

## PLATO IN RABBI SHIMEON BAR YOHAI'S CAVE (B. SHABBAT 33B–34A): THE TALMUDIC INVERSION OF PLATO'S POLITICS OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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Socrates [said]: Imagine this: People live under the earth in a cave-like dwelling. Stretching a long way up toward the daylight is its entrance, toward which the entire cave is gathered. The people have been in this dwelling since childhood, shackled by the legs and neck. Thus they stay in the same place so that there is only one thing for them to look at: whatever they encounter in front of their faces. But because they are shackled, they are unable to turn their heads around.

He [Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai] went [with his son] and they hid in a cave. A miracle happened for them and a carob tree and a spring were created for them. They sat up to their necks in sand. By day they sat and studied, and they took off their clothes. When the time came to pray they went out and dressed and covered and went out and prayed and again took off their clothes, in order that they not wear out. They dwelled in a cave for thirteen years ...<sup>1</sup>

Thus we are told in one of the most famous narratives in talmudic literature, in its most elaborate and complex version in the Babylonian Talmud. The late ancient and early medieval rabbinic popularity of Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's (henceforth Rashbi) sojourn in the cave is demonstrated by the wide distribution of the motif in various rabbinic texts.<sup>2</sup> It later gained additional prominence in the Jewish collective imagination to such a degree that no less than the composition of the Zohar was attributed to Rashbi; indeed, the text was considered a product of his

1. Plato *Republic* 514a; B. Shabbat 33b. I am drawing on the translation of the *Republic* by Paul Shorey, the translator for the Loeb Classical Series (1930), as well as that by G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve. I would like to thank Jonathan Schofer and Jeffrey Rubenstein for their careful reading of the manuscript of this article, which provided much helpful advice.

2. P. Shevi'it 9:1, 38d; Bereshit Rabba, *par.* 79:6 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 2:941); Kohelet Rabba 10(11); Esther Rabba 3:7; Midrash Tehillim 17, siman 13 (ed. Buber, 134); and Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, *Va-yehi be-shallah*, *pis.* 11:16 (ed. B. Mandelbaum New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987, 191–92).

sojourn in the cave.<sup>3</sup> As is the case with other extensive narratives in the Babylonian Talmud about early rabbinic sages from the days of the Mishnah, different and most likely earlier versions of the whole or parts of this story can be found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. Others have gone about the task of carefully assembling and comparing the versions of the story, and various interpretations of it have been offered.<sup>4</sup> Surely, any additional attempt at making sense of the story and decoding what the rabbinic narrators in the Babylonian Talmud sought to convey with its inclusion in the larger corpus needs to take this work into account.

The reading proposed here seeks to investigate an echo that has so far been left unexplored, namely, Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Republic* (514a–517d).<sup>5</sup> In short, I would like to suggest that the comparison with Plato's allegory can serve as no less than a hermeneutic key to the Babylonian story of Rashbi's retreat into the cave, if not to all the details, then at least to its *raison d'être* and the overall arch of the narrative. Reading the talmudic story in light of Plato's tale will add a different aspect to the figure of the rabbinic sage and his relationship to the community at large than has so far been portrayed.

I should emphasize that it is not merely the motif of the cave that leads me to connect the two stories, which are what we can designate as *mythic narratives*.<sup>6</sup>

3. Lee Levine, "R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias: History and Tradition," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978): 182, points out that already in the eighth-century CE apocalyptic work, *The Mysteries (Nistarot) of R. Simeon*, Rashbi had become known as a master of mystical lore, lore that was acquired during his sojourn in the cave.

4. See esp. Levine for historiographical purposes, namely, to establish the historicity of the purification of Tiberias, as the title of his article (see n. 2 herein) explicates. All subsequent readings build on Levine's piece. Ofra Meir's chapter on "The Story of R. Shimon bar Yohai and His Son in the Cave—History or Literature?" in her *Sugyot ba-poetikah shel sipure Hazal* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim 1993), 11–35, provides a detailed analysis of the version in the Palestinian Talmud, in comparison with the Bavli's version. Most recently, Holger Zellentin has suggested that, at the very least, the version recorded in Bereshit Rabba, but perhaps the Bavli's version as well, can be read as a parody or subversion of Matthew's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I thank Zellentin for sharing an early draft of the first chapter of his dissertation with me, titled "Rashbi from the Cave to the Bathhouse: A Rabbinic Response to Christian Asceticism and Providence." Jeffrey Rubenstein focuses on comparing the Palestinian and the Babylonian talmudic versions, mostly to establish the Babylonian editorial work on the story, to be attributed to the *stammaim*. See the chapter on "Torah and the Mundane Life: The Education of R. Shimon bar Yohai (Shabbat 33b–34a)" in his *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 105–39. I will not analyze all the details of the story, as this has been beautifully done by Rubenstein. Rather, I will focus on what establishes the case for a Platonic parallel and perhaps even subtext to the Babylonian Talmud's story. It should be clear from the following that I find Rubenstein's argument for a late editorial composition of the story entirely convincing.

5. For a meditation on the figure of echo as a way of relating texts to each other, see John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). Hollander distinguishes echo from modes of more overt literary allusion in various ways, some of which are useful for this current study. He considers "echo" as "a way of alluding that is inherently poetic, rather than expository, and that makes new metaphor rather than leamed gestures" (ix).

6. This is not to say that both stories operate the same way literarily. Plato's narrative can much more easily be defined as an allegory, recent references of "analogy" or "parable" notwithstanding.

Indeed, both the Greek and rabbinic literatures have their own cave traditions. More fundamentally, it is the fact that both stories are meant to articulate the fraught relationship of the philosopher or sage with civic life and the *polis*. Here, the parallels between Plato and the Babylonian Talmud are related to what both perceive as a tension between the philosophical life or the life of the sage of Torah, on one hand, and the political life and the sage's obligation to the public, on the other. Reading the talmudic narrative in light of Plato's analogy of the cave and its embeddedness in the *Republic* will allow us to add a political dimension to it that would otherwise remain hidden. That is, my claim is that the talmudic narrative does not merely attempt to negotiate the tension between the life of Torah or the devotional life and the practical or mundane life. Rather, if read as a talmudic version—or rather inversion—of Plato's analogy, the differentiation appears to be between the devotional and the *political* life. This distinction is an important one. Thus, I agree by and large with Rubenstein's reading of the story as thematizing the tension between "Torah and the Mundane Life," as in the title of his chapter.<sup>7</sup> But whereas Rubenstein presents this issue mostly in theological or generic "cultural" terms, I wish to emphasize the political substratum in the Bavli's text, which is highlighted if we read the story as an inversion of Plato's political philosophy.<sup>8</sup> A comparison of the two mythic narratives and their respective framings will allow us to draw out more clearly the underlying politics of the rabbinic text.

