



Immolating Emperors: Spectacles of Imperial Suffering and the Making of a Jewish Minority Culture in Late Antiquity

Ra'anan S. Boustan

University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

This paper traces the historical development of the discourse of violent retribution in Jewish culture over the course of Late Antiquity. The paper argues that, although Jews had long engaged in anti-Roman rhetoric, Jewish anti-imperial sentiment intensified in the fifth to seventh centuries CE. This heightened level of antipathy toward the Roman state is perhaps best exemplified by a number of texts that present tableaux of graphic violence directed against the figure of the Roman emperor. The paper shows that these fantasies of revenge redeployed and inverted specific elements of Roman imperial ideology and practice, while at the same time internalizing the pervasive stereotype of Jews in sixth- and especially seventh-century Christian sources as violent troublemakers. The paper argues that, in attempting to assert some measure of control over the “symbolic weapons” of religious violence at play in their society, the Jewish creators of this vivid discourse of retributive justice colluded with their Christian counterparts in constructing the Jew as a member of an oppositional and even dangerous religious minority.

Keywords

late antique Judaism, Rome, emperor, Christianization, revenge, eschatology

Introduction

People in the late Roman world were no more prone to conjuring up lavish visions of retributive justice than others who have lived at other times or in other places, including us moderns.¹ Indeed, the fantasy

¹) This essay develops a line of inquiry first suggested to me by Peter Brown in 2001,

that the dominant will be subjected to vengeful violence at the hands of those they have subordinated or oppressed—in some cases, suffering precisely the same forms of pain and degradation that they themselves inflicted—is hardly unique to ancient Mediterranean cultures. James C. Scott has argued that such fantasies are found cross-culturally, as a recurrent trope within the “hidden transcripts” of the disempowered in numerous diverse historical contexts.² But Scott also stresses that, despite their pervasiveness, the twin themes of inversion and revenge manifest themselves in distinctive ways in specific cultural settings, depending on the particular nature of a given political and economic system and its cultural conventions. By paying careful attention to the vengeful fantasies of the (relatively or self-perceived) powerless, we can gain a more precise and nuanced understanding of the distribution of power among rival, though always interdependent, social groups within a given society.

Over the past decade, a number of scholars have productively applied Scott’s distinction between “hidden” and “public” transcripts to the strategies by which late antique rabbis appropriated, subverted, and inevitably also re-inscribed elements of the dominant Roman (and Christian) culture within Jewish legal and narrative traditions.³ Moreover, this scholarship has shown that, at the same time that Christians were

during the early stages of my dissertation research at Princeton University. I hope that this belated effort to realize some of his intuitions does them a modicum of justice. Of course, any deficiencies in the execution rest with me. On the problematic historiographic tendency to treat late antique society as especially prone to violence, see H.A. Drake, “Introduction: Gauging Violence in Late Antiquity,” in H.A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1-11.

² J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 5-10, 36-44, and *passim*.

³ Most notably, B.A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic Judaism and Christian Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 10-11, 153-79; J. Levinson, “Tragedies Naturally Performed: Fatal Charades, *Parodia Sacra*, and the Death of Titus,” in R. Kalmin and S. Schwartz (eds.), *Jewish Culture and Society Under the Christian Roman Empire* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 349-82; J. Levinson, “The Athlete of Piety: Fatal Fictions in Rabbinic Literature” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 68 (1999), pp. 61-86; D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 42-66.

exerting great effort to conceptualize and enact a viable accommodation between Church and Empire, Jewish writers increasingly sought to articulate their distinctiveness within and perhaps also alienation from this emergent politico-religious order.⁴ The primarily literary-exegetical and cultural anthropological methodologies of these studies have thus complemented recent social-historical accounts of the emergence of Jews as a distinctive religious minority within an increasingly Christianized society.⁵

This paper seeks to advance the insights of this scholarship concerning the paradoxical impact of religious competition and, at times, violence on late antique Judaism by tracing the historical development of Jewish fantasies of revenge directed at Roman imperial power, in particular as it was embodied in the person of the Roman emperor or the imperial household. It will be my contention that, despite significant continuities between Christian and Jewish traditions of divine retribution, it is only in the early Byzantine period (circa 450–700 CE) that Jewish writers began to generate tableaux of graphic violence directed specifically at the figure of the Roman emperor. Moreover, I will argue that these expressions of profound antagonism toward the emperor not only redeployed specific elements of Roman imperial ideology and practice, but also internalized the increasingly common stereotype of Jews as violent troublemakers found in sixth- and especially seventh-century Christian sources. In attempting to assert some measure of control over the “symbolic weapons of religious violence” at play in their society,⁶ the creators of this vivid discourse of retributive justice thus colluded with their Christian counterparts in constructing the Jew as a member of an oppositional and even dangerous religious minority.

The theme of vengeance presents a particularly useful lens through which to view the historical formation—and subsequent transformations—of Jewish identity over the course of Late Antiquity, as the recent

⁴ D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 202-25.

⁵ See especially S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 CE* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 179-289.

⁶ The phrase is from P. Boudieu, “Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber’s Sociology of Religion,” in S. Lash and S. Whimster (eds.), *Max Weber, Rationality, and Modernity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 119-36 (128).

work of Israel Yuval has well illustrated.⁷ Particularly instructive in Yuval's analysis of a Jewish "theology of vengeance" is the stress he places on the gap between representation and social reality. In his view, exegetical, liturgical, and narrative evidence for the intense and often oppositional dialogue in which Jews and Christians have so long engaged should not be read as evidence of social and cultural separation, but rather as traces of their profoundly intertwined and mutually-constituting histories.

My analysis of late antique Jewish discourses of retributive justice emphasizes the generative role that contemporaneous shifts in imperial institutions and ideology played in shaping Jewish culture. In so doing, I intend to heed the appeal recently articulated by a number of Roman historians for greater attention to the "organic connection among politics, economics, and culture across the Mediterranean" that conditioned both stability and change in this period.⁸ The evolution of late antique Judaism—like that of other longstanding religious and cultural forms—is rightly characterized as a process of *gradual* transformation. Historians must nevertheless ask whether there were significant junctures at which changes in the structure and ideology of the Roman state impinged directly on Jewish cultural production.

Punishment of the Wicked Ruler in Early Jewish and Christian Sources

In this section, I analyze the *topos* of the punishment of the wicked ruler or tyrant in early Jewish and Christian writings produced before the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The notion of retributive justice

⁷ I.J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (trans. B. Harshav and J. Chipman; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); I.J. Yuval, "Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations" (Hebrew), *Zion* 58 (1993), pp. 33-90.

⁸ C. Ando, "Decline, Fall, and Transformation," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008), pp. 31-60 (48); also C.R. Whitaker, "Imperialism and Culture: The Roman Initiative," in D.J. Mattingly (ed.), *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism: Power, Discourse, and Discrepant Experience in the Roman Empire* (JRASup 23; Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1997), pp. 143-63.

colored Jewish and Christian representations of the tyrant's this-worldly death, his post-mortem suffering in the afterlife, and his ultimate defeat and punishment at the end-time.⁹ I argue, however, that there is a clear difference between the historiographic and apocalyptic genres in their treatment of this theme. Historiographic sources generally apply the notion of retributive justice to the physical death of a specific historical actor who plays a central role in the narrative. By contrast, apocalyptic literature tends to avoid topical or contemporary references in such descriptions; instead, these sources adopt typological language, describing in generic and genre-specific terms the forms of punishments to be meted out to broad classes of evil or corrupt political or religious authorities. When apocalyptic texts do describe the punishment of specific rulers, these figures are typically drawn from the legendary past (e.g., Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar) and not from the immediate historical present. The figure of the first-century emperor Nero, whose presence is felt in a number of apocalyptic texts, represents a significant exception to this pattern. But, by and large, neither Jews nor Christians, prior to the fifth century, produced detailed accounts of the post-mortem or end-of-time suffering of Roman emperors. Their reticence is somewhat surprising in light of the rich literary resources at their command as well as the contentious historical circumstances that might have led both Jews and Christians to do so. This pattern sets in relief the distinctiveness and even novelty of the increasingly oppositional anti-Roman discourse that was later adopted by Byzantine Jews in their visions of imperial suffering.

