

The Parable of the Disappearing Gladiators: Interpreting a Late Antique Cultural Reference in Genesis Rabba's Exposition of the Cain and Abel Narrative

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Abstract

According to the *mashal* (parable) attributed to Shim'on ben Yoḥai in Gen. Rab. 22:9, the murder of Abel (Gen 4:8–10) may be likened to a gladiator's death in the arena. This article argues that the parable assumes the audience's familiarity with gladiatorial shows, which came to an end in the early fifth century CE. Tracing the transmission of the *mashal* in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas (Bereshit 9) and the earliest commentaries on Genesis Rabba, it further argues that the gladiatorial allusion was not understood after the demise of the games, and that the Tanḥuma's version is a later reformulation. The preservation of the imagery in the earliest extant manuscripts of Genesis Rabba, despite the fact that it was not well-understood when they were produced, demonstrates the conservation of a reference to a late antique public institution in medieval copies and thus contributes to the knowledge of Genesis Rabba's textual history.

Keywords

gladiator – midrash – Genesis – Tanḥuma – *mashal*

Introduction¹

Throughout the Roman imperial period, gladiatorial combat, “a specifically Roman form of entertainment,”² was staged in hippodromes, theatres, and amphitheatres of the Greek East.³ At Caesarea Maritima, Josephus reports that the inauguration of Herod’s theatre and amphitheatre ca. 10 BCE was celebrated with lavish shows such as are “customary at Rome” which featured athletic spectacles, wild beasts, and a “great number of gladiators” (πολὸν πλῆθος μονομάχων).⁴ In the second century CE, the lowering of the arena of Caesarea’s western hippodrome as part of its adaptation for use as an amphitheatre is consistent with the performance of gladiatorial games⁵ and Eusebius of Caesarea reported the sentence of the Palestinian martyrs to train in an imperial gladiatorial school in 307 CE.⁶ Elsewhere in Roman Palestine, knowledge of gladiators is demonstrated by Roman period oil lamps featuring combat scenes and weapons,⁷ and graffiti resembling a *murmillio* and *retiarius* are found in Catacomb 4 at Beit She’arim.⁸ But after reaching the height of their popularity, gladiatorial games were staged less frequently throughout the Empire during

1 I am grateful to Olympe de Becker, Marc Bregman, Sebastian Brock, Peter Gendelman, Moshe Lavee, Eyal Levinson, Paul Mandel, and Zvi Septimus for answering questions and sharing expertise. My sincere thanks to Ezra Chwat, César Merchán-Hamann, and Cassy Shachar for their help in accessing library resources during lockdown.

2 Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 115.

3 Carter, “Romanization through Spectacle”; Carter, “Gladiators and Monomachoi”; Mann, “Gladiators in Greek East”; Golden, *Greek Sport*, 74–104; Carter, *Presentation*; Robert, *gladiateurs*.

4 Josephus, *Ant.* 16.136–141; cf. *Ant.* 15.341, *J.W.* 1.415. On the dating, see van Henten, *Flavius Josephus*, 249–50 n. 2329. Spielman, *Jews and Entertainment*, 18 n. 6, 20, 50, 66; Weiss, “Jews and Games.” On whether the “amphitheatre” may be identified as the western hippodrome, see the discussion and bibliography in Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, 24–28, 267; Welch, *Roman Amphitheatre*, 163–85; Dodge, “Amphitheaters.”

5 In addition, salvage excavations in 2010 confirmed the presence of an amphitheatre in the northeast of the city, dated to the second century CE. See Gendelman, “Caesarea Maritima,” 147; Porath, *Caesarea*, 27, 126, 131, 139, 155.

6 Eusebius, *Mart. Pal.* 7.4, 8:2–3 (Syriac 26, 30); Potter, “Constantine and Gladiators”; Patrich, “Martyrs of Caesarea.”

7 On the gladiator lamp discovered at Beit Nattif, see Lichtenberger, “Jews and Pagans,” 195–96. On Israel Museum 76.6.1482, 76.6.1179, and 76.6.1174, see Israeli and Avida, *Oil-Lamps*, plates 20, 25, and 28 (25, 27, 180). On the fragment discovered at the basilica gate at Beit She’an, see no. 510 in Hadad, “Oil Lamps,” 131–32. On 169860 in Erets Yisrael Museum, see Navo, Schlossman, and Yorkoff, “Catalogue,” 63 no. 191. On the lamp discovered in Catacomb 1, Hall M, Room IV at Beit She’arim, see Mazar, *Beth She’arim*, 88, 127, 145, 147 fig. 23.4.

8 Hall C; Mazar, 125–27. On the graffiti in the Roman-period tomb at Tel ‘Eitun, see Tzaferis, “Monumental”; Olshanetsky, “Do we really,” 63–67.

the fourth century, and ended at the beginning of the fifth.⁹ Numerous venues were repurposed for animal hunts (*venationes*) and, in Palestine and the Decapolis, many buildings for mass entertainment fell out of use completely by the early-sixth century CE.¹⁰ In Caesarea, for instance, the eastern hippodrome functioned into the late Byzantine period and a renovated theatre served until the Muslim conquest.¹¹

Knowledge of gladiatorial combat is evident in rabbinic texts. The Tosefta debates the permissibility of attending the games and reports (apparently accurately) that beans were a staple of the gladiatorial diet.¹² Amoraic midrashim refer to gladiators in exegetical parables, and the Palestinian Talmud (Git. 4.9, 46b) considers whether one should redeem those who sell themselves to a gladiatorial school.¹³ The Babylonian Talmud (Git. 46b–47a) reports that Resh Lakish was one such captive, and transmits the baraita that gladiators are so ravenous that they eat their main meal at the first hour of the day.¹⁴

This paper will examine a *mashal* in Gen. Rab. 22:9 that assumes the audience's knowledge of the rules of gladiatorial combat. Attributed to Shim'on ben Yoḥai, renowned student of Rabbi Akiva, it likens the murder of Abel at the hands of his jealous brother Cain (Gen 4:8–10) to the slaying of a gladiator in the arena. As the gladiator died with the king's assent, the *mashal* daringly implies God's culpability in the first murder. Though this parable has been discussed in previous studies, notably the masterful analysis of Joshua Levinson,¹⁵

9 Wiedemann, *Emperors*, 158; Wiedemann, "Ende"; Milliman, "Decline"; Potter, "Roman Games," 187; Potter, "Constantine and Gladiators," 604; Jones, "Organization of Spectacle"; Mann, "Gladiators in Greek East," 277; Dunkle, *Gladiators*, 201–6. Kyle (*Sport*, 336) dates the end of gladiatorial shows in the East to the mid-fourth century. Writing between 416–428 CE, Cyril of Alexandria referred to gladiatorial combat as a thing of the past: "When Greek superstition still held sway, gladiatorial contests were performed by the Romans at particular times." See Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 4, 19 (697A) (ed. Riedweg, 1:287–88; cf. cix–cxvi).

10 Weiss, "Mass Entertainment"; Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, 257.

11 Porath, "Spina," 22*; Gendelman, "Chronological," 130; Porath, "Theatre," 28.

12 t. 'Abod. Zar. 2:7 is discussed below. On the *sagina gladiatoria*, see the statement attributed to Rabbi Shim'on in t. Beṣah 1:23 (ed. Lieberman, 2:285; par. y. Beṣah 1:11, 61a, cf. b. Beṣah 14b); Brettler and Poliakoff, "Rabbi Simeon," 97–98. Cf. Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 1:19 (K. 529), and the analysis of bone samples from the gladiator cemetery at Ephesus reported in Lösch et al., "Stable Isotope." Note, however, that Lieberman understands לוֹדִיּוֹת (*ludiyot*) as "women of Lydda" rather than "gladiator's food" (*Tosefta Ki-Fshutah*, 5:939).

13 On the parables, see below. On redemption, see also the statements attributed to Shim'on ben Lakish in y. Ter. 8.5, 45d (par. y. 'Abod. Zar. 2:3, 41b).

14 b. Shabb. 10a, par. b. Pesah. 12b. On Resh Lakish, see preceding note and Boyarin, *Unheroic*, 127–50; Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian*, 119–32; Brettler and Poliakoff, "Rabbi Simeon."

15 Levinson, "Fatal Fictions."

this paper will draw attention to two aspects of its textual history that have so far gone unnoted. First, the demise of the cultural institution to which the *mashal* refers can be dated relatively precisely to the beginning of the fifth century CE. In addition, a similar *mashal* appears in Midrash Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas (Bereshit 9). While this latter has been used as an explanatory parallel to elucidate the version in Genesis Rabba,¹⁶ this paper will focus on the differences between them, the most conspicuous being that, in Midrash Tanḥuma, the gladiators are missing. To determine the significance, I will first examine the version in Genesis Rabba in its own right. I will then turn to the earliest commentaries on Genesis Rabba to show that medieval exegetes struggled to understand the gladiatorial imagery. Finally, I will consider the place of the Tanḥuma's text in the reception history of Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *mashal* and the reasons the parable has been transmitted in two versions.

1 Athletic Gladiators in Genesis Rabba

Gladiators go by different names in rabbinic texts.¹⁷ According to a fragmentary citation in Nathan ben Yehiel's *Sefer he-'Arukh*, Midrash Yelammedenu used the standard Greek term in its exposition of Jacob's blessings (Gen 49:1), reporting that, "A gladiator (מנומכוס, μνομαχος) does not make a will."¹⁸ In Lamentations Rabba and the Palestinian Talmud, explanations of the obscure term זרזיר (*zarzir*) in Prov 30:31 draw comparisons with combatants who may be identified as gladiators (זרזרין).¹⁹ More common, though, are derivations from the Latin *ludus*, which refers to the "games" (*ludi*) or a "gladiatorial school" (*ludus gladiatorum*). The Rabbinic term לודר (*ludar*) means "gladiator"; לודים (*ludim*) refers to the games; and לודאי (*luda'i*) to heads of gladiatorial

16 See *Bereschit Rabba*, ed. Judah Theodor and Chanoch Albeck (henceforth: Theodor-Albeck), commentary ad loc. (216); Halbertal, "If Text," 148, 159 n. 6; Levinson, "Fatal Fictions," 79 n. 104; Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabba*, 1:189.

