



BRILL

A Funny Thing Happened on My Way to Sodom

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Abstract

As an illustration of the phenomena of “filtered absorption” or “controlled incorporation” of Greek and Roman culture into late classical Judaism, this article focuses on the depiction of Abraham’s servant, identified as Eliezer, in a passage in *b. Sanh* 109b, which consists largely of confrontations—several of them of a decidedly humorous or satirical nature—with the perverse laws, judges, and citizens of biblical Sodom. The manner in which Eliezer’s midrashic personality and role were fashioned by the rabbis evokes a familiar character from classical literature, namely the “clever slave” [*servus callidus*], a figure that was cultivated most famously by Plautus and which became a popular stock character in Roman theater. The article tries to reconstruct how the midrashic homilist adapted the Latin dramatic conventions for Jewish religious and exegetical purposes. Special attention is paid to the Talmud’s incorporation of the well-known motif of the “Procrustean bed”; noting the methodological and textual obstacles that plague our attempts to identify exactly which versions of that legend were being used by the talmudic authors.

Keywords

Talmud – Midrash – Judaism – Babylonian Talmud – Latin comedy – Procrustian bed

Introduction

A major endeavor of the last century and a half of academic rabbinic studies has been to situate the Jewish circles that produced the Talmud and midrashim within their contemporary cultural environment. Major scholars have posed variations on the question: “how familiar were the rabbis of the land of Israel

and Babylonia with the dominant Hellenistic Greek civilization?" Though the profound impact of Hellenism on the Jewish religious literature in late antiquity might strike us now as glaringly obvious, it is likely that the pioneering research was impelled to overcome an impression that was being propagated by modern religious spokesmen that Judaism had somehow maintained a self-contained enclave of "authentic" tradition that was impervious to adulteration by alien influences. At any rate, more than a half century of historical and cultural scholarship has done away with archaic "Judaism / Hellenism" dichotomies, and outside of some religious apologetics one would be hard put to find an author who does not accept that the Jews of the Roman empire were deeply immersed in the heterogeneous "global" civilizations spread by Greece and Rome.

In fact, the picture has proven to be somewhat inconsistent; for example, Saul Lieberman pointed out that the evidence of Hellenistic influence is much stronger as regards law or material culture than literary or philosophical knowledge,¹ while others have suggested that a measure of programmatic censorship might have been at work in eliminating discussions on explicitly philosophical questions from the rabbinic corpus.² Studies by Daniel Boyarin,³

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- 1 Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C.E.* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942) and *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.-IV Century C.E.* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 18; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950). Elimelech Epstein-Halevi assembled (albeit without much critical analysis) numerous volumes filled with hundreds of examples of motifs common to Greek, Latin, and Jewish texts; for the present study I have found relevant material in Elimelech Epstein-Halevi, *'Olamah shel ha-aggadah* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1972) [Hebrew]; Epstein-Halevi, *Parashiyot Ba-Aggadah Le-or mekoroty Yevaniyyim* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1973) [Hebrew]; Epstein-Halevi, *Ha-aggadah ha-historit-biyografit le-or mekorot yevaniyyim ve-laṭiniyyim* (Tel Aviv: Defus Niv, 1975) [Hebrew]; Epstein-Halevi, *Agadot ha-amora'im* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1977) [Hebrew]; and Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1982) [Hebrew]. E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 B.C.E.-66 C.E.* (London: SCM, 1992), 124, has expressed this reality in sardonic (but accurate) terms: "We should dismiss the view that Palestinian Jews wore Bedouin clothes and had beards that looked like Methuselah's, Graeco-Roman styles in both clothes and hair were pervasive."
 - 2 E.g., Eliezer Segal, "The Few Contained the Many': Rabbinic Perspectives on the Miraculous and the Impossible," *JJS* 54 (2003): 273-82.
 - 3 Daniel Boyarin, "The Talmud as a Fat Rabbi: A Novel Approach," *Text & Talk* 28 (2008): 603-19; Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 133-49; and Boyarin, "Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia," in *The Cambridge Companion to the*

Kristen Lindbeck,⁴ and others have challenged the previous assumption that Hellenistic influence was characteristic of Palestinian Judaism, but far less perceptible among their Babylonian coreligionists.

While focusing attention on the transmission or dissemination of Hellenistic materials to rabbinic culture, scholarship has tended, at least by implication, to perceive the role of the Jewish texts as a passive one that is to be measured in terms of the extent of their knowledge of the dominant global culture. However, careful study of rabbinic documents reveals that in many instances the borrowings were of a decidedly creative sort. Motifs that originated in the foreign literatures were integrated into Jewish homiletical texts through a process of artistic craftsmanship. The present study will consist of a close reading and analysis of one passage from the Babylonian Talmud; we shall try to enhance our appreciation of this literary and exegetical activity as it pertains to extended meanings of the “commentary” genre.

As is the case with any credible proposal of a scholarly theory that claims to describe general features of a culture—and all the more when it involves interactions between multiple cultures—it must be founded on a careful sifting of specific details. In the following pages I will be examining what is ostensibly one of the best-known instances of rabbinic use of a motif from classical mythology, namely the transplanting of the “Procrustean bed” into the talmudic retelling of the crimes of biblical Sodom. The main purpose of this article is to arrive at an understanding of *how* the homilists whose teachings were preserved in the Talmud and midrashim made use of dramatic themes and literary tropes from the Greco-Roman surroundings in order to serve as a special type of commentary that comes to enhance or inspire their own homiletical readings of the Torah.

As will become evident, a deeper appreciation of this episode will require meticulous investigations not only into the diverse versions of the Procrustean bed [or: beds] traditions that were in circulation among Greek and Latin authors (and artists), and of the fluid textual/redactional transmission of the Talmud, but also an acquaintance with several developments in the evolution of Greek and Roman comedy and their dramatic conventions. All these phenomena should be assessed in turn within the broader context of the social, religious, and cultural contexts of their respective communities.

Talmud and Rabbinic Literature (ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336-64.

4 Kristen H. Lindbeck, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 74-84.

The Clever Slave

b. *Sanh.* 109b (according to MS Jerusalem Yad Harav Herzog 1):⁵

דפדע ליה לחבריה אמרי ליה זיל הב ליה אנרא דשקל לך דמא ועבד לך אסותא
אליעזר עבד אברהם איקלע להתם פדעוה אתא לקמי דיאנא אמ' ליה זיל הב ליה אנריה
דעבד לך אסותא שקל גלא לא פדעיה לדיאנא אמ' ליה מתח מילך מניה

One who wounds⁶ his fellow, they say to him: Go give him a payment because he let blood⁷ for you and cured you.⁸

Eliezer the servant of Abraham found himself in that place. They wounded him. He came before a judge. He said to him: Go and give him his compensation⁹ for he has cured you.¹⁰

5 For a detailed analysis of this important Yemenite manuscript and an assessment of its textual traditions, see Mordechai Sabato, *A Yemenite Manuscript of Tractate Sanhedrin and Its Place in the Text Tradition* (Dissertation Series; Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1998) [Hebrew]. A different Yemenite tradition from the *Midrash Ha-Gadol* will be presented below.

6 See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan and Baltimore: Bar Ilan University Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 888.

7 On this medical procedure as it appears in rabbinic literature and in the ancient world see Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (trans. Fred Rosner; Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1993), 33-35, 248-57.

8 The phrase "and cured you" is missing in all other witnesses.

9 On "compensation" cf. MS Florence: "four denars."

10 MS Florence at this point inserts the segment about the wedding feast (see below), and then the law about tolls for land and water travel, along with the episode of the launderer. The sequence is unquestionably corrupt. In MS Munich the feast segment appears as an addition subsequent to the story of Eliezer wounding the judge. See Raphael Nathan Rabinowitz, *Dikduke Sofrim* (16 vols.; Munich: E. Huber, 1867-1897), 9:351 n. ט. In *Midrash Ha-Gadol* (Mordecai Margulies, ed., *Midrash Ha-Gadol 'al Hamishah Humshe Torah: Sefer Bereshit* [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1975], 311-12), where the episode of the bed is inserted in the context of Eliezer's staying in Sodom in order to collect a debt (see below), the account of the confrontation with the judge is presented as a continuation of that narrative of Eliezer's lawsuit:

The following day he presented his suit. He said to him: Give me my money. He took the leather bag and struck him on his head.

He said to him: Come let us go before a judge.

He went before the judge. He said to him: It is not enough that you did not give him his payment because he alleviated your ailment, but you even said to him: Give me my money!

He took a rock and wounded the judge. He said to him: pull your thing from him (?¹¹).

