

Genesis Rabbah in Text and Context

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Between Narrative and Polemic

The Sabbath in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud

Sarit Kattan Gribetz

The Hebrew Bible does not mention especially tasty food or particularly beautiful smells of the Sabbath. Nor does the Bible stress the military advantages of observing the Sabbath. These curious features and benefits of the Sabbath, however, are found in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud. What led the rabbinic authors of these texts to stress such peculiar aspects of the Sabbath? This paper offers a possible discursive context that might help us better understand these texts.

In my analysis, I am inspired by a recent article by Shaye J. D. Cohen, who has identified a number of patristic sources that criticize the Jews' carnal observance of the Sabbath – indulging in food and drink, dancing and clapping.¹ Cohen compellingly demonstrates that these themes of eating and rejoicing appear often in rabbinic discussions of the Sabbath and are not simply Christian projections of biblical sins onto contemporaneous Jews. Such critiques, instead, reflect actual rabbinic Sabbath practices and present us with external patristic evidence for the ways in which the Jewish Sabbath was observed. If, in certain cases, studying ancient Christian critiques of the Sabbath helps us better to understand rabbinic Sabbath practice from the period, in other instances studying such criticisms – whether their authors were Christian or pagan – helps us better understand not only rabbinic *practice* but also rabbinic *discourse about* the Sabbath. In what follows, I suggest that, in the face of widespread and persistent anti-Sabbath polemics in the Greco-Roman world, rabbinic narratives preserved in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud offer counter-polemics aimed primarily at encouraging Jews to observe the Sabbath despite the negative press that Sabbath observance was receiving in pagan and Christian circles.

Genesis Rabbah 11 and Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 119a–b contain an abundance of stories, dialogues, exegeses, and sayings about the Sabbath. *Genesis Rabbah* 11 unfolds as a commentary on Gen 2:3, a verse that describes God's blessing and sanctification of the seventh day. The Babylonian Talmud, in con-

¹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Dancing, Clapping, Meditating: Jewish and Christian Observance of the Sabbath in Pseudo-Ignatius," in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity* (ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 29–51.

trast, embeds its Sabbath narratives within a discussion about the amount of food that can be saved for the three Sabbath meals should a fire break out. Both texts share an overarching interest in illustrating that the Sabbath is a sign of Israel's chosenness and unique relationship with God.²

I have identified a number of instances in which narratives within these two collections gain new meaning when understood as responses to specific polemical or prejudiced ideas popular in Greek and Latin literature of the period. These sections of *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud contain stories about the tastiness of Sabbath food and drink, the pleasant aroma of the Sabbath, the unwitting observance of the Sabbath by a Roman elite (none other than the father of Jerusalem's governor Tinneus Rufus, as he resides in the afterworld!), and the strategic benefit of Sabbath observance in military contexts. I suggest that these stories serve as responses to accusations that Sabbath food was cold and tasteless, that Sabbath observers emitted malodorous smells, that the Jews owed their many military defeats to their senseless idleness on the Sabbath, and warnings to fellow Romans not to join the Jews in the celebration of the Sabbath. The narratives simultaneously respond to critiques by Gentiles and encourage Sabbath observance by Jews.

Genesis Rabbah, compiled in a Christianizing fifth-century Roman Galilee, playfully incorporates and rebuffs these Greco-Roman polemics throughout its chapter on the Sabbath. Reading the relevant passages in *Genesis Rabbah* with these polemics in mind sheds light on the historical and literary context of the midrash, and on what the authors of the midrash imagined the purpose of their midrashic project to be. The passages in the Babylonian Talmud, compiled somewhat later and in a Sasanian context, at times incorporate additional aggadic material, and at other times address a different aspect of Greco-Roman polemics against the Sabbath not found in *Genesis Rabbah* or other earlier Palestinian sources. The Babylonian Talmud provides an interesting example of the reception of Palestinian sources that were initially composed to address particular Greco-Roman concerns in the Roman Empire, in a different context beyond that empire and its immediate culture. Comparing the Sabbath narratives in these two rabbinic collections offers an opportunity to reflect on their similarities and differences, with an eye towards the narrative, polemical, and apologetic choices behind each text's construction.

The formulation of polemics and apologetics about the Sabbath was an ongoing process through several centuries that, in different contexts, included Greek, Roman, pagan, Hellenistic, rabbinic, Christian, and other voices. These rabbinic stories participate in this multi-vocal dynamic conversation. Marc Hirshman,

² E.g. *Gen. Rab.* 11:8; the theme of chosenness is central also in Second Temple sources and other rabbinic treatments of the Sabbath, cf. *Jub.* 1–2 and *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, Shabbata (ed. Lauterbach, 2.494).

in his analysis of this series of Sabbath stories in *Genesis Rabbah*, has similarly concluded that the collection of narratives is best understood in the context of dialogue and polemic with Christians and pagans.³ Several of the rabbinic narratives are told in the form of a dialogue between a rabbi and a Roman official. Though these passages are not to be read as historical accounts of actual encounters and conversations, they do participate in a different kind of a “dialogue” with others. That is, the “outsider” character, whether a Roman emperor or a governor, does not simply stand in as a projection of internal rabbinic anxieties, as is common in rabbinic literature,⁴ but really does embody in these narratives prejudices and stereotyped judgments held by those for whom the figure speaks, in this case a segment of the Roman literate and literary elite. We find that the anti-Sabbath sentiments expressed by these characters within rabbinic sources are indeed common in Greco-Roman literature before and during the rabbinic period, and that these rabbinic sources actively engage with and seek to undermine these external ideas.

Notwithstanding the genre of dialogues with Gentiles, the authors of the passages in *Genesis Rabbah* and in tractate Shabbat did not write them for a Greco-Roman or Christian audience. The narratives engage with persisting polemics and other contemptuous ideas from outsiders, but they address an internal audience of Jews, urging them – either through positive encouragement or foreboding warnings – to remain (or become) pious Sabbath observers regardless of the critiques they might have heard from outsiders. The narratives, then, are instances of internal rabbinic engagement with others: counter-polemics and apologetics formed in the context of external polemics against Jewish practice but directed inwardly to encourage more vigilant observance by Jews. That is not to say that the stories did not make their way beyond their intended Jewish audiences. We might even imagine that they could have reached Roman audiences second-hand: Jews who heard such stories in sermons might have used them as talking points in response to real challenges from their Roman neighbors, or retold them as folktales to friends within and beyond their communities. As far as our evidence suggests, however, the intended audience was a Jewish, if not an exclusively rabbinic, one.

³ Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (trans. Batya Stein; Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 43–54.

⁴ As Christine Hayes demonstrates in “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim and Romans in Bavli Sanhedrin 90b–91a,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine* (ed. Hayim Lapin; Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 249–289, and as is discussed further in Sarit Kattan Gribetz and Moulie Vidas, “Rabbis and Others in Conversation,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19.2 (2012): 91–103.

The Sabbath in the Roman World: Legal Tolerance, Literary Intolerance, and Pagan Practice

Clifford Ando, in his work on Roman law, has demonstrated that, for the most part, the Roman Empire encouraged those within its territories to continue observing their “ancestral rites” even after they became a part of the empire.⁵ The Roman lexicographer Sextus Pompeius Festus defines the term “*municipalia sacra*” in his *On the Meaning of Words* as those rites “that a people had from its origin, before receiving Roman citizenship, and which the *pontifices* wanted them to continue to observe and perform in the way in which they had been accustomed to perform them from antiquity.”⁶ For Jews, such rites would have included practicing the Sabbath in whatever way they were accustomed to doing so at the time.⁷ Josephus catalogues seven documents from 43 B.C.E. to 2–3 B.C.E. in which various Roman prefects and proconsuls, and even Augustus himself, assured the Jews that they were permitted to abstain from work and travel on the Sabbath, even if such Sabbath observance prevented the Jews from contributing military service to the empire.⁸ Philo, too, describes Augustus’ respect for the worship of the Sabbath in Jewish synagogues and mentions a case when an exception was made for Jews so that they could observe the Sabbath:

He [Augustus] knew therefore that they have houses of prayer and meet together in them, particularly on the sacred Sabbaths when they receive as a body a training in their ancestral philosophy ... Yet more, in the monthly doles in his own city when all the people each in turn receive money or corn, he never put the Jews at a disadvantage in sharing the bounty, but even if the distributions happened to come during the Sabbath when no one is permitted to receive or give anything or to transact any part of the business of ordinary life, particularly of a lucrative kind, he ordered the dispensers to reserve for the Jews till the morrow the charity which fell to all.⁹

⁵ Clifford Ando, “Die Riten der Anderen,” *Mediterraneo Antico* 15.1–2 (2012): 31–50. The Christians were the most famous exception to this policy, as were several eastern cults. The situation changed dramatically with the Christianization of the empire.

⁶ Festus s. v. *municipalia sacra* (146L), cited by Ando, “Die Riten der Anderen.”

⁷ That the Sabbath was a widespread part of Judaism at the time is well-attested; see Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Common Judaism in Greek and Latin Authors,” in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders* (ed. Fabian E. Udoh. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 69–87.

⁸ Josephus, *Ant.* 14.185–267; 16.160–178; cf. *Ant.* 12.125–146, discussed in Goldenberg, “The Jewish Sabbath in the Roman World up to the Time of Constantine the Great,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt II* 19.2 (1979): 416–418. Given the external Roman sources on the matter, the status of the authenticity of these edicts cited by Josephus does not unsettle the larger argument; on the topic of their authenticity, see Horst R. Moehring, “The *Acta pro Iudaeis* in the *Antiquities* of Flavius Josephus,” in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 124–158.

⁹ Philo, *Legat.* 155–158 (LCL 379); cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 19.282–283.

