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Religious Lives of Image-Things, *Avodah Zarah*, and Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine

Abstract: Drawing on rabbinic sources redacted in the early third and late fourth/early fifth centuries, this paper tracks the intertwined lives of divine image-things and rabbis living in late Roman and Byzantine period Palestine. The paper argues that the religious image-things of others (or *avodah zarah*, in rabbinic terms) pressed in different ways on rabbinic notions of animation, materiality, agency, and representation, as well as on the boundaries between the thing, the human, and the divine. Additionally, the paper argues that while rabbis attempted to neutralize the claims of such image-things, in part by exposing their materiality, their excess nonetheless escaped such rabbinic efforts. Finally, the paper argues that in the fourth century, along with the “material turn” in the Roman world inspired by Christian engagement, we find not only a greater sense of the excess in the things of *avodah zarah*, but also a concomitant thingification of the rabbinic sage.

Introduction

Among the population of those things in antiquity associated with what we call religion, were images. Religious images, especially those of divinities, presented a particular conundrum for ancient Jewish sages, writers, and thinkers living in Palestine, Egypt, Rome, and Mesopotamia. This was partly due to the legacy of the second commandment in which the biblical God inveighed against the making of various artifacts for the purposes of worship. Many scholars have explored rabbinic ideas about images and “idols.”¹ However, insights from “thing theory” will allow me to

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1 See recent articles by Binder 2012, Friedheim 2009, Zohar 2009, Furstenberg 2009, Rosen-Zvi 2009 and respective bibliographies. The terms “idol” (*eidolon*, image) and “idolatry” (*eidolon* and *latreia*, worship) have complicated histories. *Eidolon* is used in a negative sense in the Septuagint; the com-

press in different ways on notions of animation, agency, and representation, as well as on the fuzzy boundaries between “thing,” human, and divinity that lie at the heart of religious image-things.²

To do this, I focus on Palestinian rabbis and their literary sources, namely Tannaitic texts redacted in the third century and containing the teachings of the Tannaim who lived between the first and third centuries CE; and later Amoraic texts redacted at the end of the fourth century or the early fifth century CE. My concern is to track some of the ways in which rabbis, living in Palestine in the late Roman and Byzantine periods, interacted with the stuff and things of other religions. Put differently, I will ask what happens in the encounter between religious images and rabbis in rabbinic discourse, the discourse of a minority group within a minority population living under a changing imperial regime.³

I use the language of encounter between images and rabbis rather than the commonly deployed “rabbinic attitudes toward x” because I wish to expand the common ground of inquiry in which rabbinic subjects are summoned for their views or constructions of various and usually non-rabbinic or non-Jewish objects or concepts (material, human, or otherwise). In this respect, even as I admit the partial (in all senses) perspective and creative hand of rabbinic authors, I am acknowledging (some would say granting) the agency of those things that appear in their discourse. I am indebted to theorists who have made the case for the agency of things beyond human projects for them and projections onto them, and who are still debating the terms of this recognition. Bill Brown highlights the “thingness of objects,” which he argues becomes manifest in two ways: when something happens to break the flow of habitual encounter or use, such as when the object literally breaks (Brown, 2001, 4), or when there is some kind of excess (“sensuous,” “metaphysical” or affective) in the objects that “exceeds their mere materialization” (Brown 2001, 5).⁴ To differing de-

pound *eidōlatría* is first used in the New Testament and then in Christian texts (Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft, 2011: 3–4; Büchsel 1964; Schwartz 2001: 165). See Neis 2013: 170–201.

² I use the terms “image” and “image-thing” interchangeably in order to emphasize the ways in which images are a type of material artifact belonging to the broader class of things. Images make particular types of claims, among them representational ones (see below), that may not be shared with other types of things.

³ I do not want to simplify the demographics of humans or things here by arguing that image-things of others need only be understood in local Jewish versus Roman imperial terms. There were a variety of different ethnic and religious groups living in Palestine besides rabbis, other Jews, and Romans. At the same time, the biblical mandate to clear the land of other gods, and the rabbinic term *avodah zarah* or “foreign worship” (discussed below), signifies the extent to which religious things of others were bound up with territorial claims.

⁴ I use the term “thing” as opposed to “object” in order to avoid an *a priori* opposition between (usually human) subjects and (usually nonhuman) objects that privileges the subject as the bearer of agency; Webb 2006: 197, 201–202. Bill Brown uses the term “thing” in some opposition to “object” (although he softens this opposition when he refers to the “thingness of objects;” Brown 2001: 4). I am not committed to this terminological distinction, though its underlying Heideggerian-inspired ideas are insightful.

grees and in different fashions Latour and Keane make the case for a strong agency for things (Latour 2005; Keane 2006a and 2006b). Appadurai and Gell allow for a type of agency for things but ultimately center their inquiries on the meaning and role of things in human lives (Appadurai 1986 and 2006; Gell 1998).⁵ Similarly, those who traditionally study image-things, or what might be called practitioners of the newer art history, seek to liberate the particular thing that is the image from its framing by producers, patrons, and consumers and, in the recent attention to materiality, even from the strictures of formal art historical methods.⁶ I proceed from a modulated position that attends to how image-things fare when they enter human discursive space. Rather than suggesting a radical agency for these image-things (about which I am agnostic), I look at how they interact with other entities, such as humans: human relations and meaning-making will not be absent from my analysis.

Within this framework, I trace how humans (in this case, rabbis) sought to tame and neutralize certain image-things, with mixed success, and, conversely, I suggest ways in which these things escaped or exceeded rabbinic discursive attempts at their containment. This is noticeable particularly in the case of those image-things that are treated as, or that claim to be, sacred or divine. I argue that ultimately the boundary between the rabbi and the image-thing falters, with things becoming humanized and rabbis becoming “thingified.”⁷ This secondary process of rabbinic “thingification,” I argue, is particularly pronounced in the later, Amoraic material and needs to be understood as part of a broader materialization of religion in Palestine and the Roman world more generally in the fourth century and onward.

1 The Tannaim and *Avodah Zarah*

The sacred images of others entered into discourses of different kinds, pictorial and textual. In terms of the former, we might think of the depiction of such images in the paintings of Dura Europos. A particularly vivid example is the painting depicting the capture of the Ark by the Philistines (1 Samuel 5: 1–5; Goodenough 1964). The biblical narrative describes how the Philistines placed the captured Ark in the shrine

⁵ Latour’s “actor network theory” eschews the division of humans and things into subjects with agency and objects without, instead, allowing for action and agency on the part of both humans and things. Appadurai traces the “social life of things.”

⁶ Osborne and Tanner 2007; Pantcheva 2006; Friedberg 1991; Elkins 1996; Gell 1998; Mitchell 1996 cf. Kumler and Lakey 2012. Keane 2006: 199, observes that things defined as “art” have been analyzed in more abstract and formal ways than those defined in functional terms: “their sheer materiality is often overlooked in favour of their representational character...”

⁷ I use the term “thingification” rather than “reification” (or “objectification”) so as not to invoke Marxist resonances regarding capitalism, commodification, alienation, production, and consumption.

of their god Dagon, and how it caused the god to be dismembered, along with other deleterious consequences. The paintings show the sacred image's torso and severed limbs, along with displaced and broken cultic implements (and possibly another sacred image). The religious images of the "other" are displayed, but their impropriety is equally visible in their disfigurement. Bearing witness to this is the Ark—a "good" religious thing—standing tall and victorious over its fallen enemies. Through the device of pictorial representation, the Dura painting tells a story about good and bad sacred things, or to put it differently, about religious and irreligious images and things (Wharton 1994). Scholars have sought to understand Dura's synagogue paintings in various ways, for example as a messianic message, or as competitive polemic with local religious groups, or as resistance to Rome.⁸ Most readings of the paintings take into account the multi-ethnic, religious population of the city, situated on the border of the Roman and Persian empires.

A good textual example of the entry of the cultic images of non-Jews into Jewish discourse is the third-century redacted rabbinic tractate of *m. Avodah Zarah*. Here too, the regional, religious, and ethnic politics of the Mishnah's authors, residing in Palestine, must be considered in any analysis.

As mentioned, Jews, and rabbis among them, considered themselves heirs to biblical traditions that inveighed against the images and worship of deities who were not the God of Israel. In their pentateuchal incarnations, these traditions mandated the systematic destruction of statues, sculptures, effigies, stone pillars (*matse-vot*), sacred trees (*asherim* and *asherot*), and altars associated with the gods of Canaan.⁹ The Israelite conquest of Canaan is founded on related rhetoric of an exclusive and iconoclastic loyalty to Yahweh.

Just as the Jews of Dura might have expressed a certain type of iconoclastic desire in their paintings rather than in action, so, too, were the Tannaitic rabbis in position to follow biblical mandates to destroy the sacred images of other religio-ethnicities in the Land of Israel. The rabbis formed a scholastic elite within the Jewish minority. By the mid-second century they had witnessed a second failed Jewish revolt with attendant upheaval and displacement; they lived in a Palestine with a heavy Roman military presence.¹⁰ Rabbis living and moving across Palestine would have encountered a variety of things, images, and buildings whose lives were religious but directed at the wrong god(s). Some of these things would have been perceived as symbols of imperial power; most obviously those things specifically related to the imperial cult, but probably also broader manifestations of Roman and Greek re-

⁸ Wischnitzer 1948; Kessler and Weitzman 1990; Elsner 2007. For recent work on Dura see Brody and Hoffman 2011.

