

CHAPTER 26

Why Was Titus Killed by a Gnat? Reflections on a Rabbinic Legend*

Steven Fine

It began near the beginning of the Arch of Titus Project (2012–2021) when I visited the Arch with my then-thirteen-year-old son. I pointed up toward the image of Titus’s triumphal entry to Rome in July 71 CE, standing on his *quadriga*, his four-horse-drawn chariot (Fig. 1). “Koby,” I said, “do you know why his head is all smashed?” Anticipating me, Koby squinted, looked up at Titus, and retorted: “Sure, because the gnat busted out and exploded his head.” We both laughed, and I wondered how many other Jews, across the ages, must have made the same pilgrimage and had the same thought. Beyond that, why was a *yattush*, a gnat or mosquito, chosen to kill Titus, and why did it attack his head? While a wide range of studies have been written about the tales of “Titus and the Gnat,” these questions have not been answered satisfactorily. In this essay, dedicated to my friend and most valued colleague, Jacob J. Schacter, I will approach these issues, which have been buzzing in my own head for some time.

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Figure 1. Titus's triumphal entry to Rome, Arch of Titus, Rome, ca. 81 CE (Steven Fine)

Tannaïtic texts and some amoraic sources struggle with a sense of cognitive dissonance¹ caused by God's inaction in the face of Titus's desecration and destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.² Why was he not punished immediately? This

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- 1 A term coined by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1956), 3–32; and used profitably by a number of scholars interpreting failed Jewish messianic expectations, including John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 308–325; Simon Dein, "What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails: The Case of Lubavitch," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 383–401; John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Motti Inbari, "When Prophecy Fails? The Theology of the Oslo Process—Rabbinical Responses to a Crisis of Faith," *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 3 (October 2009): 303–325.
 - 2 Significant modern research on the tales of "Titus and the Gnat" includes: Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Sex, Gender, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 136, 147–175; Meir Ben Shohar, "Titus in the Holy of Holies," in *Josephus and the Rabbis*, ed. Tal Ilan et al., vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2017), 741–770 (Hebrew); Elimelech Epstein Halevi, *Ha-aggadah ha-historit-biyyogerafit le-or mekorot Yevaniyyim ve-Latiniyyim* (Tel Aviv: Niv, 1975), 237–247; Israel Lévi, "La mort de Titus," *Revue des études juives* 15 (29) (July–September 1887): 62–69; Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Within Limits and Beyond: History and Body in Midrashic Texts," *International Folklore Review* 9 (1993): 5–12; eadem, "Rumors in Times of War and Cataclysm: A Historical Perspective," in *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, ed. Gary Allan Fine, Véronique Champion-Vincent, and Chip Heath (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2005), 31–51; eadem, "A Narrative Triumph: The Rabbis Write Back to the Empire," in *The*

dissonance is expressed first in a tradition preserved in a third-century collection, *Sifrei* to Deuteronomy (sec. 328) (= *Mekhilta* to Deut. 32:38):

Yakumu ve-ya'azru etkhem [They will arise and help you] is not written here, but rather *Yakumu ve-ya'zerukhem* [They will arise and He will help you] [Deut. 32:38].

Rabbi Nehemiah says: “[The taunter,] Titus the Wicked, the son of Vespasian’s wife, entered the Holy of Holies and slashed two veils with his sword and said: ‘If He is God, let Him come and protest.’”

“Who ate the fat of their sacrifices [and drank the wine of their libations]” [Deut. 32:38]. [Titus] said: “These [Jews] were deceived by Moses, who said to them, ‘Build an altar and offer burnt sacrifices and libations on it, as it says, “The one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight” [Num. 28:4].’”

“They will arise and He will help you and be a shield unto you.” The Holy One, blessed be He, pardons all [sins]. For desecration of the name, however, He takes immediate retribution.³

Titus lived a full eleven years after this sacrilege, rising to the rank of emperor in 79 CE before dying of mysterious causes in 81 CE.⁴ Having sinned so

Arch of Titus: From Jerusalem to Rome—and Back, ed. Steven Fine (Leiden; Boston: Brill; Yeshiva University Press, 2021), 55–62; Menahem Kister, “Legends of the Destruction of the Second Temple in Avot De-Rabbi Natan,” *Tarbiz* 67, no. 4 (July–September 1998): 483–529 (Hebrew); Shari L. Lowin, “Narratives of Villainy: Titus, Nebuchadnezzar, and Nimrod in the *Hadith* and *Midrash Aggadah*,” in *The Lineaments of Islam: Studies in Honor of Fred McGraw Donner*, ed. Paul M. Cobb (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 261–296; Joshua Levinson, “‘Tragedies Naturally Performed’: Fatal Charades, *Parodia Sacra*, and the Death of Titus,” in *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire*, ed. Richard Kalmin and Seth Schwartz (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 349–382; Anat Yisraeli-Taran, *The Legends of the Destruction* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), 79–80 (Hebrew).

- 3 Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifrei al sefer Devarim* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 378–379 (sec. 328); *Mekhilta* to Deut. 32:37–38 in Menahem Kahana, “Pages of the Deuteronomy *Mekhilta* on *Ha’azinu* and *Wezot ha-Berakha*,” *Tarbiz* 57, no. 2 (January–March 1988): 188–190 (Hebrew). This text is reproduced in Kahana’s *The Genizah Fragments of the Halakhic Midrashim*, pt. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 354 (Hebrew). See Ben Shahar, “Titus in the Holy of Holies,” 741–744 (esp. n. 3), who conveniently collected the essential versions of the story and significant manuscript variants.

Classical Greek and Latin sources are here cited from the Loeb Classical Library of Harvard University Press. Citations from the Hebrew Bible are modified from the Revised Standard Version. Translations of rabbinic sources are my own.

- 4 Ben Shahar, “Titus in the Holy of Holies,” 749–750, reviews the scholarly literature on Titus in the Temple. See also E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 26–27 with n. 17.

egregiously, how could this man, called consistently Titus the Wicked, have lived so successfully for so long, and why did it take God so long to do him in? All the *tanna'im* could promise was that “for desecration of the name . . . He takes immediate retribution,” but this was patently not the case. The dissonance between theological expectations and historical reality required explanation.