Only for a brief time following the Bar Kokhba revolt in the mid-second century C.E. were these allowances withdrawn.¹⁰

Despite Roman toleration of the continued observance of “ancestral rites” in the official record, there was no shortage of attacks launched against the Jews and their Sabbath, much of it preserved in Greek and Latin literary and satirical sources. Some of the literary references can properly be labeled as polemics, while others might more accurately be characterized as general contempt of a minority group by the surrounding majority culture, though the lines between polemics and contempt are often difficult definitively to draw. Cicero wrote generally of Jewish observances that “the practice of their sacred rites was at variance with the glory of our empire, the dignity of our name, and the customs of our ancestors.”¹¹ Agatharchides of Cnidus, Apion, Seneca, Persius, Tacitus, Juvenal, Martial, Dio Cassius, and Rutilius Namatianus all mock the Sabbath or express skepticism about its observance. Most of these sources have been studied in detail by Robert Goldenberg and Peter Schäfer.¹² Notwithstanding the official Roman position of toleration found in edicts and imperial documents, these literary sources demonstrate the extent to which Greeks and Romans regarded the Sabbath in negative, vulgar terms, as a feature of the Jews’ foreignness, disease, and repugnance.¹³ Apion explains that the Jews developed tumors of the groin on the seventh day of their journey out of Egypt as the aetiology for Sabbath rest; Tacitus ends his discussion of the Jewish Sabbath by stating that “the Jews are extremely loyal toward one another, and always ready to show compassion,

¹⁰ Goldenberg, “The Jewish Sabbath,” 420–421.

¹¹ Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28.69, cited in John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 56. Cicero’s text, as well as others discussed below, are best understood within their own literary/legal/social contexts (e.g. Cicero’s words might be understood as court tactics, see Benjamin Evans Holdsworth, “Reading Romans in Rome: A Reception of Romans in the Roman Context of Ethnicity and Faith” [Ph.D. diss., Durham University, 2009], 74–78, cf. Erich Gruen, “Jews and Romans,” in *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean* [ed. Jeremy McInerney; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014], 428–431); for the purposes of the present paper, however, the particular context is less relevant than the fact that these polemical ideas circulated in a diverse set of sources.

¹² Agatharchides of Cnidus, cited in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.209–211; Apion, *Aegyptiaca*, cited in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.21; Seneca, *De Superstitione*, cited in Augustine, *City of God* 6.11; Persius, *Saturae* 5.179–184; Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 4:1–5:1; Juvenal, *Saturae* XIV, 105; Martial, *Epigrammata* 4.4; Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana* XXXVII, 15:3–19:3, XLIX 22:4ff; Rutilius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo* I, 381–398. See Robert Goldenberg, “The Jewish Sabbath,” 414–447, and Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 82–92.

¹³ Ovid, in a passage that otherwise does not polemicize against the Jews, identifies the Sabbath as that which belongs to the “Syrian” or “foreign” Jews (*Remedia Amoris* 219–220, c.f. *Ars Amatoria* 1.76), and Martial takes a jab at the Sabbath by commenting on the stench associated with “the breath of fasting Sabbatarian women” (Martial, *Epigrammata* 4.4, in Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* [Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974], 1.523–524).

but toward every other people they feel ... only hate and enmity"; Perseus describes the fear of those who encounter the Sabbath – "you silently twitch your lips, turning pale."¹⁴ Christians, too, began polemicizing against the Sabbath fairly early in their attempts to create difference between themselves and non-Jesus-following Jews.¹⁵ These polemics and derogatory statements circulated in the Greco-Roman world in Greek and Latin over the course of several hundred years, from at least the second century B.C.E. to the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. While they took various forms, many of the standard tropes persisted through an exceptionally long period of time, showing up in a diverse set of sources from a large geographical and chronological spread.

Given such polemics against the Sabbath found in Greek and Roman texts, it is not surprising that early Jewish sources present the Sabbath in apologetic terms. Aristobulus, in a fragment that deals with the Sabbath, connects universalistic themes such as light and wisdom to the Jewish Sabbath, and emphasizes that the number seven is holy not only for Jews but also figures prominently in the writings of Homer and Hesiod (who concur that "the seventh day is holy" and who, Aristobulus claims, discovered the sevenfold principle in Jewish books).¹⁶ Philo, too, is quick to defend the Sabbath in light of claims that the Jews are slothful. Seneca, for instance, argues that in abstaining from work on the Sabbath, the Jews "practically lose a seventh part of their life in inactivity, and they suffer by having to put off urgent tasks."¹⁷ Philo argues, in contrast, that the observance

¹⁴ Apion cited in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.20–27; Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.1; Perseus, *Saturae* 5.179–184, translation in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1.436.

¹⁵ Stories about Jesus healing others and performing miracles on the Sabbath found in the synoptic gospels preserve a critique of some Sabbath laws and practices (see e. g. Mark 2:23–3:6, Matt 12:1–14, Luke 6:1–11 and 13:10–17), even if they were not understood as such during Jesus' lifetime and despite the fact that the same general principles also appear in rabbinic laws of the Sabbath (on which see Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* [New York: The New Press, 2012], 59–70). All the more strikingly are the opening lines of Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shabbata on Ex 31:12, which, in my opinion, present another voice in the conversation preserved in the synoptic gospels. See also Colossians 2:16 and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 18 and 47.

¹⁶ Aristobulus, Fragment 5, cited in Eusebius 13.12.9–16, in Adela Yarbro Collins, "Aristobulus," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (ed. James H. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 841–842. On this fragment and its authenticity, see Lutz Doering, "Excerpted Texts in Second Temple Judaism: A Survey of the Evidence," *Beiträge zur Technik des Sammelns und Kompilierens griechischer Texte von der Antike bis zum Humanismus* (ed. Rosa Maria Piccione and Matthias Perkams; Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2005), 4–15, and idem, *Schabbat: Sabbathalacha und -praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 306–315.

¹⁷ Seneca, a younger contemporary of Philo, wrote primarily in the decades after Philo's death. Given how similar Seneca and Philo's discussions of the Sabbath are, one might imagine them to have been in direct dialogue with one another on this matter in Rome. Philo, though, could just as well be responding to similar conceptions about the Jews and their Sabbath held by Seneca's peers in Rome or others in Alexandria. Seneca's passage is preserved in Augustine, who summarizes Seneca's comments from *De Superstitione* in *City of God* 6.11; translation by

of the Sabbath is its own type of labor – the laboring of the soul – rather than an abstention from work, and moreover that giving the body a break not only allows time for the soul to be exercised but also renews the body for more efficient laboring during the rest of the week.¹⁸ Philo's explanations portray the Sabbath as a familiar rather than a foreign experience, and through them Philo seeks to justify the observance of the Sabbath in light of those who were hostile to the idea of ceasing to work once every seven days.¹⁹

Roman anti-Sabbath polemics aside, Sabbath observance and the adoption of the seven-day week became popular among many Roman pagans in the early centuries C.E. Josephus writes that “the masses have long since shown a keen

Henry Bettenson in Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 251–252. On the impact of Roman ideas on Philo after his trip to the city and on the possibility of interaction between Philo and Seneca, see Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 17–58, 142, 185, 219–220; idem, “The Emergence of Monotheistic Creation Theology in Hellenistic Judaism,” in *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity* (ed. Lance Jenott and Sarit Kattan Gribetz; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 85–106; idem, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14–16, 96–97, 184; idem, “The Symposium of Philo's Therapeutae: Displaying Jewish Identity in an Increasingly Roman World,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 50 (2010): 95–117.

¹⁸ Philo writes: “On this day we are commanded to abstain from all work (ἔργων), not because the law inculcates idleness (ῥαθυμίας); on the contrary it always inures man to endure hardship and incites them to labor, and spurns those who would idle their time away, and accordingly is plain in its directions to work the full six days ... Its object is rather to give men relaxation from continuous and unending toil and by refreshing their bodies with a regularly calculated system of remissions, to send them out renewed to their old activities. For a breathing-space enables not merely ordinary people but athletes also to collect their strength and with a stronger force behind them to undertake promptly and patiently each of the tasks set before them. Furthermore, when He forbids bodily labor (διαπονείν τοῖς σώμασι) on the seventh day, He permits the exercise of the higher activities (τὰς ἀμείνουσας πράξεις ἐπιτελεῖν), namely, those employed in the study of the principles of virtue's lore. For the law bids us to take the time for studying philosophy and thereby improve the soul and the dominant mind ... Thus while the body is working, the soul enjoys a respite, but when the body takes a rest, the soul resumes its work (ἵνα ποιοῦντος μὲν τοῦ σώματος ἡ ψυχὴ διαναπαύηται, ἀναπαύῃ δὲ χρωμένον διαπονῇ), and thus the best form of life, the theoretical and the practical, take their turn in replacing each other.” Philo, *Special Laws* II.15.60–64; text and translation in F.H. Colson, *Philo: Volume VII* (LCL 320; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), 344–345. See also Philo, *Opif.* 128, *Decal* 98, and *Abr* 28–30, and the discussion in Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 32–51; Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, 107–8, 260–263; and Dulcinea Boesenberg, “Philo's Descriptions of Jewish Sabbath Practice,” *Studia Philonia Annual* 22 (2010): 143–163.

¹⁹ Critiques of the Jews' laziness abound. Tacitus also mentions the sloth involved in abstaining from work on the Sabbath in his writings about Jews: “They say that they first chose to rest on the seventh day because that day ended their toils; but after a time they were led by the charms of indolence to give over the seventh year as well to inactivity” (*Historiae* V, 4:1–5:1; text and translation in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, vol. 2, 25–26). Juvenal writes that “For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life” (*Saturae* XIV, 105; text and translation in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, vol. 2, 102–103).

desire to adopt our religious observances, and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread ...”²⁰ Whether or not Josephus exaggerates the level of appeal of Jewish customs to non-Jews, the Sabbath serves as his first, and primary, example of an observance that has been adopted by pagans. By the beginning of the third century C.E., Dio Cassius writes that the seven-day week had “spread to all men” and was “becoming quite habitual to all the rest of mankind and to the Romans themselves.”²¹ By the fourth century, the seven-day week had all but replaced the nine-day nundial cycle that had for many centuries oriented Roman calendrical time.²² Roman pagan observance of the Jewish Sabbath was met by yet more determined opposition to the Sabbath by vociferous critics, as we shall see below.