⁹ E.g. Exodus 20:2–4; Exodus 23:14; Exodus 34:13–17; Numbers 33:52; Deuteronomy 5:6–8; Deuteronomy 7:5, 25, 26; Deuteronomy 12:1–4; Judges 2:2; 2 Kings 11:18, 19:18.

¹⁰ Baker 2002; Schwarz 2006: 10–15, 41–48.

ligion (Furstenberg 2010). Nonetheless, rabbinic theological and political unease would have been tempered by pragmatism.¹¹

The Mishnah, a compilation redacted in early third-century Palestine, consists of legal teachings, cases, and anecdotes of rabbis who lived between the first and late second centuries. It gives us some insight into how the rabbis perceived the sacred image-things of others which were embedded in the landscape. The Mishnah dedicates an entire tractate to this topic, and coins the term *avodah zarah*, a phrase hitherto unattested. Translatable as “idolatry,” the term literally means “strange” or “foreign worship,” and designates the worshipped entity or thing, as well as the various acts and expressions (or “worship”) directed to it (Zohar 2001–2). From the rather messy invective and inconsistent terminology of the bible (*asherah*, *pesel*, *matseva*, etc.), the rabbis invented a category.

The rabbinic laws of *avodah zarah* massaged the uncompromising iconoclastic imperatives of the bible into proscriptions against benefiting from the stuff of idolatry even indirectly. Perhaps most strategically, rabbinic laws of *avodah zarah* created a taxonomy that sought to distinguish usable things from forbidden things, and “mere” images from problematic ones, or *avodah zarah* (“idols”), as in the two selections that follow:

All images (*tselamim*) are prohibited because they are worshipped once a year—the words of R. Meir.

And the sages say: only that [image] which has a staff, a bird, or a globe in its hand is forbidden. Rabban Shimon son of Gamliel says: any [image] that has anything whatsoever in its hand [is forbidden].

m. Avodah Zarah 3:1

One who finds vessels upon which is a figure (*tsurah*) of the sun, or a figure of the moon, or a figure of a dragon—he shall cast them into the Dead Sea.

Rabban Shimon son of Gamliel says: if these are on fancy [vessels] they are forbidden, but if they are on worthless ones they are permitted.

Rabbi Yose says: One grinds them and throws them to the wind or deposits them in the sea. They said to him: Even so (in the case of grinding and throwing to the wind) it is made into manure (which is forbidden), as it says: “And not a bit of the proscribed things shall stick to your hand” (Deut. 13:18). [In other words, grinding and throwing to the wind is forbidden as benefit may accrue.]

m. Avodah Zarah 3:3

In *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:1 there is disagreement. R. Meir classifies all images as *avodah zarah*. On this view all images are presumptively and minimally worshipped (once a

¹¹ Certainly scholars have analyzed some of Josephus’s description of Jewish iconoclastic acts in political terms, e.g. Baumgarten 2011: 7–21, and Fine 2005: 72–77. The conquest context in pentateuchal iconoclastic denunciations of the religious things of non-Israelite others allows for a political basis in anti-idolatry rhetoric which need not be in opposition to political understandings of the second commandment. Thus one need not contrast religious (i.e. biblical heritage) with political factors as explanations for negative perceptions of the religious things of others by later Jews. See Neis 2013: 196–201.

year) and thus forbidden. The sages and Rabbi Shimon the son of Gamliel object to such a broad net of prohibition; for them only specific images are presumptively worshipped and thus forbidden. The sages and Rabbi Shimon distinguish presumptively worshipped images on the basis of their iconography. But here they differ: while both parties clear the field for a variety of usable and therefore non-idolatrous images, the sages, in only banning images that hold specific objects, cast a slightly narrower net of forbidden things.

The problem of idolatry and benefiting therefrom is also played out in *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:4 in which Rabban Gamliel answers a non-Jew's challenge while bathing in Aphrodite's bath, and implicitly in the presence of the statue of the goddess herself.¹² The rabbi is asked how he can do such a thing given the biblical prohibition. Rabban Gamliel (or possibly the anonymous redactor) distinguishes between a statue of Aphrodite that is a god and one that is an ornament (*noy*): "they do not say, 'Let us make a bath as an ornament for Aphrodite,' but, 'Let us make an Aphrodite as an ornament for the bath.'"¹³ According to some Tannaitic rabbis, sometimes an image of the god-

12 See *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:4: "Peraclous the son of Pelaslos questioned Rabban Gamliel in Acco while he was bathing in the Bath of Aphrodite. He said to him: 'It is written in your Torah: "Let none of the proscribed things stick to your hand" (Deuteronomy 13:18). Why are you bathing in the Bath of Aphrodite? He (the rabbi) said to him: 'One may not answer in the bathhouse,' and when he came out he said: 'I did not come into her domain, she came into my domain. They do not say, "Let us make a bath for Aphrodite," but, "Let us make an Aphrodite as an ornament for the bath." Furthermore, if you were given a large sum of money, would you enter the presence of your idol (*avodah zarah*) while you were naked or had a seminal emission, and would you urinate before her? But this one stands by a sewer and all people urinate before her! It only says, 'Their gods (*eloheihen*)' (Deuteronomy 12:3) —that which is treated as a god (*eloha*) is prohibited; what is not treated as a god is permitted.'" The Mishnah uses the term "Aphrodite" to describe the statue of the god (see below [21] on the identity of god and image) and the terms *avodah zarah*, and "god" (*eloha*), to designate the type of statue that is worshipped as a divinity.

13 Scholars have questioned whether the two sets of distinction made here—between (1) a building revolving around a statue of a god versus a statue as ornament and (2) between a divine statue of the god versus non-divine statue—are accurate reflections of Greco-Roman religion (Schwartz 2004: 162–176). There is reason to think that there was a clear distinction between sacred and non-sacred images of gods (Ando 2009, esp., 24–25; Lipka 2009: 13–15). For example, Suet., *Tib.* 26.1 seems to make a distinction between the likenesses of the gods (*simulacra deorum*) and the ornaments (*ornamenta*) of temples. Yet, S. Estienne (2010) notes that this (and other sources) concerns a distinction between statues of the gods versus imperial statues. Furthermore, Estienne points out that though *simulacra deorum* refers to a distinct group it nonetheless does not mean "cult image" in a narrow technical sense. In addition, while the technical sanctity of images in temples may have had significant legal implications, there is evidence of more fluid categories of images in other spaces. For example, the images of Fortuna in toilets undermine an easy distinction between sacred images of gods versus merely ornamental images, in that Fortuna clearly is invoked as a deity to protect the human user of the space (Moorman et al 2011; Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 4.44). So too, images of deities in bathhouses specifically do not necessarily fall into the category of the ornament. On the function of such images, including those of Aphrodite, see Dunbabin 1989; on Aphrodite see esp. 23–25; on the religious dimensions of baths and their images, see 32. There is thus reason to question a hard and fast distinction, in practice, between sacred and non-sacred images of gods. Finally, regardless of

dess Aphrodite is not sacred and therefore Jews may benefit from it, and be in its vicinity.¹⁴ There is a distinction between the referent of the visual representation and its status.

An additional argument given to justify the notion that the gentiles themselves are not relating to the Aphrodite sculpture as a sacred artifact is that (non-Jewish) people are coming before the goddess in ways inappropriate in a context of worship or sanctity, for example they urinate before the deity.¹⁵ Thus, this empirical observa-

whether there was a sharp distinction between sacred and non-sacred images of gods in Greco-Roman religion, the terminology used in *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:4 itself should give us pause before we conclude that it applies such a distinction between *sancta* and *ornamenta* to Aphrodite. The equivalent rabbinic terminology for sanctity or consecration is *kedushah* or *hekdesch*, not the language of divinity (*elohut*) actually used. That the Tannaim did apply such language to *avodah zarah* is evidenced in their statement elsewhere that there is no effective consecration (*hekdesch*) with *avodah zarah* (*t. Avodah Zarah* 5:10)—a statement that clearly speaks more to an imposition of rabbinic ideas onto *avodah zarah* than to actual polytheistic norms and rules of *consecratio*. This is to say that the Tannaim do not determine the status of things as *avodah zarah* solely upon emic grounds but often impose their own ideas thereon. Another example of this in *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:4, elaborated in the next footnote, concerns the imposition of rabbinic categories of impurity (the *ba'al kerî*) on *avodah zarah*.

14 The notion of “ornament” for the rabbis indicates a differing value than that imposed upon a properly (according the rabbis, see next footnote) divine image. In line with the remainder of the tractate, especially Chapter 3, the image as “ornament” versus the image as “their god” opposes aestheticism and functionality with the (somewhat paradoxically) properly idolatrous image, manifesting the shifting or differing regimes of value of a thing (whether according to the rabbis or to Rabban Gamliel’s questioner). I thank the reviewer for raising the issue of shifting values of a thing per Appadurai. Appadurai’s observations about the ritual, aesthetic, and economic diversions of things, and especially the suspension of ritual objects from commodization, might be useful in considering the rabbinic project of (re)using certain types of idolatrous things. On the complexities of assigning statuses as being “religious” or “decorative” see Stewart 2011: 227–229.

