ROME AND THE RABBIS

Tracing the Relationship between the Severan Dynasty and the Jewish Patriarchate through Legal and Literary Material

Joshua Blachorsky

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Advised by Professor Gary A. Rendsburg and Professor Azzan Yadin-Israel
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Introduction

Understanding and analyzing the dynamic which existed between the rabbis of Late Antique Roman Palestine and their Roman imperial rulers is not a straightforward historical issue. Not surprisingly, when dealing with figures from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, there are no diaries or memoirs left behind which illuminate the thoughts of these characters, nor is there an abundance of primary source evidence which can help modern scholars construct the relationship model. Further complicating the picture is that during this time period, the rabbis were supposedly led by the נביא nasi or Patriarch. This position wielded broad authority over religious and possibly political issues of the day, and was the spokesperson for the rabbis to Rome, yet many scholars date the emergence of the Patriarchy (or at least its broad power) to the end of the 3rd century or later¹, thus erasing much of the source material. Even the most noted historians of our time struggle with answering the basic question “How did the Romans and Rabbis interact?” For example, Professor Martin Goodman, offers four distinctly different paradigms which range from “the nasi was the leader of an independent Galilee whose power could not be suppressed by Rome² to “the Romans ignored the power of the nasi without sanctioning it, simply because the Galilee was too unimportant in their eyes³.” Obviously, these models are starkly different from one another which begs the question: Why is this picture so convoluted?

¹ For a clear example, see S. Schwartz, “The Patriarchs and the Diaspora” JJS 1999 II ²M. Goodman The Galilee in Late Antiquity p 129. Lee I. Levine, ed. ³Ibid, 131
Perhaps a brief history of Roman-Jewish relations is in order to understand the dynamic in question. In a word, it was activist. Following the dissolution of the Seleucid Empire in the early 60s BCE, the Roman Empire came to control the greater land of Israel, including Judea, Samaria, Idumaea and the Galilee. During this time, the rulers of the Jews were the Hasmonean dynasty. Claiming their power from a successful revolt against Antiochus IV in 167 BCE, the Hasmoneans acted as both King and High Priest and effectively dominated the Jewish political scene during this period. However, coinciding with the Seleucid demise was the rise of Pompeius Magnus (Pompey) who encouraged the settlement of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. In the course of the Civil War which followed, Hyrcanus II, a Hasmonean, created an alliance with Julius Caesar against Pompey, following the broader approach of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Following reprisals against Hyrcanus II by the forces of Cassius and Brutus, Rome, as represented by Marc Antony, turned to a young official named Herod to rule Judea. Greatly indebted to Rome for his power as Roman troops won him his throne, Herod required his subjects to swear fealty to Augustus and not himself or any other Jew, angering the locals. Additionally, Herod did not come from a priestly line, further weakening his standing among the indigenous population. Herod continued to rule with Roman sponsorship, and only by Roman sponsorship, until his death in 4 BCE.

Following Herod’s death and the power struggle which ensued due to the lack of a clear heir to the throne, several revolts, minor to be sure, broke out but were quickly quelled by the governor of Syria, Varus. What eventually transpired was the break-up of Herod’s kingdom into separate parts led by Herod’s sons who did not have the title king, rather ethnarchs and tetrarchs; all of whom had Roman sponsorship. These small scale vassals, however, proved ineffective and

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4 Goodman, *The Roman World 44BC-180AD* p 180
Judea fell under the rule of a Roman prefect with equestrian rank, ruling from Syria. This method of ruling lasted for about 60 years, but it too not a permanent solution. In 66 CE the Jews, led by the priestly elite in Jerusalem and the zealot faction in the Galilee rebelled against their imperial rulers and declared themselves to be an independent state. This state issued its own coinage and appeared to have a political structure but it, too, was not long lived. After about a year, the general Vespasian was placed in charge by Nero, and together with his son, Titus they marched on Jerusalem. By the year 69 Jerusalem was besieged and surrounded. By 70 it had fallen. The destruction wrought by Jerusalem’s fall and sacking is difficult to quantify. Josephus records\(^5\) that 1.1 million Jews were killed and 97,000 were captured. The loss of life and loss of a national worship center left the Jews humiliated and vengeful. Clearly, Jewish-Roman relations were at a low.

In the period that followed, the relationship did not significantly improve. While we lack a Josephus for this period and therefore have a fuzzier picture, it is clear that the Jews and Romans were antagonistic towards one another. These hostilities bubbled over once again when in 132 CE Simeon Bar Kosiba (Kokhba) and likeminded individuals in Judea decided to rebel once again, this time against the emperor Hadrian. The causes of this uprising are murky and the exact circumstances remain uncertain; historians have speculated immensely about it, though most agree there were some religious overtones. Cassius Dio records\(^6\) that the rebels’ strategy relied heavily on guerrilla warfare, which may link this revolt to the Hasmonean revolt in terms of ideology as well. Whatever the causes were, the revolt proved disastrous. While there are no reliable figure for the casualties, it is clear that rebels were crushed by Hadrian and his two

\(^{5}\) BJ IX, 9.3
\(^{6}\) HoR 69 12 3
legions stationed in Palestine. Worse yet, in the aftermath of the failed revolt, the Roman government attempted a radical solution to the Jewish issue which had become a thorn in their side. In what became known as the Hadrianic persecutions, many standard Jewish religious practices were banned, further humiliating the local populace. They expelled all Jews living around Jerusalem, renamed Judea to Syria Palaestinea under the rule of a consular legatus, and renamed the capital from Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina, prompting a migration to the Galilee and the Diaspora. Due to the vast destruction in Judea, the last vestiges of the Jerusalem aristocracy were wiped out and the old ruling families lost their prestige, which in turn gave rise to a new political dynamic. As with every dynamic shift, there was no shortage of strife to follow.

Based on these patterns of Roman policy and Jewish revolt, perhaps the sage expectation might be for there to be further unease and persecution throughout history. However, in the period following Bar Kokhba, Roman-Jewish relations became markedly better. Little is known about the immediate aftermath of the revolt but within 50 years of the persecutions, the Jewish community and the Roman Empire were exceedingly friendly. Antoninus Pius, the emperor following Hadrian, repealed some of the edicts early in his reign and a neutral position appears to have been taken by emperors following him. However, during the reign of Septimius Severus and the Severan dynasty which followed, the Jews’ status markedly increased. Several historians, A. Oppeinhiemer and M. Avi-Yonah first amongst them, postulate that the Severans’ positive attitude towards the Jews is linked to their negative attitude towards the Samaritans, another group dwelling in Palestine at this time. The Samaritans had taken up arms for Niger Pescennius when he and Severus were fighting for the throne in 192, and picked the losing side. Severus responded, once he gained power, by stripping the citizens of Neopolis of their citizenship (The Samaritans had long been residents in the Neopolis area, and claim the nearby Mt. Gerizim to be
their center of worship.) Little is known about the allegiance of the Jews, however, it is safe to assume, as many scholars do, that they supported Severus. However, there is more to this than what meets the eye at first glance. I will contend that the rabbis saw themselves as part of the broader Severan regime. The appearance of emperors from the Near East who spoke Semitic languages and had Semitic customs would have caught the attention of the rabbis who identified with them. It is this identification which leads the rabbinic movement to conform itself with new Severan initiatives after which they are rewarded with increased stature and prestige.

Going back to our earlier question of why our picture is so unclear, the answer hinges on how scholars view the Patriarchate, the rabbinic group mentioned above, in the early part of the third century CE. If they are an insignificant religious group without Roman sponsorship, then it is reasonable to claim they were ignored by Rome. If they are analogous to a first century BCE Judean monarch or fourth century CE patriarch, then their status would be more elevated and would demand Roman attention. My claim is going to be that the Patriarchate, as represented by Rabbi Judah I, was in the incipient stages of power and projected a warm relationship with the Severan dynasty (193-235) in Rome. The Severans may have granted some form of sponsorship to the Patriarchal family\(^7\), yet with or without this official backing, the Patriarchy warmly regarded the Roman dynasty which gave credence to their claim in Palestine and obviated potential rebellion. It would make sense for the Severii to want to sponsor the Patriarchal family. Severus won his throne in the Near East and his backing was largely from there; therefore he needed to keep that area supportive. In return, the Patriarchal families issued decrees and acted in the interest of the ruling Roman power. This sponsorship, I maintain, can be seen in many sources, both Roman and Jewish, yet there is no proverbial “smoking gun” which informs us

\(^7\) No one reliable source points directly to such an action, yet many seem to allude to its existence.
directly of its existence. However, there are many sources to indicate that the patriarchy did identify with and act in favor of the Severii.

Based on that claim, in this paper I will argue for a broad self-identification of the early rabbinic movement with the Severan dynasty in Rome. I will contend that the rabbis viewed themselves as part of the broader Severan policy and that, perhaps, the Severans reciprocated, giving new powers to the Rabbis. This paper will argue that this rabbinic/Severan identification was responsible for several initiatives of the rabbis which mirrored the Severan ones in order to play a part in their policy and, more broadly, this identification was responsible the advance of rabbinic power during the early third century. Additionally, I will also argue that this identification can be seen in rabbinic literature, both in terms of legal decisions and aggadaic stories.
Methodology

The use of classic rabbinic works as historical sources is a particularly delicate business. On the one hand, these texts are a great resource which shed light upon and provide insight into the minds and lives of Rabbis in late-Roman Palestine. These works – which include the *Mishnah* (law code), *Mekhilta* (hermeneutical exegesis), *Tosefta* (ancillary law code), the two *Talmudim* (one from Israel known as the *Yerushalmi* or Talmud of the Land of Israel, one from Babylonia known as the *Bavli*, each a commentary on the Mishnah), and more – are substantial in depth and in subject matter and give the reader a thorough understanding of (at least rabbinic) Judaism in late antiquity. Yet, on the other hand, these works are inherently biased, at times contradictory, and contain fantastical, unbelievable narratives which no historian would take literally. For example, the Talmud records a demon fighting rabbi’s journey to Babylon to rid a city of a seven-headed dragon which was terrorizing a local synagogue. Additionally, the Talmud cites a story about a unicorn whose excrement, at one day old, was enough to dam the Jordan River. What is clear from these and many similar tales is that rabbinic literature does not constitute a history textbook. Yet, to dismiss its value entirely would be to, proverbially, throw out the baby with the bathwater. The trick then, for scholars, has been to comb through these works for “nuggets of information,” which can be utilized as primary source material in their reconstruction of late antiquity.

