This essay suggests that the Amora Rav may have used Roman imagery and Latin/Greek wordplay artistically in his Midrashim—even to great advantage and startling effect.* Rav, a third-century, first-generation Babylonian Amora, studied in Israel¹, Roman Palestine, and knew Latin, and Greek technical terms² (though he did not read Greek³), and was well-aware of Roman practices and iconography⁴. (Rav’s Palestinian colleague, R. Yohanan, another student of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, engaged in Greek/Hebrew bilingual wordplay⁵; indeed, there is even use of Greek wordplay in the Mishnah itself⁶).

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* Much thanks to Professor Steven Fine, whose truly colorful presentation on “Menorahs in Color: Polychromy in Jewish Visual Culture of Roman Antiquity,” suggested the topic.

¹ See A. Heiman, Toldot Tanaim VeAmoraim, “R. Aba bar Aibo [Rav]”.
² bRosh HaShanah 23a.
³ yGittin 9:8, 50c.
⁴ See: bAvodah Zarah 11a; bSanhedrin 63b, yAvodah Zarah 1:2.
⁵ In yGittin 9:8, 50c, of the trees that will grow out of water flowing from the Temple in the End of Days, “(Ezek. 47:12) and all their leaves for healing (ברכה) (terufah)”: “Rabbi Johanan said: “For therapeia [Greek: therapy]”’. In Gen. Rabah 99.7, of “their weapons are tools of teemed lawlessness (כסלוותים, mekeroteihem)” in Jacob’s blessing of Simeon and Levi (Gen. 49:5), Rabbi Johanan says: “In Greek—machairai: “‘knives.’” In bShabbat 116a, Rabbi Yohanan would call the Gospel, ἐυαγγέλιον, “evangelium”: “aven gilayon”: “scroll of sin.” In bGittin 55b, “Rabbi Johanan said: The ‘humility’ (ענוותנותו) of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolos caused our Temple to be destroyed”. D. Rokeah (“Zechariah b. Avkilos: ‘Humility or Zealotry’, Zion 53 (1988) (Hebrew)) argues that R. Yohanan plays on the Greek Eukolos, “humble”, to employ irony against the zealous aggressiveness of “Rabbi Zechariah b. Avkilos.”
⁶ Daniel Sperber, Greek in Talmudic Palestine, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2012, 136, cites m. Yad. 4:6: “The Sadducees say ‘We cry out against you, Pharisees, for you say “The Holy Scriptures render the hands unclean and the writings of Homer do not”’. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said, “Have we taught against the Pharisees but this? For they say ‘The bones of a donkey (’anaim hahamor’), are clean and the bones of Yochanan the High Priest are unclean?’”’ Sperber points out, quoting Haim Rosen, that in the comparison of texts (Scripture/Homer) to bones (High Priest/donkey), behind “atsamot hahamor”, “ה/twitter” [“the bones of a donkey”] is a Greek expression referring to Homeric poetry, “aismat homeron”, “the songs of Homer.”
Rav, I argue, sometimes borrows Roman/Greek iconography or imagery to elicit literary connotations of a Midrash even though he is exegetically expounding the import of a Biblical text. In this paper, I identify three examples in which he uses these Greco-Roman images effectively (There may of course be more; Rav’s literary output in Aggadah in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and Midrashim is enormous.) One is a much-discussed case of Latin/Greek wordplay; one appears to use Roman iconography; and the final one, I argue, involves Roman imagery and iconography. All three serve as good examples of how literary meaning in Midrash is enriched in the context of the history of material and visual culture.

Adam and the Solstice (Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah 1:2)

In yAvodah Zarah 1:2, Rav, discussing the origins of Kalends (the Kalendae Ianuarie: Latin calendae, Greek καλάνδαι) and Saturnalia, the December and January solstice festivals7 in Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:3’s list of idolatrous Roman festivals, says, “Kalends was instituted by Adam HaRishon”. As Adam saw the days become shorter and the nights longer he began to fear the world was descending into darkness because of his sin8. When he saw the days becoming longer [after the solstice], he exclaimed [in a bilingual wordplay] “Kalendas, Kalon dio” (variously interpreted as: καλόν δέω, kalon deo: “Praise be to God,” “God is good,” “Freedom from God”, or: calo diem: “Proclaim the day,” “I proclaim the morning” “Beautiful day” or “May the sun set well,” or, καλον dies: “How good! It is day!”9)

