

Roman Emperors in Talmudic Literature*

YUVAL SHAHAR

R. Naḥman opened his discourse with the text, *Therefore fear thou not, O Jacob My servant* (Jer. xxx,10). This speaks of Jacob himself, of whom it is written, *And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth . . . and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it* (Gen. xxviii,12). These angels . . . were the guardian princes of the nations . . . the Holy One, blessed be He, showed our father Jacob the prince of Babylon ascending seventy rungs of the ladder, the prince of Media fifty-two rungs, the prince of Greece one hundred and eighty, while the prince of Edom [= Rome] ascended till Jacob did not know how many rungs. Thereupon our father Jacob was afraid. He thought: is it possible that this one will never be brought down? Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: *'Fear thou not, O Jacob My servant.'* Even if he ascend and sit down by Me, I will bring him down from there!¹

This *midrash* clearly shows both the unique role of Rome in Jewish history in antiquity and the central place it occupies in Talmudic literature. A comprehensive study of Rome's role in the Talmudic literature would require us to collect, analyze and categorize all the sources referring to Rome, both directly and indirectly, as a collective political and cultural entity, through Rome as an empire (usually an evil one), down to details of toponymy in the place names from the city of Rome itself to the port of Brindisium, as well as the names of important Roman personae. As far as I know, there is at present no such comprehensive study, which would have to be vast. The present chapter is devoted to a narrow but important part of the Talmudic image of Rome: Roman emperors.

A methodological note: the Talmudic literature is ahistoric. It was created over a millennium, and even its earlier stages in Late Antiquity started at the beginning of the third century and continued to develop up to the seventh. There were two different centers – Palestine and Babylonia – which created two different Talmuds, and in Palestine especially rabbinic

* This chapter was given for the first time as a paper at the conference 'Rome – an empire of many nations', in honour of Benjamin Isaac (Tel Aviv University, May 2015). A different version of the present chapter was presented at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, as part of the seminar on Jewish History and Literature in the Graeco-Roman Period, headed by Martin Goodman (November 2015).

¹ Va-Yiqra Rabbah, Emor 29, 2 (ed. Soncino, adapted).

literature branched out into different genres. Nevertheless, many narratives and anecdotes about historical events and personae, in our case Roman emperors, were described, related and repeated throughout all the Talmudic literature over many periods. This is why it is so essential to analyze each text carefully in its context. Jewish religious regulations (*halakhah*) have to be understood in their religious, cultural, sociological and political framework; and when analyzing a tale, our reading should address the different contexts of interpretation: literary, generic, comparative and historical. I cannot, of course, go into every detail of the development of the character of Hadrian, for instance, but only draw the bottom line – or rather lines – of what Jews told themselves about a named emperor, in Palestine on the one hand and in Babylonia on the other. In some cases, usually in the Palestinian literature, we can trace different chronological phases that shift and vary the profile and role of a particular Roman emperor. All the sources which we relate to are from the late second to the early third centuries up to the sixth century CE. The earliest are from the Palestinian tannaitic literature (i.e. up to the middle of the third century), while the rest were produced by the Palestinian Amoraim in the Jerusalem Talmud (which was redacted or came to an end in the seventies of the fourth century), and the early Palestinian *midrashei Aggadah*, *Bereshit Rabbah* and *Va-Yiqrah Rabbah* from the fifth or sixth century. From the other side of the Euphrates we can hear the Jewish Babylonian voice, through the Babylonian Talmud, mainly from the fourth to the sixth centuries.

There are nine named emperors in the whole of the Talmudic literature,² but two of these are barely mentioned and will not concern us: Augustus appears usually as a title,³ and Tiberius is noted because of the city called

² Usually scholars identify *gaskalgas* גסקלגס with the emperor Gaius Caligula: T Sotah xiii,6 (ed. Lieberman: 232); JT Sotah ix 24b; BT Sotah 33a; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah viii,9. This identification followed the medieval scholia of Megillat Ta'anit on 22nd Shvat (Noam 2003: 112–14. See also the discussion and previous literature, pp. 283–90; dating the various scholia, pp. 424–6, 386–91). However, all the Talmudic texts connect Gaskalgas with Shimo'n haTzadiq, a figure from the Hellenistic, not the Roman, period. See especially Seder Olam Rabbah (Milikovski 2013: I, 323–4), which names Gaskalgas as one of the last Hellenistic kings מלכי יון who are separated from the wars against the Romans. Milikovski 2013: II, 550–1, came to the same conclusion concerning Seder Olam, but concluded that the Talmudic sources referred to Gaius Caligula, and even suggests, strangely, that these sources are dependent on the scholia of Megillat Ta'anit (n. 258, p. 551). See recently the discussion of Noam 2017: 453–84.

³ JT Berakhot ix,12d; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah i,19; Shir ha-Shirim Zuta i,6 (ed. Buber: 12); Esther Rabbah i,19; Aggadat Bereshit L,1 (ed. Buber: 101); Shmot Rabbah, be-Shalah' xiii,1. There is only one occurrence of 'Augustus' referring to the first Roman Emperor in the Talmudic literature: Shir ha-Shirim Zuta i,12 (ed. Buber: 12). 'Augusta' is used several times as a title for the Biblical queen Vashti: Esther Rabbah iii,5 and 8; Shir ha-Shirim Zuta i,6 (ed. Buber: 12); Midrash Tehilim x,6 (ed. Buber: 96), xvii,11 (ed. Buber: 133).

after him.⁴ This holds true also for Nero in the Palestinian literature, although in Babylonia his role is more significant and positive.⁵ Thus, we are left with six emperors to deal with, who are categorized according to the Talmudic attitude to them and after Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood, as the Good, the Bad (at times they are also ugly . . .) and the Middling. Historically, we should start with the Bad.

The Bad are those emperors who fought against and crushed the great Jewish revolts in Palestine and the Jewish diaspora during the first and second centuries CE: Vespasian, Titus, Trajan and Hadrian. I shall confine myself here to dealing only with Hadrian.⁶

Hadrian, like the 'bad' emperors who preceded him, opens his Talmudic career in the Palestinian literature with a terrible reputation based on very solid historical grounds: he crushed the Bar-Kokhva revolt, causing a great disaster for the Jewish people in their land in antiquity. His cruelty surpassed the deeds and character of Titus, and even those of Trajan and his bloodshed (in Egypt and Cyprus): Hadrian, we are told, devastated the land; killed hundreds of thousands of people; murdered infants; and profaned the bodies of the dead, forbidding their burial right up to his own death:

R. Yose said . . . [that] Hadrian, the evil one, had come and devastated the entire land.⁷

Said R. Yoḥanan, The voice [= orders] of Hadrian Caesar is killing 80,000 myriads in Beitar; they kept slaughtering [the Jews] until a horse sank into blood up to his nose; they found three hundred babies' skulls on a single rock; the evil Hadrian had a large vineyard, eighteen miles by eighteen miles. . . . They surrounded it by a wall made of those who were slain in Beitar. . . . And he did not decree that they could be buried, until another king came along and decreed that they may be buried.⁸

Unusually, the negative attitude towards Hadrian found its expression even in the halakhic field: Hadrianic earthenware is one of the things that belong to gentiles and is forbidden, and it is forbidden to have any benefit from it.⁹

⁴ Bereshit Rabbah xxiii,17 (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 221).