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8 B Qiddushin 29a-b  
9 B Bava Bathra 73b  
10 *Rabbinic Texts and the History Of Late-Roman Palestine* 1. eds. M. Goodman, P. Alexander
In light of the above, rabbinic sources have, until recently been used as primary, rather than as ancillary evidence by many noted historians of the period, including H. Graetz, M. Avi-Yonah, G. Alon, E. Urbach, and others. The ideology behind this approach, according to Alexander, is the reliance on “positivist historiography,” which pervaded the academy up until about 30 years ago. This method, which revolved around compiling pieces of historical evidence from different sources (i.e. giving credence to discussions regarding appointed judges and legal matters but not to ones concerning demon fighting) and then piecing them together to form a historical narrative of the Jews at this time, was the primary technique used since the inception of this field in the 1890’s. What emerged from this method was a narrative which granted the rabbis broad power and prestige. This understanding painted the rabbis as the figures of authority, both politically and religiously, and accepted their status verbatim. Biographies, such as the one L. Finkelstein wrote on Rabbi Akiva, used the Rabbinic corpus with little or no prejudice. What lies behind this thinking is a steadfast belief in the literalness of rabbinic literature. For example, Alon bases his history of local government in the Galilee on a passage in the Tosefta and accepts as historical fact that institutions such as the Sanhedrin and Great Bet Din in Jerusalem existed in the period following Bar Kokhba.

In recent times these positivist methods have largely fallen by the wayside as newer generations of scholars began to publish works and histories on the period. Eminent researchers

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11 Ibid, 2
12 Specifically, in Avi Yonah’s work The Jews of Palestine and Alon’s book The Jews in Their Land in the Talmud Age (which both grant the rabbis broad authority) well over half of the sources cited are from Rabbinic Literature.
14 Alon ibid 180, T San. 7:8-9
15 H. Mantel, EJ XIV 839, agrees with Alon. He says the Sanhedrin moved to Galilee after Bar Kokhba. However, there is little mention of the Sanhedrin in later rabbinic texts.
16 An exception is Z. Safrai, ha-Qehillah Ha-Yehudit be-Eretz Yisrael Bi-Tequfat Ha-Mishnah Veha-Talmud where the more tradition approach is taken and supported.
such as J. Neusner and M. Goodman\textsuperscript{17} published noteworthy studies which grant the rabbis much less authority than previously thought. These scholars exercised more critical restraint in their evaluation of rabbinic sources, and typically relied only on evidence from case stories throughout the literature. When the “rabbinized” history and institutions are removed, the picture becomes much narrower. Neusner goes as far as to claim that the rabbis competed with other “Jewish big-men” for authority during the Amoraic period. This notion of more limited rabbinic authority vastly changed the perception of the rabbis themselves. Gone were the ideas of broad power, replaced by a much narrower, limited interpretation. Scholars such as L. Levine\textsuperscript{18} and C. Heszer\textsuperscript{19} have argued for a more nuanced approach to the rabbis of late-antiquity. Levine calls them a class, Heszer a movement. Regardless of the nature and nomenclature of this group, however, both Levine and Heszer assert that the rabbis were an insular group who did not represent even the majority of the people throughout the entirety of the classical rabbinic period. Returning to the above example regarding the Sanhedrin, D. Goodblatt, of this newer school, has termed the Sanhedrin “a rabbinic ideal.”

Recently, scholars such as S. Schwartz and Hezser have attempted to poke numerous holes in the research and methodology of the older generations and have offered more minimalist solutions. Hezser in particular faults these scholars and claims that there are several issues in their research and scholarship. With reference to scholars living in modern Israel, both pre-statehood and since 1948, she argues that they were personally religious Jews living in an autonomous Jewish state and therefore were partial to a historical view which elevated Jewish

\textsuperscript{17} Neusner, \textit{Judaism in Society: The Evidence of the Yerushalmi: Toward the Natural History of a Religion} 196F. Goodman, \textit{State and Society in Roman Galilee, A.D 132-212}. 93-110

\textsuperscript{18} L. Levine, \textit{The Rabbinic Class of Late Roman Palestine}.

\textsuperscript{19} C Hezser, \textit{The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine}
texts to historical fact\textsuperscript{20}. Additionally, Schwartz critiques these scholars, saying they write from “deep inside some sort of romantic nationalist ideology, nowadays usually Zionism\textsuperscript{21}” As such, there is, in Schwartz’s view, “hermeneutics of goodwill, as opposed to the hermeneutics of suspicion\textsuperscript{22}” which pervade other fields. Accordingly, this has caused scholars to use these rabbinic works irresponsibly.

I believe there is a solid ground between these different approaches which both treats the sources with the caution they deserve, while not fully embracing the “hermeneutics of suspicion” enumerated above\textsuperscript{23}. This view is very similar to the position taken by Levine, yet not entirely the same. Additionally, I believe that there lies a distinction between aggadaic material and halakhic material. With regards to aggadaic material, Levine maintains that due to the non-biographical nature of histories of this period, the exact details, authorship, and historical accurateness are not important\textsuperscript{24}. Unlike the theory of New Criticism which focuses solely on the story itself without context\textsuperscript{25}, the historical context becomes very central to this understanding. Essentially, what is of significant importance is the roots of what lies behind the placement of certain narratives into the corpus of rabbinic literature. In other words, they are to be taken seriously, though not literally. When the rabbis include certain stories within their corpus, they are making a strong statement about how they want to be perceived\textsuperscript{26}. In the context of this paper, the placement of these stories dealing with Rabbi Judah I and Antoninus (Antolinus) in

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p 6
\textsuperscript{21} Schwartz, Imperialism in Jewish Society p 5
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p 6
\textsuperscript{23} For a clear example of where this distinction manifests, see Schwartz’s treatment of Y. Yevamot 12:7 on page 122 in Imperialism and the treatment I give that passage on page 42 of this study.
\textsuperscript{24} Levine, p 19
\textsuperscript{25} Jeffery Rubenstein’s Talmudic Stories p 10 has a good discussion of this method and its application to rabbinic literature.
\textsuperscript{26} See A Applebaum, The Dynasty of the Jewish Patriarch p 28 who understands rabbinic texts in this light.
rabbinic literature is significant as this shows a desire from the rabbis’ perspective to converse with Romans of great importance, and, more significantly, a positive rabbinic attitude towards the Romans in this time. Levine concludes by noting that “the veracity of even these (the Rabbi/Antoninus) traditions remains moot,” but that is precisely not the point. Following the logic enumerated above, the aggadaic tradition does not need to be historically true in order to be historically significant and to have great analytical value. This idea is buttressed by the work of D. Sperber. As Sperber has shown, many overarching themes which occur in rabbinic literature match outside developments, showing a broader historical appreciation of the works. Sperber limits his study to the economics of Palestine, but there is little reason to assume this tendency to represent accurately broader issues does not apply to other matters as well.

With regards to halakhic material, I will be using sources cautiously, while not omitting them entirely. In light of the discussion above, this study will be limited to sources found in the Talmud of the Land of Israel and, when possible, ones which can be read in light of extra-rabbinic events. Unlike with aggadaic material, it is difficult to argue that this more mundane material reflects the zeitgeist of the rabbinic movement. As such, treating it with the same “significant” versus “true” model above is not an option. Moreover, it would be tempting to follow the method of the earlier scholars and use this material uncritically, however, given the numerous instances where the material is seemingly inaccurate, that too is problematic. Due to the flawed nature of these sources, I will be limiting this paper to those which can be read in light of known historical events. Similar to how a newspaper will attempt to gain “double

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27 *Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* p243  
28 Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400 Money and Prices*  
29 This is not to say that I find all other Tannaitic passages to be historically inaccurate, rather, in the interest of historical exactitude, I prefer to limit this study to those which can be read in light of broader occurrences.
confirmation” on a news story, I will be using halakhic sources which can be understood as having a place in the broader historical narrative of Eretz Israel in late antiquity.

Once we have resolved that there is value in using rabbinic texts in a limited historical setting, questions about the dating of the texts themselves arise. If the text is contemporaneous with the society about which it is testifying, it is a goldmine of information; if not, it can border on uselessness, at least when viewed from a historiographical sense. As will be discussed later at length, the redactor of the Mishna was Rabbi Judah I. Most scholars assume that this text has been transmitted accurately and therefore constitutes an accurate reflection of its historical setting. The series of texts known as Halakhic Midrashim also appear to have been compiled in this same period. Again, all teachers mentioned within them predate Rabbi Judah I and this has led scholars to assume a Tannaitic origin for this corpus. Moreover, the attestation of these traditions within the Mekhilta de R. Yishmael, generally seen to be among the earliest rabbinic works, gives credence to the notion that these traditions were placed into the corpus within or just after the lifespan of Rabbi Judah I, which only strengthens the case for their historical value.

