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The Rabbinic Characterization of the Relationship between Wealth and Power: Is the Other Golden Rule True? Do the People with the Gold Really Make the Rules?

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Rabbinic Ordination.

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February 27, 2006

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In the best-selling book, *Freakenomics*, authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner apply the methodologies of economics to a variety of arenas in the "real world". As part of their work, the authors attack the wisdom of conventional wisdom. One of the truths of conventional wisdom they dispel is the belief that the candidate who spends the most money in a political campaign will win that campaign. It turns out that the amount of money spent in a campaign is not the ultimate factor in the success of a candidate; rather it is the candidate himself. Yet the popular belief remains intact. Money wins elections. Money begets power.

True or not, the acceptance of this causal relationship between wealth and power is long-standing. Perhaps because of its longevity, or because it so often appears to be true this relationship evokes a great deal of emotion in many people. We see these feelings expressed commonly in the areas of politics and business, but there is also a steady increase in the voices applying this issue to religion and religious communities. This growing concern should not be a surprise in the era of mega-churches, when a single pastor can influence the spending and voting habits of thousands of church members. Within the Jewish community, as well, issues of wealth and power abound.

In a seminar on Jewish ethics, rabbinical students quickly move from the assigned discussion of military power in Israel to one of wealth and power in relation to the rabbinate. How does a rabbi partner with a lay leader who earns twice as much his rabbi? Or half as much? How can a rabbi solicit contributions from synagogue or community members without becoming beholden to her donors? Is this connection between wealth and power inevitable in our contemporary, consumer-driven, capitalist society? Or is this relationship an age-old, permanent fixture in our imperfect world? What, if any, guidance

in this matter can our tradition provide? These questions began the investigation that will unfold in these pages.

What follows is an attempt to answer the questions raised in that ethics seminar. While the investigation might have focused on contemporary, or near contemporary, sources on communal practice I chose to avoid the bias that accompanies proximity, and look instead to the classical rabbinic period of Judaism—roughly the second through sixth centuries CE. Since the impetus for this inquiry was a collection of questions that expressed the values and concerns of those rabbinical students, the texts under examination are drawn primarily from Talmudic *aggadah* and Midrash.[1] The guiding question of the research into those texts is: How did the rabbis talk about wealthy people—including rabbis, Jewish non-rabbis, and non-Jews--and the power they claimed or wielded?

For the rabbis of the classical period, both money and power came from the same source—God. As both were considered creations of and gifts from God, both forms of status were necessarily intrinsically good. Any problems that arose from these gifts came when wealth and power met human fallibility. This situation is expressed in the following selection from *Numbers Rabbah.*

> Three gifts were created in the world. If a man has obtained any one of them, he has acquired the desire of all the world: if he has obtained wisdom, he has obtained everything; if he has obtained strength, he has obtained everything; if he has obtained riches, he has obtained everything. But when? When these things are the gifts of God, and come to him through the power of Torah, but the strength and the riches of flesh and blood are worth nothing at all, and if they come not from God, they will be taken from him at the end.[2]

Here the rabbis tell us that when strength and riches come from God, or when they are recognized to have come from God, then they are true and lasting attainments. The

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are taken from the *Babylonian Talmud.* ed. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein. London: The Soncino Press, Ltd.; 1990 or *Midrash Rabbah.* eds. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon. London: Soncino Press; 1939.

[2] *Mattot*, 22:7

reverse, then, is also expressed: human beings do not become truly rich or truly powerful without God.[3] This latter situation, in which human beings wrongly attribute their power or wealth solely to their own making, is cause for downfall according to rabbinic stories.

The notion that readers can determine the rabbis' values from the stories they tell comes from several contemporary scholars of rabbinic literature. For instance, Richard Kalmin, professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary writes in his book, *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia*, about the work of Yonah Fraenkel:

> [He] is very likely correct that the purpose of many Talmudic stories is not to advance a particular school's agenda or to promote the teachings of a particular master, but to teach a moral lesson, to make a statement about the nature of the world, or God, or the human predicament.[4]

Similarly, Peter Rubenstein argues that *aggadah* provides evidence of rabbinic values and not necessarily details of actual events or figures.[5] Even though we may be able to discern rabbinic values from the stories they tell, we need also remember the diversity of rabbinic

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[3] Later Christian thinkers would associate this idea with election: that wealth is an indication of salvation. Based on my reading of their own stories, I do not believe the rabbis of the Classical period intended to teach that one's capacity to build and maintain wealth was predetermined. However, they do teach that the distribution of wealth and power follows God's plan. The following story is presented in *Numbers Rabbah*:

> A certain lady asked R. Simeon b. Halafta: 'In how many days did the Holy One, blessed be He, create the world?' He answered her: 'In six; as it says, *For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth*' (Exodus 20:11). Said she: 'What has He been doing from then till now?' He replied: 'He sits and constructs ladders, whereby He elevates one and puts down another.' Accordingly it says, '*For God is judge; He putteth down one, and lifteth up another.*' There is proof that this is so. For when He wanted the children of Reuben and the children of Gad to become rich, He cast the Midianites down before Israel in order that the children of Gad and the children of Reuben might grow rich thereby. What is written before this? *And the children of Israel took captive the women of Midian and their little ones; and all their cattle* (Numbers 31:9). And afterward it says, *now the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of cattle* (Numbers 32:1). (*Mattot*, 22.8)

[4] *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia*. Brown Judaic Studies, Number 300. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press; 1994 (23)

[5] *The Culture of The Babylonian Talmud*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press; 2003. (1-7)

opinions. In order to ultimately glean a lesson from the classical rabbis we can only follow the majority's view. In some instances even that is not possible, as is the following excerpt from B. Shabbat 25b.

> Our Rabbis taught: Who is wealthy? He who has pleasure in his wealth: this is R. Meir's view. R. Tarfon said: He who possesses a hundred vineyards, a hundred fields, and a hundred slaves working in them. R. Akiba said: He who has a wife comely in deeds. R. Jose said: He who has a privy near his table.[6]

While it may seem that the rabbis felt that wealth was in the eye of the purse holder, many of the texts I have used in this inquiry follow R. Tarfon's literal definition.

Power, on the other hand is harder to define for the purposes of this investigation. It is both spiritual or religious authority as well as the ability to compel action or decision. As we will see, the rabbis' stories indicate that they were more concerned with building their own power than limiting that of others.

The chapters that follow will provide illustrations of these rabbinic definitions of wealth and power. In the first chapter, I will investigate how the rabbis discussed the wealth and power of other rabbis, including the range of definitions they used for each term, and the rabbis who are described as having both attributes. In the second chapter, the focus will shift to the wealth and power of Jewish non-rabbis. In the third chapter, I will present several examples of how the rabbis discussed the wealth and power of non-Jews as illustrated through four biblical gentile characters. In the concluding chapter, I will summarize the rabbis' views on the relationship between wealth and power by providing evidence of their stance on usury—the ultimate combination of money (to lend) and power (to charge interest). In the last chapter I will also list the lessons I believe contemporary rabbis or communal leaders can learn from the Classical rabbis.

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[6]This text, presented here to illustrate the range of rabbinic opinions, will be examined in the first chapter.

The Rabbis on the Wealth and Power of Rabbis

In order to understand the ways in which the rabbis of Palestine and Babylonia discussed wealth, power, and the relationship between the two it is necessary to have picture of the world in which they were teaching. Since this investigation covers two communities over a span of several centuries, details about the economic and socio-political realities will not be presented. However, general descriptions of the regions' economic situations will provide a sufficient start.

Life under the Romans was difficult for the rabbis, as it was for all Jews of the area. As Louis Jacobs has pointed out, wars with Rome had left the cities and farmland in Palestine ravaged. The Roman system of taxation demanded large payments by the Patriarch on behalf of the Jews.[7] In addition, imperial trade restrictions limited the strength and diversity of the Palestinian economy.[8] In contrast, the Babylonian community had long been economically successful. In his article, Jacobs suggests that the Jews were able to prosper in trade and commerce because the non-Jews preferred agriculture.[9] Furthermore, the Babylonian rulers did not impose the same level of taxes upon the Jewish community as the Romans did in Palestine.

In socio-political terms the two communities were also very different. Under the influence of Persian culture Babylonian society was hierarchical and concerned with lineage to a much greater degree than was Palestinian society. Conversely, Palestinian society adopted Roman egalitarianism or, more accurately, meritocracy based on

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[7] Jacobs, Louis. "The Economic Conditions of the Jews in Babylon in Talmudic Times Compared with Palestine". *Journal of Semitic Studies.* Vol. 2, 1957 (352)
[8] ibid.
[9] ibid. citing M.N. Dhalla, *Zoroastrian Civilization for the Earliest Times to the Downfall of the last Zoroastrian Empire 651 A.D.* (New York, 1922) pp. 293 and 356

education.[10] As will be discussed in the next chapter, these opposing views on the flexibility of social classes led to differing views on the non-rabbi and his role in the rabbinic world.

Various *aggadot* offer support for these descriptions of the rabbinic worlds of Palestine and Babylonia; others provide exceptions to such generalizations. For instance, R. Akiva is an excellent example of the social mobility allowed by the Roman-influenced culture of Palestine because, according to the *aggadah*, he rose from poverty to great wealth based on his Torah study. At the same time, Rav Huna who was called "the pious one of Babylonia" and who rose to be the head of the Sura academy was also described as a poor farm laborer [11] thus providing an exception to the rule that Babylonian rabbis were wealthy.[12]

Rabbinic Wealth and Rabbinic Power

The general view in modern scholarship is that the Babylonian sages were wealthy according to the traditional definition—money, possessions, land holdings, and the like. However, the rabbis of both Babylonia and Palestine expanded their definition of wealth to include, among other things, Torah knowledge. B. Shabbat 25b provides several rabbis' answers to the question "Who is wealthy?" Their answers seem to fall into two categories:

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[10]Kalmin, Richard. *Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity, The*. London: Routledge; 1999 (hereafter: *Jewish Society*) (7-8) citing Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971: 99)

[11] Ta'anit 23a, Ketubot 105b

[12] Jacobs addresses this generality in his study of the Palestinian economy (351):

> It is no mere coincidence that hardly any of the Babylonian Amoraim were poor men. Their comparative freedom from economic care explains their greater brilliance in the study of Halachah, which requires intense concentration. Furthermore the far more highly developed economic life explains the existence of greater abundance of legal material dealing with civil law in the Babylonian Talmud than in the Palestinian.

material and metaphysical.[13] Rabbi Tarfon defines wealth in terms of land, and Rabbi Jose suggests wealth is having a privy close to one's house. On the other hand, Rabbi Akiva, who came from humble beginnings but married a pious woman, says that wealth is having a good wife. [14] Soffin notes that the rabbinic emphasis often follows Akiva[15], but readers should not take from this emphasis a rejection or denial of material wealth. The rabbis fully recognize the need to have money in order to sustain oneself (and when applicable, one's family) but they also establish an alternative definition of wealth—Torah learning.

