

# Journeys in the Roman East: Imagined and Real

Edited by  
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Mohr Siebeck

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# Strangers on the Road: Otherness, Identification, and Disguise in Rabbinic Travel Tales of Late Roman Palestine

*Catherine Hezser*

In antiquity as nowadays, journeys served to widen one's horizons and challenged one's identity. The road and way station provided opportunities for a variety of encounters with strangers, places, and objects that were different from what one was familiar with back home, within one's more or less narrowly defined social circles.<sup>1</sup> In late antique Palestine, roads that passed through uninhabited areas would be relatively neutral spaces, distant from "pagan" Graeco-Roman and Byzantine-Christian culture.<sup>2</sup> They could therefore serve as ideal stages for fictional encounters between rabbis and "others," directing one's focus on the travelers' ethnic, cultural, and religious differences.

While traveling on roads and sojourning at places more or less distant from one's hometown, the traveler would have been unknown to those he or she encountered and exposed to dangers such as robbery, kidnapping, and even murder.<sup>3</sup> Confrontation with "strangers" and "strangeness" could be perceived as threatening to one's own identity. On the other hand, openness for what the "other" had to offer might lead to a reevaluation of established norms and values. Travel is potentially life-changing. As Tim Whitmarsh has suggested in connection with Greek romantic novels: "the travels are the location for what Derrida would call *différance*: a deviation, both temporal and spatial, from the linearity that constitutes identity (in its root sense of sameness)" (2011: 20).

The encounter with the unfamiliar and unknown could challenge and change but also enforce one's own identity. In ancient Greek travel narratives, from the *Odyssey* onwards, travelers are presented as heroes who prove their strength of character under duress: "They prove themselves in all situations and keep their whole identity. ... Nearly always they pass all examinations and temptations in

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<sup>1</sup> On "cultural encounters" on the road see also Harland 2011, 18.

<sup>2</sup> On the road system in Roman Palestine see Hezser 2011, 54–88.

<sup>3</sup> The potential loss of identity and exposure to dangers is especially evident in the Greek romantic novels, where the hero and heroine undergo various adventures away from home before they are reunited and marry. For these novels see Reardon 2008. On these novels see Whitmarsh 2008.

a brilliant and honourable way. They do not have identity crises like the main figures of the modern middle-class novel” (Johne 1996: 175).

Palestinian rabbinic sources transmit a number of stories about rabbis’ encounters on the road. Such stories are particularly prevalent in late antique sources, namely the Talmud Yerushalmi and amoraic Midrashim. In the following, we shall investigate how these encounters are depicted. What and whom do rabbis encounter and what impact does that encounter have on their own views and identity? Do the meetings with strangers merely serve to confirm rabbis’ assumptions about the world they live in? Or do they lead to actual changes of mind? Do the stories serve to highlight rabbinic identity in contrast to Graeco-Roman culture and society? Or are there at least traces of the transformative possibilities of culture “clashes”?<sup>4</sup> Finally, how do the rabbinic travel narratives fit into the context of Graeco-Roman and Christian travel stories in terms of both style and content?

### Self-Identification and Disguise

People who met on the road would be strangers to each other. They would not know each other’s hometown, family, occupation, and travel route, unless they identified themselves accordingly. The way they identified themselves would affirm their group- and community-membership and, at the same time, serve as a boundary marker to exclude others they did not want to affiliate with. Éric Rebillard has pointed out that North African Christians of the third to fifth centuries CE commonly used the kiss in greetings and the sign of the cross on their foreheads to make themselves known to one another (2012: 17–18). These gestures and signs served as visual markers of identity in contexts in which non-Christians did not use them in the same way (*ibid.*)<sup>5</sup> Clothes, accessories, and demeanor could also serve to indicate a traveler’s background and status, although these signs were more vague and ambiguous in their meanings.

According to a text in *Sifre Deuteronomy*, some Torah scholars assumed that they were recognizable in public by the way they walked, talked, and dressed themselves:

Just as whoever uses fire makes a mark on his body, whoever uses the words of the Torah makes a mark on his body. Just as those who work with fire are recognizable among people, so disciples of sages are recognizable in the market by their walking, their talk-

<sup>4</sup> On Romanization and the possible “clash” between Roman and local ethnic cultures see Whittaker 2009, 199–200.

