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The Motif of the Hare as a Gift to a Ruler

Abstract: The motif of a hare given or sent to ruler as a present turns out in more occurrences than expected, in the textual record, international folklore and popular culture. The most complex occurrence is in the medieval Hebrew mock-sapiential text *Life of Ben Sira*, but one comes across occurrences in the Marcolfian tradition in medieval France, in the historiography of imperial Rome, in an early modern Italian fable, and even in an incident that caught mediatic attention, with a statue of Nelson Mandela.

Key words: Hare or rabbit in folklore, a hare as a gift for a king, *Life of Ben Sira*, Marcolf, Didius Julianus (Roman emperor), statue of Nelson Mandela, *Costantino Fortunato* by Giovan Francesco Straparola.

1. Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar Eating a Live (or Raw) Hare, and a Spurious Story about Jeremiah

In the Medieval Hebrew *Life of Ben Sira*, it is related that at a bathhouse, Jeremiah reproaches some wicked men for spilling their semen.

Because that generation that there was at the times of [King] Zedekiah were wicked, therefore of Zedekiah evil deeds were stated [(2 Kings 24:19)]. As Jeremiah saw that much, he began to reproach them. They came and confronted him and beat him. They told him: “Why did you reproach us? You are not going to move from here, unless you shall do like us.” He told them: “I beg you, let me go, and I shall give you my oath that I shall never relate this thing”. They told him: “And yet, Zedekiah who had seen Nebuchadnezzar eating a live hare swore to him that he would not tell, but when he left his presence, he discarded his oath. You, too, are going to do the same. Now, if you are going to do like us, so far so good. Otherwise we shall do to you like the deed of Sodom”.

In the *Life of Ben Sira*,¹ that particular episode, concerning King Zedekiah seeing King Nebuchadnezzar eating a live hare (or a body part taken from a live hare: supposedly an example of barbarian behaviour) and not keeping his promise to keep the secret, is important for the *Life of Ben Sira*, because the very first communication from the child Ben Sira (aged seven) and Nebuchadnezzar is going to be by means of a text written (to the recipient’s amazement) on the scalp of a live hare which Nebuchadnezzar’s emissaries bring to their king. There may be a Marcolfian connection, insofar as Marcolf is depicted while riding, naked, a ram while carrying a hare as a present for King Solomon.

In the version edited by Salomon Buber of *Midrash Tanhuma*, at periscope *Va’erá*, a parallel version of the tale about Zedekiah seeing Nebuchadnezzar eating in an unseemly manner is found, but it does not involve any hare:

Zedekiah went up to bring a gift. Nebuchadnezzar said: “Eat with me at noontime”. And he [Nebuchadnezzar] made a meal/anquet (*sē’uddá*), but the meal/banquet of Babylonia is not like the meal/banquet of the Land of Israel. He [Zedekiah] saw Nebuchadnezzar eating while drivelling down on his beard. And Zedekiah stared at him in amazement. And he said [arguably, hto himself, without uttering his thought]: “To this one, all the world are submitting?!” He [Zedekiah] ate with him [Nebuchadnezzar]. What did he [Zedekiah] do? Once he [Zedekiah] had eaten, he [Nebuchadnezzar] took Zedekiah and had him take an oath. He [Nebuchadnezzar] told him: “Lest you go to you country and abandon me” [i.e., lest once away, you rebel against me]. They parted, and he [Zedekiah] came to the Land of Israel. He started to take about him disparagingly, and reneged on that oath.

In the history of religion, there has also been a claim concerning another prophet (Elijah, who was apparently celibate like Jeremiah), concerning the effects of his alleged emission of semen (in Elijah’s case, nocturnal pollutions). Stephen Benko stated:²

Immediately after [a particular] quotation from the [Phibionite] *Gospel of Philip*, Epiphanius [in *Panarion*] relates a story with reference to the prophet Elijah. Whether this is taken from a different book — perhaps a writing that bore the name of Elijah — or whether we should think of it as coming from the same source as the preceding quotation, is difficult to decide. At any rate, it says that after Elijah “was taken up, he was immediately again thrown back into the world. Because a daimon came, took hold of him and asked him, Where are you going? I have children from you and you cannot go up and leave your children here! And he asked, How can you have children from me, when I lived in holiness? She said: Indeed, many times in your dreams when you had an emission I was the one who received the sperm from you and bore you sons”. (“Pollē de

¹ See E. Nissan, “Concerning the Early Medieval Hebrew *Pseudo-Sirach* (Improperly: *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*) — the *Life of Ben Sira* and Its Mutually Exclusive Sequels — and Two Early Modern Latin Translations” (in this volume: *Rivista di Studi Indo-Mediterranei*, 6).

² On p. 108 in: Stephen Benko, “The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites According to Epiphanius”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 21(2), 1967, pp. 103–119.

mōria tōn ta toiauta legontōn” — “Great is the foolishness of those who say such things!” adds Epiphanius disapprovingly) (26,13,5–6).

2. Nebuchadnezzar Eating the Hare, and Egypt’s Lagids

Louis Ginzberg cites³ for that tradition *Ekhah Zuṭarti* 114–115; the *Babylonian Talmud* in tractate *Nedarim* 56a; and *Tanḥuma Buber* 2:33, and 5:8. Next, the same note explains how the tradition about Nebuchadnezzar eating a live hare apparently developed:

The first passage maintains that Nebuchadnezzar killed the members of the Synedrion [i.e., the Sanhedrin] in a very cruel manner. The word [**HY**, pronounced *hay*, usually denoting ‘alive’] in the passage cited from [*Tanḥuma Buber*] means “raw”, and this seems to be the original form of the legend. Nebuchadnezzar lacked refinement, and was in the habit of eating raw meat. Subsequently [*hay*] was taken in its ordinary sense, and hence the statement in *Ekah* that he was caught eating a piece of flesh from a live hare.

