

BABATHA, RABBI LEVI AND THEODOSIUS:  
BLACK COINS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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In six Greek papyri recovered from Nahal Hever on the western shore of the Dead Sea the word “blacks” appears as an otherwise unknown term of coinage. Various monetary sums are expressed as so many “blacks,” e.g., “one black and thirty lepta” or “710 blacks of silver.” The term for this black money is variously given in masculine, feminine, and neuter (μέλανες, μελαίνας, μέλαν ἔν). The documents, four of which form part of the Babatha archives, are dated between 110 and 130 CE.<sup>1</sup>

Naphtali Lewis, who edited the Babatha documents, suggested that the Greek term represented a variant or corruption of “mina” (μνᾶ). Glen Bowersock, however, argued that Lewis’s interpretation was based on a misunderstanding of the associated term λεπτά, which means coins of very low value, presumably from the low degree of fineness (λεπτός “thin”).<sup>2</sup> Bowersock conjectured that the small amount of silver in these coins would have allowed for a process of oxidation to have turned the coins black. He noted that in the last years of the Nabataean kingdom, where the documents were found, the silver content of the coins was of a sufficiently low amount. These would have been the “blacks” spoken of in the documents. Ya’akov Meshorer took issue with Bowersock’s explanation, arguing that the papyrus documents indicate that the “blacks” were not of low value, and anyway low quality silver would not turn. His conclusion is precisely opposite to Bowersock: the “blacks” are Roman denarii of high quality silver.<sup>3</sup> Meshorer’s arguments, in turn, were examined by N. Lewis, who concluded that “any attempt to identify the blacks of P. Yadin as any kind of Roman denarii, old or new, full-weight

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<sup>1</sup> The documents were published by: Naphtali Lewis in *Judean Desert Studies: The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters, Greek Papyri, Aramaic and Nabataean Signatures and Subscriptions*, ed., Yigael Yadin and Jonas C. Greenfield (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1989), pp. 37, 38, 66, 95, 98 (*P. Yadin* 5, 16, 21 and 22); idem, “A Jewish Landowner from the Province of Arabia,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 8-9 (1985/88) 134-137 (*P. XHev/Se Gr.* 7); and Hannah M. Cotton, “Rent or Tax Receipt from Maḥoza,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100 (1994) 547-557 (*P. XHev/Se Gr.* 5). For the location of the finds, see H. Cotton in Wolfram Weiser and Hannah M. Cotton, “‘Gebt Dem Kaiser, Was Des Kaisers Ist...’: Die Geldwährungen der Griechen, Juden, Nabatäer und Römer im syrisch-nabatäischen Raum unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Kurses von Sela/Melaina und Lepton nach der Annexion des Königreiches der Nabatäer durch Rom,” *ZPE* 114 (1996) 237n2.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Judean Desert Studies*, pp. 36 and 70. Bowersock, “The Babatha Papyri, Masada, and Rome,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 4 (1991) 341-342.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Meshorer, “The ‘Black Silver’ Coins of the Babatha Papyri: A Reevaluation,” *The Israel Museum Journal* 10 (1992) 67-74. Meshorer’s conclusions have been criticized by Cotton, “‘Gebt Dem Kaiser,’” p. 241n32.

or devalued, is doomed to be an exercise in futility,” and he maintained a Semitic origin for the term.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Martin Goodman thinks that “blacks” refer to a pre-Roman coinage system.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in a joint article by Hannah Cotton and Wolfram Weiser, Cotton proved that the term as used in the documents must refer to pre-Roman Nabataean currency, and Weiser showed that Nabataean silver *sela'im* (the “blacks” are silver as indicated in P. Yadin 5a, lines 7, 13-14; 5b, lines 4, 7) from 17/18 to 106 CE were made of a silver alloy with a high mixture (at least 50%) of base metals, especially copper, which would have quickly turned the coins black.<sup>6</sup> Thus, their conclusion that the “blacks” were a Roman disparaging term for Nabataean *sela'im*, which were nonetheless officially accepted by the Roman government after Nabataea became a Roman province, Provincia Arabia, in 106 CE.

