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"Overturning the 'Table'": The Hidden Meaning of a Talmudic Metaphor for Coitus

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In the fall of 2001 this journal devoted a volume to the topic "Sexuality in Late Antiquity."[1] This special issue was designed in part as a gentle critique of Foucault's planned shift to Christianity as the subject of the fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality*, which he did not live to finish.[2] Guest editors Daniel Boyarin and Elizabeth Castielli argued for the adoption of the basic premise of Foucault's earlier volumes, namely, that "sexuality" (unlike the act of coitus itself) neither is universal nor belongs to the realm of the self but is, rather, a "discourse," a means by which culture produces meaning.[3] This position is perhaps best articulated elsewhere by David Halperin, who has argued that "sex has no history. It is a natural act, grounded in the functioning of the body, and, as such, it lies outside of history and culture. Sexuality, by contrast, does not properly refer to some aspect or attribute of bodies. Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the appropriation of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect."[4] Many of the authors of the "Sexuality in Late Antiquity"

[1] *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 3–4 (2001): 355–622.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). The critique is largely for ignoring the development of notions of "sexuality" in other cultural settings, namely, that of Rabbinic Judaism, during the same period. There is also an explicit feminist critique at work in the collection of essays. For a discussion of Foucault's work, see "Christianity, Sexuality, and the Self: Fragments of an Unpublished Volume," pt. 3 in *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault,* ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 153–97.

[3] "For Foucault, the history of sexuality is not the narrative reconstruction of the changing forms of a transhistorical essence but rather the history of a discourse and culture within which a certain modern institution came into existence. It is, in short, a genealogy" (Daniel Boyarin, "Introduction: Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*: The Fourth Volume, or, A Field Left Fallow for Others to Till," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 3–4 [2001]: 358). See also Arnold Davidson, "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (1987): 16–48.

[4] David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?," *History and Theory* 28, no. 3 (1989): 257.

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issue sought to balance Foucault's proverbial scales by mining Talmudic or Rabbinic literature, that corpus of literature produced by a group of elite male Jewish scholars who were active in Roman Palestine and Sassanian Persia from some point in the second century until the rise of Islam in the seventh, for clues as to how a minority culture within the broader context of late antiquity mapped out its ideological discourse on the copulating bodies of its audience.[5] This kind of work is explicitly based on Daniel Boyarin's *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, which attempts to faithfully apply Foucault's method to the culture that produced the documents of classical Rabbinic Judaism.[6] Additionally, Michael Satlow's *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* collects and treats the relevant Rabbinic sources that pertain to sex and sexuality.[7]

This body of literature, whose documents include the Mishnah and its companion volume, the Tosefta, along with the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds and the wide variety of biblical commentaries known as Midrashim, began to take shape in Roman Judea in the period following the Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century CE. It which found its full flowering in Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylonia in the following centuries. The scholarly turn toward this material serves two explicit goals. First, as with the broader focus on sexuality in antiquity, modern readers are forced to see contrasts with their own culturally produced ideas, particularly Freudian ones, about sexuality and its meanings. Second, analysis of Rabbinic sources by their very nature as the literature of a minority culture always in dialogue with the wider world is explicitly comparative, as it invites the mining of Greek, Latin, Syriac, Persian, and Arabic texts along with whatever is to be found in the record of material culture, such as gravestones, art, graffiti, earthenware, and coinage, to better situate each in the multicultural mix that so defines late antiquity. Yet there is a third possible avenue for analysis of the history of Rabbinic sexuality, and it necessarily draws upon the first two: the tracing of the development of changing Rabbinic attitudes toward sexual acts. This is the task of this article.

A brief note on terminology and historiography is in order: Rabbinic literature is conventionally divided into two distinct periods, each named for the sages who were active during those eras.[8] The earlier Rabbinical sages

[5] The standard introduction to Rabbinic literature remains H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[6] Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

[7] Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). On the broader phenomenon of the field of Rabbinic sexuality and critique thereof, see Naomi Seidman, "Carnal Knowledge: Sex and the Body in Jewish Studies," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (1994): 115–41; and Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "On 'Carnal Israel' and the Consequences: Talmudic Studies since Foucault," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 462–69.

[8] Hayim Lapin, "The Origins and Development of the Rabbinic Movement in the Land of Israel," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4, *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Stephen Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 206–7.

are known in both Talmuds as Tannaim (singular Tanna), literally, "one who repeats [traditions]." These are the scholars who are mentioned in the collections of Rabbinic teachings known as Mishnah and its companion volume, Tosefta.[9] These scholars were active in Roman Palestine up to the early third century, when these texts were redacted and published orally.[10] The later generations of scholars who were active into the fifth century in Roman Palestine and beyond in Sassanian Babylonian are called Amoraim (singular Amora), literally, "one who expounds [traditions]." Their statements appear in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds and in various later Palestinian collections.

Both Boyarin and Satlow, not to mention Eliezer Diamond, Judith Hauptman, Richard Kalmin, David Biale, and others, focus on the long passage found in the Talmudic section, or tractate, that deals with various kinds of vows, or *Nedarim*, of the Babylonian Talmud at folio 20a–b.[11] It begins by describing various deviant methods of copulation and the congenital effects of this deviant behavior on the offspring:

> Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dahabai said: The ministering angels told me four things:
> Why are [people (born)] lame? Because they overturn their tables.
> Why are [people (born)] dumb? Because they kiss that place.[12]
> Why are [people (born)] deaf? Because they speak during sex.
> Why are [people (born)] blind? Because they look at that place.

This section has the form and language of what is known as a Baraita, a statement that is not found in the Mishnah but that nonetheless dates from the Tannaitic period, despite the fact that statements in the name of Yohanan the son of Dahabi never appear in Tannaitic literature.[13] In the Talmuds, with the exception of our present context in tractate *Nedarim* and one other in the Talmud at *Menachot* 42b, every mention of his name

[9] For a general introduction and bibliography for these texts, see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 124–33.

[10] Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, "The Orality of Rabbinic Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38–57.