17 Grossmark, "This May Be Compared"; Poliakov and Poliakov, "Jacob."

18 MS British Library (henceforth BL) Add. 26881, f. 224r; Theodor-Albeck, 1200 and commentary; cf. Kyle, *Spectacles*, 84; Spielman, *Jews and Entertainment*, 208–9.

19 See Buber's edition of Lam. Rab. 5:1 (154); Stern, *Parables*, 133–34; Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 413 s.v. זרזיר I. On the *lanista*'s interest in the combatants being fairly matched, see Carter, "Gladiators," 235; Carter, "Gladiatorial Ranking," 95; Carter, "Armorum"; Potter, *Victor's Crown*, 262–64. The זרזרין seem more likely to be animals in the version in the standard printed text (*Midrash Rabbah*, 2:59), perhaps a reformulation that reflects loss of historical memory concerning the relationship between the *lanista* and his charge. The identity of the combatants in y. Rosh Hash. 1:5, 57a, is difficult to establish with certainty.

schools, *lanistae*.²⁰ The Syriac ܠܕܪܐ (ludārā), “gladiator,” and ܠܕܢܐ (ludon), “arena,” provide parallels for the rabbinic terms.²¹

In Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *masḥal*, the combatants are designated by the generic term *ʾatletin* (אַתְלֵטִין), “athletes.” They can be identified specifically as gladiators by the rules of the combat in which they engage.²² As has been demonstrated in studies of Pauline athletic imagery, the perception of a gladiators as participants in the Hellenistic *agōn* demonstrates the cultural negotiation that accompanied the reception of the games in the eastern provinces.²³ For instance, Fig. 1 shows the funerary relief discovered at Caesarea of a victorious athlete.²⁴ Fig. 2 is the tombstone of Saturnilos, discovered at Smyrna.²⁵ Though Saturnilos was depicted in similar athletic guise, victoriously brandishing his palm branch, the armour and the telltale thracian helmet identify him not as an athlete but a gladiator.²⁶ Similarly the epitaph of Apollonius at Nicomedia commemorates his eight gladiatorial victories as athletic triumphs by describing the combat as an ἀγών and a πυγμὴ (“boxing match”), and the venues as στάδια.²⁷ An explicit designation of gladiators as athletes is found in the second-century CE inscription commemorating the anonymous official who sponsored the games at Tomis. The gladiators are designated Ἀρεως ἀθλητῆρες, “athletes of Ares,” who compete in Ἀραιως ἀθλα, “Ares-like competitions.” Here the god of war serves as a qualifier indicating that, of the many different events that might be designated “athletic,” gladiatorial combat is meant specifically.²⁸

In Genesis Rabba, a parable of two athletic gladiators serves to expound God's exchange with Cain concerning the murder of Abel in Gen 4:9–10. The biblical text reads: “The LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He

20 Jastrow, 695, s.v. ܠܕܪܐ, ܠܕܢܐ; Sokoloff, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 577, s.v. ܠܕܪܐ (“arranger of gladiatorial contests”); Sperber, *Essays*, 10 n. 34. Cf. Sokoloff, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 300, s.v. ܠܕܢܐ (“gladiators”); Brettler and Poliakoff, “Rabbi Simeon,” 95–96 n. 6. See also ܠܘܕܝܘܨ and ܠܘܕܝܘܨ in Lampe, *Patristic*, 812.

21 Payne-Smith, *Compendious*, 237.

22 See notes 40 and 41.

23 Concannon, “Not for Olive Wreath”; Williams, *Paul's Metaphors*, 264–66; Seesengood, *Competing*, 55–61; Fitzgerald, *Cracks*, 140. Cf. note 3; and Weiss, *Games*, 261 n. 121.

24 See Gersht and Gendelman, “Tombs,” 201–2.

25 Junkelmann, *Spiel*, 29.

26 On the contrast between athletic depictions of gladiators in the eastern provinces and text-based gladiatorial tombstones in the west, see Mann, “Gladiators in Greek East,” 283–84; Hrychuk Kontokosta, “Contests,” 336.

27 Dörner, *Inschriften*, 90–91 #91, plate 35/91.

28 Robert, *gladiateurs*, 21–22, 101–3 #41; image in Tocilescu, *Fouilles*, 225. The Syriac ܠܕܢܐ (*ʾatlitā*) may denote “gladiator” in Ephrem, *Hymni de paradiso* 12:6 and *Contra haereses* 41:6. (On the combination of athletic and gladiatorial imagery in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, see Heffernan, *Passion*, 249.)



FIGURE 1 Caesarea Maritima, ca. third century CE
IMAGE COURTESY OF RIVKA GERSHT; THE
SDOT-YAM MUSEUM OF THE ANTIQUITIES
OF CAESAREA MARITIMA, INV. CM.52.2

replied, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' The LORD said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me (צעקים אלי) from the ground.'

These verses raise several theological problems. First, God's enquiry into Abel's whereabouts calls divine omniscience into question. In *Genesis Rabba*, this is addressed in three *meshalim* that treat God's words not as a request for information but as a rhetorical question inviting Cain to confess.²⁹ The midrash then asks why God challenged Cain only after Abel's murder rather than intervening early enough to save him. No resolution is forthcoming, and the

29 Gen. Rab. 22:9. Kadari, "Redactional"; Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 82–92.



FIGURE 2 Smyrna, ca. third century CE

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES,
LEIDEN; INV. L 1901/7/10

audience is left with the disconcerting question of whether an omnipotent God who refrains from preventing evil is in fact complicit.

Gen. Rab. 22:9 reads:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Yoḥai said, "The matter is difficult to express and it is impossible for the mouth to state plainly. It may be likened to two athletes (*atletin*) who were standing and fighting before the king. If the king so wished, he could separate them. He did not want to do so. One overcame the other and killed him, while [the loser] was crying out, saying, 'Let my case be summoned before the king.' Similarly, 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground' (Gen 4:10)."³⁰

³⁰ אמ' ר' שמעון בן יוחי קשה הדבר לאומרו. ואי איפשר לפה לפרשו. לשני אתליטין שהיו עומדין ומתגששין לפני המלך אילו רצה המלך פירשן לא רצה לפרשן. חזק אחד על חבירו והרגו. והיה צווח ואמ' יבעי דיני קדם מלכא. כך קול דמי אחיך צועק אלי מן האדמ'. (MS BL)

Shim'on ben Yoḥai broaches this exposition with extreme caution. The introduction "the matter is difficult to express and it is impossible for the mouth to state plainly" (קשה הדבר לאומרו ואי אפשר לפה לפרשו) is unique in rabbinic literature.³¹ It bears comparison to the expression "if it had not been written in Scripture, it could not be stated" (אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו). Interpretations so prefaced, along with others introduced by the term כביכול ("as if to say"³²), are often attributed to Rabbi Akiva and his students. They explain particular biblical expressions as bold assertions that God behaves in a human way or is subordinate to human command or judgement.³³ For instance, the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael interprets David's prayer to God concerning "the people whom you have redeemed for yourself (אשר פדית לך)" (2 Sam 7:23). An interpretation attributed to Rabbi Akiva and introduced both by the statement "if it had not been written in Scripture, it could not be stated" and by כביכול ("as if to say") treats the expression "whom you have redeemed for yourself" (אשר פדית לך) not as a relative clause describing the "people," but as a statement that the redemption was "for God's own self": "It is as if (כביכול) Israel said before the Omnipresent, 'You have redeemed yourself (עצמך פדית)'"³⁴ In this case, the double negative of the introduction "if it had not been written in Scripture, it could not be stated" indicates that, audacious though the idea may be that God needed redemption, it *can* actually be set forth by the exegete because it is already articulated in Holy Writ. By contrast, the introduction to Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *mashal* states that the matter is downright "impossible" to state plainly and, crucially, does not appeal to Scripture. I suggest this holds the key to its meaning. Unlike the bold theological notions introduced "if it had not been written in Scripture, it could not be stated," the idea that God was responsible

Add. 27169, f. 56r; Theodor-Albeck, 216). On the text, see below and the synopsis in Meyer, *Editorial*, 498–500. (On the absence of Gen. Rab. 21:5–24:3 from MS Vatican ebr. 30, see Barth, *Analysis*, 19.)

31 A similar expression with the same attribution occurs at Gen. Rab. 6:8. Considering how the sun and moon set, Shim'on ben Yoḥai stated, "It is a very difficult matter, and it is impossible for any created being to settle it (דבר קשה למאוד ואי אפשר לבריה לעמוד עליו)" (Theodor-Albeck, 49).

32 On the meaning of כביכול, see Fishbane, *Biblical*, 325–401; Fishbane, *Garments*, 19–32.

33 See the aforementioned studies of Fishbane, and Halbertal, "If Text"; Yadin, *Scripture as Logos*, 138–41; Marmorstein, *Old Rabbinic*, 2:109–13, 126–32. Halbertal and Marmorstein include the introduction of this *mashal* among כתוב מקרא statements. As this latter is used elsewhere in Genesis Rabba (e.g., 5:1, 12:1), the unique formula here requires explanation. כביכול is used in paraphrases of the *mashal* in Pseudo-Rashi's commentary and Samuel Yafe's *Yefeh To'ar*; see below.)