הוּא הָלוּ הָהִיא כּוּרְסִיתָא כִּי מִקְלַע אִינִישׁ לְהַתֵּם מִגְנִי לִיה עִילוּיָהּ אִי גּוֹץ מִתְחִי לִיה
אִי אֲרִיךְ גִּזִּי מְנִיה
אִיקְלַע לְהַתֵּם אֲלִיעֶזֶר עֶבֶד אֲבֵרָהִם אֲמָרוּ לִיה קוּם גְּנִי אֲפּוּרִיא אֲמ' לְהוּ נִדְרָא נְדָרִי
מִיּוּמָא דְשִׁכְבָּא שְׂרָה לֹא גְנִינָא אֲפּוּרִיא

There was a certain small litter.¹² When a person would find himself in that place, they would make him lie upon it. If he was short they would stretch him; if he were tall they would cut off [a limb] from him.

Eliezer the servant of Abraham found himself in that place. They said to him. Lie down¹³ on the bed. He said to them: I have made a vow since the day that Sarah¹⁴ died that I will not lie on a bed.

הוּא הִילּוּלָא דְהוּא דְכִי הוּא אֲתִי אֲבַסְנִיא וּמְזַמֵּן לִיה חַד מִיְנֵהוּן וּמוֹעִיל לִיה הוּא לְהוּ
אִיסְרָא דְהוּא צִלְבִין לִיה אֲלִיעֶזֶר עֶבֶד אֲבֵרָהִם אֲזַל אֲשַׁכַּח הָהוּא הִילּוּלָא אֲזַל אִתִּיב
גְּבִי עוֹקְבָה דְכוּלָּהּ אֲמ' לִיה מִן זְמַנְךָ לְהַכָּא אֲמ' לִיה אַתְּ שְׁקַל גְּלִימִיָּה וְרַהֵט אֲזַל יִתִּיב
גְּבִי חוּרְנָא וְשְׁקַל גְּלִימִיָּה וְרַהֵט עֶבֶד בְּהוּ הִכִּי עַד דִּימְטָא לְגַבִּי דִּיאָנָא כִּי מְטָא לְגַבִּי
דִּיאָנָא אֲמ' לִיה מֵאֵן זְמַנְךָ לְהַכָּא אֲמ' לִיה אַתְּ שְׁקַל דִּיאָנָא גְּלִימִיָּה וְרַהֵט וְשְׁקַלוּ כּוּלָּהּ
גְּלִימִיָּה וְרַהִיטוּ יִתִּיב עִילוּיָ סְעוּדָתָא וְאֲכָלָהּ

Eliezer took the leather bag and struck the judge with it twice (Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 266).

He said to him: The payment that you take from me, give it to him and the rest that remains to you, go give to me.

¹¹ Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 719: "The mng. of מִלְךְ מְנִיה *San* 109b (29) is unclear." Other witnesses have (allowing for minor textual and stylistic variations): "He said to him: What is this? He said to him: The compensation that is owing to me from you give it to him and would that my denars remain as they were."

¹² On "small litter": so too in MS Munich; but below: "bed." My translation follows Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 567, who renders it as a small chair or litter, based on Syriac usage. MS Florence has a blank space here.

¹³ I have left the Aramaic קוּם untranslated in keeping with Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 994, usage no. 13: "as an aux. vb. implying emphasis."

¹⁴ On "Sarah": so too in MSS Florence, Karlsruhe, Munich, *Yalkuṭ Shim'onī*, *Ein Ya'akov*, and *Midrash Ha-Gadol*. Printings have: "my mother." See Rabinowitz, *Dikduke Sofrim*, 9:351-52 n. 3. On the chronological difficulties inherent in this text see discussion below.

There was a festivity¹⁵ where¹⁶ if a stranger would come and one of them would invite him and let him come in, they had a punishment that they would crucify him.¹⁷

Eliezer the servant of Abraham went and came upon a certain festivity. He went and seated himself at the end of all of them.¹⁸ He said to him: Who invited you here?

He said to him: You. He took his garment and ran.

He went and sat next to someone else and he took his garment and ran.

Thus did he do to them until he arrived at the judge. When he arrived at the judge, he said to him: Who invited you here?

He said to him: You. The judge took his garment and ran. And they all took their garments and ran.

He sat at the feast and ate it.

These stories about Eliezer appear as three narrative units within a sequence of episodes that revolve around the perverse laws and customs ascribed to the wicked citizens and corrupt judges of Sodom.¹⁹ The pericope as a whole

15 Usually a wedding; see Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 378.

16 MS Florence (see above regarding the order of items in this text) reads: "They stipulated in their laws that if anyone invites a stranger to the festivity his garments would be stripped off." The clause about the condition is missing in MS Karlsruhe.

17 Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 963. The clause "they had a punishment etc." is also found in the marginal addition to MS Munich, but not in any other witnesses. The printed editions (since the 1497 Soncino-Barko printing) have: "Eliezer showed up there and they did not give him any bread . . ."

18 Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 859.

19 The pericope is preserved with major textual variants that relate, among other things, to the sequence of the units. See for example Rabinowitz, *Dikduke Sofrim*, 9:350-51. On the distinctive reading of *Midrash ha-gadol* see below.

The Babylonian pericope speaks of four judges whose names contain word-plays indicating their depravity. Note however that MS Munich and *Midrash ha-gadol* (Margulies, *Midrash Ha-Gadol 'al Hamishah Humshe Torah: Sefer Bereshit*, 310-11) speak of six judges, though only four names (not the same ones) appear in each list; in MS Munich two additional cryptic names that are also found in *Midrash Ha-Gadol* (Afshakar, Karshakar) are added in the margin (Rabinowitz, *Dikduke Sofrim*, 9:350 n. 1: "They are incomprehensible"). A similar tradition is found in *Genesis Rabbah* 20:3 (Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* [Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965], 519-20) regarding five judges, with Lot being appointed as their chief magistrate (*archijudex*) on the very day of the angels' arrival. Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah*, 46, notes how this satiric strain (see below) is found in a pericope that is of Babylonian provenance.

seems to be stitched together from diverse sources, as indicated by their heterogeneous character.²⁰ In some of the cases, the offending laws are merely described, while in others the Talmud brings episodes about how they were implemented.²¹ Regarding the first law, the Talmud tells how it was applied to “a certain orphan son of a widow” who was then able to turn the absurd logic of the unjust law against his abusers; whereas other tales in the collection tell of “a certain launderer” and “a certain maiden” who were unable to resist their victimizations.

In three units that are situated toward the end of the collection, Abraham's servant Eliezer²² is pitted against the perverse citizens of Sodom whom he

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- 20 The entire section about the laws of Sodom is presented in Aramaic without any statements that are attributed to rabbis until a closing summary statement by Rav Judah in the name of Rav that relates to the final unit (the story of the compassionate maiden who was cruelly executed—this probably came from a separate source with a parallel in the Palestinian midrash; see below). According to the prevailing scholarly theory, anonymous Aramaic sections usually belong to the redactional stratum, the “*setama digmara*” and should contain no new content; see, e.g., Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus Bockmuehl; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 206 and David Halivni, *Introduction to Sources and Traditions: Studies in the Formation of the Talmud* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2012) [Hebrew]. That is clearly not the case here, and we are evidently dealing with a distinct type of talmudic source material, one that may be associated with expanded Aramaic Targums. See Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (3 vols.; BJS 291-293; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 3:239-40 and Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970), 24 [Hebrew].
- 21 This obviously aggadic passage employs the formal conventions associated with the citation of legal precedents in the Babylonian Talmud. See Eliezer Segal, *Case Citation in the Babylonian Talmud: The Evidence of Tractate Neziqin* (BJS 210; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 14-34, 155-64, 230-34, 283-86 and Segal, “The Terminology of Case-Citation in the Babylonian Talmud: A Study in the Limitations of Form Criticism,” *JSJ* 9 (1978): 205-11.
- 22 The Talmud, consistent with standard rabbinic usage, is equating two characters whom the Bible does not explicitly identify as one and the same person: Gen 15:2 speaks of Abram's steward Eliezer of Damascus, whereas the main protagonist of Gen 24 is an unnamed “servant of Abraham” who is given the mission of finding a bride for Isaac; see Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah*, 21, 28. Yet another midrashic tradition in *Gen. Rab.* (43:2) finds a reference to Eliezer in Gen 14:14. See E. A. Speiser, ed., *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 112, 178; Menakhem Perry, “Counter-Stories in the Bible: Rebekah and Her Bridegroom, Abraham's Servant,” *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 275-323, esp. 280-81, 316 n. 8; Paul Mandel, “The Servant, The Man and the Master—A Rhetorical Study of Genesis 24,” *JSHL* 10-11 (1988): 613-27; Lieve M. Teugels, “The Anonymous Matchmaker: An Enquiry into the Characterization of the Servant of Abraham in Genesis 24,” *JSOT* 65 (1995): 13-23; Teugels, *Bible and Midrash: The Story of “The Wooing of Rebekah” (Gen. 24)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 177.

succeeds in outsmarting.²³ I can see no obvious reason (other than the assumption that the pericope was stitched together from sundry sources) why Eliezer appears in only some of the stories, when he could have been cast as the foil of the Sodomites in most of them without requiring extensive alterations to the material.²⁴

There is no textual basis in the Bible—even if we allow for the application of creative midrashic hermeneutics—for the Talmud’s detailed and specific reconstruction of Sodom’s sins and injustices, let alone for Eliezer’s role as subverter of the city’s insidious institutions.²⁵ Neither Eliezer nor any other servant of Abraham is mentioned anywhere in the crucial chapters that describe Sodom’s sinfulness, Abraham’s negotiations with God over the city’s fate, the angels’ visit to and rescue of Lot and his family, or the city’s actual destruction and its aftermath. What, then, inspired the authors and compilers of this passage to cast Abraham’s drab and dutiful slave as a crafty trickster who thwarts the malicious citizens of Sodom?