[11] Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 127; Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 172n22; Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 39; and David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 50–51. I have elected to cite all texts from the standard printed editions, here the Babylonian Talmud (Vilna: Romm, 1880–86). All translations, unless noted otherwise, are my own.

[12] This answer and question are absent entirely in MS Moscow-Guenzburg 1134, likely as a result of delitography.

[13] Nonetheless, he appears once in the "Halachic" midrashim. In the so-called minor tractates, he appears once in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* and four times in *Kallah Rabbati*; and he appears in explicit *braitot* in both Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds.

is concerned with the teaching that a (partially) blind person is exempt from the obligation to appear in the Temple on the three pilgrimage festivals as mandated by Exodus 23:17 and 34:23–24. This law is transmitted in each of its appearances in the name of his teacher Rabbi Yehuda, whom we can assume was Yehudah b. Il'ai, the famous and oft-mentioned Tanna of the second century who was a student of Rabbi Akiva and a teacher of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince.[14]

Thus, the story that appears at the end of this pericope and that features Rabbi Yehuda the Prince can be assumed to be roughly contemporaneous: "A certain woman came before Rabbi [Yehuda the Prince] and said to him: Rabbi! I set for [my husband] a table, but he overturned it! He said to her: My daughter, Torah permitted you to him, and I, what can I do for you?" This story concerning Rabbi and a similar one concerning the third-century Babylonian sage Rav demonstrate that the opinion of Yohanan the son of Dahabi, ironically (despite its seemingly divine origins) is not accepted by later authors and editors as halacha, or decided law.[15] This is a position stated explicitly in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, a third-century Palestinian scholar. Rather, as Boyarin argues, "Rabbi Yohanan rejects . . . both the content of Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai's statement and, implicitly, its claims to scientific status. He promotes it from the category of 'good advice' from a knowledgeable source to the level of Torah discourse, that is, to the discourse of the forbidden and permitted according to religion, but he does so in order to reject its religious validity."[16] In other words, whether or not there is a congenital consequence for the four particular sexual practices to which Yohanan the son of Dahabi alludes, the Rabbis do not forbid husbands (and wives) from engaging in these activities.[17] To be fair, it should be noted that, though the meaning is clearly that husbands and wives may behave together however they wish, the language in all cases

[14] See Aharon Hyman, *Toledot Tannaim V'Amoraim* (London: HaEkspress, 1910), 540. Though this is not the place to detail the argument in full, it should be clear that I follow the opinion of those scholars who think that it is possible, as long as a certain care is applied, to infer rough dates from the attributions in Rabbinic literature. See Richard Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994). A good summary of the long-running academic debate can be found in the introduction to Christine Hayes's *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). My conclusion regarding the changes in the way certain sexual practices were viewed between Tannaitic and Amoraic times may be seen as further proof that the Talmud is indeed a thickly layered compilation in which earlier material is left largely untouched by later authors and editors.

[15] For a full treatment of the pericope, see Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 109–23.

[16] Ibid., 112.

[17] For a detailed analysis of this metaphor and a rejoinder to Boyarin's reading that the sex itself and not the woman is the "food," see Gail Labovitz, "Is Rav's Wife 'A Dish'? Food and Eating Metaphors in Rabbinic Discourse of Sexuality and Gender Relations," *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 18 (2008): 147–70.

Author: Is "HaEkspress" correct above (n.14)? See also the highlighted "HaEzer" on next p. (n. 20). Seems "aE" should be a character with a diacritic?

describes these acts as things men *do* to women; women are neither equal partners nor active parties. The man is the man, the woman is the table, and the sex is the food. The metaphor of eating is not accidental: one active human being (= man) consumes a foodstuff.

Yet what practices are being described here? With regard to the final three of the four acts there can be no question. "Kissing that place" can only refer to cunnilingus.[18] "Speaking during sex" is self-evident.[19] "Looking at that place" is a description of the male partner viewing his partner's genitalia, likely immediately preceding or during the sex act itself.[20] But what of the first activity, which is also the topic of the story concerning Rabbi Yehuda the Prince: "overturning their tables"? What is the act described in these two roughly contemporaneous stories from the second century CE? Surprisingly, from these early stories alone, it is not at all clear.

What is clear, however, is that these texts assume that there are both "normal" and "abnormal" ways of engaging in coitus and that some couples, having begun intercourse in one position, change their choreography in ways that, though "legal" by the Talmud's estimation, are nonetheless "abnormal" and thus not recommended. The discourse in this short legal narrative performs two largely contradictory pieces of work: though couples are not formally prohibited from "abnormal" sexual positions, the story nonetheless serves to police their behavior and enforce a kind of social discipline. As such, it is a prime locus for a broader investigation into how Rabbinic power was constituted and negotiated through discussion of the choreography of coitus.[21] As I will demonstrate, however, Rabbinic power was always negotiated in relation to the broader cultural norms of the mix of cultures in which Rabbinic Jews found themselves in late antiquity. In our example, diachronic analyses of the various texts in the Rabbinic corpus demonstrate that the sexual position considered to be the "normal" one changed between the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods.

A parallel to this passage appears in another document called *Kallah Rabbati*. There, however, appears an Amoraic layer of commentary: "Rava said: the Blessed Holy one always metes out measure for measure: he flipped over his table, therefore the legs of his offspring are flipped over."[22] David

[18] Something well documented in Roman art from the period. See Angelika Dierichs, *Erotik in der römischen Kunst*, Zaberns Bildbände zur Archäologie (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1993).

[19] Though it is also the impetus for the inclusion of the famous and fascinating story of Imma Shalom and Rabbi Eliezer's own sexual behavior.

[20] This is the explanation of Yaakov the son of Asher, *Tur Even HaEzer* 25.

[21] Barry Wimpfheimer has been a prime proponent of using this type of legal story, which resists categorization as either apodictic law or full-blown narrative, to investigate Rabbinic anxiety. See his *Narrating the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 4.

