

SAINTS AND
SACRED MATTER

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SAINTS AND SACRED MATTER

The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond



Edited by

CYNTHIA HAHN AND HOLGER A. KLEIN

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JEWISH VENERATION OF THE “SPECIAL DEAD” IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND BEYOND

RA‘ANAN BOUSTAN

T Introduction

THE HUMAN SCIENCES IN GENERAL AND THE FIELD OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES in particular have experienced in recent years what some have termed a “material turn.”¹ As a central aspect of this new orientation, scholars are showing intensified interest not only in the cultural and social meanings that human actors attach to the production, circulation, and consumption of objects but also in how persons and things are dialectically constituted within networks across the divide between the animate and the inanimate.² This broad development has encouraged scholars focused on material culture, on the one hand, and on discursive practices, on the other, to collaborate in developing new methods and approaches for interpreting the role of objects in materializing value systems and in turn in mediating human relationships.

In part because of these developments, corporeal relics as well as associated artistic and architectural productions have been subjected to increasingly sophisticated interpretation across the disciplines of the history of art and architecture, social and cultural history, and religious studies.³ Corporeal relics, as fragments of bodies, are by definition not human-made artifacts. At the same time, the power of these objects to perform miracles of healing, protection, and other forms of intercession derive from their capacity to extend and direct the agency of the special human being of which they had been a part. From the vantage point of the scholar of religion, the power of these fragments of brute corporeal matter—bits of bone, pieces of skin, and congealed blood—depends on their socially meaningful deployment within specific cultural settings. Relics of this sort require both physical containers

1 On this development within the discipline of religious studies, see M. A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford, 2011). Notable examples of this shift within the study of late antique and medieval Christianity are C. Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011), and P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2009). A similar reorientation has taken place in the study of Buddhist traditions, largely stimulated by the pathbreaking work of Gregory Schopen, especially the studies collected in his *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu, 1997).

2 W. Keane, “Subjects and Objects,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. C. Tilley et al. (London, 2006), 197–202.

3 See, e.g., J. M. H. Smith, “Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c. 700–c. 1200),” *ProcBrAc* 181 (2012): 143–67; A. J. Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks* (Chicago, 2006), 9–10; P. Cox Miller, “‘Differential Networks’: Relics and Other Fragments in Late Antiquity,” *JECrSt* 6 (1998): 113–38.

(e.g., reliquaries) and discursive practices (e.g., ritual performances) to render them recognizable and thus efficacious. In short, despite the special ontological status accorded relics by practitioners, their holiness would appear to be constituted through the “framing” work of culture.⁴

Scholarship on the creation, circulation, and function of relics in late antiquity and the early middle ages has, however, focused largely on their place within Christian piety and practice. This essay, by contrast, pushes the study of relics beyond their location and function within the Christian cult of the saints to consider how their history is intertwined with Jewish veneration of the “very special dead”⁵ and their material remains. While normative Jewish and Christian attitudes toward corporeal remains differed considerably, I argue that, in the course of late antiquity, Jews in the Mediterranean world came to share with their Christian contemporaries a set of common presuppositions regarding how certain objects mediate the divine or spiritual realm precisely through their participation in materiality. On the ground, overly neat and tidy distinctions between Jewish and Christian veneration of corporeal remains at burial sites and elsewhere do not hold.

Indeed, as we shall see, Jews participated in the wider “semiotic *koine*” that conditioned how people across various religious communities in the late antique Mediterranean and Near East conceptualized the relationship between evanescent matter and sacred power.⁶ During late antiquity and continuing into the middle ages, technologies such as seal matrices, coin dies, and tools for drawing and painting provided powerful idioms, grounded in practical action, for conceptualizing processes of reproduction and replication, both organic and spiritual.⁷

4 See especially C. Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?” *Numen* 57 (2010): 284–316.

5 This phrase is, of course, from chapter four of P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), 69–85, although Brown draws a sharper distinction between Jewish and Christian practices than I think is warranted (10).

6 On the notion of a common late antique “semiotic *koine*” shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, see T. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, 2009), 149 and 276–78.

7 See H. L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia, 2000), esp. 64–87. Of course,

The discursive field governing notions of form and image, original and copy, was pervasive—and thoroughly familiar to Jewish writers from Philo of Alexandria to the rabbis of later Roman Palestine.⁸ This shared semiotic regime and the concrete idioms through which it achieved expression explains how Jews could appropriate elements of the Christian discourse of relics to forge new approaches to the corporeal remains of their own sages and martyrs.

This having been said, I should clarify at the outset that my argument is not the positivist claim that Jews engaged in precisely the same practices of relic veneration as did Christians, nor that they did so on the same scale. Rather, my claim is that material practices like relic veneration and pilgrimage do not merely belong at the peripheries of Judaism but rather ended up being integral to the forms of Jewish piety that emerged in the early middle ages from within the cultural matrix of late antiquity.

In addition, I should stress that my investigation draws heavily on literary sources to trace the historical shift I believe occurred toward the end of late antiquity in Jewish attitudes toward the bodies of the special dead. This textual emphasis serves as a necessary complement to the fragmentary and highly ambiguous nature of the evidence for Jewish ritual use of the bodies of the special dead in the archaeological and art historical record. My orientation reflects the increasing willingness across a range of disciplines to consider how things (whether unworked objects or artifacts), representations (spatial, visual, or verbal), and human bodies (conceptualized variously as subjects or objects) interact with each other in their roles as the fundamental media of religious practice and experience.⁹

I begin the essay by reflecting on what is at stake in studying relics within the context of

despite their *longue durée*, these technologies were subject to historical change, which in turn had an inevitable impact on notions and practices of signification in the Middle Ages; see B. M. Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago* (Leiden, 2010), esp. 55–159.

8 See the foundational study in A. Altmann, “*Homo Imago Dei* in Jewish and Christian Theology,” *JR* 48 (1968): 235–59.

9 See especially the programmatic statement in D. Morgan, “Introduction: The Matter of Belief,” in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. D. Morgan (London, 2009), 1–17.

Jewish culture. I then review the evidence for ritual veneration of the special dead both within and beyond the bounds of rabbinic literature. I focus primarily on materials from the eastern Mediterranean and especially from the regions of Palestine and Syria.¹⁰ In the process, I track the significant disparities between Jewish and Christian practices in the prominence each accords to the veneration of the special dead and their corporeal remains. Yet, despite these differences, I suggest that Jewish writers, exegetes, and jurists of the fifth to eighth centuries exploited developments within Christian religious practice to discover in older rabbinic martyrological traditions the raw materials for articulating a novel approach to relics. Moreover, I argue that the dual impact of rabbinization and Christianization transformed the Jewish cult of the dead in ways that the first generations of rabbis could not have foreseen. By the end of late antiquity, the veneration of the special dead at their tombs would ultimately receive rabbinic sanction and would become a more pronounced facet of Jewish piety in the medieval period.

My argument reverses the deeply entrenched tendency among scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity to trace the flourishing of Christian veneration of the dead back to “roots” in the first-century world of Jesus.¹¹ Of course, it would be a profound understatement to say that a great deal has changed in the study of the historical

10 Because of significant regional variation, for the present I leave aside consideration of Jewish burial and graveside practices in the western Mediterranean, in particular the well-documented community of Rome. On the local character of Jewish burial practice and the significant variations from region to region, see the excellent synthesis in É. Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, trans. E. Trapnell Rawlings and J. Routier-Pucci (Ithaca, 2009), 18–27, and the earlier literature cited there; and, in much more depth, L. V. Rutgers, *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome: Evidence of Cultural Interaction in the Roman Diaspora* (Leiden, 1995), 65–81.

11 See the influential study of the Jewish “background” to Christian pilgrimage practice in J. Jeremias, *Heiligengräber in Jesu Umwelt (Mt 23,29. Lk 11,47): Eine Untersuchung zur Volksreligion der Zeit Jesu* (Göttingen, 1958). Jeremias’s approach has been further developed by numerous scholars, most recently by John Wilkinson in, for example, “Jewish Holy Places and the Origins of Christian Pilgrimage,” in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. R. Ousterhout (Urbana, 1990), 41–53, and Wilkinson, “Visits to Jewish Tombs by Early Christians,” in *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie*, ed. E. Dassmann, K. Thraede, and J. Engemann, 2 vols. (Münster, 1995), 1:452–65.

development of Judaism and Christianity since Jeremias penned his seminal *Heiligengräber in Jesu Umwelt*, both in this specific domain of religious practice and more generally as well.¹² Still, I think it worth reviewing the arguments of those scholars who, over the past twenty years, have pulled the rug out from under the simplistic model of the evolutionary development of Christian practice from Jewish antecedents. At the same time, I am critical of a scholarly approach that judges Jewish veneration of the dead, when it has arisen as a historical phenomenon, to be contrary to the “essence of Judaism.”

Veneration of the Special Dead in Judaism: Some Historiographic Reflections

Before embarking on historical study of the veneration of the special dead and their corporeal relics in ancient Judaism, it may be worth anticipating the questions of those who would argue that Judaism *as a religious system* leaves no room for such practices. Conventional wisdom would have it that the ritual veneration of special persons, in its various forms, is marginal and indeed foreign to Judaism. I believe that this view suffers from a misguided desire to align the purported “essence” of Judaism with the religious and indeed aesthetic preferences of modern liberal strands of Jewish culture.

Thus, in his contribution to a volume from the late 1980s on “sainthood” in the “world religions,” Robert Cohn gives clear and unequivocal voice to this perspective:

Saints are vital to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, as are the *walī* in Sufism, *rōṣī* and guru to Hinduism, and the *arabānt* to Theravāda and the *bodhisattva* to Mahāyāna Buddhism. These figures stand at the center of the piety of these traditions. But classical Judaism, by contrast, never officially designated a set of human beings as worthy of special reverence or models of pious behavior.

12 For criticism of the approach to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity that was exemplified by Jeremias’s methodology, see J. E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish Christian Origins* (Oxford, 1993), and D. Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden, 1995), 22–78.