Some *amora'im* struggled with this as well, asking how the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, could be executed instantly for the sin of offering a “strange fire” in the Tabernacle ritual (Lev. 10:1–2), while Titus went unharmed. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (sec. 26:5) (= *Va-yikra rabbah* [sec. 20:5]) continues the pained question asked by the tannaitic sources, the furor reaching a high pitch:

Titus the Wicked entered the house of the Holy of Holies, cut the two veils, and came out peacefully, but the sons of Aaron entered to sacrifice and came out burnt, as it is written, “After the death of the two sons of Aaron” [Lev. 16:1].⁵

Over the following centuries, rabbis sought to overcome the cognitive dissonance caused by this reality, creating an ever-more-complex series of tales that address this theological conundrum. As we will see, in all these versions a gnat was the answer. I conclude with a conjecture based on Roman portraiture and numismatics, suggesting that a visual prompt may well hover somewhere behind the gnat of our tale.

Enter the Gnat: Resolving the Dissonance

A short tradition in the London manuscript of *Be-reshit rabbah* (sec. 10:7) answers the question of theodicy that plagued the rabbis and sets the frame for all later versions. Citing Titus’s sin, this tradition provides a concrete scenario of divine retribution:

5 Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, vol. 2 (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 392 (sec. 26:5); Mordecai Margulies, ed., *Midrash Va-yikra rabbah*, 2 vols. (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993), 1:458. On the relationship between *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and *Va-yikra rabbah*, see Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 35–38. Visotzky shows that this chapter of *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* was copied by the editor of *Va-yikra rabbah*. Yisraeli-Taran, *The Legends of the Destruction*, 77, rightly calls it a “defiant, protesting version” of our tale.

When Titus the Wicked entered the Holy of Holies, pierced the veil, and cursed and blasphemed, on his way back a single *yattush* entered his nostril and gouged out his brain. When [Titus] died, they split open his head and found a bird weighing two pounds.⁶

While our tannaitic sources promise retribution, and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana/Va-yikra rabbah* is outraged at the lack of punishment, this version of *Be-reshit rabbah* asserts that vengeance was indeed exacted against Titus. Upon his return, apparently right after exiting the Temple shrine (though other amoraic and later versions assume he had already “returned to Rome”), Titus was invaded through his nose by a gnat. In some unspecified future, an unidentified “they” “split open his head” and discovered that between the infestation and Titus’s death the small gnat had become a large bird.⁷ The context for this “splitting” is here left unstated, but later versions add that Titus’s head was opened by doctors. Titus’s fate was determined at the moment of his sin, even if external manifestation of the growing gnat in his deteriorating brain was delayed. This deferred retribution resolves the theological problem occasioned by Titus’s continued longevity—and with flare.

“Who Killed Titus?” Roman Perspectives

Rabbis were not the only late antique literati to consider the circumstances of Titus’s death. Roman authors preceded them. The death of Titus was the “Who killed Kennedy?” question of its time. Emperor Titus’s death in 81 CE at the age of forty-one was a surprise, occurring a mere “two years two months and twenty days after succeeding Vespasian.”⁸ Numerous conjectures regarding his cause of death were entertained by Roman authors. Plutarch (d. after 119) suggests simply that Titus died because he refused to eat before taking a bath.⁹ Suetonius (d. after 122), himself no fan of Titus, blames the widely scorned Domitian for Titus’s demise. Suetonius suggests that Domitian “never ceased to plot against his brother secretly and openly, until Titus was seized with a dangerous illness, when Domitian

6 See Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Midrash Be-reshit rabbah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965), 82–8; London, British Library, Add. 27169, fol. 13v, digitized at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_16406_fs001r. Compare Vatican City, Vatican Library Ms. ebr. 60, fol. 15v, digitized at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat_ebr.60.

7 Compare Levinson, “Tragedies Naturally Performed,” 376–378, who focuses on mythological parallels to this splitting of the head.

8 Suetonius, *Titus* 11.

9 Plutarch, *Advice about Keeping Well* 3.

ordered that he be left for dead, before he had actually drawn his last breath.”¹⁰ A century later, Cassius Dio (d. ca. 235) made the same accusation.¹¹ The Greek sophist Philostratus (d. ca. 247–250), who traveled widely and wrote during the first half of the third century, relates a private conversation between Apollonius of Tyana (a town in Cappadocia; d. ca. 96–98), “a wandering ascetic/philosopher/wonderworker”¹² and “holy man” known for his clairvoyance,¹³ and Titus himself:

“And,” said Titus, “in what way am I to die?”

“In the same way,” said the other, “as Odysseus is said to have died, for they say that he too met with his death by the sea.”

Damis interprets the above utterance as follows: Namely, that he was to be on his guard against the cusp of the fish called the trygon, with which they say Odysseus was wounded. Anyhow, after he had occupied the throne for two years, in succession of his father, he died through eating the fish called the sea-hare; and this fish, according to Damis, causes secret humors in the body worse and more fatal than anything else either in the sea or on land.

And Nero, he says, introduced this sea-hare in his dishes to poison his worst enemies; and so did Domitian in order to remove his brother Titus, not because he objected to sharing his throne with his brother, but to sharing it with one who was both gentle and good.

Such was their conversation in private, after which they embraced one another in public, and as Titus departed Apollonius greeted him with these last words: “Pray you, my King, overcome your enemies by your arms, but your father by your virtues.”¹⁴

Apollonius’s words are glossed by his acolyte Damis (whose memoirs some scholars believe Philostratus invented).¹⁵ The question with which Titus opens

10 Suetonius, *Domitian* 2. See also idem, *Titus* 6–7.

11 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 66.26.4.

12 James A. Francis, “Truthful Fiction: New Questions to Old Answers on Philostratus’ ‘Life of Apollonius,’” *The American Journal of Philology* 119, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 419.

13 See Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 8.26–27, and Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 27.18.1.