15 “That which is treated as a god (*eloha*) is forbidden; what is not treated as a god is permitted” (*m. Avodah Zarah* 3:4). The Mishnah claims to care precisely about emic points of view, but rabbinic concepts of purity, sanctity, priority, and tertiariness actually direct the argument. The rabbis do not necessarily grant us transparent windows onto polytheistic practice in Palestine. While a bathhouse may not have functioned as a sacred space in the same way that a temple did, this does not mean that gods encountered in non-sacred spaces were not gods (*eloheihen*). An indication that the rabbis are applying rabbinic-biblical standards for what constitutes a sacred space is the inclusion of the *ba'al kerî* (someone who has had a seminal emission, not necessarily as a result of a sexual interaction) among those who would not enter before the goddess. This is a technical category of impurity that the rabbis developed from the bible, one that does not have an exact parallel in Roman or Greek religion. For a variety of sources on abstinence from sexual activity related to ritual or sacred space see Lennon 2012: 43–58 and 59–66 respectively. On Greek sacred laws about purity see Parker 1983 and Graf 2008. However, the sources discussed relate more to sexual activity with another person than to male seminal emission *per se* (e.g. Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.64). Many thanks to Professor Fritz Graf for his kind help with this topic and for his warning about generalizing from sources (Greek purification inscriptions) whose contexts are local.

tion of human behavior toward the image negates any *rabbinic* presumption of worship (as in *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:1).¹⁶

Other laws, such as *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:3 (above) and those cited below, distinguish among different types of found things, either rehabilitating them for use if they are in fact idolatrous via a nullification process (*bittul*; *m. Avodah Zarah* 4:4 and 4:5) or mandating their destruction (*m. Avodah Zarah* 3:3):

The idol of a gentile is forbidden immediately.¹⁷
 And that of the Israelite is only forbidden once it is worshipped.
 A gentile can annul his idol and that of his companion.
 But an Israelite cannot annul the idol of a gentile.
m. Avodah Zarah 4:4

How does one annul it? If he cuts off the tip of its ear, the tip of its nose, the tip of its finger, he bashes it, even if he did not take any of it off—he has annulled it.
 If he spat at it, urinated before it, scratched it, or threw excrement at it—behold this is not annulment.
 If he sold it or gave it as a pledge for a loan—Rabbi says he annulled (it) and the sages say he did not annul (it).
m. Avodah Zarah 4:5

Those techniques of annulment about which there is consensus involve targeted defacement or dismemberment; mere insult is insufficient. Annulment strikes (literally) at the sensory organs or limbs of the sacred image.¹⁸ The conceptual question at the heart of such techniques that transform a religious image-thing for Jewish use is whether these particular techniques of partial iconoclasm (after all, the point is to be able to still use the thing) betray a sneaking belief in the sensory or manual power of the image. In other words—and this is the tease of the iconoclastic act—does the visible and material manifestation of defacement or dismemberment negate power that was resident before, or does it put a lie to the representation of physical organs by demonstrating their ineffectual nature? Does it put a lie to its false representational claims, or does it negate the power in the image and its underlying ref-

¹⁶ Note that acts or states that ostensibly comprise disrespect (e.g., urination) do not suffice for the purposes of *bittul* (*m. Avodah Zarah* 4:5). Both Tertullian and Clement mock the apparently disrespectful behavior of worshippers toward their divine images, who place them in spaces like kitchens, laundry, and toilets (Tertullian, *Apology*, 13.1, 4; Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 4.44)

¹⁷ The notion that the rabbis are thinking of *avodah zarah* in purely emic (say, Roman) terms founders on this Israelite/gentile distinction with regard to determining the status of an object. Similarly, see *t. Avodah Zarah* 5:9–10 which asserts that something is consecrated from the moment that an act is directed toward it, whereas (verbal) consecration is not effective.

¹⁸ For the focus on the sensory features of an image in statue violence see Varner 2004: 3 and 327. For an argument that *bittul* derives from such practices as *damnatio* see Furstenberg 2009: 117–44. Another fruitful way of looking at *bittul* is to understand its function (i.e., to render material reusable) alongside its ideological dimensions. A useful comparandum would then be *spolia*. See recently Brilliant and Kinney 2011. See Neis 2013: 186–190.

erent? Here is where some of the tensions around the power of “bad” religious images (or idols) come into play in early rabbinic and other sources.

1.1 The Materiality Critique

It bears reemphasis that in all of these examples it is taken for granted that there is a prohibition against worshiping idols. In the tractate of *Avodah Zarah* the focus is on how to avoid contact and benefit or enjoyment (*hana'ah*) from forbidden image-things. As we have seen, in some cases an image can be rehabilitated for Jewish benefit (by *bittul*), and this is accomplished by an intervention in the material of the thing.¹⁹ When it cannot be so transformed then the thing must be thrown away and utterly dematerialized (ground into dust).²⁰ Both of these options entail involvement, even in negation, of the matter of the thing itself.

However, explicitly articulated critique of idolatry in terms of materiality, a frequent trope in prophetic literature, appears less often than might be expected in Tannaitic sources. A notable instance of this type of critique arises in the tractate of *Mishnah Sanhedrin* (on court procedure), which includes a short section on the capital punishment for idolatry, detailing which actions constitute the transgression of the prohibition against idol worship (*m. Sanhedrin* 7:6).²¹ It also describes what constitutes incitement to idolatry (also a capital offense):

One who incites others to idolatry...

He [the inciter] says to him [a person entrapping the inciter], “There is a god in a certain place, who eats thus, drinks thus, does good in this way, harms in another”...

And then he [person entrapping inciter to idolatry] says, “Now how are we going to abandon our God who is in heaven, and go and worship sticks and stones (*etsim ve-avanim*, cf. Deut 4:28)?”
m. Sanhedrin 7:10

¹⁹ In Brown’s terms an object becomes a thing when it interrupts the circuit of use (e.g., by breakage) or bears some kind of metaphysical excess (e.g., my grandfather’s wristwatch or a divine image-thing). *Bittul* almost seems to work in the opposite direction (in Brown’s terms): the excess in the thing is neutralized when its materiality is exposed, so reverting it to a utilitarian “object.”

²⁰ On distinctions between the physical environment and human-made artifacts see *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:5 (par. *Sifre Deuteronomy* 60, ed. Finkelstein, 125–26), which contrasts hills and mountains with sacred trees (*asherot*, sing. *asherah*). The former (hills and mountains) are not forbidden, whereas the latter are forbidden. The difference is that the latter has been interfered with by human hands (*sheyesh bah tefisat yedei adam*). Albeck on this *mishnah* (ed. Albeck, 333) suggests that this refers to a tree that is planted. See *m. Nedarim* 5:3 and *m. Eruvin* 8:4 in which *tefifat yad* refers to usage (or access). The usage in *Sifra Shemini*, 9:1 (ed. Weiss, 55a) seems to fit with *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:5 (see Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah, Tractate Mikvaot*, 2:7).

²¹ Only ritual acts such as worship, sacrifice, *proskynesis*, or verbal declarations of “you are my god” qualify as capital crimes for idol-worship. However, acts like hugging, kissing, cleaning, clothing, and bathing are considered to be lesser transgressions. On acts like this as rendering a thing a “social agent,” see Collins 2003: 39 (thanks to Ian Moyer for this reference).

The Mishnah's inciter to idolatry attributes life, bodily functions and agency to the idol in his attempt to lure other Jews to its worship. In its instructions for entrapping such an inciter in order to obtain evidence for conviction, the Mishnah imagines a person responding to the inciter's suggestions with a materiality critique. The critique is supposed to put a lie to the claims about the god's digestive and other functions. The idol's claims, and those made about it, are exposed and in some way neutralized by pointing toward the matter of which the idol is constituted. This is a common enough critique in contemporaneous Christian texts and in earlier prophetic writings—but perhaps surprisingly less common in rabbinic ones.²² Such a critique involves negating the representational function of the idol by focusing on its medium.

Additional instances of a materiality critique in Tannaitic sources lie in the *Mekhilta*, a run-along exegetical commentary on Exodus. The *Mekhilta* engages in a good amount of polytheism-bashing, and a fair bit of idol-bashing, too (at least discursively). It is possible, of course, that the Egyptians and the denunciatory references to their practices serve as a placeholder for Romans. Given the underlying biblical plot, Egyptians often take the fall as the “bad guys” with idols. Thus the plagues are said to have punished Egyptian idols as much as their adherents—a notion that raises a certain specter of agency and affect on the part of these things. Their punishments are material-specific: wood rots, stone melts, and metal corrodes. To this Rabbi Natan adds by describing a fourfold process of softening, hollowing, chopping, and burning.²³ The punishment for these material things is their unmaking, their dematerialization.

In a similar move, the tenth plague—the death of the firstborn—is said to have not only caused death to living firstborns, but also to have resulted in the shattering (and abuse) of funerary images of the dead. Acknowledging or perhaps mocking the power of ancestor cult and images, the *Mekhilta* imagines that the death of humans and iconoclasm toward funerary cult-images excited equal anguish from Egyptian families.²⁴ The Palestinian Tannaim use the biblical story of the tenth plague as

²² On this issue see Ando 2009, esp. 21–41. Ando distinguishes between a representational critique, “the impossibility of representing anything invisible or incorporeal through matter,” and the materiality critique.

