'ONE-UP' ANECDOTES IN JEWISH LITERATURE
OF THE HELLENISTIC-ROMAN ERA

D.S. Barrett

Among the wealth of source material in which the Jews of antiquity express their attitudes towards their Hellenistic and Roman overlords, the 'one-up' anecdotes are particularly revealing. They fall into a number of distinct categories. Within each category I shall cite one typical example fairly fully, then list others more summarily for completeness.¹

(i) A Greek or a Roman, without any provocation, is tricked, rebuked or otherwise humiliated in some minor way.

A Jerusalemite child, having bought figs and grapes for an Athenian visitor, is invited to share them. After setting the inferior ones before himself and the good ones before his benefactor, he shrewdly suggests that they cast lots for each other's share.²

Other examples: a Jerusalemite child 'obliges' an Athenian visitor;³ R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus rebukes a Roman matron for a foolish question;⁴ R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah tells Hadrian why a Sabbath dish is so fragrant;⁵ Mosollamus, a Jewish archer, by shooting a 'guiding' bird, robs Greek augury of its credibility.⁶

(ii) A Greek or a Roman, attempting to argue with, insult or otherwise humiliate a Jew, is defeated verbally.

A Roman matron complains to R. Jose b. Ḥalafta that his God indiscriminately draws near to Himself anyone He pleases. He presents her with a basket of figs, from which she carefully selects and eats the best. 'You apparently know how to select but the Holy One, blessed be He, does not,' is Jose's ironic comment. 'The one whose actions He perceives to be good, him He chooses and brings near to Himself.'⁷

¹. I have made passing mention of the genre in two earlier papers: 'Greeks and Romans in Jewish Writers,' Proceed. AULLA XI Congress (1967), 1-16, and 'Patterns of Jewish Submission and Rebellion in the Hellenistic-Roman World,' Prudentia 5.2 (November 1973), 99-115.
². Mid. Lam. R. 1.1.6.
³. Ib. 1.1.7.
⁴. Mid. Num. R. 9.48; the question itself is unanswered. The incident is discussed in Jacob Neusner, Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus, the Tradition and the Man, Leiden, 1972, 1. 450.
⁵. BT Shab. 119a.
Other examples: impertinent Athenian visitors to Jerusalem are put in their place by a tailor and a child;⁸ R. Akiba demonstrates to an obdurate Q. Tineius Rufus, governor of Judaea, the importance of keeping the Sabbath;⁹ a Jewish tailor explains to a piqued Roman governor why he outbid the governor’s servant for a fish;¹⁰ R. Jose b. Ḥalafta heatedly refutes a Roman matron’s claim that her God is greater than his;¹¹ R. Joshua b. Hananiah pays back Hadrian’s daughter for calling him ugly, then defiantly defends himself before the Emperor;¹² he shows the absurdity of Hadrian’s claim to be better than Moses¹³ and his demand to see God;¹⁴ Rabban Gamaliel effectively demolishes three blasphemous assertions and one provocative question of an emperor, probably Nerva.¹⁵

(iii) A Greek or a Roman experiences humiliation (non-verbal), confusion, fear, physical discomfort or injury at the hands of a Jew.

Four wily Jerusalemites visit an inn in Athens. The innkeeper listens to their conversation, which criticises him or his establishment on four grounds: the bed is damaged and unfit to sleep in; the dinner meat tasted of dog’s flesh; the dinner wine had the flavour of a grave; the innkeeper is illegitimate. He accepts the first criticism but blithely rejects the others—until enquiries next day show that all four are true.¹⁶

Other examples: a visitor from Jerusalem to Athens tricks the proprietors of an inn into expelling themselves from their own premises;¹⁷ one Athenian visitor to Jerusalem loses his clothes to a class of school children;¹⁸ another is embarrassed by the skill of his partially blind Jewish slave;¹⁹ another, who made great fun of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, is tricked into trying to sell sandals at an outrageous price with his head shaved and his face blackened;²⁰ the prophet Elijah forces a Roman ruler to replace a squandered patrimony;²¹ a ‘godly man’ expels a group of Roman con-

10. Ib. 11.4.
12. BT Ta’an. 7a.
14. BT. Hullin 60a.
15. BT Sanh. 39a. The assertion that God is a thief is actually rebutted on Gamaliel’s behalf by the emperor’s daughter.
17. Ib. 1.1.5.
18. Ib. 1.1.11.
19. Ib. 1.1.12.
spirators; R. Joshua b. Ḥannahiah foretells correctly that Trajan will have a nightmare in which he is humiliated by the Parthians; a Roman matron, prompted by a conversation with R. Jose b. Ḥalafta, tries to match God’s skill in joining couples—with disastrous results to her household; R. Joshua b. Ḥannahiah provides three terrifying examples of God’s might, two for Hadrian and one for his daughter, who contracts leprosy.

