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Cover Page Footnote

I previously discussed material in this article in my Ph.D. dissertation: "To Stake a Claim: The Making of Rabbinic Agricultural Spaces in the Roman Countryside," (Stanford University 2014), and in a Society of Biblical Literature Conference paper (2019). I am thankful for the helpful comments I have received from Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Stephen Weitzman, Shahzad Bashir, Helen Dixon, and Jordan Rosenblum, and I thank Rebecca Falcasantos for her feedback on the oral presentation of this paper at SBL. I acknowledge the material support I have received from the Religious Studies Department at Stanford University and the Religious Studies Department at the University of South Carolina. I thank the anonymous reviewers for this journal for their detailed and excellent comments.

A Tale of Two Fathers: Leadership Between the Estate and the Study House in the Origin Story of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus

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Found in numerous collections of midrash, the well-known origin story of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus leaving his father's agricultural estate to study Torah under Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai in Jerusalem is both a coming-of-age tale and a story of a son surpassing his father(s).¹ This story demonstrates ideals of masculine leadership in two spatial contexts—the estate and the study house—as well as different and competing styles of leadership within those spaces. In the story, there are narrative descriptions of father-figures who are characterized by markedly different forms of leadership, from caring and kind to dismissive or demanding. One idealized form of leadership is in the deft practice of household management in the agricultural estate, which varies in style between textual variants, and the other idealized leader is the Rabbi who leads a study circle and is celebrated at a banquet table in Jerusalem.² Thus, in this story, we find competition between styles of fatherhood at home, on the agricultural estate, and competition between the estate and the study house as idealized spaces for male expertise. Eliezer's coming-of-age story contains a competition between these two spaces, between demonstrating one's prowess through the sensible and careful management of the agricultural estate and demonstrating *patria potestas* over one's children, household, and landed property, on one hand, and the competitive erudition of the rabbinic sage, towering over one's peers in the study house, on the

¹ *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* A (Ed. Schechter, Ch. 6); *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* B (Ed. Schechter, Ch. 13); *Genesis Rabba* (xlii), *Tanḥuma Buber* (*lekh-lekha*, 10); and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (Ch. 1 and 2; parallel to *ARN* B). See Zipporah Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies and Their Literary Moulding in the Aggadah," in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, ed. J. Heinemann and D. Noy; Scripta Hierosolymitana 22 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971), 151. In this article, I will primarily be considering the version from *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (*PRE*). *PRE* is a late Midrashic collection, widely considered to have been authored and edited in the early Islamic period, 8th-9th c. H. L. Strack and G. Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 328. Moreover, there is some consensus that the composition, notwithstanding its pseudonymous authorship by R. Eliezer (1st c. CE, according to the Mishnah), had a single (anonymous) author. Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 25-26.

² Rabbinic ideals of leadership in the study house, notably fractious and competitive in the Babylonian Talmud, have been described by Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

A Tale of Two Fathers

other.³ In addition, particularly within the context of the agricultural estate, the variants of the story show “competition” between ideals of how the householder executes his duties as leader of the estate: between father-as-taskmaster and father-as-loving-guide.⁴

The son of a wealthy landowner, Hyrcanus, and destined to be a renowned student of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, the towering Tanna in Jerusalem, Eliezer is depicted as traveling between two worlds, the world of the agricultural estate and the world of the Rabbinic study house. In each locale, the space is governed by a different man, and Eliezer is under the authority and leadership of each, his father Hyrcanus and Rabban Yoḥanan. I believe it is fruitful to consider the characterization of all three men, to consider how Eliezer is emplaced as the “son” of two different fathers. And, by considering the textual variants of the story, we will see the range of narrative assumptions and possibilities of masculine leadership at home and in the study house. Hyrcanus and Yoḥanan represent leadership of different kinds, with authority over different spaces and “sons,” while, remarkably in some versions of the story, Eliezer proves himself master of both realms, as fitting denouement to this coming-of-age tale.

Even as the story and its recensions are found in late collections of midrash (that is, 8th-9th c. CE), the story is *set* in Late Antique Roman Palestine (1st-2nd c. CE).⁵

³ Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. Handelman asks a core question about the transition from the estate to the study house: “To what extent is the teacher’s role complementary to, or in tension with, the parent’s?” Susan Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher: Rabbinic Tales of Mentors and Disciples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 26. In the following discussion, I will consider Handelman’s recent treatment of this midrash, extending and deviating from her conclusions to emphasize the contrast between the study house and the agricultural estate, rather than the transition from student to master, as Handelman does. Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 19-38.

⁴ For discussion of the varieties of labor and familial relations within the estate, from early rabbinic sources in their Late Antique context, see John Mandsager, “To Stake a Claim: The Making of Rabbinic Agricultural Spaces in the Roman Countryside,” Ph.D. dissertation (Stanford University, 2014), chapter 3.

