

SHORTER NOTES

SARDISTŌN: A NEW TERM FOR AN OLD CONCEPT IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

ABSTRACT

Sardismos is the name, in several Latin works of literary criticism, for a combination of more than one language or dialect in a sentence. Quintilian (first century C.E.) uses the term disparagingly; the Christian author Cassiodorus (sixth century C.E.) uses it positively. A similar term, sardistōn, is found in the rabbinic work Exodus Rabbah 2, created in the sixth-century Byzantine empire. This article is a short study of this term, the history of its misinterpretation and reinterpretation, its meaning in context, and its relationship to sardismos.

Keywords: rabbinic literature; loanwords; language mixing; literary criticism; Hebrew; Aramaic; Latin

Rabbinic literature is the collective name for a diverse body of works created by Jewish intellectuals in ancient Judaea/Palestine and Babylonia in the second to eighth centuries C.E. It contains many loanwords from Greek and Latin.¹ Most of these were in widespread use in contemporary Greek, but some are in fact quite rare in Greek literature, and their usage in rabbinic literature can illuminate not only the rabbinic passage but also the function and semantics of the word in the broader Greek-speaking world.

This note discusses one such case, the word *sardistōn*, similar in meaning and usage to the word *σαρδισμός* discussed recently by Adam Gitner in this journal.² It will add one more piece of rabbinic evidence for this word to the sources Gitner assembled.

As Gitner notes, *sardismos* is the name, in several Latin works of literary criticism, for a combination of more than one language or dialect in a sentence. It is a matter of some debate whether more than two languages must be present for *sardismos* to be properly used, and also whether these are separate languages or dialects of the same language. Quintilian (first century C.E.) uses the term disparagingly; the Christian author Cassiodorus (sixth century C.E.) uses it positively.³

¹ A near comprehensive but dated lexicon of these loanwords is S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, 2 parts (Berlin, 1899). A more concise but updated list is found in N. Shoval-Dudai, *A Glossary of Greek and Latin Loanwords in Post-Biblical Jewish Literature* (Jerusalem, 2019). See also D. Sperber, *A Dictionary of Greek and Latin Legal Terms in Rabbinic Literature* (Ramat-Gan, 1984); D. Sperber, *Greek in Talmudic Palestine* (Ramat Gan, 2012). For an introduction to rabbinic literature for classicists, see H. Lapin, 'Rabbis', in *OCD*⁵.

² A. Gitner, 'Sardismos: a rhetorical term for bilingual or plurilingual interaction?', *CQ* 68 (2018), 689–704.

³ The sources for this word, as in Gitner (n. 2), are: Quint. *Inst.* 8.3.59; *Schemata dianoeas* lines 197–9, which contains the only uncorrupted occurrence of the word; *Scholia Londinensia* to Dion. Thrax 447.23–5, the only occurrence of the word, albeit corrupted, in a Greek text; Cassiod. *Explanatio in Ps.* 41.8 line 202, 59.8 line 150, 107.8 line 104; version α of Euthymius' commentary on Ter. *An.* 1919.

A relative of this word, *sardīstōn* (סרדיסטון), is found in a compilation known today as Exodus Rabbah. This compilation is made up of two distinct works: the first, known as Exodus Rabbah 1, is a tenth-century C.E. running commentary on Exodus based on earlier rabbinic materials and created in southern Italy. It is not discussed in this article. The second work (Exodus Rabbah 2) is earlier, and forms part of family of works known as ‘Late’ or ‘Tanhuman’ Midrash. The central stratum of this latter corpus is likely from the sixth century C.E.⁴

In context, the homilist is attempting to make meaning of the Hebrew phrase *‘ēgel massēkâ*, found in Exodus 32:4, 8 and elsewhere. While the first word obviously means ‘calf’, what does the second word mean? The Septuagint translates *χωνευτός*, ‘cast’ or ‘molten’, likely deriving the participle from the Hebrew root NSK, ‘libation’ or ‘pouring’.⁵ The Aramaic targums translate using the Aramaic *matkā*, ‘metal’ or ‘molten’. Exodus 32:4, however, says that the calf was not molten: Aaron took the gold and fashioned it with an engraving tool (*ba-heret*).⁶ When explaining to Moses what he was doing, he simply says that he threw gold into the fire ‘and this calf came out’ (Exodus 32:24). Again, no mould is mentioned. The rabbis thus need to explain the meaning of the word *massēkâ* differently. In this collection, three alternative readings are offered: one is that the numeric value of the word *massēkâ* reflects the amount of gold in the calf. The second is that *massēkâ* means ‘libation’, and, following Exodus 32:20, that the calf is a ‘bad drink for all generations’. The third is the focus of this note:

