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Azzan Yadin

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Rabban Gamliel, Aphrodite's Bath, and the Question of Pagan Monotheism

AZZAN YADIN

See how Porphyry denigrates Christ in preferring the Jews to the Christians, when he proclaims that the Jews are upholders of God.

St. Augustine, *City of God* 19.23

TANNAITIC LITERATURE RECORDS two exchanges between Rabban Gamliel and a philosopher: *m'Avodab Zarab* 3.4 and Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, *Ba-ḥodesh* 6.¹ Scholarship has tended to construe these as encounters between “the sages,” on one side of the debate, and “philosophy” on the other, or, more broadly, between “Judaism” and “paganism.” The thesis of this article is that neither exchange supports this interpretation. A reading that attends to the specifically philosophical nature of the exchange—as the texts suggest in characterizing Rabban Gamliel's

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1. Horovitz-Rabin edition, 226. Philosophers also appear in tShev 3.6 (Zuckerman edition, 449–50); tAZ 6.7 (Zuckerman edition, 469, and see the discussion below); SifreDt §307 (Finkelstein edition, 346). Encounters with Gentile dignitaries not identified as philosophers include a conversation between Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, *Shirata* 2 (Horovitz-Rabin edition, 125), another between Rabban Gamliel and Antigonus the *begmon* in SifreDt §351 (Finkelstein, 408), and a third exchange in *Midrash Tannaim* to Dt 15.10 (Hoffmann edition, 84), a collection gleaned from medieval sources. On this topic, see Menahem Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1999), 150–64, and the scholarly literature cited there, including studies on broader, nonphilosophical encounters between rabbis and pagan figures.

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interlocutor as a philosopher—leads to a very different picture, one in which the opposition is not between the sage and the philosopher but between them, on the one hand, and popular religious practices, on the other. Furthermore, the proposed reading resolves a series of persistent difficulties that have plagued previous interpretations of these passages, especially of the Mishnah. The central crux of the Mekhilta passage—Rabban Gamliel’s enigmatic response to the philosopher—has been resolved by Saul Lieberman, and in this respect provides a smoother point of entry into our topic.

MEKHILTA DE-RABBI ISHMAEL

The Mekhilta teaches:²

A philosopher asked Rabban Gamliel: “It is written in your Torah [*You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image . . .] for the Lord your God is a jealous God* (Ex 20.5), but does an idol³ have the power to provoke jealousy? A brave man is jealous of a brave man, a wise man is jealous of a wise man, a rich man is jealous of a rich man, but does an idol have the power to provoke jealousy?” He said to him: “If a man calls his dog by his father’s name, and then takes an oath on the life of the dog, is the father’s zeal [or: anger] aimed at the son or the dog?”

At this point the conversation between Rabban Gamliel and the philosopher appears to continue, but I will examine only what has been quoted above for a number of reasons. First, there is a clear thematic break after Rabban Gamliel’s first retort. The philosopher’s challenge focuses on the claim that God is jealous of an idol and, implicitly, the status of idols (see discussion below), while what follows raises a different line of inquiry regarding God’s inability to annul idolatry. Second, in the first challenge and response the characterization of the pagan challenger as a philosopher is critical to the logic of the passage—as I will argue below—but this is not true of what follows. Finally, the second half of the debate may well have been imported from elsewhere. Parts of the argument appear

2. The citation is based on MS Oxford 151. On the superiority of this manuscript, see M. Kahana, *Manuscripts of the Halakic Midrashim: An Annotated Catalogue* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1995), 37–39. My thanks to the JTS library for making their microfiche copy of MS Oxford 151 available to me.

3. The root meaning of *‘avodah zarah* is the worshipped statue rather than any cultic practice, as has been shown by Noam Zohar, “Idolatry, Idols, and Their Annulment” (Hebrew), *Sidra* 17 (2001–2002): 64–77.

in mAZ 4.7 and tAZ 6.7, framed as a discussion with or a challenge issued to the elders of Rome, respectively.

Before discussing this exchange in detail, a word on chronology. It is generally assumed that “Rabban Gamliel” refers to Rabban Gamliel II whose *floruit* was ca. 80–117 C.E. But this identification is not, in and of itself, meaningful. The identification of every occurrence of “Rabban Gamliel” with Rabban Gamliel II is a late convention that has been imposed upon a number of sages who carry that name. Though the identification may hold in many instances, there is no justification for making it into an inviolable rule. Moreover, even if the Mekhilta “intends” to represent Rabban Gamliel II—and this cannot be ascertained—the actual historical setting reflected in the exchange remains an open question. The Mekhilta’s textual history has not been satisfactorily established and consists, in any case, of a series of redactions. It is clear, nonetheless, that the collection does not receive its present state until long after the tannaitic period.⁴ Rabbinic collections can and do contain earlier traditions, but the historicity of an aggadic exchange between a second-century sage (*if* it is Rabban Gamliel II) and a philosopher cannot be assumed. It has been argued that this type of cultural exchange better fits the third century, when the Jewish leadership enjoyed close political and cultural ties with the Severan court.⁵ But even if this argument is not decisive, it is certainly plausible to read the exchange either as depicting Rabban Gamliel III (the son of Rabbi, whose *floruit* was ca. 210–230 or 235 C.E.),⁶ or as an anachronistic description of Rabban Gamliel II that reflects the cultural reality of the third century—in short, as a third-century (or later) text.

The Mekhilta’s exchange consists of two sections, the philosopher’s challenge and Rabban Gamliel’s response. Much scholarship has been devoted to the latter, but the philosophical challenge—“does an idol have the power to provoke jealousy?”—has received only scant attention. One interpretation has recently been suggested by Marc Hirshman, who argues that⁷

4. For a summary of the scholarly views on this question, see H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. M. Bockmuehl (Minneapolis, Minn., 1996), 253–55.

5. Avraham Wasserstein, “Rabban Gamliel and Proclus of Naukratis,” *Zion* 45 (1980): 257–67, and see the discussion below.

6. For a survey of the chronology and the relevant literature, see Martin Jacobs, *Die Institution des jüdischen Patriarchen* (Tübingen, 1995), 205–11.

7. Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World*, 162–63.

the philosopher raises difficulties regarding the traits attributed to God. In his treatise “Against the Galileans” . . . Emperor Julian, the pagan philosopher, scoffs at the notion that jealousy has been attributed to God, “for jealousy and resentment are not to be found among the finest of men, how much the more are they distant from angels and gods” . . . But here the question is more sophisticated: why would God be jealous of an idol that is mere emptiness.

On Hirshman’s reading, the core issue for the philosopher is the (unacceptable) attribution of jealousy to God—Ex 20.5 being an egregious example because the jealousy is provoked by an idol. Hirshman’s interpretation has a distinct advantage, inasmuch as it grounds the challenge in the philosophical discourse of the day, thus taking seriously the Mekhilta’s characterization of the pagan as a philosopher. Nonetheless, the interpretation is not borne out by the language of the philosopher’s challenge. The philosopher does not ridicule the notion that God can be jealous *as such*, but rather the idea that God could be jealous of an idol. The philosopher issues two sentences, both of which are explicit on this point. The first quotes Ex 20.5 and asks, “but does an idol have the power to provoke jealousy?”; the second cites examples of legitimate jealousy and repeats the questions: “but does an idol have the power to provoke jealousy?” The Mekhilta, then, is emphatic: at issue is the power of an idol to provoke God’s jealousy and, by extension, the status and legitimacy of the idol as object of religious worship. The social analogies introduced in the second sentence buttress this point: a rich, brave, or wise man may legitimately be jealous of an equal, but not of an inferior. Again, it is the inferiority of the idol—its religious (ontological?) emptiness—that motivates the philosopher’s challenge.

Since Hirshman notes this aspect of the challenge (“here the question is more sophisticated . . .”), the above comments may appear as nothing more than a shift in emphasis. But more is at stake. Recognizing the force of the philosopher’s challenge shifts the cultural dynamic of the passage in a significant way. For the philosopher does not attack Rabban Gamliel on “pagan” terms, at least not on the terms of stereotypical polytheistic, idol-worshipping paganism. His critique of the Bible is grounded in the biblical view that idols are in a deep sense unworthy of God’s jealousy. Phrased more sharply, the philosopher attacks the Torah *inasmuch* as it is (in certain passages) complicit with the pagan view that idols are meaningful objects of prayer, supplication, sacrifice, and, therefore, divine jealousy. In this sense, the philosopher’s critique of Torah is also a critique

of the legitimacy of idols as religious artifacts, and thus of a central tenet of popular pagan religious practice.

