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The Swine Suicides: On the Appearance and Disappearance of Pork-related Jewish Martyrdom in Antiquity

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The willingness of Jews to martyr themselves rather than consume pork was well known in the ancient Mediterranean. Both Jewish and non-Jewish texts attest to this predilection, some viewing it as an inspired testimony to one's faith and others as a baffling and peculiar act. In Late Antiquity, new depictions of pork-related Jewish martyrdom disappear (though occasional references to centuries-old actions do appear). In this essay, I offer an explanation for the disappearance of accounts of pork-related Jewish martyrdom. I argue that, once we recognize the rhetorical role that pork-related Jewish martyrdom plays in the discourse of religious competition in the ancient Mediterranean, we can then understand why accounts of this act disappear after they no longer are needed to serve that discursive function.¹

The Appearance of Pork-related Jewish Martyrdom

If we read history forwards instead of backwards, emphasis on the pig taboo seems curious. Twice in the Hebrew Bible, the pig is specifically prohibited.² But so are myriad other animals.³ It is in the Hellenistic Period when the pig, and its prohibition, begins to stand out – both internally and externally – as being endowed with particular meaning. And Hellenistic Period

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¹ While this essay extends well beyond my previous research, part of this argument appeared in Jordan D. Rosenblum, *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), esp. 38–45, 120–121.

² Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8. The pig prohibition is also referenced in Isa. 66:3, 17.

³ For references and discussion, see Rosenblum, *Jewish Dietary Laws*, 9–18.

narratives of pork-related Jewish martyrdom play a key role in highlighting the signification of swine.

Our exploration of the discursive function of pork-related Jewish martyrdom must begin with an important assumption: in the ancient Mediterranean, both Jews and non-Jews came to view pork consumption or avoidance as metonymic practice. For Jews, the refusal to ingest pork is an identity-affirming practice; and for non-Jews, eating pork serves the same semiotic purpose. For example, as I have argued previously, over time the pig developed a particular association with Rome and Roman mores. Embodied in multiple texts as The Pig, to ingest pig is to ingest Romanness.⁴ Concomitantly, to refuse to ingest pig is an active practice of separation from a Roman identity.⁵ We must keep this presumption in mind when we read ancient accounts of pork-related Jewish martyrdom, as the connection between pork and Otherness plays a key role in understanding the rhetoric of these texts.

The *locus porcinus classicus* are the infamous accounts of Antiochus, the Seleucid villain of Maccabean legend and the Hanukkah story. For example, after accusing the Jews of misanthropy in general, and at the table in particular,⁶ Diodorus describes “Antiochus, called Epiphanes” using a pig to implement his political and cultural agenda in regard to Jews and Judaism:

And since Epiphanes was shocked by such hatred directed against all mankind, he had set himself to break down their traditional practices. Accordingly, he sacrificed before the image of the founder⁷ and the open-air altar of the god a great sow, and poured its blood over them. Then, having prepared its flesh, he ordered that their holy books, containing the xenophobic laws, should be sprinkled with the broth of the meat; that the lamp, which they call undying

⁴ Good examples can be found in the agricultural writings of the Roman author Varro, who asked in the 30’s BCE: “Who of our people [i.e., Romans] cultivates a farm without keeping swine” (*On Agriculture*, 2.4.3)? He continues on to note the key role that the pig plays in the important (at least amongst the upper class) cultural practice of the banquet: “There is a saying that the race of pigs is expressly given by nature to set forth a banquet” (*On Agriculture*, 2.4.10). All translations from Cato and Varro, *On Agriculture*. Translated by W. D. Hooper and Harrison Boyd Ash, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), 353, 359.

⁵ See Jordan D. Rosenblum, “Why do you refuse to eat pork?: Jews, Food, and Identity in Roman Palestine,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100.1 (2010): 95–110.

⁶ *Bibliotheca Historica*, 34.35.1.1–2 (*GLAJJ* 1:182–183). For other examples of this type of argument, see 3 Macc. 3:4, 7; and Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13.245–247 (which likely uses Diodorus as a source, as noted by Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 66–67).