The story of Ilfa and R. Yohanan[16] provide a clear example of this alternate characterization. Both men start out poor and go to seek their fortunes through business. While they are resting at the base of an unstable wall, R. Yohanan discovers that he is meant to become a great sage, so he returns to his life of poverty and Torah study. When Ilfa returns from his business pursuits he finds that R. Yohanan has become the head of the academy. He is told that had he returned to his studies he would have R. Yohanan's position. It is unclear exactly which part of the situation is distressing to Ilfa, but he threatens to take his life if his knowledge is not recognized by the sages of the academy. The wealth that Ilfa may have acquired while abroad is inconsequential as compared to the Torah-wealth obtained by R. Yohanan through his studies.

This story also indicates that Torah study could be a means of power in the

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[13] Adapted from Soffin, Joel E. "The Rabbinic View of Wealth and Poverty". Rabbinic Thesis. New York: HUC-JIR; 1976 (19)

[14] Akiva was actually married three times. His first wife is mentioned only in Avot d'Rabbi Natan. His second wife supported Akiva while he studied (J. Shabbat 6:1). The piety and wealth of Akiva's third wife is discussed in B. Nedarim 50b. It is unclear if Akiva's description of a "good wife" referred to her piety or the wealth she brought into the marriage. Akiva clearly represents the ideal of Torah study over business or family life, as he left his second wife for years at a time in order to study (B. Nedarim 50a), so it seems likely that his definition would preference a wife's wealth even over her piety.

[15] Soffin, 20

[16] B. Ta'anit 21a

rabbinic world. Both Babylonian and Palestinian sages understood that there existed various modes of power, recognizing that some people held only one form while others held several, and still others all. In an amazing illustration of this conception Moses is transported to Rabbi Akiva's classroom and sits in the back because despite all of his other attributes—including wealth, as will be discussed below—he is not knowledgeable enough to join the students in the front.[17]

Rubenstein warns that since this story only appears in the Babylonian Talmud it may not be an accurate depiction of the Palestinian academies. Rubenstein's caution may have historical merit, but it ignores the power of the story itself. The Babylonian authors could have described the meritocracy of their seating by presenting the case of a hypothetical, or an unnamed, scholar who changed his position in the room based on his understanding of the lesson. Yet the rabbis chose to illustrate this value through Moses, whom they called *Rabbeinu*--Our Teacher. When Moses moves to the last row of seats because of his inability to understand Akiva, he establishes the ideal of seating by knowledge. It is difficult to imagine that Babylonian scholars would have employed Moses, the ultimate rabbi, if the Palestinian rabbis acted in a contrary way.[18]

In addition to Torah knowledge, power was also achieved by having the right lineage. Rubenstein reminds his readers that concern with genealogy is both a Jewish concept and one found in most pre-modern societies.[19] One can see the concern manifest in the aggadot originating in Babylonia. For instance, the sages present a story of two rabbis visiting Rabbi Hananiah.

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[17] BT Menahot 29b

[18] Furthermore, it is unlikely that the same academy that permitted R. Akiva's rise from poverty and ignorance to wealth and authority would have based seating on a scholar's wealth.

[19] Rubenstein, 85

> They sent [Hananiah] two scholars, R. Yose b. Kefar and the grandson of Zecharia b. Qevutal. When he [Hananiah] saw them he said to them, 'Why have you come?' They said to him, 'We have come to study Torah.' He announced concerning them, 'These men are the luminaries of the generation, and their ancestors served in the Temple, as we learned, *Zecharia b. Qevutal said, 'Many times I read to him [the High Priest] from the Book of Daniel.'* (Mishna Yoma 1.6)[20]

According to Rubenstein's theory that *aggadot* represent the values of the storyteller, Hananiah's pronouncement of his visitors as "luminaries of the generation" really tells the reader that the Babylonian storyteller had to explain why a rabbi of high station would deign to teach two immigrant rabbis from Palestine.[21] The visitors were not necessarily great scholars of their generation, but they could be related to important figures of the past.

If the rabbis equated lineage with power, the question becomes: the power to do what? In political terms the rabbis' power was severely circumscribed. With the exception of those sages who also served as Patriarch or Exilarch, the rabbis did not have political or military means to enforce their decisions or values. Rabbis were not synagogue officials, but primarily acted in a judicial or administrative role.[22] Rabbis did have the ability to place people—rabbis and non-rabbis—under *herem* (ban), but that punishment was only as effective as the community was willing to participate in its execution.[23] Primarily, the power the rabbis were most concerned with was their influence within the rabbinic academies.[24]

While the rabbis' power was mainly reserved for the rabbinic world, their income came from outside the academies and courtrooms. Contemporary scholars and classical

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[20] B. Berachot 63a, cited in Rubenstein, 82-83

[21] Following Rubenstein, 83

[22] Neusner, Jacob. *Talmudic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia.* Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity. Ed. Neusner, Jacob. Volume 14. Leiden: E. J. Brill; 1976 (105-106)

[23] Urbach, E.E. *The Sages: Their Ideas and Beliefs.* trans. Israel Abrahams. Vol. 1. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press; 1975 (601)

[24] It is interesting to note, as will be discussed in the next chapter, that to the political leaders the rabbis were powerful in terms of their connections to the people.

sages give details of the rabbis' wealth in two different ways. According to Urbach, the Patriarch gave financial support to those rabbis who could not support themselves.[25] Cohen suggests that because the rabbis were forbidden to be paid for their learning or judicial service, they demanded other financial considerations like exemptions from taxes and special market privileges.[26] The rabbis, on the other hand, present that wealth was a reward from God.

While the occupations of some of the rabbis are given, others come to their wealth purely through blessing. As mentioned above, Rabbi Akiva was poor and unlearned for most of his life. As he grew in Torah knowledge, so did his fortune grow.

> From six incidents did R. Akiva become rich: From Kalba Shebu'a. From a ship's ram. For every ship is provided with the figurehead of an animal. Once this was forgotten on the sea shore and R. Akiva found it. From a hollowed out trunk. For he once gave four *zuz* to sailors and told them to bring him something. But they found only a hollow log on the sea shore, which they brought to him saying, 'Sit on this and wait'. It was found to be fill of *denarii*. For it once happened that a ship sunk and all the treasures thereof were placed in that log, and it was found at that time. From the *serokita*.[27] From a matron. The wife of Turnus-rufus. From Keti'a b. Shalom.[28]

The reasons given for Akiva's wealth are a combination of personal choices[29] and divine intervention[30]. In keeping with the general rabbinic perspective on wealth, the ways in

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[25]Urbach suggests that this practice sullied the image of the rabbis, perhaps because it blurred the distinctions between the sages and the political leader. (ibid.)

[26] Cohen, Stuart A. *The three crowns: Structures of communal politics in early rabbinic Jewry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1990 (225-226)

[27] This phrase is omitted from later versions of the story. Jastrow considers it a corruption of the word for "matron" which would make sense since with this term there are seven reasons given for Akiva's wealth.

[28] B. Nedarim 50a-b

[29] Kalba Shebu'a was the father of Akiva's second wife, who upon learning of Akiva's great academic ability shared his wealth with his son-in-law (B. Nedarim 50a). Turnus-rufus was a Roman governor of Judea, and upon his death his wife converted to Judaism and married Akiva (B. Avodah Zara 20a).

[30] For instance, Rashi provides the story of the matron: when Akiva is sick and cannot repay a loan God causes the Emperor's daughter to throw a chest full of treasure into the sea. The chest reaches the matron who then gives gifts to Akiva in gratitude of her good fortune.

which Akiva achieved his wealth are ostensibly open to anyone provided they also earn their reward through piety and study.

The Characterization of the Relationship between Wealth and Power

Given the pragmatism with which the rabbis generally viewed the world, it is not surprising that they also speak matter-of-factly about the relationship between wealth and power. The aggadot that illustrate the intersection of wealth and power are varied, and draw from biblical and rabbinic examples of wealthy and powerful men. While there is no direct statement characterizing the relationship of wealth and power among rabbinic or sage-like figures, the stories clearly express the positive aspects and pitfalls of combining the two attributes.

One of the ways that we can tell how the rabbis felt about the relationship between wealth and power is to see whom they describe as possessing both. Rabbi Yohanan teaches:

> All the prophets were wealthy. Whence do we derive this? From Moses, Samuel, Amos, and Jonah.
>
> Moses because it is written, *I have not taken one ass from them*. Now, if he meant without a hiring fee—did he then merely claim not to be one of those who take without a fee? He must hence have meant even with a fee. But perhaps it was because of his poverty? But it is derived from the verse, *Hew thee two tablets of stone like the first*: the chips be thine.
> Samuel, because it is written, *Behold here I am: witness against me before the Lord, and before his anointed: whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken?* Now, if he meant for nothing—did he then merely claim not to be one of those who take without payment? Hence, he must have meant even for payment. But perhaps it was due to his poverty? Rather from this verse, *And his return was to Ramah: for there was his house*. Whereupon Raba observed, wherever he went, his house was with him. (Raba said: A greater thing is said of Samuel than of Moses: for in the case of Moses it is stated, '*I have not taken one ass from them*' implying even for a fee. But in the case of Samuel, he did not hire it even with their consent, for it is written, *And they said, thou hast not defrauded us, nor taken advantage of our willingness.*)

> Amos, because it is written, *The answered Amos and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit*; which R. Joseph translated: Behold, I am the owner of flocks, and possess sycamore trees in the valley.
>
> Jonah, as it is written [*and he found a ship going to Tarshish:] so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it.* And R. Johanan observed: He paid for the hire of the whole ship. R. Romanus said: The hire of the ship was four thousand gold *denarii*.[31]

Each prophet represents an aspect of the relationship between wealth and power. Jonah's wealth provides him with the buying power he needs to fulfill his mission as a prophet. Thus the rabbis teach the relationship sometimes is direct: wealth can be power. Amos, as an owner of flocks and orchards, does not need to be paid for his work as a prophet nor does his livelihood directly depend on the favor of the king. It can be said that his money bought him the power of freedom from the political authority. Here the rabbis indicate both that wealth can negate differences in power, and that freedom is another form of power.[32]

R. Yohanan describes Moses as earning his wealth directly from Torah, a rabbinic ideal. Just before R. Yohanan makes this statement, R. Hama b. R. Hanina relates the tradition on which it is based: God allowed Moses to keep the stone chips from his writing of Torah.[33] This tradition can be understood either to mean that the chips were actually valuable in themselves, or that the value of Torah is so great that even the remnants of the stone into which the Torah was written retain worth. While it is amusing to think of Moses profiting from the stones themselves (perhaps through the biblical equivalent of an on-line auction), it is likely that the lesson here is about the model sage. As with the story of R.

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[31] B. Nedarim 38a

[32] It seems that such freedom—to criticize those in power—would be especially desirable in the rabbinic world where the non-Jewish leaders could be oppressive to the rabbis and non-rabbis alike.

[33] ibid.

Akiva's classroom, the rabbis present Moses as the ideal rabbi—for whom wealth and power are both rewards for his dedication to Torah.

