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The Matrona and Rabbi Yose:

Rabbinic Storytelling and the Construction of Social Boundaries

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Referees, Professor Susan Einbinder and Professor Richard Sarason

Digest

Scattered throughout classical and medieval rabbinic literature are about twenty separate stories in which an unnamed Roman matron, or the "matrona," poses a theological question to the second-century C.E. sage, Rabbi Yose ben Halafta. The matrona stories present a rare example of a woman character who speaks with intelligence and self-possession in rabbinic literature. This paper presents a literary analysis of the matrona's portrayal in rabbinic literature, focusing on the seven stories in Genesis Rabbah in which the matrona appears.

Within Genesis Rabbah, the matrona stories participate in a broad topos of dialogues between sages and non-Jewish characters; the rhetorical function of these stories is to demonstrate the wisdom and truth of the Torah as interpreted by the Sages. But within the parameters of this topos, the matrona plays a distinctive role within Genesis Rabbah as the only female in dialogue with rabbis. Genesis Rabbah exploits this aspect of her identity, presenting her as a soundboard for rabbinic ideas about sexuality and childbirth. In some of these stories, the matrona does more than simply listen to Rabbi Yose's views on women; as she engages the rabbi in conversation about the nature of sexual attraction, she embodies rabbinic views about women's sexuality.

Other works develop the figure of the matrona differently. Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta deRav Kahana emphasize the matrona's social status, and use the form of the dialogue to criticize the arrogance of the Roman

aristocracy. In later compilations, the matrona's distinctive identities as a woman and as an aristocrat seem to have been forgotten, and she functions as a generic spokesperson for gentile polemics against Judaism. In contrast, the Babylonian Talmud portrays Roman ladies primarily in terms of the sexual threat they represent. In the Bavli, matronitas are denied the possibility of real intellectual exchange with rabbis, and instead play the roles of sorceresses, seducers, and tormenters who call attention to the rabbis' physical vulnerabilities.

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I would also like to thank my most intimate and constant partner in dialogue, Steve Weitzman, for his support and encouragement in this project, and for making of my life a thrilling, stirring, creative conversation.

Introduction

Scattered throughout classical and medieval rabbinic literature are about twenty separate stories in which an unnamed Roman matron, or the "matrona," poses a question to the second-century C.E. sage, Rabbi Yose ben Halafita. Generally, the questions focus on the exegesis of Jewish scripture. The matrona's queries are challenging, and when Rabbi Yose's responses do not satisfy her, she persists in questioning him. While most of the matrona stories consist entirely of dialogue between these two sparring partners, sometimes they include other actions as well. In each story, Rabbi Yose eventually sways the matrona over to his way of thinking; the stories end when she either voices her assent or remains silent. The boldness of the matrona's character comes through despite the stories' brevity, their tight structure and sparse detail. The matrona stories present a rare example of a woman character who speaks with intelligence and self-possession in rabbinic literature. But for all the strength of her characterization, the matrona has remained an elusive character for scholars.

"Who is the matrona?" is the central question of all previous studies which have examined the matrona corpus. Scholars have sought to identify the matrona with one of the diverse religious communities represented in second century Sepphoris, where Rabbi Yose taught. In trying to fix the matrona's religious and social identity, these scholars have evaded a more basic question which will be the starting point for the present project: *What is the matrona? Is she a real figure in history, or was she constructed for purely*

literary or polemical purposes? The present study departs from earlier scholarship in that it treats the matrona stories as a literary topos rather than as reports about history. I will argue that a literary approach is not only truer to the evidence, but can ultimately offer us far more insight into how the rabbis imagined the differences between men and women and between Jews and non-Jews than previous studies have provided.

As a non-Jew and as a woman, the character of the matrona is doubly removed from the social identity of the Sages. Despite her alienation from rabbinic culture, the matrona is consistently treated as a worthy, intelligent interlocutor. She asks difficult questions and shows critical judgment about R. Yose's responses, refusing to be brushed aside by pat answers. At the same time, her portrayal is often sexualized—she presents not only a religious challenge, but a social danger as well. This project seeks to examine what we can learn about the rabbis' conceptions of social boundaries from their ambivalent portrayal of the matrona as both a sparring partner and a sexual threat.

Scholarly Review

However one evaluates the historicity of the matrona stories, scholars agree that contacts between Jews and Roman figures like the matrona are indeed historically plausible in Sepphoris during Rabbi Yose ben Halafita's time. Studies of the city describe Sepphoris as a town where Jews and non-

Jews jostled up against each other in defining divergent religious identities.¹ These circumstances would have been ripe for exegetical debates and polemics such as those portrayed in the *matrona* stories.

Moshe David Herr reviews the wide array of stories from classical rabbinic literature which portray meetings between sages and Roman dignitaries, including the *matrona*, and argues that while literary questions should not be ignored, the primary importance of such stories is in constructing a social and intellectual history of the mishnaic period. He points out that meetings between rabbis and Roman officials, whether held in Palestine or Rome, are consistent with historical circumstances and can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon from the Greco-Roman world in which philosophers engaged in dialogue with rulers from the beginning of the Hellenistic period.² Most of Herr's article is devoted to looking at each series of reported dialogues between a particular Sage and his Roman interlocutor separately. Herr seeks to demonstrate that each set of encounters—between Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and the unidentified Roman prefect "Antoninus," Rabbi Akiva and Tineius Rufus, Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah and Hadrian, and Rabbi Yose ben Halafta and our *matrona*—represents a unique set of religious concerns, distinctive to the historical circumstances of the two interlocutors.

¹ See, for example, Miller's description of the non-Jewish castra in Sepphoris, a garrison for gentile soldiers, 31-45. Ne'eman cites archaeological evidence of a great theater in Sepphoris as evidence of a gentile population, and reviews rabbinic sources on relations between Jews and gentiles in the city, 393-412.

² Herr, 125.

Herr's work in gathering diverse accounts of meetings between Jews and Romans and in juxtaposing them with other kinds of evidence from the ancient world is invaluable. However, the weakness of his approach becomes clear in his treatment of the *matrona*, who resists his efforts to place each pair of interlocutors within a distinctive historical setting. Herr identifies the *matrona*'s various questions with views reminiscent of such diverse groups as idolaters, Christians, Gnostics and Epicureans.³ Furthermore, his dismissal of literary and philological questions as secondary leads him to ignore literary evidence that stories he treats as two separate historic accounts actually represent two variants of a single tradition.⁴ While Herr's argument about the plausibility of encounters between Jews and Romans is compelling, his failure to make a persuasive case for the *matrona*'s historicity is the best argument for taking up the kind of literary analysis he dismisses.

Other scholars have focused their research exclusively on the question of the *matrona*'s religious, philosophical, or cultural affiliation. Felix Bohl studiously considers the exegetical issues raised by the *matrona* in each *matrona* story and finds parallels for the *matrona*'s queries in the literature of such groups as the Epicureans and early Christians. He concludes that the

³ Ibid., 147.

⁴ For example, Herr notes that Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, Rebban Gamaliel and Rabbi Yose all confront accusations that God acted as a thief in creating Eve in *Avot deRabbi Natan* B8, b. *Sanhedrin* 39A, and GR 17:7 p. 158 respectively. Even as he notes the similarities among these stories, he treats them as three separate conversations, rather than entertaining the possibilities that 1) the two later accounts are based on *Genesis Rabbah*, 2) that all three stem from a common source which is no longer extant, or 3) that all three represent different literary encapsulations of the same tradition.

matrona should be identified as a Godfearer who was influenced by the teachings of diverse sects from the ancient world.⁵

Rosalie Gershenzon and Elieser Slomovic engage in a similar activity to Bohl, but come to a different conclusion. They argue that while some of the matrona's questions do not seem to touch on issues of great religious significance, when taken together the questions represent a coherent theology of second-century Gnosticism. While they concede that the stories might very well be literary constructions rather than reports of historical encounters, they hold that the challenges voiced in the stories represent a live religious debate in ancient Palestine, even if the character of the matrona is fabricated. They go to great lengths to demonstrate that such conversations between Rabbi Yose ben Halafta and a representative of Gnosticism would have been very plausible in the cultural milieu of second-century Sepphoris.

Gershenzon and Slomovic treat eighteen matrona stories and identify sixteen of them with aspects of Gnostic theology. Often they juxtapose the matrona's queries with citations from Gnostic writings. Some of their arguments are convincing indeed. For example, the matrona's question of why God never calls the creations of the sixth day "good,"⁶ does seem to suggest a challenge to Jewish notions of the goodness of God and humanity. Other times, their efforts to fit the matrona's questions into a Gnostic framework demand a much greater stretch; for instance their argument that the matrona's question about why the letter *lamed* is so tall is to be taken as a

challenge to the Jewish notion that God's power is unlimited, based on an intertextual link to a Gnostic document. While some of their arguments are more convincing than others, a recent study of Gnostic exegesis calls their whole project into question. According to David Brakke, Gnostic exegesis focused on the Genesis stories of Creation and the Flood, only occasionally extending to treatments of the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorra. The fact that many of the matrona stories raise exegetical issues relating to Exodus and the latter chapters of Genesis would seem to disqualify her as a spokesperson for Gnosticism.⁷ Another weakness of Gershenzon and Slomovic's approach is that all the matrona stories are taken as equally reliable witnesses to her existence in history. Thus, a tradition appearing for the first time in Rabbi Judah ben Barzilai's twelfth-century commentary on Sefer Hayetzira is taken as testimony of second-century Sepphoris on the same footing as sources in Genesis Rabbah, a text from fifth-century Palestine.⁸

The matrona stories have been studied most recently by Tal Ilan, who departs from earlier studies in using a critical, redactional approach to analyze

⁵GR 4: 6, page 30.

⁶Brakke did indicate to me that an exception to this rule are the Valentinian Gnostics, who interpreted the Five Books of Moses. Interestingly enough, Roman matrons did have a central role in the Valentinian sect. Still, such coincidences do not seem to warrant the kind of historicity that Gershenzon and Slomovic seek to demonstrate. This is not to say that the matrona might not represent the Rabbis' impressions of Gnostic interpretations. It may be that in some, even a majority of matrona stories, the matrona functions as a spokesperson for Gnostic ideas, as the Rabbis understood them. If this is the case, she is best understood as a figure created by the Rabbis to serve as a "straw-man" in debates about rabbinic theology.

⁷Gershenzon and Slomovic, 14. The writers are aware of this vulnerability, and justify their reliance on the tradition by arguing that Barzilai's commentary reliably preserves other traditions which are extant in early rabbinic sources. See their note 37.

⁸Bohl, 63.

the twenty matrona stories she has identified.⁹ Her project involves distinguishing between those stories which she takes to be the most authentic witness to the matrona's historical existence, the seven matrona stories of Genesis Rabbah, and stories which appear in later compilations. Her examination of the Genesis Rabbah stories leads her to a conclusion which she characterizes as "revolutionary,"¹⁰ namely that "matrona" refers not to an anonymous Roman woman as all previous scholars have presumed, but is rather the personal name of a Jewish woman who engaged in regular Bible lessons with Rabbi Yose. Ilan proposes that all those matrona stories which maintain the basic features of the Genesis Rabbah stories can be seen as authentic remnants of an ongoing study relationship between a Jewish woman and Rabbi Yose.¹¹ Alongside these authentic, historically grounded traditions are fictional accounts which developed as part of a literary topos after the period of Genesis Rabbah.¹²

Ilan's treatment of the matrona pericopes has certain clear methodological advantages over earlier studies. Her critical analysis of divergent manuscript traditions, and of literary parallels demonstrates that the various matrona stories should not all be seen as a piece. Her proposal that the Genesis Rabbah traditions should be contrasted with later traditions

⁹ Tal Ilan's study appeared first as the article "Matrona and Rabbi Yose: An Alternative Interpretation," *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 25:1 (1994), 18-51. It is reproduced, with revisions, in her book *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, 240-262 and 297-310.

¹⁰ Ilan 1997, 241.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 305-310.

¹² *Ibid.*, 260.

is also valuable. At the same time, Ilan's historical orientation proves no less problematic for her than it is for the earlier studies she criticizes.

Within the context of her new book, *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, Ilan presents the matrona as a case study which illustrates her contention that useful historical information about women can be extracted from aggadic texts, when proper methodological precautions are taken.¹³ She theorizes that when the sex of female characters in aggadic stories cannot be demonstrated to serve any literary purpose, the story can be seen as representing a woman who existed in history. Since according to Ilan only one of the matrona's queries to Rabbi Yose touch on an issue of particular interest to women, the matrona must therefore have some basis in reality. This argument is a variation of the concept of "lectio difficilior"—since it is easier to imagine a man engaged in exegetical discourse with a sage, the fact that the text reports a woman in such a surprising setting suggests that the text is reliable.¹⁴ It is also closely related to Joseph Heinemann's suggestion that midrashic interpretations which seem distant from the biblical text can be seen as reflections of the interpreters' historical circumstances.¹⁵ Heinemann challenges the midrash's sincerity as interpretation; Ilan questions the aggadic story's integrity as imaginative narrative.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 237. In her introduction, Ilan presents her arguments as a response against Jacob Neusner's critiques of historical accounts which rely on rabbinic statements as evidence.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 236-239.

¹⁵ Heinemann, 75.

In a sense, Ilan's approach presents history as literature's leftovers—whatever is challenging literarily is taken as history. The curious implication of this is that a text's historicity diminishes with each more sensitive literary reading. Ilan's thesis that the original *matrona* stories are based on events which occurred in history can thus be overturned by any reader who can persuasively argue that the stories do have literary coherence. This raises the question: Is Ilan's assessment of the stories' literary worth (or lack thereof) a fair one?

During the course of the present project, I hope to demonstrate that Ilan underestimates the coherence and complexity of the very stories on which, she focuses, the *matrona* stories of *Genesis Rabbah*. She dismisses the significance of the *matrona*'s female identity, claiming that only one of the *matrona*'s questions is of concern to women in particular. While this may be true of the *matrona*'s questions, if one reads the *matrona* stories as stories, one finds that even where the *matrona*'s *initial* questions do not explicitly address women's issues, themes of particular concern to women are often raised later in the stories. Thus, the majority of the *matrona* stories in *Genesis Rabbah*, the very corpus Ilan identifies as the most "authentic," deals with issues of sexuality, gender, and childbirth.

While Ilan is to be praised for her throughgoing analysis of all the *matrona* traditions, her critical focus comes at the expense of a broader literary perspective. Ilan fails to recognize that the *matrona* stories are but one subset of a larger class of stories, those dialogues between Jews and Romans treated

by Herr. Reading the *matrona* within the context of other dialogue stories is important for two reasons. First, such a reading helps reveal the rhetorical logic of the *matrona* stories, since so many of the *matrona* stories' formal and thematic features surface in other dialogue stories as well. Many of those aspects of the *matrona* stories which Ilan takes as evidence of their historicity, i.e. the simplicity of the responses Rabbi Yose offers his female interlocutor, can be shown to be features of dialogue stories in general. Second, the *matrona*'s very participation in a conventional story-type featuring a sage and a non-Jew raises serious doubts about Ilan's thesis that the *matrona* was Jewish. In her book, Ilan attempts to neutralize this criticism, claiming that "a gentile asking the sages of Israel questions on the Jewish religion is an accepted literary topos. That the gentile is a woman is not."¹⁶ But what is the basis of this assertion? It would seem that the *matrona*'s participation in the conventional literary topos of dialogues with non-Jews is a double-blow for Ilan: the *matrona*'s very conventionality undermines the argument that the character has no literary logic, and her functional similarity to gentile characters challenges the claim that the *matrona* is a Jew.

Given Ilan's overarching goal of demonstrating that the *aggada* can be mined for factual historical information about women, her findings are not at all surprising. In her treatment of the *matrona*, Ilan's critical acumen seems to have fallen victim to her zeal as a historian. Her description of the *matrona* stories as historical reports devoid of any artistic craft secures for Ilan

¹⁶ Ilan 1997, 241.

a portrait of a late antique Jewish woman who is a serious scholar of Judaism. As appealing as this conclusion is to Jewish feminists in search of a usable past, it is not a fair assessment of the literary nature and richness of the matrona stories.

New Methods for Meeting the Matrona

To briefly recapitulate, existing studies of the matrona treat the matrona stories as sources for history, viewing the stories as mirrors of actual historical events or as windows onto social reality. These studies pay little attention to how the stories work as stories--specifically as didactic stories with polemical theological messages--and thus fail to recognize the topoi and conventions the matrona narratives draw on, the artistry with which these conventions are exploited, and the stories' use of earlier sources. They do not consider how the stories function in their redactional settings or their reception-history among later readers. The present project departs from earlier treatments of the matrona in that it will entertain literary questions about the rhetoric, redaction, and reception of the matrona stories.

A literary approach to aggadic literature is in keeping with a recent trend among scholars to engage literary theory in the study of midrash. For example, in the book Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, Daniel Boyarin engages theory about the intertextuality of all texts to interrogate midrashic interpretation as a way of reading. In the book Parables in Midrash, David Stern focuses on a particular form, the rabbinic mashal, and examines

how it functions as both narrative and interpretation. Both these works reject the tendency in older scholarship to mine the midrash for insights about history. They call for a new approach which would not seek to peer through midrash for historical realities behind the text, but that would read midrash as discourse.¹⁷ This approach does not preclude an interest in history, but it does call for a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between history and rabbinic storytelling.¹⁸ As Boyarin demonstrates in his more recent work, Carnal Israel, storytelling and interpretation are social acts which occur in history and themselves play a role in shaping it.¹⁹

My treatment of the matrona stories as didactic narratives rather than as historical testimony has several implications for how we will proceed. First, and most obviously, it means we will read the stories as stories. This means that we have to pay attention to the dialogic form the matrona stories take, the conventions which the stories exploit, and the ways in which they portray characters and create suspense.

Second, exegesis is central to all the matrona stories. Our effort to understand how the stories work as narratives means that we will consider these scriptural interpretations not only as acts of exegesis, but also as components of the stories. How does a given exegetical issue relate to a story's other themes? Do the characters learn or change as a result of the act of exegesis?

¹⁷ See Boyarin 1990, 11 and Stern, 1-2.

¹⁸ Boyarin 1990, 117.

¹⁹ Boyarin 1993, 227-245.

Third, reading the stories as texts means heightening one's attention to redactional context. Previous studies have tended to treat the matrona stories scattered throughout rabbinic literature as of a piece, and have neglected to consider how each story relates to its local context in a discrete rabbinic work. In this study, I will be concentrating on the work which contains the highest concentration of matrona stories—Genesis Rabbah. I will consider the ways in which the forms, characters and themes of the matrona stories participate in the broader literary patterns of Genesis Rabbah: How do the exegetical issues raised by the matrona relate to similar exegetical points in the work? Does the characterization of the matrona conform to or complicate the treatment of women in the work as a whole? How can concerns about non-Jews and about women expressed elsewhere in Genesis Rabbah shape our readings of the Genesis Rabbah matrona stories?

Fourth, reading the stories as stories means being sensitive to how they were read by earlier readers. Many of the matrona stories in Genesis Rabbah have been re-worked in later rabbinic works, while other matrona stories emerge for the first time in contexts far-removed from Genesis Rabbah's late antique Palestinian milieu. Attention to the different forms and themes adopted by the matrona stories in their various redactional contexts will help us construct a literary history of the matrona topos. An analysis which is sensitive to both the literary and historical contexts of the various matrona stories must consider: To what degree can the later matrona stories be read as readings and misreadings of the early stories?

In proposing to study the matrona stories as narrative constructions rather than as reports about events which actually occurred, I am not suggesting that the matrona has nothing to teach us about history. On the contrary, the concerns and character traits that rabbinic storytellers assign to the matrona carry a wealth of information about how the rabbis conceived of gender, sex, class, the relationships between Judaism and Roman culture, and between Jews and non-Jews. The unforeseen effect of studies which read the matrona stories as testimonies *about* history has been to tear these stories out of history. At best, such historical readings can only produce descriptions of isolated actions by individuals. My hope is that by reading the matrona stories within both their literary and historical contexts we will be able to appreciate the stories themselves as *part* of history.

My argument will unfold in several stages. In Chapter II, I will survey all the stories in Genesis Rabbah which portray a dialogue between a sage and a non-Jew in an effort to describe the contours of the literary topos in which the matrona stories participate. This analysis will help me identify the conventional elements of the matrona stories, which we will turn to in Chapter III. In Chapter III, the heart of this project, I will present readings of the matrona stories of Genesis Rabbah, paying special attention to the development of characters, the creation of tension, and the relationship between each story and its local setting within Genesis Rabbah. These readings will demonstrate that issues of sexuality and gender, as well as her

status as a non-Jew and as an aristocrat, contribute to Genesis Rabbah's portrayal of the matrona's character.

Having analyzed the matrona stories of Genesis Rabbah, in Chapter IV we will consider what becomes of her in later compilations. In this chapter, I will offer a literary history of the matrona's character, proposing that following Genesis Rabbah, her foreignness displaced her gender as her defining characteristic. In Chapter V, I will examine another aspect of the original matrona's afterlife, considering how the Babylonian Talmud reads and misreads her character. In this chapter I will also examine portrayals of a matrona in the Palestinian Talmud which might have preceded those of Genesis Rabbah. Finally, in a concluding chapter, I will propose some ways in which the portrayals of the matrona's character can help us understand how rabbis in different social settings constructed boundaries between themselves and non-Jews on the one hand, and Jewish women on the other.

Chapter II: Interfaith Dialogues in Genesis Rabbah

In the next two chapters my analysis will focus on Genesis Rabbah. This is a logical first step because Genesis Rabbah contains the highest percentage of matrona stories—seven—and because, as Tal Ilan noted, Genesis Rabbah is the earliest compilation in which the figure of the matrona appears together with Rabbi Yose. If we want to understand the original significance of the matrona stories and how their meaning changed over time, we need to begin here.

Before we can proceed to the matrona stories themselves, however, there is another issue we must investigate. As pointed out in the last chapter, the matrona's dialogues with Rabbi Yose ben Halafta are but one instance of the broader literary topos of dialogues between sages and those outside rabbinic circles, including sectarians, philostophers, Roman dignarities and even emperors. Dialogues between rabbis and figures from the Roman world can be found throughout the midrash and talmudim. The earliest compilations in which these stories appear are tannaitic. For example in *Mechilta deRabbi Yishmael*, "Antoninus" twice poses questions to Rabbi Judah Hanasi, asking once about Jewish belief,¹ and once for advice about politics.² However it is only in later works like Genesis Rabbah that such dialogues appear in large enough numbers for us to identify general trends in these stories.

¹ *Mechilta Shira*, chapter 2, page 125. Antoninus here asks about God's judgement of humans after death. This has a parallel in *Sifrei Devarim*, paragraph 306.

² *Mechilta Shira*, chapter 6, page 137. Antoninus asks Rabbi whether the Egyptians will install a king to resist him if he travels to Alexandria.

A detailed consideration of this topos is a great undertaking, but it is indispensable for fully understanding the literary dynamics of the matrona stories. In the present chapter, we will explore the traits of this topos by focusing on the dialogue stories in *Genesis Rabbah*, which contains no less than thirty-five dialogues between sages and figures from the Roman world—the highest concentration of dialogue stories within any single rabbinic work. Such an investigation will help us to recognize what is conventional about the matrona stories in *Genesis Rabbah*. Ultimately, it will also help us to understand the changes the matrona story undergoes in later rabbinic texts as well.

Dialogues between Jews and others in the rabbinic literature can be seen as but one instance of a broader genre of disputational literature in Western literature. Herr identifies the dialogue between Alexander the Great and the pagan sage Kalanos as a precedent for rabbinic dialogue stories.³ Contemporary with rabbinic stories of rabbis conversing with Roman dignitaries are Christian martyrologies depicting Christians debating pagan emperors⁴, and Justin Martyr's account of a dialogue between himself and the Jew, Trypho.⁵ Richard Lim describes disputations among Jews, Christians, and pagans as a central aspect of Graeco-Roman culture in late antiquity.⁶ In the medieval period, reports of disputations between Jews and Christians include Rabbi Yehiel's of Paris disputation with Nicholas Donin, and Nachmanides'

³ Herr, 126.

⁴ See Cazelles for translations and commentaries on such stories as they were re-worked in the vernacular in medieval France.

⁵ See Marcovich for the text of the dialogue, summary and commentary.

defense of Judaism in 1263.⁷ Such religious disputes are themselves instances of a more universal genre of debate literature which can be traced back to ancient debates among the seasons in Sumerian poetry, and which surfaces in medieval Hebrew poetry in debates between the Jewish holidays, between body and soul, and between the pen and the scissors. This project focuses upon a particular crystallization of religious dispute in rabbinic literature—dialogues between sages and others in the midrash.

Despite the many stories depicting confrontations between sages and non-Jewish figures in *Genesis Rabbah*, these dialogues have never been treated systematically by scholars. In one article, Ofra Meir describes disputational stories in general as a common story-type within aggadic literature. She identifies some defining features of such stories: Typically, they portray a confrontation between two characters, and take the form of a dialogue. The narrator's comments are limited to introducing the characters by name or title, and by setting off the rounds of dialogue with words such as, "He said to him." According to Meir, no matter what the topic of the dialogue, each story is built around the efforts of one character to gain the upper hand over the other. She argues that since these stories are primarily accounts of verbal contests, attention to the characters' rhetoric is of utmost importance.⁸

⁶ Lim, 4.

⁷ For an introduction to disputations in this period, see Berger, 3-32.

⁸ Meir 1984a, 36.

Meir's analysis of dispute-stories in general can serve as the basis for a more specific inquiry into the features of dialogue stories between Jews and others in Genesis Rabbah.⁹ Her description of the dispute-stories' form accords well with our sample of stories, which always take the form of dialogues, generally between two interlocutors. The Jewish party to the dispute is always named, and within Genesis Rabbah there are a variety of rabbis who face challenges by non-Jews or heretics, including Rabban Gamaliel¹⁰, Rabbi Meir¹¹, Rabbi Simlai¹², Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah¹³, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch¹⁴, Rabbi Akiva¹⁵, Rabbi Hoshaya¹⁶, Rabbi Eliezer¹⁷, Rabbi Abbahu¹⁸, Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha¹⁹, Rabbi Jonathan²⁰, Rabbi Ishmael²¹, Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Jose²², and Rabbi Yannai²³ as well as our friend Rabbi Yose ben Halafta.²⁴ Their non-Jewish sparring partners are sometimes designated by name, for instance Hadrian²⁵, Ptolemy²⁶, Antoninus²⁷, and Tineius Rufus²⁸.

⁹ I prefer to call the stories of conversations between sages and figures from outside the rabbinic world "dialogue-stories" rather than "disputes," because while many of them are indeed confrontational, some are quite friendly as we will see. Even these friendly dialogues however ultimately serve to illustrate how sages gain the upper hand in conversation.

¹⁰ GR 1:9, p. 8; GR 20:4, p. 185.

¹¹ GR 4:4, p. 27; GR 70:7, p. 803; GR 70:7, p. 804; GR 94:7, p. 1178.

¹² GR 8:9, p. 62.

¹³ GR 10:3, p. 75; GR 13:6, p. 116; GR 13:9, p. 118; GR 20:4, p. 185; GR 28:3, p. 261; GR 78:1, p. 916.

¹⁴ GR 11:4, p. 90; GR 67:6, p. 761; GR 84:3, p. 1002.

¹⁵ GR 11:5, p. 92.

¹⁶ GR 11:6, p. 94.

¹⁷ GR 13:9, p. 118.