Seen in this light, the philosopher is clearly not a synecdoche for “paganism.” Though explicitly non-Jewish—the phrase “your Torah” is dispositive in this regard⁸—the philosopher is not promoting a stereotypical pagan agenda but rather maintains a critical stance toward idolatry. This makes good literary sense, since the enunciation of a “standard” pagan position need not have been attributed to a philosopher. Indeed, the philosopher’s critique of idols paves the way for a more specific, albeit tentative, identification of the relevant philosophical milieu, as there was a philosophical school for whom the issue of images in general and images of the divine in particular represented a philosophical challenge—the Neoplatonists.

The question of images has a long history in classical and Hellenistic philosophy, stretching back at least as far as Parmenides’ division of reality into the apparent and the real, and coming to the fore in Plato’s dialogues. This issue has been discussed at length and its details are not pertinent to the present discussion.⁹ For the present purposes it suffices to show that Plotinus inherited this philosophical difficulty and appears to have sharpened the terms of discussion. While Plato viewed the visible realm—the world of images—as possessing a lesser reality than the noetic, the visible was partially redeemed by its ability to direct the human soul toward ultimate, invisible reality. In the *Timaeus*, the dialogue that deals most explicitly with the creation and status of the physical world, Plato states that the world is an image (*agalma*) of the divine world (Tim. 37c). And though it is true that Plotinus does not speak with one voice on this topic, certain passages suggest a much harsher judgment of the image than Plato’s:

The partial soul is illuminated by moving towards the soul above it; for on that path it meets authentic existence. Movement towards the lower is towards non-being: And this is the step it takes when it is set on self; for by willing towards itself it produces its lower, an image of itself—a

8. Were it not for this phrase, the paganism of the philosopher would not be self-evident. Trypho, in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, is a Jew and a philosopher, so the literary representation of post-70 Jewish philosophers was certainly possible.

9. For a general survey of the problem, see Richard Patterson, *Image and Reality in Plato’s Metaphysics* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1985). See also the discussion in Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven, Conn., 1983).

non-being—and so is wandering, as it were, into the void, stripping itself of its own determined form. *And this image, this undetermined thing, is blank darkness, for it is utterly without reason, untouched by the intellectual-principle (nous), far removed from authentic being.*¹⁰

The last statement is very abstract and cannot be applied directly to an analysis of cult statues. But it does appear that statues, of both human and divine subjects, were understood as part of the problematic category of images. A fairly concrete example of Plotinus's disdain for images is found in the well-known story recounted at the opening of Porphyry's biography of Plotinus:¹¹ "Painters and sculptors were unendurable to him—so much so indeed that, when Amelius begged him to have a portrait done of himself, he said 'is it not enough to carry the image that nature has put about me?'" Porphyry explains Plotinus's refusal in the following terms: "Did Amelius think that he [= Plotinus] would agree to leave a more enduring image of the image as though it were some piece worthy of display?"¹² At issue is the philosophical relationship between the true, which is invisible, and its ontologically inferior image. Indeed, Porphyry raises this point in the opening line of the biography: "Plotinus, the philosopher who lived in our time, seemed like one who felt ashamed of being in a body."¹³ The reason for this shame is that the soul is not visible; only the body is (*Enneads* 4.3.20), and so in its very visibility the body bears testament to man's distance from ultimate reality, that is, to the neoplatonic notion of man's fallen state.

This question, ultimately ontological, carries over into the realm of cult. The association of the supersensible with true being suggests that the visible representation of the gods in the form of statues would be viewed by Plotinus and his followers as potentially "anti-religious," that is, a hindrance to spiritual fulfillment, inasmuch as they manifest materially that which should be invisible. The ontological direction is reversed: rather than raise the material to the spiritual, the invisible is dragged into the

10. Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. S. Mackenna, abridged and with an introduction and notes by J. Dillon (London, 1991), 3.9.3.

11. Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of His Works*, §1, in Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool, 2000), 1.

12. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 1. The phrase "image of an image" (*eidolon eidolou*) is taken from Plato, who in the *Republic* 597c-d argues that the physical is a mere image of the real, and so a painter creates nothing more than an image of an image.

13. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 1.

material realm and made into an image. The issue was evidently debated, as Porphyry devotes an essay to the status of idols, the *Peri Agalmata* (“On Cultic Statues”), a work preserved, if only partially, by Eusebius. Porphyry describes the statues as part of

[t]he thoughts of a wise theology, wherein men indicated God and God’s powers by images akin to sense, and sketched invisible things in visible forms, I will show to those who have learned to read from the statues as from books the things there written concerning the gods.¹⁴

Cultic statues, then, are texts to be read allegorically:

As the deity is of the nature of light, and dwells in an atmosphere of ethereal fire, and is invisible to sense . . . He through translucent matter, as crystal or Parian marble or even ivory led men on to the conception of his light, and through material gold to the discernment of the fire, and to his undefiled purity, because gold cannot be defiled. On the other hand, black marble was used by many to show his invisibility; and they moulded their gods in human form because the deity is rational.¹⁵

Porphyry’s words demonstrate the extent to which cultic statues—idols, *avodab zarab*—were debated in neoplatonic circles. For while he explicitly defends them, his allegorical defense bespeaks profound ambivalence. For Porphyry, the statue is not the substantive locus of divinity; when made in the proper form and of the right material, the idols’ function is educational, psychagogical. The allegorical interpretation of idols is, to be sure, part of a broader cultural practice that includes, most prominently, allegorical interpretations of classical Greek myths and of Homer.¹⁶ But the case of idols is significantly different. Allegorical readings of, e.g., the *Odyssey*, claim that a *prima facie* epic text contains a deeper, theological meaning. But a cult statue is theological from the get go; why posit a hidden, allegorical meaning in an artifact that is patently about the deity? Apparently, because the “plain meaning” of the statue—it is a visible representation of a deity—is unacceptable. Porphyry seeks to redeem the statue by arguing that it communicates theological truths about the divin-

14. Preserved in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.7.1 (trans. E. Hamilton Gifford [Oxford, 1903]).

15. Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.7.2–3.

16. On which see Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986).

ity. But the tension is palpable: black marble, the material of the *visible* representation of the deity, serves to communicate the *invisibility* of the god. Would this not be more effectively communicated by avoiding material representation altogether?

Indeed, as with all vehicles of allegory, the justification for the statues disappears once their true meaning is recognized, since allegory reveals a previously hidden meaning of a particular text or object. In this sense, the basic meaning of the text or object serves as a steppingstone to a deeper truth; its value is educational (or psychagogic) before the deeper truth is revealed, negligible after. When the object in question is a cult statue, the tension is heightened inasmuch as the basic (but now transcended) meaning of the object is itself religious. Even on Porphyry's "pro-idol" position, then, the critique voiced by Rabban Gamliel's interlocutor, qua critique of idols, expresses a view found in neoplatonic circles, according to which idols were, even in the eyes of their defenders, bereft of intrinsic religious value.¹⁷

Turning now to Rabban Gamliel's response—"If a man calls his dog by his father's name, and then takes an oath on the life of the dog, is the father's zeal aimed at the son or the dog?"—one finds an enigmatic statement over which many generations of traditional commentators chose to pass without comment. It was only with the modern study of rabbinic texts within their Hellenistic context that Rabban Gamliel's response was satisfactorily explained, first by Arthur Marmorstein and then, more fully, by Saul Lieberman, both of whom recognize the relevance of the Greek custom of swearing oaths "by dog" (μὰ τὸν κύνα).¹⁸ Lieberman is undoubtedly correct in his identification of the Rhadamanthus oaths as the relevant cultural context for Rabban Gamliel's response. This is, however, only the first step in explicating the text. For one, the text Lieberman cites may not be the most relevant. Lieberman refers to Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a third-century C.E. biography of the first-century C.E. pagan holy man. The passage in question (6.19) recounts a

17. Yaron Eliav has stressed to me the active, often leading role played by sophists and philosophers in the civic religions of the Roman Empire (personal communication). However it should be recalled that there is often a tension between the political doctrines put forward by ancient philosophers and the theological teachings promulgated within their community, a tension that goes back to Plato and beyond.

