

Some Ioudaio-Lakonian Rabbis

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A number of *loci* in late antique rabbinic literature mention a family of rabbis, living in *Eretz Israel*, some time after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The stories and sayings belong mostly to the sage R. Shim'on Ben R. Yossi Ben-Lakonia. Some of his sayings are brought by his brother, Jonathan.¹ The family thus comprises two or three generations, and three members at least are identified as rabbis.² All are qualified by the name 'Ben-Lakonia', bearing a distinct Spartan sound.

Relations between Sparta and Judea go far back, as early as the third century BCE. We first hear of these relations in the context of the embassy sent by the High Priest Jonathan Ben-Matityah to Rome, Sparta and other Mediterranean communities. In his letter Jonathan cites an earlier correspondence between the Spartan king Areios I and the Jerusalem High Priest Onias.³ The relation between the two communities was strengthened by fictitious common descent: both Jews and Spartans allegedly descended from Abraham and were thus as good as brothers. A century later the ex-High Priest Jason relied on this mythological relation in choosing Lakedaimon as his final place of exile (*II Macc.* 5:9).

Later generations elaborated the mythical aspect of the Jewish-Lakonian affiliation. The story reappears through a fascinating chain of transmission: Kleodemos-Malchos the prophet, passed it on to Alexander Polyhistor, and thence to Josephus (*AJ* 1.239-241). According to this version, one of Abraham's sons by Qtura had taken part in Herakles' Libyan campaign against Antaios. The relationship between the families must have been close, because Herakles also consorted with Abraham's granddaughter, and begat by her a famous dynasty. The tradition of this story testifies to a continued interest in the

¹ Yerushalmi Brakhot 2.3; Ma'asrot 3.8; 'Eruvin 3.4; Psaḥim 6.1. Bavli Shabat 49b; Psaḥim 51a, 86b; Baba Meṣi'a 85a; Shavu'ot 18b; Zvaḥim 62b; Bekhorot 38b. Shir haShirim Raba 4.24, 5.23; Qohelet Raba 1.9, 9.4; Vayiqra Raba 25 (ad fin.; Margalioth ed.).

² The exact family tree is difficult to reconstruct. The *Zohar* (1.5a, 7a, 61b, 143b, 188a, 3.193a) refers to R. Yossi Ben-R. Shim'on Ben-Lakonia. This may be the result of a scribal error, but may also indicate another generation, dropped by the antique sources but preserved by the *Zohar* (for a comparable case see O. Amitay, 'The Story of Gviha Ben-Psisa and Alexander the Great', *JSP* 16 [2006], 64). The *Zohar*, albeit a late source, is not irrelevant to the discussion, given the family's connections with R. Shim'on Bar-Yoḥai, its reputed author. For further complications in the family tree see note 5 below.

³ *I Macc.* 12.1-23. The correspondence is now generally accepted as authentic. For recent treatments and a survey of earlier scholarship see: R. Katzoff, 'Jonathan and Late Sparta', *AJP* 106 (1985), 485-89 (esp. n. 1); E.S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley, 1998), 253-68, who nonetheless remains doubtful about authenticity; U. Rappaport, *The First Book of Maccabees: Introduction, Hebrew Translation and Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2004), 288.

relationship between Judea and Sparta.⁴ This tradition lasted well into the time of R. Shim'on Ben-Yossi Ben-Lakonia.

The family enters our records thanks to the efforts and erudition of R. Shim'on. All the *loci* given above represent his sayings. Some are given in his name by his brother, R. Jonathan, presumably after R. Shim'on's death. He is mentioned as an authority on both *halakhah* and *aggadah*. His family was related by marriage to that of R. El'azar Ben R. Shim'on, and he himself studied under R. El'azar's father, the famous R. Shim'on Bar-Yohai.⁵

R. Shim'on was also the tutor of R. El'azar's orphan son. A handsome youth, the boy had become involved with women of loose morals. Reportedly, they paid *him* for his graces (rather than charging him), and this at four times the usual amount! Yet through the efforts of R. Shim'on, the young man saw the error of his ways and returned to the fold of the Torah. Both student and master were blessed by R. Yehudah HaNasi, president of the Sanhedrin and codifier of the Mishnah, with a verse from *Proverbs*: 'the fruit of the just man is a tree of life; the gatherer of souls, a wise man'.⁶ Clearly, R. Shim'on moved in important circles, and was on intimate terms with some of the most eminent leaders of Eretz-Israeli Judaism.

Now, what's in a name?