What is more, early rabbinic tradition possesses another item of lore about embarrassment concerning the connection between a foreign king and a hare: it is a tradition concerning the Greek biblical translation of the Seventy. That translation allegedly replaced ‘the swift-footed’ for ‘the hare’ when the text about dietary law specifically enumerates the hare among unclean animals, because the Hellenistic king of Egypt who commissioned the translation was from the Lagid dynasty (descended from Ptolemy Lagos, where *lagos* ‘hare’), but the rabbinic tradition modified this into the simpler statement that the name of the king’s wife was Hare.

I suspect that the avoidance of directly naming the hare among the unclean animals in the Septuagint may also have depended upon the fact that to the Egyptians, the hare was associated with the goddess Isis, herself mother and wife of the male Osiris, the Serapis of the Hellenistic period. (Iconography of Isis suckling the baby Horus eventually morphed into Marian iconography, as early as frescoes from Bāwīt and Saqqāra in Egypt.) Egyptian mythology had Osiris killed and dismembered by his brother, his body parts thrown into the Nile. He was resurrected (cf. the seasonal resurrection of the Phoenician Tammuz and Greek Adonis). The resurrected Osiris was symbolised by a hare.

Eating flesh from a live animal is, according to Judaism, a transgression upon one of the seven precepts that Noahids (all humankind) must abide by. The following English retelling of the tradition about Nebuchadnezzar eating a live hare is quoted here from Vol. 4, pp. 291–293, in a classic digest of rabbinic lore about biblical characters, namely, Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews* (1909–1938).

Nebuchadnezzar, who invested Zedekiah with the royal office, demanded that he swear fealty to him. Zedekiah was about to swear by his own soul, but the Babylonian king, not satisfied, brought a scroll of the law, and made his Jewish vassal take the oath upon that. Nevertheless he did not keep faith with Nebuchadnezzar for long. Nor was this his only treachery toward his suzerain. He had once surprised Nebuchadnezzar in the act of cutting a piece from a living hare and eating it, as is the habit of barbarians. Nebuchadnezzar was painfully embarrassed, and he begged the Jewish king to promise under oath not to mention what he had seen. Though Nebuchadnezzar treated him with [p. 292:] great friendliness, even making him sovereign lord over five vassal kings, he did not justify the trust reposed in him. To flatter Zedekiah, the five kings once said: “If all

³ Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909–1938, Vol. 6, p. 382, note 3.

were as it should be, thou wouldst occupy the throne of Nebuchadnezzar.” Zedekiah could not refrain from exclaiming: “O yes, Nebuchadnezzar, whom I once saw eating a live hare!” The five kings at once repaired to Nebuchadnezzar, and reported what Zedekiah had said. Thereupon the king of Babylonia marched to Daphne, near Antioch, with the purpose of chastising Zedekiah. At Daphne he found the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, who had hastened thither to receive him. Nebuchadnezzar met the Sanhedrin courteously, ordered his attendants to bring state chairs for all the members, and requested them to read the Torah to him and explain it. When they reached the passage in the Book of Numbers dealing with the remission of vows, the king put the question: “If a man desires to be released from a vow, what steps must he take?” The Sanhedrin replied: “He must repair to a scholar, and he will absolve him from his vow.” Whereupon Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed: “I verily believe it was you who released Zedekiah from the vow he took concerning me.” And he ordered the members of the Sanhedrin to leave their state chairs and sit on the ground. They were forced to admit, that they had not acted in accordance with the law, for Zedekiah’s vow affected another beside himself, and without the acquiescence of the other party, namely, Nebuchadnezzar, the Sanhedrin had no authority to annul the vow. Zedekiah was duly punished for the grievous crime of [p. 293] perjury.

3. Nebuchadnezzar’s Soldiers Are Afraid of the Task of Fetching Ben Sira

Nebuchadnezzar, according to the *Life of Ben Sira*, sends his soldiers to fetch the child prodigy Ben Sira. The soldiers are afraid, and inform the King about their reluctance to comply: “But do not send us for one of the sages of Israel. Lest he would do to us what Elisha did to the army of the Aram”. He [Nebuchadnezzar] told them: “You idiots! [...]”

The prophet Elisha hypnotised the soldiers of Aram, and brought them into the presence of the King of Israel, but then urged the latter to feed them and release them. On a different occasion, a king of Israel tried to have Elisha arrested, but expedition after expedition was destroyed by that prophet.

This is the overt intertextual reference. But the episode with Elisha is in turn akin to the precedent of Elijah (Elisha’s predecessor and teacher) who destroyed the messengers of King Ahaziah. The relevant biblical text is as follows (*2 Kings* 1:2–17):

And Ahaziah fell down through a lattice in his upper chamber that was in Samaria, and was sick: and he sent messengers, and said unto them, Go, enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron whether I shall recover of this disease.

But the angel of the Lord said to Elijah the Tishbite, Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that ye go to enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron? Now therefore thus saith the Lord, Thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. And Elijah departed.

And when the messengers turned back unto him, he said unto them, Why are ye now turned back? And they said unto him, There came a man up to meet us, and said unto us, Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. And he said unto them, What manner of man was he which came up to meet you, and told you these words? And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite.

Then the king sent unto him a captain of fifty with his fifty. And he went up to him and, behold, he sat on the top of an hill. And he spake unto him, Thou man of God, the king hath said, Come down. And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And there came down fire from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.



Elijah destroying the messengers of King Ahaziah, by Gustave Doré.

Again also he sent unto him another captain of fifty with his fifty. And he answered and said unto him, O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly. And Elijah answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

And he sent again a captain of the third fifty with his fifty. And the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and besought him, and said unto him, O man of God, I pray thee, let my life, and the life of these fifty thy servants, be precious in thy sight. Behold, there came fire down from heaven, and burnt up the two captains of the former fifties with their fifties: therefore let my life now be precious in thy sight.

And the angel of the Lord said unto Elijah, Go down with him: be not afraid of him. And he arose, and went down with him unto the king. And he said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Forasmuch as thou hast sent messengers to enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron, is it not because there is no God in Israel to enquire of his word? therefore thou shalt not come down off that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.