⁵ Yisraeli-Taran 1997: 24–8, including sources and previous studies.

⁶ I prefer to deal with Hadrian because of three reasons: 1. Hadrian, as a Talmudic figure, has been discussed by scholars far less than the Talmudic Vespasian and Titus. 2. He is much more variegated through the various Talmudic compilations and layers than his 'bad' colleagues. 3. There are some interesting similarities between the portrayals of Hadrian in Talmudic and Roman literature.

⁷ JT, Peah vii, 20a. ⁸ JT, Ta'anot iv, 68d-69a.

⁹ M A'vodah Zarah ii,3; T A'vodah Zarah iv,8. It is interesting to note that the later Palestinian rabbis (at the end of the third century) attributed this ruling to Rabbi Meir, a distinguished figure from the first generation after the Bar Kokhva War, JT A'vodah Zarah ii 41b (= JT Orlah iii 63a).

Thus, fitting the punishment to the crime, Hadrian becomes the subject of the Talmud's most negative imprecation: 'May his bones be crushed!' A special sort of *damnatio memoriae*.¹⁰

But now comes a surprise. From the late fourth century on, both the Palestinian *midrashic* literature and the Babylonian Talmud delineate a new Hadrian, an intellectually curious man, who mixes with the mob and talks to ordinary people: 'Hadrian, may his bones be crushed, was walking on the paths of Tiberias and he saw an old man hew out an area in order to plant. Hadrian said to him: Old man, old man . . .',¹¹ and in particular he converses patiently with rabbis. His conversation has a philosophical and theological aura: Hadrian wonders, how was the world created?¹² How was the human being created?¹³ What is the nature of the water of the ocean (*okeanus*)?¹⁴ In spite of the sharp change in the depiction of his character, this Hadrian is situated in the correct historical time, and usually his partner in dialogue is R. Yehoshua b. Hananiah. What brings this 'odd couple' together? Maybe this is a literary meeting between two moderate and enlightened figures, the very modest rabbi, a true successor of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in the first two decades of the second century, and the enlightened emperor Hadrian, as he is depicted in the classical sources, at least during his first years, up to the middle of the third decade of the same century.¹⁵

The cruel Hadrian, 'may his bones be crushed', has not vanished but from now on he has a second face. The sole sign that we are dealing with the same person is the mutual epithet 'may his bones be crushed' for both the

¹⁰ Bereshit Rabbah x (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 75–6), xxviii (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 261–2), lxv (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 740), lxxviii (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 916–8, and parallels); Va-Yiqra Rabbah, Qedoshim xxv (ed. Margalio: 576–9, and parallels); Eikhah Rabbah i (ed. Buber: 82), iii (ed. Buber: 138–9), v (ed. Buber: 155–6); Qohelet Rabbah ii,2; Ruth Rabbah iii, and parallels; Tehilim Rabbah xii (ed. Buber: 104); Pesiqta Rabbati, Ten Commandments, Petiḥta (ed. Ulmer: 436–41).

¹¹ Va-Yiqra Rabbah, Qedoshim xxv (ed. Margalio: 576–9, and parallels), and see the thorough discussion of Ḥasan-Rokem 2003: 87–137.

¹² Bereshit Rabbah x (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 75–6): Hadrian, may his bones be crushed, asked R. Yehoshua b. Ḥananiah how did the Holy One, blessed be He, create the world?

¹³ Bereshit Rabbah xxviii (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 261–2, and parallels): Hadrian, may his bones be crushed, asked R. Yehoshua b. Ḥananiah, From what part will the Holy One, blessed be He, cause man to blossom forth in the future?

¹⁴ Bereshit Rabbah xiii (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 118, and parallels): R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua were once travelling on the Great Sea. . . they filled a barrel of water from there. When they arrived in Rome, Hadrian asked them, What is the nature of the water of the ocean?

¹⁵ Hadrian as well educated and a promoter of culture is typical of all Roman writers, even those who are less positive towards him, such as Aurelius Victor in *De Caesaribus* xiv.

‘wicked’ and the ‘enlightened’.¹⁶ What is striking is the similarity between the two faces of the Talmudic Hadrian,¹⁷ and the double face attributed to the emperor in Roman historiography, especially the *Vita Hadriani* in the *Historia Augusta*, which is dated either to the time of Diocletian or to the late fourth century.¹⁸ The same characteristics of Hadrian are portrayed again and again throughout the second half of the fourth century up to the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries,¹⁹ in other words, at the same time as the earliest Talmudic traditions of this other, positive face of Hadrian.

The *Vita Hadriani* characterizes Hadrian clearly as double-faced: ‘He was, in the same person, austere and genial, dignified and playful, dilatory and quick to act, niggardly and generous, deceitful and straightforward, cruel and merciful, and always in all things changeable.’²⁰ In the words of Benario: ‘even a cursory reading of the life reveals a curious mingling of two traditions, one favorable to the emperor, the other quite the opposite. The former is sober and detailed, the latter anecdotal and miscellaneous.’²¹ At the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* had the same impression: ‘He was changeable, manifold, and multiform; as if a born arbiter with respect to vices and virtues, by some artifice he controlled intellectual impulse. . . . he simulated restraint, affability, clemency, and conversely disguised the ardor for fame with which he burned.’²²

In two successive sentences the *Vita* relates to Hadrian’s attitudes and manners towards both ordinary and learned people: (1) ‘Most courteous in

¹⁶ See the question of Kadushin 1987: 170, referring to Va-Yiqra Rabbah, Qedoshim xxv (ed. Margalio: 576–9): ‘The role played by the wicked Hadrian here is puzzling for his relations to the old man express the attitude of a pious man’ (170).

¹⁷ I call this ‘two faces’ because there is an (almost) total separation between the traditional ‘bad’ Hadrian, who is in charge of the destruction, massacre and persecutions, and the new ‘enlightened’ Hadrian. In Roman literature he has these two faces in each of his biographies.

¹⁸ In the preface of the *Aelius* II, Aelius Spartianus, the biographer, addresses Diocletian and informs him that he has already written a biography of Hadrian. Hermann Dessau challenged this and other ‘alleged’ dedications and the ‘pretence’ of six different biographers, and concluded that a single author wrote the whole of the *Historia Augusta* at the end of the fourth century. Up until now most scholars have accepted his conclusions. Recently, Renan Baker has vehemently criticized the common view and argued for different biographies composed by six different biographers; see Baker 2014, with detailed research history, especially his discussion of Spartianus/Separtianus: 260–6.

¹⁹ Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, xiv; Eutropius, *Breviarium historiae Romanae*, viii, 6–7; *Epitome de Caesaribus*, xiv are only remnants of the vast fourth-century literature, now mainly lost, which retold the lives of earlier Roman emperors; see Bleckmann 1997.

²⁰ SHA, *Hadrianus* xiv, 11: *idem severus comis, gravis lascivus, cunctator, festinans, tenax liberalis, simulator simplex, saevus clemens, et semper in omnibus varius.*

²¹ Benario 1980: 4.