Finally, Samuel offers an interesting case, especially in comparison to Moses. According to Rava's interpretation of the verses, Samuel had both wealth and power but didn't use either of them to influence the people in his favor. Not only did he not use his wealth to hire an ass, but he also did not use his position as a prophet to use one for free. In this way, Rava teaches that Samuel is greater than Moses who became rich based on his position as God's chosen Torah scribe. It is unlikely that Rava actually meant to denigrate Moses. Rather his statement should be understood as a critique of those who earned their livelihood through their rabbinic work.[34]

Another *aggadah* relates a similar lesson in a story about Rabbi Tarfon. The owner of a vineyard caught Rabbi Tarfon eating some of his grapes. For some time the vineyard owner had been trying to catch a thief who had been stealing from him. Even though Tarfon took the grapes legally, when he was caught he allowed himself to be punished. When Tarfon's identity as a prominent rabbi was revealed to the vineyard owner he became upset. Tarfon did not reveal his identity directly so as not to gain earthly benefit from Torah. However, the storyteller makes clear that Tarfon had another option: "R. Tarfon being very wealthy, should have pacified him with money."[35] This statement is

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[34] Rava was a wine trader and owned vineyards (B. Berachot 56a, B. Bava Metziah). He praised the workers of his city for their industry. (B. Bava Metzia 77a) Clearly Rava believed in the value of hard work to build wealth. Similarly, the sages elsewhere express concern about people who earn their living by producing religious items.

> Our Rabbis taught: Those who write Scrolls, tefilin, and mezuzot, they, their traders, and their traders' traders, and all who engage [in trade] in sacred commodities, which includes the sellers of blue wool, never see a sign of blessing. But if they engage [therein] for its own sake, they do see [a sign of blessing]. (Pesahim 50b)

[35] B. Nedarim 62a

analogous to Rava's: rabbis should be able to use their monetary wealth for their benefit, but Torah wealth should not be used in that way.

Urbach describes another way in which the rabbis might have taken advantage of their wealth of Torah learning. In the rabbinic courts, rules were applied differently to sages. According to Urbach, scholars' cases were handled before those of non-scholars and scholars appearing before the court did not have to stand while giving testimony.[36] However, the author also notes that even those rabbis who participated in the courts under these circumstances had misgivings about the consequences of this preferential treatment.[37]

In the same way that these *aggadot* present limitations on the wealth that can be used to gain power, there are several stories which teach the boundaries of human power in relation to wealth. In one instance, Rav Papa asks his teacher, Rava, about a practice that seems similar to indentured servitude.[38]

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[36] Urbach, 626 citing B. Shevuot 30a and baraita from Tosefta Sanhedrin (vi, 2, p. 63) on which the Talmudic discussion is based. The baraita teaches:

> Men must stand when they pronounce sentence, or bear witness... The judges may not show forbearance to one man and strictness to another, nor suffer one to stand and another to sit; for it is written: *In righteousness shall you judge your neighbor* (Leviticus 19:15).

From the same verse, R. Joseph explains: "he who is with you in Torah and precepts—endeavor to judge him favorably" (B. Shevuot 30a). The story that immediately follows this teaching from R. Joseph illustrates the practice he encourages: R. Ulla, the son of R. Elai had a case before R. Nahman. R. Joseph sent R. Nahman a letter telling him that R. Ulla is a colleague in Torah and mitzvoth. R. Nahman asks if R. Joseph sent the letter so that he would favor R. Ulla in the case. R. Nahman decides that the letter was meant to inform him so that he would attend to Ulla's case first and possibly judge his position favorably (ibid 30b). R. Nahman's questioning of R. Joseph's intent seems to indicate that either R. Nahman was unfamiliar with R. Joseph's reading of the Leviticus verse or that he was uncomfortable with the practice. There is no statement to indicate how R. Ulla fared in the case.

[37] Urbach, 627 citing B. Shevuot 41a at the end of a discussion about which oaths are required from different people. In response to the stammaitic statement: "But if he is a Rabbinic scholar we do not make him swear," R. Yemar asks R. Ashi: "A Rabbinic scholar may strip men of their cloaks?" An ambiguously unattributed statement follows: "But we do not attend to his case." This statement might be R. Ashi's answer to R. Yemar's challenge suggesting that the courts would avoid deciding on a case involving the need for special treatment of rabbis.

[38] B. Bava Metzia 73b

> R. Papa said to Raba: See, there are some scholars who advanced money for people's poll tax and then put them to much service!
> He replied: I might have died, without telling you this thing. Thus said R. Sheshesh: The surety of these people lies in the king's archives and the king has decreed that he who does not pay his poll tax is made the servant of him who pays it [on his behalf].
> R. Se'oram, Raba's brother, used to seize people of disrepute and make them draw Raba's litter. Said Raba to him: You have done well. For it has been taught [but not from a Mishnah]: If you see a man who does not behave in a seemly fashion, whence do we know that you may make him your servant? From the verse, *They [Canaanite slaves] shall be your bondmen forever and your brethren the children of Israel [likewise].*[39]

There are several aspects of this story worth noting. First, all of the rabbinic characters in this story are described elsewhere as wealthy. As noted above, Rava was a wine trader and owned vineyards (see note 33). Rav Papa was poor before he began his studies, and he became wealthy through the sale of poppy seeds, the brewing of beer, and his marriage to the daughter of a priestly family.[40] Rav Sheshesh is likewise described as being wealthy,[41] and Gittin 14a relates that he sold clothes to customers on credit and allowed them to pay over time.[42] The second interesting aspect of the story is the message it gives. Rav Sheshesh's statement seems to counter the biblical teachings on the proper treatment of workers, since he substitutes payment of a wage with payment of a municipal tax—so that no money goes to the worker. Rava draws support for Rav Sheshesh's approval of this practice from an unorthodox interpretation of a verse from Leviticus. Rava uses this verse by comparing Jews of disrepute with Caananites. The important part of this teaching is that it gives permission to wealthy people to require service only of those disreputable Jews who were unable to pay their taxes; Jews of good character cannot be forced into labor.[43]

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[39] Leviticus 25:46 The Soncino translator notes that the verse is not usually interpreted with this meaning, but is used here as evidence for R. Se'oram's practice.
[40] Freiman, 233
[41] B. Niddah 47a
[42] Freiman, 270
[43] It is unclear however what the connection is between the inability to pay the tax and being of disrepute. It would be uncharacteristic of the rabbis to suggest that someone was poor because of his character, or to suggest that being poor made an individual disreputable. We might also read

Finally, as evidence of the rabbis' opinion on the relationship between wealth and power, they provide these *aggadot* about Jacob. After Jacob reunites with his brother Esau, he travels to Shechem. The rabbis understand the biblical phrase "and encamped before the city"[44] to mean that Jacob "showed his respect for the important men of the city by sending them gifts"[45] and also that Jacob "began to set up bazaars and sell cheaply."[46] Next Jacob buys a piece of land and erects an altar to God upon it. The rabbis explain the verse "And he erected there an altar, and called it *El-Elohei-Yisrael*"[47] by teaching:

> He [Jacob] declared to Him: 'Thou art God in the celestial spheres and I am a god in the terrestrial sphere. R. Huna commented in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: [God reproved him]: 'Even the synagogue superintendent cannot assume authority of himself, yet thou didst take authority to thyself. Tomorrow thy daughter will go out and be dishonored!'[48]

The beginning of this section establishes Jacob's wealth and his willingness to use his wealth for his benefit. This much the rabbis treat as acceptable. Jacob's next action is to buy land in Shechem, the fulfillment of a commandment, which the rabbis laud as meritorious. Had Jacob stopped there, or had the story concluded in this positive light, it would have been unremarkable. However, when Jacob refers to himself as God's equal the rabbis recognize he has crossed the limits of acceptable thinking about his own wealth and power.[49]

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this story as rabbinic hyperbole instead of as a presentation of an actual practice. Rubenstein suggests that the Babylonian rabbis talked about non-rabbis in ways that were only intended to be heard by other rabbis; ways that expressed rabbinic values instead of their reality. He likens this style to the contemporary practice of telling ethnic jokes, such that the joke doesn't necessarily represent the teller's true feelings about the joke's subject group. (124)

[44] Genesis 33:18

[45] *Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach*, 79:6

[46] ibid

[47] Genesis 33:20

[48] *Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach*, 79:8

[49] While the obvious purpose of this story is to explain Dinah's rape, it also serves as a lesson to anyone who might be tempted to think himself too powerful because of his wealth.

Again, as with the discussion of Moses above, it is not the intention of the sages to disparage this biblical figure. Rather Jacob provides a clear lesson for the wealthy sages of the time. Jacob, here, represents the rabbis as he is described as observing Shabbat[50] and in his relations with the people of Shechem. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the rabbis occupied a social stratum that fell between the political ruler and the people of their locale. Jacob used his wealth to influence the notables and the commoners of his new town. But in the end the power of money is inferior to the true power of God. Thus the rabbis teach that no matter how rich or powerful a sage might be, he was still human and subject to God.

Two Examples of Rabbinic Wealth and Power: R. Eleazar b. Azariah and R. Huna

Of all the rabbinic figures introduced and discussed in the Talmud, there are two whose stories are representative of the preceding discussion on the relationship between wealth and power in the rabbinic world. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was a respected sage, wealthy, and the chosen as the political leader of his community. Much less is known about Rav Huna Rosh HaGolah, but it is related that his *yihus* was excellent. These men exemplified the characteristics that were combined to define wealth and power for the Sages: Torah, *tzedakah*, and lineage.

The story of R. Eleazar b. Azariah begins in the time of the Patriarchate of Rabban Gamaliel II. Following a change in judicial policy, which could be described as an attempt to constrain other rabbis' rulings or as a way to unify the judicial system under the Patriarch, Gamaliel was deposed by a group of rabbis who disagreed with his position.[51] In

[50] ibid, 79:6
[51] Urbach, 600

their search for a new Patriarch, the rabbis had two choices. The prominent rabbis of the time were Akiva and Eleazar b. Azariah. The wisdom and subsequent wealth of Rabbi Akiva have been discussed above. R. Eleazar b. Azariah's wealth was substantially greater than R. Akiva's. Two rabbinic statements attest to its magnitude.

The first description follows a Mishnah that teaches: [If a man says to a woman], be thou betrothed unto me...on condition that I am wealthy, and he is found to be poor, or poor and he is found to be rich; she is not betrothed. Presumably in answer to the question of how to define "wealthy" the rabbis assert, "'On the condition that I am wealthy', we do not say, like...R. Eleazar b. Azariah, but as long as he is honored by his fellow citizens on account of his wealth."[52] This ruling actually provides two pieces of information. Not only was Eleazar so wealthy as not to hold others to his standard, but also it was common for the people to be shown respect simply because of their wealth.[53]

The second description of R. Eleazar b. Azariah's wealth comes from the Mishnah. "When R. Eleazar b. Azariah died, wealth went away from the sages."[54] It is more difficult to discern the meaning behind this assertion. Certainly there were wealthy rabbis after R. Eleazar died. Perhaps we are to understand that no rabbi was as wealthy as Eleazar b. Azariah in the same way as there was no prophet like Moses after his death.[55] The statement could also be a reference to the comparison between Palestinian sages and their Babylonian counterparts whom scholars describe as being wealthier than the Palestinian

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[52] B. Kiddushin 48b

[53] This second fact is not in itself surprising. The unexpected aspect of the statement is that showing someone honor based on wealth would seem to be a practice warranting censure, but here the rabbis use it as neutral or even positive part of reality.

[54] M. Sotah 9:15

[55] Deuteronomy 34:10

sages. Regardless, these descriptions identify R. Eleazar as the owner of the wealth by which all others are defined.