So he died according to the word of the Lord which Elijah had spoken.

3. The Child Prodigy Ben Sira Writing a Letter to Nebuchadnezzar on the Scalp of a Hare

Let us consider the rest of the passage in which the soldiers tell Nebuchadnezzar they would rather not go:

“But do not send us for one of the sages of Israel. Lest he would do to us what Elisha did to the army of the Aram”. He [Nebuchadnezzar] told them: “You idiots! There never was on earth any king who would be spoken to as the G-d of the Hebrews spoke unto me, as he promised: ‘Even the beast of the field I gave him, so it would serve him’ [(*Jeremiah* 27:6)]. You, tell him that verse once you shall be in his presence”. Straightaway, they told him [Ben Sira] verbally as well as in writing, as it was written there that much. Once Ben Sira had read the letter, he said: “He has not sent for me, but rather for my hare”. Straightaway, he took the hare, and wrote on her head: “Here you are, some beast of the field so it would serve you. Which is what my G-d promised to you”. They went back and brought this to Nebuchadnezzar, and her head was hairless,⁴ like a bald man who has

⁴ It may (just may) be that a head turned bald in connection with Nebuchadnezzar (which in the *Life of Ben Sira* is the head of a hare) was inspired by the prophecy (*Ezekiel* 29:18) against Egypt, to the effect that Nebuchadnezzar was going to be rewarded with the conquest of Egypt, for his not managing to conquer Tyre notwithstanding a long siege, when the hardships for the besiegers were such that “every head became *muqrah* (‘turned bald’), and every shoulder became *maruṭ* (here, ‘strained’, but usually applied to hair, in the sense ‘plucked’, or to a head, in the sense ‘turned bald’: cf. §6 below). Next, *Ezekiel* 29:19 announces that Nebuchadnezzar will be successful instead in defeating Egypt. In fact, Egypt was defeated by the Babylonians in 568 B.C.E.

At any rate, considering that there exists in rabbinic homiletics, in connection with a hare, a tradition which is very embarrassing for Nebuchadnezzar, Ben Sira sending him a hare is to be taken as a reminder of that embarrassment. On top of that, if the *Life of Ben Sira* also has in context an intertextual reference to *Ezekiel* 29:18, then the bald hare that Ben Sira sends Nebuchadnezzar is derisive in the extreme, and it is supposed to remind the addressee of two episodes which are embarrassing for him and are known from the Jewish tradition.

There also exists indeed an early rabbinic homiletic tradition about Nebuchadnezzar becoming enraged against a King of Judah because the latter had seen Nebuchadnezzar eat a hare alive, and Nebuchadnezzar, embarrassed, had the King of Judah swear that he would keep it a secret, but that promise was not kept, and Nebuchadnezzar meted punishment.

The word for ‘hairless’ that Version A of the *Life of Ben Sira* employs is a reduplicative participle, spelled *mṭṭf* (which if read *mṭṭaf* in Hebrew means ‘dripping’, the lexical root being *ntf*). Eli Yassif (ed.), *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984, p. 215, admitted he could make no sense of this, even as he signalled the variants spelled *mnwṭf* or *mnwtaf* (top be read *mṅnuṭṭáf* or *mṅnuttáf*, a passive participle). Nevertheless, it all becomes clear once you consider that the author of *Pseudo-Sirach* has simply borrowed an Arabic passive participle, *māntūf*, and adapted it to a reduplicative participial pattern from Hebrew morphology (probably not the active participle *mṭṭaf*, but the passive participle *mṭṭuṭṭáf*).

Incidentally, *māntūf* is the Arabic and Maltese word-form of the family name of a long-serving premier of Malta. Dom Mintoff (1916–2012) was prime minister of Malta in 1955–1958 and 1971–1984. Properly, *māntūf* means ‘scanty-haired’, or then ‘bald’ once you realised the implication that the hair was either lost, or plucked or pulled away as though (cf. Italian *spelacchiato*). Dom Mintoff however had an almost full head of hair.

The author of *Pseudo-Sirach* certainly was adapting into Hebrew the Arabic passive participle *māntūf*, but consider the following about Aramaic. As in *Pseudo-Sirach* there is evidence of knowledge of at least some lore from the *Babylonian Talmud*, it stands to reason that the author of *Pseudo-Sirach* could understand the Middle Aramaic variety of the *Babylonian Talmud*. He is most likely to have been unaware of the following unique occurrence of a lexical derivative from the root *ntf* in Targumic Aramaic (i.e., the Jewish Aramaic of the ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic), which

no hair. And it was as white [Here, the range of “white” includes yellowish, as the comparison is to parchment.] as parchment, and there was written there: “Even the beast of the field I gave him, so it would serve him” [(*Jeremiah 27:6*)]. Immediately,⁵ he [Nebuchadnezzar] was amazed, and told his wisemen: “How come the hair of the hare is shaved like parchment? How can a person make parchment out of skin with flesh under it?” They did not now what to reply. Immediately, he sent for him another military unit, more numerous and distinguished than the ones who had preceded them. And he sent to him in writing: “Should you not come for my sake, come for the sake of the hare you sent me”. Immediately, he [Ben Sira] went with them to Nebuchadnezzar.