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30 Cf. Goodman, State and Society p 9
31 No reference exists to these Midrashim in the Talmud leading some scholars to question their Tannaitic stature, but as Goodman correctly points out “Why should they be?” Ibid
32 S Cohen The Talmud Yerushalmi & Graeco Roman Culture p 168 nt. 59
33 The notion that the more contemporaneous a source is, the more historical value it has is illustrated nicely by the R. Akiva stories. In contemporary Palestinian texts, these traditions do not exist. In later Babylonian ones, they abound. Cf. Azzan Yadin “Rabbi Akiva’s Youth” JQR 100
Chapter 1: Severan and Rabbinic Urbanization

One such example where this appearance of a cooperative relationship between the Severans and the rabbis can be seen is in the urbanization which occurred in the Near East in the early 3rd century. There is no doubt that during the early third-century, the rabbinic movement became more urbanized. The discussion surrounding rabbis and cities has been taken up by scholars such as H. Lapin and S. Miller. The early (second-century) rabbinic movement is often classified as a village-centered movement, as rabbis made their way northward to the Galilee in the wake of the Hadrianic persecutions following the Bar-Kokhba rebellion, and the notion of the tannaitic village has become a staple of scholarship on the early rabbinic movement. Most second century rabbis were poor and owned no land and were likely manual artisans and craftsmen. The jurisdiction of these rabbis appears to have been fairly limited.

The cases upon which they ruled were limited and strictly related to religious, rather than civil or criminal matters and each village appears to have had its own system. However, around the turn of the 3rd century, with the rise of the philo-semitic Severans, this paradigm changes. The rabbis became more urbanized, wealthy, and bourgeois, while the influence of village rabbis

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34 H. Lapin, “Rabbis and Cities in Later Roman Palestine: The literary Evidence” JJS 50
35 S. Miller, Sages and Commoners in Late Antique Eretz Israel
36 Goodman, State and Society p 93
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid 93-101
39 I would be remiss if I did not note there are several cases of rabbis judging cases in cities prior to the rise of the Severans. M Bešah 8:8, TMak 1:1 inform us of Simeon b. Gamliel who judged in Sephoris. Eleazar Ben Sadoq was associated with Lydda as well during this time. R. Meir is once recorded as having been in Tiberias in Sifre Zutra 19:10, but this, according to Lapin, is not enough to maintain he resided there.
diminished\(^{40}\). This is true to the extent where Rabbi Judah I, the leader of the urbanized rabbis as the Patriarch, is quoted as having an aversion to being eulogized in smaller towns.

Rabbi Judah commanded three things as he was dying.

Don’t remove my wife from the house

Don’t eulogize me in villages

And he who cared for me in my lifetime should be who cares for me in my death.

Moreover, Rabbi Judah himself moved from a smaller village to a larger city as evidenced in the Talmudic tradition\(^ {43}\), which records Rabbi Judah getting ill and moving from Beit She’arim to Sepphoris due to the higher elevation and the air quality. The reason given in the Bavli is likely apologetically minded. This is buttressed by a tradition in Gen. Rabbah which details the travels of the Sanhedrin as it moved across the country. The Sanhedrin’s last move was from Bet She’arim to Sephoris\(^ {44}\). This move, given Rabbi Judah’s stature, was likely concurrent with his move from the village to the city. This move to the city by the Patriarchate

\(^{40}\) Miller, p 11

\(^{41}\) Y. Ketubot 34d, 12:3

\(^{42}\) All citations of rabbinic texts are taken from the most reliable manuscripts. For the sources from the Yerushalmi, all are from the Leiden Manuscript.

\(^{43}\) B. Ketubot 103b

\(^{44}\) Gen Rabbah 97:13 Albek
should be seen as a catalyst for increased urbanization by the rabbis\textsuperscript{45}. Not since the days of Yavneh did the rabbinic movement headquarter itself in a major city. There were undoubtedly urban rabbis prior to Rabbi Judah I\textsuperscript{46}, but the crux of the movement was not yet in the city. Only after this move is there a widespread embrace of the urban life by rabbis.

This phenomenon was not limited to patriarchs only in this generation. Pinchas B. Yair was a resident of Lydda\textsuperscript{47} and Eleazar B. Simeon was educated in Sepphoris\textsuperscript{48}. In Levine’s words “Urbanization influenced the rabbis as well, and the venue of their activity shifted dramatically in the third century\textsuperscript{49}.” Earlier rabbis were always associated with smaller towns, such as Bene Beraq, Usha, etc. During the period of the Severans, major cities like Tiberias under R. Yoḥanan, Sephhoris under R. Ḥanina ben Ḥama, and then later Caesarea under R. Abohu, and Lydda (renamed Diospolis) emerge as centers of rabbinic activity\textsuperscript{50}. Moreover, in the wake of this urbanization, rabbis from smaller villages became relegated to the sidelines of the halakhic discourse, and are treated with a sense of inferiority by the city-dwelling rabbis\textsuperscript{51}.

It is no coincidence that this rabbinic urbanization is concurrent with the urbanization initiative of the Severans in Eretz-Israel and the broader Near East. The Severan dynasty spent more time in the East than any emperors had in the past. This is not surprising as they hailed from Libya and Syria and fought wars to win their throne across the Levant. As the empire moved east, soldiers had to be housed in garrison towns, which in turn spurred the local

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Cohen p 172. For opposing view, see Miller, \textit{Sages and Commoners} p 454.

\textsuperscript{46} Miller, Ibid

\textsuperscript{47} T. Ohalot 18:18

\textsuperscript{48} Midrash Tanhuma א_dashי p 108

\textsuperscript{49} Levine, \textit{The Rabbinic Class of Late Roman Palestine}. P25

\textsuperscript{50} For an extensive list of later Palestinian rabbis in cities, see the discussion in Lapin p 196-198

\textsuperscript{51} Miller, \textit{Sages and Commoners} p 200
economies\textsuperscript{52}. It appears the Severans used city-status in a way similar to what would become known as the spoils system in 19\textsuperscript{th} century America. Those who supported the Severans were rewarded with elevated statuses, and those who opposed them had their prestige stripped from them. As was noted above, in 192 when Septimius Severus was fighting for his throne, the Samaritans opposed him and sided with his rival. Historia Augusta records that Neapolis was deprived of its civil rights following Severus’s ascension of the throne\textsuperscript{53}. Moreover, the Severans privileged provincials over the Roman aristocracy, for whom they had no love\textsuperscript{54}. This favor towards reaches of the Empire and disenfranchisement with the center would justify their extension of \textit{polis} status to cities all across the Levant. More specifically, Ulpian, the Roman jurist and Protoconsul cites the legislation of Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla on the rights of Jews serving in municipal offices. In his \textit{Digest} he wrote, “The Divine Severus and Antoninus permitted those that follow the Jewish religion to enter offices.”\textsuperscript{55} This was a marked distinction from the policies of the emperors before them, as Hadrian had had a policy of Hellenization of Galilean cities, as evidenced by coinage from that era.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, the urbanization specifically of Eretz-Israel and the permissive attitude towards Jews in public office would be typical of the Severan dynasty. Yet, it was not an uncooperative effort. This urbanization initiative was robustly joined in by the rabbis, and the newfound warm attitude towards the Jews was capitalized upon by the burgeoning urban rabbinic movement\textsuperscript{57}, most notably in the form of \textit{taqanot} (rulings) issued by Rabbi Judah I.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{52} F. Millar, \textit{Roman Near East 31BC – AD 337} p 131
\bibitem{53} H A Septimius Severus 9:3
\bibitem{54} S. Takacs \textit{The Construction of Authority in Ancient Rome and Byzantium. The Power of Rhetoric} p 83
\bibitem{55} Ulpian, Digest L 2, 3, 3. Cited and Translated in A. Linder, \textit{The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation}, p 104.
\bibitem{56} Jones, \textit{Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces} p 278
\bibitem{57} Cf. A Oppenhimer “Roman Rule and the Cities in Talmudic Literature.” For opposing view, Goodman \textit{State and Society} p 179
\end{thebibliography}
The *taqanot* of Rabbi Judah I were largely economic and nature, and many relaxed religious restrictions which existed on produce grown in Eretz-Israel, upon which there are many limitations. Rabbi Judah I overruled two different types of laws, one relating to tithes, the other relating to food grown in the Sabbatical year. Oppenheimer contends, I think correctly so, that these *taqanot* were designed to encourage Jews to move to these cities and increase the urbanization of the Galilee. With the economic restrictions gone, more Jews would feel inclined to move to these locations, knowing it would be easier to earn a living and support themselves and families. This urbanization would be fitting given the broader Roman initiative occurring.

Three traditions cited in the Jerusalem Talmud fit nicely with this paradigm. Two examples are from the Galilee and one is from the South of the land.

Rabbi exempted [produce sold in] Bet Shean [to be eaten without separating tithes.]

Rabbi exempted Caesarea.

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58 For tithing, see Deut 14:22 Sabbatical year, Ex. 23:10-11, Lev 25:1-7
59 Ibid 384
60 Y. Demai 22c, 2:1
Rabbi exempted Bet Guvrin.

Rabbi exempted Kefar Semah⁶¹

This tradition holds the most information regarding these *taqanot* and their scope. Why the cities mentioned were selected and not others is not entirely clear. Oppenheimer offers the theory that they were cities which had a gentile majority population, and Rabbi Judah would have wanted to increase Jewish emigration⁶². The reason for these specific exemptions, for this study, is largely unimportant. What is pertinent is the clear expression of the rabbinic desire to urbanize. Additionally, the unilateral actions of Rabbi Judah I are significant. No court was convened and no broader consensus is reached, rather it is Rabbi Judah I acting on his own Roman-inspired vision.

Another story relating to these *taqanot* Rabbi Judah I is found in the Jerusalem Talmud in Shevi’it. This tradition continues the theme of the Patriarch using his authority to push the urbanization movement.

ֶ⁶³ רֶּיֶּ הָּמִי לִלְיָה יַרְכּ בִּמּוֹרָץְ שְּבִיעֵית מִדְּ

בר מְלָכּוֹתא

מה עָבְדּוֹן לְתַהְדוּרי

אַלְּבַכְּתוֹנְה סָכָּה רְקָנָּה אָוְיַרְוַנְה קְוָּרִי רַ

⁶¹ Of the areas which were exempted, only Kefer Semah was not a city. This village was on the outskirts of the city of Susita/Hippos, which was one of the Decapolis. According to Oppenheimer, the reason behind this village’s inclusion is found in the Jerusalem Talmud and Reḥov inscription. There, there is a list of settlements on the periphery of the Jewish area in Susita which were obligated to follow the laws pertaining to the Land of Israel. Kefar Zemaḥ is mentioned, and there it says “Rabbi exempted Kefar Zemaḥ” to make it easier for Jewish residents to compete with their Gentile neighbors.