14 Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 6.32. Classical sources for the death of Titus are assembled by S. J. Bastomsky, “The Death of the Emperor Titus—A Tentative Suggestion,” *Apeiron* 1, no. 2 (1967): 22–23.

15 See, for example, Ewen Lyall Bowie, “Apollonius of Tyana: Tradition and Reality,” *Rise and Decline of the Roman World* 2.16.2 (1978): 1663–1667. Francis, “Truthful Fiction,” 422–423, surveys the range of scholarly positions.

his conversation with Apollonius—“In what way am I to die?”—was a question asked by many an inquiring late Roman mind, including rabbis.

The circumstances surrounding Titus’s death were indeed ambiguous, leaving an opening for both speculation and rumor. While Roman historians accused Domitian of killing a popular emperor, the rabbis sought to explain Titus’s demise as delayed divine retribution for the blasphemous “Wicked One.” Our subaltern rabbinic tale, told in Hebrew and Aramaic, far from the centers of Roman power and culture, is a unique voice in this empire-wide conversation.

In imagining death by gnat, *Be-reshit rabbah* asserts that Titus’s punishment was consistent with how God works. It was not an unusual act, but rather exemplified the “long arm” of divine justice. This point is made through the larger editorial frame in which our story is set in *Be-reshit rabbah*. The tale concludes a section (10:7) that explicates Gen. 2:1: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.” The midrashic text focuses on the latter half of the verse, “and all the host of them”:

Even things that you consider wholly unnecessary for the creation of the world, like fleas, gnats, and flies, are integral to the creation of the world. The Holy One, blessed be He, carries out His missions through everything, even through the snake, scorpion, gnat, and frog.¹⁶

“Titus and the Gnat” is the last of six stories of divine intervention through “small things.” It is the crescendo of this chapter, illustrating one final time the dictum that “the Holy One, blessed be He, carries out His missions through everything, even through the . . . gnat.” In one of the stories that precede ours, a Roman abuses a Jew—any Jew—forcing him out of what seems to be an urban public toilet, only to be killed by a snake (in the parallel in *Va-yikra rabbah* [sec. 22:4], the Jew is the second-century *tanna* Rabbi [E]l[e]azar, the affront thus being specifically against a rabbi).¹⁷ This scenario is less fantastic than it might seem to moderns. Public toilets were standard features of Roman cities. In Israel, they have been discovered in late antique Caesarea Maritima, Beit She’an/Scythopolis, and Beit Guvrin/Eleutheropolis, setting the stage for this story of

16 *Midrash Be-reshit rabbah*, 79–80. *Ibid.*, 38 (sec. 5:9), had earlier suggested that *yattushim* were created as a curse for the fallen Adam.

17 *Midrash Be-reshit rabbah*, 81; *Midrash Va-yikra rabbah*, 2:505–506; Chanoch Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud, Babli and Yerushalmi* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1987), 224–227 (Hebrew).

divine justice.¹⁸ Levels of sanitation and hygiene were frightfully low in Roman cities, and vermin were very common in public toilets. Rabbinic texts mention poisonous snakes, frogs, and even a swarm of twelve mice that attacked Pharaoh as he used the toilet.¹⁹ The presence of a snake in search of food and liquid would not have been out of the ordinary in a public toilet.

In the next story, an imperial courier travels along the bluffs on the shore near Caesarea Maritima. Miraculously, he is felled by a thigh bone that rolls under his feet. Good thing, for the courier was found by Jews to be delivering documents to the local Roman authorities detrimental to the Jews. By divine grace, they were intercepted.²⁰ This city was likely chosen as the setting not just for its name and function as Roman provincial capital, but perhaps with knowledge of the steep coastal bluffs north of Caesarea and along the coast of central Palestine. I note that “the necropolis [of Caesarea] extended on all three sides around the city wall”—providing a setting for this rather morbid act of divine intervention.²¹

According to our tradition in *Be-reshit rabbah* (and parallel texts), God’s disposal of Titus through a gnat is part of a larger pattern of divine interventions against the worst abuses of the imperial administration. It is a subversive weapon in Israel’s continuing resistance of the empire—a “hidden transcript” of Roman colonials.²² *Va-yikra rabbah* (sec. 22:3) reproduces the *Be-reshit rabbah* exposition of Gen. 2:1.²³ Where in *Be-reshit rabbah* these stories appear as preludes to the Titus story, in the most extensive version of our tale—in *Va-yikra rabbah*—it is placed at the center of the same miscellany about the small animals and the thigh bone. These unobtrusively do God’s work as protector of Jews from the abuses of imperial Rome.²⁴

- 18 Eyal Baruch and Zohar Amar, “The Latrine (Latrina) in the Land of Israel in the Roman-Byzantine Period,” *Jerusalem and Eretz-Israel 2* (2004): 27–50; Yael Wilfand, “Did the Rabbis Reject the Roman Public Latrine?,” *BABESCH* 84 (2009): 185–186; Estée Dvorjetski, “Public Health in Ancient Palestine: Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Lavatories,” in *Viewing Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology: VeHinnei Rachel—Essays in Honor of Rachel Hachlili*, ed. Ann E. Killebrew and Gabriele Faßbeck (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 61–86.
- 19 B. *Gittin* 57a (snake); Meir Friedmann (Ish Shalom), ed., *Seder Eliyyahu rabbah ve-Seder Eliyyahu zuta* (Vienna; Warsaw: Achiasaf, 1904), 41 (frogs); Bezalel Landau, ed., *Yalkut Shim’oni*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1960), 59a (sec. 181) (mice). See Dvorjetski, “Public Health in Ancient Palestine,” 80–81.
- 20 *Midrash Be-reshit rabbah*, 81–82.
- 21 Joseph Patrich, *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Caesarea Maritima: Caput Judaeae, Metropolis Palaestinae* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 113.
- 22 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Levinson, “Tragedies Naturally Performed,” 106.
- 23 *Midrash Va-yikra rabbah*, 2:499–502.
- 24 Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, 47, notes that animal fable “collections of this type were popular throughout the empire.”