This conclusion, recalling Bowersock’s original assertion, has much in its favor. Firstly, “black” is commonly found, although from a considerably later period, as an adjective for coins of low silver alloy. Weiser refers to *Schwarze Pfennige* mentioned from the 14th to the 17th centuries in various parts of Germany, and *Denier Noir* is found as early as the 12th century.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, it is possible that, in a reverse parallel to the papyri “blacks” as a noun, we find the numismatic term “whites” mentioned twice in the Palestinian Talmud (redacted not later than 370).<sup>8</sup> The first is transmitted anonymously: “A [gold] dinar here [probably Tiberias] is worth 2000 [denarii], and in Arbael it is worth 2000 [denarii] plus a קלל (= λευκόν).” The second may be transmitted by the anonymous editors of the Palestinian Talmud or by R. Jacob ben Aḥa (fl. ca. 290-350): “R. Yoḥanan and Resh Laqish both stated that one is permitted to lend out [gold] dinars for [gold] dinars. [To loan out] a karat for a karat is [likewise] permitted; a leukon for a leukon is forbidden.” Daniel Sperber is of the opinion that the *leukon* in these texts refers to the silver-washed currency of Diocletian’s monetary reform.<sup>9</sup> Although some have argued against the identification of קלל with a monetary unit, the word’s appearance in a numismatic context

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<sup>4</sup> N. Lewis, “Again, the Money Called Blacks” in *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg*, ed. R. Katzoff with Y. Petroff and D. Schaps (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996), pp. 399-401.

<sup>5</sup> M Goodman, “Babatha’s Story,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991) 173.

<sup>6</sup> Weiser and Cotton, “Gebt dem Kaiser,” especially pp. 239-241 (Cotton) and 278-279 (Weiser); H. Cotton, “Rent or Tax Receipt from Maḥoza,” pp. 553-554.

<sup>7</sup> Weiser and Cotton, “Gebt dem Kaiser,” p. 279; so also *Wörterbuch der Münzkunde*, ed. Friedrich Schrötter in Verbindung mit N. Bauer [et al.] (Berlin: De Gruyter, [1930]), s.v. For *Denier Noir*, see Albert Frey, *Dictionary of Numismatic Names, with Glossary of Numismatic Terms in English, French, German, Italian, Swedish* by Mark Salton (New York: Barnes & Noble, [1947]), p. 26, s.v. “Black Money.” See also Richard Doty, *The Macmillan Encyclopedic Dictionary of Numismatics* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 43, s.v. “Black Money.”

<sup>8</sup> *P. Ma‘aser Shenit* 4.1, 54d and *p. Bava Meṣi’a* 4.1, 9c. For the date of redaction, see Y. Sussman in *Mehqerei Talmud* 1 (1990) 132-133.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1974, 1991), pp. 91-97, 304, and (in the 2nd edition) 336 where also the passages are quoted, translated, and discussed. For קלל = λευκόν, see p. 91, where earlier literature is cited (on p. 234n4 “Vilna ed.” should read “Venice ed.”). For the authorship of the second *leukon* source, see p. 237n23. Sperber’s comments on these talmudic passages first appeared in “Gold and Silver ‘Standards’: A Study in Rabbinic Attitudes to Roman Coinage,” *Numismatic Chronicle* 8 (1968) 103-109.

argues in its favor.<sup>10</sup> As with the “blacks,” the term “white” is found much later as a term for silver-washed currency or for coins of a high silver content (*Weisspfennig, Weissgroschen, Albus, Blanc, Blanca, Witten*).<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, arguing for Nabataean *sela'im* as the candidate for the papyri “blacks” is the fact that the documents that mention “blacks” do not mention *sela'im* while other Nabataean and Aramaic papyri from Arabia that mention *sela'im* do not mention “blacks.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite all this, it seems to me that there are some difficulties with the view that the Nabataean “blacks” were so called because of their dark color. Why is it that until the Roman annexation of Nabataea in 106 CE, “blacks” are never mentioned despite the fact that Nabataean silver coinage had a high percentage of base metals from 17/18 CE onward? To be sure, Weiser recognizes this difficulty and claims that until the Roman annexation there were no Roman coins of high silver content, with whose whiteness the black Nabataean *sela'im* could have been compared. Only after 106 CE would the blackness of the Nabataean *sela'im* have become chromatically remarkable. This assertion, however, is not proved, that is, it is not shown that wherever we find “black” money there was also “white” money. Cannot “black” money be so termed without the existence of contrasting “white” money or vice versa? “White zuz” (*zuza hivra*), referring to the almost pure silver Persian *drachm*, is mentioned by the Babylonian *amora* Abaye (d. 339), while we know of no black *zuz*, or, at least, there is no rabbinic reference to one.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, the argument that white or black designations of coins occur when high and low silver content exist simultaneously is not supported by the evidence. There are times in the history of Roman coinage when coins of high and low silver content existed side-by-side and we do not find black and white terminology. For example, in 193 CE under the reign of Pertinax the mean fineness of the denarius was about 75% silver while the denarius under Severus after 193 had a mean fineness of 46% silver, a difference of almost 40%.<sup>14</sup> A similar difference in silver content