The literary genre of hagiography is nearly absent from biblical and classical Jewish literature and appears only sporadically among later mystical groups. Most telling, the Jewish calendar lacks any celebration or memorial devoted to a holy person; there are no saints' days or seasons celebrated throughout the Jewish world. With rare exceptions Jewish graves did not become shrines, and relics are unheard of. Those saintlike figures that Judaism has produced have emerged not from its classical rabbinic center but from its periphery, from forms of Judaism localized in time or space. Thus North African Jewry, heavily influenced by Muslim practice, and Eastern European Hasidism, repelled by rabbinic formalism, both developed traditions of saints.¹³

Let us take up briefly the core claims advanced in this rhetorically loaded passage. Cohn builds into his criterion for sainthood "official" procedures for the designation of a person's sanctity; but highly localized, ad hoc processes of sanctification characterize many of the religious traditions Cohn names, not least many forms of Christianity itself. Equally slippery is Cohn's elision of the difference between the *ritual veneration* and the *imitation* of holy persons; this slippage denies to Judaism both of these rather distinct forms of piety. Even his designation of hagiography as a "genre" flies in the face of much scholarship on Christian saints' lives, which applies this term to narrative materials across a wide range of literary forms.

The apologetic aims of Cohn's tactical combination of superficial comparison and analytical imprecision is perfectly clear: he wishes to declare at the outset of his study that Judaism differs fundamentally from Christianity. He underwrites his claims about the distinctive nature of Judaism by unreflectively deploying the historically and culturally specific category "sainthood" as a human universal suitable for comparative purposes. But this rhetoric of Jewish-Christian and specifically Jewish-Catholic difference undermines any utility his comparativist project might have had.

13 R. L. Cohn, "Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism," in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, ed. R. Kieckhefer and G. D. Bond (Berkeley, 1988), 44.

Even more problematic to my mind, however, is Cohn's strategy for consigning to the periphery the very Judaic phenomena he sets out to analyze. Having denied the existence of Jewish hagiographical writings, of Jewish relic veneration and pilgrimage to the graves of the holy dead, and of Jewish communal celebrations of festival days associated with the births or deaths of special persons, he proceeds to pile up numerous examples of just such discourses and practices. He accomplishes this feat of marginalization by relegating all these uncomfortable facts to what he designates as "the periphery" of Judaism. Unsurprisingly, this periphery is identified with various abject sites of Jewish culture, namely, "mystical" forms of Judaism and the localized—and thus circumscribable—Judaism of Eastern European and North African communities. By contrast, the center in this account is constituted by classical rabbinic literature, the philosophical Judaism exemplified by Maimonides, and reformist strains of modern Judaism that emerged in Western Europe.

Cohn's view is far from atypical. Thus, for example, in a recent special issue of *Past & Present* dedicated to the study of relics across a range of religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam), the author of the essay on Judaism writes regarding the treatment of the corporeal remains of the Jewish victims of the Nazi Genocide that "in the final analysis, Judaism does not permit the creation or adoration of relics. . . . The strictly monotheistic and iconoclastic tendencies of Judaism—strongly influenced by the biblical imperative not to create graven images—leads mainstream Jewish theology to be highly suspicious about the notion of any relics, let alone those produced by the murder of six million Jews."¹⁴ Such categorical assertions regarding

14 Z. Waxman, "Testimonies as Sacred Texts: The Sanctification of Holocaust Writing," *PP* 206 (2010, suppl. 5): 321–41 (322). It is no coincidence, I think, that the article about Judaism in another recent special issue dedicated to the comparative study of relics (*Numen* 57, nos. 3–4 [2010]) likewise focuses on materials related to the Holocaust, though in this case the author happily does not make broad statements about the unparalleled status of Holocaust "relics" in Jewish history and indeed comes to the opposite conclusion, namely, that the human remains on display in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum render the museum a kind of "reliquary" that informs the articulations of Jewish identity at that site;

the “monotheistic and iconoclastic tendencies of Judaism” hinder proper interpretation of the long and rich historical record of actual Jewish practice, especially in the premodern world.¹⁵ As we will see, this view elides the robust precedent in earlier and indeed contemporary forms of Judaism for practices of veneration at the tombs of “martyrs” and other Jewish “saints,” including burial *ad sanctos*, annual pilgrimages to the graves of the righteous (*tsaddiqim*), and the use of earth and other “secondary” relics that have had contact with burial sites.¹⁶ Some might have found or might find such practices theologically or legally (halakhically) problematic or even forbidden. But they were not so judged by their producers or users, who operated with sophisticated and often highly nuanced conceptions regarding which objects could be imbued with sacrality, how they acquired it, and their proper ritual treatment.

The Cult of the Dead, from Ancient Israel to the Early Roman Period

There is little evidence for a robust “pre-Christian” Jewish background for the emergence of the Christian cult of the saints. And

see O. B. Stier, “Torah and Taboo: Containing Jewish Relics and Jewish Identity at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” *Numen* 57 (2010): 505–36.

15 For insightful critique of the application of such “common sense” notions as “monotheism” to early Judaism and Christianity, see P. Fredriksen, “Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time Has Come to Go,” *SR* 35 (2006): 231–46. And on the nuanced, shifting, and quite heterogeneous attitudes toward art and figural representation in ritual and other contexts among Jews in antiquity (including the rabbis), see the recent comprehensive discussion in L. I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven, 2013), esp. 403–67.

16 For discussion of these practices in various forms of medieval, early modern, and modern Judaism, see L. Raspe, “Jewish Saints in Medieval Ashkenaz: A Contradiction in Terms?” *FJB* 31 (2004): 75–90; eadem, “Sacred Space, Local History, and Diasporic Identity: The Graves of the Righteous in Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenaz,” in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, ed. R. S. Boustán, O. Kosansky, and M. Rustow (Philadelphia, 2011), 147–63; E. Shoham-Steiner, “For a Prayer in that Place Would Be Most Welcome: Jews, Holy Shrines, and Miracles—A New Approach,” *Viator* 37 (2006): 371–96; J. W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford, 2002); S. Epstein, “Les pèlerinages hassidiques en Pologne,” *CahJud* 8 (2000): 100–111; O. Kosansky, “Tourism, Charity, and Profit: The Movement of Money in Moroccan Jewish Pilgrimage,” *CA* 17 (2002): 359–400.

yet, ritual care for the dead among Jews would hardly have been a complete novelty in late antiquity. In the face of a venerable historiographic tradition of theological squeamishness, biblicists and archaeologists have recently come to recognize the impressive pattern in the archaeological and textual record pointing to the existence of a widespread “cult of the dead” in the highlands of Judah and Israel during the Iron Age.¹⁷ This cult entailed the provisioning of deceased ancestors with nourishment, household and personal items, and protective amulets for use in the afterlife, likely in return for ancestral blessings of fertility. Over time, these mortuary practices were subjected to intensifying regulation and even condemnation by the priestly elite of Jerusalem, although archaeological evidence for the ongoing vitality of the cult of the dead into the early sixth century suggests that these biblical restrictions did not generate significant change on the ground. Some scholars have suggested that elements of this “cult of the dead” may have continued into the late Second Temple period.¹⁸

At the same time, biblical legislation regarding corpse impurity (Leviticus 21:1–3, 11; Numbers 6:6–7; 19:11, 14, 16, 22; 31:19), as it was elaborated variously by certain groups in Second Temple society, does seem to have had a palpable impact on burial practice in Judaea and its environs. This concern may have prompted the installation of ritual baths (*miqva’ot*) at rock-cut or burial-cave tombs in and around Jerusalem; at the same time, avoidance of the “gratuitous” transfer of corpse impurity may have encouraged the use of simple trench graves, even in contexts like Qumran where burial in caves would have been relatively easy.¹⁹ It has thus been suggested that Jewish

17 See especially E. M. Bloch Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (Sheffield, 1992); eadem, “The Cult of the Dead in Judah: Interpreting the Material Remains,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 213–24.

18 For balanced assessment of the possible existence of a Jewish “cult of the dead” in early Roman Palestine, see B. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA, 2003), 49–52.

19 See especially J. Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2011), 155–64, and Y. Adler, “Ritual Baths Adjacent to Tombs: An Analysis of the Archaeological Evidence in Light of the Halakhic Sources,” *JSJ* 40 (2009): 55–73. For detailed treatment of the development of the laws of corpse impurity at

funerary practices in Roman Palestine from the first to fourth centuries such as the provisioning of the dead had largely been drained of the specific role they had played within the older “economy” of cultic exchange between the living and the dead, although precisely what function these customs did serve remains open to debate.²⁰

More important still, even where care for the dead by the living was understood to ensure care for the living by the dead, such practices should not be facetiously conflated with pilgrimage to and veneration at the tombs of a special class of dead persons. This distinction is especially important when the dead are revered not by the members of a given family but as part of wider communal ritual. The view that some Jews, in both Palestine and the Diaspora, collected and reburied the bones of the venerated dead at places of religious significance, such as synagogues, has been most vigorously advocated by Jack Lightstone.²¹ Lightstone’s treatment of the evidence can be faulted for collapsing materials from throughout antiquity, from the early Hellenistic to the late Roman periods. His most suggestive evidence for the Jewish veneration of martyrs is the often-discussed shrine to the Maccabean martyrs in Antioch, which may have been a Jewish synagogue before it passed into Christian hands in the fourth century.²² Unfortunately, this intriguing episode may be nothing more than the product of Christian supersessionist claims on an imagined Jewish shrine rather than a reflection of actual Jewish practice.²³

Qumran and among the early rabbis, see V. Noam, “Qumran and the Rabbis on Corpse-Impurity: Common Exegesis—Tacit Polemic,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Text and Context*, ed. C. Hempel (Leiden, 2010), 397–430; and on corpse-impurity within the overall rabbinic conception of impurity, see V. Noam, “Ritual Impurity in Tannaitic Literature: Two Opposing Perspectives,” *JAJ* 1 (2010): 65–103.

20 D. Green, “Sweet Spices in the Tomb: An Initial Study on the Use of Perfume in Jewish Burials,” in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, ed. L. Brink and D. Green (Berlin, 2008), 145–73.

21 J. N. Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred: Mediation of the Divine among Jews in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora* (Chico, CA, 1984), 70–87.

22 For recent assessment of the evidence and useful review of previous scholarship, see D. Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs* (New York, 2009), 63–83.

23 M. Vinson, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Homily 15 and the Genesis of the Christian Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs,” *Byzantion* 64

Equally tantalizing, if uncertain, are the deposits of human bones discovered by archaeologists in the 1930s beneath the doorways of the synagogue in Dura Europos, a city on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. The excavators of this mid-third-century structure (remodeled in 244/45 and abandoned about a decade later during a Sassanian siege in 256) unearthed collections of human finger bones in an extension of the hinge socket under the doorsill of the main entrance into the synagogue hall as well as under the socket of the south doorway.²⁴ According to Carl Kraeling, the author of the final report, the bone deposits reflect the long-standing ancient Near Eastern practice of incorporating foundation deposits into public or private buildings, perhaps for protective or apotropaic purposes.²⁵ Recently, however, Jodi Magness has called this interpretation into question, arguing instead that a closer analog might be the relics of Christian saints that were routinely buried under the apses of churches; moreover, drawing on later rabbinic sources, she suggests that the finger bones may have served to transform the synagogue into a sanctified space within which the dead—perhaps a prominent member of the community—might intercede on behalf of the congregation.²⁶ This find is certainly striking and should not be downplayed; indeed, if Magness is correct, these deposits represent a rare

(1994): 166–92; also L. V. Rutgers, “The Importance of Scripture in the Conflict between Jews and Christians: The Example of Antioch’s Maccabean Martyrs,” in *Making Myths: Jews in Early Christian Identity Formation* (Leuven, 2009), 19–28; first published in *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World*, ed. L. V. Rutgers et al. (Leuven, 1998), 287–303.