It is with these three contexts in mind – Roman official legal toleration of Jewish ancestral practice, aggressive Greco-Roman literary attacks against the Jewish Sabbath, and the widespread adoption of the seven-day week and its day of rest – that we can now turn to rabbinic sources. Widespread anti-Sabbath polemics persisted in the centuries after Aristobulus and Philo, and as we will see,

²⁰ Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.282–283, discussed in Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 101; on Josephus’ treatment of the Sabbath, see Doering, *Sabbat*, 479–507. McKay also cites the *Elegiae* of the poet Tibullus, who preferred not to travel on the day of Saturn, as a possible example of someone influenced by Jewish practices of the Sabbath. Schäfer also assumes that Tibullus refers here to the Jewish Sabbath in *Judaophobia*, 84–85, but mentions in 243n.19 the possibility that the day of Saturn was also associated with ill omens irrespective of the Jewish Sabbath, as posited by Paul Murgatroyd, *Tibullus I: A Commentary on the First Book of the Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1980), 107.

²¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 37.18, cited in Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 19. Dio Cassius’ hyperbolic language should be taken with a grain of salt, of course.

²² See *Theodosian Code* 2.8.1 and the *Code of Justinian* 3.12.3 in Samuel Parsons Scott, *The Civil Law*, vol. 12 (Cincinnati: Central Trust Co., 1932; New York: AMS Press, 1973), 275, and *P.Oxy.* LIV 3759 in Stephen Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, volume 9: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1986–87* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 107–108. On the incorporation of the seven-day week in the Roman Empire, see Michele Renee Salzman, “Minding Time: Pagan and Christian Notions of the Week in the Fourth-Century Roman Empire,” in *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World* (ed. Ralph Rosen; Philadelphia: Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004), 185–212. The seven-day cycle had been employed in Roman time-keeping long before Constantine’s official incorporation of Sunday as a holy day recorded in the *Theodosian Code*. And yet, even after Constantine, the nundial cycle’s division of time into nine-day cycles based on market days persisted alongside the seven-day cycle in calendars and paraepgmata, calendrical devices with moveable pegs or written documents used to track temporal cycles such as lunar and stellar events and agricultural seasons, into the fourth century and later. As the empire’s population increasingly Christianized and as the empire itself ultimately became Christian, the seven-day week dominated and replaced all other weekly systems. On the relationship between the planetary week and the Jewish (and eventually Christian) week and the merging of these two systems within the Roman Empire, see Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle*, 5–26. On the nundial cycle in Roman culture, see James Ker, “Nundinae: The Culture of the Roman Week,” *Phoenix* 64.3/4 (2010): 360–385.

rabbinic authors chose to respond to these attacks within a narrative framework that relies heavily on anecdotes about encounters between Romans and Jews or refers to historical moments of Roman-Jewish tension.

Defending a Day of Idleness: Roman Polemics and Rabbinic Counter-Polemics

The Quality of Food on the Sabbath and the Stench of the Sabbath

One rabbinic story insists that Sabbath food is especially delicious. The narrative appears in two versions, in *Genesis Rabbah* and in the Babylonian Talmud. In *Genesis Rabbah*, the story is told as an encounter between the Roman Emperor Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi.²³ In its interpretation of the biblical phrase “God blessed the seventh day,” *Genesis Rabbah* suggests that God blessed the Sabbath with delicious food, and then offers this narrative as an example of what it means that God blessed the Sabbath with culinary delicacies:

“He [God] blessed it [the Sabbath] with tasty dishes” (Gen 2:3). Rabbi made a meal for Antoninus on the Sabbath. He [Rabbi] set out cold dishes before him [Antoninus]; he ate them and found them delicious. [On another occasion] he [Rabbi] made a meal for him [Antoninus] during the week. He [Rabbi] set out hot dishes before him. Said [Antoninus] to him [Rabbi]: “Those others I enjoyed more than these.” He [Rabbi] replied, “These lack a certain spice.” “Does then the royal pantry lack anything?” he [Antoninus] exclaimed. He [Rabbi] responded, “They lack the Sabbath; do you indeed possess the Sabbath?”²⁴

In this story, two meals are prepared for Antoninus: the one served on the Sabbath is cold, while the one served during the week is hot.²⁵ Much to his sur-

²³ Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi is a fifth generation tanna, while the rabbinic author uses the name “Antoninus” here to refer to one of the Antonines, possibly Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Caracalla, or the Severan Elagabalus (Marcus Aurelius Anoninus Augustus). The exact historical figure referenced in the story is not crucial for our analysis. On the Rabbi-Antoninus dialogues in rabbinic sources and on the historical identity of Antoninus in these passages, see Ron Naidel, “There Is Only One Other: The Fabrication of Antoninus in a Multilayered Talmudic Dialogue,” *JQR* 104.1 (2014): 81–104; Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 163–168; Ofra Meir, *Rabbi Judah the Patriarch: Palestinian and Babylonian Portraits of a Leader* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), 263–299; idem, “The Historical Contribution of the Jewish Sage Aggadot in Light of the Rabbi-Antoninus Tales” [Hebrew] *Mahana'im* 7 (1994): 8–25; Shaye J.D. Cohen, “The Conversion of Antoninus,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture I* (ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 141–172; Martin Jacobs, *Die Institution des Jüdischen Patriarchen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 125–152; Luitpold Wallach, “The Colloquy of Marcus Aurelius with the Patriarch Judah I,” *JQR* 31 (1940/1941): 259–286; Samuel Krauss, *Antoninus und Rabbi* (Vienna: Verlag der Israel. Theol. Lehranstalt, 1910).

²⁴ *Gen. Rab.* 11:4 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 90).

²⁵ It is interesting to note that several of the Antoninus stories involve food: radishes in *Gen. Rab.* 67:5; berries, coriander, leek, lettuces, wheat, cucumbers and radishes in *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 10a–11a; figs in *b. Sanh.* 91a.

prise, Antoninus prefers the cold Sabbath food to the hot weekday meal. When Antoninus announces his preference, Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi answers that the cold food contains a special ingredient, the Sabbath, and that the emperor cannot replicate the dish because the royal pantry does not possess this spice – it is only the rabbinic kitchen that can produce this food. The midrash employs a pun – the word שבת refers both to an herb used for seasoning (dill), and to the seventh day of the week (the Sabbath), though the word is vocalized differently.²⁶ Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi's response could be understood to mean that the emperor's pantry lacks the specific spice that is used in the dish, but what the rabbi actually means is that the emperor cannot replicate the dish's delicious taste because he does not observe the Sabbath. From a literary perspective, this is an exquisite tale; it is even more remarkable when read in its historical-cultural context.

This rabbinic narrative is an instance in which different texts – Christian and rabbinic – engage in an implicit dialogue with one another. The Palestinian story emphasizes that Sabbath food, despite being *cold*, is tastier than warm food cooked on other days of the week. One of the critiques of the Sabbath is that the prohibition against cooking resulted in cold or even revolting food. Pseudo-Ignatius, in the *Letter to the Magnesians*, writes that the Christians should “observe the Sabbath spiritually, by rejoicing in meditation on laws and not in the release of the body, by marveling at the creative work of God, not by eating day-old foods, drinking lukewarm drinks, walking measured distances, and rejoicing in dancing and senseless clapping.”²⁷ The Jews, Pseudo-Ignatius claims, eat stale food and drink cold beverages – carnality in its least appealing form – because they are not allowed to cook on the Sabbath.

Pseudo-Ignatius claims that Sabbath food was not fresh and drinks were cold because, according to Jewish law, Sabbath food needed to be cooked and prepared in advance, and even warming food up on the Sabbath presented an additional culinary challenge. This rabbinic story suggests that Sabbath dishes, despite their cool temperature, are better than food cooked and served on all other days of the week, and superior to the food that even the emperor of Rome is accustomed to eating! That a comment about Sabbath food tasting especially delicious appears in a dialogue between a rabbi and a Roman, and that the rabbi's interlocutor is a representative of Rome, no less than the Roman emperor himself, strengthens the suggestion that this dialogue functions as a counter-polemic to the kind of polemic found in Pseudo-Ignatius.

²⁶ Thanks to Gabriel Wasserman for making me aware of this pun. *b. Ber.* 39a refers specifically to a dill stalk giving its taste to a dish (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1519).

²⁷ Pseudo-Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 9. This text is discussed at great length in Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Dancing, Clapping, Meditating,” 29–51; the text and translation of the passage above is found on pp. 31–32. On the origins of the prohibition against cooking on the Sabbath, see Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle*, 8. John Chrysostom, on the other hand, mentions the Jews' feasting, drinking, and stuffing themselves with food without commenting on the quality of the meal (*De Lazaro* PG 48.972, reproduced in Cohen, “Dancing, Clapping,” 33–34).

In addition to Pseudo-Ignatius' reference to cold or lukewarm beverages, the fifth-century author of the *Brevis Expositio in Vergilii Georgica* also mentions the cold food that is consumed by Jews on the Sabbath: "It has been sufficiently known that the star of Saturn is cold, and therefore the food among the Jews on the day of Saturn is cold."²⁸ The "coldness" of the Sabbath – not only of the food but of the day itself – was a frequent feature in other non-Jewish descriptions of the Sabbath as well. An early reference appears in Meleager, who playfully writes that "love burns hot even on cold Sabbaths," and less positively in Rutilius Namantianus' poetry from the fifth century C.E., in which the Jews are unfavorably compared to the Sabbath: "chill Sabbaths are after their own heart yet their heart is chillier than their creed."²⁹

That the critique of Jews eating cold, and therefore unappealing, food on the Sabbath appears in fourth- and fifth-century sources is especially interesting. Pseudo-Ignatius' *Letter to the Magnesians* is a revised expansion of a letter written by the first-century bishop Ignatius. The original text discusses the replacement of the Sabbath with the Lord's Day, but the section on food and drink is found only in the late fourth-century revision/expansion and was thus added by the author known to us as Pseudo-Ignatius. The *Brevis Expositio in Vergilii Georgica* and Rutilius Namantianus' *De Reditu Suo* are both from the fifth century. This polemic, then, is fairly late, and could explain why the story about Rabbi and Antoninus appears first in *Genesis Rabbah*, and not in earlier rabbinic sources.