²² *Epitome de Caes.*, xiv, 6: *Varius multiplex multiformis; ad vitia atque virtutes quasi arbiter genitus, impetum mentis quodam artificio regens; . . . continentiam facilitatem clementiam simulans contraque dissimulans ardorem gloriae, quo flagrabat.*

his conversations, even with the very humble, he denounced all who, in the belief that they were thereby maintaining the imperial dignity, begrudged him the pleasure of such friendliness. (2) In the museum at Alexandria he propounded many questions to the teachers and answered himself what he had propounded.²³ The first sentence matches the Talmudic Hadrian who walks through the fields of Tiberias and has a conversation with an old man. The second sentence fits Hadrian's philosophical and theological dialogues with R. Yehoshua – although here the emperor simply puts the questions and it is the rabbi who gives him the correct, meaningful answers.

The most interesting similarities between Hadrian both in the *Vita Hadriani* and in the *midrash* have been proposed and studied by Galit Hasan-Rokem.²⁴ Referring to Hadrian's generous gifts and his fondness for the public baths, the Roman biographer told a well-known bathing joke, in two scenes. In the first scene, Hadrian sees a veteran, known to him from military service, rubbing his back and the rest of his body on the wall. When he realizes that this is because he does not have a slave of his own, he presents him both with slaves and with the cost of their maintenance. In the second scene, on a different day, several old men imitate the veteran, rubbing themselves on the wall in order to arouse the emperor's generosity. But this time Hadrian orders them to be called out and rub each other down in turn.²⁵

Midrash *Va-Yikra Rabbah* tells a similar story, also based on two opposed scenes. In the first scene, Hadrian sees an old man near Tiberias planting a young fig tree and asks him for whom is he planting this tree. The old man answers that if he is fortunate, he will eat the figs himself; if not, his descendants will eat them. Hadrian tells him: 'If you are fortunate enough to eat of them, let me know.' When the figs ripen, the old man fills a basket with figs and brings it to Hadrian. The emperor orders his servants to empty his basket and fill it with dinars. In the second scene, a neighbour of the old man, instigated by his wife, imitates the old man, comes before Hadrian and says: 'I have heard that the king loves figs and reimburses them with dinars.' Hadrian's reaction is very similar to his answer to the people in the bath house in the *Vita Hadriani*: he orders his servants 'to put him in front of the palace gate and whoever enters or exits should throw [a fig] in his face.'²⁶

²³ SHA, *Hadrianus* xx, 1–2: (1) *In conloquiis etiam humillimorum civilissimus fuit, detestans eos qui sibi hanc voluptatem humanitatis quasi servantes fastigium principis inviderent.* (2) *apud Alexandriam in Museo multas quaestiones professoribus proposuit et propositas ipse dissolvit.* Again, the same characteristic is delineated by the *Epitome de Caes.*, xiv, 7.

²⁴ Hasan-Rokem 2003: 135–6. ²⁵ SHA, *Hadrianus* xvii, 6–7.

²⁶ This *midrashic* story is much more developed and variegated than my simplistic reduction, but this should be sufficient for the current discussion. Hasan-Rokem (2003: 116) also points to the similarity between the 'fig story' and the 'fish anecdote' in the biography of Tiberius by

The Talmudic Hadrian, then, heads the Roman legions who destroy Palestinian Jewry, on the one hand, while on the other hand, holds philosophical dialogues with R. Yehoshua in the same narrative time. In this context we note that the *Historia Augusta* concludes its presentation of Hadrian's dual face with a nice anecdote about an argument between the emperor and the eminent philosopher and sophist Favorinus, which reveals the inequity of such disagreement. Although Favorinus is correct, he gives way to Hadrian, and when rebuked by friends, replies, 'You advise me badly, friends, since you do not permit me to believe that he who commands thirty legions is the most learned of all.'²⁷

What is the historical background for the 'enlightened' Hadrian in Talmudic literature? Many scholars point to the early years of Hadrian's reign as a period of positive relationship between the new emperor and the Jews, at least with regard to some of his actions that were interpreted by the Jews as being in their favor.²⁸ This sounds logical at first glance, but in fact these scholarly conclusions totally neglect the clear distinction between two different chronological phases in the Talmudic literature which refer to Hadrian: both the *tannaitic* and *amoraitic* literature up to the end of the Palestinian Talmud in the last quarter of the fourth century delineate only the wicked Hadrian; the enlightened Hadrian is a product of *aggadic midrashim* only from the early fifth century on.²⁹ There are some similarities between the enlightened Talmudic Hadrian and his depiction in fourth-century Roman literature, especially in his wide education and curiosity. Thus the Talmudic *midrashim* find him as the most convenient emperor to represent Rome in dialogues with Jewish rabbis of his generation, like Rabbi Yehoshua son of Ḥananiah.

To sum up: first of all, the 'wicked' Hadrian, 'may his bones be crushed', is a direct and immediate Jewish reaction to the historic role of this emperor in the most catastrophic event in Jewish antiquity. There is no

Suetonius (*Tiberius*, iii 60), and the possible association between the emperor (Tiberius) and the *midrashic* space (the town of Tiberias).

²⁷ SHA, *Hadrianus* xv, 12–13: (12) *et Favorinus quidem, cum verbum eius quondam ab Hadriano reprehensum esset, atque ille cessisset, arguentibus amicis, quod male cederet Hadriano de verbo quod idonei auctores usurpassent, risum iucundissimum movit.* (13) *ait enim: 'Non recte suadetis, familiares, qui non patimini me illum doctiorem omnibus credere, qui habet triginta legiones.'* I owe this reference to Benjamin Isaac.

²⁸ Especially Herr 1971: 123–5, 142–5; 1972: 91–3; Hengel 1984–5: 134, 155–60; a slightly different picture in Schäfer 1981: 242–4, but see Schäfer 1990, very similar to Herr's arguments. Alon 1989 (original Heb. 1955): 432–4, 453–4 already hints cautiously at this possibility.

²⁹ See the preliminary remark of Alon 1989: 437. Hasan-Rokem 2003: 121 proposes the same direction, but does not elaborate on it, and basically ignores the chronological difference between the two faces of Talmudic Hadrian.

connection between this phase of the Talmudic Hadrian and Roman historiography. On the contrary, Cassius Dio depicts Hadrian's reactions to the Jewish rebellion and the measures he takes as rational and very cautious. In fact, Hadrian's reign is usually remembered by the Romans as a period without wars. Secondly, Hadrian is already depicted in Roman literature as double-faced from the second and third centuries, but there is no positive hint about him at all in the contemporary Talmudic works. Thirdly, it is only from the early fifth century on, hundreds of years after the last revolt and its terrible consequences, that Jews could allow themselves to draw another Hadrian as well, an enlightened one, shown as a Roman representative who deals with the rabbis of his time, revealing, explicitly or tacitly, the advantage of Jewish culture and theology. Finally, there are similarities between the variegated and even unpredictable character of Hadrian in both the *Vita Hadriani* (and later fourth-century Roman history and biography) and the later Talmudic stories which were told from the early fifth century on.