I would submit that the manner in which Eliezer’s midrashic personality and role were fashioned by the rabbis corresponds in significant respects to a familiar character from classical literature, namely the “clever slave” [*servus callidus*], a figure that was cultivated most famously by the Latin comic playwright Plautus and which became a popular stock character in Roman theater.²⁶ There is in fact much disagreement as to whether the clever slaves were

On the general tendency in midrashic hermeneutics to identify minor or unnamed biblical characters with more prominent figures, see Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah*, 13, 21, etc.

- 23 Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (trans. Henrietta Szold; 7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-1938), 1:247 and 5:238 n. 155. Ginzburg’s paraphrase is based largely on later compendia, especially the *Sefer HaYashar*, and must be used very cautiously as a source for ancient rabbinic tradition.
- 24 These inconsistencies in the story cycle are discussed by Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Folklore Studies in Translation; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 212, who ascribes the passage’s failure to make Eliezer the protagonist of the other units to the compiler’s faithfulness “to the version as he received it from his sources.”
- 25 *Ibid.*, 212 and 506 n. 123: “The central active figure, that of Eliezer, servant of Abraham, fits cleanly into the category of protagonist known as the ‘trickster.’ ”
- 26 A useful survey of archeological and literary information regarding theater in Palestine during the Hellenistic era may be found in Joseph Geiger, *Tents of Japheth: Greek Intellectuals in Ancient Palestine* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2012), 151-55 [Hebrew]. His explicit data relates principally to mime, pantomime, and tragedy rather than to comedy. See also: Arthur Segal, “Theatres in Ancient Palestine during the Roman-Byzantine Period (An Historical-Archaeological Survey),” *SCI* 8-9 (1985): 145-65; Segal, *Theatres in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia* (Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava 140; Leiden:

an original invention of Plautus or a convention that he inherited from the Greek sources (especially Menander) that he was adapting into Latin comedy for contemporary Roman audiences.²⁷ Those slaves were more likely to be disobedient mischief-makers with self-serving agendas, but they also put their wits to the service of their masters, especially to assist unworldly young star-crossed lovers.

It is not completely obvious where Eliezer fits best among the *dramatis personae* of clever slaves that inhabit the comedic repertory.²⁸ The Talmud's

Brill, 1995); Estee Dvorjetski, "The Theatre in Rabbinic Literature," in *Aspects of Theatre and Culture in the Graeco-Roman World* (ed. Arthur Segal; Haifa: Haifa University Faculty of Humanities, 1994), 51-68; Martin Jacobs, "Theatres and Performances as Reflected in the Talmud Yerushalmi," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* (ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 327-47.

- 27 C. Stace, "The Slaves of Plautus," *Greece & Rome* 15 (1968): 64-77, observes (at 66) that "there is no Roman Comedy without a slave." The question has been complicated by the fact that Plautus's main source was Menander, most of whose *oeuvre* has not survived, though the surviving corpus continued to be enlarged by discoveries of texts through much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The scholarly camp that denies the existence of the *servus callidus* in Greek comedy includes A. W. Gomme, *Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1937), 186-87; L. A. Post, "Aristotle and Menander," *TAPA* 69 (1938): 1-42, esp. 37; Sander M. Goldberg, *The Making of Menander's Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 38-40. On the other hand, Philip W. Harsh, "The Intriguing Slave in Greek Comedy," *TAPA* 86 (1955): 135-42, makes a strong case that intriguing slaves were a key feature in Menander and some other Greek playwrights, and that they make even better sense in the Greek social milieu than the Roman. See also George Eckel Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 249-53, 291; Eduard Fraenkel, *Plautine Elements in Plautus: (Plautinisches Im Plautus)* (trans. Tomas Drevikovsky and Frances Muecke; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 159-72; Kathleen McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 20-29.

There is considerable scholarly discussion about whether the conduct of Abraham's servant when seeking a bride for Isaac should be characterized as "tricks"; see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (The Indiana Literary Biblical Series; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 145; Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, 117; Teugels, "Counter-Stories in the Bible," 277.

- 28 The Eliezer of the talmudic tales falls somewhere between Stace's main categories of the *servus callidus* (e.g., Pseudolus or Chrysalus)—a roguish, insolent and boastful agent of intrigue who practices trickery and deception for immoral or mischievous purpose—and the faithful slaves, a type that according to Stace, "Slaves," 71, may also be a *callidus*; see Stace, "Slaves," at 73: "The slaves who engineer deceptions are almost always doing so out of loyalty to their masters." On the portrayals of "good slaves" and "bad slaves" in Roman

portrayal of Abraham's servant might have more in common with characters such as the enterprising but loyal slave Daos in Menander's (fragmentary) *Apsis* (The Shield) who cunningly turns the villain Kleostratos's vice of avarice into a weapon against him to prevent him from exploiting a loophole in the legal system to marry an unwilling young heiress and cheating her out of her rightful inheritance.²⁹ Or, to take another tempting example, the efforts of Abraham's slave to arrange the match between Rebecca and his young master Isaac, while tactfully fending off potential subversion of the enterprise by the wily Laban,³⁰

literature, especially the comedies, see Sandra R. Joshel, "Slavery and Roman Literary Culture," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (ed. Keith Bradley et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 121-23.

29 Menander, *Apsis*, (Arnott, LCL). See discussion in W. Thomas MacCary, "Menander's Slaves: Their Names, Roles, and Masks," *TAPA* 100 (1969): 277-94, esp. 282-83. T. B. L. Webster, *An Introduction to Menander* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 40-41, treats Daos in *Apsis* as an example of the "intriguing slave" prototype, however he argues that this is a unique case and does not attest to its status as a stock comedic character. Similarly, Sander Goldberg, though aware of the recently discovered Menander texts, concludes (in his discussion of *Apsis*) that the various activities that are assigned to the slaves in those plays cannot be seriously compared to those in Plautus for whom they are "the true controllers of the action"; see Goldberg, *The Making of Menander's Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 38-40, cited with approval by J. Michael Walton and Peter D. Arnott, *Menander and the Making of Comedy* (Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies 67; London: Greenwood, 1996), 128-29.

30 Ginzberg's synopsis of rabbinic retellings of the "Wooing of Rebekah" episode (*Legends*, 1:295-96) speaks of Laban's intentions to slay Eliezer and rob him, of his coveting Abraham's wealth, and of the insincerity of Rebecca's family's blessings on her departure. Although it is understandable that the ancient Jewish homilists would have drawn analogies from Laban's later devious treatment of Jacob in Gen 29, which was expanded considerably in the midrashic retellings, to the earlier negotiations with Abraham's servant, the curious fact remains that virtually none the proof texts cited by Ginzberg in his notes (5:261-62, especially nn. 292, 294 and 298) are from actual works of the talmudic-midrashic era, but rather are from "unknown midrashic sources" as found in medieval compilations such as the *Midrash Abkir*, *Yalkuṭ shim'oni*, *Midrash ha-gadol*, etc. The main exception to this pattern is the tradition about the attempt to poison Eliezer (which ultimately backfired to Bethuel), a tale that is mentioned in the *Tg. Ps.-J.* to Gen 24:33 and 55; see Avigdor Shinan, *The Embroidered Targum: The Aggadah in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch* (Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 80 n. 137 [Hebrew]. Thorough discussions of the relevant sources are provided by Theodor and Albeck, *Bereshit Rabba*, 65₁ to line 4 (citing a lone Yemenite MS); Arthur B. Hyman, Isaac N. Lerer, and Yitshak Shiloni, eds., *Yalkuṭ shim'oni: sefer bereshit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1973), 490 to line 65 [Hebrew]. At any rate, the ascription to Laban of malicious motives is found in many later

might easily have been a key factor in evoking associations with a comedic figure like Plautus's *Pseudolus*, the clever slave who served as a matchmaker for Hero and his beloved Philia, and thereby provided literary inspiration for the rabbis' characterization of Eliezer in our talmudic passage.³¹

We must of course take into consideration that, even without having recourse to non-Jewish influences, the norms of aggadic "creative philology" (to use the terminology coined by Isaac Heinemann)³² would likely have envisaged Eliezer as a convenient choice to be cast as the hero of this genre, if only because he was one of the few named characters in Genesis who fit the time and place. After all, Lot's role vis-à-vis the citizens of Sodom was too specific (and problematic) to permit this kind of imaginative expansion, whereas Abraham was too "serious" and central a figure to be available for the role. That comes close to exhausting the pool of characters available for the job.