Wealth alone, no matter how great, would not have propelled R. Eleazar b. Azariah to his position of leadership over R. Akiva. Rubenstein argues that R. Eleazar was chosen because he excelled in the necessary rabbinic skills. The author contends that had R. Eleazar not been accomplished in debate he would not have been able to maintain or improve his position in the Academy.[56] According to J. Yevamot 1:5, he was also known for his generosity. Upon seeing R. Eleazar another sage recited the following verses in appreciation of the sage's openhandedness:

> I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging bread. He is ever giving liberally and lending, and his children become a blessing.[57]

Even though these attributes are noteworthy, R. Eleazar b. Azariah is known for and attained his position because of another characteristic. The end of the J. Yevamot passage reads: "I know him to be in the tenth generation of his family from Ezra. His eyes are like those of Ezra."[58] According to Cohen, Rabban Gamaliel II was vocal about his own lineage, so in deposing him the leaders of the rabbinic rebellion against the patriarchate had to choose someone with better lineage.[59] At the same time, since it is not R. Eleazar but his supporters among the sages who make the lineage claim, Eleazar is further distanced from both Gamaliel and the Babylonian elites who are likewise concerned with *yihus*.

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[56] Rubenstein, 97, based on the Talmudic description of R. Eleazar: "He is wise—so that if they object to him he will solve it" (B. Berachot 27b). Similarly, B. Sotah 49b, where it is written that upon R. Eleazar's death "the crowns of wisdom have departed."
[57] Psalm 37:25-26
[58] J. Yevamot 1:5, trans. Jacob Neusner
[59] Cohen, 240

Babylonian rabbinic interest in lineage had roots in the widespread Babylonian cultural emphasis on bloodlines. One of the Babylonian sages who best represents this attribute is Rav Huna Rosh HaGolah.[60] Rav Huna was the exilarch during the time of Judah ha-Nasi's reign in Palestine. Little is recounted about Rav Huna except that his lineage was superior to that of Judah ha-Nasi; his existence is not even mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud. In the Jerusalem Talmud, Rav Huna is mentioned only in the context of Judah's humility.

> Rabbi was a very humble person, and he used to say, "Whatever a person tells me I will do, except for what the elders of Bathyra did for my ancestor [Hillel], for they dismissed themselves from the patriarchate and appointed him [in their place].
> "If R. Huna, the Exilarch, were to come up here [to the land of Israel], I would place him above me, for he is from Judah and I am from Benjamin, as he is from the male [line of descent from David], and I am from the female [line]."
> One time R. Hiyya the Great came up to [Rabbi]. He said to him, "R. Huna is outside." Rabbi's face became pale. [R. Hiyya the Great] said to him, "His coffin has arrived."[61]

This story relates three pieces of information about Rav Huna Rosh HaGolah: he lived at the same time as Judah HaNasi, he had stronger *yihus* than Judah, and when he died he was buried in Palestine. There is no direct information about his wisdom, character, or wealth.

While the beginning of the passage seems to indicate that lineage is, in fact, the most important means of obtaining power, the last scene indicates otherwise. Rabbi would have given up his position of power despite his wealth, wisdom, and character. However, there is nothing to indicate that Rav Huna would merit his position. Neusner argues that this passage indicates "a mixture of respect and apprehension" on the part of the Palestinian sages towards Rav Huna and the Babylonian elite.[62] Certainly these emotions are part of the story. The Palestinian sages showed respect to the exilarch by preserving Rav Huna in

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[60] This Rav Huna should not be confused with the better-known Amora, Rav Huna who was called "the pious one of Babylonia" (Ta'anit 23a).
[61] Kilayim 9:3, trans. Irving J. Mandelbaum
[62] Neusner, 125

their writings, and Rabbi's reaction to Rav Huna's arrival in Palestine can be read as apprehension. However, this story may also serve as a critique of the Babylonian community and their emphasis on lineage.

Ultimately, these stories about R. Eleazar and Rav Huna display the dual rabbinic understandings of the relationship between wealth and power. They recognize that it is necessary for the people in power to be wealthy.[63] At the same time, the rabbis want power in the rabbinic world to be wielded by someone rich in Torah learning more than they desire a leader who has the strongest *yihus* or largest purse.

[63] The wealth of the leader was important so that he could be generous with the people, and also so that he would be able to afford being the liaison between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish leader. For instance, B. Berachot 27b, relates that R. Eleazar was the right choice for patriarch because he would be able to travel to pay honor to Ceasar.

The Wealth and Power of Non-Rabbis

While the rabbinic world was mainly populated by other rabbis, it is illogical to think that the sages did not live and interact on a regular basis with Jews who were not rabbis. The rabbis were teachers of Torah, businessmen, sons, and fathers. At the same time, as was argued in the last chapter, the ideal of Jewish life was to be a rabbi. However, while some—namely Babylonian—sages were wealthy in their own right, the rest relied heavily upon non-rabbis for their welfare. The extent to which rabbis interacted with the people, in Hebrew *amei ha'aretz*, and how they discussed the wealthy *amei ha'aretz* was often colored by this contradiction: the same people the rabbis looked down upon for not being scholars were the people that the rabbis relied upon for their ability to be scholars.

It should be noted that while much of the following discussion will focus on the financial support the rabbis sought from wealthy *amei ha'aretz*, money was not the only reason for the rabbis to interact with non-rabbis. They would also have been concerned with solidifying their base of supporters and adherents to the Oral Law, especially in the beginning of the rabbinic period. The interactions also served as learning experiences for the rabbis. Urbach writes:

> The contact of the Sages, in all generations, with broad strata of the people of all classes not only led to the discovery of manifestations of estrangement from Judaism, of disrespect for the Torah and precepts, of abuse of the Sages and the like, but also to the revelation of good qualities, of simple faith, of piety and outstanding acts of charity and benevolence on the part of the common people.[64]

While it is doubtful that all of the rabbis' negative lessons were isolated in Babylonia, there is a distinctly negative quality to the statements about non-rabbis or interaction between rabbis and non-rabbis in Babylonian texts. Kalmin notes that while present in Palestinian sources, encouragement of non-rabbis to support the sages through money or marriage is

[64] Urbach, 639

nearly absent in Babylonian texts.[65] The mention of *amei ha-aretz* in the Babylonian Talmud is quite negative. Rubenstein explains this trend as hyperbole intended for a rabbinic audience that reflects "the core rabbinic ideology that places ultimate worth on Torah study."[66] One exception to this negative Babylonian characterization is found in the stories of Ben Eleasa. This collection of *aggadot* illustrates the ways by which the rabbis felt *amei ha'aretz* could exercise their wealth and power.

The Rabbis provide three stories about Ben Eleasa, the son-in-law of Rabbi Judah HaNasi. Explicit in these tales is that Ben Eleasa was a wealthy man. Implicit is that by marrying Rabbi's daughter, he is within the power structure of the Patriarchate even though he is not learned. Each of the three stories could be understood separately to provide a single opinion on the wealthy non-rabbi. For this study, however, the stories will be viewed as a literary triptych.

> I.
> Ben Eleasa, a very wealthy man, was Rabbi's son-in-law, and he was invited to the wedding of R. Simeon b. Rabbi.
> [At the wedding] Bar Kappara asked Rabbi, What is meant by *to'ebah*? Now, every explanation offered by Rabbi was refuted by him, so he said to him, 'Explain it yourself.' He replied, 'Let your house-wife come and fill me a cup.' She came and did so, upon which he said to Rabbi, 'Arise and dance for me, that I may tell it to you.' Thus saith the Divine Law, '*to'ebah*': *to'eh attah bah.*
> At his second cup he asked him, 'What is meant by *tebel*?' He replied in the same manner as before, [until] he remarked, 'Do [something] for me, and I will tell you.' On his complying, he said '*tebel hu*' means: Is there *tablin* [perfume] in it [the animal]? Is intimacy therewith sweeter than all other intimacies?
> Then he furthered questioned, And what is meant by *zimmah*? 'Do as before, [and I will tell you.'] When he did so, he said '*zimmah* means *zu mah hi*'
> Now, Ben Eleasa could not endure all this, so he and his wife left.[67]
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> II.
> Rabbi had high regard for Bar Eleasa. Bar Kappara said to him, "Everyone brings questions to Rabbi, and you do not bring questions to him."
> He said to him, "What should I ask him?"

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[65] Kalmin, *Jewish Society*, 27
[66] Rubenstein, 124
[67] B. Nedarim 51a

He said to him, "Ask: 'It looks down from heaven, it searches the corners of the house. All the winged creatures fear.' 'The young men saw me and withdrew, the aged rose and stood; ... and laid their hand on their mouth'. Lo, they say, 'Wonderful, wonderful. He who is taken in his sin.'"
[Upon hearing this riddle,] Rabbi turned and saw [Bar Kappara] laughing. Rabbi said, "I do not recognize you, o sage."
And [Bar Kappara] realized that he would not be appointed as an official of Rabbi's court for the rest of his days.[68]

III.
What is [known of] Ben Eleasa?—It was taught: Ben Eleasa did not disburse his money for nothing, but that he might achieve thereby the High Priest's style of hair-dressing, as it is written, *They shall only poll their heads*. It was taught that: [That means] in the Lulian[69] fashion. What was the Lulian style?—Rab Judah said: A unique style of hairdressing. How is that?—Raba said: The end [of one row of hair] reaching the roots of the other, and such was the hairdressing fashion of the High Priest.[70]

In the first story, Ben Eleasa is introduced in two sentences that serve as bookends to an exegetical exchange between two rabbis: Bar Kappara and Judah HaNasi. The discourse is a thinly veiled insult. While the target of this critique is not clear, it seems to be directed at either Ben Eleasa or R. Simeon b. Rabbi, the groom at whose wedding feast the scene takes place. Under discussion, are the Levitical categories of sexual impropriety including bestiality and incest. At the close of the argument Ben Eleasa leaves with his wife. Presumably he is no longer willing or able to bear the affront, whether to himself or his family. It is also possible to read Ben Eleasa's leaving as a sign that he does not want to participate in the Torah-centered conversation, although this understanding ignores the main character of the story, Bar Kappara, and his role in these tales as a critic of Rabbi.

It is interesting to note that *Leviticus Rabbah* preserves another incident from the same wedding feast. In this account, Bar Kappara is not invited to the wedding until he confronts Rabbi about his snub. Then at the wedding feast he distracts the other guests

[68] J. Moed Katan 3:1, trans. Jacob Neusner
[69] According to the note in the Soncino translation, "Lulian" is a corruption of Julian.
[70] B. Nedarim 51a

from their celebration by telling fables. When Rabbi asks him why he is acting in such a way, Bar Kappara replies that his actions are a response to the embarrassment he was caused by not having been invited originally.[71] In this and other stories, Bar Kappara acts as a balance to Judah HaNasi in a similar manner as ha-Satan acts to some of the biblical patriarchs in later, mystical midrashim.[72]

The second Talmudic story featuring these three characters is an earlier account from the Jerusalem Talmud. Here, we are told that Ben Eleasa was highly regarded by the Patriarch, but no mention is made of his wealth. Instead, the story emphasizes the fact that Ben Eleasa was not a sage—he was poor in terms of Torah learning—and one might also conclude that perhaps he was not the smartest non-rabbi since he was so easily led to represent Bar Kappara's criticism of Judah HaNasi.[73] The ruse is quickly discovered and no harm comes to Ben Eleasa. That he is not suspected of criticizing Rabbi could be evidence of two views on the non-rabbi. The rabbis could be using Ben Eleasa to represent a positive view of *amei ha'aretz*: they are eager to participate in the rabbinic process or to follow rabbinic guidance. Alternatively, the rabbis may be presenting a negative view of *amei ha'aretz* as pawns in the rabbinic world regardless of their family connections—a sage could coach even the Patriarch's son-in-law into insulting him.