⁶² A. Oppenheimer “Roman Rule and the Cities in Talmudic Literature”

⁶³ Y. Shevi’it 37c, 6:4
Rabbi permitted the purchase of vegetables immediately in the year following the Sabbatical year, except for leek.

What did the people of Sepphoris do with leek?

They covered it with sackcloth and ashes and brought it before Rabbi.

They said to him, “How has this sinned more than any other vegetables”

He permitted it to them.64

Clearly, here Rabbi Judah I is being lenient with regards to agricultural economic laws in a city, this time in Sepphoris. Indeed, in Sepphoris there is much evidence that under the Severan dynasty, there was a very strong Roman-Jewish relationship. Coins issued by the two emperors after Severus, Caracalla (211-218 C.E) and Elagabalus (218-222 C.E) make reference to the “friendship” (philia) and “alliance” (symmachia) between the “Holy Council” (hiera boule) of Sepphoris and the Roman people.65 However, Rabbi Judah I made it clear that he did not want to remove the holiness inherent in the Land of Israel from these cities.66 Typically, cities outside of

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64 Translation from Jacob Neusner. I am aware of the deficiencies in Neusner’s translation, as noted by S. Lieberman. However, for this passage there appear to be no errors. For an excellent analysis of this story in a different context, see Miller p 42-44

65 Miller, “Intercity Relations in Roman Palestine”, 7. Meshorer suggests, based on the language of the coins, that there may have even been a formal treaty between the two parties.

66 T. Ohalot 18:4
the borders of Israel did not have these requirements, so the removal of the city from the list might have signified its loss of enhanced holiness. Rather, all Rabbi Judah I was doing was increasing economic incentive for the local Jewish population to move into the cities, while maintaining the sacred status of the land of Israel.

Rabbi Judah’s *taqanot* were not limited to the Galilee. A border city in the south, Ashqelon, was also exempted from the agricultural laws of Eretz-Israel by a group of rabbis headed by Rabbi Judah I\(^67\). Ashqelon was similar to the places mentioned above in that it had a small Jewish population which needed to be bolstered. In fact, there is a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud which stresses that Ashqelon is a place where pagan rituals are rampant and Jews should stay away from its limits\(^68\). In this meeting, the group ruled that Ashqelon was in fact in Eretz-Israel, but was exempt from tithes. Again, this story is situated in the time period of Severan urbanization and is yet another example of Rabbi Judah I using his authority to encourage Jews to become more urbanized.

Other rabbis of the time period were aware of Rabbi Judah’s initiative. In the end of Y. Demai 23c, 3:3 there is a discussion about a citron which was untithed and which originated from Caesarea. Rabbi Zeira and Rabbi Yosi were involved in the discussion, and at the end of it, it is resolved that Rabbi Judah I issued a special *heter* for Caesarea.

\[\text{ר’ ציירא ב’ai קומ儀 ר’ יסיי}\\
\text{ולא מפרים שני מותרין בקיסריי היא}\]

\(^{67}\) Y. Shevi’it 36c, 4:1
\(^{68}\) B. AZ 11b
Rabbi Zeira came before Rabbi Yosi

“But is the etrog not one of the kinds of produce that are permitted in Caesarea [deriving from outside the Land of Israel]?"

He said to him, “But isn’t it Rabbi who declared Caesarea permitted [and its produce exempt from tithing]?

The later rabbinic knowledge of these leniencies lends credibility to their veracity.

Moreover, Caesarea was a main center of commerce and political life in the Roman province. A strong Jewish community there would be essential to giving the Jews a voice in political discussion. 69

There is one Talmudic tradition which encapsulates the argument of joint Rabbinic/Roman urbanization perfectly, but unfortunately it is a Babylonian tradition. However, given the amount of detail in the story, it is worth mentioning and analyzing. B. ‘Avoda Zara 10a records a conversation between Antoninus and Rabbi.

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69 Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule* p 68
Antoninus said to Rabbi: “I desire that Severus my son should rule after me that that Tiberias be made a colony.

If I tell them [the officials of Rome], they will do one, but not two.

He [Rabbi] brought a man and seated him on top of another. [Rabbi] gave a dove to the upper

And said to the bottom: “Tell the upper to allow the dove to fly from his hand.”

[Antoninus] said: “Hear from this that thus is he saying to me: ‘You request of them that Severus my son should rule me, and I should tell Severus that Tiberias should be made a colony’.

The conversation between Antoninus and Rabbi deals directly with the colonization of Tiberias. Outside sources which date to about 120 years later indicate that Tiberias had colony status and the fact the two main actors in the urbanization in the Galilee are having a conversation about this cannot be discarded. Of course, it is preposterous to think that Antoninus (generally assumed to be to be Caracalla) initiated a conversation with Rabbi Judah I about

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70 Translation with an eye towards Alyssa M. Gray’s chapter “The Power Conferred by Distance From Power: Redaction and Meaning in b. A.Z. 10a–11a” in Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactor, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein. For an excellent analysis of the passage, see Gray’s article there (23-69)

71 A Ketuba which dates to 347CE indicates that Tiberias was a colony. Additionally, a coin from Tiberias has the faint inscription CO which Meshorer postulates refers to colony status. Cf. Oppenheimer p34 n17 Between Rome and Babylon
which cities to give what status to, but I maintain that the fact that this conversation is recorded shows that the rabbis viewed themselves as partners with the Romans in the urbanization.
Chapter 2: Polemical Halakha in favor of the Romans

Additionally, there was some effort put in place by the Patriarchate to polemically decide certain halakot to favor the Severan dynasty. The Severans were unique among emperors of Rome in that they were worshipers of the Emesene Sun Deity, or Sol Invictus. This deity, linked with Ba’al\textsuperscript{72}, one of the most venerable deities in the ancient Near East, was worshiped for centuries prior to the Severans throughout the Near East. Ba’al as a deity appears over eighty times in the Hebrew Bible, and occurs as the proper noun for a deity in Canaanite religions, dating back to the 3\textsuperscript{rd} millennia BCE\textsuperscript{73} and was still worshiped well into Greco-Roman times. Traditionally, Ba’al was known for his control of the weather and the elements and controlled the fertility of the soil. It was Ba’al, according to these ancient cults, who controlled the forces of nature.

The history of the worship of Ba’al, while a fascinating subject, lies beyond the scope of this study. What is relevant, however, are the ramifications of the Severans Ba’al worship on the rabbis and in particular the rabbis of the generation of Rabbi Judah I. Septimius Severus was wedded to Julia Domna, the daughter of the High Priest of Ba’al in Emesa. Historical sources have also suggested that it was Domna and her female relatives who dominated the family\textsuperscript{74} and its practices, specifically its cultic ones. The royal couple had several children, all of whom were prominent members in the Roman political spectrum and all of whom Ba’al worshippers, and

\textsuperscript{72} J. Ferguson. \textit{The Religions of the Roman Empire}. p 44. Throughout the Near East during this time, there was a general trend of combining classical Greco-Roman Deities with traditional Near Eastern ones. For example, Philo of Byblos (64-141 CE) mentions a deity called Zeus Belos, which scholars have attributed to being an amalgam of the Near-Eastern Ba’al and Greek Zeus.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible}. p 171
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World}, p 183
thus a dynasty of Sun-worshipping emperors was born. First Severus, then his sons Caracalla and Geta, their nephew Elagabalus, and finally Severus Alexander. Septimius Severus built an elaborate three storied façade to the palace in Rome known as the Septizonium. Moreover, coinage from this era includes the Latin Invictus for the sun, including coins which directly link members of the Severan dynasty with Sol (Figures 1 and 2 below.) This cult reached its zenith with the ascension of Elagabalus to the throne in 218 CE. Named under the influence of his grandfather, the high priest Helios in Emesa, Syria, Elagabalus was elevated to the emperorship based on his charm and good looks, and his devotion to his pagan god appealed to soldiers in the Near East who essentially forced the Senate to grant him the purple.

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75 Ferguson, p 51
Under his brief rule, the standard Roman Pantheon of gods was in essence lowered beneath Sol Invictus. Even before Elagabalus, however, the influence of this paganism was far and wide, spanning from Rome across the Near East. Part of that influence manifested itself within the legal thought of the rabbis as it appears certain dispensations were made for this deity.

The Israelites had long been aware of Ba’al worship; throughout the Hebrew Bible, Ba’al is routinely the foil of Yahweh. Moreover, there are even instances where the attributes of Ba’al are assigned to the Israelite God (Psalm 68 where the Israelite God is called a “rider of clouds,” a known euphemism for Ba’al and Psalm 74 where the Israelite God destroys Yam, Leviathan, and sea monsters [which is reminiscent of Ba’al’s destruction of Yamm, Litan, and Tannin in the Ba’al Cycle] are two good examples of this phenomena.) In fact, no other god is as routinely cited as the object of idol worship as Ba’al throughout the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, during the times of the prophets, many nations surrounding the Israelites and even certain Israelites
themselves worshiped this deity. Certainly the grandiose story of Elijah doing battle with the prophets of Ba’al on Mt. Carmel serves nicely as a metaphor for how Ba’al was viewed. As such, it is an extremely reasonable expectation that in the tractates compiled at the time of Rabbi Judah I there would be a heavy emphasis on refraining from Ba’al/solar worship, after all, it was a prevalent deity in the area with a history of illicit Jewish worship. However, the texts on this subject are strikingly silent, especially when showed in light of many negative references to other deities of the time. For example, M. Avoda Zara 4:1 reads

רב יสมาชא אומר

שלש אבנים זה בצד והבצל מרקוליס אסורהות

והשימ כנחורות

והמכים אפורים שגרואות על אסורהות ושם רראות עמו מוהרשות

Rabbi Yishmael Says:

Three stones next to one another next to Mercury is forbidden,

and two are permitted

And the Sages say: ones [stones] which appear to be with [Mercury] are forbidden and ones which do not are permitted.