(iv) Hostile behaviour by a Greek or a Roman towards a Jew is punished by death.

A thigh bone keeps rolling up to R. Isaac b. Eleazar and refuses to be buried. Isaac concludes it is engaged on a mission. Seven days later it trips a Roman government courier, thereby causing his death. The courier is found to be carrying ill tidings for the Jews of Caesarea.

Other examples: a Roman, having ousted a rabbi from a lavatory, takes possession, is bitten by a snake and dies; R. Joshua b. Ḥannahiah, as a reward for defeating sixty Athenian sages in argument, encompasses their deaths.

(v) A Jew is preserved from his opponent’s clutches by a miracle, and the opponent often repents or makes amends.

Heliodorus, the chancellor of Seleucus IV Philopator, is sent to Jerusalem to confiscate money held in trust in the Temple. He is deterred by a vision of a horse and rider and two youths who scourge him; Heliodorus repents of his wickedness.

Other examples: at the prayer of Eleazar, two angels divert a herd of drunken elephants from its intended Jewish victims onto the army of Ptolemy IV; the remorseful King orders the Jews to be set free; three young Jews are miraculously preserved from Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery fur-
nace; the King exalts them and decrees that their God must not be spoken against;\textsuperscript{31} Onkelos, a proselyte and nephew of Titus, converts by his holy discourse three Roman cohorts sent to arrest him;\textsuperscript{32} R. Eleazar b. Peraṣa, on trial during Hadrian's persecution, is preserved by his clever replies and three miracles;\textsuperscript{33} Elisha is chased by a Roman quaestor for wearing phylacteries; the phylacteries change into the wings of a dove.\textsuperscript{34} Diocletian's plan to kill a group of rabbis is frustrated by the intervention of a bath-sprite, a miracle grudgingly acknowledged by the Emperor.\textsuperscript{35}

The following account of a \textit{triple} victory earns a place in categories (i), (iv) and (v). A Roman emperor, possibly Julian the Apostate, proposes to R. Tanḥum, 'Come, let us all be one.' While Tanḥum agrees, he declares, 'But we who are circumcised cannot possibly become like you. So you [Romans] become circumcised like us.' The emperor praised his words, but says that anyone beating the king in debate has to be thrown into the \textit{vivarium}.\textsuperscript{36} Tanḥum is thrown in but unharmed. A heretic standing by says this is because the creatures are not hungry. So he is thrown in—and eaten.\textsuperscript{37}

In the interests of balance it must be acknowledged that, in a small number of encounters, the Jew is beaten. In a theological discussion the mysterious 'Antoninus'\textsuperscript{38} twice scores off R. Judah-ha-Nasi in a style reminiscent of Socrates.\textsuperscript{39} During the Hadrianic persecutions, R. Judah b. Baba tries to circumvent the law forbidding the ordination of elders. He is caught and brutally killed.\textsuperscript{40} A Roman matron pokes fun at the portly waists of R. Jose b. Ḥalafta and R. Eleazar b. Simeon, saying that, if they stood touching each other, a yoke of oxen could pass beneath them. They consider this jibe unworthy of a reply.\textsuperscript{41}

Yet even in these incidents Jews and Judaism can hardly be said to lose

\textsuperscript{31} Daniel 3. The story seems to have been composed in the diaspora early in the second century B.C. and to have served as a warning to Hellenistic rulers, of whom Nebuchadnezzar was a symbol. See John J. Collins, 'The Court-Tales of Daniel and the Development of Apocalyptic,' \textit{JBL} 94 (1974), 218-234.
\textsuperscript{32} BT 'AZ 11a.
\textsuperscript{33} Ib. 17b.
\textsuperscript{34} BT Shab. 49a.
\textsuperscript{35} Mid. Gen. R. 63.8.
\textsuperscript{36} An enclosure for wild beasts or fish.
\textsuperscript{37} BT Sanh. 39a.
\textsuperscript{38} On the difficult problem of this ruler's identity, see S. Krauss, \textit{Antoninus und Rabbi}, Frankfurt, 1910, and L. Wallach, 'The Colloquy of Marcus Aurelius with the Patriarch Judah I,' \textit{JQR} 31 (1940-1941), 259-286.
\textsuperscript{39} Mid. Gen. R. 34.10.
\textsuperscript{40} BT Sanh. 14a.
\textsuperscript{41} BT BM 84a.
out altogether. 'Antoninus' is portrayed as a proselyte and R. Judah-ha-Nasi bows to his corrections as being in accord with Scripture.42 Although R. Judah b. Baba loses his life in the end, his plan to ordain the elders in an isolated spot between two mountains is remarkable for its ingenuity. Moreover the five newly ordained ones escape. Although the Roman matron who insults R. Jose and R. Eleazar clearly comes out in front, their dignified silence may certainly be seen as a rebuke.

