminates in a reprise of the association between the Roman government and its blandishments and dangers and the house of prostitution, and opens up to its final moral and nearly allegorical meanings: the Jewish People are figured no longer as a man, Jacob, even a feminized man, but as a woman.

As Laurie Davis has strikingly phrased it, “the rabbis see themselves as virgins in a brothel.”32 Not accidentally, but still tellingly, in a text which began with the representation of the Christian heresy as a beautiful prostitute who tempts the male Jewish People away from God, the rabbis seem very close to those Christian ascetics who at exactly the same period were also—as we shall see—using the female virgin as their most valorized exemplar. Another way of saying this would be to mark the gap between the explicit and implicit meanings of the rabbinic text. On the explicit level, the text is representing the purity of rabbinic culture, its efforts to remain entirely different and other from Christianity; however, at the same time, via its use of the figure of the female virgin to symbolize its valorized male self—the very self that resists Christianization—it is indicating, to us at least, the convergence of rabbinic culture with that of the Christians, or, perhaps better put, their common cultural history and development.

It is at least arguable that early in its history, much of Christianity represented a dramatic stance of alienation from the Empire and its culture. This alienation is represented in large part through “gender-bending” attacks on female subordination, such as the famous early story in which Jesus promises to make Mary male [see Meyer; also see note 33]. Early Christian texts frequently represent the possibility for a virilization or viraginization of the female martyr Perpetua or the apostle Thecla.33 In the second century, we find Perpetua, who is marked as the Christian resister to the Roman culture of gender through her “ability to stare directly back into the faces of her persecutors, not with the elusive demeanour of a proper matrona,” which “broke with the normative body language in a way that signalled an aggressiveness that was not one of conventional femininity”; just before her was Blandina, whose “fortitude and endurance were compared to those of a victorious male athlete” [Shaw, “Passion of Perpetua” 4, 19]. In contrast to these second-century virile, masculinized martyrs,34 in the fourth century we have the trembling Agnes.

---

32. The allusion is to the wonderful essay by Rachel Adler that I have discussed elsewhere. See Daniel Boyarin, Carnal Israel 184–88.
33. See Castelli. While in earlier work, scholars read these representations as manifesting “genuine” spaces of autonomy for women in early Christian culture [see Burrus, Chastity as Autonomy], more recently these same scholars have been inclined to see male representations of self via complex and contradictory identifications with female figures [see Burrus, “Reading Agnes”].
34. Interestingly enough, as Burrus makes clear, the virginity of female martyrs was not yet crucial in the second century, although it would become so in the fourth century. The virginity per
Burrus shows through a sharp intertextual reading that the meaning of female martyrdom had been refocused by the fourth century by mobilizing the dominant Roman cultural model specifically for virtuous women, one that reinforced female passivity [“Reading Agnes”]. In other words, that which was once unambiguously countercultural and subversive with respect to Rome and its gendered hierarchies and representations had become highly ambiguous, almost fluid in its meanings. No longer the victorious, valorous, virilized gladiator, the virgin martyr was now modeled on such types of passive, female virtue as Lucretia or Polyxena. Burrus traces the discursive modes through which was achieved “the literary transformation of would-be ‘manly’ women—viragines—into femininely docile virgines” [“Reading Agnes” 26]. By the fourth century, the masculine discourse of the Church triumphant no longer wanted Mary to be made male.