The rabbis' criticism of the Sodomites focuses principally on the residents' lack of hospitality and their brutal abuse of visitors to their city and of residents who extended hospitality or kindness to strangers.³³ The Sodomites' isolationist policy resulted, according to older midrashic sources, from the fact that the

commentators; e.g., Rashi to Genesis 24:29 (evidently not based on an earlier source; see Charles Ber Chavel, ed., *Perushe rashi 'al ha-torah* [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982], 87). We should probably bear in mind that what is evidently a very old rabbinic (or even Pharaic) tradition found in the Passover Haggadah depicts Laban's determination to obstruct the marriage of Jacob (and likely that of Isaac as well) as nothing less than a plot to eradicate the people of Israel altogether. See Louis Finkelstein, "The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggadah," *HTR* 31 (1938): 291-317; E. D. Goldschmidt, *The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1969), 30-35 [Hebrew].

31 Plautus, *The Little Carthaginian: Pseudolus. The Rope* (Melo, LCL).

32 *Darkhe Ha-Agadah*, 15-26, 96-164.

33 Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah*, 45. The religious or quasi-religious virtue of hospitality was crucial to guaranteeing the safety of travelers in a world that could not be efficiently policed. See Ladislaus J. Bolchazy, *Hospitality in Early Rome: Livy's Concept of Its Humanizing Force* (Chicago: Ares, 1977); Bolchazy, "From Xenophobia to Altruism: Homeric and Roman Hospitality," *The Ancient World* 1 (1978): 45-64; Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (New Testament Monographs 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 1-132. On the related virtue of escorting guests out of town see Epstein-Halevi, *'Olamah shel ha-aggadah*, 66-68. We must bear in mind that according to rabbinic texts, and especially in the Babylonian Talmud, the foremost sin of the Sodomites was not homosexuality (though they are accused of general promiscuity) but injustice, inhospitality, and mistreatment of strangers. See Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 64-73.

city was endowed with fabulous resources that made them economically self-sufficient and therefore unwilling to share their affluence with outsiders.³⁴ My best guess is that Sodom was being portrayed in this light in order to provide scriptural precedents for sermons in which the preachers enjoined their communities to extend more hospitality—for to treat guests in a miserly manner would place them on the same moral plane as the reprehensible Sodomites of old.³⁵

34 This dovetails with a venerable Tannaitic tradition which stated that “the people of Sodom said: Since our land produces an abundance of food, and our land produces an abundance of silver and gold, and our land produces an abundance of jewels and pearls, we do not need any people coming to us. They come only to deprive us, so let us take the initiative in banishing all those whose feet would tread in our midst” (*t. Soṭah* 32; Saul Lieberman, ed., *The Tosefta* [4 vols.; New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955-1973], 4:162-63). Other sources are enumerated by Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Feshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (10 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955-1973), 8:369. The interpretation derives in large measure from the homiletical application of Job 28 and Ezek 16:49—“Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy”—to the Sodom narrative; see, e.g., *Mek. Shirata* 2; Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), 1:178; Epstein-Halevi, *Sha’arei ha-aggadah*, 44-45. As noted by Epstein-Halevi, similar interpretations are found in Josephus, *Ant.* 1:194, and Philo, *Abr.* 134. While the cited verses connect very well to the respective biblical accounts about generations of wicked humanity, there is also good reason (as proposed by Epstein-Halevi, *Parashiyot Ba-Agadah Le-or Mekorot Yevaniyyim*, 78-92) to think that the midrashic belief that corrupt societies (especially the generation of Noah’s flood) emerged out of a primordial age of plenty was influenced by the Greek myths about the legendary Golden Age at the dawn of humanity and its degeneration into the Silver Age as described by Hesiod in his *Works and Days* 110-154. See Richard Heinberg, *Memories and Visions of Paradise: Exploring the Universal Myth of a Lost Golden Age* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1995); Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 116-20; Friedrich Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology 30; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1949), 83-90; Robert C. Bartlett, “An Introduction to Hesiod’s ‘Works and Days,’” *The Review of Politics* 68 (2006): 186-88; Barry Gordon, “Aristotle and Hesiod: The Economic Problem In Greek Thought,” *Review of Social Economy* 63 (2005): 395-404.

35 There is a powerful scholarly temptation to link midrashic themes to larger developments in the historical or political world, such as Roman imperial policies or criticisms of the Jewish political leadership (the Patriarch or Exilarch); but I am unable to come up with a convincing reconstruction along those lines, other than the general perception of a colonized people that the imperial administration rewarded the “wicked” (e.g., the traitorous collaborators) and penalized the innocent. For the rabbis’ ambivalent

The author of the talmudic tale might have understood that the faithful servant was acting on behalf of his master Abraham, however nothing of the sort is suggested in the text.³⁶ As far as we know, Eliezer seems to be acting on his own initiative in a manner that is reminiscent of the “intriguing servants” of Roman comedy. Although he has been placed in an adversarial position *vis-à-vis* the inhabitants of Sodom, the Talmud does not inform us that he was acting out of moral or religious motives; and perhaps the very fact that he visits the Bible’s most notorious den of iniquity implies some stain on his virtue, in keeping with the prevailing stereotypes (among both Jews and Gentiles) about the dissolute character of slaves.³⁷ We must in any case keep in mind that the vast majority of rabbinic depictions of Eliezer/the servant of Abraham are of a very

assessments of Roman justice see Samuel Krauss, *Paras ve-Romi ba-Talmud uva-Midrashim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 708), 101-6 [Hebrew]. Krauss finds a generally favorable attitude toward Persian law (see also pp. 153-55). A simple communal or domestic context seems much more likely for our current passage. See also Saul Lieberman, “Roman Legal Institutions in Early Rabbinics and in the Acta Martyrum,” *JQR* 35 (1944): 1-57, esp. 38; Moshe David Herr, “Roman Rule in Tannaitic Literature (Its Image and Conception)” (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1970), 49-56 [Hebrew].

- 36 Contrast this with the *Sefer ha-yashar* expanded retelling of the Torah stories—composed according to J. Dan in Naples in the sixteenth century—where it states that it was Sarah who sent Eliezer to Sodom to look into Lot’s welfare; see H. Kanevski, ed., *Midreshe Sefer Ha-Yashar* (Bene Berak: Berditchev Publications, 2003), 75 [Hebrew]; Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1:247, 5:237 n. 155. On the provenance of *Sefer HaYashar* see Joseph Dan, ed., *Sefer Ha-Yashar* (Sifriyat “Dorot” 56; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1986). *Midrash Ha-Gadol* (see below) states that he went there in order to collect a personal debt. On the social status that sometimes attached to slaves in their capacities as mediators for their masters see Catherine Hezser, “‘The Slave of a Scholar Is Like a Scholar’: Stories About Rabbis and Their Slaves in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (stammaim) to the Aggadah* (ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein; TSAJ 114; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 181-200, esp. 184.
- 37 E.g., *b. Ber.* 45b, *b. Pesah.* 91a, *b. Git.* 38b, *b. Qidd.* 49b. Similarly, on *b. B. Mešî’a* 86b Abraham is skeptical of Eliezer on the grounds that “there is no faith in slaves.” This theme is expanded considerably in *Pirke R. El.* 16 where Abraham warns Isaac that he should examine Rebecca on her arrival because the servant, like all “Canaanites,” is suspected of “all the transgressions of the Torah.” Gerald Friedlander, ed., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great)* (2nd ed.; New York: Hermon, 1965), 111 n. 9, provides numerous sources from rabbinic as well patristic authors for the widely held view that slaves as a group were suspect of loose moral conduct. Of course, what a slave’s owner regards as idleness may be an act of passive resistance for a worker with no positive incentives or motivations. Similarly, persons who have been deprived of control over their sexual or reproductive lives have few reasons not to indulge in “licentious” behavior. See Niall McKeown, “Resistance Among Chattel Slaves in the Classical Greek World,” in

commendatory character.³⁸ In the rabbinic corpus, these tales of outsmarting the authorities are especially reminiscent of the numerous confrontations between Jerusalemites and Athenians that are collected at the beginning of *Lam. Rab.* and elsewhere.³⁹ In those tales, the clever Jewish heroes prove themselves smarter than their proud and powerful adversaries or overlords or self-styled sophisticates.