²³ *Mekhilta Piskha* 7 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 24): “‘And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord’ (Ex 12:12). Judgments differing from one another: the stone idols melted, the wooden ones rotted, the metal ones corroded, as it is said: ‘... (and against their gods God wrought judgment,’ Numbers 33:4). Some say: Those of stone rotted and those of wood melted. R. Nathan said: ‘judgments’—judgment [of] judges of judgments. They became soft, they became hollow, they were chopped down, they were burned. We thus learn that the *avodah zarah* was struck in four ways and its worshippers in three: by striking, by injury and by plague.” (Cf. Targum Jonathan and Targum Neofiti s.v. Exodus 12:12). See also *Mekhilta Shira* 8, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 142, on judgment meted out to Egyptian *avodah zarah* along with the Egyptians.

²⁴ See *Mekhilta Piskha* 13 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 44) on Exodus 12:29–30 (the plague of the killing of Egyptian firstborns): “‘For there was no house in which there was not a dead person’ (Exodus 12:30). R. Nathan said: And were there no houses that did not have a firstborn? Rather, when the firstborn of

an opportunity to imagine divine destruction of *avodah zarah*. The juxtaposition of these two “deaths”—of human and image—vividly parallels the termination of human life and the rendering of the body into a lifeless and decomposing thing and the destruction (or maltreatment and abuse) of ancestor images, which are treated as somehow living by the descendants, and hence in need of physical destruction.²⁵

Elsewhere in the Mekhilta, a critique of the very concept of idolatry finds expression:²⁶

A philosopher asked Rabban Gamliel: “It is written in your Torah [‘You shall not make for yourself an image (*pesel*) ...] for the Lord your God is a jealous God’ (Ex 20.5), but is there power (*koah*) in an idol (*avodah zarah*) of which to be jealous?

A strong man is jealous of a strong man, a sage is jealous of a sage, a rich man is jealous of a rich man, but is there power in an idol of which to be jealous?²⁷

He said to him: “If a man calls his dog by his father’s name, and then takes an oath on the life of the dog, is the father’s anger aimed at the son or the dog?

This form, in which an outsider enters rabbinic discourse with critical questions, is used to entertain questions about the difficulties with the prohibition against idolatry. Does this prohibition signify divine jealousy, which is a tacit acknowledgement of the power (*koah*) and even likeness (as a divinity is surely only jealous of another divinity) of these sacred things? The counter-argument seeks to sever the relationship or likeness implied in a rivalry between God and idol by claiming that divine anger is not directed at the idol but at its worshipper. The parable sets up a parallel hierarchy as follows:

God	Father
Idolater	Son
Idol	Dog

one of them died, they would make an icon for him and set it up his house. And on that day they (the icons) were crushed, ground, and scattered, and that day was as hard for them as the day of the funeral.” The text continues to describe how they would also bury the firstborn dead at home and how dogs came, dragged the corpses out of their burial niches, and played with them, causing anguish as harsh as the day of burial.

²⁵ Brown’s ideas about objects becoming noticeable as things when they break might be applied to the human body or other entities (such as funerary images) whose lives are interrupted.

²⁶ *Mekhilta Bahodesh* 6 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 226).

²⁷ According to the database of Primary Textual Witnesses to Tannaitic Literature (<http://www.biu.ac.il/js/tannaim/> accessed April 28, 2014), only Mss. Munich and Vatican have this line (see also ed. Lauterbach, 245).

In this analogy, if God > idolater in the way that father > son, there is still a family relationship of likeness between them.²⁸ Idols on the other hand belong to an utterly different taxon, in the way that (implicitly) dogs belong to a taxon distinct from that of humans.

Looking at the immediate and broader literary context of this dialogue sharpens the sense that the issue at stake is about the power of image-things as it relates to their materiality. The dialogue is the first of three between Rabban Gamliel and a philosopher which form a commentary on the second half of Exodus 20:5, “for the Lord your God is a jealous God,” that follows the prohibition against making images. In the second dialogue the philosopher challenges Rabban Gamliel with the claim that some idols are useful, pointing to a case of an idol that “stood up for itself” by saving its shrine from a fire. Idols are not only useful, but they are actors. The rabbi responds with a parable; he argues that this is like a king of flesh and blood only bothering to wage war against the living (*ha-hayim*) and not the dead (*ha-metim*).²⁹ This notion that idols are lifeless (sticks and stones rather than the organic matter of flesh and blood) also strikes at the representational claims of divine images, as well as those made about their agency—at least as construed by their rabbinic opponents. It seeks to designate idolatrous divine images as lifeless, passive things (or “objects”), rather than as living things, actors, and agents.

In the third dialogue (paralleled in *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:9), the philosopher makes a concessionary argument: he asks why God himself does not annul (*mevatel*) idolatry completely. In this case, Rabban Gamliel counters that idolatrous worship is not limited to human-made artifacts but also encompasses the natural world, and even humans (a likely reference to imperial cult or cult of ancestors). On this logic, annulling idolatry would mean damaging significant parts of the physical and even human world.

28 Some rabbinic sources conceive of humans as a class to be both godlike and thing-like in that they are “in the image of God” (*betselem elohim*): Genesis 1:27. On the basis of this principle *Mekhilta Bahodesh* 8 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 233) analogizes homicide to a type of deicide. It does so by comparing God to an emperor who sets up icons, statues, and coins in his image (i. e., humans). On this account homicide is likened to destroying these images and to “diminishing the image of the king.” The *Mekhilta* combines the representational logic of the imperial cult and its images, while invoking Genesis 9:10. At the other end of this logic are the things of *avodah zarah*, which are false images, in that they represent what is not (a god) and make false claims (about their own divinity). Later Amoraic sources also work with the notion of humans as *tselem elohim*: e. g., *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:3 (ed. Margulies, 775–7) in which Hillel compares his going to bathe his body which is created in the image and likeness of God to cleaning and bathing statues of the emperor; *Genesis Rabbah* 8:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 62) in which “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26) is compared to an emperor who, seeing a clod of earth near his palace, decides to make a statue out of it.

29 The typical opening for the parable (*mashal*) in which God is analogized to a “king of flesh and blood (*melekh basar ve-dam*)” has a particularly interesting resonance here when the point of the parable is to distinguish between the divine versus flesh and blood, as well as between flesh and blood (or living) and dead.

Thus, this triad of dialogues between a rabbi and a gentile philosopher articulates the problem, even if apparently negated, that a prohibition against idolatry takes the banned things seriously as powerful entities. The first asks: do idols have power of which God is jealous? The second concerns the apparent indestructibility and agency of an idol. The final challenge concerns the slippery and moving target of that which can be potentially deified: from human-made things to “natural” elements—and even humans. Hence the challenges, together with the rabbinic responses thereto, constitute meditations on the fundamental categories of human, divinity, thing, artifact, and material world. In order to think through these categories, determinations about classification, liveness, materiality, and agency are made. The rabbinic counterarguments distinguish human sinners from the specious claims of their images, claim divine indifference to idols as lifeless matter, and highlight the expansive range of possible things beyond artifacts that can be “made” into idols.

The Mekhilta also incorporates a sense of unease about the problems associated with the very category of idolatry in an earlier portion of the commentary (on Ex 20:2). The very term “other gods” in the phrase “you shall not have *other gods* besides me” is probed: how can “god” even be applied to these things? The various answers attempt to read the “other” (in “other gods”) in various ways. These include the idea that it is only *others* who call these things gods and that these things are “other” (or stranger-like) in terms of their inability to respond to their worshippers’ entreaty. Another answer attributes idols’ “otherness” to their easy material replaceability and recyclability:

R. Eliezer says: *Other gods*—since they make themselves new gods every day. How so? If one has one of gold and then needs the gold, he makes one of silver. If he has one of silver and then needs the silver, he makes one of copper. If he has one of copper and needs the copper, he makes it of iron. And so also with one of tin, and so also with one of lead ...³⁰

These responses, as in the three dialogues that appear later on in this section, rebut any suggestion of agency, life, or divinity attributed to *avodah zarah*, in part by negating its ability to respond, and in part by focusing on its materiality. Not only is the idol a human-made artifact, but also it is replaceable and recyclable. In R. Eliezer’s example, the idol is successively degraded materially. Thus even in its entertainment of the threat of divinity or power coming from such images, the Mekhilta neutralizes any allure or glimmer of power by deconstructing them in grossly material terms, whether by argument or anecdote.

³⁰ *Mekhilta Bahodesh* 6 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 224). Note that this upsets an emic point of view in which, at least technically, sacred images of gods could not be reused in this way (see Estienne 2010: 264–65). Cf. Tertullian, *Apology* 13.4 who writes mockingly of how gods are recycled into household implements (Smith 1987: 105–6). See the reverse process (of upgrading rather than downgrading) imagined with the Temple vessels’ materials in *b. Menahot* 28b (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 24b; 43a-b).

