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Daniel Boyarin: Socrates and the Fat Rabbis.

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The title of this volume suggests an unexpected encounter between the protagonist of Plato's Dialogues and the heroes of the Babylonian Talmud. As its name indicates, the book seeks to uncover contacts between Greek culture and the Rabbinic Judaism of Sasanian Babylonia. Socrates in the flesh meets two well endowed rabbis (armed with huge sexual organs as Tumarkin's sketch on the book cover reminds us), and this meeting between carnal wise men seems dialectical in its nature, and bears a new understanding located between the serious and the comic.

As a rule every book by Daniel Boyarin leaves a great impact on scholars, particularly scholars of Talmudic literature. We have all learnt much from his innovative approach and this book also promises something new. The reader will indeed meet here the author, true to himself as ever, but different in many ways.

This book begins with a short introduction.[1] Its brevity, however, is offset by the relatively long first chapter[2] which is actually a second introduction. Here, according to the five epigraphs of the book the author details at great length the main methodological principles of his new work. Then in the second and third chapters[3] Boyarin describes to the reader how he was at this time emboldened to read Plato's works. Next, after dedicating three chapters to Talmudic readings[4] the author returns to Plato, probably invigorated by the familiar environment of his Talmudic sources of inspiration, analyzing his work innovatively.[5] My interest in this very rich and interdisciplinary work is in its contribution to Talmudic readings and in Boyarin's own observations regarding the culture of the Babylonian Talmud. I will leave comments on the rest to classicists, despite having thoroughly enjoyed the excursion into the world of new approaches to Plato.[6]

I anticipate that some of my colleagues, scholars of Rabbinic Literature, who were eagerly awaiting Boyarin's latest book, will be slightly disappointed since only three out of the eight chapters are actually on the (Babylonian) Talmud. Nevertheless, for the exclusive community of readers for whom Plato is no less important than the Talmud, it is an exceptional and welcome volume. In fact, from the perspective of this sort of modern western reader, who is part-Jewish in his cultural background, an analogical proximity between Plato and the Babylonian Talmud seems quite justified: it is hard to imagine a literary document which has had a stronger influence on Western civilization than the writings of Plato, nor a literary document which has had more influence on the development of Jewish civilization than the Babylonian Talmud. Therefore this book is a monologue of a leisurely reader who walks from the bookcase with the works of Greek authors to the stacks housing the traditional volumes produced by the publishing house of the *Widow & Brothers Romm*. It is a carefully and reasonably reconstructed imagined dialogue between these two important bookshelves.

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In a short preface to the book, named 'The cheese and the sermons: Toward a microhistory of ideas,' paraphrasing Carlo Ginzburg's famous book title, the author in an informal and a slightly confessional tone reveals that he is not, in fact, a historian—because he is too text oriented; nor is he a literary critic, because of the social praxis in which the text is embedded. Eliminating these two main academic fields, he clears his name of any suspicion that he might be a traditional Talmudist, because his current works seems not to fit "any of the formal disciplines in which the Talmud is studied." The tension between "to be or not to be" a historian permeates the entire book. Describing his own previous attempts to write intellectual history, to engage in cultural studies, or new-historicism, as not giving him full satisfaction, Boyarin invites us to his new act: he will be "bumbling around the disciplines" and wishes to appears in a new role—a microhistorian, but, writing a new kind of microhistory—a microhistory of ideas. The sources of his new inspiration are Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Carlo Ginzburg. I am not familiar enough with the works of the first two historians, who are famous scholars of social and cultural history of Europe. I am more familiar with Carlo Ginzburg, who is best known for his *Cheese and the Worms*. Indeed, after publishing that book he defined some of his later works as micro-historical essays and even produced a few methodological guidelines for the micro-historian.[7] Boyarin accepts Ginzburg's ideas as truly postmodern. He is not the first to list Ginzburg among postmodern micro-historians,[8] but Ginzburg himself has claimed that his historical method is different from the micro-historical approaches of the abovementioned American authors.[9] He distinguished himself from the postmodern micro-historical approach, which, according to Ankersmith's vegetative metaphor, studies only the leaves of the tree without paying attention to their connection to whole plant. The Italian micro-historical school, according to Ginzburg, concentrates on the fragment, but not without a context. The main approach of the micro-historical method is, in his opinion, not to emphasize the importance of the fragment, but rather, while the macro-historians prefers the analogy, the micro-historian searches for the anomaly, bearing in mind that the deviation from the norm is more informative regarding the whole, than the common occurrence. The past is full of details, an interweaving of countless individual strategies, and therefore, one unusual artifact can be helpful for the past's reconstruction, which is, according to Ginzburg, possible to do.[10] The question of the existence of context or of re-construction of context is actually important to Boyarin in his "bumbling" between Plato's Dialogues and the Bavli. "To imagine a different place, a hypothesized Republic of Letters, in which a series of textual readings can be imagined to lodge, it is vital, of course, that this new *meta-narrative* not violate the more or less assured results of historians to date, but it surely can go beyond the hypotheses and conclusions that they draw upon these findings".[11]

Boyarin used the name of Ginzburg's book more as a hermeneutical device than as a real marker of his attempt at micro-history. It seems that he, like Ginzburg, actually wants to know the past, but his desire is not limited only to finding the anomaly and to mediating between results obtained in the micro-historic field and that of macro-history. This book cannot be classified as a classical micro-historical research, at least not according to Ginzburg's definitions, but, in a more profound, and probably unconscious way, it contains a similar desire. Boyarin sees an anomaly in the stylistic features of the literary work—the *Bavli*, and identifying this anomaly as significant for the character of the entire composition, uses it as also informing the macro-historical process.