34 Mek. R. Ishmael, Pisha 14 (ed. Lauterbach, 78; ed. Horovitz and Rabin, 51). See Fishbane, *Biblical*, 139–41, 353.

for Abel's murder does not emerge from a hyper-literal reading of a discrete scriptural expression. It is instead the exegete's own inference from the general course of events in the narrative.³⁵ Without a specific biblical expression to justify the accusation of God, the exposition is broached with excessive caution. The statement that it is "impossible" to express such a matter openly is a most appropriate introduction to a *mashal* which, by its very nature, hints at an interpretation without articulating it directly.³⁶ As a consequence, the notion that God was responsible for Abel's death occurs only in the mind of the audience. In the manner of a *double entendre*, the exegete's disclaimer for conveying this audacious idea lies not in the citation of a justificatory proof-text, but rather in the fact that nothing improper has actually been said at all. "Made you think it," says Shim'on ben Yoḥai.³⁷

The statements that the two athletes were "standing and fighting before the king" and that "if the king so wished, he could separate them" identify the event as gladiatorial combat and the king as the *editor* or *munerarius* of the games. This was the role assumed by the Roman Emperor, provincial governor, local magistrate, or priest of the imperial cult who reinforced their public status by hosting lavish public spectacles. The *editor* occupied a position of honour in the amphitheatre, being seated in the imperial box, as can be seen in numismatic depictions of the Flavian Amphitheatre and on the funerary monument of Lusius Storax.³⁸ The seating arrangement draws attention to the *editor* who enacts imperial power by assuming authority over the life and death of the contenders.³⁹ The essential presence of this focus of authority at the gladiatorial games is reflected in the setting of the midrashic combat "before the king."

35 That Gen 4:10 is not being treated as a justificatory proof-text is demonstrated both by its meaning, which cannot be construed as a direct statement that God was culpable, and also by the introduction כִּי ("similarly"), which shows that the point made in the *mashal* is to be applied to the verse. As the latter takes the place of a *nimshal*, the exegetical function of this parable accords with Boyarin's argument that "the *nimshal* represents the biblical narrative for which the *mashal* is the interpreting text" ("Midrash," 129). Although Stern argued that "the *mashal*-proper's narrative is clearly dependent upon the *nimshal*, as story is dependent upon meaning" (*Parables*, 69), he wrote of parables which consist simply of *mashal* and lemma: "When no other information is necessary for the reader to understand the application of the *mashal*'s narrative to the interpretation of the verse, the *nimshal* consists solely of the proof-text" ("David Stern Responds," 277). Compare Dov Weiss's observation that "Abel does not explicitly critique God in the *nimshal*" (*Confrontations*, 234); on the *mashal* as the locus of criticism of God within the rabbinic parable, see Mintz, *Hurban*, 81.

36 Stern, *Parables*, 15.

37 Stern, 50.

38 Golvin, *L'amphithéâtre*, 1:357–62; Bomgardner, *Story*, 11; Elkins, "Locating,"

39 Hopkins, *Death*, 14–20; Fagan, *Lure*, 96–120; Edwards, *Death*, 53–55.



FIGURE 3 Mural of murmillor and thraex; Regio v, Pompeii
REPRODUCED UPON AUTHORISATION OF THE MINISTRY
FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ENVIRONMENT—
ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK OF POMPEII. FURTHER
REPRODUCTION OR DUPLICATION BY ANY MEANS IS
FORBIDDEN

The statement that the king “could separate” the fighters and that the loser’s death occurred when he declined to do so reflect the distinctive rules of gladiatorial combat.⁴⁰ As emphasised by Michael Carter, during the fight itself, the aim of each gladiator was not to kill their opponent, but rather to incapacitate them, thereby compelling the loser to request the *editor* for reprieve (*missio*).⁴¹ The cliff-hanger moment when all awaited the *editor*’s verdict was frequently depicted on mosaics, murals, and oil lamps.⁴² For instance, Fig. 3 shows the mural uncovered at Pompeii in Regio v. It depicts the climax of the combat between a *murmillor* and *thraex*. The latter, with blood pouring from

40 “The Roman gladiatorial games are peculiar—no similar form of public spectacles has been detected in Greek or any other culture ... It was the decision about life and death *after* the combat that made it so specific” (Mann, “Gladiators in Greek East,” 274). Though Zeev Weiss suggested other combat sports that might be meant (*Games*, 269–70; “Roman Leisure,” 12), the reference to *missio* clinches the matter, as was later recognised in Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, 162–63; cf. Levinson, “Fatal Fictions,” 66 n. 24. Cf. the evidence cited above regarding wider reference to gladiators as athletes in the eastern provinces.

41 Carter, “Gladiators,” 236–37; Carter, “Rules of Engagement”; Carter, “‘Sharp’ Weapons”; Carter, “Buttons”; Coleman, “Defeat,” 2–12; Kyle, *Sport*, 284; Fagan, “Gladiatorial”; Ville, *gladiature*, 403–6, 410–24.

42 Wiedemann, *Emperors*, 93; Brown, “Death,” 202; Flaig, “Gladiatorial,” 87; Ville, *gladiature*, 424.

his wounds, has cast his shield aside and raises a finger to request reprieve.⁴³ The winner, dagger in hand, is poised to deliver the *coup de grâce* as all await the *editor's* verdict.

In reaching a decision, the *editor* could take into account the response of the audience. An inscription discovered at Beneventum records cries of *missos missos*, presumably of spectators impressed by a show of bravery, and *iugula iugula* ("cut his throat") of the mob baying for blood.⁴⁴ A reference to the crowd's acclamation may be found in the Tosefta's discussion of the circumstances in which one is permitted to attend the "theatres of the gentiles" (t. 'Abod. Zar. 2:7). According to Rabbi Nathan, the opportunity to "cry out and save lives" is just cause for attendance.⁴⁵ But whatever the opinion of the spectators, the decision regarding the loser's death lay with the *editor* alone, who would be liable for the cost if a hired gladiator died.⁴⁶ Documentary and epigraphic references therefore attribute a gladiator's death directly to the *editor*. In the *Satyricon*, for instance, at Trimalchio's dinner party, Echion criticised Norbanus for hiring and killing only inexpensive gladiators, including *equites* comparable in stature to the depictions on an oil lamp: *occidit de lucerna equites*. And in Juvenal's third satire, Umbricius complained about social upstarts, including former musicians at provincial shows who now hosted games of their own and "kill (*occidunt*) to please the crowds when the mob demands it with a twist of the thumb." In both cases, the subject of the verb *occidere* is the *editor* rather than the gladiator who actually wielded the sword.⁴⁷

In Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *mashal*, the request for *missio* is expressed in a series of statements indicating that the king declined to separate the fighters, one overcame the other, the winner killed the loser, and the loser "was crying out." The narration of the loser's cry after his death was a point of confusion in textual transmission; the word והרגו ("and killed him") was omitted in several later manuscripts.⁴⁸ However the conjunction *vav* with participle shows that the phrase beginning ויהיה צווח ("while [the loser] was crying out") is

43 On the expression *ad digitum* in Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.5.20, and Martial, *Spect.* 31.5, see Ville, *gladiature*, 412.

44 *CIL* IX 1671 (*ILS* 5134); Ville, *gladiature*, 410–24; Dunkle, *Gladiators*, 129–40.

45 Par. y. 'Abod. Zar. 1:7, 40a; b. 'Abod. Zar. 18b. Jacobs, "Theatres," 332–44; Berkowitz, *Execution*, 155–57.

46 Carter, "Gladiatorial Ranking"; cf. note 41.

47 *Satyricon* 45:11; Juvenal, *Sat.* 3:36–37. See further Brown, "Death," 205; Coleman, "Fatal," 50. Cf. Ville, *gladiature*, 417 n. 136, 419 n. 141; Barton, *Sorrows*, 19; Levinson, "Fatal Fictions," 70.

48 *MSS* Stuttgart Cod. Or. Qu. 32, f. 51r; Bodleian Opp. Add. Fol. 3, f. 43r; Bodleian Opp. Add. Fol. 51, f. 18v; National Library of Israel (henceforth NLI) 24° 5977, f. 28r. In *MS* BL Add. 16406, f. 31r, the word is missing from the main text but has been added in the margin. והרגו is present in *MSS* BL Add. 27169, f. 56r; Vatican ebr. 60, f. 40v; Bibliothèque nationale

circumstantial, and that multiple simultaneous actions are being described.⁴⁹ This supports Levinson's understanding of the midrash as *ekphrasis*, capturing in textual form the final moment of the combat in which one of the gladiators lost, appealed for reprieve, and received the negative decision of the *editor*.⁵⁰

The *editor's* responsibility for the outcome is indicated by the loser's statement, "Let my case be summoned before the king" (יבעי דיני קדם מלכא). The moment of this declaration in the proceedings is open to interpretation. The possibility favoured by Levinson is that the request was made immediately after the negative verdict. It is therefore "the loser's defiant cry to the king before his death, a cry in which he in fact accuses the king." Levinson adduced the support of the parallel in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas. This latter interprets the cry of Abel's blood as an explicit condemnation of God by indicating that "crying to me" (צועקים אלי) should be read, by substituting *ʾalef* for *ʾayin*, as "crying against me" (צועקים עלי).⁵¹ However, explaining the version in Genesis Rabba as a similarly outspoken incrimination of God raises two problems. First, Genesis Rabba cites the biblical lemma as it appears in the Masoretic Text, and there is no suggestion that this midrash is based on wordplay.⁵² In addition, the request "let my case be summoned before the king" is an incongruous response to a death sentence issued by the king himself, for why would the loser seek justice by requesting that his case be judged by none other than the perpetrator of the perceived crime?⁵³

de France hébr. 149, f. 22r; and Munich Cod.hebr. 97, 24v, as well as in the citations in the *Arukh* (MS BL Add. 26881, f. 20r) and *Yalqut Shim'oni* 38 (ed. Hyman, 1:128–29).

49 Segal, *Grammar*, 226.

50 Levinson, "Fatal Fictions," 61; cf. Wiedemann, *Emperors*, 55–56.

51 Levinson, 79.

52 Levinson (79) notes the accusatory connotations of דין in Tg. Onq. on Gen 16:5 and when used together with the verb בעי in Gen. Rab. 45:5. However, in these cases the ensuing prepositions are על and גבך rather than קדם. As Levinson observes, קדם suggests that the king is being addressed as judge.