During the first millennium of the Common Era—and well beyond—Jewish and Christian authors drew on a common, if not wholly overlapping, body of authoritative texts to produce a vast and varied literature dedicated to describing the violent suffering that had been or would be visited upon the persecutors of God's people (however defined). Alongside the paradigmatic narratives of retributive justice found in such early Jewish writings as the book of Esther, Daniel 1-6, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, a wide range of historiographic, prophetic, and apocalyptic

⁹ On the dynamic relationship among these three types of eschatology, see C.W. Bynum and P. Freedman (eds.), *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 1-9.

sources shared by Jews and Christians likewise contributed to the development of this long-lived and rather colorful literary tradition of imagined violence.¹⁰ Such well-known apocalypses as *The Book of the Watchers* and Daniel 7-12, written in the late-third to mid-second centuries BCE, are perhaps the earliest texts to reflect the emergent notion of individual eschatology in which the righteous and the wicked are destined for separate and even diametrically opposed post-mortem fates.¹¹ As Dan. 12:2-3 famously has it, “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever” (NRSV). This model of eschatological justice had a profound impact on Jewish responses to the “Antiochan persecutions” of the mid-second century, although it likely predated these events and cannot be explained solely as a response to this or any specific religious or political conflict.¹²

Thus, in 2 Maccabees, the mother and her seven sons both anticipate posthumous vindication as reward for their noble deaths and call down vengeance upon their tormentor Antiochus IV and his descendants (7:14, 6, 19, 31-36), a fate that their tormentor in fact suffers several chapters later (9:1-28).¹³ The direct link that the text draws between the death of the martyrs and the victory over or redemption

¹⁰ On the shared vocabulary and generic conventions of retributive justice in Jewish and Christian accounts of the afterlife, see M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), to which this paper is deeply indebted.

¹¹ On the impact of apocalyptic literature on early Jewish notions of the afterlife, see the classic essay of J.J. Collins, “Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death,” *CBQ* 36 (1974), pp. 21-43; repr. in *Seers, Sibyls, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (JSJSup 54; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 75-97; also M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 47-71.

¹² G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Expanded edn; HTS 56; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 67-118.

¹³ On the notion of retributive justice in 2 Maccabees, see J.W. van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (JSJSup 57; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 163-84.

from the enemy or persecutor represents an important theme in apocalyptic literature as well as in other genres.¹⁴

In the elaborated version of this narrative in 4 Maccabees, the retribution that Antiochus IV is destined to suffer in this life is also compounded by the eternal punishment awaiting him after death: “For we shall have the prize of virtue; but you because of your bloodthirstiness will deservedly undergo from the divine justice eternal torment by fire” (4 Mac. 9:9). And the theme of post-mortem suffering is echoed throughout the remainder of the text, frequently in the speeches of the martyrs.¹⁵ The notion that a persecuting ruler is destined to face post-mortem punishment—and, in particular, by means of fire—already existed in the first or early second century,¹⁶ although, as we shall see, it did not initially exert a strong influence on Jewish representations of Roman imperial authorities.

The *topos* of the post-mortem punishment of the wicked tyrant found in such historiographic narratives as 2 and 4 Maccabees has its counterpart in early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. Martha Himmelfarb convincingly argues that Jewish and Christian descriptions of post-mortem punishment developed within the parameters of the apocalyptic genre, sharing highly precise literary conventions and, indeed, concrete textual content.¹⁷ In particular, Himmelfarb shows that the apocalyptic “tour” genre, which is characterized by the “demon-

¹⁴ Compare *Test. Mos.* 9:1-7. On the role of martyrdom in initiating divinely-guided military victory, see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, pp. 125-86; also the seminal discussion in J. Licht, “Taxo, or the Apocalyptic Doctrine of Vengeance,” *JJS* 12 (1961), pp. 95-103.

¹⁵ The theme of post-mortem suffering is repeated in the individual martyr-narratives at 4 Mac. 9:24, 32; 10:11, 16, 21; 11:3, 23; 12:12; 13:15; 14:12, 18; 18:5.

¹⁶ The dating of 4 Maccabees remains uncertain, but the scholarly consensus is that the text belongs to first- or, at the latest, early second-century diaspora Judaism. For a judicious review of the relevant scholarship, see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, pp. 73-81, which argues for a date after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and tentatively suggests that the author was a Jew from Asia Minor active around 100 CE.

¹⁷ See especially Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*. For a complementary assessment of this material, see R. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (NovTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 1998). Both Himmelfarb and Bauckham build upon the foundational work in S. Lieberman, “On Sins and Their Punishments,”

strative explanations” of the otherworldly terrain by an otherworldly guide to a human visionary, lent this material its distinctive and enduring literary form.¹⁸ As we shall see, the immense stability and longevity of this form were largely resistant to the processes of differentiation that occurred as Jews and Christians negotiated their differences from each other as well as their distinctive relationships to the Roman state.

Jewish and Christian “tours of hell” describe the post-mortem suffering of numerous classes of sinners. Operating in accordance with the measure-for-measure logic of the *lex talionis*, these texts carefully construct a world in which the punishment fits the crime.¹⁹ Thus, for example, men who indulged in the pleasures of food and drink in this world while neglecting the poor, hunger and thirst in the next; and women who have committed infanticide are hung from their nipples.²⁰

While the “tours of hell” are principally occupied with the fate of the normal sinner, they also regularly imagine the punishments that await corrupt, hypocritical, or wicked figures of authority. One of the earliest examples of this notion is found in the second-century CE *Apocalypse of Peter*, which speaks in rather general terms of the sufferings in Gehenna of “the persecutors and betrayers of my righteous ones” (9:2).²¹ Near these agents of persecution the visionary beholds the torments of “those who put to death the martyrs (with) a lie” (9:4).²² Thus, like 2 and 4 Maccabees, the *Apocalypse of Peter* seems to draw a direct link between the context of religious persecution and retributive justice exacted upon the persecutors and their collaborators. The text does not, however, identify the persecutors with a specific political power or institutional position.

in *Texts and Studies* (New York: KTAV, 1974), pp. 29-51; S. Lieberman, “Some Aspects of After Life in Early Rabbinic Literature,” in *Texts and Studies*, pp. 235-72.

¹⁸) Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, pp. 41-67.

¹⁹) See discussion of the transformation of the notion of retaliatory justice in the dying prayers of Jesus and Stephen in Shelly Matthews’ paper in this issue.

²⁰) Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, pp. 68-105; see also Lieberman, “On Sins,” pp. 48-49.

²¹) Translation of the Ethiopic and versification from D.D. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter* (SBLDS 97; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 209.

²²) Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, p. 211.

Other apocalyptic texts do add somewhat more specificity to such descriptions. In the *Vision of Ezra*, we find the following report: "And he (Ezra) saw visions of a furnace, against the setting sun, burning with great fire, into which were sent many kings and princes of this world; and many thousands of poor people were accusing them and saying, 'They, through their power, wounded us and dragged free men into servitude.'" ²³ The phrase "the kings (and princes) of the earth/this world" is as general as it is enduring. Himmelfarb persuasively notes that both Jewish and Christian branches of this literary tradition (where they are separable) rarely identify these wicked rulers with contemporary historical personages. Instead, these sources employ highly general terminology (e.g., "king" or "prince"). ²⁴

And even when some texts do identify the wicked ruler with a specific figure, this figure invariably functions as a typological embodiment of evil. Thus, in a brief medieval Hebrew vision of hell known as the "Isaiah fragment," the legendary prophet is said to have "entered the fifth court, and found it full of smoke. There were all the governors and the chiefs, and wicked Pharaoh presiding over them and watching over the gate of Gehenna. And he (Pharaoh) says to them, 'Why did you not learn from me when I was in Egypt?' Thus he sits there and watches at the gatehouse of hell." ²⁵ This passage is scarcely more specific. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, functions merely as a general paradigm for the wicked foreign ruler. And, as in numerous similar Hebrew versions of this material, the characterization of the ruling powers remain stereotyped.

²³ Translation from J. Mueller and G. Robbins (trans.), "Vision of Ezra," in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983-1985), vol. 1, pp. 581-90 (574).