<sup>5</sup> Rebillard 2012, 17–18, writes: “Though a public greeting kiss was quite common among non-Christians, it was restricted mostly to family and friends ... the extension of the practice to non-religionists would therefore have distinguished the Christians.”



ing, and their [way of] wrapping [themselves in their cloaks] (*Sifre Deut.* 343:11; Finkelstein ed. p. 400).

Since the *tallit/pallium* and beard were fashionable among wider circles of the male population of the Near East, they did not allow one to easily recognize the intellectual and the rabbi in an undefined public context. The *Sifre Deuteronomy* text seems to express Torah scholars' assumed distinction from other male Jews within a Jewish environment. The claim that Torah learning visibly changed a man and made him discernable to other Jews forms part of rabbis' self-fashioning.<sup>6</sup>

In the neutral environment of the roadside such visual markers of identity would have been ambiguous and insufficient. It was therefore customary for travelers to verbally introduce themselves to those they met. The *Odyssey* already transmits a version of the questions which strangers addressed to each other on the road: "What men are you from? Where are your city and your parents?" (15.264). According to Steven Muir, one's "identity was built up over the course of many social interactions, and is constantly needed to be maintained through these interactions" (2011: 32). During travel, separated from one's hometown and family, it was difficult to maintain one's identity. Yet the confrontation with strangers also provided the opportunity to refashion oneself.

A story in *Genesis Rabbah* addresses the issue of verbal self-identification among strangers:

Rabbi and R. Yose bar Yehudah were walking on the road. They saw a gentile coming toward them. They said: Three things will he ask us: Who are you? and: What is your occupation? and: Where are you going? Who are you? Jews. And what is your occupation? Traveling merchants.<sup>7</sup> Where are you going? To buy wheat from the store-house of Yavneh (*Gen. Rab.* 76:8; p.906 in the Theodor-Albeck ed.).

One way of preserving one's identity was to travel with a companion who knew one well: "Fellow travelers might be actual family members or co-citizens of the hometown, or they might act as surrogates of those roles" (Muir 2011: 32–33). In our story, two rabbis are said to have traveled together and could confirm each other's Jewish and rabbinic identity. The meeting with the stranger puts their identities to question.

The text implies that the traveling rabbis were able to visually ascertain the non-Jewishness of the stranger when he approached them. The criteria that led to such an assumption are not explicated here. The factual non-Jewishness of the stranger, which does not need further explanation, serves the literary purpose of focusing the reader's attention on the rabbis' own self-identification. The rabbis are also assumed to have anticipated the stranger's questions ("Three

<sup>6</sup> For more on this issue see Hezser 2017, 24–68.

<sup>7</sup> For the term פֶּרַגְמָטוּסוּיִן, see Jastrow 1985, 1214: *πραγματευτής*, "trader, esp. traveling merchant."

things will he ask us”) already, that is, both his identity and his questions are projected onto him. The quotation of Gen 32:18 preceding the story indicates that the latter is modeled on the biblical text. Gen 32 deals with the relationship between Jacob and Esau and Jacob’s fearful anticipation of a meeting with his brother, whom he believes to be murderously inclined toward him and his family (cf. Jacob’s prayer in Gen 32:12). Jacob is said to have sent his slaves with presents to Esau, instructing the leading man as follows: “When my brother Esau meets you and asks you: ‘Whose man are you? Where are you going? And whose [animals] are these in front of you?’ you shall answer: ‘Your servant Jacob’s; they are a gift sent to my lord Esau; and [Jacob] himself is right behind us’” (Gen 32:18–19).<sup>8</sup>

Two of these questions reappear in almost the same form in the *Genesis Rabbah* story and all three questions head in the same direction. The first question is about the travelers’ affiliation, that is, their household or ethnic identity (see also the *Odyssey* above). What matters is the slave’s membership in the household of Jacob and the rabbinic travelers’ ethnically defined Jewishness. Second, the travel destination and purpose of the journey are considered noteworthy. Esau is informed that the caravan with the gifts from his brother Jacob is heading towards him. The rabbis identify themselves as traveling merchants on their way to purchase wheat from a particular store-house. What is significant here is that in confrontation with a non-Jewish stranger or Roman (Esau often stands for Rome) the rabbis do not reveal their rabbinic, scholarly, or intellectual status; they present themselves as ordinary merchants with common business pursuits. In analogy to the biblical narrative, this self-identification may serve to indicate their harmlessness and to invoke a friendly reaction in the interlocutor. Business was one of the main purposes of travel in antiquity;<sup>9</sup> identifying themselves as merchants would have made rabbis unexceptional in the eyes of their acquaintance and could initiate talk about business- and travel-related matters.