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<sup>10</sup> So accepted by Saul Lieberman in E.S. Rosenthal and S. Lieberman, *Yerushalmi Neziqin. Edited from the Escorial Manuscript* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 146. Because we should have expected לוקן or לבקן, Heinrich Guggenheimer prefers to derive the word from the Arabic *laqan* ‘small dish’, which is found in *‘iwad laqan* meaning ‘a small thing given in exchange’; see *The Jerusalem Talmud. First Order: Zera'im. Tractates Ma'aser Šeni, Hallah, 'Orlah and Bikkurim*, edition, translation, and commentary by Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, Berlin, 2003, p. 123. But Sperber (p. 234n12) points to other examples of Greek *eu* dropping out in rabbinic texts. (As Sperber notes, *Roman Palestine 200-400*, p. 237n 30 = NC 8 [1968], 107n1, David Darshan had translated the word as ‘cup’ based on the Greek *λεκάνη* in his commentary published in the Cracow 1610 edition of the Jerusalem Talmud; so also Eva Guggenheimer in *The Jerusalem Talmud*, p. 123.)

<sup>11</sup> See Schrötter, *Wörterbuch der Münzkunde*, s.vv.

<sup>12</sup> See Cotton, “‘Gebt dem Kaiser,’” pp. 241-246.

<sup>13</sup> *B. Shabat* 66b; see Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices*, p. 140 (cf. 170). Black and white do appear together describing the same coinage in a rabbinic source. In *b. San* 30b Rava (d. 352, lived in Babylonia) refers to “black and white *manehs*.” Rashi (d. 1105) and R. Ḥananel (d. 1055/56) followed by Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* (Leipzig: Fock, 1911) 2:410 think that the coins became black with age.

<sup>14</sup> See K. Butcher and M. Ponting, “A Study of the Chemical Composition of Roman Silver Coinage, A.D. 196-197,” *American Journal of Numismatics* 9 (1997) 23-26 for the Severan figure of 46% (and see now the table on pp. 55-57 in Haim Gitler and Matthew Ponting, *The Silver Coinage of Septimius Severus and His Family (193-211 AD): A Study of the Chemical Composition of the Roman and Eastern Issues*, Milan: Ennerre, 2003). D.R. Walker, *The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage* (Oxford: British Archaeological

existed between the Severan issues and the contemporaneous denarii of Clodius Albinus with their lower-mean silver content at 78.4%.<sup>15</sup> From the time of Severus onward, until about 294, imperial silver coinage actually had more base-metal than silver.<sup>16</sup> During the second half of the third century, Roman silver coinage underwent rapid debasement with the antoninianus (introduced in the early 3rd century) taking on a bronze appearance and reaching a silver content of only 2.0- 2.5% during the years 268-272.<sup>17</sup> For the mint at Antioch, Walker shows a range of 54% in 238 to 9% in 251-253, with “the antoninianus losing half its silver content in the space of 8 years,”<sup>18</sup> The mean fineness of Syrian tetradrachms went from over 60% in 214 to about 20% in 219.<sup>19</sup> Although Walker’s figures may be too high, as Butcher and Ponting have shown, the relative difference between the pairs of figures would remain the same. In the mint at Caesarea in Cappadocia, the silver content of the coinage went from about 75% during the reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (14-68 CE) to about 47% during the reign of Vespasian beginning in 69 (or perhaps earlier, at the end of Nero’s reign).<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Roman silver coinage in Egypt underwent rapid debasement, with tetradrachms having a silver content of 91% in 80 BCE, 45% in 50 BCE, 30% in 20 CE, and 16% after 64 CE.<sup>21</sup> Lastly, a comparison of contemporaneous coinage from Roman and provincial mints can show a wide difference in silver content. Under Vespasian the coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia had a mean value of 47.15% silver while contemporaneous denarii from Rome had a mean of 78.71%, a difference of 40%.<sup>22</sup>