⁵ The dating and provenance of these Midrashic collections is a matter of great debate, and I recognize the contributions of Zipporah Kagan, Rachel Adelman, Dina Stein, and others in theorizing the textual history of these texts. See Kagan, “Divergent Tendencies,” 152. For discussion of the manuscript variants and the redaction history of the text, see Eliezer Treitl, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer: Text, Redaction and a Sample Synopsis* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Department of Talmud and Halakha, 2012); and David Aus, “Luke 15:11-32 and R. Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus’s Rise to Fame,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 3 (Sept., 1985): 443-469. For a Bakhtinian analysis of time and space in the midrash, as well as a comprehensive bibliography of the scholarship on *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, see Rachel Adelman, “The Poetics of Time and Space in the Midrashic Narrative – The Case of *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*,” Ph.D. dissertation (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008). For a Freudian analysis of the “Oedipal” relationships between Hyrcanus and Eliezer, and Yoḥanan and Eliezer in *PRE*, see Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed*, 28-33. For a folkloric interpretation of the story, see Dina Stein, *Maxims, Magic, Myth: A Folkloristic Perspective of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004). Since this a comparatively late story, Neusner barely mentions it in his comprehensive “biography” of Rabbi Eliezer. Jacob Neusner, *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man*, Part 1, *The Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 442-46. Likewise, as Gilat’s study is of the *halakhot* attributed to Rabbi Eliezer, he does not treat the hagiographic stories analyzed in this article. Yitzhak D. Gilat, *R. Eliezer*

John Mandsager

While we can safely assume that these stories were told and retold long after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, I believe that we can identify contexts that shed light on the kinds of competition that is being dramatized in the story.⁶ One context is the agricultural estate, the other the rabbinic study house. Both spaces are idealized in Late Antiquity as spaces where men can demonstrate their acumen, excellence, and superiority over others. The study house (*beit midrash*) is a primary space where rabbinic idealizations of masculine identity and superiority are played out.⁷ The agricultural estate, which notably is a space for demonstration of masculine prowess in Roman literature,⁸ can likewise be seen as a space for the idealization of male identity in rabbinic literature.⁹ Attention to the details of agriculture (or the necessary inattention to the details, in the case of the “forgotten” sheaf left behind for the poor¹⁰) in order to follow rabbinic prescriptions for following biblical law requires an assumed expertise that is demonstrated through careful and conspicuous management of one’s estate, as we see throughout Mishnah and Tosefta Seder *Zera’im* (*Seeds*).¹¹

My approach to presenting the agricultural estate, comparable with Roman spatial and rhetorical practices, as a space wherein rabbinic expertise, self-control, and adherence to biblical law are performed, deviates from the more positivistic history of

ben Hyrcanus: A Scholar Outcast, trans. E. J. Frank (Bar Ilan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1984). Gilat, however, does summarize traditions regarding the close relationship between the teacher, R. Yoḥanan, and the student, R. Eliezer (Ibid., 474-479).

⁶ In contextualizing these late midrashim with Roman ideals of estate management and fatherhood, I am following a form of literary contextualization that need not assume that the Rabbis were well versed in Roman agricultural manuals like Columella’s magnum opus (*De re Rustica: On Agriculture*). Rather, I argue that rabbinic literature can be compared to contemporaneous literary works, without evidence of direct cross-pollination, following scholars such as Boyarin (where rabbinic literature is part of a “shared cultural milieu”), Hezser (“intertextuality”), and Labendz (“a picture of rabbinic life...in which Socratic Torah makes sense”). Daniel Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 337; Catherine Hezser, “Roman Law and Rabbinic Legal Composition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75; and Jenny R. Labendz, *Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

⁷ See Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*.

⁸ See, for example, Columella, *De Re Rustica: On Agriculture* or the extensive quotations of Cato, Varro, and Pliny the Younger. R.E. Witcher, “Agricultural Production in Roman Italy,” in *A Companion to Roman Italy* ed. A. Cooley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), pp. 459-482.

⁹ See Mandsager, “To Stake a Claim.”

¹⁰ See Mira Balberg, “Unforgettable Forgotten Things: Transformations in the Laws of Forgotten Produce (*shikbehal*) in Early Rabbinic Literature,” *Oqimta* 5 (2019):1-33.

¹¹ See Mandsager, “To Stake a Claim?”; John Mandsager, “Agriculture and Industry,” in *A Companion to Late Ancient Jews and Judaism: Third Century BCE to Seventh Century CE*, ed. Naomi Koltun-Fromm and Gwynn Kessler (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2020); and Tzvi Novick, “Like an Expert Sharecropper?: Agricultural Halakhah and Agricultural Science in Rabbinic Palestine,” *AJS Review* Vol. 38, no. 2 (November 2014): 303-320.

A Tale of Two Fathers

Jewish farming in Late Antiquity that we find in earlier generations of scholarship.¹² While Feliks, Sperber, and Ze'ev Safrai all use rabbinic sources in different ways to paint a (more or less) historical picture of Jewish farming in Late Antiquity,¹³ I turn to these sources to consider the ideological, idealized, normativizing, and constructive ways in which the rabbis create the Jewish estate within their textual worlds. In the following analysis, I will compare our characters as embodying competing idealized forms of fatherhood and leadership (teaching keen estate management versus leading a study house, and using harsh demands and mockery versus care and concern in teaching those skills).¹⁴

Hyrcanus, Eliezer's Birth Father

In two variants of the story, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* and *Genesis Rabba*, Hyrcanus' fatherhood and leadership of the estate is harsh and demanding, providing one contrast with the eventually welcoming home of Rabbi Yoḥanan's study house. In other variants, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan B*, *Tanḥuma*, and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Hyrcanus is a more loving figure, while Rabban Yoḥanan's initial disdain for Eliezer is more prominent.¹⁵ By dividing the different variants by the differences in characterization of Hyrcanus and Rabban Yoḥanan, we are introduced to additional layers of the