Each reference to non-Jewish Greek and Roman authors includes reference to the corresponding page numbers in *GLAJJ*, which refers to: Menahem Stern, ed., *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976). This classic work often uses translations from the corresponding Loeb Classical Library volume.

⁷ According to Peter Schäfer, this refers to a marble statue with an image of a bearded Moses seated on an ass. See *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 55–62, esp. 58–59.

and which burns continually in the temple, should be extinguished; and that the high priest and the rest of the Jews should be compelled to partake of the meat.⁸

Literally pouring pig broth on the very biblical texts that prohibit ingestion of pork, Antiochus uses the pig as a symbol of his domination over the Jews. Through forced ingestion of pig-meat, the Jews symbolically both submit to his rule and renounce their reputedly xenophobic practices.⁹ Rhetorically, the pig is deployed to alter the Jewish altar, the Jewish holy books, and the Jewish body.¹⁰

Diodorus' narrative of the famed encounter between Antiochus and the Jews lacks one key detail: Jewish martyrdom. From the Greek root meaning "to bear witness," martyrs offer their lives as a testimony of their faith.¹¹ Tessa Rajak's excellent summary of how narratives of pork-related Jewish martyrdom function is worth quoting at length:

This phenomenon can be explained in terms of the specific functions of Jewish martyrology, in which a central purpose is to 'save the nation', to establish models for the preservation of Jewish identity under alien rule. The dietary laws are a vital symbolic distinguishing mark.... And it is the special contribution of Jewish-Greek martyrology to integrate what had become an everyday identity-marker of Judaism, its dietary rules, with a picture of Jewish identity and faith stretched to abnormal limits in a crisis of persecution. Whether this representation was generated by a dimly remembered historic moment, a real and traumatic attempt by Seleucid overseers to force forbidden food on certain Jews, or whether by subsequent social developments, we do not know. Nor does it matter very much. Either way, this reconstruction of the past, with its distinctive archetypes of martyrdom, was fixed both in literature and in popular memory.¹²

⁸ *Bibliotheca Historica*, 34.35.1.3–4 (*GLAJJ* 1:182–183). First century CE.

⁹ See Rosenblum, "Why do you refuse," esp. 101–102; Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 67.

¹⁰ For discussion of rabbinic texts that further this claim, see Rosenblum, "Why do you refuse," 102–107.

¹¹ For a concise and relevant discussion of these matters, see Tessa Rajak, "Dying for the Law: The Martyr's Portrait in Jewish-Greek Literature" (in *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* [Boston: Brill, 2000], 99–133). Also see Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented A Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2014 [2013]). Though Moss questions the veracity of early Christian martyr narratives, she seems to readily accept those of the Maccabees, including instances of pork-related Jewish martyrdom (see esp. pp. 48–52). However, I argue in this essay that Moss should extend her skepticism of later Christian narratives to earlier Jewish ones, as well.

¹² Rajak, "Dying for the Law," 128–129. Also see Rosenblum, "Why do you refuse," 101–102.

More important than the accuracy of these accounts is their tremendous cultural power. Martyrs bear witness to their faith by choosing a principled death over a compromised life. And, beginning in the Hellenistic period, this choice becomes symbolized in the decision to eat pork and live, or to abstain from pork and die.

Pork-related martyrdom at the hand of Antiochus appears explicitly in two texts (2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42 and 4 Maccabees 5–18),¹³ which describe two accounts of martyrdom: (1) the martyrdom of Eleazar, an old man; and (2) the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons. Here I focus briefly on the more expansive text of 4 Maccabees.

Antiochus wants to force Jews to eat pork as a symbol of both their submission to his authority and their acceptance of his cultural mores. Their reason for abstaining from pork baffles him. Thus, when Antiochus offers Eleazar the opportunity to ingest pork rather than suffer torture and death, he wonders, “Why should you abhor eating the excellent meat of this animal which nature has freely bestowed on us?”¹⁴ Given this gustatory and philosophical argument, Antiochus expects Eleazar to choose swine and survival. Instead, Eleazar’s stubborn refusal to depart from his misguided philosophy leads him to – from Antiochus’ perspective – a totally unnecessary (and violent) death. Though Eleazar offers an eloquent defense for his position,¹⁵ Antiochus simply cannot comprehend why one would choose death rather than indulge in the “harmless” pleasure of “eating the excellent meat of this animal.”¹⁶ Antiochus does not give much philosophical weight to the biblical commandment to abstain.¹⁷ In fact, he argues that God would understand and forgive Eleazar for choosing pork rather than death, since “even if there is some power that watches over this religion of yours, it would pardon you for any transgression committed under compulsion.”¹⁸