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Reports, 1977) gives higher percentages of silver but Butcher and Ponting have shown that Walker’s analytic technique resulted in too high a result (see Butcher and Ponting, “Rome and the East. Production of Roman Provincial Silver Coinage for Caesarea in Cappadocia under Vespasian, AD 69-79,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 14 (1995) 63-77, esp. the Appendix, pp. 75-76, and “Silver Standards at Caesarea in Cappadocia,” in *Internationales Kolloquium zur kaiserzeitlichen Münzprägung Kleinasiens: 27.-30. April 1994 in der Staatlichen Münzsammlung München*, Nomismata 1, ed. J. Nollé, B. Overbeck, P. Weiss (Milan: Ennerre, 1997), pp. 167-171; and Gitler and Ponting, *Silver Coinage*, pp. 11-16, esp. 13. For the Severan coins they arrived at a mean fineness of 46% as opposed to Walker’s 57.6%, a difference of 13%. I have used the 13% difference to arrive at 75% as opposed to Walker’s 87.1% for the mean fineness of Pertinax’s coinage. The difference between Walker and Butcher-Ponting was even greater for the Caesarea in Cappadocia issues under Vespasian – 25%, Trajan – 33.1%, and Hadrian – 33.3%; see “Rome and the East,” p. 69, and “Silver Standards,” p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> Butcher and Ponting, “A Study of the Chemical Composition,” p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Cope, “The Metallurgical Analysis of Roman Imperial Silver and *Aes* Coinage,” in *Methods of Chemical and Metallurgical Investigation of Ancient Coinage*, ed. E.T. Hall and D.M. Metcalf (London: Royal Numismatic Society, 1972), p. 45; see also Cope, “Surface-silvered Ancient Coins,” *ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>17</sup> See the chart in Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices*, p. 39 with cited literature. See also Cope, “Metallurgical Analysis,” pp. 41-43, and “Surface-silvered Ancient Coins,” pp. 262n4 and 271.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, *Metrology*, 3:39, 42, 44, 47, 57, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Walker, *Metrology*, 3:98.

<sup>20</sup> Butcher and Ponting, “Silver Standards,” p. 169.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Schmitt-Korte and Martin Price, “Nabataean Coinage – Part III. The Nabataean Monetary System,” *Numismatic Chronicle* 154 (1994) 123.

<sup>22</sup> Butcher and Ponting, “Rome and the East,” pp. 69-70.

Despite such great variation in silver content ranging from issue to issue within the space of a few years, we hear of no “blacks” or “whites.”<sup>23</sup> The two examples of ancient “blacks” adduced by Weiser (Philostratus, *Apollonius* 2.7 and 5.36), are not convincing, for they are descriptions of base metal coinage.<sup>24</sup> The first is explicit (“the Indians have coins of orichaleus and black brass”) and the second implicit when it compares gold to the lowest and least valuable coinage (“gold is base/fraudulent and black [κίβδηλον ... καί μέλαν], if it be wrung from men’s tears”).<sup>25</sup> No one denies that base metal coinage turned black. The question is whether “black” as an adjective, and even more so as a noun as in the papyri, ever designated silver of low fineness as opposed to silver of high fineness.

Admittedly my argument of missing black/white terminology for Roman coinage is from silence but such a long period of silence, it seems to me, speaks loudly. If this argument has merit, it would indicate that an existing chromatic comparison would not necessarily be cause for chromatic designations. Furthermore, we may ask whether in fact there was such a comparison as Weiser thinks when Rome annexed Nabataea. For while it is true that the Nabataean *selaʿim* were debased to about 50% during the years 17/18-106 CE<sup>26</sup>, and it is true that the silver coinage minted in Rome at the time of the annexation had a high silver content,<sup>27</sup> Roman coinage from eastern mints, however, did not have a significantly higher silver content than the Nabataean issues. Among the 10,000 Roman silver coins discovered by A. Negev at Mamfisis, a Nabataean town, were 2,000 drachms of the Trajanic “Arabia” type (celebrating the Roman acquisition of Nabataea), minted in Arabia (or possibly Antioch), some of which were overstruck on Nabataean *selaʿim*.<sup>28</sup> Several of the Trajanic “Arabia” coins that had not been overstruck were analyzed and were found to have a silver fineness of 56% and 63%. In the words of Karl Schmitt-Korte and Martin Price, “Both weight and fineness are fairly close to the Nabataean issues.... [T]he silver content of both types is nearly the same.”<sup>29</sup> The recent and more accurate analysis of Butcher

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<sup>23</sup> The variation in silver content within the same issue, which was found by Walker in numerous cases, must be discounted because of a problematic analytic technique, as discussed by Butcher and Ponting, “Rome and the East,” pp. 63-77, esp. the Appendix, pp. 75-76. See also the authors’ “A Study of the Chemical Composition,” pp. 17-36, esp. pp. 23-26. With a different, and more accurate, technique Butcher and Ponting found the range of variation to be minimal.