¹² Feliks stands as an important figure in such mining of rabbinic literature for the "history" of Jewish agriculture. See Yehuda Feliks, *Agriculture in Eretz-Israel in the Period of the Bible and Talmud* [In Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1990); and idem, *Fruit Trees of the Varieties of the Plants of the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature* [In Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1994). Schwartz rightly criticizes the positivistic assumptions of Feliks's encyclopedic approach to farming as presented in rabbinic sources: "Feliks believed, in my view incorrectly, that the results of this investigation simply constituted a description of ancient Jewish agriculture, which he believed was different from ancient 'gentile' agriculture." Seth Schwartz, "Historiography on the Jews in the 'Talmudic Period': 70-640 CE," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David Sorokin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 92.

¹³ Feliks, *Agriculture in Eretz-Israel*; Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine, 200-400, the Land: Crisis and Change in Agrarian Society as Reflected in Rabbinic Sources* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1978); Ze'ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London: Routledge, 2014); and the volumes of Ze'ev Safrai and Shmuel Safrai's socio-historical commentary on the Mishnah covering Order *Zera'im* (volumes 2-9), *Mishnah Eretz-Israel* [In Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mikhlelet Lifshitz 2012-2016). For contextualization and critique of these works, see Schwartz, "Historiography on the Jews," 91-95.

¹⁴ In the analyses that follow, all translations of rabbinic sources are my own.

¹⁵ Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies," 158-64. Kagan argues that in *ARN B* and *PRE* "much is made of [Eliezer] being an unlettered ignoramus who had never learnt to recite the *Shema'* or Grace after Meals and who was a complete '*Am Ha'arez*'" (165). Notably in these variants, Hyrcanus is well-known even in Jerusalem, described as "Hyrcanus the great" in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan B*, perhaps a peer of Rabbi Yoḥanan, even as they rule different worlds. Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies," 163.

John Mandsager

competing forms of fatherhood and leadership found in this story.¹⁶ Thus, in the second group (*ARN B*, *Tanḥuma*, and *PRE*), we can schematically describe the father/teacher figure (Hyrchanus or Rabban Yoḥanan) as caring, concerned for, and accepting of Eliezer. Hyrchanus, for example, attempts to ease Eliezer's workload in *PRE*, while Yoḥanan is able to ascertain that Eliezer is starving himself in *Tanḥuma* and *ARN A*, and he tells the innkeepers to make sure Eliezer eats.¹⁷ In the other variants, however, the father/teacher figure can be seen as demanding, mocking, and dismissive, a sharp contrast with the more caring character. In *ARN A*, Hyrchanus starves his son, "Not a taste of food shall you get before you have ploughed the entire furrow," while in *ARN B* and *PRE*, Rabban Yoḥanan compounds Eliezer's misery by mocking Eliezer's bad breath (brought about by his prolonged starvation).¹⁸ Before turning to these contrasts in the characterization of Rabban Yoḥanan, let us begin with the character of Hyrchanus.

In the midrash, Hyrchanus is a wealthy landowner with several sons, actively engaged in agricultural labor, where we see "many plowmen"¹⁹ plowing a variety of fields for grain production; Eliezer appears to be the oldest son on the estate, as questions of inheritance figure prominently at the end of the story. (To spoil the end of the story a bit, in *Tanḥuma*, Eliezer's brothers will become belligerent when he disappears to study, and they demand that Hyrchanus disinherit Eliezer,²⁰ arguing that he has forfeited his place in the estate by leaving his responsibilities behind.²¹) Again, in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan B*, Eliezer's paternal lineage is noteworthy, Eliezer is described as "truly a son of one of the great of this world," even though Eliezer hides this fact from Rabban Yoḥanan.²²

¹⁶ For summary of the plot differences between the variants of the story, see Kagan's helpful chart, "Divergent Tendencies," 160-162.

¹⁷ When Eliezer arrives in Jerusalem, he does not eat at all as he waits to begin his instruction.

¹⁸ "[Eliezer] fasted for eight days, and he did not taste anything until a smell from his mouth rose before Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. And [Yoḥanan] made him stand up [and move away] from him.

"[Eliezer] sat and was weeping.

"[Yoḥanan] said to him, 'Why are you weeping?'

"[Eliezer] said to him, 'Because you made me stand up [and move away] from you like a man who makes one stand up [and move away] from him because of a skin affliction.'" (*PRE*)

¹⁹ *ARN B*, see Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies," 153.

²⁰ In *ARN A*, Hyrchanus decides to disinherit Eliezer without prompting from Eliezer's brothers.

²¹ See Jonathan S. Milgram, *From Mesopotamia to the Mishnah: Tannaitic Inheritance Law in its Legal and Social Contexts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

²² Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies," 163.

A Tale of Two Fathers

The story begins with Eliezer refusing to plow his father's fields, provided here according to the variant in *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which is parallel to *Avot de-Rabbi Natan B*.

There was once a story about Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. While his father's plowmen were plowing the furrows, Eliezer was plowing the stony ground.

Eliezer sat on the stony ground and wept. His father said to him, "Why are you weeping? Perhaps you feel bad that you are plowing the stony ground – now, you may plow the furrows!"

Eliezer sat on the furrowed ground and wept. His father said to him, "Why are you weeping? Perhaps you feel bad that you are plowing the furrows?!"