¹⁸ GR 25:1, p. 205.

¹⁹ GR 27:4, p. 258.

²⁰ GR 32:19, p. 296; GR 82:10, p. 988.

²¹ GR 66:6, p. 751.

²² GR 81:3, p. 974.

²³ GR 82:10, p. 988.

²⁴ GR 4:6, p. 30; GR 14:7, p. 131; GR 17:7, p. 158; GR 25:1, p. 239; GR 63:8, p. 688; GR 68:4, p. 771; GR 68:12, p. 784; GR 84:21, p. 1027; GR 87:6, p. 107.

²⁵ GR 10:3, p. 75; GR 13:9, p. 118; GR 28:3, p. 261; GR 78:1, p. 916.

²⁶ GR 10:9, p. 85.

More often, they are designated by titles such as: philosopher, *matrona*, Cuthite, Samaritan, heretic (*min*), Roman officer (*istratiot*,²⁹ *orhegemon*³⁰) or non-Jew (*goy*). Heretics tend to travel en masse—they tend to approach rabbis in groups. There are certain trends in how all these interlocutors pair up: the *matrona* consistently approaches Rabbi Yose ben Halafta, Antoninus always speaks to Rabbi, Hadrian tends to speak with Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, and Samaritans with Rabbi Meir.

A defining feature of dialogue-stories between rabbis and others is the stories' beginning point and ending point. The dialogues generally begin with a question put to a sage by a heretic or non-Jew. Typically the stories open with the statement, "X asked Rabbi Y." The dialogue then commences with varying rounds of questions and answers set off by the narrative statements of "he (or she) said to him (or her)." Sometimes the whole conversation revolves around a single topic, and sometimes the questioner raises a series of different issues. Generally, the sage has the last word; the story ends when his questioner can find no retort, or when the questioner voices his or her assent.

Within these general parameters of form, there is great variety in how the different dialogues develop. The range of possibilities is best illustrated through example. In what follows, I will present stories which illustrate the stories' variations in tone, characterization, rhetoric, and outcome.

²⁹ GR 11:4, p. 90; GR 67:6, p. 761; GR 84:3, p. 1002.

³⁰ GR 11:5, p. 92.

³¹ GR 82:8, p. 984.

³² GR 62:8, p. 692.

Tone

By tone, I mean the quality of the interaction between the participants in the dialogue. The stories run the whole gamut from friendly conversation to hostile dispute. The following is an example of an interaction that is extremely confrontational:

Rabbi Ishmael b. R. Jose was going up to pray in Jerusalem. He passed the Palatinus and a Samaritan saw him.
He (the Samaritan) said to him, "Where are you going?"
He said to him, "To worship in Jerusalem."
He said to him, "But wouldn't it be better for you to worship at this blessed mountain (i.e. Mt. Gerizim) than at that dunghill?"
He said to him, "What do you resemble? A dog attracted to carrion! Since you know that idolatry is hidden underneath it (your mountain)-- 'And Jacob hid them' (Genesis 35: 4)--that is why you are attracted to it!"
He said, "This one wants to take the uncleanness away."
He (Rabbi Ishmael) got up and fled in the night.
(Genesis Rabbah 81:3, p. 974)³¹

This story requires some explanation. The Palatinus is a name by which the Samaritans referred to their holy mountain of Mt. Gerizim, which is near Shechem. At the heart of the story is a well-known polemic between Samaritans and Jews. Samaritans believed that Mt. Gerizim was the one legitimate site to worship God, while Jews believed the Temple in Jerusalem had been such a site. (The Jewish protagonist of this story lived well after the destruction of the Jewish Temple.) The Samaritan and the rabbi here trade insults about their respective sites, Rabbi Ishmael basing his dismissal of Mount Gerizim on an exegetical reading of Genesis 35:4. In this verse, Jacob

collects all the foreign gods that his family possessed and deposits them "beneath the oak that is near Shechem." Rabbi Ishmael suggests that these buried idols near Shechem lie beneath the Samaritans' holy mountain. The Samaritan concludes from this comment that the rabbi is intent on plundering these idols, and when he says as much aloud, the rabbi understands his life to be in danger.³²

Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Jose and the Samaritan remain hostile to each other throughout their interaction. The Samaritan's character is portrayed as stupid as well as vicious and idolatrous; if he had properly understood the rabbi's attitude toward idolatry, he would have understood that the buried idols were in no danger. This dialogue story differs from most in that it supplies more narration than others. While most dialogue stories end with the final line of dialogue, here the story tells us that the story had real consequences--the rabbi feared for his life. While dialogue-stories generally portray rabbis besting their opponents through their powers of persuasion, here the rabbi does not win the Samaritan over but further alienates him. The spectre of violence hovers at the story's close.

The above confrontation can be contrasted with a story of friendly interaction between Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and Antoninus:

Antoninus sent to our Teacher: "As our treasury is deficient, what shall we do to fill it?"
Thereupon he took his envoy, led him into his garden, began uprooting the large radishes and planted small ones in their place.

³¹ Translation. Unless otherwise noted, translations of biblical and rabbinic texts are my own.

³² This reading is based on notes in Theodor-Albeck p. 974, and on the translation and notes of Freedman on pages 255 and 748.

"But give me a written answer," he requested.
 "You do not need it," was the reply.
 So he went back to him (to Antoninus).
 "Where is the answer?" demanded he.
 "He gave me nothing," was the reply.
 "And what did he say to you?"
 "Nothing at all, but he led me into his garden and began
 uprooting the large radishes and planting small ones."
 At that he began dismissing officers and replacing them with
 others, until his treasury was filled.

(Genesis Rabbah 67:6, p. 761)³³

Before commenting on the tone of the interaction, it is important to note how the structure of this story departs from other examples of the topos. This story's structure is much more complicated than other dialogue stories in that it portrays two non-Jewish characters, Antoninus and his envoy. Also, while most stories are comprised predominantly of dialogue, here much of the rabbi's response is acted out rather than verbalized. Nevertheless, it does maintain the general form of the topos under discussion: the interaction is initiated by a question put to a sage by a non-Jew, and the story's ending serves to uphold the rabbi's wisdom.

While Antoninus' envoy is suspicious of the rabbi, the tone of the interaction between the two protagonists, Antoninus and Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, is very friendly. The presentation of the envoy as a foil for Antoninus provides us with a much richer sense of Antoninus than we had of the caricatured Samaritan above. Antoninus, though a Roman sovereign in control of his own treasury, has the humility to recognize his need for guidance, and submits himself to Rabbi's wisdom. Antoninus here is not the least bit confrontational, but utterly sincere in his question. Sensitive and intelligent, he is portrayed as almost the rabbi's equal in that he can immediately discern the rabbi's secret message.

In a sense, the portrayals of the Samaritan and of Antoninus we have here examined are polar opposites: the Samaritan is a shallow character and

³³ Translation by Freedman, p. 611

is unsympathetic, while Antoninus is a more developed character portrayed sympathetically. This suggests that the literary topos of dialogues between sages and figures from outside the rabbis' world does not presume any one attitude toward non-Jews. The variation in emotional tone among the various dialogues allows them to express a wide range of perspectives on relations between Jews and others.

Characterization

Ofra Meir points out that most rabbinic stories are too brief, and cover too short a period of narrative time, to allow for the kind of character development which occurs in longer narratives such as modern novel.³⁴ In analyzing aggadic characterizations, she recommends distinguishing among characters who function exclusively as static types, characters that are "revealing," and characters that are "changing."³⁵ A "revealing" character does not himself change during the course of the story, but through the story's gradual unfolding, the reader gains an increasingly deeper sense of the character's motivations. A "changing" character is one whose attitudes or behaviors change during the course of the story due to new insights he acquires. To help us appreciate how this typology works, it is helpful to apply Meir's scheme to the characters we have already met.

The stories above provide examples of static characters and of revealing characters, but not of characters who change. The Samaritan is portrayed as confrontational and unsavory from his first statement through to his last,

³⁴ Meir 1984b, 62.

and is little more than a caricature. He is a static type, as is the rabbi with whom he dialogues. In contrast, Antoninus and Rabbi Judah the Prince are both revealing characters. While at first, we readers share the envoy's perplexity about Rabbi's strange activities in his garden, at the end of the story we come to appreciate the wisdom which guided his actions. In the case of Antoninus, his readiness to seek advice from Rabbi at the story's beginning already communicates to us a sense of his sincerity, but our appreciation of his intelligence is deepened by the discernment he shows at the end of the story. When we survey the other dialogue-stories between rabbis and gentiles or heretics within *Genesis Rabbah*, we find that generally, the sages are portrayed as characters who neither change nor deepen, while those who question them are characters who change. The following story can serve as an example:

Hadrian—may his bones be ground to dust—questioned Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah.
He said to him, "You say that there is no one company above repeatedly praising God, but that every day the Holy One Blessed Be He creates a new company of angels who recite a new song and then go their way?"
He said to him, "Yes."
He said to him, "Where do they go?"
He said to him, "To the place from which they were created."
He said to him, "From where were they created?"
He said to him, "From the River of Fire."
He said to him, "And what is so special about the River of Fire?"
He said to him, "Like the Jordan, its flow never stops, not in the daytime, nor at night."
He said to him, "From where does it come?"
He said to him, "From the sweat of the Hayot, who sweat from bearing God's throne."

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

His (Hadrian's) advisor said to him, "But the Jordan flows by day. It does not flow at night!"
 He said to him, "Did I not watch at Beit Peor how it flows during the day the same as at night?"
 (Genesis Rabbah 78:1, p. 916)³⁶

In this story, Hadrian's character undergoes a change as his challenge of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah gives way to assent. This story proceeds for more rounds of dialogue than most other stories, but it is typical in that the non-Jew opens the conversation with a challenge. He questions the Jews' far-fetched belief that an entire celestial host is created each day. When Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah affirms this belief, Hadrian persists in questioning. Eventually, the rabbi's responses are sufficient to conquer Hadrian's incredulity. Here, the advisor plays a similar role to that of the envoy in the Antoninus story above. While the advisor remains dismissive of the rabbi's explanations, Hadrian is persuaded. Hadrian's final statement registers the change in his character—he validates the rabbi's words rather than challenging them.

How can we account for Hadrian's change of heart in this story? For most of the exchange, the rabbi is surprisingly taciturn, offering no more information than required. The explanations he does offer seem as fantastic as the claim that Hadrian initially questions—the description of celestial

³⁶ This translation is based on the eclectic text proposed in Theodor-Albeck p. 916-917, which departs from the editor's usual reliance on ms. British Museum Add. 27169. The London manuscript departs from all other manuscripts in that it truncates Hadrian's first question and runs it into his second: "You say that there is no one company above repeatedly praising God, but where do they go?" This abbreviated version fails to communicate Hadrian's incredulity about God's incessant creations, making it seem like his only problem is one of logistics—where does each day's choir go? Theodor explains the deletion as a scribal oversight.

beasts whose sweat flows into a flaming river from which new angels spring strikes the modern reader as even more extravagant than the idea of angels being replaced on a daily basis. Despite this, Hadrian is eventually satisfied. From his final statement, it seems that Hadrian is prepared to accept the mythic wonders Rabbi Joshua describes because the rabbi can provide him with a comparison rooted in observable, physical realities—the incessant flow of the Jordan River, which is here presented as an anomaly. Later, we will see that the use of empirical evidence is often used persuasively by sages in dialogue with non-Jews.

When we take into account the change Hadrian undergoes at the end of the story, his characterization here is surprisingly positive. While he is initially as skeptical of Jewish faith as one would expect of an enemy ruler, he is presented as a reasonable person capable of being swayed by a good argument. While Hadrian's assent is quite restrained, other interlocutors are much more effusive once they are finally persuaded by the rabbis. One gentile rises to kiss Rabbi Meir's head.³⁷ In another story, a Cuthean is so impressed by Rabbi Meir's ability to answer his complicated exegetical challenge that he proclaims, "Happy is your People for what is in their midst."³⁸ These characters are not quickly swayed by Rabbi Meir, but once they are won over they happily submit. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that these are not stories of conversion. However enthusiastic a character becomes in his or her appreciation of a sage's retorts, these stories never suggest that conversations

³⁷ GR 70:7, p. 804.

with rabbis lead to a non-Jew's embrace of Judaism. Rather, in stories such as these, the portrayal of the non-Jews as worthy opponents, that is, as persistent, intelligent debaters who know a good argument when they hear one, serves as a powerful demonstration that wisdom and truth are on the rabbis' side.

While sometimes a non-Jewish character such as Hadrian voices his approval of a rabbi's explanation, often a story ends when the non-Jewish party to the debate simply runs out of artillery. In most of such stories, it is hard to evaluate the degree to which the character has changed--has he come to appreciate the rabbi's teaching, or has he simply learned not to take the rabbi on in religious disputation? In the following story, though the rabbi's sparring partners offer no final pronouncement on where they stand, other elements of the story provide for rich characterization.

The heretics questioned Rabbi Simlai: "How many gods created the world?"

He said to them: "Let us ask the first days, as it is written, 'Ask the first days.' (Deut. 4:32) 'Bar'u Elohim adam--God created (plural) man' is not written, but rather, 'Bara Elohim--God (singular) created!'" (Deut. 4:32)

They questioned him again: "What about it being written that 'Breishit bara' Elohim--In the beginning God (a plural form) created?" (Gen. 1:1)

He said to them: "'Breishit bar'u Elohim--In the beginning God created (plural)' is not written, but rather, 'Bara Elohim--God created (singular) the heavens and the earth!'" (Gen. 1:1)

Rabbi Simlai said: "Whenever you find support for the heretics, you find its antidote by its side."

They questioned him again: "What about it being written, 'Then God said: 'Let us make man?'" (Gen. 1:26)

He said to them: "Read after that, 'Vayivri'u Elohim--Then God created (plural) man' is not written, but rather, 'Vayivra' Elohim--God (singular) created!'" (Gen. 1:27)

* GR 70:7, p. 804.

When they (the heretics) left, his students said to him: "Them you pushed off with but a reed. How will you answer us?" He said to them: "In the past, Adam was created from the earth and Eve was created from Adam. From then on, 'in our image, in our likeness.' (Gen. 1:26) No man without woman, nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Divine Presence." (Genesis Rabbah 8:9, p. 62)³⁹

Though the departure of the heretics at the end of this story might indicate some new learning on their part, they are best understood as "revealing" characters. As the story progresses, more and more information about the heretics is revealed, compelling readers to repeatedly revise their evaluations of the heretics. The heretics initiate the dialogue with a question about a foundation of rabbinic theology--how many gods created the world. While parallel discussions within and outside rabbinic literature indicate that this question was a live polemical debate between rabbis and Gnostics,⁴⁰ as one starts reading this dialogue these heretics' views on the issue are unclear. There is nothing about this opening question to suggest that the heretics' inquiry is anything other than a sincere request for instruction. It is only later, when they cite scripture in questioning the rabbi's response, that we realize the innocence of their first question was feigned. They have come to the rabbi intent on engaging in theological dispute, and in initially questioning the

* Segal 1977 treats this story and its multiple parallels throughout rabbinic literature at length, pp. 121-134.

* While in this story, the heretics can be identified as Gnostic dualists, elsewhere in rabbinic literature, the term "minim" may refer to other sects. As many studies as there are trying to identify the matrona's religious position, there are many more trying to identify who exactly the heretics who appear in midrashic literature are. For considerations of this question, see Lachs 1970, and the bibliography he provides in note 4. Segal warns against identifying the term with any one sect, pointing out not only that both Christians and Gnostics were implicated

rabbi in such general terms, they were really just setting him up. The ensuing conversation reveals the heretics' cunning.

The heretics turn the rabbi's first response on its head, enlisting a scriptural citation very similar to the one he uses to prove the oneness of the Creator in their challenge to the oneness of God. They point out that the very term the rabbi uses for his deity is in a plural form. When the rabbi answers this challenge by pointing to the singular verb, the heretics again have a quick comeback. In Genesis 1:26, God Himself uses a first person plural verb, suggesting a plurality of deities. The strength of the heretics' argument is that they are able to use the rabbi's own authoritative text to demonstrate that there is more than one god. It is only when Rabbi Simlai answers this second challenge that the heretics' resistance folds. If the rabbi has not won them over to a belief in God's oneness, he has at least neutralized their opposition. If the story ended here, we might compare it to the story of Hadrian and Rabbi Joshua, as an account of a rabbi's victory over a formidable opponent. However, the story continues, complicating our assessment of the heretics' intelligence.

The students who speak up after the heretics' departure serve as a model for the reading audience.⁴¹ While we might have been impressed by Rabbi Simlai's ability to neutralize the heretics' challenges, the students' reaction now clues us in to the shortcomings of the rabbi's response. While

by the "two powers in heaven" heresy, but that these two groups should not be seen as mutually exclusive, pp. 4-6.

he might have put off the heretics relatively easily, the students recognize that the question the heretics raised touches on a serious difficulty within the biblical text. Why indeed does the singular God speak in the plural? The students' question compels us to alter our earlier assessment of the heretics' character. While we were earlier impressed by the sophistication of the heretics' questions, we now realize that they bungled their challenge of the rabbi when they folded so quickly. In contrast to the story of Hadrian above, which presents the non-Jew as an intelligent disputant who knows when to bow to reason, in this story the heretics are portrayed as intellectual lightweights who cannot recognize the merits of their own arguments. Like children, they are full of questions, but lack the intellectual sophistication to appreciate the meaning of their questions. While the story of Hadrian subtly exalted his intelligence, even in his defeat, this story demeans the heretics for surrendering so quickly. It seems that the begrudging respect with which even enemy rulers are treated in dialogue stories is lacking in the rabbis' treatment of non-aristocratic figures such as heretics and Samaritans.

Whether those who initiate debates with the rabbis come around to the rabbis' way of thinking like Hadrian or are forced to shamefully steal away like the heretics, all these stories serve to demonstrate the superior wisdom of the rabbis. Even in the story above where the adequacy of Rabbi Simlai's response is called into question, he is ultimately able to provide an answer

⁴¹ For parallels to the students' refusal to be "pushed off by a reed," see J. Brachot 62B; Leviticus Rabbah 4:6; Numbers Rabbah 9:47 and 19:8; Tanhuma Hukat 8; Tanhuma Buber Hukat 26; Exodus Rabbah 29:1; Midrash Tehillim 50:1; Pesikta Rabbati 14:12.

which even his demanding disciples consider satisfactory. Here Rabbi Simlai can be seen as a "revealing" character, just like the heretics. The story first raises our doubts as to the ability of the rabbi to neutralize the heretics' challenge, only to later suggest that the weak answers Rabbi Simlai provides are themselves evidence of his wisdom; Rabbi Simlai is wise enough to discern what kind of answers suffice in any given situation. He knows how to tailor his responses to his audiences, providing outsiders with explanations appropriate for them, and insiders with different, more profound teachings. The fact that the disciples' refusal to "be pushed off by a reed" recurs in multiple dialogues in later compilations indicates that the rabbi's wily rhetorical skill itself becomes a narrative topos.

The story of Rabbi Simlai and the heretics provides a much richer portrayal of a rabbinic character than most stories about conversations between sages and Others. The story exposes how the rabbi implements different strategies for answering challenges from the outside and for answering his own students. While he counters the heretics with mere citations of scripture, he answers his own students with homiletical interpretation. The example of Rabbi Simlai raises the question: To what degree do rabbinic characters in other Genesis Rabbah dialogue stories use such deliberate rhetorical strategies? This is the question we will consider in the next section.

Rhetoric

In her brief discussion of dispute-stories, Ofra Meir points out that in stories comprised predominantly of dialogue, it is the characters' use of rhetoric that moves the narrative.⁴² We have seen that while there is great variety among dialogue stories featuring sages and those outside the rabbinic world, these stories generally uphold the rabbis' superior wisdom, either by winning over their opponents or by effectively neutralizing the opposition. What rhetorical strategies do the rabbis use in arguing their positions so effectively? Here, as in the areas surveyed above, there is variation, though some general trends emerge.

In the stories we have already examined, sages make several different kinds of argument. In the story of Rabbi Simlai and the heretics, the heretics' challenges are rooted in scripture, as were Rabbi Simlai's counter-arguments. Rabbi Simlai even enunciates the general principle that wherever Scripture provides an opening for heretics to question a point of Jewish theology, Scripture itself provides a response in close proximity to the problematic passage. The story reflects concerns about biblical polemics expressed elsewhere in Genesis Rabbah. Throughout the early chapters of Genesis Rabbah, the midrash explains that particular wordings in Scripture are intended to preclude heretics and gentiles from coming to any misconceived notions about God or Israel.⁴³ The story of Rabbi Simlai and the heretics can be seen as a narrative enactment of this concern.

⁴² Meir 1984a, 36.

⁴³ See Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin's statement in GR 1:2, p. 4; that of Rabbi Isaac in GR 1:7, p. 4; that of Rabbi Akiba in GR 1:14, p. 12; and interpretations of why the Torah begins with a bet in 1:10, p. 8. Similar concerns surface in GR 8:8, p. 61, where Moses questions God's use of the plural

However we are to understand the religious identity of the heretics who confront Rabbi Simlai, they are presumably of a sect that studies and values the Hebrew Bible, and so arguments from Scripture are very effective. Other dialogue stories similarly involve sages and others debating the interpretation of scripture. Another story about heretics, this time in conversation with Rabbi Abbahu, revolves around an exegetical issue.⁴⁴ Both stories featuring Rabbi Meir mentioned above involve the rabbi's explanation of difficult passages.⁴⁵ In other stories however, when a rabbi is questioned about a biblical verse, his response is based on analogy or on empirical evidence, rather than on exegesis. The following dialogue can serve as an example:

A Cuthean questioned Rabbi Meir.
He said to him: "Could the upper waters really be suspended by just God's word?"
He said to him: "Yes. Bring me a clepsydra."⁴⁶
He brought him a clepsydra.
He placed a gold plate upon it, but the waters would not stop flowing. He placed a silver plate upon it, and still they would not stop. When he put his finger on it, the waters stood still.
He (the Cuthean said) to him: "But you used your finger."
He said to him: "If I, of flesh and blood could stay the waters with my finger, how much the more so could God's finger! Thus the upper waters can be suspended by God's word."

"Let us make man," in the very verse cited by the heretics in their discussion with Rabbi Simlai. While Moses is worried that the verse will provide heretics with an excuse to doubt God's oneness, God dismisses this concern and provides a homiletical interpretation. Another context in which concern about non-Jews misreading the Bible surfaces is in statements about the changes that were made for King Ptolemy in the translation of the Septuagint. GR 38:10, p. 359 and GR 48:17, p. 494, suggest that changes were made in the translation so as to prevent misunderstandings about God.

⁴⁴ GR 25:1, p. 238.

⁴⁵ GR 70:7, p. 803-804.

⁴⁶ This translation is according to Jastrow. Theodor-Albeck p. 27 and Freedman p. 28 both explain that this was an instrument containing water, used for time-measurement. It had tiny holes on the bottom, and a narrow aperture on top. When this aperture was stopped up, the water would stop flowing through the holes in the bottom.

He said to him: "Is it possible that He of whom it says, 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth,' (Jeremiah 23:24) really could speak to Moses from between the two poles of the ark?"
He said to him: "Bring me large mirrors."
He brought them for him.
He said to him: "Look at your image."
He saw it large.
"Bring me small mirrors."
He brought them for him.
"Look at your image."
He saw it small.
He said to him: "If you yourself, who are of flesh and blood, can alter yourself as you wish, how much the more so is this true of the One who spoke and the world came into being?! When He wishes— 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth,' and when He wishes, He speaks to Moses from between the poles of the ark."
...⁴⁷

He said to him: "Is it possible that 'the river of God is full of water,' (Psalms 65:10) and has not been at all diminished since the six days of creation?"⁴⁸
He said to him: "Go and bathe. Weigh yourself before you get in, and weigh yourself after you get in."
He went and weighed himself, and his weight had not diminished at all.
He said to him: "All that sweat that poured out, didn't it come out of you?"
He said to him: "Yes."
"If you are flesh and blood, and your fountain does not diminish at all, how much the more so the fountain of the Holy One Blessed Be He. Thus 'the river of God is full of water' from the six days of creation and has not been diminished at all."
(Genesis Rabbah 4:4, p. 27)

In this story, while all three of the Cuthean's questions emerge out of a reading of Scripture, they focus on the content of the biblical account, rather than its wording. In response, Rabbi Meir leaves the realm of Scripture and invokes a fortiori arguments based on natural phenomena from mundane

⁴⁷ A parallel statement on this same theme by another rabbi here breaks the flow of the story and is best understood as an interpolation.

life. Rabbi Meir's rhetorical strategy is here tailored to the challenge the Cuthean represents. In questioning how the Bible's claims about God's actions accord with the laws of physics, the Cuthean challenges both the veracity of the Jewish Bible, and the Jewish notion of a supernatural God. To effectively respond to these challenges, Rabbi Meir appeals to the very source of knowledge which the Cuthean privileges—natural law. Rabbi Meir demonstrates that the very events described in the Bible which the Cuthean considers so fantastic are actually continuous with events occurring regularly in the realms of nature and technology. God's manipulations of the natural world are on a larger scale than human manipulations, but can be seen as illustrations of the same principles. In this story the rabbi's exegetical expertise cannot serve as a source of persuasive argumentation, so he makes use of the universally binding realms of logic and science.

Other accounts of dialogues between rabbis and non-Jews similarly make use of analogies to familiar aspects of human experience. In one interaction between Hadrian and Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, Rabbi Joshua uses a rhetorical strategy like Rabbi Meir's above when he compares Hadrian's ability to stretch his arms around a room to God's ability to reach into the expanses of the universe.⁴⁹ We saw a similar use of an analogy to mundane life in the story of Rabbi Judah the Prince and Antoninus above, where Rabbi used gardening to model how Antoninus should administer his court. In the

next chapter, we will observe both the matrona and Rabbi Yosi ben Halafta making use of objects from daily life in arguing their respective points.⁵⁰ In all these stories, characters look to the hard and fast rules of reason and of physical reality to allow them to speak across religious and social boundaries.

We have seen stories in which sages' scriptural expertise allows them to defeat their opponents, and stories where rabbis only gain the upper hand through recourse to science and reason. Other stories show the sages negotiating between these two realms of knowledge. For example, in *Genesis Rabbah* 13:9 (p. 118), we read of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua conducting experiments on the waters of the Mediterranean during their sea-voyage to Rome. Upon their arrival, the samples they've collected allow them to effectively answer a question Hadrian puts to them about the nature of the sea. The story closes with a suggestion that their experiments did nothing more than confirm Rabbi Eliezer's reading of Job 1:7. In this story, though Scripture and empirical observation are presented as equivalent sources of knowledge about the universe, the rabbis use empirical evidence rather than exegesis to support the answer which they give to Hadrian.

In another story, the relationship between Scripture and science is presented differently. *Genesis Rabbah* 20:4 (p. 185) tells of a philosopher who spends years trying to determine the gestation period of snakes through experimentation and observation. When his efforts yield no results, he puts the issue to two rabbis visiting in Rome. Rabban Gamaliel gives him a

⁴⁹ Should not all the rains sent down by God have diminished His stores of water? This rationale for the question is suggested by Freedman, p. 29, note 3.

⁵⁰ GR 10:3, p. 75.

⁵⁰ See GR 4:6, p. 30; GR 17:7, p.158; and GR 63:8, p. 688.

decisive answer based solely on an interpretation of God's curse of the serpent in Genesis 3:14—a snake's pregnancy lasts for seven years. The story serves to demonstrate that the rabbi's source of knowledge about the universe—Scripture—is superior to the philosopher's science. In contrast to those stories where sages use science and reason to beat gentiles at their own game, this story exposes the shortcomings of non-Jewish modes of thought.