Few of the anecdotes can be accepted unreservedly as historically accurate. In category (i) it is probably reasonable to believe the account of Mosollamus's prowess with the bow, though one wishes ancient historians had used the steadying device of the footnote. Josephus' source, Hecataeus of Abdera, wrote his *Aegyptiaca* 'on location' and could easily have made personal contact with Greek-speaking Jewish soldiers and theologians in Alexandria.

In category (v), the miracle that forestalled Heliodorus from making off with the Temple funds is justly described by V. Tcherikover as 'the rhetorical embellishments so typical of Hellenistic historiography in general and of Jewish historical writings in particular'.43 The author throughout the work is preoccupied with showing that repeated attacks on the Temple were repeatedly warded off and divinely punished. It seems entirely probable, however, that Heliodorus did assail the Temple and was successfully driven off.

There is, of course, even more rhetorical exaggeration in the drunken elephants episode, which was written from the standpoint of uncompromising orthodoxy. Tcherikover again, however, after a careful consideration of opposing views, demonstrates that the story is not bereft of historical value, at least in regard to the period of Ptolemy VIII.44

The stories in the Talmud and the Midrashim move much further from reality.45 They are important, however, in that they reflect Jewish thoughts, feelings and wishes in response to the historical facts of domination by Hellenistic and Roman rulers.

The Jewish victors in the various encounters fall neatly into two main stereotypes. First there are the anonymous Jews of humble status—child, tailor, slave, traveller—but intelligent, articulate, wily and thoroughly urbanised. They illustrate admirably one important factor identified by

44. *Ib.* 282.
45. Louis Jacobs sounds an appropriate note of warning in ‘How Much of the Talmud is Pseudepigraphic?’, *JJS* 28 (1977), 46-59.
Raphael Patai as enabling the Jews of antiquity to survive in a Hellenistic cultural environment:

'This was their settlement pattern in closed urban groups, often quite large. Their communal organisation bound all Jews of one locality into a single body, centered on the synagogue and adhering to the basic tenets of Judaism.'

Then there are the rabbis. Those involved in the stories are depicted in Jewish sources at large with a marked degree of consistency. Many (Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, Joshua b. Ḥananiah, Gamaliel and Akiba) played a major role in national affairs, particularly by undertaking diplomatic missions to Rome and Antioch on behalf of their fellow Jews. R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah, who was renowned as an associate of emperors, figures in more 'one-up' anecdotes than anyone else.

Again, with the exception only of R. Isaac b. Eleazar and R. Elisha, all were recognized as outstandingly dedicated and gifted teachers of the Torah.

While their personal characters varied widely, from the tolerant philhellene Rabban Gamaliel to the naive and quixotic R. Akiba, most, despite their religious orthodoxy, showed some affinity with pagan culture or at least an openness to some kind of rapprochement with their overlords. Both the fanatically patriotic R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus and the worldlywise R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah aided and abetted, if only in a small way, R. Johanan b. Zakkai's peace policy towards the Romans. When Hadrian went back on his promise to rebuild the Temple, R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah persuaded the Jews to accept the situation peacefully.

Rabban Gamaliel taught Greek philosophy in his home, was versed in Greek science and even bathed in the bathhouse of Aphrodite in Acre, believing its statue had a decorative function only. The invitation of R. Tanhum to Julian (?) was at least a gesture in the cause of unity. Though R. Akiba probably longed for the revolt against Hadrian, believing Bar Kokhba was the Messiah, tradition has it that he inspired Aquila to translate the Bible into Greek. He is said also to have wept at the sight of the beautiful wife of Tineius Rufus, because

46. One could well add 'Roman', though of course Roman culture was profoundly influenced by Hellenism.


48. BT Git. 56a, the famous coffin episode. See 'Johanan Ben Zakkai's Escape from Jerusalem: Origin and Development of a Rabbinic Story,' JSJ 6 (1975), 189-204.