²⁴ Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, pp. 123-25. Himmelfarb draws her conclusions from the following sources: *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Mary* 64; *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Baruch* 72-73; *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Gorgorios* 86; *Latin Apocalypse of Elijah*; *Joshua ben Levi fragment*. For full citation of the editions and translations of these sources, see Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, pp. 175-82. For historical introductions to each, see Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, pp. 19-21 (Mary), 21-23 (Baruch), 23 (Gorgorios), 32-33 (Joshua b. Levi), and 34-36 (Elijah).

²⁵ I have slightly modified the translation in M.E. Stone and J. Strugnell, *The Books of Elijah, Parts 1 & 2* (Texts and Translations 18; Pseudepigrapha Series 8; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 22.

Early rabbinic sources (from the third and fourth centuries CE) likewise conform to the general pattern we have found in early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. Although rabbinic literature (in contrast to apocalyptic texts) is relatively restrained in its depictions of the fates of the dead, the rabbinic authors did explicitly address in some detail the question of the post-mortem punishment of wicked rulers in *Gehinnom* (i.e., hell).²⁶ The standard idiom used in these sources to refer to the evil powers of this world is “those who raised their hands against the Sanctuary.”²⁷ This phrase may have functioned as a kind of code for the Romans. But it is interesting that the fourth-century Palestinian Talmud specifically discusses this tradition concerning *Gehinnom* when trying to determine whether the soldiers of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, destroyer of the First Temple, would be punished in the afterlife for participating in the Destruction (PT Berakhot 9,1 [13b]). Like the comparable units of tradition in apocalyptic sources, rabbinic teachings on the fate of Israel’s enemies display a highly stereotyped quality.

Indeed, the idioms used in early rabbinic sources to describe the post-mortem punishment of oppressive foreign rulers remained in circulation in Jewish literary culture, largely unchanged, for generations. Thus, for example, although the post-talmudic cosmological treatise *Seder Rabbah de-Bereshit* synthesizes the diverse traditions regarding post-mortem reward and punishment found in classical rabbinic literature into a novel systematic statement on the fate of the dead, the creators of this work did not see a need for greater historical specificity.²⁸ In

²⁶ Lieberman, “Some Aspects of After Life,” p. 236. For general discussion of rabbinic notions of post-mortem reward and punishment, see E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 436-44, 509-11.

²⁷ See C. Milikowsky, *Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronography* (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1981), pp. 231-32 (Hebrew original), 458 (English translation). Compare the various versions of this tradition: Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:4-5; PT (Palestinian Talmud) Berakhot 9,1 (13b); Genesis Rabbah 26:2; BT (Babylonian Talmud) Rosh ha-Shanah 17a. For discussion of these sources and their relationship to *Seder ‘Olam*, see C. Milikowsky, “Gehenna and the ‘Sinners of Israel’ in Light of *Seder ‘Olam*” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 55 (1986), pp. 311-43 (311-12).

²⁸ On the relationship of this work to ancient Jewish cosmological speculation, espe-

describing the punishment of the wicked in *Gehinnom*, the treatise largely builds upon the traditional material found in Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 13:4-5.²⁹ Where *Seder Rabbah de-Bereshit* does expand upon the phrase “those who raised their hands against the Sanctuary,” it employs equally generic terms to refer to the wicked tyrants who “destroyed my House and burned my Temple and exiled my children among the nations of the world.”³⁰ The text prefers typological discourse to historical or political specificity.

A number of late antique Christian “tours of hell” did, however, elaborate the motif of the punishment of the wicked ruler in novel directions. This is particularly true for those compositions that follow the highly influential *Apocalypse of Paul* (third to fourth century CE).³¹ Yet, in this branch of the literary tradition, instead of kings or princes who occupy the unenviable place of the suffering powerful in hell, it is internal ecclesiastical authorities who have become the focus of moral censure. Thus, the *Apocalypse of Paul* chapters 34–36 imagines in vivid detail the post-mortem suffering of sinful and corrupt presbyters, bishops, deacons, and lectors.³² But it was not until the middle Byzantine period, in ninth-to eleventh-century apocalyptic works such as the *Apoc-*

cially its rabbinic source-materials, see P. Schäfer, “In Heaven as it is in Hell: The Cosmology of *Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*,” in R.S. Boustan and A.Y. Reed (eds.), *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 233-74.

²⁹ Schäfer, “In Heaven as it is in Hell,” pp. 248-49.

³⁰ This phrase appears in different versions of the treatise at §451 (MS Munich 22) and §758 (MS Oxford 1531), printed in P. Schäfer (ed.), *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (TSAJ 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), pp. 187, 271.

³¹ Scholars disagree on the date of the text, some preferring an early third century date, while others credit the so-called Tarsus introduction, which dates the text to 388 CE. I follow P. Piovaneli, “Les origines de *l'Apocalypse de Paul* reconsidérées,” *Apocrypha* 4 (1993), pp. 25-64 (45-59), which argues for a date between 395 and 416; also P. Piovaneli, “The Miraculous Discovery of the Hidden Manuscript, or The Paratextual Function of the Prologue to the *Apocalypse of Paul*,” in J.N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz (eds.), *The Visio Pauli and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 23-49.

³² H. Duensing and A. De Santos Otero (trans.), “Apocalypse of Paul,” in E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher (eds.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (trans. R. Mcl. Wilson; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), vol. 2, pp. 755-803 (731-32).

alypse of the Theotokos and the *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, that this internally-directed critique of ecclesiastical corruption would be applied to specific “sinful” emperors who had defiled their sacred office—and then never as a wholesale rejection of “Rome” or its imperial representative as such.³³

A small number of the “tour” texts that depict the post-mortem punishment of an evil king do refer to specific historical personages, though we will see that these exceptions prove the rule. The *Apocalypse of Ezra*, chapter 4, reports that the visionary “saw a fiery throne and an old man seated on it, and his punishment was merciless. And I said to the angels, ‘Who is this and what is his sin?’ And they said to me, ‘This is Herod, who was king for a time, and he commanded to kill the infants two years old or under.’ And I said, ‘Woe upon his soul!’”³⁴ However, within the context of the *Apocalypse of Ezra*, the allusion to King Herod and his murder of the innocents lacks the immediacy of historical narration and instead capitalizes on the legendary dimensions that this figure had achieved in literary tradition. Moreover, while Herod here possesses some of the attributes of a persecuting monarch, he remains an ambiguous figure, simultaneously native and foreign. He thus occupies a midpoint between the corrupt church officials who abuse the power granted them by their community in the *Apocalypse of Paul* and such paradigmatic foreign tyrants as Antiochus IV.

Perhaps the most significant exception to this general pattern is the complex of traditions regarding the return of the Roman emperor Nero (a.k.a. *redivivus* or *redux*), current among first- and second-century Jews and Christians.³⁵ This figure is distinct from, though in some cases has

³³ See J. Baun, “Middle Byzantine ‘Tours of Hell’: Outsider Theodicy?” in D.C. Smythe (ed.), *Strangers to Themselves: The Byzantine Outsider* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate/Variorum, 2000), pp. 47-60; and, more fully, J. Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium: Celestial Journey and Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁴ Mueller and Robbins, “Vision of Ezra,” p. 574.

³⁵ See especially J.W. van Henten, “Nero Redivivus Demolished: The Coherence of the Nero Traditions in the Sibylline Oracles,” *JSP* 21 (2000), pp. 3-17; D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (World Biblical Commentary 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), pp. 737-40; L. Kreitzer, “Hadrian and the Nero Redivivus Myth,” *ZNW* 79 (1988), pp. 92-115.

attributes of, the eschatological antagonist or Antichrist, who is likewise characterized by his role as the persecutor of God's people.³⁶ The Nero *redivivus* legend presents the Roman emperor as the embodiment of evil (Beliar, Antichrist, etc.) who will return—often from the abyss—to wage war against the righteous. A version of this narrative tradition is incorporated at the end of the “tours of hell” section in the second-century *Apocalypse of Peter*. Following Peter's vision of the judgments of hell, Jesus tells the Apostle that he should seek execution at the hands of the Roman emperor in the capital city of Rome and reassures him that his martyrdom at the hands of the emperor will set in motion the destruction of his imperial persecutor:

Behold, I (Jesus) have shown all these things to you, Peter, and have expounded them. Now, go to the city that rules over the west (Rome?), and drink the cup that I have promised you, at the hands of the son of the one who is in Hades (*en cheiroin* [read: *chersin*] *tou huion tou Haidou*), so that his disappearance (*autou hé aphanēia*) may have a beginning.³⁷

Although this passage is cryptic, the phrase “the son of him who is in Hades” appears to be a reflex of a widely disseminated set of narrative traditions concerning Nero in his capacity as persecutor of the early Christian movement.³⁸ The narrative of Nero's defeat and punishment did not have a perceptible impact on the “tours of hell” tradition. The various sources that allude to or develop this theme presume that the wicked emperor is destined to be defeated in the grand final battle between good and evil. They do not, however, explore his individual eschatological or post-mortem suffering.