[22] *The Tractates "Kallah": Published According to Various Manuscripts, and Accompanied by an Introduction, Notes, and Textual Variants* [in Hebrew], ed. Michael Higger (New York: De-ve-Rabanan, 1936), 183.

Brodsky reads "overturning the table" as referring to vaginal intercourse of some kind, since otherwise there would be no children produced.[23] However, the fact that the "kissing of 'that' place" also results in the punishment of ensuing children demonstrates that Rava did not consider each of these acts to be necessarily procreative. Rather, the evident meaning is that children are punished as a result of their parents' deviant behavior, whether or not the deviant act itself led directly to the conception of that child. In fact, traditional commentaries produced by medieval scholars provide three different understandings of the overturning of this metaphoric table. The first, and perhaps most famous, explanation is that the woman in the story expected vaginal intercourse from her husband, but he engaged instead in "coitus not in her 'way.'"[24] This is a Rabbinic euphemism that most medieval commentators assume means anal sex.[25] The second possible meaning, and the one preferred by most modern scholars,[26] is that while the woman expected to lie in a supine position, she was instead on top of her husband.[27] Finally, some commentators assume that whereas the woman expected ventro–ventro (i.e., face-to-face) coitus from a supine position, her husband entered her from a ventro-dorsal pose—from behind.[28] Despite their variety, what all of these explanations share is their assumption that the standard position is what we might call the "missionary position," with the man lying on top of the woman. Such an assumption might also be made by contemporary readers, for whom the missionary position is also most likely the default one and therefore the one assumed to be most natural.[29]

The assertion that one position alone is "natural" is a mode of cultural policing and is not founded on biological grounds, as we know from primate

[23] David Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and Its Gemara* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 132n30. See also Diamond, *Holy Men*, 47.

[24] Though the term seems to indicate anal sex, it is theoretically possible that it only means "abnormal," and sex, of course, can be abnormal in many kinds of ways for the Rabbis. See Alexander Kohut, *ʿAruk ha-Shalem,* s.v. רפה and s.v. וחלוש. This explanation is perhaps the most problematic, as Rabbi Yehudah the Prince would then be allowing marital anal rape. See Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 283; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 117.

[25] See Rashi; Rosh; and Tosafot to b. *Yevamot* 34b, s.v. "אלו."

[26] Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 112; Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 50–51. Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing*, 132n1, leaves the question unanswered.

[27] See *Tosafot Yeshenim*; *Tosafot Talmidei Rabbeinu Peretz*; and a position attributed to Yom Tov son of Abraham in Betzalel Ashkenazy's *Shita Mekubetztet*.

[28] This is usually called *maʾaseh beheimah*, a term not dissimilar from the contemporary vulgar slang "doggy-style." See Raʾavad, *Baʾalei Hanefesh* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1992), 122; Yaakov Landau, *Sefer HaIggur*, Laws of Evening Prayers, 436; and Yaakov son of Asher, *Tur Orach Hayyim* 140 and *Even Haezer* 25. It is interesting that the Tur does not follow the approach of his father.

[29] Robert J. Priest, "Missionary Positions: Christian, Modernist, Postmodernist," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2001): 29–68. Priest notes that contemporary usage of the term dates to the publication of the (in)famous Kinsey report.

studies. While earlier generations of paleoanthropologists did assume the missionary position to be the most natural for modern humans, arguing that the move to a face-to-face method of copulation demonstrated how *Homo sapiens* differed from animals,[30] contemporary scholarship on primate sexuality demonstrates both that primates engage in multiple sexual positions (including face-to-face coupling) and, when it comes to humans, that there are cultural dimensions evident in establishing one manner of intercourse as "natural" or "normative."[31] Bonobos (*Pan paniscus*), the primate whose sexual behavior is most like that of modern human beings,[32] have been shown to use both ventro-ventro and ventro-dorsal positions, with a strong preference for the ventro-dorsal posture.[33] Humans themselves, when examined cross-culturally, have demonstrated no preference for the ventro-ventro male superior position. Wendy Doniger has noted that the *Kama Sutra*, the most famous of ancient textbooks of erotic love, makes almost no mention of the missionary position.[34] The *Han-wu-ti-nei-chuan*, or *The Inner Biography of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty* (ascribed to the famous Han scholar Pan Ku [32–92 CE] but in reality written during the fifth or sixth century), relates how Emperor Wu received a visit from the Taoist goddess Hsi-wang-mu, the Fairy Queen of the Western Paradise, who instructed the emperor in the secrets of sexual practice, among other

[30] Desmond Morris best represents this position: "Our own species has made a radical change in its typical body posture. Like geladas, we spend a great deal of time sitting up vertically. We also stand erect and face one another during social contacts. Could it be, then, that we, too, have indulged in something similar in the way of self-mimicry? Could our vertical posture have influenced our sexual signals? When considered in this way the answer certainly seems to be yes. The typical mating posture of all other primates involves the rear approach of the male to the female. She lifts her rear end and directs it towards the male. Her genital region is visually presented backwards to him. He sees it, moves towards her, and mounts her from behind. There is no frontal body contact during copulation, the male's genital region being pressed on to the female's rump region. In our own species the situation is very different. Not only is there prolonged face-to-face pre-copulatory activity, but also copulation itself is primarily a frontal performance. . . . It is a long-standing idea that the face-to-face mating position is the biologically natural one for our species, and that all others should be considered as sophisticated variations of it" (*The Naked Ape* [New York: Dell, 1969], 72).

[31] Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton, *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 39.

[32] For more on primate studies as a source for human sexuality, see Frans B. M. Waal, *Tree of Origin: What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Social Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 51; Katharine Sanderson, "Gorillas in the Missionary Position," *Nature*, February 14, 2008, http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080214/full/news.2008.578.html; F. Dixson and John Brancoft, *Primate Sexuality: Comparative Studies of the Prosimians, Monkeys, Apes, and Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Simon Denison, "From Modern Apes to Human Origins," *British Archaeology*, no. 8 (1995), http://www.archaeologyuk.org/ba/ba8/BA8TOC.HTML.