The third mention of Ben Eleasa is also somewhat ambiguous. Following immediately after the story of his leaving R. Simeon b. Rabbi's wedding, this statement

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[71] *Leviticus Rabbah*, Emor, 28:2

[72] See, for instance, *Zohar* 10b-11a, in which ha-Satan reports to God of Abraham's unjust treatment of the poor.

[73] While the question Bar Kappara has Ben Eleasa ask is not a direct insult of the Nasi, scholars understand it as an insult because of the final statement in the story. Bar Kappara's realization that he will not be asked to join Judah's court is taken as a punishment for his attack on the Patriarchate. According to Shulamis Freiman: "The riddle was a criticism of the conduct of the household of R' Yehudah HaNassi and of the fear that he inspired" (71).

refers to the description of Ben Eleasa as being very wealthy. It is difficult to discern the judgment being made upon Ben Eleasa. He distributes his money—a positive characteristic—but for a vain and potentially religiously problematic reason—a negative description. Are the readers to understand that Ben Eleasa distributes his money for his own aggrandizement? What does it mean that Ben Eleasa seeks to emulate either the Roman ruler or the High Priest, especially when his father-in-law is the Nasi? One answer may be found in the fact that the Roman ruler under discussion is likely Julian the Apostate (Flavius Claudius Julianus) who was a Roman emperor from 361-363 CE.[74] In his short reign, Julian campaigned against Christianity even going so far as to suggest, and raise money for, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.[75] In light of this identification, the description of Ben Eleasa takes on new meaning. Why does this wealthy man distribute his money? He is aiming to be involved with the reestablishment of the Temple.[76] That he thinks that he might buy his way into this position is a sign of rabbinic blasting of both Julian's plan and the institution of the priesthood.[77]

There is another way to understand these three stories and their unifying character, Ben Eleasa. If, following Rubenstein and other scholars, we are to read these stories as expressions of values and not as histories then we can identify several themes stemming

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[74] If this connection is accurate it would represent a historical anachronism since Judah HaNasi lived in the previous century.

[75] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*; 1974. *s.v.*: Julian

[76] This reading of the text would also fit with the generally good relations between Roman authorities and Judah HaNasi described in other *aggadot*. A member of Judah HaNasi's family would certainly be chosen to be involved with the Temple were it rebuilt, especially if he also had the support of the community.

[77] Urbach presents what could be understood as a contrary understanding if we read the description of Ben Eleasa as both negative and a reflection on his father-in-law. He writes, "The criticism was leveled not only against his 'honoring the rich' and against the style of living, the exercise of his authority, and the royal pomp that obtained in Rabbi's court, but against the very institution of the Patriarchate in Eretz-Israel and the office of Exilarch in Babylonia." (602)

from Ben Eleasa. Certainly there are references to other non-rabbis in the corpus of Talmudic literature. However, the designation of Ben Eleasa as Rabbi's son-in-law gives him a certain prominence and weight. His character represents the possibility of marriage between rabbinic and non-rabbinic families. In that sense he may be meant as a model for non-rabbis. However, since the *aggadot* were by and large meant for the benefit of other rabbis we should view Ben Eleasa from a different perspective.

Ben Eleasa is in the world of the rabbis but not of that world. He has some understanding of rabbinic values but cannot or does not express them on his own. He is a supporting character; one who facilitates rabbinic interactions. That role is precisely the one the rabbis saw as fitting for *amei ha'aretz*. Ben Eleasa is described as being wealthy and in good standing with rabbinic authority because he represented the ideal form of a non-rabbi. This collection of stories about Ben Eleasa presents the three potential modalities of how a non-rabbi might express his wealth or power: marriage, support of rabbis, and through the figure of the Patriarch or Exilarch.

Amei ha-Aretz as Potential Marriage Partners

We noted earlier that one of the ways to gain power in the rabbinic world was by claiming proper lineage. For those Jews who were not born into a powerful or noteworthy rabbinic family, lineage or *yichus* could still be attained through marriage. Likewise marriage was a way to connect oneself to wealth. In the Ben Eleasa stories it seems that while he brought his wealth to his marriage with the Nasi's daughter, he gained access to power through the relationship. In other teachings, the rabbis are much more explicit in

their judgment on the practice of rabbis seeking non-rabbinic marriage partners for their money.

As one might expect, in the same way that the Babylonian sages oppose extended interactions between rabbis and non-rabbis they are also opposed to the practice of rabbis marrying into *amei ha-aretz* families; especially given the importance of lineage as an indicator of wealth and means to power in Babylonian society. In a parable, the rabbis teach that marriage between rabbinic and non-rabbinic families is like combining "grapes of the vine with berries of a thorn bush, which is an ugly and inappropriate thing."[78] Depending on how one punctuates the text, either the thorn bush is the "ugly and inappropriate thing"[79] or the combination of the thorn bush and berry vine is "ugly and inappropriate". Following the Babylonian pattern of describing *amei ha'aretz* in negative terms, the thorn bush represents the non-rabbi, and the vine represents the rabbis. The parable's message is that to improve one would ruin the other.

Similarly, the Babylonian Amora, Rav, warns against marrying for money with the statement "all who marry a woman for the sake of money will have unworthy children."[80] Here, like the horticulture metaphor, the benefit may be in the present but the future will suffer for the combination of types. The rabbis condemned the biblical tribes of Reuben and Gad for the same reasons. In their commentary on the Torah portion Matttot the rabbis explain that the tribes were doomed because they confused the values of Torah and wealth, and further because they thought more of the present than the future.[81]

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[78] Pesahim 49a
[79] following Rubenstein, 126
[80] Kiddushin 70a, cited in Kalmin, *Jewish Society*, 32
[81] *Numbers Rabbah, Mattot* 22:9

> Another exposition is that the expression . '*A wise man's understanding is at his right hand*,' refers to the righteous who apply their minds to the Torah, which is on the right;

Palestinian sources offer a different opinion of the practice of rabbis marrying *amei ha'aretz* for their money. R. Yohanan teaches that any non-rabbis who "marry their daughters to sages, those who help sages in business, and those who benefit sages by giving them of their own property" will receive the rewards spoken of by the prophets.[82] Interestingly, later Babylonian sages offer statements similar to their Palestinian colleagues. In a statement that Kalmin understands to encourage marriage between rabbis and non-rabbis, Rava teaches that the reward for respecting rabbis is sons-in-law who are rabbis.[83] This statement combines the reward theory proposed by R. Yohanan with the overarching Babylonian ideal of Torah study.

Amei ha-Aretz as Potential Supporters

Like the statements about marriage with non-rabbis, the teachings about receiving financial support from non-rabbis are mixed. Following their general view on avoiding contact with non-rabbis, Babylonian sources are much quieter on this issue than Palestinian sages. The absence of discussion on this topic also seems to be correlated to the wealth of Babylonian rabbis. In contrast, due to their economic situation, Palestinian rabbis recognized the need to rely on non-rabbis for financial support, so there is more evidence

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> as it says, *At His right hand was a fiery law unto them* (Deuteronomy 33:2), while '*A fool's understanding at his left*' alludes to the wicked, who set their minds on getting rich; as it says, *In her left hand are riches and honour* (Proverbs 3:16). Another exposition: The expression, '*A wise man's understanding is at his right hand*' applies to Moses, while '*A fool's understanding at his left*' applies to the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, who made the main thing the subordinate, and put the subordinate things first, for they cherished their property more than human life, saying to Moses: *We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our little ones* (Numbers 32:16). Moses said to them: That is not right! Rather do the more important things first, *Build you cities for your little ones* (*ibid.* 24) and afterward *Folds for your sheep* (*ibid*).

[82] B. Sanhedrin 99a cited by Rubenstein, 126 (The author notes parallel statements from B. Berachot 34b and B. Ketubot 111b.)

[83] B. Shabbat 23b, Kalmin *Jewish Society*, 32, also B. Ketubbot 52b-53a

of this practice in their writing. Furthermore, readers can also see the difference in need for political support between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis through the texts. This is the argument put forth by Kalmin in his study. He writes:

> Palestinian rabbis lacked a strong institutional basis for their authority and the...statements reflect part of their effort to acquire such a basis. They appeal to non-rabbinic Jews for support in an attempt to gain a stronger foothold in and eventual control over Palestinian Jewish society. Babylonian rabbis, according to this theory, were more powerful than their Palestinian counterparts and already occupied a strong position in society. They tended to be secure enough to wait for others to come to them for judgment and legal decision-making and felt relatively little compulsion to humble themselves by seeking monetary support from the wealthy and marriage ties with the powerful.[84]

According to this construction, the rabbis define two different relationships between wealth and power. First, by asking for financial support the rabbis indicate that their means of power—Torah study and popular support—comes from others' money. Second, they give away a certain amount of power, which comes on the merit of their Torah study, in order to gain money.

To justify this exchange of money and power the Palestinian rabbis use a parable that expresses the interdependence of the rabbis and non-rabbis. A tradition from *Leviticus Rabbah*[85] is referenced in a statement from R. Shimon b. Lakish.

> This nation [Israel] maybe compared to a vine. Its branches—these are the wealthy. The clusters—these are the scholars. The leaves—these are the *amei ha'aretz*. The shoots—these are the ignorant. This explains that which they sent from there [Palestine]: 'Let the clusters pray for the leaves, for were it not for the leaves, the clusters could not exist.'[86]

Although this statement is found in the Babylonian Talmud, the idea's origin is clearly Palestinian. Through this teaching we learn that the Palestinian sages understood that without wealthy people sages could not exist, and there would be no hope for either the

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[84] *Jewish Society*, 33

[85] Just as the leaves of the vine protect the clusters, so it is with Israel that the *amei ha-aretz* protect the scholars. (*Behukotai*, 36:2)

[86] B. Hullin 92a

growth of the ignorant or the sustenance of the average person. The one aspect of this parable that seems incongruous with the Palestinian reality is the ratio between the wealthy—the branches—and the multitude—the leaves. We might understand this discrepancy as a nod to the wealthy community members who would have been happier to be the all-important branch as opposed to the leaves of the vine of Israel. In fact, many of the statements regarding non-rabbis offering support to rabbis might be understood in this light.

For example there is the story told of Abba the blood-letter.[87] Abba, a non-scholar, is described as receiving greetings from heaven on a daily basis—an honor not even accorded the rabbis of his time. When the rabbis seek to find the source of his merit they discover that he gives hospitality to scholars. Kalmin suggests that this story is a Babylonian version of the Palestinian motif that through support for sages a non-rabbi earns reward from God.[88] Among the examples of this pattern in Palestinian sources are two sections from *Leviticus Rabbah.*

In one section, the rabbis praise the biblical figure, Zebulun, for supporting his scholarly brother, Issachar. Adjacent to that statement is the following:

> R. Jeremiah says in the name of R. Hiyya: [If a person] has not learned [Torah], and has neither performed, observed, nor taught it to others, but, [although] he was not able to maintain [scholars] maintained [them]... behold, he is included in the term 'blessed.[89]

Here the statement expressly excludes the wealthy; which raises the question of whether someone with means to "maintain scholars" who gives money for their support is more blessed or less. The same question is raised with the story of Abba Judan in *Leviticus Rabbah, Vayikra,* 5:4.