Another important source of inspiration for Boyarin was Bakhtin, whom he uses as a key to deciphering both Plato and the Talmud.[12] The term dialogue is very important in Bakhtinian thought and has at least half a dozen meanings, but most important for our context is dialogue as the founding principle of the Zeitgeist, its opposite being monologue. Every realm of meaning is a locus of dialogical relationships—but to be apparent they must be embodied in a word or in an utterance and find the author, who will express this word.[13] Therefore, dialogue for Bakhtin is a personification of the dialectical situation. The participants of the dialogue are of course "I" and "another," but not only—each dialogue takes place in the presence of an invisible third, who stands above the participators. This third may be the empirical reader and even God. Dialogue can thus cover a broad scope of relationships and embody different degrees of severity—even a dialogue between two deaf people is a dialogue of sorts though the mutual understanding between them is minimal. Every act of understanding is dialogical. Therefore dialogical relationships can exist between texts that are very far removed one from the other in time and space. The dialogue is possible even between texts that know nothing about each other, but have at least some convergence in meaning. In such a case, the explicator of the dialogical relationship will be the third, the reader. Clearly, in a well developed text such as a novel, a dialogue can, according to Bakhtin, be exposed completely by a wide spectrum of stylistically different elements, called heteroglosia. The presence of many elements, which Bakhtin identifies as "the memory of the genre," is another basic concept in his thought, revealed in his obsession to reconstruct the genre-prototypes of the polyphonic novel. His idea was that genre is a mirror of perception, a true hero of the history of literature. There are these two Bakhtinian concepts belonging to the category of "the memory of the genre"—the concept of serio-comical and the concept of Menippea. Boyarin fully accepts the Bakhtinian idea that the "Socratic dialogue … is a genre, even a subgenre, of the late ancient macrogenre of *spoudogeloion*—the self-reflecting mixture of the serious and the comic."[14] Menippea (a Russian form, based on the word Menippus)—is also a Bakhtinian term, stemming from the notion of the well-known lost satires of Mennipus described by the Roman scholar Varro. These were characterized by a combination of free verse and prose, serious and funny, which had some influence on late Roman writers. In Bakhtin's thought the term reflects the historical sequence of the literary process—from the Menippea to the ancient novel and from this one to the modern polyphonic novel. Thus, according to Bakhtin, a memory of the genre continues its life in the modern novel. The category of Menippea was necessary for his construction of a diachronic model of a sustained literary process and is, of course, highly speculative, leaping through the millennia, squeezing the history of literature into a rather rigid and artificial diachronic model. These Bakhtinian concepts can be very useful in the search for structure, and they are more vital and less strict than models proposed by structuralists, but, like the structuralists' approach, these concepts are not that helpful in discovering the plain meaning of the text.[15]

Another concept, not directly dependent on the previous one is the famous Bakhtinian carnival, which has recently gained in popularity among American scholars, arriving at the kind of grotesque dimensions that Bakhtin himself so delighted in describing. Carnival is very important for Boyarin.[16] He sees in every bodily appearance the vital beginning of what Bakhtin called the carnival. Yet he fails to note that Bakhtin's carnival is primarily an attempt to explain the breakthrough of radical and violent forces, countering cultural imposition more than countering piety. A carnival element in a literary work—so Bakhtin—is primarily the remnant of former pagan revelry, which is transformed into protest against present cultural convention. As part of historical poetics, carnival was apparently a necessary element for Bakhtin to explain the radical tendencies in the culture he witnessed during his lifetime (radical totalitarianism). The relevance of the figure of carnival in Boyarin's proposed reading is therefore questionable.

Boyarin, with the help of Bakhtinian concepts, wishes to build a metanarrative, which is eventually a story *about* a story. He desires to encompass and explain other "little stories" within a totalizing scheme. However, although the build-up of the frame story is consistent throughout, the encompassing and explanation of the "little stories" is not equally consistent.

3

The first chapter is built around the quotations from five sages. These quotations preface the book as cornerstones of its author's methodology—Plato, Aristotle, Saul Lieberman, Rabba (as a personification of the *Bavli*) and Gorgias. Choosing these quotations, and especially two epigraphs from Plato and one from Aristotle, Boyarin wishes to say that a most representative characteristic of Hellenistic philosophical thinking was a mixture of serious and comic, *spoudogeloion* – serio-comic.[17]

Turning from the Talmud to Plato and from Plato to the Talmud, Boyarin actually wishes to explain what the Talmud is, to encapsulate the point of this strange, even monstrous, book. He is, however, delighted to find in the monstrosity of the Talmud the key to a "significantly different approach to the question of truth." And what is the monstrosity of these two significant documents, one of Hellenistic and one of Judaic culture? Monstrous, in his opinion, is a conjugation of foreign parts, serious and comic, realistic and fantastic. Boyarin see in the *Bavli* a "cacophony (!)[18] of languages, likened to the situation at Babel after the mixing up of languages, that is the analogue of the grotesque-sublime emblemized by Aristophanes' hiccups."[19] Here and further down Boyarin argues that human obesity appearing in the body of the text is a marker of a trend to add a monstrous dimension to the normal. The language of Bakhtinian carnival is apparent here. Boyarin refers again and again to the figure of carnival and the expression of the vital hypertrophic body. For both the Babylonian Talmud and Plato the seriousness of the discourse is important, but both confound the seriousness by the comic and even the grotesque. This "literary hybridity" marks the text as part and parcel of its own cultural world—an imagined republic of letters constructed by Boyarin. Further, he argues that in this phenomenon the contemporary reader can find the answer to the ultimate question: What is the Babylonian Talmud? It is a strange literary product of the process which began, according to the author, with Plato's dialogues. Therefore, he concludes, not entirely consistently, that a textual study that "comprises" Plato and the *Bavli* is necessary.

Regarding this claimed monstrosity, I maintain that actually every ancient book is a strange book for contemporary readers, but here—so Boyarin, in accordance with Bakhtinian tools—monstrosity comprises evidence for the existence of dialogue. This claim may be a little exaggerated. At least in similar approaches to, and in the detection of, dialogue it was not necessary to first detect the cacophony and the monstrosity, because every thoughtful text includes elements of a dialogue. However, this should perhaps be attributed to the individual style of Boyarin and to the special kind of dialogue that he wishes to reconstruct as embedded deeply in the editorial work of the *stamma* (the anonymous editor of the *Bavli*).[20] Indeed—the specific mixture of halachic texts with pure literary passages is quite unusual and serves as witness to a culture that is unique, but not only to the *Bavli*. The mixture of halachic and aggadic pericopes with a kind of dialectical relationship between them could be shown in many passages from the *Yerushalmi* (the Talmud of the Land of Israel) and even already in the Mishna.[21] This fact seems to be completely ignored by the author, who does not see any of it in Palestinian literature, assuming that "it is only in the Babylonian Talmud, in which the language of aggada is allowed to interpenetrate the language of halakha, that we can perceive the image of another language, another discourse of the Jews of the time of the Talmud."[22]