He said to him, "No." "But why are you weeping?" He said to him, "Because I wish to study Torah."

His father said to him, "But are you not twenty-eight years old, and *now* you want to study Torah?! Rather, get yourself a wife, and she will bear you sons, and you can send them to the study house."²³

For two weeks, Eliezer did not eat anything, until Elijah (let us remember him for a blessing) revealed himself to him. And Elijah said to him, "Ben Hyrcanus, why are you weeping?"

He said to him "Because I wish to study Torah."

He said to him, "If you want to study Torah, go up to Jerusalem and sit before Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai."²⁴

In this variant of the story, Hyrcanus is a kind and gentle father, as well as master of a large estate. He believes that he is accommodating, even conscientious, when he finds Eliezer in distress. Even though Hyrcanus misreads Eliezer's tears—thinking that Eliezer's labor is too difficult, instead of realizing that Eliezer wants to

²³ Eliezer's father's misunderstanding of Eliezer's grief implies that Hyrcanus understands that beginning to study Torah requires time and commitment from a young age: twenty-eight is too old to begin! (This question of age and inexperience is echoed later in *PRE*, when Eliezer weeps in Rabban Yoḥanan's presence because Eliezer has not yet learned the basics of Torah study.) Thus, Hyrcanus may presume that because of Eliezer's (relatively) advanced age, he should defer his dreams upon his children: just as Hyrcanus, the father, expects Eliezer, his son, to fulfill his dreams of successful estate management, so too, Hyrcanus imagines, could Eliezer, the father, fulfill his dreams of success in Torah study, via his yet-unborn sons. In addition, the question of obedience is implied here: Hyrcanus fully expects Eliezer to obey him, as father and master of the estate (and this attitude is amplified in *ARN A*, where Hyrcanus denies Eliezer food unless Eliezer obeys and plows the field), and Hyrcanus expects Eliezer to be able to demand this his future sons obey *him* and become successful Torah scholars in place of their father. (I thank Jordan Rosenblum for suggesting some of these possibilities.)

²⁴ *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 1.

John Mandsager

stop farming altogether—he attempts to stem those tears by allowing Eliezer to plow in easier terrain. Hyrcanus’s other attempt to assuage Eliezer’s tears—reassuring him that he could fulfill his dreams of Torah generation through the learning of future sons of his own, if only he would get married—also falls on deaf ears. Even though Eliezer remains unconvinced by the argument that he should father his own Torah-scholars-to-be, it is worth noting that the story emphasizes this possibility, and emphasizes Eliezer’s relative age, whereby Hyrcanus complains that at the (seemingly old²⁵) age of 28, Eliezer has not married, started to study Torah, or had sons of his own.

In other variants, such as *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A*, by contrast, Hyrcanus is not as conciliatory, as he sends Eliezer to plow without food.²⁶ In this variant, Hyrcanus does not heed Eliezer’s (implied) request to leave and travel to Jerusalem, instead he unequivocally states that “you shall not receive a taste of food until you have ploughed the entire furrow,” and the midrash continues by offering an anecdote that suggests that on his journey to Jerusalem, Eliezer is so overcome by hunger that he tries to eat a rock (or perhaps piece of cow dung). Handelman focuses on this characterization of Hyrcanus:

[Eliezer] has to spend his youth plowing the fields of his father. Later, R. Eliezer will toil in other “fields of Torah study” of his spiritual father, R. Yohanan. The “stony furrows” are like the spiritually inhospitable environment of his biological family, from which his yearning and aspiration separate him. Hyrcanus is a gruff father, all business, and insensitive to his son’s very different “hungers.” Eliezer desires not the physical food his father threatens to withhold; he seeks another kind of nourishment to fill an inner ache.²⁷

²⁵ Satlow suggests that while early rabbinic literature shows an idealized preference for young men to get married before the age of twenty, there is evidence throughout rabbinic literature indicating that many men did get married later. Here, it seems clear that the midrash is relying on the idealized preference for early marriage. Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 104-110.

²⁶ I have chosen to read the *ARN A* version of the story as depicting Hyrcanus as quite demanding of his son, as I interpret this lack of food and Eliezer’s subsequent starvation as signs of how difficult his transition is from the estate to Jerusalem. It is worth noting, however, that while workers harvesting a crop may be entitled to eat a portion of the harvest (m. *Bava’ Mezi’a*’7:2), providing a meal for one’s laborers is “according to local custom” (m. *Bava’ Mezi’a*’7:1), so perhaps Hyrcanus is treating his son like his unfed laborers. See Mandsager, “To Stake a Claim,” 172-8; Ben Zion Rosenfeld and Hiam Perlmutter, *Social Stratification of the Jewish Population in the Period of the Mishnah, 70-250 CE* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 71-87.

²⁷ Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 26-7.

A Tale of Two Fathers

To follow Handelman's assessment of the fractured relationship between Eliezer and Hyrcanus in *ARN A*, the misunderstanding between the two in *PRE*, where Hyrcanus misreads Eliezer's tears, also speaks of a son and a father who are not in accord, even if we see *PRE*'s Hyrcanus as trying to be caring for his son. It is worth noting that these variants provide competing images of fatherhood and estate management within the figure of Hyrcanus himself, from care and conciliation to demands and abuse. While the former does depict Hyrcanus as a caring, loving father, both variants nevertheless present Hyrcanus as master of his domain.