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[87] B. Ta'anit 21b-22a
[88] Kalmin, *Jewish Society*, 31
[89] *Leviticus Rabbah, Kedoshim*, 25:1

To illustrate the meaning of the verse: "A man's gift maketh room for him and bringeth him before great men,"[90] the rabbis offer the tale of a non-rabbi from the Antiocha area. Once wealthy and a supporter of the rabbis, Abba Judan had lost his fortune and became distressed when the rabbis reappeared to collect again. His wife instructs him to sell half of his land and to give the proceeds to the rabbis. Abba Judan does this and soon after finds a treasure as a reward for his support of the sages. When the rabbis return, they find Abba Judan extremely wealthy. Abba Judan thanks the rabbis and they say to him: "As you live, even though others gave more than you did, we wrote you down at the head [of the list]." Analysis of this story suggests that generosity is judged on a sliding scale of sorts. Abba Judan lost his wealth when his donation accounted for a small percentage of his fortune and redoubled it when he gave half of his holdings to the rabbis.

While the lesson drawn from this Abba Judan story is that it is more meritorious for the poor to give to the rabbis, the authors present a second Abba Judan story directly following the first which serves to clarify their feelings about the wealthy. The second story concerns Abba Judan the Deceiver, so-called because he tricks his fellow community members into donating more to the rabbis by publicly withholding his contribution until they have made theirs. For this fundraising tactic, the second Abba Judan is given a seat next to R. Simeon b. Lakish. This position of honor may be understood as an indication of power. However it is also note-worthy that this Abba Judan holds power, in the form of cunning, over his non-rabbi peers since he can manipulate them into giving more than they would have otherwise. This sage-like wisdom should not be understood as a prerequisite

[90] Proverbs 18:16

for attaining a seat of honor although both stories about Abba Judan suggest that there may be a connection between that wisdom and the willingness to support the rabbis.[91]

The way in which a person uses his wealth is generally the determining factor in how the rabbis view the situation. Judah HaNasi and Rabbi Akiba are described as showing respect to rich men.[92] The men's wealth earns them respect not because wealth is intrinsically good but rather because wealth allows the men to provide for the poor. Similarly, a connection is made between wealth and power in a discourse between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yohanan.[93] The two debate the ability of *amei ha'aretz* to merit future rewards. Elazar claims that they have no share in the world to come because they do not engage in Torah study. Yohanan responds that through their support of rabbis, *amei ha'aretz* can "cleave to the Divine Presence." This statement locates God's presence within the rabbinic world, a sentiment which conforms to (or confirms) the rabbinic claim to authority. The new addition is that the power to change one's future is thus tied to a combination of wealth and generosity towards those in need—namely the rabbis.[94]

The Exilarchs, Patriarchs, and Rabbis

In the rabbinic world, *amei ha'aretz* may have had much of the money, but the Exilarchs and Patriarchs had the power. While some Exilarchs in Babylonia and Patriarchs in Palestine were also rabbis, by and large these men personified civil leadership in their

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[91] Immediately following the story of Abba Judan the Deceiver, there is an account of Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba giving the seat next to him to a man who contributed a *litra* of gold, so clearly being seated near a sage is a reward for giving to his support and not for any quality of the giver.
[92] B. Eruvin 86a
[93] B. Ketubot 111b
[94] It should be noted that while the general Palestinian attitude was positive, there were also authorities who argued against the rabbis asking for or accepting money from non-rabbis as a practice demeaning to the rabbis and Torah. (Kalmin *Jewish Society*, 31)

locales.[95] Much could be said on the differences between the exilarchate and patriarchate and their relations to the rabbis, but for the purposes of this study the two institutions will be treated as similar entities except in cases where their differences impact the way in which they are discussed by the rabbis.

The main similarity between the two institutions of leadership is that both served as a form of self-governance for the Jewish community while remaining under the authority of the imperial, non-Jewish monarch. Urbach uses the term "shadow monarchy" to describe the patriarchate[96] and argues that all of the conflict between the patriarch and the rabbis came from this classification. As mentioned above, the when the rabbis sought support from *amei ha'aretz* it was for both financial and political reasons.
At times this popular support was a point of contention between the rabbis and political leaders and at other times it was a cause for alliance.

In *Leviticus Rabbah* 25:1 the rabbis describe a symbiotic relationship between the political officials and sages:

> But if he has not been in the habit of reading Scripture or reciting Mishnah, what is he to do to stay alive? Let him go and become either an official of the community or a collector of charity, and he will stay alive...Thus '*the shelter of wisdom is assured by the shelter of gifts of money*'(Ecclesiastes 7:12).

This statement is reflective of the rabbinic attitude towards non-scholars, but also allows for a parallel form of service to the community.[97] Here the rabbis are not suggesting that the average non-scholar have himself made the Patriarch or Exilarch, but rather the

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[95] Although as Neusner points out in reference to Babylonian Jewry—and the same can be said of the Palestinian Jewish community—"in the first five centuries A.D. it was by no means clear which was church and which was state" (109).
[96] The same could be said about the Exilarchate except that the head of the Jewish community in Babylonia was hardly quiet about ties to the Davidic monarchy.
[97] Its character is similar to the statements of Rabbis Eleazar and Yohanan from B. Ketubot 111b described above (see page 36).

statement implies those positions through the term "an official of the community". The rabbis were very careful with their references to the Exilarchs or Patriarchs because they relied on those leaders for appointed positions in the community. Cohen writes:

> For the most part, rabbinic criticism of the *keter malkhut* (and especially its Babylonian variant) was more oblique—and the evidence consequently more recalcitrant. Rabbis, after all, needed the employment which only Patriarchs and Exilarchs could provide; in addition, the ever-present threat of gentile intervention (or worse) in intra-Jewish affairs imposed its own rule of discretion.[98]

The discretion that Cohen discusses does not preclude criticism. Urbach suggests that the attitude the rabbis held towards the Exilarch or Patriarch was related to their personal relationship with those leaders or their institutional bodies. In his discussion, Urbach contrasts those rabbis who express positive feelings with the spectrum of rabbinic figures who disapproved of the Patriarchate or Exilarchate. That spectrum includes:

> Tannaim like R. Phinehas b. Jair and R. Jonathan b. Amram avoided even the semblance of benefiting from honour shown to their Torah erudition, and the Amora R. Eleazar not only refused to receive gifts from the House of the Patriarch, but did not even accept the Patriarch's invitations, whereas R. Zera permitted himself such benefits, declaring 'They are honored by my presence'[99]

Such statements seem to put the civil leadership clearly at odds with the rabbinic world. Again referring to Rubenstein's theory about the appropriate way to read aggada we can determine that some rabbis placed great value on remaining distinct from what Urbach calls their "politico-national administrative institution."[100]

Maintaining this separation on the part of both the rabbis and the Exilarch or Patriarch sometimes caused a rivalry for dominance over the community. The Exilarchs and Patriarchs had three main sources of power. Both institutions claimed deeply meaningful lineage—referring back to the monarchy and, in the case of the exilarch, ahead

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[98] Cohen, 188

[99] Rashi explains: 'They are honored by the fact that I dine with them; hence it is not a gift'. Urbach, 602 citing BT Hullin 7b

[100] ibid.

towards the Messiah. The exilarchate and the patriarchate also had the support of the non-Jewish authorities.[101] They were also, either as a prerequisite or consequence, wealthy.

Although both groups used lineage to strengthen their assertions of authority, the power of the Exilarch or Patriarch was clearly superior to that of the rabbis in terms of wealth and political or military strength. Cohen describes the wealth of the Exilarchs as being of "fabled proportions".[102] Neusner likewise reminds his readers that not only did the Exilarch live in the style of the Persian upper class, but he and the Patriarch also had imperial soldiers under their control.[103] The rabbis certainly could not compete in these terms. They did, however, maintain a great deal of power within the populace. In contrast, the Exilarch and Patriarch—as leaders chosen by or approved by the local non-Jewish authority—saw the populace as being under their control. Following this belief, "the favors which they bestowed on the rabbis were expected to produce substantive administrative returns."[104] Neusner further notes that because of this power differential, whatever discomfort there may have been between the rabbis and the Exilarchs or Patriarchs was often limited to the rabbis' perspective. He writes:

> The rabbis thus served to enhance the legitimacy of the exilarch's political power...They were useful to the exilarch, for they could give him what he lacked, both a means of influencing the ordinary people, and a source of administrative talent and local leadership.[105]

It should be noted, however, that while the civil leaders may have viewed the rabbis as tools to increase their own authority they still supported the rabbis financially and

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[101] Cohen, 179
[102] Kalmin, *Jewish Society*, 184
[103] Neusner, 124-125
[104] Cohen, 186
[105] Neusner, 126

otherwise.[106] In this sense the Exilarchs and Patriarchs acted appropriately in the rabbis' conception of the role of non-rabbis. Just as the *amei ha'aretz* could provide money, a marriage partner, or a business connection to help the rabbis afford their Torah study, so too the civil authorities arranged immunity from having to pay for legal decisions made in error, paid certain taxes for the rabbis, and financially supported rabbinic students.[107]

The rabbinic view on the Patriarchs and Exilarchs—possessors of both wealth and power—was necessarily muted by the political and social realities of their world. We recall that the rabbis describe the prophets as independently wealthy, and thus free to speak against the rulers of their time.[108] The rabbis, in contrast, do not have that freedom because they rely upon the Patriarch or Exilarch for their financial welfare and also because they had to be concerned with the imperial power becoming too involved with Jewish affairs. However, it is clear that as long as the civil leaders acted in accordance with the rabbinic view of how wealthy non-rabbis should behave towards the sages, then the majority of the rabbis whose voices are preserved are willing to accept their help and their authority.

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[106] Neusner offers an interesting note on this subject. He writes:

> It is...quite natural that politicians have made use of religious emotions, myths, and institutions to provide either normal, prescriptive legitimacy for their enterprise...or to gain for political institutions and symbols the charisma forthcoming from religious associations or sentiments.... It is equally clear that religious institutions and elites have rarely enjoyed sufficient security to eschew the support of political institutions. (108)

[107] Cohen, 185

[108] See the analysis of B. Nedarim 38b on pages 14-16.

The Wealth and Power of Non-Jews

Nowhere is the discussion of wealth and power more problematic than in the context of the wealth and power held by non-Jews. The rabbis could easily understand accumulation of wealth as a reward for engaging in or supporting Torah study, but non-Jews did neither of those things. In fact, many non-Jews were hostile to the rabbis' agenda. In addition, the power of non-Jews often came at the expense of Jewish autonomy and power. In this light, the rabbis adopted the biblical and prophetic explanation that the superiority of Gentiles over Israel was part of God's plan--the punishment of Israel and her eventual redemption. The wealth the gentiles attained was part of that same plan, which would culminate in the restoration of Israel's wealth and power upon the advent of the Messiah.