By way of introduction, it should be acknowledged that the connection between the story of Rashbi's retreat into the cave and Greek mythology in general has been remarked on before. In his careful comparison of the Palestinian and Babylonian versions of the story, Lee Levine suggested as early as 1978 that some elements of the rabbinic story may indeed have been inspired by a Greek philosophical myth, namely the myth of Epimenides (sixth century BCE) and his purification of Athens.<sup>9</sup> Noting what he considers striking parallels between that episode and the story about Rashbi,<sup>10</sup> among them the sojourn in the cave

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The Socrates of the *Republic* does formulate the story in terms of unnamed, hypothetical figures, although the referents are rather clear. By contrast, the Babylonian Talmud constructs its story with known characters in the rabbinic universe, namely, Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, his son Rabbi Eleazar, and others. In other words, the Talmud does not tell a completely abstracted story, which is precisely what has allowed scholars in the past to even consider the historicity of the contents of the story.

7. See n. 4 herein.

8. Here I am drawing on Andrea Nightingale's recent study of what she at times calls the "fable of philosophy in Plato's *Republic*," and more often "analogy of the cave," in her *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 94–139. Nightingale argues that Plato does not "oppose the contemplative to the practical life; rather he differentiates between the philosophical and the political life" (133).

9. In a note, Levine graciously attributes the idea for such a connection to an oral communication by Elias Bickerman ("R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias," 191 n. 154).

10. See Levine, "R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias," 182: "A number of elements in the Epimenides tradition bear a striking resemblance to the R. Simeon account: a city faced with a problem of defilement which seems to have been a recurrent issue, an esteemed figure

of the pre-Socratic sage, Levine cautiously raises the question of a possible historical influence of that Greek myth on the rabbinic narration. But he completely disregards the possible connection with Plato's use of the motif of the cave. For his own historiographical reasons, Levine is mostly interested in the story of the purification of Tiberias that follows Rashbi's sojourn in the cave, just as the purification of Athens followed Epimenides' sojourn in the cave.<sup>11</sup> Levine, therefore, does not pursue the larger question of the parallels between Plato's philosopher and the representation of Rashbi that we want to investigate here.

The historical, or rather historicist, question about the facticity of the rabbinic story is not our concern here. In line with recent discussions of extensive aggadic sections or *sugyot* in the Babylonian Talmud, I assume that the Rashbi story is mostly literary or mythographical in nature rather than (pseudo-) historiographical<sup>12</sup> and an expression of the later Babylonian intent to lend a mythical aura to the sages of the Mishnah—in other words, a form of rabbinic hagiography. But Levine's cautious suggestion of a possible historical influence of the Epimenides myth on the evolution of the Rashbi story raises another question of a historical nature, an obvious one in this context, namely, whether those Babylonian sages who composed the extended aggadic *sugya* about Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai were in some way or another aware of the Platonic text and perhaps even used it as a template of sorts. If the parallelism between the two texts is as extensive as I hope to demonstrate here, can we pose the question about the historical-literary connection between the two? To put it as directly, and therefore as badly as possible, did the Babylonian sages perhaps know of Plato? Had they read Plato? Had they read the *Republic*? Or did they at least know of the allegory of the cave, if it had as much of an independent life as it does today?

As in most rabbinic cases, we will most likely not be able to answer this question in any verifiable way, as obviously the talmudic sages do not overtly allude to Plato's text. But a different way to pose this question would perhaps be to consider how much Hellenism, or perhaps (neo-) Platonism, there was or could have been in rabbinic Babylonia, alias Sassanian Persia, allowing for a

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of old purifying it, and the removal of corpses. The resemblance, moreover, goes even further. Tradition has it that Epimenides spent a long period of time in a cave before purifying the city." But as a good philologist, Levine remains cautious about the influence of the Greeks on the rabbis and concludes, "Whether or not the R. Simeon cave tradition owes its association with the purification story to the Epimenides episode cannot be definitely ascertained. All that can be said is that the parallels are striking and the possibility of influence intriguing" (184).

11. As Levine points out, the city is named in most Palestinian versions of the story but not in the Babylonian Talmud's version, in which the city remains unnamed ("R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias," 167).

12. See Ofra Meir and Jeffrey Rubenstein, cited in n. 3 herein. In addition, Israel Ben-Shalom, "Rabbi Judah B. Ilai's Attitude toward Rome," *Zion* 49 (1984): 9–24, has already argued that the introductory section of the Aggadah, featuring Rashbi in conversation with his colleagues about the nature of Rome's prowess, discussed later, is the Babylonian Talmud's construction rather than a reflection of an actual conversation. See Ben-Shalom's article in particular for references to historiographical works since the nineteenth century that have consistently used the story as a historical source.

possible awareness of Plato's political philosophy among the rabbinic sages. This is how this question has been raised anew more recently,<sup>13</sup> and I will return to consider this case in the conclusion of this essay. But the major endeavor of this essay, to be pursued now, is to uncover new political dimensions certainly of the talmudic sage culture, if not also the Platonic philosophical culture, by exploring the literary parallels of their respective central narratives.

OBVIOUS DIFFERENCES: THE IMPERIAL CONTEXT OF THE BAVLI

The claim for a parallelism between the two narratives is not to deny their differences, important as they are. There is not only the obvious inversion of the sage's journey, which is represented as a withdrawal from civic life into the cave rather than the reverse, as in Plato's allegory. Prominent among the differences should be the political fact that the Torah sage cannot return to the *polis* to become a philosopher-king, as Socrates says famously to Glaucon: "Unless either philosophers *rule* as kings in our states [*en tai polesin*] or those whom we now call our kings and rulers genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, there can be no cessation of evil for our states, nor, I think, for the human race either."<sup>14</sup> Plato uses different terminology to describe the rulership of philosophers in his reiterations of the argument—for example, *basileuein* (473d), *archein/archeuein* (499b), and *dunasteuein*<sup>15</sup>—all with connotations of a hegemonic relationship between philosophy and the *polis*. It is only because the philosopher is to begin with a citizen of the *polis*, one of its members, that Socrates/Plato can imagine him as a potential *primus inter pares*.

By contrast, the rabbinic sages who formulated the story in the Babylonian Talmud were confronted with an imperial form of governance to which they were subjected, and no rabbinic sage in Sassanian Persia could possibly have fantasized

13. See, e.g., Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Becker focuses mostly on the scholastic culture of the Church of the East and advocates for more studies of rabbinic and Christian interactions in the Sasanian world, especially with respect to their respective scholastic cultures. Daniel Boyarin follows up on this point in a chapter on "Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–65, which draws on Becker's study in its argument. It should be noted that already Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Patriarchs and Scholarchs" *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 48 (1981): 57–85, invokes the Hellenization of Babylonian rabbinic Jews. For bibliographical reference on concrete evidence of the importation of Neoplatonism into the Sasanian world, see below.

14. *Republic* 473c–d. Cf. *Republic* 499b, 540d a.o. Shorey points out that "this is perhaps the most famous sentence in Plato, followed by abundant reference from antiquity to modernity" (vol. 1, 473d), an issue that will be revisited later. Charles Griswold has kindly provided me with a draft of his essay on "Socrates' Political Philosophy," to be published in the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Socrates*. Griswold also emphasizes that this is not only the most revolutionary, but quite probably most famous, argument of the *Republic*.