In the Babylonian Talmud, a parallel narrative is presented in the form of a dialogue between an anonymous emperor and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, an important early rabbi. Though the characters are different from those that appear in the passage from *Genesis Rabbah*, the story is clearly a parallel version. The Babylonian Talmud's collection of Sabbath narratives, which includes this story, is embedded within a discussion about arranging the three Sabbath meals, accepting food, and washing dishes on the Sabbath. That is, the halakhic context of the pericope – meals, food preparation, serving, and cleaning – is thematically related to the subject of the story, which is also about preparing and eating food. This legal discussion becomes the impetus for appending this series of narratives in this particular place in tractate Shabbat. After the halakhic discussion of meal preparation, a theological meditation on the importance of Sabbath food follows. In this pericope, the centrality of food in Sabbath observance is highlighted, probably a result of a number of factors beyond simply the prohibition against kindling a flame and the laws that develop around it – including that the practice of collecting two pieces of *manna* in the desert in advance of the Sabbath is the

²⁸ *Brevis Expositio in Vergilii Georgica* I. 336, cited in Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 92.

²⁹ A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, ed., *The Greek Anthology: Hellenistic Epigrams*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 223 no. XXVI, and Rutilius Namantianus, *De Reditu Suo* I.389f, both cited in Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 92.

first practical Sabbath observance recorded in the Hebrew Bible, and that food plays such an important function in the process of group formation.³⁰ The first narrative passage that follows the halakhic discussion thus tells of the rewards one receives for partaking in the three Sabbath meals: “He who observes three meals on the Sabbath is saved from three evils: the travails of the messiah, the retribution of Gehenna, and the wars of Gog and Magog.”³¹ From here, a series of other rewards and warnings are enumerated.

The sugya then returns to the subject of Sabbath food and meals to tell of the encounter between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah and the Roman Emperor. The story reads as follows:

The emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, “Why has the Sabbath dish such a fragrant aroma?” “We have a certain spice,” replied he, “called the Sabbath, which we put into it, and that gives it a fragrant aroma.” “Give us some of it,” asked he. “For him who keeps the Sabbath,” he [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah] replied, “it is efficacious, but to him who does not keep the Sabbath it is not efficacious.”³²

In the Babylonian version of this story, the emperor is surprised not by the food’s good taste despite its temperature, but by the pleasant *smell* of the rabbi’s food.³³ The food is not prepared especially for the emperor (or so it seems), as it is in *Genesis Rabbah*; he simply happens to smell it. The emperor inquires as to its ingredients, and even demands to know the seasoning used for it, but the rabbi responds that the food gains its scent only for those who observe the Sabbath. The smells tease the emperor, who, as someone who does not observe the Sabbath, cannot himself produce such sweet-smelling food.

In addition to Roman or early Christian sources that comment on the taste of Sabbath food, there is a tradition that associates the Sabbath with a putrid smell. We have a particularly colorful passage about the Sabbath in Martial’s *Epigrammata*. Martial likens “the breath of fasting Sabbatarian women” to other stench- es, including “the raw vapors of sulphur springs, the putrid reek of a sea-water freshpond, a stale he-goat in the midst of his armors.”³⁴ That Jews fasted on the Sabbath was quite a common (mis)conception in antiquity; here, Martial invokes

³⁰ E. g. Exodus 16:5, 22–30, and see David Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2007), and Jordan Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³¹ *b. Shabb.* 119a.

³² *b. Shabb.* 119a.

³³ Scent is in some way connected to taste, too, so perhaps it is not by accident that the two stories alternate between these two senses. On smell and taste, see Deborah A. Green, *The Aroma of Righteousness: Scent and Seduction in Rabbinic Life and Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 7.

³⁴ Martial, *Epigrammata* 4.4, in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1.523–524. The trope of the Jews’ putrid smell was long-lasting. In 1905, Ada Goodrich-Freer wrote of “the characteristic Jewish smell of fish and onions” in her *Syrian Saddle*, discussed in Elliott Horowitz, “Fourth and Long: Presenting (and Resenting) the Sabbath,” *JQR* 97.3 (2007): 443–445.

this imagined practice as he refers to how awful the smell of Jewish women must have been as they observed the Sabbath by fasting.³⁵ The rabbinic source, on the other hand, narrates a story in which a Roman emperor is stunned at the fragrant smell of Sabbath food, rather than the stench of Sabbath fasting. If intentional, this was quite a sophisticated polemical inversion.

The two versions also share a key narrative element – that what the royal pantry lacks is a spice (*tavlin*), the “Sabbath,” that only the Jews possess. The characterization of the Sabbath specifically as a spice might be engaging a cultural discourse in which certain salts and spices were associated with distant, foreign places.³⁶ That the Jews’ food has its own flavors might have itself been a marker of Jews as ethnic others within the Roman Empire. Inverting this trope, these two versions of the rabbinic story claim that the spice at the center of the Jews’ tastes and smells marks their uniqueness in a positive sense, rather than a derisive one.³⁷

The relationship between the versions preserved in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud is unclear. The version in the Babylonian Talmud makes more logical sense – the emperor asks for the special ingredient but is told that he cannot acquire it because he does not observe the Sabbath. The version in *Genesis Rabbah* contains the line “Does then the royal pantry lack anything?” but the request of the emperor for the mystery spice is missing; the *Genesis Rabbah* versions is more comprehensible with the Babylonian Talmud version in mind. And yet neither story is similar enough in its wording to be based on

³⁵ Strabo of Amaseia, *Historia Hypomnemata*, cited in Josephus, *Ant.* 14.6; Pompeius Trogus, cited in Justinus, *Historiae Philippicae*, Libri 36 Epitoma 2:14; Lysimachus, *Aegyptiaca*, cited in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.308; Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.4.3; Petronius, *Fragmenta* no. 37; Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 76.2. See the discussion in Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 89–90, and cf. *Jub.* 50.12–13. Is it possible that some Jews did fast on the Sabbath, or perhaps on Sabbath eve? On this question in light of the Roman sources, see Margaret Williams, “Being a Jew in Rome: Sabbath Fasting as an Expression of Romano-Jewish Identity,” in *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Strategies in the Roman Empire* (ed. John M. G. Barclay; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 8–18, though I find the evidence problematic for drawing conclusions about actual fasting practices among Jews at the time. Cf. Margaret H. Williams, *Jews in a Greco-Roman Environment* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 49–62.

³⁶ E.g. Grant Parker, “*Ex Oriente Luxuria*: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45.1 (2002): 40–95; Elizabeth Ann Pollard, “Pliny’s Natural History and the Flavian Templum Pacis: Roman Imperialism in First-Century C.E. Rome,” *Journal of World History* 20.3 (2009): 309–338; Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, “Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism,” *Journal of World History* 22.1 (2011): 27–54; Gary Paul Nabhan, *Cumin, Camels, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). Cf. Tzvi Novick, “Peddling Scents: Merchandise and Meaning in 2 Corinthians 2:14–17,” *JBL* 130.3 (2011): 543–549; Novick’s article deals with aromatics in particular, especially interesting in light of the Bavli’s version of our story.

³⁷ Or perhaps the story draws on critiques of Roman food, that it is bland in comparison with Jewish food?

the other. These two stories could rely, instead, on an independent earlier source, or – more likely in my opinion – it was a story that circulated orally, perhaps as a Jewish or rabbinic folktale, and these two rabbinic compilations preserve two written versions of the story, both similar but not identical in plot, characters, and language. Whether the story was a rabbinic invention or a popular folktale that made its way into rabbinic sources, it seems to speak directly to external critiques of the Sabbath as a day on which the Jews' cold food was unappealing. It also makes the Roman emperor an unwitting fan of the Sabbath.

Roman Observance of the Sabbath

Genesis Rabbah 11 tells another Sabbath story in dialogue form, about an encounter between Tinneus Rufus, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, and Rabbi Akiva. As with the emperor in the previous story, in this one the governor is convinced that the Sabbath day is unique in part by his father, who is described as celebrating the Sabbath in the underworld. The midrash, which centers on Roman skepticism about the unique qualities of the Sabbath day, reads as follows:

The wicked Tinneus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva: "Why does this day [the Sabbath] differ from other days?"

"Why does one man differ from other men?" he [Rabbi Akiva] replied.

"What did I ask you and what did you answer me?" he [Tinneus Rufus] inquired.

"You asked me," he replied, "why does the Sabbath differ from all other days?" and I answered you, "Why does Rufus differ from other men?"

"Because the emperor desired to honor him," he said.

"Then this day, too, the Holy One wished to honor."

"How can you prove it to me?"

"Let the river Sambatyon prove it, for it carries stones the whole week but allows them to rest on the Sabbath."

"You are evading the question," he exclaimed.

"Then let him who brings up [the dead] by his male genital prove it," he replied, "for every day [the dead] comes up but not on the Sabbath."

He [Tinneus Rufus] went and made a test with his own father: every day he came up [from the dead], but on the Sabbath he did not come up. After the Sabbath he brought him up [again].

"Father," he said, "have you become a Jew after death? Why did you ascend during the whole week but not on the Sabbath?"

"He who does not keep the Sabbath among you of his own free will must keep it here in spite of himself," he [his father] replied.

"But what toil have you there?" he [Tinneus Rufus] demanded.

“The whole week we undergo judgment,³⁸ but on the Sabbath we rest.”

Then he [Tinneus Rufus] went back to Rabbi Akiva and said to him: “If it is as you say that the Holy One, blessed be He, honors the Sabbath, then He should not stir up winds or cause the rain to fall on that day.”

“Woe to that man!” he [Rabbi Akiva] exclaimed; “it is like one who carries [objects] four cubits.”³⁹

Tinneus Rufus, a Roman elite charged with governing the region, approaches Rabbi Akiva and asks him about the uniqueness of the Sabbath day. The governor is skeptical about why the Sabbath day is essentially different from the other six days of the week. At first, Rabbi Akiva explains that God chose to elevate the Sabbath from all other days of the week in a way that is similar to the emperor singling out Tinneus Rufus to serve as governor. It is a matter of honor, the rabbi explains.