There is a decidedly humorous flavor to the stories in the Eliezer-Sodomites cycle,⁴⁰ most of which are based on the premise that the citizens of Sodom

The Cambridge World History of Slavery (ed. Keith Bradley et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 159-75.

- 38 On the face of things, this is something that should go without saying based on the biblical descriptions of Eliezer as a dutiful and trustworthy servant; nonetheless, midrashim often question the virtuousness of non-Israelites who appear as fully righteous in the unexpounded scriptural narrative. See Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah*, 51-53, who cites the rabbis' ambivalent attitudes toward Eliezer as an example of the phenomenon. If we examine entries about Eliezer in topically arranged compendia of rabbinic dicta—e.g., Yisra'el Yitshak Hasidah, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities* (Brooklyn: Shaar, 1994) or the index volume of Ginzberg, *Legends*, 7:132—we find that Eliezer is praised as a worthy protégé of Abraham with respect to both his learning and his moral discipline (*b. Yoma* 28b; *Gen. Rab.* 59:8; cf. Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah*, 125) and as a fierce soldier in Abraham's army (*b. Ned.* 32a), etc. The only item that might come close to being a blemish on his character is the charge that he was scheming to marry his own daughter off to Isaac (*Gen. Rab.* 59:9, 60:2), but this was not necessarily a blameworthy aspiration, and the sources acknowledge that Eliezer himself realized that as an heir to Canaan's curse, it was not an option to be seriously pursued.
- 39 By making cleverness the criterion for victory in the confrontation, the Jews are able to prevail against groups who defeated them on the battlefield; see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Contraversions; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 39-65; Galit Hasan-Rokem, "An Almost Invisible Presence: Multilingual Puns in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 222-37; Louis Jacobs, "Rabbi Joshua B. Hananiah and the Elders of the House of Athens," in *Structure and Form in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 76-80. See also *b. Bek. 8b*.
- 40 Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah*, 45-46, classifies this passage as satire. The stories conform well to Frye's taxonomy of irony and satire as set out in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Collected Works of Northrop Frye 22; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 223-29. See in particular his observation (228): "The figure of the low-norm *iron* is irony's substitute for the hero, and when he is removed from satire we can see more clearly that one of the central themes of the *mythos* is the disappearance of the heroic."

maintained a system of laws that was not only unjust but utterly absurd, particularly when they punished the victims of crimes or exacted payment from those who did not make use of a service—all of this in ways that must surely have backfired often on the town's citizens, and which provided the necessary leverage for a clever trickster like Eliezer to turn the system against its judges and legislators.⁴¹ Indeed, the scenes of litigants assaulting each other and the judge in a courtroom bear the hallmarks of anarchic slapstick worthy of the Marx Brothers. At the very least, the talmudic Sodom tales bear a general similarity to well-known types of Roman satire, especially those associated with Menippus of Gadera, as cultivated by authors such as Marcus Varro and Petronius.⁴²

Although the talmudic passage's portrayals of torture, mutilation, and grisly deaths⁴³ do not readily fit most people's notions of humorous, it is probable that the authors expected their audiences to focus less on the violence itself

41 The rabbis were aware that their own legal system could be made vulnerable to similar subversions by enforcing the letter of the law. Some of the tales in the current pericope are comparable to the Talmud's story of "wicked Ḥanan" who, rather than making change to pay the half-denar penalty for a minor assault, chose to repeat the assault and pay a full denar (*b. B. Qam.* 37a, *b. Bek.* 50b).

42 See John Wight Duff, *Roman Satire: Its Outlook on Social Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936), 84-105; Michael Coffey, *Roman Satire* (2nd ed.; Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 149-206; Joel C. Relihan, "On the Origin of 'Menippean Satire' as the Name of a Literary Genre," *Classical Philology* 79 (1984): 226-29; Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 212-22 (and elsewhere), has argued strongly that the authors of the Babylonian Talmud—in his view, even more so than their colleagues in Roman Palestine—were intimately aware of the conventions of Menippean satire and were applying it to features of rabbinic academic culture.

43 The last unit of the collection tells of a maiden who was punished by the Sodomites for her charity by having her body smeared with honey and placed atop the city wall to be fatally attacked by bees. This may well be an alternate version of the story related in *Gen. Rab.* 49:6 about a maiden who was arrested and executed by burning for secretly providing food for a starving friend. In *Gen. Rab.* the tale is linked to the wording of *Gen.* 18:21 in which the Hebrew for "according to the cry of it" is read as "according to the cry of her." *Pirke. R. El.* 25 identifies the compassionate maiden as Lot's daughter "Pelotit" (see sources cited in Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, 182 n. 1). On the notion that charity is an evil because it encourages indolence see Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah*, 45 n. 17; citing Plutarch's, *Sayings of the Spartans*, *Moralia* 235e56.

than on the hero's evasion of it, a phenomenon that can be situated within the bounds of the comic (or at least ironic).⁴⁴

At any rate, Eliezer's appealing to his vow⁴⁵ to get out of sleeping on the bed is not a very impressive evasion.⁴⁶ Compared to the other ploys that are

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- 44 Post, "Aristotle and Menander," 22 states: "There is in comedy none of what Aristotle defines as *pathos*—death or physical distress—nor is anything of the sort threatened except where slaves are concerned, and they do not count, for in their case such treatment was no departure from the normal actuality. Hence the term *pathos* must be taken in a new sense if we are to apply it to comedy." Note, however, the intriguing discussion in Alyssa M. Gray, "The Power Conferred by Distance from Power: Redaction and Meaning in B. A.Z. 10a-11a," in Rubenstein, ed., *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (stammaim) to the Aggada*, 23-70, esp. 46-48, who contrasts the cheapness of slaves' lives in the Roman empire with the considerable legal rights that they possessed in Sasanian Iranian law as preserved in the *Matakdan I Hazar Datastan*. In any case, a tendency to turn a blind eye to overt violence is also analogous to the situation in Plautus's comedies where implicit allusions to torture and other cruel punishments in store for mischievous slaves abound, as they did in the real lives of many slaves, and yet little or no real violence is exhibited on the stage. A valuable discussion on this point may be found in Erich Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 137-68. Segal concludes that this was an essential ingredient in the audience's feeling of satisfaction: "Part of the special pleasure which the Roman spectator derived from watching a rascally Pseudolus go unpunished was due, to a great extent, to his awareness of what would happen under normal circumstances" (144). Holt Parker, "Crucially Funny or Tranio on the Couch: The Servus Callidus and Jokes about Torture," *TAPA* 19 (1989): 233-46, on the other hand, proposes a Freudian explanation according to which this is an example of the use of humor as a coping mechanism for deeply rooted fears. See also McCarthy, *Slaves Masters*, 26-27. This might be an appropriate occasion to invoke the quote ascribed to Mel Brooks: "Tragedy is when *I* cut my finger. Comedy is when *you* walk into an open sewer and die"; cited by Sanford Pinsker, "The Instruments of American-Jewish Humor: Henny Youngman on Violin, Mel Brooks on Drums, Woody Allen on Clarinet," *The Massachusetts Review* 22 (1981): 739-50, at 743.
- 45 On the culture of religious oaths and vows shared by Hellenistic and Jewish popular cultures see Lieberman, *Hellenism*, 115-41. See also Moshe Benovitz, *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* (BJS 315; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Benovitz, "The Prohibitive Vow in Second Temple and Tannaitic Literature: Its Origin and Meaning," *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 203-28 [Hebrew]; Sanders, *Judaism*, 53-54.
- 46 The ploy that is ascribed here to Eliezer has some similarity to the ruling in *m. Ned.* 3:4 and *t. Ned.* 2:2 that it is permissible to falsely claim that property is consecrated by a vow [*neder*] in order to evade tax collectors or extortionists. As in our story, the halakhic texts seem to assume that even (probably pagan) tax collectors, though classified as paradigmatically "wicked" by rabbinic standards, would have taken sacred vows very seriously; see Chanoch Albeck, ed., *Shishah Sidre Mishnah* (6 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954-1959), 3:361; Lieberman, *The Tosefta*, 3:104; Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Feshutah*,

employed in the pericope, this one is feeble and does not demonstrate much cleverness or wit,⁴⁷ nor does Eliezer or anyone else exact any satisfying retribution from the Sodomites who were guilty of abusing strangers by means of the bed.⁴⁸ As noted above, according to most textual witnesses, Eliezer claimed to have made his vow not to sleep in a bed after Sarah died. However, according to the chronology of Gen 18-19, Sarah was very much alive when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed and she does not die for another thirty-five years.⁴⁹ From a philological perspective, the reading "Sarah" recommends itself as a "lectio difficilior." The best justification I can come up with is that Eliezer was lying to his hosts, and the narrator chose Sarah's name in order to indicate how blatant his lie was.