This is unsurprising, of course: as *ba'al ha-bayit*, Hyrcanus is master of the estate, and his sons should defer to him. In Roman sources, from the Stoics²⁸ to agricultural manuals,²⁹ the *paterfamilias* is idealized as exercising just but firm control over all aspects of his estate, from sons to wife to slaves to the land itself. As Sessa summarizes, "the Romans perceived virtually all dimensions of [household management], from the physical architecture of the home to the preservation of a chaste marriage and the education of children, as ethical variables that potentially determined an elite man's capacity to lead."³⁰ Moreover, the idea of a harsh, even cruel *paterfamilias* is widely argued against in Late Antiquity, with a variety of different Roman and Christian authors claiming that the relationship between father and son should be reciprocal and affectionate.³¹ I allude to this larger literary context not to paint a one-to-one correlation between rabbinic ideals of masculine leadership and the evolving ideals of family leadership in the larger Late Antique world, but rather as a parallel that helps illuminate the two poles I see characterized in the figure of Hyrcanus between these variants of the story, leading with an iron fist on one hand, or seeking to ease the burden of his son on the other.

Let us linger for a moment on the character of Hyrcanus. We can picture him attempting to exercise prudent management of his estate, both land and kin, attempting to raise crops, wealth, and upstanding sons. Such management and education might take the form of self-discipline and caution,³² the whip and harsh

²⁸ Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 132.

²⁹ For example, Cato, *De agricultura*; Varro, *De re rustica*; Columella, *De re rustica*; and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*. See David B. Hollander, *Farmers and Agriculture in the Roman Economy* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2019); and Robert E. Witcher, "Agricultural Production in Roman Italy."

³⁰ Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8.

³¹ Richard Saller, "Corporal Punishment, Authority, and Obedience in the Roman Household," in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, edited by Beryl Rawson (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 1991), 150. See also Sessa, *Formation of Papal Authority*, 10.

³² Rhetors such as Iamblichus argue that those in power (including power over dependents and slaves in the household) should resist abusing those dependents, instead embodying self-control.

John Mandsager

words,³³ or a blend of strict authority and loving compassion.³⁴ In the variants of this story, we see Hyrcanus acting in both ways, as a demanding taskmaster, and as a compassionate and loving father. While some Late Antique authors would applaud the variants of the story where Hyrcanus cares for his son's feelings, the other, less caring approach would not be foreign to Late Antique conceptions of fatherhood and strict management of one's *domus*. Moreover, both possibilities are just that, possibilities of leadership recognizable to the tellers of this story of Hyrcanus and his son.

In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A*, Hyrcanus's demands are too much for Eliezer: the son runs away from his father's harsh demand that he plow the field without any food. Yet, even as Hyrcanus is demanding in this instance, Eliezer should still defer to him as the master of the domain. Jonathan Schofer thinks that Eliezer runs away without further discussion with his father, in this variant, because "Ideals of filial piety are canonized in Judaism through the Ten Commandments, which uphold honor of one's parents, but here the son has to evade his father in order to enter the rabbinic community."³⁵ Taking this approach, we see Eliezer actually caught between two duties, between his responsibility to obey his father and his (hoped-for) responsibility to learn and teach Torah.³⁶ This image, of the father who threatens his son with starvation if he does not plow the field, contrasts of course with Hyrcanus in *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, where the father is full of care for his son, if not understanding of Eliezer's true desires. In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan B* and *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, as we have seen, Hyrcanus successively attempts to lessen Eliezer's burden, even though Eliezer really wants to quit the plow altogether. As Hyrcanus attempts understand his son, Hyrcanus argues that Eliezer could fulfill both duties (to family and farm, *and* to

See Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 49-51.

³³ In theory, the *paterfamilias* had absolute authority to administer his household, up to and including holding the lives of his slaves and dependents in his hands. Yet, in Late Antiquity, some questioned both the ethics and prudence of extremely harsh leadership of the estate. See Reydams-Schils, *The Roman Stoics*, 132.

³⁴ Pseudo-Plutarch, in his *The Education of Children*, for example, argues that fathers should not rely on overly-harsh dispositions with regards to their sons and calls on fathers to remember their own youth. See Emeil Eyben, "Fathers and Sons," in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 1991).

³⁵ Jonathan W. Schofer, "Self-Cultivation and Relations with Others in Classical Rabbinic Thought," in *Moral Cultivation: Essays on the Development of Character and Virtue*, ed. Brad K. Wilburn (Lexington Books: Plymouth, UK, 2007), 91.

³⁶ Other tensions, present elsewhere in tannaitic literature, may be in the background here as well, notably the tension between making a living and devoting oneself to Torah. "In tannaitic compilations, Torah study is carried out exclusively by those who were economically independent, as the Tannaim recognize a trade-off between work and learning." Gregg E. Gardner, "Who is Rich? The Poor in Early Rabbinic Judaism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104:4 (2014), 533. Hyrcanus cannot understand Eliezer abandoning his responsibilities to the family estate, just as Eliezer cannot be stopped from reaching Rabban Yoḥanan's study circle.

A Tale of Two Fathers

Torah), if Eliezer stays on the farm and sends *his* future sons to study Torah. It is not until the denouement of the story, when Hyrcanus' eyes are opened to the power of *Eliezer's* Torah, that Hyrcanus comes to value this second responsibility, responsibility to study Torah, equivalent or more than equivalent to the responsibilities of management of the estate.