53 Addressing this, Levinson (79) cites the paraphrase of the loser's statement in Samuel Yafeh's commentary *Yefeh To'ar*, f. 156r: "The king is to blame for my injury, but who can appeal before him for judgement against himself?" Yafeh interprets this statement as a question because, in the standard printed text, it begins with the interrogative מנא, an addition not found in extant manuscripts. Furthermore, Yafeh's preceding comment shows that he conflates the meaning of this *mashal* with the version in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas: "'The matter is difficult to express' refers to the expression 'crying to me' (אלי). It would be difficult to state had not Scripture done so [itself], as it means 'crying against (על) God,' if it may be said (כול) (כב יכול). It is only possible 'for the mouth to state' the matter by means of a *mashal*, likening it to two athletes, etc. Since God caused [Abel's] death, as we will explain, it is apparent that [Abel] blamed [God] (עליו) for his injury, which is the meaning of 'crying to me (אלי).' Thus it says in the Tanḥuma, 'Crying to me (אלי) [means] crying against me (על).' This indicates that the word אלי is superfluous as it is

These difficulties are removed if the statement “let my case be summoned before the king” is understood as the petition for *missio* itself, an interpretation Levinson indicated was “possible.”⁵⁴ When understood in this way, the loser’s “case” is their defeat at the hands of their opponent which is brought before the king to judge whether or not reprieve may be granted. The evidence cited above suggests that a losing gladiator sought *missio* by means of gestures rather than the spoken word. The parable vocalises the appeal in order to liken it to Abel’s blood crying aloud to God. By dramatically ending with this plea, the *mashal* brings us back to the moment of suspense when the loser’s life hangs in the balance. Though a curtain is drawn on the scene at this tense moment, the audience already knows enough to infer what happened next. By juxtaposing a request for *missio* with the narrative of Abel’s death, the midrash implies that God rejected the plea of the wounded Abel to intervene and save his life. Responsibility for the murder committed by Cain is thereby placed upon God, just as a gladiator’s death was attributed to the *editor*. In accordance with the opening statement that “it is impossible for the mouth to state it plainly,” this is suggested rather than stated explicitly. If Abel’s blood crying to God is likened to a gladiator’s appeal for *missio*, and the audience knows full well that Abel died, one may logically infer that God declined to intervene despite it being within God’s power to do so.

2 Disappearing Gladiators in Medieval Commentaries on Genesis Rabba

In order to convey its meaning, Shim’on ben Yoḥai’s *mashal* assumes the audience’s awareness of the principles of gladiatorial combat. Without such knowledge, one might well ask: What are *’atletin*? Why would such people fight in front of a king? Why was it the king’s job to break up a fight? Why was the king responsible for the loser’s death rather than the fighter who struck the fatal blow? The reception history of this midrash, as documented in the earliest extant commentaries, lexica, texts, and marginalia, shows that these questions were sources of confusion during the course of its transmission.

obvious that [Abel’s blood] was crying to [God] (יְיָ) because of [the] injury.” Note the exegetical logic of the Canpanton school in the final sentence: because Gen 4:10 could be understood without יְיָ, the word is presumed, in accordance with the assumption of omniscience, to signify something other than its usual meaning; see recently Lawee, *Rashi’s Commentary*, 110–16.

54 Levinson, 79 n. 99.

The provenance of the earliest commentaries on Genesis Rabba has been traced by Israel Ta-Shma to eleventh- and twelfth-century Ashkenaz. Encountering “foreign vocabulary, uncertain readings and the distinct syntax of mid-rashic Aramaic,” the authors assembled interpretations and listed definitions of unfamiliar Greek words.⁵⁵ This is evident in the commentary extant in a manuscript of the Library of the Jewish Community of Mantua. Judging by its *le’azim* and the authorities cited, it was likely composed by (anonymous) French scholars working about two generations after Rashi.⁵⁶ It explains our parable as follows:

The matter is difficult to express. To attribute Abel’s murder to God, saying, “If Blessed One so wished, he could have said to Cain, ‘You should not kill your brother,’ and he would have departed.”

It may be likened to two *’et laytin* (את לייטין). The meaning is not apparent to me.

Fighting. Contending with each other.

Separate [them]. One from the other, so that he would not have struck his partner.

Plead my case before the king. May my claim be sought from the king who was able to object but did not do so.

Crying to me. Seeking from me.⁵⁷

The initial point that God should have warned Cain not to kill Abel is reminiscent of the halakhic principle of *hatra’ah*, the preventative warning issued by a witness to the would-be perpetrator of a crime. Though the discussions in tractate Sanhedrin focus on the necessity of such a forewarning for any subsequent conviction, here the attention is on whether an admonition might not have prevented the crime in the first place.⁵⁸ As the divine witness failed to

55 Ta-Shma, “Unpublished,” 105 (cf. 107); Williams, “Gnats,” 162–69.

56 See Ta-Shma, 96.

57 קשה הדבר לאומרו. לתלות הריגת הבל כלפי מעלה לומר אלו רצה הב"ה היה אומר לקין לא תהרוג אחיך והיה פורש לשני את לייטין. לא נתפרש לי. ומתגששין. מריבין זה את עם זה. פורשו זה מזה ולא היה מכה את חברו. בעי דיני קדם מלכא. יתבקש דיני מאת המלך שיכול התראא (ms Jewish Community of Mantua ebr. 37, f. 6r).

58 Steinmetz, *Punishment*, 15–18; Jackson, *Theft*, 230–32; *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, s.v. התראא, 11:291–332; m. Sanh. 4:5–5:1; t. Sanh. 11:1–5; b. Sanh. 8b, 40b, 72b, 81b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Sanhedrin 12:1–2. The preceding midrash in Gen. Rab. 22:9 interprets the plural form דמי (Gen 4:10) as a reference to the death of Abel’s potential descendants, an interpretation also found in the admonition of the witnesses in m. Sanh. 4:5. The commentator has therefore drawn a clue regarding the meaning of the midrash from its context.

warn Cain, despite being able to foresee the results of the brothers' altercation, God is held responsible.

In the second comment, the author confessed ignorance regarding the term by which the fighters are designated. The reason lies partly in the text at their disposal, in which *'atletin* was apparently written as two words, presumably because the scribe was unfamiliar with the Greek term.⁵⁹ The commentator evidently could not clarify matters from any other source. But, whoever the *'et laytin* were, the author did not think they were competitors in a combat sport. This is clear from the note on "separate [them]," where the king is blamed for not preventing one party from striking the other. This is a far cry from gladiatorial combat, where the whole point was for the participants to fight. Here the *'et laytin*, bound by the common rule of law like ordinary citizens, should not have been sparring in the first place.

The reason the king witnessed the fight is addressed in the medieval commentary on Genesis Rabba which, in the sixteenth century, was one of several that were spuriously attributed to Rashi. Judging by its *le'azim* and the scholars cited, it was likely written by an eleventh- or twelfth-century Italian scholar who studied at the Rhineland academies.⁶⁰ The comment reads:

'Itlitin (אִתְלִיטִין). Ministers fighting and quarrelling. The one slain was crying out before he died, "Let my case be summoned before the king." [This means], "Let my blood be avenged of the king," because he should have separated [them]. Similarly, if it may be said, [Abel] was crying to the Holy One, blessed be he, that he should have separated them.⁶¹

Though I do not know why *'itlitin* has been defined as "ministers" or "attendants," I suggest the protagonists are being considered among the numerous

59 The commentator interpreted *hatletim* (הַתְּלִיטִים) at Gen. Rab. 77:3 in accordance with the *Arukh* (see below) as "[one of] the noblemen of the king" (f. 35v: מְשָׁרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ; [אֶחָד] מִשְׁרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ); the first word has been added by a later hand). Apparently the commentator did not recognize the different spelling at Gen. Rab. 22:9.

60 Theodor, "Ma'amar," 141–43; Williams, *Commentary*, 139–63.

61 אִתְלִיטִין. מְשָׁרֵי. מִתְגַּשְׁשִׁין מִתְקוּסְטִין וְהִיא מִצְוּחַ הַנְּהַרְג קוֹדֵם יִצְאֵת נִשְׁמָתוֹ. יְבִיעִי דִּינִי קֹדֶם מֶלֶךְ. יִפְרַע דְּמִי מִן הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁהִיא לוֹ לְהַפְרִיד [כֵּן כְּבִיכּוֹל הִיא צוּעַק לְהַקְבִּי"ה שְׁהִיא לוֹ בִּינִיהָ. (MS NLI 24° 6990 [Allony 67], f. 194r–v). The comment is also extant in MS Bodleian Opp. Add. Fol. 3, f. 43r, and MS NLI 24° 5977, ff. 27v–28r (in this latter, the text in square brackets has been omitted through homeoteleuton, and דִּינִי is written instead of דְּמִי). The initial words have been copied into the margins of Gen. Rab. 22:9 in MS Bodleian Opp. Add. Fol. 51, f. 18v. See also the version in Abraham ben Asher, *Or ha-Sekhel*, ff. 58v–59r. (The comment is not in the fragmentary MS JTS 4967a.)

officials designated by non-Hebrew titles in the *meshalim* of Genesis Rabba.⁶² Though essentially guesswork on the part of the commentator, this identification supplies a credible reason for the altercation before the king and for his responsibility. At the point of death, the loser cried for vengeance against the ruler who tolerated violence in the court he was expected to govern. As in the Mantua commentary, the parable has been removed from the context of the arena and interpreted without reference to athletic imagery. The explanation nevertheless conveys the main point that it was the king, rather than the surviving fighter, who was responsible for the death.