We move now to consider the figure of **the good emperor** in the Talmudic literature. The one perfectly good emperor is called 'Antoninus', and he is usually identified with Caracalla.³⁰ He is presented as the intimate friend of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, the renowned Jewish patriarch of the late second and early third centuries (i.e. during the Severan period). Together they discuss business, politics and pleasure, to their mutual benefit, using biblical verses and hermeneutics. There are twenty-nine different Talmudic traditions, twenty-one Palestinian and eight Babylonian,³¹ which characterize their very positive relationship and their dialogues, shaping 'Antoninus' as a clever, learned and moderate man and emperor.

Thematically there are three groups of traditions:

- I. A concrete relationship, usually in the field of economics, where Rabbi benefits from the emperor.
- II. Rabbi as the political advisor of Antoninus. The emperor consults him as to whether or not to go to Alexandria, how to fill his treasury, how to

³⁰ The main comprehensive studies of the 'Rabbi and Antoninus' Talmudic traditions are Krauss 1909/1910 (part two is devoted to scholarly opinions about the identity of Antoninus); Jacobs 1995: 125–54 (125–9, scholarly opinions, mainly the identification with Caracalla), who himself opposes methodologically and empirically any identification with a specific emperor; Meir 1999: 263–92, literary analysis and differentiation between the Palestinian traditions and the Babylonians; and Oppenheimer 2007: 43–50 (the identification with Caracalla, 47–50= Oppenheimer 2017: 48–8, as Caracalla, 54–8. See also Ch. 15 in this book).

³¹ Meir 1999, Palestinian traditions: 263–77; Babylonian: 277–91.

manipulate the Roman aristocracy in order to achieve his goals, and so forth.

- III. Philosophical and theological dialogues, where Antoninus is not only intellectually curious, learned, clever and witty, but also well versed in the Bible, Jewish regulations and hermeneutics.

Finally, one late Palestinian tradition even discusses the possibility that Antoninus became Jewish. This possibility is rejected, but Antoninus is still *the non-Jew who nevertheless deserves the World to Come*.³²

Generally speaking, the earlier traditions are closer to the historical arena and characters. Antoninus seems to be much more of a political figure who benefits Rabbi as his client, and his interest in Judaism is very simplistic. Over time he becomes a true philosopher and in consequence nearly a Jewish sage. As I shall try to argue, his character, as depicted in the Talmudic sources, develops into a hybrid of two different emperors who were both called Antoninus, Caracalla and Elagabalus. I should note here, however, that there are some scholars who fiercely refute, both methodologically and empirically, any historical identification with any historical emperor.³³

Now, within our very selective and narrow scope, I wish to point out another striking phenomenon: the way in which the Talmudic Antoninus (= Caracalla, as distinct from other candidates like Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius) is the complete opposite of the portrait of this emperor in Roman historiography, mainly characterized by the epitome of Cassius Dio, and by Herodian, both of whom were active during the years of Caracalla's reign, and later on in the *Historia Augusta*. In these Roman sources, Antoninus Caracalla is capricious, cruel, bloodthirsty, anti-intellectual, and deaf to any advice and advisor.

Antoninus as Caracalla: There are at least three Talmudic traditions about Antoninus that have many resemblances to characteristics, anecdotes and events which are peculiar to the emperor Caracalla in the Roman historiography and biography of the third and fourth centuries.

The earliest traditions in the tannaitic Midrash known as the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, redacted in the mid-third century (i.e. a short time after Rabbi's death),³⁴ associate Antoninus twice (out of four instances) with Alexandria, Egypt and Pharaoh.

³² JT Megillah ii 72b, 74a, Sanhedrin x 29c, and see Cohen 2010. I shall come back to this later in this chapter.

³³ Jacobs 1995 (throughout the whole discussion and concluding on 153–4, 165), followed by Cohen 2010: 329. Meir 1994: 25 came to the same conclusions.

³⁴ The Mekhilta as the most ancient source for 'Antoninus' is also underlined by Meir 1999: 263–5; Cohen 2010: 357, n. 59.

Antoninus asked our Holy Rabbi, I want to go to Alexandria, but will a king stand there and defeat me? He answered, I do not know, at any rate it is written that Egypt could not appoint a king or a minister.³⁵

Rabbi gives Antoninus an indirect answer, and the whole issue appears innocent. But according to the Roman historians, Antoninus turned Alexandria into a bloodbath, as Dio writes:

(1) Now Antoninus, in spite of the immense affection which he professed to cherish for Alexander, all but utterly destroyed the whole of his [i.e. Alexander's] city. . . . (3) He slaughtered so many persons that he did not even venture to say anything about their number, but wrote to the senate that it was of no interest how many of them or who had died, since all had deserved to suffer this fate. 23,2: Antoninus was present at most of this slaughter and pillaging, both looking on and taking a hand.³⁶

In the Mekhilta, Antoninus is afraid lest 'a king will stand there [in Alexandria] and defeat me', which could be an echo to the story in Dio that a short time before the assassination of Caracalla a certain Egyptian, Serapio, had told the emperor that he would be short-lived and that Macrinus would succeed him.³⁷

Again, the Mekhilta, in the name of Rabbi himself, makes Antoninus the true successor of Pharaoh, at least in chariot warfare.

And *shalishim* over all of them [*Shalishim* means] that they were triply armed. Rabban Simon the son of Gamaliel says: It refers to the third man on the chariot. Formerly there had been only two who drove the chariot, but **Pharaoh** added one more so as to pursue Israel faster. **Rabbi says: Antoninus** added one more to them so that there were four.³⁸

It is interesting to note here that Caracalla is the Roman emperor par excellence who was portrayed as a Pharaoh, and four monumental

³⁵ Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, beShalah [Shirah] 6 (ed. Lauterbach: 201 adapted).

³⁶ Dio, lxxviii 22,1-3: 'Ο δὲ Ἀντωνῖνος, καίτοι τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον ὑπεραγαπᾶν φάσκων, τοὺς ἐκείνου πολίτας μικροῦ δεῖν πάντας ἄρδην ἀπώλεσεν. Ἐπροσέτι καὶ τὰ τέγη προκατασχῶν. καὶ ἵνα τὰς κατὰ μέρος συμφορὰς τὰς τότε κατασχούσας τὴν ἀθλίαν πόλιν παρῶ, τοσοῦτους κατέσφαζεν ὥστε μηδὲ εἰπεῖν περὶ τοῦ πλήθους αὐτῶν τολμήσαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῇ βουλῇ γράψαι ὅτι οὐδὲν διαφέρει πόσοι σφῶν ἢ τίνες ἐτελεύτησαν πάντες. 23.2 καὶ τούτων τὰ μὲν πλείω αὐτὸς ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος παρῶν καὶ ὄρων.

The Alexandrian massacre is a central issue in the main surviving Roman references to Caracalla, Herodian iv 8.6-9.8; *SHA, Caracalla* vi, 2-3.

³⁷ Dio lxxix 4, 4-5.

³⁸ Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, beShalah [Va-yehi] 1 (ed. Lauterbach: 135, adapted).

'Pharaonic' statues of him have been discovered in Egypt.³⁹ This was due to the fact that his favourite deity was the Egyptian god Serapis, whose son or brother he claimed to be.