One final example will serve to illustrate the range of rhetorical strategies rabbinic characters use in responding to questions from those outside rabbinic culture:

The wicked Tineius Rufus questioned Rabbi Akiva.
 He said to him: "What distinguishes one day from other days?"
 He said to him: "What distinguishes one man from other men?"
 He said to him: "What did I say to you, and what did you say to me?"
 He said to him: "You asked me how the Sabbath differs from all other days, and I asked you how Rufus differs from all other men."
 He said to him: "(Rufus differs) in that the king wanted to give him honor."
 "So too does the Holy One Blessed Be He want to give it (the Sabbath) honor."
 "How can you demonstrate this to me?"
 He said to him: "Let the Sambatyon River prove it, for it carries rocks all week, but rests them down on the Sabbath."
 He said to him: "Would you lead me to such a distant place?"
 He said to him: "Look, the one who conjures up the dead by his male member can prove it. The dead rise every day, but not on the Sabbath."
 He went and checked this with his father. Every day he arose, but on the Sabbath he did not come up. After the Sabbath, he conjured him up. He said to him: "Father, since you died, did you become a Jew?! Why do you come up every day, but not on the Sabbath?"
 He said to him: "Everyone who does not keep the Sabbath willingly among you, must keep it here in spite of himself."
 He said to him: "And what hard labor do you have there?"

He said to him: "We are judged every day of the week, but on the Sabbath we are left to rest."
 He (Tineius Rufus) returned to Rabbi Akiva and said to him: "If, like you say, the Holy One Blessed Be He honors the Sabbath, on the Sabbath He should not make the winds blow, or the rains fall!"
 He said to him: "Let this man (Rufus) lose his breath. For it is like one who carries an item four cubits."⁵¹
 (Genesis Rabbah 11:5, p. 92)

This dialogue has a more confrontational tone than others we have looked at, and the persistence of Tineius Rufus means that Rabbi Akiva must draw on several different modes of argumentation. As the dialogue opens, Tineius Rufus asks a question which sounds like a riddle. In veiling his question in ambiguous language, he is presumably trying to perplex Rabbi Akiva from the start. Rabbi Akiva sees through this trick and responds with a rhetorical question. Though he echoes the language of the original question, Tineius Rufus cannot grasp the subtlety of the response, and asks for clarification. Rabbi Akiva now makes his language explicit—to appreciate what accounts for the Sabbath's special status, Tineius Rufus must articulate what accounts for his own status as governor. Akiva thus elicits the answer to Rufus's question from the language of Rufus himself: Just as the emperor singles Rufus out for special honor, so the Sabbath is singled out by God. Though the rhetoric here is more involved than in the other rabbinic arguments we have surveyed, Rabbi Akiva is using a mode of argument we have seen before—he is comparing cosmic events to events Tineius Rufus

⁵¹ When God moves winds and rains across the expanse of the universe, it is comparable to a person moving an item a mere four cubits, an action which is permitted on the Sabbath.

will recognize from his own life.⁵² As the dialogue continues, Rabbi Akiva uses other strategies. In citing the behavior of Sambatyon and the practices of necromancy as proof, he makes a move similar to that of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah in Genesis Rabbah 78:1, who demonstrated the plausibility of his claims by referring to the observable behavior of the Jordan River. The effectiveness of Rabbi Akiva's argument is illustrated when Tineius Rufus changes his direction of attack. In his second meeting with the rabbi, he concedes Rabbi Akiva's point about the Sabbath's special status, and articulates a challenge to God's behavior instead. Here, as before, Rabbi Akiva uses an analogy to human experience to account for God's actions.

While the story of Rabbi Akiva and Tineius Rufus is full of subtle rhetorical shifts, Rabbi Akiva takes control of the dialogue from the first time he opens his mouth. In this story, and in every other example we have looked at, the rabbi quickly gains the upper hand. These stories do generate suspense, but their suspense does not come from readers' wondering *who* will win the debate, so much as from our questioning *how* the debate will be won. But are the outcomes of these dialogues always foregone conclusions? This is the question we will consider in the next section.

Outcome

Since these stories of meetings between sages and non-Jewish or heretical figures appear within rabbinic literature, one would expect that it

⁵² More specifically, Rabbi Akiva here makes use of the very same comparison between God and a flesh and blood king which is the basis for king-parables, the story type examined by David Stern in *Parables in Midrash*.

would be the rabbinic figure who would emerge victorious in any confrontation. As we have seen, this is generally so. In the vast majority of dialogues, the sage wins, either by systematically neutralizing all of his opponent's arguments, or by bringing his opponent over to his way of thinking. Our survey of the variations among these stories would not be complete however, if we did not take note of exceptions to this general rule.

In two stories within Genesis Rabbah, rabbinic figures are shown up by their sparring partners. The first story, in Genesis Rabbah 63:8 (p. 688) differs from other examples of our topos in that it contains far more exposition than most dialogues. It tells of Diocletian's attempt to avenge the Jews for the mistreatment he suffered when he was working as a swineherd in Tiberius. Now emperor, Diocletian attempts to punish the rabbis for the taunts he suffered from Jewish children years before. He makes near-impossible demands on Rabbi and Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman which they accomplish only through miraculous intervention. When Diocletian reproaches the sages for having insulted an emperor, they protest that the Jews are loyal subjects—they might have taunted a swineherd, but they would never insult the emperor. The story ends with Diocletian's retort that they should not insult even the humblest Roman. Diocletian is thus granted the last word, and his criticism stands. Though the plots against the rabbis were foiled by miracles, the fact that the rabbis had to rely on supernatural interventions rather than on their own ingenuity further underscores their vulnerability in this story.

The second story in which rabbinic figures lose portrays the Jews in an even harsher light. The story begins like this:

Two disciples of Rabbi Joshua changed their dress during the time of the Persecution. A Roman official who was an apostate happened upon them.

He said to them: "If you are her (the Torah's) children, give your souls up for her, but if you are not her children, why be killed for her?"

They said to him: "We are her children, and for her we will be killed."

He said to them: "I will ask you three questions and if you answer them, very well. If not I will force you to convert." He said to them: "One verse says, 'The Lord *stands* for argument,' (Isaiah 3:13) and another verse says, 'For there I will *sit* to judge all the nations.'" (Joel 4:12)

They said to him: "When the Holy One Blessed Be He judges Israel, He judges them standing, making the judgment brief and flexible. He judges the nations sitting down, so as to make the judgment long and rigorous."

He said to them: "That is not how your master Joshua expounded this. Rather he taught that both verses speak of the nations. God sits to judge the nations so as to make the judgment long and rigorous, then rises and acts as plaintiff against them."

(Genesis Rabbah 82:8, p. 984)

As this story continues, the apostate asks for two more interpretations, and both times he criticizes the students for not accurately representing their teacher's teachings. While in other stories we have seen, sages use their exegetical expertise to silence challenges to Judaism, here the Roman official, himself the beneficiary of a rabbinic education, gains the upper hand. He exposes the rabbinical students' ignorance in the very realm of learning they claim to value above life itself. The irony of the story is that the very passages whose meaning the characters debate discuss God's ultimate judgment of non-Jews--the apostate defeats the disciples by expounding a message that

could spell out his own doom! At the same time, the disciples' failure to correctly understand these passages exposes that their assurance in God's ultimate protection might be false confidence. Indeed, having failed the apostate's tests, as the story closes, the disciples can only expect to be persecuted until they convert or die. However, the story has shifted accountability for their suffering from the Romans to the persecuted Jews themselves--Had the disciples committed themselves to Torah, they could have escaped such a cruel fate. The story attacks Jews who hide their identities so as to save themselves from persecution, suggesting that a lack of commitment to Jewish dress corresponds to a lack of commitment to Jewish learning. The fact that this criticism is voiced by a despised character, himself a traitor to Judaism, makes it all the more devastating.

Against the backdrop of all the dialogue stories which portray sages vanquishing non-Jewish and heretical challengers, stories in which rabbinic Jews lose are all the more striking. By manipulating the conventional features of dialogue stories between rabbis and others in unexpected ways, these stories direct criticisms at figures within the rabbinic world. They serve as good examples of the variation within the literary topos of conversations between rabbis and those outside the rabbinic world.

General trends in the Dialogue Stories of Genesis Rabbah

Thus far my survey of the dialogue stories has emphasized the variations within the topos, but when one analyzes the corpus as a whole,

some interesting patterns emerge which are important to mention. The first trend has to do with the settings of the dialogue stories within Genesis Rabbah. For the most part, these dialogues surface in two general contexts within Genesis Rabbah: Chapters 1-28, which interpret the first six chapters of Genesis (parashat Bereishit), and Chapters 63-82, which cover Genesis chapters 25-36 (the portions Toledot and Vayishlach). While each setting helps to clarify the meanings of the dialogue stories it contains, the rationales for the two clusters of dialogue stories are very different.

The fact that the stories of creation and the first generations of humanity give rise to so many accounts of dialogues between rabbis and gentiles might reflect the universal import which was attached to these biblical stories in ancient times. By representing gentiles, even Roman emperors, engaging in interpretations of the early Genesis stories, the rabbinic authors expressed their conviction that the Genesis account was relevant to all humanity. Sources outside rabbinic literature confirm that this view was more than just a rabbinic bias—there is evidence that some non-Jews did take an avid interest in the early chapters of Genesis. Gnostic exegesis, for example, is limited to interpretations of the stories from creation through the Flood.⁵⁴ Of course, to say that the preponderance of dialogue stories in the early chapters of Genesis Rabbah might reflect a historical reality is not to claim that the individual stories can be read as reports of conversations which actually occurred. Not only is such a claim incapable of being substantiated, it

⁵⁴ Brakke.

is implausible. Real-life conversation simply doesn't conform to the conventional structures and stylized responses we find in these stories. Nevertheless, these stories do demonstrate that the rabbis considered questions about creation to be an area of both shared concern and controversy with gentiles.

The dialogue stories which cluster in Chapters 63-82 of Genesis Rabbah must be explained differently. These dialogues emerge within the context of the midrash's exegesis of Genesis chapters 25-36, the stories chronicling the vicissitudes of Jacob's relationship with Esau. The rabbis understand Esau, and the nation of Edom with which he is associated, as prefiguring the Roman Empire. Interpretations of stories about Esau are thus an opportunity for rabbis to comment on their attitudes about Roman rule. Alongside dialogue stories representing confrontations between Jews and Romans in this section of Genesis Rabbah are many other discussions about Rome. One motif which recurs here is the assignment of excesses associated with Rome to the biblical character of Esau: Esau is thus described as frequenting pagan shrines,⁵⁴ and as engaging in promiscuous and illicit sex.⁵⁵ Rome is repeatedly described as "the Wicked Empire—*Malchut Harash'a*,"⁵⁶ a regime which persecutes Jews and others through violence⁵⁷ and excessive taxation.⁵⁸ Rome is described as the instrument through which God punishes Israel.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁴ GR 63:6, p. 683; GR 63:9, p. 693.

⁵⁵ GR 63:10, p. 693; GR 63:12, p. 694-695.

⁵⁶ GR 65:1, p. 713; GR 76:6, p. 903.

⁵⁷ GR 63:13, p. 697; GR 65:1, p. 713; GR 65:21, p. 740; 65:22, p. 741.

⁵⁸ GR 76:6, p. 903; GR 78:12, p. 931.

⁵⁹ GR 65:20, p. 733; GR 75:1, p. 878.

punishment is temporary however, and numerous verses are expounded so as to demonstrate that Rome is the last of four empires which have dominated Israel.⁸⁰ Amidst the numerous invectives against Rome in this section of *Genesis Rabbah*, dialogues which dramatize individual rabbis defeating Romans in debate can be read as another, more subtle expression of resistance to Roman control.

Within the context of *Genesis Rabbah*, the dialogue-stories thus communicate two very different messages, depending on the context in which they appear. Those stories which show Jews and figures from the Roman world debating the teachings of the creation stories suggest that despite all that separates Jews from the nations, interest in Scripture and in cosmogony transcends all boundaries. Stories which appear amidst larger condemnations of Rome highlight all that separates Jews from others.

Beyond these generalities, there are more specific trends in how figures from outside the rabbinic world are portrayed. When we group the dialogue stories according to the type of questioner they feature, we find certain continuities. For example, there is a logic to the type of challenges Samaritans pose to rabbis which distinguish them from other non-Jewish figures. Other characters, such as Antoninus and the philosopher are also portrayed with some consistency.

⁸⁰ GR 68:13, p. 789, 70:8, p. 807. A similar interpretation is presented within a dialogue story as well, when a prominent Jew cites Genesis 25:26 as evidence that the descendants of Jacob will succeed the descendants of Esau in power—GR 63:8, p. 692.

There are five dialogue stories within *Genesis Rabbah* featuring Samaritans. These interlocutors are never named, but are three times identified as "a Samaritan," and twice as "a Cuthean." While some characterizations of Samaritans are more sympathetic than others, their portrayal is consistent in that the questions they ask reflect concerns which are typical of Samaritan views. In two stories, Samaritans challenge the validity of the Jewish Temple site in Jerusalem.⁸¹ These stories build on a central feature of Samaritan identity, their reverence for Mount Gerizim and rejection of Jerusalem. A third story portrays a Samaritan and Rabbi Meir discussing Samaritan tribal origins.⁸² In this friendly interchange, Rabbi Meir identifies the Samaritans as descendants of Issaschar, a proposal which a Samaritan patriarch approves. This story too reflects the unique identity of Samaritans as a group distinct from Jews with a longstanding tie to the North of the Land of Israel. The remaining two stories feature "a Cuthean." As we have seen, one dialogue portrays a Cuthean challenging the validity of Scripture's claims about God's supernatural actions.⁸³ In the other, a Cuthean argues that Israel cheats God out of His promised tithe in setting aside only one tribe out of twelve—the Levites—as holy.⁸⁴ While both these attacks on

⁸¹ GR 32:19, p. 296 (which Freedman identifies as 32:10) and GR 81:3, p. 974.

⁸² GR 94:7, p. 1178.

⁸³ GR 4:4, p. 27.

⁸⁴ GR 70:7, p. 804. If one reads this story as a challenge to the Levites' exclusive claim to the priesthood, one might discern a logic to the Samaritan's portrayal here. Steven Weitzman suggests that the rabbis might have surmised Samaritan views from the Bible's description of Northern practices. This suggestion is borne out by the identification of the Samaritans with Issaschar. Several scriptural passages present those in the North appointing priests who are not Levites. For example, in 1 Kings 12:31 Jeroboam appoints priests from among all peoples, not just Levites. According to 2 Kings 17, those resettled in Samaria by the Assyrians appoint non-

Jewish Scriptures are certainly consistent with Samaritan identity, they are less distinctively Samaritan than the other three stories.

The character Antoninus appears four times in *Genesis Rabbah*, each time in relation to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch. The topics discussed by these two figures consistently reflect the interests of both men in good government. As we have seen, Antoninus once asks Rabbi for advice in filling his treasury.⁶⁵ In another, shorter exchange, a query from Antoninus about the interpretation of Job 9:23 elicits another of Rabbi's insights about the challenges of administration—he points out that while orders to mete out punishments are quickly executed, when one orders a certain individual to be monetarily compensated, somehow the money never reaches the rightful recipient.⁶⁶ While in these two stories, Rabbi relates to Antoninus as a trusted colleague, in another story, he upbraids his Roman friend for failing to recognize that even a robust royal treasury cannot buy spiritual rewards; Antoninus complains that a weekday meal is not as tasty as the cold food Rabbi served to him on the Sabbath, and Rabbi must explain that not even Antoninus can purchase the secret ingredient of the Sabbath.⁶⁷ The final story featuring Antoninus is not a dialogue story, but it is consistent with the other portrayals of Rabbi and Antoninus in that it focuses on statecraft. In composing a letter to Antoninus, Rabbi refers to himself as a servant rather than a Prince; when his secretary objects to this subservience, Rabbi points out

Levites as priests. If it can be shown that the rabbis did indeed regard non-Levitical priests as a feature of Samaritan religion, then this story could be considered distinctively Samaritan.

⁶⁵ GR 67:6, p. 761.

⁶⁶ GR 84:3, p. 1002.

that even Jacob the Patriarch understood the importance of diplomatic language when speaking to Esau.⁶⁸ Antoninus can be distinguished from all other characters who dialogue with sages in that stories about him always highlight princely concerns.

A third non-Jewish figure who is portrayed with some consistency across different dialogue stories is identified as "a philosopher." In each of the three stories about him, the philosopher's questions reveal concerns we would readily associate with Greek science. In one story, the philosopher disputes the rabbinic belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, pointing out that *Genesis* itself suggests that God had materials to use—Tohu, vohu, darkness and water.⁶⁹ In another story, the philosopher again inquires as to the nature of creation. He questions the appropriateness of circumcision, suggesting that creatures should be regarded as complete in the form in which they were created. Rabbi Hoshaya challenges the faith he puts in nature, demonstrating that circumcision is but one example of how humans complete the work of creation.⁷⁰ We have already discussed a third story which similarly criticizes the philosopher's confidence in natural science. Here, the philosopher is forced to rely on a rabbi's interpretation of Scripture when his empirical observations fail to reveal to him the gestational period of a serpent.⁷¹ In these three stories, the philosopher serves as a straw man in rabbinic challenges to Greek science.

⁶⁸ GR 11:4, p. 90.

⁶⁹ GR 75:5, p. 883.

⁷⁰ GR 1:9, p. 8.

⁷¹ GR 11:6, p. 94.

To sum up, we have seen that despite great variation in tone, characterization, rhetoric, and outcome among stories representing dialogues between rabbis and figures from outside the rabbinic world, there are some generalizations that can be made about how the topos functions in *Genesis Rabbah*. On the one hand, these stories consistently portray rabbinic Judaism trumping all other modes of thought and belief: the portrayal of sages swaying non-Jews over to their way of thinking serves to demonstrate the ultimate validity of rabbinic concepts, and the rabbis' ability to successfully argue from Scripture, logical analogies, or empirical observation illustrates the superiority of rabbinic wisdom. On the other hand, the dialogues are not just rhetorical contests between Jews and others; they are also meetings. The very existence of dialogue stories presumes a world in which boundaries of religion and national culture are not obstacles to communication; science and biblical interpretation are both realms where rabbis can enjoy meaningful exchanges with figures from outside their world.

Alongside these broad generalities, more specific observations have emerged. We have seen that within *Genesis Rabbah*, the assignment of certain views and modes of argumentation to specific characters is not haphazard. While some figures, such as Hadrian, might represent generic gentile concerns, other characters consistently represent more distinctive issues. For example, the character of the Samaritan invokes concerns unique

⁷¹ GR 20:4, p. 185.

to Samaritan ideology, Antoninus focuses on issues of statecraft, and the philosopher pursues scientific concepts. In the next chapter I will demonstrate that the character of the *matrona* as portrayed in *Genesis Rabbah* can also be defined by a unique set of concerns. While earlier studies have sought to identify her distinctiveness by describing her religious loyalties, the next chapter will show that the *matrona's* defining concerns are issues of gender, as well as theology.

In this chapter, I have described the contours of the topos of dialogues between Jews and non-Jews making only scant reference to the *matrona*, who appears in seven of the thirty-five dialogue stories surveyed. In the next chapter, I will offer readings of the seven *matrona* stories of *Genesis Rabbah*, noting which features they share in common with the dialogue stories we have considered here, and noting too how the *matrona* differs.

Chapter III: The Matrona in Genesis Rabbah

In the last chapter, I described the topos of dialogues between sages and Others within Genesis Rabbah. I noted that despite all the variations among the stories in terms of tone, characterization, length, and rhetoric, certain continuities did emerge: Stories featuring particular characters tended to discuss issues of special concern to those characters. Thus, while one could look at the topos as a whole to gain a general idea of how the rabbis imagined speaking to those outside of their community, one could also focus in on individual characters to get a sense of rabbinic attitudes toward particular groups, such as Samaritans, or students of Greek philosophy.

Turning now to the character of the matrona in particular, I will build on the last chapter's findings. In this chapter, I will present readings of the seven matrona stories which occur within Genesis Rabbah.¹ In treating these stories, I will take note of continuities between the matrona stories and other dialogue stories, and will also consider what might be distinctive about how

¹ These seven stories are the Genesis Rabbah stories in which the matrona appears which can be considered dialogue-stories comparable to the dialogues I surveyed in the last chapter. It is important to note however, that the term "matrona" appears in several other contexts within Genesis Rabbah. While I will not treat these other appearances of a matrona at length, they do contribute to my analysis by confirming that the term "matrona" is consistently used to refer to upper class, non-Jewish women. In four separate king-parables, a matrona appears as the human king's consort: GR 1:4, p. 6; GR 45:10, p. 458; GR 46:4, p. 461; GR 56:11, p. 608. Thus, it seems fair to conclude that for the rabbis, "matrona" referred to women of the highest circles of Roman society. Matronas occur in other narratives as well: GR 6:5, p. 45, recounts the story of a matrona who warns a rabbi not to embark on a sea journey during a dangerous time of year; her warning is seconded by the rabbi's late father. Here, as in the dialogue-stories presented in this chapter, the matrona is distinguished by her cleverness. In GR 52:12, p. 51, the term "matrona" seems to refer to an official station: in giving Sarah a new garment, Abimelech "makes her" a matrona. GR 52:9, p. 564, tells of how when Sarah was nursing Isaac, Abraham urged her to put some of the milk away so as to publicize God's miracle. When Sarah bared her breasts, they flowed. The matronas brought their children to drink Sarah's milk, and in so doing came to know the Jewish story, the gentile identity of the matronas is of central importance.

the matrona is portrayed. I showed that other non-Jewish characters featured in dialogues within Genesis Rabbah are presented with some consistency—Can the same be said for the matrona? If so, what is the literary logic which governs her portrayal within Genesis Rabbah? Having considered these questions I will be in a better position to consider how her character is re-worked in later rabbinic compilations.

Story #1—Genesis Rabbah 4:6 (p. 30)

A matrona asked Rabbi Yose: "Why isn't 'that it was good' written of the second day of creation?"

He said to her: "Despite that, scripture returns and includes all the days in the end when it says, 'Then God saw all that He had done, and behold, it was very good.' (Genesis 1:31)"

She said to him: "A parable: Six people visit you, and you give a whole portion to each person, except for one. Then, you divide another portion among all six. Wouldn't you find that each person then has a portion and a sixth, except for the one who has only a sixth?!"

He rejoined, saying to her as Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman said: "Since the creation of the waters was not yet completed (on the second day), on the third day, 'that it was good' is written twice—once for the completion of the waters, and once for the work of that day."

In this story, the matrona's question refers to an incongruity in the highly structured account of Genesis 1. The biblical chapter unfolds in set patterns, with a report of each day's creations followed by a statement of God's approval. As the matrona notes, the statement of God's approval is missing in the report of the second day. The matrona asks Rabbi Yose to account for this inconsistency. The dialogue persists for two rounds when the matrona finds the rabbi's first answer unsatisfactory.

Each scholar who has treated the matrona stories has tried to account for the significance of the matrona's question. Herr² and Gershenzon and Slomovic³ identify Gnostic overtones in this question, hearing in it a suggestion that there are evil elements inherent in creation. Indeed, this evaluation of the question might be shared by the character of Rabbi Yose himself, whose initial response seems calculated to neutralize any such Gnostic implications. He points out that though no statement of the second day's goodness appears within the context of the second day, such a positive appraisal does come at the end of the chapter, when God praises all of creation in the blanket statement of Gen 1:31. The work of the second day is thus undeniably good, not evil.

From the continuation of the story, it appears that Rabbi Yose's presumption that the matrona questioned the goodness of creation is a misunderstanding of her question. While the rabbi was poised to respond to a theological challenge, the matrona's rejection of his answer suggests that there was no subtle Gnostic challenge implicit in her query—her question is purely exegetical. Thus, she is not interested in pursuing the question of whether the work of the second day is good or not, but rather persists in probing the surprising incongruity of the scriptural account. As her parable makes clear, there is no denying that the work of the second day is recounted differently than all other days. How can Rabbi Yose account for this inconsistency?

² Herr, 147.

Rabbi Yose satisfies the matrona only when he too engages in a close reading of the text. His second response acknowledges that the statement of the second day's goodness is indeed missing, but he points out that this inconsistency in the chapter's narrative pattern is not arbitrary. Since God's work in reining in the waters extends into the third day of creation, His evaluation of this work is held off until the third day. The matrona offers no rejoinder to this explanation. As the dialogue ends, we sense that Rabbi Yose's response has satisfied her.

While the matrona's behavior in itself offers ample evidence that her question arises out of a close reading of Genesis 1 rather than out of any prior theological commitments, this analysis is confirmed by the context in which her story appears. Several lines before the matrona is introduced, the same question which she asks—"Why isn't 'that it was good' written of the second day of creation?"—is posed anonymously by the editor of *Genesis Rabbah*. Here, the question is clearly exegetical, and contains no anti-rabbinic overtones. In this context, the midrash enumerates three responses to the question. Two of them (including one associated with Rabbi Yose himself) propose that God withholds His praise from the second day because it was on the second day that evil things—either Gehenna (so Rabbi Yose)⁴, or dispute⁵—are created. The third response, associated with Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman,

³ Gershenzon and Slomovic, 19.

⁴ This midrashic explanation is based on an intertextual link with Isaiah 30:39. Isaiah alludes to the arrangement of Tophet "from yesterday." The midrash concludes that this must refer to the one day which had a yesterday but no "day before yesterday"—namely Day 2 of creation.

⁵ This is derived from the description of the "separation" of the waters on the second day. The second day thus introduced divisiveness into creation.

is the answer which is eventually cited by Rabbi Yose within our story. While the first two responses emerge from playful midrashic analyses of isolated words, Rabbi Samuel's explanation is based on a contextual (pshat) reading of Genesis 1.

The appearance of an identical question to the matrona's in a rabbinic work for internal Jewish consumption suggests that the matrona need not be seen as posing a theological challenge, as previous scholars have suggested. At the same time, the fact that the question is addressed in a different way within the fictional context of cross-cultural dialogue than it is within the surrounding text of the midrash suggests an awareness on the part of the rabbis that biblical interpretation must proceed differently when it crosses the boundaries of the rabbinic community. Thus, when the question is posed within our story by the non-Jewish matrona, Rabbi Yose's character refrains from simply answering her with one of the three Jewish responses available to him, and instead goes out of his way to neutralize the theological threat her question might represent, even though it means delaying a direct response to her question. When he does engage her question directly, the response he chooses is not one of the playful midrashic readings proposed in the preceding discussion, but rather the one response which offers a coherent, contextual interpretation. This too can be read as a reflection of how the midrash understands the differences between Jewish and non-Jewish interpreters of scripture. While midrashic readings might delight Jewish readers, they would likely leave a Gentile reader intent on rational

explanations unsatisfied, and could be dangerous if misunderstood or taken out of context.