In the context of rabbinic literature, where rabbis are eager to stress their rabbinic identity, this fictional self-identification stands out as unusual. Did the storyteller assume that a non-Jew would not have understood who rabbis or Torah scholars were, that such titles and occupations were intelligible in Jewish contexts only? Or did he think that such an identification would have made the stranger less well-inclined toward them? In the biblical narrative Jacob fears Esau’s resentment toward him and his family. Should we assume that rabbis (or the storyteller) perceived any non-Jew or Roman as potentially dangerous and therefore decided to disguise themselves? Or did these rabbis’ worldly occupation simply fit the context of road travel better?

<sup>8</sup> Translation with Berlin and Brettler 2004, 67.

<sup>9</sup> See Rosenfeld and Menirav 2005, 127–36.

A tradition in the Gospel of Matthew provides an interesting contrast to the rabbinic story. Matthew 23:1–7 consists of a list of polemical statements against “scribes and Pharisees.” One of the allegations is that these scholars love “the greetings in the markets, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi’” (Matt 23:7). Since Matthew composed his gospel after 70 CE, when rabbis emerged as self-styled religious leaders in Roman Palestine, we can assume that he was familiar with the use of the title within the Near Eastern environment of his community.<sup>10</sup> Early Christian leaders are warned against letting themselves be called “Rabbi” (ibid. v. 8), allegedly to avoid hierarchical thinking. It is also possible that Matthew advised against the (Jewish-) Christian use of the title to distinguish Christian from Jewish leaders.

If we read this passage in connection with the (much later) rabbinic story in *Genesis Rabbah*, we may perhaps assume that it refers to greetings by Jews in local contexts in contrast to the midrashic story’s neutral setting and non-Jewish interlocutor. In the local context of the market place, rabbis would have liked to be known and recognized as Torah scholars by their fellow-Jews and greeted with the title “Rabbi.” On the road and in meetings with Romans, on the other hand, they preferred to remain inconspicuous. In the midrashic story rabbis pretend to assume an outsider’s perspective: an outsider may be able to perceive some general distinctions between ethnic groups and professional associations. Subtle differences of affiliation and status, however, are noticeable by insiders only, such as the fellow-Jews by whom rabbis allegedly expected to be called “Rabbi,” according to Matthew’s tradition.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the audience and readers of the rabbinic story would have known what was going on: the insistence on rabbinic travelers’ “normalcy” served to underline the assumed boundary between these Jewish intellectuals and ordinary merchants, and rabbis’ claimed superiority.

In the continuation of the *Genesis Rabbah* story R. Yose b. Yehudah is said to have hid himself, whereas Rabbi allegedly stood up to face the non-Jew. The storyteller seems to have assumed that the non-Jew was potentially dangerous or threatening. A story about a roadside meeting between a sage and Romans, transmitted in the Talmud Yerushalmi, can highlight the threatening nature of such encounters:

R. Pinchas said: There was a case concerning a sage<sup>12</sup> who was coming up from the hot baths of Tiberias. Romans met him. They said to him: From where are you? He said to them: From those of Vespasian [or: Severus].<sup>13</sup> And they let him go. In the evening they

<sup>10</sup> The Gospel of Matthew is commonly dated to around 90 CE. On this scholarly “consensus” see Claussen 2002, 69.

<sup>11</sup> On such subtle clues to status and group membership see Wilkins *et al.* 2014, 125.

<sup>12</sup> According to Lieberman 1991, 193–94, the term *rav* refers to a generic (Palestinian) sage here rather than to the Babylonian scholar Rav.

<sup>13</sup> Hebr.: דספיינוס גן דספיינוס. According to Jastrow 1985, 968, the Roman emperor Vespasian is

came to him [to Vespasian or Severus]. They said to him: Until when will you sustain these Jews? He said to them: Why? They said to him: We met one Jew and said to him: From where are you? He said to us: From Vespasian [or: Severus]. He said to them: And what did you do to him? They said to him: [It should be] enough to him that we let him go. He said to them: You did well. And if someone who relies on [a person of] flesh and blood is saved, all the more so one who relies on the Holy One, Blessed Be He. This is what is written: “Whoever calls the name of God will be saved [Job 3:5]” (y. Ber. 9:1, 13a).