The lexicon compiled by Nathan ben Yehiel of Rome in 1102, the *Sefer he-Arukh*, had a strong bearing on the reception history of the *mashal*. The entry *'atletin* cites three midrashim, beginning with our parable.⁶³ The third is a fragment from Midrash Yelammedenu that appears to liken the sequence of Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot to the sounding of the trumpet, the entry of the *'itlitim* (אתיליטים), and the award of the palm branch.⁶⁴ The second citation, from Gen. Rab. 77:3, expounds the narrative of Jacob wrestling the heavenly assailant who named him Israel and stated, "You have struggled (שרית) with God and with humans and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). A *mashal* likens Jacob to a prince (בן מלך) who wrestled with an *'atletim* (אתיליטים). On catching sight of the prince's father, the king, the *'atletim* surrendered immediately. In the continuation of the midrash, Jacob's antagonist is identified as the "prince" or "guardian angel" (שר) of Esau.⁶⁵ After citing the three midrashim, the *Arukh* defines *'atletin* as שרים. In medieval Hebrew, this term is often used to refer to secular rulers and nobility.⁶⁶ It has martial connotations in a midrash included in certain Ashkenazi *haggadot* in which a mortal king goes to war surrounded by his "noblemen and servants" (שריו ועבדיו).⁶⁷ Similarly, Pseudo-Rashi's commentary on 2 Chr 17:7 associates the term with בן חיל, "valiant man."⁶⁸ I therefore suggest that the *Arukh's* definition serves to update the midrashic combat imagery. In our *mashal*, the *'atletin* are to be considered

62 Stern, *Parables*, 19–21.

63 MS BL Add. 26881, f. 20r.

64 Weinberg, "Midrash," 224–25; Weiss, *Games*, 263, 273; cf. Latham, *Performance*.

65 Jacob himself is designated a שר in b. Hul. 92a; cf. Hayward, *Interpretations*, 256–57, 266–79.

66 Marcus, "Why is this Knight," 140; Walfish, *Esther*, 224.

67 *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Goldschmidt, 2:429; Emanuel, "When God."

68 *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer'*, ed. Cohen, 223. According to a comment attributed to Eleazar of Worms, the entourage that accompanied Jacob to Egypt (Gen 50:9) comprised שרים and פרשים, "noblemen" and "knights" (*Rokeach*, 1:322).

as dueling noblemen or knights, though one is left to divine the reason for the king's culpability.⁶⁹

The definition “noblemen” (שרים) was frequently repeated in medieval and early modern commentaries and marginalia.⁷⁰ A dissenting voice was that of Issachar Berman ben Naphtali ha-Cohen, author of the sixteenth-century commentary *Matnot Kehunah*, who wrote of the word *’atletin* in our midrash, “I have discovered an interpretation that in Latin this is what they call two people who wrestle with each another.”⁷¹ To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time a commentator looked beyond the rabbinic corpus to interpret the late antique cultural reference. A full explanation of the *marshah*'s gladiatorial imagery, including the reference to *missio*, was achieved at the beginning of the twentieth century in Ignaz Ziegler's *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch*.⁷²

It may seem surprising that medieval commentators did not spot the midrashic reference to the most quintessential of Roman public spectacles. A comparison might be drawn with twelfth- and thirteenth-century descriptions of the monuments of Rome which designate the Colosseum as an ancient palace or pagan temple, revealing no awareness of its function as a venue for mass entertainment.⁷³ Confirmation that rabbinic references to gladiators were

69 Though possibly an allusion to שרית in Gen 32:28, as Kohut suggested (*Aruch completum*, 1:333), the entry does not cite this verse and שרים is more likely to be understood as the common nominal form rather than an unusual participle of the verb שרי (“strugglers”). On the development of jousting as part of the tournament during the twelfth century, see Murray, “Introduction.” On later comparisons of Jacob's wrestling match with contemporary dueling, see Marcus, “Why is this Knight,” 141; Offenberg, “Jacob.” A similar interpretation has been recorded beside Gen. Rab. 22:9 in MS BL Add. 16406, f. 31r. The word *’atletin* (אתליתין) has been struck through and איסטרטליגן (‘*isstratliḡin*’) is written in the margin. Here איסטרטליגן (“generals,” cf. στρατηγός), perhaps intended as a textual correction, is glossed פלשתים (‘*plishtim*’) (“lords of the Philistines”), and the annotator notes the rendering of נציב (“governor,” “garrison”) in Targum Jonathan as אסטרטיג (‘*asstratig*’) (στρατηγός, “general,” e.g., 1 Sam 10:5). On the changing meanings of gladiatorial terminology in the Middle Ages, see the knights depicted in the mid-fifteenth century “gladiatoria” (Hagedorn and Walczak, *Gladiatoria*).

70 Including the *Likutin mi-Bereshit Rabbah* (MS Bodleian Opp. Add. Fol. 3, f. 446v; Ta-Shma, “Unpublished,” 106). The definition was recorded alongside Gen. Rab. 22:9 in MS Munich Cod.hebr. 97, f. 24v, and printed in the margin of the Venice: Di Cavalli, 1566 edition (f. 15r). It is given in Benveniste, ‘*Ot Emet*, f. 25v, and Hertz, *Perush*, f. 6v.

71 אתליתין כו. פי' הערוך שרים ומצא[תי] פי' שבלשון לטיין קורין כן לשנים המתאבקים זה עם זה (*Sefer Rabbot*, f. 26v). See further Mussafia, *Musaf*, f. 23r s.v. אתליתין, and the commentary of Zeev Wolf Einhorn (Maharzu) in *Midrash Rabbah*, 1:102.

72 Ziegler, *Königsgleichnisse*, 312.

73 Stekelenburg, “Colosseum”; Blennow, “Wanderers.” On the question of why further textual sources (e.g., Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* 18:52–56) were not brought to bear on the identification of material remains of gladiatorial combat, see the discussion in Campanelli,

frequently attributed monstrous properties, including cannibalism, to nations surrounding the crusader state, with little concern for geographical accuracy.⁸² For instance, according to the *Image du monde* of Gossuin de Metz, the regions around paradise are uninhabitable because of the fierce creatures that live there: “giants and *chanilleu* who devour everything like wolves.”⁸³ The web of associations between Canaanites, cannibals, and *ludim* is also attested in a gloss on 1 Chr 1:11 in the thirteenth-century Hebrew manuscript with Latin superscription now at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Associating the descendants of Mitsrayim, the *ludim*, with the cannibalistic *chinelis*, the gloss attributes them with the physical properties of the Blemmyae: “the *ludini* are said to be people with a chin on their chest and they are said to eat people; in French *chinelis*.”⁸⁴ By using this vernacular term to define *ludim* in the Bavli, Rashi’s commentary obscures the etymological association with *ludus*, and the ravenous gormandisers and captors of Resh Lakish become cannibalistic monsters of the Orient.⁸⁵

3 Disappearing Gladiators in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas

In her study of the Gospel parables, Mary Ann Tolbert accounted for the inherent openness of the parable form to multiple interpretations by analysing its structure in two parts. A narrative names a point of comparison and endows it with some significative value. But in the tenor of the parable, the primary focus of interest is merely named. The audience must supply information from outside the text at two points. First, contextual information is needed to

82 On the Crusades in Rashi’s commentary, see Grossman, *Rashi*, 22–27, 74, 84–87, 107–12, 240, 320, and the bibliography cited. On cannibalism in Crusader narratives, see Rubenstein, “Cannibals”; Heng, “Cannibalism”; Friedman, *Monstrous*, 10, 12, 59–86. These freely incorporate folkloristic and legendary themes, including the conversion of St Christopher who grew up among dog-faced, cannibal Canaanites; the mission of Saints Matthew and Barnabas to the cannibals in Phrygia and Scythia; and Cambles the cannibalistic king of the Lydians. See Friedrich, “Saint Christopher’s”; Godlove, “Bodies”; Walde, “Cambles.”

83 “La sont jaiant et Chanilleu, / Qui tout deveurent comme leu.” Gossuin de Metz, *L’Image*, II.2.2197–8; ed. Connochie-Bourgne, 3:820 (cf. 2:471–93, esp. 485; 3:1070).

84 MS Corpus Christi College 9b, f. 57r. The comment was prompted by the lack of information regarding the etymology of *ludim*: “eb[rei] nesc[iunt] interpretationem ludini dicuntur homines habentes mentum ad pectus et dicuntur deuorare homines gal[lice] chinelis.” See Loewe, “Latin,” 66–67; Olszowy-Schlanger, *Manuscripts*, 212–19. Shyovitz, *Remembrance*, 135–38; Rotman, “At Limits”; cf. b. Giṭ. 14b.

85 On the relationship between Rashi’s commentary and the *ʿArukh*, see the discussion and bibliography in Grossman, *Early Sages*, 247–48.

understand the identity and qualities of the narrative's protagonists. Second, the audience must determine which narrative elements shed light on the primary focus of interest and how. In the case of our *mashal*, the medieval commentators concur regarding the tenor of the parable that God is blamed for a murder committed by Cain. However the contextual information needed to identify the narrative's characters and their roles was a point of disagreement and explicit confusion. Seeking the necessary extra-textual information, the expositors betrayed no knowledge of gladiators and turned instead to internal rabbinic references to *'atletin*, contemporary courtly culture, and the halakhic principle of *hatra'ah*. New contexts were thereby constructed for the narrative according to the principle of "representational change." One of the ten "laws of transformation" that Joachim Jeremias used for the synoptic comparison of Gospel parables, it accounts for the reformulation of a parable in the course of its transmission by replacing points of reference unfamiliar to new audiences with others that will more easily be understood. In the case of medieval explanations of our *mashal*, the transformations are effected through lexicography and exegetical comment rather than rewriting. Once the term *'atletin* and the reference to *missio* were glossed by words and concepts known to medieval audiences, a parable about gladiators became a story about courtiers, noblemen, or fighting citizens.⁸⁶

Representational change may also be detected in the version of the parable in Tanḥ. ha-Nidpas Bereshit 9. As is well known, Tanḥuma is an expansive corpus of homiletic-exegetical literature of diverse date and provenance. The passage in question exhibits characteristics of what Marc Bregman identified as the latest, post-Islamic, stage of composition. Rather than a halakhic homily on the opening of a lectionary reading, it is a continuous interpretive paraphrase of an extended portion of Scripture that does not focus on prominent lectionary verses.⁸⁷ Unlike early Amoraic midrashim that interweave Hebrew and Aramaic with Greek and Latin loanwords, the text is predominantly Hebrew. Of all extant sources of Tanḥuma midrashim, a great deal of late exegetical material is in Tanḥuma Buber and Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas. Within these

86 Tolbert, *Perspectives*, 19, 25–26, 37–40, 52, 55; Jeremias, *Parables*, 26–27, 33–42. I cite the work of Tolbert and Jeremias to note that the inherent polyvalency of rhetorical forms marked by insufficient "naming of meaning" has been observed in distinct corpora of parables, not to assert any underlying contextual association between such corpora; see further Stern, *Parables*, 15, 18–20.