Dissatisfied, Tinneus Rufus challenges Rabbi Akiva to provide more persuasive proof. What follows are three explanations that are all anchored around the underlying question of whether nature continues to operate on the Sabbath day as it does on the other six days of the week, or whether nature itself can prove the Sabbath’s sacred – and chosen – status.⁴⁰ Rabbi Akiva thus tells the governor that a famous river, the Sambatyon, ceases to flow on the Sabbath. This example shows that even a river, that should flow endlessly, rests on the Sabbath in order to give the rocks it moves a break from work. Still dissatisfied with the rabbi’s response, Tinneus Rufus accuses the rabbi of evading his question. Rabbi Akiva then challenges him with a task – to attempt to conjure someone up from the dead on the Sabbath, which the rabbi suggests is impossible. Tinneus Rufus, presumably assuming that his pagan father would be able to rise for him even on the Sabbath, is able to bring up his father every day of the week aside from the Sabbath, when his father fails to appear. Here, the happenings in the underworld are conceived as part of the natural world, as is the river from the previous example, or perhaps as the supernatural counterpart to the natural realm. Once the Sabbath is over and his father is conjured up once again, Tinneus Rufus inquires as to his absence. The general’s father explains that even those who do not observe the Sabbath in this world are forced to observe it after death. That is, even though, as a pagan, he did not cease from activity on the Sabbath during his lifetime, in the next world he does indeed observe the day of rest because judgment ceases on the Sabbath. Tinneus Rufus is *still* dissatisfied, and parries with

³⁸ Or, “are tortured,” on which see Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 32–33.

³⁹ *Gen. Rab.* 11:5 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 92–94). Different versions of this story appears in *b. Sanh.* 65b and *Pesikta Rabbati* 23.8, and in later rabbinic sources (included a greatly expanded narrative in *Tanhuma* on Ex 34:27), some of which are discussed below. On this story and the possibility that it originated in the tannaitic period, see Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius*, 43–54.

⁴⁰ Thanks to Yoni Pomeranz for pointing this out to me.

another example from nature that poses a theological challenge to the Sabbath's uniqueness: why does God continue to control the winds and the rain on the seventh day, when God is supposed to rest? In the previous two proofs, Rabbi Akiva is able to demonstrate that nature – both in this world and in the next world – ceases to work on the Sabbath. With this final question, Tinneus Rufus offers a counter-example that seems to undermine the rabbis' claims – the winds and rain are elements of the natural world that do *not* cease on the Sabbath. Rabbi Akiva, in turn, acknowledges that this particular natural process continues even on the Sabbath and is therefore an exception to the natural world's Sabbath rest, but draws on rabbinic Sabbath law to justify why the example does not in fact prove that the Sabbath is not a unique day with extraordinary features. The rabbi explains that these weather-related activities cannot be considered work for God because relative to God's enormity, the entire world is less than four cubits (and thus God can carry elements, including wind and rain, even in a public domain without transgressing the prohibition against carrying and transferring objects on the Sabbath).⁴¹

This story does not appear in the collection of Sabbath narratives in *b. Shabbat* 119a–b, but a parallel appears in *b. Sanhedrin* 65b. There, the discussion centers on the definition of a term, *ba'al ob*, related to the ritual of conjuring up the dead. The text distinguishes between different methods – soothsaying and skull consultations – and explains that soothsaying is ineffective on the Sabbath while skull consultations are able to access the dead even on the Sabbath. To illustrate this point, the dialogue between Tinneus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva is retold. This version of the story is far shorter, and much of the dialogue is condensed into Rabbi Akiva's response to Tinneus Rufus' challenge: "Let the River Sambatyon prove it; let *ba'al ob* prove it; let your father's grave, whence no smoke ascends on the Sabbath, prove it." Here, too, the Sambatyon River's restfulness on the Sabbath is solicited to prove the day's different nature. Whereas in *Genesis Rabbah* Tinneus Rufus' inability to conjure up his father on the Sabbath is a single proof, here the text treats these two separately: (1) that certain practices in the category of *ba'al ob* do not work on the Sabbath, (2) and that the governor's father's grave seems to rest on the Sabbath (that is, the governor does not suffer from the fires of purgatory on this day).⁴²

The curious detail about the Sambatyon River, present in both versions, might have been included in the story because it refers to Roman lore or to an idea that would have been known by a Roman audience. One of Rabbi Akiva's proofs that the Sabbath is indeed great is that the Sambatyon River stops flowing on the Sabbath. With this answer, Rabbi Akiva draws on a specifically *Roman* example to convince the governor of the power of the Sabbath. Pliny the Elder,

⁴¹ This halakhah is discussed widely in earlier rabbinic sources, e.g. see *m. Eruv*. 11:3–4.

⁴² Soncino commentary on this story.

in his *Naturalis Historia*, explains that a certain set of famous springs dry up on occasion: “Each one dries up for periods of twelve, occasionally of twenty days, without the slightest trace of water, although there is a copious spring near them that never dries up. It is an evil portent if those wishing to look at them find them not flowing, as recently Larcus Licinius a legate pro-praetore, discovered after seven days.”⁴³ He follows his description of this phenomenon with a reference to a stream in Judaea: “In Judaea is a stream that dries up every Sabbath.”⁴⁴ Pliny’s reference appears to be the most ancient mention of a tradition associated with a river that does not flow on the Sabbath, but could refer to an existing pagan or Jewish tradition.⁴⁵ For Pliny, it is a sign of bad luck – a bad omen – for the water to stop flowing, and thus the Sabbath day is not a hallowed and blessed day but an ominous one. Josephus also tells of this legend, but he claims that the river stays *dry* for six days and only flows on the Sabbath – the idea being that only on the Sabbath is the river blessed with an abundance of water.⁴⁶ Josephus either is familiar with a slightly different tradition from the one preserved in Pliny, or he deliberately subverts Pliny’s version. In our midrash from *Genesis Rabbah*, the description of the Sambatyon River resembles more closely Pliny’s version of the legend, in which water flows for six days but stops on each Sabbath. For Rabbi Akiva, as for Josephus, this is a divine sign that the Sabbath is blessed and hallowed rather than cursed, as it is for Pliny. Rabbi Akiva thus answers Tanneus Rufus with a legend that was familiar to him from his own tradition, rather than with an explanation that is rooted in biblical texts or based on rabbinic logic.⁴⁷

⁴³ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* XXXI, 24; text and translation in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, vol. 1, 499.

⁴⁴ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* XXXI, 24. On the Sambatyon River and the origin of this tradition, see Daniel Stein Kokin, “Toward the Source of the Sambatyon: Shabbat Discourse and the Origins of the Sabbatical River Legend,” *AJS Review* 37 (2013): 1–28, who also reads the exchange between Tanneus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva in the context of Roman anti-Sabbath polemic (14–17), and on the later sources, John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 208–224.

⁴⁵ Stein Kokin argues that Pliny’s reference is early and a product of the larger anti-Sabbath sentiment in Roman culture, and that Jewish sources, starting with Josephus, attempt to recast and appropriate this river legend to reflect favorably on the Jews and their customs. Regardless of the precise origins of the myth (Roman? Jewish?), I am inclined to think that even Pliny is referring to a tradition he encountered elsewhere because of the brevity of his statement and its placement amid other river legends rather than in the context specifically of Jews or Jewish customs. Other rabbinic references to the Sambatyon appear in *y. Sanh.* 10:5; Tanhuma, *Addition to par. Shelah*, 6 [ed. Buber]; Midrash Eikha Rabbah, *par. 2:4*, to Lamentations 2:5 [ed. Buber, 112]; Tanhuma, *Ki-Tissa*, *par. 33*, to Exodus 34:27 (ed. Zondel, 126).

⁴⁶ Josephus, *J. W.* 7.96–99, 336–337.

⁴⁷ A similar point is made in Elena Loewenthal, “La storia del fiume Sambation: alcune note sulla tradizione ebraica antica e medievale,” in *Biblische und Judaistische Studien: Festschrift für Paolo Sacchi* (ed. Paolo Sacchi and Angelo Vivian; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 657, and Zev Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 80, both cited by Stein Kokin, “Toward the Source of the Sambatyon,” 14.

Referencing legendary material previously used in anti-Sabbath polemic, Rabbi Akiva ironically defends the uniqueness of the Sabbath for his Roman imperial interlocutor. It is also interesting to note that a river is used to illustrate the alternative temporality of the Sabbath, as the flowing of water is often used in ancient and contemporary philosophical contexts to describe the passage of time.⁴⁸

As discussed above, the phenomenon of pagans participating in the Sabbath became increasingly widespread in the first few centuries C.E., but it was simultaneously also a matter of controversy. Seneca not only derides the *Jews* for wasting time by abstaining from work on the Sabbath; he has no kind words for his fellow *pagans*, who have adopted the Jewish rhythms of the week and the Sabbath, either. He writes: “The customs of this detestable race have become so prevalent that they have been adopted in almost all the world. The vanquished have imposed their laws on the conquerors.”⁴⁹ After Seneca acknowledges the popularity of the seven-day week with its day of rest among the Romans, he draws a distinction between Jewish and pagan observances and practices: “At least they [the Jews] know the origins of their ceremonies: the greater part of our people have no idea of the reason for the things they do.”⁵⁰ Seneca suggests that while the Jews rest in imitation of their God and in light of their beliefs about the manner of the world’s creation, pagan Sabbath worshippers do so not out of doctrinal or theological conviction but out of laziness, because they want a day “off,” and that they are, moreover, equally ignorant about the reasons behind their own practices.⁵¹ Tertullian also comments on pagan attraction to the Sabbath: “By resorting to these customs, you are deviating from your own rites to those others; indeed the Jewish feasts are the Sabbath and the ‘purificatory dinner’ and the ceremonies of the lamps and fasting with unleavened bread and

⁴⁸ Cf. Plutarch, *The E of Delphi* 19, 392 E and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.43, both of which are discussed in Sasha Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2003), 96–97.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *City of God* 6.11.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *City of God* 6.11. Seneca provides a reason for the draw towards the seven-day cycle, explaining that the Jews have a clear basis for their division of time – he must have in mind here the biblical story of the world’s creation and God’s cessation from work on the seventh day – while others are ignorant about the history and meaning of theirs and abstain from work presumably out of idleness.