One tradition from the Babylonian Talmud also connects 'Antoninus son of Aseverus' with Egypt:

R. Ḥama son of R. Ḥanina said: Three treasures did Joseph hide in Egypt: one was revealed to Korah; one to Antoninus the son of Aseverus; and the third is stored up for the righteous for the future time.⁴⁰

If we can rely here upon the name of the Rabbi R. Ḥama son of R. Ḥanina, and the pure Hebrew language (i.e. not Aramaic) attributed to him, this would seem to be an original Palestinian tradition from the middle of the third century, the same time as the Mekhilta, and only one generation after the death of both Caracalla and Rabbi Judah the Prince.

In several Talmudic traditions, the background of Antoninus' consultations with Rabbi, as his political advisor and confidant, is the hostile relationship between the emperor and 'the prominent Romans' (i.e. the senators).⁴¹ Thus one Babylonian tradition tells about a hidden tunnel through which Antoninus used to come secretly from his house in Rome to Rabbi's house in Palestine. In order to keep this completely secret, he would place two slaves, one at the Roman end of the tunnel, the other at the Jewish end, and when he accomplished his mission he would kill both of them.⁴²

Dio tells a story about Caracalla with very similar elements: the emperor had a special relationship with the Scythians and Germans, whom he trusted more than his own soldiers. He often conversed with Scythian and German envoys when no one else but the interpreters were present,

³⁹ Petruccioli 2012: 153–64. Caracalla's portraits have been discovered in ten different sites along the Nile. For the Pharaonic statues, see Petruccioli 2012: vol. i 154, ii 110; vol. i 154–5, ii 111; vol. i 155, ii 113 – this was unearthed at the foot of a temple dedicated to Isis; vol. I 155, ii 112.

⁴⁰ BT Pesahim 119a (parallel in BT Sanhedrin 110a).

⁴¹ Antoninus consulted Rabbi what to do with 'the prominent Romans' *הרומא השובי רומא* who impeded him. Rabbi answered by pantomime that Antoninus should kill them one at a time (and not attack all of them at once). The answer of the Talmud to the question of why Rabbi did not whisper his answer is: 'Because it is written: *For a bird of the air shall carry the voice*', BT Avodah Zarah 10a. Thus both the enmity between the emperor and the Roman aristocracy, on the one hand, and the secret negotiations with Rabbi, his confidant, on the other side, are clearly essential parts of this Talmudic tradition.

⁴² BT Avodah Zarah 10b. This is one of various traditions about Rabbi and Antoninus that are redacted together in BT Avodah Zarah 10a–11a. See also the previous note and the nice discussion of Meir 1999: 278–91.

and instructed them, in case anything happened to him, to invade Italy and march upon Rome.

‘To prevent any inkling of his conversation from getting to **our** ears’, writes Dio, adding his own personal voice and testament, ‘he would immediately put the interpreters to death.’⁴³

But contrary to the totally negative tone of Dio, the Talmudic tradition elaborates the ‘secret tunnel’ story into a very positive view of Antoninus and his attitude towards the Jews. Thus on one occasion, when Antoninus comes to meet Rabbi he found R. Ḥaninah b. Ḥama there. Antoninus sends him out to ask the sleeping slave outside to come in. The slave is, of course, already slain. R. Ḥaninah prays for him, he is restored to life, and Antoninus concludes: ‘I am well aware that the least one among you can bring the dead to life, still, when I call, let no one be found with thee.’⁴⁴

This is typical of the difference between the Roman stories, anecdotes and rumours about the most negative figure of Antoninus Caracalla and its mostly positive shift as seen in the Talmudic Antoninus.

In one Babylonian tradition, probably from the first half of the fourth century, Antoninus consults for the last time with his personal Jewish advisor,

This was the case with Aseverus the son of Antoninus who reigned [in his father’s place]. Antoninus once said to Rabbi: it is my desire that my son Aseverus should reign instead of me and that Tiberias should be declared a *colonia*. Were I to ask [the Senate] one of these things it would be granted, but both would not be granted. Rabbi thereupon brought a man, and having made him ride on the shoulders of another, handed him a dove bidding the one who carried him to order the one on his shoulders to liberate it. [Antoninus] perceived this to mean that he was advised to ask to appoint his son Aseverus to reign in his stead, and that subsequently he might get Aseverus to make Tiberias a *colonia*.⁴⁵

What is interesting here is not only the question whether and when Tiberias became a Roman *colonia* (which is beyond the scope of this chapter),⁴⁶ but the problematic consequences of the end of Caracalla’s life

⁴³ Dio, lxxix 6. The enmity between Caracalla and the Roman Senate is a central topic in the Roman literature: Dio lxxix 2,18; Herodian iv 3.4, 5.1, 5.7, 7.1, 11.6, v 2.1; *SHA Caracalla* 2.9; *Geta* 2.9, 6.2, 6.5, 7.3–6; *Macrinus* 2.3, 5.9–7.3; *Diadumenianus* 1.7.

⁴⁴ BT Avodah Zarah 10b. A similar story in Va-Yiqra Rabbah Tzav 10 (ed. Margalioth: 203–4).

⁴⁵ BT Avodah Zarah 10a.

⁴⁶ See the convincing discussion of Oppenheimer 1991: 72–8; 2005a: 30–46; 2017: 74–85; Ch. 15 in this book, and also Millar 2006: 167. For another view: Jacobs 1995: 133–6, 160–5. For the Severan urbanization, see Isaac 1992: 359–61; Millar 2006: 191–216.

and reign and the succession of the Severan dynasty. We can see here, once again, the tension between the emperor and the Senate. Caracalla was murdered by Macrinus, the Praetorian prefect, who did not belong to the Severan family. He deported the family of Avitus, Caracalla's cousin who later became the Emperor Elagabalus, to Emesa in Syria. From there his grandmother guided a successful campaign against Macrinus, which at last saw Avitus as Emperor. Now, Dio consistently calls Avitus/Elagabalus a false Antonine, and argues that the alleged connection between Caracalla/Antoninus and between Avitus, the false Antoninus, was simply propaganda from Avitus and his family.⁴⁷

But who is 'Aseverus son of Antoninus' in our story? The most plausible identification is Severus Alexander. According to Herodian, when Maesa realized that Elagabalus could not serve as an emperor she persuaded him to adopt his cousin Alexianus/Alexander as a co-emperor and successor and 'invented' the story that not only Elagabalus but also Alexander was born to Caracalla.

Alexianus changed his name from that inherited from his grandfather to Alexander, the name of the Macedonian so admired and honored by the alleged **father of the two cousins**. Both the daughter of Maesa, and the old lady herself, used to boast of the adultery of **Antoninus (Severus' son)**, to make the troops think **the boys were his sons** and so favour them.⁴⁸

It is important to note that the classical Talmudic traditions about the Severii never confuse the dynastic sequence: the regnal years of (Septimius) [A]severus are counted as eighteen years; most traditions refer to Antoninus, whom the Babylonian Talmud calls twice 'Antoninus son of Aseverus', and finally we find 'Aseverus son of Antoninus'.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Dio, lxxix 2. Also Herodian 5.3.10; *SHA Caracalla* 9.2, *Macrinus* 7.5, 7.8, 8.4, *Elagabalus* 1.1, 2.4, 3.1–2 (unique argument that Antoninus was the real name of Elagabalus), and the *damnatio memoriae* of this 'Antoninus' 16.4. Later on, Aurelius Victor 23 and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* 23.1 present Elagabalus as the real son of Caracalla, in contrast to Dio; Eutropius 8.22, *SHA Elagabalus* 1.4 stresses that this was false propaganda.