18. A. Marmorstein, "The Ideas of the Agadah and Contemporary History" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 5 (1934): 135–47; Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C. E.* (New York, 1942), 125–28.

dialogue between Apollonius and Thespesio, an Egyptian Gymnosophist. Apollonius begins with the following question:

“I will ask you first about the gods. What lesson have you sought to inculcate by giving to the natives hereabouts images of the gods which, with few exceptions, are absurd and ridiculous? Indeed hardly any of them have been made artistically, and such as gods should be; and the rest of your temples exhibit a worship of dumb and senseless animals instead of gods” . . . Thespesio said: “You are evidently passing judgment upon our system without having investigated it. If ever there was a wise idea, it was that of the Egyptians in representing the gods, that they should not presumptuously venture to copy them, but that they should figure them symbolically and metaphorically, so that they may seem more august.” Smiling at this Apollonius said: “My dear sirs, you have gained a great deal from the wisdom of the Egyptians and of the Ethiopians if a dog or an ibis or a he-goat seems to you more august and commensurate with the divine majesty than statues of human shape would be” . . . Thespesio answered: “Your Athenian Socrates must have been as senile and foolish as we are, for he treated a dog and a goose and a plane-tree as gods, and used to swear by them.” Apollonius said: “He was not at all foolish, but inspired and very wise; for he did not swear by them as gods, but to avoid swearing by the real gods.”¹⁹

This passage offers only qualified support for Lieberman’s interpretation. First, because the practice of vowing “by dog” is attributed to Socrates, half a millennium before Philostratus, and may not have been current practice. Lieberman is aware of this difficulty, as he writes: “There can be no doubt that the Jewish Patriarch ridiculed here the Greek Sophists who tried to *defend the ancient philosophers* by asserting that they took the dog as substitute for the gods in their oaths”²⁰—framing the issue as the contemporary defense of an earlier practice. But there is a second, more substantive difficulty with this passage, namely, that Apollonius has a clear response to Thespesios’s criticism: Socrates invokes dogs and other animals to *avoid* speaking of the gods. So while Lieberman’s identification of the oaths “by dog” as the relevant context is convincing, it is unclear that Philostratus’s work offers a clear example of the relevant philosophic

19. Philostratus, *Life and Times of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. C. P. Eells (Stanford, Calif., 1923), 6.19, pp. 165–67.

20. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 127; emphasis added.

issues, especially as there were other contemporary defenses of animal oaths as such. In *On Abstinence* (3.17.2), a book that exhorts the reader to avoid eating meat and killing animals, Porphyry makes an explicit argument linking the gods and animals: “[Animals are] where the gods got their titles, ‘kid’ for Dionysos, ‘wolf’ and ‘dolphin’ for Apollo, ‘horse’ for Poseidon and for Athena. Hekate is more ready to respond when invoked as bull, dog, lioness.”²¹ The linguistic similarities between the names of the gods and the Greek names of the animals is not significant in the present context.²² The key point is that Porphyry links the association of gods and animals with the practice of swearing oaths by animals: “When Socrates swore by the dog and the goose it was not a joke.”²³ These ancient oaths “by the dog” are not, then, an archaic practice, rather a contemporary call to a philosophic life justified by Socrates’ oaths, which are understood as proof of the partial (inasmuch as they possess *logos*) divinity of dogs.²⁴ Strikingly, this is the very accusation Rabban Gamliel levels against the philosopher—that he (or his cohorts) conflate the names of animals with those of god(s). Here, then, is another third-century witness—perhaps more immediately relevant to the language of the Mekhilta—to a philosophic context that makes sense of Rabban Gamliel’s riposte.

But if the writings of Apollonius and Porphyry provide the philosophical context that makes Rabban Gamliel’s response intelligible, they do not explain how this phrase responds to the philosopher’s challenge. On a certain level the matter is clear: Rabban Gamliel suggests that the true culprits are the humans whose actions bespeak confusion between the higher and the lower realms, i.e., the “children” who apply the father’s name to a dog. But this response is problematic. Is Rabban Gamliel suggesting the Bible holds that God’s jealousy was provoked by Greek philosophers and their customary oaths? Aside from the anachronism—extreme even by the lax standards of the rabbis—the biblical verse under question (Ex 20.5) is explicitly aimed at the Israelites and their potentially idolatrous behavior. The shift from the Israelite context of the

21. Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. G. Clark (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), 3.17.2, p. 89.

22. Gillian Clark glosses this statement as follows: “P[orphyry] gives the Greek titles: he evidently derives Dionysos Eiraphiotes from *eripbos*, ‘kid’, Apollo Lykeios from *lukos*, ‘wolf’ and Delphinios from *delphis*, ‘dolphin’; and, more securely, Poseidon Hippios and Athena Hippia from *hippos*, ‘horse.’” (Clark’s notes ad loc., 172, n. 457).

23. Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, 3.16.6, p. 89.

24. On the *logos* of the dogs, see *On Abstinence* 3.15.2–3.16.1, pp. 88–89.

Exodus to the introduction of the Hellenistic philosophical practices underscores the fact that Rabban Gamliel does not provide a “Jewish” response. The philosopher has, after all, raised a serious theological point based on the Torah’s description of God as jealous of idols, namely, that such jealousy accords the idols a religious and ontological status that (to the philosopher’s mind) is unwarranted. Rabban Gamliel does not conventionally defend the verse in question, nor indeed does he cite or allude to the Bible, rabbinic writings, or any other Jewish text. His response, then, is not so much a defense against the philosopher’s specific charges as a counteroffensive against a philosophic (Socrates, Porphyry) practice. Rabban Gamliel’s response does not, then, seek to assuage the theological doubts that might arise in the minds of Jewish readers as a result of the philosopher’s critique of Exodus—indeed, many generations of commentators steeped in biblical and rabbinic learning were unable to make sense of the response. It was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that scholars versed in both rabbinic and classical culture were able to explain Rabban Gamliel’s statement—a statement that is only coherent within a pagan philosophical context. To put it another way, even though the philosopher’s challenge is specifically aimed at Judaism, Rabban Gamliel does not offer a “Jewish” defense but rather a counterattack against pagan philosophic practices that would be (and was) unintelligible to a Jewish readership.

It is, moreover, quite an effective polemic response, and this for two main reasons. First, it is pithy. Like jokes, polemic rebuttals are lost if they require explanation; the literary and polemic force of Rabban Gamliel’s response owes to its presenting a quick and direct counterstrike to the philosopher’s challenge. Second, Rabban Gamliel has turned the cultural tables on his challenger, effectively beating the philosopher at his own game. Though Lieberman does not discuss this aspect, his interpretation provides a compelling symmetry: the Mekhilta’s philosopher attacks the Torah, and Rabban Gamliel responds by attacking Socrates, the founding figure of neoplatonic philosophy (as understood by the Neoplatonists). In citing Exodus, the philosopher not only poses a challenge to the Jewish sage, he also presents himself as versed in Torah, i.e., at home in the intellectual and cultural realm of the sage. Rabbinic literature often attributes Torah knowledge to pagan interlocutors, but the rabbinic response usually involves the rabbi’s scriptural virtuosity—that is, it takes place on the rabbi’s home turf. By referring to the philosophical defense of oaths “by dog,” Rabban Gamliel meets the cultural challenge head on: not only does he take the philosopher’s foray into rabbinic cultural terri-

tory in stride, he responds in kind—anchoring his response in the contemporary philosophical discourse.

MISHNAH AVODAH ZARAH 3.4

mAZ 3.4 reads:²⁵

1. Proclus the philosopher²⁶ asked Rabban Gamliel, who was in Acco bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite: “It is written in your Torah *let nothing that has been doomed [= by its association with idolatry] stick to your hand* (Dt 13.18), why then do you bathe in Aphrodite’s bathhouse?”
2. He replied: “One does not respond in the bathhouse.”
3. When he had come out he said to him: “I did not enter into her domain, she entered into mine.”
4. One does not say, Let us make the bathhouse an ornament to the bathhouse rather it is Aphrodite who is an ornament to the bathhouse.
5. Another interpretation (*ḏavar aḥer*): If they give you much money you would not enter before your idol naked, having had a seminal emission, and urinate before it, and yet this one stands upon the sewer and all the people urinate before it.
6. [Scripture] only states [*cut down the images of*] *their gods* (Dt 12.3), so that which is treated as a deity is prohibited while that which is not treated as a deity is permitted.

As with the Mekhilta passage, here too a third-century context is possible, as has been argued in detail by Avraham Wasserstein.²⁷ As with the Mekhilta passage, there is no substantive reason to assume that it is one Rabban Gamliel or another. That the dialogue appears in the Mishnah does not prove that it is a second-century text: Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Yehuda is cited in mAvot 2.2, while mAZ 2.6 refers to Rabbi

25. Citation follows David Rosenthal, “*Mishna Avodah Zara: A Critical Edition (with Introduction)*” (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1980), 40–43. פלוסוס had been substituted for פלסלוס. On this emendation, which follows the Babylonian witnesses, see Wasserstein’s argument that “Ploslus” is an unlikely reading since the name is not known in the Greek onomasticon—so unlikely, he writes, that even were it unattested he would suggest the reading פלוספוס (Wasserstein, “Rabban Gamliel and Proclus of Naukratis,” 257, n. 1).