In suggesting that the creators of the matrona story were able to sift through three existing exegetical alternatives in formulating Rabbi Yose's responses to the matrona, I am of course presuming that the three responses which precede the matrona story in its setting within Genesis Rabbah antedate the creation of the story itself. This chronology is supported by the wording of the story itself, which identifies Rabbi Yose's response with that given by Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman above. Of course, there are other ways to explain this attribution of the story. Ilan, who upholds the historicity of the matrona story, explains the story's mention of Rabbi Samuel, an amora who lived generations after Rabbi Yose, as a later interpolation. She explains that Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Samuel were each drawing upon a set answer circulating in the rabbinical academies.⁶ Ultimately, there is no way to determine which came first, the matrona story, or the exegetical discussion within which it is embedded. Nevertheless, even a synchronic reading of the passages reveals the contrasts between how exegetical issues are debated among the rabbis, and how they are presented outside the bounds of the rabbinic community.

This story of the matrona draws on many of the elements which characterize dialogues between sages and others in Genesis Rabbah. The story maintains the conventional form of the topos in that the dialogue begins

⁶ Ilan 1997, 247.

with a question put to a sage by an outsider, and ends when the sage effectively answers the outsider's challenge. Here, as in other stories we have seen, analogies drawn from mundane existence aid characters in speaking across cultural boundaries. The dialogue centers on a discussion of exegesis, but also draws on logical arguments as in other dialogues we have noted.

Despite all these continuities between this story and the *topos* as a whole, in contrast to the other non-Jewish and heretical interlocutors we have considered, the *matrona* here seems especially articulate. In other dialogue stories, even the most persistent disputants such as Tineius Rufus (GR 11:5, p. 92) and Hadrian (GR 78:1, p. 916) limit their challenges to asking the rabbis pointed questions. Their debates with rabbis read as interrogations, as they shoot out question after question, all of which are decisively put to rest by sages. Though the *matrona* here speaks up just once after her initial query, she voices a coherent argument, rather than just another question. Her real-life parable demonstrates her quick discernment both of Rabbi Yose's argument and of its shortcomings. Her initial question, her argumentation, and her eventual satisfaction all indicate that she possesses an appreciation for exegetical subtleties as well as for logical principles. Of all the non-Jewish questioners we have seen, the *matrona* here seems the best qualified to match wits with a rabbi.

While the *matrona* is persistent in questioning Rabbi Yose, she does not introduce confrontation for its own sake. There is no animus in her representation, only curiosity, and a sharp intellect which will not be easily

dismissed. Unlike other characters, such as the heretics, Samaritans, Antoninus, and the philosopher, the *matrona*'s question here does not seem to correspond with any aspect of her identity. As we have seen, it is a question as easily asked by rabbis as by a non-Jew, and it is not at all related to the *matrona*'s gender or social position. The fact that the *matrona* is a woman seems all but irrelevant here, though it does make her intellectual sophistication all the more remarkable. While this story effectively captures the *matrona*'s quick wit and no-nonsense attitude, it does not provide us with any clues about how the *matrona*'s social position or gender might distinguish her from other characters who question rabbis.

Story #2 —Genesis Rabbah 17:7 (p. 158)

A *matrona* questioned Rabbi Yose.
She said to him: "Why through theft (was woman created)?"
He said to her: "A parable. If a person secretly gave you an ounce of silver for safekeeping, and you returned to him a *litra* (12 ounces) of silver in public, is that considered theft?"
She said to him: "But why in secret?"
He said to her: "At first He created her (Woman) for him, and he (Adam) saw her full of mucous and blood, and he distanced her from himself. God returned and created her for a second time."
She said to him: "I can add to your words. I was supposed to be married to the brother of my mother, but since I grew up with him in the house, I grew ugly in his eyes, and he went and married another woman who is not as beautiful as I."

Like the first *matrona* story we examined, this story makes use of many of the conventional elements of dialogues between sages and Gentiles that we saw in the last chapter. It opens with a challenge by a non-Jew, the *matrona*, who persists in questioning Rabbi Yose for two rounds of dialogue before she

acquiesces to his argument. As in other stories we have seen, the characters here discuss the Bible and rely on parables and on analogies to real-life situations in making their points. Beyond all these commonalities however, there is another element to this story that propels us toward an initial answer to the questions set out at the beginning of this chapter: Is there anything distinctive about the concerns expressed by the matrona in *Genesis Rabbah*? If the philosopher consistently pursues an interest in science, and Samaritan characters generally inquire about points of Samaritan ideology, can we identify any particular concern in the matrona's questions which distinguishes her from other Gentile interlocutors? In the first matrona story we looked at, we got a good sense of the matrona's characterization as a sharp-witted disputant, but discerned nothing in the content of her questions which seemed particularly suited to her identity as a Roman lady. In the present story, the topics discussed by the matrona and Rabbi Yose are intimately connected to the matrona's identity as a woman.

Other scholars who have looked at this story have reached different conclusions about the significance of gender issues in this story. Central to Tal Ilan's argument that the matrona stories of *Genesis Rabbah* are actual reports of historical conversations is her claim that gender issues seldom surface in the matrona stories; if the matrona was an artistic construction, it would be reasonable to assume that she would consistently represent the concerns of women. Ilan recognizes that this is the exceptional matrona story in which

the matrona's gender is relevant to the story.⁷ Nevertheless, she explains the matrona's interest in women in this story as a "personal dimension" of the account rather than as evidence that the story was crafted as a coherent narrative. She claims that if the matrona was indeed constructed to serve as a mouthpiece for women's concerns, we would expect that it would be she, and not Rabbi Yose, paying a tribute to womanhood.⁸ As I hope to show, it is in this very element of the story, where Rabbi Yose playfully praises womankind in general in order to quiet the challenge of one particular woman, that the story's craft is most evident and most delightful.

Scholars such as Gershenzon and Slomovic and Bohl give little attention to issues of gender raised by this story. For them, the theological challenge posed by the matrona is central, and the particular topic of Eve's creation is incidental. Bohl identifies the matrona's challenge as a heathen attack on Judaism, based on Origen's discussion of the biblical account of Eve's creation.⁹ Gershenzon and Slomovic see the matrona's question about God's thievery as a Gnostic attack on the Jewish notion of God's benevolence.¹⁰ While these scholars give short shrift to the prominence of gender in the continuation of the story, in identifying the matrona's question as an attack on Judaism, they show a sensitivity to the matrona's tone which Ilan's

⁷ *ibid.*, 238-241.

⁸ *ibid.*, 249. As Ilan notes, a variant of this story does put Rabbi Yose's complimentary response in the mouth of a woman, in *b. Sanhedrin* 39a. We will look at this story in chapter five. While Ilan sees the *Genesis Rabbah* story as a historical account reformulated so as to be more artistic in the Babylonian Talmud, I will argue that each story has its own literary logic, and the differences between the two stories reflect different ideas about gender.

⁹ Bohl, 33-34.

¹⁰ Gershenzon and Slomovic, 21-22.

reading lacks. As Bohl, Gershenzon and Slomovic make clear, the matrona is not characterized as an innocent reader of scripture in this story, as Ilan suggests. While Rabbi Yose's response will quickly shift the dialogue to a discussion of the character of woman, the matrona's opening question is an explicit attack on the character of God.

There are two aspects of God's behavior in creating Eve which the matrona finds suspect. First, that God takes a possession of Adam away from him, and second, that God is so sneaky in taking from Adam while the human sleeps. The parable which Rabbi Yose presents minimizes both suspicious aspects of God's behavior. He compares the rib (or side) which God takes to an ounce of silver. An ounce of silver--like Adam's body part--is certainly valuable, but its value pales in comparison to a litra of silver. So too, while Adam might have regretted losing his rib for naught, the fact that it gives rise to something so valuable--a fellow human to serve as a partner--makes the accusation of thievery seem petty and pedantic. The parable addresses the matrona's concern with God's sneakiness by indicating that while it is true that God committed His initial act of borrowing secretly, He took no pains to conceal this action, but rather openly presented Eve to Adam. While the parable does seem to answer the matrona's accusations, it is interesting to note that the correspondence between the biblical story and the parable Rabbi Yose creates is not perfect; while in the biblical account, God takes from Adam without Adam's knowledge or consent, the parable presents Adam's stand-in himself offering silver to God's stand-in for safe-keeping.

Rabbi Yose's response thus glosses over the matrona's observation that God takes without asking.

While the matrona is not fully satisfied with Rabbi Yose's answer, if she has recognized that the parable is somewhat incongruous with the biblical account, she does not mention it. The rabbi's unrestrained praise for woman all but silences her challenge to Judaism. The rabbi has framed the issue so that any accusation against God is tantamount to an attack on women's value. For the matrona to persist in calling God a thief, she would have to suggest that the creation of woman does not eclipse the taking of a rib. In other stories, we have seen sages light upon the perfect retort to silence disputants. Rabbi Yose's use of the parable here can be seen as such a clever rhetorical strategy. He has effectively used one aspect of the matrona's identity to undermine another. She approaches him in the guise of non-Jew, with a challenge to Judaism. He answers her in her role as woman; in affirming her sex, he escapes the challenge she posed as a religious disputant. Theological differences are thus neutralized as Rabbi Yose re-focuses the conversation on the more manageable differences which separate men and women. In transforming the dialogue from a confrontation between Roman and Jew to a conversation between a woman and a man, Rabbi Yose overcomes his vulnerability as a Jew by identifying with the one social hierarchy which can empower him vis-a-vis the matrona--the axis of gender.

This is not to say that the matrona is instantly silenced. While she does not persist in accusing God of burglary, she does push Rabbi Yose to account

for God's secrecy in taking Adam's rib. Rabbi Yose explains that God's decision to create woman while Adam sleeps results from an earlier failed attempt to create Eve out in the open. God was forced to abort that first creation because Adam was so repulsed by the sight of the unfinished Eve, with all her blood and mucous showing as her tissues formed. By creating Eve while Adam sleeps, God ensures that Adam will be attracted to the final product, and want her as a partner. Though this account seems unfounded as presented by Rabbi Yose, it resonates for the matrona because it accords with her own life experience.¹¹ The matrona confides in Rabbi Yose that she suffered the same fate as the first Eve in being rejected by a fiance who watched her grow up.

As this story progresses, the reader is treated to ever more intimate perspectives on the matrona's character. Her opening question identifies her only as a non-Jew somewhat skeptical of biblical theology. The resulting exchange focuses in on her identity as a woman as Rabbi Yose's response shifts the tone of the discussion from a contest over theology between religious disputants to a playful exchange about man's appreciation of woman. With the matrona's final words, her particular identity as a flesh and

¹¹ Genesis Rabbah 18:4, p. 163-164, provides an exegetical hook for the story which is not provided by Rabbi Yose. Rabbi Yose does not attempt to justify his explanation with any reference to scripture, but further on in Genesis Rabbah, this same account of God's behavior is offered in the context of an interpretation of Genesis 2:23. When Adam sees Eve newly created, he exclaims, "This time, bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi explains that Adam says "this time," because God's first attempt to create a helpmeet for him was foiled when he saw her in the process of creation. Here, as in the first matrona story we considered above, Genesis Rabbah might have preserved the exegetical traditions from which the matrona narrative was constructed, though there is no way this can be decisively determined. A tradition in p. Megillah 2b which describes the pitfalls of betrothed couples before they are married might also be seen as a building-block of this matrona

blood woman with a distinctive personal history fills in the broad outlines of her characterization as a generic female.

Subtle sexual tension ripples through the entire story but comes to a head with the matrona's final pronouncement of her own beauty. It is Rabbi Yose who first sets a somewhat flirtatious tone for the exchange when he speaks to a woman in terms so complimentary to women. While the analogy he provides speaks of Adam's appreciation for Eve, he initially makes no suggestion that Eve's value has anything to do with her sexuality or physical appearance. In his second comment though, the description of Adam's repulsion from the first Eve clearly hints at Adam's attraction to the second Eve. Rabbi Yose here shifts the conversation from a discussion of relations between man and woman in general to a discussion of sexual attraction. As suggestive as Rabbi Yose's comments are, however, his responses refer exclusively to relations between Adam and Eve. In making a reference to her own sexual history, and to her own beauty, the matrona moves the conversation to an even more intimate level. Her final words show her yielding to the arguments of Yose the rabbi, even as she invites and challenges Yose the man to take note of her beauty. In a sense, the matrona and Rabbi Yose can be seen as acting out the dance of attraction and repulsion which Rabbi Yose attributes to Adam and Eve.

Gender surfaces as a central preoccupation of this story in another way as well. For while the account of Eve's creation and introduction to Adam recapitulated by the matrona and Rabbi Yose is a story of romantic love

between the sexes, it is also the story of a birth. The description of the first Eve as full of "blood and mucous" is reminiscent of images of menstruation and childbirth. Adam is repulsed by a vision of such incipient life, and distances himself from the first Eve. Though he squirms when forced to confront Eve's insides, when Eve's bloody formation is concealed from him, he is attracted to the finished product. The story thus identifies women's bodies with a raw physicality that men would rather avoid. By identifying women with the physical and at the same time calling attention to differences between the genders, the story encourages male readers to avoid confronting their own embodied natures.

Anxiety about women's bodies surfaces in several traditions within Genesis Rabbah in close proximity to this matrona story: for instance, Genesis Rabbah 17:8 (pp. 158-160) contrasts women's fleshliness to men's earthiness in tracing women's odor, voices, and character to the fact that they were created from Adam's bone. Throughout this tradition, women are compared to meat. Genesis Rabbah 18:2 (pp. 162-163) surveys the frailties of woman's morality, associating each weakness with a particular body part. Through the process of analyzing women's characters, this midrash dismembers women's bodies. These two traditions which follow on the heels of our matrona story make explicit the subtle implications of Rabbi Yose's comments--that from a male perspective, women's physicality is their liability.

We have seen that though this matrona dialogue opens with a question of theological significance, discussion of the nature of God quickly gives way to discussion of the nature of woman. This insight will serve my larger attempt to discern an organizing principle which governs Genesis Rabbah's portrayal of the matrona. As we saw in Chapter I, all previous studies of the matrona have concentrated their efforts on an attempt to identify the religious or philosophical perspective the matrona represents. In doing so, they have focused predominantly on the questions with which she opens her dialogues, and given little attention to issues which emerge later in the stories. My analysis of this story suggests that by neglecting to consider the story as a whole, one fails to recognize what emerges as the central concern of the story, relations between the sexes. While the matrona's initial question about God's character reflects her identity as an outsider to Judaism, as the story proceeds it gives far more attention to her characterization as a woman than to her religious perspective.

This story's attention to multiple aspects of the matrona's identity makes it much richer as a narrative than those dialogues between sages and non-Jews in which the characters are little more than mouthpieces for contesting religious ideologies. The story illustrates the interplay between the matrona's identity as a non-Jew and her identity as a woman. Here, the matrona's gender is central to the story's narrative tension, and also to its themes. It remains to be seen whether other matrona stories in Genesis

Rabbah will highlight the matrona's gender as a feature distinguishing her from other non-Jewish figures in dialogue with sages.

Story #3 – Genesis Rabbah 25:1 (p. 239)

A matrona questioned Rabbi Yose. She said to him¹²: "We do not find any death stated in relation to Enoch!" He said to her: "If it said, 'And Enoch walked with God,' (Gen. 5:24) and was then silent, I would say as you do, but it says, 'And he was not, for God took him' (Gen 5:24) meaning he was not in *this world* because God took him."

This story is the shortest matrona story we have seen. Consisting as it does of just one short line of exposition followed by one question and one answer, it is questionable whether it should even be classified as a full-fledged narrative. Nevertheless, it contains the formal traits of the other dialogues between sages and others, opening as it does with a question put to a sage by an outsider. Here, as in the six other Genesis Rabbah dialogues featuring the matrona, she appears together with Rabbi Yose.

Since each character only speaks once, it is difficult to expand much on their characterization. From the way in which the rabbi responds to the matrona's question, it seems her query is a valid one. While the conclusion which the matrona reached about Enoch's immortality was wrong, Rabbi Yose recognizes that it was a conclusion rooted in the reading of scripture. His response both credits her exegetical abilities, and demonstrates how a more

¹² This phrase is missing in the London manuscript (Add. 27169) on which the Theodor-Albeck edition relies primarily, but it is present in Vatican 30 which scholars generally consider the best version of GR. (For a brief account of the relative merits of the different manuscripts, see Strack and Stemberger, 2011). In transmitting this story, I follow Vatican 30 throughout.

careful reading leads to a preferred conclusion. The short conversation reads as a respectful intellectual exchange.

From the story itself, it is difficult to understand what import the question of Enoch's death might have for the characters. The very appearance of the question in the context of an exchange across a religious and social boundary would suggest that the question of Enoch's end has some polemical significance. This impression is strengthened by the context in which the story appears. Immediately preceding the matrona dialogue in the text of Genesis Rabbah, the following story appears:

The heretics questioned Rabbi Abbahu. They said to him: "We do not find any death stated in relation to Enoch!" He said to them: "How so?" They said to him: "It says here (of Enoch's end) 'taking,' and it says of Elijah (who did not die) 'taking.'" He said to them: "If you are expounding upon the word 'taking,' it says here (of Enoch) 'taking' and it says in Ezekiel (in a context clearly describing death), 'Here I take the beloved, and so on,' (Ez 24:16) Rabbi Tanhuma said: "He answered them well."

Several elements of this story contribute to its polemical overtones. First, and most obviously, the very identification of the interlocutors as "heretics" directs the audience to find something heretical in their claim. Second, the entire exchange has a confrontational tone. In contrast to Rabbi Yose, who immediately surmises the scriptural basis for the matrona's question, here Rabbi Abbahu demands that the heretics justify their question. Rather than acknowledging any value to their question, he takes their argument as a challenge to match his interpretive wits against theirs, and sets out to beat

them at their own game. Finally, the closing statement of Rabbi Tanhuma's approval lends a gravity to the whole dialogue, suggesting that the outcome of the dispute has implications not only for its participants, but for the broader rabbinic community as well. While none of these elements is present in the *matrona* story itself, the fact that the same question which the *matrona* asks is treated as a serious heretical challenge in the story immediately preceding gives the *matrona*'s query a sharpness that it probably would not have in another redactional context.

Scholars have accounted for the religious import of Enoch's death in different ways. Ilan, Gershonzon and Slomovic, and Herr all acknowledge that accounts of Enoch's immortality which are so prevalent during the Second Temple Period were of special significance to early Christians who saw Enoch's story as prefiguring Jesus. Herr thus identifies the *matrona*'s question as reflecting Christian influence.¹³ Bohl however points out that during the time when Rabbi Yose lived, Enoch had not yet become a prominent figure within Christianity, and this leads him to conclude that in the context of our *matrona* story, the question about Enoch's end represents a heretical circle within Judaism.¹⁴ Bohl's argument serves Ilan's thesis that the *matrona* is Jewish.¹⁵ Like Ilan, Gershonzon and Slomovic's consideration of this story is conditioned by their broader thesis about the *matrona*'s religious identity; they point to sources which indicate that Enoch was a central figure

in Gnosticism, and present this story as an example of the *matrona*'s Gnostic loyalties.¹⁶

Despite the diversity of opinion regarding the particular sect which the *matrona* might represent, all previous studies have recognized that in this story the *matrona* speaks as a religious outsider to rabbinic Judaism. The specific viewpoint she represents diminishes in importance once we recognize that her primary function in this story is to dramatize a point of contention between the rabbis and their religious opponents. The very difficulty scholars have in fixing her in history most likely reflects the fact that she is not a historical figure, but a generic character constructed by the rabbis to serve their rhetorical aims. While in the last *matrona* story we read (GR 17:7), the *matrona*'s gender identity came to eclipse her status as religious disputant as the story progressed, in this story, the *matrona*'s gender does not come into play. As in the first *matrona* story we looked at (GR 1:7), the *matrona* is here characterized as an intellectually gifted religious opponent.

The fact that this *matrona* story has such a close parallel in the adjacent story of Rabbi Abbahu and the *minim* raises questions about the relationship between the two stories. While Rabbi Yose lived in an earlier period than Rabbi Abbahu, there is no reason to conclude that the story about Rabbi Yose was composed any earlier than the story of Rabbi Abbahu. The fact that both Rabbi Abbahu and the *minim* and Rabbi Yose and the *matrona* appear in other aggadic stories suggests that both pairings were tropes available to

¹³ Herr, 147.

¹⁴ Bohl, 44-47.

¹⁵ Ilan 1997, 251.

¹⁶ Gershonzon and Slomovic, 35.

rabbinic storytellers.¹⁷ Both formulae have the rhetorical effect of indicating that belief in Enoch's immortality is unfounded in scripture and contrary to rabbinic views. The similarity between the two stories makes it all the more difficult to identify anything in the matrona's portrayal which distinguishes her from other outsiders featured in other dialogues with sages. In this story, the matrona is little more than a mouthpiece for heretical views.

Story #4: Genesis Rabbah 63:8 (p. 688)

A matrona asked Rabbi Yose bar Halafta: "Why did Esau emerge first?"

He said to her: "The first drop was Jacob's." He said to her: "A parable. If you put two pearls in a tube, is it not the first one you put in that emerges last? So too, the first drop was that of Jacob."¹⁸

Like the matrona story above, this story consists of only one exchange between the matrona and Rabbi Yose. Nevertheless, it exploits many of the conventional features we have identified in dialogue stories. As is typical of dialogues, it opens with a question put to a sage by an outsider. As in the first matrona story we looked at, an analogy drawn from everyday life plays a decisive role in the argumentation. Despite its brevity, this story develops two aspects of the matrona's social role—her identity as a Roman, and as a woman.

The matrona's question reveals her identification with Rome. She refers to the story of Jacob and Esau's birth in Genesis 25:25-26, a story which is understood throughout this portion of Genesis Rabbah and in the aggadic

¹⁷ For a review of stories featuring Rabbi Abbahu and the minim, see Lachs

¹⁸ For a later parallel to this story, see Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 25:25.

literature generally as prefiguring the competition between the nations of Israel and Rome. While commentary on Jacob and Esau's relationship provides the context for a great many stories of confrontations between sages and Romans in Genesis Rabbah, this is one of just two examples where the Jacob and Esau story is discussed explicitly within the dialogue.¹⁹ The matrona's reference to Esau's status as first-born can be read as a defense of Rome's domination of Israel.²⁰ She suggests that despite Jacob's privileged place in the Hebrew Bible, the primacy of Rome is an expression of Esau's natural rights as first-born.²¹

The question which the matrona asks appears independently in Genesis Rabbah, in close proximity to the matrona's story. Immediately preceding the matrona story, the question of why Esau issued before Jacob is asked anonymously. In this context, Rabbi Abbahu provides an answer: as the first twin, Esau carried all the foulness of the womb out with him,²² allowing Jacob to be born in a purer state. In a parable, Rabbi Abbahu compares Esau with a bath attendant cleaning out a bathtub in preparation for a prince. According to Rabbi Abbahu, Esau was making way for Jacob. The fact that

¹⁹ The other example is in this same section of Genesis Rabbah. A Roman prefect asks a Jew which empire will follow Rome, and the Jew points to the verse at hand, Genesis 25:25. Just as Jacob followed Esau, so will Israel follow Rome.

²⁰ The polemical tone of the matrona's query comes through more strongly in the Midrash HaGadol parallel, where the matrona demands: "Do you (pl.) not say that Jacob was the beloved one? Why then did Esau issue first?"

²¹ This reading follows Bohl, 55-57. Bohl entertains, then dismisses the possibility that the matrona's question reflects Christian interest in Esau. Herr is skeptical that Esau here refers to Rome, and like Gershenson and Slomovic understands the story as akin to Gnostic attempts to undermine the legitimacy of Jewish biblical heroes. See Herr, 147, and Gershenson and Slomovic, 32. The identification of Esau with Rome strikes me as the interpretation most in keeping with the story's redactional context in Genesis Rabbah, where Esau is consistently identified with the "wicked empire."

Jacob is second-born does not compromise his spiritual primacy; it confirms it.

Within the narrative context of the *matrona* story, Rabbi Yose provides an alternative explanation for Jacob and Esau's birth order. Unlike Rabbi Abbahu, he does not attempt to challenge the privileges of primogeniture. He assents to the *matrona*'s unspoken assumption, that the eldest son should dominate. The novelty of his answer is his argument that twins should be ranked according to the order of their conception rather than their order of birth. According to this criterion, the second-born Jacob has the privilege of being first-conceived. Rather than countering the *matrona*'s argument from biology, Rabbi Yose extends it. Is his argument sincere? Given that the principle of primogeniture is consistently reversed throughout the Genesis stories, it is surprising that Rabbi Yose would feel obliged to affirm it in this instance. Nevertheless, as a local comment, on Jacob and Esau in particular, his argument works, and the midrash is a collection of local interpretations.

It is also possible that Rabbi Yose's answer should not be taken as a sincere belief, but rather as a more tactical response to the *matrona*'s attack. The midrash directly preceding this *matrona* story indicates that the framer of this story could have provided Rabbi Yose with another response. When we compare Rabbi Abbahu's response to that of Rabbi Yose, the answer which Rabbi Yose provides seems considerably more appropriate to share with a Roman woman. Rabbi Abbahu's description of childbirth as foul could be taken as misogynistic, and his association of the infant Esau with the

impurities of childbirth would seem offensive to anyone identifying with Esau. If Rabbi Yose had adopted this response to the *matrona*'s question, it is easy to imagine an escalation of tension in their confrontation. Instead, his character is provided with a response which betrays no animus toward women or non-Jews, but rather builds his argument upon assumptions shared by the *matrona*--that biological privilege does matter. The story closes with Rabbi Yose's response, suggesting that his words effectively persuade the *matrona*. Rabbi Abbahu's interpretation thus provides a counter-text which can help us appreciate the rhetorical virtuosity of Rabbi Yose's character.

One of our tasks in this chapter is to consider how the character of the *matrona* is distinguished from other interlocutors who appear in dialogue with sages in *Genesis Rabbah*. As we have seen, in this story, the *matrona* speaks primarily as a Roman--her challenge could have just as appropriately been voiced by a Roman citizen or emperor. However, as the story unfolds, Rabbi Yose's response seems conditioned by the *matrona*'s gender. In basing his argument upon the mechanics of conception and childbirth, he appeals to the *matrona*'s intimate knowledge of these realms in her roles as woman. This is not to say that Rabbi Yose's reference to childbirth is in any way out of place given the context in which this story appears in *Genesis Rabbah*. The verses under discussion in *Genesis Rabbah* are themselves a description of a birth. Perhaps it is the exegetical context within Genesis, with its discussion of an issue of special interest to women--childbirth--which generated the choice of a female character for this dialogue story.

This is the second story we have seen in which Rabbi Yose's response to the *matrona* includes references to childbirth. In story #2 above, vivid descriptions of blood and mucous were evocative of childbirth. In this story, the language is much more clinical, as the rabbi compares drops of sperm entering a womb to pearls dropped into a tube. Though Rabbi Yose's descriptions of conception and birth are here explicit, they betray none of the anxiety or disgust that we sensed in story #2 (or in Rabbi Abbahu's adjacent comments). Yet for all the contrasts in tone and length between this story and the *matrona* story about Eve's creation, there is a striking similarity between them. Both stories appear in connection with biblical accounts of special interest to women: in the case of story #2, the story of Eve's creation; and here, the story of a birth. In each story, the *matrona* asks a question which reflects her identity as an outsider to Judaism; in each story, the rabbi's response speaks to her identity as a woman. The *matrona*'s questions call attention to confessional and national differences which distinguish her from the rabbi. Rabbi Yose's discussion of the universal phenomena of sex and childbirth allows him to speak across these boundaries, even as he brings another social boundary—gender difference—into sharp relief.