⁴⁸ Herodian 5.7.3: μετονομάζεται δὲ ὁ Ἀλεξιανός, καὶ Ἀλέξανδρος καλεῖται, παραχθέντος αὐτῷ τοῦ πατρῶος ὀνόματος ἐς τὸ τοῦ Μακεδόνα ὡς πάνυ τε ἐνδόξου καὶ τιμηθέντος ὑπὸ τοῦ δοκοῦντος πατρὸς ἀμφοτέρων εἶναι· τὴν <γράφ> Ἀντωνίνου τοῦ Σεβήρου παιδὸς μοιχείαν ἀμφοτέροι αἱ Μαίσης θυγατέρες αὐτῆ τε ἢ πρεσβυτίτις ἐσεμνύετο πρὸς τὸ τοὺς στρατιώτας στέργειν τοὺς παῖδας, υἱοὺς ἐκείνου δοκοῦντας εἶναι.

⁴⁹ Severus in Shir ha-Shirim Zuta 1, 6 (ed. Buber p. 12); Antoninus son of Severus, BT Pesahim 119a (parallel in BT Sanhedrin 110a), Avodah Zarah 10b; Severus son of Antoninus, Avodah Zarah 10a. Already in 1832 Jost, ii, p. 129 identified 'Antoninus' as Caracalla and Severus 'his son' as Severus Alexander. Even if we identified 'Antoninus' the father of Aseverus as Elagabalus, who adopted Severus Alexander as his colleague and successor, the latter remains the sole candidate for 'Aseverus son of Antoninus'.

Many Talmudic traditions point to the interest of Antoninus in Judaism, his knowledge about it, and his ability to follow hermeneutic discussions and even to contribute his own independent insight.⁵⁰ Over time he becomes the ideal and most prominent gentile figure, and the only Roman leader, who is said to deserve the ‘World to come’. Again, it is the Babylonian Talmud that gives his full name: ‘Antoninus son of Aseverus’.⁵¹ But the next and last step is to be found quite surprisingly in the late Aramaic tradition, probably invented by the anonymous redactors of the Jerusalem Talmud, not earlier than the late fourth century.

[There are some indications that Antoninus converted, and some that he did not convert] Antoninus said to Rabbi: Will you let me eat of the Leviathan in the world to come? He [R.] said to him: Yes. He [Ant.] said to him: From the Paschal lamb you will not let me eat, but you let me eat Leviathan? He [R.] said to him: What can I do for you, when concerning the Paschal lamb it is written (Ex. 12:48) *But no uncircumcised person may eat of it*. When he heard this, he [Ant.] went and was circumcised [אזל וגזר]. He [Ant.] came back to him (and) said to him: My master, look at my circumcision [המי גזורתי]. He [R.] said to him: Never in my life have I looked at my own; (shall I look) at yours? And why was he [R.] called by the name ‘Our holy master’? Because never in his life did he look at his circumcision [הביט במילתו].⁵²

At this point, historians usually refer to a single sentence in the *Historia Augusta*’s life of Caracalla.

Once, when a child of seven, hearing that a certain playmate of his had been severely scourged for adopting the religion of the Jews, he long refused to look at either the boy’s father or his own, because he regarded them as responsible for the scourging.⁵³

But this should be read carefully, because the context is the excessive humanity and tenderness of the younger Antoninus, who in the previous

⁵⁰ Meir 1999, in the Palestinian sources: 265–71, 272–4, 276–7; in the Babylonian Talmud: 277–8, 285–7; general conclusions: 291–2. Cohen 2010. In Bereshit Rabbah xxxiv 10 (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 320–1) and BT Sanhedrin 91a, Rabbi admits the preference of Antoninus’ hermeneutics and answer over his own.

⁵¹ BT Avodah Zarah 10b.

⁵² JT, Megillah i, 72b. See the thorough discussion of Cohen 2010, and his convincing conclusions that Antoninus was seen usually as a pious gentile and only the very last redaction phase of the Jerusalem Talmud raises the possibility of circumcision, esp. 357–60.

⁵³ *SHA Caracalla* 1,7: *septennis puer, cum conlusorem suum puerum ob Iudaicam religionem gravius verberatum audisset, neque patrem suum neque patrem pueri velut auctores verberum diu respexit*.

sentence cried whenever he saw criminals ‘pitted against wild beasts’, while in the next sentence he restores their ancient rights to the people of Antioch and Byzantium, after his father had punished them because they supported Niger.

Much more convincing is the plain circumcision that Dio related to Elagabalus, as showing what he saw as his absurd behavior, in both his religious policy and gender matters.

Closely related to these irregularities was his [i.e. Elagabalus the emperor’s] conduct in the matter of Elagabalus [i.e. the god]. The offence consisted, not in his [i.e. the emperor] introducing a foreign god into Rome or in his exalting him [i.e. the god] in very strange ways, but in his placing him even before Jupiter himself and causing himself to be voted his priest, also in his circumcising himself and abstaining from swine’s flesh, on the ground that his devotion would thereby be purer. He had planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals altogether, but that desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy; the circumcision which he actually carried out was a part of the priestly requirements of Elagabalus [i.e. the god], and he accordingly mutilated many of his companions in like manner.⁵⁴

In the light of this, it seems to me that we can hear the sarcasm in the tone of the Talmudic account. The redactors of the Jerusalem Talmud do not seem to see the circumcision of Antoninus as a point in his favor, but they present it with much more gentle implied criticism than Dio.

If the comparison here between the Talmudic circumcision of ‘Antoninus’ and between the same action of Dio’s ‘false Antoninus’ is valid, then we can point towards a hybrid Talmudic Antoninus, which combines Elagabalus with Caracalla.

Dio, and most Roman writers of the third and fourth centuries, sincerely lament the brutality of Antoninus against the Roman aristocracy, especially the senators;⁵⁵ at the same time, the Jewish aristocracy presents us with an

⁵⁴ Dio LXXX 11.1: Τῶν δὲ δὴ παρανομημάτων αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ κατὰ τὸν Ἐλεγάβαλον ἔχεται, οὐχ ὅτι θεόν τινα ξενικὸν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἐσήγαγεν, οὐδ’ ὅτι καινοπρεπέστατα αὐτὸν ἐμεγάλυνεν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι καὶ πρὸ τοῦ Διὸς αὐτοῦ ἤγαγεν αὐτόν, καὶ ὅτι καὶ ἱερέα αὐτοῦ ἑαυτὸν ψηφισθῆναι ἐποίησεν, ὅτι τε τὸ αἰδοῖον περιέτεμε, καὶ ὅτι χοιρείων κρεῶν, ὡς καὶ καθαρώτερον ἐκ τούτων θρησκευῶν, ἀπέιχετο (ἐβουλεύσατο μὲν γὰρ παντάπασιν αὐτὸ ἀποκόψαι· ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνο μὲν τῆς μαλακίας ἕνεκα ποιῆσαι ἐπεθύμησε, τοῦτο δὲ ὡς καὶ τῆ τοῦ Ἐλεγαβάλου ἱερατεία προσήκον ἔπραξεν· ἐξ οὗ δὴ καὶ ἑτέροις τῶν συνόντων συχνοῖς ὁμοίως ἐλυμήνατο). See also Dio lxxx 16.7 where Elagabalus ‘asked the physicians to contrive a woman’s vagina in his body by means of an incision’, and a similar expression in the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, *Elagabalus* 3: self-emasculatation (*abscisciue genitalibus*).