¹³ One could make a case that two other texts refer to this reputed phenomenon. In 1 Macc. 1:47, Antiochus is reported to order the construction of altars upon which to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals. However, this passage does not explicitly mention forced-consumption of pig-meat. Similarly, 1 Macc. 1:62–63 appears to summarize the events discussed in the two texts above, but never explicitly speaks of ingesting pig; rather, it refers to unclean food, which may or may not equate with pork.

¹⁴ 4 Macc. 5:8 (in general, see 5:6–13). All translations of 4 Maccabees are from H. Anderson, “4 Maccabees” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:531–564.

¹⁵ See 4 Macc. 5:14–38.

¹⁶ 4 Macc. 5:8–9.

¹⁷ See Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8. In a personal communication, Daniel Ullucci pointed out that here, “the persecutor’s absurdly obtuse inability to comprehend the position of the martyr is a characteristic of the genre going all the way back to Plato’s *Apology*. The ease of escape highlights the principled stand of the martyr. This is critical to the story. There is nothing glorious about just getting executed.”

¹⁸ 4 Macc. 5:13. As we shall see below, the rabbis would likely agree with Antiochus in this particular circumstance.

Impressed by his old age and his courage, Antiochus' guards offer Eleazar a way to avoid both pork *and* death: “Why, Eleazar, are you so unreasonably destroying yourself in this foul way? Let us bring you some cooked food, and you pretend to taste of the swine’s flesh and save yourself.”¹⁹ Though they acknowledge the fortitude of Eleazar’s refusal, Antiochus’ guards view Eleazar’s decision as unreasonable. However, Eleazar correctly realizes that such a “solution” involves a public farce in which Eleazar loses face and, more importantly, the opportunity to die as a martyr. In refusing to partake in this charade, Eleazar’s willful submission to torture and a violent death serves as a witness to his faith.

Immediately after the narrative of Eleazar’s pork-related martyrdom, we read the tale of the mother and her seven sons, wherein each member of the family suffers a gruesome death rather than consume pork. Their reason for abstaining is a desire to remain faithful to their ancestral law and to display mastery over their passions. Regarding the latter, 4 Maccabees 13:2 states: “For if being enslaved to the passions they had eaten unclean food, we would have said that they had been conquered by them.” Fortunately, their reason and self-control prevailed. This act of virtue is even more pronounced for the mother, as she both conquers her maternal instinct to save her seven sons and the contemporary cultural perception of a weaker female mind.²⁰ Antiochus implores them not to disobey him: “I not only advise you not to display the same mad frenzy as that old man who has just been tortured, but I beg of you to yield to me and take advantage of my friendship.”²¹ If they would only “renounce the ancestral law of [their] polity,” they would receive positions of authority and wealth.²² Their answer is firm and fast. They refuse his offer as soon as Antiochus stops speaking.²³ In doing so, the mother and her seven sons each endure “manifold torments unto death for piety’s sake.”²⁴

¹⁹ 4 Macc. 6:14–15.

²⁰ E.g., see 4 Macc. 14:11–16:25. On the construction of masculinity in this text, see Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, “Taking it Like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117.2 (1998): 249–273.

For another account involving women and pork, see Philo, *Flaccus*, 95–96. On the presumptions about gender in this account, which lacks martyrdom but clearly speaks of physical and sexual violence against women, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256–257.

²¹ 4 Macc. 8:5. On the biblical concept of friendship, see Saul M. Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). In the final chapter (pp. 87–103), Olyan examines how biblical notions of friendship are received in the Hellenistic Period.

²² 4 Macc. 8:7 (in general, see 8:4–11).

²³ 4 Macc. 8:29–9:9.

²⁴ 4 Macc. 17:7.