Story #5: Genesis Rabbah 68:4 (pp. 771-773)²²

²²This story presents a challenge because its original form is difficult to determine. Contributing to the challenge is the fact that there is significant variation among the various manuscript traditions. The London manuscript Add 27169, on which Theodor-Albeck generally relies, lacks Rabbi Yose's final response. The absence seems an omission, since without it the story never connects back up with Psalms 68:7, which functions as a *petihta* verse for this section. While Vatican 30 and Vatican 68 are generally useful in filling in gaps in the London ms, in this

Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi Simon expounded, "God sets the solitary at home, etc." (Psalms 68:7)
A *matrona* questioned Rabbi Yose bar Halafta.
She said to him: "In how many days did the Holy One Blessed Be He create His world?"
He said to her: "In six days."
She said to him: "And since that time with what has He been occupied?"
He said to her: "He sits and makes matches, man to woman, and woman to man."
She said to him: "If that's all, I can match 100 manservants to 100 maidservants in one night!"
She went and matched 100 manservants to 100 maidservants in one night. They stood and beat one another, and injured one another, this one saying, "I won't take her," and that one saying, "I won't take him."
He (Rabbi Yose) said to her: "This thing which you take so lightly is as difficult for the Holy One Blessed Be He as splitting the Red Sea. As it is written, 'Setting the lonely at home' is like 'freeing those imprisoned. . .'" (Psalms 68:7)
Rabbi Berchiah said: In this language did he answer her: "He sits and makes ladders, raising this one up, and lowering that one down, as it is written, 'For God is Judge, humbling this one and exalting that one.'" (Psalms 75:8)²³

instance, they both present special challenges. In Vatican 30, the *matrona*'s question is immediately followed by the term "*Gersha Ki Tisa*." As pointed out by Sokoloff (1982, p. 45-46), this is a technical term referring the reader to *Pesikta deRav Kahana*, *Parashat Ki Tisa*. Sokoloff notes that the scribe of Vatican 60 also makes reference to *Pesikta*. Indeed, this *matrona* story does appear in PRK Ki Tisa 4, in a version which we will look at more closely in Chapter IV. However, the PRK version is considerably longer than any versions of the story represented in other GR manuscripts; it likely includes expansions which are not original to GR, and so cannot be seen as bearing on the version of GR on which the scribes of Vat. 30 or Vat. 60 based their manuscripts. However, Vatican 30 does provide some important assistance in a marginal note which provides a full version of the story. This note is written in a different hand from that of the scribe—evidently a later reader sought to compensate for the original scribe's restraint. While there is no way to date the marginal note, a couple factors suggest that it might shed light on the original version of the story: it lacks the narrative expansions of PRK, but it does include the words of Rabbi Yose which make the connection with the *petihta* verse explicit. (Perhaps this is why the eclectic rendering of the story presented by Theodor-Albeck conforms so closely to this note.) I have therefore chosen to use the Vatican 30 text as filled out by the marginal note as the basis for my translation and treatment of the story. While Ilan (1997, 252-253) is aware of the existence of this marginal note, her citations of both the scribe's version and of the marginal note seriously misrepresent the evidence. She seems unaware of the scribe's technical reference to PRK.

²³ There are multiple parallels to this story in later midrashic works, including LR 8:1, p. 164-166; PRK Ki Tisa 4, p. 18-19; Tan Ki Tisa 5; Tan Matot 6; Tan BaMidbar 16; Tan Vayishlah 10; TanB Matot 9; TanB BaMidbar 18; Numbers Rabbah BaMidbar 3:6; Midrash Samuel 5:13.

Here, the matrona's initial question seems surprisingly uninformed, and it is only when she voices her second question that we realize how she has set Rabbi Yose up for a conversation much more profound than a simple review of the Genesis narrative. Her question is deeply theological: what is God's role in the world, beyond that of Creator? Both Herr and Bohl have read this question as a reflection of the Epicurean view that following creation, God absented Himself from the world.²⁴ The matrona's veiled suggestion that God's work ended in the first week of creation is a challenge to the rabbinic notion of Providence.

As a response to the matrona's trenchant attack on rabbinic theology, Rabbi Yose's portrayal of God as matchmaker is striking; in part because it seems arbitrary, but also because it seems so tame. It is jarring to imagine the Creator of the heavens and the earth settling in to such a domestic pursuit as arranging marriages. Here, as in Stories #2 and #4 above, the matrona voices a far-reaching challenge to rabbinic theology, and Rabbi Yose answers her with a response which seems tailored to her gender. Surely, a rabbinic figure such as Rabbi Yose could have comfortably argued that God's providence extends into other aspects of human experience—agriculture, health, livelihood, war. Rabbi Yose's character here focuses in on a realm of human activity which has special relevance to women—matchmaking. Presumably, since women were so much more vulnerable in marriage than men, this was seen as a response which would persuade the rabbi's female interlocutor of

God's continuing relevance and power. In this story, as in others we have seen, the matrona's self-identification as an outsider to Judaism becomes eclipsed by Rabbi Yose's attention to her gender.

In our consideration of other matrona stories, we have noted that Genesis Rabbah sometimes provides an alternative answer to the matrona's question which can be treated as a counter-text. In this instance, the alternative provided is itself inserted into the context of the dialogue between the matrona and Rabbi Yose, as Rabbi Berchiah presents an alternative version of Rabbi Yose's response. The response with which Rabbi Berchiah would have Rabbi Yose answer the matrona speaks much more directly to the theological challenge which the matrona levels against the rabbinic concept of Providence. In Rabbi Berchiah's version, Rabbi Yose defends the notion of Providence in the most general terms. Rather than limiting God's actions to the making of marriages, he retorts that God busies Himself with rewarding and punishing each individual human being. This alternative response to the matrona's question contrasts with the portrayal of God as matchmaker in that it attends exclusively to the content of the question and does not engage the matrona's gender. The observation that Rabbi Berchiah's version would have been just as effective a retort to any religious disputant helps us appreciate the degree to which the first version of the story is shaped with a view to the matrona's concerns as a woman.

I noted above that the other two matrona stories which highlight the matrona's gender identity occur within broader treatments of biblical stories

²⁴ Bohl, 36-38; Herr, 147.

of special concern to women. The same can be said of this matrona story, which appears in the context of a petihta introducing the story of Jacob's departure from Be'er Sheva (Genesis 28:10) on the journey which will take him to his future wives, Rachel and Leah. This petihta is the fourth in a series of four proems which develop the theme of matchmaking. Within this context, Rabbi Yose's portrayal of God as matchmaker can be seen as advancing the themes of the broader section of Genesis Rabbah. Here, as in matrona stories #2 and #4, the appearance of a woman interlocutor—the matrona—corresponds to Genesis Rabbah's treatment of issues of special concern to women.

While it is Rabbi Yose's words which serve to focus the reader in on the matrona's gender, as the story continues, the matrona's words and actions call attention to another aspect of her identity—her social class. As in stories #1 and #2, this narrative portrays the matrona as a persistent disputant who won't be easily turned away. But this story diverges from other matrona stories we have seen in presenting action which occurs outside the dialogue. Here the matrona does more than oppose Rabbi Yose with clever argument; she attempts to demonstrate the folly of Rabbi Yose's theology by herself playing God. The great number of slaves the matrona possesses, and the ~~domesticating way in which she treats them~~, emphasize the social power ~~associated with the matrona's aristocratic status~~. In asserting her power as ~~the matrona~~, the matrona can be seen as resisting Rabbi Yose's attempt to ~~pose a theological challenge~~. In this story, as in stories #2 and #4,

Rabbi Yose's appeal to the matrona's gender can be seen as an attempt to replace a social hierarchy which privileges the matrona—the hierarchy of gentile over Jew—with a gendered hierarchy which recognizes Yose's own superiority as a male. In this instance, the matrona responds in kind by asserting the power which attends her position as a member of the upper classes.

While this story is exceptional in that it portrays the matrona acting out her rebuttal of Rabbi Yose's argument, the story ultimately serves the same rhetorical function as other dialogue-stories. When her matchmaking schemes crumble, the matrona presumably comes to recognize the wisdom of Rabbi Yose's response, and of rabbinic Judaism as a whole. While the matrona's ultimate submission is only implicit here, it becomes explicit in later re-workings of the story. In Leviticus Rabbah 8:1, and in Pesikta deRav Kahana Ki Tisa 4, the matrona returns to Rabbi Yose after her bungled matchmaking attempt and proclaims to him that his God is unsurpassed by other gods, and that the Torah is true and beautiful. This about-face on the matrona's part makes explicit the subtle message encoded in all dialogue-stories—despite the challenges voiced by non-Jewish interlocutors, the views of the sages are demonstrated to be true.

The petihta verse with which the Genesis Rabbah story closes rewards Rabbi Yose with the last word. Rabbi Yose's retort, "This thing which you take so lightly is as difficult for the Holy One Blessed Be He as splitting the Red Sea," is an ingenious reading of the verse from Psalms. The rabbi reads the

two activities mentioned in the verse—"setting the solitary at home," and "freeing the imprisoned"—as equivalent, and concludes that the first, which he understands as a reference to matchmaking, is thus to be considered a challenge as great as God's most famous act of liberation—the splitting of the Red Sea. While this proof-text for God's occupation as matchmaker is a fitting close to the story, Rabbi Yose's statement seems somewhat out of place here, since the *matrona* has already been forced to recognize her mistake. The longer version of this story in *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta DeRav Kahana* corrects this incongruity by inserting Rabbi Yose's statement immediately after the *matrona* announces her plans to make her matches, but before her failure in doing so. This change allows the Rabbi Yose of *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta deRav Kahana* to respond to the *matrona*'s failed schemes with the statement, "I told you so."²⁵

The dialogue which *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta deRav Kahana* add to the story serves to heighten the drama of the most dramatic *matrona* story in *Genesis Rabbah*. It is likely the flamboyance of the *matrona*'s characterization in this story which makes this story so popular among later compilers of *midrash*. In other *Genesis Rabbah* stories, the *matrona* is an intelligent and thoughtful debater. Here, she is re-imagined as a haughty and headstrong woman who argues with actions rather than words. In other *matrona* stories, the confrontations between Rabbi Yose and the *matrona* are contests of words and ideas. Though both characters make analogies to real

²⁵ The additional material from *Leviticus Rabbah* appears in some versions of *Genesis Rabbah*

life, it is sufficient for them to ask their sparring partner to *imagine* an analogous situation. In this story, the contest leaves the realm of words as the *matrona* acts out an analogy. As she imposes her experiment on her servants, social power and brute force impinge upon the intellectual exchange which generally characterize her meetings with Rabbi Yose. This story, like *matrona* stories #2 and #4 above, draws on conventional views about women in highlighting the concerns which distinguish the *matrona* as a female character. It also develops the *matrona*'s patrician status, presenting her as a power-hungry aristocrat. The portrayal of the *matrona* which emerges is little more than a caricature. The *matrona* is transformed into a stereotypical shrew, and hence, into an object of ridicule.

Story #6: *Genesis Rabbah* 84:21 (p. 1027)

A *matrona* questioned Rabbi Yose. She said to him: "It is written that 'Judah prevailed over his brothers,' (1 Chron. 5:2) and that, 'Judah was comforted.' (Gen. 38:12) And yet he that was the father of them all—'He refused to be comforted!' (Gen. 37:35)" He said to her: "One can be comforted for the dead, but not for the living."²⁶

Like stories #3 and #4 above, this *matrona* story consists of only one round of dialogue. Here, the *matrona* poses what is arguably her most involved question, constructing her challenge out of the juxtaposition of three separate scriptural verses. She points out that though Jacob's son Judah

as well, most notably the Venice printed addition.

²⁶ Parallels to this tradition are *Midrash HaGadol* on *Genesis* 37:35; and a story featuring a heretic in *TanB* *Yayeshev* 8.

found comfort after the death of his wife (Gen. 38:12), Jacob himself was inconsolable when he was told that his son Joseph had died (Gen. 37:35). This question can be compared to the matrona's challenge in story #4 in that it attacks the founding father of the Israelite nation.

How can we characterize the matrona's charge against Jacob? It is possible that she speaks here, as in story #4, as a Roman woman and that her interest in Jacob stems from his status as the eponymous ancestor of the Israelite nation. Her accusation that Jacob lacked emotional strength implies that the nation which he founded is a weak people. It is likely however that the matrona's challenge is not aimed at Jacob's emotional state, but at a more profound religious concept. The matrona might here be suggesting that Jacob's inconsolable grief reflects his doubts that he will ever see Joseph again. Had Jacob had a stronger faith in the afterlife, he would have taken news of Joseph's death more calmly. While this possibility is only speculative within the context of our story, it is clearly expressed in a Tanhuma Buber parallel to this story where a certain heretic says of Jacob, "Had he been convinced that the dead would be resurrected, would he have refused to be comforted?"²⁷ The heretic's challenge is clearly theological—he refers to Jacob's behavior as evidence that the rabbinic faith in resurrection is unfounded. If this is the case for the matrona, the challenge she poses to Rabbi Yose is a theological one, as in stories #1, #2, and #5 above.²⁸

²⁷ TanB Vayeshev 8.

²⁸ Other studies identify the significance of her question differently. Bohl understands the matrona's accusation as a simple charge of Jacob's emotional weakness. He explains the matrona's concern with his failure to master his emotions as evidence of Stoic influences, 34-36.

Rabbi Yose's response does not engage the matrona on a theological level, but simply turns her question on its head. The matrona indicates that Jacob is emotionally weak. Rabbi Yose counters that Jacob's inordinate grief is but evidence of his wisdom and prescience. Had Joseph's death been a normal one, Jacob would have grieved for a time and then been comforted, as was Judah after his period of mourning. But according to Rabbi Yose, Jacob sensed that Joseph was not really dead, and so his grief could not proceed normally. Following this answer, the matrona does not persist with further questions, and the story ends.

Here, the challenge voiced by the matrona expresses either her national identity, or her religious identity as an outsider to Judaism. Her gender and her social class play no role in either her question or in Rabbi Yose's response.

Story #7: Genesis Rabbah 87:6 (pp. 1070-1071)

A matrona asked Rabbi Yose: "Is it possible that at seventeen years of age Joseph could have withstood all his passion and done this thing?"

He presented her with the Book of Genesis and began reading the incident of Reuben and Judah.

He said to her: "If Scripture did not cover up the activities of these two, who were grown and in their father's house, how much more would this be so for Joseph, who was young and on his own."²⁹

Gershenson and Slomovic explain the question as an instance of the Gnostic practice of denigrating figures whom Judaism exalts, 33. Herr similarly identifies the question with Gnosticism, 147.

²⁹ For two parallels to this story see Midrash HaGadol on Genesis 39:10.

The matrona's question here refers to the biblical account of how Joseph refused to be seduced by Potiphar's wife (Gen 39:10). The matrona is skeptical that the young Joseph could have resisted such sexual temptation. Her challenge could be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, it might be an attack on the virtue of a biblical hero, similar to the charge of Jacob's emotional weakness in story #6 above. This is the view of scholars such as Gershonson and Slomovic and Herr, who identify the question with Gnostic attacks on biblical figures.³⁰ The progression of the story itself suggests however that the matrona's challenge is much more far-reaching. From Rabbi Yose's response, it seems that he understands the matrona to be challenging the veracity of scripture.³¹

This story diverges from most matrona stories we have seen in that the matrona's charge generates an action on Rabbi Yose's part—he reads to her the biblical stories of Reuben's sexual relations with his father's concubine Bilhah (Gen 35:22) and Judah's relations with his daughter-in-law Tamar (Gen 38), and only then articulates his argument. According to Rabbi Yose, Reuben and Judah's sexual transgressions were much more grievous sins than Joseph's sleeping with Potiphar's wife would have been. The fact that the Torah provides reports Reuben and Judah's misconduct demonstrates that it did not censor accounts of biblical heroes' sexual sins. The Torah's report of Joseph's

³⁰ Gershonson and Slomovic, 34; Herr, 147.

³¹ This challenge is made explicit in the second Midrash HaGadol parallel, in which the matrona proclaims, "There is a law in your Torah, for Joseph lay with his mistress and you covered it up." Midrash Tanhuma on Gen 39:10.

abstinence can thus be trusted as a faithful presentation of what really occurred.

From the forcefulness of Rabbi Yose's response (a response that presumably silences the matrona, since it ends the story), one would not suspect that the matrona's suspicions of Joseph's virtue are shared by sages throughout the pages of this very chapter of *Genesis Rabbah*. Two alternative interpretations of Joseph's actions run through this chapter of *Genesis Rabbah*, and surface again in *Genesis Rabbah* chapter 97, where Jacob's blessing for Joseph is treated (Gen 49:22). While some rabbinic traditions stress Joseph's virtue in resisting the seductions of Potiphar's wife, others portray Joseph as initially succumbing to his passion, but escaping sin at the last moment.³²

Among those traditions which call Joseph's virtue into question is the comment in GR 87:3 which suggests that Joseph brought Mrs. Potiphar's seduction upon himself when he paid such inordinate attention to his physical appearance, pencilling his eyes and coiffing his hair. The next section of *Genesis Rabbah* suggests that Joseph invited the trial of Mrs. Potiphar when he smugly reflected on his good fortune in Potiphar's house, or when he mused that he had escaped the tests which God had set before his father and grandfather. The most explicit statements that Joseph found Potiphar's wife difficult to resist can be found immediately following the matrona story:

³² These *Genesis Rabbah* traditions, along with their parallels in Second Temple, rabbinic, and Islamic literatures are treated at length in the first part of Kugel 1990.

"And it happened on a certain day, when he went into the house to do his work." (Gen. 39:11)

Rabbi Judah said: It was the day of an idolatrous feast for the Nile, and all went to watch, but he went home to do his master's accounts.

Rabbi Nehemiah said: It was a day of theater, and all went to watch, but he went home to do his master's accounts.

Rabbi Samuel Bar Nachman said: "To do his work,"—just so, except that "there was no man!" (Gen. 39:11) He checked but did not find himself a man.

As Rabbi Samuel said: The bow stretched tight and then snapped back, as it is written: "Then his bow returned in strength, etc." (Gen. 49:24)

Rabbi Isaac said: His seed scattered and emerged through his fingernails— "And the arms of his hands were made supple." (Gen. 49:24)

Rav Huna said in the name of Rav Mattna: He saw his father's visage and his blood cooled— "From the hands of the mighty one of Jacob, from there, a Shepherd, the Rock of Israel." (Gen. 49:24) Who did this? "From the God of your father who helped you." (Gen. 49:25)

(Genesis Rabbah 87:6, pp. 1071-1073)

Here, though Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah defend Joseph's honor, contrasting his behavior with the immoral activities of local Egyptians, the other rabbis cited all call Joseph's virtue into question. These rabbis anchor their suspicions of Joseph in interpretations of two different sets of verses: the immediate exegetical context of Genesis 39, and the words with which Jacob blessed Joseph, in Genesis 49.

Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman identifies two double entendres in Genesis 39:11. The entire verse literally reads: "And it happened on a certain day that he came to the house to do his work, and no man from the men of the house were there in the house." Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman's first exegetical move is to part from his colleagues and to imply that "the work" which Joseph went inside to do had nothing to do with accounting but was of

a more intimate nature. He suggests that Joseph actually sought out Potiphar's wife. However, upon entering the house, Joseph found "no man." Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman here dispenses with the continuation of the verse and reads "no man" as a reference to Joseph himself. While Joseph went home intent on having sex with Potiphar's wife, once there he found himself unable to perform "as a man."³³ The image of Joseph failing to achieve an erection is made even more explicit in the reference to Joseph's "bow" relaxing. This image is drawn from Jacob's blessing, which describes Joseph's bow returning to strength in Gen. 49:24. Rabbi Samuel intuits: If Joseph's bow had to *return* to strength, there must have been a time when he had lost his virility.

The Genesis Rabbah passage proceeds to interpret each phrase of Jacob's blessing in terms of Joseph's thwarted sexual encounter with Potiphar's wife.³⁴ Through a word-play, Rabbi Isaac reads the phrase *Vayifozu zero'ei yadav* — "And the arms of his hands were made supple" (Gen. 49:24) as *Vayifazer zar'o yadav* — "And his seed scattered (through) his hands." While at first this calls to mind an image of the young Joseph masturbating, it is more likely an explanation of the mechanism by which Joseph's passions were reined in—Joseph's virility seeped through his fingernails, and his virtue was saved. Rav Huna interprets the next scriptural phrase with its mention of Jacob to mean that it was Jacob's image which made Joseph

³³ This is the reading proposed by Albeck in his notes on page 1072.

³⁴ The passage has parallels in Genesis Rabbah chapter 97 (in the new numbering system) and 98, pages 1224 and 1270 in Theodor-Albeck.

overcome his passions. According to Rav Huna, it was God who caused Jacob's image to appear. Joseph's continence is thus the result of divine intervention rather than of Joseph's own righteousness.

While GR 87:4 presented Potiphar's wife's seduction as a trial sent by God to punish Joseph, the passage we just read credits God with saving Joseph from Mrs. Potiphar's clutches. Both these condemnations of Joseph can be contrasted with traditions such as GR 87:5 which present Joseph as a model of piety, maintaining his purity so that he can serve as a sacrifice to God if called upon like his grandfather. The fact that all these interpretations exist side by side in *Genesis Rabbah* makes Rabbi Yose's defense of Joseph's character all the more striking.

That Rabbi Yose should be portrayed as opposing the matrona's challenge is not surprising, given the matrona's role as religious disputant. While within a community of rabbis, interpretations of scripture which cast doubt on the young Joseph's piety can be appreciated as playful acts of exegetical virtuosity, when similar aspersions are cast by an outsider, they are much more threatening. While sages such as Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman root their attacks on Joseph's character in creative readings of Scripture, the matrona formulates her challenge as an attack on Scripture itself. As Rabbi Yose's response indicates, her question is more than an accusation against Joseph; it is a charge against the dependability of the scriptural account. In his role as defender of Judaism, Rabbi Yose has no choice but to oppose the matrona's challenge with the best argument he can formulate.

But while Rabbi Yose and the matrona's meeting represents a contest of two religious ideologies, it can also be read as an encounter between a man and a woman. There are stunning correspondences between the conditions of Rabbi Yose's conversation with the matrona, and the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife which provides the substance of their conversation. The *Genesis* story under discussion is an account of a meeting between a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman of the upper classes. The matrona story itself presents a meeting between a Jewish man and a non-Jewish aristocratic woman. The fact that the biblical Joseph is Rabbi Yose's namesake brings the two stories into even closer correspondence. In a sense, the meeting between Rabbi Yose and the matrona recapitulates the encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

The characters of the Joseph story act upon their sexual impulses, while the characters of the matrona story merely talk about sex, but sexual tension permeates the matrona story nonetheless. In the matrona story, it is the matrona who opens dialogue with the rabbi, forcing Rabbi Yose to take a defensive position. His vulnerability in this dialogue corresponds to the vulnerability of Joseph in the Bible. The matrona's characterization, with her brash discussion of sex, seems to have similarly absorbed elements of Mrs. Potiphar's personality. Before I noted that Rabbi Yose's production of a Bible departs from the regular form of matrona stories, which are generally straight dialogue. It is easy to imagine this rush of activity on Rabbi Yose's part as a nervous attempt to cover up the embarrassment caused by the matrona's

overtly sexual discussion. Rifling through Genesis, reading the stories of Joseph's brothers aloud, Rabbi Yose could avoid meeting the matrona's challenge directly. Thus Rabbi Yose, like his biblical namesake, escapes the sexual threat the matrona represents.

This is not the first story in which we have sensed sexual overtones in the matrona and Rabbi Yose's interaction. In story #2 above, the matrona's announcement of her own beauty seemed overtly flirtatious, especially within the context of a discussion of Adam's attraction to Eve. In both these stories, Rabbi Yose and the matrona can be seen as standing in for the biblical characters they discuss, be they Adam and Eve, or Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

This story, like stories #2, #4, and #5, is shaped by the matrona's identity as a woman. We noted in earlier examples that matrona stories which attend to the matrona's gender appear in exegetical contexts of special interest to women: stories of birth, sex or marriage. The same is true of this matrona story, presented as it is within a longer discussion of the character of Potiphar's wife and of Joseph's sexuality. Here, the parallels between the matrona and Potiphar's wife means that the matrona's social class as well as her gender identity come into play, as in story #5.

The Matrona and Rabbi Yose in Genesis Rabbah

I framed this chapter as an inquiry into the distinctive literary logic which informs Genesis Rabbah's portrayal of the matrona. Having reviewed each of the matrona's seven appearances, I can now point to some of the ways

in which the characterization of the matrona diverges from other interlocutors who engage in dialogue with sages in Genesis Rabbah.

We have seen that while the matrona always poses questions as an outsider to Judaism, her queries cover a wide variety of topics. In story #4 she speaks as a Roman, casting aspersions upon the founder of the Jewish nation. The same might be true of her discussion of Jacob's grief in story #6, although this could also be seen as a challenge to the rabbinic belief in an afterlife. In other stories, the matrona speaks as a religious disputant, attacking key rabbinic concepts such as God's morality (story #2), Providence (story #5), the veracity of the Torah (story #7). In story #1, her interest in the account of the creations of the second day seems purely exegetical. In story #3, her interest in Enoch might reflect sympathy with heretical circles within Judaism, or with early Christians. Given the breadth of her concerns, it is not surprising that previous studies have had such difficulty in identifying the matrona with any one religious sect. The one continuity which does emerge is that the matrona is consistently portrayed as representing challenges from *outside* Judaism (an observation which conflicts with Ilan's proposal that the matrona is Jewish).

The variety of the issues which the matrona represents is best accounted for when we understand her character as a literary construction, rather than as a figure who existed in history. Throughout Genesis Rabbah, she serves two related rhetorical functions: Her challenges to Judaism define the parameters of what are acceptable Jewish views, while her submission to Rabbi Yose demonstrates the truth and persuasiveness of these views. Of

course, in this there is little to distinguish the matrona from other disputants who challenge sages within Genesis Rabbah. While Antoninus consistently pursues issues of statecraft, and the philosopher pursues scientific endeavors, there is nothing distinctive about the concerns which the matrona represents which consistently sets her apart from heretics and other characters from Roman society.

This is not to say that there are no continuities in the matrona's characterization. As we have seen, she is consistently portrayed as an intelligent sparring partner. Her cleverness is evidenced by her incisive arguments, her formulation of complex biblical interpretations, and her readiness to submit to Rabbi Yose's persuasive argumentation. Her encounters with Rabbi Yose rarely leave the realm of intellectual exchange. While Rabbi Yose and the matrona always meet as contestants, their interactions seem governed by mutual respect, rather than by hate or derision.

Within these broad parameters, a more distinctive trend did emerge: Four out of the seven matrona stories appear in contexts within Genesis Rabbah where topics of special concern to women are being discussed. Thus, story #2 appears within a discussion of Eve's creation and of the nature of womanhood; story #4 accompanies discussion of how Jacob and Esau were born to Rebecca; story #6 introduces an account of Jacob's fateful meeting with Rachel; and story #7 appears among other musings about the nature of Joseph's relationship with Potiphar's wife. All these matrona stories are

shaped by the matrona's gender. Even when the question initially posed by the matrona does not betray any particularly feminine concerns, the response which Rabbi Yose offers takes her sensibilities as a woman into account. Thus, these stories revolve around issues of sexuality, marriage, and childbirth.

While there is thus no one principle governing the portrayal of the matrona in all seven stories, the majority of the matrona stories within Genesis Rabbah deal with issues of gender and sexuality. As we would expect, the matrona is more often than not distinguished from the other interlocutors of Genesis Rabbah by her concern with the experiences of women. These concerns are rarely expressed by the matrona herself, but they do emerge at some point within four out of seven stories.