<sup>24</sup> Weiser and Cotton, “Gebt Dem Kaiser,” p. 279.

<sup>25</sup> Translations are F.C. Conybeare’s in LCL except for κίβδηλον ... καί μέλαν, which he renders “lacks luster and is mere dross.” I have translated literally for the sake of this article.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Schmitt-Korte and Michael Cowell, “Nabataean Coinage – Part I. The Silver Content Measured by X-Ray Fluorescence Analysis,” *Numismatic Chronicle* 149 (1989) 33-58, especially 56-57. See also Karl Schmitt-Korte and Martin Price, “Nabataean Coinage – Part III,” pp. 82, 112.

<sup>27</sup> Walker, *Metrology*, 2:6-12, 46, 48, for the coinage of Trajan (98-117). See also Avraham Negev, “Numismatics and Nabataean Chronology,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 114 (1982) 126, who noted that during the first century CE “Nabataean silver is totally dissimilar to that of the Roman imperial dinar, but behaves quite like that of the Roman silver money issued by some of the local provincial mints....”

<sup>28</sup> Avraham Negev, “Notes on Some Trajanic Drachms from the Mamfisis Hoard,” *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* 21 (1971) 115-120.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Schmitt-Korte and Martin Price, “Nabataean Coinage – Part III,” pp. 110 and 123. D.R. Walker, *Metrology*, 2:107 shows somewhat different figures: eight overstruck Trajan drachms range from 48 to 71% with a mean of 56.49% and four non-overstruck Trajan drachms range from 47 to 70% with a mean of

and Ponting, found the silver content of the Trajan “Arabia” drachms to be even closer, with approximately 50% silver.<sup>30</sup> If the silver content of the Trajan “Arabia” issues was that close to the silver content of the Nabataean coins, how could the Nabataean *sela'im* have been chromatically remarkable as Weiser claims?

These questions put into doubt the view that “blacks” were so called because of their dark color when light colored Roman coinage came on the scene. And yet it is true that we do not hear of “blacks” until the Roman annexation. How can we account for this? There may be another explanation for the Nabataean “blacks.”

A midrashic text transmits a parable in the name of Rabbi Levi (third quarter of the third century CE, Israel) which draws on numismatic imagery. The parable is meant to explain an etiology for the origin of dark or black skin, according to which Ham, the son of Noah, sinned and was punished by becoming black skinned (מפוחם). In explanation, R. Levi said:

This may be compared to one who minted coins (קבע מוניטן = Latin *moneta*) with his own image in the palace (אבלו = αὐλή) of the king. The king said: “I decree that the image be blackened and his coin be invalidated (שיתפחמו פניו ויפסל מטבעו).”<sup>31</sup>

This parable, presumably drawn from the real world, would seem to indicate that coins were invalidated by a process of blackening the image. Levi was fond of illustrating his points with

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62.75%. Note that a low fineness is found also in the Trajanic tetradrachms of Syrian-Phoenician mints during the years 108 to 117. Walker (*Metrology*, 2:94-97, 103) records a mean silver fineness in the mid-60% range with several coins ranging from 54 to 59%. The analytic technique used by Schmitt-Korte and Price is subject to the same criticism as that of Walker, but the relative difference in silver content between the two groups of coins – the Nabataean and the Trajan “Arabia” – would remain the same. On the location of the mint in Arabia (possibly Bostra) or Antioch, see the comments of Schmitt-Korte and Price, “Nabataean Coinage – Part III,” p. 109, on the “Arabia” coins found at Tell Kalak.