While both rabbinic communities shared this worldview, the sages related to their local non-Jews in very different ways. The Babylonian Jewish community was well established by the rabbinic period, and had long had good relations with the non-Jewish political leadership. Their process of integration began with Jeremiah's instruction to the exiles in the sixth century BCE to pray for the welfare of the place in which they lived, and was solidified with Samuel's ruling that "the law of the land is the law".[109] Jacobs even cites R. Asi's ruling permitting the sale of arms to Persians as a sign that the non-Jews of Babylonia were viewed in a more positive light than were gentiles generally.[110]

On the other hand, rabbinic authorities in Palestine never encouraged adjustment to the Roman presence in the land. Roman troops and officials were seen as an occupying

[109] Jacobs, 351 citing Nedarim 28a
[110] ibid. citing Avodah Zara 16a

force as opposed to a source of protection.[111] This feeling can easily be understood since the early Palestinian rabbis witnessed the destruction of the Temple at Roman hands, and even those who were of later generations still experienced life as subjects in a land they believed to be theirs. Further, as reported above,[112] the Palestinian economy was limited by Roman rule affecting the rabbis as both businessmen and recipients of donations from non-rabbis. In *Esther Rabbah*, the rabbis present this picture of the economic life of Palestine in comparison to Rome.

> There are ten portions of wealth in the world, nine in Rome and one in the rest of the world. There are ten portions of poverty in the world, nine in Lydia and one in the rest of the world.[113]

This assessment of the financial difference between Rome and Palestine illustrates the way in which rabbinic authors present the relationship between wealth and power much more clearly in terms of non-Jews than they do with Jews. Part of the reason for this clarity is that the rabbis were not in a struggle for control of the Jewish community with Rome or Persia as they were with the Patriarch. Rome could be described as having most of the world's wealth, without the rabbis "losing face" as they might have if the comparison were between rabbis and Jewish non-rabbis.[114] A further explanation of this willingness on the part of the rabbis to directly relate non-Jews' wealth and power is that both necessarily came as a part of God's plan, as explained above.[115]

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[111] ibid.
[112] See page 8.
[113] *Esther Rabbah* 1:7. Lydia is often understood to be Lydda, a town near Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that Lydia/Lydda is in Palestine but not in Jerusalem as Jerusalem is described in the same section as having nine-tenths of the world's holiness and beauty. The rabbis are seemingly unwilling to disparage the holy city.
[114] At the same time, criticism of the patriarch would not have caused as severe a reaction as would criticism of Rome, so the rabbis used biblical figures to represent Rome in many instances, two of which will be discussed below.
[115] See the previous page and footnote 2, page 5.

The Opposing Examples of Haman and Laban

Esther Rabbah is a source of many comments on gentile wealth and power. It is interesting to note then that the Babylonian Jews understood the Book of Esther to be an actual account of how their ancestors were treated by a previous imperial ruler. [116] Neusner relates that evidence of this belief can be seen in the murals in a synagogue located by the Euphrates River, in which scenes from Esther are portrayed in the style of Persian Babylonia.[117] By extension we can postulate that the statements about the wealth and power of non-Jews were also relevant to the Babylonian Jewish community.

One of those statements is about the ease with which wealth and power lead to disrespecting God. To make this point the rabbis discuss two men: Korach, representing Israel, and Haman, representing non-Jews.

> R. Phineas said: There were two rich men in the world, one in Israel and one among the idolaters, whose money proved their ruination. In Israel there was Korach, who found the treasures of gold and silver that Joseph had hidden. Among the idolaters there was Haman, who seized the treasures of the kings of Judah. When the king saw his wealth and his ten sons of princely rank before him, he forthwith promoted and exalted him, as it says, *After these things did King Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him*, and the king ordered all to bow down and prostrate themselves before him. What did Haman then do? He attached an embroidered image to his garment upon his breast, and everyone who bowed down to Haman bowed to the image.[118]

The nuance of R. Phineas's statement is not immediately evident through his description of the two men. For Korach, it is his wealth that leads him to quarrel with Moses, and in so doing challenge God's authority. Haman, on the other hand, has wealth and because of it is then given power.[119] With that power he advanced his program of idolatry and his plan to

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[116] Neusner, 373

[117] ibid. The author also adds that the rulers in the story came from the same province, Fars, as the Sasanian Persians who ruled Babylonia during the rabbinic period.

[118] *Esther Rabbah* 7:5

[119] A similar story is told of King Ahasuerus:

destroy the Jews. While Haman's wealth leads to his position of power, it is this power that leads to his downfall.

While it is likely that the Jews living under Persia understood a special connection with the Jews of the story of Esther, it is even easier to see the ways in which this story, through its interpretation in *Esther Rabbah*, represented the experience of its authors, the Jews living under Rome. The Rabbis describe Haman as a descendant of Amalek, who was Esau's first-born son.[120] In a connection found throughout rabbinic literature, Esau represents Rome. One of the ways the rabbis make this link between Haman and Rome is in relation to the Temple. *The First Targum of the Book of Esther* states that Haman prevented the rebuilding of the Temple.[121] In the same way that Rome destroyed the Temple and then paid for their oppression of the Jews with the spoils and the taxes they demanded the Jews pay, Haman used the wealth acquired from Jews in his attempt to destroy them.[122]

The equation of Haman with Rome is another reason why the rabbis are willing to make Haman so wealthy. In keeping with the rabbinic notion that prophets are wealthy, the rabbis were able to make Haman wealthy because they understood him to be acting in fulfillment of God's plan. In *Esther Rabbah* 7:13 the rabbis express their concern about the

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> *Who reigned*: Rab said: this indicates that he [Ahasuerus] raised himself to the throne. Some interpret this to his credit, and some to his discredit. Some interpret it to his credit, holding that there was no other man equally fitted for the throne. Others interpret it to his discredit, holding that he was not fitted for the throne, but that he was very wealthy, and by means of lavish distribution of money rose to the throne. (Megillah 11a)

[120] Glickman, Elaine Rose. *Haman and the Jews: A Portrait from Rabbinic Literature*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.; 1999 (19), cites Targum Sheni 3:1 as one example of this genealogy that can be found throughout rabbinic literature.

[121] Chapter 3, 1 *Aggadat Esther*, a medieval commentary, makes an even stronger connection by describing Haman as joining in the looting of the Temple when it was destroyed by the Assyrians. (cited in Glickman, 42-43)

[122] based on Glickman, ibid.

interaction between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors by explaining that God ordered the destruction of the Jews for their participation in Ahasuerus's feast and their abandonment of Judaism in favor of the dominant culture.[123] Here the rabbis use the opening phrase "After these things..." to mean both Ahasuerus's party and the judgment against the Jews in the Heavenly Court. Glickman describes this reading of the story as creating "a powerful paradigm of human oppressor as God's tool, enabling themselves—and us—to acknowledge persecution without denying God's power, and to acknowledge God's wrath without concluding that He has abandoned us forever."[124]

Though Haman serves an important role as God's agent in the plan of divine punishment, the rabbis are more than willing to discuss his downfall. Among the reasons they give for Haman's ultimate failure is his focus on wealth.

> *And Haman told them of the glory of his wealth* (Esther 5:11). This is what Scripture says: *The one who trusts in his wealth shall fall, but like foliage shall the righteous flourish* (Proverbs 11:28). *The one who trusts in his wealth shall fall*—this is the wicked Haman...What was written afterwards? *So they hanged Haman* (Esther 7:10).[125]

As much as Haman represents Rome or other foreign powers that would oppress or try to annihilate the Jewish people his death still delivers a message for wealthy Jews who would put their own needs or interests before that of the community based on their wealth.

In contrast to the certain wealth and power that biblical and rabbinic authors attribute to Haman, the character of Laban is much more ambiguous in both the narratives of Genesis and in rabbinic literature. Biblical authors present Laban as a foil to Jacob's plans, but do not directly describe either his character or his financial situation. The rabbis, on the other hand, offer some positive comments but mostly describe Laban as poor and

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[123] *Esther Rabbah* 7:13
[124] Glickman, 77
[125] *Agadat Esther* 5:11

greedy. Whereas the Genesis account of the first meeting between Laban and Jacob[126] seems to present a wealthy, flock-owning uncle warmly greeting his sister's son the encounter as retold in *Genesis Rabbah* is quite different.

> *When Laban heard [the news of his sister's son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and took him into his house].* He [Laban] said to himself: Eliezer was an unimportant member of the household, yet it is written of him, *Then the servant took ten of his master's camels* (Gen 24:10). How much more then must this man have who is the beloved of his home! But when he did not see his wallet, *he embraced him*, thinking, perhaps he has money in and keeps it in his girdle. Not finding anything, *he kissed him*, thinking, maybe he has precious stones and keeps them in his mouth.[127]

Unlike Haman, who was rich and still focused on wealth, Laban's interest in money is a result of his poverty. It is this condition that leads him to take advantage of Jacob by not paying him proper wages, or by giving him the wrong daughter to marry so that Laban can continue to benefit from Jacob's service and presence. Zetterholm presents the rabbinic notion that "blessing accompanies the righteous" to explain why Laban needed Jacob to stay with him.[128] It is not clear whether or not, in this context, Laban is meant to represent a foreign power as Haman and Esau represent Rome.[129] However, because Laban uses deception instead of wealth (like Haman) to get his way, he is made to be an example of how wealth is not the only source of power in the rabbinic worldview.

The Case of Esau's Wealth and Power

Throughout rabbinic literature, Esau is described as the antithesis of Judaism and Israel. While the origins of this conflict are biblical, the contest takes on new meaning in the rabbinic period—when Esau comes to stand for Rome. Although the connection is

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[126] Genesis 29:1-13

[127] *Genesis Rabbah, Vayetze*, 70:13, cited in Zetterholm, Karin Hedner. *Portrait of a Villain: Laban the Aramean in Rabbinic Literature*. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters; 2002

[128] Zetterholm, 110, citing *Genesis Rabbah, Vayetze*, 73.8

[129] In other contexts Laban is associated with the "Aramean" described in Deuteronomy 26:5 and is therefore identified with various other nations. (Zetterholm, 47-87)

forged early, the parallels between Esau and Rome come to hold greater meaning after Rome adopts Christianity as its official religion. Urbach explains that just as Esau claimed a birthright but wasted it, and then abandoned Judaism so too did Rome claim Torah and the birthright of Israel but misinterpret and corrupt it.[130] Following this view of Rome, rabbinic stories about Esau present him as both greedy and stupid. Louis Ginzberg provides this retelling of rabbinic midrash on an exchange between Jacob and Esau:

> Beside the presents which Jacob gave Esau, he also paid out a large sum of money to him for the Cave of Machpelah. Immediately upon his arrival in the Holy Land he sold all that he had brought with him from Haran, and a pile of gold was the proceeds of the sale. He spoke to Esau saying: "Like me thou hast a share in the Cave of Machpelah, wilt thou take this pile of gold for thy portion therein?" "What care I for the Cave?" returned Esau. "Gold is what I want," and for his share in Machpelah he took the gold realized from the sale of the possessions Jacob had accumulated outside of the Holy Land. But God "filled the vacuum without delay," and Jacob was as rich as before.[131]

This rabbinic expansion of the encounter between Jacob and Esau following Jacob's stay with Laban is a metaphor for the rabbinic understanding of their life under Rome. Jacob clearly represents Israel, the Jews. Esau is Rome, and the Cave of Machpelah can be either Torah or the land itself. Esau/Rome is not interested in the land, but rather in the wealth he can receive from it. Israel must be impoverished in order to placate Rome so that the Jews can eventually have their land back. God's reconstitution of Jacob's wealth is a reminder that in the future Jews will again be wealthy in gold, Torah, and land.