26. Literally: the son of a philosopher.

27. Wasserstein, “Rabban Gamliel and Proclus of Naukratis,” 257–67.

Yehudah the *grandson* of Rabbi Yehudah.²⁸ Moreover, the historical setting of Rabban Gamliel II's *floruit*, from shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple, through the revolt of the Jewish Diaspora, to shortly before the Bar Kokhba revolt, does not lend itself to cultured exchanges between a Jewish leader and a pagan philosopher.²⁹ As Wasserstein notes, it is unlikely that the patriarch was sitting in the Acco bathhouse conversing with a pagan philosopher in the generation of the destruction of the Temple but quite natural under the Severans in the mid-third century, when the patriarchate was very close to the imperial authorities, the political and economic situation had greatly improved, and the rabbinic class was more thoroughly urban—including in mixed cities such as Acco.³⁰

It should be stated outright that I am unconvinced by Wasserstein's broader argument, namely, that the philosopher in question is best identified with the third-century sophist Proclus of Naukratis. There is no way to verify such a claim (as Wasserstein himself admits)—so it cannot count as a reliable historical contribution and, more importantly, it does not advance our understanding of the passage. The mishnah, after all, is not concerned with the historical identity of the interlocutor—if it were it would have stated the full name and provenance of the philosopher. It seeks rather to portray a cultural encounter between a particular sage and a particular interlocutor, and understanding the passage means understanding the exchange. Whether the Rabban Gamliel in question is, as Wasserstein argues, Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Yahuda ha-Nasi, or Rabban Gamliel II anachronistically represented within a third-century cultural reality, cannot be determined. Wasserstein's contribution lies in recognizing that a third-century setting is possible for the cultural exchange sketched in this mishnah.

Until recently, a consensus had emerged among scholars that Rabban

28. Wasserstein, "Rabban Gamliel and Proclus of Naukratis," 261, n. 10, and see Rashi's comments in bAZ 35b, *d. b.* רבי וביה דינו התיירו בשמן.

29. Rabban Gamliel (both II and III) are affiliated with the patriarchate in rabbinic sources. The office of the patriarchate (if it was an office in the days of Rabban Gamliel II) underwent significant changes, on which see Martin Jacobs, *Die Institution des jüdischen Patriarchen*.

30. Martin Jacobs's comments, though not addressing the matter at hand, are relevant: "Die These, Rabban Gamli'el II habe als erster palästinischer *nasi* gewirkt, läßt sich nur mit der Annahme begründen, Rom sei an einer Verbesserung der Beziehungen zu den palästinischen Juden interessiert gewesen. Eine grundsätzliche Veränderung der römischen Politik gegenüber den Juden ist jedoch in der Zeit der Severkaiser (ab 193) sehr viel wahrscheinlicher, welche die östlichen Provinzen besonders förderten" (*Die Institution des jüdischen Patriarchen*, 110).

Gamliel's response aims to establish an aesthetic or ornamental understanding of the pagan goddess's statue, one that will blunt the statue's idolatrous force. Thus Moshe Halbertal writes that "the distinction between the cultic and the aesthetic is thus something that is important in order to create a neutral space between pagans and Jews and to allow for a broader interaction in that space,"³¹ and Seth Schwartz similarly refers to Gamliel's response as "a doctrine of mere decoration."³² I do not intend to challenge this reading, as it is borne out in the latter part of Rabban Gamliel's response. Sentences 4, 5, and 6 all aim, in different ways, to neutralize the idolatrous meaning of the statue by defining it as noncultic and ornamental. Despite the obvious appeal of this interpretation as an explanation of sentences 4–6, a number of difficulties remain; some, textual, involve the understanding of the mishnah, and others, contextual, involve the cultural assumptions that undergird the interpretation.

The most pressing difficulty is textual, namely, the "aesthetic" interpretation does not explain Rabban Gamliel's first response—"I did not enter into her domain, she entered into mine." In the interpretive history of mAZ 3.4, three main strategies have been employed to explain Rabban Gamliel's "domain" response. The first is to ignore it altogether. This is the approach adopted by the Palestinian Talmud and numerous Mishnah commentators.³³ This approach is particularly problematic in light of the dialogue's structure. The very first part of the encounter is given in direct discourse, with the philosopher challenging Rabban Gamliel directly ("why, then, do you bathe . . .") and Rabban Gamliel responding in kind ("I did not enter . . ."). Immediately after this statement, however, the Mishnah shifts to an anonymous, formulaic discourse (*en omrim*, "one does not say" [4]), followed by *davar aḥer* ("another interpretation") that introduces the final two statements (= 5 and 6). There is no question that *davar aḥer* represents a structural break in the narrative and that argu-

31. Moshe Halbertal, "Coexisting with the Enemy: Jews and Pagans in the Mishnah," *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity* ed. G. N. Stanton and G. G. Stroumsa (Cambridge, 1998), 167.

32. Seth Schwartz, "Gamaliel in Aphrodite's Bath: Palestinian Judaism and Urban Culture in the Third and Fourth Centuries," *The Talmud-Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture I*, ed. P. Schäfer (Tübingen, 1998), 213.

33. See, e.g., Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah and *Meleket Shelomo* (Shelomo Adani, sixteenth century). This is largely true of the Babylonian Talmud as well, which contains an odd discussion of whether or not Rabban Gamliel's response was a deceitful reply (*teshuvab genuvab*), without a substantive discussion of the reply itself (bAZ 44b).

ments 5 and 6, which appear after that phrase, are no longer to be understood as part of the conversation between Rabban Gamliel and the philosopher.³⁴ Since argument 4 appears before the *davar aḥer*, its status is not as clear as that of 5 and 6. Nonetheless, there is a stylistic break between 3 and 4 from direct speech to formulaic discourse, as well as a thematic shift: the former deals with Rabban Gamliel's relationship with Aphrodite while the latter introduces a different argument involving the relationship between the idol and the bathhouse. Without introducing undue speculations about the composition history of the passage,³⁵ it is clear that the "domain" response stands (whether conceptually or also compositionally) independently of the arguments that follow it. In other words, the "domain" response needs to be understood on its own terms, as a full-fledged rebuttal. Indeed, its strategic location in the dialogue—Rabban Gamliel's initial response to the philosopher—suggests it is, or at least could be, *the* response with the remaining arguments added for reasons that I hope to make clear later in my discussion.³⁶ Schwartz writes of the first response that its "very inadequacy explains why additional responses are given,"³⁷ and I endorse this view with one qualification: while it was seen as inadequate by those who provided the additional responses, it is unlikely that the rabbinic dialogue *ab initio* presented Rabban Gamliel as unable to provide a convincing rebuttal to a pagan challenge. The apparent inadequacy of the initial response becomes, then, an important clue inasmuch as it suggests the response originated in a cultural context not familiar to all the sages and quite early on was perceived as requiring some bolstering.

Yaron Eliav has recently suggested an interpretation that does take the "domain" response as an independent rebuttal.³⁸ Eliav argues that the Hebrew *gevul* (here translated "domain" but more literally "border") refers to the Latin *templum*, whose original meaning is "border." In this case, Rabban Gamliel's response suggests that he has not entered a temple of Aphrodite, and therefore his presence in the bathhouse is not prob-

34. The *davar aḥer* neutralizes the otherwise dialogic force of the second-person singular voice of 5.

35. The mishnah in question appears in its basic form in all the manuscript traditions, so there is no philological evidence for later additions.

36. The structure of the debate is very similar to that of the Mekhilta passage—a rather obscure initial response followed by a series of more easily understandable responses that break thematically with the initial response.

37. Schwartz, "Gamaliel in Aphrodite's Bath," 214.

38. Personal communication, and see Eliav, "On Idolatry in the Roman Bathhouse – Two Comments" (Hebrew), *Catbedra* 110 (2003): 173–80.

lematic. This interpretation has the merit of taking Rabban Gamliel's opening statement as a meaningful polemic response. It does not, however, present a compelling reason for the pagan interlocutor to be a philosopher, a point I consider central, as I will argue below.³⁹

The second approach is to interpret the domain statement as an integral part of the argument that follows in sentences 4, 5, and 6, as Moshe Halbertal does in the following:

[Rabban Gamliel's] first answer is to shift the description of the institution from Aphrodite's bath to a bath in which an image of Aphrodite is present: "I did not come into her domain, she came into mine." The bath is not Aphrodite's domain which Raban Gamliel invaded, it is the other way around; it is Raban Gamliel's domain which Aphrodite invaded. Thus Raban Gamliel claims that Aphrodite is an adornment to the bath and not vice versa.⁴⁰

I find this explanation unconvincing. Halbertal's first sentence presents Rabban Gamliel's overall strategy but does not explain how the "domain" response is relevant to it. The phrase in question is cited, followed by a fairly literal paraphrase. Halbertal then suggests that the "domain" response is linked to the subsequent adornment argument: "Thus Raban Gamliel claims that Aphrodite is an adornment." But what is the force of *thus* in Halbertal's argument? What, in other words, is the conceptual connection between "I did not enter into her domain, she entered into mine" and the attempt to reconfigure the bathhouse as a site of aesthetic, as opposed to religious, encounter. Halbertal suggests the two are related, but absent a clear argument to the contrary, it seems to me that the "domain" statement and the arguments that follow are unrelated.