In order to be clear, Boyarin wishes to reduce the definition of what is actually the main features of the intellectual discourse in Plato's books to the simplest possible terms and then to detect those same typical characteristics in the discourse of the Babylonian Talmud, whose main characteristic, as already noted, is reduced to the one Greek concept—*spoudogeloion* or serio-comic. These are, in Boyarin's opinion, the roots of monstrosity and the essence and nature of the Babylonian Talmud.[23] Yet serio-comic in literature is not simply a combination of serious and funny, but a certain kind of dialogue between serious and comical, which is a kind of dialectical relationship in which a comic pattern attacks the serious one, while their antagonism synthesizes something new—a self-awareness, a self-critical intellectual subculture. Thus Boyarin's original premise, the identification of the Babylonian Talmud as a literary work with the literary characteristics of the novel, is not beyond dispute, and it should constitute a basis for further discussion. On the way to defining what the Talmud is, Boyarin solves another major and longstanding problem (paraphrasing the famous article of Lieberman): How much Greek was there in Sasanian Babylonia?[24] Defining *spoudogeloion* as something inherent to Greek culture, Boyarin suggests that the profoundly thought-out in a mixture of comic and serious was borrowed by the creators of the Talmud from Greek culture, although the borrowing was not direct. Rather it accrued indirectly, through contact with the Aramaic-speaking Christian cultures of Sasanian Persia, which at that time had already incorporated the main characteristics of Greek wisdom into their thinking.[25]

The method of Boyarin's study is to present to the readers "an innovative attempt to read Plato with the Talmud, and the Talmud with Plato. This book examines Platonic and Talmudic dialogues to show that in a sense they are not dialogic at all, but a monological discursive form yoked incongruously with a comic mode." Therefore, as experienced readers can understand, it will not be just a comparative study of Talmud vis-à-vis Greek sources, but rather a search for common models, or, in his words, for "metanarrative."[26] As noted above, the word "dialogue" is reminiscent of the usage of hermeneutical models proposed by Bakhtin. Actually Boyarin is not the first to use tools provided by Bakhtin to analyze Talmudic literature. Thus the dialogue between the Babylonian Talmud and Bakhtin is suggested in the works of Kovelman[27] and Wimpheimer.[28] But while Kovelman wished to explain the change of genres from the Jewish writings of Second Temple period to Rabbinic Literature (without making careful observations about the differences between the Palestinian and Babylonian parts of corpus) by reference to changes in society and therefore in culture, Boyarin concentrates his discourse on the two chronologically distant literary corpora in an attempt to represent a common epistemological paradigm—the self-criticism of the Sage. Wimpfheimer used Bakhtinian opposition between dialogical and monological forms of thinking for the representation of the stammaitic redaction—placing monological legal elements against dialogical legal narratives in order to demonstrate the stama's attempt to create coherence between these two elements. Boyarin takes an additional step beyond Wimpheimer's thesis, considering the dialectical oppositions between the elements of monologue and dialogue. For him all "legalistic" passages became monological, and even the majority of "usual" aggada falls under this category. The main role of the dialogic component, or the component that invites the reader to a dialogue, is played by unusual biographical aggadot, in which Boyarin sees elements of the bizarre and the strange and in somewhat unexpected ways, presenting those stories that Wimpfheimer understood as legal narratives as the story of the unusual and grotesque. Then he goes one step further and represents the stammaitic redaction within the dialogue, but in a different way.

4

In Chapter 4, which is, probably, the most controversial for Talmudists, Boyarin finds it necessary to clarify that the hypothetical relationship between

Plato and the *Bavli* is not within a framework of typological parallelism, but something more solid and direct. The traditional point of view is that the Palestinian Rabbis were to be found in a polemical dialogue with Hellenistic Pagans and Christians, but the Babylonian Rabbis' cultural contacts with Hellenism were only indirect, through their interaction with Palestinian Rabbis. In fact, with respect to *Palestina Romana,* the famous question "How much Greek in Jewish Palestine?,"[29] is still being asked. The amount of Hellenization in Sasanian Persia,[30] and therefore in Rabbinic Babylonia, has only recently been opened up for discussion, and the possibility that direct contacts with Hellenistic culture existed in this region thus cannot be dismissed.[31] Here, Boyarin is undoubtedly right.

But which variety of Hellenism was known to the Rabbis of Babylonia? Boyarin believes that Babylonian Rabbis had a Hellenism of their own. This notion has a certain appeal. There were certain elements of Hellenism incorporated into the Iranian culture of the Sasanian period and probably even an autonomous sphere of popular Hellenistic culture can be identified in the Babylonian Talmud.[32] This home-made Hellenism of the *Bavli* is, however, very difficult to define and awaits careful analysis. One must determine from which elements this oriental version of Hellenism was created. It seems that neither the Late Roman nor the Sasanian Empire were monolithic, and both underwent historical developments from the third to the seventh century. They were not separated from each other culturally, but the Hellenism in the Sasanian Empire was somewhat different, just as "Iranism" in the Roman Empire was translated into Roman or Greek terms.[33] Hellenism was an inseparable part of the common culture of Late Antiquity, and as such it was known to the different minorities who were influenced by it in different ways. Constructing the intellectual climate of Late Antiquity for our own purposes we must see it not as a dialogue between one kind of ancient Hellenism and one kind of relatively late Judaism, but rather as part of a complex relationship between scores of many cultures, those who have left us their texts and those whose texts we have lost, and at whose true presence in the discourse we can only guess. It seems to me clear that at the time that it enters the culture of the Babylonian Talmud, the scholar must take into account the existence of an ancient Iranian culture that is to be found in the polyphony of the constituent elements of the Talmudic text, which does not seem to be the case here. And yet, while searching for traces of Hellenism in the *Bavli*, and without denying Iranian influences[34]—even declaring that Sasanian Babylonia was a Babel of cultures, including the Persian, Eastern Christian, Mandean, Manichean, and Jewish—the main body of Boyarin's argument regarding the nature of the Babylonian Talmud is based on the hypothetical "interaction with the local milieu of trans-Euphratian Christian Hellenism."[35] Boyarin warns that he does not imagine Babylonian Rabbis reading Platonic dialogues—"there just isn't evidence for that for the seventh century, even though a century or two later they certainly were—but rather that literary modes and religious ideas reached them via the modes of diffusion of the kinds of literatures that we designate folklore."[36] When speaking about folklore Boyarin means the modes of production and the dissemination of literary items that occurs at all levels of society and culture. Hence, "folklore," in his terminology, is a pure scholarly undertaking, by implication, a mode of oral transmission of motifs and ideas, and, indeed, in the realm of the Persian West, where the Babylonian Talmud was composed and which was characterized by a widely prevalent orality,[37] the dissemination of cultural items could only be oral. According to Boyarin, the Aramaic speaking Christian minority in Persia accepted a certain number of Hellenistic texts, translated them to their native Syriac, and then items from these texts circulated between Christians and Others, including Jews, which explains why these Hellenistic items were accepted not as full philosophical doctrines, but rather as short and poignant sayings and anecdotes.[38]