One way of thinking of this shift is that when temporal power was becoming an increasingly important element of Christianity’s praxis, the gender hierarchy of male and female became an important symbolic structure for naturalizing that power, whereas before, the subversion of that hierarchy was a tool for neutralizing, denaturalizing imperial power. “Orthodox” Christianity was no longer involved in a subversion of all the hierarchies of empire, having become imperial itself. Pre-imperial Christianity thus provides an elegant example of the ways that political dominance and gender configure each other [see Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity” 285]. This does not mean that in the post-Constantinian period we find a simple reversal of that which obtained earlier. Not by any means. Christianity, for all its post-Constantine temporal success, did not simply identify itself with the empire. In fact, the negotiation of various postures with respect to Roman power was, as Burrus and others have shown [see Brown; Cameron], one of the crucial moments in the internal contestations that marked the Christian world, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries: “To state the thesis in general terms: post-Constantinian Christianity lays claim to the power of classical male speech; yet at the same time late ancient Christian discourse continues to locate itself in paradoxical relation to classical discourse through a stance of feminizing ascesis that renounces public speech” [Burrus, “Reading Agnes” 33]. This sort of paradoxical stance, not surprisingly, gives rise to extremely intricate and sometimes almost enigmatic narrative representations. The very virgin martyrs whose femininity is being reinforced represent at the same time an ambiguity of gender that matches the ambiguities of identification with Rome manifested by such figures as Ambrose and Prudentius. In addition to the gross and obvious political change, which I have pointed to, Burrus emphasizes both the developments of mariology and the image of the orthodox church as virgo intacta assailed by heresies that gave further impetus to the fourth-century emphasis on (almost obsession with) the figure of the female virgin.35

For example, in Ambrose’s Concerning Virgins, we find a stunningly complex moment of paradoxical gender identifications. In one crucial episode, Thecla, the apocryphal female associate of Paul, has entered the martyrological ring. She is precisely the proverbial Christian who has been thrown to the lions. As Ambrose structures his recounting of this episode, the lion “initially represents the sexual violence signalled by both the ‘rage’ of Thecla’s would-be husband and the ‘immodest eyes’ of the male onlookers who gaze upon the spectacle of her nakedness” [Burrus, “Reading Agnes” 32]. The would-be martyr, Thecla, voluntarily presents to the lion her “vital parts,” an obviously eroticized displacement of the offer of her sexual parts to her rejected fiancé. Male sexuality (and this is crucial) is figured as devouring of the woman, and the lion

---

35. Burrus, “Word and Flesh” 36–41. Oddly enough, heresy is not only the male “rapist” of the ecclesiological virgin, but also frequently figured as an incontinent female, as Burrus points out there as well [see also Cohen].
represents both the rapacity of a husband as well as that of the Empire. 36 This lion, however, undergoes a miraculous transformation (in addition to his pluralization, duly noted by Burrrus):

\[
\text{Let, then, holy Mary instruct you in the discipline of life, and Thecla teach you how to be offered, for she, avoiding nuptial intercourse, and condemned through her husband’s rage, changed even the disposition of wild beasts by their reverence for virginity. For being made ready for the wild beasts, when avoiding the gaze of men, she offered her vital parts to a fierce lion, caused those who had turned away their immodest looks to turn them back modestly. The beast was to be seen lying on the ground, licking her feet, showing without a sound that it could not injure the sacred body of the virgin. So the beast reverenced his prey, and forgetful of his own nature, put on that nature which men had lost. One could see, as it were, by some transfusion of nature, men clothed with savageness, goading the beast to cruelty, and the beast kissing the feet of the virgin, teaching them what was due from men. . . . They set an example of piety when reverencing the martyr; and gave a lesson in favor of charity when they did nothing but kiss the virgin’s feet, with their eyes turned to the ground, as though through modesty, fearing that any male, even a beast, should see the virgin naked. [Ambrose de virg. 2, 19–20]}
\[
The text is drawing an explicit analogy between the hunger of the male lion to eat the virgin’s flesh and the lust of her husband to consummate the marriage. Even the lion, a mere beast is led to transform its beastly and violent maleness in the presence of the virgin martyr and by her example. Burrrus sums up her reading of this passage by remarking that “the subjugating force of male sexual violence has not been defeated so much as sublimated. On one reading at least, the lion’s averted, feminized gaze continues paradoxically to restrain the virgin; the very gesture of honoring her—indeed of freely mirroring her feminine subjugation—becomes itself the vehicle of her constraint” (“Reading Agnes” 33). I would unpack this conclusion in the following manner. Even in the era of “imperial Christianity,” male sexuality, understood as “naturally” violent, was resisted. Because of its cultural construction within the dominant Roman formation to which most Christians had belonged [see Richlin], this resistance remained an important part of Christian male self-construction, but it could no longer accommodate such resistance through figurations of a female “achievement” of maleness. Gender hierarchy now had to be preserved, but not at the cost of reinstating an ideal of invasive phallic maleness. The point was precisely to “sublimate” it; subjugation was to be retained but without violence. This is the moment that Burrrus quite dramatically refers to as “the veiling of the phallus.” A paradoxical relation of these men to their own male selves is paralleled in their paradoxical relation to classical discourse (figured as “male”) and even to Roman imperial power itself. It is through their stance of self-feminization that the church fathers (quite similar in this to both early rabbis and later rabbinic tradition [see D. Boyarin, “Torah-Study”]) produce and maintain their discourses of subjugation of women. This is analogous, in Burrrus’s subtle readings, of the ways that power and prestige