Rather than identifying himself as a Jew, the rabbi is said to have identified himself as a subject of Vespasian (or Severus) in the first part of this story. The assumption is that the ethnic self-identification as a Jew was avoided to prevent possible hostile reactions from the Romans. The rabbi’s alleged answer, “From those of Vespasian [or: Severus],” resembles the answer Jacob’s slave was supposed to give to Esau in Gen 32:18 (“Jacob’s”). The Romans might have assumed that he belonged to Vespasian’s [or: Severus’s] household, that he was one of the distinguished Roman’s slaves or freedmen, who formed part of his entourage. If a Roman emperor is alluded to here, the reference may be to a member of the so-called *familia Caesaris*, the cohort of privileged royal slaves.<sup>14</sup> By associating himself with the household and entourage of a distinguished Roman official or even emperor, the rabbi aspired to enjoy the dignitary’s special protection, especially when he was confronted by one of his lower officials.

The statement “and they let him go” seems to imply that, otherwise, the Romans (soldiers?) might have impeded the rabbi’s journey and possibly even detained him. The encounter was probably envisioned as occurring on a Roman road, where travelers were occasionally checked by Roman military patrols. According to Benjamin Isaac, the so-called *limitanei* were soldiers in charge of road security, who could be stationed anywhere, not only in the frontier districts, and who “controlled movement” (1998: 379).<sup>15</sup> Their activity would have been familiar to the ancient audience of the story. What rabbis or Jews might have feared when encountering such troops remains uncertain. Were the Romans expected to harass Jewish travelers? Or would they prevent them from moving on or using particular roads? Or perhaps they would subject their baggage to special scrutiny for tax purposes? In any case, the narrative suggests that the rabbi’s clever answer convinced the Romans of his legitimacy. And the an-

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meant here. Because Vespasian was emperor from 69 to 79 CE and Rab was a first-generation amora, Neusner 2010, 23, translates the name to “[the governor] Severus,” who lived at the end of the second century, instead. The name “Vespasian” matches the Hebrew consonants better, however, and can be considered the *lectio difficilior*.

<sup>14</sup> On the *familia Caesaris* see Weaver 1972.

<sup>15</sup> See also *ibid.* 418: “The essence of control focused therefore on trade routes, lines of communication, way-stations and ports, rather than a specific territory, zone or group of settlements.”

swer was not a lie: in Roman Palestine Jews were Roman subjects and subjected nations were generally associated with a servile status.<sup>16</sup>

In the second part of the story the setting is different. The Romans meet their superior at his own quarters. They report to him that they met a Jew on the road, indicating that they were aware of his “real” affiliation. In the dialogue among the Romans, the lower-rank Romans are portrayed as generally ill-disposed toward Jews, whereas the higher-rank Roman appears to be more tolerant, praising them for letting the travelers move on.<sup>17</sup> It remains unclear whether the lesson drawn from the encounter (“And if someone who relies on [a person of] flesh and blood is saved, all the more so one who relies on the Holy One, Blessed Be He. This is what is written: ‘Whoever calls the name of God will be saved [Job 3:5]’”) is meant to be a continuation of Vespasian’s [or Severus’s] speech. If so, the Roman emperor or dignitary would be presented as a believer in the salvific power of the Jewish God. If the acknowledgment of the salvific power of God is attributed to the Roman dignitary himself, the impact would be all the more forceful. The narrative would then stand in line with other stories with an apologetic function in which Roman emperors and officials are said to have blessed the Jewish God.<sup>18</sup> This application (*nimshal*), which may have been added secondarily, turns the story into a parable (*mashal*) to give theological significance to a story about an encounter between a rabbi and Romans. The notion that a Roman emperor, if actually alluded to here, was a person “of flesh and blood” could also be considered critical of emperor worship.<sup>19</sup>

### Suspicious Romans

Chance encounters with Romans, in which the Romans are assumed to pose a threat, also appear elsewhere in the Talmud Yerushalmi and amoraic Midrashim. The following story is an example of such tales:

<sup>16</sup> On this association and ancient Jewish texts which express it see Hezser 2005, 223–27.