Rabbi Isaac says: it is in Sardinian speech (Heb. *l’šōn sardīstōn*): *māsē kâ*. The holy one (God) said: this is how I will heal them, as it says: ‘they made for themselves a calf; he heals here’ (*māsē kâ*, Exodus Rabbah 42.8).⁷

There are two rabbis named Isaac in rabbinic literature. One is a third-century rabbi, and the other is a late fourth-century C.E. Palestinian scholar. This dictum is likely attributed to the latter Isaac. A tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (*Pesahim* 114a) states that this Isaac’s name was Isaac, son of Phineas. But this statement is found only in Exodus Rabbah 2, which was likely created as a work no earlier than the sixth century C.E., and possibly later. The precise wording of the dictum cannot be securely dated, but it is likely not older than the work itself—and could possibly belong to an even later stratum of the work, or even to a scribal intervention. The identity of Isaac is thus not very useful for ascertaining when the term *l’šōn sardīstōn* entered rabbinic usage.

‘Rabbi Isaac’ translates the scriptural word *massēkâ* with the rabbinic Hebrew words ‘this is how I will heal them’. This led the sixteenth-century Ottoman Jewish scholar Samuel Jaffe Ashkenazi to realize that ‘Rabbi Isaac’ is reading the biblical Hebrew word *massēkâ* as if it were two words in Aramaic, *māsē kâ* ‘he heals here’.⁸ The notion that animal sacrifice is the means for atoning for the sin of the calf is found in the earliest

⁴ See H.-J. Becker, ‘Shemot Rabbah’, *Religion Past and Present* (Leiden, 2011). On the collection known as ‘Midrash Rabbah’, see M. Bregman, ‘Midrash Rabbah and the medieval collector mentality’, *Prooftexts* 17 (1997), 63–76. On the dating of Tanhuman midrash, see M. Bregman, ‘Tanhuma Yelammedenu’, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Detroit, 2007), 503–4. On Midrash as a reading method, see introduction and literature in M. Goodman, ‘Midrash’, in *OCD*⁵.

⁵ LSJ s.v. *χωνευτός*.

⁶ LXX *γραφίς*, *stylus*. The other occurrence of *γραφίς* in the Hebrew Bible, Isa 8:1, clearly indicates a writing implement.

⁷ The English is translated from the Hebrew text as preserved in MS Jerusalem, MS Heb. 2 4^o 5977, fol. 217v.

⁸ *Yefe To ‘ar* (Venice, 1675), 205b.

strata of rabbinic literature.⁹ However, the idea that the word *massēkâ* is the source for this notion, because it means ‘he heals here’ in Aramaic, is new to this homily. ‘Rabbi Isaac’ marks this reading as *lʿšôn sardistôn*.

In Ashkenazi’s edition of the work the term *lʿšôn sardistôn* had already been corrupted, much like the occurrences of the Greek word in Latin sources documented by Gitner. Lexicographers down to the twentieth century emended it in various ways which masked its true meaning.¹⁰ The return of scholars to manuscript sources, together with the 1996 publication of the LSJ supplement, which first listed *σαρδισμός*, offered the opportunity both to ascertain that the term was in fact *lʿšôn sardistôn* and, as Nurit Shoval-Dudai noted, that it was related to *σαρδισμός*.¹¹

The grammar of *lʿšôn sardistôn* shows, however, that it is not a direct loan from *σαρδισμός*. The form *sardistôn* is analogous to loaned language terms in rabbinic literature, such as *sûristôn* (‘in Syrian’) and *ʿelênistôn* (‘in Greek’).¹² These terms were loaned from the Greek adverbial forms *Συριστί* and *Ἑλληνιστί*, with the addition of the final [n] sound to close the syllable.¹³ *Sardistôn* then likely reflects the unattested Greek form **Σαρδιστί*. Rather than referring to the rhetorical figure (‘a Sardonism’) it refers to the Sardian dialect (‘in Sardian speech’). None the less, both terms use the speech of the people of Sardis to refer to a multilingual phrase.