The third approach (ultimately endorsed in this essay), is to recognize that the "domain" response constitutes an independent argument and to explain it on its own terms—though the candidates suggested to this point fail to convince. Thus, Rashi, in his commentary on bAZ 44b, argues that "I did not enter into her domain" means that the bathhouse existed prior to the introduction of Aphrodite's idol and was made for all, so she, Aphrodite, has no right to deny entrance to the bathers. Rashi is followed by numerous Mishnah commentators (e. g., Bartenura and Tiferet Yisrael) and, in a sense, by Seth Schwartz, who writes: "I do find Rabban Gam-

39. Without pushing too hard for harmonization, it may be possible to integrate Eliav's suggestion with my own reading, which similarly involves presence in pagan temples.

40. Halbertal, "Coexisting with the Enemy," 166–67.

liel's first response difficult to understand, but it may in fact mean no more than that bath-houses are for bathers, not worshippers, so the goddess, not the bather, is the intruder."⁴¹ Schwartz, to his credit, recognizes that Rabban Gamliel's first response is something of a *crux interpretum*, but Schwartz's own explanation is unlikely. Statues of pagan gods were regular fixtures in bathhouses, and Aphrodite's more than any other.⁴² In what sense could Rabban Gamliel claim that a Roman bathhouse dedicated to Aphrodite was his domain? Moreover, such a response fails to address the theological difficulties raised by the philosopher's challenge: even if the goddess is the "intruder," does this make her statue less idolatrous? And finally, on this reading Rabban Gamliel offers a very weak polemic response. The philosopher has just issued a theological, Torah-based challenge to Rabban Gamliel: is it plausible that Rabban Gamliel's initial response would be so inoffensive? The literary framework is, after all, a polemic encounter preserved in rabbinic literature—in other words, it's a fixed fight—but Rabban Gamliel does not appear to have dealt the pagan philosopher anything more than a light jab.⁴³

Another textual difficulty is Rabban Gamliel's departure from the bathhouse. Rabban Gamliel's statement that "one does not respond in the bathhouse" has traditionally been understood as invoking a prohibition against speaking words of Torah in a setting that involves nakedness. But it is questionable whether these prohibitions underlie the Mishnah's exchange, that is, whether Rabban Gamliel's response to the philosopher falls under the category of "Torah." The first response, "I did not come into her domain, she came into mine," is not Torah in any strict sense (a biblical citation or paraphrase), but neither is it Torah in a broader sense. The phrase does not have any rabbinic—or even Jewish—content (almost two millennia of perplexed commentators bear witness to that) so it is extremely unlikely that the departure from the bathhouse is motivated by the sanctity of Rabban Gamliel's "domain" statement. The same holds for the second and third responses, which could have been made in a bathhouse as well. It is only in the fourth response (6 above) that Scrip-

41. Schwartz, "Gamaliel in Aphrodite's Bath," 214. Schwartz also discusses this mishnah in his *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 167–71.

42. See Yaron Eliav, "The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution: Another Look at the Encounter between Judaism and Greco-Roman Culture," *JSJ* 31 (2000): 432, n. 32.

43. In using this terminology I am not suggesting that Jewish and Hellenistic cultures should be broadly construed as conflicting, a position rightly critiqued in Eliav, "The Roman Bath," 416–17.

ture is cited, but this is very late in the game, as the citation occurs after the *davar aḥer* and is represented as an anonymous statement rather than part of the dialogue (i.e., the second-person singular has vanished). There is, then, little justification for characterizing Rabban Gamliel's words as "Torah." The traditional reading leads, moreover, to absurdities, as it is the statement that "one does not respond in the bathhouse" that is closest to a religious communication (Rabban Gamliel is sharing a halakhah with the philosopher) yet *it* is spoken in the bathhouse, an issue that exercised later commentators to no end.⁴⁴ Though no satisfactory solution is reached, the extensive search hints at the paradoxical nature of the discussion: the departure from the bathhouse is presumably motivated by the Torah content of Rabban Gamliel's answer, but the most halakhic statement is made inside and, once outside, the response is the perplexing "I did not enter her domain." So while it may well be true that rabbis did not discuss Torah in bathhouses,⁴⁵ it is not clear that this prohibition motivates the speakers' departure.⁴⁶

Alongside the textual difficulties, a number of broader, contextual issues require discussion. The general assumption among interpreters of this mishnah is that it can be read as emblematic of Jewish-pagan relations. For Halbertal, e. g., mAZ 3.4 is an example of "coexisting with the enemy," while Schwartz takes the story as a key text in understanding "the rabbinic legislation on *'avodah zarah*."⁴⁷ A number of issues argue against this view. First, the philosopher cannot be assumed to be a (stereo)typical pagan in matters of worship, as some philosophical circles maintained a very ambivalent relationship with popular pagan practices, as seen above with regard to cult statues. Similar ambivalence was evident with regard to another popular cult practice, namely, sacrifice.⁴⁸ Neoplatonic theology could not abide by the traditional explanation of

44. See, e.g., Maimonides' statement that "one does not respond" was said outside the bathhouse after Rabban Gamliel had walked out silently and then had to apologize for his inability to respond while inside (Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, ad loc.).

45. This prohibition may owe to the presumed nakedness of the speakers, as Rashi suggests (ad loc.). This assumption also informs Michael Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," *JBL* 116 (1997): 434–35.

46. Unless, of course, the same prohibition applies to pagan philosophers. After all, the only Torah statement is made by the philosopher, who quotes Deuteronomy, in which case Rabban Gamliel hurries out to prevent an *'averah* on the part of his interlocutor.

47. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 167.

48. The following examples are cited from Frances M. Young, "The Idea of Sacrifice in Neoplatonic and Patristic Texts," *Studia Patristica* 11 (Berlin, 1972): 278–81.

sacrifice—food for the gods—and as a result constructed an alternative theory of the practice in which its justification is not found in the needs of God (as there are none) but rather in its ability to symbolically unite man with the divine. But even under this interpretation only certain offerings are appropriate. Offerings made to lesser gods may be material, but as Porphyry argues, the supreme God can only be worshipped in pure silence, for even a word is too material.⁴⁹ And while the Mishnah is not concerned with sacrifices here, this is another example of philosophic ambivalence toward broadly accepted cult practices, and thus evidence that the philosopher cannot be assumed to represent “paganism” as such in the Mishnah. Indeed, the philosopher in the Mekhilta passage discussed above is overtly critical of the institution of cultic statues and criticizes Torah for its apparent legitimation of idols. Both on historical grounds, then, and in light of the literary representation in the Mekhilta, it would be wrong to assume a priori that the Mishnah’s philosopher is intended as a synecdoche for paganism.

Nor should Rabban Gamliel be automatically understood as a representative of “the rabbis.” As a number of scholars have noted, the mishnah in question is part of a series of rabbinic anecdotes that represent Rabban Gamliel, and the patriarchate more generally, as engaged in discourse with the non-Jewish world.⁵⁰ The exceptional status of the patriarchal family is evident in a series of statement that single it out as permitted to teach its children Greek. Thus tSot 15.8, “They permitted the house of Rabban Gamliel to teach their children Greek because they were close to the [Roman] authorities,” and yShab 6.1, 7d: “Three things were permitted to the house of Rabbi [=in an exceptional manner] . . . that they teach their children Greek, since they were affiliated with the authorities.”⁵¹ Ultimately, then, neither the philosopher nor Rabban Gamliel are central representatives of the pagan and rabbinic religious communities, respectively.⁵²

49. Young, “The Idea of Sacrifice,” 278, paraphrasing Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*.

50. See Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World*, 158–64.

51. On these passages and the question of Greek education more broadly, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen, 2001), 90–94. Though significantly later, the fourth-century letters of Libanius to the Jewish patriarch provide a fascinating picture of the extent to which the patriarch was engaged in the cultural and intellectual dialogue of the Greek East; if the development of the patriarchate was one of evolution, not revolution, these late witnesses provide a glimpse of the trend in the previous century. See Jacobs, *Die Institution des jüdischen Patriarchen*, 259–72.

52. This does not mean, of course, that Rabban Gamliel was seen as nonrepresentative by the editor of mAZ who chose to include this anecdote in the largely legal content of chapter 3.