“For Desecration of the Name . . . He Takes Immediate Retribution”: The Literary Frame of Titus’s Theomachy

The death of Titus through a small animal is typical of stories of theomachy that appear across classical and Jewish literature. Elimelech Epstein Halevi, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Joshua Levinson were well aware of this connection, though a more sustained engagement with *theomachos* in classical and rabbinic sources provides a useful frame for the interpretation.²⁵ In 1936, New Testament scholar Wilhelm Nestle discussed *θεομαχία*, *theomachía*, the state of “fighting against God.”²⁶ Nestle described *θεομαχία* in classical sources as a three- or four-step process: blasphemy followed by more-or-less immediate pain, often confession or acknowledgement of sin, and death. *Theomachos* results in a speedy, often painful, divinely decreed death for well-placed blasphemers. Infestation by living creatures, Nestle suggested, is a sub-genre of this well known literary topos.²⁷ In Greek, Roman, and Patristic sources, worms are the small creature of choice used by divinities to punish the wicked. Discussing the broad range of biblical, Greek, and Latin sources, O. Wesley Allen, Jr., calls these “Death of Tyrant type-scenes.”²⁸ In Jewish sources, the God of Israel quickly punishes tyrannical blasphemers with misery and a horrible death, the offender suffering terrible pain and infestation first.²⁹ Consistent within Jewish examples is speedy divine retribution, both for individuals—Israelite or not—and for foreign persecutors as a group.³⁰ If this standard structure of speedy retribution failed to occur, the

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- 25 See Halevi, *Ha-aggadah ha-historit-biyyogerafit*, 244–247; Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Narratives in Dialogue: A Folk Literary Perspective on Interreligious Contacts in the Holy Land in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity,” in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land: First–Fifteenth Centuries CE*, ed. Arieh Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998), 114; Levinson, “Tragedies Naturally Performed,” 375.
- 26 Wilhelm Nestle, “Legenden vom Tod der Gottesverächter,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 33 (1936): 246–269; Joshua Gutmann, “Ha-em ve-shiv’at baneha ba-aggadah u-be-sifrei Hashmona’im 2 ve-4,” in *Commentationes Iudaico-Hellenisticae: In Memoriam Iohannis Lewy (1901–1945)*, ed. Moshe Schwabe and Joshua Gutmann (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1949), 29–32; J. C. Kamerbeek, “On the Conception of ΘΕΟΜΑΧΟΣ in Relation with Greek Tragedy,” *Mnemosyne* 1, no. 4 (1948): 271–283; Primit Chaudhuri, *The War with God: Theomachy in Roman Imperial Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 27 Nestle, “Legenden.” See David J. Ladouceur, “The Death of Herod the Great,” *Classical Philology* 76, no. 1 (January 1981): 25–34.
- 28 See O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Death of Herod: The Narrative and Theological Function of Retribution in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), esp. 29–39.
- 29 See, for example, II Chron. 21:11–19.
- 30 Regarding worm infestation, see Job 7:5; Isa. 14:11, 66:24; Jud. 16:17; Sir. 19:3. See Alexandria Frisch, “Worms, Rotting Flesh, and Falling Bowels: The Power of Disgust in a Motif of Kingly Death in Early Jewish Literature,” *Dine Israel* 29 (2012): 33*–56*.

believer was sent into a state of cognitive dissonance—as is made explicit and remains unresolved in the shorter versions of our Titus tales.

Azariah dei Rossi noted the significance of the death narrative of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in II Macc. 9 for the interpretation of rabbinic stories of Titus's demise.³¹ This text celebrates the disposal of Antiochus with a burlesque crudeness not repeated again in Jewish literature until the amoraic disposal of Titus. The verb *θεομαχεῖν* appears already in II Macc. 7:19, where the sixth of the mother's seven martyred sons tells Antiochus: "But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God (*θεομαχεῖν*)!" II Macc. 9 applies this punishment to Antiochus IV Epiphanes reporting that following closely upon the defeat of his troops at Persepolis in Persia, "news came to him of what had happened to Nicanor and the forces of Timothy" (9:3) in his battle with the Hasmoneans:

Transported with rage, he conceived the idea of turning upon the Jews the injury done by those who had put him to flight; so he ordered his charioteer to drive without stopping until he completed the journey. But the judgment of heaven rode with him! For in his arrogance he said, "When I get there I will make Jerusalem a cemetery of Jews."

But the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him an incurable and unseen blow. As soon as he ceased speaking he was seized with a pain in his bowels for which there was no relief and with sharp internal tortures—and that very justly, for he had tortured the bowels of others with many and strange inflictions. Yet he did not in any way stop his insolence, but was even more filled with arrogance, breathing fire in his rage against the Jews, and giving orders to hasten the journey. And so it came about that he fell out of his chariot as it was rushing along, and the fall was so hard as to torture every limb of his body. Thus he who had just been thinking that he could command the waves of the sea, in his superhuman arrogance, and imagining that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance, was brought down to earth and carried in a litter, making the power of God manifest to all. *And so the ungodly man's body swarmed with worms*, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away, and because

31 Azariah dei Rossi, *Sefer me'or einayim* (Mantua, 1573–1574), 80b; translated by Joanna Weinberg as *The Light of the Eyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 299.

of his stench the whole army felt revulsion at his decay. Because of his intolerable stench no one was able to carry the man who a little while before had thought that he could touch the stars of heaven. . . .

So the murderer and blasphemer, having endured the more intense suffering, such as he had inflicted on others, came to the end of his life by a most pitiable fate, among the mountains in a strange land.

Here, the oppressed imagine vengeance against their oppressor—no wonder that this flamboyant tale of Antiochus’s death is not remembered by Josephus. It would not likely have found favor with his Flavian sponsors, any more than our gnat story would have pleased Domitian. Antiochus grovels before the Jews, before the life of the “blasphemer” is ended by divine “judgment.” The parallels of this tale to our story of Titus are quite apparent. Both men were punished for blasphemy before God, punishments which include, as we will see in *Va-yikra rabbah* (and parallels), invocation of the sea, confession, and a torturous death enacted through a small creature. II Maccabees has it that Antiochus’s “body swarmed with worms,” while the blasphemer Titus was invaded by a single *yat-tush*. In both cases, the blasphemer ultimately acknowledges the power of the God of Israel.