<sup>30</sup> Butcher and Ponting, “Silver Standards,” p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 36.7, ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* (1912-36, repr. Jerusalem, 1965 with corrections) 1:341-342). The translation follows Theodor, Ignaz Ziegler, Samuel Krauss (cited below) et al. in taking פניו as referring to the face of the coin and not the face of the one minting the coins. So also the English translation of H. Freedman in the Soncino edition of *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press, 1939) 1:293. The process of minting coins is commonly used by the Rabbis to illustrate the act of procreation: the engraved cast stamps out coins all similar to the engraving on the dyecast, just as human semen produces children all similar to the ‘encoded’ characteristics of the inseminator. The parable under discussion here is thus meant to say that the dyecast (i.e. Ham) was altered such that the coins (Ham’s descendants) are now affected (they are born dark skinned). For a fuller explanation of the etiology and its incorporation into early Arabic literature, see David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 102-110. On αὐλή see W. Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer* (Strassberg: K.J. Trübner, 1896) 2:410, Hebrew translation: *Aggadot Amora'e Ereš Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1928) 2/2: 115; and D. Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1989- ) 6:243n2. On *monita* see S. Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum mit Bemerkungen von Immanuel Löw*, volume 2 (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1899), p. 326. The date of redaction of *Genesis Rabbah* is usually put in the fifth century CE.

examples drawn from the real world of third-century Roman Palestine.<sup>32</sup> Support, however, rabbinic or otherwise, for this datum of numismatic realia is lacking. Another rabbinic text mentions a process of invalidating coins by “reducing/diminishing (מעט) the image of the king” but it says nothing of blackening.<sup>33</sup> Eusebius (d. ca. 340) records a case of blackening an emperor’s image on portraits: After Maximinus II Daia (305-14) died, his and his children’s portraits (γραφαί) were subject to *damnatio memoriae*: “Their faces were blackened over with dark-colored paint and so rendered useless (προσόψεις ἡχρειοῦντο σκοτεινῷ χρώματι καταμελανούμεναι).”<sup>34</sup> Contrary to Ziegler, however, this provides no evidence for coins, for while it is possible to obliterate a painted image (γραφαί) by blackening it over with dark paint, the same method would not be effective for statues or coins.<sup>35</sup> Statues were destroyed, as Eusebius indeed tells us was done to the statues (ἀνδριάντων) of Maximinus, or they were defaced, and often reworked, and as for coins, the engraved images were scratched or chiseled off and, often, the coins restruck with new images or with countermarks.<sup>36</sup> Thus, aside from Levi’s parable, we find no evidence, in either rabbinic, Christian, or Graeco-Roman sources, for the act of blackening used in, or resulting from, the invalidation of coins. This was noted by

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<sup>32</sup> See Bacher, *Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer* 2:405-424; *Aggadat Amora’e Ereš Yisra’el* 2/2: 111-127. Possibly Levi was indirectly referring to the political situation in the Roman Empire, where between 235 and 285 forty different individuals claimed to be emperor on their coinage (Christopher Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 137). Daniel Sperber notes that this is one of several *drashot* of R. Levi reflecting the anarchic situation of the mid-third century (*Minhagei Yisrael*, 6:243n3). Another example of Levi’s reliance on the Roman world for his construction of parables has recently been demonstrated by Ranon Katzoff, who has shown how Levi utilized the phenomena of *suffragium* and Roman personal patronage to construct a parable; see “Suffragium in Exodus Rabbah 37.2,” *Classical Philology* 81 (1986) 235-240.

<sup>33</sup> *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma’el, Ba-ḥodesh* 8 (ed. H.S. Horovitz and I.A. Rabin, 2nd ed., Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1960). p. 233.

<sup>34</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.11.2, trans. Kirsopp Lake in LCL. Note the close parallel in language between Eusebius and *Genesis Rabba*: the face was blackened and it was rendered invalid/useless (יתפחמו יתפסלו פניו ויפסלו and προσόψεις ἡχρειοῦντο σκοτεινῷ χρώματι καταμελανούμεναι).

<sup>35</sup> Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch* (Breslau: S. Schottlaender, 1903), p. 19n8. Daniel Sperber, in a private communication, wonders whether the statement that “one blackens (מפחמין אותו בפחמין) the house of idolatry” (*t. Ma’aser Sheni* 5.13) is not a case of *damnatio memoriae*.