At this point, I take a step back from the violent and graphic deaths depicted in these texts in order to assess the narrative function of pork-related Jewish martyrdom.²⁵ 4 Maccabees is a polemical text, written to advance a particular political, philosophical, and theological agenda. This agenda leads to the deployment of various discursive strategies. For example, note how both Antiochus and his guards are confused by the swine suicides. Their befuddlement, however, is a discursive strategy. Antiochus and his agents play dumb, feigning ignorance as to why a Jew would choose death over diet. This pretension of incomprehension serves a particular semiotic purpose: what I playfully label “the Swine and the Signified.” The swine is a semiotic sign, communicating signification, or meaning. As I stated earlier, the pig stands for Otherness. In forcing Jews to eat the pig, Antiochus uses the semiotic sign of swine in order to signify Jewish subjugation. Playing naïve, he wonders why Jews refuse this “harmless” and “excellent meat.” But this is just a literary pretense, as it signals to the reader what is actually at play here: Antiochus knows that by eating pork, they are embodying submission; and by abstaining from pork, they are embodying rebellion. Refusing to assimilate to a foreign body, they choose to flee from their own physical body via martyrdom.

Rajak’s earlier point about the irrelevance of historical veracity is important to remember here. Whether these events – or something like them – actually occurred does not matter.²⁶ Either way, this account utilizes pork as a metonym for incorporation or separation. Further, as Bruce Lincoln reminds us, force and discourse can work together to achieve “ideological persuasion.”²⁷ It does not matter whether the meat on the plate is metaphorical or material; what matters is how that meat is deployed rhetorically.

The Disappearance of Pork-related Jewish Martyrdom

Now that we have established the discursive role that the pig plays in pork-related Jewish martyrdom, we are prepared to assess the implications of its disappearance. In contrast to the Hellenistic period, only a handful of Late Antique non-Jewish texts refer to pork-related Jewish

²⁵ Commenting on these graphic details, which I omit, Candida Moss observes that, “The culinary undertones of the scene invoke ideas of barbarism and cannibalism.... The implication is that the people forcing others to eat pork have other, darker appetites” (*Myth of Persecution*, 51).

²⁶ Admittedly, this is a bit of an overstatement. My aim is not to completely dismiss history; rather, I am pointing to the discursive function of such claims. These stories become endowed with cultural power, hence their widespread and enduring transmission. The kernel (more or, as I have come to believe, likely less) of truth beneath these stories quickly becomes irrelevant, as the rhetoric shapes the way that these narratives impact, and are impacted by, subsequent texts and events.

²⁷ See Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies in Myth, Ritual, and Classification*, Second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014 [1989]), 1–3.

martyrdom, and each instance appears to be refracted through the lens of time. For example, Sextus Empiricus states: “A Jew or an Egyptian priest would prefer to die instantly rather than eat pork.”²⁸ Appearing amidst a list of various religious food practices “in people’s worship of their gods,”²⁹ this description introduces nothing new to the discussion above. Adding only slightly more, Porphyry notes that Jews do not eat pig, “and even when many kings strove to change them they preferred to suffer death rather than to transgress the law.”³⁰ Finally, the Roman emperor Julian observes that, “those whose minds were attuned to the doctrines of the Jews are so ardent in their belief that they would choose to die for it, and to endure utter want and starvation rather than taste pork or any animal that has been strangled or had the life squeezed out of it.”³¹ Though Julian uses discourse about Jewish actions as part of his larger polemic project,³² he does not offer a new account of pork-related Jewish martyrdom.

Given the extensive discussion of pork-related Jewish martyrdom in the Hellenistic period, this absence in the Late Antique period seems curious. Were Jews now more willing to eat pork? Did non-Jews cease to use forced consumption of pork as a litmus test for survival? Though the extant record remains silent, and thus my argument must necessarily be considered speculative, I argue that attending to the rhetorical function of these narratives accounts for the disappearance of this motif. Texts in which Jews must choose either swine or survival use Jewish ingestion of pig as symbolic of Jewish acceptance of external authority. Whether real or imagined – and I believe them to be more likely the latter – these narratives make sense in an era when Jews are being taken over by an Other. This is especially true when we highlight the rhetorical purpose of the pig in these narratives: namely, as a metonymic mechanism of domination. In the Late Antique period, however, Jews in Palestine remain

²⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyposes*, 3.223 (*GLAJJ* 2:159). Second century CE.

²⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyposes*, 3.222–223 (*GLAJJ* 2:159). Schäfer correctly observes that the tone of this statement is “markedly neutral” (*Judeophobia*, 70).

³⁰ *De Abstentia*, 2.61 (*GLAJJ* 2:434–444). Third century CE. On this text, see Ari Finkelstein, “The Use of Jews in Julian’s Program: ‘Dying for the Law’ in the Letter to Theodorus – A Case Study,” in *Religious Competition in the Third Century C.E.: Jews, Christian, and the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jordan D. Rosenblum, Lily C. Vuong, and Nathaniel P. DesRosiers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 168–178, 169–170; Cristiano Grottanelli, “Avoiding Pork: Egyptians and Jews in Greek and Latin Texts,” in *Food and Identity in the Ancient World*, ed. Cristiano Grottanelli and Lucio Milano (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice e Libreria, 2004), 59–93, 79–80; Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 75–76. Porphyry mentions Jews in a list of groups that would die rather than transgress their food taboos. Interestingly, in this list it is on account of cows – and not pigs – that Egyptians are willing to die. Further, there is little evidence for many of these other groups martyring themselves rather than consuming prohibited foods; rather, “It seems likely that Porphyry is making a generalization here from the history of the Hebrews, about whose fortitude in face of persecution he has much to relate” (Stern, *GLAJJ*, 2:444).

³¹ *Letter to Theodorus*, 453C (*GLAJJ*, 2:551–552). Fourth century CE. The translation follows Finkelstein, “Jews in Julian’s Program,” 169. On this text, see Finkelstein, “Jews in Julian’s Program”; Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 70–71.

³² In general, see Finkelstein, “Jews in Julian’s Program.”

under the rule of Rome. While Sextus Empiricus, Porphyry, and Julian remember a time when Jews (at least textually) had to undergo this ordeal, the absence of such narratives during this era highlights once again the semiotic role of this motif as swine signifying the imposition of foreign dominance on Jews. Now that Jews remain under Roman rule, such stories need not be told, which I argue explains this lacuna.³³

Swine Subjugation in Rabbinic Texts

As an extension of this argument, it is telling that, when narratives of swine subjugation appear in later rabbinic texts, they do so in the context of the dominance of Rome over the Jewish community.³⁴ In particular, they appear in polemical accounts of the destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of Rome in 70 CE.³⁵ Rome, which is the archetype of The Pig for the rabbis, literally uses pig as weapon in its conquest of Jerusalem, hurling it upon the Temple altar.³⁶ Thus, according to one rabbinic tradition, “A pig’s head was brought and set into the catapult, and this [Vespasian] hurled toward the [sacrificial] limbs which were on the altar [of the Second Temple]. It was then that Jerusalem was captured.”³⁷ Jerusalem falls by the pig and to The Pig. But importantly, these accounts do not include pork-related Jewish martyrdom. Though a pig is forced into Jewish physical space, it is not forced into a Jewish physical body. I believe that this is an important distinction.

Another text in which pork and Rome appear offers fruitful insight into how key variables have changed in rabbinic literature.

³³ Therefore, I am arguing that the active subjugation of Jews by Rome led to these stories being told, but once that subjugation became routine, the impetus for the creation of new porcine narratives ceases. That being said, the continued dominance by Rome occasionally leads to these stories being re-told, as noted above.

³⁴ In a personal communication, John Mandsager suggested that I consider “giving a more extensive account of what the later martyrdom narratives *do*.” After much consideration, I decided that I could not do proper justice to this suggestion without writing another essay on the topic. In short, though I want to acknowledge that martyrdom narratives (both ancient and modern) are carefully crafted to convey a whole series of cultural assumptions and arguments about theology, power dynamics, etc., my goal herein was more narrowly to account for the appearance and disappearance of one particular ancient motif of martyrdom. Accounting for broader phenomena remains beyond the scope of this essay.

³⁵ See Rosenblum, “Why do you refuse,” esp. 102–109.