Herod the Great, too, Josephus reports,³² was felled by a urological disease, which included “worms,” though he did not confess his guilt. Josephus also briefly portrays the death of Herod’s grandson, Herod Agrippa I, who, in his hubris, allowed a crowd at Caesarea Maritima to proclaim him a god (*Jewish Antiquities* 19.343–361). Foreshadowed by the omen of an owl, the king’s symptoms were torturous: “A severe pain arose in his belly, striking with a most violent intensity.” Josephus does not provide more details than that, perhaps discreetly remembering that Herod Agrippa I was the father of Herod Agrippa II and of Titus’s consort, Bernice. Acts 12:19–23 tells much the same story and applies a Christian patina to it, amplifying the punishment.³³ Herod Agrippa I’s recompense is inflicted by divine decree, via “an angel of the Lord.” Worms are the agents of his demise. Some modern scholars have suggested that Acts’s story of Herod Agrippa I’s worms is derived from Josephus’s portrayal of Herod

32 Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.656–658; idem, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.164–167.

33 See Thomas Africa, “Worms and the Death of Kings: A Cautionary Note on Disease and History,” *Classical Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (April 1982): 1–17, esp. 11.

the Great's affliction.³⁴ The structural association between tyrannical sacrilege, theomachy, and immediate punishment with worms was so intimate that Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339/340) inserts an immediate "cause" of Herod the Great's vexation. He writes that Herod's punishment followed directly upon his heinous Massacre of the Innocents (Matt. 2:16–18).³⁵

Most significant for our purposes, death through divinely ordained worm infestation appears twice in rabbinic literature. For their seditious testimony regarding the Land of Israel, the ten spies, "princes of their tribes," were punished. Expanding on Num. 14:37—"the men who brought up an evil report of the land, died by plague before the Lord"—b. *Sotah* 35a reports:

Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish says: "They died an unusual death." Said Rabbi Ḥanina bar Pappa, "Rabbi Sheila of Kefar Temarta explained: 'This teaches that their tongues were stretched and fell upon their navels, and worms were leaving their tongues and entering their navels, and worms were leaving their navels and entering their tongues.'"³⁶

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Num. 14:37 is equally graphic, reporting that the tribal leaders died with "worms coming out of their navels and going to their mouths and their tongues were eaten by worms."³⁷ Through the hideous migration of worms between the mouth and the navel, the rabbis both allowed for the viewing of the worms by the spies and bystanders alike and imagined that the spies suffered all the more profoundly for their sin.

Closer to our tale of Titus, t. *Kippurim* 1:8 describes the punishment of a heretical Boethusian high priest who sacrificed incense on the Day of Atonement according to Boethusian interpretation, rather than following rabbinic prescriptions.³⁸ Hearing this, his father exclaimed: "I will be surprised

34 Daniel R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 226–227; Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985), 392 n. 26.

35 Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Ecclesiastical History* 1.8.5–16.

36 Louis Ginzberg associated these Talmudic texts with the deaths of Antiochus and Herod Agrippa I. See his *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 98–99 n. 552.

37 Ernest G. Clarke, ed., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1984), 175.

38 Saul Lieberman, ed., *The Tosefta according to Codex Vienna*, vol. 2 (New York; Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2002), 222–223 (Hebrew).

if you live very long.' In fact, not three days passed before they put him in his grave." J. *Yoma* 1:5 (39a) intensifies the story, in a way similar to Acts when it afflicts Herod Agrippa I with worms: "Some say, 'He came out with his nose discharging worms and some sort of calf hoof rising on his forehead.'"³⁹ The heretical priest is immediately punished by God, again with worms, apparently while still in the Holy of Holies (where he is also trampled on by a beast of Ezekiel's chariot).⁴⁰ The worms imagined by the Jerusalem Talmud come out of the priest's nose and are visible to all present, his head immediately infested on account of his heresy. The focus on the head in this tradition, with worms being excreted from the nose, is the inverse of our Titus tale, where the gnat enters the blasphemous emperor's head through the nose and grows larger within his skull unnoticed.

The sense of Titus making war, theomachy, on God is expressed explicitly in *Va-yikra rabbah*: "Is not one who battled the king in the desert and defeated him comparable to one who fought the king in his own palace and defeated him?"⁴¹ In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version B, God responds: "Will I make war on you [directly]? Behold, among all the creatures I created in my world none is more lowly than this gnat, and it will make war on you."⁴² The closeness in detail of "Titus and the Gnat" to II Macc. 9's depiction of Antiochus was noted in 1570 by Italian scholar Agostino Ferentilli (or his sources). Ferentilli writes that Antiochus was killed by a single *mosca*, or fly.⁴³ *Mosca* was translated into Hebrew as *yattush* by Dei Rossi in *Sefer me'or einayim*,⁴⁴ thereby bringing II Macc. 9 in line with the rabbinic tale about Titus. Dei Rossi discounts Ferentilli's testimony even as he cites it, noting that "I have no idea what his source was." The stories were clearly conflated at some point. Ferentilli's tradition/mistake points to the similarities connecting these tales of theomachy—separated by centuries.⁴⁵

39 B. *Yoma* 19b merges these traditions. See also j. *Sukkah* 4:8 (54d).

40 See Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-peshutah: Be'ur arokh la-Tosefta*, vol. 4 (New York; Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2002), 729–731.

41 *Midrash Va-yikra rabbah*, 2:500.

42 Solomon Schechter, ed., *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (New York; Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 11a (version B, ch. 7).

43 Agostino Ferentilli, *Discorso universale . . . nel quale, discorrendosi per le sei età, et le quattro monarchie, si raccontano tutte l'histoire . . . dal principio del mondo . . . aggiuntavi la creazione del mondo* (Venice: Gabriele Giolito de' Ferrari, 1570), 110–111.

44 See above, n. 31.

45 See Dei Rossi, *Sefer me'or einayim*, 90a, and the comment of Weinberg, *The Light of the Eyes*, 299 n. 27.

Va-yikra rabbah makes clear that God personally “appointed/dispatched/designated for him a single *yattush* that entered through his nose.”⁴⁶

Why a *Yattush* in the Head?