<sup>17</sup> If Vespasian is meant here, a positive image of Vespasian is also presented in the story about R. Yohanan b. Zakkai’s escape from Jerusalem and prediction of Vespasian’s rule (*ARNA* 4, Schechter ed. p. 22–23, *ARNB* 6, p. 19, with parallels in *b. Git.* and *Lam. R.*). For discussions of the story and its parallels see Saldarini 1975, 189–204; Schäfer 1979, 43–101.

<sup>18</sup> For further examples of such stories see *y. B.M.* 2:5, 8c. The story about R. Gamliel and Roman officials who allegedly came to study with him (*y. B.Q.* 4:3, 4b) also contains such apologetic elements (“your whole Torah is beautiful and praiseworthy”). Some of the Antoninus stories also present the imaginary emperor by that name as a worshipper of the Jewish God. On these stories see Cohen 2010, 329–60.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Schremer 2009, 106: “the rabbis did not tolerate any form of emperor worship and its expressions. This was because the imperial cult implied acknowledgment of the emperor’s power, which for the rabbis meant ... an expression of doubt concerning God’s sovereignty.”

R. Yizhaq b. Eleazar was walking on the sea cliffs of Caesarea. He saw there a thigh bone [or: a ball] and hid it and it [nevertheless] rolled about. He hid it [again] and it rolled about. He said: This is designated to carry out its commission. A courier [בִּילְרָד]<sup>20</sup> passed by, and he stumbled on it and fell and died. They went and examined him and found him carrying bad decrees against the Jews of Caesarea (*Gen. Rab.* 10:7, Theodor Albeck ed. p. 81–82).<sup>21</sup>

The rabbi is imagined to have been walking on an official courier route, used by the *cursus publicus*.<sup>22</sup> He sees a circular object that he first considers to be a dangerous obstacle that could cause other travelers to fall and suffer injuries. It turns out, however, to be a magic device able to protect Caesarean Jews from the harsh realities of Roman imperialism. Impossible to hide, the bone or ball is said to have caused the death of an official Roman courier, thus preventing the delivery of anti-Jewish decrees.

The fantastical story probably served to express God's protection of Jews in a Roman environment fraught with difficulties. It is entirely unrealistic and at odds with actual practice: not only the assumption that an object could move about by itself (or was moved by God) but also the notion that the courier's death would prevent the decrees from being delivered is hard to believe. If a courier suffered an injury, another would surely replace him and the decrees would be delivered with a delay. According to Suetonius's description, Augustus already replaced the runners, who were stationed at intervals along the routes, with messengers in carriages covering the entire way.<sup>23</sup> For urgent messages riders on horses would be used.<sup>24</sup> The figure of the runner, envisioned by the storyteller, would not have existed anymore in late antiquity. The presentation of the Roman courier service would be based on long-outdated practices then. In all likelihood, the storyteller and tradents did not care about such details and were only interested in the courier's death by higher force. The only realistic aspect of the story is the notion that certain types of stones or objects could obstruct travel and cause injuries.

The negative view of Romans also applied to traveling companions. The Tosefta already advises travelers: “[When] an Israelite goes along with a non-Jew, he puts him at his right hand side, and he does not put him at his left hand side. R. Yishmael b. R. Yohanan b. Beroqah says: [The non-Jew walks] with a sword in his right hand [and] with a staff in his left hand” (*T.A. Z.* 3:4). The anonymous rule does not provide a reason for the suggestion that one should walk at the left hand side of a non-Jewish travel companion but implies that

<sup>20</sup> From *veredarius*, βερεδάριος, see Jastrow 1985, 171.

<sup>21</sup> The story has a parallel in *Lev. R.* 22:4 (Margulies ed. p.506)

<sup>22</sup> On the *cursus publicus* see esp. Riepl 1972 [1913].

<sup>23</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars: Life of Augustus* 49.3, explained by Wardle 2014, 362. On this passage see also Silverstein 2007, 30–31. See also Adkins and Adkins 1994, 184.

<sup>24</sup> See van Tilburg 2007, 57.

walking at his right hand side might be dangerous. The following explanation associates the gentile with carrying a sword in his right hand, in addition to a walking stick in his left. The sword could be used to injure or kill the Jew, even if the gentile functions as his companion or guard. Carrying swords on journeys was probably common practice, especially if valuable goods were carried through bandit-ridden territories.