An additional difficulty is the status of the bathhouse. It has generally (if implicitly) been assumed that the presence of Jewish sage in the bathhouse is religiously problematic. Consequently, the philosopher's challenge to Rabban Gamliel is understood as a thematization of the borderlines between Jewish and pagan; the rabbi's transgression into the pagan realm brings to the fore the question of religious coexistence. But Yaron Eliav has presented a thorough rebuttal of the notion that the bathhouse was an inherently problematic institution in Jewish—including rabbinic—circles.⁵³ Eliav shows that, while there were certainly halakhic strictures regarding the bathhouse, they do not express a fundamental rejection of the institution. Thus, for example, *SifreNm* §258 (Finkelstein edition, 282) states that it is prohibited to enter a bathhouse holding a scroll or phylacteries, but, as Eliav points out, the full sentence is: "One should not recite the *Shema* next to the launderers' soak tub, nor should one enter a bathhouse or a tannery holding in his hand scrolls or phylacteries."⁵⁴ Clearly, the prohibition does not entail an overarching rejection of the institutions in question—the rabbis did not object to washing clothes or tanning hides—but rather a judgment as to the appropriateness of these settings for prayer or study, one that Eliav suggests has to do with the ambient odors.⁵⁵ Moreover, as Eliav shows, rabbinic literature contains many references to bathhouses that present the institution as a positive and often self-evident aspect of Jewish and rabbinic life. Among these: the story of Hillel the Elder who elevates bathhouse washing to the level of a religious commandment, aggadot describing biblical figures in bathhouses, and *derashot* that cast the bathhouse in positive light.⁵⁶ In short, there is no reason to think that the bathhouse was an inherently problematic institution.

Perhaps, then, it is the specifically pagan nature of the bathhouse that

53. The most relevant study for the present discussion is Yaron Z. Eliav, "Did the Jews First Abstain from Using the Roman Bathhouse?" (Hebrew), *Catbedra* 75 (1995): 5–35. Some of these findings have been incorporated into idem, "The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution," and see the rich secondary literature cited there on bathhouses.

54. Translation follows *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. R. Hammer (New Haven, Conn., 1986), 257.

55. Eliav, "Did the Jews," 18–19.

56. Eliav, "Did the Jews," 30–33. Hillel in the bathhouse, *LevRab* 34.3 and parallels; aggadah about Jacob building a bathhouse, *bShab* 33b; aggadah about King David entering a bathhouse, *SifreDt* §36 and parallels; *derashah* according to which the "delights" of *Prov* 2.8 refers to bathhouses, *EcllRab* 2.8 and parallels; *derashah* according to which the "happiness" of *Lam* 3.17 refers to bathhouses, *bShab* 25b, and parallels.

is problematic? The evidence of tractate *ʿAvodab Zarab* as a whole suggests otherwise: “If a garden or a bathhouse belong to a pagan Temple (lit.: to an idol), they may be used if there is no need to offer thanks . . . If they belonged both to a pagan Temple and to others, then these may be used whether or not thanks needs to be given” (mAZ 4.3). Nor are pagan images so problematic that one needs to flee from the bathhouse. As Schwartz rightly notes, “not only is it permissible to enter places decorated with images of the gods, like public baths, and use inexpensive items decorated with unambiguously pagan symbols (3.3), but one may derive benefit from idols assumed not to have been worshipped (4.4; cf. *tʿAvodab Zarab* 5.3–4), or which have been abandoned, slightly disfigured or, in one opinion, simply sold, by a pagan (4.5–6).”⁵⁷ To be sure, the Mishnah does not provide a single rabbinic view—it records disputes and disagreements, so the statements cited here do not prove that mAZ 3.4 is not concerned with the bathhouse as such or with images as such. That said, mishnaic anecdotes usually demonstrate halakhic principles enunciated elsewhere; the approach implied by the prevalent interpretation of the story (the problematic status of the bathhouse, the theological difficulty of proximity to cult statues) is not attested elsewhere.

In trying to provide an interpretation to address these questions, I will borrow a page from rabbinic hermeneutics in using the explicit to shed light on the obscure (*min ba-satum el ba-meforash*). Since mAZ 3.4 is one of only two encounters between Rabban Gamliel and a pagan philosopher, it is possible that the cultural dynamic exhibited in the Mekhilta is also at play in the Mishnah. The philosopher’s challenge is quite similar. In both passages he quotes Torah so as to present a religious or theological challenge to Rabban Gamliel. At the same time, both statements imply a deeper, cultural challenge: the biblical citation is an act of cultural appropriation, a declaration on the part of the philosopher that he is learned in Torah and can challenge Rabban Gamliel on the sage’s home turf, as it were. In light of the similarity in the pagan’s two challenges, it is possible that Rabban Gamliel’s first response in the Mishnah parallels that of the Mekhilta. If so, “I did not enter into her domain, she entered into mine” would not so much constitute a theological response to the philosopher’s challenge but rather a counterattack—one that refers to a philosophical practice or tradition. Just as, in the Mekhilta, Rabban Gamliel invokes the practice of swearing “by dog,” thus undercutting the moral

57. Schwartz makes this point in “Gamaliel in Aphrodite’s Bath,” 213. Schwartz implies that the philosopher’s challenge involves the gap between biblical interdictions and rabbinic practice.

authority of the philosopher and problematizing the philosophical tradition, here too Rabban Gamliel could be alluding to a problematic philosophical tradition. There are not many explicit discussions of popular religious practices in philosophical, particularly neoplatonic sources, but an anecdote in Porphyry's biography of Plotinus addresses the philosopher's views of the popular cult. Toward the end of §10, Porphyry recounts:

When Amelius became fond of sacrifices and traveled around the temples on the new moons and feast-days, he once asked if he might take Plotinus with him. Plotinus refused: "*It is they who should come to me, not I to them.*" What was in his mind when he made this lofty statement we ourselves were unable to divine, nor did we dare to ask him.⁵⁸

The exchange is brief, but striking. Amelius, a disciple of Plotinus, asks his teacher to join him in offering sacrifices at the local temples on feast days. But even though there is nothing unusual about this request—it is part of the civic-religious infrastructure of Rome—Plotinus refuses to participate. The refusal is principled: the gods in the temples are not worthy of Plotinus going to them, instead they should come to him. In short, we find here a philosopher (and not just any philosopher) expressing ambivalence, if not outright hostility, to the local gods in their temples, and doing so by contrasting the philosopher to the gods in terms of who should be coming to whom.

Taking Plotinus's statement as an intertext for mAZ 3.4 raises a host of historical and cultural difficulties that I hope to address below. For now, I bracket these and focus on the literary merits of this interpretation, which are significant. The most important factor is that Plotinus's statement offers a coherent interpretation of Rabban Gamliel's "domain" statement as a forceful polemic retort. The philosopher challenges Rabban Gamliel on his proximity to Aphrodite, to which Rabban Gamliel responds, in effect: Do not worry—your master insists that "it is [the gods] who should come to me and not I to them," and that is precisely what happened here; "I did not enter into her domain, she entered into mine."

It is not that Rabban Gamliel is portraying himself as Plotinus: both the issues (sacrifice vs. idols) and the results (Plotinus stays, Rabban Gamliel goes) are different. Rather, by alluding to Plotinus's statement, Rabban Gamliel places the ball back in the philosopher's court. It is true

58. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 20–21.

that Deuteronomy can be interpreted in a way that prohibits a sage's presence in Aphrodite's bathhouse. But the philosopher is hardly in a better position, since his own philosophical tradition is critical of statues and sacrifice—the key elements of popular pagan religion. The philosopher challenges Rabban Gamliel for his failure to maintain his distance from the idol, but Rabban Gamliel immediately reminds the philosopher that he must deal with his own master's dictum before needling others.

Rabban Gamliel's response is particularly brilliant if we consider the source of the challenge. As noted, part of the force of the philosopher's challenge stems from his citation of Scripture, suggesting as it does that the philosopher is culturally superior to Rabban Gamliel, having mastered the latter's field of expertise. Rabban Gamliel's statement turns the tables on the philosopher. The sage is not shocked by the philosopher's command of Jewish sources but rather displays his own command of the philosophic traditions surrounding Plotinus, thus neutralizing the philosopher's implicit claim to cultural superiority.