Strange Bedfellows

The bed being employed as an instrument of torture might well be the most striking feature in the plot of the pericope. As readers have long recognized, this is a venerable theme from Greek mythology that circulated in a number of versions as recorded by various authors who ascribed the infamous bed to

7:418-19; Herr, "Roman Rule" 59-63. The Talmud (*b. Ned.* 28a) applies that law to rapacious tax farmers, an interpretation that fits the realities of Roman imperial rule under which the mishnaic ruling was probably formulated. On the historical background to this Mishnah, see Gedalia Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age, 70-640 C.E.* (trans. Gershon Levi; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 15, 534; cf. Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Blackwell's Classical Studies; Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 98-99.

- 47 By expressing the vow in terms of someone other than Eliezer's biological mother, the Talmud might be influenced by the principle in rabbinic law which states that slaves are not subject to legal paternity or maternity (see, e.g., *b. Yebam.* 62a, *b. Qidd.* 69a, *b. B. Qam.* 15a and 88a); hence Eliezer (especially if we accept that he was a devoted retainer of Abraham's household) should be mourning his mistress rather than his mother. A disingenuously sentimental appeal either to one's revered mother or to his saintly mistress, if properly overacted by a comic character, can be an effective source of low humor. This might be how we are expected to read Eliezer's words here.
- 48 On these points see further discussion below.
- 49 According to Gen 23:1-2 she was 127 years of age, whereas she was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac, one year after the announcement by the three angelic visitors (18:10). The destruction of Sodom took place very shortly after the announcement.

several individuals—or, as is usually supposed, to one person who was known by several names.⁵⁰

The geographer Pausanias (1.38:5)⁵¹ tells us nothing more than that he was a brigand named Polypemon with the surname Procrustes, killed by Theseus near Cesiphus. According to Plutarch, the bandit slain by Theseus bore the name Damastes as well as the surname Procrustes:

At Erineus, he killed Damastes, surnamed Procrustes, by compelling him to make his own body fit his bed, as he had been wont to do with those of strangers. [Δαμάστην ἐν Ἐρινεῶ τὸν Προκρούστην, ἀναγκάσας αὐτὸν ἀπισοῦν τοῖς κλιτηῆρσιν ὥσπερ τοὺς ξένους ἐκεῖνος] And he did this in imitation of Heracles. For that hero punished those who offered him violence in the manner in which they had plotted to serve him.⁵²

This story is narrated so tersely that it is doubtful that it would have meant anything to a reader who did not have a prior acquaintance with the legend. There is no explicit mention of amputations or stretching of limbs, and nothing that would suggest that the villain had subjected his victims (or that Theseus had subjected Damastes in turn) to anything more sinister than the discomfort of a poorly fitted sleeping arrangement. Even after we know the full details of Damastes's mode of operation, Plutarch does not inform us whether Theseus's measure-for-measure retribution involved stretching or truncation.

A fuller account of Procrustes's crimes is provided by Diodorus of Sicily⁵³ who writes with reference to Theseus:

⁵⁰ Epstein-Halevi, *Olamah shel ha-agadah*, 24 and n. 6; Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-agadah*, 46. cites parallels from Diodorus 4.59:5, Plutarch, *Theseus* 11.1, and Apollodorus, *Epitome* 1.4. See Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (2 vols.; London: Penguin Books, 1984), 1:327-32. Several scholars, including Graves (1:332 n. 6), identify Procrustes with Sinis-Pityocampes. Graves himself, true to his usual anthropological (Frazerian) approach, suggests that "Procrustes seems to be a fictional character, invented to account for a similar icon: the hair of the old king . . . is tied to the bedpost by his treacherous bride, while his rival advances, axe in hand, to destroy him." The abolition of this primordial cult is being ascribed to Theseus.

⁵¹ Pausanias, *The Description of Greece Translated from the Greek* (trans. Thomas Taylor; Priestley and Weale, 1824), 104-5.

⁵² *Lives*, 1.22-23 (Perrin, LCL)

⁵³ Scholarship has largely dismissed Diodorus as an uncreative and uncritical copier of earlier sources. For a dissenting assessment that claims to discern the author's independent personal perspective on history and politics, see Kenneth Sacks, *Diodorus Siculus and the First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

After this he put to death Procrustes, as he was called, who dwelt in what was known as Corydallus in Attica; this man compelled the travelers who passed by to lie down upon a bed, and if any were too long for the bed he cut of the parts of their body which protruded, while in the case of such as were too short for it he stretched (προκρούειν)⁵⁴ their legs, this being the reason why he was given the name Procrustes.⁵⁵

Diodorus refers to the villain only by his “surname” Procrustes, and he provides an etymology that connects it to the word for stretching. It is evident from the wording that Procrustes had only one bed that could be either longer or shorter than the traveler—though it seems to be implied as well that cases did occur of bodies that would fit the bed’s dimension without need for manipulation.⁵⁶

The main variant to this story is the one related in Pseudo-Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca* in his account of the labors of Theseus:

- 54 LSJ, 1487. Several writers accept the etymological explanations for Procrustes’s assorted names. See, e.g., Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (9th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 385 n. 8: “The name means stretcher; he is also called Damastes (Subduer), Procoptes (Slicer), and Polypemon (Troubler).” See also Apollodorus and C. Julius Hyginus, *Apollodorus’ Library and Hyginus’ Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology* (trans. R. Scott Smith and Stephen Trzaskoma; Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 131 n. 4. The proclivity toward explaining proper names as epithets that describe the person’s actions or personal traits is very similar to the widespread midrashic trope for dealing with (real or invented) multiple names in the Bible according to the formula “X was his/her name, and why was he/she called Y? Because . . .” See Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah*, 110-12.
- 55 *Library of History* 4.59:5 (Oldfather, LCL).
- 56 If Procrustes’s sadism was inclined equally toward stretching and amputation, then we must assume that the bed was of average length—and this would be true of the Talmud’s Sodomites as well. However, we should also expect that he allowed little or no tolerance for even the slightest deviation from the average. The red-figure kylix by the Codrus Painter that illustrates the whole Theseus cycle (see Anne G. Ward et al., *The Quest for Theseus* [London: Pall Mall, 1970], 104 illus. 111) shows Procrustes lying on an undersized bed with Theseus about to strike him with an axe. Similarly, in the Attic red vase by Euphronios housed in the Louvre Museum (G 104), Theseus (who had been disguised as a wayfarer) is assaulting Procrustes with an axe while grasping his hair with his left hand, as the villain is shown bleeding from the chest; see Martin Robertson, *The Art of Vase-Painting in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48, 136 and Richard Claverhouse Jebb, ed., *Bacchylides: the Poems and Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 233. Frazer in his Loeb edition of Apollodorus’s *Library* (pp. 130-31 n. 4) seems to be ignoring the pictorial testimony when he assumes that the most likely instrument was a handsaw.

Sixth, he [Theseus] slew Damastes, whom some call Polypemon.⁵⁷ He had his dwelling beside the road, and made up two beds, one small and the other big; and offering hospitality to the passers-by, he laid the short men on the big bed and hammered them, to make them fit the bed; but the tall men he laid on the little bed and sawed off the portions of the body that projected beyond it.⁵⁸

As we see, this version posits two separate beds owned by a malefactor called Damastes or Polypemon. Whereas Diodorus had him forcing the travelers to lie on the bed,⁵⁹ in Pseudo-Apollodorus he lures them in with an offer of hospitality. It is to be understood that by having two beds of differing lengths he would invariably be able to select that one that did not fit, so that there would never be cases where the guests would be exempt from the need for anatomical adjustment. The manner of *προκρούειν* described here is not what we would probably envisage (for example, on a rack⁶⁰ or wheel), but rather one taken from the world of the blacksmith—hammering the body as if it were a block of metal whose area is increased as it is pummeled.⁶¹

The oft maligned Latin mythological compendium *Fabulae* by Gaius Julius Hyginus offers us yet another version of the Procrustes legend, this one also embedded in the context of a chapter about the 38 Labors of Theseus.⁶² Hyginus tells of two different beds that were offered to the guests (rather than being forced on them, presumably). He informs us that Procrustes was the son of Neptune, and he describes the treatment of the short guest in somewhat greater detail, particularly by adding that Procrustes “placed him on some anvils,⁶³ and pounded him out until he equaled the length of the bed.”

57 See also Carl Robert, “Theseus und Meleagros bei Bakchylides,” *Hermes* 33 (1898): 130-59, esp. 148-49; Jebb, *Bacchylides*, 244-45. Ovid, *Ib.* 407, seems to be identifying Procrustes as the son of Polypemon.

58 *Bibliotheca*, Epit.1.4 (Frazer, LCL).