5. Marcolf Bringing a Hare to King Solomon

An alleged occurrence of Marcolf mockingly bringing a hare to King Solomon, an episode apparently blended with the folkloric motif of the challenge of having to bring a king a gift which is not a gift, is mentioned by Lilian Randall:⁶

Among the limited number of Romance subjects which appear in thirteenth century exempla is [... a] legend of exceptional interest [that] relates the conditions imposed by a king on his bride-to-be. She must come to him neither driving, walking, nor riding, neither out of the road nor in the road, neither clothed nor naked, and bringing a gift that was no gift. The earliest extant representation of the tale is found in a marginal illustration of the Ormesby Psalter in the section dating from the last decade of the thirteenth century (Bodleian Library, Douce MS 366; Fig. 14). Despite the fact that the figure approaching the king is apparently a male, other details of the scene indicate that the illustration is based on the above legend. The figure, with one foot touching the ground, is astride a ram; he is nude save for a cape and one shoe; in his arms he bears a hare which is a gift and yet no gift since the animal would run away as soon as it was put down before the king. On the basis of an initial to Psalm 52 in the Douai Psalter, which depicts Marcolf, the typical mediaeval fool, in a net on two crutches and wearing torn shoes before Solomon, it has been suggested that the king in the Ormesby Psalter marginal scene represents Solomon, while the figure on the ram may be identified with Marcolf.⁷ In view of the opening words of Psalm 52, which appear immediately above the marginal illustration — “Dixit insipiens in corde suo non est deus” [i.e., the fool’s confident unbelief] — the scene may very possibly have a dual connotation based both on the legend and on the religious text.

Incidentally, in the Latin *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*, between the fourth to the fifth verbal contest, “Marcolf must insinuate himself back into the royal presence, and Solomon has ordered the dogs set on him if he returns to the court. Earlier Marcolf hid three mice up his sleeve, and he now hides a live hare under his garment in order to make his way past the dogs. The ruse works: the dogs pursue the released hare instead of Marcolf, and he finds his way to Solomon, who asks how Marcolf managed to get in. Marcolf’s response” is “Calliditas, non misericordia”, i.e., “Cleverness, not compassion”.⁸

was because of the influence of Syriac (also Targumic Aramaic and Syriac are varieties of Middle Aramaic, but Syriac is Christian and has its own alphabet).

⁵ All these repetitions of the word I translate with “immediately” or “straightaway” give the narration a flavour we now all know from Hanna-Barbera animated films. They are full of action. *Pseudo-Sirach* text sometimes lingers on conversation, but the adverb seeks to give the impression of sustained action.

⁶ On p. 106 in: Lilian M.C. Randall, “Exempla as a Source of Gothic Marginal Illumination”, *The Art Bulletin*, 39(2), 1957, pp. 97–107.

⁷ According to S.C. Cockerell, *Two East Anglian Psalters at the Bodleian Library*, Oxford, 1926, p. 18.

⁸ Quoted from p. 362 in: Nancy Mason Bradbury, “Rival Wisdom in the Latin *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*”, *Speculum*, 83(2), 2008, pp. 331–365.



A naked character (Marcolf?), riding a ram, carries a hare on the palm of his hand, while being on his way to meet a crowned character (King Solomon?).

6. Hares in Folklore

There are, of course, differences in how, in different parts of the world, hares were viewed in folklore. Take for example England: Jacqueline Simpson gave the Folklore Society's Briggs Lecture of 2007 about how the book *Lore of the Land* was written.⁹ In her resulting article, Simpson conceded: "*Lore of the Land* is simply a selection, although a big one. I reckon that for my own county, Sussex, it includes about one-quarter of what might have gone in, although I hope it is the most interesting quarter."¹⁰ Hares are associated with witches:¹¹

At first our very enthusiastic and helpful editor at Penguins, Nigel Wilcockson, had a Grand Vision of his own, arising from his lifelong fascination with folklore. He wanted us to bring together all the legends of the whole of Britain, and indeed of Ireland too. [...] But, Nigel inquired, were there really enough English local legends to fill a book? Just you wait and see, we said. He soon learned. In fact, before long he was desperately

⁹ Her presentation appeared as a journal article, "Seeking the Lore of the Land [pre-headline:] Twenty-Sixth Katharine Briggs Memorial Lecture, November 2007", *Folklore*, 119(2), pp. 131–141. The book is: Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, *The Lore of the Land: A Guide to England's Legends, from Spring-Heeled Jack to the Witches of Warboys*, ix+918 pages, London: Penguin Books, hardbound, 2005; paperback, 2006; downmarket version: Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, *The Penguin Book of Ghosts: The spectres, apparitions and phantoms that haunt 'The Lore of the Land'*, edited by Sophia Kingshill, London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, xx+456 pages, hardbound, 2008 (a review essay of mine discussed these books, dwelling especially on Jewish parallels: E. Nissan, "Considerations in the Margin of *The Lore of the Land*: A Review Article", *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 63, 2010, pp. 145–158.).

¹⁰ Simpson, "Seeking", p. 132.

¹¹ Simpson, "Seeking", p. 132, my underlining.

pleading that the book was becoming too long, and could we cut down on the number of churches whose foundations were mysteriously shifted in the night, and the number of witches who got shot while running around as hares — just a couple per county, please, please.



A hare and dogs in hot pursuit, from the beginning of the Book of Proverbs. From a 13th-century Hebrew manuscript from the Ostolineum in Lemberg (Ms 141).¹²

7. A Temporal Coincidence: The Rabbit in Mandela's (Sculpted) Ear

Occurrence of a motif in different contexts is no firm proof of causal relation or even correlation. The following drives in this point. In the evening of 22 January 2014, right after I prepared a letter about this hare motif to be emailed to Jan Ziolkowski on the next morning, BBC Radio 4 reported that a tiny sculpted rabbit was going to be removed, by order of the South African government that had commissioned a nine-metre (30ft) bronze statue of Nelson Mandela, standing outside the government's headquarters known as the Union Buildings in Pretoria, and unveiled on South Africa's Day of Reconciliation, on 16 December, a day after Mr Mandela was buried. The rabbit was placed inside the right ear of the sculpture, by the two sculptors, Andre Prinsloo and Ruhan Janse van Vuuren; they claimed that the rabbit was a trademark (made after they were denied permission to engrave their signatures on the trousers of the statue, but the government denied they ever asked); a double sense was intended, they claimed: in Afrikaans, *haas* means both 'rabbit' and 'haste'; as they had to complete the sculpture in haste, the rabbit represented the pressure of finishing the sculpture on time. A report in the issue of *Time* magazine of the week ending on (and

¹² Zofja Ameisenowa, *Bestiarius w Biblii hebrajskiej z XIII wieku (Studium ikonograficzne z 6 reprodukcjami)* (Menora III,1; Warszawa, 1933) 36 p. incl. pl. (facsim.).

dated) 3 February 2014 concluded by another pun: “Talk about a *hare-raising* incident! (Sorry, we couldn’t resist).”

