

## What Has Rome to Do with Jerusalem? The Reception of Turnus Rufus and Rabbi Akivah in the Talmud and in Contemporary Israel

*Gabriel Danzig*<sup>1</sup>

Rabbinic literature is among the most widely read literatures in the world today. Every day, tens of thousands of people participate in informal classes on the Talmud, study it in school or with learning partners, or read it on their own. Although written in ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, it has been translated into many modern languages including English (at least four times), French, Russian and modern Hebrew. Compendiums of Talmudic material in Korean translation have become popular best-sellers in South Korea,<sup>2</sup> and the Talmud as a whole has been translated into Arabic.<sup>3</sup>

The Rabbinic writings contain records of conversations and debates on Jewish law that occurred in the academies of ancient Israel and Babylon in the centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem and prior to the Muslim conquest. In the Talmud and in Rabbinic compilations of Midrash we find, aside from legal material, discussions of Jewish theology and human behavior in the form of stories or *aggadoth*. We also find anecdotes about leading sages and reports of conversations between Jewish sages and Roman leaders, prominent matrons, philosophers, and others. It is this last category, reported conversations between Jewish sages and prominent Romans in the Talmud and their reception today, that is the subject of this paper.

The form in which conversation with non-Jews appear is not the original form in which such conversation would have occurred. Conversations between Jews and Romans in ancient Judaea would have taken place in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic. Some of the recorded conversations, however, contain

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2 See Ross Arbes, “How the Talmud became a best-seller in South Korea” (*The New Yorker*, June 23, 2015) <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-the-talmud-became-a-best-seller-in-south-korea>> (accessed 1 December 2016).

3 I was not able to find a balanced account of this translation, but the following site offers some information about the controversy surrounding it. <<https://thetalmudblog.wordpress.com/2012/07/05/on-the-arabic-talmud/>> (accessed 1 December 2016).

puns on Hebrew words, which would not have been part of a conversation in Greek. So these conversations have undergone significant revision from their historical form, if they are not complete fiction. But although they are recorded in Hebrew and Aramaic, these conversations do reflect something of the Hellenistic presence in Israel. Rabbinic literature contains numerous Greek and Latin terms in transliteration, and one often senses that a Hebrew or Aramaic word has acquired some of the connotations of a Greek parallel. There are also thematic parallels to Hellenistic writings and occasional quotations from Hellenistic Greek literature or even from classical sources.<sup>4</sup> Although the reported conversations with non-Jews often fail to preserve the name of the non-Jew, in some cases they do. So there may well be an historical basis for at least some of these conversations.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I will examine the reception of a disputation between Rabbi Akivah and Tineius (Turnus) Rufus, the governor of Judaea during the period leading up to the Bar-Kokhba revolt (about 132–136). Turnus Rufus appears several times in Rabbinic literature, often in conversation with Rabbi Akivah.<sup>6</sup> Rufus and Akivah are historical figures; but while our records of these disputations may descend ultimately from historical conversations, I will treat them here in their current form as historical fiction. The conversations between these two men deal with fundamental ideological questions about Jewish belief and behavior, and as a result they feature commonly in Jewish educational activities, both in schools and in extra-curricular contexts. After I studied one of the disputations with my son, he was asked, quite coincidentally, to teach a class on it in for his high-school youth group. Afterwards, I attended a lecture at his school in which the head of the school, Rabbi Avinoam Horowitz, discussed the Turnus Rufus' role in the destruction of Jerusalem (11/2/16).

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4 See the seminal writings of Saul Lieberman, especially his volumes *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942) and *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950).

5 The disputation between Rabbi Hoshaya and an anonymous philosopher concerning the circumcision (*Br. Rabbah* 11) has a strong claim to historicity. See Gabriel Danzig, "What to say when you don't have a good answer: Rabbi Hoshaya and the philosopher", *Revue des Études Juives* (forthcoming). For the historicity of these disputations in general, see Moshe David Herr, "The Historical Significance of the Dialogues between Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries", in Joseph Heinneman and Dov Noy (eds.), *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971) 123–150.

6 Circumcision: *Tanhuma Tazria* 7 (Buber); Shabat: *Sanhedrin* 65b, *Br. Rabbah* 11.5, see *Tanhuma, Ki Tisa* 33, *Pesikta Rabati* 23.8; Charity: *Bava Batra* 10b; Hatred for Rome: *Tanhuma, Truma* 3; Meeting Rufina: *Avodah Zarah* 20a, see *Nedarim* 50b; Killing Akivah: *Yer. Sota* 25a-b, *Yer. Brachot* 14b; Plowing Jerusalem: *Yer. Ta'anit* 25b; *Bavli Ta'anit* 29a.