⁵¹ Seneca’s statement about pagan ignorance of their practices might also be read as part of a general trope bemoaning the fact that Romans no longer know why their practice what they do and are forgetting their tradition, common in literature of the time, see e.g. Cicero, *Academica* 1.3, about Varro re-educating Romans on their city and religious customs. The line could also be read more critically: that some Romans *were* celebrating the Sabbath because they were drawn to the theological or communal dimensions of the day (as we know Christians in later centuries were, e.g. John Chrysostom, *Against the Jews*, Homilies 1.8.1–2; 3.3.1–3, 3.5; 6.3.1–3), but that Seneca is in denial about this and prefers to believe that they do so out of ignorance and idleness rather than conviction.

littoral prayers, which are very alien from your gods.”⁵² Here, Tertullian addresses pagans who are abandoning their own practices and participating, instead, in Jewish Sabbath rituals. Tertullian reminds them not to accuse Christians of that which pagans themselves are doing.

This rabbinic dialogue between Rabbi Akiva and Tinneus Rufus may be referring to and playing with the idea that Romans were attracted to the Jewish week and its Sabbaths. It is not only Roman *legend* that proves the blessedness of the Sabbath and the ceasing of nature to accommodate the day, Rabbi Akiva demonstrates. Despite his best efforts to discredit the Sabbath, the Roman governor discovers that his father is forced to observe the Sabbath in the afterlife because the underworld, too, is bound by the strictures of the Sabbath.⁵³ The story ends with an ironic twist – as much as Roman officials fight against the Sabbath, they cannot contain Roman observance of the Sabbath; even those who refuse to celebrate it in this world have no choice but to observe Sabbath rhythms in the next.

Abstention from Military Activity on the Sabbath

Within the Sabbath narratives in *Shabbat* 119a–b in the Babylonian Talmud, a suggestion is made that the destruction of the temple might have occurred because the Jews did not keep the Sabbath properly. Though this text is not in the form of a dialogue between a Roman and a rabbi, as are the passages discussed above, its subject matter is a political and military conflict between the Roman Empire and the Jews. The text reads as follows:

Abaye said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because the Sabbath was desecrated therein, as it said, *and they have hid their eyes from My sabbaths, therefore I am profaned among them* (Ezek 22:26).⁵⁴

The destruction of the Temple, this rabbinic passage claims, was a direct result of the Jews not observing the Sabbath in the proper way.

On what basis does this line offer such a specific and seemingly radical explanation for the temple’s destruction? Turning to the entire verse from which the proof-text comes reveals that the saying is an interpretation of a biblical condem-

⁵² Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 13.3–4, in André Schneider, *Le premier livre Ad nationes de Tertullien: Introduction, texte, traduction et commentaire* (Rome: Institut Suisse, 1968); translation from Salzman, “Pagan and Christian Notions of the Week,” 196–197. On earlier hesitation about the Sabbath from a Christian perspective, see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 12.3.

⁵³ Ambivalence about non-Jewish participation in the Sabbath can also be sensed in certain rabbinic passages. Consider, for example, *b. Sanh.* 58b, which forcefully makes a case for why Gentiles ought not observe the Sabbath: “A tradition in the name of Resh Lakish also said: A Gentile who keeps a day of rest, deserves death, for it is written, *And a day and a night they shall not rest* (Gen 8:22), and a master has said: Their prohibition is their death sentence. Rabina said: Even if he rested on a Monday. Now why is this not included in the seven Noachian laws? – Only negative injunctions are enumerated, not positive ones” (trans. Soncino).

⁵⁴ *b. Shabb.* 119b.

nation of the Israelites. Ezekiel 22:26 states that “Her priests have done violence to My law, and have profaned My holy things; they have put no difference between the holy and the common, neither have they taught difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from My Sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.” In this passage, not observing the weekly Sabbath and the cyclical Sabbatical years is associated with impurity and leads to God’s profanation – God is profaned (via the destruction of God’s temple) as a direct result of the “hiding of the eyes” from the Sabbath.

Why does this passage choose to interpret Ezekiel 22:26 in this way? Is it possible that there is a historical or polemical context in which this proposition fits? One of the features of the Sabbath that appears frequently in Greek and Roman sources is the refusal of Jews to defend themselves militarily on the Sabbath, an example that is usually given to highlight the Jews’ laziness or strategic stupidity. Agatharchides of Cnidus attributes the defeat of the Jews at the hands of Ptolemy I Soter around 302 B. C. E. to their “folly” of observing the Sabbath rest and to their “pray[ing] with outstretched hands in the temples until evening” instead of “protecting their city.”⁵⁵ “The defect of a practice enjoined by law,” writes Agatharchides, was thus “exposed.”⁵⁶ Josephus counters with his own interpretation of the event: “To Agatharchides this appears worthy of ridicule, but to those who investigate it without malice it is evidently significant and worthy of much praise that some people consistently place a higher value on law-observance and piety to God than on their safety and their homeland.”⁵⁷

Josephus mentions the conundrum of the Sabbath in military conflict elsewhere as well. In Book 2 of his *Jewish War*, Josephus recounts Agrippa’s address

⁵⁵ Agatharchides of Cnidus, cited in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.209–211; text and translation in H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus: The Life, Against Apion* (LCL 186; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 246–249. A discussion of Jews’ abstention from military activity on the Sabbath is found in Goldenberg, “The Jewish Sabbath,” 430–433.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.212; trans. Steve Mason. See also Josephus’ discussion of the event in *Ant.* 14.54–77. Josephus may be drawing on a Greek historiographical trope in his response to Agatharchides. His choice of language and ethical reasoning are reminiscent, for example, of Lysias’s description of the Athenians’ refusal to hand over Heracles’ children to Eurystheus in *Funeral Oration* 2.12. Both use the adjective “*ἄξιος*” to describe their subjects. Lysias writes that the Athenians “revered the virtue of Heracles more than they feared their own danger, and they deemed it worthy to do battle for the weaker on the side of right, rather than favor the powerful by giving up to them the men whom they had wronged” (translation by W. R. M. Lamb, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930, accessed through Perseus); this passage and similar phrases are discussed with reference to Lysias’ development of the idea of the Athenians’ human excellence in Ryan Balot, “Democracy and Political Philosophy,” in *The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy* (ed. Johann P. Arnason, Kurt Raaflaub, and Peter Wagner; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 194–197. Steve Mason, in his commentary on this passage of Josephus, writes that Josephus portrays the Judeans here as “moral heroes, setting a standard of piety unattainable by most” (accessed through pace-anceint.mcmaster.ca). Many thanks to Larry Welborn for pointing me to the passage in Lysias.

to the Jews in which he tries to dissuade them from going to war against Rome. Agrippa explains that the Roman Empire and its army is powerful and ambitious, and that the Jews have little chance to defeat it. The Jews, Agrippa says, are at a double disadvantage: not only are they militarily weaker, but they also have a religious restriction against fighting on the Sabbath, which would guarantee their defeat even if they had the stronger force. He warns the Jews that they will inevitably fail if they revolt, either because they will violate the Sabbath and anger their God, or because they will honor the Sabbath and succumb when the Romans attack on their day of rest. Agrippa elaborates:

If you observe your Sabbath customs and refuse to take action on that day, you will undoubtedly be easily defeated, as were your forefathers by Pompey, who pressed the siege most vigorously on the days when the besieged remained inactive; if, on the contrary, you transgress the law of your ancestors, I fail to see what further object you will have for hostilities, since your one aim is to preserve inviolate all the institutions of your fathers. How could you invoke the aide of the Deity, after deliberately omitting to pay Him the service that you owe Him? All who embark on war do so in reliance on the support either of God or man; but when, in all probability, no assistance from either quarter is forthcoming, then the aggressor goes with his eyes open to certain ruin.⁵⁸

In the course of his speech, Agrippa mentions that the Jews were defeated by Pompey in 63 B. C. E. because of their inability to defend themselves on the Sabbath, and thus that they face the same prospect if they choose to revolt against Rome in the current battle.⁵⁹ In total, Josephus suggests that two battles – in 302 B. C. E. and 63 B. C. E. – were lost because of adherence to Sabbath laws, and that another battle, in the late 60's C. E., would end similarly if the Jews decided to revolt.

A few centuries later, Dio Cassius, too, explains that Pompey succeeded in his siege of Jerusalem and the capture of the temple because the Jews did not protect themselves on the “days of Saturn.”⁶⁰ He writes:

The Jews, indeed, had done much injury to the Romans, for the race is very bitter when aroused to anger, but they suffered far more themselves. The first of them to be captured were those who were fighting for the precinct of their god, and then the rest on the day even then called the day of Saturn. And so excessive were they in their devotion to religion that the first set of prisoners, those who had been captured along with the temple, obtained

⁵⁸ Josephus, *J. W.* 2.391–394 (LCL); cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 6.272–7.

⁵⁹ Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.63–68, in which the Roman army did not fight against the Jews on the Sabbath but used the day to prepare themselves for intense battle the following day.

⁶⁰ Dio Cassius (2nd–3rd c. C. E.), *Historia Romana* XXXVII, 15:3–19:3; text and translation in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2.349–350. Dio Cassius writes: “on learning of this superstitious awe of theirs [of the Jews], [the Romans] made no serious attempts the rest of the time, but on those days, when they came round in succession, assaulted most vigorously. Thus the defenders were captured on the day of Saturn, without making any defense, and all the wealth was plundered.”

leave from Sosius, when the day of Saturn came round again, and went up into the temple, and there performed all the customary rites, together with the rest of the people ...⁶¹

Unlike Agatharchides, who characterizes the Jews' behavior in negative terms, as stupid or lazy, and Josephus, who portrays the Jews as exemplary in their religious devotion but still seems to regard the policy as strategically problematic, Dio Cassius presents a middle ground, respecting the pious acts of the Jews and portraying the Romans as taking advantage of them.⁶² Plutarch and Frontinus also mention the Jews' passivity in battle on the Sabbath in what appears to be a long-lasting literary trope.⁶³

On what do these Greco-Roman sources (Josephus, Dio Cassius, Plutarch, Frontinus) base their descriptions of Jews abstaining from military activity on the Sabbath? The Hebrew Bible itself does not address the matter explicitly, though some biblical sources assume that the Israelites engaged in battle on the Sabbath.⁶⁴ The passages in the Greek and Latin authors might refer to historical instances in which Jews refused to defend themselves because of the Sabbath (though no such evidence exists specifically for 70 C.E.). 1 Maccabees 2:29–41 records an instance in which a group of Jews rebelled against Antiochus IV and were massacred by Seleucid forces because they refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath. But the story in 1 Maccabees is quickly followed by a passage that explains that the Jews learned their lesson and began retaliating even on the Sabbath, and the Jews seem generally to have defended themselves in military contexts after this battle during the Maccabean revolt.⁶⁵ There is also evidence to suggest that some Jews contributed their service to other imperial armies as well.⁶⁶ But while many Jews participated in military activity after the Maccabean

⁶¹ Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana* XLIX 22:4–5.