The relationship between the four stories which explore the matrona's concerns as a woman and the three stories which give no attention to gender is open to speculation. Did the matrona's character originate as a figure with the particular function of presenting women's issues? Was this original rationale for her creation later forgotten when additional matrona stories developed alongside those dealing expressly with gender? Or did the matrona originate as a generic non-Jewish disputant? Perhaps she was indeed modelled on a prominent woman who existed in history, and her literary potential as a sounding board for women's concerns was only exploited later. There is no evidence which can help us account for how the matrona stories were first generated.

We have seen that in *Genesis Rabbah* the matrona is always portrayed as a non-Jew, often presented as having uniquely female concerns, and sometimes depicted in her role as an aristocrat. These observations will provide the backdrop for our consideration of what occurs to the matrona in other rabbinic works. In the next chapter, we will observe how in later midrashic collections, the matrona's identity as a woman is entirely eclipsed by her function as a religious disputant. While issues of sexuality and gender are central to four of *Genesis Rabbah*'s matrona stories, they do not emerge at all in later portrayals of the matrona's encounters with Rabbi Yose.

Chapter IV: The Afterlife of the Matrona and Rabbi Yose

The traditions of *Genesis Rabbah* provide the earliest meeting place for Rabbi Yose and the matrona, but *Genesis Rabbah* is by no means the only work in which the two appear together. In the last chapter, I noted that several of the *Genesis Rabbah* matrona stories appear in later midrashic works as well, sometimes bearing significant changes or expansions, sometimes with only minor variations. In this chapter I will concentrate on those matrona stories which appear for the first time in works which are generally thought to post-date *Genesis Rabbah*.

The fact that the stories I will here consider appear within redactional settings which are later than *Genesis Rabbah* does not necessarily mean that the stories themselves are later than the seven stories I have already considered. While it is possible that these stories were generated by storytellers who were already familiar with the matrona from her portrayal in *Genesis Rabbah*, it is equally possible that all the matrona stories, or any number of them, existed as oral traditions long before their inclusions in any document. Some scholars, such as Bohl, Herr, and Gershenson and Slomovic do not differentiate among the stories, but rather presume that those appearing in early works and later works alike all reflect a series of historical encounters between Rabbi Yose and a Roman matron in second-century Sepphoris. Ilan takes another approach, arguing that the stories of *Genesis Rabbah* are more historically reliable than the stories of later documents. According to Ilan, while the *Genesis Rabbah* stories were culled from a

separate corpus which contained reports of real conversations among Rabbi Yose and a female Jewish student of his named "Matrona," stories in other works reflect a literary topos which developed later.¹

The present inquiry departs from these other studies in that rather than presuming or even arguing for or against the matrona's historical existence, I've treated all the matrona stories as reflections of a literary topos. In the last chapter, I considered the conventional elements which contributed to the Genesis Rabbah matrona stories' form and content: I noted that the stories' dialogical form and the kinds of theological challenges posed by the matrona were features which the matrona stories shared with the other dialogue stories within Genesis Rabbah. Alongside these generic features however, I pointed out that the matrona stories of Genesis Rabbah were more often than not distinguished from other dialogues by their explorations of themes of sexuality and childbirth. In the next two chapters, I will subject matrona stories found in other collections to similar modes of literary analysis.

The matrona and Rabbi Yose appear together in multiple midrashic collections, and also in various other works from the medieval period. In this chapter, I will consider the literary conventions at work in these stories. If the matrona's gender is central to her portrayal in Genesis Rabbah, can the same

¹ Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 130-31. Schäfer accounts for the stories outside of Genesis Rabbah by arguing that these later stories which conform to the general features of the Genesis Rabbah matrona stories, use analogies from real life, and make use of simple language. He suggests that these stories are probably belonging to the original Matrona corpus, while the more complex and elaborate stories are "discarded." 43-49.

be said of other works? We will find that the matrona's gender seldom gets center stage outside of Genesis Rabbah. Instead, various works and stories will stress her aristocratic status, and her position as an outsider to Judaism. Having traced the vicissitudes of our matrona's relationship with Rabbi Yose through compilations spanning centuries, I will turn in Chapter V to stories featuring a matrona in the two Talmudim.

The Matrona as Aristocrat

In the last chapter I noted that while Genesis Rabbah generally highlights either the matrona's religious interests or her gender, two stories—the story of the matrona playing matchmaker (#5, GR 68:4) and the story of the matrona's musings about Joseph and Potiphar's wife (#7, GR 87:10)—explore her patrician status as a slaveholder as well. Though I have already commented on some of the expansions made by Leviticus Rabbah, the extent to which the story is re-worked in Leviticus Rabbah recommends treating it in its own right.²

A matrona questioned Rabbi Yose bar Halafta.
She said to him: "In how many days did the Holy One Blessed Be
He create the world?"

² The version of the story in Leviticus Rabbah varies only slightly from the version in Pesikta deRab Kahana, and the printed version of LR is virtually identical to PRK. In both works, the matrona story appears within the context of a petihta which opens with Psalms 75:8, the verse which serves as a proof-text for Rabbi Berchia's alternative matrona story in GR, LR, and PRK. In LR, the petihta is attributed to Rabbi Levi, while in PRK it is attributed to R. Jonah Botzriah. It is impossible to determine the direction of influence, or whether both the LR and PRK petihtot originate in a common source. Since the versions of the matrona story in LR and PRK are much longer than the version in Genesis Rabbah, it seems fair to assume that GR serves as the basis for both. This is in keeping with scholarship that dates GR to the first half of the fifth century, and LR and PRK to the latter half of the fifth century. On the dating of these works and the relationships among them, see Strack and Steinberger 279-280, 288-296.

He said to her: "In six days, as it is written, 'for in six days did the Lord make the heavens etc.' (Ex. 31:17)"

She said to him: "And from that time until now, what has He been sitting and doing?"

He said to her: "Making matches: matching so-and-so's wife to so-and-so, so-and-so's daughter to so-and-so, so-and-so's money to so-and-so."

She said to him: "I have so many slaves and so many maidservants, and I can match them in no time."

He said to her: "If it seems easy to you, it is as difficult for the Holy One Blessed Be He as splitting the Red Sea."

Rabbi Yose ben Halafta set off for home.

What did she do?

She sent for and brought one thousand slaves and one thousand maidservants and stood them in rows. She said to them: "So-and-so will marry so-and-so, so-and-so will marry so-and-so. In the morning, they came before her. This one's head was wounded, and this one's eye was blinded; this one's arm was broken, and this one's leg was broken. This one said, "I don't want that one," and that one said, "I don't want this one."

She sent for him (Rabbi Yose) and said to him: "Rabbi, your Torah is true, fitting and praiseworthy."

He said to her: "Is it not as I told you: If it seems easy to you, it is as difficult for the Holy One Blessed Be He as splitting the Red Sea, as it written, 'God seats the solitary at home, frees those who are imprisoned.' (Ps. 68:7)"

(LR 8:1, pp. 164-166³)

In contrast to the compressed style of the Genesis Rabbah stories, this story is much more expansive and dramatic. While most Genesis Rabbah stories limit all narrative statements to "he said to her," and "she said to him," here the interaction between Rabbi Yose and the matrona is spread out

³ In both LR and PRK, this paragraph is in Aramaic. The rest of the story is Hebrew.

⁴ The passage continues with an explanation of the word *bekasharot*, or "imprisoned," reading it as a combination of the words *bachu* = "weeping" and *shirot* = "singing." In LR, the text goes on to suggest that God serves as matchmaker between those who weep and those who sing, regardless of the couple's will. While both LR and PRK include the interpretation of *bekasharot*, the application of the word to God's power as matchmaker appears in LR only. In the original story in GR, as in PRK, *bekasharot* clearly refers to the miracle at the Red Sea, to which Rabbi Yose compares the feat of matchmaking. The addition in LR undermines Rabbi Yose's comparison of marriage-making to splitting the Red Sea when it reads both stichs of Ps. 68:7 as references to matchmaking.

⁵ Compare PRK Ki Tisa 4, pp. 18-19.

over two days, and the insight which the matrona comes to is achieved outside the framework of the dialogue. The account of the matrona's dealings with her servants, and of their violent response to her matchmaking attempt is presented in rich detail, and narrative statements such as "What did she do?" serve to heighten the story's dramatic tension. Not only are plot and character painted in vivid strokes, the "lesson" of the story is here spelled out. The matrona's closing pronouncement of the truth of the Torah, and the Rabbi's smug "I told you so," make explicit the story's function as a defense of rabbinic wisdom. While the Genesis Rabbah stories read as rarefied accounts of intellectual exchange, Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta der Rav Kahana here present a ribald story complete with sex and violence.

When I treated variants of this tradition in the last chapter, I suggested that this story highlights both the matrona's distinctive concerns as a woman, and her social power as an aristocratic slaveholder. The LR and PRK versions of the story emphasize the matrona's class status even more than GR does. In GR, the matrona matched only 200 slaves; here, the number of slaves she is granted—at least two thousand—further exaggerates her wealth. Other, more subtle details in LR and PRK suggest that the matrona is used to being in charge: "How many slaves do I have!" she exclaims, casting herself as a power who rivals God; she calls for Rabbi Yose in the same language in which she calls for her servants, as if the whole world is at her beck and call.

In its expanded version, this story reads not so much as a contest between Judaism and paganism, as a clash between wisdom and wealth. The

matrona, drunk on her own power, assumes that governance demands nothing more than giving orders. She comes to see that while human rulers might indeed force their will on others, only God's Providence weds power with insight, ensuring that human lives proceed peacefully and happily. The matrona can recognize the wisdom of the Torah, and of Rabbi Yose, only when she experiences the shortcomings of her own worldly power. The matrona's excesses in this story can be seen as emblematic of corrupt Roman rule. Her ultimate submission to Rabbi Yose's wisdom expresses rabbinic hopes for a time when Roman rulers will submit to God's sovereignty.

The lessons which the matrona learns in this story are recapitulated in the one other matrona story which appears in *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*. In this second story, the matrona comments in horror at the strange meal of barley cakes baked on excrement that God commands Ezekiel to eat in Ezekiel 4:9-12:

A matrona questioned Rabbi Yose.
She said to him: "What suffering did this righteous man
undergo! How many slaves and maidservants does he have, and
they shun his food and drink."
He said to her: "This is to teach you that whenever Israel suffers,
the righteous are with them in suffering."
(*Leviticus Rabbah* 28:6, p. 662; *Pesikta de Rav Kahana Mitzvat
Ha'omer* 4, p. 143; *Pesikta Rabbati Parshat Ha'Omer* 18)

The matrona's question here seems to emerge out of the matrona's sense of identification with Ezekiel. She is disgusted by what God demands of Ezekiel, but her disgust arises not so much in response to the nature of the food itself, as from the incongruity of a distinguished man being asked to

stoop lower than even his servants. The reader gets the sense that what bothers the matrona is not so much the idea of a human being ingesting such repulsive food, but rather the image of a slaveholder being shamed before others. The basis for the matrona's identification with Ezekiel seems to be the sense she has that he was a man of means. Though this story does not explicitly mention that the matrona herself is a slaveholder, this is implicit in her portrayal of Ezekiel.

Unlike the stories we saw in *Genesis Rabbah*, here it is difficult to identify the matrona's question with any kind of theological or national challenge to Judaism or the Jews. While the matrona's question might represent an accusation against God's justice, it reads more as a spontaneous response to Scripture than as an intellectual point of religious debate. Though this story maintains the structure of dialogues between sages and non-Jews which we examined in the previous two chapters, the matrona's status as an outsider to Judaism is largely irrelevant to the story's progress. The story highlights the matrona's identity as a wealthy aristocrat. Her weakness lies not in wrongful theological ideas, but in misplaced sympathies. While she is moved by her identification with Ezekiel, Rabbi Yose points out to her that Ezekiel's righteousness consisted of his identification with others. Unlike the matrona, who here presents herself and Ezekiel as belonging to a class above and apart, as a righteous prophet Ezekiel sought to experience the suffering of others along with them. The lesson which Rabbi Yose here holds out to the

matrona is an ethical one, as he exposes the shortcomings of an empathy ruled by social position rather than human sympathy.

In this story, as in the one above, the matrona is portrayed as an arrogant aristocrat who fails to recognize the humanity of her servants. In the story above, the matrona comes to understand the danger of using her power in a haphazard way. This story focuses on the matrona's attitudes rather than her behavior. Taken together, these two stories can be seen as painting a coherent picture of the matrona as a haughty aristocrat. Since these are the only two matrona stories which appear in *Leviticus Rabbah* and in *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, the parallels between them suggest that the matrona's portrayal in these two works was shaped in accordance with a particular understanding of the matrona's literary function.

As a non-Jewish female aristocrat, the figure of the matrona could potentially serve as a representative of other religious views, of women, or of the upper class. We have seen that in *Genesis Rabbah*, the preponderance of matrona stories provided a literary form through which issues of gender could be explored. In *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, her character was developed differently. Here, she is portrayed as an aristocrat, and both stories about her take aim at her arrogance rather than exposing her theological mistakes or appealing to her gender. While both the *Genesis Rabbah* stories and the *Leviticus Rabbah*/*Pesikta de Rav Kahana* stories make use of the characters of Rabbi Yose and the matrona, and of the dialogic form,

they are governed by very different conceptions of the matrona's literary function.

I have observed the tendency in *Genesis Rabbah* to relate the matrona to issues of gender, while *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* identify her primarily as an aristocrat. This raises the question: Can other, distinctive principles governing the matrona's portrayal be identified in other compositions? As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, the answer is no. In no other works in which the matrona appears more than once is she portrayed with any consistency. While *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*'s use of the matrona serves to sharpen her distinctiveness as a character, in other works such as *Pesikta Rabbati* and the *Tanhuma* literature, she becomes harder to distinguish from other non-Jewish characters. For the remainder of this chapter, we will survey the matrona stories within these works, and within later compilations of midrash, observing the variety of ways in which they make use of the matrona's identity as aristocrat, non-Jew, and woman.

In addition to the two matrona stories we looked at from *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, there are three other stories appearing in later works which also play on her patrician status. The following story, from *Tanhuma Buber*, opens with a question we have seen before:

It happened that a matronita⁸ asked Rabbi Yose ben Halafta how many days it took God to create the world. He said to her: "From the first day (He had already completed it)."

⁸ This is the form which the matrona's title takes in the Babylonian Talmud as well.

She said to him: "What is your source for teaching me this?"

He said to her: "Have you ever served a feast?"

She said to him: "Yes."

"And how many courses did you have?"

She said to him: "Thus and such."

He said to her: "And you set them all before them at once?"

She said to him: "No. I cooked all the dishes at once, but I

brought them out before them course by course."

And all this is from one verse, as it says, "For He is the Creator of all, etc." (Jeremiah 10:15)

(Tanhuma Buber Bereshit 2)

This story, appearing in a much later source than the stories we have looked at so far, departs from earlier stories in using a combination of direct and indirect speech. Nevertheless, the dialogic form is maintained, and the story opens with a question by the matrona, as in all the other matrona stories we have examined. While the matrona's question is the same as in the story of the matrona's matchmaking (GR 68:4, LR 8:1, PRK Ki Tisa 4), Rabbi Yose's answer is much different. In the last chapter, I proposed that if the matrona's question had any theological underpinnings, they likely related to the issue of God's Providence—What has God been doing since creation? In this story, the question must be understood differently, for Rabbi Yose's answer—that creation was completed in just one day—only exacerbates the problem of God's occupation since creation. It seems that within the context of this story, Rabbi Yose discerns in the matrona's question the implication that God is not all powerful, or else He would not have taken an entire week to complete creation. This is the challenge to which Rabbi Yose responds when he explains that God actually completed all creation in one day. He here refers to the idea of *sof ma'aseh be mahshava tehila*, that God conceived of the

universe in toto within His mind, and that the seven days of creation were a process of actualizing what already existed in his conception.

The analogy which Rabbi Yose uses to illustrate God's two-stage process of creation is drawn from the realia of Roman social life. Rabbi Yose draws on the matrona's experience as hostess, eliciting from her an account of how she would first prepare, and then present a feast in stages. Rabbi Yose assumes that as a woman, she would have had experiences in preparing food. But the rabbi is actually less interested in the actual cooking than in the presentation of the feast in courses. The elaborate meal to which he compares creation is a social custom of the Roman elite. This story is thus shaped by two aspects of the matrona's identity: her gender, and her social status as a member of the patrician class.

Another story presented in Tanhuma Buber also associates the matrona with the trappings of aristocratic life:

A matrona questioned Rabbi Yose ben Halafta.

She said to him: "Look, the glory of the Holy One Blessed Be He consists merely in His giving wisdom to the wise, as it says, 'He gave wisdom to the wise.' (Daniel 2:21) It should have said, 'He gives wisdom to the foolish.'"

He said to her: "Do you have jewelry?"

She said to him: "Yes."

He said to her: "If a person came to borrow your jewelry, would you lend it to him?"

She said to him: "If it was a competent⁷ person, I would lend him my jewelry."

He said to her: "You would only lend your jewelry to a competent person, should the Holy One Blessed Be He give

⁷ This is one of the translations Buber suggests for the Hebraicized Greek word *okanos* (based on the Greek *kanos*), which the midrashic text itself glosses as "wise." Buber suggests rather that it should be understood as a person who is self-sufficient, or competent.

wisdom to the foolish?! Therefore it says, 'He gave wisdom to the wise.'" (Daniel 2:21)
(Tanhuma Buber Miketz 9)⁸

While the stories of Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta deRav Kahana chastise the matrona for her arrogance as an aristocrat, here the matrona's patrician attitudes are essential to Rabbi Yose's analogy. While the matrona suggests that it is no great achievement on God's part to grant wisdom to the wise, Rabbi Yose points out that the exclusiveness God exhibits in distributing wisdom is akin to the matrona's own protectiveness over her jewels. The matrona is not portrayed as being snobbish, but as prudent, in withholding her riches from those who would not have the means to replace them. So too, God must be selective in granting wisdom only to those who do not squander it.⁹

An additional matrona story which plays upon the matrona's social class can be found among midrashim collected by Rabbi S.A. Wertheimer in his compilation *Batei Midrashot*. This story, like others we have seen, portrays the matrona as a slaveholder:

A matrona questioned Rabbi Yose bar Halafta. She said to him: "It is written, 'The eyes of the Lord your God are perpetually on it (the land of Israel).'" (Deut 11:12) It is impossible that the Holy One Blessed Be He does not move his eyes from it! If I came to watch over my faithful maidservants, they could not withstand the stink which I would discover. And the Land is

always watched by the Holy One Blessed Be He, as it says, 'The eyes of the Lord your God are perpetually on it!'"
He said to her: "Therefore you find that the people of the Land of Israel are tormented, stricken with plagues that do not strike outside the Land."¹⁰
(Batei Midrashot I, Yelamdenu Pekudei, pp. 167-168)

Here, the matrona opens the dialogue by voicing her skepticism about the Torah's claim that God's attention never departs from the Land of Israel. She compares her own position as a slaveholder with authority over her maidservants to God's providential role in watching over Israel, and points out that even the most loyal servants cannot withstand constant scrutiny. While the problem which the matrona raises here is a fairly local one, the way she frames her question allows Rabbi Yose to confront a much more common and serious polemical challenge: If Israel is indeed chosen by God, why has it suffered so many hardships?¹¹ Rabbi Yose explains that the hardships Israel has suffered are themselves an index of the degree of providential attention she enjoys. Rabbi Yose thus builds upon the matrona's argument, using it to serve his own polemical agenda. This story does not exploit the dialogue form as effectively as others we have seen; here, the matrona is not the intelligent disputant we met in Genesis Rabbah, and Rabbi Yose seems to be talking past her. Nevertheless, the story does build upon

⁸ A parallel to this story can be found in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:7. In this parallel, it is not jewels but money that Rabbi Yose would have the matrona lend away. The criterion the matrona here requires from her borrowers is that they be rich. In Sefer HaMa'asiyot p. 12 no.13, a similar story features a Caesar and Rabbi Akiva instead of the matrona and Rabbi Yose.

⁹ This lesson is drawn out further in the Ecclesiastes Rabbah parallel: "If God had given his wisdom to the foolish, they would sit and muse on it in toilets, theaters, and bathhouses."

¹⁰ The text continues with a midrash which harkens forward to the day when all other lands will quake, but Israel will be secure. It is not clear if it is meant to be part of Rabbi Yose's response.

¹¹ While this story focuses on God's treatment of the Land of Israel, similar arguments could and were made regarding the People Israel. See for example Chapter 16 of the Dialogue with Trypho. Marcovitch, 96-97.

earlier portrayals of the matrona as both an aristocrat and a religious disputant.

Here, as in the two stories above, the trappings of the matrona's life as an aristocrat provide for a comparison between human behavior and divine action. While in the story of the matrona's matchmaking efforts, the matrona's failures were contrasted with God's success, here and in the two Tanhuma Buber stories, the matrona's behavior in her human domain corresponds to God's solicitude in the cosmic realm. The rhetorical functions of these stories are thus comparable to *meshalim lemelech* parables which compare God to a human king.

All the stories in this section emphasize the matrona's upper class status as well as her position as an outsider to Judaism. There are a greater number of stories, however, where it is the matrona's status as a non-Jew which is central. When we saw examples of such stories in *Genesis Rabbah*, I noted that in stories in which the matrona is no more than a mouthpiece for a view contrary to Judaism, it is difficult to distinguish her from other Roman characters and heretics who appear in dialogue with sages. The same can be said of many of the matrona stories from later compilations, as I will show in the next section.

The Matrona as Non-Jew

The following matrona story appears within the section of *Pesikta Rabbati* dealing with the Ten Commandments:

A matronit questioned Rabbi Yose bar Rabbi Halafta. She said to him: "If circumcision is so beloved by the Holy One Blessed Be He, why wasn't it included in the Ten Commandments?" He said to her: "It already was given: 'and your *ger* who is in your gates.' (Ex 20:10) This *ger* is the convert who observes the Sabbath through a covenant like Israel." (*Pesikta Rabbati Aseret HaDibrot*; chapter 23)

The matrona here attacks one of Judaism's core rituals, suggesting that the practice of circumcision is unfounded since it does not appear in the Decalogue. In response, Rabbi Yose demonstrates that the Decalogue does allude to circumcision in the context of the commandment to keep the Sabbath. He interprets the word "*ger*" in its rabbinic sense of "convert" rather than according to its contextual meaning, "stranger." Since converts (male ones, in any case) are distinguished from non-Jews by the rite of circumcision, Rabbi Yose can thus point to a reference to circumcision within the Ten Commandments.

While some matrona stories we looked at give special attention to the matrona's gender, focusing on issues close to women's experience, the opposite is true of this story. Here, the matrona's question and the rabbi's response both focus on a practice which is exclusive to men—the rite of circumcision. How is it that such a concern was assigned to the matrona? To help answer this question, it is helpful to consider the immediate context in which the story appears.

This matrona story is third in a series of three dialogue-stories which appears as a comment on Exodus 20:10, the verse which serves as Rabbi Yose's

proof-text. The first story features a philosopher in dialogue with Rabbi, a parallel to the conversation of the philosopher and Rabbi Hoshaya (GR 11:6, p. 94) which we looked at in Chapter II. The philosopher asks: If circumcision is so important, why wasn't it given to Adam? His implication seems to be that circumcision implies some imperfection with creation. This, in any case, is how he is understood by Rabbi, who points out every aspect of creation requires some action on humanity's part: mustard must be sweetened, grain must be ground, and man must be perfected through circumcision. In this story, the philosopher's question reflects two aspects of his characterization: He wonders, as might any Gentile, about the significance of the marker distinguishing Jewish males from others, and he muses as a philosopher about what such a marker implies about the Jewish conception of nature. In this dialogue about circumcision, there is a correspondence between the questioner and his question that is lacking in the matrona story.

The second story of the series features Aquilas the convert, who questions Rabbi Eliezer. His question is identical to the matrona's: Why doesn't circumcision appear in the Ten Commandments? The answer he is given is different. Rabbi Eliezer attaches the commandment of circumcision to a verse preceding the Ten Commandments, explaining that the word "covenant" in Exodus 19:5 refers to the covenant of circumcision as well as to the Sabbath. Here, as in the story of the philosopher, an interest in circumcision is not surprising; as a convert, Aquilas would have himself experienced circumcision as an adult.

The topic of circumcision serves as a most appropriate issue for discussion across religious boundaries, because circumcision itself functions as a boundary between Jews and others. But while this boundary is significant for the male characters of the philosopher and Aquilas, it is not for the matrona, who as a woman would not be circumcised even if she were to become a Jew. In this story, the matrona's role as a representative of the non-Jewish world has overshadowed other aspects of her personality to such a degree that it is as if her gender has been erased. Here, the matrona is in no way distinguished from male characters who interrogate sages. In a sense, the gender issues which so often define the matrona in *Genesis Rabbah* are here forgotten. The matrona is so completely assimilated into the general topos of dialogues between Gentiles and sages that no aspect of her social identity, aside from her status as an outsider to Judaism, has any resonance within the story.

A parallel to this story signals the degree to which the narrative renders the matrona indistinguishable from other Roman figures. In *Tanhuma Lekh Lekha* 20, the question of why circumcision is not included in the Ten Commandments is placed in the mouth of Agrippas the king. Within the context of this story, the matrona is interchangeable with any other non-Jew; since there is no particular correspondence between the matrona and her interest in circumcision, the story is easily transferred to another interlocutor.

To a certain degree, this assimilation of the matrona's character into the generic topos of dialogues between sages and non-Jews is already evident in *Genesis Rabbah*, in those stories which do not emphasize the matrona's gender or social class. We have seen, for example, that the matrona's question about Enoch's death in *Genesis Rabbah* 25:1 is preceded by a story in which heretics ask the identical question. Since neither the matrona's question nor Rabbi Yose's response to her reflect the matrona's distinctive position as a woman and as an aristocrat, the rhetorical force of the two stories is equivalent. In a related phenomenon, a question articulated by the matrona in *Genesis Rabbah* 84:21--Why wasn't Jacob comforted after Joseph's death?--is transferred to a heretic in a later version of the story in *Tanhuma Buber* Vayeshev 8. In the *Genesis Rabbah* version, as in the story of Enoch's death, the matrona figures exclusively as a religious disputant, and neither her gender nor her patrician status comes into play. The story is thus easily transferred to a stock character who is defined by his religious view alone--the heretic.

As one traces the treatment of the matrona through the midrashic works which follow *Genesis Rabbah*, two related trends emerge. The first is the tendency we just observed: Stories which portray the matrona exclusively as a religious disputant, neglecting to develop her identities as a woman or as an aristocrat, have few parallels in later works; when the matrona's questions do re-appear in later dialogues, the matrona herself has often disappeared. The second trend is the inverse of the first--those stories which develop

multiple aspects of the matrona's character echo through Jewish literature for centuries. Thus the story portraying the matrona as matchmaker, a story which develops the matrona's personality as a woman and as an aristocrat, surfaces six times in later midrashic works,¹² and later appears in multiple sermons. The story in which the matrona interrogates Rabbi Yose about the creation of Eve likewise has a rich afterlife. Taken together, these two trends suggest that those stories which develop the matrona as a figure of multiple dimensions are the stories that resonated for later readers and redactors.