Rabban Yoḥanan, Eliezer's Rabbi-Father

When Eliezer arrives in Jerusalem, his troubles continue, as it is no easy task to gain entrance into the study circle of Rabban Yoḥanan. The narrative continues with Rabbi Eliezer continuing his weeping at the feet of Rabban Yoḥanan, first because he wants to learn and has not had the opportunity yet, then because Rabban Yoḥanan's pace seems to slow (only teaching him the basic daily liturgy), and finally, after the beginning a course of instruction in rabbinic traditions, Rabbi Eliezer weeps because Rabban Yoḥanan will not stand near him (Yoḥanan is avoiding Eliezer's halitosis).³⁷ Finally, Yoḥanan states that Eliezer's knowledge will grow like the strength of his breath.

Thus, Eliezer is confronted with a new teacher—a new father—who leads his study house in divergent ways across the variants of the story. Rabban Yoḥanan alternatively is depicted as caring for the potential student and as mocking towards him. This dichotomy of responses to the potential student mirrors Hyrcanus' responses to Eliezer's desire to go to Jerusalem and study in the first place. As we shall see, Yoḥanan in many respects replaces Hyrcanus as Eliezer's father.³⁸ The teacher/student and father/son relationships and metaphors can be found throughout rabbinic literature. For example, as Eilberg-Schwartz notes, “The Mishnah rules that a man's obligation to his teacher supersedes his obligation to his father... This is because his father brought him into this world, while his teacher brings him into the world to

³⁷ For an unsympathetic reading of this story (particularly focused, mockingly, on Eliezer's bouts of weeping), see Burton L. Visotzky, *Sage Tales: Wisdom and Wonder from the Rabbis of the Talmud* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2011), 55ff.

³⁸ See Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 26. In addition to the father-son metaphor, Handelman also argues that the “generation” of knowledge is metaphorically parallel to the relationship between husband and wife and their obligations to “generate” children. Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 10. For other arguments claiming that the teacher “reproduces” knowledge through his students, see Shmuel Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages, First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 69; and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 229.

John Mandsager

come (M. B.M. 2:11; Ker. 6:9).³⁹ Hidary echoes this claim: “The rabbis considered their students to be equivalent to their own sons. In turn, a student was expected to show respect and serve the master to an even greater extent than to a parent.”⁴⁰ In addition, the student is expected to replace the teacher/father in the process of reproduction of knowledge noted above.⁴¹ These are of course parallel (if unequal, according to Hidary) hierarchical relationships: the father or sage is assumed to have authority over his son or student.⁴²

Eliezer’s tears continue in the *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan B* variants, as he feels unable to learn quickly enough: Yoḥanan even mocks him for not having basic Torah knowledge, leading to further tears.⁴³ (Which of course recalls Hyrcanus’s suggestion that Eliezer wait until the next generation to send his future *sons* to study.) In addition, when Eliezer arrives in Jerusalem, his starvation continues, resulting in horrific halitosis. Comparisons of “leadership” qualities also can be drawn by paying attention to how Rabban Yoḥanan responds to the bad breath of this over-age potential student. In particular, the *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer/Avot de-Rabbi Natan B* variant portrays Yoḥanan as initially unsympathetic to and even disgusted by Eliezer’s bad breath. In other variants, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* and *Tanḥuma*, Yoḥanan quickly finds out that Eliezer has been starving, and seeks to help his new student get a good meal. Moreover, in *Genesis Rabba* and *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Yoḥanan (eventually) recognizes the bad breath as both a sign of great things to come (Eliezer will have Torah knowledge as strong as his breath!) and of Eliezer’s self-induced poverty and starvation.

Thus far, we have seen Eliezer between two these two spaces, between the demands of his father, sometimes described as kind and attentive, and sometimes

³⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 230.

⁴⁰ Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 82. See also Harvey E. Goldberg, “Torah and Children: Some Symbolic Aspects of the Reproduction of Jews and Judaism,” in *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 123.

⁴¹ See Susan Handelman, “The ‘Torah’ of Criticism and the Criticism of Torah: Recuperating the Pedagogical Moment,” *The Journal of Religion* 74:3 (July 1994): 365; and Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 231. Goldberg quotes *b. Sanhedrin* 19b: “He who teaches Torah to his companion’s son is considered by scripture as if he had sired him.” Goldberg, “Torah and Children,” 107.

⁴² Martin S. Jaffee, “A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge, and the Living Texts of the Oral Torah,” *JAR* Vol. 65, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 529.

⁴³ It is worth noting, and perhaps ironic, that in the legends ascribed to Rabban Yoḥanan and his trajectory towards becoming a master of the Torah is that Yoḥanan is described as first working as a merchant for 40 years, before serving the sages for another 40, and then leading Israel for 40 years (this paradigmatic 120-year lifespan is in reference to Moses’ age at his death in Deuteronomy 34:7). *Sifre Deuteronomy* 357 (ed. Horowitz 429). See Gardner, “Who is Rich?” 519.

A Tale of Two Fathers

described as demanding, and his father's estate, and the study circle of Rabban Yoḥanan, where Yoḥanan likewise is portrayed as alternatively caring and dismissive. Through the difficult transition from estate to study house (in some versions, accepted and cared for by Yoḥanan, in others mocked), Eliezer will transform from the despondent, unwilling son to a towering sage in his own right.