[33] Ben G. Blount, "Issues in Bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) Sexual Behavior," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 92, no. 3 (1990): 703–4.

[34] Wendy Doniger, "Reading the 'Kamasutra': The Strange & the Familiar," *Daedalus* 136 (2007): 1.

things.[35] This work describes nine "standard" sexual positions, none of which is presented in the text as more "normal" than the others. Finally, Clyde Kluckhohn showed that the missionary position was quite rare in the Navajo populations he studied.[36] Margaret Carole Marks has demonstrated that the cultures of both classical Greece and imperial Rome had "a basic coital pattern, whether it exists in fantasy, fact, or both," and that the missionary position was not the basic coital pattern for either culture.[37]

Following Marks, if we wish to uncover the sexual attitudes of those who told the stories and formed the legal norms promulgated in *Nedarim* 20a–b—if we want to uncover the sexual position that was "turned over"—we must turn to the other places in Rabbinic literature that speak explicitly or implicitly about the act of intercourse itself. Furthermore, we must situate all of these texts within the broader cultural contexts of those who produced them. When we do so, we see a significant shift in the meanings applied to the various sexual positions and the developments of the assumptions of the normalcy of the missionary position, which we are made aware of in the Patristic sources.[38]

Let us now turn to *Nidda* 31b, where we find what looks, at first glance, like a clear preference for face-to-face, male superior intercourse: "His disciples asked R. Dostai son of R. Yannai: . . . / And why does the man lie face downward and the woman face upward toward the man? / He to the place from which he was created, and she to the place from which she was created." R. Dostai the son of R. Yannai was a student of Rabbi Meir and a contemporary of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince,[39] which places this text in precisely the same period as the statement of Yohanan the son of Dahabi and the story concerning Rabbi Yehuda the Prince at the end of the Tannaitic period. Shlomo Yitzchaki, usually known by the acronym Rashi, the great eleventh-century French biblical and Talmudic commentator, explicitly describes the context of coitus in terms of the direction of the faces of men and women.[40] This reading makes clever use of biblical texts. In stark contrast to Genesis 1, in which an androgynous human being is the final act of creation, Genesis 2:7 describes the male as having been

[35] Robert Hans van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 BC till 1644 AD* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 136. One fascinating note about this book demonstrates the cultural divide between the original work and its mid-twentieth-century explicator. While the work is translated into English, all those passages that describe intercourse are rendered in Latin. A full translation is available online at http://china.emperadoramarillo.net/treatises.html.

[36] Clyde Kluckhohn, "Southwestern Studies of Culture and Personality," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 56, no. 4 (1954): 685–97.

[37] Margaret Carole Marks, "Heterosexual Coital Position as a Reflection of Ancient and Modern Cultural Attitudes" (PhD diss., SUNY Buffalo, 1978), 249–50.

[38] See James Brundage, "Let Me Count the Ways: Canonists and Theologians Contemplate Coital Positions," *Journal of Medieval History* 10, no. 2 (1984): 81–93.

[39] Hyman, *Toledot Tannaim V'Amoraim*, 326.

[40] Rashi ad loc.

formed from the ground, and Genesis 2:22 depicts the female human as having been created from the rib of that man.[41] In other words, the man looking at the ground and the woman looking up at the rib of her lover form the posture of face-to-face male superior coitus. The text thus suggests that during the act of normal and natural copulation, human beings reenact the original and quintessential creations of their gendered bodies by looking at the places from which they emanate. Furthermore, the act of sex reifies a particular kind of gender hierarchy in which the male is the powerful actor who lies on a passive female facing him while fulfilling her role in the created order. That this is the meaning conveyed by the editor of this text can hardly be questioned.

However, the question posed to R. Dostai the son of R. Yannai has a number of parallels in Palestinian documents in which the context and apparent meaning are much less clear and indeed may not refer to sex at all. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a Rabbinic commentary on the biblical book of Genesis: "They asked Rabbi Joshua: . . . Why does a man go out facing down and a woman goes out facing upward? / He said to them: the man looks to the place of his creation and the woman to the place of her creation."[42] A number of differences are immediately apparent. First of all, the teacher who is asked the question and answers it here is not R. Dostai the son of R. Yannai but rather Rabbi Joshua (b. Ḥananyah), active around the turn of the first century CE.[43] Second, the situation seems not to be that of coitus but rather of birth. The "going out" in the text seems to refer to the orientation of the baby as it is birthed into the world. A similar version is found in *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* version B: "Why does a woman look at the man and the man looks at the ground? Because the woman looks at her creation and the man looks at his creation." Solomon Schechter, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholar who presented and wrote a commentary on the text, claims that it indeed speaks of sex and not birth position. Presumably, his interpretation rests on the absence of the word *yotzei* (אצוי, "goes out"), but there is no clear reason to make this central, given the (admittedly, much later) parallel to this text from a Rabbinic commentary to the biblical book of Exodus, which reads: "[Pharaoh] told [the midwives]: If it is male, kill him. If it is female, do not kill her, but if she lives, let her live, and if she dies, she dies. They said to him: How are we to know if it is male or female? R. Simon said that he

[41] Genesis 2:7: "The Lord God formed the male from the dust of the earth and blew into his nose the breath of life and the man became a living being." Genesis 2:22: "The Lord God built the rib which He took from the man into a woman and brought her to the man."

[42] *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*, ed. J. Theodor and C. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 1:158–59. I have utilized the text of this edition; the apparatus there shows no variants that would alter the meaning significantly.