At the same time, the stories which appear exclusively in later works tend not to present the matrona as anything other than a mouthpiece for views contrary to Judaism. These stories seem to have been generated in imitation of earlier portrayals of the matrona, but they lack the richness of the matrona stories of *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*. The following dialogue from *Tanhuma Buber* can serve as an example:

A matrona asked Rabbi Yose: "It is written, 'So that your days and the days of your children might be multiplied, etc. . . as the days of the heavens above the earth.' (Deut. 11:21) Thus, you will only exist as long as the heavens and the earth persist, but the heavens and the earth are fated to disappear, for so said Isaiah, 'Lift up your eyes and see, etc.' (Is. 40:26), and it is written, 'Lift your eyes to the heavens, and look (to the earth beneath, for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth wear away like clothing.)'" (Is. 51:6)
He said to her: "From the very same prophet with which you challenged me, from him I will provide a response, for it says, 'As the new heavens and the new earth which I will make will

¹² *Leviticus Rabbah* 8:1; *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* Ki Tisa 4; *Tanhuma* Ki Tisa 4; *Tanhuma* Bamidbar 16; *Tanhuma Buber* Bamidbar 18; *Numbers Rabbah* Bamidbar 3:6; *Midrash Samuel* 5:13; *Yalkut Shimoni* 28.

stand before me. . . so will your seed and your name stand.'" (Is. 66:22)
(Tanhuma Buber Bereshit 20)

This story is more sophisticated in juxtaposing multiple verses from Scripture than the earlier stories we examined, but the density of exegesis seems to have displaced all attention to character. While the matrona's question is impressive, the story does not go on long enough for us to get any sense of her personality. The matrona's challenge is a forceful attack on the notion that Israel enjoys any special protection by God. Rabbi Yose's citation is an apt response to the matrona's question, relating directly to the challenge she articulates rather than to any other aspects of her identity. The matrona here functions exclusively as an opponent to Judaism.

Elsewhere, the matrona attacks other ideas held sacred by rabbinic Judaism. In one story, she challenges the notion of divine reward and punishment, interpreting Scripture so as to suggest that the wicked and the righteous enjoy the same treatment in the world to come.¹³ In another story, the matrona questions God's selection of the Levites as priests, intimating that God's choices are arbitrary.¹⁴ This story emphasizes the religious gap which separates the matrona and Rabbi Yose, as the matrona refers to God as "Your God," language that is absent from earlier matrona stories. The matrona's religious foreignness is further accentuated in a story in which she identifies her own God as a snake, and claims that "My god is greater than

¹³ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:21. The question is recapitulated in an abbreviated version of the story in Midrash Zuta, Ecclesiastes 3:21.

your God," since Moses fled from a snake, but merely hid his face in the presence of God at the burning bush.¹⁵ Matrona stories which emerge late in the medieval period likewise portray the matrona exclusively in terms of her religious or national otherness. A story which appears in Daat Zekenim, a collection of biblical interpretations by the Tosafists, has the matrona questioning why Jacob feared Esau, implying that this confirms the supremacy of Rome.¹⁶ In his commentary on Sefer Yetzira, Rabbi Judah bar Barzilai of Barcelona presents the matrona questioning how God could speak from a single pillar, that is, if God is infinite, how is it that He was contained by the pillar?¹⁷

While there is one story in which the religious force of the matrona's question is difficult to determine,¹⁸ for the most part the stories which appear for the first time in later collections portray the matrona exclusively in terms of her status as outsider, neglecting to develop any of her other distinguishing character traits. None of these later stories has the complexity of the earlier stories we looked at. They all consist of a single round of dialogue, so there is little opportunity for the two characters to respond to each other. Most of them appear just once in all of Jewish literature—unlike other matrona stories we have looked at, they were never adopted by later editors.

¹⁴ Numbers Rabbah 3:2; Midrash Samuel 8:2.

¹⁵ Exodus Rabbah 3:12.

¹⁶ Daat Zekenim on Genesis 32:12.

¹⁷ Perush Sefer Yetzira, 150.

¹⁸ In Pesikta Rabbati Aseret Hadibrot 21, the matrona asks Rabbi Yose why the letter 'lamed' is so much more prominent than the other letters.

The matrona stories of *Genesis Rabbah* and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* explore the matrona's predilections as a woman and as an aristocrat, portraying the matrona as a character with complex motivations and a capacity to learn. Stories which emerge in later works present her as little more than a strawman for rabbinic arguments. These stories do not present real exchange among the characters, and exhibit no rhetorical subtlety--the dialogue form is but the garment which Rabbi Yose's scriptural interpretation wears.

The playful repartee and sexual tension which characterized at least two of the matrona's interactions with Rabbi Yose disappear after *Genesis Rabbah*. The one time a later source does acknowledge the matrona's gender, it is careful to defuse any hint of sexual attraction, as we will now see.

The Matrona as Mother

Were it not for the following story from *Midrash HaGadol*, one could presume from the absence of any exploration of the matrona's gender in later stories that later readers of the matrona stories failed to recognize the degree to which the matrona's sexuality animates her portrayal in *Genesis Rabbah*. The following story suggests that at least one reader recognized the prominence of sex in the early matrona stories, and set out to neutralize the danger she represented as a foreign seductress.

One time, Rabbi Yose was sitting in the market and a matrona came and sat on his right side, and her husband came and sat on her left.

She said to him: "How fortunate you are that I will be your nurse in the next world, and this husband of mine your foster father."

He said to her: "My daughter, what makes you say that?"

She said to him: "Since it says in your Torah, 'Kings will be your foster parents.'" (Is 49:23)

He silenced her and tried to move her away from these matters.

She said to him: "Why do you silence me? You have another verse, 'Thus says the Lord, Redeemer of Israel, His holy one, to the despised soul--kings will see and will rise, princes will bow down. . . ' (Is 49:7) If this is realized now, that is your good fortune, and if it comes in the future, that is your good fortune. It is your good fortune, what is said of you, to you and about you."

Rabbi Yose spoke up and said: "'With all my musings within me Your consolations delight my soul.' (Psalms 94:19) Even though the nations of the world oppress us with enslavement and put their rule over us, we recall the consolations which you wrote for us and delight in them, as it is written, 'Your consolations delight my soul.'" (Psalms 94:19)

(*Midrash HaGadol* to Deuteronomy 26:19)

This story diverges from almost every feature of matrona stories and of dialogue-stories in general. Though it does take the form of a dialogue, it contains far more exposition than most dialogue stories. Though it presents a conversation between the matrona and Rabbi Yose, it introduces a third character as well--the matrona's husband. Here, as in other stories, the matrona speaks first, but rather than challenging Rabbi Yose, she praises him, and subjugates herself to him. Rather than directly responding to her words, he first tries to good-naturedly dismiss her comments, then tries to silence her; when he is finally overcome by her effusive references to Isaiah's promises, he directs his comments to God, rather than to the matrona. While all other matrona stories come to demonstrate the error of the matrona's

initial assumptions, this story confirms the sentiment with which the matrona opens the dialogue.

References to the matrona's family relationships recur throughout the story. From the moment she enters the scene, the matrona is defined as a wife. This is in marked contrast to all other matrona stories, in which she acts as a solitary agent. There is one other story—Genesis Rabbah 17:7—in which the matrona mentions family relationships, in which she recounts for Rabbi Yose how a match that was arranged for her fell through despite her good looks. As we noted in the last chapter, in the context of that story's discussion of the attraction Adam felt toward Eve, the matrona's advertising of both her beauty and her availability is especially titillating. The present story neutralizes any sexual attraction the matrona might excite in Rabbi Yose by presenting her along with her husband, and by seating the non-Jewish couple on either side of the rabbi.

The story not only presents the matrona as wife, it casts her in a maternal role as well. The prophecy she quotes predicts that in the future, royalty will nurse and parent the Jews. Here, the matrona's class status as well as her gender comes into play, as she presents herself as the royal wetnurse who will nurture Rabbi Yose in the next world. Her identification as a maternal figure for the rabbi is reflected in her physical behavior as well—she positions herself and her husband on either side of the seated Rabbi Yose, like two parents flanking a young child. In casting the matrona as mother, the story attends to her identity as a woman at the same time as it eliminates her

as a sexual threat. While in Genesis Rabbah, the matrona's comparison to Eve and to Potiphar's wife contributes to her sexual allure, here the comparison between the matrona and the maternal figure of Isaiah undermines any suggestion of sex.

The character of Rabbi Yose follows the matrona's lead in neutralizing any sexual attraction when he refers to the matrona as "my daughter." One senses that his reluctance to speak to her directly reflects his discomfort with the idea of speaking with a woman—certainly, there is nothing objectionable in the matrona's pious remarks, though they do presume a certain level of intimacy and self-abasement. The expanded exposition with which the story opens is here significant. While it might be unseemly for a rabbi to converse with a non-Jewish woman—or with any woman—the public setting of the marketplace ensures that Rabbi Yose does not allow for even the appearance of wrongdoing. Unlike the Rabbi Yose of Genesis Rabbah, who engaged the matrona as an intellectual equal, and in so doing subjected himself to sexual innuendo, this Rabbi Yose is the model of sexual restraint. He can be taken as a model for how a Jewish man should interact with a strange woman: such meetings should only occur in public, in the presence of the woman's husband, with great reluctance on the man's part, and with constant mindfulness of God.

The story in Midrash HaGadol attends to every aspect of the matrona's identity which was developed in Genesis Rabbah: her foreignness, her

aristocratic status, and her femaleness. Here however, these traits are exploited in such a way as to detract from her sexuality rather than accentuate it. The story reads as an inversion of the raciest *Genesis Rabbah* stories, a deliberate attempt to "correct" the excesses of *Genesis Rabbah's* matrona. No other story featuring the matrona and Rabbi Yose attends to the matrona's gender at all; might this absence suggest that other early readers identified the sexual tension in the *Genesis Rabbah* stories, and set out to undermine it? I can only speculate as to why the matrona's gender is so completely eclipsed in most later stories that she becomes interchangeable with other gentile stock characters.

While this chapter, together with the last, covers all the vicissitudes of the matrona's relationship with Rabbi Yose in the classical rabbinic period and beyond, there are still more portrayals of the matrona in rabbinic literature. In the Palestinian Talmud, there are several stories in which a Roman matron confronts a sage (though she never meets Rabbi Yose), and unnamed Roman matrons meet up with rabbis throughout the Babylonian Talmud as well. In the next chapter, I will survey these stories, observing yet another attitude toward the matrona's gender and sexuality. I will show that while in *Genesis Rabbah*, the matrona's identity as woman often provided the substance for her interactions, in both Talmuds, the fact that the matrona is female is represented as an impediment to any real exchange between her and the rabbis.

Chapter V: The Matronas of the Talmuds

All of the matrona stories we have looked at so far have been remarkably similar in form and content: While different stories have emphasized different aspects of the matrona's identity—her gender, social status, or religious beliefs—they have all presented her confronting Rabbi Yose with a question about Jewish interpretation or belief. None of these literary conventions is at work in the matrona stories of the two Talmuds. In the talmudic stories I will review in this chapter, the matrona never meets up with Rabbi Yose. Though she sometimes initiates dialogue with other sages, the nature of these conversations tends to be personal rather than theological or exegetical. For all the parallels between the two Talmuds' presentations of the matrona, portrayals of her in the two works were likely shaped in very different cultural contexts, and so we will treat them separately.

The Case of the Yerushalmi

Given how robust the topos of dialogue between the matrona and Rabbi Yose is in the classical Palestinian midrashim—*Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*—the absence of these dialogues from the Palestinian Talmud is striking. Since *Genesis Rabbah* is generally considered to have been completed only slightly later than the Palestinian Talmud, and in the same Palestinian milieu, the absence of the matrona-Rabbi Yose stories from the Yerushalmi might mean that they enjoyed a very

aristocratic status, and her femaleness. Here however, these traits are exploited in such a way as to detract from her sexuality rather than accentuate it. The story reads as an inversion of the raciest Genesis Rabbah stories, a deliberate attempt to "correct" the excesses of Genesis Rabbah's matrona. No other story featuring the matrona and Rabbi Yose attends to the matrona's gender at all; might this absence suggest that other early readers identified the sexual tension in the Genesis Rabbah stories, and set out to undermine it? I can only speculate as to why the matrona's gender is so completely eclipsed in most later stories that she becomes interchangeable with other gentile stock characters.

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limited circulation prior to their inclusion within *Genesis Rabbah*.¹

Alternatively, as contexts for exegesis of Scripture, the stories might simply have fallen outside the purview of the Yerushalmi's interest. A character identified as "matrona" does appear in three separate stories within the Yerushalmi, and each time her treatment is very different. Within the context of the Palestinian Talmud, portrayals of the matrona have not coalesced into a single literary topos.

One of the instances in which the matrona appears in the Palestinian Talmud actually parallels a story from *Genesis Rabbah*.² In *Genesis Rabbah* the story represents the only narrative treatment of the matrona which does not adhere to a dialogue form.³ The Yerushalmi version reads like this:

Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Tanhum of Kfar Agin: There was an instance in Asia in which he wanted to depart (by boat) between Sukkot and Hanukah. A matrona saw him. She said to him: "You would depart during days like these?!" His father appeared to him, warning that he would not even be buried. But he did not listen to this one or to that one, and went out to sea. (p. Shabbat 19b)

The one similarity this matrona shares with portrayals in the dialogue stories is that it is she who initiates conversation with the rabbi. Here however, the subject under discussion is not of a religious nature, but relates to the rabbi's behavior. The matrona is dismayed that the rabbi would embark on a sea journey during such a dangerous time of year. As she chastises the

¹ Ilan 1997, 242.

² GR 6:5, p. 45.

³ That is, the only narrative other than king-parables, where the queen is often identified as "matrona." For an account of all the places within GR where the word "matrona" appears, see Chapter III, note 1.

rabbi for his bad judgement, we get a sense of her outspokenness, and also of her caring. While in the matrona dialogue stories, the matrona is consistently proven wrong, in this story the matrona's warning is confirmed by an appearance of the rabbi's late father. The father makes explicit what the matrona's words suggest: that anyone who undertakes a sea journey would surely be dooming himself to death. When the rabbi nevertheless sets out at the end of the story, one has the sense that his death is imminent.⁴

It is unclear what role, if any, the matrona's foreignness, gender, and patrician status might play in this story. The vision of the father from beyond the grave introduces a supernatural element into this story, and raises the possibility that the matrona is to be seen as some kind of soothsayer, perhaps modelled on biblical figures such as the witch of Endor. Also possible is that the matrona is nothing more than a repository of practical knowledge; as a local she is familiar with dangers that the rabbi overlooks. In either case, the matrona portrayed here is a knowing, sympathetic figure.

A second story in the Yerushalmi presents a matrona who is a much coarser character. The story appears in two separate contexts, both times within discussions of what types of wine are acceptable for kiddush:

Rabbi Yudah was at Rabbi Ilai's when he drank the four cups for Passover night, and his head hurt until Sukkot. A matrona saw how his face was shining. She said to him: "Grandfather, grandfather, one of three things is true of you. Either you are a drunk, or you are a usurer, or you raise pigs." He said to her: "Let that woman lose her breath. None of the three can be said of me. Rather, my face demonstrates of me that

⁴ Indeed, the *Genesis Rabbah* version reports the rabbi's death.

which is written, 'The wisdom of man lights up his face.'" (Ec 8:1)
(p. Shabbat 54b and p. Pesahim 69a)

The story's opening exposition emphasizes Rabbi Yudah's delicacy--he drinks so seldom that the ceremonial requirements of Passover leave him hung-over for months. Against this background, the matrona's accusations of the rabbi's coarseness become even more offensive. The matrona has apparently seen the rabbi on the one night of the year on which he drinks, and his face reveals his sensitivity to wine. The matrona presumes that the rabbi's red cheeks indicate that he regularly indulges in a life of excess, and attributes to him three unsavory pursuits. While neither drinking, nor charging interest, nor breeding pigs necessarily contradicts the letter of Jewish law, each is clearly out of keeping with the life of a religious exemplar such as Rabbi Yudah. The manner in which the matrona addresses the rabbi is itself inappropriate; while her first mention of "Grandfather," suggests an attitude of respect, the repetition and the insults which ensue indicate that she was merely taunting him.

In contrast to the matrona's portrayal as a restrained and sophisticated religious disputant in *Genesis Rabbah*, this matrona is presented as a mean and vulgar ignoramus. While Rabbi Yudah effectively draws on Scripture to expose the baselessness of the matrona's insults, the matrona herself does not seem to have any familiarity with Jewish texts or traditions. It is the matrona's very ignorance of Judaism which allows her to reach such wrong-headed conclusions about Rabbi Yudah. Had she realized that she was seeing

the rabbi the one night a year in which drinking four cups of wine is a religious requirement, she would have recognized the folly of drawing conclusions about the rabbi's behavior in general. In this story, it is possible that the matrona's social status contributes to her snobbishness. Her vulgarity and meanness might reflect a negative view of women, of non-Jews, or of both.

The third story in which a matrona appears in the Palestinian Talmud presents her as the same kind of insightful student of Scripture we met in the matrona stories of *Genesis Rabbah*. The story appears within a larger discussion of women's potential as students of Torah. Immediately preceding our story is a comment demonstrating how Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah disagrees with Ben Azzai's opinion that a father is obligated to teach his daughter Torah.⁵ Eleazar ben Azariah holds that while both men and women gather to hear the Torah, women are expected merely to hear it, while men must study it as well.⁶ The story featuring a matrona provides yet another normative statement about the possibility of women studying Torah:

A matrona asked Rabbi Lazar: "Given that the Golden Calf incident was a single sin, why did those punished die by three different modes of execution?"
He said to her: "A woman's wisdom is limited to her distaff, as it is written, 'And every wise-hearted woman spun with her hands.'" (Ex. 35:25)
Hyrkanus his son said to him: "So as to avoid responding to her with even one word of Torah, you have caused me to lose three hundred kor in tithes each year."

⁵ Mishnah Sotah, chapter 3, mishnah. 4.

⁶ This passage on J. Sotah 14B, and its relationship to the mishnaic discussion of women's learning, is analyzed in Boyarin 1993, 170-174.

He said to him: "Let words of Torah be burned rather than be transmitted to women."
 When she left, his students said to him: "Master, her you pushed off. To us, what will you respond?"
 Rabbi Berchiah, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: Whoever (among the Golden Calf sinners) was seen by witnesses and also received a warning was put to death by the court. Those who had witnesses but no warning were tested like an errant wife. Those who had no witnesses and no warning died in the plague.
 (p. Sotah 14b)

This story opens like *matrona* dialogues throughout the midrash, with an exegetical question put to a rabbi by a *matrona*, but here the intellectual exchange we would expect is derailed when the rabbi⁷ refuses to discuss matters of Torah with a woman. As the story progresses, the intensity of Rabbi Eliezer's rejection of the *matrona* increases. At first he defends his refusal to talk with the *matrona* with an argument that is gentle if patronizing: it is inappropriate to discuss issues of Torah with a woman because they have a different realm of expertise. When this response is challenged by his son, Eliezer counters with a much more violent argument: Better to burn Torah than to share it with a woman! Teaching Torah to a woman is tantamount to destroying it.

The *matrona*'s character here functions primarily in terms of her gender. In its context in the *Yerushalmi*, this story serves to extend and illustrate the discussion of women's exclusion from Torah study. The irony of

⁷ Though the rabbi named here is Rabbi Eleazar, a better reading is Rabbi Eliezer, and this is suggested by Neusner, 95. Not only is Eliezer, not Eleazar, known to be related to Hyrcanus, but the continuation of the story provides a response to the *matrona*'s question in the name of Rabbi Eliezer. The mistaken attribution of this story to Rabbi Eleazar probably reflects displacement of his name from the immediately preceding comment, and is a standard scribal confusion.

the story is that the *matrona*'s question belies Rabbi Eliezer's initial claim that women's limited wisdom does not qualify them to study Torah. The *matrona* asks a very good question about how biblical narrative can be reconciled with Jewish law which identifies particular crimes with particular punishments. Had we as readers any doubt as to the merit of the *matrona*'s question, the story provides a model audience of learned scholars—Rabbi Eliezer's students—who themselves affirm the value of the *matrona*'s question. While the *matrona* of this story seems to have all the intellectual ability and knowledge of Scripture of Genesis Rabbah's *matrona*, her status as a woman prevents Rabbi Eliezer from engaging her in debate. While in Genesis Rabbah, the *matrona*'s gender often comes into play during the progress of her conversation with Rabbi Yose, here the *matrona*'s gender is a barrier to all conversation.

This story develops the *matrona*'s status as foreigner and as aristocrat to a lesser degree than her gender. When Hyrcanus notes that his father's rejection of her will have economic consequences, it becomes clear that the *matrona* is a woman of means. The *matrona*'s national status is harder to determine. While the title "*matrona*" would suggest that she is Roman, Rabbi Eliezer's citation of Exodus compares her to Israelite women, and the larger context in which this story appears discusses the appropriateness of teaching Torah to Jewish daughters. Hyrcanus' statement indicates that the *matrona* was in the habit of paying priestly tithes. While this might mean that she should be identified as a Jew, his fear that she would be so offended as to stop

payment might mean that as a Roman she contributed tithes on a purely voluntary basis. In either case, her role as woman clearly overshadows all other aspects of her identity.

The three matrona stories scattered through the Yerushalmi thus present three very different pictures of "the" matrona. One story presents her as caring and knowing, another as vulgar and ignorant, and this last one as a spurned intellectual partner. The story of Rabbi Eliezer's rejection of the matrona hints at the potential the dialogue form will hold for her character in Genesis Rabbah. While this story illustrates the matrona's insightfulness, it denies her the role of religious disputant by calling her worthiness as an interlocutor into question. The intensity with which Rabbi Eliezer refuses to talk Torah with a woman makes the respectful, intellectual exchanges between the matrona and Rabbi Yose which characterize Genesis Rabbah and other midrashic works all the more surprising.

As the next section will indicate, the reprieve which Genesis Rabbah grants the matrona in allowing her to speak both of her gender and despite it did not extend to the Babylonian Talmud. In the Babylonian Talmud, the vulgarity which characterizes the matrona in but one of the Yerushalmi stories becomes the rule. Bodily issues of eating, sex, and defecation displace the Genesis Rabbah matrona's interests in theology and exegesis. The intellectual challenges which the matrona voices in the midrash and in Yerushalmi Sotah are completely absent in the Babylonian Talmud.

The Case of the Bavli

The differences between the portrayal of the matrona in Genesis Rabbah and her portrayal in the Babylonian Talmud are easily accounted for, given the geographical distance separating the two works. It might be that the matrona dialogues of Genesis Rabbah were simply unknown to the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud. It is also possible that, having emerged in a Roman Palestinian setting, these stories would have had little resonance among Babylonian Jewry. Yet though dialogues featuring a matrona are absent from the Babylonian Talmud, a good number of dialogues between sages and other figures from the Roman world, such as heretics,⁸ emperors,⁹ and Antoninus,¹⁰ do appear. Alongside these characters imported from a Palestinian milieu are figures native to Babylonia, for instance an *amgoshā*, a Zoroastrian priest, is presented in dialogue with Amemar.¹¹ While we cannot know for sure why the matrona dialogues are not present among the other Palestinian dialogues preserved within the Babylonian Talmud, there is some evidence that the outspoken, intelligent and well-educated matrona of Genesis Rabbah was deliberately shut out of the Babylonian Talmud.

The matrona's absence is most arresting in one talmudic dialogue which closely parallels the matrona story in Genesis Rabbah 17:7. In its Genesis Rabbah incarnation, the story features the matrona questioning the suspicious nature of God's creation of woman; Rabbi Yose responds by

⁸ b. Sanhedrin 38b-39a; 90b-91a.

⁹ b. Sanhedrin 39a; b. Hullin 59b-60a.

¹⁰ b. Sanhedrin 91a-91b.

¹¹ b. Sanhedrin 39a.

generously praising women's merit. The version in the Babylonian Talmud shifts the gender of the participants, transferring the matrona's question to a male figure:

Caesar¹² said to Rabban Gamaliel: "Your God is a thief, as it is written, 'Then God caused sleep to fall upon the human, and he slept.'" (Genesis 2:21)
His daughter said to him: "Leave him to me so that I can respond."
She said to him: "Get me an army commander."
He said to her: "Why do you need one?"
"Bandits came upon us last night, and took from us a silver pitcher, leaving us a gold one in its place."
He said to her: "Such bandits should come upon us every day!"
"And so was it not good for the first human that they took his rib from him, but gave him a maidservant to serve him in its place?"
He said to her: "This is what I'm saying: why not take it out in the open?"
She said to him: "Bring me a piece of meat."
They brought it to her, and she placed it under her arm,¹³ then took it out.
She said to him: "Eat from this."
He said to her: "That is repulsive to me."
She said to him: "And to the first human she (Eve) likewise would have been repulsive if God had taken her out in the open."
(b. Sanhedrin 39a)

The first task in analyzing this story is to determine who the speakers are. While there is good evidence that the questioner is best understood as Caesar, it is harder to determine the identity of the daughter who answers

him. Is it Caesar's daughter, or Rabban Gamaliel's daughter? The parallel to this story collected by Moses Gaster presumes the speaker is Caesar's daughter, and has her say, "Silence, silence, Master of the Jews. I'll answer Father."¹⁴ This identification of the speaker would correspond to other dialogue stories within the Babylonian Talmud in which a Caesar's daughter questions a sage.¹⁵ If this was the case though, the story would have ceased to be a confrontation between a Jew and a non-Jew. Identifying the daughter as a Jew would mean that the Talmud here maintains the dialogue form of the Genesis Rabbah story, and had simply shifted the gender identities of the speakers so that a Roman male of the upper classes would engage a Jewish female, rather than a Roman female of the upper classes questioning a Jewish male. To better appreciate other changes which the Talmud makes, it is helpful to consider the two stories side by side. Here is the version in Genesis Rabbah:

A matrona questioned Rabbi Yose.
She said to him: "Why through theft (was woman created)?"
He said to her: "A parable. If a person secretly gave you an ounce of silver for safekeeping, and you returned to him a litra (12 ounces) of silver in public, is that considered theft?"
She said to him: "But why in secret?"
He said to her: "At first He created her (Woman) for him, and he (Adam) saw her full of mucous and blood, and he distanced her from himself. God returned and created her for a second time."
She said to him: "I can add to your words. I was supposed to be married to the brother of my mother, but since I grew up with

¹² This is the reading suggested by Epstein's translation, based on manuscript evidence. The printed edition of the Talmud features an apostrophe. It is easy to see how "Caesar" could have given rise to "cofer" during the process of scribal copying. A later parallel to this story identifies the speaker as Caesar in Sefer HaMa'asiyot p. 34, no. 55.

¹³ This translation follows Epstein. Rashi interprets this line to mean that she placed raw meat in the fire to roast. Because Caesar saw the meat in its unprepared state, he found it repulsive even after it was cooked. I prefer this translation because watching meat emerge from an armpit seems considerably more repulsive than watching it cook, and thus makes for a more powerful

argument. Additionally, the daughter's placement of the meat under her arm parallels Eve's origins in Adam's side.

¹⁴ Sefer HaMa'asiyot, 34.