Furthermore, in the variety of intellectual groups which constitute Boyarin's imagined Republic of Letters, others than only Syrian Christians had a baggage of Hellenistic ideas at their disposal. The first to absorb Hellenic ideas, and not through the prism of Christianity, were Iranian intellectuals, who appear in some way to have affected the Iranian religion.[39] The contact between Jews and native Iranian culture was no less likely a venue for these traditions to have reached the Babylonian Rabbis than contact with Syrian Christians, but unfortunately, in this case, the scholar would have to rely on speculation. No Pahlavi translations have been preserved and little Pahlavi literature from before the ninth century has reached us. Besides, the Persians may not have needed to borrow Hellenistic wisdom. Not far from Mahoza, which was the cultural capital of the East as described by Boyarin, there was a large Greek-speaking Diaspora with its own culture and apparently with its own texts, although about their composition we can only guess. True, too, the remnants of the Athenian Academy in Damascus, along with its last head and his inner circle of philosophical initiates, left the Roman Empire for the Persian court of Khusrau in 531. Nonetheless, the resonance of their knowledge and its import is not clear.[40] Only Jews and Syrians have left us a detailed literary heritage, the existence of which invites the researcher to compare and to speculate on the choices they made in exchanging information. Comparative reading of these two literary corpora should be undertaken more intensively, and some work in this field is in the process of being produced and published.[41]

But the actual existence of the Platonic texts in the Syriac realm is doubtful. Even in the closed circles of the students of Greek philosophy "the teaching of Plato in any extensive or programmatic fashion seems to stop in the late sixth or early seventh century. Though some degree of engagement with Platonic philosophy can still be seen in scattered materials like the seventh-century Syriac translation of Philoponus' *Contra Aristotelem* and Severus of Nisibis' superficial allusion to Plato's Timaeus, this may well be the product of sporadic extra-curricular study."[42] These Christian Syriac-speaking intellectuals were very interested in Christian doctrine and in Greek authors who they perceived as proto-Christian. But while Aristotle was translated in the whom fifth century[43] and Neoplatonic writings soon after, we have no indications that Plato's works themselves were actually translated and were therefore able to influence Syriac Christian intellectuals and others. Even the early Arabic culture, which accepted Greek philosophy, was orientated toward Aristotle and his Neoplatonic interpreters, but not toward Plato. Boyarin is, of course, aware of this problem, and he tried to solve it by accepting the model suggested by Vagelpohl,[44] for whom in addition to actual texts translated from Greek into Syriac and into Arabic, there were other means by which Greek wisdom was transmitted to the East, postulating "a certain amount of oral communication across linguistic boundaries and 'para-translational' phenomena which leave less conspicuous traces in a literary tradition than the outright translation of texts." Since the particular historical linguistic, and cultural system of which Vagelpohl writes is substantially the same one as that of the Babylonian Talmud (with Greek materials diffusing eastward via Syriac-speaking Christians), albeit a couple of centuries later, the phenomena of which he speaks, are, in my view, very plausibly postulated for the later layers of the textual/cultural processes that gave rise to the Babylonian Talmud.[45] But the nature of the cultural exchange between Greeks-Syrians-Arabs was slightly different from the exchange between Greeks-Syrians-Rabbis, and maybe this model could be helpful in explaining appearances in the Babylonian Talmud of unusual Grecisms, namely terms and ideas that cannot be proven to have been imported from *Palestina Romana*. However, Boyarin's claim is that something more profound, lying in the memory of the genre, was transmitted through this indirect channel of exchange. Nonetheless, the incorporation of the serio-comic mood evident in short and poignant sayings and anecdotes of the Syriac-speaking minority seems to me quite questionable.

It seems to me hard to explain how the phenomenon of the Serio-comic, which, according to Boyarin, is already present in the ancient period, was borrowed from refined Hellenism by Syrian Christian intellectuals and absorbed by them so reliably that they were able to convey this to the Talmudic sages through direct contact, even though this Hellenism displays no appreciable influence on Christian literature written in Syriac. After all, these people created a vast literature which incorporated law, Biblical exegesis, philosophy, theology and hagiography, but all of it is imbued with a grave God-fearing piety, and it is very difficult to see how any significant tendency towards self-criticism or serio-comic could enter into it (although some of these composition display modest elements of humor—usually directed against the alien or heretic).

Boyarin ends his examination of how a joint cultural milieu, or even the possibility of cultural contact between the authors of the *Bavli* and the sources of Hellenistic literary and thought-forms, came into being with a question. Yet does posing it help produce a hypothesis to account for previously unexplained anomalies in particular texts or in the entire corpus? Is the metanarrative helpful enough? Apparently not, and accounting for anomalies in the text by relating them to a particular historical-literary context leads the author to examine various Talmudic texts and suggest new readings. This is the most interesting part of the book, which unfortunately, cannot be fully reflected in this limited context.[46]

Another issue is Boyarin's attempt to present his study as historical rather than typological. The truth is that he is much more interested in determining typologically the dialoguing voices of the Babylonian Talmud, presenting them as rehearsing the dispute between philosophy and the Sophistic school in Plato's Dialogue, than in tracing their diachronic, historical, reception from Plato to the Talmud, if we take it on faith that this kind of transmission took place at all. He, like Kovelman also asserts that the Talmud is much closer to the Second Sophistic school and the novel than to philosophy, and from this premise, he draws conclusions that may appear to contain an apologetic element: Plato was a negative figure, a totalitarian thinker, and the sophists were good guys, prone to relativism, and cheerful self-reflection. Thus the Babylonian Talmud falls in with the good side of this reconstructed battle of ideologies.

5

Describing the dialogical nature of the *Bavli* Boyarin identifies two voices. One voice invites us to understand the Babylonian Talmud as a scholastic document, produced largely to convince people that the way of life of the oral Torah is the only appropriate behavior toward God and humankind. This is a strongly monologizing voice proclaiming the priority of halachah, called by the author "legism."[47] But there is a second voice in the Talmud that resists not only legism, but nomism altogether. This voice militates against monological reading practices. The halachic sugya is monologic, but in the margins of the narrative one can hear another voice, dialoguing with the harmful halachah. Boyarin discusses those who distance themselves from the exaggerated aggada by distinguishing between halachah and aggada, and he discusses those who want to show the relationship of the two realms of halachah and aggada. He mentions the folklorists who remove the stories from their halachic context altogether. But he concludes that there are two types of aggada, the gentle rational one of the halakhic realm and the wild aggada. Noticing that there is no difference in tone between common halachah and common aggada, Boyarin defines them as shaped by the "strong centripetal force for bringing the Jews ... under the authority of the rabbinic definitions of righteous behavior according to their halakhic traditions and halakhic piety."[48] Boyarin seeks to discover "discordant, dissident, or critical voices," that will have to be sought elsewhere than in the distinction between halachah and aggada. These agaddot, rational and conventional, are, as any halachic passage, part of the monological voice of the text, but dialogue actually will have occurred in these incidents when conventional texts meet the unconventional strange and bizarre ones. There, in passages of biographical, and especially grotesque legends, a centrifugal force can be discovered which sheds a different light and even casts doubt on everything that we knew before, namely, all that was included in the same "halakhic *sugya* (the non-narrative legal dialectic), the legal narrative, and the pious aggada." "The grotesque and harshly self-critical biographical legends, when read together with the 'serious' incorporated genres of halakhic dialectic, legal story, and uplifting aggada, produce a dialogical text, a text that both advances its program and recognizes its failure (...), precisely the kind of mixed bag that we find in texts such as Lucian and Petronius, that is in the literature called Menippean."[49]