⁶² This distinction is made in Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 88.

⁶³ Plutarch, *De Superstitione* 8, p. 169C, and Frontinus, *Strategemata II*, 1:17, both in Stern, *Greek and Roman Authors*, 1.549 and 510.

⁶⁴ E.g. Joshua 6:3–4; 2 Kings 11:5, 7, 8; 2 Chronicles 23:4, 8; Nehemiah 4:10–17, 6:15, on which see Jonathan Klawans, *Josephus and the Theologies of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153–154.

⁶⁵ 1 Macc 2:40, discussed in Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 83. Cf. II Macc 15:1, 1 Macc 9:43, and Josephus, *Ant.* 13.337, 18.319, 354, 14.63, and *J. W.* 1.146. On the history of Jews in the military, see Derek J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), esp. 17–26; on Josephus's discussions of the matter throughout his writings, see Klawans, *Josephus and the Theologies of Ancient Judaism*, 153–158.

⁶⁶ E.g. in the Seleucid military, in the Ptolemaic fortresses on the Egyptian borders including at Elephantine, in troops commanded by Herod Antipater's that joined with Egyptian Jews who served in the Ptolemaic military in Pelusium, in Herod's forces attached to the Roman military, in a Roman military garrison in Cyrene, etc.; see Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.42, *Ant.* 14.127–132, 14.190–195, 14.395, 18.109–115, 19.333; *J. W.* 1.186–194, 1.290–291, 2.74; Harald Hegermann, "The Diaspora in the Hellenistic Age," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Vol. 2: The Hellenistic Age* (ed. William David Davies and Louis Finkelstein; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990), 132, 145–148; Shimon Applebaum, *Judaea in Hellenistic and Roman Times: Historical and Archaeological Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 47–65, 66–69; Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev, "Did the

revolt and instituted a permanent exception for bearing arms on the Sabbath in self-defense, others were decidedly opposed to the idea. The *Book of Jubilees* and some texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, continue forcefully to forbid bearing arms on the Sabbath, and others maintain certain limitations regarding fighting or carrying weapons on the Sabbath.⁶⁷ This issue seems, therefore, to have been a matter of debate and disagreement among Jews in the latter Second Temple period, perhaps even contributing to the defeat of the sectarians at Qumran during the revolt against Rome, and might have been known to outsiders as well. Finally, the Greco-Roman sources could also be based on the Jews' general exemption from Roman military service because of their Sabbath observance, and the misconception that Jews writ large would not, therefore, defend themselves on the Sabbath. Whatever the reason, real or imagined, the notion that Jews refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath persisted in Latin sources long after the Maccabean revolt and remains a trope in anti-Jewish polemics into the first several centuries C.E.

Could the rabbinic statement be engaging with the kinds of polemical jabs found in Agatharchides, Dio Cassius, Plutarch and Frontinus? If we read this talmudic passage in conversation with these sources, then we have a fascinating exchange: it is not only Greek and Roman authors who claim that the Jews' observance of the Sabbath directly resulted in their military defeats, but also a rabbinic voice proposes that the Jews' Sabbath observance caused Jerusalem to fall at the hands of their enemies.⁶⁸ While the former assume that it was the Jews' adherence to their Sabbath laws (one of which dictated laying down arms) that caused the destruction, the latter insists that it was precisely the opposite, the Jews' laxness with these laws that brought about their defeat. What is particularly interesting is that while Agatharchides, Dio Cassius, and Plutarch have earlier battles in mind, Frontinus, in his collection of military stratagems from Greek and Roman history, identifies the defeat of 70 C.E. in his text as the one

Jews Enjoy a Privileged Position in the Roman World?," *Revue Des Études Juives* 154 (1995): 23–42; Doering, *Schabbat*, 23–42.

⁶⁷ *Jubilees* 50:12–13, cited in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1.511, and discussed in Chanoch Albeck, *Das Buch der Jubiläen und die Halacha* (Berlin: 1930), 11. See also Aaron Shemesh, "Shabbat, Circumcision and Circumcision on Shabbat in Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Rewriting and Interpreting the Hebrew Bible: The Biblical Patriarchs in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Devorah Dimant, Reinhard G. Kratz; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 266–273.

⁶⁸ The line is attributed to Abaye, a Babylonian rabbi from the early fourth century without a particularly strong connection to Palestine (on which see Zvi Moshe Dor, *Torat Eretz Yisrael be-Bavel* [Tel Aviv: Devir, 1971], and Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006]). The passage is preserved in Hebrew rather than Aramaic, so it is conceivable that Abaye transmits an idea that originated in Palestine, or that he speaks against a Babylonian voice that has in mind the Palestinian context, or that the line is misattributed. But even if we trust the attribution, it is entirely possible that Abaye responds to ideas popular within the Roman Empire, on which see my discussion in the conclusion.

having been lost by the Jews due to their devotion to the Sabbath – exactly the same one to which this rabbinic passage refers. He writes: “The deified Augustus Vespasian attacked the Jews on the day of Saturn, a day on which it is sinful for them to do any business, and defeated them.”⁶⁹ Josephus also connects the idea of abstaining from battle on the Sabbath to the revolt against Rome in the 60’s C. E. in his recollection of Agrippa’s speech dissuading the Jews from deciding to fight.

This passage from the Babylonian Talmud, then, inverts the logic found in polemical sources: Jews were defeated not because they observed the law and refrained from military activity and remained passive, but because they were not vigilant *enough* in observing the laws of the Sabbath and thus did not benefit from God’s unfailing protection. That is not to say that the passage disapproves of the use of force by Jews on the Sabbath; rabbinic law suggests that measures of self-defense can, and often ought to be, taken on the Sabbath.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, invoking the Sabbath in relation to the destruction of the Temple might not only serve to highlight the importance of Sabbath observance in general, but also to answer external critiques of the Jews regarding this catastrophic defeat. In short, this passage could be interpreted as a counter-polemic, or as being in conversation with this larger discourse around Sabbath observance and military defense.

Rather than directing its comment to Greek and Roman voices, the passage seems to be addressing fellow Jews (or rabbis), warning them that failure to uphold the Sabbath laws to the highest degree results in national catastrophes of great magnitude. There is documentary evidence – one study analyzes tax receipts written on ostraca from a Jewish community in Edfu, in southern Egypt – that suggests that at least some Jews paid taxes to Roman authorities on the Sabbath (perhaps so as not to cause unnecessary disturbance), even as they waited until after the Sabbath to pay their Jewish taxes, including the *fiscus iudaicus*, to Jewish tax collectors.⁷¹ Was this the kind of behavior that the rabbinic passage

⁶⁹ Frontinus, *Strategemata* II, 1:17 in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1510–511. Stern notes Frontinus’ inaccuracies, both that Titus actually conquered Jerusalem, not Vespasian, and that the Jews did in fact defend themselves on the Sabbath during the Great Revolt. Regardless of Frontinus’ historical accuracy, it is significant that he and Abaye both refer to the same war. This short passage by Frontinus appears in the opening section of Book II of the *Strategemata* titled “On Choosing the Time for Battle,” in which Frontinus collects examples in which the timing of an attack proved to be of great import in the outcome of the battle (e.g. dawn, a waning moon, attacking at regular intervals, etc.).

⁷⁰ E.g. *m. Shabb.* 6:4, *t. Eruv.* 3:5–8 (cf. Vienna manuscript); *b. Eruv.* 45a; *b. Shabb.* 19a; *Gen. Rab.* 70:15. On the general topic of military activity on the Sabbath, see Shlomo Goren, “Fighting on the Sabbath According to the Sources” [Hebrew], in *Sinai, Jubilee Volume* (ed. Y.L. ha-Cohen Maimon; Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1958), 149–189, and the sources surveyed in J. David Bleich, “Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature: Returning from Missions of Mercy on the Sabbath,” *Tradition* 22.4 (1987): 102–116.

⁷¹ Willy Clarysse, Sofie Remijnsen, and Mark Depauw, “Observing the Sabbath in the Roman Empire: A Case Study,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 29 (2010): 51–57. Cf. Philo, *Somn.* 2.122–125, which emphasizes the extent to which Jews *did* insist on observing Sabbath laws even when it came at potentially devastating costs. Documentary evidence suggests that, at an earlier period,

has in mind when it admonishes the Jews for improper Sabbath practices? Or are the Talmud's words, perhaps, directed toward those who were drawn to the increasingly prominent Christian views that stressed the irrelevance of Sabbath practices, emphasizing the day's spiritual significance or urging the abandonment of the Sabbath in favor of the Lord's Day (Sunday)?⁷²

Conclusions: Between Genesis Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud

In the rabbinic narrative passages discussed above, the Sabbath is defended against a range of polemics and prejudices that were popular in Greek and Roman literature by way of clever stories, dialogues, and sayings. In this set of sources, Sabbath food and drink are proven to be delicious and aromatic by the Roman Emperor (and in fact more delicious than any food produced by the imperial chefs); Roman elites and government officials cannot escape Sabbath observance despite their greatest efforts to disprove the uniqueness of the Sabbath; and the destruction of the temple is blamed not on the Jews' abstention from work on the Sabbath but on their negligence to observe it fervently enough. Each of these passages is framed as a matter of Roman-Rabbinic or Roman-Jewish relations, whether through the literary form of a dialogue or the political circumstances of war, and seems to respond to a specific set of accusations against the Sabbath that had become widespread in the Roman world.