59 It is not stated explicitly whether or not he abducted them by force to his lodgings.

60 A device of this sort is attested in the letters of St. Jerome, *Epist.* 1.3, 5.

61 The hammer also figures in Bacchylides’s words about how Theseus stopped “the ruthless bandit Sciron . . . and made Procoptes, overmatched, drop Polypemon’s heavy hammer” (Jebb, *Bacchylides*, 19 and 499-500) See also Frazer’s comment (p. 131 n. 4) on this passage in the Loeb edition.

62 Following R. Scott Smith and Stephen M. Trzaskoma, trans., *Apollodorus’ Library and Hyginus’ Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 112-13.

63 Or suspended anvils from their limbs: *incudibus suppositis extendebat eum, usque dum lecti longitudinem aequaret.*

The broader context of the talmudic story is a passage whose main topic is the wickedness of Sodom;⁶⁴ however, this sub-set of episodes might be classified as one that revolves around the adventures of Eliezer. Virtually all the Greco-Roman reports about Procrustes and his bed(s) appear in passages chronicling the labors of Theseus, so that whatever moral lessons are to be derived from the story tend to be subordinated to the hero's praises, or even to matters of geographical interest. When we take into account the narrative variables in the Greek and Latin texts, it turns out that the version that bears the strongest resemblance to the Talmud's account is that of Diodorus of Sicily. His villain (whose names are of no real importance for the purposes of this study since they do not play any part in the rabbinic story) fitted his visitors to a single bed by means of stretching or amputation of limbs—with no recourse to hammers or anvils.

Though almost all traditions of the Talmud text seem to be speaking of a single bed,⁶⁵ we cannot ignore the testimony of the important fourteenth-century Yemenite anthology *Midrash ha-gadol* by Rabbi David ben Amram al-Adani⁶⁶ which cites the passage in a significantly different version that deserves to be brought here in full:⁶⁷

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- 64 Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah*, 43-44, argues that midrashic texts from the land of Israel take a more sympathetic view toward the Sodomites and a more critical attitude toward the divine judgment that sentenced them to destruction. He states that this was a result of the rabbis' seeing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah through the lens of the destruction of Jerusalem, a circumstance that in their opinion could have been avoided had God dealt more mercifully with the sinners.
- 65 Several textual witnesses have the form פורייתא (or: כורסייתא) which Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 891-92, lists as a plural. However, all those witnesses later refer to the bed by means of a singular pronoun (עליה or עליה).
- 66 See Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 386-88; Saul Lieberman, *Yemenite Midrashim: A Lecture on the Yemenite Midrashim, Their Character and Value* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1970), 1-7 [Hebrew]; Joseph Tobi, "Ha-midrash ha-gadol: mekorotay u-mivnehu" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993) [Hebrew]; Sabato, *Yemenite Manuscript*, 31-39.
- 67 Margulies, *Midrash Ha-Gadol 'al Hamishah Humshe Torah: Sefer Bereshit*, 311, ll. 11-15. Notwithstanding some relatively significant differences in the wording, the similarities are substantial enough to leave little room for doubt that the *Midrash Ha-Gadol* here is bringing a version of the Babylonian Talmud passage (rather than that of some medieval pseudo- or rewritten Midrash). The formulation is, after all, in the Babylonian Aramaic dialect, and there is no other known version of the episode in ancient rabbinic literature. At any rate, the differences would appear to transcend a mere textual variant and likely indicate that the *Midrash Ha-Gadol's* compiler was making use of a Talmud manuscript that preserves an alternate tradition of the text. This distinction between textual variants

גוברא דהוה נקיט אושפיזא התם אית להו תרי פורי, חד זיט וחד אריך. דזיט מגנו ליה באריכא ומתחי ליה עד דהוה מאית. דאריך מגנו ליה בזוטא וגזי מניה. אליעזר עבד אברהם הוה מסיק ביה בהווא גוברא זוזי. אתא נקוט אישפיזא התם. אמרי ליה גני אפוריא.
אמר להו נדרא נדרי מיומא דשכבא שרה לא גנינא אפוריא.

When a man would take up residence⁶⁸ there, they had two beds, one short and one long. For one who was short, they would lay him on the long one and stretch him until he would die. For one who was tall, they would lay him on the short one and cut off [the limbs] from him.

Eliezer the servant of Abraham had a monetary claim against a certain man. He came and took up residence there.

They said to him: Lie down on the bed.

He said to them: I have vowed a vow since the day that Sarah died that I will not lie down on a bed.

Diodorus's Procrustes forced his visitors to lie on the bed; in the Talmud, the Aramaic clause *עלה אורחין* הוּוּ מגני עלה employs the *ap'el* causative form, which translates as "made the guests lie down" (as per Diodorus), but it can legitimately be rendered as the less specific "had them lie down" to allow for a reading according to which the oblivious victims were deceitfully invited to partake voluntarily of the brigand's offer of hospitality (as related by Pseudo-Apollodorus). Similarly, when the Sodomites say to Eliezer that he should lie in

and alternate traditions in the Babylonian Talmud has been pointed out—and some key witnesses (including Yemenite manuscripts) identified—by several scholars. See E. S. Rosenthal, "‘Lishna Aharina’: Questions in the Transmission of the Text," in *Proceedings of the Second World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1957), 14-15 [Hebrew], 18-19 [English]; Aaron Amit, "The Place of the Yemenite Manuscripts in the Transmission-History of b.Pesahim," *HUCA* 73 (2002): 31-77 [Hebrew]; Amit, "Two Textual Branches of TB Berakhot Chapter 4 and Their Contribution to the Understanding of the History of the Bavli's Redaction," in *Torah Lishma: Essays in Jewish Studies in Honor of Professor Shamma Friedman* (ed. David Golinkin and Moshe Benovitz; Jerusalem and New York: Bar-Ilan University Press and JTSA Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2008), 223-67; Amit, "The Rendering of TB Tractate Temura," *Tarbiz* 48 (1989): 317-56 [Hebrew]; Moshe Benovitz, "The Two Textual Traditions of Chapter Three of Tractate Shevuot in the Babylonian Talmud," *Sidra* 10 (1994): 5-38 [Hebrew].

68 Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 98, 774.

the bed, the sentence can be understood either as an invitation or as a command.⁶⁹

The trajectory between the Greek myths and the Talmud's story is a matter for speculation. It is all but impossible that the Jewish sages fashioned their midrashic tale about the nefarious bed independently of the Greek prototype, but we do not know how many degrees of separation to posit between Procrustes and midrashic Sodom. If the author of the talmudic story did know about Procrustes's bed in one of its Greek versions (and not just as a disconnected narrative fragment),⁷⁰ then we should also expect him to have also known that Theseus slew the scoundrel; according to Plutarch and the evidence from ceramic illustrations, he did so by forcing him into his own bed. Indeed, according to T. Northrop Frye, the stereotypical plot structure of Greek New Comedy (as known through Plautus and Terence) calls for the overcoming of the authoritarian figures that are an obstruction to the heroes' achieving happiness.

In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings the hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment of resolution, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery, *anagnorisis*⁷¹ or *cognitio*.⁷²

69 The Talmud makes no suggestion that the bed's function was kept secret. Since Eliezer is evidently aware of what lies in store for him and would not have lain purposely on the bed, it ostensibly makes better sense to understand the sentence as a command than an invitation; but it is easy to imagine how the scene could be played comedically such that the parties are putting on an ironic show of politeness ("an offer he can't refuse"), particularly if (for reasons not explained in the text) the Sodomites did not know that Eliezer was on to their trick. Note that there is nothing in the talmudic material to suggest that the Sodomites actively kidnapped wayfarers on the road. The version cited above from *Midrash ha-gadol* has Eliezer choosing of his own volition to spend the night in Sodom, while the wording does not make it any clearer than the other versions whether he was being ordered or asked to lie on the bed.

70 This latter option is not by any means to be dismissed.

71 John MacFarlane, "Aristotle's Definition of Anagnorisis," *AJP* 121 (2000): 367-83; Gerald Frank Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 341-55.

72 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 163.

This invites the question of why Eliezer was not granted a similar opportunity to score a victory over the owners of the Sodomite bed instead of just wriggling out of the situation on a labored pretext. I do not have a clear or simple answer to this question. It might conceivably be argued that in the talmudic tale, the bed did not belong to anybody in particular but was administered by the collectivity of Sodom's citizens, and hence it had no identifiable owner to whom retaliation could be directed. But this hardly seems like a serious obstacle for an accomplished storyteller. Just as the city's inequitable judicial system was personified as four⁷³ named judges, a creative narrator could easily have introduced a character (perhaps one of those judges) to bear the responsibility for the bed and suffer the retribution. More to the point, the author might have felt that the crimes committed with the bed were too horrific to be punished through the agency of a trivial figure like Eliezer, and that the function of the talmudic pericope (at least, its more serious sections) is in large measure to instill a vivid sense of the appalling evils that necessitated Sodom's total destruction. The authors of these midrashic expansions were of course well aware that Sodom and its environs would ultimately be punished in the massive fire-and-brimstone catastrophe that God eventually inflicted on the entire populace.⁷⁴ And yet, in other stories in the Talmud's collection about the Sodomites, the individual villains do suffer some sort of physical or psychological comeuppance in spite of the fact that they are slated to perish along with the rest of the city's inhabitants.