Therefore the author suggests that "the *stamma* produces a real dialogism at one level even while shutting it down at another", or "there are, in effect, two *stammas,* two authorial entities within the Babylonian Talmud (whether or not the same people are behind them historically is irrelevant here)." In other words, not using stamma-terminology—there are two anonymous redactors (probably not personal but in the collective mind of the editors) of this text—the *Bavli*, one pious and conventional, the other a critical and self reflecting skeptic, a wit with a good sense of humor. "It is this second "author" who makes the Talmud both *spoudogeloios* and Menippean. Talmud is the dialogue between the two anonymous authors, a monological voice that seeks to bring all under the purview of the system called oral Torah and another who allows cracks to appear in the fabric of that very system. Yet because only a limited amount of "grotesque and harshly self-critical biographical legends" could be found in the *Bavli*, may we suppose that the second editor is suppressed? Or is there a strategy on the part of the redactor to keep these stories to a minimum, so as not to disturb the orderly sequence of halachic discourse in which they are included? Boyarin ascribes to the second voice carnival elements (hopelessly, however, confusing them with nonidentical elements of Menippea). Here, in order to be consistent Bakhtinists we should say that coercion takes place, because the carnival is the reaction of a suppressed cultural stratum to the dominating culture. However, it seems that Boyarin wants to see in this asymmetry a kind of double-voiced editorial strategy, without paying attention to, and without offering an explanation for, the apparent marginality of the second voice.

But actually I doubt if such a thesis can be used regarding all "strange" biographical aggada in the Babylonian Talmud. How many strange and even bizarre stories are there in the *Bavli*? Quite a few, I shouldn't wonder. Yet, even without taking into account that the very definition of strange and unusual may depend on many factors that may not be accepted by all. Moreover, even stipulating a consensus on this matter, with the overall stratification of the literary traditions in this vast work, the strange and un seem unlikely to have been a major component, not to mention that there are more than a few tractates in the Babylonian Talmud that contain no biographical aggada at all, certainly not those that can be defined as "strange." In addition, some of the stories Boyarin defines as strange and grotesque do not seem so strange to me.

A problem obviously lies in our criteria of strangeness. For a medieval and a contemporary Western reader it is hard to imagine more bizarre stories than those of the wandering sage Bar Bar Chana recorded in the *Bavli.*[50] But in my opinion, based on a close and contextualized reading, they were quite logical for the narrator of late antiquity who lived within a certain oriental syncretism. Thus, although these figures are grotesque for the modern reader, for the narrator they were not only not grotesque, they were wonderful and part of a special kind of mythological reality, which also means that although these seemingly strange but quite consistent and (mytho)logical stories are the mirror of self-awareness of the rabbinic milieu, as well as they were written with a clear intention at parody,[51] nevertheless, nothing about them can be identified as centrifugal to the previous conventional halachic passage.

The story which gave the name to the book, about the fat rabbis and a provocative matrona (to be discussed below)[52] is indeed a good example of a strange text in which "The *Stamma* Meets the Grotesque". Boyarin's reading of one of his beloved episodes from the *Bavli*, Baba Metsia 83b–84a, is one of the most successful in the whole book. His proposition that "the talmudic version of the story contains a deep infelicity, an ungrammaticality that can be shown to be the product of transformations of the text from its Philostratian source (or, more likely, a common source for both of them)" seems very reasonable.[53] Yet regarding some of his other examples I have my doubts, for example, the famous story about R. Eleazar ben R. Shimon and his ascetic feat after a man he wrongly convicted was executed. "They gave him [this man] a sleeping potion and took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink. But does no fat stink? It does, if it has red blood vessels in it, and this, even though it had red blood vessels in it, did not stink." According to Boyarin's analysis this story is not intended as a compliment to its hero; the scientific experiment by which the rabbi tests and proves the ability of his guts to tell the truth is not actually serious. Indeed, in the subsequent discussion, the ascetic behavior of the sage is questioned, saying the fat-in-the-sun test is not a good test, since fat never stinks. Therefore "we have slipped in the course of a paragraph from the important and ethical reflections of the early part of the text to a grotesque parody of everything that the Rabbis hold true and holy, their study of Torah with its logical content and form."

But why can we not understand this as a panegyric to this ascetic feat of the rabbi, who borrowed from his body not just pieces of fat but strains of blood, as proposed in the same discussion? The idea that the body of this hero will serve as proof of his innocence appears in the Palestinian version of the story in *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, but there only after his death is the innocence of the pious body shown. In the Babylonian version the idea that parts of live(!) human body can serve as evidence regarding guilt or innocence is used within the framework of any ordeal. As is well known, the ordeal was an important part of Iranian religious culture.[54] This indicates that the difference between the Palestinian and the Babylonian version of the story is based on the Babylonian context in which the story was told and not on some dialogue with Greek ideas. Aside from this detail the story has another intra-Babylonian feature in which the echo of Iranian culture is preserved.[55] The application of a sleeping potion is reminiscent of a similar motif found in Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag. This story can, thus in fact, be seen as bearing more evidence for acculturation than for self-reflection.