This delineates Mercury as a contemporary deity to whom even casting a stone nearby is forbidden. Additionally, Aphrodite’s bathhouses are seen as a place to be avoided without

77 Dictionary Deities and Demons 165
special dispensation, among other examples. Specifically within Palestinian Tannaitic material, references to solar deity are rather slim. The rabbis do frequently use an abbreviation of השם מכהב המלחה (worshipper of stars and constellations) to refer to gentiles, which E. Freidheim has argued is an epithet for the worship of Sol Invictus. However, his argument is unconvincing for several reasons. Firstly, the rabbis were aware of the formal name of solar deities. Exodus Rabbah 15:6 uses the name of אוליאוס (Helios) explicitly, so the usage of the generic עכו"ם to mean Helios is not compelling. This usage shows that the compilers of rabbinic literature were aware of this deity, showing that if the rabbis wanted to forbid this explicitly, they could have. Moreover, as Ferguson has shown, the worship of celestial bodies was common during the time, and it would be normal for the generic word for idolatry to include the sun. Most strikingly, Ba’al as a deity does not appear in the entirety of the rabbinic corpus on idolatry. In fact, there may even be a positive association with Ba’al within the rabbinic corpus. The rabbis call a field watered by rain water, השדה הבעל, the field of Ba’al in M. Bava Bathra 3:1. Whether or not the rabbis did this intentionally is unclear but the fact that they are not uncomfortable with the term itself telling. This silence with regards to negative references to Ba’al is deafening, particularly when juxtaposed with the activist material regarding other deities. Moreover, this polemic manifests itself in the thought and practice of the rabbis. Now, to be certain, Ba’al and the sun-god were not the same deity, in fact they were entirely distinct in the old Canaanite pantheon. Yet during the Roman period these divine beings

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79 M. Avodah Zara, 3:4
80 Babylonian material has, not surprisingly, many more references, likely due to polemics against Zoroastrianism.
82 Ferguson, p 45
83 Ba’al Peor, the deity mentioned in numerous places in the Hebrew Bible does appear in rabbinic parlance, but this is a separate deity from the Helios/Sol Invictus/Ba’al discussed above.
became fused, as evidenced best of all by the worship of Ba’al in Heliopolis, which is discussed below.

One specific example involves the produce from the city of Baalbek (located in modern-day Southern Lebanon), or, as it was known in Roman times, Heliopolis. The rabbis were aware of this connection between Heliopolis and the sun\(^8^4\), yet did nothing to discourage trade with the city. In fact, garlic from Heliopolis was considered a delicacy\(^8^5\), and there are no prohibitions regarding it whatsoever. One might expect that food from a city which was dedicated to idolatry in the eyes of the rabbis would be prohibited, as in the cases of the Lulav or Etrog of an ir nidahat\(^8^6\) (city of idolatry,) but that is not the case here. Rabbi Judah I and his ilk did nothing to discourage the Jews from interacting with Baalbek/Heliopolis. This lack of a prohibition is startling because the rabbis were concerned with local practices, as Schwartz argues\(^8^7\), and many rabbinic laws, based on earlier biblical ones, prohibit even incidental contact with pagan items associated with cities of idolatry\(^8^8\). Thus, the allowance of garlic from Heliopolis, a city which was strongly associated with a pagan deity, is rather striking indeed. More remarkable still is that Heliopolis was given its polis status by Septimius Severus\(^8^9\), cementing the relationship between the two. This allowance signifies the leniency of the rabbis towards Helios/Sol Invictus and the Severan faith due to the relationship between Rabbi Judah I and the Severii.

\(^8^4\) Pesikta Rabbati 17  
\(^8^5\) M Maasrot 5:8  
\(^8^6\) M Sukka 3:1, Deut 13:18  
\(^8^7\) Schwartz,“Gamaliel in Aphrodite’s Bath”p 209  
\(^8^8\) Cf. T. Avoda Zara 6:10  
\(^8^9\) Jones, 289.
This polemic leniency of Rabbi Judah and his cadre towards Sol Invictus may perhaps explain the existence of several puzzling pagan motifs on the floors of Galilean synagogues. Mosaic floors containing images of Helios are extant in Bet Alfa, Zippori, Na’aran (figures 3-5), and Hammat Tiberias. These motifs have exercised scholars for quite some time. Several schools of thought have emerged, and none of which, to my mind, are particularly convincing. One view, advanced by Baumgarten in 1970⁹⁰ maintains that the mosaics were embellishments which came to be tolerated by the rabbis. Yet another view, held by Sukenik, maintains that non-Jewish patrons built the synagogue and commissioned it with pagan imagery.⁹¹ Additionally, and perhaps more curiously, Goodman maintains that this Greek imagery was just the way that Jews depicted their God as well⁹². What is apparent from all of these suggestions is that there is no consensus on this troubling issue. I think, however, the answer may be simpler in nature than

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⁹¹ E. L. Sukenik, Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece 63
⁹² M. Goodman, “The Jewish Image of God in Late Antiquity.” In Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire, 133–148”
what previous scholars have proposed. With the exception of Goodman, the other scholars have assumed that these images were forbidden and there was a reason to make a dispensation for them, or that the Jews would not have cared that these were forbidden. However, if what I have argued is correct, there would be no need to assume that this depiction of Sol Invictus would be problematic. Thus, their inclusion on the floor of a Galilean synagogue would not be worthy of scholar’s raised eyebrows thereby obviating the problem. These synagogues date anywhere from 100-250 years after the Severan Dynasty\(^{93}\), meaning that they cannot be lumped together with the evidence above to explain the existence of Helios. But I would maintain that the long shadow of Judah I, his contemporaries, and their foundational halakhic project, the codification of the Mishnah (the central text of religious law,) would have meant that Sol Invictus would have not been seen as an idolatrous deity, and therefore later manifestations and images would be equally non-problematic. This would be buttressed by the fact that in Hammat Tiberias, there is an inscription which appears to indicate that a member of the household of the Patriarch was one of the dedicators\(^{94}\) -- a fact which fits nicely with the trend of the evidence thus far.

\(^{93}\) Bet Alfa dates to the time of Justin I (518-527) as is shown from epigraphic evidence. The consensus among scholars is that Na’aran dates to the 5\(^{th}\) century, and Hammat Tiberias to the 4\(^{th}\) century.

\(^{94}\) Goodman, p 134
Additionally, Rabbi Judah I polemically attempted to use *halakha* to placate the Romans when he attempted to do away with the fast day of the 9th of Av. This particular fast day was established to commemorate the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans on the 9th day of Av in the year 70 CE. Traditionally, the destruction of the first Temple, by the Babylonians, also occurred on this date, though there is discrepancy in the biblical data. Y Megillah 70c,1:3 records that Rabbi Judah I wanted to do away with the fast day.

95 The biblical date given is both as the seventh day of the fifth month (II Kings 25:8) and the tenth day of the fifth month (Jer 52:12). The rabbis settled on the ninth day of the month to commemorate the fast.

96 Cf. Y. Yevamot 70d, 6:6
Several scholars interpret this passage as a sign that Rabbi Judah I considered himself to be a messianic figure\textsuperscript{97}, and since he, the Messiah, had come, there was no longer a need to fast on the 9\textsuperscript{th} of Av. However, these traditions appear to be of later origin, and, to my mind, cannot be used to substantiate the messianic claim. It is true that Babylonian sources (and even a later Palestinian one) do attribute a messianic element to Rabbi Judah I. A prime example of this is B. Sanhedrin 98b where, at the end of a long discussion of messianic themes, Rabbi Judah I is portrayed as a white, pure, messianic figure. Additionally, in B. Bava Mesi’a 85a there is a discussion of Rabbi Judah I being a messianic figure due to his suffering for the sins of Israel. There is no doubt there is some influence by early Christianity on this passage\textsuperscript{98}, but again, these all appear to be traditions which date to after the death of Rabbi Judah I. Moreover, Babylonian traditions in B. Rosh HaShana 25a and in B. Sanhedrin 12a support the argument for a later tradition of messianism, thus, the question remains as to what were Rabbi Judah I’s motives.

I would argue that Rabbi Judah I’s desire to do away with Tisha be-’Av stems from the fact that he would not want antagonize the Roman Empire by keeping a date which commemorates the destruction of the Temple by Vespasian and Titus in 70 CE\textsuperscript{99}. Due to the identification between Rabbi Judah I and the Severii, he would not have wanted to insult the ruling powers in Rome, and therefore wanted to do away with the somber occasion, however,


\textsuperscript{98} See 163 in Goodblatt for further discussion.

\textsuperscript{99} The day of the 9\textsuperscript{th} of Av has come to be the date of national Jewish mourning. In fact, in recent times, tragedies such as the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, and even the opening of Treblinka in 1942 have been commemorated on this date. At the time of Tannaim, these events, obviously, would not have been a factor in their decisions. Additionally, as Alexander has shown, many Jews did not commemorate the 9\textsuperscript{th} of Av in the Second Temple Period. Some more fringe groups, such as the Qumran community, did continue to mourn for the First Temple while the second one was standing, but in the times of Rabbi Judah I, only a century and a half post destruction, this was likely the event which was being mourned.
others were not ready to accept this edict. Additionally, Levine notes that the resettlement of Jerusalem by Jews during this period signifies the connection between the Jews and the Romans with regards to Temple and Jerusalem matters, and would add weight to the notion that Rabbi Judah I’s desire to uproot Tisha be-’Av was rooted in keeping Rome placated.
Chapter 3: Rabbi/Antoninus Stories as Rabbinic Identification with the Severans

The strongest evidence found throughout the rabbinic corpus for the Patriarchal/Severan identification are the several dozen stories which detail conversations between Rabbi Judah I and a Roman emperor, generally assumed to be Caracalla. None of the stories give a clear identity to the emperor, and recent scholars work to attempt to identify this emperor have proven “unsatisfactory”\textsuperscript{100} however, in light of all the evidence above, it is safe to assume that this emperor is from the Severan dynasty. Various stories about earlier Patriarchs meeting with Roman officials do exist\textsuperscript{101}, however none of these Patriarchs have anywhere near the levels of recorded interactions with Romans as R. Judah I has with Antoninus.