The name 'Ben-Lakonia' is both unique and difficult to interpret. *Prima facie*, it is tempting to read it as a toponym, signifying the origin of the family or its international connections (more on that presently). Notable onomastic parallels are Ami the Babylonian (בבליא), Yudan the Kappadokian (קפדוקיא), Yossi the Sidonian (צידוניה), Abba the Carthaginian (קרתגיניה) and Halafta of Caesarea (קסריא).⁷ However, in all these cases the toponym follows the first name directly, without the patronymic modifier 'Ben', which seems to be reserved for signifying family relationships.⁸ It is thus possible that Lakonia was, in fact, originally a personal name, belonging to one of R. Shim'on's ancestors.⁹

⁴ The mythic affinity is clear enough: Herakles is the ancestor of both Spartan royal houses and many a noble family beside. Abraham, through a different son, is the first father of the Jewish people. The myth thus establishes a tradition of relation between the Greek hero and the descendants of the Jewish patriarch.

⁵ According to *Yerushalmi Ma'asarot* 3.8 (50d) he was R. El'azar's father-in-law; in *Bavli Baba Meši'a* 85a the relationship is ascribed to his father, who is called there by the variant name איסי. This option is preferred by A. Hyman, *Toldoth Tannaim Ve'amoraim* (Jerusalem, 1964; orig. London, 1910), vol. III, 1189-91; and by M. Margalioth, *Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature* (Tel-Aviv, 1942/3), col. 857. For R. Shim'on citing R. Shim'on Bar-Yohai: *Bavli Zvaḥim* 62b.

⁶ 11:30; *Bavli Baba Meši'a* 85a.

⁷ Hyman, *Toldoth* and Margalioth, *Encyclopedia*, ss. vv. See also: חנון בן-ברכיה, אבא סרוניא, בצריה, יהושע אוניא, יודן מגדליא, יעקב גבליא, מנחם יורפאה (יותפיה), תנחום אדרעיא

⁸ Naturally, this does not apply to expressions such as בני ישראל or בני יהודה, ubiquitous in the Bible, or even to בני גליל (*Tosefta Shvi'it* 7.13 [ed. Lieberman]; *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 2.4; *Bavli 'Erubin* 53a, *Giṭin* 60a). Unlike the case of Ben-Lakonia, these qualifiers, given in the plural, refer to a class of people, not to an individual. Even *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 3.4, which has בני גליל in the singular, is a general example which does not seem to refer to anyone in particular.

⁹ Was this ancestor a man or a woman? The suffix of the name, *-ia*, seems to point in the latter

The use of toponymic nomenclature may perhaps suggest a formal relation of *proxenia*. One is reminded of Lakon son of Aeimnestos, a Plataean *proxenos* of the Lakedaimonians during the early years of the Peloponnesian war, and of Lakedaimonios son of Kimon, a contemporary Athenian general.¹⁰ If members of R. Shim'on's family were indeed at some point the *proxenoi* of the Lakedaimonians in Judea, we would then have a unique piece of evidence for a hitherto unknown aspect of the relationship, as well as its inherent Hellenic nature.

A different explanation would be that one of R. Shim'on's ancestors was a diaspora Jew, who had returned to the land of his (or her?) fathers. The only reported case of a Jewish *émigré* in Sparta is that of the ex-High Priest Jason-Yeshu'a. However, there may well have been other, unreported cases. Since it will have been difficult for an observant Jew to live abroad on his own, one may perhaps imagine a Lakonian-Jewish community.¹¹ In such a case, it is easy to see how a returnee would receive a name after his former place of abode, perhaps coupled with an originally Jewish name.¹²

A third explanation would have R. Shim'on and his family descend from a Spartan convert to Judaism. Although no such instance is recorded, the occurrence in itself is at least within the realm of possibility. Converts and their descendants could and did, in certain cases, join rabbinical circles. Two outstanding examples, according to rabbinic tradition, are 'Aqilas 'the Convert', translator of the Torah, and R. Meir, one of the pillars of the Mishnah.¹³ Incidentally, both are contemporary with R. Shim'on and his family.

Yet a fourth possibility exists. During Herod's reign Judea was visited by the Spartan dynast Eurykles, a character every bit as un-Spartan as Brasidas.¹⁴ Playing the mythical relation card, he insinuated himself into Herod's court, where he wreaked havoc with the local dynasty. His reward from Herod was 50 talents, which he then used to foment dissidence in the Peloponnese. For this he was banished by Augustus, but later reinstated. His son, C. Iulius Laco, a more sensible man than his father, returned to full cooperation with the Romans and founded a dynasty of his own.¹⁵

direction. See, however, such names as אוריאל (*Bavli Sanhedrin* 22b) and two men by the name of נחוניא (*Mishnah Brakhot* 4.2; *'Eduyot* 6:2). It should also be remembered that women are far rarer than men in rabbinic sources.