In the final analysis, we must resign ourselves to the fact that our comparative approach might simply have to leave some questions unanswered for the moment, and it is unreasonable to expect that all the peculiarities of the talmudic passage can be resolved by forcing them into a single, inflexible methodological framework.

Concluding Reflections

We have before us, then, a literary unit in the Babylonian Talmud whose author or homilist has judiciously drawn upon literary themes that originated in the cultures of Greece and Rome. It might be unfair to be looking for specific channels of citation or transmission for these motifs. The case may be comparable

73 Or six (see above).

74 Epstein-Halevi, *Sha'arei ha-aggadah*, 44-45, suggests that some of the rabbinic homilies that present Sodom as a prototype for Rome were influenced by the eruptions of volcanoes like Etna and Vesuvius.

to that of a preacher in our own day who inserts references to recent news items or characters from television shows into a sermon. Assumptions are being made—perhaps unconsciously—as to which references would be familiar to the target audience. Then as now, it is not always easy to gauge precisely the extent of that expected familiarity, nor even to fully appreciate how those references would be received by their diverse listeners.

As I noted at the outset, our assumptions regarding the Jews' familiarity with Hellenistic culture are very different now from the conventional wisdom of a generation ago. It was then assumed that hellenization was a phenomenon that took root in Palestine and other Roman provinces, but that apart from some possible exceptions during the Parthian era, the gentile environment of talmudic Babylonia was a bastion of its own Persian civilization. Studies by Richard Kalmin, Daniel Boyarin, Shaye J. D. Cohen, Isaiah Gafni and others have generated a new assessment of the cultural climate of Sasanian Babylonia as a society composed of diverse religious and philosophical communities. Scholars have pointed to the vitality of the Eastern Syrian church which served as a conduit for transmitting the Hellenistic heritage, and whose uncanny similarities to important aspects of rabbinic culture strongly indicate meaningful contacts. Nor should we ignore the Greek elements that would have reached the Babylonian sages in the course of the ongoing communications between the two main rabbinic communities. While surveying the research that supports this thesis, Boyarin nevertheless inserts a cautious reservation: "I certainly do not imagine Babylonian Rabbis *reading* Platonic dialogues—there just isn't evidence for that for the seventh century . . . but rather that literary modes and religious ideas reached them via the modes of diffusion of the kinds of literature that we design as folklore."⁷⁵ However, he also observes: "The argument for a Babylonian rabbinic Hellenism is especially compelling with respect to matters not known from Palestinian rabbinic traditions."⁷⁶ This characterization fits well with our composite pericope about Eliezer in Sodom, most of which is not attested outside the Babylonian Talmud (and regarding which a previous generation would have felt impelled to posit a lost Palestinian original). While Boyarin's preferred paradigms of folkloristic diffusion or ecotypification undoubtedly offer useful models for explaining the penetration of Greek elements into rabbinic circles, I am not as ready to dismiss entirely the possibility that some rabbis in Palestine and in Babylonia were reading actual Greek and

75 Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 135-36. An extensive statement of his case, with a review of previous literature, may be found on pp. 133-40.

76 *Ibid.*, 134.

Latin literary works.⁷⁷ The questions, in any case, merit serious consideration, and it is to be hoped that the picture will become progressively clearer as we accumulate more examples and subject them to detailed comparative study and to the deployment of appropriate methodological tools.⁷⁸

This example is instructive not so much for what it informs us about the rabbis' knowledge of Greek myth or Latin comedy, but principally as an object lesson in how they went about translating and transforming those foreign elements into quintessentially Jewish, rabbinic texts that promoted their own religious values and rhetorical conventions. Clearly this was no mere passive act of borrowing themes from foreign literary works, but rather a sophisticated and creative reshaping of the sources to serve novel objectives. To the extent that we can put ourselves into the mind of the unknown talmudic authors and try to reconstruct the process of adaptation, we are struck by how skilled they were at accomplishing their task. They have taken traits associated with a stock character from Latin comedy, the "clever slave," whose mischievously subversive personality initially appears incompatible with the pious obedience favored by Jewish moral preaching, and used those very traits to inject life into a relatively bland and marginal figure from Genesis.⁷⁹ This task was accomplished with the help of the literary device of situating the servant in the morally topsy-turvy world of Sodom, a society to which mischievous subversion is the appropriate religious response. We can imagine that a similar manner of thinking led the author to import the Procrustean bed to biblical Sodom, a city that was already stigmatized in the scriptural narrative for its abuse of strangers. The "bed of Procrustes" has thereby become the "bed of Sodom" to such a degree that Jewish audiences could understand the episode

77 We may further speculate that within the context of the eclectic culture that finds expression in the rabbinic documents of the late classical era, some familiarity with "great books of world literature" might even have been regarded as a desirable distinguishing mark of a cultured Jew, and one that could be expected to exist (in varying degrees) among the audiences to which the rabbis were directing their narrations.

78 For another example of an exclusively Babylonian reworking of a Greek text/tradition see Eliezer Segal, *The Most Precious Possession: The Ring of Polykrates in Ancient Religious Narratives* (American University Studies Series 7; Theology and Religion 343; New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 60-73, 111-38.

79 It is a debatable point to what extent Abraham's servant, in his mission to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac in Gen 24, was merely following his master's instructions completely, or should be credited with creative improvisation in carrying out the task; see Mandel, "The Servant, the Man and the Master," 619; Perry, "Counter-Stories in the Bible," 277, 290-96, 300-304; and Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 113, 134.

and be edified by it even if they had no knowledge whatsoever of the motif's foreign origin—though if they were familiar with the Greek or Roman traditions, they would presumably appreciate the talmudic story about Eliezer in decidedly different ways.

These observations dovetail with insights that have been pointed out in religious studies scholarship regarding the role of the *commentary* as a vehicle for maintaining the relevance and validity of sacred scriptures or traditions. Conventional research into commentaries was concerned primarily with the exegetical and hermeneutical activities of interpreters as they were applied to canonical texts of their religions, as a means of adapting those texts to changing realities, beliefs or values. Viewed this way, a commentary strives to imbue the present state of the evolving religion with a sense of authenticity that draws nourishment from the connection to its formative documents (or other foundational entities).⁸⁰ This process exemplifies a variation or reversal of the conventional “commentary” function: rather than reinterpreting the “internal” Jewish tradition, what we saw here was a hermeneutic that was designed (whether intentionally or unconsciously) to bring the foreign culture into conformity with Jewish religious values.⁸¹ This reversal of direction bears a resemblance to what Yaron Eliav has characterized as a model of “filtered absorption” or “controlled incorporation”—albeit my study is more narrowly focused on literary and dramatic genres, while positing a more aggressive engagement with the Roman cultural phenomena on the part of the rabbinic adaptors.⁸² A better understanding of this dynamic can help shed light on modes of identity formation in a heterogeneous society.

80 Harold G. Coward, ed., *Experiencing Scripture in World Religions* (Faith Meets Faith Series; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000); Aaron Hughes, “Presenting the Past: The Genre of Commentary in Theoretical Perspective,” *MTR* 15 (2003): 148-68.

81 Some recent scholarly studies have dealt with individual instances of this phenomenon; e.g., Lindbeck's thesis, *Elijah and the Rabbis*, 75-93, that the depictions of Elijah in the Babylonian Talmud drew on hellenistic portrayals of Hermes; or examinations of Jewish versions of Aesop's fables by Shamma Friedman, “The Talmudic Proverb in Its Cultural Setting,” *JSIJ* 2 (2003): 25-82, and Lorena Miralles Maciá, “The Fable of ‘the Middle-Aged Man with Two Wives’: From the Aesopian Motif to the Babylonian Talmud Version in B. B. Qam 60b,” *JSJ* 39 (2008): 267-81.

82 Yaron Z. Eliav, “The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution : Another Look at the Encounter between Judaism and the Greco-Roman Culture,” *JSJ* 31 (2000): 416-54 at 426.; cited by Michael L. Satlow, “Beyond Influence: Toward a New Historiographic Paradigm,” in *Jewish Literature and Cultures: Context and Intertext* (ed. Anita Norich and Yaron Z. Eliav; BJS 349; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 37-54 at 38 n. 8.