³⁶) Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 751-55.

³⁷) I follow the text and translation of the Greek Rainer fragment of this passage in M.R. James, “The Rainer Fragment of the *Apocalypse of Peter*,” *JTS* 32 (1931), pp. 270-79 (271). For discussion of the relationship between the Greek text and its corrupt Ethiopic parallel, see Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened*, pp. 228, 342-62.

³⁸) The closest parallel to this passage is *Asc. Isa.* 4:2-14 (an interpolated section often called the *Testament of Hezekiah*), which predicts that one of the Twelve Apostles, probably Peter, would be “delivered into the hand” of Beliar, presumably to be identified as Nero; see also Rev. 13:11-18, 17:7-14; *Sib. Or.* 3.36-74; 5.28-34.

We will see below that the treatment of Nero in Jewish and Christian sources from the first to fourth century comes closest to the violent forms of anti-imperial rhetoric that were produced by Jewish writers in the early Byzantine period. Indeed, the Nero *redivivus* tradition would remain vibrant for centuries, repeated and expanded again and again by Christian writers throughout Late Antiquity.³⁹ But what is particularly striking, I think, is how rarely Jewish and Christian sources address the post-mortem or end-of-time punishments to be suffered by the ideological embodiment of Roman power, the Roman emperor.

Christian historiographic writings offer an instructive contrast to the reticence of apocalyptic literature to apply its discourse of retributive justice to specific historical contexts. The writings of the pre-Constantinian Christian historian and polemicist Lactantius exemplify the nature of the impact that this discourse of divine retribution had on expressions of anti-Roman sentiment. Lactantius, who composed his history of the Great Persecution (303-311 CE) on the eve of Constantine's new dispensation, described the death of Galerius in the highly stylized terms drawn directly from earlier scriptural models. His account quite consciously recycles the central plot elements of the ghastly death of Antiochus IV in 2 Mac. 9:1-28.⁴⁰ While elsewhere in his writings Lactantius makes liberal use of the language of eschatological justice,⁴¹ he never harnessed eschatological imagery to lend depth or texture to the pointedly

³⁹) Cf. Commodian, *Instructiones* 41; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 20.19.

⁴⁰) *De mortibus persecutorum* 33-35. For text and translation, see J.L. Creed (ed.), *Lactantius: De Mortibus Persecutorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 50-55. On the far-reaching dependence of this account on 2 Maccabees, see J.-D. Gauger, "Der 'Tod des Verfolgers': Überlegungen zur Historizität eines Topos," *JSJ* 33 (2002), pp. 42-64 (61-62). Compare the more abbreviated account of Galerius' death in Eusebius, *HE* 8.16.3-5.

⁴¹) See, most notably, the culmination of the *Divine Institutes* (7.26.7), where in his review of the ultimate fate of the righteous and the wicked, Lactantius conjures up an image of the "lord" (*dominus*) of the impious burning together with his servants "for their sins for ever with perpetual fire in the sight of the angels and the just" (*pro suis facinoribus in conspectu angelorum atque iustorum perpetuo igni cremabitur in aeternum*) (S. Brandt [ed.], *Lactantius, Opera omnia* [CSEL 19; Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1890], pp. 666-67). For comprehensive discussion of the sources of Lactantius' millenarianism, see H.W.A. van Rooijen-Dijkman, *De Beata Vita: het zevende boek van de Divinae Institutiones van Lactantius. Analyse en bronnenonderzoek* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1967),

topical descriptions of imperial suffering in *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*.

Thus, while Jews and Christians had available to them a robust idiom for describing the post-mortem suffering of the wicked, kings and generals among them, and while they could produce elaborate narratives concerning the final defeat of the emperor as risen Antichrist, they did not yoke these elements together to produce historically specific and politically charged visions of the afterlife throughout the first four centuries of the Common Era. This hesitancy, if that is indeed what it was, may be little more than a reflection of the profoundly conservative nature of the specific literary genres with which we are dealing. Still, we should bear this background in mind when we turn our attention to the subsequent evolution of this theme in the fifth century and beyond.

Jews on Fire: The Figure of the Jew as Troublemaker in Early Byzantine Literature

By the sixth century, Christians had grown apprehensive at what they perceived, not without reason, as the ill-will that Jews harbored against the Christian Church or the Roman state. Such concerns are already reflected in the legislation passed in 408 CE against the alleged Jewish practice of burning Haman in effigy on “a form made to resemble the sainted cross” during the festival of Purim, which the authorities suspected was a gesture of ridicule aimed at the Savior himself (*Codex Theodosianus* 16:18:18).⁴² And, indeed, a verse parody in Jewish Aramaic from fifth-century Palestine, which features Jesus Christ amid a host of Israel’s enemies from biblical history justifying the punishment of Haman and bewailing their own cruel fates, may suggest that the dim

pp. 93-148; also O. Nicholson, “The Source of the Dates in Lactantius’ *Divine Institutes*,” *JTS* 36 (1985), pp. 291-310 (295-96).

⁴² The text and translation appear in A. Linder (ed.), *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p. 237. For analysis, see A.M. Rabello, “La première loi de Théodose II, C.Th. XVI, 8, 18, et la fête de Pourim,” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 55 (1977), pp. 545-58.

view of Purim taken by the Christian authorities was far from baseless.⁴³

Nevertheless, it appears that the figure of the Jew underwent a palpable shift in Christian discourse during the fifth, sixth, and especially seventh centuries. Jews were increasingly cast as a disruptive and even dangerous presence within Christian society and public life, although the relationship between this literary *topos* and social reality remains a vexed question in modern historiography.⁴⁴ Averil Cameron as well as Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Déroche have stressed the degree to which the image of the Jew as troublemaker spilled over the boundaries of the literary forms traditionally dedicated to anti-Jewish polemic, penetrating more deeply than before into historiographic, chronographic, and legal sources as well.⁴⁵ Thus, for example, the incorporation of anti-Jewish

⁴³ The poem is number 33 in M. Sokoloff and J. Yahalom (ed.), *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999), pp. 204-19 (Jesus speaks at lines 85-90). The relationship between such poetic compositions and the Theodosian legislation was first suggested in J. Yahalom, "Angels Do Not Understand Aramaic: On the Literary Uses of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic in Late Antiquity," *JJS* 47 (1996), pp. 33-44 (41-44); see also the penetrating reading of this poem in Ophir Münz-Manor, "Other Voices: Haman, Jesus and the Representations of the Other in Purim Poems from Byzantine Palestine" (Hebrew), in Y. Shapira, O. Herzog, and T.S. Hess (eds.), *Popular and Canonical: Literary Dialogues* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), pp. 69-79, 211-17. On Purim as a locus for Jewish violence, from Late Antiquity to the present, see E. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ For critical assessment of modern historiography on Jewish anti-Christian violence in this period, see E. Horowitz, "'The Vengeance of the Jews Was Stronger Than Their Avarice': Modern Historians and the Persian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614," *Jewish Social Studies* 4 (1998), pp. 1-39.