³⁶ See the texts cited in Rosenblum, “Why do you refuse,” esp. 102–107. Though Rome literally uses pig as a weapon in these texts, this is more likely a rhetorical metaphor.

³⁷ *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* A4, 69–73; cf. B7, 3–11; *b. Gittin* 55b–57a. For a consideration of the rhetorical role of food (and/or lack of food) during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, see Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Gender, Sex, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Rabbi Meir was sought by the [Roman] government. He fled. Passing by the store of Romans, he found them sitting and eating ‘that kind.’ When they saw him, they said: “Is that him or not?” They said: “If that is him, let us call him over; if he comes and eats with us [then it cannot be him.” They call him over]. [Rabbi Meir] dipped one of his fingers in pig’s blood and put another finger in his mouth, dipping one and sucking another. They said to one another: “If that were Rabbi Meir, he would not have done so.” They let him go and he fled. And this Scriptural verse applies to him: “the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who possesses it” [Ecclesiastes 7:12].³⁸

Rabbi Meir has gone on the lam.³⁹ Spotted by a group of Romans, Rabbi Meir knows that he must act in a manner that they would not consider suspicious.⁴⁰ To throw them off the scent, Rabbi Meir uses ingestion of pork to “prove” that he is not the Jew they are looking for.

A few features of this text are worth our notice. First, the symbolic importance of Rome and the pig is clearly present. The Romans are sitting and eating pork. Thus, The Pig is dining on pig. Second, the text cannot even bring itself to refer to pork. It uses a euphemism – “that kind.” It does clarify later that it is “pig’s blood,” but the revulsion over swine is marked linguistically. Third, and most importantly, Rabbi Meir is the hero of our rabbinic story because he pretends to ingest pork in order to escape.⁴¹ Remember that Eleazar refused his jailors’ suggestion that he perform the exact same illusion. In response to this proffered ruse, Eleazar sternly replies: “It would most surely be contrary to reason if, having lived our lives in accordance with the truth right up to our old age and ... living in conformity with the Law, we should now change and ourselves become a model of impiety to the young by setting them an example of eating unclean food.”⁴²

Why would Rabbi Meir not follow Eleazar’s example? At the very least, why would Rabbi Meir not have tried to run rather than walking right up to a bunch of Romans and performing an act of porcine prestidigitation? Because the rules of the game have changed.

³⁸ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7.12.1.

³⁹ For a fuller version of the story, including an explanation of why Rabbi Meir is a wanted man, see *b. Avodah Zarah* 18b. In this version, pork is not specifically mentioned; instead, he is described as dipping his finger in “cooked food of idolaters.” However, there may be an allusion to the pig, as the verb used in this text for him seeing this food is *ḥaza’a*, and the Hebrew word for pig is *ḥazir*.

⁴⁰ Or, put differently, Rabbi Meir must act in a manner that the Romans would consider suspicious for a rabbinic Jew to act.

⁴¹ Also see *Numbers Rabbah* 20:21, where a shopkeeper conceals his Jewish identity by cooking pork. This story is reported to occur during the period of intense persecution of Jews at the hands of the Roman Emperor Hadrian. On this text, see Jordan D. Rosenblum, “The Unwashed Masses: Handwashing as a Ritual of Social Distinction in Rabbinic Judaism,” *Historia Religionum* 10 (2018): 79–90, esp. 84–86.

⁴² 4 Macc. 6:18–19.

According to a key rabbinic principle, with the exception of idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and murder, one may violate any other biblical commandment in order to save a life.⁴³ In eating pig, a rabbinic Jew does not violate one of these three exceptions, so they could (and, in fact, should) eat pork. And Rabbi Meir does not even eat pork!

In the Hellenistic Period, the model of swine suicide allowed authors to portray pious Jews as consciously choosing principled death over compromised life. Accounts of pork-related Jewish martyrdom symbolized Jewish resistance to the imposition of foreign rule. While the cultural capital of these narratives remained, Jewish communities in Palestine continued to lack self-governance.⁴⁴ In particular, they were ruled by Rome – The Pig, in their metonymic narrative. Though new Jewish martyrdom narratives (likely both real and imagined) appear in the rabbinic period, accounts of pork-related Jewish martyrdom disappear.⁴⁵ Dietary laws are not considered rabbinic reasons to die; only idolatry, forbidden sexual relationships (e.g., incest), and murder are.⁴⁶ Unlike in the Hellenistic Period, choosing swine and survival is a rational choice. What Eleazar deemed impious, Rabbi Meir deems ingenious.