¹⁵ In b. Hullin 60a, Caesar's daughter interprets Ps. 104:3 to mean that God is a carpenter. Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah responds by praying that she be struck with leprosy. In b. Nedarim 50b, Caesar's daughter again approaches Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, accusing God for having created the rabbi ugly. The rabbi counters that great wines are kept in plain vessels.

him in the house, I grew ugly in his eyes, and he went and married another woman who is not as beautiful as I."
(Genesis Rabbah 17:7, p. 158)

In treating the Genesis Rabbah story in Chapter III, I suggested that the story subtly plays the matrona's gender identity against her identity as a religious disputant. Rabbi Yose's effusive praise for women in general effectively undermines the theological challenge the matrona represents as an individual. His rhetorical strategy pushes her into either disputing his generous characterization of woman, or relinquishing the debate. Additionally, Rabbi Yose's compliments toward womankind, and the matrona's bold pronouncement of her own beauty lend the whole dialogue a flirtatious tone. In the Babylonian version of the story, such playfulness is entirely absent. Praise for womankind is after all to be expected from a female speaker, and so this story offers none of the delightful surprise of Genesis Rabbah. And whether we identify the female speaker as either the rabbi's daughter or the Caesar's daughter, the father-daughter relationship highlighted by the story utterly neutralizes any possibility for a romantic subtext.

Another area of significant difference between the two versions of the story is in the mode of storytelling. In Genesis Rabbah, the narrative unfolds exclusively in the abstracted realm of speech acts. There is no action outside the parameters of dialogue. While Rabbi Yose draws analogies to daily life, he asks the matrona to imagine these situations, he does not attempt to enact them. The story's dramatic tension is coiled up in the characters' rhetorical

moves and innuendo. The version in the Talmud replaces such subtlety with drama. While the argument unfolds in the same two stages—first demonstrating that a wife is to be valued over a rib, then illustrating how God's secrecy ensured that Adam would find Eve attractive—the daughter dramatizes each stage of the argument. Rather than asking Caesar to simply imagine bandits who give more than they take, she pretends that she herself has undergone such an experience. While in Genesis Rabbah, the rabbi tells the matrona of God's aborted attempt to create a wife for Adam out in the open, in the Talmud an analogous event is fabricated for Caesar to experience. Caesar (and the story's audience) experience the feelings of repulsion which are merely described in Genesis Rabbah as the daughter serves up the meat she had placed in her armpit.

The Babylonian version of the story is much less generous in its treatment of women than is Genesis Rabbah, in several respects. First, while Genesis Rabbah places praise of woman in the mouth of a rabbi, the Talmud transfers it to the mouth of a woman. Whether we identify the daughter as a Jew or a non-Jew, from a rabbinic perspective her status is considerably inferior to that of a rabbi. The daughter's praise of woman, aside from being more predictable, carries considerably less authority than do Rabbi Yose's words.

The second way in which the Talmud undermines Genesis Rabbah's treatment of women is in the content of the praise itself. Rabbi Yose's positive evaluation of woman is expressed exclusively through the parable in which

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he compares Eve to a litra of silver. In contrast, the daughter explicates the parable she enacts; in the *"nimshal"* which she offers, Eve is to be valued as a maidservant in Adam's service. The rhetorical goal of demonstrating Eve's benefit to Adam is the same in each instance, but in the Talmud woman's benefit is limited to her role as her husband's servant. Even as the Talmud praises women's value, it subjugates them to the control of men. The fact that the portrayal of women as servile subjects is placed in the mouth of a woman makes this shift away from Genesis Rabbah's unrestrained praise for women all the more insidious.

The third way in which the Babylonian Talmud undermines Genesis Rabbah's elevation of women is by comparing the creation of woman to the treatment of meat. Genesis Rabbah accounted for Adam's repulsion from the first Eve by evoking images of birth. The path taken by the Talmud is much more graphic and unsettling, as the daughter effectively compares the first woman to a piece of meat. The analogy is even more damning to women than the earlier definition of woman as maidservant, in that it reduces woman to raw physicality. While the Genesis Rabbah story culminates by portraying women as sexual objects, it is at least complimentary toward women's beauty and attractiveness. In the Babylonian version, the story does not progress long enough to offset the daughter's repulsive act of placing the meat under her armpit; as the story ends we are left with an image of woman that is utterly dehumanizing.

How can we account for the differences between the two stories? If we read them as parallel crystallizations of a single narrative tradition, we allow for the possibility that the Babylonian Talmud was not familiar with the specific version of the story preserved in Genesis Rabbah. The differences between the two versions, particularly with respect to the treatment of women, could thus be explained as resulting from differences between the two cultures in which the two stories emerged. The denigration of women in the Babylonian version of this story is in fact consistent with trends other scholars have associated with the Babylonian Talmud. For example, Boyarin has compared the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds' treatment of the question of whether women may study Torah and found that while both Talmuds ultimately reject women's learning, the Palestinian Talmud tolerates a more generous attitude as a minority opinion, while the Bavli seeks to root out such leniency toward women from the Mishnah itself.¹⁶ The servile status the Babylonian version of our story assigns to women might therefore reflect a historical reality in which the women of Babylonian Jewry lived in a more circumscribed realm than women in Roman Palestine.

It is thus possible that the generous treatment of women in Genesis Rabbah reflects the relative freedom of women in Palestine, while their denigration in the Babylonian Talmud results from differing cultural conditions. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that the differences between the two stories result from a more deliberate hand, that the redactors

¹⁶ Boyarin 1993, 166-196.

of the Babylonian Talmud were familiar with the Genesis Rabbah story, but that rather than reproducing it within the Talmud they re-shaped it so as to bring it into keeping with their own attitudes about women. Among the changes made were the elimination of any hint of romance between the two interlocutors, and the reining-in of praise for women. Such a deliberate re-working of the story would exemplify what Ilan identifies as the Bavli's tendency to "censor" material on women. Examples of such censorship cited by Ilan include talmudic passages that re-work earlier rabbinic materials granting women ritual privileges they are later denied, and deletions of narratives featuring female characters.¹⁷ While such a suspicious reading of the Babylonian version of our dialogue is thus consistent with the Babylonian Talmud's demonstrated treatment of women in other contexts, in this case it is impossible to confirm.

I have now analyzed a story from the Babylonian Talmud in which the *matrona* is striking in her absence, and considered the possibility that her absence is a deliberate deletion. What can be said of the portrayal of the *matrona* in talmudic stories where she does appear? It is to these traditions that I now turn.

As noted above, while a *matrona* appears in multiple stories within the Babylonian Talmud, she is never portrayed in a dialogue about religion, as she is throughout Genesis Rabbah. There are several references within the Babylonian Talmud to a "*matronita*" (as she is known in the Bavli) who

serves in a supportive role to the rabbis. Sanhedrin 14a mentions in passing that when Rabbi Abbahu arrived at the court of the Caesar, the *matronitas* of the court greeted him with song and blessing. At Nedarim 50a an unnamed *matronita* appears in a list of the sources for Rabbi Akiba's wealth; alongside her appears a named Roman woman, the wife of Tineius Rufus. The details of how Tineius Rufus' wife converted to Judaism and married Akiba are provided in a story which appears at Avoda Zarah 20a. For an account of how the anonymous *matronita* became Akiba's benefactress, we must look to Rashi on Nedarim, who explains that when God and the sea providentially repaid the *matrona* for a loan she had made to Akiba, he was allowed to keep the sum she had lent him. A third story which presents a *matronita* as a friend of the rabbis appears twice in the Bavli, at Rosh Hashana 19a, and at Ta'anit 18a. The story recounts how when the government of Rome issued decrees forbidding the study of Torah, the observance of Shabbat, and circumcision, Judah ben Shamu'a and his colleagues sought advice from a *matronita* who was known to host Roman notables. The Jews followed the *matronita*'s counsel, that night issuing a proclamation about the uniqueness of the Jewish people, and the decrees were annulled. In all of these sources, the *matronita* is a sympathetic figure, who is distinguished either by her wealth or by her high position in Roman society.

Alongside these portrayals of a *matronita* as a sympathetic Roman are several stories which present her as a threat to the rabbis. For example, Shabbat 127b introduces a *matronita* as the same type of figure who appears at

¹⁷ Ilan 1997, 60-84.

Rosh Hashana 19a, and at Ta'anit 18a—a prominent Roman who rabbis can turn to in time of need. However, in this story, the matronita is much more than a potential benefactress; she also represents a sexual danger:

Once, rabbinical scholars were in need of something from a certain matronita whom all the prominent Romans used to visit.

They said: "Who will go?"

Rabbi Joshua said to them: "I will go."

Rabbi Joshua set off with his students. When he approached the entrance to her house, he took off his tefillin at a distance of four cubits. Then he entered and locked the door in their face. After he emerged he immersed in a mikva and then instructed his students.

He said to them: "When I took off my tefillin, of what did you suspect me?"

"We said: Apparently the Rabbi does not want to bring sacred words into a place of impurity."

"When I locked the door, of what did you suspect me?"

"We said: There is probably a matter of state between him and her."

"When I went and immersed, of what did you suspect me?"

"We said: Probably some spit from her mouth sprayed onto the Rabbi's clothes."

He said to them: "The incident was like that exactly. Just as you judged me with favor, so may God judge you with favor."

(b. Shabbat 127b)

This story comes to exemplify the rabbinic value of judging others favorably (*lekaf zechut*), rather than jumping to conclusions based on appearances. It is immediately preceded by two other stories in which individuals are judged favorably despite compromising circumstances. Our story deliberately leads the audience into questioning Rabbi Joshua's behavior, only to ultimately chastise us for prejudging the rabbi. In pursuit of this rhetorical strategy, the story plays on readers' expectations that a foreign woman represents a sexual threat. When Rabbi Joshua's behavior appears to

indicate that he had sexual relations with the matronita, his questionable behavior only serves to confirm our presumption that the matronita would tempt him. He uses her as a prop to test his students. While the story ultimately vindicates Rabbi Joshua, it does not dispel our image of the matronita as temptress; the fact that Rabbi Joshua maintains his chastity throughout his meeting with the matronita is a measure of *his* piety and restraint, which has no bearing on the characterization of the matronita.

In other stories, the sexual danger which the matronita represents is more explicit. A sugya at Kidushin 39b presents three separate stories in which matronitas attempt to seduce rabbis. In the first, Rabbi Hanina bar Pappi tries to repel a matronita's advances by pronouncing a spell which causes his body to erupt with boils. When she counters this magic with her own, the rabbi flees, taking refuge in a dangerous bathhouse. Providential salvation is his reward for so adamantly resisting temptation. This story is followed by another in which a matronita tempts Rabbi Zadok. The rabbi persuades her to prepare him something to eat, and after she lights the oven, he climbs into it. Impressed by the lengths to which the rabbi would go to avoid sexual temptation, the matronita relents in her advances. In the third story of the series, Rabbi Kahana is selling baskets when a certain matronita propositions him. The rabbi begs her leave to go adorn himself, then slips away and jumps off the roof. Elijah rescues the rabbi, but chides him for making him go to such troubles. As the story closes, he gives the rabbi money so that he can avoid such vulnerable situations in the future.

While the matronita of the second story is portrayed as slightly more sympathetic than the other two, in all three stories the matronita functions as a sexual temptress who tests the rabbis' resistance. It is unclear what role, if any, the matronita's aristocratic status plays in these stories. Perhaps her social position makes it unsafe for rabbis to rebuff or insult her. While the third story suggests that Rabbi Kahana's poverty contributes to his vulnerability, none of the three portrayals makes any explicit reference to the matronita's wealth. In these stories, the matronita is little more than the embodiment of sexual danger. At the same time, her sexuality has an almost mythic power which little short of death or divine intervention can subdue. She robs rabbis of their masculinity, countering Rabbi Hanina's magical powers with her own, and casting Rabbi Kahana in the feminine role of sexual object as he sets off to adorn himself. In all three instances, the rabbis sacrifice their bodily integrity--subjecting themselves to disease, immolation or a fatal fall--in order to escape temptation. The dangers to which the rabbis subject themselves grow progressively more drastic, but in no case can the rabbi resist the matronita through sheer force of will.

There is yet another story in which a matronita undermines the rabbis' masculinity, this time not by seducing the rabbis, but rather by directly insulting them:

When Rabbi Ishmael son of Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon would meet and walk together, an ox could pass

between them (underneath their bellies) and would not touch them (they were so fat).¹⁸

A certain matronita said to them: "Your children cannot be yours."

They said to her: "Theirs (feminine) are bigger than ours."

"All the more so."

Some say this is what they said to her: "'As the man, so is his strength.'" (Judges 8:21)

Others say they said this to her: "'Love conquers the flesh.'" (b. Baba Metzia 84a)

Though multiple interpretations of this story are possible, the coarseness of the matronita's character is unmistakable. While this story does proceed as a dialogue between the matronita and the rabbis, the matronita's vulgar inquiry into the rabbis' sex lives is far removed from the religious queries of Genesis Rabbah's matrona. For all the coarseness of the subject matter, the story is rhetorically sophisticated in that it plays on a double entendre which leads to a misunderstanding among the interlocutors.

As the story begins, the matronita archly proclaims that given the rabbis' obesity, they could not possibly have fathered children. As Rashi explains it, the matronita here suggests that given their unwieldy size, the rabbis could not function sexually. The rabbis understand the matronita to be intimating that the rabbis' wives could not possibly be attracted to such obese men, and counter that their wives' girths are as great as their own.¹⁹ Only

¹⁸ Because of the wide girths of the rabbis, when they walked beside each other with their sides touching, their bodies would form a kind of bridge broad enough for an ox to pass beneath.

¹⁹ Rashi suggests another possible interpretation as well: that their wives' sexual desire was greater than their own, and so they were not put off by their husband's appearance. However, the matronita deduces from this that, given their considerable libidos, they would seek to satisfy their sexual desires with other men. The two possible retorts could thus be seen as assertions that 1) the men's libidos were as great as their physical size or 2) that the love

when the matronita responds "All the more so," do the rabbis come to understand that the matronita's initial accusation was based solely on her assessment of the rabbis' physical ability to approach their wives sexually--If the wives are indeed even larger than the husbands, it makes the mechanics of sexual intercourse even harder to imagine. Each of the two suggested comments with which the rabbis respond to the matronita indicates that they have come to understand the force of the matronita's initial comment. The first response intimates that a man's strength, i.e. his penis (so Rashi!), is appropriate to his person; thus the rabbis reassure the matronita that they are sexually equipped to overcome their wide girths. The second response suggests that in the heat of passion, obesity is no barrier to lovemaking.

In this story, as in the stories in *b. Kiddushin*, the matronita's character focuses attention on the rabbis' sexuality and on their bodies. In other stories, the matronita's interest in the rabbis' sexual performance is displaced by inquiries into the rabbis' other bodily functions, including ingestion and defecation. For example, two Babylonian stories, both paralleling a single story from the Yerushalmi, open with the matronita mocking Rabbi Judah for his red face. In *Nedarim* 49b, the matronita accuses the rabbi of being a drunk, and the rabbi counters that his glowing cheeks reflect his wisdom. In *Berachot*

which characterizes their marriage could not be put off by such superficial concerns of physicality. Boyarin suggests yet another possible interpretation, which is even more graphic. According to Boyarin, the rabbis understand the matronita to have presumed that the size of their penises matches the size of their abdomens, and therefore surely cannot be accommodated by their wives. The rabbis therefore reassure the matronita that their wives' vaginas are even bigger than their penises. The matronita, who was after all referring to the rabbis' bellies, sees this as compounding the mechanical problem of sex. Boyarin 1993, 203-204.

55a, the matronita accuses Rabbi Judah of being either a pig-breeder or a usurer. The rabbi responds that both pursuits are forbidden to him, and offers the actual explanation for his flushed appearance: there are 24 outhouses between his home and the Beit Midrash, and it is his practice to pay a visit to each one. His red cheeks should thus be understood as a result of his straining himself on the toilet. In this story as in the matronita's sexual inquiries in *Baba Metzia*, vulgarity and coarseness are not merely traits of the matronita, but characterize the stories as a whole.

The subject of defecation is the context for yet another story featuring a matronita. *Shabbat* 81b explores the topic of what materials are appropriate for wiping oneself on Shabbat. While a shard is forbidden, the question is raised as to whether this is a prohibition unique to the sabbath, or whether shards are always prohibited for reasons of witchcraft. The following story is cited as a demonstration of how wiping with shards makes one vulnerable to witchcraft: Rabbi Hisda and Rabbah son of Rabbi Huna were travelling in a boat. A certain matronita wanted to sit with them and when they refused she cast a spell on the boat and made it stop moving. The rabbis responded in turn, and freed the boat. The matronita complained that since the rabbis refrained from wiping themselves with shards, from killing bugs on their clothes, and from eating vegetables without loosening the bunch in which they are bound, her magic has no power over them.²⁰ While this story does little to clarify the specific way in which shards function magically, it does

²⁰ This story appears in *Hullin* 105b as well.

portray the matronita as a nuisance intent on discussing the rabbis' intimate physical behaviors.

A final story portraying a matronita presents her as an expert in the art of healing, a realm akin to witchcraft in the rabbinic imagination. In this story, which appears at Yoma 84a and at Avodah Zarah 28a, a rabbi seeks out the matronita's attention to his body rather than avoiding it. Rabbi Yohanan suffers from scurvy, and so he entrusts himself to her care. Though she wishes to keep her cure a secret, Rabbi Yohanan tricks her into divulging it and proceeds to publicize it in a sermon.

In contrast to the matrona of *Genesis Rabbah*, who is clearly shaped by a single set of literary conventions, the matronitas of the Babylonian Talmud are a diverse group. Portrayals of the matronita fall into several broad categories which overlap: she is variously presented as a benefactress of the rabbis, as a sexual temptress, as a practitioner of healing and witchcraft, and as an observer (or manipulator) of rabbis' bodies. While in *Genesis Rabbah*, the matrona stories often provided a context for the discussion of women's concerns, in the Babylonian Talmud the matronita stories tend to focus attention on the male bodies of the rabbis.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the Babylonian version of the dialogue about Eve's creation reflects a cultural milieu in which women's roles are much more circumscribed than in Palestine. It is thus not surprising that, within the context of the Babylonian Talmud, Roman ladies are never

portrayed as expert in the realms which the rabbis valued most: exegesis and argument. Did the Babylonian Talmud systematically reject stories which portray articulate women who were learned in religion, did such stories fail to penetrate the imaginations of Babylonian rabbis, or did these stories simply fail to travel the distance from Palestine to Babylonia? Each explanation would entail an argument from silence. There is no way to determine whether the Babylonian Talmud's crude portrayal of the matronita is in any way a deliberate counter to the cultural threat that the Palestinian figure of the learned matrona represented.

Whatever the relationship between the matrona and the matronita, the contrasts between them are telling: The matrona is an intellectual, interested in words and ideas. While she is sometimes portrayed as a sexual object, her sexuality is rarefied in that she does not act, but only speaks. In contrast, the matronita is a force which acts on the world, sometimes acting in the rabbis' interest, sometimes snaring them in sexual traps. Her interest is not in abstract ideas, but in embodied particulars—in individual rabbis' appearances or behaviors. For all the differences between the two figures, both the matrona and the matronita are clearly the creations of rabbinic imaginations: the matrona serves to demonstrate the wisdom of rabbinic argument and interpretation, while the matronita exposes rabbinic anxieties about sexuality and physicality. Palestinian rabbis hold the matrona up as evidence of their own intellects, while Babylonian rabbis cast the matronita as prosecutor of their bodily weaknesses. In both cases, the distinctive social

space Roman ladies inhabit means that when rabbinic storytellers imagine them from across the boundaries of gender and religion, the matrons serve as touchstones for the construction of rabbinic identities.

Conclusion

Unlike other works which treat the matrona of the midrash as a shadow of a woman who existed in history, in this project I have trained the spotlight on the only matrona a reader can truly come to know—the character of the matrona as she is variously portrayed in the midrash and Talmudim. I have found that the figure of the matrona plays several different literary functions in the various rabbinic works in which she appears. In the Palestinian Talmud, at p. Sotah 14b, the story of an aborted dialogue between a matrona and a rabbi comes to illustrate rabbinic reluctance to teaching Torah to women. Despite this well-attested attitude toward discussing Scripture with women, in Genesis Rabbah, seven stories portray an intelligent Roman lady interrogating Rabbi Yose about issues of Jewish interpretation and belief. These stories participate in a broader literary topos of dialogues between sages and figures from the Roman world.

As in other dialogue-stories, the matrona stories' portrayals of a non-Jewish character submitting to rabbinic teachings serve to demonstrate the wisdom and truth of the Torah as interpreted by the Sages. But while the matrona of Genesis Rabbah is comparable to other interlocutors such as philosophers, emperors, and heretics, she plays a distinctive role within Genesis Rabbah as the only female in dialogue with rabbis. Genesis Rabbah exploits this aspect of her identity, presenting her as a soundboard for rabbinic ideas about sexuality and childbirth. In some of these stories, the matrona does more than simply listen to Rabbi Yose's views on women; as she engages

the rabbi in conversation about the nature of sexual attraction, she embodies rabbinic views about women's sexuality.

Other works develop the figure of the *matrona* differently. *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Pesikta deRav Kahana* emphasize the *matrona*'s social status, as opposed to her gender, and use the form of the dialogue to criticize the arrogance of the Roman aristocracy. In later compilations, the *matrona*'s distinctive identities as a woman and as an aristocrat seem to have been forgotten, and she functions as a generic spokesperson for gentile polemics against Judaism. In these stories, she is fully assimilated into the general *topos* of dialogues between sages and non-Jews. One story, in *Midrash HaGadol* to Deut 26:19, seems very deliberate in its efforts to neutralize the sexual danger the *matrona* embodied as a self-possessed gentile woman. In contrast, the Babylonian Talmud portrays Roman ladies primarily in terms of the sexual threat they represent. In the *Bavli*, *matronitas* are denied the possibility of real intellectual exchange with rabbis, and instead play the roles of sorceresses, seducers, and tormenters who call attention to the rabbis' physical vulnerabilities.

The diverse roles the *matrona* plays within rabbinic literature demonstrate how a single *topos* can fulfill a variety of narrative functions. Over the course of this project, I have made some speculations about how the storytelling conventions governing the *matrona*'s portrayal have been shaped by the social conventions of the rabbinic storytellers. For example, I suggested that within a Palestinian milieu somewhat amenable to women's study, the

matrona's character developed as an intelligent religious disputant, while Babylonian sages who denied women the privileges of Torah study likewise denied characters like the *matrona* any intellectual abilities. While it is impossible to determine what historical factors contributed to depictions of the *matrona*, it is interesting to speculate about what the social functions of stories about her might have been.

In his social history of public disputations in late antiquity, Richard Lim suggests that a culture of debate among the various philosophical and religious sects of pre-Constantine imperial Rome reflected the Graeco-Roman intellectual value of rational persuasion. He writes, "In the world of late antiquity, the superior claim of rational persuasion moderated, in varying degrees, the conflicts between Jews and Christians, between Christians and pagans, and among various Christian sects."¹ The dialogue-stories of *Genesis Rabbah*, though most likely composed for internal Jewish consumption, participate in this broader culture of rational debate. Even as rabbinic sages portray themselves defeating pagan and heretical disputants, their uses of rhetoric and reason in defeating their foes indicate the degree to which Hellenistic modes of discourse penetrated rabbinic culture. Dialogue-stories within *Genesis Rabbah*, including stories of the *matrona*, portray non-Jews as intellectual beings who, though they possess wrong opinions, are capable of being swayed by the superior wisdom of rabbinic Judaism. In contrast to rabbinic stories which come to illustrate the evils of Rome as the "Wicked

¹ Lim, 4.

Empire," dialogue-stories can be seen as rabbinic justifications for Jewish cooperation with Roman authorities. Thus, within the contexts of dialogue-stories, even Hadrian, destroyer of the Jewish Temple, can be redeemed through his submission to rabbinic argumentation.²

While the dialogue-stories in general may function as justifications of cooperation with Rome, the *matrona* stories of *Genesis Rabbah* are a special case. Though these stories often begin as disputes about theological and exegetical claims which distinguish Jews from non-Jews, as these stories progress they often shift to matters of universal concern—issues of sexuality which cut across religious and national boundaries. In these stories, the *matrona-as-religious-disputant* retreats, as the *matrona-as-woman* takes center stage. Religious conflict is contained as confessional differences are displaced by less threatening gender differences. At the same time, the *matrona* stories' attention to sexuality makes them a context in which rabbinic anxieties about women in general, and about foreign women in particular, surface. Rabbi Yose's glib discussion of sexual attraction in GR 17:7 and his adamant insistence on Joseph's abstinence in GR 87:6 can both be read as stories of flirtation across religious boundaries. Having read the dialogue-stories in general as rabbinic efforts to negotiate a place for themselves within Roman culture, we can now appreciate the sexualized portrayals of the *matrona* as acknowledgments of both the enticements and dangers which Rome represents. In pursuing intimate conversation with the *matrona* even

as he resists her subtle advances, the character of Rabbi Yose offers a model of how rabbis might engage in the intellectual culture of Rome even as they uphold strict religious boundaries.

It is interesting to note that while *Genesis Rabbah* occasionally has complimentary things to say about women from the biblical past,³ the *matrona* is the only female character who is portrayed in dialogue with the rabbis.⁴ The prominence of the *matrona* stories within *Genesis Rabbah* makes the absence of Jewish women interlocutors all the more striking. *Genesis Rabbah* seems to credit a non-Jewish woman with intellectual gifts and privileges which it denies women from within the Jewish community. It seems that even as the *matrona* discusses topics of interest to all women, her powers of thought and speech are manifestations of her identity as a Roman, not as a woman. As a figure who would have lived outside the bounds of rabbinic control, the *matrona* would have been less threatening for rabbis than a Jewish woman who was comparably gifted. As a foreign woman, the *matrona* provided rabbinic storytellers with a mechanism for representing a woman's point of view without empowering the women of their own community through favorable representations of Jewish women.

When we appreciate *Genesis Rabbah's* dialogue-stories as a manifestation of Graeco-Roman intellectual culture at a particular moment in the history of the Roman Empire, it is not surprising that the subtle artistry

² GR 10:3; GR 28:3; GR 78:1

³ GR 45:4; GR 47:1.

⁴ An exception to this is the daughter of Rabban Gamaliel, who requests blessings from her father in GR 26:4. However, since she fails to understand her father's responses, this story cannot be seen as representing true dialogue.

of the Genesis Rabbah matrona stories is lacking in later midrashim and in the Babylonian Talmud. Arguably, such compilations were not nurtured by the culture of respectful, rational dialogue which gave rise to the Genesis Rabbah stories. This is not to imply that Babylonian rabbinic culture is inferior or subordinate to Palestinian rabbinic culture; it is only to suggest that portrayals of the matrona had to be adapted in ways that spoke to the particular concerns and anxieties of the Babylonian sages. To fully appreciate the social functions of the matrona stories in later midrashim and in the Babylonian Talmud would involve a thorough-going investigation of the presentation of women and non-Jews in each respective work, and consideration of the cultural context within which each work emerged. While such a study is beyond the scope of this project, it is the direction in which my analysis points.

I was initially drawn to the matrona stories of Genesis Rabbah because they seemed to promise what is all too rare in rabbinic Judaism: portrayals of a woman endowed with intellectual abilities who could hold her own in dialogue with the rabbis. That the matrona's intellect did not come at the expense of her sexuality made her all the more appealing. Yet for all my initial excitement, the story of the matrona which I have presented here is a sobering one; it is disappointing that such a compelling female character as the matrona is so exceptional, and it is disappointing that when the center of rabbinic culture shifted to Babylonia, this rare portrait of female power failed to travel the distance. Yet for all these disappointments, the matrona who

questioned, debated, and teased Rabbi Yose, and the rabbis who created her, issued a challenge which still resonates today: to speak across boundaries of gender, class, and religion, and to recognize in our interlocutors all the complexity and dignity which we value in ourselves.

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