⁴⁵ A.V. Cameron, "Byzantines and Jews: Some Recent Work on Early Byzantium," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 26 (1996), pp. 249-74 (249); also A.V. Cameron, "Disputations, Polemical Literature, and the Formation of Opinion in Early Byzantine Literature," in G.J. Reinink and H.J.L. Vanstiphout (eds.), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Medieval Near East* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 42; Leuven: Peeters, 1991), pp. 91-108; G. Dagron and V. Déroche in "Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII^e siècle," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991), pp. 17-273, especially the general historical introduction by Dagron (pp. 17-46); V. Déroche, "La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^e et au VII^e siècle, un memento inédit, les *Kephalaia*," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991), pp. 275-311. The fullest treatment in English of the image of the

tropes within Justinian's famous Novella 146 suggests just how pervasive, across a wide range of genres and disciplines, such negative stereotypes had become by the sixth century.⁴⁶ This process appears to have gone hand-in-hand with the deteriorating condition of Jews in Roman civil law in the sixth century.⁴⁷

It is worth noting that the image of the Jews as "the religious outsider *par excellence*"⁴⁸ within late Roman/Byzantine society was not solely the product of the seventh-century military crises created by the Persian and then Arab wars, in which the Jews of the Empire were, rightly or wrongly, implicated. Rather, the intensification of anti-Jewish sentiment in Roman-Christian society had been underway from the late fourth century on. Fergus Millar has recently stressed the extraordinarily rapid crystallization, in precisely this period, of the ideological desire *and* institutional capacity of both Church and State to classify and manage the various dissident religious groupings against which Christians felt themselves to be in constant conflict, including Jews.⁴⁹ The punctuated episodes of actual anti-Jewish violence that began in this period reflect the far-reaching changes under way in this period in the organization of religious identity in the late Roman world, as Jews

Jew in early Byzantine sources remains D.M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994). But see the critical assessments of Olster's work in V. Déroche, "Polémique anti-judaïque et émergence de l'Islam (7^e-8^e siècles)," *Revue des études byzantines* 57 (1999), pp. 141-61, and Cameron, "Byzantines and Jews."

⁴⁶ L.V. Rutgers, "Justinian's Novella 146: Between Jews and Christians," in R. Kalmin and S. Schwartz (eds.), *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 385-407 (388-90). The text of the law is found in Linder, *Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, pp. 405-10.

⁴⁷ A.M. Rabello, "Civil Jewish Jurisdiction in the Days of Emperor Justinian (527-565): *Codex Justinianus* 1.9.8," *Israel Law Review* 33 (1999), pp. 51-66, repr. in A.M. Rabello, *The Jews in the Roman Empire: Legal Problems, from Herod to Justinian* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

⁴⁸ P. Fredriksen and O. Irshai, "Christian Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies," in S.T. Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism, vol. 4: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 977-1035 (1024).

⁴⁹ F. Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II, 408-450* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 116-29.

came to be marked out as an increasingly marginalized (but still protected) minority.⁵⁰

The disruptive presence of Jewish populations within the cities of the eastern Empire is a recurrent image in Byzantine historiographic and chronographic sources. In his well-known account of the civic violence that erupted in Antioch in 486 CE during the reign of the emperor Zeno (r. 474-491 CE), the sixth-century chronicler John Malalas imputes to the emperor the following ironic aside concerning the Jewish targets of factional violence:

The Greens were responsible for many riots and murders at that time in Antioch. They murdered Jews, it is said, sparing no one....The impious actions of the Greens against the Jews were reported to the emperor Zeno. He became angry with the Greens in Antioch, asking "Why did they burn only the corpses of the Jews? They ought to have burned live Jews too."⁵¹

Burning Jews, if not an actual event, clearly represented a potent literary trope. In his now classic book on the history of the circus factions in the Roman and Byzantine periods, Alan Cameron has argued against the notion that the Jewish populations of the empire were aligned with the Blue faction against the Green and has, in general, debunked the supposition that the factions possessed distinct ethnic or religious profiles.⁵² And it is not my aim here to revive the notion that such accounts of anti-Jewish violence, so frequent in Byzantine sources, demonstrate that the Jews lived under conditions of unrelenting "anti-Semitic" oppression. Far from it: after nearly a century of archaeological work on sites throughout the Levant as well as a profound historiographic shift in attitudes concerning the place of Jews in the late Roman world

⁵⁰ Megan Hale Williams, "Lessons from Jerome's Jewish Teachers: Exegesis and Cultural Interaction in Late Antique Palestine," in N.B. Dohrmann and D. Stern (eds.), *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 66-86 (69-77).

⁵¹ Translated in E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, and R. Scott (trans.), *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (Byzantina Australiensia 4; Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986), pp. 218-19.

⁵² *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 149-53.

in general, we are in a good position to appreciate the vibrancy and dynamism of Byzantine Jewish culture and institutions.⁵³ Nevertheless, I would argue that the unapologetic antipathy toward the Jews captured so vividly in Malalas' report reflects a palpable change of register in Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism in this period.

In some cases, the literary process by which representations of Jews came to be crystallized within the Byzantine historiographic tradition—and thus also historical memory—reveals the power that anti-Jewish discourse had to shape or reshape the figure of the Jew as a social actor. One such notable episode, in which the Jews act as the perpetrators of fiery violence rather than its victims, is the account regarding the murder of the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Antioch, Anastasius II in the year 608/9 CE. According to the *Chronicle* of the ninth-century monk Theophanes the Confessor (c. 810-815 CE), “the Jews of Antioch, becoming disorderly, staged an uprising against the Christians and murdered Anastasius, the great Patriarch of Antioch, whose genitals they put in his mouth. After this, they dragged him along the main street and killed many landowners and burnt them.”⁵⁴ This relatively brief notice has been central to modern historical accounts of the central role that the Jewish communities of the empire played in the political and social instability of the early seventh century.⁵⁵

I, for one, have no desire either to indict or exonerate the Jews of Antioch—or, for that matter, of the empire more generally. Nevertheless, the historicity of Theophanes' account of *this particular episode* can be called into question quite persuasively, since the more contemporaneous report concerning the Patriarch's death found in the seventh-century *Chronicon Paschale* makes absolutely no mention of Jews, but instead places the blame squarely on the shoulders of a group of unruly

⁵³ See especially L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2nd edn.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 210-49; Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, pp. 203-74.

⁵⁴ The text is found at C. de Boor (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (2 vols.; Leipzig, 1883), vol. 1, p. 296. Translated in C. Mango and R. Scott (trans.), *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 425.

⁵⁵ On the treatment of this episode in modern historiography, see Horowitz, “Vengeance of the Jews,” pp. 14-16.

imperial soldiers.⁵⁶ Several decades ago, J.D. Frendo sought to explain the literary dynamics by which the Jews might have become associated within the chronographic record with an event in which they had not earlier been implicated.⁵⁷ He argued that Theophanes' account of the death of Anastasius has striking thematic and even verbal affinities with reports concerning the execution of the emperor Phocas by Heraclius in 609/10 CE found both within the *Chronicle* itself and in other sources.⁵⁸ Frendo, therefore, posited that the mutilation of the Patriarch by the Jews, as described by Theophanes, resulted from a complex process of interpolation, which was significantly inflected by the anti-Jewish bias of the chronicler himself. We need not follow Frendo in all the particulars of his rather convoluted source-critical argument to doubt the reliability of Theophanes' report, with its stark divergence from its parallel in the *Chronicon Paschale*.⁵⁹ Certainly, Byzantine chronographers played an active compositional role as they redacted dossiers of earlier sources into their large-scale chronographic projects.⁶⁰ It would seem that, over time, Jews in Byzantine-Christian sources tended to attract, as it were, acts of violence against imperial or ecclesiastical authorities that in earlier sources had been imputed to others.

The fact that anti-Jewish attitudes profoundly shaped the processes of composition and redaction in which Byzantine literary elites engaged does not, of course, mean that Jews did not engage in violent speech and acts. On the contrary: in the Jewish sources from this period, we likewise detect a more confrontational attitude toward the Roman-Byzantine state, articulated most vividly in violent fantasies directed at the figure that embodied most fully its power and authority, the emperor

⁵⁶ M. Whitby and M. Whitby (trans.), *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), p. 150.

⁵⁷ J.D. Frendo, "Who Killed Anastasius II," *JQR* 72 (1982), pp. 202-4.

⁵⁸ De Boor, *Chronographia*, vol. 1, pp. 298-99. Translated at Mango and Scott, *Chronicle of Theophanes*, p. 428. Compare the parallel accounts at Nikephoros, *Chronographikon* 1.35-50; *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 699-701.

⁵⁹ D.M. Olster, *The Politics of Usurpation in the Seventh Century: Rhetoric and Revolution in Byzantium* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1993), pp. 117-38.