There is no doubt that the stories which speak to this relationships are \textit{aggadic} in nature. It is highly unlikely that any one of them actually transpired (though a few may be based on historical events, thus preserving the historical kernel), and it is nearly unfathomable that all of them did. The stories differ in their subjects and in their depictions. Some pertain to conversations about philosophy, Roman policy, theology, and other issues, and appear to be in line with stories about rabbinic\textsuperscript{102} encounters with philosophers, matrons, and heretics extant.


\textsuperscript{101} R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai and Vespasian see Lam. R. 1:31, R. Gamliel II and a \textit{hegemon} in Syria, see M. Ed. 7:7 and for R. Gamliel with other Roman officials see T. Sot 15:8 and T. A.Z. 3:5. However, A. Yadin-Israel does contend that not every mention of Rabban Gamliel \textit{must} refer to R. Gamliel II, and offers Rabban Gamliel III as an alternative. If this is the case, than it fits with the broader argument of this paper as Rabban Gamliel’s III period was 210-235 CE.

\textsuperscript{102} And perhaps other non-Hellenistic peoples. See Wallach, 261-263.
throughout the rabbinic corpus\textsuperscript{103}. These entail an outsider approaching the rabbi with a question and the rabbi giving a somewhat veiled, cryptic answer, which solves the problem, and that response is the end of the discussion. What makes these stories unique, however, is the sheer amount which are recorded about Rabbi Judah I and Antoninus, and the range of subjects which these two cover in their supposed discussions. Moreover, the extended dialogue which occurs in some of these stories speaks to a closeness between the two figures. A careful reading of these stories will show a relationship between the two figures which is not found by any of the other examples, and speaks towards the existence of the broader identification. As with other material, this paper will deal only with Palestinian sources\textsuperscript{104}. Due to the large quantity of these traditions, not all of them can be treated here; rather, the ones which speak strongest to the relationship and ones which can serve as broad paradigms will be addressed.

Perhaps the strongest stories which speak to the rabbinic affiliation with the Severans are the stories which have Antoninus converting to Judaism\textsuperscript{105}. These stories are particularly exceptional in the Talmud of the Land of Israel, which, as a whole, does not typically fantasize about foreign rulers, as opposed to its Babylonian counterpart\textsuperscript{106}. There are three stories which deal with his conversion, however, two are quite similar, as to be able to exclude the duplicate for this purpose. The first story can be found in Y. Megillah 72b, 1:10

\begin{verbatim}
אנטונינוס שאא ל"ר מורה לנבית מובח
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{103} Heszer, Ibid
\textsuperscript{104} The Bavli, on this and many other aggadaic matters, exaggerates these stories mightily. For example, in B. Avodah Zarah 10b, Antoninus has an underground tunnel from Rome to Palestine in order to serve Rabbi Judah personally.
\textsuperscript{105} More a much more detailed look at these traditions, see, in detail SJD Cohen “The Conversion of Antoninus”. There, Cohen attempts to discern the redactional history of these traditions.
\textsuperscript{106} Cohen, p171
אמ' ליה בנייה ובניהו וגו' אבניו

מה לעשות ול قوله

אמ' ליה תר המשמה

לא כל תני

לא תשוע לכל כלقيامך וגו' עניין זה והוהים הכל

אמ' ר' חנניה בגין ר' רומנוס דשליחיה ר' יעבורייה

איה מילין אמרי ר' אחא גהתו(לא)'(ובשוב איש מילין ארורי דל אשתו(לא)ובשוב

ראו אחוי ולא בIsNull פותח בונים חפורה

מכ את שמעו פיית ראו ראו שמעו וזאיא בך

אנטו(לא)ובשוב א' לרי מירילתי איש מיקירו(ולפיackets)מאי כי כי

אמ' ליה וגו' און פסחה לא אירוכלתיו(לפיackets)אתי כי

אמ' ליה חמ בגו' לא באיתו(לא)פסחה כתיב לכל כל עדא לב

אמ' ליה חמ גוזי(כ') לא ע眾י(לא)פסחה כתיב לכל כי

בון השמעך על אחר גוזא גוזא(לא) ר' חנניה(לפיackets)אתי כי(לפיackets)לא אירוכלתיו(לפיackets)אתי כי(לפיackets)

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107 Cf. Y. Sanhendrin 10:6, 29c
Antoninus asked Rabbi, “What is the law as to building an altar?”

He (Rabbi) said to him (Antoninus), “Build it but hide away its stones.”

He (Antoninus) said to him (Rabbi), “What is the law as to preparing incense?

He (Rabbi) said to him (Antoninus), “Leave out of one the herbs.

Has it not been taught?

‘And the incense which you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves; it shall be for you holy to the Lord’ (Ex. 30:37)? ‘For yourselves you shall not make it,’ but others may make it for you.”

Said R. Hananiah, “It was because of R. Romanos. For Rabbi sent him instructions to make it for him.”

There are some things that indicate that Antoninus converted, and there are some things that indicate that Antoninus did not convert.

They saw him going out on the Day of Atonement wearing a broken sandal [indicating he was converted].

What do you infer from that story? For even God-fearers [who are not full Jews] do so [Showing this may not be proof of conversion, rather that Antoninus was God-fearing].

Antoninus asked Rabbi: “Will you give me food of Leviathan in the world that is coming?”

He (Rabbi) said to him(Antoninus), “Yes.”
He said to him, “Now you are not willing to give me food from a Passover lamb, and yet are you going to give me food from leviathan?”

He said to him, “What can we do for you? With regard to the Passover lamb, it is written But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it” (Ex. 12:48).

When he heard this, he went and circumcised himself. He (Antoninus) came to him (Rabbi).

He said to him, “Rabbi, look at my circumcision!”

He said to him, “I have never looked at mine in my whole life. Should I now look at yours?”

And why was he called, “Our Holy Rabbi”? Because he never laid eyes upon the mark of his circumcision in his entire life.

And why was Nahum called, “the Most Holy”? Because he never gazed upon the face of a coin in his entire life.

That indicates that Antoninus did convert.

There are statements of rabbis that indicate that Antoninus converted.

For R. Hezekiah, R. Abbahu in the name of R. Eleazar: “If proselytes come to be accepted in the world to come, [that is, if proselytes are accepted at all,] Antoninus will be at the head of them.”
In this lengthy story, which begins as a typical question about can Antoninus build an altar\textsuperscript{108} to offer incense, turns in to a full blown discussion concerning Antoninus’s status in the Jewish community. The options the Talmud presents are: that he did, in fact, convert, if we accept the first two reasons given (that he wore broken sandals and that he was let to eat of the Leviathan) or, that he was merely a righteous gentile. Both of these options portray the Roman ruler in an incredibly positive light. This is in startling contrast to Roman emperors of the earlier Flavian and Nerva-Claudian dynasties who, likely as a response to the destruction of the Second Temple and Hadrianic persecutions, are portrayed much less favorably in rabbinic literature. For example, after Hadrian is mentioned, his name is nearly always followed by the epithet, השם הרשעה or “may his bones be shattered\textsuperscript{109}” and Trajan, in Y. Sukkah 55b, 5:1 is called הרשע or, the evil one- far flung cries from either a righteous gentile or someone who has converted.

Another one of these detailed Rabbi/Antoninus conversion stories is found in Y. Megillah 74a, 3:2.

\begin{verse}
אנטולינוס עשה מנורה לבית הכנסת

שמע ר' שמואל בר רב יצחק כי

מהאמי ר' בורוכ אלוהים ברוכ אלמנה

אין אמי בורוכ אלמנה ודה אפרתир אנטיוניסיאן אמי בורוכ אלמנה והד אפרתיר אנטיוניסיאן
\end{verse}


\textsuperscript{109} For one of many examples, see Gen. Rab. 10:3, Gen. Rab. 13:3 etc.
Antoninus made a candelabra for a synagogue

Rabbi heard it and said “Blessed is God who placed it in his heart to make a candelabra for the synagogue.

R. Shmuel b. R. Yizḥak asked a question

What exactly did Rabbi say? “Blessed is God” or Blessed is our God?

If he said “Blessed is God” this would be a proof that Antoninus did not convert, if he said “Blessed is our God” this would be a proof that Antoninus did convert.

There is reason to believe that Antoninus converted, [and] there is reason to believe that Antoninus did not convert.

The simple meaning of this story is, apparently, that Antoninus was a non-Jewish leader who befriended the Jews and donated wares to a synagogue. S. Fine has pointed out how closely this passage mirrors the Qazyion inscription which both dates to the early 3rd century and mentions the Severan family by name. While in that instance, the building, generally assumed to be a synagogue, albeit of peculiar architectural design, is donated to health of the Severan dynasty. No doubt the idea of donations to synagogues is no doubt extant in both the Menorah and the donations. Whether or not this is a proof for the “historical kernel” or whether the story

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110 This is the reading of the Leiden Manuscript. As Cohen points out, the last two lines must be flipped to read as follows. “If he said ‘Blessed is God,’ this indicates that Antoninus converted; if he said Blessed is our God,” this indicates that Antoninus did not convert.”

has been “Judaized” to allow the Romans to donate to the Jews, this story no doubt allows a
glimpse into an idealized version of the Jewish/Roman relationship.