15. *Republic* 473d, 499b, 540d.

about one of his own taking charge of that empire—or, for that matter, of Rome or any other empire. Nor is the retreat from civic life conceptualized merely as a “retreat” or a withdrawal but rather as a flight from its *imperial* governance.<sup>16</sup> The Babylonian Talmud’s version of the myth all too explicitly reflects on the political circumstances of colonization and subjugation to (Rome’s)<sup>17</sup> imperial power in its framing, setting the entire narrative up as a discussion of the prowess of the empire:

Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Shimeon [bar Yohai] were sitting, and Yehudah ben Gerim was sitting beside them.

Rabbi Yehuda opened and said, “How pleasant are the deeds of this nation. They established markets. They established bathhouses. They established bridges.”

Rabbi Yossi was silent.

R. Shimeon [bar Yohai] answered and said, “Everything they established, they established only for their own needs:<sup>18</sup> They established markets—to place prostitutes there; bathhouses—to pamper themselves; bridges—to take tolls.”

Yehuda ben Gerim went and retold their words, and it became known to the [Roman] government. They said: “Yehuda who extolled—let him be extolled.

16. It remains unclear in Socrates’ analogy what prompts the philosophers’ release from his shackles in the cave. Socrates says, “Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature [*physei*] something of this sort should happen to them: When one was freed from his fetters...” (*Republic* 515c). Later on in the philosopher’s ascent from the cave, when he himself would rather turn back than face the light, Socrates continues, “And if someone should drag him thence *by force* up the ascent” (515e). Nightingale assumes that “someone” implies a theoretical philosopher who educates the person about to be liberated (*Spectacles*, 102). Of course, one of Plato’s major issues in the *Republic* is precisely the nature of adequate philosophical education.

17. Others have noted the omission of the explicit reference to Rome, which is not entirely out of character with the Bavli’s style. See Rubenstein, “Torah and the Mundane Life,” in *Talmudic Stories*, 344 n. 12. However, perhaps we can push this point a little further and suggest that the omission of the explicit reference here, as well as of the name Tiberias for the city in which Rashbi becomes active after his return from the cave at the end of the story, add to the parabolic character of the entire construction rather than to some kind of historiographical intent on behalf of the Babylonian sages.

18. As pointed out by Ofra Meir and Ben-Shalom and much elaborated by Rubenstein, the reference to “the deeds of this nation” and Rashbi’s evaluation that these acts were done only “for their own needs” echoes another Babylonian discussion of imperial power, this one in an eschatological garb, namely, at B. Avodah Zarah 2b. In that context, the Roman and Persian empires defend their acts (i.e., their imperial prowess of construction and building) in front of the Holy One Blessed Be He on the day of judgment by insisting that they had committed those acts “for the sake of Israel, so that they could engage themselves with the study of Torah” (B. Avodah Zarah 2a). But here it is God himself who exposes the empires as having done all these things “only for themselves” (2b). All three scholars mentioned assume—correctly, I think—that the narrators of the Rashbi story drew on the material from B. Avodah Zarah and not vice versa. Rubenstein devotes an entire chapter to the passage in B. Avodah Zarah 2a–3b, “Torah, Gentiles, and Eschatology (Avoda Zara 2a–3b),” in *Talmudic Stories*, 212–43.

## Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave

Yossi who was silent—let him be exiled to Sepphoris. Shimeon who disparaged—let him be killed.” He went with his son<sup>19</sup> and hid.

This opening frame of the narrative establishes an overt *political* context for the story of Rabbi Shimeon's retreat into the cave. The three sages who are squarely associated with—and recognizable representatives of—the sages as collective and self-designed leaders of Israel, the community at large, represent three possible responses to the imperial power of “Rome”: recognition and approval of the benefits thereof, silence, and overt criticism. These options spell out exactly the range of possibilities that James C. Scott considers in his now classic work on *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.<sup>20</sup> As Scott points out in his book, “most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders [i.e., Rashbi] nor in complete hegemonic compliance [Rabbi Yehudah], but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites.”<sup>21</sup> The rabbinic story focuses on the transformation of Rashbi's position of more or less overt defiance into a position that lies somewhere in that vast territory between the polar opposites.

The fourth “response” to the political condition of colonization, by a figure only marginally or at best ambiguously associated with the sages, is that of the informer, the one who reveals the insider conversation of the colonized to the colonizing power.<sup>22</sup> Read as generic responses to generic imperial power, they have more of a paradigmatic than a “historiographical” overtone. After all, Rome is not named, although it is clearly implied, and to the stammatit narrators and their audience, Rome could easily be translated into Persia, or, for that matter, any other sociopolitical context of domination and (rabbinic/Jewish) subordination.

19. In what follows, I am neglecting the presence of Rashbi's son, Rabbi Eleazar, in various stages of the story. The story exhibits a curious back and forth between focus on just Rashbi and on both of them. At times, Rabbi Eleazar seems to drop completely out of sight of the narrators. Admittedly, I have as yet no cogent explanation for why the rabbinic story would even add the son rather than focus on the figure of the solitary sage in light of Plato's tale, other than that the narrators merely assume the culture of rabbinic dialectic, so that even in the utopia of extreme solitude of study (in the cave), a study partner is an absolute imaginary and therefore narrative necessity.

20. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). Scott's concept of hidden transcripts has been widely used and reapplied in postcolonial studies, but it will not be applied extensively here in the context of this essay. It is Daniel Boyarin who introduced Scott's work into the arena of Jewish Studies. See Boyarin's essay on “Massada or Yavneh? Gender and the Art of Resistance” in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 306–29; *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

21. See p. 136, insertions are mine. That “vast territory” is, of course, what his book is attempting to map. Interestingly, he does not consider silence as one of the options of “voice under domination,” the title of his sixth chapter.

22. There is discussion in the literature cited so far on Yehudah ben Gerim's character, namely, whether he is an informer by design or by accident (“he went and retold their words, and it became known to the government”). For my purposes, the distinction does not matter much.

At this point, we have to recall that this explication of the debate about (Rome's) imperial power is peculiar to the Bavli's version of the cave story, in contrast to its other (mostly Palestinian) versions.<sup>23</sup> To put it differently, we might argue that the Bavli pointedly provides a debate about politics as the frame for its cave story—just as Plato does for his. That is to say, the Bavli does not simply provide a narrative embellishment vis-à-vis the Palestinian tradition(s) that it might have used as a template, as if it merely saw a need to provide some sort of reason for Rashbi's "hiding" in the cave. If that were all, it would have been sufficient to mention Rashbi's resistance to or criticism of Rome.<sup>24</sup> But the Bavli presents the context as a *debate* about the beneficiary by-product of (Rome's) imperial power and colonialism, and rejection thereof is clearly not the only response endorsed by the Babylonian sages.