87 The extended discourse on Gen 4, Bereshit 9–11 follows two homilies on the third seder of the triennial cycle (beginning Gen 3:22). By linking homilies on sequential lectionary pericopes with continuous exegetical material, a more continuous exposition of the opening chapters of Genesis has been constructed. See Mann, *Bible*, 1:46; Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 166–68, 180; Atzmon and Nikolsky, "Let our Rabbi," 8.

two, we may also distinguish midrashim common to both, which likely come from earlier shared sources, from material that is distinctive to one or the other which may be later.⁸⁸ The exposition of Cain and Abel is found only in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas. Bregman suggested a *terminus ante quem* for some of its interpretive narratives in the early-eighth century.⁸⁹ But a ninth-century date of certain passages is suggested by the presence of material also found in the She'iltot of Rabbi Aḥai (e.g., Bereshit 2), the anti-Karaite paeon to the Oral Torah (Noaḥ 1), and the reference to the two academies of Geonic Babylonia (Noaḥ 3).

Though Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas presents its interpretation of Abel's death in a single authorial voice, the text is not of whole cloth. As has been shown by Yaakov Elbaum, Ira Chernus, Chaim Milikowsky, and Marc Bregman, the author-editors of Tanḥuma Buber and Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas incorporated and reworked earlier midrashim, including expositions known from Genesis Rabba.⁹⁰ In Bereshit 9, for instance, the explanation that Cain and Abel argued regarding the division of the world resembles Gen. Rab. 22:7 in its vocabulary, phraseology, and choice of scriptural proof-text.⁹¹ A further source is indicated by Cain's accusation that "informants" (דילטורין) told God of Abel's murder. This appears in the *Yalqut Talmud Torah* of Jacob ben Ḥananel Sikili, where it is designated as an extract from "Yelammedenu." As Milikowsky has shown, material from this version of "Yelammedenu" was editorially incorporated at a late stage in the development of Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas on Genesis.⁹² It therefore seems that the interpretation of Cain and Abel was constructed by one or more author-editors who reworked selected comments from Genesis Rabba and cited an existing *yelammedenu* midrash to form a continuous exegetical discourse.

Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas explains the cry of Abel's blood as follows:

88 Bregman, 167–68, 184–88; Lavee, "Midrash Tanḥuma"; Atzmon and Nikolsky, "Let our Rabbi," 4.

89 Bregman, 244 n. 321. Kensky dated the completion of Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas between the second half of the eighth century and the end of the tenth century (*Midrash Tanhuma Shmot*, 78).

90 Milikowsky, "Punishment"; Chernus, "On History"; Elbaum, "From Sermon"; Bregman, 184.

91 On the relationship between the parable of the watchman and the thief in Tanḥ. ha-Nidpas Bereshit 9 and the prefect (ḥparkos) and the murderer in Gen. Rab. 22:9, see Kadari, "Redactional," 163–66.

92 The only non-Hebrew words in the discourse on Gen 4 (דילטורין in Bereshit 9; אסיא אסר חגרתך in Bereshit 11) are citations from this "Yelammedenu" (texts in Mann, *Bible*, vol. 1, Hebrew section, 279, 281; cf. Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 164). As shown by Milikowsky, the author-editor who incorporated such "Yelammedenu" material avoided changing its text. This accounts for the presence of a loan-word and Aramaic adage in a late discourse. See Milikowsky, "Punishment," 147–48; cf. Lavee, "Tanhuma," 37, 39.

“Crying to me” [means] “crying against me” (צועקים אלי צועקים עלי). The matter may be likened (*mashal*) to two people who quarreled. One of them killed the other. A third person was present, but did not separate them. Against whom does everyone complain? It is not against the third person? For this reason it is written, “crying to me.” [This means] “crying against me” (צועקים אלי צועקים עלי).⁹³

There are notable similarities between this text and Gen. Rab. 22:9. Both expound the same biblical verse by means of a *mashal* in which two people fight to the death while a third is held responsible. In both, the antagonist is designated by the word *חבר*, and the verb *פרש* is used to blame the third party for not “separating” the fighters.

Unlike Genesis Rabba, the Tanḥuma's *mashal* is entirely in Hebrew. Removed from the arena, there is no suggestion that the combatants were athletes, nor that the third person was a king; we are left to suppose that all three were ordinary citizens. In addition, Tanḥuma has introduced an audience of active onlookers, designated as “everyone” (*הכל*). After the fight, these scandalized bystanders took up the cause of the dead citizen who was, needless to say, unable to mount his own legal defense. This is different from Genesis Rabba where the losing gladiator made his own request in the window of time between injury and death.

To account for the similarities and differences between the two parables, I suggest that the Tanḥuma's version has been reworked according to the principle of representational change. This can be explained partly by the date at which the post-Islamic exegetical narratives in the Tanḥuma were compiled, over two hundred years after gladiatorial combat had ceased. In order to convey the point without assuming familiarity with the rules, which is necessary to infer the meaning of the midrash in Genesis Rabba, the *mashal* has been transformed into a timeless parable of a brawl between two ordinary citizens in which a passive witness was blamed for the consequences.

Similar motivations underlie other reformulations in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas. Bregman pointed to the *yelammedenu* homily on Exod 7:9 (Va'era 4), another version of which was discovered in the Cairo Genizah (TS C1.46). Expounding the transformation of Aaron's staff into a snake, both texts enquire into the

93 צועקים אלי צועקים עלי משל לשנים שעשו מריבה הרג אחד מהן את חברו היה ביניהם שלישי ולא הפריש ביניה' על מי הכל משיחין לא על השלישי לכך כתוב צועקים אלי צועקים עלי (*Sefer Tanḥuma*, ed. Mantua, f. 3v). (The reading שלישי for שלישי in some later printed editions appears to stem from attempts to correct a typographical error in the Frankfurt an der Oder: Gottschalk, 1701 edition (f. 2r), which reads היה ביניהם שלש. These readings are not found in extant manuscripts.)

mishnaic teaching that one should not interrupt the recitation of the Amidah even when greeted by a king or when a snake is coiled around one's heel (Ber. 5:1). Questioning the connection between the scenarios, they liken the coils of the snake to the crooked ways of the Wicked Empire. In the Genizah text, a parody of the Roman imperial legal system serves as an exemplum: a court trial was rigged so as to convict the defendant, whose sentence was designated by the Greek term ἀπόφασις. But in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas, the Wicked Empire is not considered to be Rome. This version of the midrash omits the parody of the trial, jumping straight to the next part of the homily. Bregman therefore argued that a later editor removed the Roman legal proceedings as they were not relevant to a contemporary audience.⁹⁴

While the editor of Va'era 4 appears to have excised a late antique cultural reference, the reworked parable in Bereshit 9 is evidence of a decision to incorporate a pre-existing *marshal* into a new exegetical narrative and of the concomitant desire to retell it without the gladiatorial imagery. This raises the question of why the compiler included the parable at all when it might simply have been passed over in silence. Though we cannot know the editor's full reasons, the studies of Dov Weiss, Tova Sacher, Arnon Atzmon, and Matthew Goldstone have pointed to the prominence of critiques of God for ethical dilemmas in Scripture throughout the Tanḥuma corpus.⁹⁵ Among Weiss's examples is the treatment of transgenerational punishment in Exodus, that the Lord "visits the iniquity of parents upon children upon the third and fourth generation" (20:4, cf. 34:7). The harshness is mitigated in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, which applies the punishment only if each successive generation is evil in unbroken continuity.⁹⁶ Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas, however, accentuates the seeming injustice by juxtaposing the verse with Moses's statement in Deut 24:16 that "children should not be put to death on account of their parents." According to Rabbi Levi, God assented to Moses's lenient ruling and agreed to abide by it. This exchange is staged as a dramatic confrontation in Numbers Rabba 11, also part of the Tanḥuma corpus, in which Moses challenged God, "Is it really proper that the righteous should suffer for the iniquity of their parents?" Again God conceded the point.⁹⁷

In the Tanḥuma's retelling of Gen 4, the inclusion of the parable serves to incorporate a confrontation with God into the narrative of Abel's murder. The

94 Bregman, *Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu*, 99–101, 167; Lieberman, "Roman," 24–26.

95 Weiss, "Dramatic"; Sacher, *String*, 38–39, 108–10, 121–23, 169–71; Atzmon, "Same Fate"; Goldstone, *Dangerous*, 205–35.

96 Ba-ḥodesh 6 (ed. Lauterbach, 324; ed. Horovitz and Rabin, 266–67).

97 Tanḥ. ha-Nidpas Shoftim 19 (*Sefer Tanḥuma*, f. 100r); Num. Rab. 19:33 (*Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 2, second pagination, 165). See Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 168–80.

way it has been reformulated makes the challenge more direct, explicit, and forceful than in Genesis Rabba.⁹⁸ No longer is the voice of Abel's blood like the petition of a single gladiator for *missio*, a request which was not intrinsically critical. In Tanḥuma the voice is designated as a "complaint" and is articulated by "everyone." In Genesis Rabba, the parable simply invites a comparison between the denial of *missio* and God's actions in Gen 4 and leaves the audience to ponder the implications. By contrast, Tanḥuma tells a story in which the third party was roundly condemned, and directs the critique explicitly at God. The two *meshalim* thus derive their interpretation from the biblical text in different ways. The implication in Genesis Rabba is that Abel cried to God for deliverance, but not that he actually blamed God; after all, he was still alive at the time, so no murder had yet taken place for which God might be responsible. But the audience's conclusion that God was to blame for Abel's subsequent death has been written into the *mashal* in the Tanḥuma.⁹⁹ Rather than a cry for deliverance, the blood's voice is now the posthumous critique of "everyone" who perceives the ethical dilemma and rails against God for the apparent injustice.