1.2 The Tannaim and the Religious Image-Things of Others

What happens, then, when the sacred images of others make their way into Tannaitic rabbinic texts? Through the rabbinic classificatory concept of *avodah zarah* against which these images are assessed, they are overwhelmingly rabbinized.³¹ Scholars have sought to determine whether this rabbinization overlaps or deliberately misrepresents contemporaneous non-Jewish Palestinian, Greco-Roman, polytheistic emic notions of the lives of religious image-things.³² Certainly by the time of the Mishnah's redaction, rabbis were living in a province with a considerable Roman presence.³³ The material evidence suggests an abundance of pagan material not only in non-Jewish areas but also in "Jewish" cities like Tiberias and Sepphoris, and in the Bet Shearim catacombs. On the basis of this evidence, Seth Schwartz suggests that Jews at this time were functionally pagan. His argument is based on taking the manifest content of the images seriously and refusing to downplay their religious lives.³⁴ Such an understanding of the lives of Jews (aside from rabbis) in the second and early third centuries also complicates an either/or reading of the material evidence as having a unitary religious and ethnic identity. The evidence demonstrates that many Jews interacted with pagan religious images (perhaps even in "cultic" contexts, narrowly understood) in much the same way as did others in Palestine and across the Roman east.³⁵

Tannaitic sources give us an additional complex view of the relationship between certain Jews and images up until the early third century. The harshest anti-idolatry rhetoric is in the *Mekhilta*, in which actual iconoclasm is imagined through the ambiguous artifice of biblical exegesis about Egyptian cult images (funerary and otherwise). As mentioned, it is possible that Egyptians stand in as a placeholder for polytheist Romans (or, if we take Schwartz seriously, even Jews). It is noteworthy that the rhetoric, even when violent, points the finger at a divine rather than Israelite iconoclast. The *Mekhilta* also stresses the materiality of idols, but at the same time it entertains, if in the guise of negation, the potential critique of the idolatry prohibition itself as acknowledging the life of image-things.

The Mishnah gets closer to a materiality critique in *m. Sanhedrin* 7:10 (the inciter claims the idol drinks, acts, etc.; the entrapper asks why he should abandon God and "worship sticks and stones"). In *m. Avodah Zarah*, it sets up a taxonomy of *avodah*

³¹ Neis 2013.

³² Halbertal 1993: 159–172; Schwartz 2004: 162–176

³³ Roll and Isaac 1979: 54–66.

³⁴ Schwartz 2004. Schwartz essentially points out that the scholarship has suffered from a version of *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:4, in which the evidence is read as merely ornamental and devoid of any actual religious life.

³⁵ For discussions of the varieties of divine and mythological images found in Jewish and other cities in Palestine see the bibliography in Schwartz 2004, Fischer 1998, Schwartz 1998, Segal 1997, Chaney 2005.

zarah, seeking to pry apart images from gods, and it at least implicitly considers ways of rendering the representative function and materiality of image-things visible through the material damage to the images' organs in *bittul* (nullification). Whether in the guise of *halakhah* (religious law), in the shape of biblical exegesis, or in the form of philosophical challenge or dialogue, the possibility that there is more to these divine images pokes through. The continued enlivening of the biblical polemic against idols also continues to animate their threat, and thus their power.

2 Palestinian Amoraim, Icons, and Idols

While Tannaitic sources tell us something about the encounter between rabbis and religious image-things prior to the early third century, Palestinian Amoraic sources (redacted in the late fourth or early fifth centuries), particularly the Palestinian Talmud, also inform us about the mid-to-later third century through the fourth century. Three important shifts in rabbinic lives are worth noting. Firstly, rabbis were increasingly urbanized. Secondly, Amoraim of the fourth century would have witnessed significant shifts in the material landscape of Palestine. A process that scholars refer to as christianization was already underway in the first half of the fourth century. Palestine was an important site of imperial Christian attention, being reconstituted as the Holy Land. In material terms, this entailed a degree of removal and renewal of the material topography, including image-things. Christians (or at least those such as Eusebius) presented such transformations as part of a process of removing pagan idolatry, a viewpoint perhaps in line with rabbinic thinking.³⁶ At the same time, material manifestations of Christian sanctity appeared, which the rabbis would have viewed as equally disturbing.³⁷

A final observation to make is that the Amoraim were not only inheritors of various biblical traditions, but increasingly understood themselves as a distinctive religious and social group. As part of this process, earlier rabbinic teaching (i. e., that of the Tannaim), particularly the Mishnah, was a crucial part of their curriculum. As a major Amoraic work, the Palestinian Talmud, or the *Yerushalmi*, follows the tractates and chapters of the Mishnah and is something of a commentary thereon. These three points then give us some context within which to then frame the analysis of the following three Amoraic sources that deal with image-things.

³⁶ E. g. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 3.54–57; Stewart 1999.

³⁷ See especially Caseau 2001 and Saradi-Mendelovici 1990.

2.1 Idolizing Sages, Blinding Idols

The first source is *y. Mo'ed Qatan* 3:7, 83c:³⁸

- A. R. Yohanan was leaning on R. Yaakov bar Idi, and R. Eleazar saw him and avoided him.³⁹
- B. [Yohanan] said, “Now there are two things that that Babylonian [R. Eleazar] has done to me. One is that he did not greet me, and the other is that he did not cite a teaching of mine in my name.”
- C. [Yaakov] said to him, “That is the custom over there, that the lesser one does not greet the more important one. For they carry out the following verse of Scripture: ‘The young men saw me and withdrew, and the old ones rose and stood’” (Job 29:8).
- D. As they walked he showed him a certain house of study. He [Yaakov] said to him [R. Yohanan], “This is where R. Meir would to go into session and expound the law. He would recite traditions in the name of R. Ishmael but he did not recite traditions in the name of R. Akiva.”
- E. He said to him, “Everyone knows that R. Meir is a student of R. Akiva [so there is no need for him to cite R. Akiva].”
- F. He [Yaakov] said to him [R. Yohanan], “Everyone knows that R. Eleazar is the student of R. Yohanan.”
- G. As they were going along, [they passed by a procession in which an idol was carried, and Yaakov asked Yohanan,] “What is [the law] as to passing in front of the image of Aduri?”
- H. He said to him, “And would you give it honor? Rather, go before it and blind its eyes.”
- I. [Yaakov] said to him, “R. Eleazar treated you finely, for he did not pass in front of you.”
- J. He [Yohanan] said to him, “Yaakov bar Idi, you know how to appease.”
- K. R. Yohanan wanted traditions to be stated in his name because of David who also prayed for mercy saying, “Let me dwell in your tent *forever*. [Oh to be safe under the shelter of your wings]” (Ps. 61:4).
- L. R. Phineas, R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Yohanan:⁴⁰ “And did it enter David’s mind that he would live forever? But this is what he said: ‘May I have the merit of having my words repeated in synagogues and study-houses.’”
- M. And what benefit was this to him? Bar Tira said, “He who recites a tradition in the name of the person who originally said it — [the teacher’s] lips whisper in the grave.”

³⁸ Par. *y. Berakhot* 2:1, 4b; *y. Sheqalim* 2.6, 47a; *b. Yevamot* 96b-97a.

³⁹ Ehrlich 2004: 23–36.

⁴⁰ Note that R. Yohanan is cited here by name.

- N. What is the scriptural basis for this statement? “[And your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly,] gliding over lips and teeth” (Song 7:9)... like a mass of heated grapes that flows of itself.⁴¹
- O. R. Hinenah bar Pappi and R. Simon — one said, “It is comparable to one who drinks spiced wine,” and the other said, “It is comparable to one who drinks old wine.” That is, even though he has drunk the wine, the taste lingers in his mouth.

The framing plot (A-B) has a senior and junior sage, R. Yohanan and R. Yaakov bar Idi, encountering a third, R. Eleazar. Yohanan is offended by the fact that Eleazar flees upon seeing him. Decrying this behavior, he also notes that Eleazar recites his (Yohanan’s) teachings without attributing them to him. Yaakov bar Idi’s role in the story is that of peacemaker. He first explains Eleazar’s apparent rudeness in cultural terms (C—this is how they do things back in Babylonia). Based on biblical exegesis, the mechanics of Babylonian forms of veneration are noteworthy—they see and then flee to show honor.

What then follow are two rather staged chance encounters through which Yaakov induces Yohanan himself to justify Eleazar’s actions. The first (D-F) has Yohanan conceding that known students of particular masters need not cite their masters’ teachings by name (D-F). The second (G-I) concerns an encounter with an idolatrous image-thing. This latter combination of narrative device and halakhic discussion is found in a triplet of anecdotes elsewhere in the Palestinian Talmud.⁴² Upon being asked whether they should pass in front of the image, R. Yohanan exclaims: “And would you give it honor? Rather pass in front of it and blind its eyes.” It is thus that Yohanan ends up validating Eleazar’s actions as a worthy form of veneration. If avoiding the idol is to show it honor, then in fact Eleazar honored his teacher by retreating.

The passage then ends with an explanation of what was at stake for R. Yohanan in wishing to be cited properly (M-O). It turns out that proper citation ensures a kind of immortality for the teacher, in the form of a veritable animation of the body of the deceased. This extended passage (drawing on narrative elements paralleled elsewhere), followed by the anonymous editor’s explanatory intervention, artfully juxtaposes concerns about veneration, idolatry, and animation.

2.1.1 Blinding Eyes: Veneration and Its Opposite

To unravel how these concerns play out, let us focus on some key elements of the passage. Perhaps most strikingly, a rabbinic sage is opposed to an idol in terms of

⁴¹ See Jastrow 2005: 621.