The possibility that Roman travel companions could turn against the rabbi and rob him is explicitly stated in *Genesis Rabbah* 78:15. The midrash refers to Gen 33:15–16 (Jacob traveling without the travel companions offered to him by Esau) and then continues:

Our Rabbi, when he went to the government, would pay attention to this passage and did not take Romans [רומאין] with him. Once he did not pay attention to it and took Romans with him. He had not reached Acco [yet] before he had to sell his traveling cloak [having lost everything to them] (*Gen. Rab.* 78:15, Theodor-Albeck ed. p. 935).

The story suggests that to avoid the potential danger that Roman travel companions presented, it is preferable to travel without them. The traditions indicate that rabbis were deeply suspicious of non-Jews and Romans, especially in contexts in which they felt vulnerable, such as journeys away from home. On the open road and in desolate areas without (Jewish) settlements they would be exposed to the Romans' potentially harmful attitudes and actions. It would therefore be better to avoid such situations altogether and travel with well-known Jewish companions only.

### Learning Experiences

In some stories, road-side encounters with gentiles are presented as learning experiences: they serve to reveal something about the rabbi involved or are used as the basis of halakhic knowledge. This is the case with the tannaitic story about R. Gamliel's travels with his slave Tabi on the coastal road:

[A] An event [*maaseh*] concerning R. Gamliel who was going from Akko to Kezib. He found a loaf of bread on the road. He said to his slave, Tabi: Take the bread. He saw a gentile. He said to him: Mabegai, take this bread. R. Lei ran after him [the gentile]. He said to him: What is your business [מה טיבך]? He said to him: I am from these station-keepers' villages [מעייירות הללו של בורגנין]. He said to him: What is your name? He said to him: Mabegai. He said to him: Did you ever know R. Gamliel? He said to him: No. From here we learn that R. Gamliel was possessed by the holy spirit.

[B] And from his words we learn three things: we learn that the leaven of a gentile is permitted after Passover; and one does not pass by food [on the road]; and one goes according to the majority of those who walk on the roads [with regard to determining the character of the food]" (*t. Pes.* 2:15).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The story has parallels in *Lev. R.* 37:3 and *y. A.Z.* 1:9, 40a.

The fantastic element of the story is R. Gamliel's ability to address the stranger by his name, although he has never met him before. The identity of the stranger is confirmed by R. Gamliel's rabbinic travel companion who directly asks him for his name and business, in accordance with the customs of such encounters. The reference to the station keepers' villages adds local color to the story, but the emphasis is clearly on R. Gamliel's superhuman ability that is traced back to the "holy spirit." For the storyteller, the encounter with the stranger is relevant only in as far as it helps to reveal certain aspects of the rabbi's spiritual power.

At some stage in the story's transmission and redaction history halakhic conclusions were added [B]. These conclusions place the focus on the rabbi's instruction to his slave to collect bread found on the road. They impose halakhic issues from other contexts onto a story about a prominent sage. Those who added these rules were more concerned about R. Gamliel's behavior than about his alleged possession of the holy spirit. They used the story as the basis of and as support for certain halakhic instructions, part of which were relevant in the context of Passover practice.<sup>26</sup> The rules are not directly derived from the narrated encounter, that is, the meeting with the gentile did not teach rabbis new things. The gentile himself remains colorless.

If anyone is said to have changed in encounters between rabbis and non-Jews it is the non-Jew, influenced by the rabbi's words and actions. A story about R. Meir and an innkeeper, transmitted in *Genesis Rabbah* 92:6 (Theodor-Albeck ed. p. 114), suggests that the innkeeper collaborated with bandits eager to steal the travelers' property during the night. Being lured out of the safe haven of the inn by the host himself, the travelers would not encounter the promised caravan to continue their journey but rather the robbers, taking everything they had. R. Meir is said to have outwitted the innkeeper by making him call out the name of his alleged brother *ki tov*, "For He is Good," in front of the synagogue, that is, praising the Jewish God. On the next morning, when the bandits had departed, R. Meir emerged from the building and revealed the real meaning of his actions to his host.

Travel stories in which the road-side encounter with Romans or non-Jews leads to an actual change of rabbis' views and norms are absent from Palestinian rabbinic documents. The narratives merely serve to confirm the rabbinic world views, norms, and practices. Jenny Labendz's claim that dialogues between rabbis and non-Jews express rabbis' "appreciation of and engagement with non-Jewish ways of thinking" (2013: 15) is therefore not supported by these narratives. Labendz admits, however, that "We have not yet seen an example of a non-Jew depicted as teaching the rabbi something he did not know before" (161).