[43] The name Rabbi Joshua without a patronymic is Rabbi Joshua b. Ḥananyah. See b. *Nazir* 56b and Rashi. *Mishnah Avot* 2:8 positions him as one of the four students of Rabban Yohanan son of Zakai.

gave them a clear sign: If its face is turned downward, it is a male, for he is looking through his mother at the earth from which he is created; but if its face is turned upward, it is a female, because it is looking at the rib from which she was created."[44] This piece of exegesis, which seeks to explain Pharaoh's command to the Israelite midwives in Exodus 1:16 to "look at the birthstools,"[45] makes quite obvious that the orientation of the baby's head emerging from the birth canal is a sign of its sex and that an occiput posterior position (with the back of the baby's head toward the mother's back) indicates a female child.[46]

We are dealing with a single early Palestinian tradition whose ultimate meaning seems to have undergone a transformation during the course of its spatial and temporal transmission. I am compelled to believe that both the original version and the version at *Nidda* 31b, which appears to be about sex, are either later Babylonian adaptations or medieval misreadings, given that the text itself makes no explicit mention of sex. Either way, it should now be clear that *Nidda* 31b tells us absolutely nothing about the preference of one sexual position over another in the Tannaitic period itself. If there is a hint of preference for the missionary position, it dates to the period in which Babylonian editors (or, conversely, medieval commentators) modified an extant Palestinian tradition about birth position to suit or reflect their own assumptions about the inherent naturalness of a particular method of copulation.

There are, however, other places in the Babylonian Talmud that do give some explicit critiques of sexual positions. One position selected for special opprobrium is the face-to-face female superior position. These sources, which will be discussed below, are important because they are read by some medieval commentators as the proof texts for the claim that "overturning the table" refers to a sexual position with the woman on top.[47] In one such passage, found in folio 70a of the tractate dealing with divorce (b. *Gittin* 70a), we find the following Tannaitic tradition with Amoraic analysis:

[44] Exodus Rabbah 1:14. On the late dating of this work, see Avigdor Shinan, *Midrash Shemot Rabbah Chapters I–XIV: A Critical Edition Based on a Jerusalem Manuscript with Variants, Commentary and Introduction* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Devir, 1984), 23. Despite the late date of the collection, Marc Bregman has shown that sometimes these late collections accurately preserve early traditions, as I believe to be the case here. See his *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003), 173–88.

[45] "[Pharaoh] said: In your birthing the Israelite women, look at the birthstools. If it is a son, then kill him. But if it is a daughter, let her live."

[46] That the prevalence of posterior births accounts for only 5.5 percent of the population makes it hard to take this piece of exegesis seriously. See Susan E. Ponkey, Amy P. Cohen, Linda J. Heffner, and Ellice Lieberman, "Persistent Fetal Occiput Posterior Position: Obstetric Outcomes," *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 101, no. 5 (2003): 915–20.

[47] *Tosafot Yeshenim*, *Tosafot Talmidei Rabbeinu Peretz*, and for the position attributed to Yom Tov son of Avraham Asevilli in Bezalel son of Abraham Ashkenazi's *Shittah Mekubetzet*.

Our rabbis taught: He who copulates standing—convulsions will take hold of him.
Sitting, spasms.[48]
If she is above and he below, delaria [for example, diarrhea] will take hold of him.
[What is delaria?][49]
R. Joshua b. Levi says: The cure for diarrhea is dardara.
What is dardara? Abaye said: The crocus of thorns.[50]

Here is evidence, presented as Tannaitic,[51] for the dislike of a female superior position, or at least for the natural consequences of this act.[52] Yet if this is so clearly the position implied by b. *Nedarim* 20a–b's "overturning the table," why is there no similarity in the language used to describe it? Furthermore, this text gives us no indication as to which position men should adopt with their wives instead. After all, there are multiple ways to be on top.[53] Only in Kallah Rabbati's version of this tradition do we see any connection made between "overturning the table" and "she on top and he below." Following David Brodsky's division of Kallah Rabbati into text and commentary, indicated above in square brackets, we can see that only at the layer of commentary is the notion of "overturning" applied.[54] The passage reads as follows: "Baraita: He who copulates sitting, delaria [for example, diarrhea] will take hold of him. [What is its cure? crocus of thorns]. If she is above and he below, this is the way of perversion, [for perhaps the child will be inverted]. If the two of them copulate as one, this is the way of crookedness. [What is this? For example, if they lie on their sides, as a result of this the child will emerge crooked.]"[55]

[48] I am following MS Munich 95, MS RNL Evr. I 187, and MS Vatican 130, which all read "אירלא" (spasms) in place of "אירלד" (diarrhea). Indeed, of the extant witnesses, only MS Vatican 140 and the printed editions have "אירלד."

[49] Both MS RNL Evr. I 187 and MS Vatican 140 lack this question. Given that the statement of R. Joshua b. Levi is not actually an answer to this seemingly Stammaitic question, coupled with the similarity of the question "ארדרד יאמ" on the next line, I am inclined to see this as a scribal error.

[50] MS RNL Evr. I 187 adds "יהוהד ימטרוק הל ירמאו" (and some say: Carthamus thorns) and MS Vatican 140 reads "יחוחמ ימטרוק הל ירמאו" (and some say mashed Carthamus).

[51] The phrase "Tanu Rabbanan" indicates a Baraita, or extra-Mishnaic tradition. See Yeshua Halevi, *Halikhot Olam* (Jerusalem: Talpiot, 1960), 14.

[52] While it is true that there is no parallel to this Baraita elsewhere in the Mishnah, Tosefta, "Halachic" midrashim, Yerushalmi, or Bavli, there is a parallel in the "Minor Tractates" (more on this below), but I see no linguistic reason to ascribe it to a later period.

[53] As there are for her; see below.

[54] Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing*, 144.

[55] Chapter 1, Halacha 23. Rabbi Jerry Schwartzbard was kind to allow me, on very short notice, to look at a manuscript (JTS Rab 10,484) that is a collection of nonlegal works, the "minor" tractates (including *Kallah Rabati*), and *Megillat Taanit*, written in 1509. Unfortunately, this manuscript now lacks the entire first and most of the second chapter of Kallah Rabati. See Alexander Marx, "Eine Sammelhandschrift im Besitze des Herrn A. Epstein," *Zeitschrift für hebräische Bibliographie* 1, no. 5 (1901): 54–61. Instead

The earlier, Tannaitic layer suggests only that the inverted sexual position is problematic, while the consequence of the "inverted child" is a later addition to the text. Brodsky even goes so far as to suggest that the woman-on-top position referred to here may entail the woman sitting on top of her partner while he penetrates her from behind.[56] In this way the punishment of diarrhea in the Babylonian Talmud better fits the crime, since just as he had to sit passively for a long time in intercourse, so too must he sit for a long time on the privy.[57] Once again, if there is any connection between the female superior and the "overturning of the table," it is a connection supplied only by the commentary layer of Kallah Rabbati to Kallah, and it again tells us nothing about the Tannaitic understanding of the position implied by the phrase. Presumably, the opprobrium for such a posture stems from the passivity of the male and the active behavior of the female.