Read together, then, both Plato's debate and the talmudic debate mirror each other in that they revolve around the question of how to evaluate the sociopolitical context within which the philosopher/sage finds himself. In both, the philosopher/sage is led to distance himself from the immediate impact of the overpowering reality of ever-day civic life on his perception. To summarize and emphasize, then, the point to be made here is that the obvious differences between Plato and the Talmud—the philosopher's citizenship versus the rabbinic sage's colonized subservience to the empire—do not necessarily speak against the possibility of a meaningful relationship between the two tales, one that we will have to explore further.

#### TOPOGRAPHY OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY AND THE BAVLI'S TALMUD TORAH

Let us begin by reflecting on the spatial dimension of both stories. As noted, the motif of the cave in and of itself would not be sufficient to draw a meaningful connection between Plato's analogy and the rabbinic Aggadah. First of all, as Rubenstein has pointed out, caves figure in many rabbinic miracle stories all over rabbinic literature, not just in the Babylonian Talmud. The cave therefore constitutes a common motif in the narrative archives of the rabbis and the Bible before that.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the cave is not uncommon in the Greek mythological tradition.<sup>26</sup> In and of itself, then, the narrators' choice of a cave for Rabbi Shimeon

23. As demonstrated by Levine's synoptic presentation, only the version of the story in *Kohelet Rabba* 10:8 mentions a persecution as the reason for Rashbi's retreat into the cave. Based on Lieberman's historical argument, Levine adds the clarification of "(Hadrianic) persecution" ("R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias," 150). Because of the complicated question of dating the rabbinic literary traditions, such a supplementation is difficult to substantiate.

24. Which is, in fact, what *Kohelet Rabba* 10:8 does, which mentions a *shmad* (persecution) as a background; see previous note.

25. See Rubenstein, "Torah and the Mundane Life" in *Talmudic Stories*, 340 n. 61, for references. He notes that "while caves (especially burial caves) figure in many rabbinic miracle stories (bBM 84b–85a, 85b; bBQ 117a; bMQ 17a; bBB58a; yTA 3:10, 66d), the figure of a sage hiding in a cave is unparalleled and cannot be considered a motif" and then proceeds to provide biblical precedents.

26. Of course, there is the story about Epimenides mentioned earlier. As Levine points out, the story about Epimenides' dwelling in the cave was widely cited, starting with Plato himself, through Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius and Clement ("R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias," 181).

bar Yohai to withdraw into and indulge in the devotional life is not necessarily particularly noteworthy.

But if we move from a focus on the individual narrative motif or image to the topography of the narrative, another pattern emerges. Here, I wish to draw on a recent study that has analyzed Plato's topography in his political philosophy at great length. Andrea Nightingale remarks on the allegory of the cave in her study of Plato's innovative conceptualization of philosophy as a distinct intellectual practice: "Plato creates a sort of topography of the physical and metaphysical regions, which border one another at the mouth of the cave. He uses highly visual, physical language in his description of these regions, offering the reader a vivid spectacle of the realms of being and becoming."<sup>27</sup> Nightingale's main goal in tracing this link between Plato's political philosophy in the *Republic* and the ancient institution of civic *theoria* is, first and foremost, to demonstrate that the fourth-century BCE Greek philosophers took that institution as a paradigm, a good model for their conception of philosophical vision (*theoria*), but then completely transformed it in order to conceptualize theoretical philosophy as distinct from other, more practical and political forms of wisdom. What is more important for our purposes, however, is the political dynamics at play, as well as the topography involved.

Nightingale's approach here, in particular her emphasis on the topography built into Plato's analogy in particular and the *Republic* in general, proves to be highly fruitful for reading the Rashbi narrative. In other words, the spatial logic of our respective narratives is not an arbitrary one. Both narratives assign distinct and even diametrically opposed spaces or realms to what I want to designate, for now, as civic life, or the life of the *polis* (or empire), on the one hand, and the act of contemplation or devotion, on the other. In fact, the talmudic story explicitly reflects on the relationship of the sage to the "city" and on his desire to do something for the "city" upon his return from the cave.<sup>28</sup> In both stories, the philosopher and the sage leave one realm and cross into another, leave everyone else behind, and in their respective solitudes find for themselves a space in which to indulge in the devotional life. And in both stories, the sage returns from one space to the other.

Here we need to backtrack just a little bit in order to build the case for a connection between the two stories. Nightingale teases out the topographical dimension of Plato's analogy, and therefore Plato's conceptualization of the relationship between philosopher and *polis*, by linking it to what she describes as the "civic institution of *theoria*" in ancient Greece. Civic *theoria* brought foreign Greeks together in shared religious sanctuaries to witness spectacles and participate in rituals.<sup>29</sup> The ancient *polis* would choose its civic *theoros*, a representative of the *polis* who would venture beyond its boundaries to one of the pan-Hellenic festivals: "Whether he journeyed to an oracular center or a religious festival, the civic *theoros* was appointed by the city and his trip was paid for by public funds."<sup>30</sup>

27. Nightingale, *Spectacles*, 96.

28. We will return to this in the next section.

29. Nightingale, *Spectacles*, 35. This is distinguished from private *theoria*, not very common and frowned upon by Plato; see p. 48.

30. *Ibid.*, 48.

This more ancient form of *theoria* is adapted by Plato and transformed into what will become the distinct episteme of philosophical speculation.<sup>31</sup> Nightingale argues that Plato models his allegory of the cave on this spatial logic and the movement across boundaries of (sociopolitical) spaces built into the ancient institution of *theoria*. Because the civic *theoros* is a public ambassador and messenger, his *theoria* affects the entire city, so much so that Plato, in fact, felt a pressing need to regulate the moment of return of the *theoros*. Nightingale writes,

In his legislation for the city of Magnesia,<sup>32</sup> Plato ... sets forth many strictures for the practice of civic *theoria*, focusing in particular on the rules for the return of the *theoros* to the city .... Here the reentry of the *theoros* is treated as a momentous and potentially dangerous political event: the importation of foreign ideas and practices can bring benefits to the city, but it can also bring corruption instead. Plato's attempt to control the reentry of the *theoros* is a reminder that, in civic *theoria*, the ambassador's return home is no less important than the journey abroad.<sup>33</sup>

We will discuss this representation of the moment of return as crisis further in the next section. For now, we should just take note that this is quite reminiscent of the representation of Rashbi's return from the cave bearing destructive consequences for the rest of the community, at least initially.

The spatial logic of the traditional civic *theoria*, whereby leaving the *polis* and attending the pan-Hellenic event is equated with a movement toward transcending particularity, in turn lends its force to the political dimension of Plato's conception of the place of philosophy in the *polis*. As at pan-Hellenic festivals and gatherings, during which people from individual city-states could affirm a single "Greek" identity and thus transcend the particular boundaries of the city-states, the philosophic *theoria* of the fourth-century philosophers was made to operate in a sphere that completely transcended social and political life and its accompanying divisions. "In the activity of contemplation, the theorist rises above all earthly affairs—including his own individual human identity—in order to 'see' eternal and divine beings. Building on the practice of traditional *theoria*, the philosophers developed the notion of the transcendental, impersonal, and impartial 'space' of theoretical activity."<sup>34</sup> Plato's radical separation of theoretical and social-political "space" inevitably raised the question of whether the wisdom acquired in metaphysical contemplation could (or should) play a role in civic affairs. This is, of course, precisely the question that Plato's *Republic* attempts to answer.<sup>35</sup>

If we summarize, then, in light of the aforementioned, we see the narrative of the analogy of the cave as governed by two movements: (1) the movement out of

31. *Ibid.*, 29.