The passage from Plotinus's biography also sheds light on the second textual difficulty, namely, the departure from the bathhouse. After reporting Plotinus's statement that the gods should come to him, Porphyry writes: "What was in his mind when he made this lofty statement we ourselves were unable to divine, *nor did we dare ask him.*" The disciples' fear was justified. As Mark Edwards writes:

Practical atheism—the refusal to participate in popular cults—had never been the norm among philosophers. Since the second century it had been regarded as a vice of Christians, many of whom had suffered in 251 when the Emperor Decius commanded universal sacrifice as a test of loyalty. Both Plotinus and his pupils therefore knew that he had taken a dangerous resolution.⁵⁹

Despite his protestations to the contrary, Porphyry was not afraid to ask Plotinus what he meant—the admission of fear already indicates that the disciples recognized the danger of their master's statement—rather he was afraid to state the matter openly. A similar dynamic may be at play in the Mishnah. Rather than reticence to speak of Torah matters—a problematic reading not supported by the language of the Mishnah—the departure is motivated by the politically sensitive topic. After all, the canonical texts of each tradition, Deuteronomy's command and Plotinus's statement, are critical of the dominant religious practices that surround

59. *Ibid.*, 21, n. 115.

the sage and the philosopher. And for both traditions, the only way to make cultic statues palpable is by denuding them of their basic religious significance, recasting them either as aesthetic objects or as allegorical signs of higher truths. Such matters were likely best not discussed in the public baths.

The interpretation offered here addresses the broader, contextual issues as well. For starters, the identity of both the *dramatis personae* becomes clear. On the pagan side, the speaker must be a philosopher since his challenge—like Rabban Gamliel’s response—is philosophically meaningful. The former, inasmuch as the philosopher speaks from within a tradition that is itself ambivalent about popular pagan culture; the latter, as a targeted attack on that very philosophical tradition. On the Jewish side, only a member of the patriarchy could, within the borders of rabbinic discourse, plausibly be represented as engaging a philosopher. The identity of the rabbinic speaker may also reflect on the identity of the intended audience. By this I mean the following: in their present form, both the Mishnah and Mekhilta passages exhibit a structural similarity inasmuch as both shift direction immediately following Rabban Gamliel’s preliminary retort (“domain” and “dog,” respectively). In the Mishnah, additional responses are offered that no longer maintain the dialogue format. In the Mekhilta, the dialogue continues, but with a different focus (why God does not destroy the idols, whereas the problematic status of the idol and God’s jealousy opened the discussion), and includes passages that are likely taken from other sources.⁶⁰ The thematic breaks following the retorts suggest that at some point in the transmission of the Rabban Gamliel-and-the-philosopher traditions, the sage’s responses were not understood or were found to be unsatisfactory, and so were augmented with more easily comprehended rebuttals. If so, it is possible that the traditions first circulated among an audience relatively familiar with Hellenistic philosophy and thus able to appreciate Rabban Gamliel’s pointed jabs at the custom of swearing “by dog” and neoplatonic anxiety regarding popular cults.

PAGAN PHILOSOPHY, PAGAN MONOTHEISM

As noted, the interpretation offered here raises a number of cultural and historical questions. One difficulty is that it requires a realignment of the cultural forces involved in the exchanges. It is today unproblematic, “natural,” to speak of the division between Jews and pagans, and there

60. Namely, the inclusion of sources apparently taken from mAZ 4.7 (the elders of Rome).

is a tendency to read rabbinic texts that feature Jews and pagans as thematizing this division. On the reading offered here, mAZ 3.4 and the Mekhilta passage are concerned with coexistence, but not between pagans and Jews. Rather, their concern is with attempts of like-minded members of different religious elites to coexist with the surrounding religious environment. The exchanges between Rabban Gamliel and the philosopher are polemical, but polemic is not their final end. Rather, the surface polemics raise a potential difficulty that is resolved by recognizing the shared elements in the two interlocutors' respective traditions: both oppose idols and contain authoritative statements to that effect.

There is also a fundamental difficulty in proposing that the rabbis were familiar with philosophic traditions and practices, and alluded to them in theological debates. Part of the difficulty may be alleviated by the fact that I do not make such a claim. As the comments on the origin of these exchanges suggest, I am emphatically not depicting "the rabbis" as engaged in these practices. The readings offered here are "local," particular to the figures in question. This is a critical point in light of the tradition among modern scholars of drawing parallels between rabbinic dicta and those of various philosophical schools, a tradition from which I wish to distinguish the present argument.⁶¹ The attempt to identify Greek or Latin parallels to rabbinic sayings (usually construing the former as the source for the latter) involves many problematic assumptions regarding the historicity of the texts (both rabbinic and classical), the paths of cultural contact between rabbis and philosophers, the nature of cultural influence, and more. In her recent article on the relations between the rabbis and the philosophers, Catherine Hezser rightly cautions against the assumptions guiding research of this nature: "The assumption that the rabbis were well acquainted with particular philosophers and their doctrines is an argument from silence, for which no rabbinic evidence

61. See, among others, Henry Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings* (Leiden, 1973), and Fischel, ed., *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York, 1977); Warren Zev Harvey, "Rabbinic Attitudes toward Philosophy," "Open thou mine eyes. . ." *Essays on Aggadab and Judaica Presented to Rabbi William G. Braude on His Eightieth Birthday and Dedicated to His Memory*, ed. H. J. Blumberg, et al. (Hoboken, N.J., 1992), 83–101; E. E. Halevy, *The World of Aggadab* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1972); Lieberman, "Greek and Latin Proverbs in Rabbinic Literature," *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 144–60. For additional works, see the bibliography cited in Catherine Hezser, "Interfaces between Rabbinic Literature and Graeco-Roman Philosophy," *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture 2*, ed. P. Schäfer and C. Hezser (Tübingen, 2000), 161–87.

exists."⁶² The Mekhilta and Mishnah passages in question, however, exhibit a number of traits that would mark them as exceptions to Hezser's statement. The key issue is that the philosophical context is mandated—or at least strongly suggested—by the rabbinic texts themselves. Once the interlocutor is characterized as a philosopher (a rare and thus marked occurrence in rabbinic literature), it is incumbent upon the modern interpreter, at least as a preliminary reading strategy, to try to make sense of the rabbinic narrative on these terms—to explain the role of the interlocutor qua philosopher. (Part of the beauty of Lieberman's interpretation of the Mekhilta passage is that it does just that—it provides a context for Rabban Gamliel's response that explains the Mekhilta's characterization of the pagan as a philosopher.)

Another justification for the philosophical interpretation is the identity of the sage, Rabban Gamliel. The Greek education of the patriarch's family, along with the social circles in which they traveled, are key to understanding the exchanges; the Mishnah and the Mekhilta are portraying the conversations as encounters with a particular social and cultural class, the urbane patriarch chatting with the philosopher at the local (pagan) bathhouse. The present interpretation would not be offered if the sage in question were, say, one of the students of Rabbi Akiba.

It should, moreover, be noted that the later rabbinic reception of mAZ 3.4 almost necessitates that Rabban Gamliel's domain statement refer to an obscure (from the rabbinic perspective) context. The uneasy silence of the two Talmuds and the forced readings of medieval commentators suggest that the explanation of this statement lies outside the generally accepted purview of rabbinic literature. Of course, this does not mean that my reading is the correct obscure explanation, only that the obscurity (again, from a rabbinic perspective) should not count against it; in light of the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of this mishnah, an obscure, nonrabbinic context is practically requisite.

There remains the question of historical plausibility. By this I do not mean the plausibility of the historical Rabban Gamliel encountering a philosopher, but of the existence of the kind of discourse presupposed by this interpretation. Whether historically accurate, could the representation of an encounter between a sage and a Scripture-quoting pagan philosopher be seen as plausible by contemporary readers or hearers? And does the representation of these figures as kindred spirits, their barbs

62. Hezser, "Interfaces between Rabbinic Literature and Graeco-Roman Philosophy," 180.

thematizing a shared anxiety over the surrounding pagan culture, have any historical basis?

The answer to the first question is clearly affirmative, and the evidence is to be found in the largely scriptural nature of the pagan philosophical polemic against Christianity. The polemic exchanges between philosophers and the Church Fathers have a long and complex history, the specifics of which lie outside the scope of the present discussion.⁶³ What must be emphasized for our purposes is that the philosophical critics of Christianity display a familiarity, at times profound, with Scripture. For example, attacks on Scripture make up a significant part of the Neoplatonist Celsus's work *On the True Account*, parts of which survive as citations in Origen's *Against Celsus*. Here is how Origen describes one of the attacks:

Then, as it was his purpose to attack the Bible, he also ridicules the words *God brought a trance upon Adam and he slept; and he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place; and He made the rib which He took from Adam into a woman* (Gn 2.21–22), and so on.⁶⁴

Celsus's ridicule of the Genesis account of the creation of Eve bespeaks some knowledge of the Bible, as does Origen's statement that Celsus professes "to know everything about the gospel."⁶⁵

By far the most scripturally learned of the philosophers was none other than Porphyry, who displays a deep familiarity with Scripture in his (lost) fifteen-volume work *Against the Christians*. One venue of attack, for example, involves exposing apparent New Testament errors regarding the Hebrew Bible. Porphyry takes Matthew to task for quoting (in Matt 13.35) a passage from Psalms while attributing it to Isaiah. Mark (1.2) commits a similar error when he identifies a passage that includes elements of both Malachi and Isaiah as belonging solely to the latter.⁶⁶ Theologically, Porphyry took these mistakes as an indication of the ignorance among the followers of Christ; from our perspective it is significant that Porphyry picked up on these errors. Perhaps Porphyry's most remark-

63. For a classic discussion, see Pierre de Labriolle, *La réaction païenne: Étude sur la polémique antichrétienne du I^{er} au VI^e siècle* (Paris, 1934).

64. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.38 (cited from *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. H. Chadwick [Cambridge, 1980], 213).

65. *Contra Celsum* 1.54 (Chadwick, 50).

66. M. V. Anastos, "Porphyry's Attack on the Bible," *The Classical Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan*, ed. L. Wallach (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966), 426.

able feat as a student of Scripture involved his analysis of the Book of Daniel. Porphyry argued—correctly!—that the book was a Maccabean pseudepigraph, a conclusion he reached following a detailed analysis of the oracles in Daniel 7.⁶⁷ It must be emphasized that these are not ad hoc anti-Christian arguments; they are the fruit of Porphyry's long-standing engagement with the Bible. (The discussion of Daniel, for example, appears in Porphyry's complete commentary on the book.) His interest in the Bible is also evident from his determination to meet the premier interpreter of his day: when Porphyry left his native Tyre (at the time he was still named Malkus, "Porphyry" being a Greek translation of his name), he traveled first to Caesarea in order to meet Origen, whom he much admired.⁶⁸ Some scholars even argue that Porphyry spoke Syriac (though this is controversial) and that he was familiar with the Syriac interpretive traditions.⁶⁹ Whether or not this last point is true, Porphyry is an outstanding example of a philosopher whose polemical writings build on his deep knowledge of Scripture. The figure of the philosopher citing Scripture while challenging the doctrines of a revealed religion is no rabbinic fantasy: both the attacks and the (at times sophisticated) employment of Scripture by philosophers were historical realities of the third-century Mediterranean. The upshot for the present argument is that the literary representation of a sage and a philosopher engaged in Scripture-based religious polemic is an existing literary trope; the only difference being that in the Mishnah and Mekhilta the sage in question is not Christian but Jewish.

It is worth noting briefly that the responses of the Christian Fathers to philosophers' attacks on Scripture consist, like Rabban Gamliel's, in a counterattack against pagan practices. Thus, Origen responds to the challenge quoted above:

Are, then, the stories related by your *inspired* Hesiod in the form of a myth about the woman to be interpreted allegorically . . . whereas you

67. See Maurice Casey, "Porphyry and the Origin of the Book of Daniel," *JTS*, n.s. 27 (1976): 15–33.

68. See Philip Sellw, "Achilles or Christ? Porphyry and Didymus in Debate over Allegorical Interpretation," *HTR* 82 (1989): 79–100, esp. 88–90.

69. See Casey, "Porphyry and the Book of Daniel," 23. The evidence for Porphyry's being a Syriac speaker is a statement in *The Life of Plotinus* §17: "I Porphyry was called Malkus in the dialect of my home land, this being also the name of my father, and Malkus has the meaning 'King' if one elects to turn it into the Greek tongue" (Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 30). Whether this means Porphyry spoke Syriac is unclear. See Edwards's comments ad loc., n. 171.

think that there is no deeper and hidden meaning at all in the [biblical account]?⁷⁰

Origen's response consists of a counterattack against the creation account of Hesiod, or, more accurately, against the double standard Celsus employs in assuming that Hesiod is worthy of allegorical interpretation but Genesis not.⁷¹ Origen responds to Celsus's attack by holding a mirror up to the philosopher and arguing, in effect, that the Neoplatonists need to allegorize Hesiod no less than the Christians need to allegorize the Gospel. Similar counterattacks are launched against Porphyry by Saint Augustine, who, in *City of God*, repeatedly harnesses his intimate familiarity with pagan philosophy to his polemic, citing from Plato, Plotinus, and others in defending the Church and its teachings. The anti-philosophical counterattack is also, then, an established trope.⁷²

But concerning the tone my interpretation attributes to the sage-philosopher exchange, the parallels to the pagan-Christian polemic are less helpful. For, as I've argued above, the debates between Rabban Gamliel and the philosopher are more concerned with a shared ambivalence toward idols than with delineating borderlines between the groups. The derision and hostility so visible in the pagan and Christian exchanges do not appear. The difference in tone reflects, arguably, a difference in the mutual estimation of the speakers. From the pagan side, a number of pagan philosophers took a more positive view of Judaism than of Christianity. Significantly, Porphyry portrayed the Christians as frauds who veered from the old and venerable path of Judaism. In his *City of God*, Augustine refers to an oracular utterance of Apollo's instructing the hearer that he let the "polluted" wife "go as she pleases, persisting in her vain delusions, singing in lamentation for a god who died in delusions, who was condemned by right-thinking judges." Augustine then cites Porphyry's gloss and adds his own comments:

Porphyry goes on to say, "In these verses Apollo made plain the incurability of the belief of Christians, saying that the Jews upheld God more than the Christians." See how he denigrates Christ in preferring

70. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.38 (Chadwick, 213).

71. On this question, see Sellew, "Achilles or Christ?" passim.

72. It is true that both Origen and Augustine were versed in Hellenistic philosophy in a way the rabbis were not. But, to repeat, my argument is not about "the rabbis," but rather Rabban Gamliel, whose family was exceptional in its Hellenistic education.

the Jews to the Christians, when he proclaims that the Jews are upholders of God.⁷³

The same view recurs in a later, fourth-century, anti-Christian book *Against the Galileans* by the emperor Julian ("Julian the Apostate"), who writes: "And why is it that you [=the Christians] do not abide even by the traditions of the Hebrew or accept the law which God has given to them? Nay, you have forsaken their teaching even more than ours, abandoning the religion of your forefathers."⁷⁴ The view that the Jews were the true heirs to the ancient biblical traditions may provide an explanation for the theological common ground evident in the polemic exchanges of the Mekhilta and the Mishnah.

Finally, it should be noted that the shared anxieties reflect shared (though not identical) theological commitments. I have already discussed the issue of neoplatonic ambivalence toward icons, an issue that placed some pagan philosophers and rabbinic sages on one side of the debate, most of the Church Fathers of the eastern Mediterranean on the other.⁷⁵ Moreover, ambivalence toward iconicity placed neoplatonic philosophers and rabbis on the same side relative to the broader public, which embraced visual representations without such qualms. But the most significant theological commonality between rabbinic Judaism and neoplatonism is their shared commitment to monotheism. True, "pagan monotheism" may sound like an oxymoron—at least in certain quarters—but this has more to do with stereotypes than historical record. Without addressing the historical richness of this phenomenon,⁷⁶ it can be stated flatly that both Greek and later Hellenistic philosophy contain a strong monotheistic element. Indeed, Michael Frede has argued that monotheistic positions are established early in Greek thought, reaching at least as far back as Aristotle's argument about the unmoved mover in the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁷ Whatever its historical roots, it is clear that pagan monotheism reaches one of its apogees in the thought of Plotinus, who combines a

73. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.23 (pp. 884–85).

74. *Against the Galileans* 238A-B, in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, 3 vols., trans. W. Cave Wright (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 3:389.

75. The Synod of Elvira (Spain, early fourth century) prohibited pictures in churches, but that was not a prevalent view along the eastern Mediterranean.

76. Such a discussion would surely include the Cult of Theos Hypistos, on which see Stephen Mitchell, "The Cult of Theos Hypistos between Pagans, Jews and Christians," *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (Oxford, 1999), 81–148.

77. See Michael Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity," *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 41–67.

theistic vocabulary with a metaphysical monism so radical that its ultimate principle is called “the One.” As John Dillon writes:⁷⁸

Plotinus identifies as a matter of course the Good of [Plato’s] *Republic* and the absolute One of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*. This identification which, in the words of Plato, situates the Good ‘beyond being’ . . . constitutes the basis of the ‘negative theology’ which, in Plotinus and in his disciples, plays so great a part in the doctrine of God and of the mystical experience.

This “negative theology”—recall Porphyry’s statement that the supreme God can only be worshiped in pure silence—might well have proven intriguing to the rabbis, or at least to the few rabbis whose thorough education in Greek letters gave them access to the riches of neoplatonic thought. Like Maimonides’ respect for the theological truths contained in the writings of contemporary Muslim philosophers, an upper-class rabbi with a thorough Greek education could have recognized in neoplatonic thought a kindred spirit, at least as far as the role and status of idols was concerned. And it is just such a recognition that animates the debates in the Mekhilta and Mishnah *‘Avodab Zarab*.

78. Plotinus, *Enneads*, introduction, lii.