⁴² See y. *Avodah Zarah* 3:8, 43b.

appropriate veneration and its contrary. Consider the terms of veneration: the passage contrasts Babylonian-style sage veneration of seeing and fleeing with dishonoring confrontation that “blinds the eye” of the idol.⁴³ R. Yohanan’s instruction to approach the image and blind its eye should be read as an affective (rather than literal, material) iconoclasm.⁴⁴ The eye-blinding in question is the effect of dishonor, not the physical means by which it is accomplished.

Besides its aggressive tone, the language of eye-blinding is enormously evocative. It recalls iconographic apotropaic techniques by which the evil eye (often just referred to as “the eye” in ancient sources) was apotropaically negated—depictions of an eye being attacked by spears or animals.⁴⁵ The underlying mechanics of the evil eye, and indeed of vision more generally, involved emanations streaming from an eye.⁴⁶ If I am right about all these associations with the phrase, “blind its eye,” this may imply the rabbinic attribution of some kind of agency, even if malevolent, to the image. We should also consider the propensity in antiquity to strike out the sensory organs (particularly eyes) of images. In representational terms the eye makes a claim about the visual capacity of an image. To challenge it, to blind it, is to put a lie to that claim.

Another avenue to understanding this phrase lies in the visual encounter between cult image and worshipper as the ultimate moment (in worship). The epiphany of the god and image were fused in ancient religious imaginations.⁴⁷ Moreover this encounter was understood as reciprocal, in Verity Platt’s words, “To view a cult image was to encounter a being who *looked back*,” (Platt 2011: 78). The Amoraim were themselves heirs to earlier Tannaitic traditions that imagined that the Jerusalem Temple pilgrimage to the deity entailed an ocular encounter of precisely this recip-

⁴³ The supporting exegesis of “the young men *saw* me and fled” (Job 29:8) picks up on how R. Eleazar “saw” R. Yohanan and avoided him. This echoes the pericope’s attention to vision’s role in sage veneration (Neis 2013: 202–52). For a recent account of the importance of visual, physical encounter with the cult image in Greco-Roman religion see Platt 2011: 77–85.

⁴⁴ It is not likely that Yohanan is advocating that Yaakov walk up to the image that is being processed and attack it. Even on a technical, halakhic, level the Mishnah states that a Jew cannot annul the image of a gentile once worshipped. Contrast this with R. Yohanan’s instructions to Bar Derosay to break the images (*tsalmayya*) in the bathhouses (*y. Avodah Zarah* 4:4, 43d). See Schäfer 2002: 350.

⁴⁵ See *b. Sukkah* 38a; *b. Qiddushin* 30a, 81a; *b. Menahot* 62a for casting “an arrow into the eye of Satan.” This could be considered to be a virtual *bittul* (annulment).

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Bartsch 2006: 145–47.

⁴⁷ Platt 2011: 78–85; Gordon 1979. For a rather different account of the relationships between presence of the god and representation, see Johnston 2008: 449, who challenges the notion of a “single, consistent ancient explanation for the relationship between divinity and representation,” at least in the matter of specific beliefs that the god was “inside” (or “entering” or “filling”) the statue. Most interestingly, she shows that such beliefs, concomitant with rituals of animation, surface only in later antiquity in Platonist theory (cf. Cox Miller 2009: 138). It is curious to note that it is in roughly contemporaneous writings (second and third centuries) there is a greater sense of the agency of Greek statues (especially in erotic and sexual terms; Collins 2003: 40).

rocal nature.⁴⁸ The approach toward the god was ritualized. A gutsy and disrespectful approach would be the gestural equivalent to not only disregarding the sanctity of the image, but also to denying its equivalence to the god it represented, or even worse, to denying the god. The rabbi's focus on eye-blinding serves to challenge the image-things's agency by quelling the visual exchange at the heart of the encounter.

Despite or because of these various resonances at play, there is an ambiguity about iconoclastic behavior, even if symbolic. We can illuminate this by the example of physical iconoclasm in antiquity as discussed earlier. Perhaps most straightforwardly, damage to an image serves as a mark of disrespect; to deface something is to belittle it. On the one hand, damaging an image, particularly its sensory organs, is a way to show up its gross materiality and insensibility: one of the critiques of idolatry. The very madeness and artefactual nature of the thing is both revealed and negated by its unmaking. As suggested, the defacement visibly puts a lie to an image's claims, particularly those related to divinity.

On the other hand, defacement might also imply that even the iconoclast has a certain faith in the representational claims of an image. In other words, does blinding an image (whether physically or symbolically) mean to show up something that was never there (sight) or does it serve to cancel a capacity that was there? Surely blinding may imply that it originally did see. To put things within the particulars of our narrative: does behaving rudely imply that the idol sees and registers the insult? The narrative clearly struggles with this very suggestion when R. Yohanan suggests that running away from an image accords it power. This uneasy persistence of the possibility of life and vision in a cult image—its “excess” beyond its “mere materialization as objects” or its “mere utilization as objects” (Brown 2001, 5)—brings us back to the potential problem with the very concept of idolatry as hinted at in the *Mekhilta*. Furthermore, in this later source in the *Yerushalmi*, it serves as both echo and contrast to a similar persistence of life in the dead sage.⁴⁹

2.1.2 Blind Images Versus Animated Dead Sages

If there is an uneasy persistence of the image-thing's power, a similar lingering animation is more happily also applied to the rabbinic sage. As noted, the basic elements of this story—a senior Amoraic rabbi directs a junior rabbi to pass in front of an idol and blind its eyes—are repeated elsewhere in the Palestinian Talmud as stand alone vignettes (in a series of three). The deployment of these elements here, within the frame of R. Eleazar's failure to greet and to cite R. Yohanan, thoroughly transforms their resonances. Specifically, veneration or dishonor to an idol

⁴⁸ *Sifre Deuteronomy* 143 (ed. Finkelstein, 195–96). See Neis 2013: 41–81.

⁴⁹ On iconoclastic treatment of faces and eyes, see Flood 2002 and Kristensen 2013.

is contrasted with, and used to uphold, veneration practices toward the rabbinic sage.

At the same time, the frame-story also involves the issue of attribution. This additional layer, as enriched by the anonymous editor's supplemental discussion and set of citations in K-O, enhances the uneasy contrast/comparison between a seeing/blind image and the death-defying capacity of the sage. While the narrative ostensibly resolves R. Yohanan's anger at Eleazar's failure to cite him by name, the Talmud goes on to ask why this was even a problem.

- K. R. Yohanan wanted traditions to be stated in his name because of David who also prayed for mercy saying, "Let me dwell in your tent *forever*. [Oh to be safe under the shelter of your wings]" (Ps. 61:4).
- L. R. Phineas, R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Yohanan: "And did it enter David's mind that he would live forever? But this is what he said: 'May I have the merit of having my words repeated in synagogues and study-houses.'"

At first it appears that the editor is explaining R. Yohanan's upset by virtue of a different teaching of R. Yohanan's. That teaching converts the weight of David's (and by implication Yohanan's) concern for posterity into a metaphor. The verse's "forever" is transformed into the preservation of words. But then the passage continues:

- M. And what made this important to him? Bar Tira said, "He who recites a tradition in the name of the person who originally said it — [the teacher's] lips whisper in the grave."
- N. What is the scriptural basis for this statement? "[And your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly,] gliding over lips and teeth" (Song 7:9)... like a mass of heated grapes that flows of itself.

Thus, the citation of a person's teaching does not just keep him alive metaphorically; it also literally animates him in the grave.

It is worth bearing in mind that the larger literary setting of this narrative concerns the laws of mourning rituals for relatives and rabbinic teachers.⁵⁰ A Tannaitic tradition on an earlier folio declares that seeing a dead sage is like seeing a burned Torah scroll.⁵¹ If a dead sage is like a damaged sacred thing (and as the text outlines, requires similar mourning rituals), then here Yohanan is in search of the cure against decomposition. The figure of the sage stands in sharp contrast to the idolatrous

50 Attention to the broader redaction settings of all parallel versions of this story are also instructive. In *y. Berakhot* 2:1, 4b the underlying *mishnah* is *m. Berakhot* 2:1 on interrupting one's prayer to greet out of fear or respect. The passage moves into this narrative after determining that one ought to greet one's superior in Torah knowledge. In *y. Sheqalim* 2.6, 47a the underlying *mishnah* concerns building grave monuments and in *y. Mo'ed Qatan* 3:7, 83c the underlying *mishnah* concerns laws of ritual mourning for the deceased.

51 *y. Mo'ed Qatan* 3:7, 83b. Given its "excess" the Torah scroll is surely a "thing" in Brown's terms, yet to understand the dead sage as a damaged Torah scroll (surely another instance of a "thing") pushes up against the adequacy Brown's dual typology of things and/versus objects.

image-thing not just in terms of veneration, but also in its resistance to constraints of matter. If the image is to be blinded, the sage in the grave is neither silenced nor quite dead, despite his dead flesh.