49. Mid. Gen. R. 64.10.

50. BT Sot. 49b.

51. BT RH 2.8.

52. BT 'AZ 3.4.

53. Mid. Lam. R. 2.2.4.

he thought of her end, to rot away in the ground. 55

Many of the characteristics revealed by Jewish protagonists in the ‘one-up’ anecdotes are paralleled to a striking degree in later eras. Such differences as emerge are readily explainable. The rabbis in the stories cited by Ed Cray 56 have a similar ability to outwit their opponents with consummate ease. Like their ancient counterparts, those from continental Europe, lacking social parity, tend to be modest in victory. The fully acculturated American rabbis, however, deal with their opponents as equals and are consequently more aggressive, personal and venomous.

Again, our victors fit well with the timeless pattern of Jewish character traced by Patai, himself a Jew, distinguished as a sociologist and folklorist: a mental alertness which makes it hard to accept authority, a need for objects on which to sharpen the mind, and, the result of centuries of external oppression, a spirit which has learned neither to command nor to obey. 57

The pattern is rounded out by Sigmund Freud: a high self-concept, ‘a peculiar confidence in life, such as is derived from the secret ownership of some precious possession, a kind of optimism: pious people would call it trust in God’, stemming from a belief that the Jews are God’s chosen people. 58 Freud’s summing-up seems wholly reasonable:

‘Trustworthy reports tell us that they behaved in Hellenistic times just as they do today, so that the complete Jew was already there.’ 59

It is pertinent to add, however, that one common motif in the anecdotes is non-Jewish in origin, that of the ruler who, in a spirit of competition, asks questions of a wise man. Wallach shows that this is a typical theme of Hellenistic literature, first seen in the encounter of Alexander the Great with the Indian sage Calanos. 60 The usual pattern is that a ruler questions an alien sage and is so amazed at the sagacity of his answers that he is finally convinced of the sage’s wisdom. Wallach might well have found pictorial support for his examples in the portrait of a Hellenistic philosopher-sage found in the villa of P. Fannius Sinistor at Boscoreale and presently housed in the Museo Nazionale, Naples. 61 Of course, the long history of oppression

59. Ib. 106.
of Jews by outsiders makes it scarcely surprising that their folklore shows a constant infusion of foreign elements.\textsuperscript{62}

It is also worth exploring the purpose and function of the ‘one-up’ anecdotes. First, such stories may fairly be described as a form of aggression, an expression of hostility and resentment against oppressors. Aggression has been shown by Brewton Berry and Henry L. Tischer as one of the four main ways in which minorities cope with the hardships and subordinate status inflicted on them by a dominant group.\textsuperscript{63}

Further, the stories are a safe form of aggression: they must have relieved feelings of persecution while causing no harm to the oppressors or reprisals to the tellers. In a classic study, John Dollard and his colleagues describe an experiment held to test the effects on a group of subjects of sleep-deprivation and a host of other frustrations.\textsuperscript{64} The group became very resentful. Since, however, the situation precluded the direct expression of aggression against the experimenters, another outlet was found: one of the subjects produced a series of drawings showing people undergoing frightful physical torments. To the vast amusement and satisfaction of his fellows he identified the victims as psychologists. The parallel is clear.

Again, the anecdotes are sometimes humorous, and it is a commonplace that the victims of a totalitarian or oppressive regime find a safety-valve in circulating funny stories about their oppressors.\textsuperscript{65}

Most of the ‘one-up’ anecdotes, at least in their details, are at variance with historical reality. Yet they are important to the social historian, for they form an indispensable part of ancient Jewish folklore. In this folklore the Jews recorded more fully than any other nation in antiquity everything that was important to them in their oral tradition, but especially their thoughts and feelings about themselves, their God, their destiny, and the peoples that infringed on their world.

\textsuperscript{62} This phenomenon and its implications for folklorists are discussed by Raphael Patai, ‘Jewish Folklore and Jewish Tradition,’ in Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore, ed. Raphael Patai, Francis Lee Utley & Dov Moyal, Bloomington, 1960, 22.

\textsuperscript{63} Race and Ethnic Relations, Boston, 4th ed., 1978, 394. The others are avoidance, assimilation and passing, i.e. posing as a member of the dominant group.

\textsuperscript{64} Frustration and Aggression, New Haven, 1939, 45.

\textsuperscript{65} Ib. 46.