⁵⁵ Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 21 is the only one who praises the personality of Caracalla; see n. 3 of Bird on this passage.

elevated and enlightened Antoninus. Whose history is right? Whose history is it? Maybe the histories of Rome – an empire of many nations.

The middling emperor is represented by Diocletian. There are several Talmudic traditions, all of them in the Palestinian literature, which deal with this emperor. They give us information about the emperor, which usually ties in with other historical, epigraphical and archaeological data. I shall sum up the main points.

The Jerusalem Talmud notes that Diocletian was linked to the city of Tiberias, telling us that in his youth his name was Diclot, and he was a swineherd in Tiberias. He got the name Diocletian only when he was crowned:

The children of R. Yehudah Nesiah scorned Diclot the swine[herd]. He became a king and went down to Paneas. He sent letters to the rabbis that they should be at his place immediately after the end of the Sabbath. . . . They said to him: **We treated Diclot**, the swine, with contempt. We do not treat **Di[o]cletianus, the king**, with contempt.⁵⁶

All the historiographical sources agree that Diocletian's origins were lower class. See, for instance, the Anonymous Epitome about the Caesars (late fourth century):

Diocletian of Dalmatia, a freedman of the senator Anulinus, ruled for twenty-five years. His mother and hometown were both called Dioclea, from which name he was called Diocles until he took power; when he took control of the Roman world, he converted the Greek name to the Roman fashion.⁵⁷

Diocletian actually visited Tiberias in person on 31 May 286, and on 14 July in the same year, and again on 31 August when he and Maximianus were both consuls, namely in 287 or 290.⁵⁸ Two different Talmudic sources connect Diocletian with Paneas, the above-mentioned, and the following:

Diocletian oppressed the people of Paneas. They told him: We will leave. A sophist said to him: They will not go, but if they do go they will return. If

⁵⁶ JT, Terumot viii, 46b-c. The parallel in Bereshit Rabbah lxiii (ed. Albeck and Theodor: 688–90) designates Diclot/Diocletian as a swineherd instead of the obscure תזירא in the JT.

⁵⁷ *Epitome de Caesaribus* 39.1: *Diocletianus Dalmata, Anulini senatoris libertinus, matre pariter atque oppido nomine Dioclea, quorum vocabulis, donec imperium sumeret, Diocles appellatus, ubi orbis Romani potentiam cepit, Graium nomen in Romanum morem convertit, imperavit annis viginti quinque.* See also Eutropius, *Breviarium* 19; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 39, 40.12–13; Lactantius, *De mort. persec.* 9.11.

⁵⁸ *Cod. Jus.* iv 10.3 in Tiberias at 31 May 286 CE; i 51.1 at 14 July 286 CE; v 17.3 at 31 August in the consulate of Diocletian and Maximianus, namely 287 CE or 290 CE; see Barnes 1982: 50–1.

you want to check, bring deer and send them to a distant land; in the end they will return to their [original] places. He did so, brought deer, covered their antlers with silver, and sent them to Africa. At the end of thirteen years they returned to their places.⁵⁹

There is no direct evidence that Diocletian was ever in Paneas, but there is an indirect link: inscriptions of the Tetrarchic land surveyors were discovered in the region of Paneas. As Millar has noted: ‘The erection of these inscriptions clearly reflects the Tetrarchic taxation-reform of AD 297’,⁶⁰ and it seems plausible that this tax reform is the background to the Talmudic statement: ‘Diocletian oppressed the people of Paneas.’

Two Talmudic sources connect Diocletian to Tyre. One mentions an inscription of his, dedicated to his partner Maximianus, whose religious title was Herculus:

R. Shimon b. Yoḥanan sent and asked R. Shimon b. Yoḥadak: Have you ever looked into the character of the fair held at Tyre? . . . He went up and found written there: I, Diocletian the king, have founded the fair of Tyre in honour of Herculi[u]s my brother, for eight days.⁶¹

Greenfield convincingly verifies the authenticity of this Talmudic passage as a reliable reflection of a formal inscription in Tyre.⁶²

The other source mentions R. Hiyya, an important rabbi who was also a priest, who was so eager to see Diocletian in Tyre that he even went through a graveyard to get to him:

R. Yannai said, A priest [may] defile himself in order to see a king. When King Diocletian came here, R. Hiyya was seen stepping over graves at Tyre in order to see him.⁶³

Avi-Yonah, followed by Barnes, dates the visit of Diocletian to Tyre to the early years of his rule, prior to 293 CE; Greenfield tends to the later period, 296–302 CE, when Diocletian spent most of his time in the Roman East.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ JT, Sheviit ix, 38d.

⁶⁰ Millar 1993: 535, and see the data and discussion there. Also Jacobs 1995: 158; Hadas-Label 2006: 202.

⁶¹ JT, Avodah Zarah i, 39d.

⁶² Greenfield 1991, suggests dating the fair to the twentieth anniversary of his reign (*vicennalia*), which began on 20 November 303 CE. See the interesting note of Hadas-Label 2006: 202 that maybe even the tetrarchy looked like a diarchy to the provincials. For the relationships between Palestinian Jewry and Tyre in Talmudic times, see Oppenheimer 2005b: 93–101.

⁶³ JT, Nazir vii, 56a. ⁶⁴ See Barnes 1982: 50, n. 25 and Greenfield 1991: 500.

Another source in the JT notes that Diocletian controlled the water source known as the lake of Emesa, probably the present-day Qattina lake on the Orontes to the south-west of Emesa:

Seven seas surrounded the Land of Israel: the Great Sea, Lake Tiberias, Lake Semakho, the Salt Sea, Lake Ḥulata, Lake Sheliat, Lake Apamea. But is there not also a lake at Ḥomṣ? Diocletian dammed up rivers and created it.⁶⁵

This is mentioned together with Hulata, Daphne of Antioch and the lake of Apamea. There is evidence that Diocletian was very active in this region: on 6 May 290 he was in Antioch, where he spent most of his time from 299 CE till 302 or 303, and four days later, on 10 May, he reached Emesa.⁶⁶

In connection with monetary matters, the Jerusalem Talmud discusses different kinds of gold, and ends with the Diocletian denarius. This appears to refer to his reform of the currency, which stabilized the imperial coinage and fixed the denarius, instead of the sestertius, as the common coin. The first phase of the reform dates to 286 CE and does indeed apply to the gold coins.⁶⁷

As an aside in a discussion about vows, the Talmud talks about a huge army headed by Diocletian, which it compares to the large number of Israelites who came out of Egypt in the biblical Exodus:

This is a vain oath: . . . if one said, (may I be punished) if I did not see walking on this road as many as went out of Egypt. . . . When Diocletian went down there, one hundred twenty myriads went down with him.⁶⁸

This may refer to Diocletian's campaign against the revolt in Egypt in 297–8 CE, which included a long siege of Alexandria.