Putting Greek and Latin in the mouth of Adam10 cleverly reverses the conventionally understood origins of the pagan solstice festivals, linking them back to Adam’s archetypal fears and worship. The delightful anachronism conveys a similar idea in the Bavli parallel (baraita, bAvodah Zarah 8a): “He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. But when he saw the days getting longer, he said, “It is the way of the world”. From that day, he went and celebrated eight festival days; in the following year he made both into festivals (וכלח ועשה שמונה ימים טובים, לשנה האחרת הלך ועשה שמונה ימים טובים, “He established them for the sake of heaven—but they established them for the sake of idolatry.”

Lieberman rejects reading אֲדוּתִלָא ראהַלְלוֹ יְום תְבוֹם as “καλον dies”11, since “it is necessary to emend the text and read אֲדוּתִלָא ראהַלְלוֹ יְום תְבוֹם instead of אֲדוּתִלָא ראהַלְלוֹ יְום תְּרוּם, with the result of a combination of Greek and Latin!” In the context of a satiric comment, however, deliberately combining Greek and Latin in Adam’s exclamation to God, conveys to comic effect how the pagan

7 See Rav’s formula in yAvodah Zarah 1:2.
9 See also Lieberman, Hellenism in Jewish Palestine, New York (1950), 10.
10 In bSanhedrin 38b Rav says that Adam spoke Aramaic.
Greek/Latin festival, “for the sake of idolatry”, was corrupted from Adam’s holiday, “for the sake of heaven”. Moreover, if Rav’s story about Adam and Kalends in the Bavli version can be attributed to him as well (which needn’t be ruled out), there may be additional wordplay. Adam’s celebratory relief, καλὸν dies,” “Good//Day”, as “Good! [It is] day!”12, in the Yerushalmi, can also literally mean, “Good Day”, "יום טוב". In this way, the triple-play Greek/Latin/Hebrew wordplay neatly describes Adam’s “Yom Tov” “for the sake of heaven” degrading to a pagan festival.

Rabbi Akiva and “Tied Crowns” (Bavli Menahot 29b)
In a story in bMenahot 29b, Rav employs the classical imagery and iconography of “tying crowns”:

R. Yehudah said in the name of Rav: When Moshe ascended above he found the Holy One Blessed be He sitting and tying crowns to letters . . . He said before Him, “Master of the world, who forces Your hand?” He said to him, “There is one at the end of many generations and Akiva son of Yosef is his name who in the future will elucidate mountains of laws on every ornamental hair” . . . He said to Him, “Master of the World, You showed me his Torah, show me his reward.” He said to him: “Return behind you”. He returned around behind him and saw that they were weighing his flesh in the marketplace. He said before Him, “Master of the World, this is Torah and this is its reward?”

“Tying crowns” (the classical crown was a wreath, a string of jewels tied with a ribbon at the back) has a clear set of connotation in the Greco-Roman world, where tying of wreath crowns served to honor outstanding public service, sports or military, victories.13 Tying wreaths to victors appears in Midrashim,14 as do kings

12 Ibid.; Rabbenu Hananel, bAvodah Zarah 8a.
13 Tying wreath crowns to honor people is well-attested (Plin. H.N. xv 39; Findar. Olymp. iv 36). The Greeks awarded such laurel-leaf wreaths to Olympic victors, or tied leaf or flower wreaths to those performing outstanding public service, as well as victors in sports or poetry competitions. They similarly tied gold crowns for civic or military accomplishment (Aesch. c. Ctesiph.; Dem. De Coron. passim). Tied gold crowns were also rewarded to victorious generals (they were lavished profusely on Alexander after defeating Darius [Athen. xii. p. 539a], a custom the Romans borrowed as the Aurum Coronarium, tied gold crown.)
14 In Tanhuma Re‘eh 7, a king of flesh and blood sends his legions out to war: if victorious, they return and crown him with a wreath, but God fights His wars Himself and gives the crown to Israel. God defeats Pharaoh at the Sea as a stronger athlete defeats a weaker and takes a wreath for his head (Ex. Rabah 22:11). God ties crowns to people and angels or Israel tie crowns to God or His words (bShabbat 87b;104a; bHagigah 13b; Pesikta Rabati 20; Ex. Rabah 21:4; Lev. Rabah 24:8; Shir HaShirim Rabah 3:11). Angels likewise tie crowns to Israel (bShabbat 88a).
with tied crowns\textsuperscript{15}, but the imagery of tying crowns to letters is startling and suggestive.