36. The rabbis also use the lion as a symbol for a violent male sexuality, saying that “the ignorant man is like the lion who tramples and then devours its prey,” while the courting routine of the rooster is taken as a positive example of the husband who plays and dallies with and arouses his wife before intercourse. For the lion as an image of violent male sexuality in Roman literature, see the text of Martial cited by Richlin. For the persistence of the lion in this guise, see James Joyce’s Ulysses, in which Bloom remarks, “the lion reek of all the male brutes that have possessed” a prostitute [409].

76
were both subverted and maintained even by such ascetic figures as Sulpicius (a fortiori by bishops) through their rhetorics of seclusion, withdrawal, and “feminizing ascesis.”

The female virgin remained a highly charged symbol, owing to her subversions of sexuality, but she functioned now most readily as an example for the male ascetic, as virgo, not virago. She is a figure no longer for the viraginized female but rather for the feminized male, the male who upon perceiving her, like the lion, is inspired to—which is not to say that he achieves—a complete renunciation of his “naturally” violent, leonine, male sexuality. It is indeed telling that in the earlier version of the Thecla story, Thecla is protected by a female lion from the rage of the male lion, while in the fourth-century Ambrosian version, the female lion is gone, her place taken by a male lion who is himself transformed through the example of the virgin [Burrrus, “Reading Agnes” 32]. The pluralization of the lions is, as Burrrus remarks, significant of their transformation into an icon of the audience watching the martyrdom (and the audience reading the martyrology), at least insofar as these are male.

Burrrus’s analysis of Ambrose proves strikingly productive for our understanding of the rabbinic text as well, for in both texts the female virgin as valorized symbol for the ideal male is being put forth. Indeed, the Ambrose text even includes a “virgin in a brothel,” a parallel that I will be analyzing elsewhere. For all this convergence, however, it is fascinating to observe possible lines of difference as well.

As a tentative hypothesis, I would offer the following: identification with the female virgin is a mode for both rabbis and church fathers of disidentification with a “Rome” whose power is stereotyped as a highly sexualized male. Both groups are engaged in complex, tangled, and ambivalent negotiations of self-fashioning in response to their attraction to and repulsion from that Rome. Each, however, occupies a different space within the economies of power and ethnic emplacement in the Empire. On the one hand, Christian writers, even as late as the fourth or fifth centuries, were frequently former Roman “pagans,” sons of power and prestige in imperial society and highly educated and identified with classical culture. Their renunciation of such identification and certain forms of power and prestige is thus both more dramatic (for being voluntary and “expensive”) and ambivalent than that of the rabbis who are always/already outsiders to a certain extent by virtue of birth into a minority ethnic and religious group and socialization into a different language and literary tradition. On the other hand, Christian culture with its powerful—but by no means ubiquitous—critique of marriage continued to represent a much more radical rejection of Roman cultural values than did that of the rabbis.

