

Greco-Roman Light on Rabbinic Texts III¹

Howard Jacobson

1. Midrash Haggadol *ad* Numbers 16:33: We are told that the destruction of Korach and his followers was complete: אף שמותן אבדו מתחת טופסיהן. The point here seems to have been missed. The exegete conceives of Korach and his followers undergoing a (divine) *damnatio memoriae* in Roman style. טופס here should be taken = τύπος in the sense of “statue.” As is well documented, the victim of the Roman *damnatio memoriae* suffered, *inter alia*, the erasure of his name from monuments and statues. So here (in miraculous fashion, to be sure) of Korach and his men.²

2. Midrash Haggadol *ad* Deuteronomy 1:1: אין אברך אלא אפרכוס שהכל נכנסין: תחת ידו לקיים מה שנאמר ונתון אותו על כל ארץ מצרים. The parallel (or original) text at Sifre Deut. 1:1³ is clearly corrupt לבירכיים אברכם (several variants are also impossible). Finkelstein and Hoffman⁴ approved Brill’s emendation אלברכיס = ἀλάβαρχος (ἀλαβάρχης). Whether this is correct (and it is worth noting that Egyptian Jews did occupy the office of Alabarch: see e.g. Jos.

1 See ICS 5(1980)57–62, 8(1983)165–7; also, Sinai 80(1976)72. The following works are cited throughout in abbreviated form: M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (repr. New York 1967); S. Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin 1898–9); Aruch Hashalem (Vienna 1926²); J. Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (Berlin 1924²); J. Fürst, *Glossarium Graeco-Hebraicum* (Strassbourg 1890).

2 Rabinowitz (Jerusalem 1967) records a variant reading, מתוך טופסיהן, which may suggest a version in which the *damnatio memoriae* is effected through the deletion of the victim’s name from documents, also a recognized phenomenon.

3 Ed. L. Finkelstein (repr. New York 1969), p. 8.

4 D. Hoffman (ed.), *Midrasch Tannaim zum Deuteronomium* (Berlin 1909), p. 3.

AJ18.159) I do not know. But it is clear that אפרכוס in the Midrash Haggadol text has a point that ἀλαβάρχη lacks. For אפרכוס is not = ἔπαρχος (the usual equivalent and Fisch's choice here⁵), but rather ὑπαρχος. We now understand the emphasis on ירו תחת and on על. For there is a play on ὑπαρχος, as if the word signified, "one *under* whose rule other people are." 3. Shir Rabbah ad 6:4: נשי תירען כשרות היו. עמרו ומיחו על עצמן ולא נתנו מנומהים; ליסטטירין הרך על אחת כמה למעשה העגל. אמרו, מה ליסטטירין הקשה שיברו הקב"ה, ליסטטירין הרך על אחת כמה וכמה. Thus, the righteous women refuse to contribute to the making of the golden calf, arguing that just as God has already destroyed the "hard" ליסטטירין, so will he also destroy this soft one. Commentators (e.g. מתנות כהונה ad loc) correctly observe that this must be an allusion to the reports at Exodus 12:12 and Numbers 33:4, that God inflicted punishments on the gods of the Egyptians, and must then mean, "Just as God destroyed the idols of the Egyptians, so too will he destroy this one — an even easier task since this one is made of gold and therefore soft." In general, this must be the correct interpretation of the passage. But what of the strange word ליסטטירין? I believe that this word has never been properly explained, and furthermore that a correct explanation of the word will enable us to understand the entire text better.

Jastrow (709) suggested ληστήριον ("robbers' den") which is orthographically not far off. Otherwise, it is in no way suitable. Jastrow's notion that "robbers' den" can be an appropriate term for the Egyptian gods or for the golden calf is incredible. Others, with more devotion to the demands of context, consider *statura*.⁶ This however is so far removed from the word as it is presented to us in the text (twice) that it seems a futile conjecture. Other attempts have also tended to be paleographically implausible, e.g., σταθερός (=στερεός, starker),⁷ στηθάριον (*Brustbild*),⁸ στατήριον.⁹

Let us examine the text more closely: ליסטטירין הרך, ליסטטירין הקשה. Both the singular number in *each* case and the definite articles suggest that the comparison is not general ("Egyptian idols") but rather specific, i.e., the golden calf is

5 P. 9 (Jerusalem 1975).

6 See e.g., מתנות כהונה ad loc., Aruch pt. 5, p. 39, pt. 6, p. 37; Krauss, *Lehnwörter*, 2.379.

7 Levy, *Wörterbuch*, 3.500.

8 M. Sachs, *Beiträge zur Sprach- und Alterthumsforschung aus jüdischen Quellen*, vol. 2 (Berlin 1854) 105. See too Fürst, *Glossarium* 152; Krauss, *Lehnwörter*, 2.379.