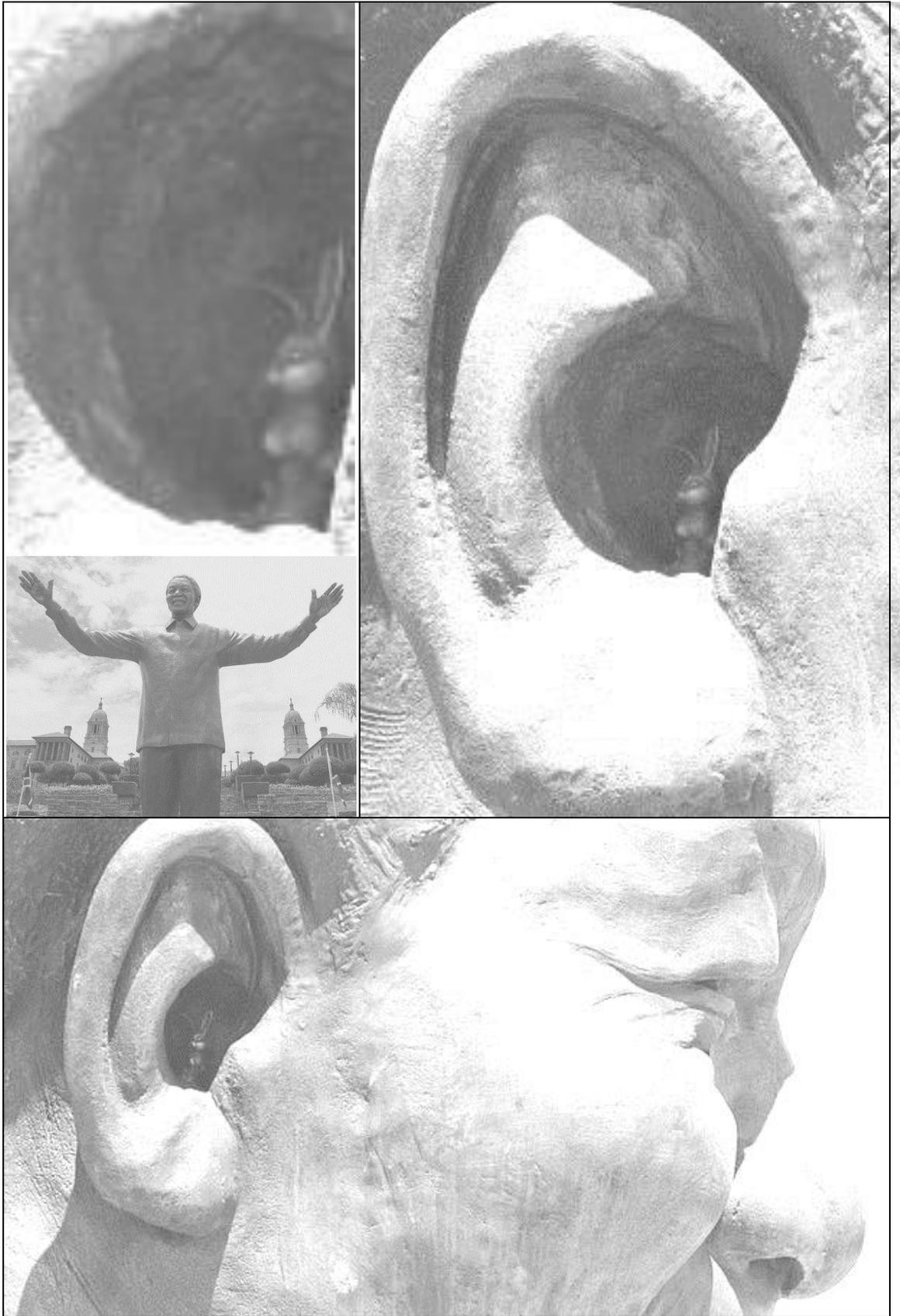
This in turn illustrates re-motivation, something we also saw with the rationale of the hare of *Pseudo-Sirach* (the reason Ben Sira gives in his first message to Nebuchadnezzar is different from what makes the hare in particular relevant and especially offensive for Nebuchadnezzar, namely, the incident with Zedekiah involving the hare, and which is indeed mentioned in what the wicked men at the public bath tell Jeremiah when they reject his reassurances of not telling around what he saw them doing).



Hares in the title of Tractate *Betsah*, in a Jewish manuscript from Italy.

Understandably, the rabbit uncovered peering from inside the ears of Mandela’s statue was considered to be disrespectful, and the sculptors apologised because of the uproar the discovery of the rabbit caused (it had been noticed at neither the moulding, nor the unveiling of the statue). In a sense, one could conceive of this as yet another occurrence of the construct by which a leporid (here, a rabbit instead of a hare) is inconveniently and disrespectfully “given” by some maverick to a generally respected ruler, even though in the case at hand, it was a past ruler in effigy (the rabbit, too, was in effigy). Clearly this episode owes nothing to the Marcolfian tradition or *Pseudo-Sirach*.

Likewise, one should be cautious before jumping to the conclusion that Marcolf’s hare, whose rationale is that it is the gift that is not a gift, is related to the hare that Ben Sira sends Nebuchadnezzar out of different reasons (allegedly to show condescension to his claim of mastery over beasts, not only humans, as well as arguably in order to remind him of his having been shamed by Zedekiah by means of a hare). By chance, the rabbit in the ear of Mandela’s statue reminds of of Russian legend about the centaur Kitovras, whose wife resided in his ear, and who taught Solomon how to capture him.