⁶⁰ William Adler, *Time Immemorial: Archaic History and Its Sources in Christian Chronography from Julius Africanus to George Syncellus* (DOS 26; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989), pp. 132-234.

himself. I will suggest that the adoption by Byzantine Jews of this discourse of violent retribution reflects their tactical deployment—and perhaps internalization—of the trope of the violent Jew that was so pervasive in Byzantine-Christian literary culture.

The Eschatological Fate of the Emperor in Rabbinic and Related Sources, 450–700 CE

A wide range of Jewish sources from the early-Byzantine period—from liturgical poetry to a new spate of apocalypses written in Hebrew—at test an intensification of anti-Roman sentiment among Byzantine Jews.⁶¹ This heightened level of antipathy is best exemplified by a number of texts that describe in graphic detail the eschatological suffering of the Roman emperor, which mirrors measure-for-measure his oppressive deeds. I will argue here that Jewish writers in the early Byzantine period enhanced the more conventional critique of Rome as a wicked kingdom with vivid depictions of Roman emperors being subject to retributive punishment. Moreover, these literary spectacles of imperial suffering are distinctive for their concerted use of language and imagery drawn from Jewish eschatological traditions describing the post-mortem or end-of-time punishment of the wicked.

The famous and widely-attested rabbinic narrative that recounts the suffering inflicted by God on the emperor Titus for his role in the destruction of the Second Temple offers a notable example of the novel incorporation of eschatological imagery into Jewish anti-Roman discourse.⁶² In brief, the narrative—at least in its more fully realized

⁶¹ See, e.g., W.J. van Bakkum, “Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries,” in J. Den Boeft and A. Hilhorst (eds.), *Early Christian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 297-308; J.C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalypses: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). On the re-emergence of Jewish apocalyptic writing within the context of Byzantine Christian culture, see A.Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 233-72, and the previous literature cited there.

⁶² The narrative appears in a number of distinct versions in *Sifrei Deuteronomy* §328; *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 26; *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:5; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 21 (Lieberman); *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* A and B 7; *Genesis Rabbah* 10:7; *Leviticus Rabbah*

forms—reports that Titus, after having destroyed and despoiled the Jerusalem Temple, was tormented for seven years by a gnat (יתוש) that entered his head upon his return to Rome. Various versions of the narrative stress the public and humiliating nature of Titus' suffering, as various specialists are brought in to treat the emperor. Indeed, when Titus discovers that only the banging of a blacksmith's hammer can bring him temporary relief from the gnat's merciless banging, he pays a number of blacksmiths for their therapeutic services. But if the blacksmith happened to be a Jew, the Romans withheld payment since they deemed it sufficient that the blacksmith should "see the suffering of [his] enemy" (מיסתייד דקא חזית בסנאך).⁶³ When Titus at long last mercifully passes away, his Roman courtiers perform an autopsy on the emperor and discover that the gnat has grown to the size of a large bird in his head.

Joshua Levinson has brilliantly demonstrated the ways in which this intricate narrative tradition subversively mimics the Roman culture of spectacle.⁶⁴ Levinson calls particular attention to the deployment within the narrative of mythic motifs drawn from both Jewish and Roman cultures as it crafts its own distinctively Jewish version of a "fatal charade" in which it is the imperial conqueror rather than the conquered who suffers public and humiliating death. Building on Levinson's compelling reading of this narrative, I will here analyze the belated integration of eschatological motifs into this narrative tradition, a process that occurred only in the fifth century and after.

The earliest versions of the story restrict themselves to an exploration of the retribution suffered by Titus during his lifetime, ignoring his post-mortem fate. This emphasis conforms to the pattern I traced

22:3; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:8; Tanhuma, Huqat 1; Tanhuma Buber, Huqat 1; Pesiqta de-Rabbi Eliezer 48; Numbers Rabbah 18:22; BT Gittin 56b.

⁶³ Only BT Gittin 56b provides this particular narrative detail, which explicitly thematizes the act of vengeful viewing by a Jewish spectator.

⁶⁴ Levinson, "Tragedies Naturally Performed." On the narrative as anti-Christian polemic, see Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, pp. 146-48; I.J. Yuval, "The Lord Will Take Vengeance, Vengeance for His Temple—Historia sine ira et studio" (Hebrew), *Zion* 59 (1994), pp. 351-414 (362-73). For a contrasting interpretation, see M. Kister, "Legends of the Destruction of the Temple in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 67 (1998), pp. 483-529.

earlier in the paper regarding the motif of the death of the tyrant in early Jewish and Christian sources. However, the late Palestinian midrash to Ecclesiastes, *Qohelet Rabbah*, adds a significant final detail to one dominant form of the narrative that was in circulation in Palestine in the fifth century.⁶⁵ This particular form of the narrative ends with a report by R. Eleazar b. R. Yose that he was in Rome at the time of Titus' death and witnessed the oversized gnat being weighed on a scale.⁶⁶ According to this tradition, Titus' soul departed his body at the very moment that the gnat flew away—a detail that Levinson convincingly interprets as an allusion to the apotheosis of the emperor that was understood to occur during imperial funerals upon the release of the eagle.⁶⁷ To this unit, the text of *Qohelet Rabbah* appends a number of telling words: “when the gnat flew away, the soul of Titus flew away *to destruction* (lit: *Avaddon*) and everlasting abhorrence.” The phrase “to everlasting abhorrence” (לדראון עולם) is an echo of Dan. 12:2, although the colorful term *Avaddon*, drawn from Ps. 88:12 and one of the seven netherworld abysses in rabbinic cosmology,⁶⁸ here displaces the somewhat more generic “shame” (חרפות) of the biblical text. The verse from Daniel serves elsewhere in rabbinic sources as a proof text for the notion that certain classes of sinners, such as heretics and apostates as well as those who destroyed the Temple, would face eternal damnation.⁶⁹ The *Qohelet Rabbah* version thus explicitly links the Titus narrative to the cosmological-eschatological traditions regarding the fate of the wicked in *Gehinnom* that we analyzed above.

The impulse to explore the post-mortem fate of Titus is further developed in the highly elaborate adaptation of the narrative that appears in

⁶⁵ Exemplified by *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:5; *Genesis Rabbah* 10:7.

⁶⁶ On the various “eye-witness” reports of what R. Eleazar b. R. Yose saw in Rome, see R.S. Boustan, “The Spoils of the Jerusalem Temple at Rome and Constantinople: Jewish Counter-Geography in a Christianizing Empire,” in G. Gardner and K. Osterloh (eds.), *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 327-72.

⁶⁷ Levinson, “Tragedies Naturally Performed,” p. 380.

⁶⁸ On *Avaddon* within late antique Jewish cosmological speculation concerning the netherworld, see Schäfer, “In Heaven as it is in Hell,” pp. 245-50.

⁶⁹ E.g., *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13:5; *BT Sanhedrin* 16b-17a; *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 24.3.

the Babylonian Talmud in tractate Gittin. In this version, Titus gives the following instructions to his courtiers at the time of his death: “Burn me and scatter my ashes over the seven seas so that the God of the Jews should not find me and bring me to trial” (56b). The emperor is apparently concerned lest God continue to afflict him in the afterlife—and for good reason. The immediate continuation of the Bavli passage presents what is an otherwise unparalleled tradition regarding the post-mortem fate of three of Israel’s most famous enemies, Titus, Balaam, and Jesus. I cite only the section concerning Titus:

Onqelos the son of Qaloniqos, the son of the sister of Titus, wanted to convert to Judaism. He went and brought up Titus out of his grave by necromancy and asked him: “Who is important in ‘that’ world (i.e., the afterlife)?” He (Titus) answered: “Israel.” He answered: “What then about joining them.” “Their requirements are many, and you will not be able to carry them out. Go and attack them in ‘that’ world (i.e., the world of the living) and you will be on top, as it says, *Her adversaries have become the head* (Lam. 1:5), (that is), whoever harasses Israel becomes head.” “What is your punishment (in the afterlife)?” “What I decreed upon myself: Every day my ashes are collected and they pass sentence on me, and I am burned and my ashes are scattered over the seven seas (וקלו ליה ומבדרו אשב).”⁷⁰

Titus’ answer to his nephew Onqelos concerning his experience in the afterlife—despite his best efforts to elude the retributive anger of God, his ashes are gathered together each day so that he can be judged anew, before again being immolated and cast upon the seas—presents itself as an organic continuation of the larger narrative, intentionally echoing its language.