Scholars of Christianity have noted the fourth century material turn, following on Peter Brown's insights about the simultaneous rise of the cult of the dead and the cult of the saints (Brown 1981 and 1989). He writes of the increase in Christian desire for *praesentia* in terms of "the physical presence of the holy" (Brown 1981: 88). More recently Patricia Cox Miller has argued for a material turn in Christian religion between the fourth and seventh centuries, linking the rise of relics and the fixation on the body of the saint to the eventual cult of icons (Cox Miller 2009). In the process, Cox Miller has shown us how the specter of idolatry hovered over Christians as they considered what holy things and bodies did for the relationship between materiality and holiness. Cox Miller's instructive consideration of thing-theory to think through the ways in which Christians grappled with the implications of the sanctification of living and dead human bodies and the meaning of sacred images (as opposed to idols) can enrich our understanding of rabbis in fourth-century Palestine producing narratives about their rabbinic predecessors. Christians were not the only people wrestling with such issues. As our second Amoraic source will further illuminate, it is important to attend to the material-political context in which the rabbis operated. Their encounters with the populations of things in Palestine must also be framed within broader fourth-century transformations of holy matter.⁵²

2.2 Breaking Idols and the Special Rabbinic Dead

The second source to be examined, part of the Palestinian Talmud's commentary on *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:1, also contrasts idols with dead rabbis. Let us begin with a glimpse of the top of the passage, which begins with a blend of Amoraic and Tannaitic determinations related to the underlying *mishnah*:

"All images are forbidden, since they are worshipped once a year." (*m. Avodah Zarah* 3:1).

- A. Asyan the carpenter in the name of R. Yohanan, "Why are the images (*ikoniyot*) forbidden? Because they offer incense before them when they go up."
- B. R. Yohanan said, "It is permitted to look at them (*lir'otan*) when they go down. Why? 'When the wicked are cut off you shall look (*tir'eh*)'" (Psalms 37:34)...
- C. Furthermore, one does not even look at images (*ikonot*) on weekdays. What is the reason? "Do not turn toward the idols" (Lev 19:4)—do not turn to worship them. R. Judah says. Do not turn to look at them literally.⁵³

⁵² On Jewish participation in new Christian martyrological materiality, see Boustán 2015.

⁵³ *y. Avodah Zarah* 3:1, 42c.

In A-B Rabbi Yohanan—a figure around which stories and discussions involving idols cluster—features as the originator of teachings about forbidden images. Perhaps most relevant for our purposes is R. Yohanan’s teaching about looking at icons when they are taken down. It paints Jews as witnesses to the violence of others towards religious image-things in Palestine.⁵⁴

From the life and death of icons (the “wicked”), the passage launches into a litany of rabbis’ funerary processions, most of which are in the vicinity of Tiberias. This funerary list is clearly linked to what precedes it by the themes (and language) of looking, spectacle, idolatrous images, and iconoclasm:

- D. When R. Nahum bar Simay died, they covered the icons (*ikonta*) with mats. They said, “Just as he did not look at them when he was alive, so he should not look at them in death.” Now can they [the dead] recognize anything?
R. Simeon b. Levi said: We have nothing in common with the righteous except the power of speech [i. e., that is all they lose upon death unlike the rest of us who lose all sensory capacities]...
R. Zeira said: The deceased hears words of praise for himself as if in a dream...
And why was he called Nahum most holy? Because he never gazed upon the image of a coin his whole life...
- E. When R. Hoshaya died, the *kalon* (lit. rebuke) of Tiberias fell.⁵⁵
- F. When R. Hanan died, the statues (*andartayya*) bent over.
- G. When R. Yohanan died, the icons bent over; they said it was because there was no icon like him.

The first dead rabbi is R. Nahum bar Simay. We are told that, given his signature piety of visual abstinence, when he died they (the rabbis, presumably) covered the icons with mats so that he would not see them. But then the Talmud pauses to ask about the apparent implication that this rabbi continued to see after death. The answer is that the righteous (or special dead) do indeed continue with their senses and capacities intact except for the power of speech. Once again we have a narrative encounter and material opposition between rabbis and idols. Rabbis defy their material trappings; their bodies are somehow somewhat alive and sensate, even after death.

⁵⁴ On Christian reuse and neutralization of pagan images see James 1996. Questioning whether all acts of mutilation and recycling of images by Christians ought be considered ideological iconoclasm is Caseau 2011. The article includes a consideration of statuary in Palestine. The Tannaitic laws of *bittul* in *m. Avodah Zarah* can be understood as partly motivated by similarly pragmatic concerns of disposal and reuse. We must also take into account that Christian texts emphasize transformation (or apologetically explain the lack thereof, e. g., Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.54, 57), but that polytheism was far from over in the fourth century. On the persistence of pagan culture in Palestine, see Belayche 2001. For scholarship that emphasizes the complexity of the process of christianization in Palestine see Mulryan 2011: 61–64.

⁵⁵ Schwartz and Jastrow take *kalon* to be a “cacophemistic” reference to an image of a deity or its temple; Schwartz notes that such a reading makes most sense in this context (Schwartz 2004: 342, n. 24; Jastrow 2005: 1373).

The guiding conceit in the series of rabbinic deaths and damage to things and built environment that follow, is the power of rabbis, even in death, to somehow show up the material fragility of idols. As seen in the first case, the rabbinic storyteller dares to imagine that rabbis covered up the statuary adorning the streets of the town. In another, the saintly rabbi causes the statues to tip over. R. Yohanan also appears: at his funeral, icons bend over, apparently out of respect for his superior iconic quality. Roles are reversed—images are covered up from visibility and vision, while the rabbinic dead who ought not see or act continue to do so and, in the case of R. Yohanan, become religious icons and spectacles themselves (essentially venerated by idols). A simple contrast between the material vulnerability of idols versus the ongoing animation and agency of dead sages is to be eschewed however, as images and things do seem to move, even if toward their own comeuppance. Is the “excess” in the thing that is the rabbi also still present in the idol? What does it mean to account for the icons bowing to R. Yohanan in terms of his superiority as an icon?

We saw in *y. Mo'ed Qatan*, how R. Yohanan was insulted by his student's failure to greet and cite him, advised “blinding the eye” of an idol, and worried about his posthumous life and animation. If *y. Mo'ed Qatan* brings sages, students, and idols together to consider iconoclastic impulses toward idols and the vivifying effects of veneration and citation upon sages, then *y. Avodah Zarah* here surfaces similar themes through legal hypothetical and iconoclastic funerary fantasies. Besides these themes, the *y. Avodah Zarah* passage gets even more vividly at the life and death of idols in the Palestinian landscape. From R. Yohanan's description of the erection and dismantling of a religious image to effects of rabbinic death on idols, we have the sense of a landscape heaving with symbols of non-Jewish, religious things. Seth Schwartz views the funerary story-collection as “motivated by claims of Christians like Epiphanius that it was the Christians, not the Jews, who eradicated paganism in Palestine”.⁵⁶ I would view this passage as motivated not just by the witnessing of Christian iconoclasm or related claims, but also as partaking in a broader debate about religious image-things, idols, and the sacred discussed above. Here it is crucial to recall that the christianization of Palestine needs to be seen not just as iconoclastic, but also as iconic—things (the wrong religious things) were not only destroyed but were often replaced or re-appropriated.⁵⁷

A stark difference between the earlier Tannaitic sources and these later Amoraic ones is how the problematic surplus in image-things, their religious “liveness,” is mirrored by the death-defiance of the rabbinic sage. Like fourth century Christians, rabbis were grappling with the specter of idolatry, while at the same time considering the material limits and qualities at play in special humans in terms of image-things.

⁵⁶ Schwartz 2007: 343. See also Schwartz 2004: 145–47.

⁵⁷ Cox Miller 2009; Cameron 1992.

2.3 Rabbis as Sacred Things, Nonrabbis as Insensible Idols

Our third and final Amoraic source, *y. Bikkurim* 3:3, 65c-d, bears out this idol/rabbi inversion in bold terms. This passage reframes the underlying *mishnah* about ritual greeting during a Temple pilgrimage procession into a discussion about rituals of intra-rabbinic veneration. The long and sinewy passage lays out different forms of veneration for various respected figures and things. The basic currency of veneration involves gazing, rising from being seated, and, sometimes, greeting.

These ritual elements ground a process of sanctification of the rabbi as a type of religious thing. For example, in one section, through a series of legal and narrative segments, the passage considers conflicting objects of veneration in terms of whether “the Torah rises for her son”—that is, whether people studying Torah ought to interrupt their study session in order to rise for a senior rabbi, “the Torah’s son.” These are moves toward the sanctification and thingification of the sage and the corresponding humanization and animation of the Torah. In the same section, R. Hanina is said to strike people who don’t rise for him, crying “would you annul Torah (*mevatlah de’orayta*),” both thingifying and sanctifying himself. In another vignette, a rabbi waits at a particular spot every week so that he can “see his son-in-law and rise” in veneration toward him. He refers to the man as “Sinai” and “that righteous body” (*hahu gufa tsadika*).

Focusing on two anecdotes, both of which contrast veneration with dishonor, will illustrate how the Amoraim find religious things “good for thinking about” rabbinic sages:

When the patriarch enters, everybody stands before him, and it is not permitted for any of them to sit down, until he says to them, “Be seated.” When the head of the court enters, they set up rows [of disciples] before him. If he wants, he passes through this row, and if he wants, he passes through that one. When a sage enters, one stands up and the one before sits down, one stands up and the one before sits down, until he reaches his places and sits.⁵⁸

When R. Meir (a sage) would go up to the assembly-house, everyone would look at him and rise before him. When they heard this Tannaitic teaching (i.e., that preceding, about according a lesser form of veneration for the sage), they wanted to treat him accordingly. He became angry and left. He said to them, “I have heard (in a teaching) that ‘they raise the level but do not lower the level of sanctity (*ma’alin baqodesh velo moridin*).”