Rabbi Meir's actions serve as a useful comparison for what has changed. Yet, notice that even though Rabbi Meir could have actually eaten pig's blood (and, indeed, even pig itself) in this particular situation, he merely pretends to do so. Behind this illusion we detect the long cultural revulsion over eating pork. While he could do so, Rabbi Meir still endeavors to find a

⁴³ For example, see *b. Sanhedrin* 74a and *b. Yoma* 85b, which both cite Lev. 18:5 to claim that “he shall live by them” (i.e., “My statutes and My ordinances”), “but he should not die by them” (the former language is from Lev. 8:15, the latter from the Talmudic passages).

⁴⁴ This applies even after the Christianization of the Roman Empire, as it still represents external rule by Rome. For a comparative discussion of Jewish and Christian martyrdom in Antiquity, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). See esp. 115–125 for his discussion of martyrdom in Maccabees.

⁴⁵ On Jewish martyrdom in this period, see e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God*; and Alyssa M. Gray, “A Contribution to the Study of Martyrdom and Identity in the Palestinian Talmud,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 54.2 (2003): 242–272. Also see n. 34, above.

⁴⁶ According to *b. Berakhot* 61a, Rabbi Aqiva violated a decree by Rome (“the Evil Empire”) prohibiting the practicing of rabbinic Judaism, and thus was arrested and ultimately martyred. This tradition is referred to in *b. Menahot* 29b, which speaks of Rabbi Aqiva's flesh being “weighed in the meat-market” for his rejection of idolatry and embrace of rabbinic Judaism. In a personal communication, John Mandsager offered a suggestion that I had never considered: “what...if the rhetorical function of this scene is to think of Rabbi Aqiva's flayed flesh as presented for sale in a *Roman* butcher's shop, as that paradigmatic Roman meat, *pork*?” (original emphasis). Though I cannot think of a way to prove whether this speculation is correct, this is a highly original suggestion. If correct, it would mean that the motif of pork-related Jewish martyrdom has a related, but differentiated, motif wherein The Pig treats a Jewish body like a pig, and performs an embodied act of violence and dominance. While I find this suggestion intriguing, I see no explicit evidence to connect the dots in this manner.

way to avoid it. What matters in the end is that the Romans *think* that he ate pork, and hence Rabbi Meir is allowed to escape. This understanding is supported by the Scriptural verse applied to him. As we learn from Ecclesiastes 7:12, “the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who possess it” – meaning that Rabbi Meir’s knowledge of how to create an act of porcine prestidigitation saves his life. Like a Boy Scout, a sage should always be prepared. In this case, Rabbi Meir not only had the knowledge that pork consumption would “prove” to the Romans that he was not a wanted Jewish felon, but Rabbi Meir also had the wisdom that he could do so without actually eating pork.

Conclusion

In the arena of ancient competition, the pig plays an important rhetorical role. Given the power of this metaphor of foreign domination, the absence of pork-related Jewish martyrdom in Late Antique texts seems curious. As I argue in this essay, however, the discursive purpose of pork-related Jewish martyrdom explains this absence. While Hellenistic Period narratives offer detailed accounts of swine suicides, the reality of continued foreign dominance in the period that follows causes authors to turn to other cultural practices to symbolize martyrdom and resistance. Narratives of martyrdom do not disappear, but narratives of pork-related Jewish martyrdom do.

Recognizing the discursive function of pork-related Jewish martyrdom has led me to become increasingly skeptical about the veracity of these accounts. Historians tend to accept them at face value (accounting, of course, for the literary flourishes and polemical perspectives). However, inquiry into their rhetorical purpose suggests strongly that these were powerful metaphors, but that they were figurative and not literal. That is not to claim that no one was actually killed in the writing of these narratives, but simply to assert that swine suicides in antiquity were literary and not literal. Nevertheless, their cultural power led to their enduring memory.