- ¹⁰ Thuc. 3.52.5; 1.45.2. See also G. Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge, 1987), 21.
- ¹¹ The existence of such a community is deduced by H. Michell, *Sparta* (Cambridge, 1964), 92, from Jason's flight and from the letter of L. Calpurnius Piso (*I Macc.* 15:16-23).
- ¹² The custom of naming families after their place of abode, at some point in their history, is widely prevalent in modern practice among both Jews and Gentiles.
- ¹³ 'Aqilas: *Shmot Raba* 30.12, cf. *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 2.1 (77a) with A.E. Silverstone, *Aquila and Onkelos* (Manchester, 1931); R. Meir: *Bavli Giṭin* 56a; cf. generally *Bavli Giṭin* 57b = *Sanhedrin* 76b.
- ¹⁴ Jos. *BJ* 1.512-532; *AJ* 16.300-10. See also: G.W. Bowersock, 'Eurycles of Sparta', *JRS* 51 (1961), 112-118; P. Cartledge & A. Spawforth, *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta: A Tale of Two Cities* (London, 1989), 97-104 *et passim*.
- ¹⁵ See the various C. Iulii Lacones in A.S. Bradford, *A Prosopography of Lacedaemonians from the Death of Alexander the Great, 323 B.C. to the Sack of Sparta by Alaric, A.D. 396* (Munich, 1977), 178-80, 256-7, 380.

The Euryklid dynasty displays a remarkable nomenclature. A prominent member of the family, roughly a contemporary of R. Yossi, was called Herklanos.¹⁶ Another, C. Julius Spartiaticus, is identified in an inscription as *f. Laconis*. In Hebrew his name could have been rendered 'Ben-Lakonia'!¹⁷ Considering (a) that Lak- based names were not exceedingly common in late Sparta,¹⁸ (b) seven of the eleven recorded individuals bearing the name Λάκων in the first and second centuries CE belong to the Euryklid dynasty;¹⁹ and (c) the close spellings of *Laconis* and לקוניא, one may at least conjecture a connection between the two houses.²⁰

What can we learn from the case of R. Shim'on and his family? They were intimately familiar with some prominent figures in 2nd century CE Eretz-Israel. They may, perhaps, have been related to the influential Euryklid dynasty in Sparta. Since one cannot rule out with absolute certainty any of the explanations given above, it is hard to draw firmer conclusions. Indeed, the explanations need not be mutually exclusive. For example, explaining לקוניא as a toponym does not contradict the possibility that the person bearing the name also acted as *proxenos*, or that he was a convert. Various scenarios combining two or more explanations can easily be imagined.

However, the very existence of the name in a second century CE Judean family is in itself a testimony to the depth and duration of the relation between Judea and Sparta: the period between Areios I and R. Shim'on Ben-Lakonia spans five centuries!²¹ One hopes that this new perspective, provided by the longevity of the connection, may serve to illuminate other aspects of the relationship between the two polities.

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¹⁶ Bradford, *Prosopography*, 179. An earlier family member may have borne the name as well: see the stemma in Bowersock, 'Eurycles', 118.

¹⁷ For photograph and transcription see L.R. Taylor & A.B. West, 'The Euryclids in Latin Inscriptions from Corinth', *AJA* 30 (1926), 389-400.

¹⁸ See Bradford, *Prosopography*.

¹⁹ P.M. Fraser and E. Matthews *et al.* (ed.), *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* (Oxford, 1987-2000), vol. I, 281, vol. II, 278, vol. IIIa, 266, vol. IIIb, 254.

²⁰ If this explanation is accepted, one is left to speculate on the circumstances which led a Jewish family to adopt a name connected with the Spartan adventurer. One possibility would be that Eurykles had, in some way, aided one of R. Shim'on's forefathers, who in turn took the name by way of recognition and gratitude. The use of the name Agrippa by the Herodian dynasty would thus provide a parallel (as suggested by one of the anonymous readers). Another possibility would be that Eurykles, a man of great personal charm according to Josephus, had consorted with a Judean woman and begat by her a son or a daughter. This hypothetical progeny would then be the original לקוניא.

²¹ Especially if one accepts the historicity of the *Zohar*'s additional R. Shim'on (note 2), which would stress the importance ascribed by the family to its Lakonian heritage.