6

Notes on some of his readings

With regard to the famous "turning the tables" sugya from *Nedarim* 20a–b, Boyarin "upgrades" his commentary from Carnal Israel, arguing against most interpretations of these narratives. In these parallel stories two women come to the rabbis complaining of having "set the table," for their husbands, which these then overturned, and the rabbis' refused to intervene. This is usually interpreted as rabbinically sanctioned marital sexual abuse. Against this approach, Boyarin suggest that the text is primarily about the acquisition of rabbinic power and the rabbis' struggle with other forms of Jewish authority, and not principally "about" sex or sexual abuse at all. "According to Rabbi Yohanan ben-Dahavai, one of the sexual practices proscribed by the "angels" is precisely the activity that the two women claim their husbands desired . . . The complaint of these wives is not that their husbands wished to engage in a painful or distasteful form of sex, but that they wished to engage in intercourse that the old mores of the Jews considered improper and dangerous to the fetus. . . The responses of Rabbi and Rav [is that]. . . if the Torah does not prohibit an activity, no other source of authority has any jurisdiction over Jewish behavior . . . neither angelic nor popular, including women's culture."[56] But which kind of Jewish authority rejected by the Rabbis can this be? Maybe a solution may offer itself if we bear in mind that Babylonian sages were living in the Iranian realm where the list of unlawful sexual acts is even longer than in Judaism and where anal sex as an untraditional position in sex is totally forbidden. The Vidēvdād 8:32 states: "The man that lies with mankind as man lies with womankind, or as woman lies with mankind, is the man that is a Daeva; this one is the man that is a worshipper of the Daevas, that is a male paramour of the Daevas, that is a female paramour of the Daevas, that is a wife to the Daeva; this is the man that is as bad as a Daeva, that is in his whole being a Daeva." [57] Thus, we can probably accept Boyarin's suggestion about rabbinic opposition and an unknown authority, but not as an opposition to some unknown Jewish authority but rather as opposition between popular circles influenced by Iranian sexual mores and a Jewish elite with Torah-based norms—which is to suggest that Boyarin has not always paid sufficient attention to the Iranian background of his source.

The book brings many texts to support an argument that they represent literary features unique to the *Bavli*. However, Boyarin fails to note that many of the elements that he sees as typical of the Babylonian Talmud, are in fact, Palestinian in origin, for example, the intertextual exchange between the two narratives The Stove of Akhnai (*Baba Metsia* 59a) and the Death of Rabba the son of Nahmani (*Baba Metsia* 86a). In his discussion of them, Boyarin concludes: "A final clue to the association of these two counter narratives is the fact that in the entire rabbinic corpus, only in these two stories do we find the trope of a sage dying with the word 'pure' on his lips." Yet this is actually a Palestinian literary topos (PT Shabbat 2:7 5b).[58]

With regard to the famous story about Rav Kahana's adventures in Land of the Israel (*Baba Qamma* 117a) Boyarin writes: "This text represents, then, a perfect example of Menippean satire in the sense in which I shall be developing it through the next several chapters; on the one hand, it aggrandizes its own practices and institutions; on the other hand, it presents a sharp critique (and parody) of those same practices and institutions at the very same time and in the very same moment." As to the Menippean nature of this story, I am prepared to accept that something in its design can really recall Menippean elements of the Lucian's satyrs, but these go no farther than the typological properties of self-reflecting intellectual narrators. This story may indeed set out to criticize a simulacrum of rabbinic institutions, but it is much more than a panegyric to a Babylonian sage, for many of its motifs are borrowed from the Iranian epos,[59] whose usage can probably be interpreted as parodical. Yet there is nothing Greek in it, except the hypothetical features of the Bakhtinian Menippea and a small amount of *spoudogelion*. In which case, it must be questioned whether these stories, which contain an impressive structure of oriental motives and which rest on a massive Palestinian foundation, actually belong to a Greek context only because of their serio-comic mixture.

In chapter six, which deals with Rabbi Meir's Babylonian life as a Menippean satire, all categories of a Menippean genre are applied to the story, found in Avoda Zara 18a–b.[60] Boyarin's own discussion of the famous story about R. Meir rescuing Beruriah's sister from the brothel maintained by the Roman Army, plays with satire, rhetoric, and the serious, but many elements in it are left as metonymy or emblematic, without a full interpretation.[61] Indeed, in presenting the story as Babylonian-Helenistic Menippea, the discussion is weakened, since it fails to compare this part of the story with what can be called its second half, which recounts the persecution of Rabbi Meir by the Romans. As related in Ecclesiastes Rabba 7:12, the wandering sage, persecuted by the Romans, visits an Aramean tavern, and there he is recognized by one of the patrons. In order not to be recognized, or in order to make a false impression, Meir pretends to eat forbidden meat, succeeds in deceiving his oppressors, and flees. This whole story is present in the *Bavli,* but there, it is prefaced with the first part, in which the narrator, apparently unfamiliar with Greek or Roman brothels, imagines a cruel place,[62] under strict Roman control.,[63] where exiled Jewish maidens are imprisoned, and the flow of visitors is regulared by the guards. I cannot analyze all the Babylonian additions to this Palestinian story, but the spirit of Iranian culture, which in every way demonized prostitution, and which equally demonized Rome, is most apparent. To wit, the motif of rescuing maidens from sexual abuse by claiming menstruation, identified by Boyarin as a Greek motif, is very common in Persian narratives. It is, in fact, more Iranian than Greek, because of the similar attitude of the Jewish and Iranian cultures to menstrual blood.[64] The proposal that the "miracle by which the guard is saved seems deeply parodic of the Passion narratives" is very interesting, but the pun seems unlikely from the phonetic point of view, as well as in terms of overall content. I read this as a case where the Babylonian narrator accepted a Palestinian plot about a persecuted sage and transferred it to the whorehouse. He then added another, and vital, motif about the salvation of the Rabbi by Elijah, who "came in the guise of a whore and embraced him." Boyarin argues that it wasn't just a hug between them, but that the term used refers to the full sexual act. R. Meir actually had sex with Elijah himself, "in whatever guise the Prophet is appearing at the moment. Else the Roman pursuers would not have

let him go." I am not sure that this is the intention of the narrator and even more I disagree with the interpretation of the sentence from Avoda Zara 18b
אתא אליהו אדמי להו כזונה, כרכתיה,

כרכתיה—This word is translated by the author as "embrace," and he understands it as meaning the sexual act, but this is doubtful. Sokoloff included under "to embrace" as a possible meaning for כרכתיה, but the only reference he could adduce for this usage is the very passage from Avoda Zara we are discussing. Sokoloff also said that this meaning is based on the use of the word in Mandaic. However, none of the variants in the Mandaean Dictionary, although they include "to embrace," convey a sexual connotation.[65] In most cases, the word means "to be wrapped around" or "to attach" and even "went around," and that meaning is probably the correct one to adopt in order correctly to interpret the story of R. Meir. But even should we ignore this evidence and accept the author's reading, the presence of a perceived carnivalesque transformation of sex with a prostitute into sex between two men, one a rabbi and the other a prophet, with all its theatricality, seems to me unlikely.