The question still remains: why was a single *yattush* chosen to afflict Titus and not the usual worms? We might have expected a worm attack on his genitals, or perhaps worms from his nose. The need for delayed action might be one reason, a stealth gnat doing God’s bidding silently, undetected. With our *Be-reshit rabbah* tradition, *Va-yikra rabbah* (and its parallels) provides an explicit answer to this question. God exclaims, “By your life, I shall punish this villain with the smallest creature of all that I created in the six days in the beginning.”⁴⁷ In this, our author reaches for an approach expressed already by Philo of Alexandria:

And after this the inquirer should be taught a further lesson, and one that is needed throughout life. What is this? When men make war, they look round to find the most powerful auxiliaries to fight beside them, and so compensate for their own weakness; but God, the highest and greatest power, needs no one. But if, at any time, He wills to use any as instruments for His vengeance, He does not choose the strongest and the greatest, of whose might He takes no account, *but provides the slightest and the smallest with irresistible and invincible powers, and through them wreaks vengeance on the evil-doers. So it was in this case. For what is slighter than the smallest creature* [τι γάρ εὐτελέστερον σκνιπός]? Yet so great was its power that all Egypt lost heart, and was forced to cry aloud: “This is the finger of God”; for as for His hand not all the habitable world from end to end could stand against it, or rather not even the whole universe.⁴⁸

Where the Titus legends afflict Titus with one single gnat, Philo used this to explain the plague of swarming lice (Ex. 8:12–15). The medieval *Alfa beita de-Ben Sira* sharpens the question: “Why were gnats created? After all, they only

46 *Midrash Va-yikra rabbah*, 2:501–502.

47 *Ibid.*, 2:501.

48 Philo of Alexandria, *Life of Moses* 1.111–112.

exist for one day and commit suicide to create others.” The *midrash* then zeroes in on this single gnat, answering, “By the merit of the one gnat that will take vengeance on Titus the Wicked; and the rest were created to give life to the young of the raven. . . .”⁴⁹ All gnats, then, are encoded with our tale according to this medieval version. Talmudist Israel Lévi was quite right in 1887 when he associated our tale with Aesop’s fable of the lion and the gnat, though in a far looser way than he then thought.⁵⁰ Gnats were literally in the air, though unlike some other insects they generally do not hunt in consort. Each works alone. Our single gnat is the representative of the one God.

The association of a divinely sent flying creature with a two-pound bird, Levinson suggests, mocks Roman belief in the apotheosis of each emperor and his ascent to heaven on the wings of an eagle.⁵¹ Thus, the most majestic “divine” ascent is comically felled by the single *yattush*. He may be right. Levinson associates this text with a relief bust of Titus that appears at the apex of the interior arch of the Arch of Titus, which portrays Titus as ascending on the wings of an eagle (Fig. 2). Rabbis did not need to have seen the Arch. Heavenly ascent was *de rigueur* for “divine” Roman emperors and for the not-quite-divine Christian ones.⁵² It may not be insignificant in contextualizing our rabbinic tale that Domitian’s cruelty was associated with a small flying creature. Domitian “bestowed no honor upon him, save that of deification, and he often assailed his memory in ambiguous phrases, both in his speeches and in his edicts.” Suetonius then reminds us:

At the beginning of [Domitian’s] reign he used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catch flies and stab them with a keenly-sharpened stylus. Consequently when someone once asked whether anyone was in there with Caesar, Vibius Crispus made the witty reply: “Not even a fly.”⁵³

49 *Alfa beita de-Ben Sira* (Venice, 1544), 24a.

50 Lévi, “La mort de Titus.”

51 Levinson, “Tragedies Naturally Performed,” 380.

52 Ibid. See also Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

53 Suetonius, *Domitian* 2–3.



Figure 2. Apotheosis of Titus, Arch of Titus, Rome, ca. 81 CE (Steven Fine)

While I am not suggesting that rabbis were necessarily aware of Domitian's apparent part in Titus's death, nor that they were aware of Suetonius's reference to flies, ambiguity regarding the death of Titus was literally "buzzing" in the empire-wide rumor mill. The presence of flies in Domitian's palace is taken for granted by the story told by Suetonius.

Va-yikra rabbah (and parallels) places Titus's infestation in a bathhouse, an architectural setting that the author parallels with the Temple.⁵⁴ Even the finest bathhouses were not immune to such filth. The bathhouse context provides *Va-yikra rabbah* with an architectural environment paired with the Temple in which Titus was infected after his grand triumphal parade, and a fat bird could be seen escaping and flying to the heavens—a parody of apotheosis, to be sure. My sense is that, beyond the literary parallels that I have suggested, a gnat infecting Titus would certainly have rung true to the storyteller and to his audience, just as a snake in a public toilet would not have been unreasonable. In a world lacking the basic sanitation facilities and practices that moderns take for granted, dampness, feces, putrid liquids, refuse of all kinds, small birds, flying insects, and other vermin were facts of life.⁵⁵ Lack of screens on windows and skylights, modern standards of sanitation, pest abatement programs, and insect repellent would naturally have allowed such creatures in. Fat birds eating their fill of human and animal waste likely flew in and out of windows, chimneys, or perhaps the oculus of a dome. This would have been a common sight. To be buzzed by a gnat, mosquito, or fly was a common source of irritation.

The Death of Titus and Roman Medicine

Be-reshit rabbah concludes with Titus's autopsy: "When [Titus] died, they split open his head and found a bird weighing two pounds." According to the more expansive *Va-yikra rabbah* version of our tale, the growing and quite ravenous gnat/bird caused Titus enough pain to demand medical attention. Titus undergoes brain surgery while still alive, and before expiring, he admits his defeat by the God of Israel. He requests the procedure, "so that I shall know by what means the God of this nation punishes that villain [meaning himself]."⁵⁶ Brain surgery to relieve pressure on the cranium was a well known practice among Greek and

54 Yaron Z. Eliav, "A Scary Place: Jewish Magic in the Roman Bathhouse," in *Man Near a Roman Arch: Studies Presented to Prof. Yoram Tsafrir*, ed. Leah Di Segni et al. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 88*–97*; idem, "The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution: Another Look at the Encounter between Judaism and the Greco-Roman Culture," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 31, no. 4 (2000): 416–454; Levinson, "Tragedies Naturally Performed," 373–374.