<sup>36</sup> For examples of *damnatio memoriae* on sculpture, see P. Zanker and M. Bergmann, “‘Damnatio Memoriae’. Ungearbeitete Nero- und Domitiansporträts: zur Ikonographie der Flavischen Kaiser und des Nerva,” *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 96 (1981) 317-412, and *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture*, ed. Eric R. Varner (Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2000). For coins, see the literature cited in C.J. Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks: Studies in the Provincial Coinage of the Roman Empire* (London: Royal Numismatic Society, 1985), p. 5n31; see also Schrötter, *Wörterbuch der Münzkunde*, pp. 119, s.v. *Damnatio memoriae* and 179, s.v. *Erasion*. Regling, who wrote both entries, notes that removal of the image or inscription from coins is quite difficult and examples on coins are in fact uncommon, so uncommon that *damnatio memoriae* as an official act may not have been meant to include coins and that existing cases may indicate private zeal rather than official decree. The midrash of R. Levi may indicate otherwise. Examples on coins are shown in the Varner volume, p. 111, nos. 11 and 12 (countermarked); p. 130, no 24 (countermarked); and especially pp. 187-189, nos. 45-47 (defaced and countermarked). On the relationship between *damnatio memoriae* and countermarking, see C.J. Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks*, pp. 5-6.

Samuel Krauss over 80 years ago and for this reason he concluded that the midrash's blackening should not be taken literally but must be understood in a derived sense to mean "obliterating" or "overstriking."<sup>37</sup>

Although Krauss could offer no support for his suggestion, support may indeed be found in an eighth-century Byzantine text, the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*:

Theodosius the Great (379-95) wiped out (ἡμαύρωσε) the coinage of Julian. In addition, when he saw his statue standing outside the Mint, he turned red and asked his companions whose likeness it was. When they replied that it was Julian's, he said at once: "I have seen a black man (μέλαν ἄνθρωπον) represented in a statue and I grew very red," and at once he broke it and issued a decree saying that whenever that same man's likeness was seen on coins and the Treasury was not notified, he who was responsible should suffer confiscation and be banished from Constantinople.<sup>38</sup>

The word that the editors translated as "wiped out" is ἡμαύρωσε, which means "to make ἀμαυρός," i.e. "to blacken," and then in a derived metaphorical sense, "to obliterate, obscure."<sup>39</sup> The statement attributed to Theodosius ("I have seen a black man") is a pun on this double meaning of ἀμαυρώω. Theodosius calls Julian a "black man" because his image on coins had been "blackened," i.e., wiped out, and he thus contrasts Julian's "blackness" with his own redness caused by anger and/or embarrassment. The same pun is made by R. Levi in the midrash. R. Levi compares a blackened Ham to a coin's image that has been "blackened," i.e., wiped out. Thus, both Levi and Theodosius pun on the literal and derived meanings of the word "to blacken."<sup>40</sup> Although, as far as I know, there is no evidence of חָפַח in Hebrew meaning "to obliterate, obscure" paralleling the semantic development of ἀμαυρώω in Greek, evidence for

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<sup>37</sup> *Monumenta Talmudica* (Vienna/Leipzig, 1914) 5:117, §260: "Für die angedeutete Art der Tilgung der Münze fehlt es einstweilen an Parallelen." Similarly in his *Paras we-Romi be-Talmud uwe-Midrashim* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1947), p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> A. Cameron and J. Herrin, *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, ed. with translation and commentary by A. Cameron and J. Herrin (Leiden: Brill, 1984), chapter 46, pp. 122-125. The Greek text was originally published by Theodor Preger, *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitanarum* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1901-07). The dating of the work is that of Cameron and Herrin; see A. Kazhdan's comments in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3:1586. It is unclear whether this paragraph continues an excerpt, begun at paragraph 44, from a certain "Papias," who, if the name is not an invention, is considered by the editors to have been a contemporary of the author, or whether the paragraph is the work of the author himself; see Introduction, p. 10 and note on p. 232. In any case, the source (written or oral) for the story may well go back to the time of Theodosius, or shortly thereafter.

<sup>39</sup> See Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, rev. Henry S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 9th edition, 1940; revised supplement, 1996), s.v. ἀμαυρώω; G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), s.v. ἀμαυρώω.