The rabbit placed by sculptors in the right ear of Nelson Mandela's statue.

The example of Mandela's statue is closely related to the subject of "Intentions and Effects of Portraying the Ruler", this being the title of a section in an article I previously published.¹³

8. Rabbit Magic in the Medieval Islamic East

Is the appearance of the *arnévet* (hare) in the *Life of Ben Sira* (a work arguably from Caliphal Iraq) in any relation to lore about the *arnab* (Arabic for 'rabbit' and 'hare') in Arabic texts from the Middle Ages? In my opinion, the relation to Nebuchadnezzar being shamed by Zedekiah on account of the former eating the flesh of a live hare is a sufficient explanation. Nevertheless, it is interesting that *arnab* as *materia medica* or an ingredient in medieval Arab magic was ascribed extraordinary properties, such that would shame people. This however was not necessary known to the author of the *Life*. At any rate, consider a paper by Tzvi Langermann.¹⁴

That paper begins as follows: "MS St Petersburg, Russian State Library Hebrew-Arabic I 2239 (IMHM F 55683, twenty-five folia) is a fragment of a longer work on the medical and magical uses of animals and their bodily parts. The language is Arabic, but the text is copied in Hebrew characters. There are no signs at all that the author was Jewish; this work thus appears to be one of many non-Jewish works written in Arabic that were transcribed into the Hebrew alphabet, especially in medicine and related fields." On p. 174, Langermann translates as follows a magical recipe: "If you want the women at home to throw off their clothes and dance, place the blood of a rabbit on a wick, and light it up in a lamp in the middle of the house. You won't see a woman who doesn't throw off her clothes and dance."

9. The Hare in *Materia Medica*

Bernhard Heller wrote:¹⁵ "The popular belief that the hare changes its sex led to the use of hare's stomach as a remedy for barrenness. When the angel warned the wife of Manoah, who later became the mother of Samson, not to eat any unclean thing, he meant the stomach of a hare (V, 55.177; VI, 206.111)." The latter citation is of Vol. 5 of Louis Ginzberg's digest in seven volumes of Jewish traditions about biblical narratives, *Legends of the Jews*.¹⁶

10. The Roman Emperor Didius Julianus Receiving a Gift of a Hare and Eating It

An ancient monarch receiving a gift of a hare and eating it occurs in Roman historiography. When the emperor Pertinax tried to restore military discipline, the

¹³ "Intentions and Effects of Portraying the Ruler" is the title of Sec. 3.6 (pp. 547–555) in: E. Nissan, "Nested Beliefs, Goals, Duties, and Agents Reasoning About Their Own or Each Other's Body in the TIMUR Model: A Formalism for the Narrative of Tamerlane and the Three Painters", *Journal of Intelligent and Robotic Systems*, 52(3-4), 2008, pp. 515–582 + 340–341.

¹⁴ Y. Tzvi Langermann, "*Materia medica et magica* from Animals, Including a Long, Unknown Passage from al-Mas'ūdī", *Aleph*, 11(1), 2011, pp. 169–178.

¹⁵ On p. 405 in: Bernhard Heller, "Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (continued from JQR, N.S., XXIV (1934), 307)", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 24(4), 1934, pp. 393–418.

¹⁶ Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909–1938.

Praetorian Guard revolted on 28 March 193 C.E., after a reign of just a few months. “In the chaotic hours that followed, the senator Didius Julianus managed to gain the support of the praetorians and won the throne”.¹⁷ Two months later, Didius Julianus was replaced on the throne by the much better regarded Septimius Severus. “Three ancient authors give a detailed description of Julianus’s elevation”.¹⁸ Of these, Cassius Dio was quite hostile to Marcus Didius Julianus, even though he was among the senators who (apparently intimidated) voted him into office, thus regularising his imperial powers. “The second is Herodian, who used Dio’s work as one of his sources”, and is therefore hostile. The third source instead was sympathetic to Didius Julianus: “The third is the life of Didius Julianus in the *Historia Augusta*, a series of imperial biographies that is of much later date and derives its information from a lost, contemporary source”. Martijn Icks relates:

Cassius Dio, a personal acquaintance of Didius Julianus, did not think much of his fellow senator, claiming that “as advocate for others I had frequently proved Julianus to be guilty of many offences”. According to him, Julianus was “at once an insatiate money-getter and a wanton spendthrift, who was always eager for revolution”. Herodian, too, paints an unflattering picture of the man, calling him “one of the Romans censured for an intemperate way of life”. The anonymous author of the *Historia Augusta* provides a counterview, denying all charges of extravagance and claiming that “Julianus was so frugal as to make a suckling pig or hare last for three days, if anyone by chance presented him with one; and often, moreover, even when there was no religious reason for it, he was content to dine on cabbages and beans without meat”. These different assessments of Julianus’s character are reflected in the different representations of his investiture.

11. A Hare as an Introductory Gift to a King, in *Costantino Fortunato*

One comes across a hare given as an introductory gift to a king, for the benefit of the person introduced through an emissary (but in this case by the emissary’s initiative, with the person introduced being aware) in the fable *Costantino Fortunato*, set in Bohemia — an early version of Perrault’s better known “Puss in Boots” — from the first volume (1553) of *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Pleasant Nights*, 2 vols., 1550–1553: the frame story is set on the island of Murano in the Venice Laguna) by Giovan Francesco Straparola (b. Caravaggio, Bergamo, ca. 1480–1500, d. 1557). The original Italian title of that tale is “FAVOLA I. Soriana viene a morte, e lascia tre figliuoli: Dusolino, Tesifone e Costantino Fortunato; il quale per virtù d’una gatta acquista un potente regno”.