Turning now to Diocletian's religious policy, the Jerusalem Talmud writes:

R. Abbahu prohibited their [Samaritan] wine. . . . When Di[o]cletian the king came up here, he issued a decree, saying, 'Every nation must offer

⁶⁵ JT, Kilayim ix, 32c, parallel JT, Ketubbot xii 35b. See the discussion of Grossmark 2014 with previous studies.

⁶⁶ Barnes 1982: 51, 55; Isaac 1992: 437.

⁶⁷ JT, Yoma, iv, 41c-d. For Diocletian's monetary reform as reflected in Talmudic literature, see Sperber 1991: esp. 36–7. See also Rees 2004: 40–1.

⁶⁸ JT, Shevu'ot, iii, 34d. The parallel in JT, Nedarim iii, 37d has 'Lulianus' instead of 'Diocletian', which could mean Julian the Apostate. Both led a huge army in the Middle East, but the literary context of 'walking on this road as many as went out of Egypt' fits nicely with Diocletian's campaign against Egypt; Eutropius, *Breviarium* 23, Barnes 1982: 54–5.

a libation, except for the Jews.' So the Samaritans made a libation, and [that is why] their wine was prohibited.⁶⁹

This clearly refers to the anti-Christian persecutions, and it is very similar in wording to the original decrees, especially the Fourth Edict, which was published by Diocletian in spring 304 and reported by Eusebius in the long recension of the *Martyrs of Palestine*, composed in April 311 and preserved in a Syriac manuscript of 411:

There came then again the second time edicts from the emperor, . . . which compelled all persons equally: that the entire population of every city, both men and women, should sacrifice to dead idols, and a law was imposed upon them to offer libations to devils.⁷⁰

The Jews alone were exempted from the pagan libation, while the Samaritans (or some of them) offered libations like the gentiles. What is striking here is the fact that the Talmudic passage does not even mention the Christians. I shall return to this point at the end of my chapter.

To sum up: Diocletian did nothing exceptional, either for or against the Jews.⁷¹ Probably this is the reason why the Babylonian Talmud and the later Talmudic compilations ignore him almost completely. He is presented as the new broom who came to Palestine, restored order, initiated significant administrative, economic and fiscal reforms, and headed a huge army. He visited the local *polis* of Tiberias (probably a Roman colony), and the center of the most important Jewish institutions – the patriarchate and the central rabbinic academy – and stayed for a long time in the adjacent provinces. His name is carved on the coins and engraved in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Roman East, on milestones and inscriptions of the land surveyors, so he left his mark on both urban centers and the rural environment. He is the middling Roman emperor of the Talmudic literature, between the 'bad' and the 'good'.

But 'middling' or moderate is also the proper adjective for the Talmudic voice which characterizes Diocletian. This emperor and his modern scholars are trapped between Christian anti-Diocletian historiography and between his admirers, the so-called pagan anti-Christian historians.⁷² The Talmudic voice is much more temperate and moderate. In Tacitean mode, it is a good example of a tale told *sine ira et studio*.

Thus we come to the following preliminary conclusions.

⁶⁹ JT, Avodah Zarah 5, 44d. See the discussion in Shahar 2011, with details of earlier studies in n. 4.

⁷⁰ Eusebius, *History of the Martyrs in Palestine*, edited and translated into English by William Cureton (Paris 1891), 9–10; see also the short recension MP 3.1 (PG 20, 1469).

⁷¹ Rabello 1984. ⁷² Cameron 1993: 15; Rees 2004: 3–5, 86–7.

The Roman emperors mentioned by name in Talmudic literature belong to three different periods of relations between Judaea and Rome, from the late Second Temple period up to the early fourth century: the 'Bad' belong to the time of the great Jewish revolts (66–136 CE); the 'Good' reflect the honeymoon of the Severan period, with Rabbi and Antoninus/Caracalla; while the middling relations that were neither very bad nor very good are represented by Diocletian.

The shifts and changes in the Talmudic images of each emperor over the generations are the products of the political and social world of these different generations which retell and reshape the traditions. The 'Bad' emperors (with the exception of Titus) are usually presented much more positively in the Babylonian Talmud, as part of the agenda of the Babylonian amoraim discouraging Jewish rebellion. Over time, the Palestinian literature also softens the character of the 'Bad', as the contributors get further away from the revolts themselves and their harsh consequences.

The wording of the narrative may also be affected, probably indirectly, by stories about the emperors which were current throughout the empire, such as those which found their expression in the *Historia Augusta*.

Roman emperors who figure in the Talmudic literature are generally those who were very active and effective in the Jewish arena, especially in Palestine, but also, as in the case of Trajan, in the Hellenistic diaspora – Egypt and Cyprus. This is true in particular of emperors who came to the area in person, leaving their own mark on Jewish territory and the immediate vicinity.

Who are missing from the picture? First of all, the Julio-Claudians before Nero. At first glance, it seems as if the reason for this is the length of time which elapsed between Augustus and his successors, and the creation of the Talmudic literature. But the fact that Hellenistic kings and dramatic events at the end of the Hasmonean and early Roman periods found their expression in Talmudic literature makes this answer hardly satisfactory. It is more likely that their absence is due to the significant representation of the Herodian dynasty in the Talmudic literature. Thus this Roman client kingdom and its kings served as a membrane between the empire and the Jews, so that the emperors of their time, who had no direct contact with Jews, do not appear in Talmudic literature. It is when we come to the direct confrontation between the Roman legions headed by Vespasian and Titus, and the Jews that the future emperors came to the fore. Josephus' *Bellum Iudaicum* becomes the '*polemos* of Aspasianus' for the Mishnah and all the later Talmudic traditions. After Agrippa II dies (between 86/7 and 100 CE),

there is direct contact between Judaea and Rome, and the cooperation or confrontation is headed by the emperor, on the Roman side, and by the Jewish patriarchate and central aristocracy and the rabbis, on the Jewish side. Thus all the other emperors who did not come into direct contact with Jews and did not legislate to affect the life of the Jewish community were of no interest to the compilers of the Talmudic literature. And this is true for the majority of the Roman emperors.

Most significant by their absence are the Christian emperors, especially Constantine. This silence is all the more noteworthy because the Constantinian revolution is contemporary with the late and very intensive phases of the creative process of the Palestinian Talmud. On the other hand, it suits the Talmudic references to the religious policies of Diocletian only as a background to the Jewish ban upon Samaritan wine, without mentioning the Christians, the true target of Diocletian's persecutions. There is a very strong scholarly tendency to search for any hint of Christians and Christianity in the Talmudic literature, especially the Palestinian literature, in order to stress their presence there, based on the supposition that Christians and Christianity played a significant role in the Jewish agenda. On the other side stand scholars who argue that the low profile of Christianity in the *Tannaitic* and *Amoraic* literature is a true representation of the limited role of Christians in the world of Palestinian Jewry during the third and fourth centuries.⁷³ I agree with this view, and the absence of Constantine and his successors from the Talmudic literature supports these conclusions.

⁷³ For the scholarly debate, see Schremer 2010, who tends to reduce the role of Christianity in the early Talmudic literature.