Statements of the Amoraim preserved in the Babylonian Talmud may give us a better idea of how they viewed this phrase and of their attitudes toward sexual choreography more generally. On b. *Yevamot* 63b we see: "What does the term: 'bad wife' mean? / Abaye said: She who prepares a tray for him and adorns her mouth. / Rava said: She who prepares for him a tray and turns her back."[58] Although Rashi and those who follow him see these descriptions about objectionable behavior as referring to an actual meal,[59] I prefer to see this conversation as yet another example of food and eating as a metaphor for sex, just as Reuben Margaliot and Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg do.[60] Abaye may be criticizing a wife for initiating sex and then offering fellatio in place of vaginal intercourse, whereas Rava may be imagining that the woman signals for ventro-ventro sex but presents her posterior for rear-entry vaginal or anal sex.[61] In the middle of fourth-

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I have presented the text as it appears in the first printed edition of 1863/64. See Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing*, 142–45.

[56] Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing*, n65.

[57] Many Rabbinic texts admonish the men not to be passive during intercourse, though this is usually explained in terms of homoeroticism. See Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 212–22.

[58] MS Vatican 111 lacks "ייבא" and has "ל"א" (he said to him) instead.

[59] Rashi, s.v. "אמופ" and "אבג היל ארדהמו."

[60] Reuben Margaliot, *Nitsotse Or* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 2002), 113. Margaliot explicitly compares this section to b. *Nedarim* 20a–b. See also Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg, Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer*, 14:98. See Labovitz, "Is Rav's Wife 'a Dish'?" Judith Wegner comes to a similar conclusion in "The Image and Status of Women in Classical Rabbinic Judaism," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 79.

[61] So as to preclude conception. This latter possibility is supported by the statement "רבעתת אלש (ידכ) תכפהתמ הנזמ השא" quoted once in the name of אבר (at b. *Yevamot* 35a) and once in the name of הבר his teacher (at b. *Ketubbot* 37a). These attributions are notoriously interchanged, however. See Shamma Yehuda Friedman, "The Writing of the Names Rabbah and Rava in the Talmud" [in Hebrew], *Sinai* 110 (1991–92): 140–64. See also Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors*, 179–85. There, while accepting Friedman, Kalmin provides a literary "litmus" test for determining which Amora is likely intended. Here, given that Abaye's statement is brought first and that there seems to be no direct, face-to-face contact between the Amoraim, it is likely that אבר is the correct reading.

century Sassanian Babylonia, we do see a predilection for the missionary position, but we must be careful not to retroject this predilection onto the earlier period.[62]

There is one final text from the Babylonian Talmud to consider, one that is especially important in light of its focus on the interpretation of sexual dreams. In b. *Berakhot* 56b, we read: "A certain sectarian said to R. Yishmael: I saw that I was walking in the shade of a myrtle. He replied: You had sex with a betrothed woman. He said to him: I saw shade above me and simultaneously below me. He said: Your intercourse was overturned." This story features R. Yishmael the son of R. Yose the son of Halafta, a student of Rabbi Akiva and a teacher of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince; once again we see a tradition about sexual positions placed into the mouth of a sage who lived at the very end of the Tannaitic period, in the time of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince. Yet here the language of the narrator and the interlocutor (but not the Rabbi, who, characteristically, is presented as speaking in Hebrew) is clearly not the Hebrew of the Mishnah but rather the Babylonian Aramaic that is the hallmark of the latest, redactional layer of the Talmud's development. Furthermore, the variation in textual witnesses corroborates this dating.[63] It is thus likely that it is the redactor/editor of the Talmud here who is forcing his own understanding of a female superior position onto the phrase "overturning the table."

Unfortunately, having perused these sources, our understanding of the precise mechanics described by the phrase "overturning the table" in its original Tannaitic context is still quite opaque. While it is clear that the text marks this behavior as deviant, perhaps because the woman is on top, we have gained little in our understanding of what the primary and preferred position was. That the Babylonian Amoraim and the medieval commentators who follow them seem to assume the missionary position and place this assumption onto the Tannaitic period does little to convince us that their own assumptions are shared by the Tannaim.[64] Thus,

[62] See n. 108. I am also consciously leaving out of the discussion the famous "midrash" regarding Lilith's refusal to engage in male-superior sex, which appears in the medieval work *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*. See Eli Yasif, *Stories of Ben Sira from the Middle Ages* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 65n10. However, this story, it seems to me, is a reworking of the b. *Niddah* 21b / *Bereshit Rabba* tradition.

[63] See Shamma Yehuda Friedman, "A Critical Study of Yevamot X with a Methodological Introduction" [in Hebrew], in *Texts and Studies, Analecta Judaica,* vol. 1, ed. H. Z. Dimitrovsky (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1977).

[64] It should be noted here that there is a single tradition that, without question, assumes the face-to-face position as the normative one. It appears at Genesis Rabba 20:3 (p. 183 in the Theodor and Albeck edition), and at b. *Bekhorot* 8b: "All [animals] copulate face to back / except three who copulate face to face / because the divine presence spoke with them / namely: human beings, snakes, and fish." While written in Rabbinic Hebrew, I see no reason to ascribe this text to the earlier Tannaitic period, and it may well reflect later norms. As the notes to the Theodor and Albeck edition make clear, this passage bears a striking resemblance to chapter 5 of Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals*. As such, this text might well be seen not as a product of Rabbinic Jewish culture at all.

we must turn to the broader Greco-Roman context in which they lived for more clues.