32. The reference is to *Laws* 950d–952c.

33. Nightingale, *Spectacles*, 48.

34. *Ibid.*, 70.

35. For a helpful discussion and bibliography, see T. Mahoney, "Do Plato's Philosopher-Rulers Sacrifice Self-Interest to Justice?" *Phronesis* 37 (1992): 265–82.

the cave, out of the darkness of delusion and ignorance, and into the light of knowledge, a movement that is described as an ascension, and (2) the return from the light into the cave, described as a descent, whereby the philosopher must return to the cave.<sup>36</sup>

Here we can fast-forward to the talmudic narrative again, for the Babylonian Talmud asks precisely the same question, illustrated with the help of a similar topography. In certain respects, the Talmud's version of speculative philosophy, of contemplation in its scholastic form, is, of course, the equally theoretical practice of *talmud torah*, of study, that is, study for its own sake, study as a practice of devotion.<sup>37</sup> Whereas Plato's philosopher looks and contemplates "the spectacle of truth," Rashbi and his son in their cave "sat by day and studied." In the dark of the cave, study is entirely disconnected from any sociopolitical context or enactment. Indeed, this disconnection is only further underlined by the narrative burial and therefore erasure of the body: "[Rashbi and his son] sat up to their necks in sand." Absolute study is represented as almost disembodied,<sup>38</sup> an idea that is further underscored by the pampering of the body in the bathhouse as part of Rashbi's reentry into civic life.<sup>39</sup> Upon Rashbi's exit from the cave, his son-in-law, Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair, "heard and went out to greet him. He took him to the bathhouse." Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair bemoans the sorry state of Rashbi's body, saying, "Alas that I see you so," whereupon Rashbi replies, "Happy that you see me so. For if you did not see me so, you would not find me so." The narrator glosses this statement by demonstrating the vastly improved dialectic

36. See also Dominic O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 10. I thank my colleague Tom Sheehan for this helpful reference.

37. For a comprehensive discussion of the scholasticism of the Babylonian Talmud and its praise of Torah study as the apex of devotion, see esp. Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

38. Rubenstein reads this burial of the body in terms of structuralist anthropology, as part of nature (in the cave) versus culture (baths, etc.): "[T]he image of neck-deep burial in sand portrays them as an integral part of the natural terrain, similar to carrots or tubers with the vegetable body comfortably hidden below. Submersion in the sand of the cave contrasts with their subsequent immersion in the waters of the bathhouse, and the resulting damage to the sages' bodies is the opposite of the pampering which RSBY associated with Roman baths" (*Talmudic Stories*, 113). Again, I do not necessarily disagree, rather I suggest that the burial of the body for the sake of study carries more significance, especially in light of my suggested Platonic inversion. Rubenstein further emphasizes that "perforce [the scene] is very close to nature; with all time and effort invested in study, there is no way to produce food, build shelter or weave clothes" (*ibid.*). To me, this kind of pragmatic reading simply seems to underestimate the symbolic weight of the depiction. Beyond Plato's obvious trouble with the body, it seems to me—drawing once again on Hollander's figure (see n. 5 herein)—that somehow there is an "echo" of Plato's cave dwellers "having their legs and necks fettered from childhood" (*Republic* 514a). Consider also the following image: "When the eye of the soul is really buried in a sort of barbaric mud [*borborw barbarikw tini*], dialectic gently pulls it out and leads it upwards" (*Republic* 533c–d). Christopher Bobonich (*Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002], 53) comments, "Plato's phrasing here echoes his description of the fate of nonphilosophers in the *Phaedo*. There the souls of nonphilosophers, on arriving in Hades, will 'lie in the mud'; in this passage from the *Republic* their souls ... now really are buried in the mud."

39. See also Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 117, for a more detailed analysis of this scene.

capabilities of Rashbi: “For originally when Rashbi raised a difficulty, Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair solved it with twelve answers. Subsequently when Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair raised a difficulty, Rashbi solved it with twenty-four solutions.” The narrators here clearly reiterate the juxtaposition of learning and commitment to the body: less of the latter, more of the former.

Commitment to the body is only one expression, perhaps a primary one, of commitment to civic life, whereas its erasure easily signifies the negation thereof. We have only to think of Philo’s succinct formulation in his famous critique of the radical allegorizers: “As it is, as though they were living alone by themselves in a wilderness, or *as though they had become disembodied souls*, and knew neither city nor village nor household nor any company of human beings at all, overlooking all that the mass of men regard they explore reality in its naked absoluteness.”<sup>40</sup> Philo’s allegorizers, who disregard the laws for the sake of their meaning, who read the laws that circumscribe the body politic merely as signs for a transcendent signified, behave like souls without bodies, which he equates with withdrawal from the *polis* into the wilderness.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Rashbi and his son bury their bodies in the sand for the sake of study “in its naked absoluteness.” They separate themselves not only from the civic community but also from their own bodies.<sup>42</sup>

Subsequently in the talmudic story, this form of devotion is equated with “eternal life,” as opposed to “temporal life,” for when Rashbi and his son finally leave the cave—that is, return to civic life—they remark on beholding agricultural laborers: “These forsake *eternal* life (*hayyei ’olam*) and busy themselves with *temporal* life (*hayyei sha ’ah*)?” This question could be asked in exactly the same way by Plato’s philosopher as he returns to the cave and squints at the cave dwellers.<sup>43</sup>

Before we allow the sage to return, allow us to ponder the obvious question, the moment of the most blatant metaphorical inversion, if we read the talmudic tale against the background of Plato’s allegory. What about the cave itself and its referent? How should we make sense of the fact that, for Plato, it is the *polis*, alias civic community, that is represented by the cave, from which the philosopher escapes out into the open, whereas in the Bavli, the sage withdraws into the cave, away from the political world and the people who inhabit it, including Rashbi’s

40. Philo, *De Migratione Abrahami*, 90; emphasis added.

41. Hindy Najman, “Towards a Study of the Uses of the Concept of Wilderness,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 13, no. 1 (2006): 99–113, esp. 107–9 on Philo.

42. It is true that Rashbi’s study in the cave is accompanied by prayer, perhaps the other side of the coin of talmudic devotion. But in the end, this does not undermine the emphasis on absolute devotion and contemplation.