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And to close by returning to an earlier issue with respect to the microhistory of ideas. In a very thoughtful essay Carlo Ginzburg attempted to define microhistory and its place in historical discourse. The essay ends with a thoughtful parable of Ginzburg's own about microhistorical studies:

> Recently, Giovanni Levi has addressed the subject of microhistory, reaching the conclusion that "this is a self-portrait, and not a group portrait" [. . .] If this is a self-portrait, then its models are Boccioni's paintings, where the street enters into the house, where the context blends with the face, where the external sphere invades the internal one—the I is therefore porous.[66]

Ginzburg understood the study of microhistory, typologically, as a self portrait, the historian trying to understand phenomena that are fantastically woven into his own image as it appears on the canvas. The book under review reflects this premise inasmuch as it is an extremely impressive image, in which, on the general contour of the author's face, Socrates, Gorgias, fat rabbis, R. Meir, Lucianus, a number of teachers at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and multiple colleagues and students are depicted in a polyphonic situation. However, despite the vital polyphony produced by this audience, my impression is that this dialogue between Socrates and fat rabbis was made possible by the presence of the explicator of the dialogical relationship, the third party in the discussion, who is the author of this book himself. For all the doubts, moreover, there is no question of the book's importance. Its demand cannot be ignored, that scholars look at the problem of the influence of Greek culture in Sasanian Babylonia from a new point of view. Its demand that scholars look at the problem of the influence of Greek culture in Sasanian Babylonia from a new point of view cannot be ignored.

Notes

1. ‘The cheese and the sermons: Toward a microhistory of ideas’
2. ‘In praise of indecorous acts of discourse: An essay by way of introduction’
3. Confound laughter with seriousness: The Protagoras as monological dialogue; Confound seriousness with laughter: On monological and dialogical reading, the Gorgias.
4. Jesting words and dreadful lessons: The two voices of the Babylonian Talmud; Read satire and the literary world of the Babylonian Talmud; Icarome’ir: Rabbi Me’ir’s Babylonian Life as Menippean satire.
5. The truest tragedy: The Symposium as monologue; A crude contradiction or, The second accent of the Symposium; Appendix: On the postmodern allegorical.
6. Having irresistibly reminded me of my experiences when reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*
7. See Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*; translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
8. See F.-R. Ankersmith, “Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations,” *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 263–274. See also idem “Historical Representation,” *History and Theory* 27 (1988): 205–229.
9. See C. Ginzburg, “Microstoria: due o tre cose che so di lei,” *Quaderni storici*, Nuovo Serie, 86 (1994): 511–539.
10. Note that contemporary historians are not always so optimistic, see Ankersmit 281.
11. Boyarin, p. 140.
12. Bakhtin of Boyarin is Bakhtin of Julia Kristeva and Bakhtin’s English translators. Today the society of Bakhtinists is not completely homogenous, see Ruth Falconer, “Bakhtin and the Epic Chronotope,” *Face to Face: Bakhtin in Russia and in the West*, ed. C. Adams and others (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 254–272; Barry Sandywell, “The Shock of the Old: Mikhail Bakhtin’s Contribution to the Theory of Time and of Alterity,” *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, ed. Michael Mayerfeld Bell and Michael Gardiner (London: Sage Publications, 1998), pp. 230–254; Jay Ladin, “Fleshing Out the Chronotope,” *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. Caryl Emerson (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999), pp. 347–354; Bernard F. Scholz, “Bakhtin’s Concept of ‘Chronotope’: The Kantian Connection,” *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Studies in Russian and European Literature*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, Harwood Press, 2000), pp. 141–172; Натан Тамарченко, “Капитанская дочка”, Пушкина и жанр авантюрно-исторического романа, *Russian Literature Journal* 53 (1999): 120–135. The Hebrew reader can find a good summery of the contemporary Bakhtinism in Helena Rimon, T*he Time and Space of Mikhail Bakhtin,* in *Mikhail Bakhtin, Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*, (Jerusalem: 2007 (Hebrew)).
13. See Михаил Бахтин, *Собрание сочинений*, *т. 2*: *Проблемы творчества Достоевского*, Москва: Русские словари, 2000, p. 314.
14. See Boyarin, p. 30. This was already proposed by Arkady Kovelman, *Between Alexandria and Jerusalem: The dynamic of Jewish and Hellenistic Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 52–66.

15. I agree with A. Compagnon, *Le Démon de la Théorie: Littérature et Sens Commun* (Paris 1998), p. 224.
16. See Boyarin, pp. 28, 221, 265, 342.
17. Kovelman, *ibid*.
18. I thought that cacophony is an antonym of polyphony. Did the author mean that this literary text is completely out of harmony? I don't know any literary text which is cacophonic.
19. Boyarin, p. 23.
20. Actually, according to Bakhtin, in every thoughtful text the elements of dialogue could be found.
21. See for example PT Shekalim 5:2 48c, Sanhedrin 3:6 21b. See Lieberman's very interesting observation about this as a characteristic feature of the editorial process. We could suggests other explanations for this contradictions. The explanation he gives is in the spirit of his time, but may be reconsidered here, see S. Liebermann, *Talmuda shel Qissrin* (Jerusalem: Azriel, 1931), p. 23 (Hebrew); J.N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), p. 598 (Hebrew): E.-L. Melamed, "Maase in Mishna as a Source of Halachah," *Sinai* 46 (1954–1960), 152–176 (Hebrew); L. Moskovitz, 'Notes on Methods of Incorporation of Agadot in the Yerushalmi—Preliminary Observations," *Asufot* 11 (1995): 177–210 (Hebrew).
22. See Boyarin, p. 265.
23. As mentioned above, the term and concept are borrowed from M. Bakhtin, who, in his attempt to see a novel as a culmination of the evolution of literature (in the frame of so called "historical poetics of literature"—the discipline appeared in Russia in his period and survives for the time being), proposed that in the novel different genres "become more flexible ... they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of parody..." and then the novel both joins and gives rise to "a broad and varied field of ancient literature, one that the ancients themselves expressively labeled *spoudogeloion*, that is, the field of the seriocomical." See M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press), pp. 7 and 21. For the methodological discussion about the application of this Bakhtinian concept and the comparison with N. Frye see Kovelman, above n. 9, pp. 40–45.
24. See Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II–IV centuries C.E.*, New York: P. Feldheim, 1965.
25. This point I will discuss below.
26. Boyarin, p. 140.
27. Kovelman, above, n. 15.
28. His book (Barry Wimpfheimer, *Telling Tales out of Court: Literary Ambivalence in Talmudic Legal Narratives* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religions) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming) is not yet published, but Boyarin has had the opportunity to read the authors exemplar, I read his PhD dissertation on which this book is, I suppose, based: *Legal Narratives in the Babylonian Talmud*, Colombia University PhD dissertation, 2005.
29. See Peter Schäfer, "Introduction," *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), pp. 1–23.
30. See the discussion of Albert de Jong, Traditions *of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill), 1997, 12–35.
31. Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2006, pp. 19–61.
32. See M. Boyce and F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 1989, pp. 51–196.