24 C. H. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, Final Report*, vol. 8, pt. 1, *The Synagogue* (New Haven, 1956), 19.

25 Kraeling, *Excavations at Dura Europos*, 19 and 361. See now the comprehensive discussion of the various apotropaic strategies employed in the synagogue, including the doorway deposits, in K. B. Stern, “Tagging Sacred Spaces in the Dura-Europos Synagogue,” *JRA* 25 (2012): 171–94, esp. 189–91, and Stern, “Mapping Devotion in Roman Dura Europos: A Reconsideration of the Synagogue Ceiling,” *AJA* 114 (2010): 473–504.

26 J. Magness, “Third Century Jews and Judaism at Beth Shearim and Dura Europos,” in *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, ed. D. M. Gwynn and S. Bangert (Leiden, 2010), 135–66, esp. 144–47. A similar interpretation of the deposits was already offered in S. Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame, 1997), 145–47.

and very early example of the ritual use of corporeal relics in a Jewish context. At the same time, her interpretation must remain in the realm of speculation until further support—either archaeological or textual—can be found to rescue this puzzling case from anomalousness.

The well-studied necropolis at Bet She'arim in the Lower Galilee represents a final possible candidate for a site at which Jews during the pre-Constantinian period engaged in practices (of one kind or another) directed at a special class of dead persons. Beginning in the third century, this elaborate complex of two dozen interconnecting catacombs appears to have become associated with Rabbi Judah the patriarch (d. ca. 220) and the patriarchal dynasty.²⁷ A rich vein of narrative tradition in early rabbinic sources reports that at his death Rabbi Judah was brought to Bet She'arim from his residence in Sepphoris for interment, an occasion that was apparently marked by public expressions of mourning and broad communal participation in the funeral procession.²⁸ Lee Levine and others have persuasively argued that the prestige of the patriarchs interred there transformed the necropolis into “a choice burial site,” especially for those situated within the regional networks that radiated out from the patriarchal household.²⁹ The inscriptional evidence found at the site thus attests to the desire among some Jews from the third century on to have their physical remains buried or reburied alongside the tombs of their prestigious contemporaries, such as the Jewish patriarchs and (eventually) rabbinic sages. Still, no literary, inscriptional, or material evidence suggests that Bet She'arim served as a focal point for local or regional pilgrimage practices or that its dead and their tombs were treated as objects of ritual veneration.

27 See, most recently, Levine, *Visual Judaism*, 119–40, and his assessment of long-standing scholarly debates concerning the relationship of the necropolis to various sectors of Jewish society, especially the patriarchal household, the rabbinic movement, and various Diaspora communities in the eastern Mediterranean.

28 Significantly, this narrative appears already in the Palestinian Talmud (*yKil* 9.4 [32a–b]; *yKet* 12.3 [35a]), which was redacted prior to the end of the fourth century. For analysis of these sources as well as of the later reflexes of the tradition, see O. Meir, *Rabbi Judah the Patriarch: Palestinian and Babylonian Portraits of a Leader* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1999), 300–337.

29 See now Levine, *Visual Judaism*, 128–35 (citation on 135).

In a careful survey of early Jewish pilgrimage practices from the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, Allen Kerkeslager has shown that Jews not only made pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem and to comparable holy sites throughout Egypt, but also included the tombs of the dead in their sacred itineraries.³⁰ Yet, Kerkeslager stresses that even where we do find Jewish pilgrimages to the tombs of the dead these practices seem initially to have centered almost exclusively on Israel's biblical ancestors, rather than on more recent figures of religious authority.³¹ Kerkeslager concludes that “the growth and proliferation of traditions of pilgrimage to the tombs of Jewish heroes and ancestors in later periods was nourished by an infrastructure of ideology and practice that did not clearly emerge until the third century C.E.”³²

In sum, Christian pilgrimage to the graves of the special dead and practices of veneration performed there did not emerge out of an already highly developed landscape of Jewish holy sites and routes. Even where Jewish pilgrimage to the tombs of biblical figures was practiced in the pre-Constantinian period, this practice cannot adequately explain the flourishing of the Christian cult of saints in late antiquity. Instead, the reflexes of such practices within Jewish culture, which we will see began to take shape from the fifth century on, emerged together with and in response to the Christianization of Roman society and especially the imperially sponsored development of Palestine as a Christian “Holy Land.”

Changing Norms Regarding Graveside Rituals in Rabbinic Literature

Pilgrimage to the graves of the special dead and various forms of worship conducted at those sites were slow to emerge within Judaism. Significantly, the emergent rabbinic elite not only did little to promote the veneration of rabbinic sages and martyrs, but actively resisted such

30 A. Kerkeslager, “Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity in Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt,” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. D. Frankfurter (Leiden, 1998), 99–225, esp. 123–46.

31 *Ibid.*, 142.

32 *Ibid.*, 132.

developments. Yet, despite this initial resistance, there is evidence that rabbinic norms regarding veneration of the dead, including rabbis, began to shift gradually in the fifth century, with long-term consequences for Jewish practice toward the end of late antiquity.

Broadly speaking, a powerful strain within early rabbinic compilations like the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the Palestinian Talmud (ca. 200–400 CE) sought to prevent the sanctification of holy places outside of Jerusalem and its destroyed Temple.³³ This negative attitude toward the expansion of sacred topography in Palestine may also have informed those traditions that placed restrictions on the veneration of the dead at their tombs, although these restrictive measures are explicitly justified on other, more specific grounds. Most common is the rabbinic concern that rituals performed at the graveside would lead to the promiscuous spread of corpse impurity, especially in the absence of proper on-site provisions for purificatory bathing.³⁴ At the same

time, other texts indicate that some rabbis were concerned that graves might become dangerous sites of interreligious contact that could attract the “idolatrous” practices of non-Jews.³⁵

Yet, as Joshua Levinson has recently demonstrated, numerous rabbinic narratives evince far greater latitude toward the veneration of the dead than we might expect from these polemical voices, a tendency that intensified in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries.³⁶ In particular, these rabbinic sources show that systematic exceptions could be made for certain classes or categories of the dead. Thus, the fifth-century midrash *Lamentations Rabbah* contains a tradition (which also appears in a different form in the Babylonian Talmud) regarding the honors accorded King Hezekiah at his tomb. The passage reports that a group of rabbis established a study-session (*bet va'ad*) at this site and even went so far as to place a Torah scroll upon his grave in appeal to the dead king's knowledge of scripture that had resulted from his perfect piety during his life.³⁷ This tradition suggest that, at least beginning in fifth-century Palestine, rabbinic authorities not only increasingly tolerated graveside rituals, but could even countenance the harnessing of what might appear to be something like a necromantic practice for the purposes of Torah study. This source does not present us with what might be easily dismissed as “popular piety.” Rather, we witness here the power of the pious dead to enhance the scholastic authority of the rabbis.

If Jewish culture in late Roman Palestine saw the emergence of novel and considerably more flexible norms regarding contact with the graves and even bodies of the special dead, this trend

33 E. Ben Eliyahu, “The Rabbinic Polemic against the Sanctification of Sites,” *JSJ* 40 (2009): 260–80. See also S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1962), 128–38; L. Di Segni, “On the Development of Christian Cult Sites on Tombs of the Second Temple Period,” *ARAM* 18–19 (2006–7): 381–401.

34 On the rabbinic expansion of the biblical law of corpse impurity (esp. Num. 19:14–16, 18, 22) to include not only a “tent” but almost anything that “shelters” or “overhangs,” see J. L. Rubenstein, “On Some Abstract Concepts in Rabbinic Literature,” *JSQ* 4 (1997): 33–73, esp. 34–40. Indirect evidence for pre-Constantinian rabbinic opposition to graveside ritual as a source of corpse impurity is found at *Didascalia apostolorum* 26: “But make no observance of such matters, and do not think that such things pollute, and do not alter your conduct on their account, and seek after separations or sprinklings or baptism or purifications. For in the ‘secondary legislation’ (*deuterōsis*) anyone who touches a tomb or somebody who is dead is to be baptized, but you, in accordance with the Gospel and in accordance with the power of the Holy Spirit, gather in the cemeteries to read the Holy Scriptures and to offer your prayers and your rites to God without observance [of the ‘secondary legislation’] and offer an acceptable eucharist, the likeness of the royal body of Christ, both in your congregations and in your cemeteries and on the departure of those who sleep. You set pure bread before him, which is formed by fire and sanctified by the invocation, offering without demur and praying for those who sleep” (translated in A. Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Annotation* [Turnhout, 2009], 255–56). For discussion, see B. R. McCane, “Bones of Contentment? Ossuaries and Reliquaries in Early Judaism and Christianity,” *Second Century* 8 (1991): 235–45, esp. 243–44. Compare the parallel passage in the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* 6.27–30.

35 See, e.g., *Genensis Rabbah* 96.5; also *Tanhuma Buber, Vayehi* 5.

36 J. Levinson, “There is No-Place Like Home: Rabbinic Responses to the Christianization of Palestine,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power in Late Antiquity*, ed. N. Dohrmann and A. Y. Reed (Philadelphia, 2013), 99–120. See especially Levinson's discussion of the tradition in the Palestinian midrash *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 11.23 (cf. *bBM* 84b) regarding the competition between the towns of Gush Halav and Meron over the corporeal remains of Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai; also, in much greater detail, J. Rubenstein, “A Rabbinic Translation of Relics,” in *Ambiguities, Complexities, and Half-Forgotten Adversaries: Crossing Boundaries in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. K. Stratton and A. Lieber (forthcoming).