43. Even though there are no exact counterparts, this kind of juxtaposition is common in Plato. In the *Republic*, see, e.g., 525b: “he [the student of philosophy] must rise out of the region of generation and lay hold of essence” (cf. 525c, 526e, 527b a.o.). The juxtaposition of *genesis* and *ousia* is common in the *Republic*. The temporal element of this juxtaposition is emphasized in his discussion of the study or appropriate knowledge of geometry, which is “the knowledge of that which always is (*tou aei ontos gnwsews*) and not of a something which at some time comes into being and passes away (*ti gignomenou kai apollumenou*)” (527b).

colleagues? Both sage and philosopher escape, move away from the political world, but whereas one withdraws into a space of confinement, a protected space, the other leaves all spatial boundaries behind, it seems. I would suggest that such an inversion does make sense given the political context of the Babylonian narrators. For the rabbis, the *polis* had turned into *cosmos* in a manner of speaking, and the empire was the world, whether Roman or Sassanian. An outside beyond the boundaries of that world would have been next to impossible to access, whereas Plato could very much draw on the boundedness and boundaries of the *polis* as a metaphor for his politics of philosophy. The talmudic sage would have had to choose withdrawal from the *cosmos* into a place of seclusion therefrom, and certainly such separatist thinking had attractiveness. One model for rabbinic piety, therefore, could have been radical separatism within the empire in order to obtain the freedom to study, represented by the withdrawal into the cave. At the same time, the talmudic narrators betray a certain amount of criticism of such a model, as one aspect of the underlying agenda of Rashbi's tale is to send him back into the world again rather than leave him be in the bliss of quasi-monastic solitude. But let us turn to the moment of return.

#### RETURN TO THE POLIS: THE MOMENT OF CRISIS AND RESOLUTION

Again, the parallelism between the two tales seems palpable. Both tales allude to the moment of reluctance, Plato much more explicitly so. But even in the talmudic tale, the sage has to be prodded by divine intervention into leaving the cave: "They dwelled in a cave for thirteen years. Elijah came to the opening of the cave. He said, 'Who will inform Bar Yohai that the emperor died and the decree is annulled?' They went out." For the thirteen years, Rashbi does not so much as make an attempt to leave the bliss of study.<sup>44</sup>

Both tales configure the return of the philosopher/sage as a moment of crisis, burdened by a process of reluctant adjustment and fraught with danger. We have alluded to the moment of crisis in Plato's allegory, as discussed in particular by Nightingale. In his experience of the freedom to contemplate outside the cave, Plato's philosopher is transformed, as is the civic *theoros* before him. To reiterate Nightingale's crucial observation, "The reentry of the *theoros* is treated as a momentous and potentially dangerous political event: the importation of foreign ideas and practices can bring benefits to the city, but it can also bring corruption instead."<sup>45</sup> Hence, Plato dramatically underlines the aggression of the cave dwellers toward the philosopher upon his return, to the point that they might kill him.<sup>46</sup> In the talmudic tale, the fatal dynamics of the return are turned around: "[Rashbi and his son] went out and they *saw* men plowing and sowing. They

44. The *Vorlage* in the Palestinian Talmud actually has Rashbi go out himself: "At the end of the thirteen years, he said: 'Perhaps I shall go out and see what is happening in the world.' He went out." The change in the Bavli's version, which emphasizes the moment of reluctance, supports my hypothesis of the Bavli's critical engagement of the Platonic allegory.

45. Nightingale, *Spectacles*, 48

46. *Republic* 517a.

said: ‘They forsake eternal life and busy themselves with temporal life!’ Everywhere they turned *their eyes* was immediately burned.” It is the others who suffer the consequences of the transformation of the philosopher.

In light of Plato’s allegory, the emphasis on the element of sight is curious. Rubenstein again points out that the motif of the lethal gaze is a motif common in the Babylonian Talmud, in which opponents of sages may be reduced to a heap of bones (as in our case at the end of the story as well) or the sage’s gaze may cause destruction.<sup>47</sup> It is not, however, in the realm of impossible that the Babylonian Talmud introduces the motif again quite pointedly into our story. We recall that the motif of seeing, the gaze, and the incongruities of seeing between the philosopher and the civic community pervades Plato’s depiction of the crisis of the philosopher’s return, as it does, for that matter, the entire allegory. In the drama of movement between darkness and light, bondage and freedom, vision, the ability to see, takes center stage. So also in the return. Socrates says to Glaucon,

And consider this also, if such a one should go down again and take his old place would he not get *his eyes* full of darkness, thus suddenly coming out of the sunlight ... Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in “evaluating” these shadows while *his vision* was still dim and before *his eyes* were accustomed to the dark ... would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with *his eyes ruined* and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent?<sup>48</sup>

The philosopher’s powers to see work against him in the darkness of the cave. At the same time, habituation within the cave endangers his powers to see truly. As Nightingale points out, “Plato’s theoretical philosopher, in sum, has blind spots: the vision of the theorist is not panoptic, since he sees differently—and different objects—in each realm. When contemplating the Forms, he does not see the world, which now appears dark; and when he pursues practical and political activities back in the cave, he sees the Forms less clearly. Since the eye of the soul ‘is destroyed and blinded by [nontheoretical] pursuits’ (527e), the philosopher will have to keep renewing and increasing his knowledge via philosophical discussion and contemplation.”<sup>49</sup>

In the talmudic tale, the dynamics are once again overturned. Rashbi’s acquisition of knowledge (eternal life) endows him with powers of seeing that are incongruous with the ways of the world outside his cave, with reality—with the reality of the civic community, that is. And this proves to be destructive. *Sub specie aeternitatis* reality of human life withers. Again, I wish to highlight the moment of talmudic inversion with respect to Plato’s allegory. That is,

47. For references, see Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 340 n. 62. In our own narrative, Rashbi still kills by eyesight at the end of the narrative, first a certain old man who mocks him and then finally Yehuda ben Gerim from the beginning of the story.

48. *Republic* 516e–517a.

49. Nightingale, *Spectacles*, 104.

Rashbi emerges from the cave not merely endowed with miraculous powers that he needs to learn to contain but as a platonic philosopher, beholden to the quasi-metaphysical realm of pure knowledge, or of "theoretical Torah," as it were. But whereas Plato's philosopher suffers the consequences, in his continuous effort not to submit to the powers of the this-worldly reality of the *polis* and transform reality in light of what he has seen in the quasi-metaphysical realm, this very act is rabbinically represented as destructive, indeed as countering the divine plan. For God sends him back into the cave: "A heavenly voice went out and said to them: 'Did you go out to destroy my world? Return to your cave!'" Rashbi has to readjust his powers of seeing. The reality of the civic community in the talmudic inversion of Plato is not a mere shadow of the metaphysical realm, one that is perpetually left in the dark, and that the philosopher (and his students) merely learns to see as such. Rather, this reality *is all there is*, and the sage does not have a superior perspective on it. Upon his second emergence from the cave, Rashbi and his son are made to see the world accordingly:

They *saw* a certain old man who was holding two bunches of myrtle running at twilight. They said to him, "Why do you need these?" He said to them, "To honor the Sabbath." They said, "Would not one suffice for you?" He said, one for "Remember [the Sabbath]" (Exodus 20:8), and one for "Observe [the Sabbath]" (Deuteronomy 5:12)." He said to his son, "*See* how dear is a commandment to Israel!"