33. Ibid p. 491 and de Jong, above 30.
34. Boyarin, p. 134.
35. Boyarin, p. 134.
36. Boyarin, p. 136.
37. Yaakov Elman, "Orality and the Redaction of Babylonian Talmud," *Oral Tradition* 14/1 (1999): 52–99.
38. Boyarin, p. 137.
39. About Greek philosophers visiting at the court of Khusrau, see D. Frendo, "Agathias' View of the Intellectual Attainments of Khusrau I: A Reconsideration of the Evidence," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* NS 18 (2004): 97–110
40. The experience in Persia proved disappointing and the philosophers soon returned home with the freedom to practice their religion secured by the Roman-Persian peace treaty signed in 532 (Agath. 2.30.5–2.31.4), see A. Cameron, "The Last Days of the Academy at Athens," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 195 (1969): 7–29.
41. See Adam Becker, "The Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism' in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians," *AJS Review* 34 (2010): 91–113.
42. E. Watts, "Where to Live the Philosophical Life in the Sixth Century? Damascius, Simplicius, and the Return from Persia," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 45 (2005): 285–315 especially p. 313.
43. See S. Brock, "The Syriac Commentary Tradition," in C. Burnett (ed.), *Glosses and Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts: The Syriac, Arabic, and Medieval Latin Traditions* (London 1993) 3–18.
44. Uwe Vagelpohl, *Aristotle's Rhetoric in the East::The Syriac and Arabic Translation and Commentary Tradition* (Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 76) Boston: Brill, 2008).
45. Boyarin, pp. 136–137.
46. Then, in the following readings of selected texts, the author provides evidence for the hypothesis of extensive cultural contact and interaction between the Rabbis of late Babylonia and the Greco-Christian cultural world—I will relate to some of them further down.
47. The term Legism, according to Boyarin, is drawn from Confucian literature, "in precisely this sense of the schools of Confucianist thought." When Christian authors in their critic on Judaism, designate its interest as legalistic, this is probably the same thing. Boyarin argues: As Borges remarked (I don't remember where), the Chinese and the Jews are the only peoples on earth who tried to legislate for every moment of life'. He probably intended to refer to the elegant sentence form Borges's *El Zahir* (***The Zahir*** is one of the stories in the book *The Aleph and Other Stories* (London:Penguin books, 2000), p. 79: 'The Hebrews and the Chinese codified every human situation: the Mishnah tells us that beginning at sunset on the Sabbath, a tailor may not go into the street carrying a needle; the Book of Rites informs us ...') But actually the life of the people of Iranian religion in Late Antiquity was just as rigidly codified by a wide range of norms governing every aspect of the human existence. The similarities between the halachic obsession of the *Bavli* and the normative stringencies of Iranian customs were already discussed somewhat tendentiously in the Wissenschaft des Judentum studies.
48. See Boyarin, p. 172. Here he writes "certainly we see how the rabbinic halakha and aggada, far from being in tension, as frequently held by certain pundits and scholars, are actually in astonishing harmony with each other", contra the famous essay of the Hebrew poet and critic Ch. Byalik. Antagonistic relationships between halachic and aggadic passages and even the presumption of the aggada to propose the antithesis to the previous halachic passages (*maase listor*) is quite immanent enough to both Talmudim Moreover,

the well-known expression of Bialik "the smiling face of the aggada and the stern face of the Halachah," which has already become worn out, by quotation, is nothing more than a paraphrase on an aphorism of Rabbi Nehemiah (*Pesikta de Rav Kahana* 12:25) and truly reflects the phenomenological relations between Halachah and aggada, at least as it were perceived her creators.

49. Boyarin, p. 191.
50. See R. Kiperwasser, "Rabba bar Bar Channa's Voyages," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 22 (2007–2008): 215–242. (Hebrew), and R. Kipperwasser and D.Y. Shapira, "Irano-Talmudica I: The Three-Legged Ass and Ridya in B. Ta'anit: Some Observations about Mythic Hydrology in the Babylonian Talmud and in Ancient Iran", *AJS Review* 32 (2008): 101–116.
51. See Kiperwasser, "Rabba bar Bar Channa's Voyages," 21–26.
52. p. 178.
53. p. 180.
54. See for example in Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag 2 and 3–4.
55. See Shai Secunda, "Talmudic Text and Iranian Context: On the Development of Two Talmudic Narratives," *AJS Review* 33 (2009): 45–6 (especially pp. 50–54).
56. Boyarin, p. 159.
57. James Darmesteter (ed.), p. 62.
58. See Boyarin, p. 226. The similar problem could be found in Boyatrins' reading of the famous story about Elisha ben Abuya and the school boy (BT Hagiga 15b) without its Palestinian parallels, see M. Kister, 'For the Talmudical Lexicon', Mehkerei Talmud 2, Jerusalem 1993, pp. 431–434, especially n. 14.
59. See Geoffrey Herman, "The Story of Rav Kahana (BT Baba Qamma 117a-b) in Light of Armeno-Persian Sources," Irano-Judaica VI, ed. Sh. Shaked, Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008, pp. 53–86; idem, "One Day David Went out for the Hunt of the Falconers": Persian Themes in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shoshanat Yaakov: Ancient Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Professor Yaakov Elman*, (forthcoming).
60. He cites a web posting of Jewish orthodox propagandists, to show how a "non scholarly to a fault source" uses the Roman material as a form of piety probably intending to show how the Greek *spoudogeloion* turn into modern Jewish seriosity. Personally, I was sorry that the author referred to this example of modern vulgarization of a Talmudic tradition.
61. I cannot see any real similarity between this story and the story from Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass) 9.17–21.
62. About the historical reality of prostitution in Ancient Rome, see Thomas A.J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Probably the rumors about the taxation of Roman prostitutes (see there 249–283) inspired the development of this plot.
63. The term *Kuba shel zonot* appears only in the *Bavli* and later literature. In Palestinian sources, *shuk shel zonot* appears, namel,y the street where prostitutes live and work.
64. See G. Herman, "*One Day* .." idem, "Persia in Light of the Babylonian Talmud: Echoes of Contemporary Society and Politics: *hargbed* and *bidaxš*," *Talmud in its Iranian Context,*, eds. C. Bakhos and R. Shayegan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), p. 81.
65. See E.S. Drower and R. Macuch, *The Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 223. It is interesting that occasionally in the Mandaean quotes this word is used in those cases when someone is hiding from the gaze of the other, being surrounding for example by a cloud.
66. See n. 9, above.