37 *Lamentations Rabbah* 25; *bBK* 16b–17a. Cf. 2 Chron. 32:33.

eventually produced a wholesale shift in both the legal realm and in actual practice. Israel Ta-Shma has traced the introduction, toward the end of late antiquity, of a new legal (halakhic) principle that the bodies of Israel's deceased "righteous" do not confer impurity (צדיקים אינם מטמאין; *tsaddiqim 'enam metam'in*).³⁸ While Ta-Shma does suggest that this greater latitude toward the impurity of the dead has its roots in long-standing, regionally specific trends within Palestinian Judaism, he locates the formal enunciation of this legal principle in the eighth or ninth century. In his view, it was within a Christian orbit that Jews—among them rabbinic authorities—began to carve out a legitimate space for contact with the bodies of the "righteous" and thus for Jewish veneration of the special dead.

Ta-Shma based his historical reconstruction on the appearance of an extended debate about relics in the Syriac *Disputation of Sergios the Stylite against a Jew*, set in Gousit, a town near Emesa in southern Syria.³⁹ At the center of the extended passage in question stands an argument between Sergios and a Jewish "teacher" (*malphânâ*) regarding the legitimacy of the Christian cult of relics. Citing Numbers 19:11–22, the Jew notes that biblical law forbids contact with "the bone of a dead man."⁴⁰ He thus contends that the relics of Christian saints convey impurity to their surroundings (e.g., church buildings) and to those who come into contact with them. Sergios argues in response that, in fact, scripture draws a clear distinction between the remains of "the righteous" (*zaddiqê*), who are not to be classed among the dead, and those of wicked sinners or the heathen; the Jews are blind to the fact that the righteous (i.e., the saints) remain alive beyond the grave.⁴¹ In addition, Sergios also maintains that

scripture itself provides narrative precedent for the Christian cult of relics, pointing especially to Moses's transfer of the bones of the patriarch Joseph from Egypt to the Promised Land (Genesis 50:25–26; Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32); if contact with the bones of certain special dead were forbidden according to scripture, Moses would have violated the very Law (*nâmôsâ*) he had just given.⁴² Noting the similarity between this debate between Christian and Jew and the relatively late halakhic pronouncement that "the righteous do not convey impurity," Ta-Shma explains this apparent innovation in Jewish law as the internalization by Jews of the widespread Christian practice of using corporeal remains to transform places of interment into holy sites.

I find largely persuasive Ta-Shma's argument regarding the development of this new rabbinic norm within the wider context of the Jewish–Christian encounter. At the same time, I do not share his optimism that the *Disputation of Sergios the Stylite* can bear the evidentiary weight required to fix the precise timing of this halakhic innovation, which is enunciated in the context of rabbinic martyrological narrative. It is far from certain that this dialogue accurately reflects then-existing rabbinic or Jewish norms, which then gave way in the eighth or ninth century.⁴³

42 *Disputation of Sergios* 13.13–21 (fol. 30r–31r); Hayman, *Disputation of Sergios*, 1:36–38, 2:36–38. Among other arguments from scripture, Sergios also points to the special bodies of Daniel's companions, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, which, having repelled both beasts and fire (Dan. 3:27, 6:22), would surely be immune to impurity (*Disputation of Sergios* 14.10–12 [fol. 33v–34v]; Hayman, *Disputation of Sergios*, 1:40–41, 2:40–41). On the citations of the Old Testament in the text, see A. P. Hayman, "Biblical Text in the *Disputation of Sergios the Stylite against a Jew*," in *The Peshitta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy; Papers Read at the Third Peshitta Symposium* (Leiden, 2006), 77–86.

43 Hayman, *Disputation of Sergios*, 2:51–70, argues, somewhat tentatively, that the latter parts of the text (from chap. 5 on) are less literary and more realistic and thus may contain elements of contemporaneous Jewish–Christian dialogue and perhaps even records an actual encounter. But scholars remain deeply divided about whether Christian disputation literature reflects social contact with Jews or rather presents primarily literary constructions of the "Jew" and "Judaism" drawing on the well-worn rhetorical conventions of the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition. For balanced assessment, see P. Fredriksen and O. Irshai, "Christianity and Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4, *The Late Roman–Rabbinic Period*, ed. S. T. Katz (Cambridge, 2006), 977–1035, esp. 1007–29. Whatever the case may be for this literature as a

38 I. Ta-Shma, "The Righteous Do Not Defile—Law and Narrative" (Hebrew), *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 1 (2002): 45–53.

39 Ta-Shma, "Righteous Do Not Defile," 51. The passage in question is *The Disputation of Sergios the Stylite against a Jew* 13.1–15.13 (fol. 27v–40r). For Syriac text and English translation, see A. P. Hayman, ed. and trans., *The Disputation of Sergios the Stylite against a Jew*, CSCO 338–39, Syr. 152–53, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1973), 1:33–47 (Syriac) and 2:34–46 (English).

40 *Disputation of Sergios* 13.1 (fol. 27v); Hayman, *Disputation of Sergios*, 1:33, 2:34.

41 *Disputation of Sergios* 13.5–12 (fol. 28v–30r); Hayman, *Disputation of Sergios*, 1:34–36, 2:35–36.

Instead, what the Jewish interlocutor in this text most likely demonstrates is that Christian writers in this period were still representing Jews as misguided by their failure to comprehend the “still living” nature of the corporeal remains of those who had achieved holiness in their lifetimes, a view that had arisen in Christian anti-Jewish polemic as early as the third and fourth centuries.⁴⁴

In what follows, I argue for a more gradual process of narrative and legal development, one deeply informed by Jewish martyrological literature produced in Byzantine Palestine in the sixth and seventh centuries. The halakhic principle that “the righteous do not convey impurity” is first explicitly invoked in a narrative that appears in the eighth- or ninth-century *Midrash Mishle* (midrash on Proverbs).⁴⁵ The provenance of *Midrash Mishle* is difficult to pin down because it contains large quantities of earlier literary traditions from various Palestinian corpora as well as the Babylonian Talmud; we must thus be content to locate it some place where the redactor would have had access to a transregional stream of rabbinic and pararabbinic traditions from both Palestine and Babylonia.⁴⁶

In two separate chapters of its commentary on Proverbs (chs. 1 and 9), *Midrash Mishle* alludes to or makes use of material from *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, a unified compilation of rabbinic martyr-narratives that circulated in narrative and liturgical forms in early Byzantine Palestine from the late fifth century on.⁴⁷ The first instance is a

whole or for its individual instances, I think it unwise to lean too heavily on it for straightforward evidence regarding Christian knowledge of actual Jewish beliefs and practices in the immediate social milieu of the author.

44 See, e.g., the parallel passages in *Didascalia apostolorum* 2.6; *Apostolic Constitutions* 6.27–30. This Christian conception of the martyrs and saints is best captured by Peter Brown in *Cult of the Saints* (n. 5 above), esp. 70–71: “The early church tended to leap-frog the grave: the long processes of mourning and slow adjustment to the great sadness of mortality tended to be repressed by a heady belief in the afterlife. . . . The late antique cult of the martyrs represents, therefore, a consistent imaginative determination to block out the lurking presence . . . of black death.”

45 On the dating of this midrash, see B. L. Visotzky, trans., *The Midrash on Proverbs: Translated from the Hebrew with an Introduction and Annotations* (New Haven, 1992), 8–12.

46 Visotzky, *Midrash on Proverbs*, 12.

47 For the dating of the martyrology, see R. S. Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism*, TSAJ 112 (Tübingen, 2005), esp. 97–98.

relatively brief discussion of the notion of vicarious atonement advanced by the martyrology. The second entails what I will argue is an extended citation of the martyrology—or at least of material closely related to it.

The first passage, which is introduced as “another interpretation” (*davar aher*), belongs to an extended reflection on the sale of Joseph by his brothers (Genesis 37:21, 27, and 29) and his dealings with them once he had risen to power in Egypt (Genesis 43:34 and 49:26). Elements from the Joseph narrative inform and are interwoven with a running exegesis of Proverbs 1:11–13.⁴⁸ The passage is triggered by Proverbs 1:11 (“If they say, ‘Come with us, let us set an ambush to shed blood, let us lie in wait for the innocent without cause’”): the “innocent without cause” is identified with Joseph, while his brothers, who had looked for an opportunity (*metsappin*) to kill him, are identified with those who “lie in wait” (*nitspennab*).⁴⁹ When the passage at last reaches Proverbs 1:13 (“We shall find every precious treasure, we shall fill our homes with loot”), it identifies the acquisition of “precious treasure” in the verse with the sale of Joseph, who had been precious to his father; of course, the verse also is said to allude to Joseph’s intercession on behalf of his brothers and the help he provides them in acquiring as “loot” gold and silver from the treasuries of Egypt.⁵⁰ Thus, according to *Midrash Mishle*, these three verses in Proverbs 1 represent a rendering in miniature of the Joseph narrative that is recounted at much greater length in the book of Genesis.

It is in this context that the midrash reports the following statements regarding the sale of Joseph: “R. Joshua ben Levi said: ‘The ten martyrs were seized [and slain] just for the sin of selling Joseph.’ R. Abun said: ‘You must conclude that ten [are martyred] in each and every generation—and still this sin remains unexpiated.’”⁵¹ The direct linkage drawn by Rabbi Joshua ben Levi between the sale of Joseph and the atoning

48 Hebrew text in B. L. Visotzky, ed., *Midrash Mishle* (New York, 1990); English translation in idem, *Midrash on Proverbs*, 23–25.

49 Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle*, 16; idem, *Midrash on Proverbs*, 23.

50 Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle*, 18; idem, *Midrash on Proverbs*, 24.

51 Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle*, 18; idem, *Midrash on Proverbs*, 24.

deaths of the ten martyrs echoes the generative role that the sale of Joseph plays within the narrative logic and sacrificial theology of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.⁵² The martyrology itself had explicitly articulated the direct equivalency between the ten sages and the brothers of Joseph, stressing that God could not find ten men in any other single generation, either before or after, who are sufficiently righteous to counterbalance Joseph's brothers.⁵³ For his part, Rabbi Abun—or, more precisely, the redactor who juxtaposed the statements put in the mouths of the two sages—argues that the sin of the sale of Joseph requires ongoing self-sacrifice. In questioning the ultimate efficacy of these martyrs' deaths, Rabbi Abun perhaps also raises questions about their exceptional status. Yes, he seems to say, the ten sequential deaths of the rabbinic martyrs were necessary to atone for the sin of Joseph's brothers, but their deaths do not bring this task to completion and instead represent only one chapter in the ongoing work required of each and every generation to expiate the original national sin of the Jewish people. In downplaying the uniqueness of these ten martyrs, Rabbi Abun in effect also casts them as exempla for future action and thus as models of sanctity that can be applied to others who might choose a similar path. And, indeed, the graves of many of the ten martyrs were destined to become permanent destinations for pilgrimage during the medieval period and after, while at the same time serving as powerful models for emulation by later generations that would produce their own martyred "saints."⁵⁴

52 See Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic*, 81–85.

53 *Ten Martyrs*, recensions I–X, chapter 18, paragraphs 1–3; textual divisions of the Hebrew text follow G. Reeg, ed., *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern*, TSAJ 10 (Tübingen, 1985), here on 38*–39*.