La gatta, che era fatata, mossa a compassione di Costantino e adirata contra i duo fratelli che sí crudelmente lo trattavano, disse: — Costantino, non ti contristare; perciò che io provvederò al tuo e al viver mio. — Ed uscita di casa, se n’andò alla campagna; e fingendo dormire, prese un lepore, che a canto le venne, e l’uccise. Indi andata al palazzo regale e veduti alcuni corteggiani, dissegli voler parlare col re: il qual, inteso che era una gatta che parlar gli voleva, fecela venire alla presenza sua; e addimandatala che cosa richiedesse, rispose che Costantino suo patrone gli mandava donare un lepore che preso aveva: e appresentollo al re. Il re, accettato il dono, l’addimandò chi era questo Costantino. Rispose la gatta, lui esser uomo che di bontà, di bellezza e di potere non aveva superiore. Onde il re le fece assai accoglienze, dandole ben da mangiare e ben da bere. La gatta,

¹⁷ Quoted from p. 91 in: Martijn Icks, “The Accession of Didius Julianus (AD 193)” (pp. 91–94) in his article “Creating Tyrants in Ancient Rome: Character Assassination and Imperial Investiture”, Ch. 4 in: Martijn Icks and Eric Shiraev (eds.), *Character Assassination throughout the Ages*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 83–100.

¹⁸ Icks, *ibid.* (like all other quotations in my same section).

quando fu ben satolla, con la sua zampetta con bel modo, non essendo d'alcuno veduta, empí la sua bisciaccia, che da lato teneva, d'alcuna buona vivanda; e tolta licenzia dal re, a Costantino portolle. I fratelli, vedendo i cibi di quai Costantino trionfava, li chiesero che con loro i partecipasse; ma egli, rendendogli il contracambio, li denegava. Per il che tra loro nacque una ardente invidia, che di continovo rodeva loro il core.

This passage as given below in English is from Nancy Canepa's 2011 translation.¹⁹

But the cat, who was enchanted, felt compassion for Costantino and, angry with the two brothers who treated him so cruelly, said, "Costantino, don't be sad, for I intend to provide for both your and my own lives". The cat left the house and went out to the country, where, pretending to be asleep, she caught a passing hare and killed it. Then she went to the royal palace, and when she saw some courtiers she told them that she wanted to speak with the king. The king, hearing that it was a cat who wanted to speak to him, had her summoned and asked her what sort of request she brought. The cat answered that her master, Costantino, was sending him a gift of a hare he had caught, and she presented it to the king. The king accepted the gift, and asked the cat who this Costantino was. The cat answered that he was a man whose goodness, beauty, and power had no superiors. At this, the king gave the cat the warmest of receptions, offering her delectable things to eat and to drink. When the cat was well sated, with a sleight of paw and without being seen by anyone she filled her knapsack, which was next to her, with some of the fine victuals. Then she asked the king's permission to leave, and brought the food to Costantino. When his brothers saw the food that Costantino was enjoying, they asked him to share it with them, but he returned their favor and refused. And this gave rise to a burning envy, which continuously gnawed at their hearts.

12. Lowly Food and a Mesopotamian King: Disney's Lentils of Babylon

Incongruity resulting in a grotesque effect occurs in a Walt Disney story written in Italy, *Paperino e le lenticchie di Babilonia*, i.e., *Donald and the Lentils of Babylon*. It was scripted by Romano Scarpa, and published in the weekly *Topolino*, issue 250–251 of the two weeks 11–18 September 1960. The story is about Donald Duck (Paperino) and his uncle, the richest duck on earth, Scrooge McDuck (known in Italian as Paperon de' Paperoni), who has bought a brand of lentils from Babylon (i.e., modern Iraq). The criminal gang that is his nemesis, the Beagle Boys (known in Italian as the Banda Bassotti, even though in Italian a *bassotto* dog is a dachshund — a sausage dog — not a beagle), intervenes in order to thwart Uncle Scrooge in his promotion of that commercial enterprise. One of the Beagle Boys, the one identified by his inmate number, 372-273, disguises himself as the ghost of King Assurbanipal. Never mind that the historical Assurbanipal was an Assyrian, not a Babylonian.²⁰

¹⁹ The passage is on pp. 78–79 in "Costantino Fortunato" in *Feathers, Paws, Fins, and Claws: Fairy-Tale Beasts*, edited by Jennifer Schacker and Christine A. Jones (illustrated by Lina Kusaite), Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2015, pp. 76–81. Canepa's translation of this tale first appeared in *Marvelous Transformations: An Anthology of Fairy Tales and Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Christine A. Jones and Jennifer Schacker (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2013), pp. 106–108.

²⁰ I became aware of this story upon finding a mention and brief partial description of it in the Turin-based webpage by Andrea Salimbeti, "Personaggi Disney occasionalmente mascherati – Salimbeti", posted at <http://www.salimbeti.com/paperinik/occasion.htm>



The ghost of Assurbanipal threatens Donald Duck's nephews: "Malanni e calamità... per chi ha a che fare con le lenticchie di Babilonia!" ("Ailments and calamities... to anybody who has to do with the lentils of Babylon!"). In the original image in colour, the three ducklings — Huey, Louie, and Dewey (known in Italian as Qui, Quo, Qua) — are shown as a black silhouette. The ghost is entirely yellow. The ground is red, and the background is sky-blue. This image appeared in Romano Scapra's Disney story *Paperino e le lenticchie di Babilonia*, i.e., *Donald and the Lentils of Babylon*.

What is grotesque is the association of a famous ancient king from Mesopotamia, one who entered modern legend because of royal might, with matters as prosaic and low-prestige as selling or not selling lentils. This is a food staple that is neither vital for the population (in the story, the Mesopotamian king is not one feeding the people in time of famine), nor prestigious (i.e., not as prestigious as caviar and champagne are in modern Western societies), even though relatively to other pulses, lentils are nutritious, valued across cultures, and have been traditionally carrying a somewhat higher price.

What is especially grotesque is that the ancient mighty king, doubly exotic because of his geographical and temporal removed, appears as a ghost, and one who is threatening not because things he would do to the living, but because of supposedly authoritative superior knowledge of bad things to come. And for what? Because of dealing with lentils.