The crowns may indeed be meant to suggest a connection with the end of the story, Rabbi Akiva’s execution at Caesaria\textsuperscript{16} by Rome. The \textit{tied} city-crown associated with Tyche, the city goddess\textsuperscript{17} as personification\textsuperscript{18} of the idea of the Roman city-state, was connected in particular with Caesaria as Roman capital of \textit{Provincia Judaea}.\textsuperscript{19} Rav would certainly have been aware of the ubiquitous \textit{tied-crown} iconography in Roman Palestine. Almost all the cities which Rome permitted to mint coins represented their \textit{tychae} patron goddesses on them with \textit{tied} city-wall crowns\textsuperscript{20}, and, “one third of all Caesarea coin types are Tyche types”.\textsuperscript{21} Rav’s uncle and colleague the Palestinian Tana R. Hiyya, once asked a question about the permissibility of a pitcher with a Tyche image on it\textsuperscript{22}. So the “\textit{Tying crowns}” of R. Akiva’s creativity in the first half of the story may be in tension with the opposed

\textsuperscript{15} Esau’s army of 400 kings, or Sennacherib’s of 185,000: “all with \textit{tied crowns}” (Gen. Rabhah 75:12; Tosefta Sotah 3:18; Seder Olam Rabah 23) or 300 Edomite \textit{kings tied with crowns} (ר믄 קיני תגאן, bMegilah 6b); Gog and Magog call “kings with tied crowns” (��לוק תגיאי יתנכ) to fight Israel (Targ. Jonathan, Num. 11:26); Ahasuerus summons 127 kings, “\textit{all tied with crowns on their heads}” (קטיר קיני יהי יהושע) (Targ. Pseudo-Jonathan, Ex. 19:6: “You shall be for Me . . . a \textit{kingdom of priests}”: \textit{kings tied with crowns} (מלך קיני יהוה)).

\textsuperscript{16} Semahot 8, at Caesarea, seat of the Roman procurators; in yBerachot 9:5, Sotah 5:5, before the procurator Tornus Rufus [Quintus Tineius Rufus].


\textsuperscript{20} Y. Meshorer, \textit{City Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period}, Jerusalem (1985), 20, 62


\textsuperscript{22} In a Genizah text of yAvodah Zarah 3:3; J.N. Epstein, “Yerushalmi Fragments” (Hebrew), \textit{Tarbiz} 3 (1933) 19; Lieberman, \textit{Yevanit U-Yevanut Be-Eretz Yisrael}, 249.
iconography of the second half. (In yShabbat 6:1 a tied bridal-crown has a clear connection with Caesarea.)

**Korah’s All-Blue Tallit (Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:1)**

Rav discusses Korah’s ‘all-blue tallit’ in ySanhedrin 10:1’s discussion of ‘apikorsim’ who have no share in the World to Come (Mishnah ad loc.): The story appears in Tanhuma, Korah 4, Tanhuma (Buber), Korah, 2, Targ. Jonathan 16:1, and bSanhedrin 110a, but this version’s clear attribution to Rav predates the others.

“Said Rav, ‘Korah was an apikorsi. What did he do? He stood and made tallits that were entirely of techelet. He came before Moshe; he said, “Moshe Rabbeinu, a tallit that is entirely techelet, what is it that it should be obligated in tzitzit?” He said to him, “It is obligated, as it is written, ‘You shall make strings on the four corners of your garment (Deut. 22:12)’... In that hour Korah said, “There is no Torah from heaven, nor is Moshe a prophet, nor is Aharon the Kohen Gadol.””

In magisterial Midrashic exegesis, Rav employs metaphor —and imagery—to amplify elements present in the biblical text. That is, his use of metaphor and Roman/Greek iconography and imagery serves an argument grounded in textual exegesis and methodology. And Rav employs the imagery to undermine the metaphor.