Like the release of the gnat/bird that accompanied the departure of Titus’ soul, the miraculously recurring cremation of the Roman tyrant must be a parody of the act of lighting the funeral pyre, which gradually came to serve as the symbolic culmination of imperial funerals, at least until the time of Constantine.⁷¹ But, in addition to this apparent

⁷⁰) BT Gittin 56b–57a. This passage is otherwise only found in the medieval compilation Yalqut Shim‘oni §933.

⁷¹) S. Price, “From Noble Funeral to Divine Cult: The Apotheosis of Roman Emperors,” in D. Cannadine and S. Price (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial*

allusion to Roman funerary practice, it would seem that we have here an example of measure-for-measure punishment: just as Titus had set the Jerusalem Temple ablaze, so, too, would he forever be condemned to suffer repeated immolation.

Peter Schäfer has recently argued that the account of the post-mortem fates of Titus, Balaam, and Jesus, along with numerous other traditions concerning Jesus, is distinctive to the Babylonian Talmud.⁷² According to Schäfer, this material attests to an escalation in Jewish anti-Christian polemic in the Sasanian Empire, outside the bounds of the Roman world, as Babylonian Jews continued to experience tensions with their Christian neighbors, but felt sufficiently confident to parody the sacred narratives of Christianity. Indeed, by the fifth to seventh centuries, the Titus narrative seems to have been understood in at least some quarters to be more anti-Christian than anti-Roman. Insofar as the Christian discourse of empire that emerged in this period was dependent upon the productive fusion of ecclesiastical authority and Roman imperial power,⁷³ the long-standing Jewish traditions of anti-Roman rhetoric could be retooled in the service of expressing anti-Christian sentiment. Yet, the intimate juxtaposition of Titus and Jesus in hell in the Gittin passage is relatively unusual for the way it updates and, implicitly, Christianizes the Jewish image of imperial Rome. Otherwise, Jewish anti-Roman discourse in this period has a peculiarly timeless quality.

The conservatism of Jewish anti-Roman literary expression did not, however, preclude quite radical conceptual innovations in the representation of Roman authority. Perhaps the most fully realized—and violent—caricature of the Roman emperor and his imperial court found in any branch of late antique Jewish literature appears in the composi-

in *Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 56-105 (93-103).

⁷² P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 82-94.

⁷³ On the development of a distinctively Byzantine-Christian form of imperial authority, see now Sarlota A. Takács, *The Construction of Authority in Ancient Rome and Byzantium: The Rhetoric of Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 119-34.

tion known as *Heikhalot Rabbati*.⁷⁴ The creators of this passage have imaginatively adapted the future-oriented idiom of Jewish apocalyptic and martyrological literature in order to fashion an account of the retributive justice visited upon an apparently fictional Roman emperor named Lupinus and his household. This narrative was produced sometime after the middle of the sixth century in either Palestine or Mesopotamia, although an exact provenance has been—and will likely remain—impossible to establish.

A few further words of introduction are necessary in order to place this complex text in literary and historical context.⁷⁵ This passage, which I will call the “martyr-narrative” of *Heikhalot Rabbati*, is a radical reworking of the post-talmudic martyrological anthology *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.⁷⁶ Whereas late Jewish martyrological literature is built around the notion of martyrdom as atoning communal sacrifice, *Heikhalot Rabbati* transfers the redemptive power of the rabbinic martyrs, whose deaths ensure the salvation of Israel, to the “mystical” visionaries of the Heikhalot corpus, who likewise intercede in their own lives, through the process of heavenly ascent, between God and his people. In this adapted form of the martyrology, the ten rabbinic martyrs—here cast as members of a mystical fellowship—escape the death-sentence that has been decreed against them. Their escape from death is achieved through a reversal of fortune in which the emperor dies instead of the sages. Indeed, beyond merely inverting the role of oppressor and victim,

⁷⁴ The passage appears in Schäfer, *Synopse* §§107–121. For an overview of Heikhalot literature, see R.S. Boustan, “The Study of Heikhalot Literature—Between Religious Experience and Textual Artifact,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2007), pp. 130-60; M.D. Swartz, “Jewish Visionary Tradition in Rabbinic Literature,” in C.E. Fonrobert and M.S. Jaffee (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 198-221. On the historical development of Heikhalot literature as a distinct class of texts, see my “The Emergence of Pseudonymous Attribution in Heikhalot Literature: Empirical Evidence from the Jewish ‘Magical’ Corpora,” *JSQ* 14 (2007), pp. 18-38.

⁷⁵ For full discussion of the literary development of this narrative, see R.S. Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (TSAJ 112; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 245-88.

⁷⁶ This text is to be found in the immaculate synoptic edition of G. Reeg (ed.), *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern* (TSAJ 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985). All references to this text refer to the chapter and paragraph numbers in this edition.

the narrative goes a step further, radically destabilizing the boundary between and identities of protagonist and antagonist in tragicomic identity confusion. R. Hanina ben Teradyon takes up the imperial crown and violently purges the emperor's household and army from within, while the emperor Lupinus is miraculously made to assume the appearance—and cruel fate—of each of the ten rabbinic would-be martyrs (*Synopse* §§120–121).

The narrative itself is elaborate and intricate and, for present purposes, I will restrict my analysis to one of its particularly rich sections. The narrative opens with the martyr-rabbi R. Ishmael questioning whether it is God's will that he and his colleagues die a martyr's death. In the conventional martyrology, he learns that this is indeed the case. By contrast, in the version in *Heikhalot Rabbati*, R. Ishmael is immediately treated to a vision of the divinely-sanctioned punishment inflicted on the imperial household:

R. Ishmael said: "What did the upper court of justice do at that hour? It ordered the angels of ruin to descend upon the Emperor Lupinus and to bring destruction and devastation upon him, so that in his entire palace not a single survivor remained. And Ripa, the wife of his youth, and all his maids and all his concubines were cast down and burned before him alongside all his sons, all the people of his house and all who were dear to him." R. Ishmael said: "What did they do to that wicked man?" "They disgraced and degraded him with his dead, since they were cast down before him. And whenever anyone would stretch out his hand to lift up one of the dead of the Emperor Lupinus in order to lay him upon his bed for burial, the abyss (*tehom*) would swallow him up. And, when that person would withdraw his hand, the abyss would spit him out, and they (i.e., the dead) would again be cast down before him. What is more, they stank and putrefied everywhere in his royal palace, so that he was ashamed before the princes of the kingdoms who entered and departed before him."⁷⁷

The creators of this narrative took great care to situate the scene within the narrative present, signaling that the punishment of Rome is not contingent upon on the deaths of the rabbinic martyrs and their future retribution. This temporal shift transforms the predictions concerning

⁷⁷ Schäfer, *Synopse* §§112–113. The translation of the "martyr-narrative" in *Heikhalot Rabbati* primarily follows the version in MS Dropsie 436 because of its particular clarity in this portion of the text.

the *future* punishment of the city of Rome in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* into a tale of immediate revenge against the Roman emperor.

The tale, however, intentionally blurs the distinction among the three primary types of eschatologies—end of life, post-mortem, and messianic. On one level, the execution of the emperor brings his life to an end. At the same time, like Nero *redivivus* or perhaps Titus in the Babylonian Talmud, Lupinus does not suffer death only once, but must relive his humiliating defeat again and again. Finally, the scene draws on the messianic vision of redemption from Rome: the calamity that befalls the imperial tyrant threatens to undermine Roman power and prosperity once and for all.⁷⁸

This picture of the imperial household in the grip of these chilling and bizarre events is painted with the ironic brush of political parody. I think it likely that the odd and otherwise unattested name of the Emperor, Lupinus, may be a verbal pun on the adjectival form of the Latin word for wolf (*lupinus*), the animal that according legend reared the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus.⁷⁹ According to this logic, the Emperor would be an embodiment of Roman power. And, in fact, later in the text, at §118, the angelic guide Suriya explains to R. Ishmael that the power of wicked Lupinus derives from the fact that “he comes from the line of Esau, the wicked one. For this reason his heart is strong, powerful and cruel.” An extremely close parallel to this brand of polemic is to be found in seventh-century apocalypse *Sefer Zerubbabel*, with which the “martyr narrative” shares a comparable hatred for Rome as well as a confidence in the ultimate downfall of the evil Empire. Here, as in numerous other sources, the figure of the Antichrist who represents the demonic power of Rome bears the name Armilos, which is

⁷⁸ This more conventional eschatological perspective, in which Rome is destroyed at the end time, is incorporated into the “martyr narrative” at *Synopse* §§108–110, but is here adapted to the realized eschatology of *Heikhalot Rabbati* (Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic*, pp. 185-97).