Rabbi Eliezer Triumphant, Master of Study House and Estate

Now, let us turn to the conclusion to the story, again drawing on the *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* variant. As the story concludes, we find Eliezer's brothers understandably upset that Eliezer has abandoned his responsibilities, and, moreover, upset that Eliezer still stands to inherit a portion of the estate, even though he is not contributing anything to the work and management of the estate. Thus, at the urging of Eliezer's brothers, Hyrcanus travels to Jerusalem to disinherit Eliezer, seeing how Eliezer is no longer an active member of the household.⁴⁴ When Hyrcanus arrives in Jerusalem, he joins an ongoing celebration for the illustrious Rabban Yoḥanan and joins the elite of Jerusalem at the banquet table.⁴⁵ After Hyrcanus is seated at Yoḥanan's side, Rabban Yoḥanan asks Eliezer (now bestowed the title "Rabbi") to expound the Torah. Rabbi Eliezer is initially reticent to match intellectual skill with his master in such a public setting, but Yoḥanan exits the banquet-hall, ceding the stage to Rabbi Eliezer, "Yoḥanan said to him, 'Perhaps you are shy, since behold I am standing next to you.' Yoḥanan stood up, and went outside." Rabbi Eliezer's subsequent performance is nothing less than miraculous:

⁴⁴ In the versions of this story that are found in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A*, 6 and *Genesis Rabbah* xlii on Gen 14:1, it is Hyrcanus, not the brothers, who makes the decision to disinherit Eliezer. See Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies," 158-164.

⁴⁵ In *PRE*, Hyrcanus is recognized and welcomed to eat with the Jerusalem nobles. In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A*, Hyrcanus is not given such a warm welcome. Instead, Yohanan tells the guards to bar the door; Hyrcanus pushes through anyway and sits down, visibly frightened (perhaps in recognition that he is not welcome or worthy to be at the table). See Kagan, "Divergent Tendencies," 163-4. Handelman suggests not only that Eliezer may be quaking as much as his father, as he prepares to expound his Torah, but that Hyrcanus's trembling may stem from either a recognition that his peers—the wealthy of Jerusalem—are also R. Yoḥanan's students, or perhaps he is also trembling with rage, "having come not only in wrath to disinherit his son, but also been denied a seat," in the *ARN A* version. Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 36-7.

John Mandsager

And Rabbi Eliezer was sitting and interpreting the Torah, and his face appeared as the light of the sun, and his “horns” came out like the beams of light of Moses,⁴⁶ and no one knew if it was day or night.

Rabban Yoḥanan came behind [Eliezer] and kissed him on his head. He said to him, “Happy are you, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that this one came from your loins!”

Hyrchanus said, “To whom did he say this?”

They said to him, “To Eliezer, your son.”

He said to them, “He should not be saying this; rather, *I* am happy that this one came out of *my* loins!”

R. Eliezer was sitting and interpreting the Torah, and his father was standing on his feet. When he saw his father standing there, he was confounded. He said to him, “Father, sit, since I am unable to speak words of Torah when you are standing on your feet.”

Hyrchanus said to him “My son, I did not come because of this. Rather, I entered to disown you. But now that I have come to see you, and I saw all this praise, behold your brothers are disowned from my properties, and they are given to you as a gift!”

It is worth noting that in the midst of Eliezer’s display of Torah knowledge, he is spatially and emotionally stuck between his two fathers. The spatial arrangements seem particularly noteworthy, as Eliezer, Yoḥanan, Hyrchanus, and the wealthy men of Jerusalem⁴⁷ are arranged around the banquet table, with a “space” made for Hyrchanus among these luminaries, yet with Eliezer sitting in the place of honor. (Again, in *ARN* A, R. Yoḥanan attempts to prevent Hyrchanus from joining, yet Hyrchanus muscles his way to the table, “trembling” with fear and/or rage in the august company.⁴⁸) In a deft set of rhetorical moves, the midrash shows that Eliezer is uncomfortable showing his expertise both to his new master, Rabban Yoḥanan, who conscientiously leaves the

⁴⁶ Cf. Exodus 34:29-35, which narrates Moses’ return from receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai: Moses’ face is described as “radiant” (lit. “a beam of light”). This comparison is unique to the version of the midrash found in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. Kagan notes that the other versions of the story emphasize Eliezer’s Torah wisdom (as this version does as well) without comparing Eliezer to Moses (“Divergent Tendencies,” 169).

⁴⁷ Ben Tzitzit ha-Kasat, Nakdimon ben Guryon, and Ben Kalba Savu’a. See the mythic account of the siege of Jerusalem (where R. Yoḥanan is saved) in *b. Gittin* 55b-56b. Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 36.

⁴⁸ See Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 37.