In methodology, his Midrash uses the textual nexus (סמכות פרשיות) of Korah’s rebellion (Num. 16:1) that directly follows the commandment of tzitzit (Num.15:38-41). (It’s explicit in the Tanhuma versions: “What is written above the matter? “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them and they shall make for themselves tzitzit (Num. 15:38).”) In the bSanhedrin 110a, Tanhuma, Tanhuma (Buber) and Targum Yonatan versions, Korah dresses himself and his two hundred and fifty followers in tallits entirely of techelet to stage the rebellious confrontation with Moshe.

On the level of its Midrashic meaning, the "טלית שחולה toda, tallit shekulah techelet, the tallit entirely of techelet, metaphorically conveys Korah’s argument, רבי לבה יי כל רבים קולות לקולות בקהל הם זרעים הלוע ../../../ו הלוע../../../. “You take too much upon yourselves for the entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?” The metaphoric all-blue tallit embodies the egalitarian "כל העדה", “the entire congregation” which has no need for the superfluous string of leadership, which is Moshe.23 Posed as a halakhic question, it communicates how Moshe, having invented (fabricated!) the

23 R. Bahye, ad loc.; Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael 22, among many others.
law of the individual string for his own interests, should not be leader of Israel or the teacher of Halakhah.

The metaphor of the blue tallit conveys the biblical text’s opposition of the individual and the congregation. Moshe does in fact champion the individual (“In the morning God will make known the one He chooses . . . Korah and his congregation (קֵרָה וְכֵלֵי עַדְּחָה), take for yourselves censers . . . and the man (שְׂמִיעָה) whom God chooses he is the holy one (הוּא הַקְדוֹשָׁה) (Num. 16:6-7)”. And subsequently he also later prays, “Shall one man sin (שָׁאַו, מַעֲשֵׂה) and on all the congregation (וּכְלֵי עַדְּחָה) You will be angry?”

The large tallit and small string imagery additionally plays on the opposition in the biblical text of “much”/“little”, “רָב” and "כּהַשָּׂעָה". Korah argues: “‘You take too much (רָב) for yourselves for the entire congregation are all holy.” (16:7) Moshe responds accordingly: “You take too much (רָב) sons of Levi . . . Is it little for you (מַעֲשֵׂה) that the God of Israel distinguished you from the congregation of Israel? (16:9)” Datan and Aviram accuse Moses: “Is it little (מַעֲשֵׂה) that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert, that you should also rule over us? (16:13).”

So Korah looks good, as it were, in his tallit shekulah techelet whose metaphor embodies and expresses the populist argument. But at the same time, looking at the meaning of its imagery in its clear reference to Roman iconography, the informed third-century (and twenty-first-century) reader may note the ironic commentary which undermines the level of metaphor.

Understanding the blue tallit’s significance in Classical visual culture elucidates Rav’s exegetical strategy.

**Exclusive Imperial Purple**

According to Roman practice, iconography, and law, only the most exclusively privileged personages, the Emperor or his restricted class of officials, could wear the all-purple toga purpura. The toga wholly of purple worn by the Roman emperors appears to have been first assumed by Julius Caesar (Cic. *Philip*. II.34). Originally during the Roman Republic, when a triumph was celebrated, the victorious general wore a toga picta, an entirely purple toga, bordered in gold. However, during the Roman Empire, purple came to be associated exclusively with the Emperors and their officers. Earlier Roman kings had worn an all-purple toga traeba or toga purpura, but Julius Caesar began the practice of wearing the toga picta, to publicly commemorate his victories, as his standard dress, and his successors did as well.24 Servius (*ad Aen.* VII.612) mentions three types of toga trabea: One wholly of

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purple, was sacred to the gods, while the purple and white trabea were royal robes, associated with the Latin and early Roman kings, especially Romulus (Plin. H. N. VIII.49, IX.39; Virg. Aen. VII.187, XI.334; Ovid. Fast. II.504). The earliest use of the term ‘royal purple, purpura regnum,’ appears in Cicero, Pro Sestio 57 (56 BCE); Pro Scavro 45 (purpura regalis)\(^{25}\), though the robe was not prohibited but simply prohibitively expensive except for royalty\(^{26}\).