Torah, the rabbinic form of knowledge, lives in the world, not above it or secluded from it. Torah, knowledge as enactment of the divine plan, pervades the fabric of the world. And here, we might emphasize that the old man is not just performing Torah but acts based on an interpretation that he himself presents to Rashbi and his son rather than one represented as being taught by them. He is instructing them. However, lest we overly romanticize the talmudic story as a parable about the sage's relationship to the civic community as a whole, the emphasis here shifts to "Israel," the idealized people of the Torah, not to the *polis* as a whole. Whereas the Talmud refuses to represent the sage (or even the community of sages and their disciples) as the sole arbitrator of knowledge, as Plato does, the sage is represented as reentering a relationship with a specific community only, not with the larger civic community. Therefore, my reading of the Rashbi narrative as an inversion of Plato's elitism of the philosopher-king does not necessarily fly in the face of recent emphases on the academic elitism of the *stammaim*. The *stammaim* may very well evince contempt vis-à-vis the so-called peoples of the land (*'ammei ha'arez*), as famously in the longer passage in B. Pesahin 49a-b, Jews not in line with their version of Torah-itic Israel.<sup>50</sup> However, phenomenologically speaking, the sage is not allowed a way out of at least that larger community called "Israel," a community that is always envisioned as larger than and transcending the

50. For a recent discussion of the *'ammei ha'arez*, see Christine E. Hayes, "The 'Other' in Rabbinic Literature," in Fonrobert and Jaffee, *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, 243-70.

boundaries of the academic world of the talmudic sages. In that sense, the Bavli's self-representation is not one of totally exclusive scholasticism.<sup>51</sup> This, then, would be the stammaitic version of the tannaitic imperative "not to separate oneself from the public,"<sup>52</sup> with the public read as "utopian Israel," an Israel that is infused with Torah and a midrashic mentality.

Still, the critical force of the talmudic narrative resides in its rejection of Plato's model of the philosopher-king. Rashbi and his son do not return to rule, nor to subject the world to their grasp of theoretical Torah. If anything, they return as enablers. And here, we turn to the last section of the narrative that is relevant to our work of comparison. After Rashbi has his body massaged back into civic life,<sup>53</sup> the Babylonian Talmud reformulates a midrashic interlude that it inherits from the same tradition that produces the much shorter narrative in the Palestinian Talmud:

He [Rashbi] said: "Since a miracle occurred I will go and fix something, since it says, 'And Jacob came whole' (Genesis 33:18)."

And Rav said, "Whole in his body, whole in his money, whole in his Torah."

"And he encamped before the *city*" (Genesis 33:18).<sup>54</sup>

Rav said, 'He established coinage for them.' And Shmuel said, "He established markets for them." And Rabbi Yohanan said, "He established bathhouses for them."

He [Rashbi] said: "Is there something to fix?"

51. Here, I think, my reading of the Rashbi narrative as a critical inversion of the Platonic allegory can serve as a slight corrective to such descriptions of *stammaitic* and therefore talmudic culture, as in Rubenstein, *Culture of the Talmud*, 141.

52. M. Avot 2:5: 'al tifrosh min hazibbur. For a survey of the various terms for "public" used in Palestinian rabbinic literature (*zibbur*, *rabbim*, *parhesia*), see Catherine Hezser, "'Privat' und 'öffentlich' im Talmud Yerushalmi und in der griechisch-römischen Antike," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. II, ed. Peter Schäfer and Catherine Hezser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 423–579.

53. By Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair, now identified as his son-in-law. Rubenstein emphasizes that this scene is about Rashbi's reintegration into the world and acutely observes that the "seemingly superfluous datum that Pinhas is RSBHY's son-in-law emphasizes that the sage rejoins the family he had abandoned earlier" (*Talmudic Stories*, 117). More sharply, then, kinship ties are the primary ties to the civic community. However, once again I would emphasize the political emphasis inherent in the Bavli's juxtaposition of Rashbi's initial rejection of the Roman bathhouses in the political introduction to the story, discussed earlier, and Rashbi's visit to those very bathhouses upon emerging from the cave. Rubenstein does observe the chiastic structure and the return to the beginning of the story here at his end.

54. This is my emphasis. The whole verse reads (following the NRSV translation), "And Jacob came safely to the city of Shekhem in the land of Canaan, upon arriving from Padan Aram; and he encamped before the city." See Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 338, on medieval commentaries on this verse. He surely is correct when he notes that "the exegetical play on 'he settled' (*vayihan*) as 'he graced' (*vayahon*) evokes R. Yehuda's initial opinion that these institutions are 'pleasant.' RSBY's valuation now coheres with the opinion he formerly rejected!" (118). Suffice it to say that the subsequent biblical chapter (Genesis 34 on Dinah) hardly suggests the reading of the verse put forward by the midrash here, reading "encamped before" as "gracious to!"

This strange midrashic reading of a difficult verse from Genesis is clearly rooted in the Palestinian *Vorlage* but is adjusted to suit the Bavli's framing of the story in its political pretext. That is, whatever the biblical verse itself might mean, the Babylonian Talmud now represents the biblical patriarch Jacob as doing exactly what the Romans are represented as doing in the beginning of the story. The Romans established markets, and so did Jacob. The Romans established bathhouses, and so did Jacob. While the Romans established bridges, Jacob established coinage, both vital tools of the infrastructure of civic life, whether of the *polis* or the empire.<sup>55</sup>

Rubenstein provides as thorough and careful a reading of this section of the story as is possible and details the echoes of Esau versus Jacob and Rome versus Israel in this midrashic section, and there is not much more to add. Yet, one more time, I think we can advance just a slightly more politically invested reading of the story than Rubenstein's. Rubenstein suggests that "juxtaposed with the reference to Rome in the first scene, Jacob as the 'establisher' of institutions symbolizes Israel appropriating Roman culture ... Jacob building markets and bathhouses represents the acceptance or absorption of gentile culture."<sup>56</sup> True, but Rome is not just a signifier for Gentile culture as such, but for imperial (Gentile) culture, its buildings, the development of markets and infrastructure, an expression of its colonialism. It seems to me that what this story is struggling with, at least in part, is what the role of the sage in his community should be when that role cannot possibly be translated into political leadership, as in the model of the philosopher-king. In the context of an imperial world, the sage cannot aspire to rule, at least not in the conventional sense. Hence, the midrashic section does not so much justify "Israel's" appropriation of Gentile (Roman) culture but rather ascribe political and even imperial power to the biblical patriarch. After all, building markets, bridges, and bathhouses and instituting coinage are acts of *designing* the "city," not merely endowing it with "high culture." Here, the city serves precisely as the signifier for what in Plato is the *polis* and in the Roman (and Sassanian) context is the empire.