⁷⁹ The *locus classicus* of the legend is Livy 1.3–8. But for a useful collection of the many variants of the legend in classical sources, see T.P. Wiseman, *Remus: A Roman Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 160-68. See also J.N. Bremmer and N.M. Horsfall, “Romulus, Remus, and the Foundation of Rome,” in *Roman Myth and Mythography* (London: University of London, Institute of Classical Studies, 1987), pp. 25-48.

almost certainly an adapted form of the name Romulus.⁸⁰ The “martyr-narrative” in *Heikhalot Rabbati* thus appropriates Roman foundation myth in order to dramatize the archetypal conflict between Rome and Israel. But, in the fun-house mirror of the narrative, myth is inverted and, along with it, relations of power—at least for the duration of the drama.

The narrative makes explicit the causal logic behind the suffering of Lupinus and his family (§§117–119). With rare poetic justice, the stratagem planned by Lupinus against R. Hanina ben Teradyon and his wife and daughter serves as an exact template for the devastation of his own imperial family.⁸¹ The measure-for-measure principle that governs the discourse of divine retribution in Jewish and Christian eschatological speculation is thus realized in particularly graphic form.

Moreover, within the context of *Heikhalot* literature, the parallelism between imperial persecutor and Jewish victim is placed within a second frame of reference, the household of God. Philip Alexander has persuasively argued that the Latin loanword *pamilya*, which appears in the Hebrew phrase used in *Heikhalot* literature describing God’s heavenly entourage, is an allusion to the Roman’s own designation for the imperial family (*familia Caesaris*).⁸² The suffering of Lupinus and his family thus function on both the horizontal and vertical axes, as a defeated and humiliated Rome is subordinated to the would-be rabbinic martyrs as well as to the one true sovereign of the cosmos, the God of Israel.

⁸⁰ D. Berger, “Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah Son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus,” *AJS Review* 10 (1985), pp. 141-64 (155-62), argues that the name Armilos is not only associated with the Roman figure of Romulus but also simultaneously with a number of other antagonistic figures from biblical history. For general discussion of this figure, see J. Dan, “Armilus: The Jewish Anti-Christ and the Origins and Dating of the *Sefer Zerubbavel*,” in P. Schäfer and M. Cohen (eds.), *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (SHR 77; Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 73-104.

⁸¹ The humiliation and suffering of R. Hanina ben Teradyon is recounted elsewhere in rabbinic literature (Sifrei Deuteronomy §307; BT ‘Avodah Zarah 17b-18a) as well as within various versions of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* (I, III-VII, IX-X.38/40).

⁸² P.S. Alexander, “The Family of Caesar and the Family of God: The Image of the Emperor in the *Heikhalot* Literature,” in L. Alexander (ed.), *Images of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 277-97.

It is, of course, notoriously difficult to identify with any certainty direct relationships between literary creations—especially those as ethereal as *Heikhalot* texts—and political events or social conditions. However, the act of contemplating in such intricate detail the violent deaths suffered by the emperor and his family is so bold and innovative that I think it demands some effort at historical contextualization. Morton Smith has proposed that the description of the violence inflicted on the imperial court in *Heikhalot Rabbati* reflects the political chaos of the third century.⁸³ Yet, Smith's faulty dating of the "inverted" martyrology is based solely on a generic and thus inconclusive reference to the Palestinian city of Caesarea elsewhere in *Heikhalot Rabbati* and does not take into account its *direct literary dependence* on the fifth or sixth-century *Story of the Ten Martyrs*.

I would suggest instead that the "martyr narrative" of *Heikhalot Rabbati* reflects the oppositional stance taken by Jews toward Roman and Roman-Christian power, at the time of their emergence as an increasingly marked religious minority in the early Byzantine. In general terms, the image of Lupinus' gruesome execution may have derived some of its cogency and force for its Jewish audience from the profound political disruptions of in the early seventh-century. The brutal execution and immolation of Phocas by his successor Heraclius in 610, mentioned above, represented a radical break in the fabric of imperial authority. Indeed, Heraclius—and the Constantinopolitan literary elite of his generation—had to work hard to shore up the damaged image of Rome as a just and beneficent imperial power; and they did so by Christianizing in bold new ways traditional Roman imperial discourse. Thus, for example, George of Pisidia in his poetic encomium for Heraclius casts him as a holy warrior crusading on behalf of a specifically Christian Roman Empire that exists under the aegis of a specifically Christian cosmocrator.⁸⁴ But George goes further than prior panegyrist of Roman

⁸³ M. Smith, "Observations on *Hekhalot Rabbati*," in A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 142-60 (149).

⁸⁴ George of Pisidia, *De expeditione Persica*, esp. cantos 1, lines 1-34; 3, lines 385-399 (A. Pertusi [ed.], *Poemi Giorgio di Pisidia 1: Panegirici epici* [Studia Patristica et Byzantina 7; Eatal: Buch-Kunstverlag, 1959], pp. 84-85, 133). On George's evolving representation of Heraclius, see Mary Whitby, "George of Pisidia's Presentation of the Emperor Heraclius and His Campaigns: Variety and Development," in

imperial power by likening Heraclius to the early Christian martyrs—and to Christ himself—as the emperor suffers and even bleeds to defend his empire from its (in this case, Sasanian) enemies.⁸⁵ I would suggest that it is this distinctively seventh-century image of an embattled, yet sanctified emperor that lies behind the violent caricature of Lupinus in the “martyr narrative” of *Heikhalot Rabbati*, albeit through many layers of what appears to be a bitterly ironic assessment of the legitimacy—and justness—of Roman imperial power.

Thus, just as the ideological legitimization of Roman imperial power in the “public transcript” evolved from the fourth to seventh centuries in constant dialogue with long-standing and venerable traditions, so, too, Jewish responses to the Christian discourse of empire that emerged in this period remained rooted in centuries-old tropes. Yet, despite these profound literary and cultural continuities, the dramatically violent register that Jewish “Kaiserkritik” assumed in the early Byzantine period suggests that the Mediterranean world that Jews and Christians shared had indeed changed in palpable ways.

Conclusion

Despite the shared genealogies of Jewish and Christian discourses of retributive justice, we have seen that the progressive Christianization of Roman political institutions and power gradually led these traditions along diverging trajectories. This divergence represents one small facet of the much wider process through which Jews and Christians in the post-Constantinian era gradually articulated their differences within often uncomfortably proximate social and cultural domains. I have argued that Byzantine Jewish sources from the late fifth to early seventh centuries attest just such a shift in—or, perhaps better, intensification of—negative Jewish attitudes toward the institutions of the Roman empire, precisely at a time when Jews were being increasingly cast in Roman-Christian sources as a troublesome and violent minority.

G.J. Reinink and B.H. Stolte (eds.), *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), pp. 157-74.

⁸⁵ J. Trilling, “Myth and Metaphor at the Byzantine Court: A Literary Approach to the David Plates,” *Byzantion* 48 (1978), pp. 249-63 (259-60).

Resistance to the new Christian order also entailed the integration and internalization of that order.

More interesting still, this image of the Jew seems to have exerted an equal, if paradoxical, influence on the evolution of Jewish self-representation, as we have seen most clearly in *Heikhalot Rabbati*. This unsettling convergence in the Jewish and the Christian literary cultures of the Byzantine period demonstrates the degree to which Jews and Christians, though increasingly occupying distinctive social positions, still shared a common discursive landscape. I would even argue that Christian fantasies of the violent Jew and Jewish fantasies of violent retribution could serve the mutual interests of both groups, namely, the process of communal differentiation. In imagining themselves as a dissident counter-culture, Jews embraced a role that the Byzantine-Christians authorities were more than happy to grant them. The violent fantasy of making the Roman emperor's life here on earth a living hell, I would suggest, is one index of the climate in which the Jews were formed—and formed themselves—into a minority culture.