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<sup>26</sup> See the discussion in Hezser 2011, 125.



## Travel Tales and Otherness

From a historical perspective, the possibility to widen one's horizons through travel is a modern concept that did not develop before European travelers' *Bildungsreisen* in early modern times.<sup>27</sup> Although people from many different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds co-existed in the ancient world and met each other on the roads, multi-culturalism became a moral value in Western societies in the last fifty years only. In antiquity people always traveled for well-defined purposes, whether for business or in search of physical or spiritual healing (travel to healing sanctuaries and pilgrimages to "holy men"). The actual travel experience "on the road" was an intermediary stage between one's home town and destination, a necessary undertaking which is not a value in and of itself. Since the travelers shared this experience of travel through uninhabited and unfamiliar territories with strangers, this commonality could lead to mutual support when encountering shared problems and dangers. But rather than engage in congenial interactions, we may assume that strangers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds would have kept their distance.

The stories' *Sitz im Leben* and *Sitz in der Literatur* would have determined the ways in which they were formulated and transmitted: the rabbinic narratives functioned within internal rabbinic contexts, whether they were transmitted orally or as part of edited documents.<sup>28</sup> They were meant to illustrate and enforce rabbinic practices and values rather than pronounce sages' openness for the surrounding non-Jewish culture. In fact, sameness could be best expressed in confrontation with the other. The roadside settings were therefore such potent stages for expressing possibly dangerous "clashes" between rabbis and Romans.

Beneficial encounters, which could lead to the change of a rabbi's views and practices, were mentioned in stories only if they concerned meetings with fellow Jewish strangers. For example, R. Shimon b. Eleazar's encounter with an ugly man in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* (version A) 41:3 eventually threatens his identity as a rabbi:

An event [*maaseh*] concerning R. Shimon b. Eleazar who came from Migdal Eder from the house of his master, and he was riding on an ass and passing along the sea shore. He saw a man who was extremely ugly. He said to him: Empty head! How ugly you are! Perhaps all people of your town are as ugly as you? He said to him: And what can I do? Go to the craftsman who made me and say to him: How ugly is this vessel which you made! When R. Shimon realized that he had sinned, he descended from the ass and prostrated himself before him.

<sup>27</sup> On these journeys for educational purposes see Stannek 2001; Hlavin-Schulze 1998, esp. 40–41: "Bürgerliche Bildungsreise," who argues that bourgeois travel to explore the difference of neighboring or more distant nations began in the eighteenth century. See also Warneke 1995, esp. 17–101 (part 1: "The Background").

<sup>28</sup> On the scholarly nature of rabbinic texts which were composed by rabbis for later generations of rabbis see especially Kraemer 1993, 125–40.

The ugly man's Jewishness is indicated by his reaction to the rabbi's insult. This reaction suggests that the man is more pious than the rabbi himself. It reveals the rabbi's attitude as an insult against God as the creator of all humankind. Confrontation with the man serves to expose the rabbi's own sinfulness which is subsequently expressed non-verbally, by his dismounting from the ass and prostration before the man. Instead of solving the issue and concluding the story, the plot continues in a more urgent manner when the man refuses to forgive the rabbi: "He ran after him three miles. People of the town came out towards him. They said to him: Peace be to you, Rabbi. He said to them: Whom do you call Rabbi? They said to him: The one who walks behind you. He said to them: If that one is a rabbi, let those like him not be many in Israel!" (ibid.).

In this dramatization of the plot Shimon b. Eleazar is stripped of the public's acknowledgement of him as a rabbi. A reversal of the hierarchical relationship between the two main characters has taken place: based on his clever theological answer, the ugly man is honored with the title "Rabbi," that is, seen as a Torah scholar, whereas the rabbi has become an ordinary man. When the public is informed about what happened, they ask the man to forgive the rabbi. The final sentence indicates that the encounter served as a learning experience for the rabbi: "On that day R. Shimon entered his great study house and expounded: Let a person always be as soft [bendable] as a reed and not as hard as a cedar." The readiness to apologize and to forgive others is presented as a major rabbinic value here.