54 For example, traditions from *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* are used in what might be called "hagiographic catenae" in early-modern itineraria for Jewish pilgrims to the Holy Land, such as the fifteenth-century *Sefer yibus ha-tsaddiqim*, ed. A. M. Lunz (Jerusalem, 1896); see, e.g., the martyrological materials in the vita of the martyr Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha (buried at Kefar Kana) on 85–87. On the emergence in the medieval period of a sacred topography in Palestine and especially the Galilee centering on the graves of "sainted" rabbis, see E. Reiner, "Traditions of Holy Places in Medieval Palestine: Oral versus Written," in *Offerings from Jerusalem: Portrayals of Holy Places by Jewish Artists*, ed. R. Sarfati (Jerusalem, 2002), 9–19. On the impact of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* on later medieval martyrological

The second passage in *Midrash Mishle* that appropriates material from the martyrological literature likewise takes up precisely this question of the imitability of the ten rabbinic martyrs by considering the proper treatment of the body of a righteous person (*tsaddiq*), in this case the martyr Rabbi Akiva. The midrash narrates the interment of Rabbi Akiva following his imprisonment and death. This story is not found in earlier rabbinic works, either Palestinian or Babylonian, but represents a significant departure from the established narrative cycle that had developed over the course of the third to sixth centuries in rabbinic circles.⁵⁵ Indeed, according to this vignette, Rabbi Akiva is presented as a kind of confessor figure who dies in prison and not as a martyr publicly executed by the Romans. In this regard, this narrative stands in contrast to the dominant form of the sage's martyrology.

This fascinating coda to the story of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom is presented in *Midrash Mishle* as an exegetical narrative affixed to a series of interpretations of the description of Lady Wisdom in chapter 9 of Proverbs. Having offered several interpretations of Proverbs 9:2 ("She has prepared the feast, mixed the wine, and also set the table"), *Midrash Mishle* records the following narrative:

Another interpretation of *And also set the table* (Proverbs 9:2)—a story is told of R. Akiva who was confined in prison and was cared for by Joshua of Gerasa. Once, on the eve of a holy day, Joshua took leave of his master and went home, whereupon Elijah

traditions, see I. Marcus, "Qiddush ha-Shem in Ashkenaz and the Story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz" (Hebrew), in *Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom*, ed. I. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (Jerusalem, 1992), 131–47, esp. 136–40.

55 The figure of Joshua of Gerasa does appear in the specific context of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom in the fifth-century *Lamentations Rabbah* 3:44 (ed. Buber, 137), but that passage does not include the material found here. Conversely, Joshua of Gerasa, who is linked to Rabbi Akiva in numerous sources, does not otherwise appear in the martyrological traditions; see especially *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata* 2; *Sifre Deuteronomy* 32; *yBer* 9.7 (14b); *ySot* 5.7 (20c); *bBer* 61b; *bMen* 29b; *bEruv* 21b; *Tanhumah, Tavo* 2; *Tanhumah Buber, Tavo* 4; *Semahot* 8.9. For excellent treatment of the literary formation of the various branches of Rabbi Akiva's martyr story, see now A. Tropper, "From Halakhah to Aggadah: The Formation of Rabbi Akiva's Martyrdom Narrative," in Tropper, *Like Clay in the Hands of the Potter: Sage Stories in Rabbinic Literature* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2011), 111–54.

the priest (*ba-kohen*) came by and stood at the door to his house, calling, “Come out, Joshua! Come out, Joshua!”

Joshua asked, “Who are you?”

Elijah replied, “I am Elijah the priest, who has come to tell you that your master, R. Akiva, has died in prison.”

They both rushed off and found the gate of the prison open and the warden and everyone else asleep, while R. Akiva was lying on his bed. Elijah took charge of him and hoisted the corpse upon his shoulder, whereupon Joshua of Gerasa said to him, “Did you not tell me, ‘I am Elijah the priest’? Surely it is forbidden for a priest (*le-kohen*) to render himself unfit by [contact with] a corpse!”

Elijah replied, “Enough of this, Joshua, my son! God forbid—there is no impurity in [the corpses of] the righteous nor even in [those of] their students (*en tum’ah ba-tsaddiqim ve-’aflo’ ve-talmidehem*).”

Having left the prison, they traveled all night until they reached the four-arched gateway of Caesarea. When they arrived at the four-arched gateway of Caesarea, they went down some descents and up three ascents. There they found a bier spread out, a bench, a table, and a lamp. They placed R. Akiva’s corpse upon the bier, and immediately the lamp was lit and the table was set. At that moment, they exclaimed, “Happy are you, O laborers in Torah! Happy are you who fear God! Happy are you, R. Akiva, for whom a good resting place has been found at the moment of your death!”

Therefore it is said, *and also set the table* (Proverbs 9:2).⁵⁶

The central concern of this narrative is to establish the principle that the body of the righteous martyr Rabbi Akiva does not convey impurity; even a person of priestly lineage, as Elijah is here said to be, may come into direct contact with the remains of the very special dead.

This narrative and its associated halakhic teaching do not appear to be original to the context of *Midrash Mishle*. The placement of

⁵⁶ I have slightly modified the English translation in Visotzky, *Midrash on Proverbs*, 49–50. The Hebrew text appears in idem, *Midrash Mishle*, 67–69.

the narrative here is triggered by the association between the “table” of the verse from Proverbs and the bier on which the sage is laid out in the cave. It is significant, therefore, that a version of this tradition also appears in almost all the complete recensions of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.⁵⁷ This text, by contrast, makes an explicit attempt to harmonize the tradition of Rabbi Akiva’s death in prison with the better-known image of his public execution: Rabbi Akiva’s execution is thus said to have occurred precisely in the interval between the departure of Joshua of Gerasa and Elijah the High Priest’s arrival on the scene.⁵⁸ It is, of course, possible that the stitching together of these accounts of Rabbi Akiva’s death reflects a secondary redactional process. Still, this impulse to harmonize a variety of martyrological materials within a single narrative framework is characteristic of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* as a whole. It seems likely to me that the story of Rabbi Akiva’s interment developed within the wider orbit of Byzantine-era rabbinic martyrology and was incorporated directly within this literature relatively early on.

It is significant, then, that *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* thematizes the redemptive power of the deaths of the rabbinic martyrs, which will be realized through liturgical commemoration and recitation. The cave in which Rabbi Akiva’s body is laid to rest as well as the set table, the chair, and especially the lamp (*menorah*) strongly suggest a cultic setting, one with strong affinities to the Christian cult of saints.⁵⁹ The compilers of *Midrash Mishle* harnessed martyrological traditions associated with the founding figures of rabbinic Judaism in order to authorize the alteration of a religious norm, namely, the halakhic strictures imposed on visitors to the graves of the

⁵⁷ The narrative appears in various forms at *Ten Martyrs* 31.33–70 (recensions I, III, V–X in Reeg, *Geschichte*, 72*–75*). Recension II is an abbreviated form of the narrative, which contains only the stories of the first two martyrs, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel.

⁵⁸ *Ten Martyrs* 33–34 (recensions I, III, V–X in Reeg, *Geschichte*, 72*–73*).

⁵⁹ For discussion of affinities between this narrative and features of the burial of Jesus in a cave in the New Testament, see J. Z. Abrams, “Incorporating Christian Symbols into Judaism: The Case of *Midrash Eleh Ezkerah*,” *CCAR Journal* 40 (1993): 11–21. I think the imagery echoes aspects of the Christian cult of saints more broadly as well.

righteous by the impurity of the dead. Moreover, the midrash does not elevate the specific rabbinic figures from the martyrology to an inimitable status. Instead, it extends the model of religious power they embody in an open-ended fashion. While the evidence remains patchy, it would seem that the novel and distinctive approach in these sources to the purity of the righteous Jewish dead reflects wider developments in the Jewish cult of “saints” in the early Byzantine period.

Holy-Face Relics among Christians and Jews

In the previous section, I traced how certain Jewish authors in the early Byzantine world carved out narrative and legal space for contact with the righteous dead and ultimately for graveside practices of veneration. I now turn to consider Jewish attitudes toward corporeal relics themselves. I focus on one particularly charged subset of corporeal relics, relics of holy faces. I suggested in an earlier study that narrative traditions about the face relic of the rabbinic martyr Rabbi Ishmael were in dialogue with sixth- and seventh-century traditions about the holy face of Christ, although I have not yet pursued these parallels in detail.⁶⁰ I analyze the affinities that Jewish conceptions of the divine face, as instantiated in material form, shared with the relics of the “holy face” of Christ that emerged in the sixth and seventh centuries.

It is significant for my purposes that, as we will see, Jews figure in Christian traditions about the holy face of Christ at the same time that Christian relic veneration forms the implicit context for Jewish traditions about their own holy-face relics. Virtually all the texts that narrate the production, circulation, and ritual use of these image-relics explicitly thematize the role of the religious other in recognizing and deploying their efficacious power. The presence of the figure of the other in these narratives does not necessarily suggest actual social contact between these groups. Yet, I would argue that the insistence in the late ancient sources themselves on the mutual intelligibility of the discourse of relics across religious

lines lends weight to the phenomenological parallels I find in the Jewish and Christian sources.

The earliest and most famous of these holy-face relics was the Image of Edessa, a designation for a shifting set of objects that in the east went under the name of the Mandyllion and, later in the Latin West, came to be called the Veronica.⁶¹ These were images of Jesus’s face imprinted on a piece of fabric during his lifetime—though at exactly what moment in his biography varied in the telling. As art historians have made clear, these images of Christ’s face should not simply be assimilated to the discourse of the icon (Gr. *eikon*) that would emerge in the Byzantine world during of the iconoclastic debates of the eighth and ninth century. In those debates, holy-face relics served as a powerful paradigm for how the divine archetype might take on form within matter in order to realize the economy of salvation. But, when the Holy Face of Christ initially appeared on the scene, it was not an icon but an image-relic; it did not derive its sanctity from the sacred image it bore but from the impress of Christ’s face on its material substance. The fabric absorbed not only the image of Christ but also the sweat or blood he wiped from his face at the moment of imprinting.⁶² The iconic function of the image of the holy face was, at first, ancillary to its function as an indexical sign pointing to Christ’s embodied life on earth and his suffering death.