55 Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, "*Baiarium Grata Voluptas*: Pleasures and Dangers of the Baths," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 57 (1989): 35–36; Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 179–188.

56 *Midrash Va-yikra rabbah*, 2:502.

Roman doctors,⁵⁷ setting the scene for this element of our tale. *M. Oholot* 2:3 mentions a tool known as a *makdeah*, a skull borer, and *t. Oholot* 2:6 recalls a case of trepanation under the care of a doctor.⁵⁸ During the period between Titus's infestation, his unsuccessful surgery, and his death, the gnat grew undetected in his cranium, without symptoms. When Titus ultimately showed symptoms, *Va-yikra rabbah* expands, it was too late. Building on the far more compact London *Be-reshit rabbah* tradition, this silent gestation period resolves the dissonance caused by the reality that Titus did not die immediately for his blasphemous behavior. The birdlike gnat is discovered and escapes in the course of Titus's autopsy/surgery.

B. *Gittin* 56b, sensing the theological dissonance of this delayed punishment, specifies that the gnat "picked at his brain for seven years." Titus suffered over the course of that entire period, his suffering alleviated only by the piercing sound of a hammer against an anvil. In biblical and rabbinic terms, seven is a stereotypically round number.⁵⁹ At another point in the Babylonian Talmud's "legends of the destruction" cycle, we find that "for seven years the Gentiles [of Tur Malka] harvested their vineyards without fertilizer, [as they were fertilized] from the blood of Israel" (b. *Gittin* 57a). Seven represents a full sabbatical cycle—a significant measure of chronology among late antique Palestinian Jews.⁶⁰ The situation in *Va-yikra rabbah* was far less defined. The gnat slowly and silently killed Titus. In *Be-reshit rabbah*, this time period was not defined at all.

The *Yattush* and Roman Portrayals of Titus

The mode of Titus's slow—though inexorable—execution might further be contextualized, or at least imagined, in light of Roman visual culture. While few ancient rabbis saw the Arch of Titus, sculptures depicting Roman emperors

57 Symeon Missios, "Hippocrates, Galen, and the Uses of Trepanation in the Ancient Classical World," *JNS: Journal of Neurosurgery* 23, no. 1 (July 2007): 1–9; Georgios Tsermoulas, Asterios Aidonis, and Graham Flint, "The Skull of Chios: Trepanation in Hippocratic Medicine," *JNS: Journal of Neurosurgery* 121, no. 2 (August 2014): 328–332.

58 Moses Samuel Zuckerman, ed., *Tosefta al pi kitvei yad Erfurt u-Wien* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1970), 599. See Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. Fred Rosner (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), 205.

59 See Bastomsky, "The Death of the Emperor Titus," 22–23.

60 See Ben Zion Wacholder, "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles during the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973): 153–196; Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar, Second Century BCE–Tenth Century CE* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89–93, 137–138, 150, 162.

graced the cities of late antique Palestine, as they did cities across the empire. The images of Titus, and especially of his longer-ruling father and much-despised brother, were ubiquitous, appearing on a wide range of *Judaea Capta* coins from Spain, Lyon, Rome, Antioch, and especially Judaea (Figs. 3, 4, 5). The coins of *Judaea Capta*, bearing the images of the Flavian emperors, were among the most numerous imperial series ever issued, flooding the empire as this new dynasty sought to establish itself. The numismatic short versions of Titus's title and his visage were widespread. Coins bearing the visage of Titus, some explicitly part of the *Judaea Capta* series and others implicitly so, were minted at Neapolis, Berytus, Gadara, Ashkelon, and especially Caesarea Maritima. Herod Agrippa II minted Titus issues in Caesarea Maritima, Caesarea Paneas, and even the majority-Jewish city of Tiberias.⁶¹ Commemorative coins of Vespasian and Titus were minted by Trajan after 107 CE. Indeed, Titus's *monita* (to use the standard Rabbinic Hebrew loanword from Greek/Latin *moneita*), his currency—and thus, his title, visage, power, and fame—“went out” across the empire. The intense concentrations of inexpensive Titus (as well as Vespasian and Domitian) bronze issues in Jewish population centers in Roman Palestine during the decades after 70 CE were certainly no accident. They were concentrated propaganda, tokens of both the fidelity of urban elites and the subjugation of Judaea at the local, “retail” level. Coins bearing the visage and title of Titus would certainly have reached Jewish change purses—including those of rabbis—in Roman Palestine and beyond for centuries to follow.⁶² I believe that through this medium, more likely than through sculpture or visits to Rome, Palestinian Jews might have been familiar with the imperial visage of Titus's head even centuries after his demise/apotheosis.

The official images of the Flavians portrayed in sculpture, coinage, and other media are distinct from those of their predecessors and their successors. A viewer familiar with Flavian portraiture might easily distinguish any of the three from the earlier Julio-Claudians or from later emperors. First of all, Antonines and Severans are often bearded and their official portraits idealized to make them

61 *Judaea Capta* and related coins are conveniently assembled by David Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 5th ed. (New York: Amphora, 2010), 406–458.

62 On the use of Roman coin motifs in aggadic sources, see Steven Fine, *Art & Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 103–105; Gideon Bohak, “The Hellenization of Biblical History in Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer, vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 11–15; and Sacha Stern, “Dissonance and Misunderstanding in Jewish-Roman Relations,” in *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 242–245.



Figure 3. Colossus of Vespasian, National Archaeological Museum, Naples, 66–78 CE (Steven Fine)



Figure 4. Bust of Titus, Pantelleria, 66–81 CE (Wikimedia Commons)

look like imperial philosophers. The Flavians, by contrast, are clean-shaven, like their Julio-Claudian predecessors. Nonetheless, one cannot easily misidentify Flavians for Julio-Claudians.⁶³ From Julius to Nero, the Julio-Claudians show a distinct resemblance, with their idealized and elegantly shaped classicizing heads and tall necks. Early in his career as emperor, Vespasian presented himself

63 I note also the coins of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, all of whom ruled briefly during the fateful year 69 CE and whose portraits tend to be more naturalistic than do the Julio-Claudian portraits.