Another, albeit different, example of a learning encounter is transmitted in a story tradition in Tosefta *Hagigah* 3:36:

An event [*maaseh*] concerning R. Tarfon who was walking on the way. An old man met him [cf. *T. Yoma* 2:7]. He said to him: Why do people complain about you? And are not all your words truthful and righteous? But you accept heave offering on the rest of the days of the year [outside the harvest season] from everybody. R. Tarfon said: May I bury my sons, if I do not have a halakhah in my hands from R. Yohanan b. Zakkai who told me: You are permitted to accept heave offering on the rest of the days of the year from everybody. Now [that] people complain about me I decree upon myself that I shall not accept heave offering on the rest of the days of the year from everybody unless he tells me: I have in it a quarter [in the status of] holy [things].

This encounter between R. Tarfon and an old man focuses on a specific halakhic issue. The man acknowledges the rabbi's general expertise but alerts him to an allegedly wrong halakhic view concerning heave offering that people are said to complain about. Despite remembering a supporting tradition by R. Yohanan b. Zakkai, R. Tarfon is said to have given in to the complaints and to have accepted the stricter view. The roadside setting merely serves as the background for the halakhic discussion here. What is striking, again, is that the encounter is said to have led to a change of the rabbi's view on the matter. Such changes of attitude do not appear in stories about rabbis' travel encounters with non-Jewish

strangers. It seems that the storytellers assumed that only meetings with fellow-Jews could change rabbis' views and practices, whereas meetings with non-Jews merely served to confirm their pre-existing identity.

In a study of travel and "liminal landscapes" Simon Ward has pointed to the opportunities which roads and similar spaces present: "To enter a liminal landscape is to open up a space of free play, but also to open up oneself to experiences beyond the boundaries normally set by society, to confrontations with what that society has placed *beyond* its boundaries, with the abject that 'disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules'" (2012: 186). In modern road movies chance encounters that happen in such spaces liberate the protagonists from conventional identities and behaviors and allow them to reconfigure themselves: "These encounters form a key element in the 'testing' of the protagonist" (ibid.).

The setting of the road and the unfamiliar surroundings are also used in the Greek novels to experiment with issues of identity. Concerning these novels, Tim Whitmarsh defines identity as "the set of categories of selfhood presumed, legitimised or questioned in the romances themselves" (2011: 3). In scenes of self-identification to strangers, various types of identity markers are used. In Xenophon of Ephesus's novel *Anthia and Habrocomes*, dated to the first century CE, for example, Aegialeus the fisherman introduces himself to Habrocomes as "not a settler or a native Sicilian but an elite Spartan, from one of the powerful families there, and very prosperous" (5.1.4). Aegialeus here presents himself as an outsider, a member of the elite and wealthy. Whitmarsh notes: "These identities are provisional, strategic, and designedly false; they will be shed when their usefulness is outlived" (ibid.).

This observation is also very important for the rabbinic stories discussed here. The rabbinic self-identifications serve the settings in which they are expressed. Rav presents himself as a member of the household of Vespasian in front of a Roman (*y. Ber.* 9:1, 13a); Rabbi and R. Yose bar Yehudah tell a gentile that they are traveling merchants (*Gen. Rab.* 76:8). They all adopt the identity that is most useful in the situations in which they find themselves. Just as Aegialeus disguises himself as a member of the elite when talking to Habrocomes, Rav disguises himself as a close associate of the emperor when meeting Romans. In both cases the reader knows these characters' "true" identity and becomes curious to know the reasons for and consequences of the disguise. Whitmarsh stresses that "narrative creates identities" in as far as identities are "configured within a particular body of literature" rather than being essential aspects of a personality (ibid. 4). In narrative, a prominent rabbi can assume the "cover-up" of an imperial slave if it suits his purposes.

The aspect of travel, of being "on the road", is important as well: "the travels introduce the difference into the identity narrative" (ibid. 20). Away from the local surroundings the protagonists are blank slates regarding their self-pres-

entation and others' projections. The storytellers present rabbis as harmless ordinary travelers; yet they project danger and suspicion onto the Romans. Altogether, however, the stories can be considered narratives of accommodation: rabbis are willing to accommodate themselves to the Roman image of a loyal subject (traveling merchants; subjects of Vespasian/Severus) and are "rewarded" by the Romans' *laissez faire* attitude ("they let him go"). By showcasing how rabbis might have moved about in their Roman imperial surroundings, the stories reveal the broader realities of their time. The preservation of one's identity required accommodation and accommodation involved strategic thinking.

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