Indeed, the precise difference between this relic and later icons is significant. The power of such image-relics to encapsulate the paradoxical logic of incarnational theology was expressed through their formal features. While icons generally take the form of half-length portraits, the Mandyllion images are limited to the imprint of Christ’s face and hair. In deviating from the conventional icon scheme, the replicas offer visible proof of the way in which the original was produced, that is, through mechanical

61 For a useful collection of the most important textual and pictorial sources, see M. Guscini, *The Image of Edessa* (Leiden, 2009), and H. L. Kessler and G. Wolf, eds., *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation* (Bologna, 1998).

62 See especially H. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia, 2000), 64–87; also the concise statement in G. Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC, 2011), 79–82.

60 Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic*, 125–30.

imprint. Moreover, the artisans who produced these “objects not produced by human hands” eschewed color, which was considered the most material aspect of light and was closely associated with portraiture. Instead, they developed a distinctive visual idiom characterized by black-and-white outlining more akin to drafting than painting, an idea that was intended to evoke the notion of form without substance.⁶³ Thus, according to Byzantine theologians, this wondrous object was created in the same manner that a coin die or seal transfers its image to the material substance of a coin or seal-pressing. Like the image on the copy, the holy face is referred to as a *typos* (imprint) or *sphragis* (seal). As such, it points to the absence of the divine original *from* matter, while at the very same time signifying the capacity of divine being to be made visually and even tactilely perceptible *through* matter. The relationship between original and copy is one of form, not essence. The idiom of seals and their copies continued to exert an impact on the commercial, political, and theological spheres well into the middle ages.⁶⁴

It must be stressed up front that historians now largely agree that it is only in the course of the sixth century that Christian holy portraits—the image of Edessa among them—became acceptable as intercessors on behalf of cities.⁶⁵ Still, the gradual transformation of the relic-icon of Christ’s face from legendary to actual object reaches back to relatively early traditions that describe an exchange of letters between Jesus and Abgar, king of the Syrian city of Edessa. These sources do not, however, speak of an image of Christ, let alone a cloth impressed with his face. Rather, authors like the fourth-century bishop Eusebius of Caesarea mention only the existence of a letter written by Christ to Abgar and

subsequently stored in Edessa’s archive as material testimony to the city’s early acceptance of the Christian gospel as well as to Christ’s power to heal and to protect.⁶⁶

It is only in the fifth century that we begin to hear about the existence of a pictorial representation of Christ’s face, in this case, one painted on wood. According to the Syriac text known as *The Teaching of Addai* (ca. 400 CE), Hanan, the city’s archivist, traveled to Palestine on the orders of the king to verify the reports he had heard about Christ and to bring him back to Edessa to heal the king.⁶⁷ The Savior demurs: he is not able to come to Edessa in person, for he must fulfill his fate to die on the cross at the hands of the Jews. But he does permit Hanan to paint his portrait for the king. The crucial scene of the text runs as follows:

When Hanan the archivist saw that Jesus spoke thus to him, he took and painted the portrait of Jesus with choice pigments, since he was the king’s artist, and brought it with him to his lord King Abgar. When King Abgar saw the portrait he received it with great joy and placed it with great honor in one of the buildings of his palaces. . . . After the Messiah had ascended to heaven Judas Thomas sent Addai, the apostle, to Abgar. When Addai came to the city of Edessa, he dwelt in the house of Tobia, son of Tobia the Jew, who was from Palestine. . . . Abgar sent and called Tobia and said to him: “I have heard that a mighty man has come and dwelt in your house. Bring him up to me. Perhaps by this one there will be found for me a good hope of recovery.” So Tobia arose early the next day, took Addai the apostle, and brought him up to Abgar. Addai himself knew that it was by the power of God that he was being sent to him. When Addai went up and entered before Abgar, his nobles were standing with him. At his entrance before him a marvelous vision appeared to Abgar in the face of Addai. As soon as Abgar saw

63 Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing*, 64–87; also the lucid discussion in B. V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *ArtB* 88 (2006): 631–55, esp. 634–36.

64 B. M. Bedos-Rezak, “Replica: Images of Identity and the Identity of Images in Prescholastic France,” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. F. Hamburger and A.-M. Bouché (Princeton, 2006), 46–64.

65 See the overview of the sources and relevant scholarship in L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge, 2011), 35–56; also the incisive analysis in Av. Cameron, “The History of the Image of Edessa: The Telling of a Story,” *HUKSt* 7 (1983): 80–94.

66 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.13.

67 Text and translation in G. Howard, trans., *The Teaching of Addai*, SBL Texts and Translations 16; Early Christian Literature Series 4 (Chico, CA, 1981).

the vision, he fell down and did obeisance to Addai. Great wonder seized all those who were standing before him for they did not see the vision which appeared to Abgar.⁶⁸

This account stands poised between the earlier Eusebian narrative and the full-blown traditions about the image-relic of the sixth century. An image painted on wood has replaced a letter written on papyrus. But the account speaks precisely of a painted portrait and not a miraculous imprint of Jesus's face. Moreover, it is Jesus's follower Addai who is the locus of a miraculous vision as well as the vehicle for the healing power the king desires.

Still, *The Teaching of Addai* does foreshadow several important facets of the later sources. In particular, the text deploys a Jew as an authenticating agent, while also vigorously polemicizing against the Jews as a group.⁶⁹ On the one hand, the author has a clear desire to provide a Jewish foundation for the earliest Christianity in Edessa and to stress that the Jews of the city ultimately converted to Christianity. We are thus told that "when Addai came to the city of Edessa, he dwelt in the house of Tobia, son of Tobia the Jew, who was from Palestine." On the other, in his farewell address toward the end of his teaching, Addai warns his listeners about the pernicious influence of the Jews, repeatedly highlighting their role in the crucifixion and tagging them with the epithet "the crucifiers" (*zāqōphē*).⁷⁰ He pointedly warns those who will succeed him in Edessa to "beware of the crucifiers and do not be friends with them, lest you be responsible with those whose hands are full of the blood of the Messiah."⁷¹ As in so many Christian accounts of the discovery (*inventio*) of relics, Jews play an ambivalent role, locating or authenticating the object in question,

68 Howard, *Teaching of Addai*, iv & 9–vi & 13 (Latin numerals signify Syriac text and Arabic numerals the English translation). Compare the account in the *Acts of Thaddaeus* in H. J. W. Drijvers, "The Abgar Legend," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, trans. R. M. Wilson (Louisville, 1991), 492–99.

69 S. H. Griffith, "The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Edessa in the Fifth Century," *Hugoye* 6 (2003): 269–92.

70 See, e.g., Howard, *Teaching of Addai*, xi & 23, xxix & 59, xlii & 85, and xlviii & 97.

71 Howard, *Teaching of Addai*, xliiii & 87.

while also threatening the community of the faithful with their obstinate resistance.

Despite the long prehistory of the Image of Edessa in Syrian regional tradition, it is only in the second half of the sixth century, in the wake of the unsuccessful Persian siege of Edessa in 544, that sources unequivocally attest to the existence of an image of Christ's face "not made by human hands." Significantly, this tradition appears almost simultaneously in Greek and in Latin, east and west. Thus, the Piacenza pilgrim reports that, while in Memphis in Egypt, he saw a "piece of linen on which is a portrait of the savior. People say he once wiped his face with it, and that the outline remained. It is venerated at various times and we also venerated it, but it was too bright for us to concentrate on it since, as you went on concentrating, it changed before your eyes."⁷² At almost the same moment, the Syrian-born historian Evagrius Scholasticus (527–600 CE) narrates the miraculous protective role that the image played during the siege of Edessa. In response to the Persian stratagem to tunnel under the walls of the city, the Edessenes attempt to block the channel with fire. But the timber would not catch fire without divine aid.

So, when they came to complete despair, they brought the divinely created image, which human hands had not made (τὴν θεότευκτον εἰκόνα ἣν ἀνθρώπων μὲν χεῖρες οὐκ εἰργάσαντο), the one that Christ the God sent to Agbar (sic) when he yearned to see Him. Then, when they brought the all-holy image into the channel they had created and sprinkled it with water, they applied some to the pyre and the timbers. And at once the divine power made a visitation to the faith of those who had done this, and accomplished what had previously been impossible for them: for at once the timbers caught fire and, being reduced to ashes quicker than word, they imparted it to what was above as the fire took over everywhere.⁷³

72 *Piacenza Pilgrim* §44; translated in J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, 2002), 149. Compare also the description of the wondrous portrait of Christ kept in the "Praetorium" in the basilica of Saint Sophia in *Piacenza Pilgrim* §23 (Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 141).

73 Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.27 (PG 86.2:2748–49; trans. Bohn's Ecclesiastical Library 1854).

In Evagrius's report, the holy image of Edessa serves as a palladium, a sacred image on which the safety of a city was thought to depend. Indeed, it bears special resemblance to the prototype of this class of objects, the wooden statue of Pallas Athena from Troy; it was said that, under Constantine, this palladium was transferred from Rome to Constantinople, where it was installed, along with various Christian relics, beneath the famous porphyry column that was erected in the forum of the new imperial capital.⁷⁴

Having begun its career in Jerusalem, the image of Edessa ended up traversing the archipelago of great Mediterranean cities—Edessa, Constantinople, Rome, and, after the fourth Crusade, various cities in the Latin West, including the Vatican. In each city, the image was installed in a public building from where it was taken in procession on specific occasions as material guarantor of the providential guardianship that the empire and its rulers enjoyed.⁷⁵ In short, the holy face of Christ proved perfectly suited to condensing in a single material object the discourse of Christian theology and imperial ideology and practice. Even more, the theologians and historians who mediated this tradition deployed this charged object as a means of casting the Jews of the empire both as the font of religious authority and authentication and as a threat to Orthodoxy and peace.

Did Jews in the early Byzantine world respond to this facet of the Christian discourse of relics concerning the miraculous countenance of Christ and, if so, how? Jews, like other people in late antiquity, participated in a shared discourse regarding the nature of models and their copies. The impact of this shared idiom on rabbinic thought is perhaps most famously captured in a passage from Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, which was said to have served as an admonition to witnesses

in a trial that might involve the death penalty. Contrasting the human practice of minting coins with the divine powers of reproduction, the Mishnah articulates the paradox that, while all humanity shares common origins, each individual human being is unique and thus of incomparable worth.⁷⁶

Again [but a single man was created] to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He; for man stamps many coins with one seal and they are all like one another; but the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, has stamped every man with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them is like his fellow. Therefore every man must say, For my sake was the world created.⁷⁷

As Alexander Altmann noted in his now-classic discussion of this passage, the idiom used here bears striking resemblance to Philo of Alexandria's Platonizing distinctions "between God as the archetypal image, the Logos as God's image, heavenly man as the image of the image, and earthly man as stamped with the latter."⁷⁸ But Altmann is quick to stress that the formulation in the Mishnah and its application there reflect egalitarian and individualizing impulses within rabbinic thought, a view he contrasts (variously) with Platonizing, Christian, and "Gnostic" conceptions of special mediator figures uniquely imprinted with the divine form. In his view, this mishnaic statement does not, in the end, attest to significant affinities between rabbinic conceptions of the semiotic forms that mediate between the divine and the human, but instead represents a prime instance of rabbinic difference. Moreover, if Jewish materials diverge from this view, they are either the road not taken

Translated in M. Whitby, trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus* (Liverpool, 2000), 226–27.