When it comes to reading sexual choreography in the high Roman Empire, we are on somewhat firmer ground, for there are a number of writers in both Latin and Greek who directly address preferences for particular sexual positions. For example, the first-century BCE Epicurean poet Titus Lucretius Carus seems to suggest that the primary position is ventro-dorsal rear entry: "And the ways in which the charming pleasure is carried on also really matter. For people generally believe that wives conceive more easily if they have sex like wild animals, following the style of quadrupeds, for that way, with chests down and sex organs raised, appropriate parts can take in seed. And wives do not require the slightest sensual motions."[65] This description of nonmutual sexual pleasure—that is, that sex is something done by a person with a penis to another, rather than something that two human beings of any kind do with each other—seems to have been a basic feature of the way Romans thought about sex, and it is quite reminiscent of the way in which Yohanan the son of Dahabai himself speaks of sex.[66] Likewise, Plutarch seems to ascribe a preference for such a position to the masses on whom he looks down: "Men who through weakness or effeminacy are unable to vault upon their horses teach the horses to kneel of themselves and crouch down. In like manner, some who have won wives of noble birth or wealth, instead of making themselves better, try to humble their wives, with the idea that they shall have more authority over their wives if these are reduced to a state of humility."[67] For Plutarch, a rear-entry position, though perhaps inferior, is widespread.

Visual depictions of intercourse were widespread throughout the Roman world, and our best examples of this kind of art in the Tannaitic period are clay drinking vessels decorated with images of couples, almost always heterosexual ones, engaging in coitus in a variety of positions.[68] Otto Brendel explains that these erotic vessels were likely created as popular art for the masses and not for a select few, and he notes the variety of sexual positions depicted on these objects. He concludes that "the erotic art of the Hellenistic Greeks and the Hellenized Romans found its proper range of diversity in the variations of a single representational schema."[69]

[65] Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura*, chap. 4. On this passage, see Robert Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex: A Commentary on "De Rerum Natura" IV, 1030–1287* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 67–68.

[66] David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 29–33.

[67] Plutarch, *Conjugalia raecepta, Section 8*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

[68] Otto J. Brendel, "The Scope and Temperament of Erotic Art in the Greco-Roman World," in *Studies in Erotic Art*, ed. Theodore Bowie and Cornelia V. Christenson (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 3–107.

[69] Ibid., 47–48.

The ventro-dorsal *a tergo* (vaginal intercourse from the rear), female superior, side-by-side, and missionary positions are all well attested on the erotic drinking cups, though the first seems to have been the most common.[70] Additionally, paintings of similar scenes are preserved throughout the Roman world, and there are some especially well-preserved paintings of a number of sexual positions in the brothels of Pompeii.[71] Given that we simply cannot know with certainty who made these images, for whom, and why, it is hard to make definitive claims about what these descriptions mean for the production of culture in this period. But they at least lack the preference for the missionary position that we see in the later, essentially Amoraic, Jewish sources surveyed above, not to mention the Patristic sources.[72]

In a surprising parallel to the dream interpretation detailed in b. *Berakhot* 56b above, perhaps our best-attested pagan source for an analysis of sexual positions and their cultural meaning comes from the dream interpretation manual the *Oneirocritica*, by Artemidorus Daldianus of Ephesus, who was active in precisely the same period as Rabbi Yehuda the Prince and Yohanan the son of Dahabai. What is so striking for the modern reader about this work is that the dreams themselves, while obviously about sex, are not interpreted as speaking in any meaningful way about the sexuality of the dreamer. Instead, the sexual dreams tend to have political meanings. As David Halperin argues, "Artemidorus saw public life, not erotic life, as the principal tenor of dreams. Even sexual dreams, in Artemidorus' system, are seldom really about sex. Rather, they are about the rise and fall of the dreamer's public fortunes, the vicissitudes of his domestic economy. If a man dreams of having sex with his mother, for example his dream signifies to Artemidorus nothing in particular about the dreamer's own sexual psychology, his fantasy life, his relationship with his parents."[73] Artemidorus explicitly addresses the meanings of various sexual positions in the context of interpreting the dreams a man may have about having sex with his own mother: "So if one penetrates his own mother frontally, which some say is according to nature—and she is alive, if his father is in good health he will have a falling out with him."[74] Artemidorus's claim that the "flesh-to-flesh" (συγχρωτα) position is "according to nature" (κατά φυσιν) is a striking vote of confidence given the wide variety of positions he himself describes later

[70] John Grimes Younger, *Sex in the Ancient World from A to Z* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 183.

[71] Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 235–43.

[72] An analysis of early Christianity's meaning making of sexual positions is beyond the scope of this article, but there has clearly been interesting work produced in this field. See Peter Brown, *Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) for the broader context; and Brundage, "Let Me Count the Ways," 81–93. For a somewhat more recent take, see Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[73] Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 262.

[74] John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 213.

on (face-to-face, from behind, mother "riding cavalry," both standing upright, etc.). He comments: "That the other positions are human inventions prompted by insolence, dissipation, and debauchery and that the frontal position alone is taught by nature is clear from the other animals. For all species employ some regular position and do not alter it, because they follow the rationale of nature."[75]

Artemidorus employs the phrase "according to nature" (κατά φυσιν) throughout the work.[76] John Winkler convincingly argues that "according to nature" for Artemidorus is best understood as "according to cultural convention." "What idea or idea of nature generates this heterogeneous list of things para phusin [according to nature]?," Winkler asks. "Not reproductive potential, since both the natural-conventional and the unconventional categories contain acts that are not reproductive (anal intercourse is conventional, fellatio is unconventional). The basic idea seems to be that unnatural acts do not involve any representation of human social hierarchy."[77]