The association of lentils with a prominent statesman is also instantiated by the name, *dokol* (from *De Gaulle*), given in Chad to an appreciated cultivated variety of lentils. During the Second World War, once Chad was secured for the Allies, Chadian farmers were ordered to cultivate and then consign the entire crop of that variety of lentils to the authorities, for use by the forces of Charles De Gaulle's Free France. This convinced the locals that *dokol* lentils are preferable, and therefore they were motivated to contravene on the orders of the French authorities, and to keep part of the crop surreptitiously, for consumption by local people.

Incidentally: in Iraqi Arabic, *māš* is one of the terms for 'lentil(s)', along with the usual *adas*, but is especially used in the compound *rəzz u-māš* 'rice and lentils'. The etymology is from India, through either Turkish or Persian. Berthold Laufer explained, in his *Sino-Iranica*, p. 585:

48(517). *māš*, mungo bean (*Phaseolus mungo*). Skr. [Sanskrit] *māṣa* (*Phaseolus radiatus*). This Indian word is widely diffused over Asia: Tibetan *ma-ša*, Mongol *maša*, Turkī *maš* ("a small kind of bean"), Taranči *maš* ("bean"), Osmanli *maš*.²¹

In the Middle Persian Zoroastrian work *Būndahišn*, Ch. 27, lentils are called *mačag*.

²¹ Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran*. Publications of the Field Museum of Natural History. Anthropological Series, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1919), pp. i, iii–iv, 185–597, 599–630. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782155>

13. Nebuchadnezzar Becomes Curious, to His Detriment

The association of an ancient powerful Mesopotamian king and food in a lowly context is also what happens in the rabbinic legend about Nebuchadnezzar being surprised by Zedekiah, King of Judah, while the former is eating the flesh of a hare that is still alive: as an animal predator would do, not a human being. Nebuchadnezzar is embarrassed, Zedekiah promises he shall keep the secret, but he does not, and divulges that compromising information about Nebuchadnezzar. This in turn is an aetiology for why Nebuchadnezzar was so keen to deal cruelly with Zedekiah and his kingdom. This embarrassing association of Nebuchadnezzar with a hare is arguably alluded to in the *Life of Ben Sira*, when Ben Sira sends him a letter written on the scalp of a hare. This causes Nebuchadnezzar to become curious about the hare's scalp (readers of the *Life of Ben Sira* are supposed to know about the episode of Zedekiah surprising Nebuchadnezzar eating a living hare, so readers would be all the more amused because of that allusion). When Nebuchadnezzar asks Ben Sira how he managed to transform the scalp of the living hare into writing material, Ben Sira discloses the technique, and reveals that this is how King Solomon had the legs of Nebuchadnezzar's own mother, the Queen of Sheba, undergo depilation before he would have intercourse with her: this is surely reason for Nebuchadnezzar to be embarrassed.

14. Concluding Remark

We have considered a motif that on the face of it, would appear to be quite peculiar: a hare or rabbit given as a present to a king or ruler. Somewhat surprisingly, we have unearthed more occurrences than one would have suspected. Admittedly, some of these occurrences are more central to a prototype, and some are more remote, and yet made relevant once we are aware of the more central ones. More generally, we have briefly looked at hares or rabbits in folklore or in magic.

Typological closeness does not necessarily entail phylogenetic derivation of the lore. In the central occurrences of a hare as a gift to a king, the present giver is a clever trickster (Ben Sira, Marcolf), and there is an element of mockery involved. In the story associated with Marcolf, a hare is a gift that cannot be kept because it runs away (this is the answer to a riddle proposed by the King, and yet the King himself was unaware of the correct answer). In the *Life of Ben Sira*, the child prodigy Ben Sira sends the King a letter written on the treated scalp of a live hare, and apparently the author of that medieval work of mock-sapiential literature used a hare at all because of an early rabbinic tale which aetiologicalised Nebuchadnezzar's cruel treatment of Zedekiah by relating that Zedekiah had watched Nebuchadnezzar in an embarrassing situation, then broke his promise not to divulge this. Implicitly, Nebuchadnezzar being sent a hare is an insolent reminder of that embarrassing episode. The *Life of Ben Sira* then has Nebuchadnezzar question Ben Sira about the method by which he achieved making the hare's skin as smooth, and Ben Sira further embarrass him, by claiming that he had applied the same technique of depilation King Solomon had used with the Queen of Sheba, supposedly Nebuchadnezzar's mother. (This legendary parentage originated as an illustration of the idea that Solomon's promiscuity brought about, in retaliation, the destruction of the Temple he had built: Nebuchadnezzar, the destroyer of the Temple, is made into Solomon's son, even though they were historically

separated by over four centuries. The author of the *Life of Ben Sira* was being mischievous however.)

One comes across a Roman emperor, Didius Julianus, who received bad press from the Roman historians. One of the things reported about him, was that he was keen to receive gifts, even as prosaic a gift as venison, in particular a hare, which he would eat. That action in the context of Roman historiography is not as complex as the early rabbinic homiletic lore about embarrassment brought about in connection to a hare, something which was also mentioned in relation to the Seventy rendering into Greek the Hebrew for 'hare' with an epithet, in order not to offend the Lagid king of Egypt who had commissioned the translation of the Hebrew Bible.

By coincidence, a scandal erupted when the artists who made a statue of Nelson Mandela placed without approval a rabbit inside one ear of the statue, something they considered to be their signature. This is a peripheral occurrence of the cluster of occurrences we have been considering, but it is typologically interesting, because of the constellation involving a ruler being honoured, and a rabbit causing embarrassment.

We have also seen that an early modern fabulist (in *Costantino Fortunato*) could contrive of a hare being a present made to a king, who not only appreciates the gift, but also rewards the person claimed to have sent the gift. That person is the title character of the fable, and that a hare was made into a present "makes sense" once one considers that the protagonist was quite poor, and that the agent who physically gave the present (upon that agent's own initiative) is a talking cat, a praeternatural helper.