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Malalas 13.7; E. Jeffreys et al., *The Chronicle of Malalas* (Sydney, 1986), 174. On the development of the tradition regarding the transfer of the palladium to Constantinople, see C. Ando, "The Palladium and the Pentateuch: Towards a Sacred Topography of the Later Roman Empire," *Phoenix* 55 (2001): 369–410, esp. 397–404.

⁷⁵ E. Jeffreys, "Malalas' World View," in *Studies in John Malalas*, ed. E. Jeffreys with B. Croke and R. Scott, Byzantina Australiensia 6 (Sydney, 1990), 55–66, esp. 58.

⁷⁶ See the recent exploration of this paradox and its implications for the monetary valuation of persons in various domains of rabbinic law in M. Balberg, "Pricing Persons: Consecration, Compensation, and Individuality in the Mishnah," *JQR* 103 (2013): 169–95.

⁷⁷ *mSanh* 4:5, following the translation in H. Danby, trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford, 1938), 388. In what is often considered the "best" medieval manuscript of the Mishnah, MS Kaufman 50A, the language and especially the versification of the text differ considerably; here this passage appears as *mSan* 4:13.

⁷⁸ Altmann, "Homo Imago Dei in Jewish and Christian Theology" (n. 8 above), 242.

(Philo), are found at the margins of rabbinic Judaism (the Targumim), or bear the influence of foreign thought (“Gnostic” forms of Judaism, like Hekhalot literature).

While Altmann’s view may correctly capture the particular perspective of the Mishnah, it cannot be generalized as an expression of the essential Jewish view writ large. Midrashic, narrative, and liturgical sources from early Byzantine Palestine suggest that Jewish tradition—whether rabbinic, rabbinizing, or nonrabbinic—could in fact accommodate a wide range of positions on the problem of the bodily form of the divine and its material mediations.⁷⁹ This receptivity is hardly surprising in light of the deep and lasting impact that biblical conceptions of the body (or, indeed, bodies) of Israel’s God exerted on Jewish culture.⁸⁰

A prime example of the Jewish engagement with the notion of the holy face is found in the quasiliturgical portion of *Hekhalot Rabbati*, a central work from the corpus of the late antique Jewish ascent and adjurational texts known as Hekhalot literature.⁸¹ The passage in question describes the rituals carried out in heaven by God and his entourage at the time that the community of Israel recites the *Qedushah* (the *Sanctus*) on earth—and to which the ascender to heaven is instructed to bear witness:

Bear witness for me to them (i.e., Israel) regarding the testimony you see in me, regarding what I do to the countenance (*qelaster panav*) of Jacob, your forefather,⁸² which is engraved (*haquq*) for me upon the throne of my glory. For at the hour when you recite

“holy” before me, I bend my knee before it and I embrace it (*u-megappet ’otah*), fondle (*u-mehabbeq ’otah*), and kiss (*u-menashsheq ’otah*) it, and my hands are (clasped) upon my arms,⁸³ three times, when you speak before me “holy,” thus as it is said: *Holy, holy, holy* (Isaiah 6:3).⁸⁴

We learn here that the divine throne carries on it an engraved image of the face of the patriarch Jacob, which God lovingly caresses each time the Jewish people recites the *Qedushah*. This tradition regarding Jacob’s heavenly countenance, which has numerous parallels in midrashic, talmudic, and targumic works, is predicated on the notion that this image of Jacob resembles the appearance of the divine presence itself.⁸⁵ If that is the case, then God is here imagined engaging in the liturgical adoration of a replica of his own holy countenance; conversely, the divine countenance serves as the prototype for the heavenly manifestation of Jacob, the progenitor of Israel.

Rachel Neis has recently argued that the ritual actions attributed to God in the text bear a striking affinity to practices of icon veneration in late antique Christianity.⁸⁶ I would add to her insightful treatment, however, that these forms of embodied action—bowing, touching, embracing, and kissing—were not reserved for icons nor did they develop only with the full flourishing of the cult of icons in the Byzantine world, but were

79 See especially Y. Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadab* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 2004), and A. Goshen-Gottstein, “The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature,” *HTR* 87 (1994): 171–95, which do not collapse the difference between rabbinic and other materials, but chart a much wider set of views within rabbinic literature itself.

80 See B. D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, 2009), esp. 124–44.

81 For a synthetic introduction to this corpus, see R. S. Boustain, “The Study of Hekhalot Literature—Between Religious Experience and Textual Artifact,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2007): 135–67. On the place of Hekhalot literature within the wider historical development of early Jewish mysticism, see P. Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen, 2009).

82 Note: “your father” according to all the other manuscripts with the exception of MSS V228 and O1531, where the text reads “their father.”

83 Some manuscripts read “on its arms” (*al zero’otav*), rather than “my arms” (*al zero’otay*).

84 §164 in P. Schäfer, ed., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius, TSAJ 2 (Tübingen, 1981). See also the use of the phrase to describe the faces of each of the angels serving God (*Synopse*, §160).

85 See, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* §66, on 28:12; §78, on 32:29; §82, on 35:9; *bHul* 91b; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Gen. 28:12. It is worth noting that, in midrashic and talmudic literature, references to Jacob’s countenance more commonly use the term “likeness” (*demut*). On the traditions regarding Jacob’s heavenly face as a manifestation of the divine likeness, see especially S. Friedman, “Graven Images,” *Graven Images* 1 (1994): 233–38, and, in much greater detail, Friedman, “How Much Anthropomorphism? Allowing the *Aggadab* to Speak for Itself” (Hebrew), *Sidra* 22 (2007): 89–152. Friedman stress the difference between the notion of the divine image, which he believes is unabashedly articulated in rabbinic and other traditions from late antiquity, and the notion of divine embodiment, which he believes has been incorrectly imported into these sources by some scholars.

86 R. Neis, “Embracing Icons: Jacob as *Imago Dei* in Early Jewish Mystical Prayers,” *Images* 1 (2007): 36–54.

already a fully articulated aspect of the veneration of relics from the late fourth to early seventh centuries.⁸⁷ Indeed, we find precisely these forms of adoration being lavished on corporeal remains and graves in Palestinian midrashim from the fifth century onward. An early example of this topos is found in one of the homiletical poems (*petihtaot*) that are prepended to the fifth-century midrash to the book of Lamentations, known as *Lamentations (Ekhah) Rabbati*.⁸⁸ As part of an imaginative account of what the prophet Jeremiah did during his exile from and return to Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, the midrash relates that, when he came back to the land of Israel from Babylon, he found numerous fingers that had been cut off by the invaders from the hands of the vanquished during the sack of the city:

When he (i.e., Jeremiah) returned, he found severed fingers cast about upon the mountains. He gathered them together, embraced them (*u-megappesfan*), fondled them (*u-mehabbeghan*), and kissed them (*u-menashshegan*), and placed them within his prayer shawl. And he addressed them, “My children, did I not thus warn you saying, *Give glory to the Lord your God before he brings darkness, and before your feet stumble on the mountains at twilight* (Jeremiah 13:16a)?”⁸⁹

This brief vignette of a biblical prophet gathering the finger bones of Israelites—or, from the perspective of the midrash, of Jews—who had been killed by a persecuting enemy suggests that the discourse of relics had penetrated

deeply into the rabbinic literature of late antique Palestine, especially in martyrological or quasi-martyrological contexts. Moreover, the sequence of verbs employed here, which I have rendered “embrace,” “fondle,” and “kiss,” matches precisely the formulation found in the “face of Jacob” text from *Hekhalot Rabbati*. This idiom of adoration appears with some frequency in the midrashic literature of this period in contexts in which either God or human beings engage in acts of veneration or intercession.⁹⁰ Significantly, the positive valence that these ritual actions carry in these later sources differs considerably from the usage of these same terms in the third-century Mishnah and Tosefta and in the late fourth-century Palestinian Talmud, where it is often associated with the illicit worship of “idols.”⁹¹ But by the sixth century, as we have seen, the veneration of the special dead had begun to find a footing, however tentative, within the rabbinizing culture of Palestinian Jewry. The application of this marked terminology to God’s adoration of the face of Jacob emphatically placed this heavenly object within this emergent legal, ritual, and narrative framework.

This distinctive nexus of ideas and language informs the treatment of the martyred body of the central figure in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha. I discussed this narrative cycle above in connection with the traditions about Rabbi Akiva’s interment. Here I focus on the martyrology’s treatment of Rabbi Ishmael’s own semidivine countenance.

In its elaborate account of Rabbi Ishmael’s life—from his miraculous conception to his gruesome execution—*The Story of the Ten Martyrs* describes the sage as possessing a beautiful and radiant face, which is said to resemble the

87 Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (n. 62 above), passim.

88 My discussion addresses the recension of *Lamentations Rabbati* printed in S. Buber, ed., *Midrasch Echa Rabbati: Sammlung aggadischer Auslegungen der Klagelieder* (Vilna, 1899; repr. Hildesheim, 1967). On the dating, text, and complex transmission-history of *Lamentations Rabbati*, see P. D. Mandel, “Between Byzantium and Islam: The Transmission of a Jewish Book in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods,” in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Y. Elman and I. Gershoni (New Haven, 2000), 74–106. I would like to thank Tzvi Novick for calling my attention to this passage.

89 *Lamentations Rabbati, petihta* 34 (Buber ed., 19b). My translation.

90 See, e.g., *Pesiqta Rabbati* 3, where the tomb of the matriarch Rachel is ritually venerated, causing her to intercede on behalf of her “children”; *Lamentations Rabbati, petihta* 25 and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 13.11, where the verbs describe the adoration of the Jerusalem Temple by the divine Presence or Glory; *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 28, where Rabbi Ishmael embraces and kisses the decapitated head of his colleague Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel after his execution. See also *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 5, 16, and 17 and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* 13, where this language refers to adoration that God (or, in one case, Elijah) lavishes on the righteous or the repentant on their way to eternal life.