Now here it is hard to understand a preference for face-to-face sex. What social hierarchy is implied by the missionary position that is not implied by rear-entry vaginal sex? If a free Roman man manifested his social position by penetrating not only his wife but also his male and female slaves, does not the rear entry position seem just as "natural" a way of defining and maintaining the social order as a face-to-face position, especially given the sexual assumptions of the Greek and Latin authors above? Winkler argues that this use of "nature" with regard to the frontal position is actually incongruous: "When [Artemidorus] calls the use of any other position than the frontal unnatural, he is making use of a 'found' piece of thought, an item circulating in the discourse of his day. He may also happen to have believed it himself when thinking about his own practices, but this is not something we can know; and the significant fact is that his interpretive system is not based on this use of 'nature,' but rather on an understanding of 'nature' to mean the conventionally bounded field of human hierarchy. Once again 'nature' stands for 'culture.'"[78] Despite Winkler's own claim that positing change in the second century CE is problematic due to the survival of more literature from this period,[79] he is in fact suggesting that this piece of "found" thought constitutes something novel. Perhaps both Artemidorus and the Tannaitic sources at Nedarim 20a–b are actually pointing to a change in sexuality in this period, the period in which the missionary position became normative for the first time.

[75] Ibid., 214.

[76] *Natura* in Latin is, of course, the direct equivalent to φύσις, which makes the whole attempt at translation here difficult.

[77] Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 38.

[78] Ibid., 42.

[79] Ibid., 44.

To return finally to the beginning: What position was originally implied by the stories of "overturning the table"? I believe the answer is a simple one. When does a woman's posture most closely resemble a table? Notwithstanding the broader food-as-sex metaphors, she most closely resembles a table when she faces away from her partner, who enters her from behind in the *a tergo* position favored by Lucretius. This was the position assumed by the woman who came to Rabbi Yehuda the Prince to ask for his advice when her husband, aware of the same "found" piece of cultural thought as Artemidorus, flipped her over and initiated the missionary position. The woman, unnerved by this unexpected experience, seeks and receives Rabbi Yehuda the Prince's approbation. The story reflects changing practice, asserting that while it is true that one position may be more "natural," "nature" is in fact only a social convention; all modes of copulation are permitted.[80] Why did such a change occur? How did a sexual position that had once been abnormal come to be persuasively normative, so much so as to obviate any inkling that it had once been otherwise? The sources themselves, whether Hebrew or Greek, do not allow for clean answers to these questions. And yet this is precisely the period in which emerging Christian ideas may have begun to police real bodies in the western half of the empire, where the Rabbis were active.[81] As Kyle Harper notes:

> Perhaps inevitably, impossibly strong models of freedom found their starkest testing ground in the area of human behavior where motivation is most muddled, subconscious, indeterminate: sex. In the same period when Greco-Roman philosophy and literature became notably more conscious than ever before that our deepest, constitutive moralities, especially sexual, depended so inscrutably on the lottery of fate, Christians preached a liberating message of freedom—from the cosmos, from the sweeping cycles of social reproduction alike. Indeed, the absolutist model of free will was the doctrine of a persecuted minority, capable of rejecting the world and, more importantly, imagining itself and its morality apart from the world.[82]

Perhaps this increasing notion of free will coupled with increasing rejection of the hierarchy of fate contributed to changes in the choreography of sex itself.

The later Babylonian texts that explicitly or implicitly comment on the Tannaitic picture of a changing sexual reality are themselves subject to an additional cultural milieu that, in combination with this "found" piece of Christian thought, affected the way the Rabbis viewed sexual practices as

[80] I would hasten to add that this Tannaitic position continues to reflect broader Roman norms: sex is phallus centered and penetrative, and it reflects a particular power dynamic.

[81] Brown, *Body and Society*, 60.

[82] Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 14.

well.[83] Finally, the medieval commentators who were outside the realm of Christendom were largely subject to Muslim views of sex and sexuality. There is a telling story in the Hadith literature that depicts Jews as condemning Muslims for utilizing the *a tergo* position, claiming that it would lead to birth defects. These Jews may have been under the sway of the rejected position of Yohanan the son of Dahabi.[84] Later readers who inherited Artemidorus's assumptions about what the "natural" sexual position is read it back into the earlier sources. Modern readers who share the same assumptions are likely to do the same.

Aside from the rediscovery of the normative sexual position implied by Nedarim 20a–b, there are a number of conclusions that we may draw from my analysis. First, as with so many other facts of late antique life, we cannot speak of the "Rabbinic view of sex" any more than we can speak of the Jewish view of any other aspect of culture. Not only did different Rabbis have divergent views on most everything, but Rabbinic culture itself was not monolithic in its understanding of sex and the meanings it made of sexual acts. Time, place, and the broader cultural milieu in which any given Rabbinic text was produced had profound implications for the production of meaning by that text.

In our context, we see a change in early Palestinian and later Babylonian attitudes toward sex positions—a change that should not be surprising given how much we know about the differences between these Rabbinic cultures.[85] If we want to understand the power dynamics the Rabbis wished to create in visions of the utopian society, we would do well to focus on sex and sexuality as a major locus for the production of social meaning.

About the Author

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[83] For an analysis of Rabbinic views of sexuality in the context of Persian norms, see Yaakov Elman, "He in His Cloak and She in Hers: Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sassanian Mesopotamia," in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-text in Rabbinic Judaism. Proceedings of a Conference on Rabbinic Judaism at Bucknell University*, ed. Rivka Ulmer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 130–31.

[84] Asbab Al-Nuzul to Sura 2:223 by Al-Wahidi, translated by Mokrane Guezzou, http://www.altafsir.com/asbabalnuzol.asp?soraname=2&ayah=223&search=yes&img=a&languageid=2.

[85] See Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and, more recently, Richard Kalman, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud's Narratives and Their Historical Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Rabbinics from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Dr. Bickart's dissertation focused on the meaning and usage of a particular set of linguistically related Talmudic terms in order to show how and in what cultural context the Talmud began to take shape in the emerging scholastic centers of Rabbinic learning in late Sassanian Babylonia. He is currently working on a project that focuses on sexuality in ancient Jewish and related cultures.