The rabbis also stand in a highly ambiguous position vis-à-vis their version of “Rome.” As we have seen, for them being male represents a species of danger, danger of being “seduced” into pursuing one of two prostitutes, heretical sectarianism, Christianity (becoming the dominant religion of the empire), or collaboration with Roman power. Thus for them, too, the female virgin becomes symbolic of a virtual ego ideal. However, there are differences as well. The female virgin in the brothel, the valued model of rabbinic resistance is subtly different from the Christian model. She escapes her fate, not like the second-century Perpetua, nor even like the fourth-century Agnes, through open resistance, which ultimately cost her her life, but instead through the use of trickster methods, “feminine” wiles, thus escaping both fates, rape as well as death. If the paradigmatic virgin for the church fathers remains the virgin in the arena, the paradigmatic virgin for the rabbis is the virgin in the brothel, the one who manages through her wiles to preserve her virginity while staying alive, in order finally to become a virgin bride. For the church fathers

37. See Cooper for another extended exploration of the ways that figures of idealized women are used within late antique culture in the rhetorical struggles between men for prestige and power.
38. In a text that I have discussed elsewhere such collaboration is explicitly marked as becoming leonine [Unheroic 88], and “feminine” stealth is recommended as the antidote.
(Ambrose and Prudentius), the primary issue in their symbolization of the virgin as their model is precisely her virginity—her literal continence interpreted as a model for male celibates. But rabbinic Judaism, for all its alienation from certain aspects of late classical culture, still strongly accepts and identifies with the pro-marriage and pro-natal ideologies that such contemporary texts as novels indicate. The rabbi's daughter cannot, therefore, die a virgin. Her virginity is being preserved, like the heroine of a novel such as Leukippe, whose behavior is reminiscent of that of Rabbi Me'ir, for her husband, not until death, while Thecla's is being preserved from her husband.

In her habitation of "private" indoor spaces, this talmudic virgin is the figure construed as most able to resist the "sexual" seductions of both sectarianism and accommodation to Roman power. To reprise: it is behaving as a male with respect to the "female" blandishments of heresy or collaboration that gets one into trouble; behaving as a "female" would get one out of it. In this form, the female virgin as ideal for the male is more like that other late ancient Christian figure of the virgin, not the virgin martyr but the virgin ascetic who becomes her inheritor from the fourth century on [see Elm]. As Burrus observes, Sulpicius Severus, a Gallic ascetic squarely contemporary with our talmudic text, explicitly remarks women and especially virginal women as his models for the ascetic life of retirement and withdrawal from public exposure and activity: "Sulpicius' special interest in virginal women is in large part attributable, I think, to the fact that it is women in general and virginal women in particular who traditionally model the life of complete retirement and avoidance of public exposure." Burrus concludes, quite strikingly, that "Sulpicius puts forth the radical suggestion that the male must indeed 'become female' through his ascetic renunciation of public life" ["Male Ascetic"] paralleling the rabbis' "becoming female through their ascetic renunciations of intercourse within alluring Christianity or participation in the Roman State. As Burrus remarks, "Sulpicius presents the virgin as an ideal of which Martin acknowledges himself to fall short, compromised by his episcopal office and also, I would add, by his very maleness" ["Male Ascetic"]. Like our rabbis, the male must become female in order to escape the moral dangers of his masculine state. In our talmudic text, the rabbis are thus close, mutatis mutandis, in their use of this charged symbol to those ascetics (such as Sulpicius Severus) for whom the virgin was a model for a life of withdrawal from public exposure. Mutatis mutandis, for the withdrawal of a Roman aristocrat from the public cannot be identical to the withdrawal of Jewish sages. I find here, nevertheless, a remarkable example of sharp cultural convergence, suggestive once more of the need for our researches in late antique culture to transcend the narrow lines of histories of particular religious groups. So-called syncretism is not a marginal phenomenon in the formation even of monotheistic religions but the very heartland of their life and development.

WORKS CITED


39. On Jewish martyrlogies in midrashic texts from the talmudic period, Galit Hasan-Rokem has written, "[t]he intertextual connections that are expressed in these stories do not remain enclosed within the inner-Jewish, Hebrew, and rabbinic borders. In these stories are revealed also the connections with universes of discourse with which rabbinic literature carries out ambivalent, tense and even openly polemic relations" [135].
Baker, Cynthia. "Bodies, Boundaries, and Domestic Politics in a Late Ancient Marketplace." 


Gruen, Erich. E-mail to the author. 1997.