<sup>40</sup> For other possible examples of rabbinic puns on Greek words or implicit knowledge of Greek puns, see Daniel Sperber, *Essays on Greek and Latin in the Mishna, Talmud, and Midrashic Literature* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1982), Hebrew section, pp. 35 and 55. Note that the pun cited by Sperber in the first case (*Midrash Psalms* 17.5) is transmitted in the name of R. Levi, and in the second case (*Leviticus Rabba* 16.1), according to one variant cited by Margulies in his edition (p. 346), is also transmitted by R. Levi.



such a development is commonly found for other words meaning ‘to darken’ in Hebrew as well as in other Semitic languages. The root *šhr* appears in Hebrew as a verb with the meaning ‘to obscure’ (מהשיך עצה) ‘to obscure counsel,’ Job 38:2), and the noun is used metaphorically to designate that which is obscure or hidden (Isa 47:5, Ezek 8:12, Job 34:22). In Syriac, R. Payne Smith records three instances of Ephrem’s use of *šhr* with this meaning: *mšhr* (paʿel) ‘to corrupt, mar,’ *mšthr* (ethpaʿal), and *šhryn* (noun); and he records also *ʿwkm* (aphʿal) ‘to corrupt, vitiate.’<sup>41</sup> In Arabic *lawwata* ‘to blacken’ means ‘to be obscure’ in the VIIIth form *talawwata*; both *ʿalama* and *ʿattama* mean ‘to blacken’ and ‘to obscure.’<sup>42</sup> Similarly in Ethiopic *šll*, *šalma*, *ʿašalmata*, *damma* (*damanmin*), *ʿamama* all mean ‘to obscure’ as well as ‘to darken.’<sup>43</sup> Such a semantic development is natural and obvious and is, in fact, implicit in the Latin *obscurus*, *obscurus* itself. Whether R. Levi’s הַתְּפַח has also come to have the sense of ‘obliterating or obscuring, although non-extant in the literature, or R. Levi is inventing the usage for the purpose of the midrash, it seems that this is the required meaning of הַתְּפַח, for, as said above, its literal meaning, ‘to blacken,’ has no support from numismatic realia.

If the obliteration of the image on coins was referred to as “blackening” the coins, as is indicated by the midrash and the Byzantine text, then such obliterated coins may consequently have been known as “blacks.” Coins whose original image had been obliterated would have been called “blacks,” whether the obliteration was by means of erasing the image or by overstriking the image, as were the Nabataean coins with Trajan’s image after the Roman conquest in an attempt to integrate the Nabataean into the Roman currency system.<sup>44</sup> Babatha’s coins were used to pay taxes in Nabataea/Provincia Arabia and thus, as others have noted, had an official standing in the Roman province, indicating that they were probably overstruck, while R. Levi’s parable indicates that “blackened” coins had no currency value, thus implying that they remained imageless.<sup>45</sup> In either case they may have been known as “blacks.” This explanation would account for the missing Nabataean “blacks” before the Roman annexation because, until then, of course, the coins had not been overstruck by Rome.

In summary, then, the regnant explanation for the Nabataean “blacks” is not without difficulties. As an alternative explanation I suggest that the term refers not to color but rather to coins whose original image had been obliterated. This usage of the term underlies the puns made in the

<sup>41</sup> R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1879-1901, col. 4126; see also Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2nd ed. (Halis Saxonom: Sumptibus M. Niemeyer, 1928), p. 771, s.v. *ʿšthry*.

<sup>42</sup> Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863-93), s.vv.

<sup>43</sup> W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987), pp. 63, 135-136, 555, 556, s.vv.

<sup>44</sup> For Roman overstriking of Nabataean coins, see Y. Meshorer, *Nabataean Coins (Qedem 3)*, Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975), p. 82.; W.E. Metcalf, “The Tell Kalak Hoard and Trajan’s Arabian Mint,” *Museum Notes. American Numismatic Society* 20 (1975) 102; A. Kindler, *The Coinage of Bostra* (Warminster, Wiltshire UK: Aris & Phillips, 1983), p. 98; Karl Schmitt-Korte and Martin Price, “Nabataean Coinage – Part III,” pp. 109-110.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *b. Bava Mešira* 46a, where, in a statement by R. Aba, it is said that coins without an imprint have no currency value (בפרוטות שנו דליכא עלייהו טבעא ... פירא הוּוּ ומשום הכי נקנו בחליפין).

midrash by R. Levi (“I decree that the image be blackened [יִתְפַּחֵמֶר] and his coin be invalidated”) and in the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* by Theodosius, who obliterated (ἠμαύρωσε) the coinage of Julian and then referred to him as a “black man” (μέλαν ἄνθρωπον). The *Parastaseis* thus explains the enigmatic midrash and the two together provide the solution to the Nabataean “blacks,” which referred to the Nabataean *sela'im* that had been obliterated by Trajan’s overstriking in 106 CE. By use of the term these coins would have been distinguished from the Trajanic issues that were not struck over the Nabataean *sela'im*.

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