Other stories, which do not mention the conversion narrative of Antoninus, but which
involve the exchange of tangible goods exist as well, most of these stories involve the Emperor
giving goods to Rabbi Judah, and these, too, speak to the friendly relationship between the two.
In Y. Sheviit 36d, 6:1 Antoninus lends Rabbi Judah I thousands of acres of land and Rabbi Judah
I is portrayed as his tenant. Additionally, Gen. R. 20:6 records that the flocks of Rabbi Judah I
and Antoninus mated and their offspring were numerous. Hezser notes that this constitutes “a
service rendered by his emperor-friend.” In these examples, Antoninus gifts or lends physical
materials to his friend, Rabbi Judah I. On their own, they may be seen as gestures of friendship,
but perhaps, in the broader narrative of these stories, they may represent one side of a quid-pro-
quo arrangement, or at least the portrayal of one.

Certain other stories show immaterial services which Rabbi Judah I performed for
Antoninus. For example, Lev. R. 10:4 records that Antoninus asked for Rabbi Judah I to send
him a student to revive a fallen servant. In the tale, Rabbi Judah I sends a lad, and Antoninus’
servant was revived. Also, according to other rabbinic texts, Antoninus asked for Rabbi Judah I’s
prayers on his behalf. These stories, combined with the religious dispensation granted in the
conversion stories by Rabbi Judah to Antoninus, may be indicative of the sort of relationship
which was extant between the two parties. In exchange for the physical support of the Severii,
Rabbi Judah I and his circle provided non-tangible, tacit support for the Romans in the form of

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112 S. Klein, in “The Estates of R. Judah Ha-Nasi and the Jewish Community of the TransJordanic Region,” JQR 545-556 takes this story literally as identified the fields as Gaulanitis.
113 Heszer 443
114 Y. Sanhedrin 29c, 10:5
laws, political backing, and religious rhetoric. This is very reminiscent of the overall relationship between the two, and the dynamic manifests itself into the literary tales.

As noted above, it is apparent that these stories are not to be taken as a literal historical rendering of what happened between Rabbi Judah I and whichever emperor Antoninus is. There is no extra-rabbinic evidence, either epigraphic or archeological in nature, to corroborate these largely fantastical tales and certainly no record from the Roman side which lends credence to their veracity. Thus the exact details of the story cannot be safely used for historical reconstruction. However, the historical meaning and message behind these stories is clear. The Rabbi/Antoninus stories are the product of the relationship between the Severan emperors and the Patriarchate in the eyes of the rabbis. The rabbis portrayed close ties between the two figures to shed light on the period of warm relations which existed under the Severans and to identify their movement with the ruling powers. It is understandable that after the period of anti-Jewish emperors in Rome dating back to the destruction of the Second Temple 150 years prior to this period, once a dynasty of emperors from the Near East emerged whose customs and rites were familiar to the rabbis and whose policies were not openly anti-Jewish, rather the opposite, the rabbis wanted to identify themselves with them. These stories represent that identification.

That noted, perhaps I have found the answer to a question SJD Cohen poses at the end of his article on the conversion of Antoninus. When discussing the differences between how the Bavli and Yerushalmi portray foreign leaders, Cohen notes that, as a whole, the Yerushalmi has no use for fantastical stories about non-Jews. Cohen concludes his article saying “Why did the Yerushalmi tell the story of Antoninus’ conversion? I do not know.” I would, perhaps, like to

115 Cohen p 171
answer Prof. Cohen’s question as follows: the Yerushalmi portrays the conversion of Antoninus because it is the highest possible honor the rabbis can bestow upon their friend in Rome, Antoninus. In a way similar to how universities award doctorates *honoris causa* to those who they feel have earned the accolade, the rabbis bestowed upon Antoninus an honorary conversion, due to their affiliation with him and his family.
Chapter 4: Expansion of Rabbinic and Patriarchal Power in Light of Roman Law

Another area which appears to attest of the relationship between the two groups is the expansion of the Patriarchate in light of Roman law. As noted above, the Severii rose in the aftermath of a low point in Jewish/Roman relations. Following the Bar-Kokhba rebellion in 135 CE, Hadrian levied a series of harsh persecutions against the Jews of Roman Palestine. Some of these prohibitions had been repealed by the time Severus ascended his throne, but there is no doubt there was tension between Rome and the Jews. However, rather than impose further restriction or persecutions, Severus and his sons opened the doors for Jews to hold higher offices and positions of authority. As noted above, Uplian records that under the Severan dynasty, Jews were afforded new political rights and positions to which they never could have risen before then. In this context of increased liberalized attitudes towards the Jews, a floruit of Jewish writing and traditions occurred, the likes of which have not been matched in the past 1800 years. It is commonly accepted amongst scholars that it is this period which saw the redaction of Mishnah and many of the Midrashim on the Bible. These developments likely were aided by the advancement of the rabbinic stature which was made possible by these Severan edicts.

With this new Severan support, or, even as some scholars term it, sponsorship, the rabbis became much more entrenched in the political realm of the Roman Near East. In particular they did this by capitalizing on the new, more liberal edict allowing Jews to hold municipal office.

116 Antoninus Pius granted permission for Jews to circumcise their sons Ca. 150, as recorded in the Digest, 48:8:11
117 See note 55
118 For a discussion of various theories and dates regarding the redaction, see E.P Sanders Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion 63-64
This edict opened these positions to all Jews, but it appears the rabbis and particularly the Patriarchal family responded to the Severan edict with the most gusto. This lenient attitude of the Severans manifested into an expansion of rabbinic authority onto matters which before then they could not have ruled. S.J.D. Cohen has compiled all Tannaitic cases ruled on by rabbis and found that much of earlier rabbinic authority was limited to spiritual matters, such as purity and marriage laws. However, for cases relating to R. Judah I, which would have been adjudicated immediately after the new legislation, a different story is told. Marriage laws are still the most cited, but purity laws drop to third on the list. What is more interesting, however, is that civil laws now rise to second place. Prior to this Severan edict, Rabbi Judah I would not have had the authority to rule on these matters, only now is the authority expanded once Jews are allowed to take public office. These edicts did not take place in a vacuum and this likely coincided with the urbanization of the rabbinic movement treated above. This new expansion of the rabbinic office to include municipal posts not only expands rabbinic jurisdiction, but it allowed for a greater stature of the movement.

Also, the powers of the rabbi expanded not only in terms of their jurisdiction, but also the officers they were allowed to appoint. In this period, the idea of a מַנוֹנָי or appointment, where the Patriarch selects figures to fill public roles in communities began to develop. For example, Y. Ta'anit 68a, 4:2 records

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119 SJD Cohen, “The Place of the Rabbi in Jewish Society” 161
120 Cohen’s findings, based off of the Mishnah, Tosefta, Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre, show that of the 128 cases, 27.6% revolve around purities and 19.4% around marriage. The next closest item is laws concerning oath-takers which only amount to 8.2%, showing a clear bent towards the first two.
121 What is rather interesting is the absence of any mention in rabbinic literature of this edict. However, this can be explained if the redactors of the text would not want to appear as if their expanded power emanated from Rome.
Rabbi Judah I would appoint two appointees at a time

If they were worthy, they would stay. If not, they would be removed.

When he was dying he instructed his son, “Don’t do it this way, rather, appoint each at a time.”

In this passage the Patriarch is shown appointing officials. To which office they are appointed is unsaid, but it clearly shows the broad authority which the Patriarchs had in their appointments.

Another passage which highlights this power is found in Y. Yevamot. Here, the Patriarch is approached by townspeople asking him to appoint over them leaders. What is noteworthy here is both that the townspeople approached the Patriarch for the appointment (rather than he approaching them) and the wide jurisdiction shown.

The men of Simonia came to Rabbi Judah I

They said to him, “find us one man who can deliver sermons, serve as a judge, act as a sexton, serve as a scribe, teach us,
and fulfill all our needs”\textsuperscript{122}.

These sorts of appointments only begin to develop in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century\textsuperscript{123}, concurrent with this new Severan law. It appears, also, that for the better part of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century, the process of appointing officials was strictly a patriarchal power\textsuperscript{124} \textsuperscript{125}. Y. Sanhedrin 19a, 1:3 records specifically that these powers were now given to the Patriarchs, to the exclusion of other groups of authority.

It is said “A court that appoints without the knowledge of the Patriarch, its appointment is not an appointment (ie, the appointment is invalid)

A Patriarch who appoints without the knowledge of the court, his appointment is an appointment” (i.e. his appointment is valid)

Additionally, there are several instances where Rabbi Judah refrained from appointing rabbis who opposed to him. Y Mo'ed Qatan, 81c,3:1 records a long passage about Rabbi Judah’s interaction with a sage who opposed him and the repercussions of that.

\textsuperscript{122} J Yevamot 13a 12:6
\textsuperscript{123} Schwartz, \textit{The Jews in Imperial Society} 122, Alon, 719. Levine, in \textit{תקופת ר' יהודה הנשיא}, argues for different periods of appointments, and that the Patriarchal period of appointing begins around the turn of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century, but his argument appears to lacking textual evidence.
\textsuperscript{124} Alon, Ibid cf Y. Hagigah I 76c,1:8 Nedarim 42b 10:8
\textsuperscript{125} Levine argues sharply for this connection in \textit{Rabbinic Class} 36, but does so without mentioning the context of the Severan legislation. Furthermore, Levine states that “[The Patriarchate] by the time of R. Judah I, was fully recognized by the Roman authorities.” While this statement would significantly help my thesis, I cannot find any solid evidence to prove this, rather I will treat it as a strong conjecture.
Rabbi had high regard for Bar Eleasha [his son-in-law].

Bar Qappara said to him, “Everyone brings questions to Rabbi, and you do not bring questions to him.”

He said to him, “What should I ask him?”

He said to him, “Ask: ‘It looks down from heaven, it searches the corners of the house. All the winged creatures fear.’ ‘The young men saw me and withdrew, the aged rose and stood; and laid their hand on their mouth. They say, ‘Ho Ho. He who is taken is taken in his sin.’”