Certainly, Alexander the Great (in imperial audiences as Emperor of the Macedonian Empire), the Seleucid emperors, and the Ptolemaic kings all wore Tyrian purple.\(^{27}\) But Caesar allowed only those of a designated position to wear an all-purple toga (Suetonius). Augustus “gave orders that no one should wear the purple dress but senators acting as magistrates” (Dio Cassius, Roman History, Book 49), and Nero made it punishable by death for anyone but the emperor to wear it. (Nero forbade any use of Tyrian purple dye and sent someone feigning to be a merchant in the dye to entrap dealers, close their shops and confiscate their property [Suetonius, De Vita Caesarum, Nero 32]).

In the context of Classical visual culture, in a 6th-century mosaic at the basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I alone wears purple, a solid-Tyrian purple robe. (His Codex Justinianus, Book 4.40 stipulated that anyone dyeing or selling Tyrian purple were at the risk losing their property and their lives.\(^{28}\))

Jews of antiquity were certainly well-aware of the all-purple toga’s iconographic visual significance. In the mid-3rd-century Dura-Europos synagogue wooden wall painting in Syria, for example, under the inscription, “Samuel Anointing David” (шуמאל דמשח ית דוד), David stands as the central figure, distinguished from his brothers, like Justinian in the Ravenna mosaic, as the only one wearing an all-purple toga.

Further, Gen. Rabah (4th-5th century), 75:15, using Roman imagery, describes David as rejecting the trappings of kingship. He is described removing “his

\(^{25}\) Similarly, Vergil, Georg. 2.495 (purpura regnum); Strabo, 14.1.3; Plutarch, Tib. Gracc.; Lactanius, Inst. Div., 4.7.6.


\(^{27}\) There is a painting of a man wearing an all-purple toga picta at an Etruscan tomb (about 350 BCE).

\(^{28}\) Tyrian purple production was tightly controlled in Byzantium and subsidized by the imperial court which restricted it for coloring imperial silks (D. Jacoby, “Silk in Western Byzantium before the Fourth Crusade” in Trade, Commodities, and Shipping in the Medieval Mediterranean (1997) 455f; notes 17–19). Theodosius II’s Codex Theodosianus outlawed wearing, manufacturing, or owning Tyrian purple. Making counterfeit Tyrostanian purple with indigo was a crime severely punished under the Byzantine Emperors.

http://jewish-faculty.biu.ac.il/files/jewish-faculty/shared/JSIJ15/levine.pdf
porpiron [פורפירון, purple robe, the Greek (πορφύρα, porphyra) and Latin (purpura) term for Tyrean purple] from upon him and his wreath from on his head, and wrapped himself in his Tallit, and came before the Sanhedrin.”

This is notable both for the obvious use of Roman imagery (the purple purpura and the imperial diadem wreath), but more importantly, David’s choice of the modest tallit as demonstration of his humility. In a halakhic context, Midrash Tanaim 17 writes of a Jewish king, whose “heart shall not rise above his brothers” (Deut. 17:20): “That he should not say, ‘tzitzit costs an isar; I shall make it [a tallit] entirely of techelet, the strap of Tefilin, I shall make entirely of gold.’” The imagery at once brings to mind a tallit of all techelet and a toga picta, ornamented with gold embroidery. (This description certainly contrasts with Josephus’ account of Herod’s Roman funeral, with him “enveloped in a purple robe, a diadem wreath, encircling the head and surmounted by a crown of gold”29.) Perhaps the Midrash’s subtext is a rejection of an all purple-tallit, in which a “Jewish” porphyra is rejected as well. Overwhelmingly in Midrashim, only God wears a porporia (or clothes Israel in porporias [—and wreathes], in imagery usually emphasizing His love or protective ness of Israel).

Thus Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 49 describes a robe of a non-Jewish king in comparing him to Mordechai: “Just as a king wears a porporia (פורפיריה, πορφύρα, porphyra, purpura), so did Mordechai, as it says “And Mordechai went out before the king in royal clothes, techelet . . . ” (Esther 8:15)30. (Midrash Tehilim 22 asserts: “It is not the way of a commoner to wear a purpura,” and certainly not the king’s [ibid 21].) In fact, in the Lev. Rabah 28:6 version, in the opposition of the the tallit and the porporia, when Haman comes to dress him in the king’s porporia, Mordechai is wrapped in a tallit in prayer.