At times, the ideas against which the rabbinic stories argue are articulated most cogently in Christian sources, such as the passage from Pseudo-Ignatius. This is not a surprising phenomenon, given that, by the fourth and fifth centuries, Christianity was popular in Roman Palestine and quickly becoming a tolerated religion and soon enough the official religion of the empire. When the rabbi cooks a meal for the emperor – his identity as “Antoninus” notwithstanding⁷³ – we must remember that, at the time of *Genesis Rabbah*'s redaction (after Theodosius I), the current emperor was a *Christian*. The counter-polemic functions

there was a wide range of Sabbath observance; for Elephantine, see O. Clermont-Ganneau 44, 152, 186 and Mezaḏ Hashavyahu Ostrakon (IM 60–67) in James M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters* (2nd ed.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 44, 50, 53–54, 109–110, on which also see Bob Becking, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Construction of Early Jewish Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 118–127, and from the Zenon Papyri, see PCZ 59762 in Victor A. Tcherikover, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press/Jerusalem: Magnes, 1957), 136–137.

⁷² E.g. *Epistle of Barnabas* 13:10; the Synod of Laodicea; John Chrysostom, *De Lazaro* PG 48.972; *Apostolic Constitutions* 7:36; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.18–19. We also know that by the time of the Great War, Jews had begun defending themselves on the Sabbath, and despite rabbinic allowance of such actions, perhaps Abaye is expressing dissent by not accepting this leniency at a time of crisis.

⁷³ Antoninus becomes, in many ways, a “stock” emperor in rabbinic tales about him.

in this complex context, in which an attack against a Roman emperor was also a rebuttal to ideas articulated in Christian sources.

How best do we understand the relationship between the passages in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud? There are not many studies about the general literary relationship between *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud, but it is likely that *Genesis Rabbah*, as a unified midrash, was not known to the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud even if some of its traditions were.⁷⁴ The passages discussed in this paper align well with this assumption: it seems most likely that the compilers of the Babylonian Talmud were not reworking narratives as they are found in *Genesis Rabbah*, but were using, instead, alternative Palestinian versions of our stories that have not been preserved in extant Palestinian sources but that found their way into the Babylonian Talmud. This explains, in a technical sense, how Greco-Roman polemical ideas are found in Babylonian sources, and also why they differ in certain ways from those found in *Genesis Rabbah*. It does not explain, however, how Babylonian rabbis *understood* these stories in their different context.

It is understandable that Palestinian rabbis, living within the Roman Empire, would have felt moved to compose stories about the Sabbath in response to Greco-Roman and Christian traditions against the Sabbath. How do we make sense, though, of the passages in the Babylonian Talmud, which were included in a compilation redacted not in the Roman Empire but in the Sasanian Empire? How were the stories that originated in a Palestinian context and incorporated into the Babylonian Talmud read and received in a Sasanian context? It is possible that the Babylonian rabbis knew of the anti-Sabbath polemics that originated in the Greco-Roman tradition, even as they lived outside the Roman Empire, and used these stories to respond to these polemics much as their Palestinian counterparts did.⁷⁵ It is also possible that these polemics actually made their way to

⁷⁴ There is surprisingly little work on the general, overarching literary relationship between *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud, though there is work on individual parallels, e. g. Alyssa M. Gray, "The Power Conferred by Distance From Power: Redaction and Meaning in b. A.Z. 10a–11a," in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammam) to the Aggada* (ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 33–40. On the relationship between *Genesis Rabbah* and the Palestinian Talmud, see Albeck, *Bereschit rabba*, 3.66–84; Baruch Bokser, "A Minor for 'Zimmun' (Y. Ber. 7:2, 11c) and Recensions of Yerushalmi," *AJS Review* 4 (1979): 1–25; Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Die großen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palastinas: Zur literarischen Genese von Talmud Yerushalmi und Midrash Bereschit Rabba* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) and idem, "Texts and History: The Dynamic Relationship Between Talmud Yerushalmi and Genesis Rabbah," in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Shaye J.D. Cohen; Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 145–158; and Chaim Milikowsky, "On the Formation and Transmission of Bereshit Rabba and the Yerushalmi: Questions of Redaction, Text-Criticism and Literary Relationships," *JQR* 92.3/4 (2002): 521–567.

⁷⁵ On the general intersection between Babylonian rabbis and ideas and texts from the Roman east, see Richard Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud's Narratives and Their Historical Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Babylonia, or even that there were anti-Sabbath polemics that developed in the Babylonian Persian context to which these stories were adapted to respond and took on new meaning despite their having initially been composed in a different, Palestinian context.⁷⁶ Alternatively, the Babylonian rabbis might not have been directly familiar with Greco-Roman polemics, but the polemical responses were embedded within the traditions and stories they inherited. In this case, even though echoes of the polemics persist in passages in the Babylonian Talmud (and can be detected by modern scholars), they might not have been recognized as such by Babylonian rabbis and/or the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud and were included in the Talmud for other reasons, perhaps as general feel-good tales about the benefits of the Sabbath or for internal legal, literary, or social purposes. It is difficult to conclude which of these scenarios is most likely from the passages themselves, and so I offer them as alternative explanations.

Despite the similarities between the narrative passages discussed above, an overarching difference can be identified in the collection of rabbinic passages in *Genesis Rabbah* 11 and Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 119a–b. *Genesis Rabbah*'s narratives provide mostly positive reinforcement to encourage Jews to observe the Sabbath properly. The chapter is structured around the different ways in which God is understood to “bless” the seventh day. In the opening lines, we learn that such blessings might entail wealth, the absence of mourning, the deliverance of manna, the requirement to change one's clothes or don special clothing, the presence of a lamp and a blessing over light. In addition to the two stories discussed above, about the Roman Emperor finding Sabbath food to be more delicious than food on other days of the week and the encounter between Tineus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva about the power of the Sabbath, *Genesis Rabbah* includes a story about a Jewish butcher from Laodicea who became wealthy as a reward for setting aside his best animal for the Sabbath, and a story about a poor but praiseworthy tailor who spent more money than the governor on a fish in order to honor the Sabbath. The chapter continues with sections on the special relationship between Israel and the Sabbath: it posits that because Jacob kept the Sabbath he was rewarded more greatly than Abraham, and emphasizes that Israel is considered Sabbath's partner, yet another answer to how God blessed the day. The last two sections reflect on God as creator. The two stories discussed in detail above, along with the entire chapter, can be read as a defense of the Sabbath, its worthwhile observance, and the glory of a God who ceases to create but continues to rule the world, even as it is placed within a polemical framework.

While the Babylonian Talmud incorporates the dialogue about the delicious Sabbath food between the rabbi and the emperor also found in *Genesis Rabbah*

⁷⁶ E.g. there is mention of the Sabbath in at least one of the Persian Martyr Acts, *History of Abda Damshikha*, on which see Aaron Michael Butts and Simcha Gross, “Jewish-Christian Relations in Northern Mesopotamia toward the End of the Sasanian Period: A View from the Syriac *History of Abda Damshikha*” (AJS Paper, 2014).

and includes other narratives from *Genesis Rabbah* that focus on the rewards of the Sabbath, it also contains material that does not appear in *Genesis Rabbah* and that is decidedly more negative in tone. The narrative passage in the Babylonian Talmud begins with warnings about what happens when the Sabbath is not diligently observed and descriptions of punishments meted out to those who violate the Sabbath: a person who eats three Sabbath meals is saved from three evils (the travails of the messiah, the retribution of Gehenna, the wars of Gog and Magog), and a person who delights in the Sabbath is given an unbounded heritage, granted his heart's desires, and forgiven even for the sin of idolatry. We then learn that had Israel observed the first Sabbath (presumably after Sinai), no nation would have been able to dominate the nation, and that if Israel is able faithfully to observe two Sabbaths, they would be redeemed. Here, observance of the Sabbath keeps you safe from a variety of calamities – the implication is that breaking Sabbath rules makes you susceptible to such tragedies. Only after this list does the Babylonian Talmud describe positive scenes of greeting the Sabbath with delicacies and a series of stories that parallel those found in *Genesis Rabbah* 11.

Not all rabbinic stories about the Sabbath have a counter-polemical focus. There are plenty of passages in rabbinic texts that focus on other aspects of the Sabbath. So it is especially striking that the extended collections of narratives in *Genesis Rabbah*, and by extension the Babylonian Talmud, are so focused on such matters. The midrash *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, for example, also contains a chapter of narratives about the Sabbath, but the collection of stories and exegeses related to the Sabbath in that chapter do not preserve the same concerns about anti-Sabbath polemics. That is, by the time of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer's* composition – the second half of the eighth century – its author(s)/redactor(s) seem no longer to be concerned with the same set of polemic ideas found in Greek and Latin texts that the classical rabbinic sources were so focused upon. For *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Israel's chosenness as well as the composition of the universe and its relation to an eschatological future were of far more concern. Similarly, in the narrative sequences in the *Tanhuma*, which appear first as an extended exegesis of Gen 2:2–3 and later also as a shorter exegesis of Ex 34:27, the passages are again far less focused on polemical matters and are directed, instead, towards providing narrative context and explanation for the proper observance of Sabbath laws, including ritual practices and customs (eating and drinking, wearing clean clothes, Torah readings, types and topics of conversation, ways of walking and carrying oneself) and prohibitions (fasting, writing letters, carrying within an eruv). The section on Gen 2:2–3 begins by emphasizing that the people of Israel must rest and observe the Sabbath because God did so, and the final passage on Ex 34:27 ends with equating the observance of the Sabbath with observance of all commandments. These beginnings and endings, as well as the stories incorporated into the midrash, highlight that, for these midrashic authors and compilers, what was of utmost importance was communicating the details

of what proper Sabbath observance entailed and how to carry these laws out in daily life. These later two midrashic compilations each have their own focus – chosenness and eschatology for *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, and proper *halakhic* observance for the *Tanhuma* – and as a result the polemical aspects of earlier narratives are downplayed or absent altogether. For the rabbis whose saying and stories were included in *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud, however, rumors and polemics against the Sabbath were of great concern and they could not be left unaddressed.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ I wrote this paper as a post-doctoral fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary; I would like to thank my students there for the vibrant class conversations that inspired this research and the faculty for welcoming me so warmly. Many thanks as well to Clifford Ando, Jonathan Gribetz, David Grossberg, Martha Himmelfarb, Benjamin Holdsworth, and Yoni Pomeranz for helpful suggestions.