A Tale of Two Fathers

room until Eliezer's Torah is seen by all, and to his father, who is now standing as Eliezer prepares or continues to teach. Eliezer asks his father to sit, so Hyrcanus will not overshadow him. With his two "father-leaders" appropriately arranged—Yoḥanan out of the room and Hyrcanus seated—Eliezer can deliver his spectacular demonstration of Torah.⁴⁹ After Yoḥanan returns to the room and, awestruck by Eliezer's words and his resemblance to Moses, he exclaims, "Happy are you, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that this one came from your loins!"⁵⁰ Rabban Yoḥanan aligns Rabbi Eliezer's maturity as a Torah scholar with the lineage of the patriarchs, from Abraham to Moses, and presumably down the chain of Torah generation that leads from Moses to Rabban Yoḥanan himself.⁵¹ In response, it is Hyrcanus's turn to feel overshadowed. Hyrcanus is perturbed by comparison to Yoḥanan and the chain of Torah knowledge on display in Eliezer: when Yoḥanan praises Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the progenitors of this new rabbinic sage, Hyrcanus objects: wait, Eliezer is *my son!* The competition between these father-figures reaches its inevitable resolution: in succeeding at Yoḥanan's dinner table, in front of the luminaries of Jerusalem and his own father, Eliezer is recognized as a descendent of the patriarchs par excellence, while Hyrcanus's star (and paternity) fades.⁵² These respective leaders represent different forms of generation: generation of sons, wealth, and property on one hand and the generation of students and Torah knowledge on the other.⁵³

These demonstrations of Eliezer's Torah knowledge, as well as Rabban Yoḥanan's praise of Eliezer, lead Hyrcanus to recant on his express purpose in coming to Jerusalem. Hyrcanus is suitably impressed by his son at Yoḥanan's banquet table, and he vows to disinherit his other sons and to bequest his entire estate to the incomparable Eliezer. The variant of the story found in *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* B concludes with Eliezer piously quoting scripture and refusing to accept the gift of the estate: "Eliezer said to Hyrcanus, "But behold, I am not worthy as one of my brothers."⁵⁴ If I wanted properties, it would be for the Holy-One-Blessed-

⁴⁹ The relative placement and positions of the different characters is not entirely consistent in the *PRE* version of the story: first we are told that Hyrcanus is seated next to Rabban Yoḥanan, then R. Yoḥanan leaves the room to allow Eliezer to speak, then R. Yoḥanan returns, and then Hyrcanus is standing, overshadowing Eliezer. Each set of spatial relations is important to show Eliezer's discomfort and the effect his miraculous demonstration of Torah has on his audience, but these vignettes are not completely consistent.

⁵⁰ See also *Pisqta de-R. Kahana*, ed. Buber 39b, where God tells Moses that Eliezer will "spring from thy loins," after Moses is impressed by God's prediction about the future Eliezer's Torah-prowess. Gilat, R. *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus*, 385.

⁵¹ See Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 229-234.

⁵² See Stein, *Maxims, Magic, Myth*, 135; and Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed*, 30.

⁵³ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 231.

⁵⁴ I wonder about the impact of Eliezer's comparison with his brothers. Is his statement that he is not "worthy" ironic? While the brothers are "worthy" of the estate because they are the ones

John Mandsager

Be-He to give to me, since it is written, “The earth is the LORD’s and all that it holds” (Psalm 24:1).” In electing to rely on God’s beneficence, Eliezer is perhaps ignoring the material concerns of devoting oneself to Torah: the well-to-do can leave their professions to study Torah.⁵⁵ Yet, in the variants found in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* and *Tanḥuma*, the story concludes without this pious refusal, by implication awarding the story’s hero all of the trophies: the praise of Rabban Yoḥanan, the public demonstration of his prowess, the praise of his father Hyrcanus, and ownership of the estate back “home.”⁵⁶

If the midrash directs us towards these conclusions, that Eliezer is supremely worthy of the title Rabbi *and* deserves to take over as the *ba’al ha-bayit* of his father’s estate, the path to these conclusions takes us past contrasting, even contradictory qualities of leadership in the contrasting and competitive spaces of the estate and the study house. The alternating leadership styles, kind or demanding, caring or mocking, that we see in Hyrcanus and Yoḥanan, again would be recognizable in Late Antiquity, where fathers, householders, and rabbinic masters⁵⁷ were idealized as authoritarian and/or conscientious leaders of their respective domains.

In this paper, through analysis of R. Eliezer’s *Bildungsroman* in multiple textual variants, I have shown a series of contrasts. Hyrcanus as father and householder is alternatively portrayed as caring and demanding towards his son, initially dismissive of Eliezer’s dreams of studying Torah but eventually astounded by his son’s skills. In some versions of the story, Rabban Yoḥanan is supportive and conscientious towards his new student, while in others, he is haughty and mocking towards Eliezer’s lack of Torah-knowledge. And, the spaces themselves are contrasted: Hyrcanus’s estate represents a particular form of masculine and paternal mastery, while Rabban Yoḥanan’s study house and banquet room⁵⁸ are spaces for showcasing a different form of masculine excellence, rhetorical and even miraculous skill in interpreting the Torah. Mastery of both domains, with preference for mastery in the study house, shows that in this Midrashic tradition, masculine leadership was valued in both spaces: Rabbi Eliezer, now Torah-sage *and* householder, shines forth like Moses.

working it, the impact of Eliezer’s refusal is to downplay both the “worth” of the brothers’ labor and of the estate itself.

⁵⁵ See Gardner, “Who is Rich?”

⁵⁶ See Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 37.

⁵⁷ And Christian bishops as well. Geoffrey Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 54; and Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ix.

⁵⁸ For discussion of banquets and banquet spaces in Late Antiquity and early rabbinic literature, see Jordan Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).