The Tanḥuma's interpretation is encapsulated in the expression, "Crying to me' [means] 'crying against me'" (צועקים אלי צועקים עלי). Though manuscripts differ regarding its placement at the beginning or end of the parable, or both, it most commonly serves as an introduction.¹⁰⁰ There it takes the place of the tentative statement in Genesis Rabba that the matter is "impossible for the mouth to state plainly." The reason Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *mashal* was introduced this way, I argued, is because the implied critique is not expressed directly in Scripture and therefore the exegete refrained from articulating it explicitly. By contrast, the Tanḥuma's statement "crying to me' [means] 'crying against me'"

98 Dov Weiss also identified this heightened accusatory tone in the preceding midrashim in Tanḥ. ha-Nidpas Bereshit 9 (*Confrontations*, 234–36).

99 To use Stern's terminology, הכל is the "implied interpreter," a character in the *mashal* whose role guides the audience towards a particular interpretation (*Parables*, 86–93). Cf. Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 177–90.

100 The statement is at the beginning of the midrash in MSS Columbia x 893 M 5843, f. 7r; Palatina Cod. Parma 3254, f. 6v; Bodleian Hunt. Don. 20, f. 4v; Angelica 61, f. 12r; Yeshiva University 1372, f. 13r; and *ed.* Mantua, f. 3v. It is at the end in MS Parma; MS Angelica; *ed.* Mantua; MS Vatican ebr. 44, f. 12v; and *ed.* Constantinople, sig. 8, 4r (p. 7 in 1971 facsimile reprint). MSS Columbia, Bodleian Hunt. Don. 20, and Yeshiva University conclude by citing the lemma as צועקים עלי; MS CUL Add. 1212, f. 12v, concludes צועקים אלי. In MS Bodleian Hunt. 74, ff. 7v–8r, the lemma is cited as in the MT at the beginning and end. (In MS CUL Add. 1212, the opening has been omitted, seemingly through homoioteleuton.) As differences are found in manuscripts classified by Bregman as belonging to the same families (*Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 167), they appear to be scribal changes rather than recensional variants.

derives the interpretation that Abel's blood cried "against" God from Scripture by means of midrashic wordplay. The quest for a justificatory proof-text was pursued yet further by the editor of the *Midrash ha-Gadol*, the Yemenite collection of midrash on the Pentateuch dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. The editor selected the Tanḥuma's version of the parable, but here it begins, "Do not read 'to me,' but 'against me'" (אל תקרא אלי, אלא עלי).¹⁰¹ After locating the rebuke in the biblical text, the *darshan* gives full voice to a critique that was previously "impossible" to state plainly.

4 From Arena to Commentary

The reception history of Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *mashal* shows that medieval *darshanim* and commentators attempted to convey the central point by rewriting or reinterpreting without reference to gladiators. I suggest this was motivated by loss of historical memory as medieval readers did not know information that the parable assumes of its audience. Shim'on ben Yoḥai's *mashal* is not intrinsically esoteric; it concerns a spectacle that was a public event.¹⁰² The meaning of the comparison is clear, provided only that one recognizes and understands the principles of gladiatorial combat. This raises the question of the *mashal*'s intended audience which was evidently expected to comprehend the late antique cultural reference.

In Victor Pfitzner's study of New Testament athletic imagery, he argued that Pauline metaphors adapted conventional *topoi* that "moved attention from the physical athlete who toiled for corruptible trophies to the moral athlete who trained in true virtue for indestructible prizes."¹⁰³ Though Pfitzner has since reevaluated his emphasis on the transmission of traditional imagery independently of firsthand experience, he recognized in his original study that it is difficult to see rabbinic athletic images as expressions of common rhetorical tropes.¹⁰⁴ Though the "noble athlete" (ὁ γενναῖος ἀθλητής) is the archetype of perseverance in the cause of right in a wealth of Jewish sources from antiquity, including the Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira, the Testament of Job, Philo, and 4 Maccabees, athleticism has different connotations in rabbinic literature. This is supported by a heuristic comparison of the portrayals of Jacob the wrestler

101 Ed. Margulies, 1:120. Stemberger, *Einleitung*, 392–93.

102 Contra Stern, *Parables*, 50.

103 Pfitzner, *Paul*; Pfitzner, "Was St. Paul," 92; cf. Jones, "Imaginary"; Esler, "Paul"; Harrison, "Paul."

104 Pfitzner, *Paul*, 73–75; Spielman, *Jews and Entertainment*, 216.

by Philo and Genesis Rabba. In accordance with the Septuagint's use of the verb παλαίω in Gen 32:24–25 (MT vv. 25–26), Philo likened Jacob to the “perfect athlete” (ἀθλητής τέλειος) who was “trained in the exercises (γυμνάσματα) of the soul” and “wrestles (παλαίη) with the thoughts that fight against and overpower it.”¹⁰⁵ As we have seen, the rabbis also interpreted Gen 32 with an athletic simile. But in Gen. Rab. 77:3, the athlete is not Jacob, but his adversary. Jacob wins not through physical prowess or athletic virtue but because of his identity as the “king’s son” (בן מלך). His victory thus illustrates the providential care afforded by God to Israel, who would assuredly prevail over their assailants.¹⁰⁶

Like the *mashal* of Jacob and the athlete, Shim’on ben Yohai’s parable attaches no intrinsic virtue to athleticism. Wicked Cain is as much an athlete as righteous Abel.¹⁰⁷ Without moralising, the parable focuses all attention on the actions of the divine *editor*. To grasp its point, the audience is presumed to be familiar with specific principles of gladiatorial combat rather than conventional tropes regarding athletic virtue. Pfitzner’s acknowledgement that detailed references are more likely to be based on public games familiar to the audience would explain this.¹⁰⁸

The argument that the imagery in Gen. Rab. 22:9 reflects knowledge of a present reality raises the question of the extent to which Jews of Roman Palestine frequented public entertainment. Attention has focused on Josephus’s statement in *Jewish Antiquities* that the Herodian games in Jerusalem were “alien to Jewish custom” and a “blatant impiety.”¹⁰⁹ Rabbinic discouragement from attending public entertainment has sometimes been taken as evidence that the aversion described by Josephus was widespread and enduring in Roman Palestine.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, Zeev Weiss, Catherine

105 Philo, *Migr.* 6.27; *Mut.* 12.81 (cf. *Somn.* 1.20.129). Harris, *Greek Athletics and Jews*, 69–71; Poliakov and Poliakov, “Jacob,” 64–65.

106 Hayward, *Interpretations*, 256–57; Grossmark, “This May Be Compared,” 7–9.

107 In pitching athlete against athlete, its purpose is different from patristic imagery in which athletic neophytes, martyrs, and even Christ fight not against athletes like themselves, but against the world, the flesh, and the devil. For instance, in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Treatise on the Inscription of the Psalms*, the opponents of the ἀθλητής, who represents the one who fights in the “stadium of life,” are the ἀντίπαλος, ἀνταγωνιστής, and the ἐχθρός (II 16, 62, 197). Cf. Poliakov and Poliakov, “Jacob”; Brock, “Greek,” 444–46.

108 Pfitzner, *Paul*, 3. In distinguishing the degree of first-hand knowledge that detailed and generalised athletic metaphors may assume of the audience, a point that emerged in Pfitzner’s study, I do not suggest any necessary contextual association between different corpora in which such images are found. Cf. Poliakov and Poliakov, “Jacob,” 48, 53, and the discussion of Epictetus’s athletic images in Harris, *Greek Athletes*, 130–31.

109 Josephus, *Ant.* 15.268–276.

110 E.g., Sifra *Aḥarei Mot*, perek 13:9; t. ‘Abod. Zar. 2:2–7 (par. y. ‘Abod. Zar. 1:7, 40a); Ruth Rab. 2:22. Alon, “Some Early”; Juster, *Juifs*, 2:239–41; Pfitzner, *Paul*, 73–75. As objections to

Hezser, and Loren Spielman have argued that rabbinic opposition countered the reality of widespread Jewish attendance, and that theatres would hardly have been maintained in cities with significant Jewish populations including Tiberias and Sepphoris if the inhabitants would boycott the events on principle.¹¹¹ Weiss, however, presents gladiatorial games as an exception to his overall argument. The few amphitheatres discovered in Palestine and the Transjordan are located in Roman administrative centres or garrison towns, and there is little positive evidence for the staging of gladiatorial games beyond Caesarea and Bet Guvrin.¹¹² But knowledge of gladiators certainly extended beyond the environs of the amphitheatre, as is shown by the widespread depictions of gladiators on oil lamps and graffiti.¹¹³ As Hezser has argued, awareness of popular culture could be gained in the street and marketplace regardless of rabbinic disapproval.¹¹⁴ A parallel may be seen in the teachings of Epictetus, who praised conquering the passions over the hollow triumphs of “deplorable” wrestlers, boxers, and gladiators, but nevertheless used athletic imagery to advocate forethought and commitment. To this end he compared the amateur who is today an athlete, tomorrow a philosopher, to children who play one moment as wrestlers, and the next as trumpeters, actors, or gladiators.¹¹⁵ The metaphor presumes an acquaintance with gladiators not in the amphitheatre, but in the games of children in the street. As knowledge of public spectacles might be gained in the marketplace as well as the arena, it may have been hard to escape an awareness of gladiatorial combat in the period in which it was a present reality, regardless of whether or not one went to the games in person.¹¹⁶

There is some evidence that midrashic sporting allusions kept pace with changing fashions. For instance, in Lev. Rab. 30:2, the palm branch that distinguishes the winner is likened to the lulav carried on Sukkot that differentiates Israel from the nations. Though Leviticus Rabba does not identify the sport in question, Midr. Ps. 17:5 reported the simile with specific reference to charioteers.

attending public spectacles are also found in the works of pagan and Christian moralists (notably Seneca, *Letters* 7.2–4; Tertullian, *De spectaculis*; John Chrysostom, *Contra ludos et theatra*), they evidently do not constitute evidence of universal compliance; see further the references in Wiedemann, *Emperors*, 141–60.