Figure 5. Aureus of Titus, gold, Mint of Rome, 76 CE (Wikimedia Commons)

in visual continuity with his predecessors, his larger and more oblong head set on a tall neck without wrinkles. Quickly, however, this conceit of visual continuity and imperial grandeur was abandoned, and later sculptures show the aging Vespasian as a republican “everyman,” with deep wrinkles and a balding or bald head.⁶⁴ The difference between the elegant Julio-Claudians and the rather gnarled Flavians must have been quite startling—certainty when seen on public sculpture, and more commonly when the numerous coins of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian flooded the empire and were mixed in one’s change purse with those of Tiberius, Claudius, Hadrian (as the rabbis added, “may his bones be ground up”), or Constantine.

The official portraits of Titus are particularly significant for our purposes (Figs. 4–5). His head is as bulbous as those of his father and brother. What is different, however, is that Titus is shown with a huge, even bulging, forehead. I wonder if this physical anomaly was a starting point for our legend? Knowing that God could fell blasphemous rulers by the smallest creatures, did rabbis interpret the image of Titus? Did the rabbinic counter-telling of Titus’s advent and apotheosis invoke the fact that Titus had an unusually large and oddly shaped head? Mary Beard writes:

One of the commonest themes in the ridicule of an emperor was the state of his head: Julius Caesar was repeatedly mocked for being bald and was said to have combed his remaining hair

64 On the Flavians, see Diana E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 172–177, 190, and the bibliography there.

forward to hide his bald patch (a time-honored tactic in the circumstances, and a time-honored theme of further mockery); Domitian too (the “bald Nero”) is supposed to have taken it as an insult. . . .⁶⁵

Did ancient Jews, including rabbis, participate in this type of mockery—especially as the busts of the emperors were so well known? Scorn for funny looking heads goes as far back in Jewish sources as II Kings 2:23–24, where the prophet Elisha is taunted as a “baldy.” Did this mocking, yet “hidden,” transcript occur to some Jews as they spent their Judaea Capta coins, expressing a knowing chuckle or a forbidden sardonic swipe at the destroyer of Jerusalem (perhaps mixed with a latent memory of the *Fiscus Judaicus* and later perceived imperial abuses)?⁶⁶ As Beard writes, “Power is met, and spontaneously challenged, by laughter.”⁶⁷ In other contexts, rabbis did, in fact, interpret Roman coins in ways midrashic and aggadic, so this conjecture is well within the rabbinic “toolbox.”

Conclusion

We will never know whether this numismatic or sculptural point of departure for our tale of “Titus and the Gnat” is correct, suggestive as it is. What is clear, however, is that death by invasion of small creatures was seen by ancient Jews as a plausible punishment for dignitaries who blasphemed the God of Israel—Greek, Roman, and Jew alike. This was the punishment for those who engaged in Nestle’s theomachy. “Titus and the Gnat” is a variation on this motif, imagined by rabbis who could not tolerate the cognitive dissonance and theological challenge caused by Titus’s success for over a decade after his sin. Short-lived as he was, and ruling only two years, Titus went unpunished for his blasphemy for too long. Rabbis overcame the cognitive dissonance and theological challenge caused by Titus’s worldly success by imagining a single *yattush*, “the

65 Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 132. See Suetonius, *Julius* 45.2; idem, *Domitian* 18.2; Juvenal, *Satires* 4.38; John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 49–50.

66 See Martin Goodman, “The *Fiscus Judaicus* and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome,” in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–177.

67 Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 4.

smallest creature of all that I created in the six days in the beginning,” sent by the Omnipresent to infest his brain, torment him with pain in his cranium, and ultimately do him in—and then to fly away! Our tale is thoroughly embedded in the realities of life in the Roman world, where a pesky mosquito could serve as God’s instrument and Jews could hope that a gnat would overcome an all-powerful emperor. Through this tale, in its ever-expanding versions, rabbis set out their own understandings of what *really* happened to Titus—counter-narratives that have helped Jews to relieve their cognitive dissonance across Jewish history when times got tough.

I began this essay with my visit to the Arch of Titus with my son and his evocation of our tale as he looked up at the triumph of Titus. Each year on Tish’ah be-Av, Ashkenazim revisit Titus as we relive the destruction of the Temple in our local synagogues. The late antique poet Eleazar ha-Killir reminds us:

Remember what the persecutor did inside [the Temple],
He drew his sword and he entered the Holy of Holies,
He pummeled our heritage, as he defiled the Bread of the Presence,
And he pierced the two faces of the [Temple] veil.⁶⁸

Contemporary artist Mark Podwal gives voice to the still-unrequited rage against Titus the Wicked that the Killiri expressed nearly 1,500 years ago. He imagines the single gnat at the ready, the image of Titus’s triumphal procession in Rome in 71 CE—illustrated on the Arch of Titus—firmly set in its eye, primed to fulfill its divinely appointed mission (Fig. 6). In the second drawing, he presents a sculpture of Titus, his bust exploded and a gnat hovering over his headless torso (Fig. 7). Titus’s gnat represents the promise that God and His people—“the smallest of all peoples” (Deut. 7:7)—will overcome even the worst of our enemies. Though sometimes this takes time, the divine arsenal may include even the tiniest of creatures—even a single one of them. It is no wonder, then, that the tales of “Titus and the Gnat” continue to “gnaw” at us even today.

68 Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Seder ha-kinot le-Tish’ah be-Av ke-minhag Polin u-kehillot ha-Ashkenazim be-Erez Yisra’el* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1968), 72.



Figure 6. Mark Podwal, “Titus and the Gnat,” 1983, ink on paper (courtesy of Mark Podwal)



Figure 7. Mark Podwal, “Titus’s Tormentor,” 2021, ink on paper (courtesy of Mark Podwal)



Emet le-Ya'akov

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