The notion that the Pentateuch and the Hebrew scriptures more broadly were multilingual works, and could be decoded using the lexicons of more than one language, predates the use of *lʿšôn sardistôn* in Exodus Rabbah by centuries. The Septuagint translates some Hebrew words as if they were transliterated Greek.¹⁴ Rabbinic literature will sometimes read words in scripture as if they were from a different language, Greek or Aramaic, and occasionally glosses them with a note saying so explicitly: ‘it is in the Greek (or Arab) language’.¹⁵ The rabbis believed that the linguistic diversity they found within the scriptures was the result of a multilingual revelation:

‘And he said: The Lord from Sinai came’ (Deut. 33:1)—when the Holy one revealed himself to give Torah to Israel, he did not reveal himself in one language but in four languages. ‘The Lord from Sinai came’—this is the Hebrew Language. ‘And from Seir He dawned upon them’—this is the Roman language. ‘He shone from Mount Paran’—this is the Arab language. ‘And appeared (וַעֲרִיאָה, Aramaic ‘and came’) from Ribebboth-Kodesh’—this is the Aramaic language. (Sifre Deuteronomy 343, ed. Finkelstein, 395).¹⁶

⁹ See e.g. the third-century rabbinic commentary on Leviticus 9:2, Sifra, *Milu’im*, 1.2, ed. Weiss 43c: ‘let the [sacrificed] calf come and atone for the making of the calf’.

¹⁰ See e.g. M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London, 1903), 970, s.v. סורסי; Krauss (n. 1), 2:413 s.v. סרדיניסין.

¹¹ Shoval-Dudai (n. 1), 122 states simply that the term *sardistôn* is a borrowing of *σαρδισμός*.

¹² *Sûristôn*: Palestinian Talmud, *Nedarim*, 10:8, ed. Venice, 42a; Deuteronomy Rabbah ed. Lieberman (Jerusalem, 1974³), 1. See also M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic* 234 (Leuven, 2014), 284; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat Gan, 2017³), 372. *ʿElênistôn*: Palestinian Talmud, *Sotah*, 7:1, ed. Venice 21b (Sokoloff, *DJPA*³, 60). The form *ʿelenistî*, without the final [n], is attested in later rabbinic compositions: Tanhuma ed. Buber Genesis, *Va-yishlah* 26, page 176; Tanhuma ed. Buber Numbers, *Shelah* 19, page 84; Tanhuma ed. Mantua Leviticus, *Tsav* 2. Loans without the final [n] sound are also found in Christian Palestinian Aramaic. See Sokoloff (this note [2014]), 299, 395.

¹³ See analogous examples in Krauss (n. 1), 1.192, section 337.

¹⁴ E. Tov, ‘Loan-words, homophony and transliterations in the Septuagint’, *Biblica* 60 (1979), 216–36.

¹⁵ On these glosses, with a comprehensive list of their uses, see A. Gvaryahu, ‘“Greek to me”: rabbis reading biblical words in Greek and Aramaic, a handlist of explicit loci’ (forthcoming).

¹⁶ Compare August. *Ennarationes in Ps.*, CCSL 38, page 512, lines 11–13, cited in M.J. Carruthers, ‘“Varietas”: a word of many colours’, *Poetica* 41 (2009), 11–32, at 23. On this pericope of Sifre, see

What exactly the ‘Roman’ and ‘Arab’ languages in this text refer to is a matter of some debate, but the fact of the multilingual revelation is clear.¹⁷ For the rabbis in the second or third century, the multilingual nature of their scriptures was a point of pride. It is possible, therefore, that Cassiodorus’ affection for *sardismos* not only is a sign of his Byzantine cultural affinities but also reflects traces of the Jewish notion that the Torah contains more than one language.

The use of the term *l^ēšôn sardîstôn*, related to *σαρδισμός* but not identical to it, shows that a new term for this feature began to enter Jewish circles at some point. This difference indicates that the notion of ‘Sardian speech’ did not come to the rabbis through the Latin works of literary criticism that are available to us. Usage of the term without any definition shows that it must have had a broader-usage base than the minute number of Jews who may have had the capacity to read Latin books in Byzantine Palestine, because the homily was meant to be understood by its audience. *L^ēšôn sardîstôn* was thus apparently part of the spoken language of Byzantine Jews who used it to describe a feature of their scriptures of which they had been proud for centuries.

University of Copenhagen

AMIT GVARYAHU 

amgv@teol.ku.dk

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S.D. Fraade, ‘Before and after Babel: linguistic exceptionalism and pluralism in early rabbinic literature and Jewish antiquity’, *Diné Israel* 28 (2011), *47–*8. The rabbis were also multilingual in their own speech: see G. Hasan-Rokem, ‘An almost invisible presence: multilingual puns in Rabbinic literature’, in C.E. Fonrobert and M.S. Jaffee (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, 2007), 222–40; S.D. Fraade, *Multilingualism and Translation in Ancient Judaism: Before and after Babel* (Cambridge, 2023).

¹⁷ ‘Roman’ likely refers here to Greek (cf. Fraade [n. 16 (2023)]); ‘Arab’ is the Nabatean Aramaic dialect of Arabia Petraea, as opposed to the dialect of Syria.