111 Spielman, *Jews and Entertainment*, 6, 127–219; Hezser, “Towards,” 274.

112 Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, 61–66, 108–12; Kloner and Hübsch, “Roman Amphitheater”; Spielman, *Jews and Entertainment*, 94.

113 Goodman, *State*, 83.

114 Hezser, “Towards,” 268.

115 Epictetus, *Ench.* 29.3; *Diatr.* 2.18.22–23; 3.15.5–6; Arnold, *Christ*, 117–19; Long, *Epictetus*, 120, 169, 202–3, 215–16.

116 On gladiators as omnipresent topics of conversation, see Tacitus, *Dial.* 29; cf. Horace, *Sat.* 2.6.44.

Chariot racing reached the height of its popularity in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt following the introduction of the circus factions in the East from ca. 400 CE onwards.¹¹⁷ The factions feature explicitly in the midrash entitled *The Throne and Hippodrome of King Solomon*, dated to ninth- or tenth-century Byzantium. Here the performers and audience at King Solomon's hippodrome in Jerusalem were divided according to the four factional colours: blue for the aristocracy; white for Israelites; red for city-dwellers; and green for the nations of the world. By depicting Solomon's hippodrome as of similar dimensions to that at Constantinople, the Israelite king was accorded the symbols of Byzantine royal power.¹¹⁸

As is evident from medieval manuscripts of *Genesis Rabba*, Shim'on ben Yoḥai's parable was still being told centuries after gladiatorial combat had ceased. Though the Tanḥuma's reworking facilitated understanding, this version never replaced the text in *Genesis Rabba* but circulated in parallel. This dual transmission draws attention to the different textual histories of *Genesis Rabba* and *Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas*. In his argument that *Genesis Rabba* was a single work that, after redaction, was generally considered to be closed, Milikowsky drew a contrast with *Tanḥuma* midrashim that borrow from earlier texts to create homilies that were themselves freely re-edited and reformulated in transmission.¹¹⁹ The situation from the ninth to thirteenth centuries is illustrated by the texts in the Cairo Genizah. The earliest extant copies of *Genesis Rabba*, dated to the ninth or tenth century, contain a text similar to that found in parts of MS Vatican ebr. 30 organized according to numbered chapters.¹²⁰ The Genizah fragments of *Midrash Tanḥuma*, by contrast, include gatherings of homilies on groups of lectionary readings rather than collections on the whole Pentateuch like *Tanḥuma Buber* or *Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas*. Some fragments contain different recensions of homilies known in these compilations, but much unique material provides evidence of ongoing fluidity and rewriting.¹²¹

117 *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, ed. Margulies, 694–95 (par. Pesiq. Rab Kah. 27:2, Tanḥ. Buber) Emor 27; *Midrasch Tehillim*, ed. Buber, 128; Perles, "Thron," 137–38; Weiss, *Public Spectacles*, 100–108, 151–57; Spielman, *Jews and Entertainment*, 201–3; Humphrey, *Roman Circuses*, 539; Cameron, *Circus*, 201–29; Potter, *Victor's Crown*, 308–20. On the dating of *Midrash Psalms*, see Atzmon, "Midrashic Traditions."

118 Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 5:39; Mehlman and Seth, *Medieval Midrash*, 135–48; Boustán, "Israelite"; Millman, "Decline," 198–200.

119 Milikowsky, "Status Quaestionis," 69–70, 75.

120 Olszowy-Schlanger, "On Hebrew Script"; Sokoloff, "Major Manuscripts," 29–30; Sokoloff, *Geniza*, 36 (compare, for instance, the chapter headings in MS St. Petersburg Yevr. III B 958, f. 1r, and MS Vatican ebr. 30, f. 143r).

121 Lavee, "Tanḥuma," 33–39; Bregman, *Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu*, 180.

Returning to the question of the redactional identity of Genesis Rabba, Milikowsky acknowledged that scribes of late manuscripts did supplement the text with “a sizable amount of additional material,” some of which was drawn from Tanḥuma midrashim, though he distinguished insertions from attempts to “rework the formulation of the received text.”¹²² In the case of Shim’on ben Yoḥai’s *mashal* in Genesis Rabba, extant manuscripts do reveal scribal changes, notably the deletion of וְהָרַגוּ (“and killed him”). In addition, MS Vatican ebr. 60 glosses the statement “let my case be summoned before the king” with a synonym,¹²³ while the *editio princeps* adds the interrogative מִאֵן (“Who will summon my case before the king?”), turning the appeal for *missio* into a request for legal representation.¹²⁴ These variants do not appear to be mere accidents of transmission as they address exegetical questions. But editorial intervention was limited to the addition and omission of individual words or phrases. Despite the difficulty of medieval commentators and *darshanim* in comprehending the gladiatorial imagery as a whole, the scribes of Genesis Rabba neither replaced the parable with the Tanḥuma’s version nor rewrote it so as to exchange a late antique cultural reference for one that contemporary readers could understand.

An important factor in the dual transmission of the *mashal* was the different status of Genesis Rabba and Tanḥuma in the spheres in which they circulated. While Tanḥuma Buber was read in medieval Ashkenaz, Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas on Genesis and Exodus was known among rabbinic communities of the Muslim world.¹²⁵ As a consequence, the reworking of Shim’on ben Yoḥai’s parable may have been unknown to medieval Ashkenazi commentators. But a similar interpretation of the *mashal* in Genesis Rabba would nevertheless have been available readers of the Mantua commentary, where the athletes are also treated as ordinary citizens. In Ashkenaz, therefore, the transmission of the late antique parable with minimal editorial intervention did not mean that it was a dead letter due to the availability of secondary aids to understanding non-Hebrew words and unfamiliar realia. Further confirmation that the

122 Milikowsky, “On Formation,” 527–28, 530; Schäfer and Milikowsky, “Current Views,” 85–86; Stemberger, *Einleitung*, 186, 310–11. On the Tanḥuma midrashim in the final chapters of Genesis Rabba, see Sokoloff, “Major,” 30–31; Hirschman, “Final.” On those in Gen. Rab. 75, see Zunz, *Ha-derashot*, 78, 339 n. 66; Theodor–Albeck, commentary at 884.

123 יִבְעִי דִּינִי קִדָּם מַלְכָּא יִבְעִי דִּינִי קוֹמִיָּה מַלְכָּא (MS Vatican ebr. 60, f. 40v).

124 *Ed.* Constantinople: Naḥmias, 1512, sig. ב, 7r. Variant spellings of *’atletin* are found in different manuscripts.

125 This has been confirmed by the discovery of fragments of Tanḥuma Buber in the “European Genizah”; see Lehnardt, “Transmission,” and the bibliography cited.

narrative did indeed have meaning can be seen in the Yalqut Shim'oni, where Genesis Rabba's version was incorporated without explanation or rewriting.¹²⁶

The preference of the editor of the Midrash ha-Gadol for the Tanḥuma's version, however, confirms knowledge of the rewritten parable in Jewish communities of the Muslim world. Moshe Lavee, in his studies of haggadic midrash in the Cairo Genizah, has noted that twelfth-century book lists testify to the wide circulation of Tanḥuma literature; Genesis Rabba, though by no means absent, appears relatively rarely. The differing degrees of authority accorded to the two sources are illuminated by a thirteenth-century record of a dispute that likely took place in the Babylonian synagogue in Fustat concerning the *paytan-nic* association of Elijah with the son of Yeroḥam, as in Genesis Rabba (71:9). Though the Tanḥuma's contrary identification of Elijah as Phinehas was immediately familiar to the community, the argument that eventually won the day was grounded in the venerable authority of Genesis Rabba.¹²⁷ In contexts in which both forms of our parable circulated together, therefore, they would have been distinguished by the different statuses, uses, and audiences of the works of which they were part. The Tanḥuma's version, rewritten so as to be immediately intelligible in a popular homiletic setting, enabled the explication of Gen 4 to a wider audience. But it did not supplant the version attributed to the illustrious Shim'on ben Yoḥai, which continued to be transmitted in the more authoritative, albeit less familiar, source of rabbinic interpretations of Genesis.

Genesis Rabba and Midrash Tanḥuma were first printed in Constantinople in 1512 and 1520–22 respectively, and were reprinted in Venice at the press of Daniel Bomberg in 1545. Editions produced in the same places at the same times disguised the different textual histories of the two versions of our *mashal*.¹²⁸ When the sixteenth-century commentator Samuel Yafe interpreted the version in Genesis Rabba, he referred to the parable in Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas as if it were a disinterested explanation. Proposing that Genesis Rabba assumed Tanḥuma's עֵלִי-אֵלִי wordplay, he asserted that the cry of Abel's blood was a rebuke directed at God.¹²⁹ However, as we have seen, the Tanḥuma's *mashal* was itself a reinterpretation, formulated to advance the rigorous interrogation of God's actions throughout Tanḥuma corpus. When examined in its own right, it emerges not as a simplified explanation, but as an artful reformation

126 Meyer, *Editorial*, 491–514.

127 Lavee, "Tanḥuma," 48–49, 57–58; Lavee, "Literary," 288–93; Lavee and Gan-Zvi, "From France," 111–13, 130.

128 *Sefer Rabbot* (Constantinople: Naḥmias, 1512); *Midrash Tanḥuma* (Constantinople: Solomon ben Mazal Tov, 1520–22). On the Venice 1545 edition of Midrash Rabba, see Williams, "Venetian"; Tanḥuma was similarly issued by Adelkind under Bomberg's imprint.

129 See note 53.

that derives its interpretation from the biblical text in a different way in order to convey it to a contemporary audience. By thus reaching into the medieval reception history of this *mashal*, we can distinguish exegetical gloss and rewriting from earlier forms of the text, and thereby identify and explain a late antique cultural reference in our extant sources.

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