In Lev. Rabah 34:12, the nephews of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, silk-traders, were slandered; a royal emissary told them they could either make the emperor a porpira or be fined six hundred dinars. In an appropriation of Roman imagery, Ex. Rabah 15:13 describes how God attained kingship over Israel in Egypt, as Roman legions throw a porpira before a doxos (δούχας =important personage), that is, the one they have chosen to be Caesar. In Gen. Rabah 75:4, Jacob (Israel) removes his purpura before Esau (Rome) in obeisance, giving up his claims to royalty, a clear allusion to its significance in Roman iconography. When Diocletian abdicated in 305, the ceremony consisted of the emperor standing under a statue of his patron deity before

29 AJ XVII 196-199.
30 In Gen. Rabah 92:17, Joseph, as the Egyptian viceroy, shakes his purpurei at the thought of taking all of Jacob’s sons as slaves for Benjamin’s purported theft, which plays against their tearing their clothes as the silver cup is found in his sack (Gen. 43:13).
the assembled military, then removing his purple robes and placing them on the shoulders of his successor. Then, removing his purple robes and placing them on the shoulders of his successor.

Jews were certainly aware of the exclusivity of the purple dye: In a parable of R. Tanhuma (4th-century) in Deut. Rabah 1 (concerning how Moshe’s speech in Deuteronomy fits within the context of God’s Torah), a man caught by the king selling argaman protested that his argaman was not the same as the king’s. (Indigo, whose chemical composition is close to that of Murex dye, was used to counterfeit Tyrean purple, a crime severely punished under the Byzantine Emperors. In Codex Justinianus, Book 4.40, anyone dying or selling Tyrian purple risked losing his property and life. The Roman Emperors regulated Tyrean shellfish dyes, but they did not restrict indigo.)

The Subversion
As I have suggested, in Rav’s Midrash, the connotations of the Roman image subverts those implied by the metaphor. The borrowed “Epicurean” imagery of Korah wearing the exclusive all-purple toga purpura undermines the ostensible populism of the metaphor of the all-blue tallit, ”כלי השכלת הכהנים” as meaning, ”כל העדה קדושים” , “the entire congregation are all holy”.

Pitting the (Roman) imagery against the metaphor functions, for us as readers, to question the veracity of what Korah says. Indeed, Korah is only looking out for himself or his exclusive ”כלי הכהנים”, “congregation of Korah”, the “two hundred and fifty men . . . chieftains of the congregation . . . men of renown,” and certainly not for ”כלי הכהנים”, “the entire congregation”. When Korah agrees to Moses’ “incense-wager,” from which only one elitist winner will emerge (16:6-7, 18), the pretense and pose of populism is revealed for what it is.

Rav’s Midrash, in opposing Korah’s Roman toga purpura to the all-blue tallit, thus highlights how in the text Moshe ignores Korah’s public posturing on the “entire congregation’s” egalitarian sanctity (כלי השכלת כלם כnaments) and tells Korah’s “entire congregation” (כלי השכלת כלם כnants) not to crave more exclusivity than they already have. He says that Korah’s congregation (כלי השכלת כלם כnants) was justifiably separated from the congregation of Israel (כלי השכלת כלם כnants) . . . .אלהים מצאוה ישראלי.
to serve before the congregation (ל פ נ י ה ע ד ה) that is, before all Israel (16:9). Moses calls Korah and his followers, “You and all your congregation (א ת ה ו כ ל ע ד ת ךָ) that congregate (ה נ ע ד ים) against God (16:11).”

The discrepancy between the metaphor and the imagery expresses Korah’s duplicity in literary form. It parallels the Bavli, bSanhedrin 109b34 where Rav describes how On ben Pelet’s, wife dissuaded him from the rebellion by arguing that while all the congregation is equal—some are more equal than others:

“Said Rav: “On ben Pelet, his wife saved him. She said to him, “What comes out for you from this? If one is the master, you are a disciple, and if one is the master, you are a disciple.”35

(That Rav’s all-purple tallit story appears only in the Yerushalmi, while the midrash about On ben Pelet’s wife, with the same underlying meaning [that Korah is an elitist, not a populist] appears in his name in the Bavli, may indicate that the significance of the “all-purple” tallit was not as readily understood in Bavel.)