9 H.L. Fleischer in his *Nachträge* to Levy, *Wörterbuch*, 3.722.

compared to a specific Egyptian idol. Who then might this be? The answer is not hard to find. The Egyptian counterpart to the golden calf would surely be Apis, the bull-god. The early church enjoyed exploiting this association and frequently asserted that the Jews made the golden calf after the model of Apis (e.g., Ps-Clem. *Recog.* 1.35) or even that the calf represented — or was — Apis (e.g. Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 4.10; *Apostol. Const.* 6.20; Isid. *Etym.* 8.11.86). While the Jews did not enjoy making such a connection, it is clear that they also recognized the possibility. At *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 45 the Jews tell Aaron, עשה לנו אלהים כאלהי מצרים — and then of course the calf is produced. Philo (*Moses* 2.162) remarks that the Jews created a golden calf, a replica of the creature considered holiest by the Egyptians.

When our text refers to the destruction of the “soft” idol (the golden calf) and the “hard” idol, we should think of (1) the Targum Yerushalmi’s expansion of Exodus 12:12 and Numbers 33:4, to the effect that God broke the stone idols of the Egyptians, and of (2) the stone representations of Apis fashioned by the Egyptians, as exemplified by the still preserved granite Apis-bull from the Alexandrian Serapeion¹⁰ and the limestone Apis-bull from the Serapeion of Memphis.¹¹

Thus, the Rabbis represent the pious women as saying: “Just as God broke the hard stone idol of the Apis bull-god, so will he break this soft calf of gold.” What then of לִי־טַטְטָרוֹן? Given both the demands of context and orthography, this should be λιστόταυρος,¹² “a bull who is worshipped.” To be sure, such a word is never attested (it is not a rare occurrence to find in a Rabbinic text Greek words that are not attested elsewhere in extant texts), but its meaning is apparent: λιστός (from λίσσομαι, and found in several compounds, most frequently in πολύλλιστος), + ταῦρος.¹³ Whether classical Greek allowed compounds in which a substantival second element was modified by a passive adjectival first element is not clear. But that such were allowed and used in late

10 See G. Botti, *Bulletin de la Soc. Arch. d’Alexandrie* 2(1899)27–36, with two wonderful photographs at the end.

11 See J.-Ph. Lauer and Ch. Picard, *Les Statues Ptolémaïques du Sarapieion de Memphis* (Paris 1955) 13 and 14 (good photographs).

12 It is a recognized phenomenon that Greek nouns in *-os* frequently end in ןן or ןי in their Hebrew transcriptions: see Krauss, *Lehnwörter*, 1.192.

13 The worship of the Apis-bull is referred to frequently in Greek and Latin texts of the Empire, with words like *adoratus* (Stat. *Silv.* 3.2.116), *coli* (ps-Clem. *Recog.* 1.35; Pliny *NH* 8.184), *veneror* (Aug. *Civ.* 18.5), *προσκυβεῖν* (Dio Cass. 51.16).

Greek is certain. Thus, κλωστόμαλλος is built on κλωστός + μαλλός. In the word ἀλυκτοπέδη, whether ἀλυκτο- is really a passive adjective is debated. But it is clear that late Greek writers understood it to be and so used it¹⁴ (ἀλυκτο — or ἀλυτο — (as passives) + πέδη).¹⁵

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14 See P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la langue Grecque*, I (Paris 1968) 66; H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, I (Heidelberg 1960) 80.

15 Given the way Egyptian deities were loaded down with titles and adjectives in the Roman period, one almost wonders whether λιστόταυρος could have been a cultic designation of Apis. One thinks for instance of the peculiar description of Isis as πιστοίασπις (*POxy* 1380.138).

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