In other words, in its reflection on the role of the sage in the community, on his power (or lack thereof), the Talmud now triangulates Roman power, the founding power of the biblical patriarch, and the sage's imitation of the latter. Again, the Talmud does not allow the sage to withdraw altogether from political life, always an attractive option, threatening as it might be in its oppressive colonialism. But the sage cannot rule either. Nonetheless, the sage is driven back into the life of the civic community through the invocation of models of political power. Ostensibly, he is compelled by the biblical model of Jacob, Esau's perennial foe. Jacob could do what the Romans could do, which is to say, "their" power to impose their infrastructure on the land does not eradicate the community of Israel, or the power of Torah, with the sages as its safeguards.

The story ends with the puzzling and much-interpreted purification of the space of the civic community. Contrary to Levine's attempt to read this ending

55. Or, as Rubenstein suggests, the money recalls the bridge tolls (*Talmudic Stories*, 338 n. 46).

56. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 119.

of the narrative as a (potentially) historical event, it seems clear that the evocation of purity and purification is a *topos* that the Babylonian Talmud often draws on in designing its narratives. In these narratives, purity often stands for unknowability, and therefore uncertainty, along with the simultaneous assertion of rabbinic authority.<sup>57</sup> The Babylonian narrators perhaps deliberately eliminate the name of the place (Tiberias in some of the Palestinian versions) and simply evoke the space of the community of Israel. All that might be added to the many interpretations in our context is that in the act of purification, the sage, in turn, imposes *his* map onto the Jewish *polis*, however highly symbolically, just as Jacob did, and just as the Romans as the proverbial empire still do. He does so in imitation of Jacob and in spite of the Romans. In a manner of speaking, whereas the Romans (and Jacob) have built infrastructure above ground, the sage has gone underground with his purification of gravesites. In the end, this act enables the Jewish—or better yet, rabbinic—*polis* to subsist in spite of the overt inscription qua development of the land by its imperial overlords.

#### CONCLUSION

To summarize, then, in light of the foregoing analysis, it is possible to read the story of Rashbi's (and Rabbi Eleazar's) withdrawal as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud as an echo of Plato's allegory of the cave, with major critical differences. I have read these differences here as elements of the overall talmudic inversion of the Platonic narrative. The Talmud suggests a model that sails between the Scylla of total withdrawal from the political life into the cave and the Charybdis of fantasies of ruling the political community. The sage's ruling is, if anything, represented as a highly symbolic form of rulership in that Rashbi is depicted as inscribing and imposing his own map on the city (thereby enabling Jewish men of priestly descent to go where hitherto they could not).

The time has come to at least briefly foreground the question about the concrete relationship between the two texts.<sup>58</sup> For the most part, the comparison of the two texts pursued here has served the purpose of analyzing the striking parallels between them without making a claim for a necessary historical-literary relationship between the two or making the comparison dependent on such a relationship. As we have seen, much can be learned about the respective cultures of knowledge production and devotion by reading them in light of each other. However, the parallels are so striking that I feel compelled to ask whether there is indeed a

57. In the famous Aggadah of Rabbi Eliezer and the "Oven of Akhnai," Rabbi Eliezer is represented as the only one who has access to divine knowledge and therefore to the answer of the status of purity of the oven in question (B. Bava Mezi'a' 59b). But his opinion is exactly the one that is rejected in favor of the majority decision. So also in B. Bava Mezi'a' 84a, in which Rabbi Eleazar decides the questionable menstrual cases in favor of sexual intercourse, and the story celebrates the assertion of his authority in spite of the uncertainty. So also here, where Rashbi's assertion of declaring pure what might actually be impure is met with criticism, which he promptly squashes.

58. This paragraph is a response to the very generous and indeed helpful anonymous reader of the manuscript of this article.

historical-literary connection between the two narratives, not just a connection of general comparability, or whether the talmudic narrative is indeed a more or less intentional version of the Platonic narrative, perhaps a commentary thereon or a retelling thereof, in which case a different layer of meaning may be added to our reading of the talmudic narrative. As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, such a relationship is not verifiable, as the talmudic sages never overtly allude to Plato, but it is at the very least historically possible.

Recently, scholars have argued for the permeability of the border(s) between the Roman and the Sassanian empires. The flight of the last generation of (neo-) Platonic philosophers under Damascius from the school of Athens to the Sassanian court plays a central role in this discussion. That event, the result of antipagan legislation enacted by the Roman emperor Justinian in 529 CE, led to the eventual closure of the school in Athens.<sup>59</sup> If we follow Joel T. Walker, the Sassanian court of Khosrow was much more open to Greek intellectual life than the sources would make us believe. Hence, neo-Platonism would have made its inroads at least into the Sassanian royal world in Ctesiphon, a city which, in turn, had a strong presence of rabbinic sages. And with the neo-Platonic philosophers, we may assume their recycling of and commentaries on Plato and his *Republic*.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Adam Becker's *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* has suggested that the Christian schools provided an important cultural bridge to render the borders in the East porous.<sup>61</sup> This literature would suggest that there is a strong possibility that the Babylonian rabbinic sages, and especially the *stammaim*, had some, if not plenty of opportunities to engage Plato's political philosophy at least by his reflection through neo-Platonism.

If this historical possibility is plausible, and the Rashbi story is read as a commentary on Plato's cave story, it stands to gain a different force. The inversions that have been sketched out here might acquire the force of critical differences, of distancing Rashbi from the Platonic philosopher-king model. The strongest moment of critique, then, would be God's rebuke of Rashbi and his son and his sending them back into the cave. The story of Rashbi's education would be the story of the platonic philosopher turned into a talmudic sage, not

59. For an extensive discussion of this story and the anti-Persian bias in the Greek sources, see Joel T. Walker, "The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran," *Ancient World* 33, no. 1 (2002): 45–69. Walker argues for extending the horizons of what we all have come to designate as the world of late antiquity to include the Sasanian world. Damascius's flight plays a central role in Walker's argument, as he advocates the intellectual openness of the Persian court of at least Khosrow Anoshirvan (531–79 CE), contrary to the Greek sources depicting the event, which previous scholarship had trusted all too much. See pp. 61–63 for a discussion of scholarship that all too readily accepted the view of the Persian court as intellectually and culturally inferior.

60. For neo-Platonic political philosophy, see O'Meara, *Platonopolis*. O'Meara discusses the extensive neo-Platonic commentary literature of Plato's *Republic*.

61. Both Becker and Boyarin (see n. 12 herein) advocate work with the Syriac Christian sources as a way to suggest that even in talmudic Babylonia, Christianity established a not insignificant presence, allowing for further work on the close connections between Judaism and Christianity and Jews and Christians even there.

*Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert*

just as adaptation but also as transformation.<sup>62</sup> Needless to say, this is a stretch, but then perhaps not too much of a stretch.

Our understanding of the story about Rashbi in the cave stands to gain from entertaining these rich and suggestive possibilities and, therefore, our understanding of the political philosophy of the *stammaim*.

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62. I should point out that Holger Zellentin reads the Rashbi story as a parodic imitation and a subversion of Christian models of cave asceticism, which suggests yet another way to bring the story in conversation with another literary culture. I have not had access to the last and definite version of his dissertation, but he graciously shared an earlier version of the relevant chapter with me (see n. 4 herein).