Further, in the implicit irony, despite Korah’s remonstrations to the contrary, the act of publicly donning a tallit itself is hardly a populist move. It is in fact investiture, taking a high public office in the Classical world, the Latin donning (“vestire”) of a robe, “vestis”. In Ex. Rabah 27:936: “If a man is appointed to be the head of the community and takes his tallit, he shall not say, ‘For my own advantage I am appointed, I do not care about the public,’ but rather, ‘All the troubles and bother of the public is upon me.’” Korah, while seeming to make the latter claim in donning the tallit, is in fact saying the former.

In Pesikta Rabati, 10, just as a sage is solicitously careful with his tallit, “For with this tallit, they dressed me when I was appointed a community Elder”, so God tells Moses to care for the nation of Israel: “Be careful with this nation Israel, for when I created the world, she was the first to make me king.” In the same way, a king instructs his servant to be careful with this porphira, “For while wearing this I wed the king’s daughter.” In the Roman context, the “purpuram sumere,” donning the purple, meant the emperor’s investiture (Eutr. 9,8), and the “nateles purpura, the annivesty of it.

34 See Tanhuma (Buber) Korah 24; Tanhuma Korach 10.
35 In Tanhuma (Buber) Korah 24; Tanhuma Korach 10: “If Aaron is the Kohen Gadol; you are a disciple; If Korah is the Kohen Gadol; you are a disciple.” On ben Pelet’s wife and Korah’s wife are contrasted in bSanhedrin 109b and the Tanhumas. In bSanhedrin 109b, it is Korah’s wife who suggests that his congregation put on the all-blue tallits. In later Midrashim (Midrash Mishlei, Midrash Ester, Midrash HaGadol), she makes him the all-purple tallit.
36 See also bBava Batra, 98a.
Moreover, the meaning of tzitzit is opposed to that of wearing purple. In Midrash Tehilim 90, for example: “R. Hizkiyah said, ‘When Israel wraps themselves in tzitzit, they should not think they are perhaps wearing purple, but should look at their tzitzit as if the glory of the Shechinah is upon them, as it says not, “and you shall see them,” but “it/Him.”’

Additionally, Rav’s describing Korah as an “Apikursi” is multi-layered. On one level, it has the double sense of showing disrespect towards Moshe (in bSanhedrin 99b Rav says an ‘Epikoros’ is one who disrespects a Talmid Chacham)37, as well as showing him to be a heretic (“Korah said, ‘There is no Torah from heaven nor is Moshe a prophet’”).38 Beyond this, the imagery plays on its “Epicurean” etymology so that Korah the populist, in his exclusive purple toga, is exposed as an “Epicurean,” from Ἐπικοῦρος (Latin Epicurus, Greek Ἐπίκουρος), a follower of the heretical philosopher of “Epicurean” luxury (342-270 BCE)39. At the same time, we needn’t rule out wordplay between “Apikursi”, (“heretic”), and אפיקרסין (or ἐπίχαρσιον) an “overgarment” in some sources (Mishnah, Tosefta, and Yerushalmi) which is contrasted with a tallit40 (as here in Rav’s Midrash).

Ironically, while Korah’s entirely blue or purple tallit shekulah techelet was obligated in tzitzit, a toga, purple or any color, is in fact exempt from tzitzit: Sifrei 230: “[Strings you shall make for you on the four corners of] your garment”: except for a toga41 (“פרשי לlashes”) . . . since they do not have four corners.”42 As it is written in Sifrei Zuta 15:38: “Togas ("טגיות") are not obligated43 in tzitzit”.

**Summary**
Rav employs strategic anachronism, in employing Roman imagery, as well as Latin/Greek wordplay in his Midrashic readings. In the γAvodah Zarah Kalends story, placing Greek and Latin in the mouth of Adam cleverly reverses the pagan solstice festival origins in Adam’s archetypal fears and worship. Similarly, the

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37 Similarly, bNedarim 23a; Sifrei Deut 12, etc.
38 Korban HaEdah (ad loc.) cites both possibilities.
41 “כסותך, פרט לטגא . . . לפיといってים.
42 Though there is wide variety of toga styles, the garment always has rounded ends (S. Stone, “The Toga: From National to Ceremonial Costume,” in J.L. Sebesta and L. Bonfante, eds., The World of Roman Costume (Madison, 1994) 13-45.
43 "שית ויגן ויבצעית".
Korah story’s *anachronistic* Roman imagery effectively creates the disconnect between the metaphor of ostensible populism (the all-blue *tallit*) and the true colors of exclusivist elitism (the *toga purpora*).