At first his colleagues would extend a very high form of veneration to R. Meir—a type mentioned elsewhere in this pericope, consisting of everyone standing and looking at the honoree. They then learn of a teaching that someone of R. Meir’s status (a sage) should be honored in a lesser fashion and try to implement it, with each person merely rising when he passes them and sitting down as soon as he has gone by. R. Meir’s angry rebuke thingifies himself by invoking an halakhic (religious-legal) prin-

⁵⁸ Paralleled in *t. Sanhedrin* 7:8.

ciple usually applied (elsewhere) to cultic and sacred things like Temple vessels, sacrifices, and ritual artifacts like Torah scrolls and *mezuzot*. The principle essentially states that a thing, once sanctified, can only be augmented, not diminished, in status or value.⁵⁹ Like a sacred thing, R. Meir must not be degraded once elevated in sanctity.⁶⁰

This pericope closes with an even more striking move that uses the notion of good and bad religious image-things (or icons and idols) and even deification to think about real and pseudo-rabbis:

- R. Mana denigrated those who were appointed for payment of silver (*mitmanne bekhesaf*).
- R. Immi recited with regard to them, “You shall not make for yourselves gods of silver (*keseif*) or gods of gold” (Exodus 20:20).
- R. Josiah said, “And the cloak that he wears is like an ass’s saddle-cloth.”
- R. Asyan said, “This one who is appointed in exchange for silver, one should not rise before him nor call him rabbi; the cloak that he wears is like an ass’s saddle-cloth.”

Here is a rabbinic critique of wealthy Jewish men being appointed to communal and judicial positions to which the rabbis felt entitled.⁶¹ These men are pretenders in the rabbis’ eyes. The material wealth—the silver—to which these men owe their appointments, is like the precious metals of which idols are made—gross materiality with no authority. Their material manifestations, their taking up of a cloak, is an object of mockery—a beast’s saddle-cloth.⁶² As idols claim to be deities, so these falsely claim to be “rabbis,” but must not be recognized, venerated, or greeted as such.

The critique continues, spiced by anecdote:

- R. Zeira and one of the rabbis were seated. One who had been appointed in exchange for silver passed by. The rabbi said to R. Zeira, “Let us recite traditions so as not to rise up before him.”

Conspicuous trade in rabbinic currency—rabbinic teachings—while not rising is the means of dishonoring the non-rabbinic appointee. But what then follows brings home the idolatry-critique of these faux-rabbis even more forcefully:

- Jacob of Kefar Nevorayya interpreted the followed verse: “Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, ‘Awake!’ To a mute stone, ‘Arise!’ Can this give instruction? [Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, but there is no breath within it]” (Habakkuk 2:19–20).
- “Can this give instruction?” (Habakkuk 2:19)—does he (or: it) know how to instruct?
- “Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver” (Habakkuk 2:19)—was he not appointed for silver

⁵⁹ E.g., *m. Menahot* 11:7 and *t. Sheqalim* 6:4, in which the rule is cited as the explanation for why the showbread in the Temple is taken in on a marble table and taken out on a gold table. See also *y. Yoma* 3:9, 41a, *y. Megilah* 4:10, 75d and *y. Shevu’ot* 1:5, 33b.

⁶⁰ I am intrigued by the suggestion that this and *y. Mo’ed Qatan* 3:7, 83c may evince critique or ambivalence about veneration of the rabbis; see Schwartz 2012: 137 and 152.

⁶¹ See Lapin 2006: 79; for further references on this pericope see Neis 2013: 231–39.

⁶² Note the combination of thingification and animalization—cf. *Mekhilta Bahodesh* 6 (above) in which idols are compared to dogs.

(*kaspayya*)?

“But there is no breath within it” (Habakkuk 2:19)—he is not at all knowledgeable (*hakim*); woe to those who say ‘I wish to be appointed.’

Rather, “God is in his holy temple” (Habakkuk 2:20)—this refers to R. Isaac b. Ele’azar in the synagogue of Madarta in Caesarea.

Jacob of Nevorayya applies verses of prophetic idol-polemic through exegesis. The nonrabbinic appointee might bear the external trappings of authority and power, but there is nothing inside. He is speechless, insensate, without instruction and learning. The juxtaposition of appropriate veneration to a sage versus the dishonor due to idolatry is drawn in high relief. If the inappropriate object of veneration—the faux-rabbi—is an idol, the rabbi, in this case R. Isaac b. Eleazar, explicitly becomes the deity itself, sitting in its sanctuary.

In this final source, the thingification (as an effect of veneration) is even more explicit. At the same time, faux-rabbis become negatively thingified or objectified as bad religious things or idols. In this blurring of things, the sacred, and the human, rabbis are promoted as proper religious things, true images. Their representational claims of divinity invert those made by idols, but in the rabbinic case they ring true; rabbis are the “real thing.” Unlike the two first sources, the idol/rabbi contrast and its attendant themes of sanctity, materiality, and sensibility are applied to intra-Jewish rather than Jewish-Gentile relations.

3 Conclusion

This article has sought to think through the religious life of image-things as played out in their encounter with Palestinian rabbis between the second and fourth centuries. As Clifford Ando has noted, divine images are a particular type of thing, at once material and representational.⁶³ Perhaps this is no different from non-divine images, except for the claims of worship and ritual that divinities made upon their human subjects. For rabbis, as for some other Jews and Christians, religious image-things—or “idols”—presented a particular problem. My approaching rabbinic texts with the insights of thing-theory has allowed me to reposition the analytical thrust of “idols” and to consider the ways in which their liveness or “excess” threatened and also (in later sources) resisted and even infused rabbinic religious ideology.

Earlier, Tannaitic, sources betray some of this threat, despite the apparently neutral category of *avodah zarah*. Whether by the technique of *bittul* or through philosophical or exegetical polemic, the theoretical possibility of idols’ power inhabits these earlier texts. By the fourth century, the robust reconfiguration of religion in the Roman world in the form of Christianity gave new life to questions about divinity, the sacred, materiality, and the human. Whether in Constantinian and post-Constan-

⁶³ Ando 2009: 21–43.

tinian building projects, or in the discursive mappings of material shifts by Epiphanius and Eusebius, or in the rising cult of saints—religious things and holy bodies took on bolder colors.

Religious images of others thus enjoy multivalent journeys in the Palestinian Talmud. In *y. Avodah Zarah* 3:1, 42c, *y. Mo'ed Qatan* 3:7, 83c and *y. Bikkurim* 3:3, 65c-d idols are expressly opposed by rabbis who simultaneously take up features of religious image-things in the veneration they excite, in their defiance of their own human materiality and mortality, and ultimately in a movement toward thingification *and* deification. At the same time, idols, even when they move toward their own downfall, *do* move. Thus:

R. Nahman in the name of R. Mana, 'In the time to come, the idol will come and spit in the faces of its worshippers and shame them and be nullified (*betelah*) from the world.' And what is the basis for this? 'All idol-worshippers will be ashamed' (Psalms 97:7).

R. Nahman in the name of R. Mana, 'In the time to come, the idol will come and bow down before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and then be nullified from the world.' And what is the basis for this? 'All gods will bow before him' (Psalms 97:7)."⁶⁴

Here idols move to shame their human worshippers and bow before God before being nullified.⁶⁵ The iconoclastic legacy imparted by the second commandment becomes, in the mixture of narrative imagination and legal hypothetical, a means for the Amoraim to restore their own agency vis-à-vis the Palestinian landscape full of others' things. They track the material shifts, uneasily register the exit and entry of religious things, and perhaps most crucially instate themselves in the urban landscape as things worthy of respect. The story of the agency of things and the power of images in Byzantine Palestine is at least in part bound up with stories about the agency and power(lessness) of the scholastic Jewish minority. The fluidity between humans and non-human things, between dynamic agency and senseless materiality, and between proper religion and '*avodah zarah* is not unrelated to the complex position of a minority living in a material landscape largely controlled and populated by the "religious things" of an imperial order. The rabbis end up tapping into the very excess of the forbidden image-thing. At the same time, in translating the properties of image-things into recognizably rabbinic terms of teaching and study, and in ensuring their own posterity, the rabbinic image-thing becomes an icon for the rabbinic project of *talmud torah* (Torah study) itself.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *y. Avodah Zarah* 4:7, 44a; on spitting in the faces of idols see Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 10:4.

⁶⁵ Notice that in the later sources these idols enter the texts relatively free of people and companions. These scenes consist of rabbis and sacred images with no gentile characters (and only a non-rabbi in one case). This contrasts with the philosophers who quiz rabbis in both the Mishnah and the Mekhilta.

⁶⁶ A striking assertion of thingification (as a image-thing in particular) is found in an exegetical play on a verse from Psalms in *y. Shabbat* 1:2, 3a (paralleled in *y. Qiddushin* 1:7, 61a): "Gidol says, "One who recites a tradition in the name of the person who said it should see the tradition's author standing

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before him. Why? 'Surely a man walks about with an image (*akh betselem yithalekh ish*)' (Psalms 39:7)."

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