Another example of the rabbis' hope for Rome's future downfall is explicitly put forth, again under the guise of Jacob addressing Esau, in a passage from *Yalkut Reuveni*. The rabbis write that Jacob is not distressed by having to give his wealth to Esau because in the end Esau will be destroyed.

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[130] Urbach, 381

[131] Ginzburg, Louis. *Legends of the Jews*. trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin. 2nd edition, Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 2003 (306)

> Wealth was not an object of desire to Jacob. He would have been well content, in his own behalf and in behalf of his family, to resign all earthly treasures in favor of Esau and his family. He said to Esau: "I foresee that in future days suffering will be inflicted by thy children upon mine. But I do not demur, thou mayest exercise thy dominion and wear thy crown until the time when the Messiah springs from my loins, and receives thee." These words spoken by Jacob will be realized in days to come, when all nations will rise up against the kingdom of Edom, and take away one city after another from him...[132]

Jacob's statement here is representative of rabbinic thinking about wealth and power on several levels. First, Jacob recognizes that wealth is not the highest value. Second, his statement reflects the rabbinic notion that attainment and loss of wealth is cyclical and ultimately out of human control. Finally, the rabbis have Jacob express their belief that God only chooses to grant power to non-Jews as part of the plan of temporary divine punishment.

The Sodomites Use of Wealth and Power

Whereas the examples of Esau and Haman are plainly used to represent the rabbis' opinions on Rome, there are other instances in which wealthy or powerful non-Jews are employed to teach a universally applicable lesson. Working from already descriptive biblical literature, the rabbis expand upon the atrocities committed by the Sodomites in order to delineate the limits of their own society. Sodom's destruction by God serves as an unnamed threat against those who would use their wealth or power as the inhabitants of Sodom did.

The list of transgressions committed by the Sodomites because of their wealth is lengthy, according to rabbinic authors. They were haughty, unjust, and even murderous.[133] Ginzburg notes that the phrase "in the way of the Sodomites" is used in rabbinic literature

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[132] *Yalkut Reuveni* I, 133 as retold by Ginzburg, 307
[133] B. Sanhedrin 109a

to describe "a high degree of parsimony and niggardliness."[134] More than any of these faults, the rabbis take issue with the Sodomites' use of their wealth and power to harm the poor and powerless.

> Their laws were calculated to do injury to the poor. The richer a man, the more he was favored before the law. The owner of two oxen was obliged to render one day's shepherd service, but if he had but one ox, he had to give two days' service. A poor orphan, who was thus forced to tend the flocks a longer time than those who were blessed with large herds, killed all the cattle entrusted to him in order to take revenge on his oppressors, and he insisted, when the skins were assigned, that the owner of two head of cattle should have but one skin, but the owner of one head should receive two skins, in correspondence to the method pursued in assigning the work. For use of the ferry, a traveler had to pay four *zuz*, but if he waded through the water, he had to pay eight *zuz*.[135]

The laws developed by the Sodomites clearly contrast the biblical commandments regarding the poor. Leaving aside, for the moment, the story of the orphan cattle-herd/rebel two other laws are identified. The law regarding fees for crossing the river, in which using the ferry service is less expensive than crossing through the water, seems to push the bounds of logic and is intended merely as punishment for being poor. The first statement of Sodomite law, that the wealthy are given preferential treatment, should be seen in the same light. Since it is possible for someone to argue that because of their higher tax payment or because of their large contributions to the community the wealthy should be treated differently, the rabbis teach that to do so would be to harm the poor in the manner of the Sodomites.

What harm would be done? Here the rabbis use the story of the poor orphan as an answer. As a result of the unjust law regarding service as community cattle-herd, the orphan kills his own cattle and those of others. Presumably the boy would not have acted against self-interest in this way if the law had been fair.

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[134] Ginzberg, 208

[135] ibid, 209-210 citing Sanhedrin 109a, 109b

The rabbis offer reasons other than their unjust laws to explain God's destruction of Sodom. By making the misuse of wealth and power one of those reasons, the rabbis present powerful lessons regarding this relationship. While it is certainly possible that the rabbis meant for the Sodomites to represent Rome as Esau and Haman do, this is not the only reading. Precisely because Sodom was destroyed, and therefore did not produce any descendants to whom the rabbis could relate a contemporary group, it provides a warning about the universal temptation to misuse wealth and power.

Lessons on the Relationship between Wealth and Power

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the rabbis of Palestine and Babylonia are comfortable with the idea that some people in the world are wealthy and some are not. Wealth is a blessing, but also the result of human effort. Similarly, God grants power to those people, Jewish and Gentile, who fulfill God's plan for the world. Within those generalizations though the rabbis provide specific lessons to guide their students in the accumulation of wealth and the exercise of power. The rabbis' teachings on the practice of usury serve as a sort of summary of these lessons.

The practice of charging interest on loans, usury, is prohibited in Torah.[136] The rabbis maintain this commandment but develop other means by which people might be encouraged to make loans. In order to provide for economic development within the bounds of Torah the Babylonia rabbis allow for credit buying but limit the amount of interest that can be added to the price.[137] To support their kosher economic practice the rabbis make statements like: "He who takes usury has no fear of God," and "God says, 'He who lives on usury in this world shall not live in the world to come.'"[138]

Why did the rabbis choose this method to solve the problem instead of effectively doing away with the usury law as they did with other untenable rules?[139] The answer to this question is found the rabbis' own writings.

> He who takes interest says to God, 'Why do You not exact payment from Your world and its creatures? Payment from the earth to which You give water, from the plants which You make sprout, from the stars which You cause to shine, from

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[136] Exodus 22:24 "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act towards them as a creditor; exact no interest from them." Montifiore notes that the rabbis do not define usury as charging excessive interest, but rather as charging any amount of interest. (448)
[137] Jacobs, 356
[138] *Exodus Rabbah*, Mishpatim 31:3
[139] For instance there are the rabbinic limitations on "*ben sorer u'moreh*" the rule that an insolent son must be put to death, the root of which comes just before the rule against usury, Ex. 21:17.

> the soul which You breathed into the body, from the body which You guard?'
>
> God replies, 'I lend much but I take no interest, and the earth lends and takes none; I take back only capital which I have lent and the earth takes back only its own,' as it is said, 'Then shall the dust return to the earth, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it' (Ecclesiastes. 12:7).[140]

Through this exchange the rabbis teach that it is the natural way—God's way—not to take interest on a loan. If it were only God that refrained from practicing usury, then readers might think that that is the perfect method of conducting business—one that only exists in the Divine realm. However since the imperfect earth is also described as loaning without interest, then the reader understands that the rabbis are describing what reality should be. We cannot lend on interest because it would go against the way in which God created the world.

The rabbis also address the arguments that usurers might make. In Baba Metzia 6b, R. Simeon b. Elazar responds to a statement made by a usurer who claims: "Had Moses but known how much we earn, he would not have inscribed this prohibition of interest." R. Simeon replies by suggesting that if they knew how much guilt they were incurring, usurers wouldn't charge interest.

That *sugya* continues with a statement from R. Akiva that widens the definition of usury. Instead of simply applying to money, Akiva calls usury anything that the person who has borrowed money now does for the lender that he didn't do before. This expansion is related to another statement on Makkot 24a. In a discussion of those to whom the verses of Psalm 15[141] could be applied, we learn: "He [who walks in perfection] is the man who

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[140] *Exodus Rabbah, Mishpatim*, 31:15

[141] A psalm of David./Lord, who may sojourn in Your tent,/who may dwell on Your holy mountain?/He who lives without blame, who does what is right, and in his heart acknowledges the truth;/whose tongue is not given to evil;/who has never done harm to his fellow,/or borne reproach for his neighbor;/for whom a contemptible man is abhorrent,/but who honor those who fear the

does not lend on interest even to a Gentile." With these statements the rabbis show that they were conscious of the fact that owing someone money is already a bad situation, but to also owe interest creates additional tension. The power differential between the person who has money and the person who needs it would be exacerbated if the wealthy person also were able to charge for the opportunity to place oneself in his debt. By extrapolating the themes from these lessons on usury, we can apply the rabbis' teachings to our contemporary issues.

The rabbis start their discussion of wealth and power with the belief that wealth is intrinsically good. In the stories of Rabbi Akiva, Abba Judan, and even Haman we learn that wealth is provided by God as a reward or as part of God's plan.[142] At the same time, the rabbis also expand the definition of wealth to include Torah knowledge and criticize the focus on wealth over scholarship. Similarly, in their teachings on usury the rabbis do not disparage the wealthy, but rather encourage them to act in a pious way by following the biblical injunction on usury. In this way the rabbis also remind us that wealth is not a shield against the *yetzer ha'ra*; in fact wealth may magnify the temptation to transgress.[143]

Similar to their understanding of wealth, the rabbis teach that power comes from God. However power does not come as a reward, rather it is assigned according to God's plan for the Jewish people. Since political and military power was assigned to others, the rabbis elevated the powers of learning and lineage. The rabbis also established their own guidelines for the exercise of power. The story of Jacob comparing himself to God and the

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Lord;/who stands by his oath even to his hurt;/who has never lent money at interest,/or accepted a bribe against the innocent./The man who acts thus shall never be shaken.

[142] See pages 13, 35, and 43 respectively.

[143] If this notion were not borne out in contemporary "Society pages" and by wealthy figures throughout history, it would seem to be a way of justifying the rabbinic attention paid to wealthy community members.

rules on usury are examples of these guidelines.[144] The rabbis do not suggest that power is intrinsically corrupting, but it must be used for the right purposes.

The rabbis certainly knew of their societies' versions of the 19th century American "Robber Barons", but they did not assume such abuse of wealth and power was the natural result of combining the two characteristics. Rabbinic descriptions of wealthy and powerful individuals teach that there is a distinction between what a person has and who that person is. Since power and wealth are both granted and taken away by God, those who are wealthy and those who hold power should consider themselves in a temporary state.

The impermanent nature of wealth and power leads to the most important of the rabbis' lessons on this subject. The rabbis' main argument against the practice of usury is that charging interest on a loan widens the divide between lender and borrower. Through this erroneous exercise of wealth and power, the lender separates himself from the community: a grievous mistake. The rabbis teach that the tribes of Gad and Reuben settled on the other side of the Jordan so that they could raise their cattle, and because they chose their possessions over their people they were the first to be sent into exile.[145]

With this midrash, the rabbis establish the means by which exercise of wealth and power can be judged—impact on the community. Those things that will separate the wealthy individual from her community, like charging interest or asking for other accommodations in exchange for money, are wrong. On the other hand, using one's wealth to support rabbis or communal institutions is a way of strengthening the ties between the individual and her community. Therefore using wealth and power in that way is not simply good, but meritorious and worthy of emulation.

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[144] The story of Jacob, *Genesis Rabbah, Vayishlach*, 79:8, is discussed on page 19.
[145] *Numbers Rabbah, Mattot*, 22:7

Appendix—Texts cited

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