[Upon hearing this riddle,] Rabbi turned and saw [Bar Qappara] laughing. Rabbi said, “I do not recognize you [as a] sage.”

And [Bar Qappara] realized that he would not be appointed as an official of Rabbi’s court for the rest of his days [and it served him right]127.

What is critical to glean from this passage is the consolidation of power by the Patriarchate. Soon after this edict arose, they were exercising considerable power. Only they

126 J Moed Qatan 81c, 3:1
127 Translation with an eye towards Neusner.
could decide who would serve in these public positions, which had great influence on the people. The people, then, would be more amenable to Patriarchal positions. Additionally, Rabbi Judah used this power to purge from offices those whom he did not like or felt were worthy of the positions. Very soon, rabbis who were close to the patriarchate took up most, if not all, of the prestigious civil jobs across the Galilee, cementing power behind the Patriarchate.

Goodblatt has gone on as far as to say that the power of the Gamalielian Patriarchate (of which Rabbi Judah I was the most prominent member) resembled a monarchy at times. However, it appears that Goodblatt’s characterization is perhaps too strong. There are numerous cases in rabbinic literature where Rabbi Judah’s appointments were not accepted by the people. The Talmud in J Ta’anit 81a, 4:2 records a case where popular opinion derails one of Rabbi Judah’s appointees.

And appoint R. Ḥama the son of Ḥaninah to its head
And why hadn’t Rabbi Judah already appointed him?
Says R. Drosah, because the people of Sepphoris had cried out against him in Sepphoris.

128 J Ta’anit 4:2 is another example
129 The Monarchic Principle 135. In fairness, Goodblatt argues that the Patriarchate wanted themselves to be perceived as a monarchy outside of any Roman context, and marshals Babylonian evidence about Davidic descent to support his claim. It could be that by the time of the redaction of the Bavli, there was a notion of Davidic descent about the Gamalielian Patriarchate in collective Jewish memory, but I have not found any in Palestinian sources.
Clearly this narrative is indicative of the fact that the Patriarchal power was not unlimited and that they did have to account for the will of the people when they appointed, lest their appointees not be allowed to take their positions. Another narrative similar to the one above occurs in the Talmud in Pe’ah. In this instance, R. Yosi, a student of R. Judah I, also had trouble appointing individuals when the townspeople did not want them.

R. יוסי עсал לכפרה
בֵּנֵא מַקוֹמָה לֹא פָרַגְּסָה
ולא כֶּבֶל נְעִיָּה

Rabbi Yose went to Kuprah

He wanted to appoint for them *parnasim*

But they would not accept it on themselves.

Again, there is a reluctance by the residents of the village to accept the appointment made for them. Clearly, those who were appointing did not have a monarchic status, rather an elevated one which was still subject to the desires of the people whom they governed.

However, once they existed, the appointments began to be for jobs even outside strictly civil jobs. This too appears concurrent with another law passed by the Severii. Modestin, as preserved in the *Digest*\(^{131}\), records that Jews were permitted to serve both as guardians (אפיטרופוס) and as liturgies for Gentiles. This is significant because it shows the growing stature of Jews within the eyes of the empire. Furthermore, it widens the scope of what positions of

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\(^{130}\) J Peah 21a, 8:7
\(^{131}\) Dig. 27:1:15:6, as cited in Linder, p 110
authority were now open to Jews, all thanks to the Severan edicts. This notion of the expansion of the power of the Patriarchate and the rabbis manifests in many different ways, as shown above, but it also fits into the broader narrative of provincials during the Severan dynasty. Certainly the most famous piece of legislation enacted by emperors from the dynasty was the Constitutio Antoninina enacted in 212, during the reign of Caracalla. This landmark legislation granted Roman citizenship to all freemen in the empire. Reasons behind the edict are still fuzzy\textsuperscript{132}, but there is no doubt that the extension of the powers to the Jews and the Patriarchate are in line with this dynasty’s overall policies.

Additionally, the prestige of their group also increased during this period. This rise, evidenced in numerous Talmudic sources shown above, is also attested in the archeological record of the period. Most prominently, the catacombs in Bet Shearim show the elevated status of the Patriarch and his family. These catacombs, excavated between 1936-1959\textsuperscript{133}, are the most concrete archeological evidence which exists to support the advance of the Patriarchate during this period. Bet Shearim, the Galilean necropolis at the western end of the Jezreel valley, was Rabbi Judah I’s home prior to his move to Sepphoris. As noted above\textsuperscript{134}, Rabbi Judah I moved

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{132} Scholars offer such as ideas as a thank you present to the empire after he escaped an assassination plot to wanting to expand his tax base.
\textsuperscript{133} T. Rajak, “The Rabbinic Dead and the Diaspora Dead at Beth She’arim”, in \textit{The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture} p 349
\textsuperscript{134} See page 13
\end{footnotes}
away from Bet Shearim to Sepphoris in his old age, but there are Tannaitic stories which connect him to the graves of the city and he is likely buried there\(^\text{135}\).

What is most striking, however, is the difference in what is believed to be his grave, shown above in figures 6 and 7, and all other graves in Bet Shearim. Most of the graves are unmarked and entombed in a large room with many other graves, as was typically the custom of that age\(^\text{136}\) and of those that do have some indication of who is buried there, over 80% of those writings are in Greek. However, in Catacomb 14, believed to the Patriarchal burial site, there are over 130 sarcophagi which were found, only 13 of which that had inscriptions\(^\text{137}\), nearly all of which were in Hebrew and many of which match names of known Patriarchs, including two sons of Rabbi Judah I, Rabbi Gamliel and Rabbi Shimon. Additionally, this catacomb is by far the most ornate and has an outer façade which is more elaborate than that of other caves. Inside the cave, as opposed to the cluttered feel of many of the others, Catacomb 14 is rather large and

\(^{135}\) J Kelayim 32a-b, 9:3 J Eruvin 18c

\(^{136}\) Cf. Z. Weiss, “Social Aspects of Burial in Beth She’arim”, in The Galilee in Late Antiquity p 358 and see bibliography there.

\(^{137}\) Rajak, p 354
spacious. All the way in the back of the cave, there is a special burial chamber which, unfortunately, is unmarked, but its unique size and set up has led scholars to speculate that is the tomb of Rabbi Judah I. The clear, marked distinction between this burial site and all of the others in Bet Shearim is a clear indication of the status of the Patriarchate and shows the extent of its rise.

Additionally, Roman patristic evidence attests to the rise of the Patriarchate during this time period. Origen, the mid-3rd century CE Church father who lived in Caesarea, wrote a letter to Africanus discussing the historical accuracy of the story of Susanna. In his letter, he wrote about the status of the Jews and Romans in his time. In part, the letter reads:

“Now that the Romans rule and the Jews pay the two drachmas to them, we, how have had experience of it, know how much power the ethnarch has among them and that he differs in little from a king of the nation. Trials are held according to the law, and some are condemned to death. And though there is not full permission for this, still it is not done without the knowledge of the ruler.”

Origen’s testimony is considered to be accurate by most, if not all, scholars, as his argument about the story of Susanna would be worthless without the current testimony.

Origen’s letter speaks to the amount of power given to the ethnarch and the non-explicit authority which he wields. This evidence fits nicely with the established pattern, and also adds credence to the notion that there is no “smoking gun” pointing to the authority of the Patriarch from the Roman front. The authority granted to the Patriarch was, in the eyes of the Romans,

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138 Ep. Ad Afric. 20 14
139 Translation by Goodman
140 See M. Goodman, p 128 in Galilee in Late Antiquity for more on this point.
141 Generally assumed to be the patriarch. See Goodman, p 132-133 for a detailed analysis of the name.
officially unofficial. All the laws which were passed did not single him or his office out individually, rather the power which they acted came in almost a tacit way. Origen provides a wonderful corroboration of this in his letter.
Conclusion

When looking at the nearly 700-year period of Roman-Byzantine rule over Eretz-Israel in late antiquity, there is no time of greater friendship and cooperation between the imperial Romans and the local Jewish population than the generation between 193-225, when the Severan Emperors ruled Rome. During this time the Romans were able to forge ahead with their initiatives in the Near-East unimpeded by Jewish rabble rousing or rebellions and cemented their standing across the Levant. Also during this time, the rabbinic movement, based in the Galilee and led by the Patriarch Rabbi Judah I, was able to expand its authority and power and firmly established itself as normative. These two simultaneous occurrences are no coincidence, though the latter appears more to be more connected to the former. The Patriarchate identified strongly with the Severan dynasty during this age. By closely mirroring the Romans on urbanization, by polemically using halakha to both favor and not offend the ruling dynasty, and by showing their strong identity with them as seen in the Rabbi/Antoninus stories, the rabbis were able to use this fortunate set of circumstances to greatly increase their standing. Whether or not this is a quid pro quo arrangement with the Severan dynasty responding with special favors to the rabbis is unclear as the evidence is circumstantial at best. I suspect they did not openly support the rabbis, though a tacit sponsorship cannot be ruled out. Yet there is no doubt that they were certainly not openly antagonistic towards the Jews as some of their predecessors might have been, perhaps as an elongated “thank you” for support during their ascension to the throne.

What emerges from this study is the complex, intertwined relationship between politics, religion, and identity which existed among the Jews of Eretz-Israel in late antiquity. With their Temple destroyed almost 150 years prior, this generation of Jews had to decide whether to
harbor their ill will towards the Romans and get left behind, or embrace the kinder, gentler face of the Roman Empire that the Severans offered, and keep progressing forward. Under the leadership of Rabbi Judah I, they chose the latter.

What also emerges from this study is the value of close readings and vigilant hermeneutics when studying ancient texts, whether religious or secular in nature. Because nearly two millennia have passed since their writing and redaction, every text needs to be evaluated with suspicious, discerning eyes. Especially with rabbinic texts, whose scholarly treatment has undergone a complete reversal in the past generation, careful analysis is needed to coax out the historical value in them. It is always there; it is up to scholars to find it.
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