91 *mSanh* 7:6; *tSanh* 10:3; *ySanh* 7:9 (25b); also *Mekhilta de-Shimon bar Yohai* to Exod. 22:19.

countenance of the great angel Metatron.⁹² More significant still, the language employed in the martyrology to link the face of Rabbi Ishmael to its heavenly model echoes the verbal idiom used by Christian theologians when elucidating the paradoxical logic behind the translation of divine essence into the human features on the Mandylion. Naturally, both Jewish and Christian writers have recourse to a common source, the biblical account of the creation of human beings in the divine “image” and according to the divine “likeness” (Genesis 1:26; κατ’ εικόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν and וְיַצְרָנוּ אֱלֹהִים בְּצַלְמֵנוּ וְבְדִמְיוֹנוֹ).⁹³ The martyrology refers to the form of Rabbi Ishmael’s face as his *demut*, his likeness, which it reports resembled the *demut* of the great angel Metatron, himself understood as the Sar ha-panim, the Prince of the Divine Countenance.⁹⁴ Like both the heavenly icon of Jacob and the face of Metatron, the radiant countenance of Rabbi Ishmael is likewise a materialization of the divine visage. And, in this one case, the divine visage has been manifest in actual fleshly matter. The chain of divine being is mediated through a descending sequence of replicated images in a manner very much like the general Platonizing framework of early Philonic thought and contemporary Christian theology. We are here far removed from the Mishnaic insistence on the ontological gap between the divine and the human and from its corollary, the common origin of all human beings despite their uniqueness.

This convergence of Jewish and Christian conceptions of the holy face is perhaps most striking in the portion of the martyrology that depicts the Romans making ritual use of the relic of Rabbi Ishmael’s actual face. This passage appears at the end of the account of Rabbi Ishmael’s

martyrdom, during which the skin of the sage’s face is peeled off by the Roman executioner. The mask of his face is then preserved in the treasury at Rome, but is brought out of safekeeping every seventy years for use in the following ritual:

The countenance of R. Ishmael is still kept in wicked Rome. And every seventy years, they (i.e., the Romans) take a healthy man and have him ride on [the back of] a cripple; they summon a man who proclaims before him: “Let him who sees, see; and anyone who does not see it, will never see.” They place the head of R. Ishmael in the hand of the healthy man. They call the healthy man Esau and the cripple Jacob because of his limp. And they proclaim: “Woe to him when this one rises up for the sin of the other. Woe to Esau, when Jacob rises up for the crime of R. Ishmael’s head,” as it is written: *I will wreak my vengeance on Edom through My people Israel* (Ezekiel 25:14).⁹⁵

This text is obscure and certainly does not accurately record any actual object or ritual. But what is important for my purposes is the cultural imagination disclosed in the text. Having begun its career in the Holy Land, the mask of Rabbi Ishmael’s face has found its way into the storehouses of the imperial capital. Through ritual use, it connects its carrier to the patriarch Jacob, who is himself the earthly double of the heavenly figure carved upon God’s throne as a representation of the collectivity of the people of Israel. Of course, it is the Romans who engage in this ritual act. But rather than confirming God’s favor as concretized in Roman political dominion, the ritual in fact effects God’s promise to the Jews that Jacob will avenge the crimes of his brother “Esau,” a symbol for Rome. Read together with material from Hekhalot literature, this scene links the heavenly liturgy of adoration performed by God before the icon of Jacob to the macabre pageant of the Romans, thereby transforming the love of God for Israel into vengeance against the “wicked empire.”

92 *Ten Martyrs* 11.10–23 (recensions V, VII, VIII in Reeg, *Geschichte*, 18*–19*).

93 See the Sermon of Gregorius Referendarius (Guscini, *Image of Edessa* [n. 61 above], 86).

94 In Metatron’s own words, God takes pride each day in Rabbi Ishmael, saying: “I have a servant on earth, a priest like you (Metatron); his radiance is like your radiance and his appearance is like your appearance” (*Ten Martyrs* 15.1–4; also *Midrash Shir ba-Shirim* to Song of Solomon 1:3 [Grünhut 4a]). In recension I at *Ten Martyrs* 15.11–30, the term used for countenance is *qelaster* rather than *demut*. In this case as well, the term employed carries suggestive resonances, linking the face of Rabbi Ishmael to both the countenance of God and that of the patriarch Jacob.

95 *Ten Martyrs*, 22.65–73. The text appears in a variety of forms in the various recensions of the work (cf. II, IV–VII.22.65–73; IX.54.1–6). I translate recension VII here.

Set within its literary context in the sixth or seventh century, the Jewish “discovery” of Rabbi Ishmael’s face in the treasury at Rome parodies the Christian discourse of relics, especially the circulation, preservation, and ritual display of the image-relics of the divine countenance. We are here glimpsing an image reflected in the fun-house mirror of religious contestation. Yet the martyrology does suggest that some Jews in early Byzantine Palestine were deeply impressed by the power of corporeal relics, even if the “Romans” in the narrative misrecognize the meaning of their own ritual actions.

Curiously, the striking image of a face relic being worn as a mask by another person that figures so centrally in the story of Rabbi Ishmael bears suggestive affinities to the literary traditions regarding the image of Edessa that emerged in the post-Iconoclastic period. The celebrated depiction of King Abgar receiving the Mandyllion from Thaddaeus, which appears on a tenth-century panel from St. Catherine’s in the Sinai, attests to the renewed importance that the holy face of Edessa assumed in this period, especially during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 913–59).⁹⁶ The Sinai triptych, in which Abgar has the appearance of Constantine VII, complements the account in the *Narratio de imagine Edessena*, which narrates the transfer of the Mandyllion from Edessa to Constantinople in 944.⁹⁷ This considerably expanded form of the legend draws together a variety of existing traditions, aligning the narrative with the ideological aims of the emperor and updating it to comport with contemporary religious and aesthetic sensibilities.⁹⁸ In its account of the arrival of Thaddaeus (Addai) in Edessa bearing the Mandyllion for Abgar, the apostle places the miraculous face over his own, thereby creating the impression that Christ himself had come to see the king. Similarly, once he has received the relic, the king likewise dons

the holy face, prior to passing it over the length of his ailing body. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Just before he came into the king’s presence, he placed the likeness on his own forehead and went in thus to Abgar. The king saw him coming from afar and seemed to see a light shining out of his face, too bright to look at, sent forth by the likeness that was covering him. Struck by the bright shining light, and as if he had forgotten about his illness and the longstanding paralysis of his limbs, he quickly got up from his bed and forced his limbs to run to meet the apostle. He felt the same, although in a different way, as those who saw the figure flashing with lightning on Mount Tabor. He received the likeness from the apostle and with great reverence put it round his head, on his eyes and on his lips, and did not omit the rest of his body. He knew immediately that his limbs had been miraculously healed, and changed for the better. His leprosy was cleansed and left him, except for a small spot that was left on his forehead.⁹⁹

This passage is quite different both in tone and in key narrative details from the ritual drama of Rabbi Ishmael’s face recounted earlier. The mask of Rabbi Ishmael’s face, while a replica of the divine countenance, is in fact made from the martyr’s flesh. By contrast, the Mandyllion is never said to be the flesh of Christ, but an imprint of his earthly form. Moreover, the *Narratio* entirely lacks the parodic tenor of the rabbinic martyrology. The Mandyllion, when worn as a mask, encapsulates the desire for unification with the divine so characteristic of medieval Byzantine piety.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, the mask of Rabbi Ishmael gives expression to the abject position of “the people of Israel” within an empire that has taken possession of the relics of the Jewish martyrs.

Still, there are considerable affinities between the two narratives. In both, the holy face is transformed into a kind of mask that extends the identity of the holy person to those tasked with

96 H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, 1994), 209–15.

97 For the Greek text and English translation, see Guscini, *Image of Edessa*, 8–69.

98 See esp. *Narratio de imagine Edessena* 10 (Guscini, *Image of Edessa*, 24–25), where the author discusses the range of sources on which he is drawing and provides an alternative account of the creation of the Mandyllion.

99 Guscini, *Image of Edessa*, 26–29.

100 G. Peers, “Icons’ Spirited Love,” *Religion and the Arts* 13 (2009): 218–47.

its care and preservation. More striking still, the capacity of the face to bring healing, protection, or even redemption is triggered by the ritual action of donning the face itself. We need not posit a direct connection between the two traditions to be impressed by the extent to which Jews and Christians could make use of common representational forms and conventions when exploring the capacity of corporeal relics to mediate divine power.

Conclusion

I have argued that we must avoid speaking about Jewish attitudes toward the very special dead or their corporeal remains in static terms. The period of late antiquity saw significant innovations within Jewish culture—encapsulated in both legal norms and narrative traditions—that made possible greater contact with the bodies of “the righteous” and their graves. Caution about and even out-and-out rejection of such practices as foreign to Jewish piety remained (and remain!) one possible response, drawing on early rabbinic efforts to place restrictions on this potentially dangerous domain of interreligious contact. Yet, between the fifth and eighth centuries, some Jews began to formulate new authoritative traditions that legitimated the view that there existed a class of dead persons whose bodies were immune to the normal dynamics of impurity.

Moreover, I have argued that these innovations came about, at least in part, in response to the rise of the Christian cult of relics. Just as Jews

figured heavily in Christian discourse regarding the authenticity and power of relics, Jewish traditions about their own special dead engaged deeply with Christian religious forms and norms, producing a discourse marked by a highly unstable combination of fascination, imitation, and ridicule. In the process, this Jewish discourse, which was forged toward the end of late antiquity, delineated new modes of piety that would enable and even encourage the formation in the medieval period of networks of holy tombs. In the course of time, objects and tokens from such sites (e.g., soil, fabric, and written texts) would traverse the Jewish world along circuits of travel, pilgrimage, and exchange, bearing with them the blessings provided by the interred holy person.

Despite the deeply intertwined histories of Jewish and Christian veneration of the special dead, significant differences remain. Most notably, the fragmentation of the holy body itself and the encasement of those fragments in reliquaries, which are so characteristic of Christian practice, know no direct equivalents in Jewish material culture. Still, I have suggested that it is precisely this set of Christian practices that informed and ultimately transformed Jewish attitudes toward the corporeal remains of rabbinic sages and martyrs who had come in the course of late antiquity to serve as embodied vehicles of sacred power. In that respect, the emergence of this new class of the righteous dead in Judaism was a product of the twin processes of rabbinization and Christianization that reconfigured Jewish life in the Mediterranean in this formative period.

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